

Gardiner Foundation Project

“What does it mean to be a Long Islander” Themes and Summary of Investigation

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## DOCUMENT OVERVIEW

The following document is a summary of the preliminary research conducted by Betyne Farrell and Nadia Khan-Roopnarine under the guidance of Dr. Max Renner in fulfillment of requirements for the Gardiner fellowship at Molloy College. In the fall 2020 semester, Betyne and Nadia began by examining their own perspectives as native Long Island women of color and engaged in an exchange of narratives about their particular understandings of Long Island and what it meant to “be a Long Islander.” Subsequently, they reviewed literature from academic sources as well as popular news and print sources to better understand how a “Long Islander” was presented in existing literature, examining intersections and points of departure with their own experiences. Over the course of their review Betyne and Nadia also read transcripts from previously conducted interviews from participants in the ongoing study, “Long Island, How Did We Get Here?” funded by a grant from the Robert David Lion Gardiner Foundation to Molloy College - The Energeia Partnership, excerpts of which are presented below. The summary of investigation from the semester includes a section on overarching themes as Betyne and Nadia understand them, a timeline of historical events relevant to the overarching research question, excerpts, and summary from previously conducted interviews, potential frameworks that can be used for the literature review, and potential interview questions. All information presented below is representative of the work of only one semester and should be treated as a living document that will be revised over the course of further investigation.

## I. OVERARCHING THEMES

After a review of the literature and previous interviews conducted, we have determined one key framework and three themes regarding the question, “What does it mean to be a Long Islander.”

**Key Framework: Insider / Outsider-** We are labeling the major overarching theme as “insider/outsider” to establish that identities of people on Long Island fall within the categories of being within or inside of specific communities and outside of specific communities. People identify themselves as Long Islanders both by the groups they belong to and by groups they believe are not belonging to their identification of a “Long Islander.” Sub-themes within the insider / outsider perspective include location-based identity, cultural / racial identity, and education-based identity, which are further explained below.

We imagine that this is a key dynamic for how publics and individuals navigate/ understand/constitute/perform/practice their identity as Long Islanders. We are looking to examine these elements through the insider/outsider framework and additionally keep insights from McMillan & Chavis’ sense of community theory in conversation with our work. With

this broader framework in mind, we imagine the following themes being crucial for our understanding of engaging in interviews and understanding participant experiences.

**Theme 1: Location Based Identity-** As members of the Long Island community, and women of color, we write from a position of insider knowledge. Long Islanders identify themselves to one another based on geographic location. Long Islanders identify themselves by county (Nassau & Suffolk) and by shore (North Shore & South Shore). There are five municipalities in Nassau County (City of Glen Cove, City of Long Beach, Town of Hempstead, Town of North Hempstead, and Town of Oyster Bay). In Suffolk County there are eleven municipalities (Town of Babylon, Town of Huntington, Town of Islip, Town of Smithtown, Town of Brookhaven, Town of Southampton, Town of Riverhead, Town of East Hampton, Town of Shelter Island, Town of Southold, and Fire Island). Residents also identify themselves by the cities they live in. For example, in Nassau County, “there are 2 cities, 3 towns, 64 incorporated villages and over 100 unincorporated areas. The entire county is physically divided amongst the 3 towns: Hempstead, North Hempstead, and Oyster Bay, and the two cities, Long Beach and Glen Cove. Within the three towns reside the 64 Incorporated Villages” ([nassaucounty.gov/382/government](http://nassaucounty.gov/382/government)). Following Massey (2005), we recognize that places are not always clearly recognizable or merely consistent locations, places are instead practiced by groups and individuals with unique histories. This project takes up our research question with a recognition and focus on practicing identity and place as complicated/informed by race, gender, education, sexual orientation, economic access, etc.

**Theme 2: Cultural / Racial Identity-** The population of Long Island is increasingly diverse. According to 2020 census data, of the total population of residents in Nassau County (1,356,924), 794,199 residents identify as non-Hispanic White, 158,916 residents identify as non-Hispanic Black, 145,191 residents identify as non-Hispanic Asian, and 237,225 residents identify as Hispanic. The total population of residents in Suffolk County is reported at 1,476,601; 983,806 residents identify as non-Hispanic White; 110,520 residents identify as non-Hispanic Black. The non-Hispanic Asian population is reported at 60,195. The Hispanic population is reported at 298,429. According to census trends, the population of Long Island is increasing in demographics for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) and decreasing in the categories of White, non-Hispanic. ([Newsday Special Report](#), [Census Data: Newsday](#)). Because so many diverse groups are represented on Long Island, it is often referred to as “America's first suburb” that can be examined as a microcosm of American identities. Based on the literature, we are interested in grappling with what it means to belong to any of these groups while also belonging to the “Long Islander” identity group. The intersectional identities represented by young people and people of color are particularly of interest to us. Based on previous interviews conducted by Gardiner fellows thus far, we have identified an interview population of high school aged students to speak to their experiences as young people on Long Island. Drawing on critical race theorists such as Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas, we are looking to examine the ways in which young people navigate intersectional identities as Long Islanders.

**Theme 3: Education Identity-** Residents of Long Island also identify themselves by their experiences in education, i.e., what high school they attended. Though Long Island is divided into cities, towns, incorporated and unincorporated areas, school districts do not align

seamlessly with corresponding neighborhoods. For example, residents in the town of Malverne can attend school in the Valley Stream district, the Lynbrook district, or the Malverne district depending on what street they live on, even when specific schools may be geographically closer to their homes. Identifying the educational experiences of individuals as important aspects of their identity is a uniquely Long Islander trait. Due to the non-linear and political ways in which school zones and district boundaries are drawn, the high schools people attend carry with them implications about class, socio-economic status, and formative experiences that may fuel implicit bias.

### Summary Points from Previous Interviews

The following are transcript excerpts from previous interviews conducted by Gardiner fellows in the Land Use, Education group who asked a version of the question, “What does it mean to be a Long Islander?” After a review of the transcripts, we have organized the responses according to the three themes: location-based identity, cultural & insider/outsider identities, and education-based identities.

#### Location-Based Identity

In previous interviews, participants indicated that many people from Long Island use the geographic locations of the Island to describe where they are from. They described the specific shores, proximity to New York City / Queens, and relationships to municipal features as indicative of peoples’ Long Island identities and experiences.

#### *Quotes:*

- L.O.- “A Long Islander is someone who lives in the region from the Queens / Nassau border to the tip of Montauk.”
- A.G.- “Someone who has a sense of history...person has some attachment to NYC.”
- C.M.- “It’s more local.”
- R.C.- “Geographic region.”
- M.H.- “by region” “the tracks divide the haves and have nots.” “We’re very cultural in the sense of identity when it comes to our towns.”

#### Cultural Identity & Insider / Outsider Identities

People who were interviewed by previous Gardiner fellows also indicated specific values or mindsets that are unique to Long Islanders such as “pride” “community minded” and “same environment.” One participant mentioned the diversity but segregation rampant on Long Island.

#### *Quotes:*

- J.M- “someone who is community-minded” “someone who values living in a community with people and raising a family in the same environment...a piece of Americana.”
- P.E. “...someone who takes pride in Long Island...if you live here on Long Island, you were raised here on Long Island, you will raise your family here on Long Island, and you will ultimately spend eternity here on Long Island.”

- T.E.- “unique”
- Dr. B.E.- “Diversity” and “Segregation”

### **Education Based Identity**

From previous interviews, people indicated (as we can attest to from personal experiences) that people identify by the specific K-12 and college experiences they have had on Long Island.

#### *Quotes:*

- Dr. L.K.- “they’ll either identify by their town or in most cases they identify by their local school district which is really the foundation of local home rule.”

## **II. RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **1. Research questions**

- According to current Long Island high schoolers, what does it mean to be a Long Islander?

### **2. Methodology**

- Ethnographic study
- Convenience sampling
- Series of virtual interviews taking place from (date) to (date)
- Interviews video recorded, transcribed, and hand coded

### **3. Research sites**

- Saint Mary Magdalene Academy*
  - Private high school, located in the suburbs
  - Serves just over 2000 students from grade 9-12 from over 100 school districts
  - Students are granted admission based on an entrance exam taken in 8th grade
  - Annual tuition is over \$10,000
  - Racial demographics of student body:
    - 70% White
    - 15% Hispanic / Black
    - 15% Asian
- Herrington High School*
  - Public school, 9-12 high school, located in the suburbs
  - Serves just over 1500 students
  - Racial demographic of student body:
    - 15% White
    - 75% Black/Hispanic
    - 7% Asian/Multiracial

#### 4. Data collection & analysis process

- a. High school students were recruited using convenience sampling.
- b. Focus group interviews from each site were audio / video recorded and submitted for transcription to the Gardiner fellows' transcriber.
- c. After transcripts were received, researchers followed Tesch's 8 steps in the coding process to examine transcripts.
- d. After independently reviewing transcripts, researchers met to discuss common topics. Then, researchers compiled topic lists to generate common themes.
- e. Researchers then applied Mcmillan & Chavis' "Sense of Community" theory in a series of analyses, summarized in the findings below.

### III. MAJOR FINDINGS

Using [McMillan & Chavis \(1986\)](https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6629(198601)14:13.0.CO;2-I) as organizational framework. McMillan, & Chavis, D. M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *Journal of Community Psychology*., 14(1), 6–23. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6629\(198601\)14:13.0.CO;2-I](https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6629(198601)14:13.0.CO;2-I)

Major findings were organized according to the four major aspects of McMillan and Chavis' "Sense of Community" Theory. The four components are: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Excerpts that are representative of each of these areas are included below:

**A: Membership-** is the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness. Membership has five attributes: boundaries, emotional safety, a sense of belonging and identification, personal investment, and a common symbol system. These attributes work together and contribute to a sense of who is part of the community and who is not.

INSIDER- Feeling membership	OUTSIDER- Not feeling membership
NS: I would say that, in a sense, when you are in Long Island and you do find your community, it does feel very much like a community, even the kids that are ignorant and close-minded, you tend to see that their towns are towns just in general are very united. Like obviously, it's not good that, you know, one color is with one color, you know what I mean, we love to diversify things. But, in a sense, even when I first went to St. Magdalene Academy I was embraced into the community of Color.	ZJ: I think one thing that I would say is although Herrington is a very tight-knit community, there are some people that believe that certain people don't belong here because a little bit closer where Tamara lives, I was down there when I was younger and my brother and I were just playing, whatever, and my mom had to drop something off and a White lady comes out of her house, no one was bothering her, and says "You need to go back to where you came from." But we came from four blocks down from you-...-so really, you have to- you really have to still be aware- you still have to be aware that there are people who are not gonna be happy that you are in the environment that you are in.
AR: The friendships I've made here. I guess- I went to a private school for (inaudible, 11:48) from kindergarten to eighth grade and my lifelong best friend I made there so it's like we have this place where we can always go back to- this is where it started, and this is where we became so close. So, it's like home in the sense of family and friends.	TM: For me personally, I would say what's great is the diversity cause definitely have- growing up in a diverse community, as a African American, it was very- it's very important and I feel like it has developed- it has helped develop me into who I am today because I feel like if I grew up in a White town- like my cousin, she lives in Farmingdale, and when she posts pictures, I see that she's the only Person

	<p>of Color in her friend group- so, definitely being able to look at my own pictures, and see a diverse friend group- that makes me feel good because I- throughout high school I felt like I can be who I am around by friends. But, what's not so great is that you could still see the old, White values that are- that were prominent in the town before People of Color began to move- whenever- recently, while driving through the community, you could see there's Trump stickers on the stop signs, there's Trump flags being hang up around everywhere. So definitely seeing the White values and just what people used to believe and the fact that it's still prominent- well, it's not as prominent- it's still- still prevalent in this town and- just even knowing that- what they- what they believe and what they think about People of Color is still prevalent in this town- I would just give a warning about moving to Long Island in general.</p>
	<p>AR: I live in East Massapequa, but I live on the border of North Amityville and Farmingdale, so my backyard is North Amityville, I'm in East Massapequa and then Massapequa Park is a few blocks down in front of me, and then Farmingdale is to my right. And it's like you see how the funding is different essentially from like- East Massapequa, they pushed everyone who's- I feel like- they push anyone who's like diverse in Massapequa to East Massapequa- so then all the other- the rest of Massapequa and Massapequa Park are mostly White people. So a bunch of the diverse people were pushed to East Massapequa and then North Amityville is right behind me so I- I like right- I didn't see like how- North Amityville- they don't get funding, they're rundown, they're not as clean, and then Massapequa is all pretty and everything and I would- the only reason why I'm going to private school is because if I went to public school, I'd be going to Amityville Public School and they don't have- their- their education isn't that well- that's why I go to private school. And it's just how, just by town-wise, I live on the border, and there's such a difference when there shouldn't be. (12)</p>

**Major Finding:** Students reported patterns of feeling simultaneously like insiders and outsiders in terms of membership to the Long Island community. Students highlighted feelings of belonging according to the towns they lived in and the schools they attended. Students also noted that amid the tightly knit communities there were subgroups of people that had varied levels of belongingness. Subgroups included: race, socio-economic status, political affiliation, town of residence, and age.

**B: Influence-** a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group, and of the group mattering to its members.

**INSIDER- Feeling a sense of mattering**

AH: For- since ninth grade, I've been volunteering at a place called the Science Center, and every year they hold a- a Spooky Fest- they have the haunted walk/ haunted house,

**OUTSIDER- Not feeling a sense of mattering**

ZJ: I would say that Herrington is a good place to be if you want to experience different types of things and be around different types of people. But, in terms of the schools, you

<p>they have games, they have crafts- and it's center- it's in Village Town, but every time that I've gone there, I've seen- I've seen all People of Color, I've seen every race, and it's like- and I volunteer there every year, and people are always so nice- they're like- it's like- if you (inaudible, 43:32)- eh- excuse me- there's different walks you can volunteer on- different activities that you can volunteer on- and everyone's just so nice...</p>	<p>might not see as much representation in your teachers that you need for students to connect and for the teachers to really understand their students because in my experience, some of the things the teachers say are not very good. I know in middle school, they would say, "Do your parents even care?" and I felt like I really had to make it known that my parents care and not- they're not what you think they are- not specifically my parents, but just in general, they would look at the Parent Portal and be like "Do your parents even check the parent portal?" or whatever- so little things like that, you really have to look out for because those things are damaging.</p>
<p>TM: I actually have two experiences- over- I think- I think it was 2020- it could've been 2021- but while the- while the protests were just starting to get- were just starting to increase, they did a protest- I think it was Highland Park- and a lot of people came and they gathered and they fought for- they were protesting for one single thing and I really felt the togetherness there, even though it was mostly People of Color at that protest- I definitely felt like we were all protesting for one single thing. And then also another experience that I have where I feel like a Long Islander is the actual night of Sports Night- yeah- it's just like, being with all those girls and cheering, and then marching, and dancing with all of your friends after you spent so many months together through the ups and downs, that one night where it all comes together is- it's like a really- it's a really good experience for me personally. (12)</p>	<p>ZJ: I think one thing that I would say is although Herrington is a very tight-knit community, there are some people that believe that certain people don't belong here because a little bit closer where Tamara lives, I was down there when I was younger and my brother and I were just playing, whatever, and my mom had to drop something off and a White lady comes out of her house, no one was bothering her, and says "You need to go back to where you came from." But we came from flour blocks down from you-...-so really, you have to- you really have to still be aware- you still have to be aware that there are people who are not gonna be happy that you are in the environment that you are in. (15)</p>

**Major Finding:** Students reported instances of influence, or a sense of mattering / making a difference to a group through experiences such as volunteer work, protesting, and engaging in school-based activities. They were simultaneously able to articulate moments where their sense of mattering was diminished in school through the actions of teachers and adults in their local neighborhoods.

**C: Integration and fulfillment of needs-** This is the feeling that members' needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group.

INSIDER- Needs met	OUTSIDER- Needs not met
<p>ZJ: I would say that Herrington is a good place to be if you want to experience different types of things and be around different types of people.</p>	<p>NS: I remember we were in South Bay and we didn't even get seated, like people wouldn't seat us, like the owner watched us walk in and didn't seat us. My mom had to practically keep reiterating, "Oh, you know, are we gonna sit down?" And people were coming in- White people were coming in around us and sitting down and they wouldn't seat us, and then they- and then when they seated us, they proceeded to seat us in the most middle spot- like they were trying to put us on the spot and embarrass us- I don't know, I feel like just- and also near St. Magdalene's, I think as you go out east, and there- it gets a little bit worse when it comes to close-mindedness and just- just those kids are comfortable in their own bubble and when anybody else tries to come and break that bubble, it's really- it's really just a bunch of ignorance. So, I mean, Herrington is really, that's what I mean, it's really not the worst at all-</p>

	obviously there's- it's not perfect- but definitely not the worst (14)
SJ: So, I would say there's a lot of opportunities to experience different things because of the amount of different people we have all over the Island and there's a lot of resources to learn about different things and like you- like they were mentioning before- once you find your people, you have a sense of community and it's just really nice. (6)	NS: I guess I would say that a time I felt very like- like an outsider would have to be- when I first transferred, obviously, like I said before, I was new and I was trying to maybe think "You know, no one's talking to me so obviously I understand, being a teenager, you know, we're both uncomfortable, we're both shy, so if I don't say anything, you're not going to say anything. Let me, you know, go out of my way to say something." So, I went up to a group of girls that were sitting at a table and I was just like, "Hey, you know, I'm new to the school- I was just wondering if I can, you know, sit with you guys?" And she kind of just like, "Uh, yeah, yeah," like "Sure." Kind of- and I- I read into a lot of things so the- the response was kind of very brushed off and just "Whatever," so I was like "Okay, alright, whatever, I'll just sit down." So, I sat down and then another group of girls came and they all kind of saw me sitting, I guess, I'm not sure if I'm thinking about it too much- but they all just were like, "Um, there's not enough space here." And they just got up and left and then I was sitting at the table by myself. (9) (FULL STORY 8-9)

**Major Finding:** Students identified that they received many opportunities to engage with people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives. However, they also reported instances where they faced ostracization based on their race, and school attendance.

**D: Shared emotional connection-** the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences

INSIDER- Shared history	OUTSIDER- Not shared history
NS: But I- I would say being- being here on Long Island, we can definitely say that community's a big thing- but the biggest thing about Long Island is that the communities aren't very integrated. While Long Island does have a lot of wealth and a lot of poverty, it- there're just a really big disparity between the two and I think that while- while- if you're in a certain community- whether it's- whether you're, you know, in a certain town, or in a certain school, or you identify with a certain community, when you're in that community, it can be a really- a really, really beautiful thing. But it's just when you're trying to get into a certain community, it can be really hard- it can be really- just you- you just don't feel comfortable. So, I think that's the biggest thing about being on Long Island- once you're in, you're in, but getting in is another thing. (16)	AR: Yeah, I guess it's not sunshine and roses. Every time someone mentions Long Island, everyone assumes Richmond, but Long Island is nothing like Richmond. Especially depending on where you are, if you're closer to the city, if you're more out east you're gonna find different people and you're gonna find different groups and you're gonna face racism and you're gonna have- you kinda have to take your time and figure out where is best for you.
LW: I would say just the beach- I don't know, Long Island- we- we love the beach here- I don't know, not everyone loves the beach, but I know my family's a beach family cause my mom- my mom raised me- she's a single mom- and so she's ob- I said- not obviously- but she's Caribbean and so she loves the sun, she loves the beach- obviously nothing	NS: But a lot of teachers aren't like that, and sometimes it kind of just lets certain kids that have a very small-minded attitude towards things- they don't really like to hear anybody else's opinion or when they do, they kind of shut it down. And so, in a class where there's not really a teacher allowing or making other students, maybe of Color or of different



compares to Caribbean beach- but- so we're always at the beach, you know, we have our little music on, windows down, the sun's set- coming from Sunset Island, the sun is setting, and just a moment where, you know, you feel like a Long Islander really appreciating the beauty of where we live.

backgrounds, feel comfortable speaking, it's like a- you feel like "Well, if I speak, what if they come after what I say?" or- or, you know, just things like that, I just feel like if I share this, they're gonna make a comment. They've made many comments in my gov class that I'm in now that are really troubling, and it's just I- last year I felt so comfortable speaking in Mr. V's class and obviously- this also has to do with teachers, like I said- but I just don't feel comfortable speaking and sometimes I just feel really uncomfortable in the class altogether. (4)

**Major Finding:** Students shared that they feel a strong sense of shared emotional connections among their school, peer, and town groups but also reported a struggle in these same areas to build shared emotional connections.

**Overall Major Finding:** Students spoke about the experiences of being a Long Islander as being contradictory. In their experiences you feel simultaneously like an insider and outsider. To be a Long Islander is to have affirming experiences that foster a sense of membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and a shared emotional connection while also having experiences that diminish each of those elements that contribute to a "sense of community."

## 1. Implications

### a. For teacher practice

- i. Help foster rapport across diverse groups of students
- ii. When discussing political or potentially contentious issues in the classroom, emphasize student voice over your own

### b. For school communities / districts

- i. Establishing collective school identities that highlight diversity while building interconnectedness
- ii. Training teachers in culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate methods for engaging students in critical dialogue
- iii. Should include teaching staff that is representative of the student population. Schools should actively recruit teacher candidates whose experiences and backgrounds represent those of the students.

### c. For curriculum

- i. Emphasize location-based lessons, touching on topics including but not limited to:
  1. Local redlining and school district zoning
  2. Natural resources (beaches, parks)
  3. Diversity in the school community (cultural, linguistic, religious)

### d. For pre-service teacher education

- i. Developing deep historical knowledge of the communities they will work in

## 2. Limitations

- a. This study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and was limited to virtual interviews only. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, accessing schools to interview students was increasingly challenging. Therefore, this study was only conducted with two major sites. Though this sample was small, the students that were interviewed provided rich, detailed descriptions. The descriptions were also verified and / or supported by reporting from other members in the focus groups.
- b. Due to confidentiality, we could not disclose particular schools or locations mentioned in the interviews. This limits the type of analysis we can conduct. We were unable to conduct deep analysis using specific demographic information of the particular communities we discussed in the interviews.

## 3. Conclusion

### a. Recommendations for future study

- i. We recommend additional research be conducted with more / larger focus groups. Opinions and experiences from students with varied racial, socio-economic, and religious backgrounds should be represented.
- ii. We also recommend intergenerational focus groups be conducted to delve deeply into the shared experiences of people across towns or schools.

### b. Our takeaways

- i. Being a Long Islander is a complex and complicated identity, especially for people of color. To be a member of this community means to feel simultaneously like an insider and outsider. In other words, it means to have affirming experiences that enhance a sense of membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and a shared emotional connection. However, it also means having experiences that diminish these feelings as well.

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