Chapter One
Rethinking High School as a Relational Journey

Susan: Can you tell me about the different groups in school?

Reginald: All right, you got . . . different types of groups . . . a group of people who don’t care about school, who walk around the hallways. You got a group that want to do well in school . . .

Susan: . . . Let’s talk about the group that . . . don’t care about school . . .

Reginald: They . . . go to lunch . . . if the security guards happen to catch them, they go to class . . . They’ll just disrupt the class, throw books around, stuff like that. I pay no mind to them.

Susan: . . . What types of people are they?

Reginald: . . . Well, one, I don’t think they care about themselves. Two, most of them is blacks and Hispanics. Like . . . mostly, the highest rate . . . of people in a group that go to class is Chinese people. Blacks, Hispanics, hang out in the hallway, playing around, going to (the) lunchroom . . . three times a day.¹

Reginald was a smart, sociable, and confident black high school junior, with lots of friends in school and in his neighborhood.² Similar to many other students interviewed, he also differentiated the good and bad groups of students by race and ethnicity. Over four years, I listened attentively to students such as Reginald as they explained a commonly held belief that African American and Latino students were the “bad or loud” and disruptive students in comparison to the Asian American students who were “good or quiet,” obedient, and academically successful. These categories were constructed around oppositional peer groups based on race and ethnicity and were repeated by students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds.

These racial and ethnic peer groups differed from the usual class-based categories found in previous research in high schools.³ Peer
groups such as the Penelope Eckert’s study of jocks and the burnouts, Paul Willis’ ethnography of lads and the ear’oles, and William Foot Whyte’s seminal work on Doc’s gang and the college boys were all based on school-related categories such as extracurricular activities, college attendance, or relationships with teachers. Most of these studies were limited to comparing youth from working class and middle class backgrounds, where the reproduction of class was chiefly attributed to interactions with adults in school and the organization of the school. These influential studies defined how mechanisms in school, through social interactions with adults, contributed to the American system of class and occupational stratification. Almost all of these studies of peer groups are now over twenty years old and—most importantly—they are limited to mostly white populations in suburban or small towns.

Since these studies were completed, there have been major demographic shifts in the American population that altered the racial and ethnic populations in urban school systems. These shifts include Latino and Asian immigration to cities, concentrated poverty in urban areas, and white suburbanization. Currently the population of non-white students in American public schools is about 41 percent. American public schools are now multiracial: Latinos and blacks comprise more than one-third of the student population and in some regions of the country, such as the western states, Asian American students outnumber black students. From 1970 to 2002 the Latino enrollment in New York public schools increased by 73 percent. Consequently, the social interactions in multiracial urban schools that include immigrant students are increasingly relevant.

My research documents adolescents’ experiences with friends and peers from 1996 to 2000, in a large multiracial high school in New York City. The school that I call Last Choice High School (LCHS) had about 2,700 students that was 15 percent African American, 48 percent Puerto Rican and Dominican American, and 36 percent Asian American. Every year, for four years, I interviewed the same students to talk about how their experiences in school shaped their close friendships and how their friendships changed over time. I encouraged them to talk about the social landscape in high school including their relationships with peers and how they differed from friendships. I wanted to understand from their perspective, the meanings they gave to their relational journey through high school. By relational journey, I refer