“I Don’t Want to Spend My Life under a Toilet Seat”

Aspiration, Belonging, and Responsible Masculinities in the Lives of White, Working-Class Boys in a Youth Inclusion Program at the YMCA

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Abstract: Working with a cohort of boys aged 14–18 and classed as not in employment, education, or training (NEET) at the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) in the UK city of Brighton and Hove, this article follows their progress as they engage with instructors and other pupils at the YMCA, using qualitative modes of inquiry to explore their reactions, feelings, and attitudes. As I demonstrate, their aspirations and sense of emergent manhood is often predicated on new relationships generated in the YMCA spaces rooted in a culture of caring and responsible masculinity founded on implicit Christian values. Through interviews with young men and the people around them, I probe some of the tensions in this process, showing how persistent attachments to places and spaces beyond the YMCA can create feelings of ambivalence and, in some cases, a sense of alienation and marginality even as they begin to feel that they belong.

Keywords: charity, class, education, engagement, masculinity, NEET, youth

Focusing white, working-class boys (14–18 years old) not in employment, education, or training (NEET) who engaged in a youth inclusion program the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), this article explores how a spatially informed analysis can generate more nuanced accounts of how young people reflexively negotiate the options arrayed before them, performing complex, contingent forms of masculinity in the process. NEET, white, working-class boys are

often classified as “at risk” “in crisis” or “disadvantaged,” portrayed as a mixture of deviant delinquent and passive victim” and associated with negatively framed “landscapes of concern” (Reay and Lucey 2000: 410; cf. McGregor and Farrugia 2019; Smyth 2017; Ward 2015). However, recent studies have shown how young people also powerfully exert their sense of agency through space, challenging and subverting forms of dominant masculinity and developing forms of “situated agency” that rely on complex assemblages of space, place, and belonging (Stahl and Baars 2016: 324).

Based on in-depth ethnographic research conducted in the UK city of Brighton and Hove, this article explores these interconnected themes in the lives of young men at a Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) youth center. As I show, the YMCA offered a particular space where masculinity could be performed and rehearsed in the context of safe guidelines and a sense of care moving toward a more caring, responsible, and reflexive form of masculine identity deemed more palatable to wider society. However, young men were also carrying their own senses of spatialized and embodied feeling that sometimes clashed with the YMCA ethos and traced some of the inherent contradictions in working across deeply embedded social and geographical inequalities.

First, I situate this study in relation to boyhood, youth masculinities, and belonging, before describing the methods used in the study, briefly outlining how the YMCA has contributed to contemporary forms of boyhood. I then present qualitative data from fieldwork conducted at the YMCA, documenting how feelings of belonging become integral to integration into the YMCA corporate culture. Finally, I argue deeper, historically situated understandings of how young people conceptualize and reflect on their own processes of masculine self-making can help us understand more accurately how emergent youth identities are triangulated through

geographies of inequality and displacement, particularly as urban and suburban spaces are increasingly subject to widening wealth disparities under neoliberalism and austerity.

Learning Your Place: Belonging and Marginalized Young Men's Lives

In the UK context, public anxiety over the role of young men in forms of violence and antisocial behavior has placed increased onus on youth intervention programs designed to promote and modify young men's behavior (Reay and Lucey 2000: 410; cf. McGregor and Farrugia 2019; Smyth 2017; Ward 2015, 2018). In this context, organizations such as the YMCA have gained greater purchase in the public sphere by offering to transform aberrant young men into productive members of society, simultaneously nullifying their perceived threat and contributing docile workers for the neoliberal economy. However, while studies of masculinity that center on white, working-class boys have focused on how a sense of belonging is configured through space and place (see, e.g. Farrugia and Wood 2017), less is known about the processes of transformation enacted in noninstitutional settings, which align complex organizational objectives with sometimes discriminatory governmental agendas, policies, and ideologies (see Featherstone et al. 2017; Roberts 2011). This becomes particularly problematic when dealing with white, working-class boys who are already heavily stigmatized and signals the need to understand how these programs explicitly and inadvertently impact their lives.

This then requires an understanding of boyhood, belonging, and place as interrelated "socially constructed categories" (Hopkins 2010, cited in Habib and Ward 2019: 6) as young men "construct status and meaningful identities for themselves through their conceptions of belonging" that are often "heavily influenced by their relationships with "territories" and places" (Habib and Ward 2019: 6; cf. Baroutsis and Mills 2018; Farrugia and Wood 2017; Ingram 2011;

Stahl and Habib 2017). Defined as feeling “at home” or “secure,” belonging can also be defined as feelings of attachments to spaces and places that are “multidimensional” and “continually negotiated in relation to respectability and authenticity” (Stahl and Habib 2017: 4; cf. Habib and Ward 2019). Consequently, belonging offers an important analytical “lens” through which to make explicit the way youth as a social object is constructed relationally through dynamic processes of inclusion and exclusion (Cuervo and Wyn 2014: 903; Farrugia and Wood 2017; Habib and Ward 2019).

Central to this project is locating how “boyhoods” are transformed and triangulated through specific processes of spatialization and associated logics of legitimation as young working-class men “learn their place” in the geographical and social hierarchy (Smyth 2017; cf. Reay and Lucey 2000; Taylor 2012; Ward 2015). Particularly in institutional settings such as schools, young people identifying as working class encounter the “emotional landscapes” (Taylor 2012: 50) of class and begin situating themselves in relation to both their peers and broader social categories (see Ingram 2009, 2011; Reay 2008). Many of the YMCA clients are drawn from working- or lower-middle-class backgrounds or communities where social issues (antisocial behavior, truancy from school, violence, criminality) are associated with local geographies of disadvantage or cast as part of a general social “backwardness” that requires remedial action (see Ingram 2009; Stahl 2013; Ward 2015). For many working-class men, this has meant that rather than “learning to serve,” they reject dominant notions of new masculinity and form their identities from the areas they are familiar, the “margins” (McDowell 2002: 13, cited in Ward et al. 2017; Willis 1977).

To explore these tensions, I frame the YMCA masculine model as a space-specific dominant masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) geared toward a well-honed masculine

"habitus" that can be "taught" or inculcated into young men (Bourdieu 2002). Defined as "the permanent internalisation of the social order in the human body" (Eriksen and Nielsen 2013: 130), habitus can offer an important mechanism for associated forms of embodied behavior with specific moral and social frameworks (Bourdieu 1991). As I will explore, the YMCA system relies on a continual process of moral embodied and experiential learning aimed at "responsibilizing" young men through a sequence of carefully designed tests, tasks, and duties, which combines rite-of-passage style forms of becoming with spatialized forms of belonging rooted in a lattice of intimate relationships. Sport is key in this context as a way of ritualizing embodied behaviors and integrating individuals both into YMCA corporate structures and broader social frameworks (Bourdieu 1991; Shilling and Mellor 2014).

As I explore, the YMCA method is rarely harmonious, generating moments of tension, ambivalence, and conflict which call for a greater understanding of how men reflexively interpret and target their own masculine behaviors as forms of "situated agency" (Stahl and Baars 2016: 324; cf. Threadgold and Nilan 2009), often orienting themselves toward personal objectives, educational goals, and different, sometimes contradictory, audiences and spaces (Bryant and Ellard 2015: 385–486; see also Berrington et al. 2016; Coffey and Farrugia 2014; Stahl and Habib 2017). Rather than simplistic programming, the habitus can be subject to internal tensions and disruption what Nicola Ingram (2011) has called a "disjunctive habitus," especially when developing in a social field or setting where it is unfamiliar, as it "feels the force of the field in which it originated" creating a "dialectical confrontation" between habitus as structured structure, and objective structures" (Bourdieu 2002: 31, cited in Ingram 2011: 300; cf. Coles 2009; Reay 2008). As I now explore, these tensions form an important part of YMCA operations, as the degree to which young people achieve these their goals also becomes part of the storying

of the YMCA space itself. As such, the subsequent analysis seeks to understand the intimate affinities between belonging, emotional connections and narrative at the YMCA as the stories of success and failure serve to underline the importance of adhering to the YMCA system, and ultimately becoming or not becoming part of the YMCA family.

Context and Methods

Founded in London in 1844, the YMCA has had a profound effect on shaping ideas of both British and American boyhood and spreading the gospel of space-based youth engagement worldwide. Originally conceived by a group of Christian businessmen as a spiritual safe haven against the unchecked immorality of the city, the YMCA expanded through the United Kingdom and the United States most notably at the turn of the century as they broadened their scope from religious evangelism to secular engagement, seeking to transform the moral rectitude of young men more widely (Muukkonen 2001: 104). Under charismatic leaders who harmonized interests in business, the Bable, and bodybuilding, the YMCA adopted its core tenets of developing the "whole men" who were transformed in "mind, body and spirit" (Spurr 2014). Today, the YMCA embeds these values more implicitly in its programs, becoming implicitly nongendered and blended with a range of organizational and societal goals to transform the lives of young people, moving increasingly toward producing what could be termed whole persons.

From its inception, YMCA used a combination of strong, intimate relationships in specific spaces to generate forms of moral transformation. Charismatic male leaders were key to this process and were given full autonomy to run their center they way they wanted, creating a loose network of affiliated, entrepreneurial centers primarily scattered across the United Kingdom and the United States but also expanding along colonial and trade routes into more

than 128 countries today. For this research, as a translocal youth organization, the YMCA offered an important set of interconnected sites for understanding how young men's masculinities were articulated in and through particular spaces and places and, as such, how a transnational organizational culture translated into the intimate spaces of local youth interventions. The study presented here focuses on activities at the Hove YMCA from 2009–2016, a local branch connected into regional, national, and international networks of the global YMCA movement and recently undergoing a period of rapid organizational transformation. Located on the South Coast of England, the city of Brighton and Hove (pop. ca. 300,000) is known for its tourist attractions and nightlife and boasts a vibrant local economy. The Hove YMCA center is located in a wealthier part of the city but draws clientele from nearby council estates and less wealthy areas, ironically creating "visual grammars" (Campos 2012: 24) of wealth disparity and stilted social mobility through actual mobility.

The wider project was designed to capture how the YMCA helped youth negotiate these forms of inequality by studying YMCA centers in Brighton and Hove and Banjul, The Gambia, which have been working together in partnership. As a small Islamic country, The Gambia offered important points of contrast with Brighton and Hove, such as a secular/Christian culture versus an Islamic one, a poor country in the Global South versus a rich one in the Global North, and a democracy versus a dictatorship. At the same time, both locations were selected for the comparative parallels they offered. Both are significant tourist destinations, which creates a particular spatialized local and global imaginary landscape rooted in stark contrasts between mobility/immobility and affluence/poverty (see Porter et al. 2010).

Both Brighton and Hove and Banjul also have specific issues with young men. Brighton and Hove, for example, has high levels of youth unemployment and poverty, as well as addiction

and delinquency issues, despite being in an affluent area of the United Kingdom. Like many parts of West Africa, The Gambia struggles with high youth unemployment and has suffered from a constant loss of young men through widely reported illicit migration through Libya and Italy (see Gaibazzi 2015) and a flow of initiatives to engage and encourage young men in their local communities (see Wignall 2016a).

For the purposes of this article, I focus on the UK iteration of the Sports Leadership course, but it is important to note that the theoretical frame and research questions are applicable to both locations and form an important comparative framework (see Wignall 2016b, 2019). The Sports Leadership course targets disengaged young people and involves four main learning areas incorporated into 33 hours of teaching: planning and running a coaching session; health and fitness; communication; and leadership. These learning areas offer fertile ground for crafting an analysis of how the YMCA builds its "mission" of treating young people's "mind, body and spirit" into a discourse of leadership and self-development.

Analysis of the YMCA space was a key component of my research design, offering a delimited or bounded area to explore the web of relationships in which young people are embedded, with a particular focus on how these relationships are negotiated over time (see Porter et al. 2010). Based on the masculinities literature (e.g., Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), the research questions were designed to capture the sense of emergent masculinity and the tensions in the self-making process as young men experienced them and in turn how these tensions are incorporated into the YMCA system of "moral" transformation: (1) What models of behavior do the YMCA centers encourage globally and locally, and what role does morality play in young men's transformations within YMCA centers and global organizations? (2) How are particular types of masculinity produced and reproduced through daily practice in YMCA centers, and how

are different models of masculinity policed? (3) How are models of leadership, autonomy and masculinity translated from global programs to local implementation in different communities, and how are young men shaped by their experience of leadership, voluntarism, and sport?

To answer these questions, I conducted a series of interviews with leaders, managers, volunteers, and staff, combined with ethnographic observation of cohorts of young people as they moved through the Sports Leadership course for a period of six months in 2011 with follow-up interviews conducted in 2012. My primary data is drawn from two cohorts of Sports Leadership students with eight students on each course with the other interviews conducted with young men who had been through the Sports Leadership course previously. In total, I interviewed 30 young men aged 14–18 at the YMCA, all of whom identified as working class and white. Though it is important to note not all Hove YMCA clientele are white, working-class (several are drawn from the wealthy surrounding areas of Hove), but most on the Sports Leadership program are drawn from nearby surrounding council estates such as Hangleton, Mile Oak, Whitehawk, and Moulscoomb, as well as from disadvantaged areas further afield such as Seaford and Newhaven. Young people on the course are often formally referred from councils and local authorities and are often involved with several different state agencies supporting them with family or personal issues. As such, many of the young men on the courses initially feel doubly alienated: first from their school or family environments and second by being compelled to travel to an unfamiliar area.

With the young people, I combined serial interviews over several months, participant observation, and focus groups with interviews with related YMCA staff and in some cases family members to generate holistic portraits of young men on their YMCA journey. This made recruitment and observation a delicate and sometimes problematic issue. The young people were

often confused as to my status creating “blurred boundaries” between my role as practitioner and researcher. For example, informants initially often mistook interviews or focus groups with me for other reflective elements of the Sports Leadership course, which meant I had to be constantly vigilant about any assumptions either of us were making about our interactions (Wolff 2004: 202). The young people were also often multiply vulnerable, having ongoing personal or family situations that had profoundly affected their mental health and ability to engage with education (Delamont 2016; McGregor and Farrugia 2019). Consequently, I had to be sensitive to the crossovers between my pastoral role as a youth worker and the sometimes intimate discussions taking place during interviews. This required a “negotiated” form of ethics and consent that was generated by a relationship of trust and care, which I reflect on in other work (Wignall 2016b). As such, the research process was conducted in continual conversation with the key gatekeepers to reflect on any troubling issues that arose. Moreover, this also meant being open and transparent with my informants, creating a transparent dialogue of consent and mutual trust and often incorporating them more intimately into the research process, for example, by making video diaries or in some cases acting as research assistants (see Wolff 2004).

As I will discuss next, the spaces of the YMCA are also open and fluid but are defined by a set of rules and procedures to create a sense of safety and security for both staff and young people. I conducted most of my research in the primary YMCA space in Hove, a dilapidated youth center composed of a central reception/games area, a sports hall, a dining/gaming area, a digital music center, a dance studio, a training/teaching room, and several offices for the staff. Young people in the Sports Leadership course were primarily taught in the upstairs training room but at other times were free to mill about in the central reception area on sofas or playing pool or play football or basketball in the sports hall. The Sports Leadership course is also a mobile

course, and we would often make trips to other areas such as primary schools for coaching sessions; sports centers or parks to do fitness, swimming, or other activities; wooded areas for walks/activities; and outdoor locations such as the nearby Hove lagoon for activities like canoeing. Over a week, the course was balanced to provide a range of activities combined with the teaching and learning objectives, which were often classroom based. As Sara Delamont (2016) notes, these spaces offer useful platforms for observation but do create ethical dilemmas as to how and when your informants know they are being observed.

The overall aim of the research was to compare and contrast experiences from both locations to ascertain local variations in experience and narratives that I document elsewhere (see Wignall 2016a, 2016b, 2019) and have two core themes: first, YMCA cultures struggle for coherence and moral norms even in the face of vast geographical and sociocultural differences, which can create difficulties with young men striving to articulate their identities in multiple arenas of masculinity and suggests we need to finesse our conceptual tools for understanding how emergent masculinity is performed, situated, and negotiated (see Wignall 2016b); second, the YMCA culture of reflexive, holistic masculinity is inherently geared toward reinvented forms of contemporary masculinity, which translate well into a service-based and sometimes servile neoliberal labor economy (see Wignall 2016a, 2019). As I now discuss, collecting the voices of young people as they enact complex formations of masculinity and belonging can better inform us of how youth itself is rendered as a social category through noninstitutional settings (see McGregor and Farrugia 2019).

"Out of School and Out of Trouble": Spaces of Masculinity and Belonging at the YMCA

When Benny[1] first arrived at the YMCA, he fulfilled every stereotype of the disruptive, white,

working-class boy from a troubled home and a problem area. His checkered history of violence and exclusion from multiple schools and providers such as the YMCA flagged him as a difficult case among all our difficult cases. He was also from a notorious local council estate on the other side of the city of Brighton, a place we sometimes informally called “the front line” because of its reputation for violence, drug-related issues, and troubled youth. When I first met Benny in the Sports Leadership course, these negative expectations were appearing to be realized. He refused to engage with me at all, turning up to the YMCA center late, if at all, in the same branded but well-worn tracksuit and designer beanie hat perched on his head every day. He was also rude to the main tutor, engaged monosyllabically with his peers, spent most classroom-based lessons on his cell phone, and often refused to complete simple tasks or participate in activities. The only time he showed signs of life was when playing football either in the YMCA sports center or at the local park, where he would animatedly tell his classmates what to do, when to do it, and how to do it better.

However, as I followed the Sports Leadership course, something subtly altered. In Benny’s dealings with me, his course mates, and his tutor, little had ostensibly changed, but at the same time, I began hearing stories of how he was spending time at the YMCA outside his Sports Leadership lessons, sometimes just hanging around playing pool or football, but sometimes chatting to the YMCA team or even helping with some menial tasks around the office. Then one of the YMCA staff told me how Benny wanted to be a sports coach and had offered to volunteer at the YMCA. This took me aback, as I had not really noticed a change in him, but over the ensuing few weeks, I gradually noticed a few alterations in his behavior and attitude: he would still turn up unkempt and in the same tracksuit and beanie hat, but he would more often than not be on time; when a tutor asked him to put his phone away during a lesson, he

would do it, albeit often temporarily; and when he was asked to do something, he would either do it reluctantly or engage in a form of "delaying banter" or protest, but significantly, he would in most cases engage and complete the task or activity. I also noted subtle changes in the ways he treated other people: he would respond jovially to banter with peers and would chat with members of staff around the center in between sessions.

When we started to go into schools, the change in Benny was dramatic: he was suddenly communicative, kind, and caring toward the children and professional with the teachers and YMCA staff. His new demeanor was also placed in stark relief against some of the other Sports Leadership students who tried to keep their original taciturn, faux macho manner, only halfheartedly engaging with children and teachers. Sometimes, interestingly, Benny would slip back into this original "tough" disposition, especially when in a group of his peers playing pool or going out for a smoke, swearing and making lewd jokes about girls just outside the threshold of the YMCA building, and occasionally giving us back talk in lessons. However, whereas we would have seen this as symptomatic of a poor attitude earlier, we now gave him the benefit of the doubt: he had become one of us.

Despite this progress, when I came to interview Benny, he was initially suspicious and reticent. Even though I had known him for a few months, our relationship had remained reserved but cordial with stronger relationships with the main course tutor, Stacey; the center manager, Angie; and one or two other male course tutors. As I spoke to him, he gradually opened up, telling me his difficulties at school, how he did not really get along with his parents and had moved in with another relative, and how the YMCA had changed him: "I haven't had an exclusion for a while," and it "gets me out of school and out of trouble." When I told him I had heard he wanted to be a sports coach, he suddenly became even more enthusiastic. He told me

how “sport is a bit of a religion” and how he would be happy to be paid to do it. He also explained how his parents wanted him to become a plumber, earning good money and helping with his family. He had already applied for some plumbing courses when he started going into to local schools to coach younger children, and he realized he could turn his love of sport into a job: “It gave me more options and made me look, more open-eyed . . . I’ve seen . . . that there’s more in life.” He told me how he was completely disillusioned with education and work before coming to the YMCA and experiencing coaching, and about his disengagement between the “dull future” as a plumber his parents had sketched out for him: “I wanna do something with sport, a job career in sport . . . that’s my dream. What I wanna do with plumbing? I don’t want to spend my life under a toilet seat.”

Benny’s story and transformation serve to underline the spatio-moral coordinates encoded into the YMCA’s sense of belonging and how they link specific ideas of the future to the performance of masculinity in the present. For Benny, moving away from his family and spending more time at the YMCA had coincided with and triggered a rejuvenated sense of direction. It had also helped him clarify what he wanted to do with his own life as his imaginative, aspirational, sense-making process slowly realigned to the YMCA ethos (see Habib and Ward 2019; Stahl and Habib 2017). Benny’s story also offers an important narrative of how the YMCA (re)placed his sense of attachment, cultivating a form of belonging rooted in relationships and responsibility. Sport played a vital role in this process, offering a pleasurable counterpoint to the other chaotic elements of his life and acting as a hook with which to draw him into the wider corporate structure of the YMCA. However, as I now examine, it was the emotional support provided by the YMCA staff that began to outline and entrench the emotional attachments that Benny and others felt at the YMCA.

"The YMCA Is Quite Sick Really": Learning to Belong at the YMCA

One element of Benny's transformation was his relationships with other staff members and how they operated through a combination of discipline and care, or "tough love." As one student commented on the center manager, Angie, "She don't take bare shit," referring to the way staff members attempt to foster a culture of direct communication and action-based reflection. Often, these relationships were situated in relation to descriptions of the YMCA space as more relaxed and informal compared to places such as school where discipline was viewed as more rigid. As Nira Yuval-Davis (2006: 197) has argued, a sense of belonging relies on feeling safe, secure, and "at home" and is dependent on strong relationships (see also Trowler 2019). As Benny began to feel more secure in his relationships at the YMCA, it changed his overall attitude, though it is important to note that his embodied dispositions were more resistant to change, and for other students, the changes were less fundamental. Kyle (16) and Ryan (16), two other boys in the same course as Benny, make interesting comparisons, as they failed to have the same levels of success as Benny on the course but also articulated some similar thoughts on way the YMCA works for them. Unlike Benny's reticent demeanor, both Kyle and Ryan often had too much to say, their sharp tongues and quick tempers getting them into trouble at school and with the police. In the course, they were often difficult to manage, swearing, talking back, mucking about, or sometimes more seriously fighting with each other.

YMCA staff are key in this process, as they are often called in to arbitrate on moments of conflict, invoking a reflective language that helps reshape and recontextualize the young men's behavior. When I spoke to Kyle, for example, he framed this in negative terms and told me how the YMCA Sports Leadership course was the least undesirable option for him: "No, I don't

wanna do it, but I've gotta do it, or I'll be a proper little bum . . . probably in prison." A self-confessed "little shit" who has been in and out of school from a young age, he is trying to get a steady job though was recently fired for various forms of unreliability and is now trying to become a mechanic. More concerningly, he told me about the various ongoing feuds he had with other youths in his neighborhood, which has generated a "reputation" on the street for violence: "You have to become a bully to survive; you get people coming up to you to try and mug you." From the same notoriously violent area as Benny, Kyle eventually admitted how much he enjoyed the coaching ("It's quite boring, but it's something to do") and how he was proud of himself for sticking with it. As he told me, coaching children is quite challenging at times but mostly enjoyable: "I swore a couple of times, but under my breath . . . it's quite cool, telling 'em what to do . . . I told one, that kid who kept running off with the ball, to sit out for five minutes." Though not fully opening up to me, he did admit the tutors at the YMCA were "all right I suppose . . . more laid back," and that his perception of the YMCA had fundamentally altered: "When my teacher said it was going to be the YMCA, I thought it was going to be that shithole where everyone lives, but it's all right; the YMCA is quite sick really."

Despite Kyle slowly converting to the YMCA ethos, he and Ryan never quite adhered to the YMCA principles in the way Benny and others did. As Ingram (2011: 301) has noted in her depiction of high-achieving, working-class boys, these moments, what she terms "habitus tugs," reflect the difficulty of performing "versatile" forms of masculine identity that do not necessarily come naturally: "While it is possible that reflexivity may become internalized as part of the habitus . . . it does not necessarily afford an individual the ability to slip seamlessly in and out of different social fields." Similarly, in her ethnography of boys from a London council estate at school, Gillian Evans (2011: 296) has identified how "big-man systems" on the street translated

violently into school spaces, creating a “pecking order of disruption” and a “frenetic . . . learned disposition” that militated against the required expectations of teachers and parents (cf. Ward 2017).

Ryan was in fact the most disruptive learner from this cohort, his “frenetic” disposition jarring with the requirements of the course tutors. When I spoke to him one on one, it was clear that his life and behavioral issues were rooted in complex histories of space and relationships. His father was in prison for a violent crime committed many years ago, leaving him, as he put it, to “protect” his mother, as his brother had now also left home after completing an apprenticeship. As he has fallen in with friends involved in minor criminality, he has become disengaged from both school and his family and was acutely aware of the pain this had caused his mom: “We used to be close . . . she felt like she was losing me.” However, he also recognizes the difficulty of growing up in his council estate: “There are some kids who think they are proper gangsters . . . You’ve gotta . . . present yourself like you’re not bothered if they start on you . . . Nine times out of 10, nothing ever happens.”

As Ryan’s story illustrates, provisional, street-based masculinities present obstacles to the YMCA system but also offer surrogate family support systems through which young people can both express themselves and thrive. As Benny noted, the YMCA offers vital support and emotional scaffolding for the young people as they reach key transitions points from education to employment, providing a buffer against the harsh realities of the job market and a deeper sense of control and agency. Unlike Benny, Kyle has decided he wants to be a plumber and is applying for various courses, and tells me how the Sports Leadership course has helped more generally with his behavior: “You gotta grow up, you’re in the proper world, you gotta proper go for it, it’s not like school . . . Its there, its done, if you do something, you break the law, that’s it.” As he

says the YMCA is “all right,” as it’s “more relaxed, a different environment to school,” where space and identity synchronize, or as he puts it: “At school you have to be, like, a student. Here you can be yourself, where it’s a youth club and that; it’s more of like you can let your hair down, it’s all right.”

These stories illustrate the power of relationships to enable certain masculinities. As Michael Ward and colleagues (2017: 811) have observed, gender is less important than place in fostering secure relationships, as each version of masculinity has its “own local characteristics and consequences, rooted in the histories and traditions of each locality and community.” The belonging framework offers a way of seeing YMCA spaces as components in a lived and imaginative spatial network that structures young men’s lives and gives shape to their aspirations (Farrugia and Wood 2017; Habib and Ward 2019). As I have demonstrated, young people’s interlocked aspirations for the future and sense of emergent manhood are often predicated on new relationships generated in the YMCA spaces rooted in a culture of caring and responsible masculinity. For young people like Kyle and Ryan, YMCA spaces offered respite from their difficulties in school and their neighborhoods, with their peers or with their families. For others, like Benny, the relationships they formed in YMCA spaces offered important anchors for their journey of transformation but were always tenuous and prone to failure. By analyzing these “disjunctive moments” (Ingram 2011), we can more fully understand how places such as the YMCA cultivate forms of spatially bounded belonging which are of increasing value to the neoliberal state.

Conclusion

In this article, I have shown how an analysis rooted in belonging can shed new light on how

masculinities are transformed through organizations such as the YMCA that are based on a caring, responsible masculinity. As moral guardians of a historic form of boyhood rooted in sports-based ideas around teamwork, communication, and physical exertion, YMCA centers themselves are responsible for being part of a youth machinery that prioritizes some forms of youth over others. In this context, white, working-class boys are often stigmatized as emerging through dangerous "landscapes of concern" where their negative impact on the social fabric is translated into geographical coordinates (Reay and Lucey 2000: 410). These dramatic polarizations often play out in enforced spaces such as schools where young people come into regular contact with the state, authority figures, and their peers, creating both a constructed sense of their own class and a powerful imaginative impression of how this relates to place (Ingram 2009; Smyth 2017). However, our understanding of "alternative spaces" such as the YMCA remains limited, even as they operationalize and monetize forms of belonging, occupying imaginative and socioeconomic functions traditionally reserved for state actors.

Moreover, an analysis of the YMCA can reveal some of the sociohistoric processes that have contributed to constructing "youth" as a deterritorialized object of policy and research that impacts how social and moral norms are implemented through organizations operating as youth engagement centers (Smyth 2017). In this context, the "reflective culture" (Kushner 2006; Wignall 2016a) engendered through sport at the YMCA needs to be seen as a choreographed "technology of the body" (Foucault [1979] 2008) that renders young people as "governable" subjects (McGregor and Farrugia 2019: 45). However, the YMCA, unlike in analogous formal educative settings, deliberately generates conflict and confrontation to target behaviors associated with specific, often working-class, masculinities. Moments of conflict and tension become "learning moments" that help realign and recalibrate ideas around ideal masculinity and

more deeply wed individuals into the collective YMCA project. Moreover, as I show, young men classified as NEET are creatively shaping and reshaping their current circumstances, using their embodied sense of space and place as a platform for performing positive forms of masculinity that defy simplistic stereotypes (see also Stahl and Dale 2013; Ward 2015). By analyzing how organizational imperatives create these "disjunctive moments" (Ingram 2011), we can more fully understand how these young men may be "learning their place" in the class hierarchy just as they are learning to feel part of the YMCA family.

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Note

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1. All names of people and locations are pseudonyms