

# **Aspirations of university graduates: an ethnography in New York and Los Angeles**

John Loewenthal

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
of the award of Doctor of Philosophy

by

Oxford Brookes University

First submitted for examination:

September 2020

Student Number: 15095153

Word Count: 99,911



# Abstract

This thesis adopts an anthropological perspective and an ethnographic approach to explore the following research question: ‘What do university graduates aspire to do with their lives, and how are such aspirations produced, negotiated, and revised over time?’. The research examines the aspirations of students and graduates from a prestigious university in New York City. Los Angeles emerged as a popular destination for graduates from this university and so two periods of fieldwork were conducted with graduates there. Data collection lasted 18 months spread over two calendar years (2017-18). The conceptual framework is person-centred and longitudinal, and the prime source of data is semi-structured interviews. The thesis features 16 of the 30 participants involved. Graduates in the study are shown to reckon with the compatibility of finding fulfilment through work and attaining future financial security. There was a tendency to perceive careers in terms of mutually exclusive extremes of either artistic expression or the acquisition of wealth. These patterns in graduate aspirations are characterised by high expectations coupled with an inability to imagine diverse careers. Graduates also conveyed high levels of parental involvement affecting their choices in education and work which resulted in complex entanglements of reciprocity, compliance, conflict, and constraint. The central thrust of the thesis which forms a novel contribution to knowledge is the notion of ‘fateful aspects of aspiration’ which has been theorised and published to conceptualise a closing down of perceived future options. Graduates are shown to feel constrained to certain paths and to ominous expectations of the future through parental pressures, student debts, and the specialisation of degrees. The longitudinal methodology reveals graduate responses to such predicaments. Reveries, regret, rationalisations, perseverance, and the revision of aspirations were means in which graduates reconciled the pasts and futures which they appeared to have and not have. This research makes empirical contributions to the study of graduate aspirations and graduate trajectories and both methodological and theoretical contributions to the conceptualisation of aspiration and the life course.

# Acknowledgements

I would like to extend many thanks to all of the people who have helped me to have such a positive experience over the course of this research. It has been an extremely rewarding journey. Thank you to Oxford Brookes University for funding the research and to all of the participants for their honesty and insights which I will keep considering for the rest of my life. I experienced our conversations in ways that were transformative and truly educational. Thank you to Patrick Alexander, Graham Butt, and Roger Dalrymple for their commitment, illumination, and critical and encouraging feedback. The guidance has shaped not just the thesis but the ways in which I think about writing, research, and putting life into words. Many thanks to Patrick for making the funding and this pathway in my own life possible through his own Fulbright-funded research in New York. I would like to thank the examiners, Annie Haight, Susanne Bregnbæk, and Andrew Irving for agreeing to read the work and for engaging closely with the ideas, providing encouragement, critique, and helpful suggestions (while also awarding the degree outright!). At Oxford Brookes I would additionally like to thank Susannah Wright, Jeremy MacClancy, Louella Matsunaga, Maja Cederberg, Jason Danely, Jane Clark, Marinka Walker, and Jill Organ. In New York I would like to thank John Broughton, Hervé Varenne, Juliette de Wolfe, Suzanne Jenkins, David Kirkland, René Arcilla, Elaine, Mary and Maddy Johnston, and the anthropology colloquium at Teachers College, Columbia University where I first explored these ideas as a Margaret Mead Fellow and master's student. In Mexico City, where I have written this thesis, I would like to thank Alma Maldonado and the post-graduate seminar at the Department of Educational Research at the Centre for Research and Advanced Studies. I would also like to thank Ara, Paco, Fernanda, Joaquin, and Rosita, among others, for the warm environment in which I live. I would like to thank my parents, Del and Jane, for their influence and advice, my broader family of Lucy, Lola, Tom, Sophie, and Sam, and my girlfriend, Jessica Cuapio, for her love and companionship.

This thesis is dedicated to my friend, Kirsty Flanagan (1992-2018). I lived with Kirsty during my final year of undergraduate studies, and she highlighted how the fruits of a good life can be harvested through learning and conversation.

# Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction.....	8
Introduction.....	8
Aspiration and Higher Education in the USA.....	10
New York and Los Angeles.....	13
Key Recent Scholarship.....	15
Aspiration, Education, and Fate in Stories from Stella and Evelyn.....	17
Research Development and Outcomes.....	21
Outline of the Thesis.....	23
Chapter Two: Researching Graduate Aspirations.....	28
Introduction.....	28
Part I: Young People’s Aspirations.....	30
Education, Early Adulthood, and Inequality.....	31
Studying the Aspirations of Individuals.....	34
Aspiration as a Search for Meaning in Life.....	36
Part II: From Higher Education to Work.....	39
A Cultural Drive Towards Work.....	40
Opaque Futures and Elusive Fulfilment.....	42
Cruel Optimism and False Consciousness.....	44
Part III: Socialisation into Aspirations.....	48
Instructing the Future through Schooling and Culture.....	49
Acquiring Entitlement in the Name of Meritocracy.....	53
Parental Influence and Involvement.....	54
Part IV: Conceptual Framework.....	56
A Person-Centred Approach.....	57
Space and Existential Mobility.....	58
The Life Course.....	60
Contingency and Fate.....	62
Emotional Responses to the Past and Future.....	65
Conclusion.....	67
Chapter Three: Methodology.....	70
Introduction.....	70

Part I: Development of the Research.....	72
Specifying the Enquiry .....	72
Inductive Principles, Insights from Grounded Theory, and the Value of an Abductive Approach .....	75
Part II: Overview of the Research .....	78
Audit Trail .....	78
Participants and Recruitment.....	80
Ethics .....	85
Part III: Reflection on the Research Methods.....	86
The Ambiguity of Participant Observation .....	86
Aspiration and Interviews.....	92
The Contextual Production of Data .....	97
Conclusion .....	100
Chapter Four: What do university graduates aspire to do with their lives?.....	102
Introduction.....	102
Part I: Deliberations of Meaningful Futures .....	104
Part II: Graduate Critiques of Working Lives.....	112
Part III: Intrinsic Motivations towards Work .....	119
Part IV: Finding Meaning through Money .....	123
Conclusion .....	129
Chapter Five: Superlative Aspirations and High Expectations at Manhattan University.....	132
Introduction.....	132
Part I: Superlative and Specific Aspirations .....	134
Part II: New York City and Ambition .....	143
Part III: Entitlement.....	147
Part IV: Meritocracy.....	152
Conclusion .....	157
Chapter Six: Parental Influence on Aspirations.....	161
Introduction.....	161
Part I: Parental Attempts to Produce ‘Practical’ and Prestigious Aspirations .....	164
Part II: Parental Attempts to Nurture Artistic Dreams .....	173
Part III: Complexity, Compliance, and a Lack of Control.....	179
Conclusion .....	187
Chapter Seven: Fateful Aspects of Aspiration.....	190
Introduction.....	190

Part I: Pigeonholed and Beholden .....	192
Part II: Revising Aspirations .....	198
Part III: False Hope? .....	206
Conclusion .....	212
Chapter Eight: Conclusion.....	215
Introduction.....	215
Part I: Empirical Findings .....	216
Aspiration .....	217
Education.....	218
Fateful Aspects of Aspiration.....	221
Revising Aspirations.....	222
Empirical Contributions .....	224
Part II: Theoretical Contributions .....	225
Conceptualising the Aspirations of Individuals .....	225
The Ongoing Education Involved in Aspirations.....	227
Fateful Aspects of Aspiration.....	228
The Ambivalence of Prosperity .....	231
Part III: Critical Reflections on the Research.....	232
Methodological Contributions.....	232
Limitations to the study.....	234
Reflexivity .....	236
Cross-Cultural Comparison.....	237
Part IV: Future Directions .....	238
References .....	240

# Chapter One: Introduction

## Introduction

Aspirations, ideas, and occupations have typically been passed on within family and community in the traditional and rural settings that human beings have historically inhabited (Peou and Zinn, 2014). Worldwide, knowledge transfer and the prospects for future actualisation are increasingly delegated to schools and universities (Rhodes, 2001). Universities have been described as ‘the most significant creation of the second millennium’, as gateway to a diversified and specialised knowledge economy (Rhodes, 2001, p. xi). The global number of university students continues to grow exponentially, doubling between 2000 and 2014 to 207 million (UNESCO, 2017 in Bagri, 2017). In tandem with this drive towards further study, there are various issues identified concerning the burgeoning population of university graduates. Higher Education (HE) may discursively promise the prospects of brighter, more mobile, global futures that are better paid and more fulfilling (Black and Walsh, 2019). This discourse is contrasted to the disappointments, disillusionment, labour market struggles, and debts that have been identified among contemporary university graduates (Bregnbæk, 2016; Burke, 2017; Zaloom, 2019; Black and Walsh, 2019). There is much to be gained from an ethnographic view of aspiration at the end of university in order to understand perceptions of the future from graduates’ own perspective. However, the field of qualitative research into graduate aspirations is limited. Finn (2015) calls for: ‘a growth in research on the experience of young adults – men and women – who are moving out of university, to match that of studies of university choice and entry at the undergraduate level’ (p. 156). Pabian (2013) also suggests that there are surprisingly few ethnographic studies of HE. Furthermore, as will be shown, there are different ways of conceptualising aspiration and approaching this topic. There has been a lack of anthropological and existential approaches (e.g.



Bregnbæk, 2016) which get to the meaningful and relational aspects of what people want to do with their lives after formal education.

I have conducted this research on graduate aspirations by drawing upon the disciplinary framework of social anthropology<sup>1</sup>. Durham (2017) has articulated the orientation of anthropological research as pursuing two central lines of enquiry, asking what things ‘mean to people in [a certain] part of the world’, and how that meaning is ‘constructed, contested, and re-created in ever-changing terms and circumstances’ (p. 28). The research question of this thesis echoes the two halves of Durham’s (2017) formulation. I investigate the following research question: ‘What do university graduates aspire to do with their lives, and how are such aspirations produced, negotiated, and revised over time?’. Through this question, I aim to describe and analyse the subject and rationale of graduates’ aspirations (what they aspire to do with their lives, and why). I also aim to interpret the derivation and consequences of these aspirations (how they are produced, negotiated, and revised over time). Varenne (2019, p. 9) suggests that a perennial question that scholars of education have asked is: ‘What should we pay attention to when we wish to write an account of education?’. This thesis is an account of education in two senses. First, I explore the role of HE within the life course of individuals – how does HE attendance affect the aspirations and imagined futures of the participants in the study. Second, I explore the educational processes that shape aspirations over time – how participants learn their aspirations through culture, education, media forms, geography, social class, parental and peer influence, the accrual of debt, and through ongoing revision and reverie. This ecumenical approach develops the ethnography of education which tends to focus more narrowly on what is happening inside of classrooms and educational settings (see Varenne, 2019a). I hence contribute to the theorisation of education writ large as an ongoing process across life (Levinson, 2000; Varenne, 2019a).

I conducted eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork between January 2017 and December 2018 with students and graduates from a university in New York City which I have called

---

<sup>1</sup> I studied social anthropology at undergraduate and master’s level and have been teaching the subject to undergraduates since 2016 and to adults online since 2017 – hence my disciplinary commitment.

Manhattan University (MU). MU is a highly selective private university in Manhattan that attracts a student body from across the United States of America and the world. At the time of this investigation, average fees for an undergraduate programme cost over \$40,000 per year after ‘financial aid’<sup>2</sup>. The university hence attracts affluent families and/or those willing to take on significant debt for their ambitions. I have investigated the aspirations of MU students and graduates who completed bachelor’s or master’s degrees in their early- to mid-twenties. The prime source of data in this thesis is semi-structured interviews with individuals who I followed up with over time. The thesis features data from 16 out of the 30 participants involved. While interviewing participants in New York, they repeatedly mentioned Los Angeles as a popular destination for MU graduates. A central reasoning behind this aspiration was to work in the industries of Hollywood film and television. I thus developed a multi-sited (Marcus, 1995) approach and conducted research trips to Los Angeles in August 2017 and March 2018 to follow the aspirations of MU graduates who had moved across US coasts.

In this chapter I first provide some context on how aspiration and HE may function ideologically in the USA. I then introduce the research contexts of New York City and Los Angeles. I subsequently establish four key recent studies which conceptualise graduate aspirations and human perceptions of the future as relational, situated, and contingent (Bregnbæk, 2016; Zaloom, 2019; Finn, 2015; Irving, 2017). These studies help to theorise the central contribution to knowledge to derive from this thesis of ‘fateful aspects of aspiration’ (Loewenthal, Alexander, and Butt, 2019) in which future horizons appear to be constrained. I then present stories from two MU graduates which exemplify this notion and are also indicative of broader themes that respond to the research question. The penultimate section summarises publications and presentations to derive from the research so far. I then present an outline of the thesis to come.

## Aspiration and Higher Education in the USA

---

<sup>2</sup> ‘Financial aid’ is a system within American HE in which fees are reduced through different combinations of on-campus work, grants, and scholarships based on a student’s circumstances.

Dominguez and Habib (2017) have called for more non-US scholars to conduct anthropological studies in the United States. I hope to offer an outsider perspective, coming from the UK. The USA is an interesting context to study aspiration. The US Declaration of Independence on 4<sup>th</sup> July 1776 announced that American citizens would enjoy 'unalienable Rights' to 'Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness' (US, 1776). 'All men are created equal', expressed the Declaration, which is an ideology that differs from most through human history (Harari, 2015). This founding philosophy forms the basis of the American Dream which can be described as an 'achievement ideology' (MacLeod, 2018). In the context of formal education, a belief is sold to students that through hard work, any person can overcome any disadvantage, even to become President (MacLeod, 2018). This ideology of opportunity and meritocracy runs in stark contrast to the country's history and its ongoing ethnic and social stratification. The Declaration of Independence did not conceptualise Native Americans, African slaves and their descendants, nor women to be included in the equal rights of the land (Harari, 2015). However, despite profoundly unequal opportunity, rhetoric of aspiration remains abundant across the class spectrum of American society (MacLeod, 2018; Alexander, 2019). In the nineteenth Century, Alexis de Tocqueville toured the United States from France and was struck by a personal freedom with which individuals went out into the world and tried to make a future for themselves (1835/2000). Aristocratic Europe was divided clearly into social classes. de Tocqueville (2000) interpreted a greater corresponding acceptance among Europe's inhabitants of the place in society into which they were born. The USA has come to champion an ideology of individual aspiration (MacLeod, 2018) and the country has attained global influence in the reach of its ideas (Ritzer and Stillman, 2003).

The contemporary Western concept of the person is unique in its emphasis on the individual and their responsibility for the outcome of their life (Giddens, 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Eriksen (2004, p. 20) compares this centring on the ego in the West to a hypothetical Indian village where people believe in reincarnation. Children in the village are thought to be reborn from a previous life. They do not grow up to imagine themselves as sovereign individuals but a member of a caste with parameters inscribed into their plausible life course. Most conceptions of the life course throughout human history have been imagined according to a similar view of

fate (Peou and Zinn, 2014; Harari, 2015). Increasingly, what had been ascribed to forces beyond one's control have become channelled into the domain of personal responsibility (Giddens, 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). These developments have been theorised according to what has been called the individualisation thesis. Social institutions that have historically shaped people's lives have splintered and diluted in significance:

People used to be born into traditional societies, as they were into social classes or religions. Today even God himself has to be chosen. And the ubiquitous rule is that, in order to survive the rat race, one has to become active, inventive and resourceful, to develop ideas of one's own, to be faster, nimbler and more creative – not just on one occasion, but constantly, day after day. Individuals become actors, builders, jugglers, stage managers of their own biographies and identities and also of their social links and networks. (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 23)

Individualisation may leave people 'liberated' with freedom to choose and construct their own lives; though this option also burdens human beings with risks and precarity to be taken on personally (Giddens, 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

To make a future for themselves today, young people in the USA are instructed that they must aspire towards HE (Zaloom, 2019), with college framed as 'indispensable' (Deresiewicz, 2014, p. 41). The country is host to more than 4,000 degree-awarding colleges and universities (Moody, 2019), more than anywhere else in the world (Arnett, 2015). A diversity of HE options is a defining feature of the country (Mullen, 2010). Another significant aspect of HE in the US is a system of high university fees that burden students and their families through savings and debts (Zaloom, 2019). The total amount of student debt owed in 2019 was \$1.6 trillion – up 107% in 10 years (Hess, 2019). The average debt owed by a graduating student in 2017 was \$33,000 (Collinge, 2017). There are an estimated 3 million people in the US with over \$100,000 of student debt (Hornsby, 2018). These figures have escalated since the mid-1990s when the nation's student loan organisation, Sallie Mae, became privatised and hence deregulated (Collinge, 2009). Student loans in the US were released from the federal sector (which included consumer protections) and opened to the free market given the amount of money that can be made by rates of interest on a loan (Collinge, 2009). A for-profit and corporate model of HE has developed correspondingly in which institutions may offer credentials at increasing rates (Collinge, 2017). An instrumentalist model of HE has thus developed in which the financial component of further study is delegated

onto individuals as a private investment on the assumption that they will be the beneficiaries (Collinge, 2009; Cappelli, 2020). This view may reduce a university degree to the idea of financial gain for the individual (Cappelli, 2020) and may neglect consideration of universities as a public good (Collini, 2012).

American HE is also interesting to consider from an international perspective. The US attracts the most international students in the world, more than twice the UK, which is second (Barnett *et al.*, 2015). A degree in the US may be the target of the hopes of students and families hoping for subsequent sponsorship to work there, perhaps in the pursuit of the American Dream of a house and a car in an American suburb (Fong, 2011). A US degree may also be imagined symbolically and economically as a status symbol to return to one's home country with (Bregnbæk, 2016; Ma, 2020). The US is an affluent, powerful country that is a source of global influence in the HE sector. Fourteen of the top twenty ranked universities in the world are in the US (Times Higher Education, 2020). As globalisation standardises cultural forms that emanate from centres of power, other countries are faced with pressures to conform in order to globally compete (Ritzer and Stillman, 2006). It is important to study powerful groups and locations from which values are disseminated (Nader, 1972). The US and its leading cities are hence worthy of investigation as sources of global influence and potential indication of future trends elsewhere.

## New York and Los Angeles

This research was conducted in New York City and Los Angeles. These geographically very different metropolises are situated on the East and West coasts of the USA. They are the country's two most populous cities: New York at under 9 million inhabitants, Los Angeles at under 4 million inhabitants. Both cities have global identities and may be perceived as dream destinations (Giovacchini, 2003; Fujita, 2009). Bell and de-Shalit (2011) analyse the 'spirit' of nine contemporary cities. New York, they define, as the city of ambition. New York is a place of perpetual reinvention and a refusal to accept things the way that they were (Irving, 2017). This insatiability may be the very definition of aspiration. Southgate (2012) distinguishes two modes

of being: aspiration versus acceptance. Aspiration is defined as a 'continual striving towards something preferable (though often indefinable) that seems forever just out of reach' (Southgate, 2012, p. ix). Acceptance, by contrast, is viewed as 'contentment by accepting the 'reality' (and so the inevitability) of our situation as it is' (ibid, p. ix). New York, historically and symbolically, is the antithesis of 'acceptance'. The city can be interpreted as a testament to human innovation: 'The skyscrapers of Manhattan seem like deliberate attempts to affirm the mastery of man over nature' (Bell and de-Shalit, 2011, p. 251). It is a city of ambition fuelled by its history of immigration. Through graft, people's own futures and that of the city have been recast in perpetual motion. New York is a future-centred society that has developed in a short number of centuries (Bell and de-Shalit, 2011). The city's ongoing crises and inequalities across the five boroughs are masked through an imaginary of Manhattan that has been marketed as the capital of the world (Greenberg, 2008, p. 44). New York City is branded as a centre of finance, real estate, commerce, entertainment, tourism, shopping, art, music, innovation, Higher Education, and general fantasy and success (Greenberg, 2008). In this thesis I examine how students and their families literally buy into an imaginary of New York via Higher Education.

By incorporating Los Angeles into the research, we obtain a further example of how geography may function in relation to aspirations. From the early stages of research, the name 'LA' kept recurring in the narratives of MU students. For some, it appeared that Los Angeles was imagined as the only alternative to New York. The perceived lure of 'liveability' in both cities has increased following parallel crime epidemics between the late 1960s and the early 1990s (Haller and Beveridge, 2013). New York and Los Angeles are subject of rivalry and comparison with a repeated mention of how different they are (Giovacchini, 2003). Los Angeles is the centre of the nation's film and television industries. This is the key reason for its popularity among MU students and graduates. (Nonetheless, others who were interviewed grew up there and were returning to engage in pursuits unrelated to entertainment.) There is a mythology in the United States of 'heading West' to new frontiers, exemplified by the mass migrations to California during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century gold rush. The presence of graduates in Los Angeles, trying to make it in the Hollywood industries, may be interpreted according to a similar 'West-bound' aspirational mythology. Giovacchini (2003) writes how most people encounter Hollywood through mythology before and

often instead of through geography. Hollywood is a source of cultural power that resonates from the United States around the world. The industries of Hollywood constitute a 'dream factory' that engineer stories of aspiration and the American Dream (Powdermaker, 1951). The spirit of Los Angeles remains closely tied to the realm of fantasy (Giovacchini, 2003). Both cities, therefore, represent rich contexts to explore the contemporary aspirations and dreams of university graduates.

## Key Recent Scholarship

To establish the empirical and theoretical orientation of this thesis I here introduce four key texts upon which this research builds. A much fuller discussion of existing enquiry takes places in the following chapter. Bregnbæk (2016) conducted an ethnography of undergraduate and post-graduate students at the two top universities in Beijing, China. Despite being the 'lucky few' who had climbed to the top of a gruelling education system, students were faced with 'great expectations' and senses of dilemma (p. 8). The participants are products of China's one-child policy who inherit a Confucian cultural ideal of filial piety. They are shown to wrestle with senses of obligation towards their parents, which seemed incompatible with desires to make a life of their own. Bregnbæk (2016) interprets a process of coming into one's own as an adult through a tension between honouring and also challenging parents. She develops the notion of *aporias* – unresolvable moral dilemmas – in which no resolution is foreseeable. For example, self-actualisation through a life in Beijing or abroad is shown to be incompatible with providing in-person care as parents age and die in the Chinese countryside. Through the layers of complexity to people's relationships and locations, her interlocutors are constrained by demands which they cannot escape nor satisfy. This sense of constraint, even in apparently fortunate circumstances, indicates a theme of ambivalent prosperity that echoes across this thesis.

Another important contribution has been made by Zaloom's (2019) ethnography on the social effects of paying for college in the USA. Over four years of research, Zaloom (2019) engaged with both students and their parents as they navigated towards and through HE – including students

who graduated and others who did not. A child's college attendance is shown to be the pinnacle of many parental aspirations nurtured over years, even saving from a child's infancy. Parents in the study took on financial loans to help pay for their child's university education, which tended to compound their already indebted circumstances. Zaloom (2019), like Bregnbæk (2016), draws on Mauss's (1934) theory of reciprocity which states that a gift invokes a sense of indebtedness in the recipient. Financial debts incurred by parents are shown to generate social indebtedness from their offspring which in turn structured the nature of family relatedness. This entanglement was imagined by some families to last entire lifetimes, hence fundamentally undermining the hope that HE may engender independence for ageing parents and their adult children.

Finn (2015) conducted a qualitative longitudinal study of young women from a town in Northern England as they traversed through and beyond HE. Finn (2015) correspondingly pioneers a relational approach to the study of graduate transitions. Relationships with people, places, and institutions are shown to frame students' and graduates' understandings of their own futures. Decisions and aspirations were co-ordinated in tune with these relationships. Over time, these individuals navigated changes, generating new conditions which, in turn, affected outlooks on the future. Finn (2015) is thus able to theorise the significance of contingency to aspiration. Similar insights are gained from Irving's (2017) ethnography conducted over twenty years on the shifting perceptions of persons diagnosed with HIV/AIDS living in New York City. While the predicaments of these individuals differ to those of university graduates, the theoretical contributions from Irving's (2017) ethnography have been salient in informing the present study, as elaborated in the conceptual framing in the following chapter. The research of both Finn (2015) and Irving (2017) contribute the key insight that perceptions of the future may be contingent on a range of intersecting factors. This contingency may be experienced as constraining or immovable – such as through family obligations (Bregnbæk, 2016), degree specialisation (Finn, 2015), or debt (Zaloom, 2019) – as evidenced in my own research.



# Aspiration, Education, and Fate in Stories from Stella and Evelyn

A central theoretical driver of this thesis is the notion of ‘fateful aspects of aspiration’ which I have theorised (Loewenthal, Alexander, and Butt, 2019) to represent deterministic forces acting upon graduates’ futures. Fateful aspects of aspiration are shown to derive from expectation, from family pressure, from degree specialisation, and from debt. To give a sense of how these findings are apparent in the data, and to demonstrate other lines of argument that are pursued in this thesis, I now present stories from two participants in the study. Stella and Evelyn<sup>3</sup> are MU graduates who aspire to be actors. Evelyn had moved to New York from Arizona and has remained there as a graduate; meanwhile, Stella has traversed the country in the other direction and moved as a graduate from New York to Los Angeles. In the data that follows, we see an early indication of what graduates aspired to do with their lives. We also see how these aspirations were produced, negotiated, and revised over time. A central tension appears regarding a perceived lack of control. This imposition which I term ‘fateful’ derived from different sources. In Stella’s case, it was the weight of a future that had been made available for her that was not of her own choosing. For Evelyn, it was the mutually attained dream of studying what she wants, supported by her parents, that has led to debts and a sense of feeling trapped.

Sat in her living room in Los Angeles, Stella enumerated internships that had been organised for her. However, she emphasised that despite the apparent privilege, she had lacked a sense of authorship over her own life:

I mean here's the thing, I've interned at the Senate, I've interned at [a television show], I've interned at the Mayor's office, which was like a nine to five internship. I remember being at City Hall in New York and going to the bathroom and going to wash my hands and looking up and seeing myself in my suit. And, you know, City Hall in New York is beautiful, beautiful office building, in my fucking outfit – and I was *so* miserable. And I remember looking at the suit and thinking, '*this is just a fucking costume.*' And I mean, I quit that internship and spiralled out of control for a while which culminated in me going to rehab. But just to be candid, and this is

---

<sup>3</sup> All names have been changed for anonymity.

anonymous, there were suicidal tendencies. I mean I hate this cos it's dramatic, but it's the fucking truth. It was a matter of life or death. [*starting to cry*] It really was. So, yeah, [my extended family] can go fuck themselves, because if they don't get that, they just don't get that. And I can't make them. I can't make them live that experience of what it was like for me to be in my apartment in New York with this prestigious internship and wanting to fucking kill myself.

Stella describes the splendour of her surroundings during an internship at 'City Hall' and contrasts this to how miserable she felt. Stella could not embody her 'costume' of a suit and rejected the present and implied future which the internship entailed. She even describes thoughts of ending her life as a means of escape from what seemed an imposition of futures that she was not moved by.

Stella continued, presenting a narrative of turning to acting as though an existential necessity:

I found that the strongest voices came from artists and creative people. And that's what I aspire to. And I wasn't really sure how. And in my self-consciousness, I think that I was too scared to admit how I wanted to go about that. Because wanting to be an actor, writer, or performer has that inherent sense of '*Hey! I've got something to say. And I think it's worth people listening to.*' And I think when I was 19, 20, like, that was really scary to me, it felt self-important and uncomfortable. And I was thinking I would do more of this supporting aspect of other people being able to achieve that. And it came to just, you know, a meltdown, really, saying '*I'm never going to be happy until I'm pursuing this availability.*' ... And that very much came from a place of, you know, I could – not I could – I am going to die. It could be soon. I don't want to spend my life adhering to the expectations of other people. Because I did that. And what happened? I ended up doing a lot of drugs, drinking a lot, and putting out cigarettes on myself. But like, '*Oh, but I had a fucking prestigious internship, and like a 3.7 [Grade Point Average] at MU.*' Like, who fucking cares? To some people that matters. But – and it's one of those things where on the outside it looks really nice and cool and pleasant. And for someone else, maybe that's great and maybe that's enough. And it's not so much that it was either, like, enough or not enough for me, but just the fact that it just wasn't what I wanted.

Stella invokes the adage that you only live once. Recognition of mortality is instrumentalised as rationale to focus on what she considers to be important. Stella's remarks raise a theme about value. A prestigious internship and good grades were perceived psychologically not according to their societal worth. Though effectively valuable to have such qualifications, they were not affectively experienced as such. She responded to this life by self-harming and sedating herself with alcohol and drugs. Stella took a year of absence soon after quitting her internship at City Hall. She returned to her studies under the premise that she has been saved by doing something

that is self-directed. The importance which Stella ascribed to doing something that she ‘wanted’ to do exemplifies a theme that echoes across this research.

Evelyn’s story also speaks of how meaningful it was for many MU graduates to pursue aspirations that ignited an internal sense of excitement. Unlike Stella’s conflict, Evelyn presents a harmonious view of her and her parents mutually forming her acting dreams. Her mother successfully auditioned her for three television commercials while she was still a baby. Below, Evelyn gives an insight into further educational processes that led to her pursuing HE as she did:

**Evelyn:** I think I was in, like, seventh or eighth grade, something like that. And I saw my sister in a play. I was like, ‘*I want to be in a play. I want to do whatever my sister does.*’ So, I started acting and doing that more than dancing. And I just really fell in love with it. And pretty much ever since, like, seventh, eighth grade, I’ve been, like, ‘*this is what I want to do.*’ And then sophomore year of high school, I was like, ‘*I want to go to MU! I want to figure out what I could do to get there.*’

**JL:** Sophomore year of high school?

**Evelyn:** Yeah. So, like, 16, 15.

**JL:** All the way from Arizona? Wow! How did that get into your head?

**Evelyn:** I watched *Gossip Girl*, the TV show. And they all went to MU. And I was like, ‘*that was cool.*’

We here see the role of epistemology in enabling what kinds of futures were knowable to Evelyn. At first, she describes seeing her older sister in a play and a subsequent desire to emulate her. Evelyn then moved all the way across the United States inspired at first by a fictional series on television. Media forms complicate the theorisation of geography due to the erosion of physical boundaries and the simulation of other places (factual, fictional, or fantasy) through a screen. The conduits according to which Evelyn was able to imagine a future and commit to aspirations accordingly were mediated through this virtual realm of media.

Evelyn studied to become an actor at MU. She was also accepted to other universities, including one that offered her a half-scholarship. However, her parents supported her decision to attend her ‘dream school’. To fund her undergraduate degree her parents have withdrawn \$280,000 of loans. As a graduate Evelyn has around \$30,000 in personal debt. Evelyn and I first met in May 2017 around the time of her graduation. By October 2018, Evelyn’s aspirations had lost the innocence they had as a teenager. She and I were sitting on a bench in Harlem (New York City)

after attending her Sunday church service together. She wondered what she had done to put herself in a situation where she has no 'choice but to succeed':

There's a lot of times that I'm like, '*did I make the right decision?*'. I studied Acting, and I am in buckets of debt. So, there's lots of times where I'm like, '*wow, I really made a mistake. What have I done?*' There's been a lot of that recently, where I was like, '*what did I do? Like, this is insane. I have all of this debt and I have nothing to show for it.*' I feel like I can't get, like, a normal job because I didn't do, like, twelve internships about marketing or whatever, accounting or whatever people – I don't know what people do. I don't have a bunch of internships in offices. So, I feel like I can't get jobs like that. And I feel like I need to, like, be an actor. But like, breaking into the industry is really hard. I'm not really good at, like, marketing myself, what's it called – like, self-promotion when you, like, mingle with people – networking! I'm not good at networking. I'm, like, good in that I can talk to someone, but I don't wanna, like, force myself on someone. So, there's a lot of times that I'm like, '*what am I doing with my life? What have I done to put myself in this kind of debt where I feel like I'm really trapped.*' And I can't, like, do a lot of other things. I really have to, like, do acting and be good at it, or I'm not gonna, like, get out of this hole. I can't like travel or like, go to grad school or like do really anything because I kind of, like, put myself in this place where I really have to just start acting and then do well and make money. But I do – I had a really great experience. I really wouldn't trade it. I met a lot of really great people. So, it's worth it. *But* there's a lot of times where I'm like '*I don't know what I've done with my life.*' I've basically made it impossible for me to, like, do anything besides succeed at this point. Just a little daunting.

Evelyn reflects upon the repercussions of her former decisions to specialise as she did. Evelyn is in her early twenties and holds a prestigious degree. These attributes might suggest that she has a range of opportunities at her feet. However, the future did not appear as such. Evelyn already felt that the future had narrowed in front of her. She perceives herself as worthless in other career paths, lacking a foundational training or demonstration of prior experience. Evelyn provides insights into the culture of Manhattan University students: embarked on multiple internships as though they are vital. In contrast to the career options being imposed in Stella's remarks above, Evelyn appears beholden to her 'dream' and the outcomes of attending her 'dream school'. While she does not mention her parents here, they often enquire (Chapter Six) if she is "famous yet", which provoke in Evelyn senses of expectation and obligation. She therefore feels that she must nail her colours to the mast and sail on in the direction that she originally set out.

These examples indicate key arguments to develop from the research. It is hoped that these stories show the value gained from studying aspirations over time (Finn, 2015). We see the ways

in which aspirations develop relationally, often through diverse forms of parental involvement (Finn, 2015; Bregnbæk, 2016, Zaloom, 2019). Pathways towards the future authored externally might be experienced antagonistically, or as we later see, fatalistically, as an imposition that a graduate complies with. This research also demonstrates how aspirations may convert through HE from the hypothetical world of potentiality into a binding sense of feeling pigeonholed into a certain future. Affixed by social expectations and the financial consequences of student debt, graduates may perceive themselves to be tethered to their former decisions. Perceived senses of fixity may run in tension with human desires and requirements to grow, develop, adapt, and explore (Bateson, 1989). The notion of ‘fateful aspects of aspiration’ has been developed as a novel contribution to conceptualising these dynamics.

## Research Development and Outcomes

Before moving on to outline the structure of the thesis, I first present some context on how the research has come about. In the autumn of 2014, I applied to a PhD Studentship at Oxford Brookes University entitled ‘*Urban Futures: Aspiration, Inequality, and Transitions to Adulthood among Young People in London and New York City*’. I had just begun a master’s degree in Anthropology and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University in New York City that was facilitated through a Margaret Mead Fellowship and an International Scholarship. After being awarded the PhD Studentship in December 2014, to commence in October 2015, I used the remainder of my classes and time in New York to develop ideas for the research project. For my master’s dissertation (Loewenthal, 2015a), I conducted a pilot study through an organisation that facilitates out-of-school opportunities for adolescents from low-income neighbourhoods in New York City. I got to know a group of adolescents of African and Caribbean parentage and explored their aspirations in terms of world travel. I have published analysis of what these youths’ travel imaginaries may mean with regards to the concept of belonging (Loewenthal and Broughton, 2019). While writing up and reflecting on this exploratory study, I developed and modified the doctoral research design. I chose to study the aspirations of university graduates and to focus on

New York City (excluding a London comparison). I was able to obtain affiliation with MU and decided to study the aspirations of students from there. Further rationale for these decisions is presented in Chapter Three.

Published outcomes of the research so far are an article on the notion of fateful aspects of aspiration which featured in the journal *International Studies in Sociology of Education* (Loewenthal, Alexander and Butt, 2019), a captioned photograph in the journal *North American Dialogue*<sup>4</sup> on the themes of solitude and loneliness among Manhattan University graduates (Loewenthal, 2017d), a chapter in the book, *Youth, Place and Theories of Belonging* deriving from the pilot study (Loewenthal and Broughton, 2019), and reviews of two books that were influential (Irving, 2017; Arum and Roksa, 2014) that featured in *Anthropology & Aging* (Loewenthal, 2018a) and *Educational Review* (Loewenthal, 2019). I have also co-authored an entry entitled 'Youth Culture' that featured in the *SAGE Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood Studies* (Broughton and Loewenthal, 2020). During the PhD, I also spent 18 months as a research assistant on the *Urban-Rural Youth Transitions* project. I conducted qualitative data collection and analysis among school leavers across in the UK (in 2016) and ran a monthly blog relating emerging findings to current affairs. An article on the theme of uncertainty has recently been published in the *Journal of Youth Studies* (Alexander, Loewenthal and Butt, 2019).

Presentations of the developing research proposal for the PhD were given at Oxford Brookes University (*The Royal Anthropological Association Student Conference* 2016 and to a seminar at the School of Education) as well as at the universities of Roehampton (*Becoming a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Graduate conference*), Bristol (*Graduate School of Education Annual Doctoral Conference*), and Warwick (*Inequality and Social Justice in Education: graduate seminar series*). Emerging findings from the research were then presented at the *Society for Psychological Anthropology Biennial Meetings* 2017 in New Orleans, at the *American Anthropological Association Annual Meetings* 2017 in Washington DC, at a conference on *Materialities and Mobilities in Education* at the University of Oxford, at the *Humanities and Social Sciences Research Conference* 2018 at Oxford Brookes University, to a master's seminar on Youth Culture by invitation at Teachers College,

---

<sup>4</sup> This journal has since changed its name to *Journal for the Anthropology of North America*.

Columbia University, at the *Association of Social Anthropologists Annual Conference 2018* at the University of Oxford (in a panel entitled *Temporalities of Work, Money, and Fantasy* which I co-organised), at the *Third Conference on Anthropology and Education* at Teachers College, Columbia University, and to a seminar at the Department of Educational Research, CINVESTAV<sup>5</sup> in Mexico City. These presentations were opportunities to develop the analysis of the data and to share emerging arguments. However, I have written this thesis subsequent to these presentations and there are new insights from the writing process that inform significantly the structure of the argument that follows.

## Outline of the Thesis

This thesis contains eight chapters. In Chapter Two, 'Researching Graduate Aspirations', I introduce research and theory that helps to contextualise and frame the analysis of the subsequent data. There are four sections: young people's aspirations; from Higher Education to work; socialisation into aspirations; and a conceptual framework. At first, the term aspiration is introduced in relation to education, young adulthood, and the theme of inequality. I discuss how aspiration can accordingly be viewed from a structural perspective in terms of opportunity. However, I make the case to instead explore the subject of individual people's aspirations: what they aspire to do with their lives. I then conceptualise aspiration as a promising line of enquiry into people's search for meaning in life. The second section examines perspectives on transitions from HE to work. I first look at a cultural impulse towards work, imagined as a site of adult identity construction and fulfilment. I then address contrasting evidence that young people struggle to envisage future work options and struggle to attain fulfilment in work. This theme of contradiction is elaborated through discussion of the notions of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011) as it pertains to HE and 'false consciousness' with regards to work. The third section concerns processes of socialisation into aspirations. I show how aspirations are fundamentally cultural in

---

<sup>5</sup> The Centre for Research and Advanced Study of the National Polytechnic Institute

nature and may be instructed through disciplinary forces such as schooling and family and acquired in various ways through media. I then discuss how elite education may impart senses of entitlement and how students may learn to legitimize high expectations through discourses of meritocracy. Subsequently, I consider different forms of parental involvement and how these may influence how graduates see the future. The fourth part of the chapter presents a conceptual framework that I have developed to articulate the research themes. I first develop a person-centred approach which zooms into the temporalities and interiorities of individual lives (Irving, 2017; Strauss, 2006). I then locate aspiration in relation to space and the notion of existential mobility (Hage, 2005). I introduce theory about the life course and situate aspiration in relation to ageing and mortality. The notions of contingency and fate are then established as means of conceptualising how lives may be directed and constrained through factors that are both inherited and emergent. I introduce the notion of fateful aspects of aspiration (Loewenthal, Alexander, and Butt, 2019) and present examples of such themes evident in contemporary research on graduates (Bregnbæk, 2016; Finn, 2015). Finally, a dynamic life course perspective is developed, concerning people's emotive engagements with their pasts and futures.

In Chapter Three, 'Methodology', I first discuss the research design including rationales for certain foci. I then consider the inductive principles that guided the research and present insights from grounded theory, including possible strengths and weaknesses of an open-ended approach. Ultimately, I endorse an 'abductive' approach that fortifies an ethnographic openness to alterity with a sense of direction (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). I then provide an audit trail of what was done in the research and introduce the participants, including a discussion of how to conceptualise them demographically in terms of social class and categories. I also discuss participant recruitment and ethical considerations. Subsequently, I consider the comparative strengths and weaknesses of the research methods of participant observation and interviews as means of studying aspiration. While various tacit insights were gained from the participant observation component of the research – from experience, from anecdotes, and from observations – these forms of data have proven difficult to articulate as evidence to form a thesis. The central source of data in the thesis is recorded interviews with individuals who I followed up with over time. This method had the capacity to access diverse themes and temporalities of



participants' lives in their own words. The extent of verbatim material has allowed for a nuanced subsequent analysis that goes deeper than what I was able to ascertain 'in the moment'. I finally consider how different aspects of the interview methodology may have produced different kinds of interactions and hence data and I emphasise the utility of a longitudinal approach.

Chapters Four, Five, Six, and Seven present data and analysis that answer the four parts of the research question: 'What do university graduates aspire to do with their lives, and how are such aspirations produced, negotiated, and revised over time?'. This question is answered across Chapters Four to Seven and then synthesised in the Conclusion. The aim is for an argument to progress across the chapters. The central contribution to knowledge of fateful aspects of aspiration culminates in Chapters Six and Seven. However, the contributions of the chapters are further reaching than this central notion.

Chapter Four, 'What do university graduates aspire to do with their lives?', explores participants' attitudes towards work, meaning, money, and the life course. I first consider examples of how graduates deliberated over what makes for a meaningful future and how their aspirations centred on the realm of work. There was a recurrent tension between the prospects of attaining fulfilment or financial security, which were often imagined as incompatible. I consider graduate critiques of working lives in relation to alienation (Marx and Engels, 1932/1998) and materialism (Kasser, 2002; de Botton, 2005). The modal aspiration among the participants in the study was towards work which they were intrinsically motivated towards. I consider some of these rationales to be involved in one's work and to be excited by it. However, such aspirations were towards uncertain and precarious fields, were financially supported by parents, and were often abstract in nature. In the final section, I present a counter-perspective on the meanings which some graduates ascribed to money. The power of an income was deemed to enable the imagination of the future.

Chapter Five, 'Superlative Aspirations and High Expectations at Manhattan University', examines patterns in MU graduates' aspirations and explores how these may have been produced. Aspirations were frequently 'superlative' – orienting towards the sublime – and iterated according to a narrow range of possible trajectories in either entertainment or finance, or else a

post-graduate degree. I introduce the lens of epistemology to suggest how a specific range of futures were rendered visible, with other options not knowable. I continue this discussion through a look at the role of space – and New York City in particular – in cultivating students' ambitions. To interpret the high expectations of MU graduates, I then assess the notions of entitlement and meritocracy. There is evidence that MU students and graduates saw themselves as above various kinds of work and had embodied a sense of superiority. However, I suggest that they articulated this sense of entitlement through meritocratic ideas of deserving success by virtue of their institutional status, their hard work, and the amount of money spent on education. The chapter concludes by reiterating the high expectations that were pervasive across the study.

Chapter Six, 'Parental Influence on Aspirations', investigates graduate perceptions of their parents' involvement in the construction of their own futures. Parents are shown to be fundamental (though often hidden) in structuring graduates' opportunities and aspirations. I introduce the term 'vicarious career anxiety' to describe a phenomenon where parents imaginatively inhabited their children's futures and correspondingly exerted themselves in their children's lives. I present two contrasting modes of parenting that recurred in the data. Some parents tried to produce aspirations towards 'practical' subjects and prestigious career paths by expressing concern or disparagement towards others. A contrasting version of parenting appeared to nurture a child's artistic talents and to try facilitating their dreams in HE and beyond. Across these dynamics, themes of reciprocity and expectation oblige graduates to honour parental hopes. This chapter hence illustrates elements of fateful aspects of aspiration, which I exemplify in the final section. Some graduates struggled to disentangle themselves from their parents (cf. Bregnbæk, 2016) as was reflected through indications of cognitive dissonance and compliance. At its most extreme, there are thoughts of suicide and murderous rage in response to lacking a sense of control over one's life.

Chapter Seven, 'Fateful Aspects of Aspiration', develops the central theoretical focus of the thesis through examples of graduates' feeling constrained to paths as a result of their studies. I describe fateful aspects of aspiration in terms of either being pigeonholed into specialisations or feeling beholden to debts and expectations. A further fatefulness is indicated by a sense of being compelled towards a competitive working future. I then consider how graduates revised their

aspirations, often in relation to others. The influence of peers and social media provoked senses of missing out in comparison to the many other lives that graduates could apparently be living. I consider different means in which graduates reconciled their (lost) pasts, presents, and futures, from counter-factual reveries of ‘what if’ they had done things differently, to rationalisations of a chosen path, to a change in route. The capacity to change path was shown to be contingent on a lack of student debt, highlighting the significance of this financial variable in how fateful or flexible the future seemed. In the final section, I consider the theme of perseverance with aspirations and whether such hopes may prove rewarding or illusory. MU graduates in Los Angeles pointed to symbolic aspects of its geography – as a land of persistence and possibility – as a source that enables aspirations to persist indefinitely even in the absence of success. Post-graduate study is also raised as a means through which graduates revised their aspirations and reinvested in hope, though which also threatened to compound fateful aspects of aspiration. I suggest how the notion of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011) may help to theorise the contradictory consequences of HE in opening the future up, while potentially weighing it down.

In Chapter Eight, ‘Conclusion’, I first summarise the empirical findings through a synthesis of how the research question was answered across the thesis. I situate these empirical findings in relation to other studies and suggest their possible implications. I then develop four theoretical contributions to come from the research, concerning: the conceptualisation of the aspirations of individuals, the educational processes that shape aspirations, the notion of fateful aspects of aspiration, and the theme of ambivalent prosperity. I then highlight the methodological contributions of the study and discuss critical reflections. Finally, I suggest future directions.

# Chapter Two: Researching Graduate Aspirations

## Introduction

In this chapter, I review research and theory which help to contextualise and elaborate on the data that was gathered. Through the research process, I have arrived at the question: ‘What do university graduates aspire to do with their lives, and how are such aspirations produced, negotiated, and revised over time?’. This chapter presents perspectives which help to explore this question, and which locate the thesis within the literature. I have drawn on material that is relevant to the context studied in the USA, though which engages themes of cross-cultural and global relevance. While there is a focus on university graduates, much of the material is further reaching. The chapter is sociological and anthropological in nature, depicting the social structures through which individuals navigate education and society and establishing tools through which to conduct qualitative research on aspiration. There are four sections: Part I: young people’s aspirations; Part II: from Higher Education to work; Part III: socialisation into aspirations; and Part IV: a conceptual framework which includes an introduction to the notion of ‘fateful aspects of aspiration’ (Loewenthal, Alexander, and Butt, 2019).

In Part I, ‘young people’s aspirations’, I introduce the study of futurity as a developing field of enquiry and one that is highly congruent with the study of youth. I first consider how aspiration may be understood in relation to education, early adulthood, and inequality. A corresponding structural approach may view aspiration in relation to macro factors such as capital, social reproduction, and social mobility. I make the case that meanings of ‘aspiration’ may be under-theorised if young people’s futures are reduced to differential opportunity. I argue instead to look at the subject of individual people’s aspirations – what they aspire to do with their lives. This approach opens an exciting avenue of conceptualising aspiration as people’s search for meaning

in life. However, I also note a contrast between possible utopian dreaming (Bregnbæk, 2018) and a less euphoric sense of lacking passions or known goals (Mathews, 1996). In Part II, 'from Higher Education to work', I respond to the empirical findings from this research that Manhattan University (MU) graduates centred their aspirations on work and a career. I first examine how a drive towards self-actualisation and adult identity through work may be culturally and historically produced (Taylor, 1991; de Botton, 2010; Taylor, 1991) and may relate to gender and social class (Rao, 2020; Damaske, 2011). I then contrast this drive towards work with evidence of how difficult it is for many young people to imagine the future and to see themselves in different types of work (Archer, 2010; Gershon, 2015; Alexander, 2019). I also note how pervasively hopes for work-place fulfilment are unmet (Terkel, 1985; de Botton, 2010; Graeber, 2018). The final section elaborates on the theme of contradiction. I introduce the themes of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011) with regards to HE and false consciousness (Moore, 2011) with regards to work as tools to explain widespread senses of compromised conditions in fields that are hoped to be a source of achievement.

In Part III, 'socialisation into aspirations', I make the case that educational processes passed down from culture, society, and parents regarding how to behave and aspire in the future are core themes of anthropological enquiry (Levinson, 2000). I first situate ideas and aspirations as products of culture and social entanglement (Appadurai, 2004; Harari, 2015). I look at schooling and childhood socialisation as means of disciplining future-gazing. Media and popular culture are also considered to have disciplinary components (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997; Powdermaker, 1951), while also equipping young people with tools to imagine the future (Caughey, 1984; Mendick *et al*, 2018). Subsequently, I look at how senses of entitlement may be learned through education and social class, and how students may legitimise a sense of superiority through discourses of meritocracy (Khan, 2011; Markovitz, 2019). I then look at how parental influence and involvement may be ongoing into a child's adulthood (Tannen, 2001) and may form a key duel in a young person's coming of age (Bregnbæk, 2016). I consider the possible significance of social class, migration, and culture in affecting the rationale and extent of parental involvement. In Part IV, I develop a conceptual framework for studying aspirations. I first demonstrate the power of looking at individual lives in their complexity (Irving, 2017) and substantiate a person-

centred approach (Strauss, 2006). A key theme framing this thesis is the significance of contingent variables that make up a life. I hence consider the contingent nature of space (Finn, 2015) and themes of escape (Fong, 2011; Bregnbæk, 2018; O'Reilly and Benson, 2011) and 'existential mobility' regarding where one feels one is going with one's life (Hage, 2005). The themes of the life course, ageing, and mortality are then raised as contexts in which aspirations are set (Irving, 2017; Becker, 1997). I then introduce the theme of fate which has emerged as a useful means of conceptualising the longitudinal experience of aspirations. I consider the 'fatefulness of culture' (Varenne and Koyama, 2011) regarding the power of norms in determining the lives and destinies of human beings. There is discussion of irrevocable decisions that takes a person's life in a certain way, theorised by Giddens (1991) as 'fateful moments.' Here, the groundwork is laid for the notion of 'fateful aspects of aspiration' (Loewenthal, Alexander, and Butt, 2019) that drives the theoretical framing of the thesis and that forms a novel contribution to the study of graduate aspirations. This discussion is elaborated with examples of graduates whose aspirations are deemed to have fateful components (Bregnbæk, 2016; Finn, 2015). A final discussion develops a dynamic life course perspective regarding human beings' emotive reckonings with their pasts and futures. I discuss the theme of educational regret (Roese and Summerville, 2005) and introduce the notion of hauntology (Fischer, 2014). Within the context of 'fate', I recognise the agency of individuals and the ongoing processes of learning that make up human lives (Varenne, 2019a).

## Part I: Young People's Aspirations

Appadurai (2013, p. 286) argues that aspiration, anticipation, and imagination exist 'at the centre of cultural activity'. He suggests that such future-oriented themes are considered insufficiently in social research. Anthropology has tended to focus on the reproduction of the past through such notions as tradition, custom, heritage, culture, and habit. Even practice theory, it is argued (Appadurai, 2004; 2013), concerns the mediation of structure and agency in the present and the

ways in which self and society co-produce and reproduce each other within the present. Appadurai (2004; 2013) thus orients enquiry towards the future, particularly towards people's quotidian engagements with possibility. Pink and Salazar (2017) similarly introduce an edited collection on *Anthropologies and Futures* by emphasising the 'multiplicity of futures and modes of future thinking' that human beings are engaged with (p. 5). There is an affinity between the study of young people's lives and the study of futurity. In their plasticity and their liminal status between childhood and adulthood, youth are at the vanguard of social change, pioneering new cultural forms, and imagining new futures (Salemink, Bregnbæk, and Hirslund, 2018). I have arrived at the notion of 'aspiration' as the most appropriate means through which to research young people's futures. Aspiration can be addressed across various scales from policy and governance, to discourses and ideology, to schools, parents, and individuals. Below, I rationalise the approach that has been taken in this research.

## Education, Early Adulthood, and Inequality

Young people's aspirations are mediated by institutions, by their age and life stage, and by socio-economic and geo-political circumstance. Stambach (2017) introduces an edited collection on *Anthropological Perspectives on Student Futures* by arguing that education is an 'arena through which people express their hopes and aspirations' (p. 5). Education is also a context in which young people 'must work out their lives' (Strathern, 2008, p. 11). Through mass compulsory education, young people must engage in a process of self-making in relation to both schooling in the present and a simultaneous reckoning of the future (Alexander, 2020). Schools socialise age as a fundamental and yet transitory aspect of social identity (Alexander, 2020). Higher Education (HE) has altered experiences of age and postponed the adoption of roles that have been typically associated with adulthood. Durham (2017) cautions against a nostalgia for 'invented traditions' (Hobsbawm, 1983) of adulthood, though notes that objective social markers that have defined maturity in former generations are increasingly elusive across national contexts. In the US, Arnett (2015) characterises a historically new period of youth from the late teens to mid- to late-twenties that involves a relative moratorium on adult responsibility. This generational pattern

has been described as 'emerging adulthood' and is defined through five principal features: identity explorations; instability; self-focus; in-between-ness; and possibility. Arnett (2015) describes four historical shifts at the heart of these changes. These are: the rise of post-secondary education to facilitate a more technologically advanced workforce; changing gender expectations that have oriented women from domesticity into work; sexual freedoms in which love and sex have ceased to be so strictly or quickly sedimented into marriage; and a youth movement which has celebrated a cultural construction of freedom. Issues may, indeed, be taken with the universality of this 'emerging adulthood' paradigm and its trans-societal applicability. Many adolescents in urban working-class or else rural environments follow a more direct pathway into adulthood, including pregnancy and work (Broughton and Loewenthal, 2020). There are also distinctions to be made between delayed transitions, such as Arnett (2015) suggests, and adulthoods that seem to never arise. In the US, unable to attain such tropes as financial independence, stable work, or a home of their own, many people are forced to navigate an 'elusive adulthood' through their 20s, 30s, and beyond (Durham, 2017)

With the parameters of young adulthood stretching, parent-child relations have reconfigured, also. There has been a trend of extended parental involvement and dependence which has resulted in the perpetuation of inequality. Arum and Roksa (2014) conducted a mixed methods sociological study of 1,600 final year undergraduates across twenty-five colleges in the United States. They followed approximately 1,000 in the first two years after graduation and found that 24% of graduates were living at home with parents and 74% were still receiving financial assistance (p. 119). This significant level of financial involvement leads to various inequalities which undermine the equalising ideals of HE. As Arum and Roksa (2014) note:

Families' differential abilities to assist their children create vastly different starting points for young adults, which are likely to influence their overall socioeconomic trajectories and thus have notable consequences for social inequality over the life course. (p. 92)

Examples of financial support include money towards accommodation or post-graduate course fees (Arum and Roksa, 2014; Bathmaker et al, 2016). Underlying differences in social class background may hence affect transitions into, through, and after HE (Bathmaker *et al*, 2016).



In response to such inequalities, the study of aspiration can be viewed at a structural level in terms of opportunity, social reproduction, and social mobility. Worldwide, education plays an oxymoronic role: imagined as the source of hope that will enable young people to make the most out of their lives, regardless of background, as well as the chief site through which elite groups attempt to reproduce themselves (Maxwell and Aggleton, 2015). Young people's transitions to adulthood are mediated by different access to forms of capital – such as economic, social, and cultural – which may be passed on inter-generationally and may convert into each other (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Such differences fundamentally shape the politics of possibility (Stambach, 2017). Scholars accordingly critique a neoliberal ethic of aspiration which devolves responsibility for life outcomes onto individuals in a stratified economic and class system (MacLeod, 2018; Mendick *et al.*, 2018). In the sociology of education in Britain, the Bourdieusian concepts of *habitus*, *capital*, and *field* have been popular in analysing how social class affects aspiration and transitions into and through education (Burke *et al.*, 2016). Young people are theorised as having different embodied dispositions, shaped by their upbringing and classed position (*habitus*), having access to different structural availability (*capital*), and navigating unequal landscapes of opportunity (*field*) that are accessed according *habitus* and *capital* (Burke *et al.*, 2016). Corresponding practice theory seeks to address the mediation of structure and agency (Burke *et al.*, 2016). Such research is useful in situating individuals sociologically while retaining the capacity to understand them at the individual level (e.g. Burke, 2017).

However, I now go on to argue that a structural view still dominates understandings of aspiration. Baker (2017) summarises that research into aspiration is often focused on one of two types of questions: whether aspirations vary between people of different backgrounds, and whether a causal link can be drawn between 'aspirations' and different outcomes in education and employment. As Baker (2017) notes, these framings do not interrogate the complexity of people's aspirations themselves, nor what aspirations mean to young people. Government and policy discourses, such as to 'raise aspirations', refer to aspiration according to participation in education and work (Hart, 2016). This framing is reductive, collapsing the meaning of aspiration to a gradating scale of institutional enrolment (Hart, 2016). There is a risk of treating aspiration as an unproblematic idiom for 'ambition', conceptualised within a broader arena of socio-

economic opportunity. By zooming in from a macro to a micro approach, we may gain an insight into the subject of what people aspire to do with their lives and their corresponding values. This framing of aspiration appears to be a strangely neglected field of social enquiry. To engage with such questions, I veer into the somewhat taboo realm of studying human beings as individuals.

## Studying the Aspirations of Individuals

The social sciences tend to explain people's lives in terms of large-scale structures. Primacy is ascribed to the social with a widespread aversion to conceptualising people as individuals (Rapport, 2012). The reasons behind this orientation towards the macro are sensible. Human beings are inter-dependent members of societies who follow generic patterns of culture that are determined by their environment and their historical era. Notions of individualism may hence be illusory (Bateson, 2011). Durkheim's (1897/2002) foundational study of functionalist sociology demonstrates that even the most personal of desires – to take one's own life – may be correlated with season, age, gender, occupation, education level, national and religious system, and romantic and family life. The outcomes of human lives are contingent on multiple variables that overlap and intersect (Irving, 2018). Ethnographic studies on the contingencies of life, such as for a financially poor and orphaned family in Uganda, remind us that individuals are not free floating, free acting agents (Irving, 2018). Economic booms such as in China enable individual aspirations such as to study in the United States (Ma, 2020).

However, an attention to large scale forces appears to overshadow social research – orienting analysis towards abstract forces such as capitalism or neoliberalism. To this day, not only quantitative but qualitative research continues to analytically organise the social world through units of analysis larger than the eye can see (Irving, 2017). Individual human beings are subsumed analytically according to factors deemed to generate and represent their lives such as nation, class, ethnicity, and gender. Such categories may contribute substantially to how people experience the world and interpret their position within it. Politically, it is apposite to differentiate New York according to categories such as ethnicity and class. In the pilot study

conducted in New York, most participants were black and spoke frequently about identity and inequality pertaining to race and ethnicity. These themes were therefore prominent in the analysis (Loewenthal, 2015; Loewenthal and Broughton, 2019). However, an attention to ethnicity can result in an over-determination according to such factors. In his ethnography of Southall in London (UK), Gerd Bauman (1996) warns against an 'ethnic reductionism' that sees 'whatever any "Asian" informant [says as] a consequence of their "Asianness", their "ethnic identity", or "the culture of their community"' (p. 1). People of different skin colours and upbringings are also members of humanity who may share a lot in common (Rapport, 2012). Equally, one can challenge assumptions of ethnic homogeneity. In Rapport's (1993) ethnography in Northern England, he talked to villagers about politics and identified an array of difference that may be concealed by apparent ethnic and cultural conformity. Rapport concludes that the social world is 'farical, chaotic, multiple, [and] contradictory' (1993, p. viiii), too complex for distant lenses such as functionalism (that are exemplified by Durkheim's (2002) study of suicide, above). Rapport (2012) has gone further to critique not just the epistemology but also the ethics of reducing people to social categories of identity. 'Symbolic collectivization' or 'category thinking' is deemed 'deindividuating and hence dehumanizing' (p. 7). In this thesis I do not go so far as rejecting categories, though treat them as tools of potential explanatory value, not as an *a priori* conceptual framing.

Through a person-centred approach that I develop in Part IV, the research participants are interpreted as individuals with their own aspirations and combinations of influences. This approach differs from a variance-oriented comparison of populations – such as between white and black students (MacLeod, 2018), between boys and girls (Holland and Eisenhart, 1990), or between students from different universities of different social class background (Mullen, 2010; Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016). Such sociological differences are very real. However, variance-oriented comparisons such as those above can tend to essentialise the more privileged demographic and highlight their (often blatant) advantages. As a result, studies of aspiration are often studies of unequal opportunity. By avoiding this impulse towards sociological comparison, I have been able to understand members of one population on their own terms without diverting attention to relational meanings. I have conducted an internal analysis of students and graduates from one

university. I have accordingly been able to look out at the world from people's own point of view – what do they aspire towards. A person-centred conceptual framework which I go on to develop allows for social patterns and differences to be identified that are more nuanced than a potentially essentialised vision of black versus white (MacLeod, 2018) or working-class versus middle-class<sup>6</sup> (Bathmaker et al., 2016). I still engage with the social, cultural, and economic mediation of life and aspirations – as in the following section – though recognise that ideas and experiences configure uniquely for individuals (Rapport, 2012). By liberating the study of aspiration from a structural focus on unequal opportunity, there opens a pathway towards studying aspiration in terms of what people value in life.

## Aspiration as a Search for Meaning in Life

Robbins (2013) calls for anthropological researchers to consider looking at the 'good' in life, in contrast to the 'suffering subject' which has come to dominate ethnographic studies. Studying aspiration may be an insight into what is most meaningful to people's lives. The Japanese term *ikigai* can be translated to 'that which makes one's life seem worth living' (Mathews, 1996, p. 5). Mathews (1996) compares the *ikigai* of Japanese and Americans of different ages and walks of life. Across the contexts he found that people's lives often required 'a link to something larger, a meaning that is in some way transcendent' (p. 254). For young people, *ikigai* was located in dreams of the future and the sense of potential actualisation that the future might hold (p. 144). In their future-gazing, youth may engage with philosophical questions about what they consider to be missing in their lives and what they consider to be important (Salemink, Bregnbæk, and Hirslund, 2018). Baggini (2004) suggests that it is best to reduce 'the mythical, single and mysterious question of "the meaning of life" to a series of smaller and utterly unmysterious questions about various meanings in life' (p. 3). To explore such questions of meaning I have drawn upon researchers working in the field of existential anthropology (Jackson, 2005; Hage,

---

<sup>6</sup> In Chapter Three I discuss class categories at more length and reasons for avoiding them in this thesis, despite the significance of social class in framing the study.

2005; Bregnbæk, 2016, 2018; Irving, 2017, 2018). Jackson (2005) introduces existential anthropology with remarks from Amartya Sen: ‘ultimately, the focus has to be on what life we lead and what we can and cannot do, can and cannot be’ (cited in Jackson, 2005, p. ix). As Jackson (2005) elaborates, socio-economic inequality is significant but does not explain the totality nor complexity of wellbeing. Being alive may form a series of overlapping tensions, such as between free will and fate, health and sickness, and between life and death (Irving, 2017; 2018). Questions concerning what to do with one’s life engage the existential predicament of being a mortal being thrown in and then out of existence. Systems of supernatural belief have historically dominated human understandings of life’s purpose and have promised the possibility of life after death (Harari, 2015). The decline of organised religion and an associated loss of afterlife have resulted in crises of existential meaning, such as in the West (Eagleton, 2007) and in China (Bregnbæk, 2018). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argue that in the contemporary era, ‘decisions about lifestyles are “deified”’. Questions that went out of use with God are re-emerging at the centre of life. Everyday life is being post-religiously “theologized”’ (p. 7).

Young people have a capacity to imagine bright and Utopian futures in contrast to the circumstances which they have inherited (Salemink, Bregnbæk, and Hirslund, 2018). Utopias may be defined as ‘ways of imagining, enacting and embodying what was missing in the past or present’ (ibid, p. 128). Salemink, Bregnbæk, and Hirslund (2018) draw together research which explores youthful dreaming of places and futures in which what was missing may be found, often through hopes of conjoining ‘social change with personal transformation’ (p. 127). In Bregnbæk’s (2018) person-centred post-doctoral research with the Chinese youth whom she had worked with previously, some sought to escape *fuzoa* – endless striving – and to derive meaning from life through Christianity. Her participants envisaged something soulful to the values of religion which she interprets as a search for ‘the heart of a heartless world,’ paraphrasing Marx<sup>7</sup>. Many participants also harboured an escapist fantasy of moving abroad. These research ideas are important in conceptualising the breadth of aspiration to incorporate values and desired feelings.

---

<sup>7</sup>Marx argued that: ‘Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions’ (cited in Bregnbæk, 2018, p. 177).

Bregnbæk (2018) calls for research into ‘daydreaming or utopian yearnings for a better world’ (p. 177). Aspirations may hence be conceptualised as imaginative vehicles and streams of consciousness which take people to somewhere yonder (cf. Weiss, 2009; Bregnbæk, 2018). Aspirations may be empowering, and as well imaginary, and also illusory. Weiss (2009) argues that ‘the imaginative implications of aspiration make it a realm of fantasy as much as a pragmatic domain’ (p. 37). In Weiss’s (2009) ethnography in Tanzania, young male barbers presented their futures through idealistic portrayals that veered into the quixotic. Frye (2002) similarly examines the radiance of youth aspirations in rural Malawi, where high hopes for the future were unfounded in economic prospects. Aspirations, as such, are not framed as ‘rational calculations, but instead as assertions of a virtuous identity’ of who a person aspires to become (Frye, 2002, p. 1565).

However, research has also shown that human beings are often unclear about what they want in life and what they aspire towards (Bateson, 1989; de Botton, 2010; Phillips, 2015). In contrast to the fantasy realm of aspirations that may leap in time and space and bend reality (Weiss, 2009) young people must forge a sense of the future through more rigid parameters. The hegemony of education (Varenne and Koyama, 2011) is succeeded by economic and cultural imperatives to work (Weeks, 2011), layered with the range of contingencies and social determinants that frame people’s lives (Irving, 2018). A pervasive difficulty has been identified to plague adults across their lives in finding a synergy between their fragmentary abilities and a line of work (de Botton, 2010). Abilities, interests, and the monetization of these traits may not overlap (Robinson and Aronica, 2009). In Mathews’ (2017) research on *ikigai* conducted over twenty years, he has never met a contractually salaried office worker in Japan claiming to be happy in his job. In the US, Mathews (1996) echoes Terkel’s (1985) findings regarding a lacklustre attitude across both work and leisure:

... many Americans work hard but don’t like their jobs; the janitor, the waitress, the salesman, the lawyer may work for the sake of a paycheck to enjoy in their leisure hours. But television is the most common American leisure activity – could television be what makes life worth living? (Mathews, 1996, p. 5)

The potentially empowering and idealistic qualities of aspirational dreaming (Bregnbæk, 2018) are contrastive to this more sullen emotional landscape. Mathews (1996) implies an important

theme of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivations towards work. That is, do people seek tacit rewards from doing an activity or compensation such as money, status, or 'free time'. If extrinsic rewards are prized, then which, and why? Aspiration, framed as such, engages some of the most pertinent questions that human beings face and may re-negotiate across their lives about what to do with their time. The aspirations of students and graduates at Manhattan University appeared to span a range of inter-connected domains. However, the present and future were dominated by the realm of work.

## Part II: From Higher Education to Work

Higher Education (HE) presents young people with the prospects of a promising pathway towards the future. There are longstanding debates about the purpose of HE, whether it should focus on learning and the development of the human character or a vocationalism that equips young people for work (Roth, 2014). HE is the primary societal mechanism for the organisation and training of a diversified economic workforce (Rhodes, 2001). Degrees form specialisations in the characterisation of work and hierarchies in its remuneration (Collins, 2019). However, many subjects on offer at university also have a tenuous connection to specific work. Universities experience a pressure to market transferable skills and prospects for employability to meet instrumentalist expectations from students and their families that an HE degree – as well as enriching the mind – is a route to superior employment (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton, 2011). Young people increasingly aspire towards HE in the hope of obtaining a 'graduate premium' of better-paid and more fulfilling work (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton, 2011). However, such hopes are unmet at an increasing rate, both globally (Lauder and Mayhew, 2020) and in the US (Cappelli, 2020). The number of graduates that exist and the mobility of qualified workers to move across borders result in competitive domestic labour markets (Black and Walsh, 2019). The wages offered within national contexts are diminished by the re-allocation of work through globalisation to lower-paying regions of the world (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton, 2010). An economic component

concerning competition and wages underlies many of the issues which graduates face in their pursuits of work (Black and Walsh, 2019). The concept of neoliberalism is often discussed to represent a global culture of individualised competition. Issues in transitions to work also appear to relate to broader issues, which I now consider.

## A Cultural Drive Towards Work

MU graduates in this investigation expressed a pervasive impulse towards work in the present and imagined future. This framing of aspiration stands out culturally. Various youth cultures place their emphasis on other foci as sites for expression and emancipation, notably among them, love (Sirisena, 2018), friendship, and hedonism (Broughton and Loewenthal, 2020). Bregnbæk's (2016) research among elite students in China found that love and relationships were side-lined through an internalised pressure to focus on educational success. This makes for interesting comparison to Sirisena's (2018) ethnography of romance at a university in Sri Lanka; students sought after monogamous love as a source of continuity in their lives and as a bulwark against uncertainty.

There are various factors that may contribute to an impulse towards work – from different historical, cultural, and economic derivations. In the USA, Weeks (2011) examines a contemporary 'work ethic' and a 'willingness to live for work' (p. 2). She locates this exaltation as a legacy of what Weber (1905/2001) analysed as the religious foundations of capitalism of proving one's worthiness through hard work<sup>8</sup>. In a more secular age, there remains a religiosity – a 'cultural devotion to work that cannot be explained by simple economic necessity' (Weeks, 2011, p. 75). Adults in American society have been described to judge each other by how much they are appearing productive (Markovitz, 2019). Work has become moralised and notions of not working stigmatised (Graeber, 2018). There is a contemporary pressure across the Western world

---

<sup>8</sup> Among Calvinists, who believed that only a limited number of predetermined individuals were entitled to a place in heaven, working was an attempt to justify (even if only to themselves) that they were among the chosen few. The 'spirit of capitalism' that took off entailed an asceticism of articulating one's worthiness through assiduous work, saving, and reinvestment (Weber, 2001).



for both men and women to become economically active and independent (Taylor, 1991). Rao (2020) conducted research among married couples in the US in which at least one spouse was facing unemployment. There remained a lack of social scope or cultural recognition for men to adapt to joblessness and to pursue parenthood as a vocation. Men felt that they had to imagine and build a future centred on economic activity (Rao, 2020). An equivalent pressure towards working as a central aspect of life and identity is increasingly applicable across gender. It has been argued that the professional era has morally diminished parenthood as a vocation, whereby for a woman to want to 'just' be a good mother she may have to negotiate a sense of this being a limited ambition (Taylor, 1991). This pressure to forge an adulthood through the lens of work may have class dimensions, also. Damaske (2011) discusses how one might imagine it being working-class women that need to work more due to financial need. In the US, the opposite is in fact true: rates of employment steadily increase with income and education level<sup>9</sup>. For more highly educated individuals, professional work has come to be central to understandings of social identity and personal achievement; people in working-class jobs are more likely to seek such tropes through family and community (Damaske, 2011).

Another influence on this call to work may be a historically recent notion that work should be a source of fulfilment and happiness (de Botton, 2010). Through an ideology of romanticism that developed in the mid-eighteenth Century, the two domains of work and love have come to be seen by many as 'the principal source of life's meaning' (de Botton, 2010, p. 30). Hereditary occupations and arranged marriages have receded in Western contexts, replaced with an imperative to find work and love for one's self (Giddens, 1991). Cultural ideas about work and family have continued to develop. Barlow (cited in Twenge, 2006, p. 80) suggests:

... the idea has grown up, in recent decades, that work should not be just... a way to make money, support a family, or gain social prestige but should provide a rich and fulfilling experience in and of itself. Jobs are no longer just jobs; they are lifestyle options.

---

<sup>9</sup> The 2008 US Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 85% of women with a post-graduate degree worked, 80% of those with a college degree, 68% with a high school degree, and 48% of women with less than a high school degree (cited in Damaske, 2011, p. 7).

Twenge (2006, p. 80) elaborates to suggest that it did not occur to a 1950s American businessman whether his job fulfilled him.

There are differences in the prospects of what work may entail. HE forms a credentialization process that orients students away from so-called manual to mental work, and from 'blue-collar' to 'white-collar' and other roles associated with the 'knowledge economy' (Rhodes, 2001). A 'career' may be defined as a longitudinal working life that involves aspects of identity and development over time (Arthur, Hall and Lawrence, 1989). A vocation, meanwhile, derives from the Latin *vocare* (to call), hence implying a spiritual affinity to one's work. Graduates may experience a tension between finding a career (which provides a source of constant income) and finding a vocation (which they enjoy). There may be a limited range of careers that graduates can foresee. Deresiewicz (2014) describes a 'big four' that loom upon graduation at top US universities: law, medicine, finance, and consulting (p. 71). Deresiewicz (2014) describes finance and consulting to be dominant at recruitment fairs at the end of college. In Ho's (2009) ethnography of Wall Street, she similarly identified how the vast presence of financial institutions at recruitment fairs at Ivy League campuses served to normalise a sense that investment banking was the most legitimate option for after college. A cultural drive towards working is hence contrastive to a more limited range of options which graduates may be able to envisage, as now considered.

## Opaque Futures and Elusive Fulfilment

Research suggests that both students in school (Archer, 2010) and graduates from university (Gershon, 2015) are unclear about work they could do. In an ethnography of a public high school in the Bronx (New York City), there was a gap between aspirational rhetoric and the actual pathways towards the future which students could imagine (Alexander, 2019). In an Advanced Placement (academically proficient) class, a common goal was philanthropy – to be a generous, affluent individual. The issue for these students was that they were not sure how to get rich in the first place (Alexander, 2019). Archer (2010) introduces the notion of 'making jobs thinkable'.

Drawing on four research projects, she argues how students in Britain from different backgrounds of disadvantage lacked the cultural capital and knowledge to imagine themselves in certain forms of prestigious work such as science. Archer (2010) points to the sociological intersections of class, race, and gender as explanation for the barriers to imagining one's self in future work. Her argument – 'to address and support... contexts within which... young people's aspirations are produced' (Archer, 2010, p. 5) is salient; however, issues appear to be further reaching than that which can be explained by inequality. Gershon (2015), who teaches anthropology in the USA, describes how difficult jobs are for her university students to imagine:

I have so many students who don't know what they want to do when they graduate, who don't even know what kinds of jobs are possible. They think mostly of the jobs that their parents and their parents' friends have, or the jobs that they see on television. They often wonder how to even begin to dream of other ways of living, of other kinds of work that they would enjoy. (p. 9)

Gershon's (2015) collection of ethnographically-inspired fiction is an attempted answer to this mystery with some idea into what various lines of work are like on the ground.

Uncertainty is another pervasive theme inhibiting young people from devising aspirations or imagining the future (Black and Walsh, 2019). At the time of writing, the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated tremendously uncertainties that had already been ongoing. In the *Urban-Rural Youth Transitions* project in the UK, uncertainty and change at both the political and personal level were shown to scupper school leavers' plans profoundly (Alexander, Loewenthal, and Butt, 2019). These youth adopted an agentic stance of adapting to uncertainty, encapsulated in the expression 'FISH' ('Fuck It, Shit Happens'). In a blog post for the project, I argued how aspirations are both shaped and constrained by epistemology (Loewenthal, 2017c). It is the principle of epistemology that underlies schemes such as university open days, mentorship, and work experience which – in the vein of Archer's (2010) argument – render an abstract future knowable. The notion in public discourse, 'you cannot be what you cannot see', implies an epistemic link that renders ontology (what one can be) knowable only via empiricism (what one can see). In this thesis I elaborate on how the theme of epistemology can help to conceptualise what futures are knowable or not. There may be a widespread epistemic narrowness – of not knowing – whereby human beings in their various niches imagine futures

based on piecemeal information which they are familiar with, excluded from the multitude of possibilities which they are not.

Further to an issue of opaque futures, work-place fulfilment also appears to be elusive. Arnett (2015) makes this argument with regards to 'emerging adults' entering the workforce:

Emerging adults aspire to work that is enjoyable, fulfilling, and makes the most of their unique abilities and interests. But employers don't typically wake up in the morning and ask themselves, "Whom can I fulfil today?" Their goal is much more likely to be limited to how to find someone to do the work they need to have done, for as little money as possible. Emerging adults enter the labor force expecting a lot more, which sometimes leads to exasperation for employers, who find them presumptuous and spoiled, and parents, who may be thinking (and perhaps saying), "Why can't you just get a *job*? Work isn't supposed to be *fun*. That's why you get *paid* for it!" (pp. 176-177)

In the workplace, graduates may experience themselves as over-qualified, or not having their potential maximized (Arnett, 2015). Graeber (2018) has written on a pervasive theme of what he terms 'bullshit jobs' that fail to provide either personal satisfaction or societal contribution. Terkel (1985) previously documented working lives in the USA to entail hard work, and a search 'for daily meaning as well as daily bread' (p. ix). He interpreted such pursuits of meaning and recognition to be largely unmet across both blue- and white-collar work. The philosopher, de Botton (2005; 2010) has been an influential source in this research. He argues that human unhappiness often derives from elevated expectations that such domains as work and love may provide complete individual fulfilment. As a result, people are left disappointed. I elaborate upon these perspectives from Arnett (2015), Graeber (2018), Terkel (1985) and de Botton (2010) in Chapter Four. In the final section of this review on transitions from HE to work, I consider further elements of these two domains which – despite promising the future – may impede and constrain individuals.

## Cruel Optimism and False Consciousness

'Cruel optimism' theorised by Berlant (2011) is a useful concept to explain the elusive or even punishing consequences of aspiration. This term can be summarised as 'a relation of attachment

to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be *impossible*, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic' (Berlant, 2011, p. 24, original emphasis). Berlant's (2011) form of analysis aims particularly at 'good life' fantasies such as concerning job stability, political equality, upwards mobility, and reciprocal intimacy within relationships. Berlant (2011) does not mean 'optimism' in terms of wishful thinking. Rather, she argues that all attachments have an optimistic character whereby people put their faith in a person, or project, or profession. While disappointments can occur in everyday affairs, Berlant (2011) directs the notion of cruel optimism at ideals that provide an existential foundation to people's lives. These attachments thus offer a life-giving sense of directionality that cruelly do the inverse and act as an impediment to the person's prosperity.

Berlant (2011) discusses how cruel optimism often emerges through attachments to a 'cluster of promises' (p. 23). HE can be said to offers various hopes and promises which are increasingly unmet (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton, 2011; Black and Walsh, 2019). In Burke's (2017) research on graduate trajectories in Northern Ireland, we meet Hannah and Johnny, two graduates with determined aspirations to pursue careers in acting and fiction-writing. Four and six years after their graduation, respectively, they were still struggling in the labour market and experienced a paradox of 'inflated subjective expectations incompatible with current objective realities' (p. 393). Burke (2017) has inverted the notion of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) which refers to inequalities that are perceived as 'how things are' and the natural allocation of where people belong. Inverse symbolic violence regards a sense of entitlement to success that fosters expectations which are unmet. Some researchers are therefore employing the notion of cruel optimism to theorise false hopes ascribed to education within competitive and austere economies (di Paolantonio 2016; Mendick *et al*, 2018).

Successful education is framed as a necessary pathway towards the future, yet this may be contingent on various conditions such as the costs incurred – financial and emotional – which implies a further element of cruel optimism. Zaloom's (2019) research on how 'middle-class'<sup>10</sup> American families afford the costs of college shows the immense burdens which families take on,

---

<sup>10</sup> The issues of defining class categories and translating them cross-culturally are addressed in Chapter Three.

and hence a cruel underbelly to the high hopes ascribed to HE in the USA. Zaloom (2019) describes a cultural ideal of future autonomy in which neither adult children nor their parents are reliant on each other. However, she develops the notion of 'enmeshed autonomy' to represent a contradiction that debt has effects on social relations that make young adults and their parents even more entangled, and a perceived burden on each other (p. 95). The weight of debt constrained the future in a way that is inverse to the openness that these parties had hoped would arise from a degree (Zaloom, 2019). Another cruel element of HE may be the mental health issues that are often associated with educational success (e.g. Deresiewicz, 2014; Bregnbæk, 2016). In Deresiewicz's (2014) critical appraisal of HE in the US, one student remarked: 'Sure I'm unhappy, but if I wasn't unhappy, I wouldn't be at Yale' (p. 9) – as though a necessary compromise. In Demerath's (2009) 'ethnography of stress' (p. 129) at a high achieving American high school, the stakes were raised so high that a series of afflictions were common. School counsellors described 'school phobia' as when students 'can't be here. They'll come in and they'll have an anxiety attack' (p. 149). This kind of stress represents a contradiction: that elite education appears to take its toll on students' wellbeing. Ma (2020) describes contemporary Chinese students in the US as characterised by an interwoven combination of ambition and anxiety. Bregnbæk's (2016) study shows that expectations to succeed in Chinese HE may be so severe as to provoke suicide, as discussed in Chapter Six. The prospect that aspiration and education should result in death exemplifies to an extreme degree the notion of 'cruel optimism'.

Cooley (2013) has pointed out the similarities between Berlant's (2011) notion of cruel optimism and the Marxist notion of false consciousness. False consciousness was not theorised by Marx but by others working in a Marxist tradition (Moore, 2011). There may be a mystification of social relations in which a worker actively participates in their own subordination in the 'false consciousness' that they are acting freely. Indeed, contrary to the glorification of work, it has been described to have oppressive and extractive qualities. Marx (1988) theorised capitalism as a system that replaced slavery and feudalism but operated according to an equivalent principle. Workers sell their 'labour power' and create 'surplus value' which is 'alienated' from them to those who control the means of production. Workers are then made financially dependent on

the forms of labour that exploit them. For Marx, capitalism is sustained by human 'ignorance of its fundamental meaning' (Eagleton, 2007, p. 9).

Marx and Engels (1998) theorised freedom to be the ultimate human value in contrast to the alienation that is caused by the division of labour in which:

... man's own deed becomes opposed to him, which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him. For as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood. (p. 53)

The cruel optimism of such a dynamic, which Cooley (2013) infers, is that human beings under capitalism are compelled into realms of work to which they then become coerced. While Marx and Engels were writing at a historically specific time of Europe's industrialisation in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, their arguments – that workers are estranged from the capital that is generated by their labour and may be alienated from their own humanity through their work – have been elaborated to contemporary contexts (e.g. Graeber, 2018). Markovitz (2019) argues that the 'classic afflictions of capitalism' have moved 'up the class structure', whereby 'elite workers' are now subject to 'the same alienation that Karl Marx diagnosed in exploited proletarian labor' (p. 40). Marx (1988) and then Lefebvre (2014) have argued that the legitimization of work through purchased leisure can be seen as an extension of capitalism that merely makes alienated work palatable (see Blackledge, 2017). Non-work time has been transformed into an economic market which advertises activities that make people want to work even more (Weeks, 2011, p. 47). False consciousness is implied if such pursuits therefore maintain complicity in the worker's own subservience to a system which exploits them (Moore, 2011). In these above sections of Part II, we have seen that people may be culturally and economically compelled towards forms of work via HE. However, there are various traps and snares identified in the process of aspiring to such goals. I now consider how the research question may be answered through an engagement with how aspirations are socially and culturally produced.

## Part III:

# Socialisation into Aspirations

This section addresses how human beings are shaped into ways of seeing the world, and may be socialised into aspirations. There are many layers of complexity to this topic which includes the formation of human character. I focus on anthropological and sociological perspectives on education as an ongoing aspect of life, as opposed to psychological studies of personality. Levinson (2000) writes: 'Most of us have so habituated ourselves to equating school with "education" that only with some difficulty can we consider non-school sites of learning properly educative' (p. 6). Educational processes occur well beyond classrooms and institutional settings and may be considered as a continual element of life as it unfolds (Varenne, 2019a; 2019b). Fortes (1935) argues how education 'occurs as a by-product of the cultural routine' of ordinary and everyday activity (cited in Stambach, 2017, p. 4). Ethnographies of Higher Education have innovated the study of such educational processes by looking at how students are educated into worldviews on campus and in dormitory settings. These ethnographies have tended to examine how students learn and negotiate themes of romance, gender, sexuality, race, and identity (Moffatt, 1989; Holland and Eisenhart, 1990; Sirisena, 2018). I am interested in the production of aspirations which stretches further in time and space beyond the university. This social and cultural production of aspiration may involve multiple actors. As Appadurai argues, 'aspirations are never simply individual. They are always formed in interaction and in the thick of life' (2004, p. 67). Levinson (2000) argues that education is the fundamental process via which cultural transmission occurs across generations. On the one hand, groups pass on their conditions, customs, language, beliefs, and norms. And yet, 'amidst this group imperative, individuals develop their own educational repertoire from the cultural resources at their disposal' (Levinson, 2000, p. 2). Through an ensuing entanglement between structure and agency, individuals acquire an array of influences that are unique to them though shaped collectively. These questions orient our attention to core themes of anthropological enquiry about the reproduction of society, meaning, and culture into ideas about what counts as an appropriate way of behaving and of conducting one's life.



## Instructing the Future through Schooling and Culture

At a fundamental level, ideas and aspirations have a cultural derivation (Appadurai, 2004). Harari (2015) argues in his book on the history of humankind that ‘every person is born into a pre-existent imagined order and his or her desires are shaped from birth by its dominant myths’ (Harari, 2015, p. 114). The ‘imagined orders’ and ‘dominant myths’ that Harari refers to across history signify the flexibility and range of human possibilities. As anthropology has demonstrated through evidence of extreme human diversity, ‘No path is preordained as the only one that is “natural”’ (Ingold, 2018, p. 58). However, this malleability becomes forged into distinct cultural forms. Constructivism addresses the socially constructed meanings imbued into the categories which humans live by. Malleable meanings are then reproduced and reiterated in social life so that they appear to be normal. As summarised by Bourdieu (1977, p. 164), ‘every established order tends to produce... the naturalization of its own arbitrariness’.

One arbitrary construction of society is through compulsory schooling (Alexander, 2020). It can be argued that the values of adult society impose a consideration of the future onto young people and pre-organises them into human capital through specific channels of education (Bowles and Gintis, 1967). From the early years, young people’s exuberance is often experienced in tension with an obligation to attend school (Illich, 1971). Continuous educational assessment applies pressures throughout youth of an inter-temporal nature. Stambach (2017) writes:

In school contexts, the time of education orients continuously forward, toward the immediate and near-term future, sometimes relentlessly. Schooling coordinates schedules. The annual calendar is marked by formative and summative exams, by preliminary and final papers. (p. 2)

A discourse of delayed gratification suppresses leisurely fun in the promotion of school-based learning to be measured through tests (Deresiewicz, 2014). Threats are signalled of what might become of a student not committed to attaining good grades (Deresiewicz, 2014). Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue that schooling is at the root of a process that produces future obedient workers who do not question authority. School may socialise and normalise hierarchy, the division of labour, and the requirement to sit still or do as one is told (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Schooling may thus be interpreted as an apparatus employed by societies to streamline young

people towards a disciplined, working adulthood (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Accordingly, one may theorise educational systems as not simply emancipation and opportunity, but even indoctrination into a way seeing and behaving in the world that coerces an individual's freedom<sup>11</sup>.

Durkheim (1895/1982) was interested in how social norms act as a form of governance. He characterised parenting as a form of all-encompassing education. Arbitrary standards may be engrained into the child systematically and with authority: 'from the very first hours of his life, we compel him to eat, drink, and sleep at regular hours; we constrain him to cleanliness, calmness, and obedience' (Durkheim, 1982, p. 5). Education may hence constitute an informal process of daily rules, routine, and instruction. Durkheim (1982) also wrote about the more implicit ways in which human beings are constrained into conformity. He described 'social facts' as norms through which individuals are forced to interact. Social facts might include language, financial currency, or the social institutions of kinship. Social facts operate independent of human beings though act upon their lives by coercing them into forms of social control. Following in the same vein, Foucault (1975/1995) was interested in how societal power shapes individual behaviours and desires. The notion of moralising 'gazes' refers to the internalisation and reproduction of values. A person may police themselves according to values which have been imposed upon them. An example of such a manifestation might be implied in Wexler's (1992) study of 'Penbrook', a high-achieving American high school designed as a pipeline to the Ivy League. Wexler (1992) describes a unanimous 'pressure to succeed' (p. 56) that is bolstered by 'a professional rationalization that appeals to excellence and competence rather than force and rule' (p. 73). Foucault's (1995) portrayal of self-discipline through an internalisation process might be echoed in the students' adherence to gruelling work not through external imposition but through a 'professional rationalization' that deems it logical.

---

<sup>11</sup> It is, nonetheless, noteworthy that schooling is imagined in different ways dependent on context. In countries where the default future appears to be one of poverty, education conjures more positive associations (Broughton and Loewenthal, 2020). Youth criticisms of schooling as coercion have historically come from contexts of North America and Western Europe. These regions have a longer-standing history of economic advancement, enabling education to be taken for granted (ibid.).

There are both subliminal and agentive means in which media forms may guide young people towards the future. Concerning the former, Powdermaker (1951) conducted an ethnography of Hollywood in the late 1940s. She makes the case that:

Hollywood is engaged in the mass production of prefabricated daydreams. It tries to adapt the American dream, that all men are created equal, to the view that all men's dreams should become equal. (1951, p. 39)

This dynamic of universalising aspiration through mass fiction is salient: representing the good life to strive for through the screen. In the USA, the mythology of aspiration is written into the fabric of society and broadcast through the country's media (Powdermaker, 1951). Writing at the same time, when media forms were booming, Adorno and Horkheimer (1944/1997) argued that popular culture in the United States is another disciplinary mechanism. A 'culture industry' was argued to produce standardised people through homogenising media that promotes generic patterns of consumption and behaviour. Such popular culture was deemed to function in relation to capitalism by glorifying what to desire and consume (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997). The notion of false needs critiqued the sense that through advertising and media, workers are sold inflated appetites – things which they do not need – which makes them unwilling to question the system of work (Moore, 2011). The notion of false needs hence echoes that of false consciousness in which social relations are misrepresented and misunderstood (Moore, 2011).

Media forms and popular culture have developed substantially over the decades. Digital media has expanded exponentially to become a ubiquitous feature of many young peoples' lives (Eichhorn, 2019). As well as a more coercive vision of being subliminally instructed through media, such as outlined above, there are seemingly more empowering educational components to media usage. Waskul and Vannini (2016) argue that people who watch television series often do so from a biographical perspective, in terms of how it echoes aspects of their previous, present, anticipated, or ideal life (p. 15). Mendick and colleagues (2018) have conducted research on how school students in Britain engage with popular figures as a means of making sense of their own futures. For instance, the pop singer and cultural icon, Beyoncé, was associated by their school-age participants 'with a plethora of socially approved goods: marriage, motherhood, career success, creativity, autonomy, respectability, dedication, talent, empowerment and

philanthropy' (p. 107). There may hence be an agentive and thoughtful process via which young people select, produce, share, and metabolise media forms. 'Consumption' is in fact a complex social process that involves interaction and consideration in tune with multiple known and imagined others (Miller, 2012). Caughey's (1984) research on imaginary social relationships in the USA emphasises the influence of public personalities in people's understanding of the world. Even writing prior to the age of 'social media', Caughey (1984) wrote:

It is simply taken for granted that an American will know about a huge swarming throng of unmet figures through his consumption of the various media – through television, movies, radio, books, magazines, and newspapers. Within this group will be many sports figures, politicians, historical personages, actors, musicians, authors, columnists, announcers, disk jockeys, talk show hosts, and other celebrities, as well as the fictional characters in the novels, plays, movies, television shows, and comic strips that are familiar to him. The enormous number of beings in this artificial social world – commonly numbering over 1,000 – includes several times as many "persons" as those in his real social world. (p. 32)

There is something educational to the implications of mass media which may provide a series of templates of lives through which people know the world, and are familiar with what is possible (Caughey, 1984; Mendick *et al.*, 2018).

Social media is now globally pervasive and may be a channel through which people learn what is deemed valuable within their social and cultural context. Miller and colleagues' (2016) comparative study in nine worldwide locations emphasises that social media is not autonomous but an instrument that elaborates on pre-existent social and cultural dynamics. For instance, in the context of desired upwards social mobility in their Brazilian site, they note:

The images of consumption taken at exclusive sites such as the gym or swimming pool, or featuring prestigious brand clothing, reflect in material form individuals' imagination about their futures and who they dream of becoming. (p. 198)

In the same Brazilian context, there existed 'considerable competition among neighbours' as 'some individuals fear[ed] being seen as those who fall behind in their neighbourhoods as everyone else move[d] up' (p. 198). Through a normalised culture of wishfully associating one's self with symbols of success, members of the community felt compelled to keep up and to play the game themselves. Such entanglement with peers and anxiety about impressions were frequent in this research with MU students and graduates. I now consider another element of

education, broadly conceived, that may help to explain how students in the study came to see and expect the future.

## Acquiring Entitlement in the Name of Meritocracy

MU is a highly expensive and selective HE institution. Students arrive to study there from around the world and the United States, often coming from private schooling. Insights from the study of elite education help to explain how young people may learn to embody certain dispositions. The notion of entitlement posits an internalised sense that a person is naturally deserving of superior circumstances. In an ethnography of a boarding school in the Northeast of the US, Gaztambide-Fernández (2009) argues how ‘social class works from the outside in’ (p. 197). Pupils at ‘Weston school’ learned to internalise privilege, growing accustomed to certain facilities and becoming habituated with high expectations. Gaztambide-Fernández (2009) raises a theme of entitlement regarding what may be considered satisfactory employment:

They may envision an ideal world of fairness and equity, where the “common man” is valued, but they do not see themselves as “common.” Doing what the “common man” does, in fact, would be deemed failure for proper Westonians. (p. 196)

Gaztambide-Fernández (2009) addresses student perceptions of the non-teaching staff. The students overlooked such lines of work as plausible options for their futures on an assumption that they were of a different class of person. Similar insights into the embodiment of expectations is gained from Khan’s (2011) ethnography of another boarding school nearby in New Hampshire. Students imagined that fellow classmates with talents in mathematics or music would go on to be the world’s best in their fields, such was the normalisation of an idea that they were surrounded by extraordinary ability (p. 164).

A differing though not mutually exclusive perspective on entitlement regards a meritocratic ethos of hard work that proves one’s worth (Markovitz, 2019). Khan (2011) depicts a cultural shift among elite groups away from believing that one’s background is a birth right to power. Rather, students in his ethnography were shown to anxiously compete. Khan (2011) in fact suggests that the ‘new elite are not an entitled group... they firmly believe in the importance of the hard work

required to achieve their position' (p. 14). Markovitz (2019, p. xi) emphasises the meritocratic ideals that make up a new aristocracy in the form of a 'meritocracy'. He explains:

Once, aristocrats got status by birth-right, based on race or breeding, and abused undeserved privilege to hoard unjust advantage. Today, meritocrats claim to win their status through talent and effort – to get ahead fair and square, using means open to anyone. Once, lazy aristocrats produced little or nothing at all. They lived lavishly by exploiting other people's labor. Today, hardworking meritocrats claim to pull their weight, insisting that their enormous accomplishments contribute fair value to the societies they lead. (2019, p. xi)

Meritocracy thus becomes a new medium through which prevailing forms of inequality are cloaked (Markovitz, 2019). Khan writes (2011, p. 9) that an idea of:

... meritocracy of hard work and achievement has naturalized socially constituted distinctions, making differences in outcomes appear a product of who people are rather than a product of the conditions of their making.

In the analysis of the aspirations of MU graduates, notions of entitlement are applicable. However, these heightened expectations which they have learned to inhabit can also be understood as being articulated through a discourse of meritocracy: deserving success because of hard work or even because of the cost and prestige of a degree. I now finally consider what effects different forms of parental involvement may have on the cultivation of aspirations and on adult children's outlook on the future.

## Parental Influence and Involvement

Following on from the theme of meritocracy, the contemporary era demands that economic opportunities as an adult be earned through educational credentials (Markovitz, 2019). Increased parental involvement in children's education and subsequent scrutiny of their aspirations have been identified to increase with social class (Deresiewicz, 2014). Among more affluent populations, children's education has become perceived as the primary gateway to social reproduction (Maxwell and Aggleton, 2015). Choices of school may accordingly be the subject of considerable (even anguished) attention, emotion, and financial investment (Kenway, Fahey and Koh, 2013). Entire ways of life are forged by parents who hope to inscribe in their children as much human capital as possible in order to gain them access to selective universities

(Deresiewicz, 2014). Weeks (2011) writes that the 'gold standard' of parenting is to raise children 'with attributes that will secure them forms of employment that can match if not surpass' the parents' own social position (pp. 6-7). In contexts of migration to the United States, Chua (2011) portrays a three-generational dynamic: a frugal, hard-working aspirational generation who migrate; their offspring who do well in professional fields; and then their children, who have grown up with material comforts earned by their parents and grandparents. The naturalness of such amenable conditions which these children grow into may not cultivate the drive that fuelled the success that got them there. Chua (2011) suggests that this third generation is 'headed straight for decline' (p. 22). A passive by-product of children being raised within such comfort may be a corresponding lack of financial concerns in their aspirations towards HE and work. Research in the US (Mullen, 2010) and UK (Bathmaker et al., 2016) points to the increasing orientation towards 'practical' degrees among university applicants from families with little or no history of HE attendance. Liberal arts ideals of pursuing learning for its own sake are more associated with students from privileged backgrounds (Mullen, 2010). These individuals may have been implicitly socialised as well as actively told that HE is a time of exploration and need not be so instrumentalist as to lead to specific futures (ibid.).

There exist a range of different parenting styles and diverse means in which young people internalise parental influence over the years. In the observation and analysis of pre-schoolers in the USA, Baumrind (1967) characterised different 'parenting styles' which have subsequently been elaborated by Maccoby and Martin (1983). These are: authoritative (as responsive but with rules), authoritarian (centred on a one-way exertion of discipline), permissive (where the parent indulges in the child and expresses few or no rules), and neglectful (where the parent shows indifference and a lack of involvement). Such social dynamics might be considered even in parent-child relationships as the children grow up. Tannen (2001) describes a pattern in the USA in which parents redirect their roles from caretaking to socialisation as children grow into adults. She specifically describes a balance that some parents seek between connection and control. Marinova (2007) draws upon Tannen's (2001) ideas regarding the teetering between connection and control to analyse how an American father speaks with his daughter in college as she prepares for a study-abroad year in Spain. He tries to help and care for her while also being

worried that she does not take enough responsibility for her age, for the trip, and for her future character. His remarks to her in conversation therefore attempt to modify her behaviours, even while performing a supportive role. Finn's (2015) research among graduates in Britain showed that parental involvement is not unidirectional. Drawing on Zelizer's (2006) work in *The Purchase of Intimacy*, Finn (2015) shows how parental support was not simply experienced as a burden on their resources. Rather, it was a means in which parents felt they could maintain involvement in their adult children's lives. Finn (2015) hence argues that prolonged dependency must be understood in the round – as complex and symbiotic. An inter-generational approach can be elaborated looking at how adult children negotiate their futures in tension with their parents. Bregnbæk's (2016) ethnography emphasises the conflict that takes place in education across generations. HE is framed as a high-stakes medium through which students contested an 'unresolvable oedipal dilemma of how much one owes one's parents (or that past) and how much one owes oneself (and the future)' (p. 143). Bregnbæk (2016) portrays the process of maturation as a human being in psychoanalytic terms in which the child rises and takes the parents' place. There are cultural components to the dynamic described – of only children feeling constrained by a filial culture in China – however, there is scope for cross-cultural validity. Human beings are inherently inter-subjective (Bregnbæk, 2016), and young people may be compelled to work out their lives in co-ordination with others who may shape and constrain their futures (Finn, 2015; Zaloom, 2019). These sections above provide some aspects of educative processes that may socialise young people into aspirations. Further educational components are considered in the conceptual framework below, such as the roles of geography and contingency in shaping how aspirations are reckoned and revised.

## Part IV: Conceptual Framework

I now develop a conceptual framework for studying the aspirations of individuals. This toolkit engages with the temporality of aspirations, as having derivation and continuity, and being



contingent on a range of variables. I first establish the person-centred component of the conceptual framework and the value of zooming in to the intricacies of individual lives (Irving, 2017; Strauss, 2006). I then explore aspiration in relation to space and to the life course. Subsequently I introduce the notion of fate, as a force that may determine perceptions of the future. There may be fatefulness that is inherited from culture, environment, and upbringing (Varenne and Koyama, 2011; Peou and Zinn, 2014) as well as fatefulness that emerges through commitments and turns in people's lives (Giddnes, 1991; Irving, 2017). I introduce the notion of 'fateful aspects of aspiration' (Loewenthal, Alexander and Butt, 2019) which has derived from this research. I then substantiate its meaning through examples of such themes that are also apparent in recent ethnographies of graduates (Finn, 2015; Bregnbæk, 2016). In the final section, I elaborate on the temporality of aspiration and complicate the notion of fate by looking at human beings' dynamic responses to the past and future.

## A Person-Centred Approach

Irving's (2017; 2018) research has been influential in demonstrating the power of zooming in to individual lives over time. Irving has conducted longitudinal research with persons who have contracted HIV/AIDS in New York City (2017) and Kampala, Uganda (2018). He has followed up with individuals as an anthropologist for over twenty years. In a monograph on the New York research site (2017), people's lives are shown to unfold in ways that are specific. Irving employs a 'face to face' methodological approach of getting to know people well, as individuals, over time. In doing so, findings indicate the idiosyncratic nature of human bodies, minds, and biographies. Irving (2017) shows that people may inhabit and experience both the space and time that frame their lives in ways that are unique to their personal situations. He goes further to theorise the significance of streams of consciousness, pointing to interiority as an example of the unseen multiplicity of social life:

Such is the complexity and diversity of people's inner lives that two people walking down the same street might be engaged in radically different forms of inner dialogue and imagery with one person thinking about sports or what to buy for dinner, while the other is communing

with God and dealing with a major life change such as having lost their job or spouse or having been diagnosed with a serious illness. (p. 93)

This attunement to interiority opens a door to exploring the diverse thoughts and temporalities of individual lives that may stretch far beyond the present moment or scenario.

Strauss (2006) similarly promotes a person-centred form of psychological anthropology. She argues that researchers should 'study concrete material and symbolic conditions, on the one hand, and the understandings, emotions, and desires that individuals develop as they experience these conditions, on the other' (p. 323). Strauss (2006) thus promotes an approach that acknowledges culture and social structure to be in dynamic interplay with the individual's psychology and the ongoing occurrences in their life. She notes that: 'this person-centred approach recognizes the importance of learned cultural understandings but does not take "culture" to be a fixed entity assumed to be held in common by a geographically bounded or self-identified group' (2006, p. 323). A person-centred approach is apposite to conducting research in 'hyper-diverse' New York City in which individuals come from different cultural, geographic, and ethnic backgrounds and carry an array of distinct influences (cf. Vertovec, 2007). In the analysis of this doctoral research, I have moved beyond individual stories and drawn patterns. However, it has been important for analytical precision to at first recognise the dynamic and diverse ways in which individual lives and hence patterns may manifest.

## Space and Existential Mobility

A key conceptual theme in this research regards the contingent role of space in young people's lives and aspirations. Certain places may be a magnet for aspirations. In Finn's (2015) research with graduates in Britain, a framing of the future founded on making it in the cultural sector was shown to be contingent on living in London. For one graduate, the capital was seen as an imagined community of opportunity. There was an adhesive factor to stick to her aspirations propelled by the thought of being around others in a similar position. When she then moved back to her hometown in the north of England, the change in location engendered a series of other changes to her aspirations, and future life. While some places may have a pull factor, other places

may inspire desires to escape. The notion of some places having 'no future' is a common, though powerful, explanation for why they migrate (Crivello, 2015). Participants in my research who moved to New York City and/or to Los Angeles form a privileged category of migrant. Fujita (2009) looks at young Japanese 'creatives' moving to London and New York City in their tens of thousands. He explains this phenomenon as 'cultural migration'. Fujita (2009) points to a longer-standing trend, such as American artists in Paris from the 1920s though he explains that cultural migration now engages a broader range of social classes and a more trans-national web of sending populations and destinations. O'Reilly and Benson (2009) have developed a similar notion of 'lifestyle migration'. In an edited collection (2009), they summarise: 'each and every one of these mobile individuals presents migration as a route to a better and more fulfilling way of life, especially in contrast to the one left behind' (p 1). Some of those whom the authors refer to dream of escaping the monotony of their surroundings. Others are inspired by certain landscapes or imagined romance and life projects. This edited collection draws from the editors' own research on British people in France (Benson) and Spain (O'Reilly). These lifestyle migrants seek to re-imagine their relationship with leisurely consumption and with space, time, and the elements.

Hage (2005) introduces the term existential mobility – when 'another geographical space is [imagined as] a better launching pad for our existential selves' (p. 470). This term moves beyond migration as a physical phenomenon to assess the feelings in a person that their body's location evokes in them about their life. Existential mobility represents a sense that one is 'going somewhere' with one's life by virtue of one's geographical surroundings. Hage (2005) conducted a global ethnography of Lebanese people living in other countries. These people did not identify with the term migrant, but rather, 'someone living in Paris' or 'Boston'. Hage went to a part of Venezuela which he described as ugly and cursed with a constant smell of sewage. There, he met a young Lebanese man who recognised that the village he is from is more beautiful, though presented himself as much happier to be in Venezuela. The key reasons given were a sense of novelty, not being tied down, and a corresponding sense of an open future. Being in Venezuela granted him sense of existential mobility, whereas to be home in Lebanon the future might appear pre-destined, predictable, and circumscribed (Hage, 2005).

Bregnbæk (2018) makes the argument that ‘human beings everywhere try to move beyond their circumstances and yearn for a utopia, which is literally ‘yonder’ – neither here nor there – but constantly negotiated’ (p. 187). In Bregnbæk’s (2016; 2018) research, trans-national space outside of China is imagined as a site of escape and liberty – yet which has ambiguous qualities even when achieved. She engages with Fong’s (2011) ideas on the ambivalence of space and prosperity in *Paradise Redefined*. Chinese students in Fong’s (2011) ethnography had dreamed of redefinition through studying abroad, yet often experienced this less positively than had been hoped. Many remained in limbo as graduates, caught between reverting to a life in China which they had tried to escape or treading water in a ‘floating life’ abroad. These conceptual tools help to articulate how MU students and graduates engaged symbolically and existentially with the role of space in their lives.

## The Life Course

One element of consideration in studying the aspirations of individuals is that human lives are set within temporal limits. Herodotus tells the story of Xerxes of Persia conquering Greece with nearly two million men though shortly after turning to weep at the realisation that in less than a century they would all be dead (cited in de Botton, 2005, pp. 223-224). Graeber (2012) writes on how both waste and death are systematically interred into subterranean physical and mental spaces. Dead or dying bodies are hidden from public, purged from thought as a form of suppression (ibid.). Some young people epistemically side-line death through immersion in the present or past (Broughton and Loewenthal, 2020). Alternatively, certain youth cultures and cultural expressions (e.g. YOLO: ‘You Only Live Once’) are acutely aware of such perils and position their values in response (ibid.). Becker (1997) argues that death’s horror prompts its denial through life projects. He describes human activities throughout history as heroic yet delusional attempts at creating a sense of immortality. Becker (1997) distinguishes between physical and symbolic selves. The symbolic self may be imbued with meanings which seem significant and eternal. By focusing energies on their symbolic selves – examples of which include

family and religion – people may generate an illusion of living beyond the grave in denial of physical disintegration.

In Irving's (2017) research, we see that life may take on meanings in relation to its imagined ending. In the lives of young people unexpectedly diagnosed with HIV, a temporal horizon of death that had been imagined as belonging to a distant future is shown to accelerate into view. This medical diagnosis disrupted assumptions of a future life course, while the virus itself disintegrated elements of the body and the senses. An interesting question arose in the face of premature death: how to best spend this finite time? Some attempted to condense as much adventure or pleasure into their life as possible. One participant became heavily involved in drugs now that their warnings meant nothing with the future already lost; he in fact ended up in prison. Another participant withdrew vast financial loans with no plan to pay them back; yet anti-viral medications granted him a future that he had written off: "dammit, I lived and now I've got a \$100,000 debt hanging over me" (p. 64). While Irving's (2017) ethnography addresses the specificity of living with a disease, and facing a premature death, he argues that such experiences of change, finite time, and corresponding pursuits of meaning are really the 'story of all human beings' (p. 31). Themes of existentiality and mortality are thus introduced to the conceptual framing of aspiration in this research.

In a similar vein, research on the anthropology of ageing has been surprisingly relevant to this study of university graduates. Danely and Lynch (2015) argue that 'geroanthropology' is reshaping social enquiry beyond the elderly by orienting attention towards the life course. The variables of space, time, tasks, companionship, purpose, and what to do with one's time – and hence life – seem to appear more clearly when there is a more condensed period of life left to live. The variables that make up a life may be rendered visible only as they come under threat or dismantle through gradual or sudden decline (Irving, 2017). As humans pass through different ages, they may be engaged in corresponding social networks and assemblages of routine, space, and activity that carry their own epistemological status (Bateson, 1994). Human beings are constantly ageing, and they must reconcile the passage of time and personal changes with shifting expectations of what is appropriate for their emergent age (Alexander, 2020). Mathews (1996) summarises a directionality of life in which perceived options narrow over time:

In youth, any or all of the self's dreams may come true. One may become a famous athlete, novelist, or company president; one may marry an ideal spouse and have ideal children. By old age, these dreams, whether realized or unrealized, are past. The multitude of potential paths of our future progressively become the single actual path we have taken. (p. 153)

This framing of the life course recognises a contradiction between human malleability and the ultimate, specific direction of a life. Geertz (1973) emphasised this paradox: that of all the diverse lives that a person could potentially live, they ultimately inhabit just one. I now consider the role of contingency and fate in shaping the life course.

## Contingency and Fate

Contingency is understood as the factors upon which different outcomes depend. The contingencies that determine a life are broad and may be conceptualised as operating on scales that intersect. Irving (2018) summarises:

... contingency might encompass such things as one's land of birth, nationality, ethnicity and the economic status of one's parents – as well as chance, luck and happenstance – all of which are understood and negotiated in relation to people's unfolding social activities and the wider global political economy. (p. 390)

Contingencies in a person's life may thus be inborn or a product of socialisation as well as emergent, unexpected, and changing over time. Irving (2018) describes a universal tension:

Broadly speaking, those realms of experience and action whereby a person has little choice or control pertain to fate, whereas those areas where the person has some movement and latitude relate to free will. (p. 391)

From birth, human beings may negotiate their freedom and constraint through material and social domains which, following Marx, are not of their own choosing (Irving, 2018, p. 390). Varenne and Koyama (2011) discuss 'the fatefulness of culture' regarding the arbitrary conditions that human beings inherit – of family, schooling, culture, language – and which they must work with and against. Mathews (1996) similarly writes: 'a given self is "the product of fate" in that it is shaped by the particular family and larger culture... in which it has lived' (p. 50). Such fatefulness may be pronounced in settings in which youth experience their futures through a sense of 'social fatalism' or predetermination (Peou and Zinn, 2014, p. 728). In rural or

‘traditional’ contexts in which change has been slight over generations, a template of a working future may be perceived as a default (Peou and Zinn, 2014). Contrastingly, both urban environments (Bell and de-Shalit, 2011) and the prospects of HE (Rhodes, 2011) offer a diversification of opportunity and the creation of one’s own future. A central contradiction that emerges out of the data to come is that even through the agentic process of aspiration and the channel of HE, graduates can become fated to futures which they cannot seem to control.

Human beings – in their freedom to choose – are left vulnerable to the contingencies of life (Giddens, 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Irving (2017) emphasises the ‘radical contingency’ in how lives may unfold. Participants in his study are shown to age according to elements of chance and happenstance that enter their lives in unexpected ways. He points to the cascades of consequences from seemingly small acts and decisions. Turning left or right, a random encounter, or an element of luck or chance (good or bad) may irrevocably change (or indeed end) a person’s life. In a similar vein, Giddens (1991) theorises ‘fateful moments’ which may determine a person’s life course:

Fateful moments are times when events come together in such a way that an individual stands, as it were, at a crossroads in [their] existence; or where a person learns of information with fateful consequences. (p. 113)

Giddens (1991) notes that fateful moments can include ‘deciding to opt for a particular apprenticeship or course of study’ (p. 113).

I draw from the above themes to theorise the notion of ‘fateful aspects of aspiration’ (Loewenthal, Alexander, and Butt, 2019). The central intended meaning of this term is when the future is experienced under forms of constraint that are produced by aspects of the aspiration itself. Key contingencies associated with ‘fateful aspects of aspiration’ are parental pressure and the debts and specialisation to arise from HE attendance. The notion of ‘fateful aspects of aspiration’ connotes a determinism which contradicts the agency and optimism which aspiration insinuates. I now consider two examples from recent ethnographies which also demonstrate evidence of fateful aspects of aspiration. These examples help to convey the intended meaning of the term and also indicate a wider resonance of the research findings beyond my own study.

One fateful aspect of aspiration, evocative of ‘the fatefulness of culture’ (Varenne and Koyama, 2011), may entail a trajectory towards the future that an individual inhabits without a sense of authorship. In Bregnbæk’s (2016) study, we are introduced to Gu Wei, who ‘like many students at Tsinghua [University], was not really interested in his major’ (p. 129). A fatalism had echoed from Gu Wei’s filial compliance:

My mother used to plan my life a lot... She is a typical Chinese mother. She chose my middle school, my high school, and she wanted me to enter Tsinghua University. As a child I didn’t like the way she was so strict with me, always telling me to study and not to play, but I more or less followed her demands. Even though I did not find it interesting, I just followed the way and I did well in the college entrance examination and I entered Tsinghua University. (p. 129)

As a result of Gu Wei’s adherence and his studies in Accounting, a new series of parameters have come to exacerbate the fatefulness from his mother’s decisions, and to govern his future life:

... after graduation I know that I may make a lot of money, but I will still have no time to do the things I like. An accountant works twenty hours a day. Only death is the end of suffering. (p. 133).

Gu Wei appears to feel beholden to obey this path through life fatalistically, as though he has been granted no sense of control all the way from cradle to grave.

Finn’s (2015) research in Britain provides an example of fateful aspects of aspiration that is more indicative of ‘fateful moments’ (Giddens, 1991), whereby a decision to specialise pigeonholes a graduate. We are introduced to Caitlin who decided to pursue a career in Law following the completion of her undergraduate degree. Her delighted parents helped with rental payments and post-graduate course fees. They even put a photo of Caitlin in the local newspaper when she passed the Bar. They were so proud that they ‘never stop[ed] going on about it’ (p. 122). Caitlin, however, found that the reality of her work was different than she had imagined, even after four periods of work experience. Two years on from her training, she remarked:

I hate my job, I find it so distressing... The whole thing, personal injury claims, it’s completely soulless and I hate every minute of it. It isn’t me, it isn’t *for me*. (p. 123, original emphasis)

The financial investments and high levels of moral support from Caitlin’s parents made it more difficult for her to reveal her dissatisfaction and to consider alternative paths. Caitlin had developed a professional identity that was expected of her and that was difficult to disavow. The



apparent progression of specialising in Law had fateful consequences, of forging a life in a direction that was out of synchronisation with her own personality and desires.

## Emotional Responses to the Past and Future

Contingency may hence lead to reveries in which people re-trace their steps or ruminate over routes (not) taken (Irving, 2017)<sup>12</sup>. There has been a tendency for social research to neglect the significance of human emotions, which is odd considering their centrality to human experience (Svašek, 2005). Hart (2016, p. 327) argues that ‘aspiring is a sentient and emotive process’. Similarly, Durham (2017, p. 27) presents ‘time as emotionally shaped, as having an emotional dimension as well as well as simply directionality or measurements.’ Regret is a worthy theme to consider regarding emotional responses to the past. In a meta-analysis of 11 surveys in the United States, education was the theme of most frequent regret in people’s lives, followed by career (Roese and Summerville, 2005). Roese and Summerville (2005) argue that regret is especially high in these fields due to their promise of potential. A corresponding sense of missed opportunity may heighten the lament of what ‘could have been’ and what could have procured them a better life (Roese and Summerville, 2005). Psychoanalyst, Phillips (2015) argues that humans harbour a latent recognition that there are things that they could potentially love more than what they already do. This prospect haunts some humans, he writes, encouraging them to re-assert (even exaggerate) their attachments in order to eschew these anxieties (Phillips, 2015). The notion of hauntology refers to lingering ghosts of the past and of futures that never happened (Davis, 2005; Fisher, 2014). Davis (2005) writes that: ‘Hauntology supplants its near-homonym ontology, replacing the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive’ (p. 373). Eichhorn’s (2019) research suggests that young people can no longer forget their pasts in the age of social media. Youth may grow up

---

<sup>12</sup> Contracting a (possibly) fatal virus is a good example of an instance in which people may ponder and lament over past steps taken (Irving, 2017). This point may have global relevance at the time of writing, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

being defined by a continuous trail of their former selves that is digitally photographed and tagged. Eichhorn (2019) evokes the lingering notion of 'childhood's perpetual presence' (p. 3) whereby there may be a fateful element of the past structuring the parameters of the future, preventing reinvention and redefinition.

This research with MU students and graduates has benefited from a longitudinal component of speaking to graduates on repeat occasions. One aim of these encounters has been to grasp graduates' responses to their changing conditions, and to their pasts and futures. The theoretical focus of this thesis orients towards the notion of fateful aspects of aspiration and draws upon other constructs of constraint such as 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011). Yet how much weight should be ascribed to the determinism and 'doom' of such perspectives? Biehl and Locke (2017) discuss cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) as a framework for making sense of the stories that follow in their edited collection on the anthropology of becoming. The authors offer a counterpoint, emphasising human agency and invention. They suggest that:

... while these openings may ultimately lead nowhere, and futurity always struggles with futility and a sense of the inevitable, people can simultaneously be stuck and do things, and this is not nothing. (Biehl and Locke, 2017, p. 21)

Similarly, Waskul and Vannini (2016) encapsulate a sense of dynamism across the life cycle:

Biography, of course, is constantly being written, performed, and revised as we live our day-to-day life. Interactionists believe in a constantly developing self that is continuously emerging and reshaped as a result of different encounters, situations, and environments. Who we were as children and what we experienced during our primary socialization does not determine who we are today, how we live our daily life, or the popular culture we produce and consume. Rather, our mundane existence over the years is something that is regularly woven into a complex story whose twists and turns make sense only when we look at our biography holistically: with a past or beginning, a middle or present, and a future end. (p. 16)

These insights return focus towards the study of the life course. There is a dynamic temporality to the tempo and rhythms of aspirations – that change longitudinally as shaped by intersecting contingencies (Finn, 2015). Life itself is subject to perpetual instability in the face of ceaseless time (Epstein, 2013; Irving, 2017). Similarly, in her analysis of the improvisation involved in five women's biographies, Bateson (1989, p. 17) emphasises that people must 'reinvent themselves again and again in response to a changing environment'. There is a question of whether fateful aspects of aspiration may prevent such manoeuvrability.

There is an ongoing nature to social life and hence, it may be argued, to education (Ingold, 2018). Ingold (2018) draws upon Dewey's notion of learning being like an organic process of renewal – of taking in elements and nutrients in a constant flow, like a plant in contrast to a stone (Dewey, 1966 in Ingold, 2018, p. 3). Varenne (2019b) argues that education lies in the deliberations that humans engage with in situations across their lives, as they confront problems and unforeseen circumstances – including how to navigate systems of education. The ever-unfolding nature of social life means that humans must continually adapt to unfolding scenarios and new normals (Varenne, 2019b). Humans are deemed to educate themselves and each other as they work out 'what to do next' – how to proceed, how to organise themselves, how to search for solutions, how to resolve dilemmas (Varenne and Koyama, 2011; Varenne, 2019a; Varenne, 2019b). In the thesis I thus explore how dynamic responses to the past and future, with others and with the self, may constitute ongoing deliberations that are educational.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed and integrated research and theory which helps to answer the research question, and which forms a foundation for the thesis to come. There were four sections. Part I, 'Young People's Aspirations', situated the research themes in relation to a broader, structural view of education, early adulthood, and inequality. I considered some conventional approaches to the study of aspiration that maintain a sociological and structural focus on the political and economic determinants of possibility. However, I made the case that such approaches may reduce aspiration to differential opportunity. I proposed to study the subject of individual people's aspirations as opposed to differences between populations. I argued that people's aspirations are still produced and negotiated socially and culturally but at an individual level. I then championed the exciting prospects of studying aspiration as a search for meaning in life. This discussion also highlighted a contradiction between potential utopian dreaming (Bregnbæk, 2018) and a less euphoric, even lacklustre, means in which many people are able to imagine a future (Mathews, 1996).

Part II, 'from Higher Education to work', engaged with some key and often contradictory perspectives. I first portrayed a cultural drive towards work, and a centrality ascribed among highly educated populations to a professional identity (Taylor, 1991). Subsequently, it was shown that students and graduates often struggle to imagine lines of work or pathways towards the future (Gershon, 2015; Archer, 2010; Alexander, 2019). The theme of uncertainty was raised, and so too was the notion of epistemology regarding what futures are knowable or not. I considered a theme of elusive fulfilment, whereby hopes for work-place gratification are pervasively unmet (Terkel, 1985; de Botton, 2010; Arnett, 2015). I then considered the notions of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011) as well as 'false consciousness' (Moore, 2011) and alienation (Marx and Engels, 1998) to explain how pursuits of the future through HE and work may act as an impediment to wellbeing. There is a pattern of young people hoping to find a future through these two domains of education and employment, and yet they are often encumbered with constraint – from elusive career success (Burke, 2017) to student debt (Zaloom, 2019) to work-place alienation (Graeber, 2018).

Part III, 'Socialisation into Aspirations', engaged an educational question that cuts to the heart of anthropological enquiry regarding the ways in which ideas and aspirations are transmitted and acquired. I first considered the cultural derivation of ideas and how arbitrary customs may be engrained and disciplined through schooling and upbringing. Popular culture was also considered as a source that may instil and instruct different ideas about the future (Powdermaker, 1951; Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997); so too were media forms portrayed in a more agentive light, whereby young people curate their own mosaic of cultural forms through which they imagine a future (Mendick *et al.*, 2018). The significance of social media was also noted in how ideas and aspirations may be digitally mediated (Miller *et al.*, 2016). I then considered how social class and elite education may impart a sense of entitlement and imagined superiority (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009; Khan, 2011; Burke, 2017). I introduced a discourse of meritocracy alongside, as an example of how students may learn to imagine themselves as deserving of success (Markovitz, 2019). Subsequently, I considered different rationales and implications of parental involvement in their (adult) children's education and aspirations. Themes of social class, migration, and culture

were considered as possibly significant. However, I emphasised the prospects of a cross-cultural validity to such themes as young adults negotiating a future in synchronisation and tension with family concerns (Finn, 2015; Bregnbæk, 2016; Zaloom, 2019).

Part IV, 'Conceptual Framework', developed the tools through which to study the aspirations of individuals over time. I introduced the value of a person-centred framework that zooms into the complexity and psychology of individuals (Irving, 2017; Strauss, 2006). I then explored ways in which aspiration can be understood in relation to space, including dreams of escape (Fong, 2011; Bregnbæk, 2018), different forms of migration (Fujita, 2009; O'Reilly and Benson, 2009) and the notion of 'existential mobility' (Hage, 2005) which posits an existential feeling of going somewhere with one's life based upon one's geographical surroundings. I also developed a life course perspective, framing aspiration in relation to mortality and ageing. Discussion considered how different stages of life may carry their own corresponding epistemology (Bateson, 1994; Mathews, 1996; Danely and Lynch, 2015, Irving, 2017). I then introduced the themes of contingency and fate as central organising themes in the research, and discussed how constraining forces may be inherited – as in the 'fatefulness of culture' (Varenne and Koyama, 2011) – as well as emergent such as through 'fateful moments' (Giddens, 1991). I introduced the notion of 'fateful aspects of aspiration' (Loewenthal, Alexander, and Butt, 2019) to derive from this research and gave examples of similar themes in other studies of graduates (Bregnbæk, 2016; Finn, 2015). Finally, I complicated the analysis through further attention to temporality and consideration of emotions regarding dynamic responses to the past and future as lives unfold over time. The themes of educational regret was discussed, and the notion of hauntology (Davis, 2005; Fischer, 2014) was introduced. Learning was considered a dynamic and ongoing aspect of life, as humans adapt and deliberate over what to do next (Ingold, 2018; Varenne, 2019b). The following chapter on methodological components of the research builds upon what has been established here.

# Chapter Three: Methodology

## Introduction

This thesis draws on eighteen months of research which were spread over two calendar years. I was affiliated with a university in Manhattan from January 2017 to December 2018. I studied the aspirations of students and graduates from this university which I have called Manhattan University (MU). This thesis is presented as an ethnography, which can be summarised as ‘writing’ (*graph*) about ‘people’ (*ethnos*). Ethnography is a qualitative methodology that is used to understand social relations and cultural meanings as they are lived and experienced. Irving (2017) presents a view, ‘of ethnography as a shared experience or journey in which informant and anthropologist work together toward a set of questions in an attempt to generate new understandings about life and the world’ (p. 72). This framing of ethnography is well suited to the person-centred conceptual framework for studying people’s lives in motion established in Chapter Two. One argument made in this chapter concerns the strength of an ‘abductive’ approach that allows data to inductively orient the enquiry, though moves beyond ethnographic description (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). I also argue that participant observation – though idealised as the ultimate form of ethnography (Malinowski, 1922/2014; Moffatt, 1989) – may generate ambiguous forms of data. I argue that recorded longitudinal interviews were the strongest way to research graduates’ aspirations for their capacity to grasp verbatim and in their own words a range of themes spanning time, space, and subject matter.

This chapter consists of three overarching sections: the development of research; an overview of the research; and a reflection on the research methods. In Part I, I first present a chronology of the research design and its rationale. I then look at inductive approaches to research with reference to some implications from ethnography (Okely, 2011) and grounded theory (Glaser and

Strauss, 1967). The case is made that *a priori* assumptions from investigations conducted elsewhere should be considered secondary to data emergent in the context studied. I discuss how an 'abductive' approach may mediate between the open-endedness of ethnography and the specificity that helps to write a thesis. In Part II, an audit trail is first provided of what methods were employed and what forms of data are used in the thesis. I then discuss the participants who feature, how they are conceptualised in terms of identity, and how they were recruited to the study. I also discuss questions of representation. Ethical considerations are then presented such as concerning participants' awareness that all interactions could be used for the research. Part III covers the methods of participant observation and interviews and analyses their strengths, weaknesses, and insights with regards to studying aspiration. I conducted participant observation in a range of contexts that I considered relevant to the investigation. These include: participating in an undergraduate class for a semester, living with other students and graduates from MU, attending graduation ceremonies and events, and observing aspiration as symbolically manifest in the daily life of New York City. These forms of evidence were insightful, though were ultimately found to generate data that was unspecific and insufficient to write the thesis. Interviews emerged as the strongest form of evidence through which to analyse the aspirations and transitions of individuals. I discuss different aspects of the interview methodology. These include the capacity of interviews to generate verbatim text on a range of issues that can be analysed in its nuance; the private space of an individual encounter where participants can express themselves away from the gaze of others (Hart, 2012); and the ensuing capacity of interviews to access graduates' inner lives (cf. de Botton, 2005; Irving, 2017). I finally discuss how different kinds of conversations derived from different interview contexts and I note relational aspects of identity between myself and research participants.

# Part I:

## Development of the Research

### Specifying the Enquiry

This research was facilitated through a PhD Studentship at Oxford Brookes University advertised with the title: *'Urban Futures: Aspiration, Inequality, and Transitions to Adulthood among Young People in London and New York City'*. I applied for the Studentship shortly after commencing an MA in Anthropology and Education in New York City, commencing in August 2014, after an undergraduate degree in Archaeology and Anthropology. The Studentship was awarded in December 2014, to start in October 2015. I therefore used this academic year prior to the start of the doctorate to develop research themes in classes and through research. In one research project, I sought to understand how financial concerns may structure university application. I spent four months volunteering on the New York State *College Road* programme discussing college admission with two non-traditional applicants (adults in their forties). Findings were written up for a class entitled *Methods of Inquiry: Ethnography and Participant Observation*. I gave a presentation of these findings in the UK at the start of the doctorate (Loewenthal, 2015b).

For my master's dissertation, I was part of a colloquium where students designed research proposals for summer fieldwork. I attained access to an out-of-school organisation called the *All Stars Project (ASP)* on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street in Manhattan. The ASP was established in the 1980s with the aim to reconcile New York City's 'stark contrasts between the cosmopolitan corporate world and the circumscribed and underdeveloped experiences of many young people from the surrounding boroughs' (Gordon, Bowman and Mejia, 2003, p. 5). I conducted a continuous month of fieldwork at the ASP in June 2015 in the context of a longer involvement throughout that year. The aim of this research was to develop understandings about aspiration among young people in New York City as a pilot study for the PhD. During an early visit to the ASP I approached a group of adolescents and their surprise at hearing a British accent sparked conversations about geography. The youths spoke excitedly about travelling the world and so I incorporated this



theme into the study of aspiration. At an event I advertised a series of '*Group conversations about travel, the future, and the world*'. In the two focus groups that ensued a methodological success was conducting the conversations sat over a large world map which I had brought along. This visual stimulus prompted spontaneous participant-led conversations about travel, history, heritage, race, identity, schooling, mobility, and media consumption. In these focus groups we also spoke about New York City and its inequalities. I was subsequently invited on a trip around a neighbourhood in Brooklyn in which one of the participants lived, and then to the nearby, culturally dissonant, Coney Island theme park. The resulting master's dissertation looked at the young people's perceptions of New York City and their perceptions of travelling the world (Loewenthal, 2015a). A book chapter which came out of the research (Loewenthal and Broughton, 2019) examines the young people's travel imaginaries and what these reveal about belonging. Four themes were considered: attachment to history and ethnicity; the cosmopolitan notion of belonging to the world; the politics of mobility, shown through the young people's hesitation to travel; and the virtual mobilities of learning which were seen to parallel and shape the youths' travel imaginaries (Loewenthal and Broughton, 2019).

I began the PhD programme in October 2015 and thought hard about the research design. I made an early decision to focus on university graduates rather than school leavers. The future may be rich with concerns as a teenager, as evidenced in the pilot research, yet it occurred that next steps may be dominated by a primary question about the prospects of further study – whether to go, where to go, what to study, and what the implications might be. For those leaving university in their twenties, I considered questions about the future to have a potentially less abstract quality. Encountering Bregnbæk's (2016) study on the dilemmas of students in China oriented my attention to the existential questions that may accompany HE. I made a further decision to not conduct a comparison between New York City and London (discussed below). There was subsequently an emergent decision to focus on the meanings of aspiration among one group rather than inequalities between populations. I carried forward insights from the *College Road* programme and from the pilot research as I worked out the PhD research design. I had thought that inequality would be an enduring theme, given the virulent inequalities in New York City such as evidenced in these projects. Through one of my supervisors I was able to obtain

affiliation at MU. Consideration of the student access which this position might permit led to a re-consideration of the demographic that I might engage with. Having studied young people in New York institutionally categorised as 'disadvantaged' in the MA, it seemed appropriate to explore another perspective on the society's class ecosystem. However, the significance of inequality persisted, and I successfully applied for research ethics from Oxford Brookes and MU to study the aspirations of students from MU and from the City of University of New York (CUNY). CUNY is the most affordable HE option within New York City, comprising of a series of colleges across the city. This is where many students who have grown up in New York City attend as commuters. I interviewed a graduate from CUNY whom I contacted through *Facebook*. Her story was interesting, layered, and an important comparison to the MU graduates. However, it dawned during early stages of data collection that a focus solely on MU would provide a heightened specificity of demographic. Focusing on one university has allowed for patterns and differences to be elucidated with more internal coherence. By simplifying the population studied I was able to go deeper with the analysis of aspiration 'on its own term' without a comparative focus. This was the case with the geographical settings of the research, also.

A lot of thought was given as to how a study of London and New York City might take place. I was hesitant to generalise ideal types of a 'classic' London or New York graduate and then to compare them. Such comparison has been attempted in drafts of this thesis. Yet these arguments have receded from the main text due to the issues of using ethnographic research to represent vast and diverse populations. The UK and US have different systems of HE, different ethnic and classed composition, and different national and regional cultures. The scale of each of London and New York City also makes for a 'super-diversity' in which demographic variables multiply in a myriad of ways (Vertovec, 2007). I have therefore attempted to develop closer understanding of one city, without diverting attention to its comparative meaning<sup>13</sup>. By committing myself to the New York site, I also felt more liberated to follow the enquiry and to respond to the recurrent mention of Los Angeles. During fieldwork, Los Angeles was repeatedly mentioned by MU students and

---

<sup>13</sup> Having grown up in London, I was more excited at the prospects of a culturally foreign field site.

graduates<sup>14</sup> and hence was a geographical extension of aspirations in New York. This insinuation of an aspirational imaginary across the country invited the prospects of a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995). I was hence able to track the dynamism of people and ideas that spread across time and space (Marcus, 1995). This development of the research design, changing and incorporating over time and in response to data, is indicative of an inductive approach. I now consider this epistemological and temporal question of how research ideas may evolve.

## Inductive Principles, Insights from Grounded Theory, and the Value of an Abductive Approach

This thesis appears more focused in its aim and purpose than many of the meandering scribbles from the research process. I spent most of the data collection and much of the early writing working out what was worth studying in the first place. I entered the research with the broad aim to explore how the themes of aspiration and transition manifest among young people leaving university in New York City. A research question with four components was clarified while writing up ('What do university graduates aspire to do with their lives, and how are such aspirations produced, negotiated, and revised over time?'). This question has enabled a specific engagement with the data that has produced a sense of coherence. The question has excluded many insights in a way that is largely beneficial. To some researchers it may seem self-evident that a research question is fundamental to enquiry. However, coming from social anthropology, I was suspicious of the notion that one can know what is worth studying based off of a literature review conducted online or in a distant library. Should it not be empirical reality which orients the researcher towards what is worth paying attention to? Is this openness to the alterity of the field not at the heart of ethnographic fieldwork? O'Reilly (2009, p. 3) describes ethnography as: 'iterative-

---

<sup>14</sup> The following fieldnote from June 2017 reveals in real time the thought process that led to Los Angeles being incorporated into the research: "Through what symbols do people maintain, convert or hide identities after college? Glasses. Alcohol. Coupledness. Work. Travel. Place u live. Hollywood!!!! [tick tick tick]. Yes. Go to LA to interview MU grads in Hollywood/ LA. Great idea."

inductive research' that 'evolves in design through the study'. Deductive research tests a hypothesis devised from existing theory and research. Inductive enquiry allows iterations in data to orient researchers towards themes of significance. Taking up this latter position, Okely (2011) criticises the 'advanced selection of relevance' (p. 22) such as through a hypothesis and other conventions deemed rigorous in positivistic social science. She had had to adhere to these conventions in proposals for her research among Gypsies in Britain. However, she soon realised how such a framework may distort a subject of study: 'In pre-identifying relevance and themes, I was inadvertently ignoring or excluding others *at the outset*' (Okely, 2011, p. 22, original emphasis).

Pioneers of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) championed this idea of granting data the power to direct even the conceptual framing and aims of enquiry. While I do not claim to have conducted grounded theory research, the methodological ideas are worthy of discussion. Grounded theory is a philosophical perspective on research that has formed independently from ethnography though is highly congruent. Glaser and Strauss (1967) initially sought to challenge the higher respect granted to positivistic approaches in the social sciences, epitomised in quantitative research. The authors argued that deductive approaches that were dominant at the time may cloud investigations with preconceptions. Literature reviews and hypotheses were deemed to potentially impose assumptions and prior concepts that may not have relevance in the context studied. Glaser and Strauss (1967) proposed an epistemological inversion from deductive to inductive that involves the 'the discovery of theory from data' (p. 1). They proposed continuous analysis of data during its collection through the development of codes and a 'constant comparative method'. Through iterations in codes, it was deemed possible to develop theory that increases in validity and generalisability. The authors proposed that emergent theories were to be tested in relation to new data and recounted back to research participants. In this sense, the iterative nature of grounded theory is complimentary to ethnography whereby the ethnographer is continually observing, writing, and extrapolating.

Grounded theory researchers agree that a literature review should take place at some stage; there is debate over when (Dunne, 2011). Dunne (2011) notes both ideological and pragmatic rationales behind postponing the review of literature until data is collected and analysed. The

chief ideological principle is to require 'extant concepts to earn their way into your narrative' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 126). Glaser and Strauss (1967) initially advised to ignore all prior research and theory. However, given the practical challenges to ignoring extant studies, Strauss became open to the prospects of a light review in advance (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This move influenced an intellectual split between Strauss and Glaser (see Dunne, 2011). Glaser (1998) remained staunch in resisting the imposition of a prior literature review to allow for the potency, the alterity, and the originality in what is studied. Such a purist view may, nonetheless, fall victim to its own diagnosis and overly prescribe the manner in which a researcher is to engage in their studies.

My own research is not presented as grounded theory. However, I am in agreement with the ideological point that the (theoretical) cart should not be placed before the (empirical) horse. A methodological fieldnote written while writing up in November 2019 reads: "Wow – just looked at the thousands of words of Literature Review written in 2016. Little of it resonates now that I am writing up, even though the themes have not changed." There is an extent to which this early reading and writing was a necessary road, familiarising myself with debates and literature. I would agree with Strauss and Corbin (1998) in this regard. Though, as Glaser (1998) might suggest, literature reviews prior to data collection may also reflect a flawed temporality and an inefficient use of time trying to theorise data before it even exists. The social sciences remain oriented towards positivistic principles (Charmaz, 2006) encapsulated in the requirement for research proposals to state literature reviews, methodology, aims, and questions prior to embarking on research. On reflection of my own research process, I would argue that some clarity in advance may be beneficial. The open-ended approach which I have pursued has proven inefficient, as I have explored multiple avenues no longer addressed in this thesis such as concerning graduation ceremonies, rites of passage, loneliness and friendship, and racial inequality.

Ultimately, an abductive approach may be the most appropriate mediation between open-endedness and an *a priori* rigidity. Tavory and Timmermans (2014) depict deductive and inductive approaches as frequently operating on distant poles. They describe much ethnographic research as overly inductive and mere description, unanchored to theory. They suggest that many

ethnographic insights remain unpublished because, while interesting, they cannot participate in a broader conversation. Following Tavory and Timmermans (2014), I would argue that the final thesis has been abductive: drawing from a combination of orienting perspectives and novel insights. The research question – though clarified in the analysis, and not imposed from the outset – has enabled lines of argument that are more theoretically salient than sheer ethnographic description (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014).

## Part II: Overview of the Research

### Audit Trail

Research ethics was attained through both Oxford Brookes University (UREC) and MU's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to the start of fieldwork in January 2017. I was in New York for the calendar year 2017 and returned to the UK for periods of 2018. I lived in the neighbourhood of Bushwick in Brooklyn with other students and graduates, including from MU (discussed below). I was constantly engaged in the research themes even if not through direct methods<sup>15</sup>. As will be discussed, participant observation is considered the hallmark of immersive ethnographic research (Malinowski, 1922/2014; Moffatt, 1989). Participant observation with MU students and graduates included: joining an undergraduate class for a semester, attending graduation ceremonies and events, visiting the careers centre, and chatting to undergraduates and post-graduates. Such conversations took place in the library, as well as the Anthropology graduate student common room, and a park and bar that are frequented by undergraduates. The

---

<sup>15</sup> I was working for the widow of a famous American artist one day per week and also did both tutoring and babysitting which all contributed to my understandings of New York City and American society. Between 2014-18 I was in a relationship with my ex-girlfriend who is from Jersey City (neighbouring Manhattan). Getting to know her family from the Dominican Republic and witnessing her own transitions (from an undergraduate programme at Rutgers in New Jersey to a master's in London to work in New York) also contributed informally to the ethnography.

most effective source of data was found to be recorded interviews with individuals. I interviewed 30 students and graduates from MU. The stories of 16 of them remain in this thesis.

Upon deciding to incorporate Los Angeles into the research, I conducted a one-week trip there in August in 2017. There, I interviewed six MU graduates up to three years after their graduation, of whom five remain in this thesis (Jill, Stella, Martin, Luke, Ricardo). The research was originally due to be twelve months. I became excited at the prospects of continuing the enquiry and to develop a longitudinal component. I applied to extend my exchange at MU for another year and I returned to Los Angeles for a further, 10-day trip in March 2018. There, I followed up with six participants whom I had interviewed previously (Ricardo, Stella, Martin, Jill, and Luke, as well as Paulo who had since moved there). I also interviewed two new participants for the first time (Daniel and Uma). There is discussion below on how I have selected the 16 participants who feature in the thesis, and how representative this data may be.

Semi-structured interviews were arranged through a premise of enquiring about students' and graduates' aspirations. I would often start a recorded interview by asking a participant to introduce themselves and to "say a little a bit about who you are and where you are from". Through the interviews, I would orient conversation towards a series of recurrent themes which developed through the project. These themes concerned where they grew up, their time at university, what they wanted to do next, their broader thoughts about the future, the role that money played in their lives, their living situation, their thoughts about where they might like to live in the future, their social (and sometimes romantic) lives, and the role which they perceived their parents to play in the mediation of their futures. Within the context of discussing these themes, I tried to allow interviews to be open-ended. Echoing client-centred approaches promoted by Rogers (1951/2003) the aim was to provide a space in which participants could speak as they please. I would then follow their lead. This combination of applying research themes and responding to emergent topics is abductive (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014).

## Participants and Recruitment

The participants who feature in this thesis are listed below according to the order in which they are introduced. These individuals can be summarised according to the characteristics as shown in Figure 1.

**FIGURE 1: LIST OF PARTICIPANTS WHO FEATURE IN THE THESIS**

**Stella:** white American female who grew up between Louisiana, Washington DC, Rhode Island, and a boarding school in Britain; she lives in Los Angeles and is aspiring to be an actor.

**Evelyn:** mixed-race (black and white) American female from Arizona; lives in New York and is aspiring to be an actor.

**Ricardo:** white American male who grew up in Manhattan with Italian and American parents; lives in Los Angeles where he is enrolled in a master's degree and is aspiring to be a film director; he is now married to his wife who is from Russia.

**Giovanni:** white American male who grew up in Pittsburgh with Italian parents who now live in Boston; he lives in New York (though returned at one stage to Boston) and is aspiring to be a screen writer.

**Paulo:** male with Brazilian and German parentage who has attended international schools in different countries including Germany and Saudi Arabia; during the research he moved from being depressed and unemployed in New York to having a well-paid job there as a copywriter which he then gave up to move to Los Angeles; his visa then expired and he has moved to Berlin where he is involved in the English-speaking comedy scene which he considers to be following his dreams.

**Mary:** white American female from Connecticut; lives in New York and is aspiring to work in the film industry.

**Grace:** Chinese female who grew up in Shenzhen, China; attended a boarding school in Dallas, Texas from ages 16-18; lives in New York in an apartment which her parents have purchased; she studied Finance though was fired from a graduate internship, triggering a mental health breakdown; she is disillusioned with the prospects of continuing to work in this field.

**Luke:** Jewish American from New Jersey; lives in Los Angeles and is aspiring to work in animation for television.



**Martin:** Asian American male who grew up in Los Angeles with Chinese parents; lives in Los Angeles and works in finance; he is now married to his wife who is Asian American.

**Luis:** American (Latino) male with who grew up in Tampa, Florida with Puerto Rican parents; lives in New York and is aspiring to be an actor.

**Simon:** Chinese male from Guangzhou, China; studied for an undergraduate degree at Edinburgh University; came to New York for a master's degree in Accounting; aspires to make money through business in the US and then China.

**Daniel:** white American male who grew up in Louisiana; lives in Los Angeles where he aspires to be an actor.

**Steven:** white American male who grew up in Washington DC; studied Art History and Anthropology; he was still a student and did not have fixed aspirations, though spoke about teaching abroad then conducting further study and perhaps entering academia.

**Denise:** black American female who grew up in Austin, Texas with Nigerian parents; moved to New York for a master's degree in Race, Media and Communication; she was deliberating between working in media or pursuing a PhD.

**Uma:** Canadian female who grew up in Vancouver with Bosnian parents; lives in Los Angeles and is aspiring to be a film director.

**Jill:** white American female from Los Angeles; studied Social Work at MU and was conducting a master's degree in the same field in her hometown of Los Angeles; she was engaged to her now wife who is Italian American.

Already from these descriptions, there are insights into the patterns in graduate aspirations that echo throughout the thesis. A report published by Manhattan University on the labour market transitions of the Class of 2019 documents that Entertainment/Media were the most frequent form of employment, followed by Financial Services/ Banking as the second. Among the Class of 2016, Financial Services/ Banking were the most common trajectories, followed by Entertainment/Media<sup>16</sup>. These two domains were also independently found to be the modal aspirations among the students whom I was able to recruit to the study. No claims are made that these participants' stories are generalisable across the university. However, this selection of sixteen participants is deemed a fair representation in terms of aspirations and demographic

---

<sup>16</sup> These statistics are addressed again in more detail in Chapter Five. The source has not been shared to retain the anonymity of the institution.

characteristics. There may be a potential bias towards the participants who produced data that seemed more compelling. Would the arguments in this thesis be different if I were to draw solely from the other 14 out of the 30 participants interviewed who do not feature here? I argue that the conclusions would not differ, as the general direction of analysis – especially ‘fateful aspects of aspiration’ – was drawn from interviews and data across the study. There was a lot more that has been cut from the thesis which substantiates or elaborates on arguments made, but which a lack of space prohibits. However, this thesis does represent small-scale research and a degree of modesty accompanies the conclusions, as discussed in Chapter Eight.

There has already been a discussion in Chapter Two about the ways in which participants are conceptualised in this research according to identity. Characteristics of ethnicity and gender have been taken into consideration but do not form a key conceptual framing of how I have interpreted participants. I have considered whether there are significant gendered differences in the data. While, in principle, there is a notion that men may be less prone to revealing their thoughts and emotions than women (Mathews, 2017), I could not identify distinct gender differences in what was said. It was difficult to ascertain the class background of participants. Evelyn, Martin, and Luis referred to themselves as coming from middle-class families, which they reiterated to mean stable though not affluent unlike many of their peers at MU. There were no ostensibly ‘disadvantaged’ students that featured in the study. The nature of the university and its relative lack of financial aid meant that the majority of students in the study came from affluent backgrounds and/or private schooling. Fees at Manhattan University at the time of the research cost over \$40,000 per year after financial aid. I have considered whether to refer to these students and graduates through the terminology of elites. The notion ‘elite’ has an ambiguous definition – it may be brandished on products as a status symbol as well as smeared onto groups deemed to hoard unjust power (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2017). There are technicalities of family income and institutional positioning within league tables that may provide distinctions of how to define ‘elite’. I do not draw from such metrics. However, I do use the term ‘elite’ at a discursive level to situate the university in relation to other studies of highly selective and/or costly education (e.g. Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009; Khan, 2011; Bregnbæk, 2016).

Despite the significance of social class to the study, I have avoided class categories due to the ambiguity of language which they convey. Zaloom (2019) suggests that ‘most Americans, from the affluent to the insecure, refer to themselves as middle class’ (p. 202). Her research is on how middle-class<sup>17</sup> American families manage the financial component of paying for college. She defines middle-class families as those earning more than \$50,000 per year – rendering them ineligible for low-income Pell grants – yet those who cannot pay for college outright (p. 202). This is a very broad definition. In my own research, nothing is deemed to be gained from using a term like ‘middle-class’ which carries such breadth. Class categories also have different meanings in different contexts, hence causing cross-cultural miscommunication. In Britain, the notion ‘middle-class’ is often euphemistic for privilege while in the United States it has humble connotations. For instance, in Bathmaker and colleagues’ (2016) study of HE trajectories in Britain there are two conceptual groups: working-class and middle-class, the latter representing the advantaged population. By contrast, Markovitz (2019) denotes three conceptual groups in his analysis of selective American Higher Education: the super-elite, the elite, and the priced out middle-class. During fieldwork, a participant corrected the suggestion that MU students are ‘middle-class’ (speaking in British vernacular) to say that MU students are ‘upper-middle class’. This is an accurate description. Yet there is deemed to be no analytical merit in using and hence reifying even this more precise term.

All participants were young adults in their early- to mid-twenties completing an undergraduate degree at MU except for two participants completing master’s degrees there (Denise and Simon). I attended the Class of 2017 graduation ceremonies and studied individuals who graduated in this year or else in the previous years of 2016, 2015, or 2014. This spread of graduation dates was more productive of insights than following one cohort. I was able to gain a diachronic view of change in the lives of graduates during their transitions in the first years after college. Furthermore, similarities among participants cut across the year in which they had graduated. Bregnbæk’s (2016) study similarly looks at undergraduate and doctoral students in analytical

---

<sup>17</sup> Unlike in Zaloom’s (2019) ethnography, I have hyphenated the terms ‘middle-class’ and ‘working-class’ when used in this thesis.

unity, burdened with equivalent dilemmas of constructing a life after university. In my research, those who graduated in 2017 can be described as members of a generation cohort called Zillennials (born in 1995 or after). The rest of the participants who graduated in 2014, 2015, and 2016 fall under another broad generational category of Millennials which can be defined as people young around the year 2000. There is of course cross-over between these socially constructed markers of generation. I do not employ these generational categories in the thesis due to their ambiguity as academic concepts.

Participant recruitment took place through a range of strategies. I made a series of recruitment posters using imagery from the film *The Graduate* and put them up around campus. Three people responded. I interviewed them all, though only Simon's story remains in the thesis. I bought tickets for graduation ceremonies from MU students through a 'Facebook Class of 2017 Leavers' page (discussed below). I used this opportunity to interview two graduating students. Neither of these participants' stories have featured in this thesis. On three occasions I sent out calls for participants on Facebook pages for MU alumni. Jill responded to one of these advertisements though explained that she lived in Los Angeles. When I decided to interview graduates there, I got back in touch. The MU library is where I spent most of my time and I interrupted people and tried to recruit them to the study where possible. For instance, Grace, Charlotte, and Xu were chatting in their graduation gowns on a balcony in May 2017. I got talking to the group and Grace became a key participant. I joined various campus tours to gain an insight into the imaginary that led students to study at MU. Denise was a tour guide whom I got talking to. I interviewed another two tour guides who do not feature in the thesis. I met Evelyn in a bundled taxi leaving an MU graduation boat party around the Manhattan skyline, heading for a 'house party' in the East Village. In the first apartment in which I lived in Brooklyn (described more below), Giovanni moved in for one month in June 2017 having just graduated from MU. Through him I conducted a group interview in the apartment with himself, Mary, and Paulo. In August 2017 after deciding to follow the enquiry to Los Angeles, I reached out to participants to put me in touch with MU graduates there. Paulo put me in touch with his friend Luke whom he had lived with. Contacting Paulo in December 2017 via *Skype* he informed me that had also moved to Los Angeles, where I met both himself and Luke together in March 2018. Snowball sampling was a key means by which

participants were recruited to the study. I had met Stella in New York in 2014-15 and remembered that she had studied at MU and so I got back in touch via *Facebook*. There, I discovered that she had also moved to Los Angeles. Through Stella, I was introduced to Ricardo, Daniel, Uma, and another participant (Rebecca) whom I was only able to speak with on the phone and who does not feature in the thesis.

## Ethics

I attained research ethics from both Oxford Brookes University and from Manhattan University prior to data collection. I would offer a summary of the research when introducing the study. Participants signed informed consent for their stories to be used under pseudonyms; and they consented on the forms to be involved in participant observation, which I explained. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any time. There are some possible issues relating the technical domain of consent forms to emergent ethics on the ground. A potential ethical issue arose when a degree of rapport emerged between myself and a research participant. The status of our encounter as a 'research encounter' might have been made ambiguous. On certain occasions in which I met up with Ricardo, Martin, Simon, and Grace, I did not record the conversation. My hesitation was for this seemed overly direct. To record again like on our previous encounter may have reduced a seemingly friendly and mutually enjoyable exchange to cold data collection. A power imbalance might have emerged in which I was in control of questions and scrutinising their life, or in which they were doing me a favour. I did not want it to appear so instrumental as though my main aim was to extract information. Yet the fact that I was primarily concerned with gathering information is an ethical issue to consider.

In response, I was sure to remind participants of the ongoing project. Yet even in recorded interviews, there is an ethical question of whether participants were conscious that anything they said could be taken as evidence. Quinn (2005) argues that the merits of a recording device over note taking is that 'their presence is almost always quickly forgotten' (p. 20). However, this is a potential issue. For instance, after speaking for some time to Jill, she confided tensions and

differences that she had with her partner. These reflections may have been because I had offered a listening ear, and not been intended for the purpose of a published research project. When participants agreed to take part in the study and to have their stories published under pseudonyms, did they know the range of places that it could be published? It is difficult to imagine what one signs up to in signing a form that permits the reproduction of one's life. I have used pseudonyms to de-identify all participants and have removed information such as the names of small companies where they worked.

## Part III: Reflection on the Research Methods

### The Ambiguity of Participant Observation

There has been a long conversation about ethnographic methodology since the 1920s and that remains lively to this day. Malinowski (1922/2014) pioneered an immersive method of participant observation. Rejecting distant theorisation, he argued that an ethnographer must take part in life as it is lived. From this vantage point, one could observe customs and gain an insight into the social and cultural world from people's own perspective. Malinowski (2014) deemed the ultimate aim of ethnography as:

... to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise *his* vision of *his* world. We have to study man, and we must study what concerns him most intimately, that is, the hold which life has on him. In each culture, the values are slightly different; people aspire after different aims, follow different impulses, yearn after a different form of happiness. (p. 24)

Malinowski (2014) argued to reject the comfort of retreating for the evening to culturally affiliated others. By being among those that are being studied in their entirety one was deemed to have the best chance of understanding their way of life.

Going into research, I had imagined that participant observation would be the ideal form of ethnographic knowledge production. I was further influenced by Moffatt's (1989) points on

methodology in his ethnography of 'floor life' at the state university of New Jersey. Moffatt depicts an epistemological hierarchy of research methods. The authenticity of data is deemed to increase as one escalates in the level of engagement with one's research participants:

Questionnaires usually require their subjects to respond to predetermined topics... with students, they are about what adult investigators have decided should be relevant to youths in advance. Interviews give subjects a better chance to talk and think in their own terms. But interviews with adolescents, especially with glib college adolescents, also encourage subjects to talk in their most formal, adult sounding ways. Participant observation with the undergraduates, on the other hand, amounts to hanging around with one's subjects for a long enough time to start hearing them in their more natural adolescent tones – very different ones – and to start sensing their own priorities as they understand them. I have tried to capture these distinctive adolescent voices and mentalities below. (1989, p. xv)

I went into fieldwork with 'hanging out' (Bernard, 2011, p. 277) imagined as the ultimate form of enquiry. In the research and ethics proposals I said that I would converse, analytically observe, and generally soak up the atmosphere of people's lives with a view to how it pertains to the research themes. I said that I would focus data collection efforts on social interaction with university leavers in their own spaces and regimes: in lectures, libraries, cafes, and parks. The theoretical premise, as I put it, was to understand cultural production from the bottom up.

Yet what do these immersive principles entail in practice? Jackson (1989, cited in Ingold, 2018, p. 60) argues that participation and observation might not be possible simultaneously, but only successively. Further to this technical distinction, what forms of knowledge do each research method produce? I here discuss three forms of evidence that were gathered through participant observation. These were often formative and have influenced the enquiry, yet they do not feature in the thesis as they constitute ambiguous forms of data. These data take the form of experience, anecdotes, and observations.

I had imagined that experience would be a key vehicle of ethnographic knowledge. Two examples of experiential processes that were meaningful but which were difficult to articulate as evidence were an undergraduate class at MU which I joined for a semester and my experiences of living with other young people including MU students and graduates in shared accommodation. In the autumn of 2018, during the final period of fieldwork, I joined an undergraduate class entitled '*Literature, Art and the Path of Life*'. I chose this class because of its title and syllabus which

related closely to the research themes. I was also looking to gain shoulder-to-shoulder exposure to academic life as a student at MU through the lens of their education. The class composed of roughly twenty undergraduates, the professor, myself, and another Visiting Scholar from Germany whom I would go for lunch with afterwards and continue the discussion. The class was founded on a philosophy of education that took education in the etymological sense of *edu* (to lead) and *cere* (out). Through twice weekly seminars sat in a circle, the class engaged with cultural texts from film to poetry to novels to painting each of which dealt with questions of being alive specific to stages of the life course. Each class had a title to relate discussion to human themes, examples including: 'the experience of aimlessness', 'calls to care', and 'mortal conversion'. In a moving end-of-semester seminar, the professor said to the class how scary life's questions and endings may be, though reminded the students that they are not alone in their predicaments. He said to seek company and guidance by speaking with others about such themes and consulting the plethora of cultural works which deal with them.

Various notes were taken during this class and I was taken aback by its brilliance. Insights were gained into the personalities of MU students and their ways of engaging with ideas. The academic culture was one of eager intellectual discussion. The curriculum was also a cultural text itself which conveyed meaning: that whole courses were dedicated to the discussion, ostensibly, of aspiration. Attending this class was hence a formative experience, but jottings of mine from the class discussion have not featured in the thesis. There is an argument that ethnography is more than the sum of its parts, whereby the ethnographer learns through experience and then reproduces an embodied account (Ingold, 2018). However, I have struggled to spell out ethnographic experience and multiple notebooks into a final written text. One reason, discussed later in the chapter, is limitations to my own fieldnotes. However, there remains a sense of ambiguity surrounding the substantiation of an argument from data which is rich in experience though inchoate.

The research process was guided from the outset by the holistic and immersive aims of ethnography and participant observation. I considered any aspect of my life during the fieldwork to be of potential relevance to the study. Renting rooms in shared housing was one of the main ways in which I got to know people in New York. In 2014-15 I lived in a room in an apartment on



109<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan which featured one MU graduate who was working (and has since enrolled on a PhD programme) and two other graduate students at Columbia University. In 2017-18 I lived in two different apartments in the neighbourhood of Bushwick in Brooklyn. In the first apartment, I lived with two American graduates who were working in advertising and finance. One of them rented his room to someone from Italy, and then to Giovanni who had just graduated from MU. In the second apartment, I lived with a rotating assortment of characters including an undergraduate at CUNY (from New York, of Guatemalan parentage), graduates from different universities working in the city (of various backgrounds: from Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Australia), and two graduate students from Quebec studying at MU. Across these settings, I became friendly with the people that I lived with. We would talk about the research themes directly (by discussing the ethnography and emerging findings) and indirectly (as themes in their lives organically emerged). These experiences gave the kind of everyday embodied interaction that anthropology is most known for methodologically compared to other disciplines. While living in the second apartment where I was based for most of fieldwork in 2017-18, I considered drawing upon these characters and the conversations that we had as a source of data in the thesis. I even discussed this prospect with the three other flatmates at the time and made ethnographic fieldnotes about various utterances and encounters. The apartment had a rooftop that looks onto the Manhattan skyline. Most evenings we would talk up there and this seemed like the kind of *in situ* ethnography that Malinowski (1922/2014) and Moffatt (1989) promoted. However, these insights have not featured as evidence in this thesis. There could be a potential issue of ethics. Do people consent to being observed at all times in their own living quarters? Does friendship with participants complicate their status as research participants? More fundamentally, the issue which prevents this 'embodied' ethnography from being carried over into the thesis is the ambiguity of evidence which these forms of interaction generated. There was lots of 'experience' living with others. But what does experience add up to? How does one know which bits of one's 'experience' amounts to which elements of emergent knowledge? Through what evidence does one form an argument? One of the issues of writing down conversations afterwards without recording is that they become anecdotal and may float without

a structure (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). Limitations of anecdotal evidence occurred in my interactions in the city also.

I wrote frequent fieldnotes about the vibrancy of New York's street life on an 'app' on my phone and/or in a notebook. I thought that such description was a large part of what ethnography was. Malinowski (2014) argued that occurrences in social life should be noted down at once, as often 'the facts speak for themselves' (p. 21). I tried to focus on encounters and observations that related to the research theme of aspiration:

"This is v. NYC scene: Big big man with big belly is counting an enormous pile of cash to my right. In bagel store... Reading *NY Daily News*. Outside: hopeless. Young person asking for charity sign up. "Hello, we're working for *Protect the Environment*. Do you have a moment?" Sad – forced smiles. It's been barely 10 mins and even I'm exhausted watching her. She shifts her feet."

"Mexican lady waiting for J train. Scratches away at lotto cards. Life's a gamble. Snakes and ladders. The role of luck and chance. Hope of beating the rules."

"Round 90th on the East. Where I buy my can of *Arizona* after work. Black New Yorker lyricizes lottery numbers: "gimme a 47, 63, 29, 68..." – waves of numbers falling from the sky. [Speaking to him outside of the shop afterwards] "Same numbers everyday" he says.

Until the start of the fifth year of this doctorate, I thought that such anecdotes of street life would feature as evidence of the research themes. For instance, when there is no means of articulating aspiration through the channels of education, people may be resigned to tools such as gambling to give a sense of possibility. I considered that HE might be interpreted as an institutionalised means of a similar dynamic of 'selling hope' (Posecznick, 2017). However, writing this thesis into chapters, vignettes have not sounded so rigorous when unanchored to a wider narrative (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). For some researchers this may be clear from the outset, while other researchers may successfully integrate vignettes. In my own case, excitement about the holistic and experiential components of ethnography prevented me from thinking sufficiently in advance of how these might translate into a written text. I thus here reflect on the potentially limited scope of anecdotes on their own, and/or in answering a thesis.

Hence, to unpack 'participant observation', I experienced limitations in representing what I had learned from 'participation' in people's lives. One may learn through participation (Ingold, 2018) but there is another step of conveying this experience and its implications through writing which

I struggled with. The notion of ‘observation’ was also found to be less conducive as a form of evidence. A popular attitude in anthropology has developed from Geertz’s (1973) notion of culture being constituted by symbols. Geertz (1973) posited anthropology’s role as to spell culture out into language through ‘thick description’. My research was designed to study university graduates; hence graduation ceremonies had been considered as worthwhile events to attend. As graduation approached in 2017, it had even been considered that the university graduation ceremonies would be central to the study. I attended MU graduation ceremonies at the Yankees Stadium, Madison Square Garden, and Radio City Music Hall<sup>18</sup>. The events were audio recorded on my phone; I took photographs; I spoke to people where possible; and I wrote ethnographic fieldnotes describing interactions. I tried to analyse what I observed through such analytical tropes as ‘rituals’ and ‘symbols’.

There was plenty of symbolism, from the grandeur of the ceremonies to rhetoric in the speeches to the competitive applause which marks graduates with a judgement of their popularity. I had spent the morning walking to the Yankees Stadium through the South Bronx which was a world apart from the oasis of affluence where Bronx residents hustled away selling water and paraphernalia in the sweltering heat. Similarly, there were various ritual components that could be interpreted at the ceremonies. Symbolic gestures of reflection served to order time and to express that things would never be the same again. Insights were gained from these graduation ceremonies. However, ‘data’ has not survived as evidence in the final thesis. Part of the reason is that the clarified research question and conceptual framework are person-centred. Hence, while observations have posed limited answers to my own research question, they may be more valid in other forms of enquiry. However, as discussed below, there may also be something about appearances which do not tell a whole story (Irving, 2017), especially in the case of studying aspirations (Hart, 2012).

---

<sup>18</sup> Attaining tickets was an insight into the capitalist mindset of many students. I entered impromptu auctions that had started on the *Facebook* ‘Class of 2017 Leavers’ page. Tickets are distributed as complimentary to graduating students. I paid \$100 to go to the university-wide ‘commencement’ at the Yankees Stadium, \$30 for the Business School at Madison Square Garden, and was given a ticket to the College of Arts and Sciences at Radio City Music Hall for free.

## Aspiration and Interviews

Interviews form the prime source of evidence in response to the research question explored in this thesis. A key reason for the strength of interviews is that they offer an insight into the aspirations of individual graduates. In Strauss's (2006) person-centred framework of studying social imaginaries, she emphasises the need to investigate 'the imaginaries of real people, not the imaginaries of imagined people' (p. 339). In my research, interviews provided verbatim insights into aspects of participants' internal worlds. I learned about their life histories, their relationships, and their aspirations that are specific to them. I also learned of their thoughts on the connections between these domains. These aspects of life may be invisible and even hidden socially from ordinary conversation. Hart (2012) found compelling insights into the privacy with which aspirations may be held. In a study of 580 students in the UK, ages 17-19, one in four reported holding aspirations which they had never shared with another person. Meanwhile, one third of participants reported feeling scared to mention their aspirations to other people. These findings are striking and endorse the need for more direct research methods to study young people's aspirations, namely, providing a private space to talk. de Botton (2005) argues that personal issues and anxieties are rarely brought up to others to their full extent as 'it can be socially imprudent to reveal the extent of any anxiety' (p. viii). He thus suggests that there is a widespread ignorance over the extent of other people's 'inner drama' (p. viii).

Irving (2017) critiques the epistemological propensity in anthropology that has followed Geertz (1973) of turning towards observable symbols as forms of evidence. In response, Irving (2017) pioneers an anthropology of interiority in which he demonstrates not only the limits of what the eye can see but also the potential deception to what is going on underneath. He refers to a documentary on the Golden Gate bridge in San Francisco (Steel, 2006) which filmed continuously for a year and captured footage of twenty-three attempted suicides. In one case, a man was jogging, chatting, and laughing while talking on his phone with no apparent distress. He then climbed the barrier, drew the sign of a cross, and jumped to his death (cited Irving, 2017, p. 95). The methodological study of aspiration gains from this point that interiority may not correspond with external appearances. Via observation, how can one tell another person's situation?

Financial circumstances are one example of the extent of social life that may be unknown on the surface and which may only be elicited, if at all, through questions. The availability of money structures the scope of people's lives. Yet, paradoxically, it is a private domain that is taboo to enquire about. The hidden nature of this layer of social life was evidenced when talking to Denise about the costs of study and how her peers were coping. She reflected: "And then, I guess, we have a lot of international students from China, so they don't really talk about it, because I don't know if they have money or what." In Zaloom's (2019) ethnography of how students and parents navigate college in the US, she claims to have gained access to topics that are broad and relevant though private: 'The conversations broach topics – family history, job security, debt, aspirations, anxiety, and hope – that are rarely discussed outside the domestic sphere' (p. 1). A similar degree of depth has been granted by interviews in my own research.

Goffman (1959) famously introduced a 'dramaturgical' means of understanding social life as performative. In the USA, social life has been deemed to be skewed towards a disproportionate emphasis on the positive (Cerulo, 2006; Ehrenreich, 2013). In consideration of the performative nature of social life (Goffman, 1959), interviews are an intimate context where the 'mask' can lower if one is trusted. Levine's (2006) account of her work as a psychologist with affluent and unhappy teenagers in California makes the point that:

Many of these teens have a notable ability to put up a good front.... Nevertheless, they complain bitterly of being too pressured, misunderstood, anxious, angry, sad, and empty. (p. 5)

This dualism may be specific to performance-oriented educational contexts. Deresiewicz (2014) similarly argues:

Look beneath the façade of affable confidence and seamless well adjustment that today's elite students have learned to project, and what you often find are toxic levels of fear, anxiety, and depression, of emptiness and aimlessness and isolation. (p. 8)

It seems, from Levine's (2006) and Deresiewicz's (2014) research, that self-presentation of 'putting up a good front' may conceal a more complex or contrasting reality.

Interestingly, it was found that students and graduates in the study were often keen to talk about their lives. This eagerness suggests that speaking with graduates about their aspirations was endorsed by them as a worthy topic of investigation. Powdermaker (1951) reflects on the

interview methodology in her ethnography of Hollywood. She makes points that resonate with my own research:

Hollywood people made excellent interviewees for a number of reasons. The level of frustration was high, and frustrated people love to talk.... One afternoon I had a particularly fruitful interview with a producer, who had given me very generously of his time. The interview lasted about two hours, and he had told his secretary that he was in conference and not to be interrupted by phone calls. He did practically all the talking with only an occasional question from me. When I finally got up to go he said, 'You know, this has been simply fascinating. You must come again.' (p. 6)

Powdermaker (1951) concludes that people 'are flattered at having their opinions taken seriously' (p. 6) which was applicable to my own research. For instance, when I thanked Ricardo for his time, having spent an entire Saturday talking, he reflected: "Maybe, sub-consciously, it makes me feel like I'm important." Furthermore, interviews may provide a reflective space in which people can put their inner life into words. Irving (2017, p. 77) suggests that: 'Often, we are not conscious of what we are actually thinking, and even when we are it can sometimes be difficult to understand or put into language.' These limitations pose a problem to an interview method, but also underscore the scope of one-to-one conversation for participants to try to articulate themselves. By granting people a space to talk about themselves, the research process gave them the capacity to put their lives into language and to render them audible (Rogers, 2003). Giovanni referred to our interview as "like therapy". Denise sighed a deep breath after one of the interviews and said that she felt emotional, having never put it all together like that in words before.

In fact, aspirations may be made through talk about aspirations. An interview method is hence inextricably linked to the thing which it seeks to explore. By articulating out loud a wish for the future or a dashed hope, people are actively engaged in a process of making meaning in relation to aspiration. They may be working out what they aspire to do by talking it through. There is, nonetheless, a caveat that accompanies this broad, ethereal nature of aspiration (cf. Weiss, 2009). Talk of the future may involve attempts at exploring a tenuous idea and should perhaps not be taken too literally. This idealistic component to aspiration is apparent at times in this thesis. Hardgrove, Rootham and McDowell (2015) have accordingly criticised the notion of aspiration for its 'lack of conceptual precision' (p. 163). However, I would argue that an

amorphous term is required to reflect the nebulous nature of aspirations and desires. People's aspirations may be sentiments or persuasions as much as nouns of known goals (Hart, 2012; 2016). Jackson (1996) warns against 'a fallacy of speaking as if life were at the service of ideas' (p. 2). That is to say that concepts may colonise phenomena, reducing and distorting their messy realities (see also Rapport, 1993). There is hence a need, on the one hand, not to reify 'aspirations' and to recognise this is simply a word used to represent a conceptually imprecise domain (cf. Hardgrove, Rootham and McDowell, 2015); and yet, on the other hand, I would argue that this 'word' is very helpful and appropriate in its breadth. 'Aspiration' could represent a wide variety of articulations regarding what participants said they would like to do with their lives.

Interviews provided the best opportunity to gather evidence of the research themes verbatim. Bielo's (2009) 'ethnography of reading' on a Bible study group in Chicago states the cultural significance of 'just sitting around talking' (p. 19). In my research sitting around talking was shown to be culturally significant. However, unrecorded conversations disappeared, at best memorised or reduced into written bullet points. On reflection, I would argue that conversations in people's daily lives may be rich sources of hypothetical data. Yet this potential is lost without a written transcript to analyse and to draw from as evidence. Some anthropological perspectives on methodology hold a 'romantic prejudice against the tape recorder' (Quinn, 2005, p. 18). However, Quinn (2005) argues that notetaking is in fact more intrusive and less efficient. Recorded interviews also have the benefit of enabling the researcher to re-live the data multiple times in a more sensorial and embodied way. I have been able to teleport back into a scene in the United States, to remember people's accents and from there, aspects of their personality and of our encounters. Recording has allowed me to re-enter the field on demand. I have also been able to analyse data in more depth upon subsequent listening according to emergent conceptual tools and arguments (cf. Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Re-listening alone, I was able to be with the material and to analyse it in a more nuanced way that had gone 'over my head' in the moment. This point has methodological implications, contradicting the romanticisation of experience – of the inimitable significance of 'being there'.

There was a long process between having recorded interviews and having full transcripts. This is a limitation of the research that I would seek to amend in the future. I listened to recordings of

interviews repeatedly as a means of immersing myself in the data. In 2018, I jotted down parts of relevant text and the time stamp of significant dialogue. However, I was too intimidated by the quantity of audio to systematically transcribe the interviews. Early analyses of the data were largely from remembered and written anecdotes and from piecemeal engagement with audio recordings. A significant step forward in the writing of this thesis was having transcribed the interviews halfway through 2019. The arguments set forth in the thesis have developed through analysing these written transcripts. The writing process has provided a vehicle to push further analytically. While some elements of the data do 'speak for themselves' as Malinowski (2014) suggested, it has been valuable to extrapolate meaning through analysis that has come from writing and responding to a research question. The writing process has involved various reading which – in soliciting prior studies – has fortified original insights with theory from elsewhere (Dunne, 2011; Tavory and Timmermans, 2014).

Consideration should, though, be given to the nature of interview data and how this may skew the findings. Bateson (1989) refers to an 'illusory sense of purpose' that is rhetorically employed when people construct a narrative of their life in retrospect (p. 17). The interviews may have elicited overly precise articulations, in turn, reifying graduates' 'aspirations' as though distinct entities. The nature of the interviews may have encouraged more formal, work-oriented questions – such as Moffatt (1989) warned about interviews. I have likely produced a more serious account of participants' lives by virtue of the nature of the research focus – talking about work and the future – that has not accounted for some of the social and cultural vibrancy of their lives in the present. Furthermore, while participant observation was deemed to have generated ambiguous forms of data, one shortcoming could be my fieldnotes. I imagined a porosity between the research project and my own life which may have spread my attention too thin and inhibited focus when necessary. Ortner (2003), who studied the trajectories of her classmates from high school in New Jersey decades after graduating, reflected in her published fieldnotes: "I can't read a newspaper, see a movie, watch television, without it being part of my fieldwork. No escape" (Ortner, 2003, p. 22-23). A similar breadth of understanding of my own field site inhibited me from being more direct in the analysis of certain data. Gerd Bauman (1996) mentions keeping a separate diary during his ethnography living in London. My digital and



physical notebooks were an assortment of all aspects of my life from jottings of the day's occurrences, to ethnographic descriptions, to consideration of research themes, to financial budgets and reflective writing concerning my personal life. This conflation may have 'cheapened' the scientific rigour with which I approached fieldnotes. Whereas Geertz (1973) proposed meticulous thick description, my own fieldnotes often formed anecdotal 'one liners'. One fieldnote reads: "I am terrible at fieldnotes. These rarely manifest in coherent sentences for more than a paragraph before resorting to bullet point jottings in notebooks I have not gone through." A different ethnographer could have made more of describing social life as they saw it and have relied less on interviews.

## The Contextual Production of Data

During early stages of the research in February and March 2017 interviews were conducted in musical rehearsal rooms of an MU building. I would book one of these rooms, or in the event of a spontaneous interview in which no booking could take place, would conduct an interview in a corridor outside. The motivation for booking a music rehearsal room is that it provided a space out of the earshot of others. Manhattan is notoriously dense (Irving, 2017), making private interactions in a public space difficult to attain. Given the personal nature of the conversations, it was considered both ethically and empirically best to provide a space free from imagined judgement. However, these interviews conducted with students on campus during term time echoed Moffatt's (1989, p. xv) point on interviews being a rigid research method. Conversations were relatively generic, with little scope to develop what Irving (2017) describes as a 'face to face' sense of rapport. Interview responses were generally positive and less reflective. Being on campus appeared to foist a diligent student identity onto participants who recounted the merits of their degree and produced ambitious articulations of ideal futures. There was even at times a sense that our meeting elicited the same responses as they gave in a job interview. There was usually a sense of consciousness towards time, these interviews lasting thirty minutes to one hour.

Meeting with graduates no longer symbolically so associated with the university and no longer affected by its physical presence, they appeared to open up more. The time and space of social interaction was hence significant in affecting the kinds of conversations that I was able to have. After analysing the research at the end of 2017, I sought to engage in more collaborative methods in the rest of the research. In Los Angeles in March 2018, I went on a drive with Stella from a coffee shop to her Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. Our conversation while driving was conducted in the context of a recorded interview which she took in her stride. Listening back to an interview with Evelyn, I was reminded of her religious faith and so asked to attend church service together in Harlem in October 2018. Afterwards, for an interview, we went to Morningside Park and sat on a bench. By facing forward into space and not eye to eye, she presented frank realisations, perhaps more than usual. Banks (2009) discusses how some interview strategies that focus on a neutral third-party object reduce the burden of scrutiny. Looking forwards into space may have elicited an increased sense of free association, as opposed to direct question and response.

My researcher identity can be summarised as a white British male with a similar educational background to those that studied at MU. I discuss the possible effects of these attributes upon the research in the reflexivity section of Chapter Eight. I was 25 at time of entering research in 2017 having graduated from my undergraduate programme in 2014. Moffatt (1989) had felt that his age (in his thirties) was a barrier to accessing more natural tones in interview settings. In my own research, authentic interaction could be generated through interviews. My similar age seemed to facilitate a sense of shared social position. Conversation was informal; for instance, participants often used swear words in a way that they may not to an older researcher. There was a novelty generated by my national identity. As a British person I was treated very well by Americans in general. Research encounters were infused with the premise of cross-cultural dialogue. There was a sense of alterity to my identity coming from another culture and one which the participants often wanted to know about. My nationality encouraged participants to explain what was banal and obvious about their situations on the assumption that an outsider might be new to these ideas. It appeared that participants did not feel so scrutinised to open up when speaking to someone who was culturally foreign and not 'one of their own'. Bregnbæk (2016)

makes a similar point. As a Dane who speaks Mandarin she refers to one Chinese participant in particular: 'I think the fact that I was a total stranger, a foreigner in no way connected to her lifeworld, made her momentarily suspend her "happy face"' (p. 47). Through encounters between persons of different nationalities, the politics of subtle intra-national differences may also disappear. Stahl (2016) refers to a comparative ease with which his foreign national identity as an American enabled him to ask questions about social class in research in British schools. British researchers were deemed to find such questions and language potentially more sensitive in that their identity and accent would be coming from a specific British class position. A comfortable distance of national distinction appeared to foster a mutual ease of interaction in my own research.

The benefits of spreading the research out over two calendar years was significant. Ingold (2018) suggests that a lot of ethnography involves waiting around for things to happen. I was able to wait long enough for ideas to develop and for encounters to emerge, and then to feed analyses from the data back into the research design as questions to participants (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The most insightful data in this research has come from students whom I was able to meet up with over multiple occasions. I was able to get to know these participants better as human beings. There is a chicken and egg question: do these participants feature because I have multiple interview recordings, or was subsequent recording conducted because the first interview was rich? Both possibilities may be implicated. Finn (2015) endorses a qualitative longitudinal approach to studying HE students and to following them as graduates to gauge how and why lives and aspirations change. The data and arguments in this thesis have not only benefited by the scope for a longitudinal component. They have been shaped by these long-term insights. Long-term engagement with participants helped to illustrate the life course of aspirations and how the trajectories of participants panned out in relation to their intentions. Rationale for longitudinal research is therefore not just because it is interesting. It may be a more authentic representation of human life than a static snapshot at a moment in time (Finn, 2015; Irving, 2017). An excessive sense fixity may be extrapolated from a single interview which distorts a more complex and fluid manner in which lives unfold.

# Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the research processes that have led to this thesis. There were three overarching sections. In part I, I discussed the research design including a pilot study in New York conducted for an MA dissertation (Loewenthal, 2015a; Loewenthal and Broughton, 2019). I explained the rationale for certain decisions to focus the study as I have. There was then discussion of the inductive nature in which the research came about. While I have not conducted grounded theory in its fullest sense, key ideas from this research tradition have been influential whereby I have responded to data with literature rather than vice versa (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Dunne, 2011). Ultimately, I argued that I pursued an abductive approach that I would advocate elsewhere. Such an approach combines an openness to the alterity of the social life that is studied with developing questions and theoretical perspectives (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). In Part II, I first presented an audit trail which covered what was done and what forms of evidence have been gathered. I then introduced the participants, their characteristics, and questions of their categorisation. I explained why I have avoided using categories such as of social class which may be overly generalised and lack cross-cultural applicability. I discussed how participants were recruited to the study and noted ethical considerations. This research is not deemed to have breached ethical protocols though there was scope for participants to forget that they were being studied as part of the research. I was sure to remind participants of the rationale for our encounters.

In Part III, I discussed the research methods of participant observation and interviews. I embarked on data collection with an idealised though vague aim to immerse myself in the context studied. Some forms of participant observation were shown to generate important insights though ambiguous data in the form of experience, anecdotes, and observations. Hence, in this chapter I did not simply re-state the value of ethnography but considered its strengths, weaknesses, practical components, and theoretical implications in the study of graduate aspirations. Interviews were found to be the strongest form of evidence through which to answer the research question. Aspiration and conversation may be inherently connected as people externalise and articulate futures in the hope of them coming true. However, equally, aspirations

(Hart, 2012) and anxieties (de Botton, 2005) may be hidden from public presentations of self. Interviews present the scope for privacy and honest reflection, and hence provide a space to explore the unseen realm of interiority (cf. Irving, 2017). Recorded interviews were found to be the most compelling source of data for their verbatim qualities and their ability to convey aspects of participants' lives far beyond the present moment or scenario. I also commented on a methodological point regarding the contingencies of time and space which produced different kinds of conversations and rapport. Follow-up interviews were found to be insightful, generating further insight into participants' lives and showing how situations and aspirations may dialectically transform (Finn, 2015; Irving, 2017). The next chapter is the first of four chapters which present and analyse data from this research.

# Chapter Four:

## What do university graduates aspire to do with their lives?

### Introduction

In this chapter I analyse data that responds to the first part of the research question: 'What do university graduates aspire to do with their lives?'. Manhattan University (MU) graduates appeared to centre their aspirations on the domain of work. There is a centrality to the prospects of work after university, both in an immediate and practical sense (earning money) and in one that is more imagined and symbolic (how might work feature in the rest of one's life). MU graduates appeared to be weighed down by this second sense of where their activities appeared to lead. By virtue of the prestige and cost of studying at MU, graduates sought to bypass what they saw as jobs in search of careers. A career can be defined by a work identity that develops through professional specialisation over time (Arthur, Hall and Lawrence, 1989). Robbins (1993) defines 'professionals' as 'credentialed carriers of institutionally defined expertise' (p. ix). Simultaneously, graduates often aspired towards a vocation – something that they were called to personally. A distinction can be drawn in the data between more intrinsic or extrinsic motivations towards a career. Intrinsic motivations derive rewards from the pleasure of conducting an activity. Such aspirations were the modal in the study. Extrinsic motivations are driven by compensatory incentives such as money that are separable from the activity itself (Ryan and Deci, 2000). MU graduates expressed a recurrent sense of entitlement towards the prospects of earning substantial income through work perceived to be dull. The majority of participants in the study rejected such an ethos of working merely for a wage, though not all. In the data that follows, graduates draw from their experiences, though work is often imagined in abstract terms. Fulfilment and money are often imagined as in tension and even seen as incompatible. A useful means of understanding these graduate perspectives on aspiration and framing the discussion

that follows is the notion that value is relative and not absolute (de Botton, 2005). There is no universal consensus for what makes for a 'successful' or 'happy' life – the attainment of these qualities is dependent on a person's perspective (Mathews, 2017). Sen (1988, cited in Jackson, 2005 p. x) notes:

You could be *well off*, without being *well*. You could be *well*, without being able to lead the life you *wanted*. You could have got the life you *wanted*, without being *happy*. You could be *happy*, without having much *freedom*. You could have a good deal of *freedom*, without *achieving* much.

Sen makes the case that metrics of success may misalign. Valuable qualities may mean little if accompanied by a lack of others that are beneficial or desired. MU graduates appeared aware of this variable character of prosperity in the way that they constructed and rationalised their aspirations.

This chapter has four sections: 'deliberations of meaningful futures'; 'graduate criticisms of working lives'; 'intrinsic motivations towards work'; and a counter-perspective on the 'meanings ascribed to money'. The first section explores the kinds of deliberations that graduates had over what makes for a meaningful future. Data from Ricardo and then a group interview involving Paulo, Giovanni, and Mary is illustrative of discourses across the research. Points that are raised include: the imagination of future ages and identities, the perceived attainment of happiness, attitudes towards money, the purpose of one's work, and the propensity of MU graduates to be professionally driven. The second section of the chapter draws upon insights from Ricardo and Grace which exemplify a critical tone that many MU graduates expressed towards full-time work. Critical insights on alienation (Marx, 1988) and materialism (de Botton, 2005) help to elucidate points which are raised. Marx and Engels (1998) envisaged ideals of authenticity, freedom, and choice in contrast to the perils of enforced labour and associated alienation. Interestingly, a majority of graduates in the study sought such ideals of emancipation *through* their work. In the third section, on intrinsic motivations towards work, I substantiate this finding through examples from Giovanni, Luke, Paulo, and Stella. These graduates aspire to be excited by the prospects of their work, and for the fruits of their labour to be a form of personal expression. In the final section, featuring Martin and Ricardo, a different perspective on work is presented: as primarily, if not exclusively, a source of income. There is one narrative of contented compromise with

sacrificing time for economic power to enjoy a good life beyond the realm of work. This view complicates assumptions of alienation such as presented earlier in the chapter. There is also discussion on how financial concerns may emerge in the aspirations of graduates. Recognition of the need for money (or a lack of such thinking) may derive from students' social class background, or else be emergent as a graduate, in response to impending or imagined responsibilities. I go on to conclude by exploring the tensions which graduates imagined between seemingly mutually exclusive extremes of fulfilment or money and ask why they imagined the future in such ways.

## Part I: Deliberations of Meaningful Futures

In this section, I consider some key deliberations about the future which were apparent across the research and which are exemplified through data from Ricardo and then a group interview with Paulo, Giovanni, and Mary. These graduates consider the perceived merits and downsides of different attitudes towards work and associated walks of life. In doing so, they deliberate over what a meaningful future might be, and how to construct their own aspirations.

The first participant who we meet is Ricardo who was living as a graduate in Los Angeles. Stella, whom we met in the Introduction, had put us in touch. Ricardo grew up on the Upper East Side of Manhattan and attended a Catholic school and then a private school, both in New York. At Manhattan University he majored in History and Italian Literature, with minors in Film Theory and Film Production. Ricardo was 25 at the time of first meeting in August 2017. He was engaged to his fiancée who also aspires to be a film director and is from Russia. Ricardo emailed from St Petersburg in January 2018 to explain that they had had a "very quaint wedding". In the following reflection, Ricardo introduces different aspects of his life from narrative constructions of his childhood to imagined futures. He raises the themes of money, happiness, family, and a limited time on earth, and frames these factors as in possible tension with each other:

So, I would hope to have a production company. I would hope to be able to monetize. And I'd hope to figure out how do you make money while still being happy. And that's, you know, the



big thing. Because the reality is, like, you know, life isn't fun. I spent my whole life as a kid – I used to have a set of LEGOs, and I used to play with these LEGOs. I used to buy all of these Star Wars LEGOs and with LEGOs you can, like, take apart a person. So, I'd get all of the coolest shit, and I'd put it on myself. And I'd make everyone else look really shitty in my LEGO world. And I'd create this massive, like, bio-dome, and soccer field, and I'd make myself out to basically be, like, the equivalency of a dictator, without realising it because I was, like, you know, six years old. And I thought, like, you always think when you're younger that when you get older, you're just gonna suddenly, you're gonna be this really hot shot person. There's so much hopefulness and there's so much expectation. And I think I'm still in that. I'm still kind of, you know, there's always going to be that, sort of, level of fear in my eyes, cos you know, we're all struggling with, like, you know, the Percy [sic] poem 'Ozymandias': no matter how great you are, you're gonna disappear and turn into dust. It doesn't matter if you were the biggest thing ever, at best you're gonna be a name in a history textbook. So, all I can hope for is, I guess, happiness. Sadly, now that I'm beginning to start a family, I need, you know, to have money and stuff. And money is, unfortunately – I think my girlfriend's father had a really good idea about it – which is that it's more of like a tool to get rid of things, to get rid of problems. Because it's like the reality is, like, you know, how do you start a legacy, how do you do something impactful with your life, and how do you do something that's gonna have a long influence?

Ricardo presents a coming of age narrative through a convergence of two constructions of life: Peter Pan or *puer aeternus* (eternal boy) refusing to grow up clashed with mortal recognition. Ricardo situates his present self in synchronisation with a sanguine gaze of youth: "There's so much hopefulness and there's so much expectation. And I think I'm still in that". The future, presented as such, is still to come. The presence of MU graduates in Los Angeles, trying to make it in the Hollywood industries, might be interpreted as attempts to retain such potentiality. By positioning themselves in a location of imagined and real opportunity, the future may appear open and filled with possibility – such as Finn (2015) describes the perception of London for graduates in Britain (Chapter Two).

Above, we see an element of Ricardo's education on display: he has used a poem to help him consider issues of personal (and universal) significance. The poem by Percy Shelley (1818/2002, p. 194) regards a traveller who finds plaques in the Egyptian desert. The poem concludes by describing the stones' bold declarations in a lifeless setting:

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;  
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare

The lone and level sands stretch far away.

The juxtaposition of life and death is developed in Shelley's poem with another paradox that even the greatest of glories will recede into nothingness. Resigned to the fate of a limited lifespan, Ricardo considers the merits of happiness as perhaps all that he can really hope for. Interestingly, he frames this prospective pursuit of happiness in tension with the financial demands of raising a family. Parenting itself is a common existential response to mortality through the construction of a family that will outlive a person and will retain their symbolic presence on earth (Becker, 1997). Ricardo's comments crescendo with a rebuttal to the light-hearted present tense hope for happiness with ambitious calls about "legacy" and a "long influence", as though looking to live beyond the grave.

Ricardo graduated in 2014 and returned from a rented room to his family home, both in Manhattan. There, lives Ricardo's mother who is a successful oncologist from Italy. Ricardo's divorced American father lives in Los Angeles where he is in a high position at a Los Angeles film school. As a graduate in New York, Ricardo experienced different forms of work that were made available to him through parental contacts. After negative experiences, his father suggested that he apply for a master's programme at the university where he works. Ricardo was accepted and moved across coasts. He was a master's student there both times that we met. Ricardo expressed aspirations to become a film director though said that he was "incredibly shy" to reveal this aspiration and that he felt "like a boy" (as though a child) when he did. This dynamic reveals a sense of struggling to inhabit an aspired occupational identity and a barrier to expressing one's aspirations, as discovered by Hart (2012), and discussed in Chapter Three. In Ricardo's deliberations above, he suggests that the "big question" is "how do you make money while still being happy[?]". An imagined tension between these domains can be seen throughout this chapter. Ricardo went on to describe Los Angeles as a place where people pour themselves into their work, fighting even to work for free:

*That's why it's so hard, because it's like, your job is your passion. I think M. Night Shamalan [a film director] said it the best, he said, people ask him, you know, film students and what not, they ask him, 'What does it take? I wanna be in film. What do I do?' And he says, 'only be in film if you could go for the next 20 years of your life, and every single person would call you an idiot and say that you're a fuck up, and not respect you. And you still don't care. It's still worth*

*it to you. That's when you know that you should be in film.'* ... I'm so impressed by how much people are passionate about film, and how much they love it, and how much actors are willing to, um, go through with it. Even like, Stella, you know, Stella's commitment. And it's just like, it's so – you're so unsure – you have no idea what happens. Everything is about being at the right place at the right time... A testament to how much people want it in LA, to how willing to go through [is] the fact that I can go on a website and I can post like Grip, or Boom, or Boom Operator, or DP, and I'll get like 40 applications. And in two days I'll have a crew, and they'll all work for free. It's fucked. On like my end, I'm like '*oh, it's free*' – but on the flip end, I'm like, '*fuck, then I'm also free.*' ... So, like, going back to this whole thing about people working for free. It's like, this is like a life to people, you know. Like, some people live by this. Movies are so important to people... [And] what's absolutely, you know, ironic about everything is that, you know, despite the fact that people are so passionate about it, it somehow is so, you know, unimportant. You know. Me and my girlfriend, we constantly go through these mood swings where we're like. Yeah, like, my mom's a cancer doctor, my mom's a cancer researcher. One of my friends, he became friends with me because he reached out to me and became my friend because my mom saved his mom's life. You know what I mean? That is important. Like that is, that is, like, different. All I can hope for is that you saw [my film] and you thought about it and maybe it inspired you, you know.

People who are driven by vocation may also be required to 'hustle' to make it work and to persevere without stability or (high) pay. This dynamic can, of course, refer to situations far beyond the realms of the film industry. Ricardo portrays the themes of passion and of an income as in tension and even mutually exclusive. He echoes a film director's comments on a severe degree of commitment. To succeed may require weathering years of failure, shame, and conflict, to the extent that "it is still worth it to you". Ricardo describes a sub-cultural mentality in which "this is like a life to people". A devotion to one's work and a likelihood of a lack of funds or stability are sometimes exalted in the arts. The Russian film maker, Tarkovsky (1989) writes:

The only condition of fighting for the right to create is faith in your own vocation, readiness to serve, and refusal to compromise. Artistic creation demands of the artist that he 'perish utterly', in the full, tragic sense of those words. (p. 39)

There is something potentially neurotic in the intensity of working incessantly and without pay. Such deliberations about the ideals and realities of the film industry weighed on Ricardo's mind and are returned to throughout this chapter. He raises his mother's job as an oncologist as a career that has a positive (lifesaving) effect on others. Ricardo thus reflects on the potentially limited social value of film and notes the irony of committing so much to something fictional that may also be described as "unimportant".

Similar deliberations over how to proceed into the future, and how to evaluate a well lived life, are seen in a group conversation between Paulo, Giovanni, and Mary. On a Saturday evening in June 2017, the group were sat in my apartment in Brooklyn which Giovanni had moved into. The group had recently graduated from Manhattan University. They considered the research themes over a two-and-a-half-hour recorded interview. At one stage, the group discussed the forward gear momentum of student life in New York and compared it to a more present tense value system which they had witnessed in Europe. Mary (from Connecticut, with American parents) and Giovanni (from Pennsylvania, with Italian parents) had been on a semester abroad together in Paris. There, they felt a once-in-a-lifetime experience of “hanging out in cafes” and “doing nothing”. This temporality of not orienting present activities towards the future had been appealing, though foreign. It was ultimately perceived as dissonant with the necessary hard work that lay ahead for them as graduates in New York. Paulo (of Brazilian and German parentage) had attended an international school in Berlin as a teenager. He referenced his peers from high school as now engaged in a kind of presentism that was unfamiliar to the culture at Manhattan University:

**Paulo:** But, in Europe, I got the same sensation as you guys. And when I go back there and visit my friends from high school, they are all like – maybe it's a Berlin thing –

**Giovanni:** Kids just aren't working.

**Paulo:** They're not worried about working. They want to just sustain and live life. I don't know if it's a ricochet of Europeans just wanting to live life, enjoy life to the fullest. They don't have a drive, though. And I think that drive is maybe just like a big city, like, New York – LA thing. I don't know if they're happier. I think some of them are definitely happier. But they, yeah, they just have no worries about the future. Like, if they need a job, they're gonna be a bartender. They always know somebody who, like, needs something. And you can actually be a barista, a bartender in Berlin, and pay your rent and have money like left over. You can do that. So, like, why worry about small things like that? And the competition is not a thing. I've never met anyone in Berlin who was actually, like, intimidated by my, like, resume or anything or wanted me to, like, help them advance in their careers. Never. If anything, they are always open to giving me, like, opportunities.

Here Paulo describes a different kind of youth culture to the relentless professional drive that he has grown used to at MU. He considers whether a culture of competitive ambition may be exclusive to ‘big cities’ (seemingly in the USA) like New York and Los Angeles. He also infers possible cultural distinctions in the values between the continents of Europe and North America.

Paulo appears to find the alternative temporality of working enough to fund a good life in the present to be both enticing and off-putting. He recognises the merits of lacking “worries about the future” and suggests that as a result, some of these people are “definitely happier”. However, he also seems to find this lack of “drive” to be static. Paulo reveals the normality of competition and a networking mentality among peers in New York. There is an apparent motive to use friends for career advancement – as though even friendship was infused with a capitalist ethos of potential gain. A perceived lack of this mentality in Berlin is so unfamiliar that it is deemed worthy of exclamation.

For many graduates whom I spoke with, their articulations about the future were shown to be contingent on what was going on in their life at the time (cf. Finn, 2015). Paulo had been particularly apathetic in the group discussion in June 2017. He had graduated from university suffering from mental health problems and joylessness. He thus considered the merits of another alternative path that he had previously thought of as foolish:

**PAULO:** Well, who’s in the wrong? Who’s in the right? How are you supposed to live your life? You can argue both ways. You give your life a meaning. I don’t know, so one of my friends from high school, he dropped out of college first year. And he’s been rock climbing in East Asia since high school. And I see his pictures, and I used to think, “*what an idiot. He’s not doing anything with his life.*” And now I’m like, I have anxiety and depression, and I’m just like, “*wait. This guy is living the life!*” He’s like –

**GIOVANNI:** But how is he *'living the life'*?

**PAULO:** He’s making money, he’s just, like, working in, like, a normal job and he can afford everything there because it’s, like, Indonesia. And he’s, like, rock climbing, he’s in touch with nature and his self –

[*laughter from Giovanni and Mary*]

**PAULO:** I don’t know, he’s like a balanced human being. And then there’s me here trying not to lose my shit every day.

Paulo presents this story as a means of complicating an assumed superiority of his own more conventional pathway through college. Unlike his friend, Paulo had completed his degree. Yet the value of this achievement is undermined by the mental health problems which he considers to have resulted from it. Paulo appears to wonder what his university trajectory was all for when comparing his “anxiety and depression” with his friend’s seeming wellbeing. He describes his friend as having a “normal job”, interpreted to mean having enough money to enjoy one’s life

doing other things. The example of rock climbing as a central focus of one's energy is presented as a more embodied and authentic means of being alive. The connotations of climbing rocks and walls with body and mind in synchronised action may contrast with urban imagery of both work and leisure in New York. Paulo says that his friend appears (on social media) to be "a balanced human being" who is "in touch with nature and himself".

The 'back to nature' connotations provoked impulsive laughter from Giovanni and Mary who were too sceptical to consider the point. Giovanni went on to elaborate, "I couldn't work in a restaurant and rock climb all my fucking life. I just couldn't." The tone of Giovanni's response represents a recurrent mentality expressed by participants in the study of evaluating present activities in relation to a future career. Activities that did not put one's self on an imagined escalator to professional success as quickly as possible (such as work in a café or bar, or backpacker travel) were generally rejected in the interviews when raised<sup>19</sup>. Giovanni did not see a hobby or the adventure of living abroad as a sufficient activity for the focus of his energies. Rather, as will be explored, a dominant aspiration of participants in the study was to find meaning in life through one's work. As will be addressed in the next chapter, such graduates sought adventure and escape not through hedonism or travel but through fiction and forms of media.

The group explained the prevalence of internships during their experiences as undergraduates at MU. Extra-curricular activities while a student were geared toward the cultivation of professional working futures. Giovanni, Mary, and Paulo suggested that being located in the professional world of New York exposed them to the reality, and necessity, of adopting a competitive spirit:

**GIOVANNI:** Yeah, it's also we weren't, like, quarantined in, like, rural Ohio when we went to college, right. We had some kind of reality hit us before we left school.

...

---

<sup>19</sup> For instance, one British participant, speaking from an Irish bar in New York, explained: "The Irish lads who work here – they came here, they work at an incredibly popular, successful bar in New York – [and they] make more money than all of my friends do working office jobs in creative fields. And I'll say to my friends that I kind of admire the fact that they're doing this job and they do it very well. And they're just like enjoying New York. But then people are very dismissive. They're just like, 'they're *just* a bartender'."

**MARY:** Yeah. It's like, every semester, needing to have an internship. And everyone else has an internship. And applying to a million and not getting any calls back.

...

**JL:** You were saying people have been doing internships since 'day one' at college?

**GIOVANNI:** Oh yeah.

**MARY:** Yeah.

**GIOVANNI:** Oh yeah.

**MARY:** I didn't. And that stressed me out. I didn't until, like, sophomore [2<sup>nd</sup>] year. And that really stressed out my freshman [1<sup>st</sup>] year. Cos I wasn't doing anything.

**JL:** Oh shit. So just because in your first year you weren't doing internships –

**MARY:** I felt horrible. I was like, "what am I doing with my life?"

These quotes reflect the prominence of career thinking in the MU college experience. Mary refers to feeling "horrible" and aimless by virtue of not being affiliated with future-oriented work experience during her first year at university. The fact that she questioned what she was "doing with [her] life" without her schedule and mindset organised accordingly indicates the enormity of work in how MU students envisaged their present and future selves. Students appeared to see themselves in relation to others and they emulated their environment in which "everyone else has an internship". Hence, a socially constructed value system of aspiring professionally while a student – and to an extreme degree – became normalised as though it was natural (cf. Bourdieu, 1977).

As we see later in the chapter, Giovanni and Mary's drive was not empty of reasoning. They wanted to find fulfilment through work which they find enjoyable – in their cases, in the film industry. Like Ricardo, above, they recognised competitive futures in this field and so committed themselves in the present. Many such aspirations to work in a fulfilling (though unstable) field were founded on a perception that there existed limited opportunities for workplace gratification elsewhere. The next section of this chapter explores graduates' critiques of what were perceived to be the pitfalls of many working lives.

## Part II:

# Graduate Critiques of Working Lives

This next section draws upon reflections from Ricardo and then Grace. Both ruminate over their stultifying experiences of work as a graduate. Such perspectives on work have precedent. In Terkel's (1985) study of work in the US, he recounts:

For the many, there is a hardly concealed discontent. The blue-collar blues is no more bitterly sung than the white-collar moan... 'I'm caged,' says the bank teller... 'There is nothing to talk about,' the young accountant despairingly enunciates. (p. xiv)

Such discourse remains prevalent in the contemporary era. Graeber's (2018) research shows how frequently people perceive their job to fill a hole in an organisation. Graduates and workers from around the world wrote to him expressing a feeling that their role contributed little or no meaning to themselves or society. A pervasive finding in the study of transitions from HE to work regards a disparity between graduates' hopes for workplace fulfilment and the less gratifying nature of employment opportunities (Arnett, 2015; Lauder and Mayhew, 2020). Narratives from Ricardo and Grace, below, exemplify a criticality expressed by MU graduates towards not being personally invested in their work. Ricardo and Grace are sceptical also about the compensatory rewards of an income in exchange for unfulfilling time. Discourses of alienation and materialism help to elaborate on points which they make.

Ricardo interpreted that he could have had a well-paid job in New York yet that he lacked the motivation to follow through on opportunities made available. He appeared to treat the interviews as a reflective and even confessional space through which to reflect on his life. He was keen to point out the privilege in his background, as though a form of catharsis and also social analysis as he identified that even substantial support did not generate joy:

**Ricardo:** I think that I had so many opportunities. That's the really sad part is that I could have – I could have had like a decent paid job right now –

**JL:** How do you mean, in LA?

**Ricardo:** No, in New York – in New York, definitely. LA, I don't know many people. But, as I told you, I am the definition of this white privilege mascot. I am from a well-off family who had connections. I was given careers I didn't deserve, and I hated everything about it, and I was so



fucking miserable. Nothing made me wanna do it. And the way I knew that is because I would stay up all night writing music. I would stay up all night writing scripts. I would stay up all night doing this. I would inconvenience myself. I would never stay up all night when I was, you know, working – I was doing marketing shit for, like, when the advertising thing came. I would never stay up all night for that because it's like, it's just a job.

Ricardo did not enjoy the work that was made available to him and describes himself as having been “miserable”. He was looking for more than “just a job” and rejected work that did not stimulate him. He depicts an ideal of excitement through examples of staying up all night writing music and writing film scripts. He compares this self-directed thrill with a bloodless sensation of working in marketing and advertising positions. In these instances, where work was not of his own choosing, he appeared to lack a sense of internal drive: “Nothing made me wanna do it.”

Ricardo elaborated on what he experienced as a monotonous and alienating routine when he was working as graduate in New York. He generalised these experiences and interpreted them to be a common feature of conventional working lives:

You go through the routine. The routine of the nine to five where you're in New York. And suddenly you try to change that routine by getting off at a different Subway stop. But even that becomes a fucking routine because you go to the same store or something. Or you go home, and you do the same thing and you're so tired because you're fucking working all the time like an animal. And maybe that, at its core, that's why, maybe I'm just someone who's trying to seek the thrill of not having something be consistent, you know. Consistency and repetition is like, to me, is like death.

New York City Subway cars during the commuting hours form a constant surge of train after train of crammed commuter carriages. Ricardo perceives a sense of enforced conformity among these commuters. Workers are deemed to “go through the routine” and to be extracted of their energies, “working all the time like an animal”. At the heart of Marx’s (1988) critique of work under capitalism is the notion that workers are in bondage to their employers. People are deemed to be forced economically into forms of work that prevent their freedom. The worker is alienated from the fruits of their labour and estranged from their own authentic humanity. Marx (1988) writes:

The worker.... feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home. His labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced labor*... man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions – eating, drinking, procreating, or at

most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. (p. 74; original emphasis)

Fromm (1961, p. 43) elaborates on what Marx meant by alienation:

Alienation (or "estrangement") means, for Marx, that man does not experience himself as the acting agent in his grasp of the world, but that the world (nature, others, and he himself) remain alien to him. They stand above and against him as objects, even though they may be objects of his own creation. Alienation is essentially experiencing the world and oneself passively, receptively, as the subject separated from the object.

Ricardo's depiction of going through the motions in monotonous work against one's will speaks to this notion of being estranged from the self. He experienced "consistency and repetition" as simulating lifelessness. This point echoes a comment from Marx (1988, p. 74) that 'labor in which man alienates himself, is a labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification.' The fact that Ricardo aspires to avoiding experiences that are "like death" insinuates aspirations to feel alive through his work and to retain a sense of his humanity.

In the same conversation, in August 2017, Ricardo went further to criticise the dynamic of being sold material rewards in exchange for one's labour. Schor (1998) analyses how consumer goods have been placed at the centre of understandings of the American Dream. Americans in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century have demonstrated their accomplishments through physically purchased symbols. Cars, clothing, domestic appliances, and homes have been branded as a means of rewarding one's work with the money one earns (Schor, 1998). An ideology of materialism has been promoted through advertising. Industries have promoted products and activities to desire during non-work time which may provoke people to want to work even more (Weeks, 2011, p. 47). The idea that one can afford more things the more one works could be understood through the Marxist idea of developing false consciousness (Moore, 2011). Material rewards might convince the worker that they are succeeding while in fact sustaining their complicity in an unsatisfying job. Ricardo portrays a hyperbolic dynamic in which "materials and vacations" are distributed as consolation for a life in which "you hate your job":

**Ricardo:** I have friends in New York that are my age (25) and they probably have a million dollars in their bank account by now.

**JL:** Really?

**Ricardo:** Yeah, they work in Goldman Sachs and –

**JL:** Is it people from MU? Or high school?

**Ricardo:** No no. It's friends from high school. Cos I was friends with kids that went to like Dalton and Horace Mann. These really preparatory schools, and their kids get into like, Harvard, Brown. So, I have friends that went to Brown and they're working in like Goldman Sachs, or they went to MIT and they were, you know, top of their class, all A's. And they're fucking miserable. Like, they're making so much money. And they're like going out and partying and like trying to, like, forget about how much they hate their jobs. It's like, I was saying this to my girlfriend, Mira. I was like, what is the price, like, *'yeah, you hate your job. And the majority of your life sucks.'* And you're exchanging that for, like, material – materials and vacations.

Ricardo here is interpreting his friends' positions from afar. We do not know their actual thoughts, salaries, or wellbeing. There is a generalised portrait of educationally successful graduates who have sold themselves to soulless work and who attempt to resolve this sacrifice through consumptive leisure that helps them to “forget about how much they hate their jobs”. Ricard is attempting to distance himself from this construction of life by diagnosing its ills. He interprets this dynamic of compromise in superlative terms involving extraordinary rewards (“a million dollars” in the bank) in “exchange” for significant cost (being “miserable”). While an extreme version, this example touches on a more broadly applicable dynamic of selling one's labour or wellbeing for extrinsic rewards (Marx, 1988).

Kasser (2002) discusses perspectives on the relationship between materialism and wellbeing. He argues that in the United States, a profusion of materialism has failed to provide meaningful happiness. Haig (2018) discusses the ironic epidemic of anxiety and depression in affluent societies: ‘people often live in fear, or feel inadequate, or even suicidal, when they have – materially – more than ever’ (p. 12). The so-called Easterlin paradox in economics regards the weak or non-existent correlation between wealth and happiness. Easterlin (1973) identified that over decades of growth in the American economy, rates of reported happiness had not risen. The same paradox is the case in China today: as people are lifted out of poverty, middle classes boom, and millionaires are made, levels of satisfaction with life and work have remained stagnant (Monnot, 2017). Findings from my research are not sufficient to strongly support these lines of argument, though there is plenty of implication that ‘success’ – however defined – may have an

ambiguous relationship to 'happiness' (cf. Bregnbæk, 2016, pp. 141-142). The next participant whom we meet is Grace, from Shenzhen in China, who is a central figure in this research.

Grace and I met various times for both recorded and non-recorded conversations. She is an only child of upwardly mobile Chinese parents who have dreamed of her having a successful life in finance in the United States. To fulfil this dream, Grace was sent as a teenager to a boarding school in Dallas, Texas. There, she studied for two years prior to her four-year degree in Finance at MU. The assumption underpinning Grace's educational trajectory was that this would lead to a 'green card' US visa and a career in the financial sector. However, as a graduate, Grace grew increasingly apathetic towards such motivations and questioned what it was all for. Grace and I first met on the day of her graduation in May 2017 as she and two friends were chatting on a balcony of an MU building in their graduation gowns. Soon after, Grace began a graduate internship with an international bank in midtown Manhattan. Yet she despised the atmosphere and would come home in shock as to what had happened that day. She would muse, confused as to why she said a certain thing. Grace was considered by her employers to be rude and lacking in the appropriate etiquette. She hence was fired which triggered a downwards spiral of mental health issues and family problems. In December 2017, Grace and I spent a day drinking tea in a pub in New York generating five and a half hours of interview recording. At one stage we discussed the notion of delayed gratification. She reflected:

You can say Chinese people are one of the most obsessed with delayed gratification: work, work, work, work, and you save a lot of money, and then you buy a house at age 90. But I think a lot of people just don't care anymore. Younger generations don't care anymore. *'Oh, well. I don't know what to look forward [to] in life. I don't know what my life's meaning is, and no one really gave me the opportunity to explore. So, I'm just gonna, like, get a job, live in my parents' house, get married, and do the same job. And then on the side, I like, buy a lot of clothes, buy a lot of cosmetics, and search for the next best dessert in the city, and things like that.'* I think that's what most people are doing to avoid thinking about real life.

Grace is critical of an allegedly typical Chinese model of being "obsessed" with work. The notion of affording a house at age 90 suggests a cruel irony of postponing the rewards from one's sacrifices to a stage at which it is too late to enjoy them. It is estimated by Ipsos research that 70% of Chinese people measure their success by material things they own – more than any other country (cited in Monnot, 201, para 1). Grace portrays younger generations as apathetic about

attaining meaningful goals; they “don’t know what their life’s meaning is” having never been given the “opportunity to explore”. She interprets Chinese youth as hence turning to materialism such as through the purchase of clothes, cosmetics, or dessert. She critiques this consumerist dynamic as preventing them from “thinking about real life”. These comments echo arguments from Lefebvre (2014) of consumerism as a palliative function of capitalism. Blackledge (2017) describes how Lefebvre (2014) spells out explicitly ideas on leisure that had been implied from Marx, that: ‘leisure under conditions of capitalist alienation is best understood not as the free alternative to the necessity of work but as an aspect of broader alienated relations’ (Blackledge, 2017, p. 474). The construction of leisure time may be to make one’s alienated labour palatable, and hence to reinforce complicity, whereby a break from work simply allows for the continual reproduction of the workforce (Blackledge, 2017, p. 474). Foucault’s (1970) notion of an internalised ‘gaze’ that disciplines a person’s behaviours and desires may apply to both generational trends that Grace depicts. She suggests that Chinese people, young and old, have internalised a dominant ideology which they re-enact and do not even have the capacity to question.

Both Ricardo and Grace portray others whom they interpret to lead spiritually ungratifying lives that are defined instead by conventional symbols of status and materialism. de Botton (2005) analyses the flaws of high-status aspirations that may lead to unhappiness. He writes:

The essence of the charge made against the modern high-status ideal is that it is guilty of a gigantic distortion of priorities, of elevating to the highest level of achievement a process of material accumulation which should be only one of the many things determining the direction of our lives under a more truthful, more broadly defined conception of ourselves. (p. 198)

As alternatives, de Botton (2005) assesses more holistic values through which people have forged internally rewarding lives. He discusses the domains of philosophy, politics, religion, art, and bohemianism as possible avenues that have historically led people to a greater sense of meaning and purpose. MU graduates were seen to place ideals associated with art and bohemianism in high regard. Such values may emphasise a spiritual, aesthetic, and intellectual richness that may not correlate with material acquisition (de Botton, 2005). Across our meetings, Grace expressed disillusionment towards material rewards in compensation for a working life. She was apathetic about the prospects of work in finance and – like many MU graduates – saw the only alternative,

of a meaningful and happy future, through the lens of the arts. Grace's worried parents had assisted her in attaining interviews for new positions in finance, after she had been fired. Yet without believing in what she was doing Grace felt inauthentic:

**Grace:** I'm too non-practical for [finance]. You go on *Excel*, and you figure out, you just deal with three numbers on the spreadsheet and trying to get the perfect valuation for the company. I don't care. I can't make myself care about that. So, I thought about – I feel like I'm digressing from something. Well, just basically growing up, my mom has been super strict with me, and whatever I do is never good enough. And she has given me a lot of mixed messages about everything. This way is wrong. The opposite way is also wrong. So, I just kind of gave up. I don't know. Whatever I do, I just feel like I don't get recognition. So, why bother?

**JL:** I mean, have you got examples of things you've done that people haven't given you recognition for?

**GRACE:** The only times I get recognition and everything in anything is – well, my grades are good. But I don't really care about that. The only times that I'm happy and I make people happy and people recognise me for what I do is in the arts.

**JL:** Can I ask what kind of arts are you into?

**GRACE:** When I was in school, I used to write plays, and play supporting roles, and direct – stage plays that are hilarious. People laughed. And I wrote poems. And my friends read them, they were like, '*this one's really good. It really helped me*'. I really liked that. And then I started writing songs. A lot of people liked my songs. I've never heard anyone saying anything, like, not positive about myself. So, I am not a very good singer. I'm okay. And I think, well, music in China is not very developed. People sing the same old songs over and over and over and over. There's not much nice, good new things to explain the life of Millennials and this generation that has a good material comfort but are very sad and scared inside and have, like, four parents to support and then two child. It's very stressful. No one talks about their life. So, I think someone needs to do that. But then, is that person going to be me? And then there's also the censorship problem. I don't know how well I can keep my hatred for the Chinese government under control. Arggggh! So that's a very risky path.

Grace's attitudes towards finance jobs reveal the significance that she ascribes to having a sense of connection to one's work. There are similarities with Ricardo's sense of inertia in work that was "just a job". Grace commented: "I don't care. I can't make myself care" with regards to perfecting equations on *Excel* spreadsheets. The sense that Grace's education has specialised her for work which she does not want to do indicates a phenomenon which will be theorised later in this thesis as 'fateful aspects of aspiration'. Robinson and Aronica (2009) emphasise that what people enjoy and what they are good at may not correlate. Grace even refers to having "grades" that are "good" though also claims to not "really care about that". Rather, she is looking for

something more. In his research on working lives in the US, Terkel (1985) describes the significance that people ascribed to having 'a meaning to their work well over and beyond the reward of a paycheck' (p. xiii). Work, in this sense, was shown to be a (usually unfulfilled) search 'for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash' (p. ix). Grace refers specifically to wanting "recognition" and a failure to receive this, such as from her mother. She suggests that "the only times that I'm happy and I make people happy and people recognise me for what I do is in the arts." Grace here subscribes to a dichotomous conceptualisation of future options that pervaded the aspirations of MU graduates and that is examined in the subsequent chapter. She exudes a sense of casual access to well-paid work in finance which she finds soulless. In rejecting this, Grace can only imagine alternatives in the other extreme of artistic expression through theatre production, poetry, and writing songs. These domains are notoriously precarious as means of earning money or developing a stable career. The subsequent section examines the ideals underpinning these intrinsic motivations that were modal aspirations in the study.

### Part III: Intrinsic Motivations towards Work

This section considers the propensity of the MU graduates who were in the study to aspire towards work which they wanted to do for the intrinsic value of the work itself. Ryan and Deci (2000) offer definitions to distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Intrinsic motivations may be supplemented by extrinsic prospects such as recognition or income; though if a person is willing to engage in the task for its own sake, aside from these rewards, then it is intrinsic in nature. Comments from Ricardo and Grace, above, indicate such intrinsic motivations. Both sought deeper meaning through their work which they could not find in the graduate jobs which they had initially embarked on. I here explore evidence from Giovanni, Luke, Paulo, and Stella in which they are intrinsically motivated towards their career aspirations.

Giovanni described his aspirations as to work in the field of "fiction writing". In June 2017, while he lived in the same apartment, he was involved in an internship with a film production company.

He would come from this internship and continue to read and review film scripts as part of his job. This hard work appeared to be conducted as part of a belief in investing himself into his work and hoping that it would pay dividends in the future. In the group interview, he spoke about looking forward to the future, seeing himself in 30 to 40 years' time and being excited by the prospects:

**GIOVANNI:** As much as I complain about New York, or about, you know, how I'm not getting paid enough at this job or whatever. Again, I'm genuinely happy to be in, like, an industry or like on a certain path that's something I can see myself doing in 30 years and being excited about, you know. So, I think that's something. There's something to be said about that. The fact that I feel like I will still be genuinely interested in the thing I'm doing now 30 to 40 years from now.

**JL:** Do you think you will be you will be doing something –

**GIOVANNI:** Yeah, yeah. Absolutely.

**JL:** That's quite a conviction to think that you will be doing something broadly similar.

**GIOVANNI:** Yeah, absolutely. A hundred percent... It seems like when you look at the history of New York – documentaries that you see – you see the people who are like the famous artists who are around, you know, a certain kind of artistic movement. Oftentimes, it seems like those people were just people who just stayed in that area who kept doing what they were doing, you know. And that's often been like a motivating factor for me. It's like, if you just keep doing the thing that you're doing, if you keep liking the thing that you're doing, keep putting energy into it, it will kind of lead to something. That might be a naive thought, but it seems like if you can support yourself in that way, if you can keep doing it, it will become something real.

Here, Giovanni projects a view of his future life that is filled with excitement. He depicts an ethos of persistence, drawing upon success stories that he has seen in documentaries on artistic movements in New York in which people “kept doing what they were doing”. This dedication is framed as rationale for Giovanni to keep going for not years but decades. He portrays this prospective future with recognition of the need for patience and considers that it may be a “naïve thought”. However, he describes this imagined future using the terms “genuinely happy”, “being excited”, “genuinely interested” and “liking the thing that you’re doing”. This exuberant language stands out in a landscape of graduate aspirations that includes disappointments, angst, inertia, and dilemma (Bregnbæk, 2016; Black and Walsh, 2019). Giovanni appears to align his aspirations with what he ‘wants’ to do.



Through Paulo I was introduced to Luke, in Los Angeles. In the following example, Luke situates the meaning of his work within an existential context of wanting to 'do' something with his life. Luke is the only child of Jewish parents and attended a public (state) school in the state of New Jersey which borders New York. He studied Film and Television with an Animation focus at MU and graduated in May 2017. He moved to Los Angeles shortly after, driving across the country with his father. His parents paid for his rented apartment in Los Angeles and for a car there. In Chapter Six, I examine the dynamics of parental involvement in Luke's story as he perceives them. Luke and I first met in August 2017 in North Hollywood, where he was living. He wanted to work in animation and explained that "more than anything, I'm pretty career focused". He felt as though he had invested so much so far that he must come good on this commitment: "I've sunk so much time into this. I'm not gonna retrain in Engineering." This mentality exemplifies the theme of 'fateful aspects of aspiration' that is examined later in the thesis. Come March 2018, Luke had still not attained a full-time paid position. He expressed that there "have definitely been some dark times", referring to a momentary mental health breakdown. However, Luke re-stated his rationales, presenting what his work as an animator meant to him in the context of his entire life:

I don't know, I just honestly kind of feel like I'm doing what I actually want to be doing. In a weird way I am, like, not even that afraid of not making it. Like, I feel like even if I don't immediately have enough of a support net obviously, it's like, things will never get that bad. Like, worst case scenario, I can move back to the East Coast. And it's like, I already have a tablet, I already have animation software, I can just always keep making shit. And if something hits even a little bit, by the time I am like, you know, 80 or 90, you did something.

As in earlier examples from Ricardo, Grace, and Giovanni, Luke prioritises the prospect of "doing what I actually want to be doing". Luke's aspirations appear intrinsic, though layered with an extrinsic hope of having his artistic contributions recognised "even a little bit" by the time that he reaches 80 or 90. This life course perspective frames the meaning of Luke's artistic work within the context of his mortality. A sense of purpose is ascribed to the idea of his work, as though this was the most important thing to 'do' in Luke's entire life. Luke does not aspire to time away from work. It seems that he hopes to keep working as long as he can.

These insights from Giovanni and Luke are elaborated through further examples from Paulo and Stella. Both Paulo and Stella depict an ideal form of work as one which integrates their personality and their professional life. Paulo described his career aspirations in the same group interview with Giovanni and Mary. His comments introduce a theme of seeing one's self in one's work:

I just want a job that pays well, and also something that will fulfil me a little more. Not that they can't go hand in hand. But I don't think for me personally they do. Cos first I wanna work in advertising for a bit. And although it is a creative outlet, I don't think it will fulfil me enough – as a person, I won't see myself in the work enough. So, I'm gonna try to switch maybe later on to comedy writing. That's like what I wanna do. But it's like also, no guarantees in life. And we always have to, like, pivot and change. So, let's see what happens.

Paulo wants a “creative outlet”. He perceives advertising (which he studied as part of his degree) to potentially offer this, though worries that it would not “fulfil” him enough. The metric according to which Paulo evaluates this fulfilment – or the potential lack of it in advertising – is that “as a person, I won't see myself in the work enough”. Two aspects of this comment can be addressed. First, Paulo insinuates his own humanity and individuality, referring to his prospective working self “as a person”. This ideal may be interpreted as the antithesis of the capitalist alienation which Marx theorised. Marx's visions of emancipation encouraged labour that is not dehumanized or automated but self-directed (Fromm, 1961). Secondly, Paulo holds an ideal of osmosis between his own ideas and interests as a person and what he does for a living. Comedy writing is imagined as a route that may offer the prospects of authenticity and fulfilment through work. As the thesis develops, we learn that Paulo goes on to follow this dream.

Stella, aspiring to be an actor in Los Angeles, took a similar view of what it meant for one's job to be a meaningful part of one's personal life. She portrays careers in the arts as entailing a permeable membrane between these domains:

I think that's what's really the difference between the arts and the quote unquote 'sensible careers' in finance and law and medicine or whatever it is. Is that, those boundaries between your personal life and your professional life are gonna be very much blurred.

These comments echo a mentality among MU graduates of work options being reduced to either a narrow list of prestigious, well-paying careers (finance, law, medicine) or else “the arts”. In the arts, Stella presents a view in which “boundaries between your personal life and your

professional life” are “very much blurred” – in which one takes one’s work home and is animated by the ideas.

Stella reiterated that aspiring to be an actor offered a means of exploring the diversity of human experience: “Being a conscious entity is weird. Like, how can we play with that and delve into this whole fucking human experience situation.” Stella seeks to explore ideas of personal interest through her work. This sense of intrinsic motivation is contrastive to the pervasiveness of jobs perceived by those who do them to be meaningless (Graeber, 2018). In Graeber’s (2018) research, one Egyptian university graduate reflected:

After graduation, the only job I could find was as a control and HVAC [heating, ventilating, and airconditioning] engineer in a corporatized government company – only to discover immediately that I hadn’t been hired as an engineer at all but really as some kind of a technical bureaucrat. All we do here is paperwork, filling out checklists and forms, and no one actually cares about anything but whether the paperwork is filed properly. (p. 97-98)

Work, characterised as such, does not elicit feelings of excitement nor the articulation of skills or interests. The MU graduate aspirations presented here, towards intrinsically meaningful work, are perhaps in denial of the reality of how much unfulfilling work exists. Alternatively, as discussed, these graduates may be acutely aware of such perils. Stella explained: “It's not even so much, *'I wish I could have a sensible career'*, *'I wish I could want a sensible career'*, because I just don't. I just don't want a sensible career.” She does not want to feel that work is defined by the laborious label often ascribed to it. Rather, she wants her work to be voluntary and self-directed. However, as is now considered, such ideals may be founded in a way that is far removed from the financial realities of adulthood.

## Part IV: Finding Meaning through Money

In this final section, data from Martin and Ricardo offers a contrasting perspective to those developed thus far in the chapter. Aspects of life outside of work such as fun, financial security,

and a future family are identified as sources of meaning. Work is portrayed not as intrinsically meaningful but a meaningful way of attaining the money to fund the life that one wants.

I met Martin on both research trips to Los Angeles. He was living by the beach with his girlfriend from high school to whom he was engaged, and they are now married. Martin was raised by a Chinese family in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles. He was hence returning to his hometown. Martin transferred from an initial two years of study at a state university in California to study at MU Business School to complete the final two years of a four-year degree. US universities have the infrastructure that facilitates such student mobility. Martin's transfer across US coasts to a reputable institution in New York was an aspirational move. He graduated in 2015 and moved directly back to Los Angeles to work for an investment bank. For a year and a half, he was working "hundred-hour weeks". His weekends involved both scheduled work and unexpected projects laid upon him that required an immediate turnaround. Martin has subsequently moved to what he perceives to be a more relaxed 9 am – 8 pm schedule. This new position is with a merchant bank, what he describes as a cross between an investment bank and a private equity fund – "half advisory, half investing".

For Martin, the need for money was apparent from the outset of his university studies. He presented a clear narrative of his choice of career in finance:

**MARTIN:** So, for me, like, when I was coming out of college, like I said, I wasn't making money. So, I was all about the money. I was like, '*I have to make money.*' And that's what motivated me to get into finance, investment banking, and so on and so forth.

**JL:** Had you realised that before college? I assume you applied to [MU Business School] with some motivation?

**MARTIN:** Fair, fair. So even before college. So, let's say coming out of high school, I was all about the money because I wanted to make money. I didn't have a lot. My parents were middle-class, they weren't necessarily rich. So, I wanted to make money. That was my thing. But once I got into it, I realised, too, like, I think I'm pretty darn close to the level where, like, I'm just okay with what I'm doing. Like, if I made more, I probably wouldn't spend much more. So, I think I'm kind of pushing up against – that said, I'm making a lot – but me personally, I think I'm pushing up against a point where I'm pretty okay with this, what I'm making. So, if I get a raise, that's fantastic. If I get a bigger bonus – cos banking bonuses are a big deal – that's fantastic. But I don't know how much more happiness I would get. And after that point, it all just becomes, like, about success.

Martin questions the extent to which he has a professional drive beyond the perks of income, defining an even bigger salary through the lens of “success”. He says that he doesn’t “know how much more happiness [he] would get” from an increase in wealth. These comments echo those made by Ricardo about the tentative correlation between wealth and happiness. However, unlike Ricardo, Martin seems more accepting of a dynamic in adult lives that one must work for money.

Martin discusses his motivations for going into the financial sector. He suggests that a degree of modesty in his family background fuelled his desire for affluence. This point raises the important theme of the social class production of higher educational and career choices. Instrumentalist views of Higher Education as a means of bettering job prospects have been associated with students from families without a history of attending university (Bathmaker et al, 2016). Research shows an inverse correlation among students in the US between parental income and the perceived ‘practicality’ of degrees which their children study (Mullen, 2010). It is argued that such students, as well as graduates, from backgrounds of financial security and wealth may be prevented from thinking of university in vocational terms and may even be encouraged to explore intellectually or artistically with an imagined safety (Mullen, 2010). This lack of needing to aspire with money in mind helps to contextualise the idealistic aspirations of those presented in the chapter so far. Giovanni’s father is a doctor and his mother is a dentist; Paulo’s parents run international businesses. These occupations may have generated the economic foundations that enable a sense of possibility for Giovanni and Paulo to pursue fictional writing. One might interpret a shift in inclinations across generations that is inverse to Martin’s, moving from financial security to a lack of such drive. Ricardo reflected on returning home as a graduate:

I kind of was, just, having a really hard time being ambitious, you know. I was just going out and drinking with the same people. And I was just, like, trying to have fun in New York.

These issues are further explored in Chapter Six on graduates’ perceptions of parental involvement. Chua (2011) refers to “generational decline” (p. 21) which she interprets as a dwindling sense of hunger or drive among privileged youth who have grown to take their affordances for granted.

Martin presented a clear distinction between his work and his life outside of work which echoes Stella’s theorisation of such a boundary for people in such careers. Yet whereas graduates

pursuing meaningful work in artistic fields were often struggling, Martin presented himself as content:

**MARTIN:** I'd say I easily spend like 75% of my life working right now. Like, any given day, three quarters of it, excluding sleeping time, is working. I probably have a quarter of leisure time, at best. So, in my leisure time, I don't want to fucking talk about work. I've been dealing with work for 75% of my day. I just want to enjoy, like, enjoy a beer, grab some food, like, actually relax a little bit. Because I – and you know what's weird, too – and this is said all the time. Like, that 75% of my day is actually meaningless. And I do it to enjoy the 25% of my day.

**JL:** Would you say that's true?

**MARTIN:** I think that's true. Like I think it's different for people, right. Like, I think people that really want to be successful at work, and they want to be the best, the CEO types – maybe I'll become that eventually – that's fantastic. For me, I enjoy my time hanging out with my girlfriend and hanging out with my friends more than I enjoy my time working. And I think that's probably true for most people. Unless you're like, you know. I don't know, like, a fucking clown. No, clowns probably hate it, too. Like, I think that's true for most people. Is that I spend most of my time to make money to supplement like, the time, like, I go out and have dinner with my friends and hang out and stuff like that. That being said, I think there's that 75% – it could be spent in different ways. Like, mine's tolerable, and I somewhat enjoy it. Um, I think there are times when, like – so like, I appreciate it. There are times when you could be working like a super shit job 75% of the time. But then in those cases, I think the 25% becomes even more amplified. It's like then I *really* appreciate what I'm doing in my free time. So again, it's like a weird balancing act, in my opinion.

**JL:** It is weird, maybe it's like, it is a cliché that comes up, that 25% of leisure becomes, like, sanctified.

**MARTIN:** I love it!

**JL:** People are living for the weekend. Or for –

**MARTIN:** Yeah, exactly. I don't know, during the day, like, I'm not like scheming – like, on any given day, I'm not scheming, like, *'I'm going to be, like, the most powerful guy in the world.'* No, I'm scheming about, like, *'Oh, where am I gonna take my girlfriend to this weekend?'* Like, *'what friends am I gonna meet up with?'* Like, it's fun. And like, I need money to do that. And I spend most of my time making that money, but I have more fun spending the money than making the money. So, like I said, I think I live – for me personally – I'm pretty sure I live for that 25%. The 75% is bearable, and I appreciate it. And I somewhat like it. But at the end of the day, I don't think anything can compare with like, going out for drinks with the boys, like, going out to dinner with my girlfriend. *Netflixing*<sup>20</sup> and chilling – oh, that's fantastic – that's a great invention. So that's kind of my, what I live for. Yeah. Yeah, different from a lot of [slang

---

<sup>20</sup> *Netflix* is the name of a media services provider with a host of television shows that one can watch when one wants.

name for MU Business School students]. I think they live for work. But fuck that. I am who I am. Ha ha ha.

Martin's comments offer an interesting counterpoint to notions of alienation through work. Some leisure practices purchased through money may be deemed emancipating and authentic (Lefebvre, 2014), including pursuits such as dining and drinking held as ideals by Marx (Blackledge, 2017). One could make a more rigorous defence of consumption if considering what these practices mean to people (Miller, 2012). Martin spoke of what was meaningful to him – even what he 'lives for' – as centred around fun. Interestingly, no other participant in the study presented such a value system. Fun appeared to be too light-hearted as a focus in an atmosphere where people took themselves and their aspirations seriously. Martin does not view the notion of 'living for the weekend' cynically but appears to embrace it. He seeks a clear distinction between work and life. Martin presents his own work and leisure rationalisations as normal for most people. Indeed, the dynamic of working to fund other things extends beyond the extreme example of finance to explain many people's working lives. As we see in Chapter Seven, Martin also derives meanings through an imagined role as provider which he anticipates playing in the future. Such concerns about a future family and the practical necessity of earning money began to occur for others, also – such as Ricardo.

In data presented above, Ricardo portrayed the pursuit of fulfilment through film as coming at a cost, notably, the attainment of financial security. He was also critical of conventional working lives. He is opposed to the notion of doing "just a job" or of working for the purpose of attaining the funds for "materials and vacations". A change of tone emerged when considering the future less philosophically and more practically. His marriage and the imagined role that he must now play were beginning to dawn on him for the first time:

So, with regards to long-term plans, to be honest with you, I've like never really had a long-term plan. This is my first time thinking about it. Like, I'm gonna be getting married, you know. I'm 25. That's a big thing, that's fucking long term. We're doing like 'prenup'<sup>21</sup> and everything. But, you know, I have to think about it. Even having been with this girl for a year I'm starting to think, like, you know, I've gotta start making more money. I saw my parent's relationship crumble because of money. My dad said to me famously when we were having dinner a couple

---

<sup>21</sup> A 'pre-nuptial agreement' declares ownership of assets legally in advance of marriage in the event of a divorce or death.

of nights ago, “*you know what kills marriages?*” And I said “*what?*” expecting him to give this whole myriad of things that are really in-depth, and he said “*money*”, so it’s like money is always you know like I guess the rationale and the thing that chases everything. I think long-term I’m hoping that I can try to monetize myself more and solidify that monetization. Because right now, as I’ve told you, trying to be in the film biz, doing the indie thing, a lot of time you’re spending money not even to make money. You’re spending time and money to not make money, that’s the reality.

Ideals in the arts often deem money an ugly aspiration or even consideration. However, Ricardo appeared to be nurturing a more humble and practical view of how the future might pan out. He references advice on the possible significance of money to keep relationships and families afloat. Continuing in the same vein, Ricardo opened himself up to a situation that differs substantially from the fantasy of coming to Los Angeles and the rhetoric displayed so far in the chapter:

Because it's, like, you're doing what you wanna do; and you wanna be paid for what you wanna do; and it's like, fuck, you're asking for a lot, you know... I mean now I have to actually start getting a job I might have to work as a – help my friends with this insurance start-up that they're doing. Which is kind of like, kind of like the point in which you're kind of like, you go back home and people are like, '*oh yeah, you're still directing?*' and I have to be like, '*well, actually I haven't gotten a feature film. I'm doing something that's, like, fucking miserable. I'm selling insurance to people.*' Which is like the equivalency of being a snake oil salesman.

Ricardo exudes an idea that work and enjoyment are in tension: “doing what you wanna do” and “getting paid for what you wanna do” are viewed as independent and potentially incompatible. Ricardo’s depiction of coming down to earth compares the grandeur of a “feature film” (a full-length movie) with the prospects of unrelated work in insurance which he describes as “miserable” and even unethical. Ricardo’s change of tone indicates how abstract many of the participants’ aspirations presented here have been, imagined from a context of Higher Education or shortly after. Student loans, unpaid internships, and behind the scenes parental subsidy meant that work was often not imagined based upon empirical reality or a pressing need for money. Some of the students and recent graduates did not have much concrete experience of the labour market through which to root their narratives of aspiration. Stafford (2016) makes the epistemological argument that ‘people do not generally know much about things they have not yet lived through’ (p. 60). This insight suggests that student and graduate aspirations may be informed and altered by ongoing experience (Finn, 2015) such as we see in the subsequent chapters.



# Conclusion

This chapter has explored data that responds to the first part of the research question: ‘What do university graduates aspire to do with their lives?’. Manhattan University graduates appeared to negotiate their aspirations through the domain of work as the lynchpin to their potential lives. Graduates were shown to reckon with the perceived compatibility of finding fulfilment or future financial security. Frequent aspirations were to be free from the perceived restraints of work, and to be motivated intrinsically to enjoy what one is doing. These aspirations were articulated in relation to existential concerns about being recognised and fulfilled as a human being. However, such idealistic aspirations to find meaning in work often reduced graduates’ futures to hopes and dreams situated within unstable fields. I thus considered an alternative view, of possible meanings derived from money.

Part I engaged with graduate deliberations of meaningful futures. Comments from Ricardo were considered to encapsulate a theme throughout this chapter: “how do you make money while still being happy[?]”. He factors in concerns from hopefulness to the responsibility of raising a family to the recognition that life does not go on forever and so should perhaps be enjoyed. He further reconciles a passion for making films with pitfalls such as a lack of stability and a lurking doubt over its social value. Data from a group interview with Giovanni, Paulo and Mary demonstrated a cultural drive at MU of being career focused. The group compared the professional mindset around them with examples of alternative temporalities of youth culture elsewhere. Paulo compared his “anxiety and depression” as a graduate with the seemingly wholesome and happy life of a friend of his who had “dropped out” of college and was rock-climbing and living abroad. While Paulo’s trajectory looked more prestigious, the lack of accompanying wellbeing provoked him to wonder how to measure prosperity.

Part II analysed graduate critiques of working lives and explored what these may mean in terms of their aspirations. Ricardo and Grace reflected critically on jobs which they had experienced as graduates. Ricardo spoke of the inertia he felt working in positions that were perceived to be “just a job”. He depicted senses of lifelessness commuting in to work each day in New York. He

was also critical of material rewards which he saw as extrinsic compensation for an unfulfilling life. Insights from Marx (1988) on alienation have assisted in making sense of these comments. Are workers subject to false consciousness through the prizes of rewards and a notion of career progression that in fact maintains complicity in their own subjugation? We were introduced to Grace who offered further insights on senses of disillusionment towards cultural models of a career. Neither saving nor spending through consumerism appear to elicit excitement within her. Grace revealed the significance, as for Ricardo, in feeling invested in her work. She did not “care” about jobs in finance and claimed to only feel “happy” when involved in the arts.

Part III discussed this pervasive disposition among MU graduates in the study to be intrinsically motivated towards their work. These graduates were accepting of the prospects of hard work on the premise that they may develop a rich inner life through a career that is internally rewarding. Giovanni wants to be involved in a line of work that is exciting to imagine himself doing in the future. Luke suggests that making a contribution through his work would be the worthiest sense of having done something with his life. Paulo aspires to find a career in which he can see himself in his work. Comments from Stella reiterated this point on integrating personal and professional life. There are two noteworthy dynamics that are contextual to these passionate pursuits. Firstly, the ‘aspirations’ were articulated ideas and ideals that were often contrastive to more sombre economic realities of the fields in question. To aspire to a vocation that does not pay well and is not secure appeared to require significant dedication. Secondly, aspirations that prioritised meaning and fulfilment over financial consideration were usually founded on financial subsidy from parents. I return to this point on the significance of parental involvement throughout the thesis.

Part IV finally looked at the meanings derived from money and provided an alternative appraisal of aspirations towards work. Martin aspires to earn money having not had an abundance of it growing up. The possible social class production of aspirations is evident through comparisons between Martin’s financial hunger and the lack of such concerns among other participants. Furthermore, Martin, in an apparently characterless finance job, sees himself as being authentic. His tone of self-assuredness differs from the more neurotic narratives of those seeking authenticity *through* their work and yet struggling. Martin’s story might suggest that, for him at

least, money can be emancipatory, if only at the cost of being tied down “75% of the time”. This view complicates assumptions of alienation through work whereby Martin presents himself as happy with its compensatory rewards. Finally, there were further insights into how aspirations may change, and how financial considerations may emerge. Ricardo stumbled into realising money’s worth in anticipation of raising a family, causing him to revise some of his ideals.

Across the chapter, there is a complexity and multi-layered quality to imagining and inhabiting future work after HE. There is a tension between what graduates imagine or fantasise about work and its realities. As people were coming out of university and generally not speaking from much experience, an abstract quality lingers. Graduates were imagining work in fields that remained ‘imaginary’. MU graduates appeared to have limited understanding of career options through which meaning could be found, outside of the highly expressive, though insecure, industries of the arts and entertainment. They appear to have been largely unaware of how many aspects of work can be meaningful, without it requiring personal expression (Bateson, 2011). The next chapter on the production of aspirations examines how and why MU graduates perceived their options in such particular ways that were simultaneously illustrious and narrow.

# Chapter Five: Superlative Aspirations and High Expectations at Manhattan University

## Introduction

In this chapter I examine the characteristics of Manhattan University (MU) graduates' aspirations. These aspirations are interpreted to be 'superlative' in nature and to be accompanied by high expectations. This chapter further responds to the first part of the research question ('What do university graduates aspire to do with their lives?') and focuses on the second part of the research question ('how are such aspirations produced over time?'). Contemporary research suggests that a buoyancy in youth aspirations may be widespread across geographical contexts. In a city in Tanzania, Weiss (2009) describes the 'ordinariness of extraordinary aspirations, reveries about striking it rich, even speculations about the solidity of reality itself' (p. 38). In rural Malawi, Frye (2012) examines the 'seemingly irrational optimism of youth aspirations... where future optimism appears particularly unfounded' (p. 1565). In Arum and Roksa's (2014) study in the US, university graduates expressed an 'unbridled optimism' about their own futures, despite them recognising contrasting economic forecasts (p. 105). Findings of 'superlative aspirations' from my own research might fit within these broader patterns. A sense of possibility could be generational, associated with youth's life stage (Mathews, 1996; Arnett, 2014). A belief in the future may also be connected to the American Dream (Cerulo, 2006; Ehrenreich, 2009) and to the hope ascribed to Higher Education (HE) (Arum and Roksa, 2014; Zaloom, 2019). However, the aspirations and expectations of MU students and graduates also appear to be specific to the nature and context of MU. Features of the university's location, prestige, cost, and both student and academic cultures are shown to influence the nature and content of graduates' aspirations. New York City and MU appeared to present themselves as ambitious spaces that instructed students how to behave and what to aspire towards. Following the conceptual framework outlined in Chapter

Two, I have drawn correlations between aspirations and the contexts which may have produced them (Strauss, 2006). This chapter examines empirical evidence that demonstrates some educational processes through which aspirations were produced and influenced.

There are four sections to the chapter: superlative and specific aspirations; New York City and ambition; entitlement; and meritocracy. In Part I, I first define superlative aspirations and provide examples of what is meant by this term through Simon and Luis. Comments from Grace and statistics produced by MU elaborate on the modal trajectories among MU graduates. It is argued that these options – of entertainment, finance, and further study – represent a sense of potentiality in which the future is open and filled with promise. An equivalent sense of the superlative is implied in the iteration of New York and Los Angeles as the prioritised places to live, as spelled out by Giovanni, Mary, and Paulo. I consider the production of these radiant patterns in aspiration through an epistemic lens regarding what futures were knowable or not. It is suggested that the university experience at MU may have generated tunnel vision towards specific aspirations in a limited and illustrious range of occupations and geographies (cf. Ho, 2009; Tett, 2015). In Part II, I interpret the high aspirations and expectations of MU graduates in relation to cities, urban migration, and New York City in particular. Ricardo argues that those coming to big cities in the United States capitalise on their opportunities through a hunger to succeed. Daniel demonstrates how MU students arrived wide-eyed in Manhattan and emulated their adult surroundings in order to keep up. Steven suggests how the university's location in New York City demonstrates to students what they could have and what they should aspire towards. Course provision at the university is then suggested to offer an imagined route towards the attainment of such goals. In Part III, on entitlement, it is suggested that graduates saw themselves as above certain kinds of work. High aspirations and expectations may thus be interpreted not simply as 'ambition' but as a sense of 'entitlement' produced through the socialisation processes of social class and elite education (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009). The existence of behind-the-scenes parental subsidy is also indicated to form a fundamental, if hidden, scaffolding to idealistic aspirations. Examples derive from the group interview with Mary, Giovanni, and Paulo and then from Stella. The final section, Part IV, on meritocracy, complicates possible meanings of entitlement. It is suggested that graduates articulated senses of deservedness to success, which

they saw themselves as having earned (cf. Markovtitz, 2019). Ricardo discusses how fellow MU students showed willingness to compete and to prove their worth through hard academic and professional work. Denise ascribes great meaning to having studied at MU, and to having invested tremendous money and sacrificed her wellbeing. As a result, Denise and other graduates harboured high expectations for the future. The concluding tone of ominous expectation forms a basis for the notion of ‘fateful aspects of aspiration’ (to be explored in the following chapters) in which graduates felt beholden to lofty visions of success.

## Part I: Superlative and Specific Aspirations

I describe MU graduates’ aspirations to be frequently superlative in character. I define superlative aspirations as attitudes that oriented towards the utmost – the best, most wonderful, most successful. Graduates did not want to come down to earth but to stay ‘high’ as though life were a crescendo that kept on rising. On the one hand, superlative aspirations enabled graduates to feel as though they were ‘existentially on the move’ (Hage, 2005, p. 440) through the agency of imagining a bright future to come. Yet on the other hand, superlative aspirations were blinding and fated graduates to expectations of actualisation in only the most dazzling forms, at the thinnest end of the wedge of plausible success. To begin this section, examples from Simon and Luis exemplify ‘superlative aspirations’.

Simon responded to my recruitment poster with an email entitled, ‘After Graduation Plan’. He seemed keen to discuss the future and to tell me of this plan<sup>22</sup>. Simon is from the city of Guangzhou in China. He studied for six years in Britain, taking A-Levels at a further education college and an undergraduate degree at the University of Edinburgh. He then tried to find work in London but could not. Simon therefore came to New York for a master’s degree in Accounting

---

<sup>22</sup> We conducted the start of an interview in a café near to the MU campus and then continued the same interview in a university building. We met again on a Saturday afternoon in Brooklyn to play darts and watch the 2017 Champions League final.

at MU. He had a full-time job offer in strategy with IBM<sup>23</sup> for as soon as he would graduate. Upon meeting, Simon ‘apologised’ that although he is very fond of Britain, it is New York, not London, that is the “capital of the world”. Such remarks indicate how participants in the study migrated to New York City with a cultural imaginary of making dreams real. Simon’s “ideal situation” involves an ambitious vision of acquiring money and contacts and traversing across continents, before retiring in his 50s in London, if not Dublin. He discussed his planned manoeuvres:

**Simon:** My ideal situation is this: I will be placed in the life science sector, and then I’ll probably work for several years, until I reach what they call the glass ceiling. And then I’ll say, ‘*can you place me back to Shanghai or Beijing?*’. And then I’ll work probably two, three years there, I’ll accumulate enough resources. I mean, people and money.

**JL:** And you think it would be cities you would work in, not rural?

**Simon:** I’m happy to work wherever they have money.

**JL:** *Laughs*

**Simon:** Seriously. Let’s say the CEO of Goldman [Sachs] is seriously clever, right? And very, very smart person. But consider the amount of money they make, that he makes. It’s not that much. So, for example, a primary school educated Chinese businessman, they just take the call from a province in China and make more than Lloyd Blankfein, which is again, the CEO [of Goldman Sachs, until 2018]. Because he [the Chinese businessman] is an employer. ‘Yeah, you’re a CEO, but you’re still an *employee*’, right? So, that’s how I perceive things. I think if I have two or three very successful transactions, probably, I can just live in London or Dublin. Ha ha.

Simon brazenly discusses the Chief Executive Officer of Goldman Sachs as having a small salary. He idealises a long-term future of freedom, away from the constraints of being an “employee”, by becoming a businessman and hence the “employer”. Simon expresses a networking imaginary of the future, anticipating the acquisition of “people and money”. He accounts for obstacles in his imagined ascendance such as a “glass ceiling” which he has learned to expect for Chinese businessmen in the United States. Simon has a confident response to this hindrance and plans to venture upon the market in China. It is interesting to note the meanings which he ascribed to different geographies: the US as a place of hard work and the accumulation of contacts and capital, China as a developing market in which to strike fortune, and Europe as a place of a

---

<sup>23</sup> IBM stands for the International Business Machines Corporation.

leisurely early retirement. Simon grants himself the power to imagine his future mapped out across the world.

A high standard was set by those such as Simon who were enrolled in degrees that led to concrete job offers and high salaries. One graduate whom I spoke to from the Business School *complained* that his starting salary was \$90,000 per year and hence less than his peers. Such premiums played on the imaginations of those without such guarantees. Even those lacking imagined security still expected high rewards to result from their studies. We here meet Luis, a student in his final year of studying Acting with a minor in Dance. Luis grew up in Tampa, Florida to Puerto Rican parents who still live there, five minutes from his older sister and her two children. Luis is the first in his family to graduate from college and he feels that his parents have achieved the American Dream. I interviewed Luis in March 2017 during the final term of his studies. He came to the interview learning lines for an audition that he went on to afterwards for a Broadway musical of *Harry Potter*. For Luis, the uncertainty of his field was negated through ‘superlative aspirations’:

A lot of the future, when I think about it, just in my past and kind of present, too, I see my dream more than I see a realistic future, I guess. Yeah, when I think about my future, I think of it in a very, like, what I want my future to be. Not like, I don't really think about the downsides of it, or if things don't work out. I kind of always have this optimistic view of like, ‘*yeah, hopefully my future is gonna be this*’. Like, I don't really think about like, ‘*well, if it doesn't work out.*’ Like no. No, that's not an option. Like, ‘*this is going to be what it is.*’... Like, I see me on Broadway. That's what I want to be doing, so that's what I see, or that's what I want to see. Or I see me doing something big because that's what I want.

Luis allows the emotional drive of what he “wants” to shape the perceptions of what he “sees”. The research themes of ‘aspiration’ and ‘imagined futures’ are often explored in tandem and we here see a synergy between the two. Luis’s aspirations have generated imagined futures which sustain the original “dream” through their luminosity. Such wishful thinking may enable Luis to imaginatively bypass the uncertainties that burden the acting profession. Through the power of his hopes and ambitions he generates a prospective pathway upwards out of university. Luis has come to expect social and geographical mobility and appears to maintain this belief such as through his subsequent audition. Superlative aspirations may be a necessity in fields such as acting which require bold commitment to opportunities in which one might attain recognition. However, by acquiescing in an imagining of superlative status – and going straight for *Harry*



*Potter* on Broadway – Luis is also acquiescing in severely limited odds. As per the notion of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011), such aspirations to the most spectacular (and competitive) of goals may only increase chances of failure.

Comments from Grace help to exemplify how MU graduate aspirations were not just superlative but operative according a specific pattern. I met Grace, Charlotte, and Xu on the day of their graduation in May 2017 as they were chatting on a balcony in their graduation gowns. The group – who are from Shenzhen, Florida, and Shanghai – explained that they formed a good representation of MU students: one in finance (Grace), one wanting to go into acting or comedy (Charlotte), and one wanting to work in film production (Xu). When I subsequently met Grace in December 2017, she portrayed an either/or extreme of MU graduates’ aspirations that echoed this pattern:

**GRACE:** Everyone wants to do finance. All of the CAS people want to do finance.

**JL:** CAS being?

**GRACE:** College of Arts and Sciences. All of the politics majors. Or the economics majors... And I mean, even a lot of people who does [sic] Comparative Literature<sup>24</sup>– they don’t know what to do with their life – and they’re like, ‘*ah, finance, all of the money. I’m gonna go do that*’. So, everyone wants to do finance. And also, everyone wants to be a YouTuber, and everyone wants to be a movie star.

Grace first suggests that “everyone wants to do finance”. She interprets this lucrative route to have an allure among MU students who face uncertainty – those studying non-vocational subjects or who “don’t know what to do with their lives”. In recognising, “ah, all of the money”, these graduates might be reassuring themselves that they are doing something appropriately illustrious after their degree. Grace elaborates on a bifurcation implied throughout Chapter Four that the (only) alternatives to “finance” are being a “YouTuber” or a “movie star”. Both a YouTuber and a movie star might be conceptualised as similar aspirations, entailing expression and recognition. The notion of becoming a “star” exudes a sense of the superlative, as though reaching out into space into infinite and shining stardom. This pattern of aspirations (making money or creative expression) also echoed in Simon and Luis’s aspirations to become a

---

<sup>24</sup> We had been discussing ‘Comparative Literature’ as an example of a non-vocational degree. This is the subject that Mary had majored in.

businessman or actor. The third most frequent graduate pathway was post-graduate study. This pattern in graduate trajectories is presented cautiously, considering that it was identified in a limited study of 30 people. Nonetheless, an iteration occurred, which is supported by statistics produced by Manhattan University<sup>25</sup>.

These aspirations might be infused with a sense of limitless potentiality. By aspiring towards expressive pursuits or else the attainment of significant wealth, the future might appear to have a sense of extraordinary potential. Graduates aspiring towards entertainment and the arts might imagine themselves to hypothetically have a magnificent life of fame and fulfilment. The nature of such professions also engages with fiction which may enable the sublime through its license to bend the rules of reality. For those who aspired to make fiction and film, there was an apparent thrill of being able to create art and to be immersed in ideas. Powdermaker (1951) writes:

Movies meet, wisely or unwisely, man's need for escape from his anxieties; they help assuage his loneliness, they give him vicarious experiences beyond his own activities, they portray solutions to problems; they provide models for human relationships, a set of values and new folk heroes. (p. 15)

In my experiences of living with students and graduates in New York, there was a tendency for them to be so immersed in the realm of fiction that people watched television series of young adult actors pretending to live in New York. A euphoric imaginary of the city was portrayed in such media – featuring shots of the city's iconic urban landscape – and hence perhaps reaffirming the superlative sense of living there. It seemed as though students and graduates were working on their aspirations via such media consumption. Similarly, for those such as Simon, Martin, and those whom Grace refers to, the prospects of earning significant money may offer the reverie of purchasing a life of grandeur. Such lives may indeed be promoted in media forms (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997). Money can procure centrality in global and urban locations as well as mobility and freedom to behave and buy as one pleases. The very prospects of imagining future wealth

---

<sup>25</sup> In the undergraduate Class of 2019, 83.8% of graduates went on to work, 12.6% went on to post-graduate education, and 3.7% were both working and in post-graduate study. Entertainment/ Media was the most common form of employment (14%) and Financial Services/ Banking was the second (13.6%). In the equivalent survey among the Class of 2016, Financial Services/ Banking was the most frequent form of graduate employment, followed by Entertainment/ Media as the second. These statistics echo the findings from my own research of entertainment, finance, and further study as the modal trajectories among MU graduates.

might unleash the imagination and a sense of having future power. It is noteworthy that none of the graduates in the study aspired to be a teacher or nurse. Such aspirations might not be seen to offer such limitless scope. A similar sense of potentiality might be interpreted also in the third most common graduate trajectory of post-graduate study. Embarking on a further degree might insinuate a sense of ascendance towards a subsequent position that is prestigious and feels to be leading somewhere. This motion and mobility contrasts to a possible constraint of a repetitious full-time job. Returning to the status as 'student' may allow graduates to retain a 'stem cell' quality where they are not yet differentiated – as Deresiewicz (2014) describes elite students who are hesitant to specialise. Graduates investing their beliefs in a further degree may thrive off the superlative sense of the symbolic capital of accruing qualifications. They may re-acquaint themselves with a sense of hope which HE can exude, in which the future is not circumscribed but is rich with potential (Arum and Roksa, 2014).

From these patterns in MU graduate aspirations one might infer that the seemingly limitless futures that graduates aspired to were coupled with a limited understanding of what career options exist. A conviction to do something brilliant seemed to result in a similar, limited trend of what seemed 'radiant' and appealing. Gershon (2015) describes a pervasive opacity among graduating university students regarding what jobs and careers could represent a future for them. Archer (2010) introduces the notion of 'making jobs thinkable'. This argument was in response to findings that students from working-class backgrounds and particularly girls could not imagine themselves in careers such as science. In the comments below, Grace indicates that a phenomenon of jobs not being 'thinkable' may apply more broadly. In April 2018, I shared the following:

**JL:** The three most common [graduate pathways from MU in my research] are finance, Hollywood, or further study.

**Grace:** Well, what else can you possibly do?

**JL:** *Laughs*

**Grace:** I don't see anyone doing anything other than that. I mean 'finance' as in, like, corporate America. But I guess there are people that do like marketing or computer science that are OK with their lives.

These comments indicate the possible significance of visibility and empiricism in mediating what aspirations are foreseeable to young people. Grace first wrestles with the boundaries of perception, asking “what else could you possibly do?” and expresses that she does not “see anyone doing anything other than that”. She does go on to expand the scope of graduate pathways beyond finance, Hollywood, or further study to include “corporate America”, “marketing”, or “computer science”. Grace’s tone appears fatalistic, as though only a limited range of options were available and the reward being simply an “OK” life. Through these remarks, Grace triangulates the idea that MU graduates’ aspirations were narrow in their range. The implications of this finding elaborate on Archer’s (2010) notion that jobs were not thinkable among disadvantaged teenagers by showing that even elite university students may experience a limited sense of perception.

Ho’s (2009) research identifies the cultural construction of imagined pathways out of elite US universities whereby investment banking was made to appear like the obvious and perhaps only option. Recruitment practices on Ivy League campuses, including dinners held by financial institutions, demonstrated to students this possibility of banking and the rewards it may procure. In Ho’s (2009) research, and in Grace’s comments, an option of Wall Street appears to dominate elite graduating students’ perceptions of possibility. The prospects of job stability and supreme wealth and status may stand out in comparison to an otherwise opaque future, and hence be rationalised as the most suitable and even the natural option (Ho, 2009). Through a prestigious career path, MU graduates may also assure themselves that they are ‘coming good’ on their investment and continuing in the upwards trajectory that is expected to succeed their studies (cf. Markovitz, 2019). The prevalence of Los Angeles as an imagined MU destination may be interpreted as equivalent to the perceived pipeline towards the financial sector. Moving on from New York to Los Angeles may have offered graduates a sense of going forwards to a subsequent move that is appropriately illustrious. Graduates might entertain a sense of ‘existential mobility’ (Hage, 2005) whereby they feel they are going somewhere with their life simply by being in a novel location.

Comments from the group interview with Paulo, Mary and Giovanni in June 2017 indicate an imaginary of living in either New York or Los Angeles. Paulo described a lifestyle of celebrities in

the US that is “bi-coastal” – having a life on the East and West coast. He suggested that this vision of an ideal life had been appealing personally, and continued:

**Paulo:** I’m, like, the least attracted to people in New York and LA, or in New York, that think they can only survive in New York and LA. And I, honestly, myself, think that I am one of those people, too... The fact that I will have to move back to Europe almost was like a nice reminder that there is life outside of New York and LA. And my purpose in life doesn't have to be fulfilled by a career in New York or LA.

...

**Mary:** I think we’re harsh on ourselves. I think there are other places that you could possibly go. But, like, in my mind, there are those two places.

**JL:** What, New York or LA?

**Giovanni:** Yeah

**Mary:** Yeah

The above conversation suggests a narrow and superlative understanding of where one could live and work as a graduate. Data such as this conversation prompted the decision to follow the enquiry to Los Angeles. Paulo presents himself as waking up to this social construction of feasibility; his expiring US visa has sensitised him to the realisation that “there is life outside of New York and LA. And my purpose in life doesn't have to be fulfilled by a career in New York or LA.” Mary similarly argues that surely, there must be “other places that you could possibly go” yet she cannot quite put her finger on it. In her “mind”, there are “those two places”. Just as MU graduates were fated to a limited range in their perceived career choices, so too were they fated in their movements. To veer outside of the superlative realm would smack of failure, as New York and Los Angeles are the only places which many saw themselves as being able to ‘make it’.

Giovanni joined the discussion to echo the dualistic imaginary. On another occasion, speaking with Giovanni in our living room, he suggested an even more specific spatial clustering. “LA or Morgan Ave” were the only two places which he perceived fellow graduating students from MU to move to. ‘Morgan Avenue’ was our nearest Subway station in the Brooklyn neighbourhood of Bushwick. Journalist, Golin (2016) writes on an impulse among a certain demographic of graduates towards this very specific part of New York City:

Many post-college young adults with big dreams and skinny wallets seem to think Bushwick (and, yes, Williamsburg) is the *only* destination for them. The allure of having a little cafe on

the corner by the Non-Imperialist Book Shop, across from a health food store/gallery strikes a chord with the community-minded kids who think of the borough as one big campus. (para. 9, original emphasis)

The tone of these remarks is exaggerated to make a point; yet what is significant is that even the expanse of New York City may be reduced to a limited line of sight, as though a certain destination is perceived to be the “*only*” one that exists. The world is huge and is made tiny at the same time.

The above data indicates that there may be an epistemic dimension to aspirations. Epistemology concerns the nature of knowledge, and there are hence questions about what futures are knowable or not based upon which determining factors. Human perceptions may be formed out of what is empirically at hand, as Xenophanes argued:

... if oxen and horses or lions had hands... horses would paint the forms of the gods like horses, and oxen like oxen, and make their bodies in the image of their several kinds. The Ethiopians make their gods black and snub-nosed; the Thracians say theirs have blue eyes and red hair. (cited in Heath, 2014: 13)

Aspirations may be similarly formed out of a known environment. That which is unknown, and unseen, may be unimaginable (Archer, 2010). Tett (2015) develops an analysis of ‘silos’ to describe how expertise and specialisation within organisations generates tunnel vision and subsequent barriers that prevent communication. A similar kind of ‘silo effect’ (Tett, 2015) may have taken place among MU students and graduates. Only a limited range of future careers and geographies appeared to be knowable to them as options (cf. Archer, 2010). There is nothing ‘natural’ about envisioning the future in terms of the two specific cities of New York and Los Angeles, nor to harbouring passions specifically in television, theatre, and film. These framings of desirable futures are socially constructed. The social environments and student culture at MU appear to have rendered these particular futures knowable, and desirable. I now consider how cities and urban migration may have also influenced how students and graduates came to know themselves and to know the future.

## Part II: New York City and Ambition

New York City proclaims itself on the world stage through its skyline that represents a competitive spirit of rising to the top and fighting to be the tallest (Bell and de-Shalit, 2011). Such escalating heights are symbolised in the city's iconography through ambitious connotations of looking up, aiming high, thinking big, and daring to dream. MU branding advertises euphoric imagery of New York City as an awe-inspiring urban landscape and global centre. In this section, examples from Ricardo, Daniel, and Steven indicate the ways in which symbolic qualities of urbanism – and of New York City, as the city of ambition (Bell and de-Shalit, 2011) – may have contributed to MU graduates' superlative aspirations and high expectations.

Theories of migratory drive have been interpreted to propel a sense of aspirational momentum across generations (Modood, 2012). An equivalent migratory drive may be identified in the ambitious attitudes of MU students, most of whom arrived in New York City from elsewhere. The same may be said for graduates who moved to Los Angeles, arriving with a sense of purpose to achieve something. Ricardo is from New York and was living as a graduate in Los Angeles, conducting a master's degree there (which was his father's idea). He described those around him on both occasions – as an undergraduate in New York and as a master's student in Los Angeles – as having more hunger and drive than himself. Ricardo thus suggested that the most ambitious and successful people in the United States are those migrating into the big cities with an awareness of how much opportunity there is:

So, I think in the US, the irony is, like, all the people who are kicking ass are all the people who are coming from, like, the Midwest who are, like, coming from, you know, their middle-class life and they're saying, *"fuck it. I wanna be, like, rich. And I'm gonna come to the city and I'm gonna make a shit ton of money cos there's opportunity."* And there's opportunity everywhere. And it took my one year and a half of living with a Russian woman [his now wife] to realise how much fuckin' opportunity there really is. And also, being Italian. For instance, in Italy, I'll give you an example. You and I could go to medical school together, right. You could graduate top of your class – valedictorian – all the professors love you. You could even have invented something as a student. And I would get a job over you, even though *all* of that because I had a relative who's a doctor. That's completely still the case. That's why there's so

many Italians in England. Because there's no future in Italy. There's no future in Russia. There's no future in the fuckin' Midwest. There's no future in the South. Everyone is coming towards *future*. You know. New York has *future*. New York has money: money, tech. Like, everything that happens in this country it's gonna hit New York first, or it's gonna hit San Francisco first, or it's gonna hit California first. They are the forefronts.

Ricardo describes a concentration of opportunities in the urban centres on the two coasts of the United States. He suggests that he was not so cognisant of this opportunity having been born within it – it required his partner to show him what he had taken for granted. Ricardo identifies the entanglement of places and livelihoods in referring to certain places as having a magnetising “future” which draws people in. The effects of economic opportunities on imagined futures is exemplified in the notion of some places having ‘no future’, fuelling the reason for why they migrate (Crivello, 2015). Ricardo argues that there is “no future” in a series of locations (Italy, Russia, the American Midwest, and the American South). By contrast, he describes New York to have “*future*” and he suggests that “everyone is coming towards *future*”, to the economic “forefronts” of New York and California. Ricardo suggests that such people are “kicking ass” by performing an imagined geography: “*I’m gonna come to the city and I’m gonna make a shit ton of money cos there’s opportunity.*” These remarks indicate that students such as Ricardo had been socialised into seeing the rest of the world as a cul-de-sac, with New York and Los Angeles as open roads to the future.

A similar urban symbolism can be seen in Daniel’s remarks which indicate a psychogeography through which MU students emulated their environment. Upon graduating in 2014, Daniel packed up his life in New York, rented a car, and drove home to Mississippi in the American South. He then purchased his sister’s car and headed West to Los Angeles to become an actor. I conducted a two- and half-hour interview with Daniel in Hollywood in March 2018. This encounter was the first return to fieldwork after three months of interim analysis. I reflected emerging findings such as an attitude evident among MU students:

**JL:** A lot of the MU students I’ve been speaking to have not been caught up in a hedonistic youth culture.

**Daniel:** No!

**JL:** If anything, it’s been much more driving towards adulthood.



**Daniel:** Absolutely. And that's, I don't think that's necessarily something MU would be the sole perpetrator of, but I think MU is a very good concentrated dose of it. Because unlike other American schools, you don't really have a campus. New York City is your campus. You don't have a college bar; you have a normal East Village bar that you try to sneak into with a fake ID. The rules are a little bit more elevated. Your grades – and therefore the stakes – are a little more elevated, because your accountability is just citizen. There is no one really looking after you. You're just an 18-year-old, I think with the responsibility of an adult. You don't quite know exactly what to do with it. So, there's this weird ambition and drive throughout college that makes some people hit a roadblock right within or right when they graduate, that I don't think you find in other schools.

Daniel describes a process of “elevation” – of “rules”, “grades”, and “the stakes” – and an ensuing impulse to expedite maturity from an “18-year old” to “the responsibility of an adult”. Without a creche-like campus, Daniel suggests that students condensed and accelerated a series of ‘coming of age’ processes. The “weird ambition and drive” which Daniel describes represents a velocity which students appeared to adopt in synchronisation with the tempo of Manhattan. Cities are considered rapacious compared to their rural counterparts and New York City is an exemplary: a ‘New York minute’ is a global expression to mean ‘right away’. Daniel’s remarks suggest a symbiosis between a place, its pace, and the direction of a person’s life. Irving (2017) makes such a point in describing Manhattan as:

... a grid of straight-edged, commerce-lined streets and avenues that continuously enable citizens to look far into the future and work toward an economically productive life and retirement. (p. 64)

Urban architecture and imagery may be experienced by the individual “citizens” referred to by Daniel and by Irving (2017) as coaxing a sense of structured motion and ambition. Though, interestingly, Daniel suggests that such aspiration among fellow MU graduates was temporal and not an eternal fountain. One graduate from California whom I spoke to described New York as being sold as “the city of dreams” but in fact being “the city of lies”<sup>26</sup>. Daniel infers an analogy of mobility and endurance in which undergraduates burned out or hit a “roadblock” at the end of or after college. Such overbearing consequences of superlative aspirations will be explored as fateful in Chapter Seven.

---

<sup>26</sup>New York City epitomises the spectrum of capitalism: from glorious consumptive rewards to extreme and pervasive poverty; an abundance of opportunity cheek-by-jowl with the multitude of individuals who roam the streets and Subway system without a home, often deranged, in a society lacking an apparent safety net.

Another example, this time from Steven, indicates how MU students' aspirations may be produced in a dialectic with New York City's urban environment. Steven is an only child from Bethesda, Maryland near to Washington DC. He was the first person recruited to the study, in a printer queue at the MU library in January 2017. Steven described New York as being the "pinnacle" of students' aspirations, and for MU students to view their degree as a tributary that may lead to a future life there:

New York is sort of seen as the pinnacle and seen as the goal. And, you know, you're taking four years to be here. And maybe you don't stay here after college. But I feel like a lot, many, many people – at least, at the time that they are students at MU – do want to, like, they do hope to be back here, you know. This is where they hope to eventually be. California is another big one. Just because the sort of pace of life is kind of the opposite. That sort of opposite end of the spectrum, much more relaxed.

Steven presents MU students as ascribing significance to New York City as "the pinnacle" and "the goal" and "where they hope to eventually be". One might elaborate on the effects of this urban environment upon aspiration through the conceptual framing, developed in Chapter Two. Strauss (2006) proposed to study 'concrete material and symbolic conditions, on the one hand, and the understandings, emotions, and desires that individuals develop as they experience these conditions, on the other' (p. 323). Steven went on to suggest that the positioning of MU within Manhattan made students aware of what there is to desire. The university's location and course provision offered an apparent track along which to proceed towards a superlative future:

The school makes you aware of how many good things there are – being in this part of Manhattan, you know. You always see people walking around in incredible clothes, and you know, you see women with incredible handbags, and incredible cars, and you know, sort of, the top – these incredible restaurants are all around and everything... You are aware of what you could buy here. And you're also aware of, like, how much it costs here. So, you're sort of made aware of what you could have, and how you could have it, and you're made aware that, like, these are the steps you need to take. Once you're at MU, you can take these classes, and you can – if you do well in them – and you know, maybe you're studying Econ [Economics], maybe you're transferring to [the Business School]. But you're made aware of, like, this is the sort of track that you can put yourself on. And if you stay on the track and you do well enough at it, you can have all this and more, you know.

It was during this conversation with Steven that the notion of 'superlative' first came to mind. Steven depicts the empirical stimulations of supreme rewards in "this part of New York" such as "incredible clothes", "incredible cars", and "incredible restaurants", which are seen as "sort of

the top". These stimuli are described as indicators of "what good things there are" and "what you could buy". This sensorial exposure is deemed an incentive for many students as to what they should aspire towards. Hence, there may be an epistemic dimension in which the rewards and goals on show in abundant Manhattan demonstrate to students what is valued, culturally and economically, and what they could "have". MU appears to function in relation to this framing of possible futures, offering a "track that you can put yourself on". Again, a mobility metaphor is inferred, whereby if students take certain "steps" they may "stay on the track" and become entitled to "all this and more". I now explore how such discourses of opportunity and imagined access to abundant potential may be understood through the lens of entitlement.

## Part III: Entitlement

The discursive framing of MU as a prestigious institution appeared to establish a sense of entitlement whereby students and graduates imagined themselves as above various kinds of work. Arnett (2015) depicts young people's experiences of work over the advent of adulthood to increase in specialisation and remuneration. For instance, a teenage paper round may be superseded by more particular roles during and after HE (ibid.). In my research, the base of such a pyramid upon which to begin one's working life was pervasively imagined to be high. Many students and graduates appeared to overlook wage labour such as in a café or bar, envisioning their vocational worth as commencing on a higher echelon. MU students and graduates appeared to express a sense of entitlement to their superlative aspirations. Gaztambide-Fernández (2009) depicts students at an elite US boarding school to assume granted access to superior kinds of futures:

Of course, anyone can contemplate the idea of attending Harvard or imagine a career as a lawyer or a politician, but not everyone feels entitled (or has direct access) to such futures. (p. 197)

Here, a distinction may be drawn between quixotic reveries such as discussed by Weiss (2009) and Frye (2012) among African youth, and a more embodied sense of feeling destined to embark

on a bright future (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009). Examples from Paulo, Giovanni, and Mary and then from Stella indicate how young people may embody different expectations and may have different kinds of scaffolding to support their aspirations.

It was common for MU students and graduates to not recognise certain forms of work as legitimate if they did not lead towards an imagined career (cf. Deresiewicz, 2014). This echoes the notion established earlier in this chapter that attending MU educated students into imagining a limited range of superlative future options. The drive among MU students towards professional internships which are often unpaid represents their expectations to immediately bypass wage work such as in retail or as a barista. Take the following example which begins with Mary and Giovanni discussing their semester abroad in Paris:

**Mary:** And I feel, like, because, like, basically no one could get jobs. Because we were all, you know, Americans.

**JL:** Were you trying even, like, cafés?

**Giovanni:** Well, no. Some people got like big record label internships or something because the company that they were at in New York had a base there or something.

**Mary:** I wasn't friends with those people. I was friends with people who had no jobs at all. And it was amazing. It was just, like, we were all just, like, hanging out and having fun.

**Giovanni:** That was probably the biggest like, 'college as a buffer to the real world'.

**Mary:** Oh, I loved it. It was amazing.

**Paulo:** That has nothing really to do – cos I'm in your guys' position here. For four years straight I couldn't work anywhere.

**Giovanni:** But you could work at MU.

**Paulo:** I know. But that's not like a real job. You feel like you're in kindergarten.

There may be a sense of entitlement to embarking on a semester in Paris without consideration of how to fund it. Mary's response that more ordinary work such as in a café had not been considered, despite the claim that "no one could get jobs", indicates that work was imagined in 'all or nothing' terms. It was either "big record label internships" with an international enterprise or else no job at all. Jobs were hence imagined as far beyond a means of income – money may not have even been a central concern. Arnett (2015, p. 174) suggests that 'emerging adults' in the US aspire to work that is connected to identity. Internships with a "record label" may be interpreted as an identity-based aspiration towards future work. As shown in Daniel's example,

above, MU students attempted to expedite adulthood by performing mature roles. Internships with prestigious companies may enable students to play this game of acting like a successful adult. Interns may be granted this simulation by working for limited or no compensation (Perlin, 2011). Internships have been described as a 'curious blend of privilege and exploitation' (Perlin, 2011, p. xv). They form a socio-political configuration in which one has to be already advantaged in order to work for free.

Paulo's suggestion that "for four years straight I couldn't work anywhere" echoes a sense that MU students had elevated expectations of their own vocational worth. Paulo saw himself as above jobs on campus (or, it seems, cash in hand opportunities). He would rather have no job (and was able to cope with this financially) than demote himself to labour that "feels like you're in kindergarten". Again, work is symbolically imagined in relation to age. Certain roles were perceived to be infantilising in comparison to the kinds of real adult work that Paulo had in mind. There appears to be an abstract quality to money which may relate to the financial abstractions of using credit (often vast amounts) to pay for university (Zaloom, 2019). Credit invokes a complex temporal dynamic of facilitating premature possibilities – on certain conditions of the future (Zaloom, 2019). Via credit and via parental support, MU students were granted access to money which they had not yet earned. Much like the nature of credit, they also populated the island of Manhattan prior to making the kinds of money that could pay for a place to live there. Ricardo at one point described MU as a "protruding palace". MU students may develop a sense of entitlement growing accustomed to such an environment in a central part of a world city without yet working to pay for it.

Such a fast-track process may produce expectations in a young person of where they belong in a society. Much like it has been argued that students from working-class backgrounds may be accepting of inequality, through a 'symbolic violence' in which they do not perceive higher ranks as suitable for a person like them (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990); so too has it been argued that students from more comfortable social classes may develop inflated expectations of their own life outcomes (Burke, 2017). This dynamic of raised expectations can be seen in the following examples from Stella, in Los Angeles, who aspires to become an actor. In March 2018, as we conducted an interview outside of a health food store in the neighbourhood of Venice, Stella

referred to an interaction that we had had while buying the tea that we were drinking. She referred to work as a barista as having an allure. However, it lacked the sense of ascendancy that she had been conditioned to expect:

What I've also noticed from people who come from, I mean not necessarily just education, but just sort of from youth in general is that they have this pressure to be *something*, to have a voice, to be able to say like, 'oh, my parents are proud of me because I accomplished this, this and this.' And I guess it creates that paradox of, you can't just be happy as a barista in a café living paycheck to paycheck. And it's kind of like, why not? Like, if there is someone out there who's happy like that. I guess it's just always this question of, like, have I been conditioned to be ambitious?

Here, Stella idealises a present tense imaginary of 'living paycheck to paycheck' as a barista in a café. She wonders why she feels compelled to strive for perpetual progress – why a life of simple sustenance is not an option. She ponders a Pavlovian conditioning that denies 'happiness' from an ordinary lifestyle. In doing so, Stella resigns agency as though these expectations have been produced beyond her recognition or control. In fact, the previous time that we had met, in August 2017, Stella had referred to herself trying to embark on such work, as a hostess in a restaurant, and finding it unbearable:

There's this weird idea of, like, what you're supposed to do, particularly if you're an actor, and it's like, you have to, like, wait tables and struggle until something breaks, and you find your way. And so, I did that. Like, I got the service job as a hostess. And it was like, it was the same thing. Maybe I'm just really overdramatic, but like, I was so unhappy. Like, so unhappy. It just didn't make it worth it at all. It really didn't.

Stella had tried to enact what she had learned is the 'done' thing as an aspirant actor – waiting tables as one waits indefinitely for a successful break. She experienced a strong degree of unhappiness trying to do so. For Stella, being miserable as a "hostess" did not make trying to be an actor "worth it at all". However, Stella's negative experience does not seem to have put her off acting; if anything, it may have reinforced her superlative aspiration that she can only be satisfied by doing what she loves. There is a sense of entitlement to wanting to do what one loves each day and to reject both prestigious internships (as discussed in the Introduction) *and* non-career related work.

One might infer socialisation processes by which young people learn to internalise privilege (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009). Social class upbringing may instil a different *habitus* of embodied

dispositions that affect how a person approaches and navigates societal institutions (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Burke et al, 2016; Burke, 2017). Graduates whom I interviewed in Los Angeles expressed a recurrent shock that I had traversed the city via its bus network. Two graduates said that they did not know that LA even had a bus system. MU graduates in Los Angeles had their own private car and used services such as *Uber* in which one has one's own private driver. In New York, also, teenage students were seen hailing yellow taxi cabs. Through participant observation, it emerged that students frequently ordered takeaway food and went to New York restaurants. In the undergraduate class that I took part in, students sauntered in holding *Starbucks* breakfasts. The habituated manner of ascending above public transport and indulging in the kinds of consumption engaged in by well-earning working adults may indicate a socialisation process of entitlement.

A further component to consider in the production of superlative aspirations and high expectations is the role that financial support often played in students' and graduates' lives. Stella reflected on what funds her life in Los Angeles and by implication, her aspirations to become an actor:

You know, I get little things here and there which get me by, and to be candid, my mother helps a lot. And I have an inheritance from when my grandfather died that's currently paying the rent. Which will pay the rent for, you know, if I stay here it will last for another couple of years. So, I'm fortunate in that sense, but again, it's finite. But it gives me some breathing room.

As Stella identifies, there is "breathing room" granted by these forms of support. The insinuation of this breathing room is substantial, given that she does not have to pay for rent for the next two years. The release from having to seek wage work to pay bills might be at the heart of such graduates' articulations of 'pure' aspiration towards gratification and fulfilment. One might infer that it is not simply that MU graduates had a distinct taste for certain aspirations towards the arts and entertainment. Rather, some of them had the support structures that entitled them to pursue certain risky paths without the burden of worrying about immediate income or failure (Mullen, 2010).

Inequalities in the creative industries proliferate through supplementary incomes such as Stella receives (Allen and Hollingsworth, 2013). In fields where persistence and an ability to work

precariously or without pay determine success, odds may favour those who can weather a storm longer and not have to worry about money. Inequalities become further exacerbated as students, such as Stella, embark on further degrees to gain competitive advantage. On our second encounter in Los Angeles, Stella had enrolled on an online Master of Fine Art degree which she was engaged with part time and that was funded by her mother. This process of credentialization may provide some behind-the-scenes scaffolding that bolster Stella's prospects, whether of attaining her superlative aspirations in acting, or else offering increased scope to transfer into alternative fields. The prospects of passing through post-graduate study without taking on debt may lessen the extent of expectation than others who took out loans, such as we see below. The final section of this chapter now looks at how certain graduates felt they were earning their aspirations and a right to their expectations.

## Part IV: Meritocracy

The characteristics of MU graduates' aspirations and expectations can also be understood through notions of meritocracy. MU students were shown to be academically studious and professionally competitive. The time, money, and emotion they had invested into their studies generated high expectations for the future. In this section, Ricardo's interpretations of his peers from MU indicate that meritocracy and entitlement are not mutually exclusive: graduates felt entitled to futures which they felt they had earned. We then meet Denise who came to see the future in an ominous and expectant manner in response to the costs (financial and emotional) of her master's degree.

Markovtiz (2019) describes a culture of competition in contemporary American HE to manifest through the seemingly fair discourse of meritocracy. The pursuit of prestigious educational qualifications is described as 'a ruinous contest to preserve caste' among elite groups, which simultaneously and systematically 'excludes' others (p. xiii). The value of educational qualifications has continuously decreased as previously rare credentials are attained by more of



the population (Collins, 2019). A market for new forms of distinction has thus proliferated, such as internships and yet further qualifications (Collins, 2019). Manhattan University students expressed an unwavering commitment to internships during their studies. Ricardo depicted the kind of intensity which he perceived among his peers in their pursuit of a job and life in New York after graduating:

*I saw so many people behave very collegiate at the beginning and then towards the end, they were all like, 'yeah. I'm doing this job', 'I'm hanging out with these people because we're trying to get this job.' And it became very professional. People really wanted to have a job. That seemed like the biggest goal, was, 'I wanna live in New York, because New York is the best place to live on earth. And I wanna get a fucking job. So as long as I, like, do all these fucking internships, or I apply for a million jobs, and have the best LinkedIn profile, or have the best resume, I'm gonna get a job, and then I'm good. And that's my security.'*

Ricardo describes the atmosphere at MU as becoming “very professional” over the course of his degree. The focus for students is deemed to have revolved around “the biggest goal” of getting a job. Social lives and circles became organised accordingly. New York is depicted as superlative: “the best place to live on earth”. Ricardo says that students try to earn their aspirations through a frantic pursuit of internships, applying “for a million jobs”, and working on attaining “the best resume” which they can also present through an online profile. By committing to ideals of working hard, graduates may be presenting their side of the bargain in what they hope will manifest in future success. Such a view is presented in Mendick and colleagues’ (2018) research in the UK: “I know if I work hard, I can do anything I want to”, recounted one adolescent (p. 41). Khan (2011) and Markovitz (2019) argue that idle aristocratic expectation does not describe contemporary elite students who call upon a meritocratic ethos of working hard in order to signal their deservedness. In a similar vein, Souleles (2019), draws upon Weberian discourses of pious work to explain how private equity investors in New York legitimize sizeable salaries through a belief that they had earned it through their toil.

In the comments from Ricardo below, we attain further insight into the student and academic culture at MU. Ricardo depicted an assiduity that his peers brought to their studies, yet he also suggested a sense of superiority and entitlement to derive from their confidence:

*I ended up getting into MU, but I was like the dumbest fucking kid at MU when I got there, I have to say. Like, everybody was from this, like, very 'preppy' school or from this, like, high*

calibre school. And they all were much better writers than me. Much more hard working than me. They were doing all the reading. And I was like, I remember, like, in the first week, I was, like *'no one's gonna do the reading. It's college. They're in New York. They're gonna have fun'*. And everyone just did the fucking reading... One of the rarest sentiments that I ever got from let's say an MU student is that they failed much. Most of them seem like they went through, you know, almost like this guided – you know, it's like the weird sensibility that everything is like an advisory course, you know. It's like, *'OK, I'm in this school. I have good grades. My parents expect me to do this. And I'm great at this because my parents told me I'm great at this.'*... Like, *'I'm the best actor in New Jersey right now.'*... By the time I got to MU every single fucking kid in my class thought that they were, like, Ernest Hemingway, or that they were, like, fucking brilliant.

Ricardo depicts the pedigree of his peers upon arrival to university as much more academic than his own. His classmates are described as though they underwent a seamless and buoyant transition into and through HE. An abundance of options appears to have been on offer, with classes merely an “advisory course” tilting the future in different directions. Interestingly, Ricardo depicts senses of hard work *alongside* notions of entitlement. Students’ are presented as having absorbed a sense of arrogance by virtue of their educational attainment (getting into MU), their “good grades”, and their parental encouragement. They have been socialised, it is suggested, to think of themselves as “brilliant”. Meritocracy and entitlement are hence insinuated as not mutually exclusive but interwoven. Ricardo went on to describe students and graduates as feeling entitled to deserving success because of the calibre of their degree:

There's this really weird thing that's going on and I think that's part of the reason why people have a bad taste in their mouth to Millennials is because Millennials are so entitled. They're like, *'Oh, I went to an expensive college that's a good name, so like, I deserve to start out on a career.'* It's like, are you kidding me? Like, no. No one has to do anything for you. No one owes you anything. Like, the only thing that you can do is help yourself. Like, no one has to fucking help you. No one owes you anything. It's not like you served in like the foreign legion or you went to war. You went to college at MU... There's so many people that you probably interviewed, many of which will have the same attitude as my friends that are complaining. That are like, *'Oh yeah, I majored in like, Interpretive Feminist Dance Theory and I can't get, you know, like, a six-figure job.'* And I'm like, *'ah. Interesting. I wonder why that is.'* I wonder why – you don't benefit anyone. And you majored in something – I'm not trying to mock that because that's what I did. And I know I did that.

Ricardo exudes a strong tone in a manner that appears cathartic. He works through issues that appear close to home through a caricature of others onto which concedes that he may project elements of himself. Ricardo recognises that majoring in something that does not patently

“benefit anyone” is what he did (having studied History and Italian Literature). He suggests that his friends are “complaining” because they have not attained the expectations which they have developed in response to their university degrees. He mimics: *“Oh, I went to an expensive college that’s a good name, so like, I deserve to start out on a career.”* Ricardo thus indicates that MU students and graduates had an entitlement to success articulated through senses of deservedness. Such an attitude is deemed to invoke a sense of being “owed” something as a result of one’s degree. While Ricardo employs a sarcastic and critical tone, there may also be legitimate expectations to result from university studies.

Arum and Roksa (2014) describe graduates in the US as holding a belief in the power of HE to produce personal and economic rewards, even if these graduate premiums had not yet arisen. In Zaloom’s (2019) research, the extensive inter-generational efforts, savings, and investments poured into a US undergraduate degree are founded on the same belief in the power of HE. Universities may exude a discursive promise of better job prospects and hence be imagined as a means of investing in the self as human capital and making one’s self more profitable (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton, 2011; Lauder and Mayhew, 2020). In the US, in particular, an instrumentalist and individualistic view of HE has grown to dominate: imagined as an economic transaction that adds value in the labour market (Cappelli, 2020). The final discussion of this chapter introduces Denise who exemplifies high expectations as a result of the investments in her studies.

Denise grew up in Houston, Texas in a Nigerian family. She studied as an undergraduate at the University of Austin, Texas yet she came to regret her choice of major:

After undergrad, like, I was really stressed. Like, *‘I have a degree, an undergraduate degree, in Public Relations’, which sucks.* And I really thought it was going to be something else... So, I was like, *‘Oh, I completed the wrong degree.’*

Denise indicates a phenomenon of educational regret (Roese and Summerville, 2005). She interpreted herself to have studied the “wrong degree”, as though there could have been a more appropriate pathway towards the future. Denise spent the following year as a graduate living at home and grew to feel as though she was not keeping up with her year group. She saw peers brandishing their achievements on social media which she says influenced her decision to move forward with something ambitious. Denise applied to master’s programmes and came to New

York to study for a master's degree in Race, Media, and Communication. She had previously withdrawn \$5,000 of loans to attend her state university in Texas. Her master's degree at MU took her debt to \$115,000. She reflected, "I always think to myself, like, '*I will die before I am able to pay it off completely.*'" Denise was hesitant about what jobs options to pursue, yet she envisioned graduation with an ominous sense of expectation:

What am I gonna do with this this expensive degree? This degree was expensive as hell. So I need to leave here with *a* job, with *the* job. Not just any job but *the* job that makes it all worth it. Not just financially but all the stress, I've had so many panic attacks. Emotionally, the sticker price has to be worth it.

Denise refers to the cost of her master's degree: being "expensive as hell". She asks, portentously: "what am I gonna do with this expensive degree?". Markovitz (2019) argues that meritocracy, ironically, brings 'the idea of deserved advantage to life' (p. xii). A sense of deservedness may be interpreted in Denise's remarks: she "needs to leave" university in a certain way and feels that this expectation is warranted by the extent of her contributions. Denise is now one of the nearly three million people in the US with six-figures of student debt (Hornsby, 2018). With such high costs to further study, the learning experience may be seen by students instrumentally as an investment (Cappelli, 2020). Denise was investing money that she does not yet have, and that will accumulate interest and that must be paid back. This expectation to earn substantial future income appears to charge her perceptions of suitable future jobs with a financial weight and a sense of foreboding. Ordinarity will not suffice, it has to be "*the* job" – the ideal – in order for the sacrifices to be worth it.

A fateful aspect of aspiration may have arisen by devaluing and closing down less illustrious avenues which may otherwise have been appealing or a source of fulfilment. Denise also discusses the emotional investment and toil of her degree: "all the stress. I've had so many panic attacks. Emotionally, the sticker price has to be worth it". Crises of mental health have been described as an accepted accompaniment, and even necessary evil, in exchange for the privilege of attending an elite university (Deresiewicz, 2014; Bregnbæk, 2016). Further to the compromise of a stultified present, an ethos of sacrifice may amplify expectations of future reward. Kenway, Fahey and Koh (2013) argue that 'elite schools' are turned into 'banks of emotion' (p. 15). The higher the financial and emotional investment, the higher the expected reward may be. The

nature of Denise's superlative aspirations (to attain "*the job*") may hence operate in symbiosis with her high expectations (for her investments to be "worth it").

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have identified 'superlative aspirations' and high expectations to be ubiquitous among the MU graduates in this research. These findings elaborate a response to the first part of the research question: 'What do university graduates aspire to do with their lives?'. In the context studied, aspirations tended towards something spectacular. I define superlative aspirations as ambitious visions which escalated in graduates' imaginations towards sublime dreams and idealised geographies. The focus of this chapter has addressed the second part of the research question regarding how such aspirations are produced. In this chapter I have attempted to draw correlations between the character of student and graduate aspirations and what may have produced them (cf. Strauss, 2006). I have focused particularly on aspects of Manhattan University as a context in which students were situated during a formative period in their transition to adulthood. Students were seen to have adopted particular dispositions towards the future which their competitive urban environment deemed necessary. Students learned of what kinds of aspirations were normal among those around them and there is an extent to which students may have emulated each other. This chapter hence illustrates some of the educational processes through which MU graduates developed their aspirations and expectations.

Part I illustrated the kinds of aspirations held by MU graduates and characterised them to be superlative in nature. Examples from aspirant businessman, Simon, and aspirant actor, Luis, demonstrated a radiance in graduates' aspirations and how these may be sustained by illustrious imagined futures. Comments from Grace indicated that graduate aspirations also iterated according to specific patterns. The most frequent graduate pathways at MU were suggested to be in the realms of entertainment, finance, and further study – as indicated qualitatively in this research and quantitatively, by MU statistics. These avenues were interpreted to grant the

prospects of not being restrained, and of having an open future: entertainment could offer imaginative adventure and the heights of fulfilment and fame, corporate positions could garner status and the money to purchase power and mobility, and continuing with HE may re-invest in the mystery of a bright future through further symbolic capital. Ironically, as we go on to see in Chapter Seven, each of these superlative aspirations may also be constrained and fateful. These avenues are also considered to represent a limited range of perceived choices. Paulo, Giovanni and Mary's perception of New York City or Los Angeles as the sole graduate destinations available indicated a similarly narrow and superlative scope of perceived possibility. These patterns in MU graduates' aspirations were considered through the lens of epistemology. The empirical stimulation (and limits) offered by an environment may determine what futures – such as jobs or places – are 'knowable' or not (cf. Archer, 2010). It was suggested MU students emulated the values and aspirations of those around them. Grace, for instance, did not to "see" peers engaged in a diverse range of careers.

Part II explored a potential symbiosis between urbanism, on one hand, and superlative aspirations and high expectations, on another. Particular reference was made to the symbolic qualities of New York City and how these may foster ambition. Ricardo identified a ravenous aspiration in big cities in the US among people migrating from outside who are "coming towards *future*". Daniel suggested that MU students were driven to ambition through being 'thrown in at the deep end' of Manhattan as a teenager. He indicated that students performed a sense of maturity and emulated the velocity and grandeur of their surroundings through a "weird ambition and drive". Steven commented on New York being perceived as "the pinnacle" and he described a feedback loop from the magnificent rewards on show in Manhattan into students' choices and aspirations while at MU. These findings further insinuate the role of epistemology in the production of aspirations. The environments of MU and New York City instilled particular ways of seeing what aspirations are normal or desirable, and ways for students to know what they thought that they wanted in life.

In Part III, the notion of entitlement offered a further means of interpreting the production of graduates' aspirations and expectations. MU graduates appeared to see themselves as above various kinds of work. A conversation between Mary, Giovanni, and Paulo indicated how work in

the present was seen in terms of where it could lead in the future. Immediate financial components of work appeared abstract, exemplified in the dynamic of internships in which interns conduct specialised professional work for little or no compensation (Perlin, 2011). Paulo did not subject himself to the prospects of paid work on campus for it appeared “like you’re in kindergarten” – not fulfilling his ideas of real adult work in New York. Insights from Stella showed possible socialisation processes that may raise expectations – such as her negative experience working in a restaurant, and her sense that she did not need to persist in such wage work. We also see how financial support from parents may provide a foundation to MU graduates’ idealistic aspirations. Not needing to worry (so much) about money may pardon graduates from the less romantic prospects offered by many jobs and entitle them to a purer vision of fulfilment. Graduates in such circumstances may be given a platform from which to pursue their passions, and to persist, in a manner that perpetuates inequalities in the cultural sectors (Allen and Hollingsworth, 2013).

In Part IV, a contrasting yet complementary perspective was put forward on meritocracy as an explanation for how MU graduates learned to see their futures. Ricardo presented a series of reflections on the assiduous academic and professional pursuits of his peers at MU. He sarcastically interpreted these students and graduates to feel entitled to future success by virtue of having worked hard and attended an expensive and selective university. Senses of deservedness may thus be interpreted as entitlement rationalised through meritocratic notions of having earned one’s rewards (Markovitz, 2019). In the final example, from Denise, we saw an ominous sense of expectation to result from her having invested a lot of money and sacrificed her wellbeing in the attainment of her master’s degree. Denise encapsulated a sense of foreboding experienced by MU graduates: “what am I gonna do with this expensive degree?”.

The superlative aspirations expressed by MU graduates appear to have been produced by combinations of these domains of epistemology, urbanism, entitlement, and meritocracy. Superlative aspirations and high expectations developed and sustained each other. Having aspired highly to study at MU, students grew to expect a great deal to result from their efforts, their investments, and their imagined talents. Graduates hence appeared fated towards expectations of excellence. Raising the stakes as such may diminish the value which graduates

could ascribe to less extraordinary pursuits. These highly charged dispositions towards the future can be seen as an element of what will be explored as 'fateful aspects of aspiration'. The next chapter examines how parental involvement may be a fundamental process through which MU students and graduates negotiated their aspirations, and through which their expectations were raised.



# Chapter Six: Parental Influence on Aspirations

## Introduction

Manhattan University (MU) students and graduates recounted the roles played by their parents in scrutinising their Higher Education (HE) choices and in arbitrating their aspirations after university. This chapter examines how parental involvement may have influenced participants' aspirations. The second and third parts of the research question are explored: 'how are such aspirations produced and negotiated over time?'. Durkheim (1895/1982) describes child raising as 'a continual effort to impose upon the child ways of seeing, thinking and acting which he himself would not have arrived at spontaneously' (p. 53). Durkheim (1982) describes such forms of structured influence as 'education' (p. 53) and while he likely did not have twenty-somethings in mind, parental imposition and influence may be ongoing as children grow into adults (Bregnbæk, 2016). For instance, Tannen (2001) depicts parents in the US as seeking relationships with their adult children that balance between connection and control. In this chapter, education is considered in terms of both the socialisation of aspirations and in terms of the contested values ascribed to the purpose of a degree. I have devised the notion of vicarious career anxiety to refer to a prevalent theme of parents worrying about their adult children's futures. Vicarious career anxiety may entail the parents acting on the child's behalf and/or encouraging them to absorb concerns about the future into their choices for education and work. A trend occurred in the analysis between two parenting styles. On the one hand, a more disciplinary form of parenting attempted to produce aspirations towards 'practical' degrees or towards prestigious career trajectories. On the other hand, a parenting philosophy tried to nurture and even administrate the child's artistic talents. Parents may be (un)involved in various ways and I hence caution away from emphasising a dichotomy or even a taxonomy of parenting styles. The data suggests evidence of parenting that fits within categorisations in the psychological literature such as

'authoritative', 'authoritarian', 'permissive', and 'neglectful' (Baumrind, 1967; Maccoby and Martin, 1983). Such distinctions are considered as auxiliary to the analysis. The aim of this chapter is not to delineate differences in parenting styles but to analyse the diverse, powerful, and subtle implications of parental involvement on graduates' aspirations.

The interview methodology has elicited the externalisation of internal worlds (cf. Irving, 2017) and has hence illustrated the complexity of the social relationships that mediate aspiration (Appadurai, 2004; 2013). There were contradictory responses from participants who both criticised and defended the roles of their parents in shaping their lives. A sense of paradox pervaded graduates' perceptions of their parents' involvement: as sources of influence, emulation, support, and guidance, as well as imposition, pressure, conflict, and even trauma. An aspect of fateful aspects of aspiration can be identified whereby parental involvement constrained a sense of control that graduates perceived over their life trajectory (Loewenthal, Alexander, and Butt, 2019). MU graduates felt the weight of reciprocity on their shoulders as they negotiated between what they aspired towards and what they thought their parents wanted for them. Mauss (2002) theorised an obligation of reciprocity to be invoked by the receipt of gifts: that 'a gift necessarily contains the notion of credit' (p. 46). As Zaloom (2019) shows, parental involvement and investment in their children's HE may give rise to financial debts and social obligations. Contrary to an American cultural ideal of autonomy, a paradoxical sense of 'enmeshed autonomy' may develop, in which parents and their adult children grow even more entangled with each other (Zaloom, 2019, p. 95). Bregnbæk's (2016) research depicts students and graduates in China as striving and often failing to reconcile their own desires (which often involved living in the city or abroad) with an obligation to honour their parents (often in the countryside). Bregnbæk (2016) portrays an ensuing 'struggle between self-sacrifice and self-actualisation as part of a universal effort to experience a degree of determination over one's own destiny' (p. 12). In this chapter, I explore such relational dynamics between individual graduates and their parents. I focus on the production and negotiation of aspirations and on the implications of inter-generational interactions on how graduates perceived the future.

The chapter consists of three parts. Part I investigates parental attempts to produce particular aspirations in their offspring that garnered more secure occupational guarantees. Parents are

shown to intervene in their children's HE choices based on an assumption that different degree subjects lead to different futures. Mary and Giovanni reflect on how their parents promoted 'practical' degrees with perceived vocational leverage. Evidence from Ricardo expands on this point that parents may try to guide their children towards occupational hierarchies (Roder, 2017) via hierarchies of subjects to study (Robinson and Aronica, 2009). Grace reflects that through education and disciplinary parental socialisation, her entire life has been managed and structured towards a prestigious future. I consider how culture and migration may influence parental aims and methods, including the severity of child socialisation. Ricardo and Denise elaborate that parents who have migrated to the USA may exert their ambitions and anxieties through the child more blatantly. Denise's story – as with Grace's – demonstrates continued parental influence in the production and negotiation of aspirations subsequent to university. Part II examines how MU graduates negotiated a different kind of parenting that involved a positive encouragement of their own artistic aspirations. On the one hand, this distinction in parenting style is shown to instil in students and graduates a sense of freedom to pursue the future in a liberated manner. However, there are various similarities in the aims and outcomes of this parenting style with the more severe parenting earlier identified. Evelyn describes her parents as supporting her to study whatever she wanted, and they even withdrew vast loans for her to study Acting at MU. Yet Evelyn's ongoing communication with her parents as a graduate is shown to be weighed down by expectation deriving from their financial and emotional support. Luke's parents can be seen to vicariously sculpt his future: coming up with the idea of him moving to Los Angeles, driving there with him, and funding his life. These examples echo a theme of entanglement between graduates and their parents, even in seemingly harmonious relations. Part III synthesises developing themes of complexity and compliance and looks at how parental involvement may lead graduates to experience a lack of control over their lives. Ricardo demonstrates a sense of cognitive dissonance by holding contrasting views that defend and rebuke the parenting from his upbringing. Denise indicates the fragility and porosity of human psychology whereby mere words from her parents have a totalising impact on her courses of action. Such forms of compliance pose complications to the notion of autonomy (cf. Finn, 2015; Bregnbæk, 2016). The final

example from Grace shows that even conflict may not suffice in eschewing the overriding power of her parents in governing her life.

## Part I: Parental Attempts to Produce ‘Practical’ and Prestigious Aspirations

The ways in which MU students and graduates recounted their parents’ involvement indicate a pervasive theme of what I term as vicarious career anxiety. Parental attention to their children’s career prospects often promoted an anxiety about the futures implied by different aspirations and university degrees. Chua (2011) discusses a parental concern about ‘family decline’ (p. 21), also termed ‘generational decline’ (p. 21), in which a child’s socio-economic status does not match or surpass their own. Weeks (2011) writes that the ‘gold standard’ of parenting is to equip a child with the occupational means of reproducing or improving the parents’ social and economic status (p. 6). Among participants from MU, social mobility and social reproduction often appeared to weigh more heavily on parents’ imaginations than their children’s. As demonstrated so far in the thesis, MU graduates often aspired towards careers in the arts and entertainment. As also noted, such aspirations may have been partially produced by social class background. A sense of financial security may have insulated such students from imagining HE in an instrumentalist sense of attaining a higher income (Bathmaker et al, 2016; Mullen, 2010). A contradiction thus arose entailing deliberation and conflict between young people and their parents surrounding HE choices and implied career prospects. In the following examples – from Mary, Giovanni, Ricardo, Grace, and Denise – we see parental attempts to produce ‘practical’ and prestigious aspirations in their offspring.

Mary and Giovanni have dealt with pressures during their studies surrounding the utility of a college major. In the US, undergraduate applications do not require commitment to degree subjects upon application or enrolment; rather, it is common to declare a major at the end of one’s second year. This construction of HE may lead to ambiguous academic experiences (Arnett,

2015), as well as providing the space to explore and not specialise in the wrong subject too soon (ibid.). Either way, students and parents in the US may engage in dialogue and conflict surrounding university subjects during a course of study. The conversation below is taken from the group interview with Mary, Giovanni, and Paulo in June 2017. Mary had spoken about the fear of being judged by her peers:

**Paulo:** But also, who cares what people think?

**Mary:** Everyone cares what people think.

**Paulo:** I really don't care what people think. I care about what my parents think. And they are very liberal and don't care, so –

**JL:** Well, can I use that to lead into, like, how do people conceive of themselves and to what extent do, like, your parents' anxieties infringe upon what you want, and what you're going to do?

**Mary:** Um, it used to be a lot more impactful, my parents', like, impression of me. Especially since they helped me so much with, like, paying for college, that I felt like I should basically kind of do what they wanted me to do. And so, like, my first couple years at MU, I was like, really trying to make something work that was – they like to say, 'practical' –

**Giovanni:** Riggghhtt. That's the big word. Practical.

**Mary:** Practical, yeah.

**Giovanni:** Like, were they supportive of you?

**Mary:** Oh, I was fucking miserable. Like, I was gonna –

**Giovanni:** Cos your brother is a software engineer.

**Mary:** Well, I was gonna quit school at the end of sophomore [2<sup>nd</sup>] year. I was like "*I'm gonna transfer and not do school anymore.*" And they were like, "*Okay, Mary, just do what – what makes this work.*"

**JL:** To the extent that they were not so pleased with Comparative Literature?

**Mary:** No, by that point, by the time I'd actually dealt with, like, declared a major, they were fine with it. But that's just because they went through the whole ordeal of me being like very, very miserable for two years.

**JL:** For general reasons?

**Mary:** Ummm

**JL:** I don't need to ask specifically, I'm just saying, was it –

**Mary:** Well, they wanted me to do like, I don't know, they wanted me to be like an engineer or somebody, something like that, or sciences. Or even like, Psych [Psychology] they wanted

me to do. And I was like, “*you know I’m not gonna get a job with a Psych degree.*” But I just was not happy with any of that.

**JL:** These are familiar stories.

**Mary:** Oh, super. Like, everyone has this shit happen to them. Like, nobody in my entire family does anything creative. Like, either side. Anyone. So, the fact that I did something that was not like, a science or politics or something like that was kind of unheard of.

**Giovanni:** Yeah. I sympathize with my parents’ kind of perspective on education a lot. Because –

**Mary:** Oh, mine too. I understand.

**Giovanni:** Right. But especially as like, so my family's obviously born and raised in Italy. And they came when they were in their mid-30s. And so, you know, if I were in my parents’ shoes, you know, obviously, you want your kids to do something that’s gonna get them a job. But even more so, it's kind of like, *‘how do I help this person – the culture within which that person is being raised I have no idea of, I’m not familiar with’*, right. And so, it was kind of difficult, you know, to be raised within that culture, where my parents were wanting me to be practical. And hoping that that kind of, like, severity would just kind of thrust me into something that made sense. But also acknowledging that they didn't know what the fuck they were doing, either. You know. And so, so that was, that was something that was interesting to me. I mean, my brother is, you know, kind of, like the poster boy for, you know, ‘intellectual education for whatever’. But it wasn't a career medicine, like my father, my father's father, my father's father's father did. And my mother's father was – all my mother’s brothers and sisters are dentists – their father was a dentist, and his father was a dentist. So, it wasn't any of those careers. So although, like, I would have liked them to be more supportive of, like, me being in film and being in philosophy, whatever, I can't blame them for not being, you know, that supportive because, you know, it's something that doesn't make sense to someone who came from another culture.

In this passage, we see that Mary had originally felt obligated to comply with her parents’ hopes that she does something “practical”. The ‘practical’ approach to HE encouraged – recognisable to Giovanni, too – refers specifically to Engineering, sciences, or “even” Psychology. These subjects were imagined as gateways to well-paid and secure employment. Mary’s original obedience was in response to her parents’ financial contributions to her education, echoing Mauss’s (2002) theory of reciprocity that a gift invokes a sense of indebtedness in the recipient. Zelizer (2006) and Zloom (2019), also drawing on Mauss (2002), show how financial transactions such as for college tuition can fundamentally shape relationships between parents and their adult children. The professional direction that Mary’s parents had hoped for reflected its reach backwards in time to structure her university education. In doing so, this made her “very very

miserable” to the extent that she wanted to “quit school”. It is salient to note the difference in Mary’s wellbeing having been able to study what she enjoyed, at last. However, she now faces uncertainty – which her parents’ anxieties wanted to help her avoid in the first place.

Giovanni arrived at MU planning to major in Business Management. During his time as a student he came across Film and Philosophy which he majored in and he graduated with aspirations to work in fiction writing. As analysed in Chapter Five, the student culture at MU may have contributed to the production of such aspirations. Giovanni’s remarks above, nonetheless, reveal conflict emanating from his parents, as another source of influence. Like Mary, whose interest in creative fields (in film) are unlike anything any of her family have done before, Giovanni portrays a rupture in occupational tradition. The stability, familiarity, financial security, and prestige of convergent lineages of doctors and dentists has come to an end through Giovanni and his brother. Giovanni claims to “sympathise” with his parents’ fear towards the unknown, suggesting that they are nervous in the face of cultural change across geography and generation. They may feel helpless seeing their children veer into uncertain waters, favouring “practical” options with more guarantees. Giovanni “would have liked them to be more supportive”; a potentially euphemistic statement which at the least suggests a lack of enthusiasm for his studies in film and philosophy. Giovanni introduces a metaphor of “severity” that his parents hoped would “thrust” him towards “something that made sense”.

Robinson and Aronica (2009) outline a hierarchy within the school subjects which they claim to occur across the globe. Maths, science, and language skills are most prized, followed by humanities and at the bottom, if not absent, are the arts. The lowly arts, they claim, have their own hierarchy of music and visual arts better appreciated than theatre and dance. The fear-driven ideas exuded by Mary and Giovanni’s parents suggest that educational hierarchies (Robinson and Aronica, 2009) may be reinforced and promoted by parents. Varenne (2019a; 2019b) argues that education often takes place not in schools but in domestic deliberations over how to navigate educational institutions. In the example below, Ricardo talks about his mother’s anxieties and threats about the kinds of low-paid futures associated with a History degree:

I graduated in 2014. So, from 2014, I just had, I guess, kind of like a year or so of trying jobs, doing, you know, summer internships and what not. Like, in what I wanted to do. So, I really

wanted to do music. I was into film and I was doing History, and my mom used to always taunt me and say, like '*oh, what are you gonna be, a History teacher in the Bronx and get shot up?*' Like, you know, my mom is very like 'money' thinking. Because her marriage ended because my dad was like a producer in Hollywood and he had at one point to mortgage the house to try to finance this movie. And because of that she has a really bad – there's a very bad smell that's been left with her, kind of, about entertainment stuff.

Ricardo's mother appears anxious of 'family decline' (Chua, 2011, p. 21) in financial terms. She appears to interpret HE as a powerful mechanism that can produce different destinies (Zaloom, 2019). She thus attempted to influence the way in which her son engaged with something so powerful, trying to steer him away from a degree without lucrative guarantees. Ricardo's mother devalued the academic and economic value of studying History by depicting and disparaging a graduate outcome of Ricardo becoming a teacher. She hyperbolically portrays this future to him as being 'shot' in a deprived neighbourhood. The specificity of teaching being devalued for educationally successful students has been documented globally (Roder, 2017). Roder (2017) describes students in Bhutan who were faced with a 'hierarchy of aspirations' (p. 33). Teaching was viewed as too many hours for too little compensation; the grade requirement to enter teacher training were also comparatively low. Many students were therefore taught to internalise a sense that they were 'too good to teach' (p. 42). Ricardo equates his mother's attitudes to low-paid teaching with her aversion to the financially unorthodox cash flow of careers in entertainment such as led to her divorce. Ricardo summarises his mother's concerns as being 'money thinking'. Similar agitation among parents to produce in their children aspirations that lead to lucrative or secure careers can be seen in Grace's story.

Grace is an only child and she spoke critically about her parents and about the Chinese state and education system. Parallels between parents and the state as sources of authority and protection have been noted, in China in particular (Bregnbæk, 2016). Grace depicted how scrutiny and pressure were concentrated upon her in ways that were experienced as traumatic. Such consequences have been documented among other Chinese children born under the 'one child' policy (Fong, 2004; Bregnbæk, 2016). Grace came to interpret her relationship with her parents to be cold and framed through power relations of instruction and domination. Whereas Western countries such as Britain have witnessed a so-called democratisation of child-adult relations (Alexander, 2020), for Grace, there appears to have been a continued formality and hegemony



to her parents' relation above her. In April 2018, Grace was still out of work (having been fired) and was feeling suicidal. She reflected:

I used to have parents. And now I just realise they haven't really been taking care of me all of these years. They just kind of feed me, and then force me to do whatever the fuck they think I should do. And doesn't really care what the outcome is.

Grace perceived a callous parenting style that did not account for her own agency or negative experiences. She depicts a deteriorating relationship between herself and her parents who are still in China. It dawned on her that her mother and father – as the closest people to her in the world – were also distant, not just geographically but also emotionally. There is a cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) to aspiration and HE in that they appear to have led to an inter-generational fraying of bonds and a kind of violence.

Grace no longer wanted to even apply for jobs. By rupturing an assumption of continuous ascendance through education and to work, she revealed the extent to which the future had been a guiding principle in her relationship with her parents. Grace went on to speak of the lack of language that she felt was available between them. She would scream and shout to her mother on the phone in English, which is a language that her mother does not understand. This lack of common language appeared to go deeper than vocabulary. Grace portrayed an impasse in communication with her parents without specific futures to talk about:

**GRACE:** I know my mom is feeling terrible right now because of me. And I know my dad is feeling terrible because of me. And I don't know what to do about it.

**JL:** What's the nature of your conversations? What do you talk about?

**GRACE:** Normally? I don't know my dad at all, as a person. I know him through how he's similar to me. He would, he just used to, like, when my mom yelled at me about how I got a shitty grade on my math exam – one time I remember he just, like, came in, saw my mom yelling at me about my grades. And then he took the test, he looked at it, he sighed, and he, like, slammed the door and he went out. That's the kind of interactions that we have. And like, we talk about jobs, and grades, and where the economy is going. That kind of stuff.

Grace here comments on the severity of their interactions as a family of three. We see two modes of parental activity trying to shape the child. Firstly, there is a direct disciplining through the behaviour of both parents as punishment for a grade that is not deemed to be good enough. Secondly, and more subtly, Grace's father may be trying to cultivate what Freud termed the

super-ego: largely unconscious, internalised values that mediate a person's drives and restraint (Vellerman, 1999). Conversations about "jobs, grades, and where the economy is going" may form an epistemic gaze of the future in which Grace's father is reinforcing the kinds of values which should be deemed important. Freud argued that parenting passes on the super-ego of the parent to the child's unconscious. In doing so, parenting generates an internalised 'moral authority' as 'the child imaginatively takes his parents into himself through a process known as introjection' (Vellerman, 1999, p. 533).

The processes via which children internalise their parents' values and anxieties may be passive and subtle; there may also be active and blatant attempts at structuring the child's life and future, even as an adult. In the following example we see evidence of vicarious career anxiety articulated after university, in which Grace's parents were looking for employment on her behalf:

So, I got fired in September. And I started looking for a job. And my parents were living here with me, and they were *really* worried. And they just tried to, like, kind of take over my job search process. And they, like, talked to *everyone* that they know to see if like anyone can help me. And they like tried to plan for me. And they tried to, like, to summarize or help me learn from my mistakes. And I just I couldn't take that anymore.

The notion of 'helicopter parenting' refers to parents who metaphorically hover above the child and swoop in as a matter of emergency at the faintest of problems. Grace's description illustrates 'helicopter parenting' with trans-continental imagery. Her parents come to the United States periodically to stay in the apartment where she lives and which they have bought. This trip was injected with a dramatic dose of anxiety and purpose. Grace's parents projected their own fear onto her, being "*really* worried", regardless of how she felt about the situation. Grace felt infantilised by her parents taking over the administration of her life and even desires. They moved into the apartment and embarked on a process of "planning" for her and speaking to employers as her unelected representative. There appears to be a confidence, even hubris, in which Grace's parents are appointing themselves as the most knowledgeable leaders of her life.

Parents from different cultural backgrounds may have different ideas about what claim they have to their children's futures. Across history, geography, and social class there are different means and degrees of severity through which (adult) children are socialised (Lancy, 2008). Aspiration can be seen in structural terms as the means via which offspring try to succeed educationally and

then economically; families may be engaged in wholesale efforts to secure the next generation's capacity to attain or reproduce security. This inter-generational view of the family challenges ego-centric notions of aspiration as what the individual wants to do with their life. Chua (2011) writes that in traditional Chinese culture children are not seen as autonomous but as an extension of the parents. She hence endorses severe parenting techniques under the ethical premise that the parent and child are not separate entities. Bregnbæk (2016) discusses Chua's (2011) book in relation to the stressed students and graduates in her study in Beijing. Bregnbæk (2016) also notes the polarised reception to these ideas in Europe and the US, from an appreciation for traditional values now forgotten, to a repudiation for disregarding children's wellbeing. These ideas on different parenting styles being connected to demographics manifested in participants' opinions. Ricardo at one stage suggested:

Let's be real: in the Asian countries, in the Asian cultures there's a lot less leniency, you know... If you're a first-generation immigrant and your parents fucking killed themselves to bring you here, you can bet your ass that they want you to be richer than them.

Ricardo raises the theme of social mobility, that parents "want you to be richer than them". The notion that parental motivations and practices may differ according to culture and generation is addressed by Denise in the final example of this section.

Denise conveyed the kinds of anxieties that were thrust upon her career aspirations by her Nigerian parents. Below, she suggests that "comparison" between families is "less backstage" for "Africans" and "a lot of immigrant people". She depicts pressures from her father to be ongoing as a graduate and to actively shape her view of future options:

I think for Africans, it's less – I mean, Africans, a lot of immigrant people – it's, like, less backstage. So, there's a lot of comparison. Like, '*oh, look at what this person is doing.*' Or '*why aren't you doing – have you heard about what this person is doing?*' This, this, and that. And so, we always have to hear about what someone else's kid is doing. Or what our friend is doing. And '*Oh, I heard this person goes to Harvard.*' ... And, like, a whole comparison feels, like, '*wow, this is what I'm going to have to live with.*' ... When I got into MU, I also got into a school in Atlanta that was, like, lower ranked. And my dad was like, '*well, obviously, you're going to go to MU.*' So that, you know, he can tell people his daughter goes to MU, and it's a better programme, and this, this, and that.... My parents realised, like, really quickly, that most of their kids were not going to take the standard, you know, routes, like my oldest sister. My dad is, like, a chemical engineer. My mom was in nursing and stuff. So, they were like, '*well, our kids are going to be engineers and doctors.*' And literally only one person studied Engineering.

And so, for the rest of us my parents were just like, *'okay, whatever you do, be the best at it.'* So that's why my dad is really every time I talk to him, he calls me, *'Dr. \_\_\_\_\_.'* Which is so stressful. He's like, *'you said you wanted to do it. And I'm supporting you. So now I want you to keep doing it regardless of whether you want to teach Black Studies, or you want to teach a Beyoncé class or whatever, you're going to be a professor.'* And I'm like, *'Okay, that's cool.'*

Denise suggests that her father's desire to boast about the status of the institution where his daughter studies compelled him to instruct her to study at MU rather than a "lower ranked" university in Atlanta. Denise often described her parents as being perplexed about her attachment to a racial identity. As Nigerians, they had not grown up to conceive of themselves in such explicitly racial and relational terms. Growing up in the US, Denise had learned to imagine herself as distinctively black and said that this identity permeated all aspects of her life including what she studied and where she wanted to live (among other black people and culture). It appears that Denise and her parents saw the value of education differently, in ways that might be seen to parallel the views of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Both Washington and Du Bois envisaged the potential role of education in developing the lives of black people in the US (see Roth, 2014). For Washington, who was born a slave, the main aim of education should be practical: to equip the student with the skills that will gain them employment and subsequent social mobility. Du Bois rejected this vocationalism and argued that the purpose of education for historically oppressed groups should be as a form of intellectual emancipation (Roth, 2014, pp. 65-66). Denise described her family as 'upper middle-class' and there are hence not structural parallels with this historical discussion of education among ex-slaves and their descendants. Nonetheless, it could be inferred that Denise's parents hold practical views of education akin to Washington's: as a vocational training that will generate gainful employment ("our kids are going to be engineers and doctors"). Denise seems to hold a vision closer to Du Bois' ideals of education igniting an internal revolution that can in turn transform society.

Denise depicts an ensuing negotiation of aspiration. Her father appears to have adapted to her dispositions and infused them with his own imperative towards excellence: "whatever you do, be the best at it". He declares a statement of what he would like for her in which he moulds an acceptance of her interests with an echoing back of her former utterances: "you said you wanted to do it. And I'm supporting you. So now I want you to keep doing it... you're going to be a

professor”. Such exertions of support could be framed through the lens of power and control. Denise’s father attempts to demystify doubt or multiplicity in her mind by stating her own aspirations to her and granting these with his approval. The weight of approval is laden with the anticipatory (and complementary) title of ‘Doctor’ followed by the family’s surname. Aspiration is thus being imposed upon Denise by illustrating and reifying this prospective future of professional prestige and embellishing the aspiration with family expectation and honour. Denise suggests she responds to her father in a non-conflicting manner (“Okay, that’s cool”), even though such input is “so stressful”. Echoing the epistemological dimensions of aspiration noted in the previous chapter, the iterations of possibility and expectation forged by her father’s remarks may chisel this suggested route as one of the most knowable in Denise’s mind. Denise’s father’s efforts to address her as Doctor “every time” he speaks with her – despite her not even being sure if she wants to apply for a PhD – demonstrate the potentially significant involvement of parents to produce aspirations even after their children have graduated. In the following section, there are differences and also similarities in the inter-generational production and negotiation of aspirations.

## Part II: Parental Attempts to Nurture Artistic Dreams

The notion of a ‘dream’ conjures an ideal aspiration that may be difficult to attain. Although young people may develop ‘dreams’ towards various fields, in this research, dreams were often artistic. So-called ‘child-centred’ approaches to parenting that privilege the agency of the offspring have been identified as comparatively more apparent in parenting culture in the US (Chua, 2011; Twenge, 2006). Twenge (2006) has a chapter, ‘You Can Be Anything You Want to Be’ in her book on entitlement in American youth. She locates this attitude of omnipotence as being sold to children in cultural texts such as a pop song by N Sync ‘Believe in Yourself’ and a video by Barney the purple dinosaur aimed at toddlers entitled ‘You Can Be Anything!’ (p. 108). Twenge (2006) refers to an abundance of choices and hence power granted to children such as

mothers asking their one-year olds if they would prefer apple juice or milk. She suggests that constructions of parental love aimed at the child manifest in a hyper-individualisation centred on the child's ego, such as personalised bedrooms with large font lionising the child's name. In Baumrind's (1967) parenting styles, such parenting could be seen as 'permissive', also termed 'indulgent' (Maccoby and Martin, 1983). This section explores the motivations and consequences of such a parenting style in contrast to the parenting described above. As well as differences, similarities can be identified, such as parents living vicariously through their children, albeit through a different approach.

Evelyn's story demonstrates such an approach of vicarious parenting. Her parents have tried to aspire to success through her since she was a baby. Evelyn is of 'mixed race' (black and white) heritage and explained: "Mixed raced babies are really cute. I was a really cute baby. Really cute kid. And mom put me in commercials." She successfully auditioned for three television commercials while still an infant. From a global cultural perspective, there may be something characteristically American about this parental aspiration to strike fame and fortune through the screen. Powdermaker (1951) describes 'the importance of the motion picture' to American society in elaborating and altering the perceived democracy of the 'folk tradition that any American boy could be president of the country' (p. 15). The prospects of Hollywood fame are said to have promoted an even more accessible channel of aspiration:

Who would want to be president of a country in these troubled times... if, instead, he could have a glamorous life of wealth and ease in Hollywood, merely by opening his mouth and singing or passing before a camera and acting? (Powdermaker, 1951, p. 15)

This cultural analysis does not necessarily apply to Evelyn, yet fictional media did appear to play a significant role in mediating her aspirations. She described the television show *Gossip Girl* as the chief inspiration for her and her friends (in Arizona, on the other side of the country) to apply to study at MU. Evelyn described MU as her "dream school". Her parents fully supported her aspirations to study there, including turning down a half scholarship to another university:

My parents have always been very supportive, so they never would have been like, "*go where the money is*". My mom always said like, "If your dream is MU, go to MU".

To fund her degree in Acting, Evelyn has taken out a \$30,000 loan and spent two years as a live-in 'Residence Assistant' in lieu of paying rent. Her parents have taken out \$280,000 of loans to help fund her undergraduate degree.

Evelyn explained a distinction between a form of parenting such as discussed in Part I and her own:

**Evelyn:** I know a lot of my friends struggled with this. Like, people don't support actors, especially actors who want to go to college, especially actors of color who want to go to college and get their degree in Acting. Like, there's not a lot of support for that. Like, parents aren't like, *'oh, yeah, we'll make him to be an actor'*. They'll be like, *'we'll make him to be a doctor or a lawyer or something that makes money and is reliable and dependable.'* And I know a lot of my friends struggled with, like, *'we don't have a lot of support from our families'*, whose parents are like, *'okay, you can go to Acting School, but like, you're never going to, like, make any money.'*

**JL:** Do your parents say that to you?

**Evelyn:** My parents would *never* say that to me. My parents are always, *'when you're successful. When you make all this money.'* My parents are the most amazing people. I've always had their support to be an actress – be whatever I wanted to be. And their financial support, which was also really important. I have a lot of friends who are like – I had a friend who almost left the [MU] programme because she was like, *'my parents don't think I should be an actor. Because it's not reliable.'*

Evelyn's comments echo themes identified in Part I of parents promoting "something that makes money and is reliable and dependable". In her language, Evelyn indicates the extent to which parents may be involved in this process, impersonating, "we'll make him be a doctor or a lawyer" – the word 'make' insinuating creation as well as possible imposition. Evelyn reflects that her parents have decisively not exercised such caution over HE: "I've always had their support to be an actress – be whatever I wanted to be". She suggests that her parents would "*never*" express negative concerns about the prospects of making money as an actor. Quite the contrary, her parents tell her: "when you're successful. When you make all this money". Evelyn portrays this positive encouragement in evangelical terms: "My parents are the most amazing people". However, their tone might also foster a significant pressure of expectation. Much like Denise's father depicts an imagined future to her, there is a similar weight insinuated in Evelyn's parents' statement that she will one day be "successful" and "make all this money".

The consequences of Evelyn's parents' financial and emotional support can be seen through the longitudinal component of this research. In October 2018, sixteen months after recruiting her to the study at the time of her graduation, Evelyn and I were sat on a bench in Harlem after attending her Sunday church service together. She suggested a high degree of family involvement, framed through positive and loving terms:

I talk to my mom every day. I text my sister every day – I think about my sister every day. I think about my dad every day – I talk to him every day.

Evelyn nonetheless recounted her parents' hopeful questions through the phone as carrying expectations that she cannot meet:

Like, I talk about my career with my parents but there are some frustrating points because – God bless them – they are so supportive. But sometimes you need to like *'dial back'*, because I can't meet these expectations. And I know that it's just love and support and well wishes, but my dad asking me every day, *'Are you famous yet? Are you on SNL<sup>27</sup>?' really got to me. Cos I'm not famous. I'm not on SNL. I don't really want to be. They just want me to do so well that for a while it was like 'you need to just not ask me questions about it until I have something to say and I will tell you.'*

Evelyn continued:

The other day I called my dad and he was like [whispering] *'hey what's up'* and I was like *'hey are you free? I just wanna, like, chat, I'm just walking to work'*. And he was like *'no I'm in a meeting'*. I was like, *'why do you answer your phone if you're in a meeting. Just like call me back.'* And he was like, *'what, like, did you get a part in a movie? I just wanted to know'*.

The consequences of Evelyn's parents' support appear to have manifest in their well-meaning expectations. The abstract and opaque nature of the future outlined in the previous chapter may be occurring for Evelyn's parents, who assume that their investments in a costly education combined with the talents of their child should automatically lead to success. It appears to be Evelyn's parents who have fostered superlative aspirations through their efforts to live a dream of success through and alongside her. Her parents think highly of her capacity, enquiring as though an inevitability if she has made it on to a television talk show for celebrities or if she is "famous yet" (emphasis added). These expectations appear to be nurtured by an imaginary of

---

<sup>27</sup> SNL is an acronym for Saturday Night Live', a popular talk-show with celebrities hosted each Saturday evening in New York and broadcast around the world.



career success that was bought into and that is maintained by virtue of her having attended her “dream school”. The iterations of the same conversation with her father re-state the mission in mind and may implicitly remind her of their \$280,000 in loans which they must keep working to pay back. Evelyn frames the constraining expectations of her parents as a product of “love and support and well wishes”, and she elaborated: “what a problem to have – just too much love and support from your parents”. I return to Evelyn’s story in the following chapter to develop the analysis of fateful aspects of aspiration, whereby she feels beholden to persist and succeed in the acting dream.

Luke, whom we met in Chapter Four and who studied Film and Television with an Animation focus, indicates another example of parental involvement in a child’s artistic aspirations. Luke grew up in New Jersey and is the only child of Jewish parents. He observed how his relational identity changed from where he grew up to attending university:

Yeah, I got called, like, real anti-Semitism which like, going to MU that was such a weird jump because it was, like, realising that I’m, like, a white guy now. Whereas for all of my life it was like, ‘no, you’re, like, the fucking town Jew.’

Luke’s parents were able to support him financially through his studies at MU and beyond. Luke wants to work in illustration, and ideally to one day design his own cartoon show. This bold vision was in fact nurtured by his parents. Luke interpreted their support for his artistic talents to be fuelled by unfulfilled aspirations from their own lives:

I mean, both my folks, the reason they're so supportive is they are both kind of, like, failed artists, who never really went after, like, what they wanted to do. My mom went to college for art three times and ended up an account woman in advertising. And my father was a writer who really, like, wanted to ‘write write’, and also ended up writing in advertisement.

Luke suggests that neither of his parents achieved success in art or in writing in the pure terms which they had dreamed of. He interprets them to be “so supportive” because his own talents represent a continuity of their own artistic values. Luke’s aspirations may present themselves as a channel through which his parents may try to articulate their own unfinished life narratives through him. Luke had in fact started a job in New York straight after graduating in 2017. Yet he explained that he had been encouraged to give this up in order to realise a bigger goal:

So yeah, [my dad] gave me a little talk. I got the kind of vibe that he wanted, like, he wished he had gone after a little bit of, like, a harder kind of writing, and didn't want me to fall into the same thing. So, I already had a solid job there [in New York]. And I think his fear was that I would do well at it. And then you end up getting a promotion and you never end up really, like, going out and making the TV shows you want to make.

Luke's parents saw their son's talents as worth investing in. In Part I, parents appeared to usher their children away from the arts, instead hoping for their children to procure occupational and financial stability by putting their faith in hierarchies of educational subjects (Robinson and Aronica, 2009). Luke's parents were keen to take a risk and to advise their son away from immediate security that may prevent a bigger dream of "going out and making the TV shows you want to make". Interestingly, this notion of what Luke says he wants was pioneered by a "little talk" given from his father. Luke's parents are also exercising a 'vicarious career anxiety'. Motivations for supporting Luke might come back to his parents own egos, in which they are re-attempting their own dreams through his life. Notably, Luke's parents are passing on the risks involved in such a career, albeit providing a safety net.

Further to the passive notion of providing support if needed, Luke's parents also played an active role in shaping his graduate pathway. Luke's parents set him up in North Hollywood with a rented one-bedroom apartment and a car, both of which they pay for. In fact, the very idea of moving to Los Angeles was not Luke's but that of his parents. He described an evocative scene:

We went out to dinner. And then they sort of, like, very abruptly changed and were like, '*Luke, we've got something to talk to you about.*' And then they brought up the thing of moving to LA... I only thought about it for a little bit. Quickly, like, I sort of realized the only reason not to do it would be out of the fear of packing everything up and moving across the country.

This influential role of parents providing both moral and financial support shaped Luke's perception of the future to the extent of carving an idea for him that he had not personally thought of. Luke described his journey 'heading West' with his father, driving across the North American landscape from New Jersey to California. Daniel described a similar drive with his father from Mississippi to Los Angeles to embark on a summer internship while a student at MU. There is something pertinent to this parental attitude. Rather than facing pressures to settle down closer to home, Luke's parents suggested the idea of him moving to the other side of the country (indeed, the other side of the North American continent). Moving to Los Angeles to try to succeed

as an individual in Hollywood insinuates a symbolic sense of aspirational individualism. In Luke's case, this sense of singularity – striving to make a name for one's self – appears to be an aspiration that has in fact been produced socially and even paternalistically. The Hollywood dream was orchestrated by Luke's parents – whereby he merely played a role in his own story. In the final section of this chapter, such insights are elaborated, on the entanglement of parents in their children's aspirations.

### Part III: Complexity, Compliance, and a Lack of Control

This final section demonstrates the extent to which parental influence had a powerful impact on graduates' aspirations and sense of control over their lives. Diverse forms of parental involvement are shown to have a grip on graduates' perceptions of what is a worthy future or not. Bregnbæk's (2016) research analyses 'how young people struggle in various ways to experience themselves as autonomous people and try to come to terms with or distance themselves from the will of their parents' (p. 6). Building on these ideas of an inter-generational struggle, the notion of fateful aspects of aspiration is applicable in the data that follows. There is an educational component to this dynamic. Varenne and Koyama (2011) emphasise the 'fatefulness of culture' (p. 51), whereby people are subject to conditions not of their own making. An educational process ensues in which people are forced to deliberate with others over what to do with their constrained circumstances (Varenne and Koyama, 2011). Examples below from Ricardo, Denise, and Grace demonstrate negotiations that MU graduates had with their parents, with their situations, and with themselves. Senses of autonomy are problematised by internalised perspectives which graduates had absorbed from their parents, and by compliance with parental wishes.

The notion of cognitive dissonance regards the presence of more than one contradictory perspective which a person may simultaneously harbour and may experience in tension with each other. This phenomenon is apparent in the following passage from Ricardo who caricatures

parenting styles evocative of those outlined in Parts I and II. Ricardo calls upon the harsh, critical parenting that he has grown up with as an internalised norm against which to evaluate and deride parenting styles that congratulate a child and absolve them of any criticism. However, Ricardo wavers between contrasting values in talking through his own past and his plans:

We have this culture – there's been this New Age parenting thing that's all about, like, you can't let the kid feel bad about anything. The kid has to think that he's hot shit. Otherwise he's not gonna succeed. Because there's such an obsession in the United States about confidence. The value of confidence. That you need confidence to fucking achieve and if you don't have confidence, you're not gonna get the job. That they foster this artificial reality for these kids – by the time they get to New York and they realise that, like, they're not in fucking Kansas anymore, that they're not the fucking shit. And like that was what I saw [at MU]. And that was, by the way, that was something I forgot to mention to you that was such a big difference is that I felt my whole life that I was a total disappointment. And my parents never praised me. And my mom always said to me – my parents were very European about it. It's a very American thing to say, *'Oh, yeah, he's so good at drawing.'* Like, *'Isn't he talented?'* And you know, it's this whole idea of like, you have to somehow, you have to constantly just like, self-congratulate your own children. There's something very narcissistic about thinking your children are brilliant. And it's very American. And it's very, like, I think some – I read somewhere that somewhere in the 70s, you know, these like, New Age psychiatrists that were, like, telling parents in the United States that they had to basically void themselves of any criticism. And, look, coming from the opposite end, and seeing my girlfriend, her dad was incredibly critical, like, my mom was incredibly critical of me. Like, my siblings were incredibly critical of me. And I understand that there's a value to, like, not completely destroying a child's, like, you know, if there's a predisposition to being, like, artistic and if I have a kid – like, I had an argument with my girlfriend about this last night, that's why it's so relevant. I was saying to my girlfriend, like, I'm not gonna make our kids read. Like, if they wanna draw, even if they're not talented, I'm gonna let them do what they want because I really suffered in a way. Because I was in this like really archaic, like, the other end of the spectrum, which was like, you know, for instance people telling my mom that I should be put in like a Special Ed program. Because at my Catholic school I had to be fluent in Latin and, like, write in Latin when I was in Fourth Grade, and I was taking, like, 7 classes. In a way it was so realistic to life my middle school, because it was like, you either were in AP [Advanced Placement] and you were a brilliant kid and they were saying, *'Oh, yeah, you're gonna be great'*. Or you were bad at school, and you were an idiot. And I was one of the idiots. And I, like, had so much of that that I doubt myself so much now. But at the same time, you know, I know how to handle criticism. It's like, if you wanna like – so many people at MU that I met were so weak to criticism. Any time a professor was even remotely critical, there was such an outpour of emotion, such an absolute form of resentment. So, I guess, I hope that explains that – kind of, like, from my position, from what I've studied. I really suggest that you look into this as being the main subject of your whole thing.

We here see two constructions of parenting that echo those explored in Parts I and II. Ricardo locates his own background, having a European mother, with a parenting style that does not hand out praise. He repudiates what he sees as an 'American' focus on congratulating a child which he deems as a means of really complimenting one's self. Ricardo caricatures, '*Oh, yeah, he's so good at drawing... Isn't he talented?*'. Bateson (1994) depicts a relevant comparison between children's drawings in Iran being collected into the rubbish bin as opposed to adorning the American refrigerator. Ricardo suggests that a lack of resilience to criticism that he saw in the student body at MU is produced by such a parenting culture of putting the child first. His portrayal is indicative of what Chua (2011, p. 22) describes as a 'soft, entitled child'.

There is, nonetheless, ambiguity surrounding Ricardo's own opinion. He creates a dichotomy between the overly pampered parenting that is the focus of his criticism and the "other side of the spectrum" that he has experienced: as harsh and neglectful. He appears proud not to have been showered with praise and to be able to withstand criticism as a result. Yet he now doubts himself and appears harmed by the cruelty from his parenting and schooling. Such polyvocality is symptomatic of the contradictory attitudes from participants towards their parents: criticising them and defending them at the same time. There is a further contradiction, and evidence of possible cognitive dissonance, when it comes to the discussion that Ricardo had with his girlfriend (now wife) about how to one day raise their own children. Ricardo seems to find appeal in a parenting approach akin to the 'American' one that he criticises. Echoing child-centred ideas (Twenge, 2006), he plans to let his children "do what they want" such as drawing, regardless of ability. He would not force activities such as reading upon them. His girlfriend appears to have disagreed. This example demonstrates the complexity in how young people may internalise and negotiate the influence of their parents. Ricardo's socialisation appears to have formed a habituated understanding which is so pronounced that he cannot evade its influence on what he considers to be normal, or desirable. His present attitude either reproduces the norm that he has been exposed to or else consciously reacts against it.

In the following example from Denise we again see the prominent role of parents as a source of power and influence. Denise expressed diverse articulations of what she wanted to do with her future. I first talked to Denise at the end of a campus tour which she had led. I explained the

study and she engaged chirpily with the research themes, “by forty, I want to be a soccer mom and a professor”. We conducted two interviews at MU over the course of her master’s degree and then a final interview on a bench by a basketball court in Brooklyn after she had graduated. By the time she had finished her degree she was planning to leave New York, to move back to her family home in Texas. As examined in the previous chapter, Denise considered her options for the future through a lens of finding something to do that was spectacular. She was often doubtful about whether academia was for her and wondered about working in television. The questions of what to do, and what jobs to look for, were intensified by her \$115,000 of student debt. This financial pressure coalesced with expectations from her parents to form an ominous view of the future. Below we see two examples of Denise’s parents as authority figures whose input and validation carried substantial weight. Denise referred to a time when she was speaking to her mother on the phone:

My mom was like, *‘wait, what are you saying you don't want to do your PhD?’* And [my dad] just like, flew onto the phone and was just shouting for like, maybe 10 minutes. And I was listening, *‘Okay, well, okay.’* ... And I was like, *‘I just don't know.’* And then we started talking about like, PhD application deadlines.

Denise here depicts her father’s presence in the vicinity of her mother as she was speaking to her on the phone. Denise’s mother recounted back one articulation of a possible future in which Denise was not thinking of applying for another degree at that time. This rupture in the trajectory which her parents were hoping for invoked an urgency in Denise’s father who “flew onto the phone”. The effects of him “shouting” for “maybe 10 minutes” had a considerable effect. The initial dialogue in which Denise considered not applying for a PhD resulted in the opposite outcome of her discussing PhD application deadlines. This example demonstrates a sense in which Denise was not constructing her aspirations in a purely individual manner. Finn’s (2015) relational approach to the study of HE transitions challenges assumptions of individual agency that may be implied by theories of individualisation:

... the young women did not appear to be acting in isolation, 'deciding, shaping and choosing how to live' as dominant accounts of individualisation would have us believe. On the contrary, these stories reveal the ways in which agency emerges out of relational connections, feelings of belonging, yearning for co-presence and the embedded and reciprocal dimensions of family support. (p. 109)

Denise's story reveals such entanglement to the extent that a distinction between her own desires and that of her parents is unclear. Denise's agency indeed appears to be relational and rooted in her family's input. There may be different means through which Denise's parents exerted their will on her frame of mind. In Part I, Denise's father had appeared to exude an authoritative tone, calmly stating what he wants for her. In the example above, his influence appears authoritarian, interrupting a conversation which he had not been a part of to 'shout' commands about the future down the phone.

Below, Denise reveals a more subtle though equally powerful influence from her mother's words. Denise discussed her own tendency to avoid parental conflict, which differs from her twin brother:

He's used to getting into those arguments. He's like, *'I can fight about it all day. I'm not gonna do it.'* As opposed to me. I didn't even want to apply to MU. My mom was like, *'no, I want you to go to New York. I want you to do this.'* And instead of me being like, *'I don't really want to do that'*, I still applied. And for good reason, obviously. Everything turned out well. But, I'm always like, *'Okay, mom. Okay. Okay. Okay. Mm-hmm. Sure. Yeah. Yeah.'* So luckily, it's not anything that I don't want to do. But if there's something that I'm really like, I really want to do and my mom was like, *'no'*, I would be more inclined to be like, *'oh, maybe I shouldn't do it.'* Or maybe I won't do it to keep the peace, or something.

Denise suggests that her tendency to avoid conflict – “to keep the peace” – may prevent her from speaking her mind. The implications of her silence, enacted in order to achieve consensus, appear to have had significant consequences on her life. Denise retrospectively interprets her decision to study in New York as being not her own, but the wish of her mother. In Part I of this chapter, Denise suggested that studying at MU was a result of her father's influence, so that “he can tell people his daughter goes to MU”. These multiple articulations reveal the multiple perspectives that people may hold on the same phenomenon. Kierkegaard famously argued that life can only be understood backwards (though must be lived forwards)<sup>28</sup>. Denise appears to have been working through the past via different narratives to explain it. In speaking of the powerful influence of her mother, Denise suggests that a simple statement of *'no, I want you to go to New York. I want you to do this'* influenced a course of action that was not of her own choosing, and

---

<sup>28</sup> There does not appear to be a clear source for this statement which has taken on a life of its own as a quote that is expressed in different ways.

even against her will: “I didn’t even want to apply to MU”. Such discourse complicates notions of an autonomous sense of self. Denise’s compliance indicates a fateful aspect of her aspirations being affected, and even governed, by other parties. She appears fated, through her obligations to kinship, to inhabit a certain future or at least to strive to inhabit it. Such filial obedience echoes the story of Gu Wei, in Bregnbæk’s (2016) ethnography, who did as his mother wished, as discussed in Chapter Two.

The arguments made in this chapter culminate in the final, following examples from Grace. Involvement from Grace’s parents appears to have prevented her from feeling a sense of authorship over her own life. In December 2017, six months after graduating, Grace reflected on her negative experiences, and on other people’s failure to understand where she was coming from:

I graduated school not knowing what to do and I just pretty much hated everything in the world. And a lot of people were just like, ‘*get on with your life.*’ Or like, ‘*you have everything. You don’t have to worry about money, you don’t have to worry about – there’s no – you just do whatever the fuck you want. Are you depressed? Why are you hating everything? Like, what did the world do to you that you should hate so much. You’re super privileged and well educated.*’.... Well, my family is probably the top, like, 2% or 1% economically in China. But I still think my life frickin’ sucks. I have, like, PTSD, I have to go to therapy, I can’t even function, I scream and cry constantly at home.

Grace had been diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder which she attributes to her upbringing and her education. Grace was relieved to situate her predicaments sociologically after I recommended Bregnbæk’s (2016) ethnography. In June 2018 she texted, “I cannot thank you enough for recommending *Fragile Elite* to me. That book changed my life. So tea is on me this time.”

Things had not been going well. Grace and I spoke on two different occasions about the prospects of eventual death, to which she commented on how peaceful it seemed. Grace had mentioned a recurrent fantasy of rage:

I keep on just dreaming of having a knife and killing my parents, then killing myself. Bloody apartment, and it’s all over. Or taking a gun from my bedside table and shooting myself in the head.



The future as it appeared was so inert and imposed that Grace could not imagine a pathway forwards via peaceful or happy means<sup>29</sup>. Bregnbæk (2016) interprets how suicide could be imagined by pressured Chinese students as a perverse means of gaining autonomy over one's life. She introduces her ethnography describing how a student jumped to her death from a tall university building and explains: 'Some students quietly remarked that suicide was really the only way to escape from the pressure' (p. 1). Bregnbæk (2016, pp. 41-42) also refers to a story of a Chinese student who in 2001 hit his mother with a hammer which killed her. The student had been described as academically able though his grades were not streamlining him towards one of China's top universities. His mother, unsatisfied, enforced strict rules upon him – beating him with a belt and preventing leisure activities such as reading the newspaper. The student felt so suffocated by the framework of a life and future that were imposed upon him that he was prompted to physical violence. Grace, too, felt impotent through the tools of communication that were available to her. The fantasy of killing her parents indicates how they may have been perceived as an overbearing obstacle in her perception of the future.

One might further examine the nature of the socialisation processes through which Grace was encouraged towards aspiration. Dewey (1966 cited in Ingold, 2018, pp. 4-5) distinguished between education and training whereby one may train a dog to do something for reward or the avoidance of punishment without the dog understanding an intrinsic purpose to their behaviour. Education, meanwhile, would involve a commitment to the values of why one is engaged in an activity. Dewey lamented that children are too often 'trained like an animal rather than educated like a human being' (1966 cited in Ingold, 2018, pp. 4-5). It appears that the construction of a future on Grace's behalf has denied her the chance to build up desires of her own. Her studies have not instilled an apparent education, in Dewey's sense, but rather a vacant adherence to a training in which her human spirit has not been cultivated. Grace had been seeing a therapist who had told her that she does not know what she wants. In the dialogue below, Grace suggests that she does not know what her "concerns" are. By contrast, she identifies an organic sense of

---

<sup>29</sup> I was aware that Grace was in therapy at the time which provided some reassurance in response to her remarks. I have also recommended to Grace that she becomes a therapist given her disposition to talk and listen, or else that she use her financial skills to work for a charity or NGO, trying to come up with a solution to her predicaments.

purpose experienced by her grandparents, who had to hide from the Japanese during World War II; as well as her parents, who saw meaning in their social mobility:

My grandparents' concern was hiding, and then my parents' concern was making money and not getting pushed away by the wave of development. And I don't know what my concerns are. And they'll be like, *'you have no problems. We feed you and we don't put pressure on you to make money or anything. Just like, live and do whatever the fuck you want.'* And then I'm like, I'm so traumatized from all my childhood problems and I like, I have depression and shit. And they're like, *'what is wrong with you? You need to be more resilient.'* I'm like, *'I don't want to be like this, okay.'* But then they'll be like, *'all your problems with culture and identity, they're not real problems. They're problems with things in general.'* So, I just feel really lonely in my own family, kind of. Because they don't understand.

Grace indicates an intuitive momentum that appears to have propelled the two generations above her. In contrast, she does not have a clear sense of internal drive. The suggestion that she does not have the “pressure to make money or anything” appears to have ironically had an adverse effect: depriving her of the hunger that had fuelled her parents' aspirations. Levine (2006) analyses pervasive feelings of 'emptiness' reported among affluent teenage clients in her therapy practice in California. She suggests a contradiction: 'Indulged, coddled, pressured, and micromanaged on the outside, my young patients appeared to be inadvertently deprived of the opportunity to develop an inside' (p. 8). This analysis may not apply specifically to Grace but is a noteworthy discourse regarding suffocating effects of intense parental scrutiny. Unlike in Chua's (2011) vision of shaping adolescent drive to internalise that of the parents, Grace has struggled to adopt the aspirations or ambition that her parents had in mind for her.

Grace's inability to untangle herself from her parents appears to be embodied by her living conditions. As we sat on a bench in Lower Manhattan, she cursed, “that!” pointing up to the apartment where she lives. Grace's parents wanted her to remain in the United States to be eligible for a 'green card' visa and an ensuing life there. The symbolic and material circumstance of where she sleeps and eats each day being determined by her parents on the other side of the world can be seen as a literal and metaphorical expression of the lack of control which she felt in her life. For Grace's upwardly mobile Chinese parents, purchasing real estate in Manhattan had been a point of pride. Yet this 'generous' act invoked in Grace a sense of infantilization that has stunted her drive to make a life for herself. She appeared to occupy the apartment vacantly –

present in body but not in character. Much like the prestigious career in finance which she had trained for, yet which had no desire to embark on, Grace inhabited her high-rise room in the 'Big Apple' without wanting to actually be there. Grace's story encapsulates a fateful aspect of her parents' involvement that appears to have stifled the cultivation of her own aspirations.

## Conclusion

The conceptual framing of this research has sought to articulate the contingencies that structure a person's life over time. This chapter shows how family and upbringing may relationally and continuously construct a person's aspirations and future. I have devised the notion of vicarious career anxiety to represent concerns that emanated from parents into their children's choices. Parents were shown to employ different beliefs about how to raise their children, articulated through different attitudes towards aspiration and HE. Some parents placed faith in credential hierarchies, suppressing artistic aspirations. Others believed in nurturing and mutually inhabiting the artistic dreams of their children. Across these attempts at the transmission of values and opportunities from one generation to the next are processes of education (Levinson, 2000). This chapter has further contributed to answering the second and third parts of the research question: 'how are such aspirations produced and negotiated over time?'. The socialisation of young people's aspirations appears to have been a central aspect of child raising that stretches from early years and education. Parental involvement can be seen to continue through and beyond HE. Processes of education are apparent in the ways that students and graduates negotiated such influence in everyday interactions (Varenne, 2019a). It should nonetheless be stated that not all parents appeared as hyper-involved – notably Jill's – whom we hear about in the following chapter.

Part I of this chapter depicted parental attempts to produce 'practical' and prestigious aspirations in their offspring. Parental attitudes were shown to promote a 'hierarchy of aspirations' that devalued certain occupations (Roder, 2017). This stratification echoed back into a hierarchy of educational subjects to study (Robertson and Aronica, 2009). Mary and Giovanni discussed the

'sympathy' which they feel towards their parents' anxieties imposed upon them which they have nonetheless fought against. Ricardo mentioned his mother's "money thinking" and her threats about the kinds of futures that derive from studying History. Grace reflected on her relationship with her parents and suggested that it has been centred for her entire life on forms of socialisation to produce a kind of future which they have in mind. Denise exemplified a point that some migrants to the US may exercise their hopes and aspirations explicitly through their children, perhaps imposing their will with more severity.

Part II addressed how graduates negotiated a differing cultural stance to parenting that nurtured their artistic dreams. This parenting stance may still involve vicarious career anxiety and heavy parental involvement. Evelyn discussed her parents' attitude of supporting her to do "whatever she wanted to do" and them taking on substantial debt to fund her studies to become an actor. These forms of involvement are shown to generate expectations which Evelyn perceived to be overbearing. We hence see that even more gentle modes of parenting that do not force an agenda onto a child may still be negotiated and experienced in ways that are constraining. Luke's story encapsulated a contradiction that 'dreams' of individual success may be motored by parental motivations behind the scenes. Luke described his move to Los Angeles to become an animator being planned and implemented by his parents. It was inferred that Luke's dreams may be articulations of his parents' unfulfilled aspirations channelled through him as their only child.

Part III explored how graduates often struggled to disentangle their own perspectives from those of their parents (cf. Bregnbæk, 2016). Ricardo depicted two extremes of parenting: between his habituated norm of criticality and a positive praise which he derided. He nonetheless oscillated between defence and criticism of both stances, indicating a lack of clarity as to where he stands. Cognitive dissonance was implied in which a person holds more than one, contradictory, attitude. Denise revealed an overriding power that words from her parents have had on her opinions and courses of action. Echoing Finn's (2015) relational approach, her agency may be entangled. It was also suggested that there may be something fateful to Denise's compliance, and her corresponding absence of control. A theme of lacking control was epitomised through a return to Grace's narrative. It appeared that her successful trajectory through education has stunted her from discovering her own aspirations, interests, purpose, or drive. Thoughts of suicide and

patricide even occurred as an only means of escape. Grace's sense of not being in control of her life is epitomised by her spiritually vacant habitation of a room in Manhattan without choosing to be there.

The central contribution to knowledge to derive from this thesis is an analysis of how aspirations may, paradoxically, constrain the futures of university graduates. This chapter depicted blatant and subtle forms of parental involvement as one of the streams through which young people's futures may be determined in a 'fateful' manner – by which I mean, beyond their control. The next and final empirical chapter crystallises the notion of fateful aspects of aspiration. I look at how the implications of aspiring through HE may bestow aspirations with an overpowering life of their own in governing a graduate's future.

# Chapter Seven: Fateful Aspects of Aspiration

## Introduction

This chapter explores how Manhattan University (MU) graduates negotiated and revised their aspirations over the course of their transitions out of university. I address the last two parts of the research question: ‘how are such aspirations negotiated and revised over time?’. I have devised the term ‘fateful aspects of aspiration’ to represent deterministic qualities that appeared to act upon graduates’ futures. Fatefulness may connote ominous or detrimental consequences; yet the main intended meaning is a future affected by forces outside of a graduate’s control. Fateful aspects of aspiration have been suggested in the data and analysis so far. The geography, prestige, and cost of a degree at MU appeared to charge the future with high expectations (Chapter Five). The involvement of parents often exacerbated pressures, albeit in diverse ways (Chapter Six). In this final empirical chapter, I develop how fateful aspects of aspiration arose as a result of how graduates had specialised in Higher Education (HE) and how they had funded their studies. I thus examine possible fateful consequences of degrees and debts. These can be understood as contingencies of the life course (Chapter Two). There may be ‘fateful moments’ (Giddens, 1991) that determine how lives unfold in specific ways. Choices, chance encounters, and sudden occurrences may have a chain of consequences that affect a person’s destiny (Irving, 2017). According to Varenne (2019a):

... human beings are alive, making particular conditions for themselves out of their past and present peculiarities... They make what they will then stumble over, day in and day out, throughout their lives. (p. 14)

This chapter addresses how MU graduates appeared to ‘stumble’ into configurations of their present and future. I investigate how graduates negotiated their aspirations accordingly, and how they revised their aspirations as a result. The influence and expectations of peers had a strong

influence on how graduates negotiated their futures. Graduates also revised their aspirations internally through dialogues with themselves that considered alternative options and routes not taken. Following Varenne (2019a), these deliberations over how to proceed within given circumstances may have educational components.

The chapter consists of three parts: 'pigeonholed and beholden'; 'revising aspirations'; and 'false hope?'. Part I establishes how fateful aspects of aspiration were experienced by graduates, and how they may be explained. The most apposite means of describing fateful aspects of aspiration is through the notions of feeling 'pigeonholed' to specialisations and 'beholden' to debts and expectations. These forces are shown to structure graduates' sense of possibility and to curtail their freedom. Evelyn feels as though she must become an actor and points to the amount of time and money invested so far. The driving force of her ambition is no longer an independent love of acting but a pressure to earn money to pay off her loans. Grace, meanwhile, feels branded by her degree in Finance yet does not feel suited to the profession. She feels beholden to become defined by a "professional identity", to the exclusion of other aspects of her humanity. A fateful aspect of Higher Education (HE) thus appears to be an ensuing intensity to aspire professionally that denied the time or space to develop outside of work as human beings. Part II concerns the theme of revising aspirations. Peer influence and social media were shown to affect graduates' understandings of possibility and of the relative merits of their transitions. Evelyn reflects on a culture of hyper-connectivity and the kinds of constant comparison that she felt subjected to online. We then see different responses to fateful aspects of aspiration: from reveries (Denise), to rationalisations (Martin), to a change of path (Paulo). I discuss how the presence or absence of different kinds of debt may have a significant impact on graduates' flexibility. Part III considers the theme of hope and asks how it may be generated and what its consequences may be. Uma, in Los Angeles, suggests the need to bide one's time for not years but decades. Ricardo and Daniel point to the cultural geography of Los Angeles as a symbolic space that fosters the longevity of such aspirations through a culture of 'make-believe'. I consider how persistence may prove beneficial or else may further exacerbate senses of fatefulness. I finally look at the role of post-graduate study in the negotiation and revision of aspiration. Jill pursues one, two, and then three degrees, hoping that the future will get better as a result each time. The notion of 'cruel

optimism' (Berlant, 2011) is developed to show how HE may give the future a sense of meaning and direction, while also escalating fateful aspects of aspiration through further specialisation, expectation, and debt.

## Part I: Pigeonholed and Beholden

In this section I develop the main intended meanings of the term 'fateful aspects of aspiration'. Examples from Evelyn and Grace demonstrate how a course of study may pigeonhole graduates to certain employment options and may restrict them from others. HE is also shown to make graduates beholden to debts and expectations. Such factors served to direct the future beyond graduates' control and to diminish their perceived options in life.

Evelyn, from Arizona, remained in New York as a graduate and she aspires to be an actor. Her story was presented in the introductory chapter as an example of graduates' feeling constrained to a choice of career associated with their studies. In Chapter Six, we saw the high levels of financial and moral support from Evelyn's parents, who now wonder and ask when she will be famous. I here explore how factors associated with HE and with a career identity further fated Evelyn to persist in this path. After first meeting in June 2017, I interviewed Evelyn on a rainy evening that December, six months after her graduation. She spoke of her inability to even audition for acting roles as she was working as a nanny that occupied her between 3 and 8 pm every day. By October 2018, Evelyn had switched to working as a hostess in a restaurant, and had been in a Broadway show, albeit unpaid. Evelyn conveyed a combination of hope, persistence, disillusionment, and doubt. She reflected on the range of alternative options that she has contemplated, yet felt daunted at the prospect of starting from the "ground floor":

*I definitely do think, like, 'oh man, like, what if I just, like, got an office job. Or, like, was a secretary. Or what if I tried to, like, actually write and like become a writer. And what if I went to work for like, an editor, like try to edit stuff. Or work for like a book company or like a publishing company.' I've had every thought. 'What if I went and worked for a casting agency, or people who like manage actors. Or what if I went into, like, a different part of the acting*



*world. What if I wanted to be a manager, agent, or cast director.*' Lots of thoughts. But I don't know. It's hard to kind of change what you're doing. Because I feel like I know a lot about acting at this point. And I still don't even know a lot about acting. So, if I would have started something all new, I would be like, *'well I don't know anything about it.'* I would really need to start from the ground floor. That's a daunting thought in itself. So, I mean, I've had the thoughts of like, *'what if I didn't do acting anymore?'* But at this point, I'm still on board with acting. I can't find something else that would make me happier.

Evelyn mentions a multitude of alternative prospects ("I've had every thought") though she ultimately expresses an attachment to acting ("I can't find something else that would make me happier"). In Bateson's (1989) research on the longitudinal construction of lives she argues: 'We hold on to the continuity we have, however profoundly it is flawed. If change were less frightening, if the risks did not seem so great, far more could be lived' (p. 8). Evelyn's story may reflect such attachment to continuity and a fear of the unknown. There are also fateful aspects of aspiration that are specific to HE and work. Evelyn appears pigeonholed: "It's hard to kind of change what you're doing." A similar fatefulness is inferred in Finn's (2015) research. One graduate, discussed in Chapter Two, pursued a post-graduate training in Law which they felt beholden to persist with despite disliking the profession (Finn, 2015, p. 123). Evelyn feels that she may have missed the boat to embark on a different trajectory; that she may have to nullify her progression so far and start again in a field where she does not "know anything about it". The specialisation of careers necessitates prior experience and often entail gatekeepers of (costly) qualifications (Collinge, 2019).

Giddens (1991) introduced the term 'fateful moments' to describe pivotal decisions or occurrences that determine a person's life. He notes that educational choices can constitute fateful moments (p. 113). Irving (2017, 2018) similarly emphasises the heavily contingent ways in which human lives may unfold whereby actions and occurrences can have life-changing consequences. In the following text, Evelyn reflects on the irreversible and unforeseen implications of pursuing HE as she did. She locates the central source of this contingency as her student debt:

I don't really have the option to fail at this point. Because I spent so much money doing this one thing... I feel like I didn't understand what debt was when I went into debt. And now I'm like, *'OK, so like, I have to, like, pay all this back.'* And then, all of the interest for how long I don't pay back is more money that gets added on. And then, like, if I ever want to, like, enter

a relationship, and then if it ever gets serious, like, '*can we combine our lives?*'. Marriage is a contract – and then I give them all my debt. Like, that's a lot of pressure.... When I calculated how long I'd be paying it off, that's when I was really like, '*I'm daunted*'. I'm going to be like 30-something, or 40, or something like that. It seems like a really long time – if I just keep paying what I'm paying right now. But I'm hoping I can get some acting jobs and just, like, throw money at it until it goes away – hopefully. Or buy a place to live, if I ever make a lot of money – so, I'm not paying rent. Either one of those options works. But I don't know. I think there's a lot of things I didn't think about when I went into debt. And now realising it, I don't necessarily regret going to MU. But I mean, there were other choices I could have made.

Evelyn does not perceive herself as having “the option to fail”. A sense of feeling pigeonholed to acting is compounded by a sense of feeling financially beholden. Evelyn comments that she does not “necessarily regret going to MU” but that there “were other choices I could have made” and that “there's a lot of things I didn't think about when I went into debt”. She describes the weight of debt phenomenologically, feeling “daunted” by having her horizons structured by loan repayments until she is much older. She imagines a future relationship and the financial baggage she will carry, noting “that’s a lot of pressure”. Evelyn is only referring to her own debt of \$30,000 (plus the interest that will accrue) not the debt which her parents have withdrawn on her behalf of \$280,000.

Zaloom (2019) writes that ‘debt loads are constraining the life choices of young adults after graduation – in some cases imperilling their financial security and that of their parents as well’ (p. 3). Evelyn’s current aspiration to “get... acting jobs” is no longer for the intrinsic pleasure of acting, but for the external demand of money that she hopes to “throw” at the debt. Her debt charges her search for acting jobs in a way that prioritises this money (which she will not access) over anything else. Durkheim’s (1895/1982) notion of a ‘social fact’, discussed in Chapter Two, might help to conceptualise the role played by debt in disciplining Evelyn’s future. Evelyn’s sense of having “no option” but to negotiate a future through her debt renders this financial imposition as though a ‘social fact’ through which she must interact. While people may respond to their debt differently, including through nonchalance (Davis and Cartwright, 2019), Evelyn perceives her debt to be so insidious that it governs all forms of her future interaction, including with work and a prospective partner. Debt thus seems to have ominous and constraining implications on Evelyn’s entire life – determining present behaviours, future options, and the relationship

between the two. She has been educated into the essential nature of debt as part of her life, to the point where it has become the main event.

Whereas Evelyn feels fated to an unstable field that was nonetheless her 'dream', Grace's degree in Finance appears to have specialised her for something that she does not care about. We have learned that Grace "can't make [herself] care" about jobs in the financial sector (Chapter Four); nor can she imagine alternative options that she could "possibly do" (Chapter Five); her parents' involvement in her future is also experienced as suffocating, even from the other side of the world in China (Chapter Six). In the passage below, from December 2017, Grace summarises and elaborates on aspects of her predicament:

Cos I've been living by myself for seven years. And then I suddenly have my parents jumping back on everything I do. And my mom is like a really critical person. She just criticizes me all the time. That's stressful. She is not a very nice person by words. She knows what's hurtful and she'll say it. Also, I see all [of] my friends working at the big-name places. And I got fired. The other person who's like, I think, not nearly as good as me, stayed. And I also just feel like I shouldn't be doing finance at all. I don't have the personality for it. But then, I got in to [MU Business School], I survived [MU Business School], and I learned all of these stuff [sic]. And I don't know what to do with them. And I also don't know what else I can do. I also don't know who I am. Sometimes I'm just really fun of a person and a lot of time, some other times, I just don't respond to people's messages. Don't talk to anyone. So, I don't really know who I am. That's the biggest stress for after graduation. And no one telling you what to do.

Here, Grace reiterates a sense of parental pressure re-asserting itself after a period of perceived autonomy. Grace also laments on the standards of success generated by peers around her whom she sees "working at the big-name places". Grace seems to have felt more secure while in education. Without this student identity and schedule (people "telling you what to do"), she does not know who she is ("I don't know who I am"). Grace feels that she has specialised in the wrong field: "I also just feel like I shouldn't be doing finance at all. I don't have the personality for it." The aforementioned Law graduate in Finn's (2015) study also felt that she had trained in something out of synchronisation with her personality. Grace negotiates her prospects by re-visiting the worth of her qualifications: "I got in to [MU Business School], I survived [MU Business School], and I learned all of these stuff [sic]". However, Grace does not know how to apply her specialised knowledge ("I don't know what to do with them."). These credentials hold economic value and could grant Grace a lucrative job and prospective career. Having this option, and even

expectation, to recuperate rewards from her specialised training appears to fatefully raise expectations.

It can be inferred that the burden of aspiring had been absorbed by Grace's institutional status. Enrolment in a course of study may indicate aspiration and directionality in life while in fact protecting the student from job searching or having to think about the future. Both student and occupational status may confer a successful identity onto a young person. Grace felt stuck in an abyss between these transitional states, highlighting the significance of institutions in mediating the role of the individual in society. Grace was critical of cultural pressures to self-actualise through the workplace, at the expense of other human qualities:

I'm also thinking, why do people have to have like a professional identity? Or like, why can't you just define yourself as like a really fun person or like a really caring person or someone who's really good at cooking, things like that?

Occupational identities are an increasingly central means through which adults in Western countries conceive of themselves and each other (Taylor, 1991; de Botton, 2010; Weeks, 2014). Grace indicates a sense of obligation, that "people have to have.... a professional identity". This apparent imperative appears to have been perpetuated by social norms around her. She dreams of fun, caring, and cooking defining one's identity. However, Grace feels beholden to professional expectations that preclude her from aspiring to simple pleasures in life. Grace's comments echo humanistic and anti-capitalist visions of not reducing one's self to one's work or productivity (Fromm, 1961; Marx, 2011).

Work can be theorised as an obligation that holds a person's life to ransom and extracts time, labour, and capital (Marx, 2011). Marxist understandings of this coercion focused on economic bondage in which a proletariat had to sell their labour in order to survive (Marx and Engels, 1998). Markovitz (2019) argues that the perils of contemporary competition have shifted the 'classic afflictions of capitalism up the class structure', whereby 'elite workers' are now subject to 'the same alienation that Karl Marx diagnosed in exploited proletarian labor' (p. 40). Similarly, Graeber (2018) theorises a prevalence of contemporary work which atrophies people's sense of their own humanity. He writes (2018): 'Bullshit jobs regularly induce feelings of hopelessness, depression, and self-loathing. They are forms of spiritual violence directed at the essence of what

it means to be a human being' (p. 134). Grace described her friends as fatalistically adhering to profoundly fateful working lives:

**JL:** I don't know whether you know anyone else that's gone into finance and is finding their job a bit 'shit'?

**Grace:** Oh, everyone. Anyone that went into finance and actually likes it, everyone thinks '*you're crazy.*' Well two of my best friends live in [New] Jersey. I used to crash on their couch when my parents are here, and I can't handle them anymore. One of them works in internal consulting – both of them graduated from [MU Business School] – one of them works in internal consulting for [a company]. They do consumer products like pots and coffee machines. She hates her life. And her roommate works in Goldman Sachs treasury department working from 7 [am] till like 10 [pm] every day. Every time I see her it just looks like she's gonna faint. She's just totally out of it.

Grace's friends do not appear to be enjoying their career 'success', echoing the point from Chapter Four that such notions are dependent on perspective (de Botton, 2005). Grace says that one of her friends (in the good fortune of having a full-time job) "hates her life". She interprets the other friend to be so "totally out of it" that she is non-present when in person. These descriptions indicate a crushing intensity of jobs which are nonetheless adhered to with apparent diligence. Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue that compliance with the division of labour and with the command to work as adults may be the enduring consequence of schooling. There may be something fateful to such adherence to education and to work. For graduates, the appeal of secure work and the threat of uncertainty may enhance their complicity. Harari (2015) describes a 'luxury trap' as a process of adjusting to new conditions and growing to depend upon them (p. 84). Graduates who fulfil expectations to enter the professional workforce may become 'trapped' even in their security, as the prospects of change may become too daunting (cf. Bateson, 1989).

Above we have seen different iterations of fateful aspects of aspirations, as exemplified through stories from Evelyn and Grace. Degree specialisation may pigeonhole graduates to certain fields and may exclude them from others. The debts and professional expectations that accompany HE may also bind graduates to certain kinds of futures. This requirement of high-octane ambition may accelerate pressures to commit to a career, which may indeed be the wrong one (Finn, 2015). Such velocity may also inhibit the scope to explore as human beings and to develop in ways not centred on work. In the next section a further fateful aspect of aspiration is developed

in the analysis, whereby a culture of online sharing made graduates beholden to the expectations of others. We also see different constructions of agency, and different responses to fate, as graduates revised their aspirations.

## Part II: Revising Aspirations

In this section, I explore a tension that MU graduates often experienced between the specificity of their own situations and a prospective range of alternative options which they were not living. Rosa (2010) argues that a pressure to make the most out of one's life compresses one's own future and diminishes it in comparison to the many possibilities that one could be engaged in. He elaborates how media forms accelerate an impulse to accomplish achievements as people are presented with more and more potential life goals (Rosa, 2010). MU graduates recurrently mentioned the transitions of peers and particularly social media as affecting their understandings of possible futures. For instance, Grace, above, saw her friend's working in "the big-name places" which exacerbated an expectation to keep up. In this section, I look at the narratives of four graduates (Evelyn, Denise, Martin, and Paulo). Each of them negotiate fateful aspects of their aspirations, feeling beholden to expectations and pigeonholed to lines of work. They respond by considering the relative merits of their choices in education and work. They are shown to revise their aspirations in different ways: from comparisons, to reveries, to rationalisations, to a change of path.

MU students and graduates were engaged in a culture of expressing their lives online as they unfolded. There was a tendency to recount updates of their professional successes through online platforms. Evelyn suggested that the very existence of accomplishments became dependent on their acknowledgement:

I think a lot of it is – if you post that you're successful, then you're successful. It's not happening until everyone knows it's happening. I try really hard not to do that.

There appears to have been a yearning for one's life to be validated in the eyes of others. de Botton (2005) argues that a desire to be recognised and to be loved underlies human aspirations:

The predominant impulse behind our desire to succeed in the social hierarchy may be rooted not so much in the goods we can accrue or the power we can wield as in the amount of love we stand to receive as a consequence of high status. (p. 6)

The impulse of MU students and graduates to portray their lives online could represent equivalent pursuits of recognition and adoration. A hyper-connectivity ensued, entailing constant comparisons with peers. Evelyn indicated how a culture of performative success ties her aspirations to a heightened scrutiny:

Trying not to let other people's success get to me is probably one of the biggest post grad struggles. Because we live in a society where everything is online. Like, I was watching *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion* movie, whatever, where they go back to their high school reunion. No one knows what they did in their life because it was like the 80s. And there was no Facebook. And I was like, 'how do they not know what their friends are doing?' Because they don't – they aren't updated. I, every day, I'm constantly bombarded with, like, 'booked a commercial!', 'booked a job!', 'doing a play', 'doing a reading', 'doing a podcast', 'here are new head shots!', 'this is me on set!', 'this is me in makeup!'. Constantly. So, it's just like, trying to be really happy for my friends. And be a good friend and be a good person. Trying not to be bitter about that. Trying to understand that, like, other people's success is not my failure. It's really hard.... The constant social media, like, attack of success. It's really hard.

Evelyn describes an endless cascade of success stories that bombard her with a "constant.... attack of success". The nature of her friends' social identities appears to be professional. They are forging online personalities in which they are defined by their work and their aspirations. A normalisation of attaining and sharing success appears to create a template of what is expected as a graduate transition. Evelyn feels that her own life must be judged in comparison to these frequent and superb articulations. There is something fateful to living one's life according to the eyes and expectations of others (de Botton, 2005). Those who are attached to how they appear to their peers may become beholden by their expectations and forced to retain certain identities (professional, social, or otherwise). As Eichhorn (2019) discovered, young people may become trapped by their online profiles which haunt the future with the weight of the past. Graduates may lose autonomy over their aspirations if the motivation is not intrinsic but to prove one's self to others.

Denise from Texas also spoke about social media subjecting her to high expectations. Denise's story signifies various elements of fateful aspects of aspiration. She withdrew more than \$110,000 of loans to study for a master's degree at MU. She graduated feeling as though she had to get "*the job.... to make it all worth it*" – regarding both financial investment and emotional compromise (Chapter Five). Influence and pressure from her Nigerian parents compounded the expectations through which Denise imagined the future (Chapter Six). As with Evelyn and Grace, Denise also saw herself as part of a cohort kept digitally intact. She felt as though she was not keeping up with the symbols of success that she saw online:

*LinkedIn* is a huge trigger for me, just professionally speaking, because [there are] people who graduated the same class as me at undergrad who are like, 'Oh, I work at Deloitte. I have a house now. I have a car.' And so, you're just looking, and I'm like, 'I'm in grad school. And I owe the government X amount of dollars. I don't know where I'm going to be.' And the more that you see it being, like, depicted on the internet, you're just like, 'wow, I'm not doing this shit.' ... There are some people who it's, like, literally every time they get on to *Instagram*, it's like to announce some shit. Like, 'I just got into Med School', 'I just got a scholarship', 'I just got married', 'I just had a baby', this, this, and that.

Online profiles and platforms appear to have magnified all of the lives that graduates were not living (Rosa, 2010). Denise reflected: "the more that you see it being, like, depicted on the internet, you're just like, 'wow, I'm not doing this...". Digital media have transformed the time and space of a university experience by keeping graduates conscious of their peers long after they have left campus. The notion of hauntology (Davis, 2005; Fisher, 2014), discussed in Chapter Two, refers to the failure of pasts to vanish, as exacerbated by the digital age. The time that students happened to be in a class together may linger with them indefinitely and, it appears, act as a litmus test against which to evaluate their own lives. Denise's sense of the contingency of her situation – of the fatefulness of studying as she did – may in fact have arisen in relation to the opportunities which she feels that she has missed out on.

Denise was faced with uncertainty regarding what career she could pursue with degrees in *Public Relations* and *Race, Media, and Communication*. At the end of her master's degree, she proceeded to revise her aspirations and question the merits of specialising as she did:

Not that I wasted time, but I didn't, like, diversify my studies enough, personally. I don't know. I just feel like I wrote too much about like, Karl Marx, and like, dumb shit that doesn't matter.



That doesn't have, like, a practical application, per se. Right now. Yeah.... Like, I always think, like, 'what if I would have gone to grad school for, like, Computer Science or, like, something that would have definitely gotten me a job.' I doubted I would have been happy. But then there are so many times around school that I wasn't happy, because I was, like, stressed. And just, like, academia for me, I found is a very oppressive space.... So, I was just like, 'man, what if I would have studied something practical like Engineering, or something' – got, like, a Master's in Engineering. I could be working for like, *Shell* in Dubai or something – something that makes sense. But at the same time, like, I'm really passionate about media. And I'm passionate about culture. And it informs, like, my daily life. So, it kind of makes sense. But at the same time, like, I know I would have had a job if I would have studied something else. For sure.

There is a longstanding tension regarding what university is for, and whether abstract learning or vocationalism should be the main goal (Roth, 2014). Denise considers the value of her education differently as a graduate to when she applied. Now that she is searching for jobs she questions the value of what she read and wrote about, now deemed to lack “a practical application, per se”. Denise sees her specific investment as at the opportunity cost of many other options; she hence evokes the hauntological notion of futures that did not happen (Davis, 2005; Fisher, 2014). Denise imagines counter-factual scenarios of what may have eventuated under different conditions, “what if I would have gone to grad school for, like, Computer Science or, like, something that would have definitely gotten me a job.” Denise even jumps in her imagination into a parallel universe in which a reasonable outcome that “makes sense” had she studied Engineering involves her working for “*Shell* in Dubai”.

Senses of contingency and fate may prompt reveries about routes (not) taken. Irving's (2017) ethnography investigates such 'what if' imaginings that humans may engage in retrospectively in response to the myriad contingencies that lead to different destinies. He presents an example of one participant's journey into prison:

Bill's experience of life inside the prison can only be properly understood in relation to the life he would have been living at the same time outside the prison, *had* his friend not been caught, *had* the DEA<sup>30</sup> not cut a deal, *had* Bill followed his momentary instincts and not fallen for the sting. This means that to understand people's lives and experiences, it is necessary to consider not only people's current situation but also the many other lives they could, and do, live through their inner dialogues, dreams, fantasies, and imagination. (p. 218, original emphasis)

---

<sup>30</sup> The Drug Enforcement Administration.

The radical contingency that Irving (2017) theorises could be read equally as ‘fatefulness’. The contingencies that lead to certain outcomes and not others may be relived in a person’s mind over time. As in Irving’s (2017) analysis, Denise imagines that she could be leading different lives, *had* she engaged with HE differently. When human lives unfold according to significant aspects of contingency – what can be termed ‘fateful moments’ (Giddens, 1991) – then counter-factual reveries may linger as a point of reference of what could have been (Irving, 2017). Current situations may thus be revised through comparisons with a hypothetical realm of futures that did not happen.

One response to this perceived multiplicity of other lives not lived was a rationalisation of the choices that individuals had made. In Chapter Four we met Martin, an Asian American MU graduate from Los Angeles who was working in finance back in his hometown. His story could represent elements of fateful aspects of aspiration, such as spending “75%” of his time working in a job which he felt to be “meaningless” (Chapter Four). Martin himself referenced the prospects of becoming ‘stuck’ and proceeded to caution: “some people get, like, stuck in it, right. It's like, ‘*my wife is at home taking care of the kids. Somebody's got to bring home money. So, it's going to be me.*’” Martin is fun loving and claims to value good times such as drinking with friends or “hanging out” with his girlfriend (now wife) as more important to him than work activities. In the passage below, Martin talks about social media exposing him to lives that appear much more “free” than his own. In response to initial reverie, Martin rationalises his situation and reminds himself of why he is working:

The thing is, like, *Instagram... Facebook* [are] just filled with people like ‘influencers’ now, right? That like, travel wherever they want to go. And like have all of the time in the world. Like, for regular people – like, for me – like, I can't just do that, right? Like, I have to pay rent, and I have to, like, do all of this stuff. So, I'm actually, like, pretty jealous of like those people. Given, we see like 5% of their lives. So, it's a little unfair. But just the thought of, like, being free and being like *that* free to do whatever you want, like, ‘*Oh, you know, if I want to go to Greece today, like, it's fine, like, my parents are fine, I can go to Greece, I don't have rent to pay. Like, whatever. It's all cool.*’ Seeing, like, that kind of stuff, like, I definitely get jealous of that. But at the same time, like, and you’ll hear me say this a lot. But it kind of just is what it is. Like, I have to pay rent. Like, I want to provide for my girlfriend and my future family. Stuff like that. So, I work. But eventually, like, I’ll have my Feng Shui, I’ll have my own peace of mind, with maybe not being able to travel everywhere. But the fact that, like, I can put my kids through – it’s kind of a bad example – but put my kid through school, which I'm most looking

forward to, like, going to his sporting events or, like, if he's not into sports, like, whatever extracurricular activities he has. Stuff like that. I'll find peace of mind with that.

Martin elaborated on competing streams of consciousness:

It's kind of funny, too, because it's like, I'll think about it. Like, I'll see these people in, like, Ibiza. Like partying. And it's like, '*I would fucking love to go to Ibiza!*' And I'm like, '*I would love to live there!*' And then, like, that goes on for, like, five seconds. Right. Like, '*ah, what would I do there?*' Like, '*I would drink so much! And like, go oblivious [sic]!*' And then you start thinking, like, '*yeah, but like, I kind of wanna have a family eventually.*' And like, my family's not gonna grow up in fucking Ibiza. That's just not gonna happen. So, like I said, I found my own peace, like, I get to bike at the beach. That's cool with me. I'll go to Ibiza on vacation. But I'm not, like, I see those people in, like, Greece, and I'm jealous for like a second because like, I'm sitting in a cubicle, like, working. Like, '*I would love to be in Greece right now.*' But eventually, like, I'm happy with where I'm at. I'm like, I'm good, like, biking at the beach. I go with my girlfriend, or with my family. So, I'm cool, once I have a second thought.

In Spanish, '*un compromiso*' is both '*a commitment*' and '*a compromise*'. Martin's expression of "*it is how it is*" echoes this entanglement – that to commit to his future family, then he has to bring home money. There is a noteworthy sense of assuredness in Martin's narrative that differs from some of the more anxious articulations from graduates in uncertain fields. Martin defends the strengths of having selected and stuck with a series of interconnected pathways. He has secured his partner (whom he has subsequently married), he is close to his family (out of his own volition), and he has a well-paid career trajectory that enables him to live by the beach and to imagine the future through economic security. As acknowledged in his daydreams, this situation is not free from provocations of what could be a better life. Martin admits to envy and reverie at the prospects of being "*that free to do whatever you want*" and he gives the example of travelling "*to Greece*". However, reverie is shown to be rebutted through a re-statement of rationales and an inter-temporal imagining (and aspiration) to "*provide for [his] girlfriend and [his] future family.*"

While Martin revised his aspirations though rebutted temptation through rationalisations, longitudinal insights from Paulo's story demonstrate a change of heart. One evening in June 2017, Giovanni came home and explained that Paulo wanted to "*re-do his interview*". Paulo had been apathetic in the group discussion. Having dreamed for years of staying in New York and "*becoming a New Yorker*", he was instead preparing to go back to Europe where he has a German passport. However, Paulo subsequently got a job working as a copywriter for a tax company. No

longer depressed at home, he was commuting to a tall glass and steel building looking over the Hudson River and Downtown Manhattan. He described it as an “intense atmosphere” with “helicopters flying around everywhere.” Paulo had wanted to update the version of himself that went on record to account for this more successful transition. That December 2017, I got back in touch with Paulo, having not spoken since August. He told me that he could not meet in person though would be happy to *Skype*. As he tuned in, the sun streamed in behind him and he explained that he had moved to Los Angeles. Paulo aspires to work in comedy writing (Chapter Four). He had given up the job in New York which included a high salary and the prospects of a ‘green card’ visa which had previously been his dream. While Paulo had grown to enjoy his work environment, it dawned on him that working for a tax company was not something he “could actually believe in”. The inspiration to revise his aspirations was news that Luke in Los Angeles had won an animation competition. Luke had been awarded with professional representation and a taste of success which made this more precarious artistic path seem more feasible and desirable. As set by Luke’s example, Paulo aspired to a higher standard of “pursuing [one’s] dreams fully”:

He's, like, really going for it, you know. And for me, really going for it is not sitting in a cubicle... Although I know this doesn't even mean that he's making it and he won't probably make money for a few years, he was kind of just pursuing his dreams fully, like, all in. And I thought to myself, *'I really wanna do that, too.'*

Paulo reveals a sensitivity to his aspirations, whereby one success story from a peer planted a vision in his mind. For all of their planning, human beings are also permeable to random influence that can take their thoughts, actions, and lives in radically different directions (Irving, 2017).

Paulo also explained how a different form of peer influence shaped his decision to ‘follow his dreams’. Paulo saw a projection of himself in the future in the form of his colleagues a few years older working at the tax company. This construction of his fate provoked Paulo to revise what he wanted and to reject the future that was laid out:

I saw that while I was, kind of, working there and I was hanging out with all the other, like, my two friends at the company, like, my best friends that were, like, the two other foreigners. And I was like, *'I could be like you, like, six years from now.'* Like, the way that your life went... Instead of security I just wanted, like, happiness, really.

There appears to be an epistemological component, as in Chapter Five, in which futures were rendered knowable empirically. Paulo saw a glimmer of success being possible in Luke's animation competition. Paulo also saw a template of his future self in the lives of his older peers. He decided that working for a tax company in a suit and office was not how he wanted his life to be "six years from now". Instead of "security" what he really wanted, albeit in abstract terms, was "happiness". This aspiration echoes findings from Chapter Four that aspiration was often about values (Baker, 2017) and identity (Arnett, 2015), over income, especially for those who could afford it. Catching up with Luke and Paulo together in Los Angeles in March 2018, Paulo planned to return to Europe. He has since settled in Berlin and has found a home in the English-speaking comedy scene.

Paulo's freedom to reject his well-paid graduate position and his subsequent moves to Los Angeles and Berlin represent an open future. This sense of flexibility as opposed to fixity is facilitated by a lack of student debt. Paulo's parents work in international trade and they paid for his studies. The fateful predicament which Paulo foresaw of being swept into a career trajectory despite lacking a sense of personal investment may be a more common graduate transition. High levels of student debt are a generational phenomenon applicable across contemporary American society (Zaloom, 2019). In Hsu's (2019) review of Zaloom's (2019) ethnography, he raises an example of a commencement speaker paying off the student debt of an entire graduating class. Hsu (2019) asks what the effects may be: how many more would be teachers or artists? Debt is such a powerful force that it may curtail or prevent entire dreams and livelihoods. This point has social class implications, whereby some graduates will be further beholden by the repercussions of their studies, while others with less or no debt loads may have greater capacity to revise their aspirations. Debt is thus a contingent variable of fateful aspects of aspiration, the presence or absence of which may have significant implications. In the final section of this chapter, I address how graduates forged means of believing in the future – including through credit – and ask what the consequences may be.

## Part III: False Hope?

This final section examines how aspirations were often (re-)negotiated and revised through hopeful attachments to the future. I look at how hope may be facilitated and sustained by geography and by the prospects of post-graduate study. There is a question surrounding the implications of optimism and hope. Such qualities may bestow a patience, confidence, and persistence that prove beneficial or necessary to graduates' aspirations. There is, nonetheless, a prospect of false hope: of rewards proving elusive. The notion of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011) is helpful in describing a dynamic in which aspirations and optimistic attachments have illusory or punishing consequences. Cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) helps to explain how post-graduate study might offer a pathway towards the future while also exacerbating fateful aspects of aspiration. Examples derive from Uma, Ricardo, Daniel, and Jill.

Uma is an MU graduate living in Los Angeles, aspiring to be a film director. We met in March 2018. Uma grew up in Vancouver to parents who fled the Bosnian war. She states the need for perseverance and fight in her career trajectory:

Life would be boring if you had everything you wanted from the get-go. You know what I mean? Even though I'm in the career I love, I have to fight every day to keep my career. I'm not sitting here like, *'uh, a lap of luxury'*, like, just chilling, you know. Like, I have to fight. But if I didn't have to fight, if I had everything I ever wanted, I'd be so fucking bored. I would just be like, drinking my days away and like, doing stupid things just to pass the time. Like, the struggle is, I think, what life is about. Being happy with that, or accepting that, or at least understanding it, I think is really helpful, you know. For you to just be like, *'okay,'* like, *'this is cool,'* you know, like, *'I didn't get those four music videos. Let's do another one. Maybe not tomorrow, maybe not 10 years from now. But there will be another one.'* You know.

Uma refers to an inner monologue of mentoring herself. She calls upon the need for patience, weathering failure not only multiple times but also for multiple years. Uma may be speaking from a comfortable position, in which her acceptance of "struggle" does not account for the depths of the struggles that many people go through. Nonetheless, she ascribes meaning to the process of having to perpetually prove herself. She states, "I have to fight", not complaining, but invoking a heroism.

Uma continued in her upbeat tone:

Yeah, but also, like, there's so many, like, successful people that didn't reach a level of success until they were much older. Till they were in their 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, you know.

This perspective imagines a long and healthy life course as a continuous arena through which to keep pursuing one's aspirations. As in Chapter Four, there may be something idealistic and abstract about the way in which the future is being imagined. Uma is quite cheerful about the prospects of having to wait decades for career success and does not appear to account for other changes or responsibilities. Uma and I spoke about different attitudes towards the future, to which she cautioned, "Don't be, like, overly optimistic and delusional, you know." The following dialogue ensued:

**JL:** LA is an interesting place for that, because it's a whole empire. Very aspirational people, but statistically, a lot of them will not be anywhere near as successful as they hoped.

**Uma:** Oh, 99.99 percent. Yeah. I mean, I just did a docu [documentary] series that's premiering on Saturday, in which I follow five aspiring actresses around Los Angeles. But it was really fascinating because, like, none of them are where they wish they could be. But every single one of them, I asked them, like, the exact same question. Like, *'what if I told you, at the end of your life, you didn't have anything you [had] wanted.'* ... Every single one of them was like, *'uhh, I'd still do it.'*

These remarks indicate a possible combination of resignation and hope. Uma suggests that most people aspiring to the entertainment industries in Los Angeles are setting their sights higher than is realistically achievable. Uma is aware of this unrequited dynamic of aspiration and has just made a documentary film on the theme. The aspiring actresses claimed that they would still pursue their dreams, even if they knew that they would not come true. This is a significant insight into what aspirations mean to people (Baker, 2017). The meaning of activities is often in their pursuit, and not simply their attainment (de Botton, 2005). It is important to recognise such forms of meaning and to acknowledge the forms of agency that may struggle heroically against seemingly futile odds (Biehl and Locke, 2017, p. 21). Hope, however slim, may be a valid method through which people may forge a sense of belonging to the future. For instance, Sear's (2018) research among serial entrants of promotional competitions in Australia indicates a power that is derived from the sense of not knowing what good fortune could lie around the corner.

There may, nonetheless, be reason to explore how hopeful attachments may form of illusion. In the US, Ehrenreich (2009) warns that a culture of positivity goads people into a wishful thinking that works against their own interests. She refers, for instance, to a trend of withdrawing excessive mortgages on the unfounded hope of one day getting rich. The symbolic geography of cities is a potential source of aspirational sustenance. In Finn's (2015) research, discussed in Chapter Two, the aspirations of one graduate were shown to be contingent on living in London where perseverance in precarious careers was normalised. Ricardo (from Manhattan and living as a graduate in Los Angeles) also suggested that the longevity of aspirations may be contingent on geography. He compared the cities:

The example that I always like to use is: New York is like being in a savage jungle and LA is like being in a zoo. LA is very routine in a way. You're very sheltered in a way. There's a reason why people are here, you know. In New York they try to be an actor for two years. And here they try to be an actor for twenty-two years. It's because here, all they have is the dead space in their car and you know, the self-help tape that they're listening to. In New York they have a bunch of, like, fuckin' cynical assholes probably like me that are gonna tell them the truth. LA is about being like *"oh yeah, really good job. Awesome."*

Ricardo's portrayals of New York and Los Angeles parallel the dichotomy of parenting that he depicted in Chapter Six. Los Angeles is deemed to provide 'shelter' while New York is characterised by criticism. Positive affirmation such as "self-help tapes" and notions of everything being "awesome" are said to protect aspiring actors in Los Angeles from changing their mind about their dreams. Such persistence (caricatured as trying "to be an actor for twenty-two years") may constitute a form of false hope that exacerbates fateful aspects of aspiration. Los Angeles is characterised by year-round sunshine and a lack of seasons. One might interpret a (false) sense of eternity in a land with no apparent passing of time. Without visible cycles of birth or death, as metred in changing seasons, there may be an illusion that life and aspirations can go on forever<sup>31</sup>.

A further example from Daniel in Los Angeles indicates how realities such as ageing may be subject to distortion. In March 2018, Daniel was describing the history of Los Angeles and depicted a "make-believe" fantasy on which the city is founded:

---

<sup>31</sup> Graeber (2012) refers to the masking of human refuse and corpses as simulating a denial of life's cyclical nature, including death, as though objects and humans are floating and infinite.



I kind of feel somewhat that LA is a product of what it is now, which is – it's a town of make-believe. So, for some reason in my mind, all of its money is still somewhat make-believe. It's settled on make-believe. Versus New York which is a city that was started on making a buck. And it continues to be that. Cos it was traded from the Native Americans. And then the Dutch traded it to the British. And the British traded it back and forth. And then we won it. But even then, it's just a city of trade. Whereas here [in LA] it's sort of like, 'oh yeah, we have money'. Or, 'yeah, we have youth'. It's just all make-believe. We tell ourselves here what we wanna believe. Even though it's quite obvious it's not true.

As the home of Hollywood cinema, the realms of fiction and pretence appear to be normalised tools in the portrayal of human lives. The construction of “money” or “youth” are open to invention. Daniel suggests that “we tell ourselves here what we wanna believe. Even though it's quite obvious it's not true”. The notion of belief is interesting to note. The Latin *credere* (to believe) forms the root of the word credit. The financial credit withdrawn for HE may grant a certain belief in one's future (Zaloom 2019), as explored in the final example.

Jill studied Social Work at MU and aspired to help people and transform society through her work. She graduated in 2014 and moved back to Los Angeles where she is from. I interviewed her there in August 2017 in an outdoor café, and then again, in March 2018 in the apartment which she was renting with her female partner (now wife). Unlike the majority of participants, Jill's parents were not involved in her navigation of HE. She never spoke of a father figure and explained that her mother:

... wasn't really a part of my application process to colleges. So, she didn't know where I applied or for what. She just wasn't active in that.... She knew that, like, I wasn't going into Business, so like, how could I get into a school like MU?

In Jill's solitary pursuit of HE, she had not anticipated the low pay that she is eligible to earn as a social worker. Jill was engaged in a master's degree in Los Angeles that she deemed a necessary step forward in her career. However, she claimed that she would have used HE differently and “chosen a different field” if she had her time again:

I mean if I could do it all over again and be like 17 or 18, just starting college, I would have chosen a different field and just done a shit ton of volunteer work in my life and not like, done it as a career. Because it's just so hard to live on the salary that you get as a social worker. And that's not something you really think about when you're 17 and 18 going into a field. Now that I've done my undergrad and committed to my grad, I've accepted that this is what I'm gonna do. But I'm gonna have to, like, cave a little bit and do private practice or, you know, do something that I don't really wanna do that brings in a little extra money. Yeah.

Jill describes “going into a field” as definitive and unidirectional, echoing the notion of being ‘pigeonholed’. She now presents herself as at peace with the decision because she has “done” her undergraduate training and “committed” to her post-graduate degree. Committing further to education may serve to exacerbate the sense of fatefulness to commit to specific aspirations. There is a fatefulness to the notion: “I've accepted that this is what I'm gonna do” and to the resignation to seek surplus income trying to “do something that I don't really wanna do”.

Jill’s commitment to come good on her decision to specialise in social work appeared to be tethered to expectations that derive from the amount of debt that she had withdrawn:

**Jill:** I was debt-free for 5 minutes. That was a nice five minutes.

**JL:** Now you've had to take out some loans?

**Jill:** So many loans.

**JL:** But there's very little funded opportunities at graduate level.

**Jill:** There's like none. Like, I got a scholarship. I can't remember what the total was but when you divided it up by the three semesters it was \$833 a semester. It's almost, like, don't give me any money cos that's just embarrassing. That's like a joke. 800 bucks when the program costs \$60,000 a year.

The significant costs of HE in the USA may have a particular effect on the nature of aspirations after university. Money may become abstract when \$833 granted as a scholarship is perceived as an insultingly small quantity. The figure is dwarfed in comparison to the \$60,000 per year for Jill to embark on a second degree. Nonetheless, Jill reflected on the low likelihood of a graduate premium:

That's really the sad part. When I was in New York [as an undergraduate] I was a nanny and I made \$25 an hour under the table, no taxes. And there's a 0% chance that I'm gonna make that much straight out of a master's. So, it's just like, what's the point? Cos I could have made more with no degree.

Jill questions what was “the point” of her degrees in response to a seemingly absurd logic of being eligible to earn less after two degrees that she was able to earn with none. The notion of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) appears applicable, as Jill’s aspiration to help others through her work has been converted via HE into binding financial contract. Berlant (2011) suggests that dynamics of cruel optimism can be life-giving as well as life-impeding. The role of HE in Jill’s career aspirations appears to be an ‘enabling object that is also disabling’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 25).

HE, through its marketing, evokes the reverie of brighter futures, bigger salaries, and a maximization of potential (Black and Walsh, 2019). Such rewards appeared elusive to Jill as she was coming towards the end of her master's degree. She faced a double burden of a salary that appears doomed to be low coupled with debt to pay off. Jill thus aspired towards HE once again, believing that a PhD would enhance her salary at last:

**Jill:** It just sucks because no funding goes into non-profits, so they don't have the means or the money to hire you. And if they do, it's not for what you're worth. Like, I didn't go to school for eight years to get paid \$10 an hour. Like, it doesn't, I can't fathom that. And so, it's difficult in that aspect because it's like, you kind of seem like an asshole. Because it's, like, you are getting all of these job offers for \$10 an hour but then it's, like, *'then why did I go to school for eight years?'*. And then on the other hand, the jobs that pay what you probably should be making, don't hire you. Cos, they want that next level, they want that PhD... Even just to get a \$10 an hour job, you need a master's. I'm definitely at some point going to have to get a PhD if I really want to do policy work, which is fine. But I'm not doing it next year. Like, I need a little break. But the thing is, is like, it's almost as if they want you to settle. They know that you've just put so many years into school. And then they're like, *'OK, I'll dangle it in front of you if you get a PhD.'* But you're so exhausted that you're like, *'fine I'll take the \$10 an hour because I need a job.'* And that's sort of frustrating.

...

**JL:** Going into a doctorate, is the idea of a higher salary one of the main motivations?

**Jill:** It's the only motivation.

Jill expresses a sense of frustration as to why she has had to study for so long for what she perceives to be a limited salary: "I didn't go to school for eight years to get paid \$10 an hour." Jill's altruistic aspirations to become a social worker have, paradoxically, engendered a mercenary mentality. She now views HE through an instrumentalist lens, whereby the "only motivation" for doctoral study is the hope of a higher salary.

Jill has subsequently enrolled on a PhD programme. She has thus supplemented her aspirations once again through another degree. However, hopes of graduate premiums are increasingly elusive (Black and Walsh, 2019; Lauder and Mayhew, 2020). The cruelty of Jill's situation may lie in the suppressed wages available in her field of social work. HE nonetheless has developed into an industry that provides course provision (that keeps academics in a job) which proliferates off of this competition (Collins, 2019). With the mass adoption of HE, sometimes called 'massification', qualifications have inflated in value (Collins, 2019). This process has contributed

to a 'credential society' in which livelihoods are contingent on qualifications and in which there are pressures to keep training and re-training across the life course (Collins, 2019). Post-graduate degrees may indeed be transformative and beneficial and there is an open question on how Jill's future will pan out. However, it might be inferred that further debts (in their occurrence), raised expectations, and increased specialisation from subsequent degrees may also increase fateful aspects of aspiration.

## Conclusion

This chapter has responded to the third and fourth parts of the research question: 'How are such aspirations negotiated and revised over time?'. I have sought to provide an insight into the lived experience of aspirations and have devised the notion of 'fateful aspects of aspiration' to represent pervasive senses of constraint. Such analysis has been suggested in previous chapters and has been crystallised here, with a focus on how aspects of HE participation appeared to determine graduates' futures. I have shown how fateful aspects of aspiration can manifest through degree specialisation, student debt, and fatefully high expectations to aspire professionally at once (Part I). I have considered different means in which graduates responded to constructions of their future (and possible fate) in relation to others, often revising their aspirations in the process (Part II). In this sense, I have considered how forms of agency were exercised within contexts of constraint. Consideration was nonetheless given to what extent agency and optimism expressed by graduates may prove to be cruel (Berlant, 2011) and may compound the fatefulness of their aspirations (Part III).

Part I depicted how graduates could feel pigeonholed to careers relating to their degree, and beholden to debts and high expectations. Evelyn's decision to embark on HE as she did was a 'fateful moment' (Giddens, 1991) with radical consequences for her future life (cf. Irving, 2017). Debt now serves to structure her aspirations and possibility (cf. Zaloom, 2019) as though an independent force beyond her control (cf. Durkheim, 1982). Evelyn considered alternative routes, though is too daunted at the prospects of nulling her progression and starting again "from

the ground floor". Grace feels constrained to the field of finance which her studies have streamlined her towards. She does not feel suited to the profession yet negotiates a pressure to maximize her credentials. Grace also critiqued the dominance of professional identities and work in how she is able to conceive of an adulthood, at the expense of other human qualities like "fun", "caring", and "cooking". She noted the fateful adherence of her peers to exhausting careers. Fateful aspects of aspiration may thus manifest as graduates are denied the time or scope to explore in their search for work and identity.

Part II examined how MU graduates engaged with their prospective futures and revised their aspirations in different ways. Participants perceived the specificity and often fixity of their situations in relation to a range of ideas and images broadcast through social media. A theme of fatefulness persists, as graduates appeared beholden to specific lines of work and to the online expectations of others. Social media was also shown to disrupt contentment, prompting reverie, envy, and senses of regret. Evelyn described a culture of performing professional success online and how the success of peers' places scrutiny upon her. Denise demonstrated how online social comparison makes her revise the merits of her own situation. She has reveries about 'what could have been' if only she studied something "practical" like Engineering. Martin recounted his daydreams about "freedom" away from the constraint of his "cubicle". However, he rebutted such thoughts by imagining the family provision that he hopes to play in the future, hence eschewing temptation through rationalisations. Paulo changed route, leaving a tax company to follow his dreams of comedy writing. The stimulus was both inspiration from Luke's success and a reaction against seeing himself on track for a future that he did not want. This story indicated a sense of manoeuvrability that appears contingent on a lack of student debt.

Part III raised the question of how aspirations may be sustained by persistence, by symbolic geography, and by the prospects of post-graduate study. MU graduates exercised forms of optimism and hope. However, I considered whether false hope or cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) may be applicable. Uma expressed a belief in the future and the need to keep persisting. She nonetheless conceded that the prevalence of such ambitions is disproportionate to the likelihood of their attainment. Ricardo and Daniel described a wishful make-believe in Los Angeles in which people mediate and modify the information which they expose themselves to. These suggestions

echo that notion that epistemology (Chapter Five) and geography (Finn, 2015) may be channels that sustain aspirations. In the final example, Jill kept persisting through HE, onto her third degree. She hoped each time that the future would improve as a result. Such hopeful attachments may prove rewarding as well as increasingly fateful by engendering further specialisation, expectation, and debt. I thus considered how HE in general, and post-graduate degrees in particular, may be indicative of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011). I now consider the ways in which the different chapters from this thesis come together, and what conclusions can be drawn from this research.

# Chapter Eight: Conclusion

## Introduction

This thesis has explored the question: ‘What do university graduates aspire to do with their lives, and how are such aspirations produced, negotiated, and revised over time?’. I conducted an ethnographic study over eighteen months between January 2017 and December 2018 on the aspirations of students and graduates from a university in New York City which I have called Manhattan University (MU). MU is a highly selective university with a global status and international student body. Fees cost over \$40,000 per year after financial aid. MU graduates articulated illustrious aspirations that included moving to Los Angeles and trying to succeed in the Hollywood industries. I thus conducted two research trips to Los Angeles to explore the aspirations of MU graduates who had moved there. Participants in the study expressed high ambitions through their engagement with Higher Education (HE) and geographic mobility. However, this thesis has shown that aspirations came at a cost. A central concept that drives the thesis is the notion of ‘fateful aspects of aspiration’ which I have theorised to represent deterministic forces acting upon graduates’ futures. Pressures from expectation, from parental involvement, from debt, and from degree specialisation were shown to constrain perceptions of future possibilities. This predicament is oppositional to the open futures often imagined of HE attendance (cf. Zaloom, 2019). Building on my previously published article entitled ‘*Fateful Aspects of Aspiration among Graduates in New York and Los Angeles*’ (Loewenthal, Alexander, and Butt, 2019), this thesis has examined further data and developed arguments that go beyond the article, and that are further reaching than this notion. The thesis is the product of insights from across the ethnography though is focused on interview extracts from 16 participants out of 30 who were interviewed.

There are four sections to this concluding chapter. In Part I, I synthesise the empirical contributions of the study by answering each of the four aspects of the research question. I summarise and elaborate on key insights that were presented across empirical chapters Four, Five, Six, and Seven. I also situate these findings in relation to other empirical studies on university graduates. In Part II, I develop four theoretical contributions to derive from the research: conceptualising the aspirations of individuals; studying the educational processes that shape aspirations; fateful aspects of aspiration; and the theme of ambivalent prosperity. In Part III, I consider critical reflections on the research. I discuss the strengths of an ‘abductive’ approach, the possible ambiguity of participant observation, and the value of studying aspiration through recorded longitudinal interviews. I then address limitations of the study, reflexivity, and the prospects and challenges of cross-cultural comparison. Part IV addresses future directions that include: possible longitudinal research with the same participants; studying equivalent themes among different age groups across the life course; applied research into the themes of ‘imaginative mobility’ (Urry, 2007) and of loneliness (Loewenthal, 2017d); and how I hope to address these issues by training to become a humanistic counsellor or psychotherapist.

## Part I: Empirical Findings

This research makes empirical contributions to the study of graduate aspirations, transitions, and trajectories. Finn (2015) identified a lack of research on young people leaving university in comparison to the substantial body of research which focuses on transitions out of school. I have contributed to a growing response to this gap in the literature and have located this ethnographic study in the USA in relation to key recent qualitative studies of graduates’ aspirations in the US (Zaloom, 2019), Britain (Finn, 2015; Burke, 2017), and China (Bregnbæk, 2016). I have also integrated other literatures with the study of aspiration, particularly regarding aspirations to, and experiences of, work (Terkel, 1985; de Botton, 2010; Arnett, 2015). Across Chapters Four, Five, Six, and Seven I addressed the research question according to four parts: ‘What do university



graduates aspire to do with their lives (Chapters Four and Five), and how are such aspirations produced (Chapters Five and Six), negotiated (Chapters Six and Seven), and revised (Chapter Seven) over time?'. Through this question, I have aimed to describe and analyse the subjects and rationales of graduates' aspirations (what they aspired to do with their lives, and why). I have also aimed to interpret the determinants and consequences of their aspirations (how they were produced, negotiated, and revised over time). Below I synthesise findings in response to each of the aspects of the research question. I have named the sections in a way that represents the nature of the findings: aspiration; education; fateful aspects of aspiration; and revision. There is a directionality and a dialectic to this structure which echoes the research aims, identifying: what graduates aspired to do with their lives; the determinants of their aspirations; the consequences of their aspirations; and subsequent revision. I then discuss implications of the empirical findings and their generalisability.

## Aspiration

Aspiration was not an obscure theme for MU students and graduates to consider. Questions about the future were central to their studies, activities, relationships, and thoughts. What participants said in interviews and the ambitious nature of their behaviours prioritised the construction of a future career. It was common to engage in multiple internships alongside their studies. This prioritisation of work among young adults stands out culturally. Participants were not absent minded in their anxious pursuits of success. They considered the perceived merits of slower-paced walks of life though felt compelled towards what I have termed 'superlative aspirations'. Graduates aspired to the most luminous of goals, including the chosen geographies of New York City or Los Angeles as though they were the only places to live. The three most common graduate trajectories – as evidenced in this small sample (n=30), though also supported by MU statistics – were entertainment, finance, and post-graduate study. Such aspirations may indicate a sense of not wanting to come down to earth. There is something sublime in the prospects of euphoria and fame in the arts and entertainment, or spectacular money and success, or else the sense of potentiality of a further degree that may eschew the constraints of immediate

work. Graduates expressed a sense of entitlement towards well-paid careers which were often rejected in favour of doing something that they 'want' to do. I distinguished between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations towards a career. The modal aspirations in the study were intrinsic in nature: wanting to be involved in one's work, to enjoy it for its own sake, and to use work as a vehicle for personal expression. It is noteworthy that these aspirations were articulated ideals and hence retained an abstract quality. As a consequence of inhabiting hopes for workplace fulfilment, graduate experiences in employment often evoked themes of estrangement and alienation (Marx, 1988; Graeber, 2018) in which graduates could not authentically integrate work with their personality or even humanity. Findings echo other research on a pervasive, yet strained, search for meaning and purpose in work (Terkel, 1985; de Botton, 2010; Arnett, 2015). However, a view of alienation through work was complicated through a contrasting perspective on the perceived power of money to purchase a life that one wants. One participant expressed a sense of contented compromise. His characterless though well-salaried work enables weekends of fun and romance, and the capacity to imagine raising a family. Across the findings, therefore, graduates reckoned with their aspirations through a perceived tension between finding fulfilment and happiness through one's work and the security of a career that brings in money. There may be something profound and further reaching to this finding: that graduates struggled to imagine a line of work that was rewarding in both a spiritual and a pecuniary sense. There is a question to what extent this mutual exclusivity is a general reality – aspiring musicians, actors, artists, potters, maybe even teachers can feel this tension of doing something that they love but getting little financial reward for it. Simultaneously, as explored in the second part of the research question, a narrow view of future options may be a product of participants' limited perceptions.

## Education

The second part of the research question regarding how aspirations are produced is educational. Echoing the findings above, there was a sense of limitation to the range of careers which MU graduates could imagine. These findings support evidence of a widespread lack of understanding among students at school (Archer, 2010) and university (Gershon, 2015) about what careers exist.

It is noteworthy that this 'limitation' cannot be reduced to inequality, as initially suggested by Archer (2010), as even highly privileged students and graduates from MU were confronted with opacity with regards to future options. As well as the potentially 'boundless' nature of imagination, the imaginations of participants were also restricted. This point echoes social theory on how malleable constructions of normality may nonetheless morph into narrow configurations (Bourdieu, 1977). I introduced the theme of epistemology to explain how empirical exposure rendered a specific range of futures knowable and others not knowable. The location of MU in New York City made an extravagant background to student life. Cultures of professional adult work and of expensive rent and leisure defined the high velocities and superlative aspirations that were deemed normal and necessary. I thus engaged with the role of geography in the production and sustenance of aspirations. Echoing arguments from Finn (2015), a city may have symbolic sway on graduates' attitudes towards their futures by offering a sense of real and imagined possibility. The cities of New York and Los Angeles were protagonists in this investigation. Participants often referred to their lives in relation to their location and they indicated an associated sense of existential mobility – of going somewhere with their lives by virtue of their geographical foundations (Hage, 2005). The means through which geographies influenced aspirations expanded through the virtual realm of media forms. Students had learned of the cities which they had moved to through popular culture and social media. There was a culture of constantly updating online profiles in a search for social validation and professional development. This process placed individuals into networks of comparison which they felt they could not escape (cf. Eichhorn, 2019). Through performative posting of their ongoing transitions, graduates both actively and passively instructed each other as to what options exist (such as moving to New York and Los Angeles) and what was socially and culturally approved as an apparently good life.

There were indications of how social class background may affect whether and how financial aspects were factored into graduates' aspirations. There was a correlation between dispositions towards the uncertain fields of the arts and entertainment (as well as moving to Los Angeles) and receiving financial support from parents. A sense of (false) security might have insulated such students from thinking about HE and work in vocational or financial terms. Equally, one

participant pointed to a degree of humility from his upbringing as the motivation for his ambitions towards affluence. I explored the possibility of 'entitlement' being a discursive trope that explains the high expectations of MU graduates. Students embodied a sense of superiority by virtue of being accepted to study at a selective and prestigious institution. Graduates imagined themselves to have earned bright futures through this institutional recognition compounded by the costs of study which evoked expectations for a return on investment. Furthermore, graduates worked hard academically, echoing other research on the assiduous nature of contemporary elite students (Khan, 2011; Markovitz, 2019). I thus interpreted a sense of entitlement to be articulated and rationalised by students and graduates through a meritocratic sense of deservedness (cf. Souleles, 2019).

Aspirations were produced, at a fundamental level, by parental involvement over the years. Participants perceived their parents as trying to influence their aspirations through socialisation from childhood. Rather than parents fading away, their scrutiny and involvement were apparent during university and even became more prevalent after graduation. I identified a theme that I have called 'vicarious career anxiety' of parents inhabiting worries about their children's futures and encouraging them to engage with education and work in certain ways. I distinguished between two broad themes in parenting styles. On the one hand, there were parental attempts to suppress artistic interests and to produce in their offspring aspirations towards prestigious careers and towards 'practical' degrees that led to more guarantees of financial security. In the process, parents promoted hierarchies of occupations (Roder, 2017) which echoed back into hierarchies of subjects to study (Roberts and Aronica, 2009). There are possible correlations with cultural background (Chua, 2011). The children of non-American parents often dealt with a more severe exertion of parental involvement, as parents ascribed meaning to the opportunity of upwards mobility in the United States. An alternative pattern in parenting involved the other extreme of nurturing a child's artistic dreams. Such involvement was perhaps vicarious also – trying to live through the child. Parents were often social and financial facilitators of artistic aspirations, including financing extravagant moves such as to Los Angeles. As a result, university and afterwards appeared to be a rich ground for the reinforcement and contestation of kinship ties and hierarchies. Parental contributions of money and guidance came with reciprocal

expectations of compliance and of living up to raised hopes (cf. Zaloom, 2019). These findings all emphasise the relational (Finn, 2015) and inter-subjective (Bregnbæk, 2016) nature of graduates' aspirations. As explored below, influence was not simply passed down but was negotiated.

## Fateful Aspects of Aspiration

I developed the notion of 'fateful aspects of aspiration' in response to the third part of the research question, regarding how graduates negotiated their aspirations. I explored how expectation, parental involvement, and the costs and specialisation of HE may have had a deterministic impact on graduates' futures. The grip of parental influence can be interpreted as an aspect of the 'fatefulness of culture' (Varenne and Koyama, 2011) whereby a young person inherits norms and conditions that constrain them. Similar to Bregnbæk's (2016) finding and argument among elite students in China, MU graduates sometimes struggled to attain a sense of authorship over their lives. There was evidence of possible cognitive dissonance whereby internalised parental authority and habituated norms from upbringing were so strong that participants defended such perspectives, even as they critiqued them. Graduates felt bound to a search for parental approval and fatefulness could be inferred through reciprocity and through compliance (cf. Bregnbæk, 2016, pp. 44-47). Mere words from parents had powerful effects on attitudes and courses of action. Zaloom's (2019) notion of enmeshed autonomy was applicable, whereby parents and their adult children became even more entangled as a result of the debts and expectations to succeed HE. This kind of infantilization runs contrary to the broader discursive framing of the university experience as a process of becoming more autonomous (Zaloom, 2019).

I employed the terms 'pigeonholed' and 'beholden' to represent fateful aspects of aspiration connected to HE participation. Some graduates felt pigeonholed to occupational trajectories associated with their studies. Graduates perceived their degrees to streamline them to particular kinds of employment and to preclude them from others. Other research on graduate transitions has indicated a similar sense of being pigeonholed by specialisation (Finn, 2015). Educational

choices may prove a decisive, 'fateful moment' (Giddens, 1991) that determines the direction of a person's life. For the apparent calm of having settled on a choice, an existential angst may arise from being constrained to it. Graduates who felt affixed to a trajectory were largely resigned to a sense that they had gone too far in a certain direction and had missed out on the opportunity to specialise elsewhere.

Some graduates were also beholden to debts and expectations which compelled certain forms of future-oriented aspiration. Institutional status as a student at MU conferred a successful identity and a sense of directionality to students' lives. By leaving university, graduates felt the burden of aspiration fall upon them. A sense of 'existential mobility' (Hage, 2005) in moving to Los Angeles was often experienced in tension with a pressure that anchored and affixed graduates there in order to come good on their decision. Those students who acquired large debts felt compelled to 'go out there' and to succeed immediately in a known field and/or to pay off loans. The financial investment was thus shown to inject the present and future with a fateful sense of foreboding. Expectation and debt served to discipline graduates towards certain kinds of careers that excluded them from more ordinary avenues which might otherwise have been a source of fulfilment. An imperative to be career ambitious at once prevented the prospects of more exploratory transitions to adulthood or the scope to develop as human beings outside of institutions (cf. Deresiewicz, 2014). The culture of online sharing further fated graduates' aspirations by placing their every move under scrutiny. Students and graduates felt subjected to the expectations and approval of others (cf. de Botton, 2005). One might extrapolate that there is something inherently fateful and constraining to groups; individuals may be harnessed into forms of conformity by operating through a common language and shared symbols in attempts to synchronise with each other (cf. Durkheim, 1982).

## Revising Aspirations

On the one hand, graduates often felt themselves to be stuck. Yet on the other hand, they were susceptible to diverse influences – particularly from peers and social media. Graduates were

shown to grapple with constructions of their own implied futures – including senses of fate – in relation to the multiple other lives they could have been living. Senses of constraint from jobs that required being stationed in a ‘cubicle’ provoked fantasies and forms of reverie about alternative lives. Meanwhile, the precarious nature of artistic fields reduced occupational identities to ‘aspirations’ that lacked stability and required continual work and revision. Graduates thus negotiated their aspirations with themselves and with others. In revising aspirations, graduates were educating themselves by talking through different perspectives. Education was hence not just a passive process of ‘enculturation’, but an active and ongoing deliberation (Ingold, 2018; Varenne, 2019a).

I considered how aspirations were revised in a range of emotive and embodied ways. There were counter-factual reveries about what ‘could have been’ in a parallel universe of having engaged with HE differently. These findings echo the notion that the contingency of life may prompt streams of consciousness that re-live steps made, including regrets about routes (not) taken (Irving, 2017). Alternatively, one participant eschewed the anxiety of missing out on freedom by re-stating his rationales. He was able to rebut daydreams of escape after a ‘second thought’ that rationalised his hard work through an imagination of what it will provide in the future. (Notwithstanding, most graduates did not seem capable of such ‘deferred gratification’ – they wanted it all and wanted it now, even if they were not sure of *what* they wanted). Another participant changed path, rejecting what he saw as a soulless route working for a tax company. He had been simultaneously inspired by the success story of a friend who was ‘following his dreams’ and scared by seeing a mirage of his future self in the form of his older colleagues. The decision to reject security in favour of what he wanted to do (work in comedy writing) echoes a tension between money and meaning that occurred throughout the research. In this instance, and elsewhere, the rejection of a seemingly ‘fateful’ pathway towards the future was facilitated by a lack of student debt. Hence, debt was a key variable determining the flexibility or fatefulness of aspirations. Across the research, the prospects of post-graduate study were an alluring avenue through which graduates considered enhancing or revising their aspirations. A further degree offered the space to escape a world of work and to reinvest in the mystery of a bright future yet to materialise. I raise a question about the extent to which HE and post-graduate degrees may

foster a sense of false hope and 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011). While offering promise, further degrees may exacerbate fateful consequences through expectations, further specialisation, and debt.

## Empirical Contributions

It is intended that this ethnography presents social and cultural aspects of aspiration and HE in the contemporary USA. While I have presented a limited view of a highly expensive HE institution in a world city, there are elements conveyed of HE in the US that are generalisable in terms of its culture, structure, demographics, and cost. O'Reilly (2009) makes the case for ethnographers to 'make confident and overt, but *modest* generalisations' (p. 83, original emphasis). Many of the empirical findings above were specific to the contexts studied and specific to individuals. Due to the limitations of my sampling, a degree of humility accompanies the research conclusions. However, I argue that research themes derived from this thesis do have broader resonance. Discussing the research findings at conferences and with other students and graduates who did not go to MU, both in the USA and beyond, people repeatedly mentioned aspects of the research which resonated. People had their own stories to tell or a sense of familiarity with what they had seen or experienced regarding intrinsic motivation, living on credit, parental involvement, a sense of 'life or death' pressure, and feeling constrained to the implications of educational and work choices. Considering the global influence of the USA and the status of American HE, there may be elements of what was found that have broader applicability to future populations elsewhere. There has been value in studying a centre of power from where trends emanate (Nader, 1972). The USA and its leading cities are a chief engine of globalisation (Ritzer and Stillman, 2003). As the world becomes more urban, more populous, more globalised, and more competitive, contemporary New York and Los Angeles may reveal aspects of plausible futures elsewhere.



## Part II: Theoretical Contributions

Below I present four theoretical contributions to derive from the research concerning: the conceptualisation of the aspirations of individuals; the ongoing education involved in aspirations; fateful aspects of aspiration; and the notion of ambivalent prosperity.

### Conceptualising the Aspirations of Individuals

This research has contributed to the study of aspiration as a complex, qualitative, subjective, and inter-subjective phenomenon (Hart, 2016; Bregnbæk, 2016). Findings from this study respond to a recent call from Baker (2017) to examine what aspirations mean to young people. I have also shown the significance of relational aspects of graduate aspirations (Finn, 2015), particularly the entanglement of young people and their parents (Bregnbæk, 2016; Zaloom, 2019). These themes of *meaning* and *relationality* are central to social anthropology (Durham, 2017). I hope to have employed the theoretical nuance and methodological intimacy of anthropology to the study of education. I also hope to have demonstrated the relevance of educational themes to broader social and anthropological enquiry. Furthermore, I argue that researchers in education, anthropology, sociology and beyond may benefit from further attention to the themes of aspiration, existentiality, and the life course. A focus on social structure and unequal opportunity appears to dominate studies of aspiration and HE. Studies of aspiration may accordingly deal in broad brush sociological terms of social mobility or reproduction. In Chapter Two, I argued that such views of aspiration may fail to grasp some of the more meaningful elements of aspiration in terms of people's hopes and desires for their life. I cautioned against treating 'aspiration' as an idiom for ambition, measured through a rising scale of attainment in education and work (see Hart, 2016). Rather than dealing sociologically with different groups and their differences, I have instead emphasised the value of a more local, 'face to face' (Irving, 2017) and person-centred (Strauss, 2006; Bregnbæk, 2018) form of social anthropology that engages the aspirations and

situations of individuals. Bregnbæk (2016) pioneered the use of existential anthropology in the study of HE transitions and aspirations. I have made a modest attempt at developing this line of analysis. Existential themes elicited include attempts to forge a life of one's own in correspondence with others (Bregnbæk, 2016; 2018), reckoning with the fatefulness of past occurrences and actions (Irving, 2017), and seeking meaning in life in recognition of its ending (Becker, 1997; Irving, 2017).

I developed a person-centred conceptual framework for studying the aspirations of individuals over time. I integrated a series of literatures on the life course to illustrate how human lives are given structure and meaning by different aspects of their relationships, their environment, their past, and their perceived future (Finn, 2015; Irving, 2017). I showed the value of a more nuanced analysis that does not define and compare humans according to bounded (nor even intersectional) social categories. Dealing conceptually in categories of identity risks essentialising populations and exaggerating distinctions between them which may be assumed and not empirical (Rapport, 2012). As Strauss (2006) argues, it is important to study 'real' and not 'imagined' people, and to recognise both social and psychological complexity and their overlap. Salemink, Bregnbæk, and Hirslund (2018) contrast the 'identity thinking dominating youth studies in the Global North' by examining 'youth in the Global South not as a uniform category but as subjectivities in the making' (p. 126). In this thesis I have attempted to present the complexity of human beings at an individual level. In doing so, patterns of similarity and difference have cut across conventional distinctions such as ethnicity and gender. These themes include: 'intrinsic motivation' (Chapter Four), 'superlative aspirations' (Chapter Five), 'vicarious career anxiety' (Chapter Six), and 'fateful aspects of aspiration' (Chapter Seven).

These research outcomes have implications for the conceptualisation and vocabulary through which to discuss the contemporary politics of identity in the USA and beyond. Issues surrounding race in particular were a prominent discourse throughout time spent in New York in 2014-15 and 2017-18. The Black Lives Matter movement has developed in 2020 following yet further cases of unarmed black Americans being murdered at the hands of the US police. There are now important discussions at universities and in public about history, race, and inequality. Teachers and researchers have a responsibility to guide students to reasonable and thoughtful discussion

of various issues at hand. I have written a blog post for *Teaching Anthropology* on the symbolism and sensitivity of talking in racial categories and hence possible difficulties talking about race (Loewenthal, 2018b). In light of this research, I would argue that there is worth to applying a person-centred framework to public discourse in order to caution against ethnic reductionism (Bauman, 1996) or *a priori* assumptions about individuals or groups. While recognising clear structural differences between populations, there may also be drastic and subtle differences between persons who ethnically and culturally share a lot in common (Rapport, 1993). In a blog post for *The Sociological Review* I argued how a myriad of influences may configure uniquely for individuals – as though each person can be conceptualised as a Venn Diagram of layered filters (Loewenthal, 2017b). This educational theme of how people’s lives are shaped has been developed in the thesis also.

## The Ongoing Education Involved in Aspirations

Through a diachronic analysis I have shown multiple forms of intersecting and overlapping education that have shaped the aspirations of individuals. Notions such as ‘informal learning’ pose difficulties for study. How does one know what learning is occurring and when? The person-centred conceptual framework and interview methodology have enabled a response. Graduates revealed educational processes in the ways that they spoke about their situations. Through speech I was able to access topics that spread far in time and space beyond the present moment. There was something dispersed and ubiquitous about the educational processes inferred. Ethnographies of education which have pioneered this more ecumenical view of learning have, nonetheless, focused on a more limited range of issues regarding the adoption of attitudes on campus towards romance, gender, sexuality, and race (Moffatt, 1989; Holland and Eisenhart, 1990; Sirisena, 2018). I have extended the remit through which education has been identified as writ large across life (Levinson, 2000), looking at themes that are further reaching in time and space than the university campus.

There has been evidence of both active and passive aspects of education that weave through the life course as it unfolds (Varenne, 2019a). I explored both sociological and psychological perspectives on how parenting may instil cultural ideas and arbitrary norms (Durkheim, 1982) and more specific values and ways of seeing (Vellerman, 1999). We saw parents' attempts at active manipulation of their children's choices in education and work. There were also more subtle forms of socialisation, emulation, and internalisation. Influence continued into adulthood, whereby parents and their young adult children co-constructed one another's lives (Daneley and Lynch, 2015; Finn, 2015; Bregnbæk, 2016; Zaloom, 2019). Interactions between one generation and the next may entail both an exertion of ideas and their transformation (Levinson, 2000). There was a give and take between parents and children, which formed the epistemology through which the different parties knew and understood the world (Bateson, 1994).

The theme of epistemology was a useful means of considering how different spaces offer and inhibit different kinds of knowledge about the future. The epistemic foundations of participants' lives were shown to be in flux during their transitions out of HE (cf. Finn, 2015). Varenne (2019b) argues that education occurs in the re-negotiation of ever-unfolding new normals. Irving's (2017) theorisation of dynamic change in human lives could in fact be indicating a process of 'education' such as Varenne (2019b) refers to. As human beings update and normalise change, adapt to shifting norms, and deliberate over futures, they may be *educating* themselves and each other (Varenne and Koyama, 2011; Varenne, 2019b). The ongoing 'stuff' of education may thus be tacit and continuous.

## Fateful Aspects of Aspiration

The story of being alive may be told through a tension between aspiration and fate. At a fundamental level, the parameters of possibility in a person's life are determined by geopolitical and socioeconomic circumstances, layered with family and individual situations that may be unique (Irving, 2018). From birth, a person is socialised and enculturated into a fate through practices such as parenting and schooling which streamline particular ways of seeing and

experiencing the world (Mathews, 1996; Durkheim, 1982; Varenne and Koyama, 2011). The premise of aspiration and of HE is to influence one's future with a sense of agency and autonomy (Zaloom, 2019). However, the central contribution to knowledge to derive from this research emphasises a contradiction that through HE, aspirations may engender a fatalistic sense of determinism. What is ironic about these findings is that horizons narrowed as a product of education – which is glorified worldwide as a means towards diverse and agentive futures (Rhodes, 2001). The notion of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) helps to convey the oxymoronic predicament that HE opened the future up and also potentially closed the future down (cf. Zaloom, 2019). This high level of contingency to HE participation in determining futures can be understood in relation to the contemporary era of individualisation in which each person is left to fend for themselves. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) underline this sense of collective singularity. They write that people are

... invited to constitute themselves as individuals: to plan, understand, design themselves and act as individuals – or, should they “fail”, to lie as individuals on the bed they have made for themselves. (2002, pp. 3-4)

This sense of ‘making a bed for one's self’ and having to lie in it, come rain or shine, conveys the central intended meaning of fateful aspects of aspiration.

There is a widely communicated imperative in the USA to attain a college education (Deresiewicz, 2014). Students and their families are sold visions of individual future success through marketized models of HE that suggest or promise a return on investment (Cappelli, 2020). However, there appears to be a Catch-22 situation: it is difficult to advance without a degree, yet students are burdened with the financial implications of attaining one. Further to financial cost, the specialisation set in motion by educational institutions may burden young people to make specific choices for the future from a premature and abstract position. Young people must attempt to find out who they are as a person and as a potential ‘worker’ through the lens of educational subjects and the implied vocations these entail. It can be inferred that students and graduates do not necessarily know what they want to do with their lives and are given certain perceived options as a result of a degree. Subsequently, graduates may be required to apply themselves to the labour market selling the subjects they have studied, regardless of how they

feel about them. Some subject specialisations may direct students quickly into certain professions, with varied outcomes, not all of which are negative. Indeed, there was evidence in the research of the positive elements of securing a sense of stability and guaranteed income. Other degrees may have the opposite dynamic of appearing too ambiguous, with a tenuous connection to specific work. It may be necessary and healthy for a young person to explore different interests and options after compulsory secondary schooling; yet such exploration need not be immediately through the framework of (costly) HE. In a review of Arum and Roksa's (2014) study on the 'tentative transitions of college graduates' I argued for more scope for young people to delay university entry (Loewenthal, 2019). The capacity to learn through experience such as in work and travel may enable young people to develop a closer sense of who they are and to then apply to HE with purpose.

This point on the timing of university entry is in response to the potentially enduring and irrevocable consequences of HE attendance that were identified. Fateful aspects of aspiration may heighten over time. There is increasing awareness of widespread feelings of disillusionment in work (de Botton, 2010; Graeber, 2018). People may spend their lifetimes getting to know themselves, or failing to do so, through the parameters of employment (de Botton, 2010). Commitment to a career may specialise a person in a field which elicits their weaknesses which they may not have been previously aware of. Graduates may become trapped in a profession that does not call upon their strengths or that demands tasks that they struggle with. People may wonder about switching fields across their adult lives (de Botton, 2010); they may wish to adapt to emergent and imagined expectations (Alexander, 2020). However, fateful aspects of aspiration may prevent manoeuvrability. The capacity of young people to imagine alternative ways of being (Salemink, Bregnbæk and Hirslund, 2018) may be crushed by a ferocious drive to work and to succeed at once. Fatefulness may exacerbate over time as freedoms pass and visions of the future narrow (Mathews, 1996). Social and cultural expectations demarcate youth as a time of exploration and adulthood as a time of specificity (Arnett, 2015). Changes later in life may be stigmatised and charged with heightened pressure. Fatefulness may become compounded by calls to care and to bring home money that affix a graduate to a line of work or prevent them from exploration. In considering alternative options, many forms of employment entail

gatekeepers of required experience or qualifications (Collins, 2019). Re-training and further degrees pose the prospects of hope, though at the risk of further debt and an increasingly contingent situation.

## The Ambivalence of Prosperity

This research has tried to look at the 'anthropology of the good' (Robbins, 2013), asking the potentially empowering, exciting, and agentic question of what people want to do with their lives. There have been idealistic aspirations and demonstrations of privilege, success, and geographic mobility. However, the thesis also includes struggle and strife such as dominate ethnographic studies (Robbins, 2013). Such ordeal may be an inherent aspect of the human condition that is marked by ongoing, often unspoken, trauma (Epstein, 2014). The ceaselessness of time renders all things impermanent, placing prosperity in the constant balance (Epstein, 2014). Sociologically, inequality is often identified as the source of human differences. This explanatory trope was minimized by studying a highly advantaged population. This thesis has shown that there were still many problems in people's lives. Graduates were shown to struggle with unhappiness, anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, stress, debt, family conflict, and precarious presents and futures. Markovitz (2019) argues that a system of competitive credentials perpetuates inequality while crippling those who profit. He argues that 'sympathy' is not the right response to the plight of those at the top of educational hierarchies, but that their problems and 'alienation' are very real (p. 40). Similarly, in Blum's (2016) review of Bregnbæk's (2016) ethnography, she writes: 'the fact that the system does not work well even for the winners should give everyone pause' (p. 884).

There are important implications about human complexity and prosperity when circumstances that are prized appear to be flawed. This ambivalence of prosperity maps out geographically. The USA promotes itself as leader of a so-called 'developed' world and is idealised as a migration destination. Notions of freedom are culturally treasured (Varenne, 1977). However, inhabitants of this 'dream' landscape did not appear that 'free'. While the country may have many forms of

power and portray itself in splendour through Hollywood screens, this does not mean that its inhabitants have the best quality of life. Bregnbæk (2018) draws on the etymology of Utopia which is *ou-topos* – no place (Bloch, 1986 in Salemink, Bregnbæk, and Hirslund, 2018, p. 132) and argues that ‘utopia is never fully achieved since it is essentially “no-where”’ (2018, p. 176). What might be inferred from this statement, and that is resonant with my findings, is that psychological wellbeing is transient, subjective, and dependent on perspective (Mathews, 2017) and cannot be assuredly located in a physical land of paradise. Questions about what and where the good life is (O’Reilly and Benson, 2009) are inherently open. We are reminded that life’s quality can be perceived according to different metrics (Jackson, 2005). The study of aspiration demands a broad conceptualisation of what is valuable in life. This thesis has contributed to a theorisation of aspiration that is aligned to this sentiment.

## Part III: Critical Reflections on the Research

I now consider critical reflections on the research: what methodological contributions have been made; what are the limitations of the study; some thoughts on reflexivity; and the prospects and challenges of cross-cultural comparison.

### Methodological Contributions

This research has been conducted abductively, entailing a combination of guiding themes and inductive insights from the data (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). Ideas in both ethnography (O’Reilly, 2005; Okely, 2011) and grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Dunne, 2011) endorse a research epistemology which gives primacy to empirical reality as opposed to a prior hypothesis. The research design and focus continued to develop over time. The literature review has been written alongside and interlinked with the analysis (Dunne, 2011). On reflection, I would



endorse this approach of allowing data to demonstrate what is worthy of study and of responding to data with literature; this appears a more organic reflection of social reality that does not impose assumptions from the outset (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Dunne, 2011; Okely, 2011). However, I note that practically, a pre-determined framework may be necessary in applying for research funding and may also hasten the helpful process of engaging with data through some kind of specificity (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014).

Part of the learning process in this research was working out how to convert ethnographic experience into a written thesis. Through an ethnographic methodology I wanted to understand the world from people's own perspective by getting to know them *in situ* and over time (Malinowski, 1922). I entered the enquiry planning to embark on an idealised albeit vague notion of participant observation through 'hanging out' (Bernard, 2011, p. 277). I had imagined that this would be the most authentic form of knowledge production for the task at hand (Moffatt, 1989). I conducted participant observation in a range of settings such as living with (MU) students and graduates, sitting in on an undergraduate class for a semester, and attending MU graduation ceremonies. Observations and experiences contributed to the tacit learning that is part of ethnography's *longue durée* methodology (Ingold, 2018). However, I caution that this passive approach generated ambiguous data that proved relatively toothless as evidence to form a thesis. Recorded interviews engaged participants at an individual level. I was able to get to know them 'one to one' and to talk about issues that are far reaching in time, space, and subject. Having transcripts of verbatim speech has enabled a closer analysis of themes that were lost in the moment of the initial conversation. Talking to participants elicited their lives in their own words and revealed an iceberg of complexity that may not be visible on the surface (de Botton, 2005; Hart, 2016; Irving, 2017). This point on the salience of interiority has broader implications for social enquiry, reminding us of our ignorance, that there is still much that we do not know about the world around us – including the lives of others (Irving, 2017). We may not even know that much about the everyday lives or 'inner drama' of those with whom we are close (de Botton, 2005, p. viii). Interviews – within the broader context of getting to know people ethnographically – offer one means of getting closer to this kind of knowledge.

A longitudinal component of following up with participants provided further insight in demonstrating the contingencies of aspiration. Participants experienced dialectical changes between their situations and their thoughts about the future. They re-worked their aspirations over time in relation to changing circumstances (Finn, 2015). Again, there are broader implications. Irving's (2017) ethnography was conducted over twenty years and demonstrates the radical ways in which lives can and do change. In a review of the book, I underlined that researchers should be careful about theorising people's lives from one-off encounters (Loewenthal, 2018a). Ensuing portrayals may exaggerate a sense of fixity that would be a misrepresentation of life's fluid and changing nature. Indeed, writing this thesis has committed this act of ossifying utterances produced at a moment in time. I have converted some human beings that I spoke with into 'participants', 'data', quotes, and chapters. What I have theorised of their lives may distort more complex – and perhaps contrasting – realities which I did not get to learn of. Their lives have and will continue to change and may echo, elaborate, or challenge the findings presented here.

## Limitations to the study

A strength of Zaloom's (2019) ethnography is that she engaged with parents as research participants. Her status as a professor may have aided this access. In my own case, sharing a similar age to participants, it would have been more methodologically awkward to try to involve their parents. However, there is much missing to the story of aspiration by lacking this point of view. As the research has shown, children were only a 'part' act in their own apparent story. I have produced a one-sided view of aspiration that centres the ego of the child. This conceptual framing may also be critiqued for its indulgence of individualism. The research question has normalised a cultural framing of aspiration in terms of 'what people aspire to do with *their* lives' – as though it uniquely belongs to them. There may also be an excessive assumption that graduates should have autonomy. The 'fatefulness' identified such as failing to disentangle one's self from one's parents may be an inherent part of inter-subjective being (Bregnbæk, 2016). There are stereotypes about ego-centrism in the West in contrast to socio-centrism in the rest of

the world. While these patterns may exist, I would argue that subjectivity should not be underplayed in socio-centric societies (Salemink, Bregnbæk, and Hirslund, 2018) and that we should not tempt patronisation, as though people worldwide do not harbour individual thoughts and concerns. I therefore defend the research question and argue that it would be worthy elsewhere. However, one aspect of the research that was not so easy to write about was 'informal education' which proved a less helpful phrase than expected. However interesting it is to consider everyday learning, there are difficulties registering this learning either personally or as an ethnographer looking to understand others. I have grappled with educative processes writ large and there is further work to be done to develop this representational lens. However, I would caution that many aspects of tacit education are – perhaps, by definition – not easy to empirically identify.

In the analysis and write up of this research I have dealt with a balance between a psychological focus on individuals and a sociological framing. There have been psychological and existential perspectives that may have been under-theorised due to trying to tell a broader story. I could have gone more in-depth with some individual case studies. On the contrary, there could have been more sociological analysis and attention to issues surrounding HE. I could have engaged more closely with correlations between subjects and aspirations. There was evidence of such themes in the findings – such as surrounding uncertainty in the humanities – which space did not allow for. Furthermore, while there is attention to student debt and the disparate implications of parental involvement, the thesis does not contain a strong class analysis (for reasons already identified). Placing these students and graduates in broader sociological and geo-political perspective, elements of privilege in their lives come into view. Most young people around the world are 'fated' more severely to family, location, and possibility than young adult university graduates in New York and Los Angeles. Have I therefore exaggerated fatefulness as a trope? The COVID-19 pandemic will have a significant impact on graduates' opportunities and will perpetuate inequalities. In this sense, those MU graduates from wealthy backgrounds may fare much better than most. One of the issues of this research is that it lacks a clear audience or politics. The aim of studying elites is often assumed to be for the purposes of critique – to understand how power is maintained and reproduced (e.g. Nader, 1972; Khan, 2011). I have not

conducted such an analysis. Though nor is it my political intention to highlight the plight of the privileged. There are political implications of these research findings – that socio-economic inequality does not explain all forms of adversity (Jackson, 2005) – yet this is an auxiliary point, and not the central line of argument. It is therefore unclear how this research may be branded as there is an ambiguous angle on the ‘elite’ aspect of the demographic.

## Reflexivity

My role as a researcher may have influenced the study. One point of consideration is the proximity between the research themes and my own life. It has been considered an embodied aspect of this research process that I have a lived parallel transition to those whom I have studied. Upon embarking on fieldwork in January 2017 I made this point in an article that I wrote for the *Life Course Blog* (Loewenthal, 2017a). I reflected on having to dismantle and leave my childhood bedroom that I had adapted as a teenager and young adult. I interpreted this highly decorated bedroom as a space that allowed me to immerse nostalgically in my life so far, and which prevented me from having to think about the future. A further question, however, is whether this research has also protected me from having to think about the future. Being a doctoral candidate has felt a more comfortable space through which to consider the research themes as abstract ideas than submitting the thesis and constructing a future beyond the comforts of study.

I have attempted to manage a distance between my own concerns and the research themes through a cross-pollination and not a conflation. There is a possibility that I was able to generate interactions and hence data with participants whose concerns are similar to my own or with whom I identify. I have tried not to project my own thoughts onto participants, though this is a possibility. If I were from a different educational background, I may have seen things differently. I attended a private school in London then the University of Oxford then Columbia University. As noted in Khan’s (2011) ethnography of an elite school in which extraordinariness is seen as ordinary, I entered the research already accustomed to meeting people with privileged lives. It could be that too much was normalised in my habituated view compared to what another

researcher might notice. I attended a methodological workshop in London in 2018 where researchers were asked to bring along raw data and to discuss it collectively. Playing an excerpt of an interview with Ricardo, another researcher (a British woman in her 40s) exclaimed that he sounds “like one of the most entitled people I have ever heard”. A more politicised analysis of opportunity may have been conducted by another researcher and this would be a worthy complementary perspective.

## Cross-Cultural Comparison

Dominguez and Habib (2017) have called for more non-US scholars to conduct ethnographies in the United States. It is hoped that from an outsider (UK) perspective I might have seen some things afresh. Van Maanen (2011, p. 6) argues that ethnography brings into focus two cultures in comparison: the ethnographer’s in contact with that of the people studied. The most visceral sentiment that I experienced throughout the ethnography was how distinct student life at MU was from what I am accustomed to in Britain. The culture shock was in how earnest and openly ambitious American students appeared to be. Students wore their heart on their sleeve through a bold integration of their career aspirations and their social identity. Alongside, student culture entailed a literal and metaphorical sobriety – thinking clearly about the future and feeling unashamed to declare aspirations without humility or irony. In Britain, by contrast, I am accustomed to performative nonchalance, and a sense of hiding behind cynicism as though a form of self-defence. Cusack (2015) depicts a ‘self-deprecating and humility-obsessed outlook’ (para. 2) which he describes as a ‘very British sense of humility [with] toxic limiting effects on [the] nation’s schoolchildren’ (para. 7). In Fox’s (2014) ethnography of England she employs the notion, ‘the importance of not being earnest’ (p. 79), arguing that it is frowned upon to take one’s self too seriously. A cultural context of irreverence may affect the construction and performance of aspirations. I made US-UK comparisons in earlier drafts of this thesis. Yet I have ultimately avoided a cross-cultural analysis for reasons of generalisation and subjectivity. It would appear like an over-extrapolation of the data in the USA and of my own subjective take on the UK to make sweeping generalisations about national cultures. However, I would recommend that these

lines of enquiry on the (national) cultural framing of aspiration be studied to highlight the different manifestations of how aspirations are articulated and made public.

## Part IV: Future Directions

This research has opened many avenues that have shaped my own interests and aspirations. It would be interesting to look in more depth at some of the case studies presented here, both through deeper analysis of individual narratives (including data not presented) and through further longitudinal research. To follow up with the participants would develop a rich study of the life course of aspirations. I have become interested in the life course more broadly: how lives change over time, carrying new concerns and new epistemic ways of knowing (Bateson, 1994; Danely and Lynch, 2015; Alexander, 2020). I argue that both research and teaching should focus more on the study of aspiration, meaning, and purpose across the life course, as well as associated themes such as imagination and life-long learning. While in Los Angeles, I met a man in his eighties on the Subway called Lance who invited me to his book-filled bungalow. I went twice and interviewed him there about the objects and books around him. I was interested in the theme of 'imaginative mobility' (Urry, 2007) which I had explored in my master's research (Loewenthal and Broughton, 2019). In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, there may be a likelihood of further quarantine and time indoors. There have been reports of mental health issues, caused, in part, by boredom and loneliness as people do not know what to do with themselves (Brooks *et al.*, 2020). There could be scope to explore 'imaginative and virtual mobility' (Urry, 2007) through participatory and action-oriented research. How might people find adventure and companionship through reading (such as Lance mentioned in his 'adventures with Alice in Wonderland')? How might people travel the world through video footage? Or embark on virtual mobility through their memories? What prompts – such as poetry (Gregory, 2011) or maps (Loewenthal and Broughton, 2019) – might elicit different forms of meaningful thought and conversation? How might empowering forms of internet usage be identified, or fostered, among people of different ages and situations (Otaegui, 2020)?

Encounters with Lance and subsequent contact has also echoed a theme of loneliness that was pervasive across the research with MU students and graduates and which a lack of space has denied discussion of here. I published a photograph entitled 'Solitude in NYC' in the journal, *North American Dialogue* in which I tried to 'metaphorically represent the paradox experienced by many graduates living in New York: euphoria, for having made it to the Big Apple, in tandem with a sense of isolation going forward in life' (Loewenthal, 2017d, p. 31). Bell and de-Shalit (2011) write that 'the dark side of ambition... is an extreme form of individualism that is almost unique among great cities'. The authors point to the 'rich literature on the ills of urban life' in New York specifically, including alienation and loneliness (p. 250). I hope to address such human problems through a parallel vocation (alongside teaching and research) and to train to become a humanistic counsellor or psychotherapist. This avenue appears to be a way of working in anthropology and education in an applied way, and to keep on going with themes related to this research.

# References

Adorno, T. W. and Horkheimer, M. (1997) *Dialectic of enlightenment*. London and New York: Verso.

Alexander, P. (2019) 'Boys from the Bronx, men from Manhattan: gender, aspiration and imagining a (neoliberal) future after high school in New York City', in Clack, B. and Paule, M. (Eds) *Interrogating the neoliberal lifecycle: the limits of success*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 39-65.

Alexander, P., Loewenthal, J., and Butt, G. (2019) '“Fuck It, Shit Happens (FISH)”: a social generations approach to understanding young people’s imaginings of life after school in 2016-2017', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 23(1), pp. 109-126.

Alexander, P. (2020) *Schooling and social identity: learning to act your age in contemporary Britain*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Allen, K. and Hollingworth, S. (2013) '“Sticky subjects’ or ‘cosmopolitan creatives’? Social class, place and urban young people’s aspirations for work in the knowledge economy, *Urban Studies*, 50(3), pp. 499-517.

Appadurai, A. (2004) 'The capacity to aspire: culture and the terms of recognition', in Rao, V. and Walton, M. (Eds) *Culture and public action*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, pp. 59-84.

Appadurai, A. (2013) *The future as cultural fact: essays on the global condition*. London and New York: Verso.

Archer, L. (2010) 'Making jobs “thinkable”: engaging with the complexity of young people’s career aspirations', *Education and Employers Taskforce, London*, paper presented at the 1st Education and Employers Taskforce Research Conference. Available at: [http://www.educationandemployers.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/archer\\_making-jobs-thinkable1.pdf](http://www.educationandemployers.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/archer_making-jobs-thinkable1.pdf) (Accessed: 07 Jul 2020).

Arnett, J. J. (2015). *Emerging adulthood: the winding road from the late teens through the twenties*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New York: Oxford University Press.

Arthur, M. B., Hall, D. T., and Lawrence, B. S. (1989) 'Generating new directions in career theory: the case for a transdisciplinary approach', in Arthur, M. B., Hall, D. T., and Lawrence, B. S. (Eds) *Handbook of Career Theory*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 7-25.

Arum, R. and Roksa, J. (2014) *Aspiring adults adrift: tentative transitions of college graduates*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Baggini, J. (2005) *What’s it all about? Philosophy and the meaning of life*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Bagri, N. T. (2017) 'The number of students globally has doubled since 2000 – and it’s private colleges that are meeting the demand', *Quartz*, 22 April 2017. Available at:



<https://qz.com/965664/the-number-of-students-globally-has-doubled-since-2000-and-its-private-colleges-that-are-meeting-the-demand/> (Accessed: 06 April 2020).

Baker, W. (2017) 'Aspirations: the moral of the story', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38(8), pp. 1203-1216.

Banks, M. (2009) *SAGE Methodspace Marcus Banks*, SAGE Publishing. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=COfhpqj83tE> (Accessed: 28 September 2020).

Barnett, G. A., Lee, M., Jiang, K., and Woo Park, H. (2016) 'The flow of international students from a macro perspective: a network analysis', *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 46(4), pp. 533-559.

Bateson, M. C. (1989) *Composing a life*. New York: Grove Press.

Bateson, M. C. (1994) *Peripheral visions: learning along the way*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

Bateson, M. C. (2011) *Composing a further life: the age of active wisdom*. New York: Vintage Books.

Bathmaker, A.-M., Ingram, N., Abrahams, J., Hoare, A., Waller, R., & Bradley, H. (2016). *Higher education, social class and social mobility: the degree generation*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bauman, G. (1996) *Contesting culture: discourses of identity in multi-ethnic London*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Baumrind D. (1967) 'Child care practices anteceding three patterns of preschool behaviour', *Genetic Psychology Monographs*, 75(1), pp. 43-88.

Beck, U. and Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2001) *Individualization: institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Becker, E. (1997) *The denial of death*. 1<sup>st</sup> Free Press Paperbacks edition. New York: Free Press.

Bell, D. and de-Shalit, A. (2011) *The spirit of cities: why the identity of a city matters in a global age*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Berlant, L. (2011) *Cruel optimism*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.

Bernard, H. R. (2011) *Research methods in anthropology: qualitative and quantitative approaches*. 5<sup>th</sup> edition. Plymouth: AltaMira Press.

Biehl, J. and Locke, P. (2017) 'Introduction: ethnographic sensorium', in Biehl, J. and Locke, P. (Eds) *Unfinished: the anthropology of becoming*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, pp. 1-40.

Bielo, J. S. (2009) *Words upon the word: an ethnography of evangelical group Bible study*. New York and London: New York University Press.

Black, R. and Walsh, L. (2019) *Imagining youth futures: university students in post-truth times*. Singapore: Springer.

- Blackledge, P. (2017) 'The dialectics of work and leisure in Marx, Lukács, and Lefebvre', in Spracklen, K., Lashua, B., Sharpe, E., and Swain, S. (Eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of leisure theory*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 473-486.
- Blum, S. D. (2016) Review of *Fragile elite: the dilemmas of China's top university students*, by Susanne Bregnbæk, *American Anthropologist*, 118(4), pp. 883-884.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977) *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J.-C. (1990) *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. London: SAGE.
- Bowles, S. and Gintis, H. (1976) *Schooling in capitalist America: educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bregnbæk, S. (2016) *Fragile elite: the dilemmas of China's top university students*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bregnbæk, S. (2018) 'In search of the heart of a heartless world: Chinese youth, house-church Christianity and the longing for foreign Utopias', *Identities*, 25(2), pp. 176-191.
- Brooks, S. K., Webster, R. K., Smith, L. E., Woodland, L., Wessely, S., Greenberg, N., and Rubin, G. J. (2020) 'The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: rapid review of the evidence', *Lancet*, 395 (February 26, 2020) pp. 912–20.
- Brown, P., Lauder, H., and Ashton, D. (2011) *The global auction: the broken promises of education, jobs, and incomes*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Broughton, J. and Loewenthal, J. (2020) 'Youth culture', in Cook, D. (Ed.) *The SAGE Encyclopedia of children and childhood studies*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, pp. 1711-1716.
- Burke, C., Thatcher, J., Ingram, N., and Abrahams, J. (2016) 'Introduction: the development of Bourdieu's intellectual heritage in UK sociology' in Thatcher, J., Ingram, N., Burke, C., and Abrahams, J. (Eds) *Bourdieu: the next generation: the development of Bourdieu's intellectual heritage in contemporary UK sociology*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, pp. 1-7.
- Burke, C. (2017) 'Graduate blues': considering the effects of inverted symbolic violence on underemployed middle class graduates', *Sociology*, 51(2), pp. 393-409.
- Cappelli, P. (2020) 'The return on a college degree: the US experience', *Oxford Review of Education*, 46(1), pp. 30-43.
- Caughey, J. L. (1984) *Imaginary social worlds: a cultural approach*. Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Cerulo, K. A. (2006) *Never saw it coming: cultural challenges to envisioning the worst*. Chicago, IL and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Charmaz, K. (2006) *Constructing grounded theory: a practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: SAGE.
- Chua, A. (2011) *Battle hymn of the tiger mother*. New York: Penguin Books.

- Collinge, A. M. (2009) *The student loan scam: the most oppressive debt in U.S history and how we can fight back*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Collinge, A. M. (2017) 'Forward', in Hartlep, N. D., Eckrich, L. L. T., and Hensley, B. O. (Eds) *The neoliberal agenda and the student debt crisis in U.S. higher education*. [eBook]. New York: Routledge.
- Collini, S. (2012) *What are universities for?* London: Penguin.
- Collins, R. (2019) *The credential society: an historical sociology of education and stratification*. Legacy edition. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Cooley, W. (2013) Review of *Cruel optimism*, by Lauren Berlant. *American Studies*, 52(3), pp. 79-80.
- Crivello, G. (2015) "There's no future here': The time and place of children's migration aspirations in Peru', *Geoforum*, 62, June 2015, pp. 38-46.
- Cusack, M. (2015) 'Problems in British culture and education: escaping humility'. Available at: <https://www.redbrick.me/problems-in-british-culture-and-education-escaping-humility/> (Accessed 13 Sep. 2020).
- Damaske, S. (2011) *For the family? How class and gender shape women's work*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Danely, J. and Lynch, C. (2015) 'Transitions and transformations: paradigms, perspectives, and possibilities', in Lynch, C. and Danely, J. (Eds) *Transitions and transformations: cultural perspectives on aging and the life course*. 1<sup>st</sup> paperback edition. New York: Berghahn, pp. 3-20.
- Davis, C. (2005) 'Hauntology, spectres and phantoms', *French Studies*, 59(3), pp. 373-379.
- Davis, M. and Cartwright, L. (2019) "Deferred lives': money, debt, and the financialized futures of young temporary workers', in Featherstone, M. (Ed.) *The sociology of debt*. Bristol: Policy Press, pp. 91-118.
- de Botton, A. (2005) *Status anxiety*. Vintage international edition. New York: Vintage Books.
- de Botton, A. (2010) *The pleasures and sorrows of work*. Vintage international edition. New York: Vintage Books.
- de Tocqueville, A. (2000) *Democracy in America*. Chicago, IL and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Demerath, P. (2009) *Producing success: the culture of personal advancement in an American high school*. Chicago, IL and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Deresiewicz, W. (2014). *Excellent sheep: the miseducation of the American elite and the way to a meaningful life*. New York: Free Press.
- di Paolantonio (2016) 'The cruel optimism of education and education's implication with 'passing-on'', *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 50(2), pp. 147-159.
- Dominguez, V. R. and Habib, J. (2017) *America observed: on an international anthropology of the United States*. New York: Berghahn.

- Dunne, C. (2011) 'The place of the literature review in grounded theory research', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 14(2), pp. 111-124.
- Durham, D. (2017) 'Elusive adulthoods: introduction', in Durham, D. and Solway, J. (Eds) *Elusive adulthoods: the anthropology of new maturities*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, pp. 1-38.
- Durkheim, E. (1982) *The rules of sociological method*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Durkheim, E. (2002) *Suicide: a study in sociology*. London: Routledge Classics.
- Eagleton, T. (2008) *The meaning of life: a very short introduction*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Easterlin, R. A. (1973) 'Does money buy happiness?', *Public Interest*, 30 (Winter 1973), pp. 3-10.
- Ehrenreich, B. (2009) *Bright sided: how positive thinking is undermining America*. 1<sup>st</sup> edition. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Eichhorn, K. (2019) *The end of forgetting: growing up with social media*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Epstein, M. (2014) *The trauma of everyday life*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Eriksen, T. H. (2004). *What is anthropology?* London: Pluto Press.
- Finn, K. (2015) *Personal life, young women and higher education: a relational approach to student and graduate experiences*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fischer, M. (2014) *Ghosts of my life: writings on depression, hauntology, and lost futures*. Alresford: Zero Books.
- Fong, V. L. (2011) *Paradise redefined: transnational Chinese students and the quest for flexible citizenship in the developed world*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1995) *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Vintage Books edition. New York and Toronto: Random House.
- Fox, K. (2014) *Watching the English: the hidden rules of English behaviour*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Boston, MA and London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.
- Franceschelli, M. and Keating, A. (2018) 'Imagining the future in the neoliberal era: young people's optimism and their faith in hard work', *YOUNG*, 26(4\_suppl), pp. 15-17S. doi: 10.1177/1103308817742287.
- Fromm, E. (1961) *Marx's concept of man*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing.
- Frye, M. 2012. 'Bright futures in Malawi's new dawn: educational aspirations as assertions of identity', *American Journal of Sociology*, 117(6), pp. 1565-1624.
- Fujita, Y. (2009) *Cultural migrants from Japan: youth, media, and migration in New York and London*. Plymouth: Lexington Books.
- Gaztambide-Fernández, R. A. (2009) *The best of the best: becoming elite at an American boarding school*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Geertz, C. (1973) *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gershon, I. (2015) 'Introduction', in Gershon, I. (Ed.) *A world of work: imagined manuals for real jobs*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, pp. 1-9.
- Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Giovacchini, S. (2003) 'Hollywood is a state of mind': New York film culture and the lure of Los Angeles from 1930 to the present', in Halle, D. (Ed.) *New York and Los Angeles: politics, society, and culture: a comparative view*. Chicago, IL and London: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 423-448.
- Glaser, B. G. (1998) *Doing grounded theory: issues and discussions*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G. and Strauss, A. (1967) *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Goffman, E. (1959) *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Doubleday.
- Golin, D. (2016) 'Bushwick vs. Washington Heights: why this twentysomething would rather stay Uptown', *Brick Underground*, 01 September 2016, Available at: [www.brickunderground.com/blog/2015/11/bushwick\\_vs\\_washington\\_heights\\_why\\_this\\_twentysomething\\_would\\_rather\\_stay\\_uptown](http://www.brickunderground.com/blog/2015/11/bushwick_vs_washington_heights_why_this_twentysomething_would_rather_stay_uptown) (Accessed: 13 Sep 2020).
- Gordon, E. W., Bowman, C. B. and Mejia, B. X. (2003) 'Changing the script for youth development: an evaluation of the All Stars Talent Show network and the Joseph A. Forgione Development School for Youth', Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York. Available at: <http://eastsideinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Changing-the-Script.pdf> (Accessed: 17 September 2020).
- Graeber, D. (2012) 'Afterward', in Alexander, C. and Reno, J. (Eds) *Economies of recycling: the global transformation of materials, values and social relations*. London and New York: Zed Books Ltd, pp. 277-290.
- Graeber, D. (2018) *Bullshit jobs: a theory*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Greenberg, M. (2008) *Branding New York: how a city in crisis was sold to the world*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Gregory, H. (2011) 'Using poetry to improve the quality of life and care for people with dementia: a qualitative analysis of the Try to Remember programme', *Arts & Health*, 3(2), pp. 160-172.
- Hage, G. (2005) 'A not so multi-sited ethnography of a not so imagined community', *Anthropological Theory*, 5(4), pp. 463-475.
- Haig, M. (2018) *Notes on a nervous planet*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd.
- Halle, D. and Beveridge, A. A. (2013) 'New York and Los Angeles: the uncertain future', in Halle, D. and Beveridge, A. A. (Eds) *New York and Los Angeles: the uncertain future*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 1-32.

- Hardgrove, A., Rootham, E., and McDowell, L. (2015) 'Possible selves in a precarious labour market: youth, imagined futures, and transitions to work in the UK', *Geoforum*, 60 (March 2015), pp. 163-171.
- Harari, Y. N. (2015) *Sapiens: a brief history of humankind*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Hart, C. S. (2012) *Aspirations, education and social justice: applying Sen and Bourdieu*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Hart, C. S. (2016) 'How do aspirations matter?', *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 17(3), pp. 324-341.
- Heath, T. L. (2004) *Greek Astronomy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hess, A. (2019) 'Student debt increased by 107% this decade, Federal Reserve data shows'. Available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/12/30/student-debt-totals-increased-by-107percent-this-decade.html> (Accessed: 11 September 2020).
- Ho, K. (2009) *Liquidated: an ethnography of Wall Street*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- Hobsbawm, E. (1983) 'Introduction: inventing traditions', in Hobsbawm, E. and Ranger, T. (Eds) *The invention of tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1-14.
- Holland, D. C. and Eisenhart, M. A. (1990). *Educated in romance: women, achievement, and college culture*. Chicago, IL and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Hornsby, T. (2018) 'The Population of Six-Figure Student Loan Borrowers is Exploding'. Available at: <https://www.studentloanplanner.com/the-population-of-six-figure-student-loan-borrowers-is-exploding/> (Accessed: 02 May 2019).
- Hsu, H. (2019) 'Student debt is transforming the American family', *The New Yorker*, 02 September 2019. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/09/09/student-debt-is-transforming-the-american-family> (Accessed 05 September 2019).
- Illich, I. (1971) *Deschooling society*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Ingold, T. (2018) *Anthropology and/as education*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Irving, A. (2017) *The art of life and death: radical aesthetics and ethnographic practice*. Chicago, IL: HAU Books.
- Irving, A. (2018) 'A life lived otherwise: contingency and necessity in an interconnected world', *Anthropologica*, 60(2), pp. 390-402.
- Jackson, M. (1996) 'Introduction: phenomenology, radical empiricism, and anthropological critique', in Jackson (Ed.) *Things as they are: new directions in phenomenological anthropology*. Bloomington, IN and Indianapolis, IN: University of Indiana Press, pp. 1-50.
- Jackson, M. (2005) *Existential anthropology: events, exigencies, and effects*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Kasser, T. (2002) *The high price of materialism*. Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press.

- Khan, S. R. (2011) *Privilege: the making of an adolescent elite at St Paul's school*. Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Lancy, D. F. (2008) *The anthropology of childhood: cherubs, chattel, changelings*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lauder, H. and Mayhew, K. (2020) 'Higher education and the labour market: an introduction', *Oxford Review of Education*, 46 (1), pp. 1-9.
- Lefebvre, H. (2014) *Toward an architecture of enjoyment*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Levine, M. (2006) *The price of privilege: how parental pressure and material advantage are creating a generation of disconnected and unhappy kids*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Levinson, B. A. U. (2000) 'Introduction: whither the symbolic animal? Society, culture, and education at the Millenium', in Levinson, B. A. U. (Ed.) *Schooling the symbolic animal: social and cultural dimensions of education*. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc, pp. 1-12.
- Loewenthal, J. (2015a) *Home and away: cultural imaginaries of the city and the world among New York City youth*. Master's thesis. Teachers College, Columbia University, New York.
- Loewenthal, J. (2015b) 'Imagining indebted futures: risk calculation during university application amongst adult applicants in New York City', presentation given at 'Introduction to Learning and Teaching in Higher Education', Oxford Brookes University, 20 November 2015.
- Loewenthal, J. (2017a) 'Dismantling a bedroom of youth: how space and material culture mediate the life course', *The Association for Anthropology, Gerontology and the Life Course – Blog*, March 09 2017. Available at: <https://anthropologyandgerontology.com/dismantling-a-bedroom-of-youth/> (Accessed: 13 September 2020).
- Loewenthal, J. (2017b) 'Between categories and cosmopolitanism: on the subtleties of voters' persuasions', *The Sociological Review – Blog*, 07 June 2017, Available at: <https://www.thesociologicalreview.com/between-categories-and-cosmopolitanism-on-the-subtleties-of-voters-persuasions/> (Accessed: 13 September 2020).
- Loewenthal, J. (2017c) 'Geography and epistemology in the production of aspirations', *Urban-Rural Youth Transitions – Blog*, 19 June 2017. Available at: <https://urbanruralyouthtransitions.wordpress.com/2017/06/19/geography-and-epistemology-in-the-production-of-aspirations/> (Accessed: 13 September 2020).
- Loewenthal, J. (2017d), 'Solitude in NYC', *North American Dialogue*. 20 (2), p. 31.
- Loewenthal, J. (2018a) Review of *The art of life and death: radical aesthetics and ethnographic practice*, by Andrew Irving. *Anthropology and Aging*, 39 (1), pp. 112-114.
- Loewenthal, J. (2018b) 'Talking about race in text and in person: is hiding behind a screen helpful?', *Teaching Anthropology: A Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute – Blog*, November 09 2018. Available at: <https://www.teachinganthropology.org/2018/11/09/talking-about-race-in-text-and-in-person-is-hiding-behind-a-screen-helpful/> (Accessed: 13 September 2020).

- Loewenthal, J. (2019) Review of *Aspiring adults adrift: tentative transitions of college graduates*, by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa. *Educational Review*, 71 (6), p. 800.
- Loewenthal, J. and Broughton, J. (2019) 'Travel imaginaries of youth in New York City: history, ethnicity and the politics of mobility', in Habib, S. and Ward, M. R. M. (Eds) *Youth, Place and Theories of Belonging*. London: Routledge, pp. 66-79.
- Loewenthal, J., Alexander, P., and Butt, G. (2019) 'Fateful aspects of aspiration among graduates in New York and Los Angeles', *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 28 (03-04), pp. 345-361.
- Ma, Y. (2020) *Ambitious and anxious: how Chinese college students succeed and struggle in the United States*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Maccoby, E. E. and Martin, J. A. (1983) 'Socialization in the context of the family: parent-child interaction', in Hetherington, E. M. (Ed.) *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 4: Socialization, personality and social development*. Chichester, NY: Wiley, pp. 1-101.
- MacLeod, J. (2018) *Ain't no makin' it: aspirations and attainment in a low-income neighbourhood*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. New York and Abingdon: Routledge.
- Malinowski, B. (2014) *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Marcus, G. E. (1995) 'Ethnography in/of the world system: the emergence of multi-cited ethnography', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24 (Oct), pp. 95-117.
- Marinova, D. (2007) 'Finding the right balance between connection and control: a father's identity construction in conversations with his college-age daughter', in Tannen, D., Kendall, S., and Gordon, C. (Eds) *Family talk: discourse and identity in four American families*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 103-122.
- Markovitz, D. (2019) *The meritocracy trap: how America's foundational myth feeds inequality, dismantles the middle class, and devours the elite*. London: Penguin Press.
- Marx, K. (1988). *The economic and philosophical manuscripts of 1844*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1998) *The German ideology*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Mathews, G. (1996) *What makes life worth living? How Japanese and Americans make sense of their worlds*. Berkley, CA and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Mathews, G. (2017) 'Happiness pursued, abandoned, dreamed of, and stumbled upon: an analysis of 20 Japanese lives over 20 years', in Holthus, B. and Manzenreiter, W. (Eds) *Life course, happiness and well-being in Japan*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, pp. 189-201.
- Mauss, M. (2002) *The gift: the form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*. Taylor & Francis e-Library edition. London: Routledge.
- Maxwell, C. and Aggleton, P. (2015) 'Introduction: elite education – international perspectives', in Maxwell, C. and Aggleton, P. (Eds) *Elite education: international perspectives*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, pp. 1-12.



- Mendick, H., Allen, K., Harvey, L, and Ahmad, A. (2018) *Celebrity, aspiration and contemporary youth: education and inequality in an era of austerity*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Miller, D. (2012) *Consumption and its consequences*. Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Miller, D., Costa, E., Haynes, N., McDonald, T., Nicolescu, R., Sinanan, J., Spyer, J., Venkatraman, S., Wang, X. (2016) *How the world changed social media*. London: UCL Press.
- Modood, T. (2012) 'Capitals, ethnicity and higher education', in Basit, T. N. and Tomlinson, S. (Eds) *Social Inclusion and Higher Education*. Bristol: The Policy Press, pp. 17-40.
- Moffatt, M. (1989) *Coming of age in New Jersey: college and American culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Monnot, M. J. (2017) 'The goods life: China's wealth and happiness paradox', 10 April 2017. Available at: <https://think.iafor.org/chinas-paradox-of-wealth-and-happiness/> (Accessed 13 September 2020).
- Moody, J. (2019) 'A guide to the changing number of U.S. universities'. Available at: <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/2019-02-15/how-many-universities-are-in-the-us-and-why-that-number-is-changing> (Accessed: 12 September 2020).
- Moore, R. (2011) 'False consciousness/false needs', in Southerton, D. (Ed.) *Encyclopedia of consumer culture*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc, pp. 570-571.
- Mullen, A. L. (2010) *Degrees of inequality: culture, class, and gender in American higher education*. Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Nader, L. (1972) 'Up the anthropologist: perspectives gained from studying up', in Hymes, D. (Ed.) *Reinventing anthropology*. New York: Pantheon Books, pp. 284-311.
- O'Reilly, K. (2009) *Key concepts in ethnography*. 1<sup>st</sup> edition. London: SAGE.
- O'Reilly, K. and Benson, M. (2009) 'Lifestyle migration: escaping to the good life?', in Benson, M. and O'Reilly, K. (Eds) *Lifestyle migration: expectations, aspirations, and experiences*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, pp. 1-14.
- Okely, J. (2011) 'Retrospective reading of fieldnotes: living on Gypsy camps', *Behemoth: A Journal on Civilization*, 4(1), pp. 18-42.
- Ortner, S. (2003) *New Jersey dreaming: capital, culture, and the class of '58*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- Otaegui, A. (2020) 'Getting lonelier: the forbidden spaces of sociality during lockdown in Santiago', *Anthropology of smartphones and smart ageing blog*, 27 July 2020. Available at: <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/assa/2020/07/27/getting-lonelier-the-forbidden-spaces-of-sociality-during-the-lockdown-in-santiago/> (Accessed: 15 September 2020).
- Pabian, P. (2014) 'Ethnographies of higher education: introduction to the special issue', *European Journal of Higher Education*, 4(1), pp. 6-17.

Peou, C. and Zinn, J. 'Cambodian youth managing expectations and uncertainties of the life course – a typology of biographical management', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 18(6), pp. 726-742.

Perlin, R. (2011) *Intern nation: how to earn nothing and learn little in the brave new economy*. London and New York: Verso.

Phillips, A. (2015) *Unforbidden pleasures*. New York: Farrar, Straus And Giroux.

Pink, S. and Salazar, J. F. (2017) 'Anthropology and futures: setting the agenda', in Salazar, J. F., Pink, S., Irving, A., and Sjöberg, J. (Eds) *Anthropologies and futures: researching emerging and uncertain worlds*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 3-22.

Posecznick, A. (2017) *Selling hope and college: merit, markets, and recruitment in an unranked school*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Powdermaker, H. (1951) *Hollywood: the dream factory: an anthropologist looks at the movie makers*. London: Secker and Warburg.

Quinn, N. (2005) *Finding culture in talk: a collection of methods*. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rao, A. H. (2020). *Crunch time: how married couples confront unemployment*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Rapport, N. (1993) *Diverse world-views in an English village*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Rapport, N. (2012) *Anyone: the cosmopolitan subject of anthropology*. New York and Oxford, Berghahn Books.

Rhodes, F. H. T. (2001) *The creation of the future: the role of the American university*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Ritzer, G. and Stillman, T. (2003) 'Assessing McDonalidization, Americanization and Globalization', in Beck, U., Sznaider, N., and Winter, R. (Eds) *Global America? The Cultural Consequences of Globalization*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, pp. 30-48.

Robbins, B. (1993) *Secular vocations: intellectuals, professionalism, culture*. London and New York: Verso.

Robbins, J. (2013) 'Beyond the suffering subject: toward an anthropology of the good', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 19, pp. 447-462.

Robinson, K. and Aronica, L. (2009) *The element: how finding your passion changes everything*. London: Penguin books.

Roder, D. (2017) "'Too Good to Teach": Bhutanese Students and a Hierarchy of Aspirations', in Stambach, A. and Hall, K. D. (Eds) *Anthropological perspectives on student futures: youth and the politics of possibility*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 33-50.

Roese, N.J. and Summerville, A. (2005) 'What we regret most... and why', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31(9), pp. 1273-1285.

Rogers, C. R. (2003) *Client-centred therapy*. London: Constable and Robinson, Ltd.

- Rosa, H. (2010) *Alienation and acceleration – towards a critical theory of late-modern temporality*. Malmö and Aarhus: NSU Press.
- Roth, M. S. (2014) *Beyond the university: why liberal education matters*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Ryan, R. M. and Deci, E. L. (2000) 'Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: classic definitions and new directions', *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25(1), pp. 54-67.
- Salemink, O., Bregnbæk, S., and Hirslund, D. V. (2018) 'Introduction: youth, subjectivity and Utopia – ethnographic perspectives from the Global South', *Identities*, 25(2), pp. 125-139.
- Schor, J. B. (1998) *The overspent American: why we want what we don't need*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
- Sear, C. (2018) "'You never know what's coming 'round the corner': optimism and fantasy in the lives of "compers" or the serial entrants of promotional competitions', presentation given at *Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth Annual Conference 2018: Sociality, Matter, and the Imagination: Re-creating Anthropology*, University of Oxford, 21 September 2018.
- Shelley, P. B. (2002) *The selected poetry and prose of Shelley*. Ware: Wordsworth Poetry Library.
- Sirisena, M. (2018) *The making and meaning of relationships in Sri Lanka: an ethnography on university students in Colombo*. [eBook]. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Souleles, D. S. (2019) *Songs of profit, songs of loss: private equity, wealth, and inequality*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Southgate, B. (2012) *Contentment in contention: acceptance versus aspiration*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stafford, C. (2016) 'Being careful what you wish for: the case of happiness in China', in Kavedžija, I. and Walker, H. (Eds) *Values of happiness: toward an anthropology of purpose in life*. Chicago, IL: HAU Books, pp. 59-82.
- Stahl, G. (2016) 'Relationship-building in research: gendered identity construction in researcher-participant interaction', in Ward, M. R. M. (Ed.) *Gender identity and research relationships*. Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing, pp. 145–165.
- Stambach, A. (2017) 'Introduction', in Stambach, A. and Hall, K. D. (Eds) *Anthropological perspectives on student futures: youth and the politics of possibility*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1-17.
- Strathern, M. (2008) 'Preamble: knowledge identities', in Barnett, R. and di Napoli, R. (Eds) *Changing identities in higher education: voicing perspectives*. Oxford and New York: Routledge.
- Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1998) *Basics of qualitative research: techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Strauss, C. (2006) 'The imaginary', *Anthropological Theory*, 6 (3), pp. 322–344.

- Svašek, M. (2005) 'Introduction: emotions in anthropology', in Milton, K. and Svašek, M. (Eds) *Mixed emotions: anthropological studies of feeling*. Oxford and New York: Berg.
- Tannen, D. (2001) *I only say this because I love you: how the way we talk can make or break family relationships throughout our lives*. New York: Random House
- Tarkovsky, A. (1989) *Sculpting in time: the great Russian filmmaker discusses his art*. Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press.
- Tavory, I. and Timmermans, S. (2014) *Abductive analysis: theorizing qualitative research*. Chicago, IL and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Taylor, C. (1991) *The malaise of modernity*. Concord: House of Anansi Press Limited.
- Terkel, S. (1985) *Working: people talk about what they do all day and how they feel about what they do*. 1<sup>st</sup> Ballantine Books edition. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Tett, G. (2015) *The silo effect: the peril of expertise and the promise of breaking down barriers*. New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks.
- Thurlow, C. and Jaworski, A. (2017) 'Introducing elite discourse: the rhetorics of status, privilege, and power', *Social Semiotics*, 27(3), pp. 243-254.
- Times Higher Education (2020) 'World university rankings 2020'. Available: [https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2020/world-ranking#!/page/0/length/25/sort\\_by/rank/sort\\_order/asc/cols/stats](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2020/world-ranking#!/page/0/length/25/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/stats) (Accessed: 17 September 2020).
- Twenge, J. M. (2006) *Generation me: why today's young Americans are more confident, assertive, entitled – and more miserable than ever before*. New York: Free Press.
- Urry, J. (2007) *Mobilities*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Van Maanen, J. (2011). *Tales of the field: on writing ethnography*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Chicago, IL and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Varenne, H. (1977). *Americans together: structured diversity in a Midwestern town*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Varenne, H. and Koyama, J. (2011) 'Education, cultural production, and figuring out what to do next', in Levinson, B. and Pollock, M. (Eds) *A Companion to the Anthropology of Education*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 50-64.
- Varenne, H. (2019a) 'Introduction: when is education?', in Varenne, H. (Ed.) *Educating in life: ethnographies of challenging new normals*. New York: Routledge, pp. 1-16.
- Varenne, H. (2019b) 'Normals, emerging, and diverging', in Varenne, H. (Ed.) *Educating in life: ethnographies of challenging new normals*. New York: Routledge, pp. 21-34.
- Vellerman, J. D. (1999) 'A rational superego', *The Philosophical Review*, 108(4), pp. 529–558.
- Vertovec, S. (2007) 'Super-diversity and its implications', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30(6), pp. 1024-1054.

- Waskul, D. D. and Vannini, P. (2016) 'Introduction: popular culture as everyday life', in Waskul, D. D. and Vannini, P. (Eds) *Popular culture as everyday life*. New York and Abingdon: Routledge.
- Weber, M. (2001) *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. Abingdon: Routledge Classics.
- Weeks, K. (2011) *The problem with work: feminism, Marxism, antiwork politics, and postwork imaginaries*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- Wexler, P. (1992) *Becoming somebody: toward a social psychology of school*. London and New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Weiss, B. (2009) *Street dreams and Hip Hop barbershops: global fantasy in urban Tanzania*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Zaloom, C. (2019) *Indebted: how families make college work at any cost*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Zelizer, V. A. (2006) *The purchase of intimacy*. Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press.