

Chapter ?

Coming of Age through the Recession: High School Imaginings of Post-Recession Futures in New York City

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Introduction: Kinds of Men

The findings and analysis of this chapter are drawn from a comparative ethnography of aspiration and imagined futures in schools in London and New York (funded by the US-UK Fulbright Commission and the Peabody Trust). For the purposes of this chapter, I concentrate on the New York City phase of the research, at Bronx High School, to provide a critical assessment of how masculinity is enveloped into neoliberal framings of “aspiration” (Allen 2014). At Bronx High neoliberal masculinity is articulated in relation to individualized educational success and failure, adaptability to uncertain future economic conditions, “hard work,” and achievement against the odds to achieve particular (and in this case particularly elusive) imaginings of the American dream. I also consider how lived experiences in the present lead young men to imagine future aspirations and future masculinities beyond a hegemonic neoliberal ideal. Bronx High shows itself to be a profoundly future-oriented institution in which students must reconcile the privileging of imagined neoliberal futures with the often starkly different realities of their own experiences in the post-financial-crisis present. This precarious balancing act speaks to the notion that the recent financial crisis represents a potential ideological as well as structural crisis for neoliberalism (Duménil and Lévy 2011) – in this case, by subtly challenging the extent to

which neoliberal framings of aspiration can or should be accepted by young men as the “natural” foundations for particular imaginings of the future framed in relation to masculinity (Hall, Massey, and Rustin 2013).

In order to address the question of how neoliberal ideals of masculinity and aspiration are at once championed and resisted at Bronx High, I begin by considering the broader discursive processes through which constructions of masculinity are fused into constructions of aspiration in the context of schooling. I then consider specific examples from the ethnography. First I consider how dominant forms of neoliberal masculinity are reproduced in school discourse at the institutional level, and in the persona of the school’s principal. Drawing on examples from the classroom, I then consider how male students negotiate between “tough” performances and narratives of masculinity framed in relation to educational failure, and articulations of masculinity that fit with notions of academic, athletic, and/or economic success. Through these examples I show how multiple, entangled, concurrent, and often uncertain imaginings of gendered future aspirations are collapsed, made invisible, or rendered tractable under the weight of a single dominant, taken-for-granted neoliberal reckoning of what the future will look like for young men coming of age through the recession. I conclude by suggesting a quantum metaphor of the construction of personhood as a means to complicate our understanding of the relationship between masculinity, aspiration, and neoliberalism. I use a metaphor of quantum personhood to suggest that multiple and seemingly mutually exclusive discourses of aspiration and masculinity may in fact intertwine in the everyday lives of young men at Bronx High.

“Life is Straight Improv”

I would like to begin with a story. In the crisp, dappled sunlight of a late March afternoon, I was sitting in my usual place at the back of AP (Advanced Placement) English class at Bronx High School. On the horizon, out of the classroom window, the spired silhouette of the Empire State Building was just about discernible in the rising haze of a humid New York City spring, turning into summer. Much closer at hand, the grey tracks of the 4 Train shunted past tower blocks, tenements, delis, and dollar stores, the sound of passing trains mingling with excited shouts and laughter out on the well-groomed football field below. Inside, Mrs. Farey's classroom showed the signs of a year's worth of future-oriented activity. Carefully prepared class projects on *The Great Gatsby* now hung limply from the walls, curled by humidity; and character profiles from *Great Expectations* wore frayed edges where idle fingers had pried them from their display boards. Among these tributes to the work done during the year (most framed in anticipation of college careers to come), the room glimmered with conversation. Seniors huddled in corners or scraped desks together to talk, some about the task at hand (preparing for AP exams), but most about the impending excitement of leaving school and going to college.

I started talking to Andre, a student recognized by teachers as a "success story" among Bronx High seniors. I congratulated Andre on his recent successful application for a competitive scholarship that would pay his way to a prestigious liberal arts college. I asked if he had always hoped that his future would turn out this way, given the hard work that he had put into planning and preparing for a future at college. In response he said:

You know, life is *straight improv*: you just make it up as you go along. You never know what's going to happen or what kind of man you're gonna be. And I wouldn't want a roadmap for what my life is going to be like – that would be boring. Even when you do have a plan, you never know how you're going to like it until you're in it. Life is straight improv!

Andre shrugged and smiled, fixing me with a curious look, as if I should know, of course, that this was the case: *of course* life was “straight improv,” in spite of the fact that on the surface Andre was also one of the more strategic and “successful” students at Bronx High in terms of planning an explicit and singular route into the future, based on transforming the hard work of high school into success at college and in employment beyond. Andre faded back into a conversation with friends about college, parties, and prom; and I looked back out of the window, towards the city.

The above description speaks to the complex ways in which contested discourses of gender and aspiration make up part of the everyday imaginings of the future at Bronx High School. With Andre's pronouncement about the tenuous and performative nature of future masculinities in mind (his reference to becoming different versions of a “kind of man”), during this ethnographic research I was compelled to understand how high school seniors made sense of contested ideas about aspiration and imagined futures at the end of schooling. Bronx High is home to just over 2000 students of predominantly Latino (mostly Dominican, Mexican, and Puerto Rican), African-American, Afro-Caribbean (mostly Jamaican), West African (mostly Ghanaian), and South Asian (Indian and Bangladeshi) backgrounds. Most (but not all) students at the school

come from low income households reflective of the poverty that characterizes this borough of New York City. Social mobility and aspiration are tied, at the level of discourse in the school, to escaping poverty; and future masculinity is linked directly in turn to the achievement of this aspiration. Future-gazing messages of transformation and transition through “hard work” are literally written on the walls of classrooms and corridors, for example, on a noticeboard proclaiming loudly, “Through Education You Can Achieve the American Dream! (Pass With Hard Work),” and in the school’s Latin motto: *Sine Labore Nihil* (Nothing is Achieved Without Hard Work). Future-focused messages also emerge in the everyday discourse of the classroom. Imaginings of the future can be found in institutional texts (for example, school newsletters anticipating the future success of the school and/or individual students); in curricular texts (for instance, the kinds of aspirations depicted in *The Great Gatsby* and *Great Expectations*); and in standardized future-oriented activities (in the pragmatics of achieving future aspirations via college applications, SATs, or New York State Regents Exams). Interlinked with these texts, conversations about “successful” imagined futures (for example, becoming a professional basketball player, or going to college) exist alongside counter-narratives of cutting classes, failing classes, dropping out, and refuting the value of schooling as a means to achieve one’s dreams (Zipin 2009).

Schooling Young Men of the (Neoliberal) Future

In the kinds of banal institutional practices described above, neoliberal discourse about the future becomes an ever-present part of mundane, everyday life for young people in school. In important ways, personhood – one’s status as a viable, recognized member of society (Carsten 2004) – is

achieved through the successful narration of gendered self, via aspiration, towards this vision of the future (Skeggs 2011; MacLeod 2008; Stahl 2015). And yet discourse of equality of opportunity for young people must be measured against austere economic conditions, within which the reality of future aspirations may fall significantly short of the imagined futures that young people hold for themselves (Spohrer, this volume). While Harper (2014) emphasizes the importance of highlighting positive examples of young people (and particularly young men of color) achieving aspirations through high school and college, and while Skeggs (2011) points to ways in which personhood may be articulated outside of a neoliberal framing, recent research (for example, Steckel and Zasloff 2014; Roderick et al. 2008; Conley 2005; Hopkins et al. 2013) has explored these challenges in relation to the real and imagined futures of young people, particularly in the context of urban public education and transitions to post-secondary education in New York City. In spite of pronouncements about improvements to the US education system (with, for example, the highest national rates of high school graduation on record in 2015), much of this research reveals what still remains to be done in bridging the gap between where high school students want to be in the future, and where they end up. In this ethnographic research I was therefore interested to investigate in more detail *how* urban high school students are socialized through schooling to aspire to particular (and often neoliberal) imaginings of the future in the first place, in order to understand better if and how they are able to achieve these aspirations.

Schooling – understood as a process of disciplining, of training, of making tractable (Foucault 1975) – is a fundamental part of the symbolic language through which youth and “the future” are mobilized to articulate political agendas for wider society. Political calls to safeguard the future

of young people (often through education) can represent a means to reaffirm a version of the core ideals of neoliberalism - that is, the idea of aspiration towards individual self-actualization through economic competition that inevitably, if often implicitly, requires the dispossession of the many to service the interests of the few (Harvey 2005). Key to this neoliberal vision of the future is the connection between education, aspiration, and social mobility, and the assumption that moving from a working-class to a middle-class position in society is an *a priori* goal that all working-class young people should be actively working towards, despite substantial barriers (Allen 2014, 761). For young men, positive ideals of aspirational masculinity become inextricably tied through this rhetoric to a neoliberal model of social mobility based on the idea that leaving behind markers of one's working-class identity is an unproblematically good thing.

The rhetoric of meritocracy and choice, coupled with discourse about individual resilience and adaptability to uncertain economic futures, presents a neoliberal framing of the future that is exclusive in its conjuring of reality. That is to say, the seductive power of neoliberal rhetoric – what Harvey describes as “a benevolent mask full of wonderful-sounding words like freedom, liberty, choice, and rights” (2005, 119) – becomes not only the *preferred* version of the future for young people, but the *only* one. Certain *kinds* of aspiration (in some cases, attending a higher education institution; in others, pursuing education for pragmatic and “realistic” vocational ends) are privileged within these discourses, while others are not (Archer and Yamashita 2003). In response to deficit depictions of youth imaginings of the future – rhetoric of concern, for example, about the impact of celebrity culture (Mendick et al. 2015), or about “poverty of aspiration” (St Clair, Kintrea, and Houston 2001) – schools become a battleground for instilling more “appropriate” aspirations, often connected to notions of “hard work” and industriousness.

Using the example of the London riots of 2011, Tylor (2013) notes the ways in which this so-called “poverty of aspiration” becomes pathologized to reinforce forms of class-based stigma around “disordered” youth who, ironically, do not represent a neoliberal ideal of the future but are in their marginalization an essential part of its realization. The same argument might be made justifiably of media representations of young men of color in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement that emerged in New York City and other locations around the United States during 2014–2015. There is a gendered element to both sources of social anxiety and their political outcomes, with sexualized popular imaginings of female youth “off the rails” representing one alternative to the neoliberal ideal of the future (Allen 2014) (or of “masculine” girls, as in Jackson’s (2002) account of “ladettes”), alongside criminalized imaginings of disaffected male youth of color. As Law and Swann (2011) suggest in their account of “geeks” and “gangstas” in schools in the north of England, both imaginings involve a classed and racialized component that paints the “negative” alternative to the neoliberal ideal of future aspiration principally as the reserve of ethnic minority youth or working-class white youth. The stigmatization of youth can then be operationalized into forms of governmentality. This can range from economic and social policy relating to youth (un)employment, to educational policy aimed at eradicating “poverty” of aspiration through the normalization of the values of neoliberalism. In relation to masculinity, this means that certain “kinds of men” become positively framed through schooling, while others are not.

As in the case of the London riots or Black Lives Matter demonstrations, urban centers become particularly evocative staging grounds for imagining the future – as cityscapes where futures are

forged and where “dream” (or phantasmagoric) masculinities and femininities can apparently become real. In relation to masculinity in particular, New York City is the forging ground of individuals who have come to represent particular forms of “successful” maleness, from hip hop and fashion impresarios like Jay-Z (Belle 2014), to male sports stars, to artists, activists, and politicians. These individuals may represent aspirational performances of “successful” masculinity quintessential to New York as a hub for culture and capitalism; and they may also represent idealized rags-to-riches narratives of masculinity where the exception is used to prove the rule connecting aspiration and “hard work” (however this may be defined) to future “success.” This serves as an example of what Zipin et al. (2015) describe as “doxic” aspirations: those versions of an idealized neoliberal vision of “aspirational” future masculinities reinforced discursively through popular-ideological mediations and reinforced through “aspirational” messages driving school ethos in settings like Bronx High. Imagined future masculinities – and the aspirations associated with them – can in this sense be as elusive as they may be illusory in a “dream” cityscape like New York City. From Andre’s AP English classroom described above, the Empire State Building was visible, but it was a long way off, and it belonged to another version of New York City slightly out of reach to many young men at Bronx High.

Framing “The Future” in Relation to Masculinity, Aspiration, and Schooling

A large body of school ethnography explores how formal schooling shapes the real and imagined futures of young people, often with “the future” as a backdrop to well-worn categories of analysis such as class, ethnicity, and gender (to name but a few, Hargreaves 1967; Willis 1984;

Bowles and Gintis 1976; Ogbu 1974 Varenne and McDermott 1999; Evans 2007; Macleod 2008; Stahl 2015).

Notably, Mac an Ghaill (1994) has explored in detail the relationship between schooling and masculinity, drawing on Butler (1991) to highlight the “constitutive cultural elements of dominant modes of heterosexual subjectivity that inform ... male students’ learning to act like men in the school arena” (1994, 4). Crucially, Mac an Ghaill, and many others since (for example, Evans 2007), points out the contradictory and contextually contingent nature of performing and reproducing gendered subjectivities in schools. In linking masculinity and neoliberalism within the context of schooling, Phoenix (2004) points to the contradictions and tensions between hegemonic forms of masculinity privileged in the social lives of boys at school – (often racialized) markers of hardness, aggression, confrontation, and hierarchical power – and markers of academic success that, while occasionally considered “masculine” (for example, competitiveness), are also interpreted as effeminate (2004, 233; Francis 2006). Archer (2001, 435) also points to the ways in which young men – and working-class young men in particular – must balance (and in so doing reproduce) notions of masculinity that are valued outside of education (as “breadwinners” or “manual workers”) with those constructions of masculinity more readily valued in educational contexts. In relation to aspiration, this speaks to a well-established literature about the conflicting but not necessarily mutually exclusive ideas that young people (and young men in particular) may have of what the future might hold (see, for example, Mickleson 1990; Kimmel 2008, 2012).

Research exploring new configurations of social identity in relation to the future presents an interesting avenue through which to further investigate how young men give meaning to their lived experiences of becoming gendered adults at school (Cole and Durham 2008; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013; Carabelli and Lyon 2016). Woodman (2011), for example, points out that current research on youth transitions predominantly focuses too much on the capacity to plan for the future. Drawing on Bourdieu (1977), he argues instead that choices about the future are derived as much from explicit, reasoned plans as they are from a wide range of dispositions about the future that, while not necessarily coherent or fully articulated, still represent a kind of framework for thinking about the temporality of one's social identity. Indeed, "not planning" might represent a framework that is more subtle and suitable in its flexibility to the precarious conditions that young people encounter as they navigate uncertain pathways through the post-recession "life course" (James 2014; Arnett 2000; Cote 2000; Rosa 2008). However, messy plans for uncertain, messy futures do not fit well with a neoliberal reckoning of what future identities should look like, not least in relation to an essentialized neoliberal ideal masculinity founded in assuredness, entrepreneurship, and self-interested aspiration towards clear economic goals and markers of social mobility. In the context of schooling, an unclear plan for the future represents the opposite of what is promoted under the auspices of aspiration to future success, along clearly planned routes that require particular performances of diligence and "hard work." Andre may think that "life is straight improv," but he knows not to show this in how he articulates his imagining of the future to teachers, college administrators, and the keepers of scholarship money. As the noticeboard at Bronx High reminds us: "The American Dream Can Be Achieved Through Education! (Pass With Hard Work)."

Rethinking Future Masculinities and Schooling

Understanding how young people make sense of their futures in relation to notions of aspiration is key to understanding how students like Andre turn intention into action in order to achieve imagined future outcomes. In particular, in what follows I am interested in investigating how alternatives to a neoliberal ideal of future masculinity are collapsed and made invisible in the lives of young men, reducing the possibility of thinking about the future in another way. In order to make sense of this process, Gale and Parker (2015) suggest the “correction” of a more static interpretation of how aspiration is cultivated to reproduce inequality through education, incorporating Appadurai’s (2004) notion of aspiration as a cultural capacity characterized by “relationality, dissensus and weak boundaries” – and above all by its orientation not towards fixed “pastness” but to the possibility and portent of the future I argue that this mercurial sense of temporality as yet remains to be fully theorized in relation to schooling, neoliberal ideals of aspiration, and masculinity (Zipin et al. 2015; Carabelli and Lyon 2016). When faced with an apparent multiplicity of choices, opportunities, and uncertainties, young people at the end of their school careers may see not only multiple *potential* futures (Archer et al. 2010), but also multiple and concurrent potential future gendered selves that both conform to *and* challenge a neoliberal enveloping of aspiration and masculinity – what Zipin et al. (2015) refer to as the coming together of *doxic* (or naturalized, ideational) and *habituated* (or internalized, individualized, dispositional) logics of aspiration, alongside an *emergent* (emancipatory, novel, critical) sense of future potential that engages with, but also transcends, these logics. Following Zipin, in the ethnographic vignettes to come I now show how a multiple, concurrent approach to framing aspiration and masculinity may reveal more of the complexity of how doxic, habituated, *and*

emergent logics of aspiration are articulated in relation (and sometimes in contradistinction) to neoliberal imaginings of the future. I then suggest a quantum metaphor of personhood that may help to capture something of this complexity.

Imagining a Future After High School in the Bronx

In various ways, Bronx High is a staging ground for competing future imaginings of masculinity and aspiration. The Bronx remains the most disadvantaged of New York City's boroughs, and while Bronx High is not in the most underprivileged area of the borough, the school is located in a densely populated neighborhood characterized by disadvantage. US Census data suggest that 39 per cent (or around 10,000) of the population in the immediate vicinity of the school live below the poverty line, with a median income of around US\$24,000 (less than half the median income for New York City in 2014). Just under two thirds (64 per cent) of local residents have a high school diploma or higher, but only 11 per cent have a bachelor's degree or higher (US Census Bureau 2014). The neighborhood has a relatively high crime rate, with instances of violent crime increasing in the vicinity immediately south of the school grounds. Incidences of violent crime and notions of "tough" or "hood" masculinity emerge in students' recounting of experiencing crime in their community and in the school (as Charles indicates, below). The neighborhood around Bronx High, then, can be seen to reflect a more general trend in US cities whereby entrenched structural poverty and income inequality reinforce the marginalization of certain urban areas and their communities. Tylor (2013), drawing on Wacquant, might describe the neighborhood as experiencing key aspects of structural violence imputed by neoliberalism: "labour precarity ... the relegation of people to decomposing neighbourhoods ... and heightened

stigmatisation” (2013, para 2.1). While young men at Bronx High were not all affected equally by the above factors, many arrived at school each day with significant disadvantages born of the adverse socio-economic conditions of their local and home environments. Bronx High has a high number of students who are recent migrants to the United States in circumstances of disadvantage. It is home to a large number of young people who are homeless or in sheltered housing. It is also home to a high proportion of young people who have already been incarcerated and who have returned to school. In 2010 the school was touted in the media as the “most heavily armed” high school in the city, with the highest rate of seized illegal weapons of all New York City public schools. Until recently, these issues have led to a negative perception of the school in the press and in the local popular imagination. Perhaps not surprisingly, in media coverage of the school this is often articulated through a contested image of black and Latino young men who are at once presented as a phantasmagoric, criminalized exemplar of deviance, and as young men of untapped potential in circumstances of disadvantage and risk (Cooper 2006; Domino Rudolph 2012).

Masculinity and Institutional Aspirations

Students and staff are well aware of the negative popular perception of their school and of its contradistinction to the school’s history. The school itself is housed in a castle-like building dating to the late 1920s. The walls are hung with gilt-engraved oak signs that show the honor rolls of (mostly male, mostly white) students now long-graduated, including individuals who have since excelled and achieved fame in their fields, from fashion, to politics, to comedy, to American football. The school is proud of its past and celebrates these alumni wherever possible

by holding them up – on noticeboards in the school, as visitors, when mentioned in school assemblies – as examples of what *kinds* of men (for they were predominantly men) students might be in the future. In spite of the laudable aims behind promoting these figures, the school’s celebration of its past success stories could be seen to fit into Zipin et al.’s (2015, 232) notion of a doxic logic of aspiration – as evidence of the taken-for-granted assumption that with the right amount and kind of “hard work” inevitably comes “success” in the form of fame and fortune, even though the conditions in the local neighborhood may strongly suggest otherwise.

Representations of these exemplars of “successful,” aspirational masculinity can be seen just down the hall from the metal detectors that slow students’ progress into the building every morning as they are checked for weapons – something that might be described as the “cruel optimism” (Zipin et al. 2015, 234) of representing doxic forms of neoliberal aspiration towards “success” alongside barriers (in this case symbolic and literal) to achieving such success. In the very physical space and material culture of the school, neoliberal representations of masculinity loom large.

As a school now labelled as “failing,” Bronx High recently attracted a new, dynamic principal. Often found smiling and talking with students in the halls, the principal feels a sense of genuine hope that the future will indeed be much brighter. This is crystalized in his mantra that *in the future* Bronx High will be “the school of choice for all families in the Bronx.” On one hand, this rhetoric of choice and change could be reflective of neoliberal discourse about aspiration based on the supposed agency of individuals to make the positive transformation of the school a reality (Phoenix 2004, 229; Spohrer, this volume). As a first generation Dominican migrant to the United States, now hailing from the Bronx, and as a charismatic, physically impressive

individual who has “made it” in spite of the challenges that his circumstances presented to him as a young man, the principal also embodies this potential for change and individual transformation, not unlike the masculine “heroes” of the school’s alumni. In the image of the principal and in his vision for the school, masculinity and neoliberal aspiration are therefore intertwined. And yet, at the same time, the principal’s sincere and enduring commitment to improving the life chances of his students may also intimate an *emergent* imagining of the school’s future that is intended to be emancipatory. As one student scrawled on a blackboard during an English class, “Just because I’m in a ‘failing’ school, that doesn’t mean I’m failing,” echoing the principal’s belief that the future of the school and of its inhabitants can be more than the reproduction of a “failed” past, even if the route to this future success remains tied to doxic and habituated logics of aspiration.

Becoming the “Man of the House”: Charles’ Story

Another example of at once embracing and resisting a dominant neoliberal ideal of masculinity came from a student in a senior English class I observed in the school, which was team-taught by two teachers, Carlos and Anne. Charles is a tall, skinny student and second generation migrant from Jamaica. He has a calm, affable demeanor, and constantly talks about his progress as a track athlete. Charles was one of a number of students in the class described affectionately by Carlos as a “knucklehead” when he arrived in freshman year – a common term used among teachers to describe young men involved in misbehavior and “nonsense,” in danger of making poor decisions and taking the “wrong” path through high school, of becoming the wrong *kinds* of young men. Students who were acting “tough” or “gangsta” (as one student put it, acting like a “grown-ass man”), or what Anne referred to as “getting all Tupac” (in reference to the famous,

now-deceased rapper Tupac Shakur), were also imagining themselves as gendered and adult. But they were doing so in a way that was not validated or recognized in the classroom. Competing imaginings of future masculinity rubbed uncomfortably against one another in this class, with “tough” masculinity (Phoenix 2004) being dismissed as “nonsense” by the teachers.

As Jackson suggests (2002), there is a particular kind of “hard work” involved in students appearing not to try hard academically while in school, with considerable effort paid instead to avoiding schoolwork as a means of reinforcing a form of “tough” masculinity that has value within male students’ social worlds. At Bronx High, this kind of “tough” anti-school behavior was epitomized by the activity of “walking the halls” (see also MacLeod 2008) – literally walking continuously around the quadrangle corridors of the school, evading security staff and police, and avoiding spending time in the classroom while ostensibly still “at school.” Charles was a serial “hall walker” to begin with, but by the end of sophomore year, Charles’ mother had fallen seriously ill. At first, he took this as another opportunity to cut classes and avoid school work, but as his mother’s illness worsened he realized he “had to be the man around the house.” He also wanted to make his mother proud of him and present to her the kind of adult future that she wanted for her son. His initial resistance to school culture and his embracing of a different kind of “tough” or “street” masculinity was challenged by his obligation to fulfil a masculine role as a dependable and respected figure within his family. As he put it,

Sophomore year was ... I wouldn’t want my mom to feel like she ... if something happened to her, that she would just leave me here doing nothing with my life, so, I had to take care of my priorities ... the people I grew up with, we all went

through some stuff. I mean, I don't really regret it because I never really got caught with it, but there have been moments where I've almost gotten caught, and then in the long run, it's like "if I do get caught, I'm goin' to jail, so why should I go to jail when I could just be free, like, go to college." ... I'm always gonna remember where I came from, but if I stay in this *environment*, I don't think I'm gonna move ahead in life, like, especially when you're in the ghetto part of uptown, I think like every summer like two, three people die, so I was like "I don't wanna be a part of that."

The alternative, it would seem, to his performance of a "tougher" masculinity, was to embrace that version of "manhood" lauded by the school (even if he did also emphasize that he is "always gonna remember where I came from"). As a result, Charles told Carlos that he was going to get a 95 per cent average in his class. He managed to get an 85 per cent, and by the end of senior year was the top of the class, was set to graduate on time, and had even taken on a mentoring role to other young men in the class who were struggling to pass. Moreover, he was able to style himself as a success in his performance as a track athlete. What was once a wasted talent became his ticket into college: Charles won a sports scholarship based on his potential as a runner. For Charles, then, it was the "adult" experience of his mother's illness and his impending family responsibilities that forced him to re-evaluate his imagining of himself and re-shape his vision of "adulthood" via the idiom of aspiring to academic and sporting success in high school ("getting ahead in life"). Charles is in this way an example of a student who, once seen to take responsibility for his educational success ("take care of my priorities ... be the man around the house"), reflects the wider school discourse of taking responsibility for one's behavior, one's

potential, and for one's successful trajectory through education into later life. That is, he came to fit an archetypal neoliberal narrative of future masculinity, the kind that is celebrated in the image of the principal and in past alumni (and particularly those alumni associated with physical prowess and sporting acclaim).

And yet, when pushed, he was also reticent about the extent to which he actually believed in his own narrative of redemption from being a “knucklehead” to being the “kind of man” that his mother (and the school) could be proud of as a future college graduate and track star. Indeed, he actively eschewed the latter “dream” future, seeing it as a precarious and fickle trajectory toward wealth and fame. After a conversation about how much he loved competing in track, Charles said, without irony, “But man ... I *hate* track!” He mocked the irony of going to college on a competitive sports scholarship, suggesting that existing professional track athletes had advised him “go (to college), but don't go (unless you need to as a back-up)” – that is, they suggested that the only track stars who go to college as a contingency are the ones who are unlikely to be committed and talented enough to actually “make it.” Charles' approach was more strategic: he needed to “sell” his willingness to be a track star in order to get into college and maintain his scholarship, but his own aspirations were less stratospheric:

You could be injured at any time ... like you could stretch and get injured ... so I'd rather get my education, get a job ... you know, I'd rather be the runner-up than be the one who gets injured ... So I'm gonna be a physiotherapist, then I can help all the others.

Here Charles demonstrates a complex engagement both with habituated and doxic logics of aspiration, while also maintaining an imagining of himself in the future that is facilitated by, but is also divergent from, this logic of aspiration. While still framed in relation to self-interest and strategic positioning of the self – hallmarks of an idealized neoliberal masculinity –there are glimpses here of an emergent logic of aspiration that is also critical of how aspiration has been framed for him through his experience of “making it” as a young man in high school.

Reimagining the Past to Reconfigure the Future: Jackson’s Story

Imaginings of potential future masculinity emerge in other contexts in the school. In AP English, students regularly engaged in creative writing activities. In many of the texts produced, contested imaginings of masculinity emerged as students crafted speculative autobiographical accounts of the future. This was the case in various pieces of writing completed by Jackson. Jackson was a smaller than average but athletic young man, and quarterback of the school’s football team. He took great pride in wearing his letterman jacket on game days. Because of his smaller size, he was aware that his aspirations to the National Football League (NFL) were unlikely to come to fruition. Nevertheless, Jackson wrote a play in which the main character, “Jr,” makes it to the NFL and confronts his absent father on draft (team selection) day. This play involved unsettling revelations about narratives of self, and a reconfiguration of the future in relation to these revelations about the past. In the play, “Jr” is initially closed off from his father figure, having believed his father abandoned him:

Jr: I'm surprised I even recognized your face ... maybe it's because you look like me! Yeah ... *you* look like *me* ... hello stranger who looks like me! ...

Father: ... Don't disrespect me, I'm a grown-ass man and I'm your father!

Jr: Any boy can make a baby but it takes a man to raise one ... [Audience: Ooooh!]

Father: ... I've been watching you all through high school and up through Syracuse ... I went to [Bronx High] too and I wore Number 29 just like you did ... I watched every game you played ... I don't want your money or your fame, I just want my son back. [A few members of audience audibly crying] ...

Jr: Well let me call you and we'll get something to eat ... come on pop, we aint settlin' for no McDonald's anymore! We're big time now.

In the end, Jackson reconciled his future imagined self with his future imagined father, and they made up (in reality, he was estranged from his father). This was an evocative example of a student wrestling with complex reckonings of masculinity in the present, while attempting to reconcile creative re-workings of the past with a more coherent vision of aspiring to “successful” masculinity in the future.

In another writing exercise, this time focusing on college personal statements, Jackson wrote about being kicked out of his home because of an argument with his mother's boyfriend. Although technically homeless, with no money or clothes, he described how he was able to persevere with the help of his teammates on the high school football team. Students were

encouraged in this AP class to write multiple college letters, all of which varied in terms of the anecdote or extended metaphor used while maintaining a coherent sense of the positive qualities of the individual being described. Students would then strategically choose which of these representations of themselves to put forward to prospective colleges. In this way, the writing of college letters provided an opportunity for students both to reinforce the construction of discrete articulations of themselves as persons, while at the same time recognizing the multiple, contingent ways in which this person may be imagined as similar, but also different, in the future. In Jackson's personal statement (if not in reality) he eventually reconciled his differences with his mother and her boyfriend to return home, presenting himself as the "bigger man." Various narratives of masculinity can be seen in Jackson's writing – in relation to the fraternity of his football team; in his rivalry with his mother's boyfriend; and in his own construction of an emotionally engaged, intelligent (but still physically strong and "tough") aspirational masculine sense of self that he *in turn* imagined would be appealing to prospective readers of his college application. In the class, Jackson's personal statement was held up as a successful example of how students can imagine themselves as the *kinds* of individuals that would fit into future college life and who would be appealing to admissions offices. Interestingly, the above narrative was the basis of the personal statement in Jackson's successful application to Syracuse University on a football scholarship, providing further vindication of this particular future imagining of masculinity as one that is valued in the world beyond high school. If there is some emergent logic of aspiration here in Jackson's strategic use of this narrative of masculinity to secure a place in college, the doxic and habituated nature of the "kind of man" that he promises to be in college are also problematic because they do not necessarily match his experience of reality. It is important in this respect to consider the potential gaps between these successful, coherent,

college-friendly narratives of future masculine selves, and students' lived experiences – some of which include challenges that may significantly complicate future experiences at college.

Conclusions: Quantum Reckonings of Personhood?

In this chapter I have summarized findings from ethnographic research at Bronx High School. I have outlined the narratives of young men in order to present a) their gendered imaginings of the future; and b) the complex sense of personhood developed in relation to these imagined visions of future masculinity. Rethinking how the future is framed in relation to schooling requires a critical appraisal of how aspiration and masculinity are changing as elements of gendered personhood for young people in contemporary society. In particular, futurity remains under-explored in the existing literature on masculinity in the context of schooling (see, for example, Carmo, Cantante, and Almeida Alves 2014). In the interwoven, contingent, future-gazing narratives of Andre, Charles, and Jackson, there is a confluence of seemingly discordant logics of aspiration (Zipin's doxic, habituated, *and* emergent forms). The coming together of these logics suggests the need for new ways of thinking about how young people are socialized into notions of futurity.

One means of making sense of these complex reckonings of self may be through the concept of “quantum personhood” (Alexander forthcoming). By using imagery and metaphor derived from quantum physics, quantum personhood explores how the supposedly inchoate, isolated individual person can be conceived, electron-like, to co-exist in multiple places, both in the past and present but also across diverse potential futures, in ways that while seemingly incongruent

are in fact more often concurrent and even complementary. As with quantum physics, the intention here is to complicate existing ideas about personhood by focusing on complexity, uncertainty, and paradox. This complexity is collapsed and made invisible within a neoliberal articulation of individualist personhood based on a single and narrow vision of what the future can and should look like. And yet, as I have suggested so far in this chapter, evidence of multiple concurrent imagined futures is all around in contexts like Bronx High where future orientation is particularly important. As the repetition of daily routines turns present into past and future into present, with habitual behavior students re-work familiar but *always slightly different* imaginings of the impending future. The regular and repetitive scheduling of the “daily grind” at Bronx High can be seen in this way as the performance of idiosyncratic versions of the same scene (doxic and habituated), at once similar but also different and sometimes incongruent (emergent), played out over and over again in the pursuit of an imagined future that will also be made up of repetitive, future-gazing actions, as in the routines of employment or college.

Quantum personhood accounts for the ways in which the many *potential* versions of persons impact on how one constructs a coherent sense of self both in the present, and in representations of the person projected backwards into the past and forward into the future (as in Jackson’s play). It also emphasizes the ways in which personhood is shaped by relational entanglement: personhood exists in the co-constructed, shifting narratives that we tell to ourselves and to others, and the stories that others tell about us (Skeggs 2011). Sometimes these narratives are complementary: others may imagine future action – whether distant or imminent – in the same way that we imagine it. This may lead, as in the examples of Andre, Charles, and Jackson above, to a co-construction of personhood that is positively aligned with aspirations or dreams for the

future – a collaborative, quantum complication of the notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968). When these narratives do not match up, either in the present or in an impending future reality, this discord can have profound consequences for the realization of future aspirations. In addition to its relational quality, quantum personhood illuminates how the person is shaped in spatial as well as temporal conditions, meaning that personhood can be perceived to linger in and to alter once-inhabited spaces (like schools) or anticipated spaces and times (like going to college in the future) even if the person is not physically there. As in the case of Jackson, aspirations to future masculinity are forged in a high school classroom but looking into the past *as well as* towards college; and in turn, when this projection of “successful” future masculinity is validated by his acceptance to college, the future reaches into the present and begins to re-shape his present reckoning of masculinity accordingly. Within future-oriented contexts that privilege neoliberal conceptions of masculinity and aspiration, gendered personhood is perpetually articulated and enacted in the present, but its quantum qualities relate to multiple versions of the same personhood, located in the past and the future; always present, as it were, in the present, but not always in neat agreement or concordance. To return to Andre, if the negotiation of aspiration and masculinity involves “straight improv,” then it is the challenge of young men at Bronx High both to recognize and then to mask this improvisation, at once to fit the strictures of a neoliberal ideal of what it means to be the right *kind* of man, and to demonstrate their capacity to aspire to a future beyond this ideal.

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