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The Neoliberalization of Latino Men and Boys: Power and Resistance in a School-based Mentorship Program

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The Neoliberalization of Latino Men and Boys:
Power and Resistance in a School-based Mentorship Program

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A growing number of school district and community programs are seeking to remedy the achievement gap experienced by Latino boys through Latino male mentorship programs. Indicative of neoliberal shifts in Latinx education, these programs often involve public-private partnerships and assume a damaged Latino boy in need of technocratic and innovative solutions, rather than structural changes. Through an ethnographic case study of one Latino male mentorship program in an urban school district in California, this study explores the ways the administrative power of Latino male programming constructs the ideal Latino male subject through neoliberal values of individualism, excellence and earning potential, and pushes boys to be the future hetero-patriarchs of their community. Furthermore, based on in-depth interviews with the mentors and boys of the program, as well as one year of participant observations, this paper uncovers the ways these discourses are lived, embodied, and/or resisted in the classroom among boys and mentors.

Introduction

City Councilman Rodriguez approached the podium and began addressing the crowd of donors at the Pueblo Unido fundraiser: We all *know* who these boys are and they're not bad kids... I *know* them better than most, you see, I never shy away from saying I am from Bahía, and I'm proud of it [crowd applause] …. I *know* what it's like to grow up on the Northside. I was a little knucklehead myself, a travieso who needed a big brother to knock me on the head sometimes and keep me on the right path…These mentors here [points to mentors lining the walls of the golf course banquet hall], they are changing lives.[1]

In the above fieldnote excerpt, we see a Latino city councilman contributing to a growing discourse on Latino boys by claiming a knowledge of them: who they are, what they need, and what their educational hardships are. In the past two decades there has been an explosion of discourse surrounding the academic struggles faced by Latino boys, Black boys, and the often ambiguous category of "boys of color."[2] In academia an array of publications has documented the policed and punished lives of boys (A. A. Ferguson, 2001; Lopez, 2002; Malagon, 2010; Noguera, 2003; Rios, 2011), the struggles they face in higher education (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009, 2011; Strayhorn, 2010), and possible interventions in changing the educational outcomes of boys of color (Bristol, 2015; A. L. Brown & Donnor, 2011; Fergus, Noguera, & Martin, 2014; Harper & Associates, 2014; Howard, Flennaugh, & Terry Sr., 2012; Noguera, Hurtado, & Fergus, 2011). In addition to research, universities have developed numerous young men of color initiatives for their undergraduate student populations, as well as centers and institutes dedicated to changing educational outcomes of boys of color at the K-12 level. On the national stage, former President Barack Obama's 2014 My Brother's Keeper (MBK) initiative serves as an exemplar of this

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[1] Pseudonyms have been assigned to all people, organizations, schools, and cities in this study.

[2] While this study focuses specifically on Latino men and boys, a larger push to address boys of color more broadly has greatly informed the creation of this program. I understand the literature's use of "boys of color" to encapsulate students who are marginalized in the education system due to their gender and racial identities. This category typically includes Black, Latino, Native American, and Southeast Asian boys. While I use the category boys of color when drawing from the literature, I would like to note that despite the commonalities of these groups, I am cautious not to assume a homogenized educational experience. In a separate paper I engage with the particularity of anti-black racism surrounding neoliberal multiculturalism in Latinx educational spaces.

growing movement, encouraging cities, towns, and tribal nations to seek creative ways to improve the life trajectories of boys and young men of color.

This paper links two ongoing conversations in the field of educational research. The first is about the education of boys and young men of color. While it is perhaps undeniable that boys of color, and in particular Black boys, face a particular struggle in schools, the conceptual framing that determines who these boys are and what problems they face is contested terrain. The second conversation I enter is the growing concern for the ways neoliberalism, beyond simply an economic theory, is a discourse and logic that has become embedded in how we understand and address the troubles of urban education (Lipman, 2011). Growing in power since its rise in the late 1970's, neoliberalism has developed its own language which is now endemic in education policy and school reform (Apple, 2006), many times used and ushered in by communities of color ourselves (Dumas, 2013; Pedroni & Apple, 2005; Spence, 2016). While scholars have begun to examine the ways neoliberal discursive framing has come to inform policy regarding boys and young men of color, this work has stayed at a broad national policy level (see Dumas, 2016). This paper builds on this literature by exploring the interconnectedness of neoliberal educational discourse and boy of color programming at the ground level. Key to this study are the ways neoliberal logics not only frame and discursively construct specifically Latino men and boys, but how these subjectivities are embodied and normalized in classrooms among students and educators.

While reiterating the need to address educational inequalities in communities of color, this article asks what happens to a population previously excluded, denigrated, and negatively represented in the field of education, when it now becomes included and targeted in the neoliberal educational imaginary? On whose terms does this inclusion enter the educational

discourse, and what ideological projects inform this inclusion? The work of Michel Foucault is useful here, in that Foucault (1980) retheorizes power as not simply a negative and repressive force, but rather something potentially productive. Power speaks in the affirmative, asking for knowledge and understanding as a means of subjectification. Through connecting power and knowledge as possessing affirmative qualities, Foucault provides a valuable framework to examine the discourses contributing to the conversation on boys of color, and the construction of the male of color subject in today's educational landscape.

This research is an ethnographic case study of Latino Male Success (LMS), a Latino male mentorship program in Bahía, CA. Indicative of the neoliberal, decentralizing climate of Bahía, LMS was created through the partnership between a Latinx nonprofit, Pueblo Unido, and Bahía Unified School District (BUSD). Latino Male Success now operates in 10 middle and high schools in the district. As I describe in more detail below, my study employs ethnographic methods to build a comprehensive understanding of how institutions and actors contribute to particular knowledges of Latino boys in Bahía, as well as how mentors and boys in Latino Male Success live out these knowledges on the day to day. My findings reveal the ways neoliberal logics frame the goals of LMS, frequently pathologizing unproductive identities and idealizing a Latino masculinity that is deemed respectable, entrepreneurial, and both heterosexual and patriarchal. Furthermore, participant observations illustrate the way these neoliberal values become animated by mentors and boys as both groups frequently embraced this hailing. Despite the pervasive presence of neoliberal discourse, I close with moments of resistance, highlighting the ways research participants at times refused neoliberal logics and promoted alternative framings of Latinx education.

Schools and the Construction of Neoliberal Subjects

Schools and educational programs are always already shaped by wider economic, political, and social contexts (Apple, 2004). Far from neutral, schooling practices, curricula, and programming reflect a dominant politics, which serve to impact the ways the subjects of educational policy are managed, monitored, and in fact created. Critical educational theorists understand this as the reproductive aspect of schooling, positing schools as sites of social and cultural reproduction; both the products and the producers of society (Giroux, 1983). Schooling and educational programs are both shaped and limited by the predominant discourse of the time, making educational knowledge and action fundamentally political.

Neoliberalism has become the dominant discourse in today's urban educational landscape. At a global scale, neoliberalism as an economic framework has been preeminent since the 1970's, promoting individualist agendas and ushering in waves of deregulation and privatization (Harvey, 2007). In the field of education, neoliberal policies have become the basis for education reform efforts. Lipman (2013) describes the complex nature of neoliberalism in education as an assemblage of "economic and social policies, forms of governance, and discourses and ideologies that promote individual self-interest, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in the cost of labor, and sharp retrenchment of the public sphere" (p.6).

Beyond simply an economic policy, neoliberalism is a governing rationality which promotes the notion of human capital, reconfiguring the human itself as *homo oeconomicus* (W. Brown, 2015). Neoliberal regimes of truth serve to discipline and regulate teacher and student subjects into embodying and embracing the neoliberal values propagated by education policy (Ball, 2012, 2016; Youdell, 2006). In this study the neoliberalization of Latino male subjectivity

can be understood as both a subjection to neoliberal programming, but also a self-configuration, as the subject is created through a neoliberal rationality and understanding of self. With this in mind, understanding Latino boys as "who" are the target of educational policy is "not simply descriptive but also productive" (Youdell, 2011, p. 9) as the parameters and limits of identity are created in the language of capital investment. This perspective enables us to understand the notion of subjectivity as a process of becoming (Ball, 2012).

The affirmative aspect of power is particularly relevant for conversations regarding the educational achievement and wellbeing of boys of color. These populations, after having experienced state and school sanctioned punishment, policing, and violence in the classroom (Malagon, 2010; Noguera, 2003; Rios, 2011), now find themselves frequently institutionally included as a population to be invested in, cared for, and fixed.[3] Following others who have posited the non-profitization of youth activism and empowerment as a technology of neoliberal governance (Kwon, 2013), I bring a Foucauldian lens to ask how power says 'yes.' As Foucault (1990) reminds us, institutionalization serves as a strategy of power bent on "a will to knowledge" (p. 73). It is useful then, to "reverse our direction of analysis" and begin to understand these "positive mechanisms" as they "produce knowledge…[and] induce pleasure" (p. 73). This theoretical orientation guides this research to shift its lens from the study of the explicit forms of pushout and exclusion of Latino boys in schools and towards an interrogation of the ways neoliberal institutional knowledge induces a covert subjectification through creating a discourse around an idealized, neoliberal Latino male identity, limiting the possibility of critical awareness and communal political action.

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[3] It should be clarified that boys of color, as well as all students of color (see Morris, 2016), continue to be surveilled and policed in schools, however the types of educational enclosures (Sojoyner, 2016) they experience have recently begun to also include an inclusionary component.

The Problems of Boys of Color and the Neoliberal Solution of the Role Model

The ongoing proliferation of interventions and solutions to the educational crisis of boys of color presents a critical task for educational researchers to understand the ideological underpinnings that circumscribe this intervention, particularly within communities of color. As scholars have argued, while neoliberalism has often been thought of as a violent economic strategy inflicted on communities of color, elites within communities of color have also helped to facilitate this transition and sell neoliberal solutions to the communities most vulnerable to the withdrawal of social service (Dávila, 2004; Spence, 2016). This has been the case in communities of color who, after years of segregation and neglect in the realm of public education, have at times turned to the values of the market and "choice" in hopes of changing their educational outcomes (Pedroni & Apple, 2005). Following Melamed (2006), we must question how neoliberalism may "appear to be in harmony with some version of antiracist goals" while simultaneously promoting a concealed racist discourse that propagates racial inequality and violence.

In regards to boys and young men of color, Dumas (2016) highlights the ways former President Obama's 2014 My Brother's Keeper (MBK) initiative serves as an exemplar of neoliberal governmentality, making an ideological argument for "government retreat from racial redress" and a turn to educational solutions found in the private and community sectors. With no funds for the program provided by the federal government[4], the White House initiative called on communities of color to join the MBK Community Challenge and make interventions in the lives of boys of color. As Dumas states,

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[4] Funding for the initiative was raised through the private sector and philanthropic organizations, who agreed to raise US$200 million over five years (Dumas, 2016).

> My critique here is that these arguably beneficial programs are being advanced within a neoliberal project intended to undermine more fundamental change by locating problems within (the bodies of) Black boys and young men rather than in the social and economic order (Anyon, 2005, 2014; Crenshaw, 2014). MBK initiatives are proffered not as public investments in the public good, but as private-sector technical solutions to the perceived cultural problems of a specific group. (p.97).

While the specifics of programs may vary, programs like MBK, as well as the larger ideological shift to neoliberal understandings of the problems faced by boys of color, have led to the over idealization of male teachers of color (Martino, 2015; Phillips & Nava, 2011), particularly when accompanied by neoliberal, deficit framings of boys of color (Baldridge, 2017; Singh, 2018). This turn to successful men of color as mentors and role models has served to reify deficit understandings of boys, promoting an idealized Latino masculinity that is upwardly mobile, heteronormative, and merit-based.

While not arguing against the benefits of culturally relevant pedagogy for boys and young men of color (A. L. Brown, 2009; Lynn, 2006; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2011), this article is concerned with the narratives assigned to boys (A. L. Brown & Donnor, 2011), the ways neoliberal logics have influenced communities of color, and the ways we understand and frame our educational problems and solutions as cultural and individual. Indeed at a global scale, neoliberalism has reformulated the role of teacher as practitioner who must individually take on the responsibility of class outcomes amidst diminishing school funding and structural support (Done & Murphy, 2016). For men of color, this has meant pressures to become the disciplinarians of boys of color (Brockenbrough, 2015) as a means to produce academic success. Bristol (2015) contends that policy initiatives aimed at increasing the number of Black male teachers have insidiously placed the burden of achieving educational equity on Black men themselves, while excluding "the provision of an educational system, writ large, with the tools to ensure the success of Black boys" (p. 57).

In this paper I explore how a neoliberal understanding of the problems facing Latino boys serves to create an idealized, neoliberal Latino male subjectivity to be lived and promoted through Latino male mentorship. Guiding questions for this paper include: How do neoliberal values inform the goals and practices of Latino Male Success? How is Latino male subjectivity in the program understood and constructed? And in what way, if any, is neoliberalism disrupted through alternative framings of Latinx education and/or Latino masculinity?

Methods

Research Site

This paper presents selected findings from a larger ethnographic case study of Latino Male Success (LMS). LMS is a school-based mentorship program located in the city of Bahía, California and just one program run by Pueblo Unido, a local non-profit community development corporation whose mission is to improve the quality of life of Bahía residents, with a focus on its predominantly Latinx neighborhoods. Though under the jurisdiction of Pueblo Unido, LMS receives a small portion of its budget from Bahía Unified School District (BUSD) and is frequently portrayed in the media as a district program. Established in 2010, the program now operates in 10 middle and high schools, serving students ages 12-19 years old. BUSD is a mid to large sized school district. The designated schools that Latino Male Success serves were chosen for both their low performance as well as high numbers of Latinx students, which led to nearly all LMS schools being located on the northside of Bahía which houses large numbers of Latinx families. The program employs 10 mentors, each assigned to a single classroom at each school site, with class sizes ranging from 15 to 30 students. This allows roughly six percent (225

of 3,500) of Latino boys in BUSD to access Latino Male Success. There is no uniform admission or selection process, and entry into the LMS group varied across campuses. While LMS attempts to target students in need of emotional and academic support, a range of students (from advanced placement students to those at risk of dropping out) participates in the program. Each mentor runs a period-long class during the regular school day as either an advisory course or Chicano Studies class. They also maintain contact with parents, advocate for their students among teachers and administration, and hold study halls and individual tutoring sessions. Mentors range from 23 to 29 years old; all but one hold bachelor's degrees, and all self-identify as Latino males. The majority are of Mexican descent.

Data Collection and Analysis

Primary forms of data collection for this ethnographic case study were participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and media and document analysis. I first used media analysis to build a detailed picture of the ways the program was discursively constructed through a wide array of media. Data for this portion of the study included Pueblo Unido and BUSD websites, a variety of newspaper articles and local nightly news clips (broadcasted from as early as 2011 and as recently as 2018), and several web pages promoting existing work with boys and young men of color in this particular region of California.

After making contact with the organization, I was invited by the program director to present my interest in studying Latino male mentorship at a Latino Male Success staff meeting. From there, three mentors expressed openness to participating in ongoing observations and invited me to begin shadowing them and volunteering in their classroom. Because of my identity as a fellow Latino man who had worked with Latino boys in the past, my addition to their

classrooms was seen as welcome help and an additional role model for the boys. Two of these sites were middle schools and one was a high school. Field visits began in August of 2017 at the beginning of the school year and continued until the end of the academic year in June 2018. Visits generally occurred at least twice a week for each school site, and I became an active participant in classroom discussions, athletic activities, tutoring, and the occasional fieldtrip. Through my field visits I was also able to form a relationship with the individual campus community beyond Latino Male Success, and I conducted formal and conversational interviews with school administrators, staff, teachers, and non-LMS affiliated students.

I conducted in-depth interviews with all 10 mentors, as well as the program director, assistant program director, two former mentors, several Pueblo Unido staff, and BUSD officials involved in Latinx educational issues in Bahía. Interviews lasted from 1-2 hours and were conducted in a variety of locations including school sites, coffee shops, and the Pueblo Unido office. Follow-up interviews were conducted with all three of the mentors being shadowed to further discuss themes generated from participant operations. I also conducted 15 student interviews. The majority were students in the high school classroom I observed, however several middle school students and one LMS alumnus were also interviewed. Beyond interviews and classroom observations, I sought to immerse myself in the educational life of Bahía. This led me to attend a variety of events directly connected to Latino Male Success, such as Pueblo Unido fundraisers, as well as events more broadly connected to Latinx education issues in Bahía like district board meetings, district-led Latinx community engagement meetings.

The qualitative research software Dedoose was used to organize and code fieldnotes, media clips, and interview transcripts. An initial round of descriptive coding began immediately for available public documents and mentor interviews, and fieldnotes were coded roughly every

two to four weeks. Descriptive codes were loosely guided by my initial conceptual framework and documented common practices and physical attributes associated with the reproduction of race and gender in male of color spaces. Examples of the descriptive codes include: male friendship, laughter, athletic activity, punishment, misogyny, bullying, clothing acknowledgment, love of job, critique of job. Consistent with ethnographic methods, analysis was a cyclical and recursive process as I tested out emerging themes (LeCompte & Schensul, 2012).

Following reflections on the previously mentioned fundraiser gala, and triangulating this with several mentors' reiterated disdain for the business and money-catering culture of their organization, I began to incorporate neoliberal criticism as a useful conceptual model and expanded my coding. Examples of value-based codes included neoliberal institutional partnerships (NIP), market-orientation, neoliberal racial logic (NRL), individualist attitude, funder appeasement, and productivity. Codes like neoliberal racial logic served as parent codes for more specific codes such as NRL-meritocracy, NRL-gender deficiency, NRL-sexual deviancy, NRL-racial pathology.

This paper draws primarily on this nested value-based coding, which aided me in identifying the ways neoliberal shifts in education not only informed the partnership that created the program itself, but also the ways neoliberal logics, coupled with preexisting racial, gender, sexual discourses surrounding Latino masculinity, framed the "problem" of Latino boys at the administrative and public level. These codes were also useful in identifying the ways this knowledge and understanding of Latino men and boys was lived, embraced, or resisted in the classroom among mentors and boys on the day to day.

Neoliberal Framings of Identity for Latino Men and Boys

Similar to all hegemonic discourse, neoliberalism enjoys a level of anonymity by hiding and ruling in plain sight. Upon my first visit to the Pueblo Unido office space that houses the Latino Male Success program, I was struck by a large timeline-mural commemorating the long history of Pueblo Unido's efforts in supporting the Latinx community of Bahía. The mural begins in the mid-1960's under the title *The Latino Civil Rights Movement* and marks the establishment of Pueblo Unido (then a grassroots organization under a slightly different name) as a part of this movement. The founding year is surrounded by a collage of brown fists, angry demonstrators, and slogans reading "CHICANO POWER!" As the mural progresses we see fewer images of political critique, and more representations of professionalism and development. In the late 1960's we see the time point "Incorporated as Non-profit Community Dev. Corp. [Development Corporation] 501(c)(3)." In the mid-1970's three dollar signs are featured next to a Ford Foundation arrow to indicate a substantial funding stream. As the years progress, the artwork highlights key partnerships with large corporations and massive banks. In 2010 a picture of a group of well-dressed Latino boys marks the beginning of LMS. The mural culminates with a celebration of the now massive non-profit's cumulative "100-million dollar investment" in "community assets." Most notable of these investments was the organization of a housing and commercial development project in North Bahía which continues to spark controversy and serves as a signifier of the ongoing gentrification of the neighborhood for many housing rights activists.

I begin with this mural to illustrate the gradual shift from Chicano Movement era politics to a more business-oriented politics functioning in Pueblo Unido. While the earlier era of Latinx activism was centered around structural changes in a white supremacist system and calls for a redistribution of wealth (Munoz, 2007), Pueblo Unido now looks to support the Latinx

community and its neighborhood through market inclusion and investment. This has included job training workshops, micro-finance lending, the active development of neighborhood real-estate for commercial use, and bringing in large corporate sponsors interested in investing in the community development of particularly North Bahía. This re-branding of Latinx politics to adhere to neoliberal values of capital accumulation and investment is a shift that demonstrates the ideologies informing how Pueblo Unido and its financial backers envision the cultural work done by the Latino male mentors with the boys of Bahía.

Deviant, but Potentially Productive

Through an analysis of Pueblo Unido web pages, interviews with administrators, Latino Male Success founding documents, and fundraiser events, I found that the problem of Latino boys was discursively constructed as due to their own individualized cultural deficiencies, pathological behaviors, and probable fate of succumbing to the violence and crime that was so prevalent in North Bahía. In the entirety of all administrator interviews and official mission statements, race or racism was never mentioned. Instead, popular in LMS documents and administrator interviews was what I identify as the "right path" discourse. For example, in an interview with the program director he stated, "I think our biggest goal here is to keep boys on the right path…show them they have options. Bahía is a rough place for a Latino male. Drugs, violence, gangs, you know how it is, especially in the North. People don't get out. Our boys…they don't get exposed to anything else, they don't know there's more out there for them…college, success, a career..." Through this quote we see the discursive creation of a pathway to idealized Latino manhood. The end goal of this road was posited as success and a productive career. The framing of the program's goals in this way frequently functioned to

devalue and pathologize community members whose lives became rendered as unproductive and

wasted, a result of poor "choices" and a deviation from the right path.

Absent from (and thus erased) in the pathway metaphor was an awareness of late

capitalism's brutal violence inflicted on Bahía which, like in many mid and large size cities in

the United States over the past several decades, has led to the creation of racially segregated,

resource-depleted neighborhoods where communities of color live and attend school. The answer

for these boys then, became choosing to succeed, aided by the presence of mentors to help

remedy deplorable cultural practices that risked pushing them off the path to success. This

narrative was particularly useful for fundraising efforts as the boys of Latino Male Success

became humanized and valued to donors through their potential to earn and produce. I return

here to the fieldnote excerpt that opened this paper as a Latino city councilman of a North Bahía

district contributed to this discourse as a means to raise support among a ballroom of

philanthropists.

> We all *know* who these boys are and they're not bad kids... I *know* them better than most, you see, I never shy away from saying I am from Bahía, and I'm proud of it [crowd applause] …. I *know* what it's like to grow up on the Northside. I was a little knucklehead myself, a travieso who needed a big brother to knock me on the head sometimes and keep me on the right path…

Here we see the councilman validate the humanity of the boys of Bahía by making a claim to

their potential productivity, as evident in his own success. In this way the philanthropists were

able to participate in problem-solving by investing in at-risk boys. Invisible in this narrative was

the exclusion of low-income communities of color from the massive accumulations of wealth in

the region gained by many funders and developers present at the gala (a process that had ignited

rapid gentrification in Bahía as well as other surrounding cities). Here, the boys' own cultural

deficiencies and lack of self-restraint are the barriers standing in the way of success. This was

seen as an individual, rather that structural problem, and would be remedied by the mentors who

now stood around the fundraising floor. Within this neoliberal solution, the mentors would serve as role models to excavate the worth of the boys. As the assistant program director was quoted as saying in one of the region's prominent newspapers several years before this study began, Latino Male Success understands Latino boys as "resources" that "are not to be wasted."

Neoliberal Framings of Gender and Sexuality

As a value system, neoliberalism disciplines subjectivity in an attempt to reject unproductive identity practices. Under neoliberal multiculturalism (Melamed, 2006), this means a conditional acceptance of deserving multicultural identities to the detriment of the larger racialized group who become pathologized and marked as undeserving of wealth and resources. Cacho (2007) extends this indictment of racialized neoliberal systems of value by arguing that Latino masculinity is marked as deviant by racial signifiers that become entangled in heteronormativity and patriarchy. Through a queer of color critique (Ferguson, 2003; Rodríguez, 2009), we are reminded of the ways queer people of color are victimized by the "social disorganizing effects of capital" (Ferguson, 2003, p.1). That is to say, materially disposed while also culturally devalued—seen in sexual excess and holding little worth in the heteronormative reproduction of society. Through this lens, Cacho (2007) argues that neoliberalism asks Latino boys to "perform masculinity" in ways to "redeem, reform, or counter" racial deviancy (p.184).

For Latino Male Success, the idealized productive Latino masculinity to be cultivated was implicitly or explicitly heterosexual and a responsible patriarch of their future families and communities. This was framed as a dire need for the larger Latinx community by several participants in the study. In an interview with the Pueblo Unido CEO, he stated "…and some of these boys are about to be young fathers, I mean, think about that. That's why character

development is huge to us." Beyond this quote, concern for heteronormative, nuclear family values was a running theme in LMS, and throughout the study differing or queer family arrangements were never talked about or perceived as possible. This targeted idealization of the family is what Kimberlé Crenshaw calls a "patriarchy enhancement" solution. Crenshaw, an outspoken critic of President Obama's MBK initiative, identifies MBK and similar male mentorship programs as framing the problems of communities of color as problems "because the men are not appropriately socialized to be the kind of men who are responsible for families and for communities" and identifies this way of seeing racial inequality as solely in terms of "patriarchal absences" (Crenshaw, 2016). Beyond erasing the needs and racial struggles faced by Latina students, this patriarchy enhancement discourse served to devalue queer and trans masculinities as insignificant in a neoliberal multicultural solution that only valued the traditional family.

Towards the end of my interview with the program director of Latino Male Success I asked about queer students in the program and how they fit in the greater mission. The director looked taken aback for a moment. Then, after a pause he stated, "We don't have any LGBQ students, and if we do, I don't really know… about that perspective." He paused again in thought and offered an anecdote.

> We've had a student who was a female but kind of like queer…or... They [the school] were saying that she could be part of our group, but the way the mentor approached it was like, "Well the kid is going to go through a lot of changes that I won't be able to help with, or I won't be able to like kind of like have an idea what that change is, because I've never dealt with that." So in that instance…the understanding with the student, the administration, and us was that it would be best served if she was not part of the circle…. I think it would be tougher for that youth to be helped because she would feel isolated…we would not know how to serve that youth.

Through these quotes we are able to see the boundaries of proper Latino masculinity established through exclusion and disregard. Here at the administrative level, homophobia did not exist through explicit anti-gay rhetoric, but rather through a disinterest in queer identity and an

absence of targeted support for queer Latinx students. Furthermore, in the later account we hear of a student interested in a gendered space not assigned to them at birth, yet denied entry into the program, a denial couched in rhetoric of care. Through the reaction of Latino Male Success we see trans exclusion and the upholding and protection of <u>male</u> mentorship. The needs of the student are presented as beyond the scope and abilities of the program, further revealing a confining and limited manhood valued by the LMS and its mission. Nowhere in founding documents or the LMS website were queer or non-cis-male students mentioned. Exclusion and the disciplining of identity were done here by creating a positive discourse around an idealized Latino masculinity to be cultivated and nourished in the space, implicitly rejecting alternative gender performances and practices by assigning no value to them in the mission to support Latino boys. Responding to a question regarding role modelling, the program director clearly lays out some of the valued characteristics of Latino masculinity:

> Yeah, our mentors are definitely role models, and I think that's huge for our boys. You know, they grow up without having positive role models, dudes slingin [selling drugs] and not doing anything with their lives…. Or like no dad at home, right? And so now here's this guy, went to college, wears good clothes, takes care of his family in some of our cases. It feels good for our boys to be around a *real man* you know? Someone who takes care of business.

This discourse, spoken many times in different iterations throughout the study, exemplifies the ways neoliberal values become intertwined with the knowledge and construction of *real* Latino men. Embedded in this idealization are quiet exclusions as identity practices seen as unproductive to the needs of capital are discursively absent from what is a real [ideal, most valued] Latino man.

Living and Embodying Neoliberal Subjectivities

Within the framing of Latino boys discussed above, a neoliberally informed Latino male subjectivity was lived and cultivated in the classroom among mentors and boys. While neoliberal

values are embodied in a variety of forms and performances, I identified three identity values assigned to Latino boys in the program: meritocratic individualism, smart consumerism, and benevolent patriarchy.

Normalizing Meritocracy Through Competition and Rewards

The everyday practices of each classroom varied among school sites; however, a consistent emphasis on hard work and self-discipline was common. Many classrooms started the week with public check-ins about individual student grade statuses and strong encouragement from mentors for improvement. Phrases like "hold boys accountable to their word" and "take responsibility" were consistently repeated in mentor interviews. As one mentor stated, "They can't be asking for handouts…. No excuses." Beyond individual check-ins, a reward system was in place to reinforce a culture of individualized earning and merit.

> Mr. Miguel quieted down the class. "And of course, the 50 dollars this marking period goes to Luis, let's give it up for him" [Applause]. Mr. Miguel turned to Anthony who was not clapping, "It looks like Anthony's a little salty because he's not getting that cash money," Mr. Miguel joked. "Naw he mad cuz he knows he gonna be working for me!" interjected Luis, then giving the boy next to him a handshake. The class laughed. "You want to work for Luis? No? I suggest you get to work Anthony" chimed in Mr. Miguel, laughing. Anthony responded, "Yeah, yeah, I know, I know."

The practice of giving cash incentives for good grades was recently made popular by Roland Fryer, a Black economist at Harvard intimately involved in urban education reform. Though the practice has been condemned by scholars critical of its neoliberal assumptions regarding individualized success of Black youth, it has become a popular tactic[5] (Spence, 2016).

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[5] Spence (2016) argues that the logic behind this solution is that students of color "aren't properly incentivized" to see the payoffs in education like their white counterparts, and thus do not invest in their own human capital (p.95). He argues that this framing of the problem draws from the controversial "acting white" thesis, the notion that students of color to do not do well in school because they see academic success as synonymous with acting white and will be shamed by their peers. This argument has consistently been challenged by studies that find that students of color have strong aspirations to success in school (see Carter, 2006; O'Connor, 1997).

Financial and other incentives were used in Latino Male Success, and mentors frequently reminded students of both the ability to earn money through grades, as well as the loss of privileges for low grades. This system had the consequence of individualizing success and normalizing meritocracy at the expense of those who were not successful. Students who did not meet GPA requirements were disciplined through exclusion. This included the denial of the coveted program t-shirt,[6] the inability to attend program-wide fieldtrips to an amusement park, as well as loss of other privileged activities. This served to normalize meritocracy as common sense and depoliticize and obfuscate the social factors that led to the educational disenfranchisement of Latino boys in North Bahía. As one high achieving boy stated, "My best friend…he can't go on the fieldtrip. And yeah, I'm sad, but I'll be happy because – then he has a mindset, 'All right. I will challenge myself to pass my limit.'"

Despite the incentives to do better in school, there was little grade fluctuation in the year I spent with Latino Male Success[7]. Instead, this practice served to normalize the notion that academic success equated to deserved rewards, while failure was an individual choice that did not merit praise or resources. This normalization at times resulted in tears.

> Today Mr. Enrique made an unexpected announcement: the local NBA team had reached out and offered to gift each Latino Male Success classroom several passes to an upcoming basketball game against LeBron James and the Cleveland Cavaliers. This caused a murmur of excitement among the boys, but also an immediate groan from Diego who was seated next to me. Diego was known to be a big NBA fan, and I turned to him in surprise. He whispered to me, "I won't be able to go, watch!" A few seconds later Mr. Enrique asked which students might be interested in attending. Diego reluctantly put his hand up. "Put your hand down Diego, you can't expect to have three Fs and go to this game." Diego's eyes began to water as he put his hand down. He whispered to me again, this time angrily, tears slowly running down his face, "What about the people with bad grades? Don't WE deserve to get fun things too sometimes?"

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[6] This shirt was only given to boys who were overall a success in the program and signaled the embodiment of the "real man" LMS sought to create. Having this shirt was also a privilege at the two middle schools I observed because both campuses allowed LMS students to break dress code on Fridays in order to wear their program t-shirts. This was a privilege highly valued by the boys.

[7] While my study is not an evaluation of LMS, the fact that grades did not change much throughout the year suggests that the incentives did not result in higher grades. Future research should investigate the efficacy and any unintended consequences of these incentives.

Becoming Entrepreneurial Subjects

Like many urban school districts in the neoliberal era competing with charter schools, BUSD had several public schools at risk of closure due to underattendance. Two of these were predominantly Latinx high schools on the northside, both with Latino Male Success programs. In the cafeteria at one of these schools, Esperanza Nuño, the BUSD director of Latinx Community Affairs, held an evening meeting with Latinx parents, families, teachers, and students to address a recent district study on the needs facing Latinx students in Bahía. The meeting felt warm and casual. Esperanza Nuño had burned sage earlier to cleanse the space, giving the cafeteria an earthy smell. She opened the meeting acknowledging the indigenous people of Bahía and situated their meeting in a long legacy of Latinx resistance to colonial oppression. Among the agenda items was how to improve two of Bahía's northside high schools, commonly referred to as the "bad" high schools.

In my breakout circle, parents, teachers, and lower-level BUSD administrators talked of low attendance and the threat of closure. "Everyone thinks these schools are terrible, but look at us here, this is community, we love this school," stated one mother. A teacher complained of new charter schools in the area "poaching" select students from the northside. The administrator added in, "And it's not just the charters, we need to figure out how to stop BUSD staff from badmouthing these schools, they're turning all the kids to Poly [commonly known as the best BUSD high school], but the whole damn district can't go there." The meeting ended with report-backs, goals, and the formulation of a circle where the attendees offered their thoughts and hopes moving forward. The circle was composed almost exclusively of women.

The notion of school choice is a market-oriented, consumer-based approach to education that seeks to offer families the best educational option for their child. Despite this intention,

research shows that this promise has "usually gone unfulfilled" for Latinx families (Morales, Trujillo, & Kissell, 2016, p. 13). However, the "empowerment" of students and families to "self-advocate" and find the best school choice was common practice in Latino Male Success. In their interviews, all middle school mentors stated that they encouraged this, many stating they tried their best to divert their students from the two "bad" high schools mentioned earlier. As one middle school mentor stated in an interview:

> Mentor: I have a friend that works at Urban Charter, so I have a strong relationship with them. A few of my students have gone there and done well so they tell me, "Keep sending them our way and we'll see what we can do."
> Interviewer: And Adams? [the local high school down the street]
> Mentor: For real, the school is crazy. But the ones that have to go, I just tell them find Eduardo [the LMS mentor there]
> Interview: Eduardo doesn't mind you diverting students away from Adams?
> Mentor: No no, he knows how that school is…and he wants the best for the boys.

At the end of this interview we hear the phrase "best for the boys" function as best for individual boys, particularly in the Latino Male Success program. This is stated with little awareness (or perhaps concern) for district-wide efforts to improve the lives of all Latinx students in the district.

In a different instance, a middle school mentor invited representatives from the local Catholic high school, St. Luke's, to speak to his eighth grade students. St. Luke's had several scholarships this year and was looking to recruit ambitious Latinx students from North Bahía.

> "Sell your story," urged Mr. Enrique, "it gives you options." Several boys complained of the imagined discipline of private school life and lamented the possibility of being separated from friends. "At the end of the day you got to do what's best for you," stated Mr. Enrique, pointing at individual students. "If it's a hard school, good. That's good for you. I am just saying you guys got to learn to advocate for yourselves, pick the best high school you can. If you have to go to Adams, fine. But look into your options first."

After ranking their top high school options, the eighth graders were accepted into high schools towards the end of the school year. It was clear Latino Male Success had an over representation of students avoiding the lower performing high schools, with some students who could not avoid them calling on their mentors to "see what could be done." Within the two LMS classrooms that

I observed, the highest performing students were successful at avoiding the two "bad" high schools. As one student informed me, "I don't have to go to Adams because I got good grades." When I asked if he was concerned for his friends who would be going to Adams he stated, "They'll be fine, they just need to work harder, not mess around."

The Benevolent Patriarch

Like perhaps most all-male spaces in schools today, Latino Male Success openly stood against the notion of sexism. In interviews, from the CEO of Pueblo Unido down to the middle school students, all expressed that "respecting women" was a strong value of the masculinity cultivated in the program. Two of the goals of LMS were "healthy families" and "character development," both being areas the program felt overlapped with a push against sexism and machismo in the Latinx community. Mentors held several activities and discussions surrounding domestic violence, respect for the women in their lives, and reflections on machismo in their family. While the level of sophistication in these workshops varied considerably, what was perhaps most striking was that discussions on the broad notion of "sexism" during my full year in the field never deviated from the topic of family and relationships (with the exception of one mentor, Mr. Javi, who will be mentioned in the *Resistance* section of this paper).

In an interview, one high school mentor stated, "Sexism is a problem…a big problem that men need to address…. A good man, for me, is humble, responsible, and honorable…not a mujeriego [womanizer], you know? Be faithful to your wife…never hit her." A version of this statement was repeated by most mentors and boys when asked how sexism related to the program's vision of manhood. In classroom discussions I observed, boys were habitually asked to unpack machismo in their own family, frequently referencing fathers' or uncles' infidelities,

alcoholism, or absences. This practice had the consequence of equating anti-sexism to the ability to perform a non-abusive, hetero-patriarchal figure in one's family. This narrow and restricting version of gender justice left space for misogynistic and homophobic language, which was commonplace with many boys and two of the three mentors I observed. One mentor continually used derogative terms when referencing women's anatomy, such as "titties" and "pussy," with the boys throughout the school year, while another tolerated and at times used homophobic language to joke with the boys, as well as to discipline them.

In interviews with the boys regarding sexism and machismo, all consistently reiterated the values of marital fidelity, an opposition to domestic violence, and an iteration of "a real man takes care of his family." When I followed up by posing some of the contradictory behavior performed by their peers and mentor, citing common misogynistic language and jokes, one boy stated, "Yeah yeah, that's true but…well like I wouldn't be saying that stuff when I'm like a dad, and like have a family and stuff…married." Through the boy's response we see the notion of anti-sexism become conditioned through a hetero-patriarchal value system. Here common (and broad) tropes of "respect for women" used in all male spaces become limited to a benevolent patriarchal attitude to heterosexual family arrangements and reproduction. This allowed both the boys and mentors in many cases to claim their work as anti-sexist and anti-machista while still allowing misogynistic and homophobic language to be used in the classroom.

Resistance

Mr. Javier, known as Mr. Javi, was an outlier in many respects. His classroom walls broke from the common and unspecific cultural empowerment images seen in the rooms of most Latino Male Success classrooms (slogans such as "healing from within" and "la cultura cura")

and instead had posters reading "Abolish borders," "Black Lives Matter," and "Bahía against gentrification." Among the mentors Mr. Javi was commonly referred to as the "political" one. He was also one of the three mentors I observed during the school year, and field notes consistently documented the ways Mr. Javi sought to counter what I have categorized as the neoliberalization of Latino male subjectivity.

On the day to day, Mr. Javi brought political lessons absent from the other two classrooms I observed. He went out of his way to tie school problems to decidedly political problems, such as the historical ghettoization of North Bahía and the unfair wealth gap between the boys' families and the new, more white and wealthy residents of Bahía. He did not shy away from words like racism and colonialism, and he encouraged boys to name and analyze racist practices that they felt they experienced in school. He taught lessons on the intersectional gender wage gap and the rise of Chicana feminism in a response to toxic masculine practices in the Chicano movement. And despite being critical of his school site as a whole, Mr. Javi was by far the most involved in activities on campus, which extended beyond his paid role as Latino Male Success mentor. For instance, he, along with a Latina teacher, facilitated an all-gender Raza Club during lunch. He also had a close relationship with Esperanza Nuño, who had been a mentor of his as a youth doing community organizing in North Bahía. When she was able to secure district funds to bring the school's Raza Club to a local university for an event on the history of radical Latinx student-activism on campus, Mr. Javi jumped at the opportunity to bring as many of his students as possible, surprising many when he said there would be no GPA requirement for this fieldtrip.

However, despite a cheery and passionate disposition in his classroom, in my interviews and private conversations with Mr. Javi, he expressed exhaustion and frustration with what he described as a "savior complex" and conservative politics promoted by his organization.

> Mr. Javi: It's a façade that we live under…. like, we're an organization that comes out of 60's, we have this history, blah, blah, blah. This actually gives us an advantage beyond like, conservative organizations, where we could use that [history] to do conservative stuff but still put this face on. Like, we're going to make this nice pamphlet of the community and throw a pyramid on it…and this is how we are supposed to function, like, a buffer between the community and the corporate world, manipulating but with a different face…
> Interviewer: Do you ever feel manipulated in your work?
> Mr. Javi: Of course, I would be lying [if I said I didn't]. No matter how "revolutionary" [uses air quotes] I try to make my work….I know, non-profits like this…how I'm used.

When asked why he stayed working for an organization that he described as having conservative values that conflicted with his political beliefs, he simply stated, "I want to work with youth." In the changing landscape of urban education, it had become increasingly difficult get jobs working with youth that matched the values of Mr. Javi, and he imagined past eras of Bahía history where he might be involved in more radical political education work rather than what he described as the "non-profit industrial complex." Many days Mr. Javi was cynical, questioning the value of his work and complaining of the ways his students were seen in the eyes of administrators and corporate funders. Conveniently "sick," he was the only mentor absent from the fundraising gala for Latino Male Success that opened this paper. Discussing the event in an interview, he stated "I just couldn't be there…to see all that."

However, despite his cynicism, Mr. Javi assured me he believed in the work he did, speaking to the potential of critical pedagogy as a way to promote what he deemed community organizing. He talked of other educators he knew with similar viewpoints, stating "We're kind of like the little viruses in the Matrix, you know what I'm saying?" This hope to incite change through gradual cultural disruptions and subversive teaching is reminiscent of the critical education tradition (Freire, 2000) and the belief in the possibility of counter-hegemonic struggle

beyond more economic determinist understandings of schooling (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). As this section highlights, Mr. Javi found creative ways to subvert a neoliberal politics so heavily present in his organization. His thoughts on the effectiveness of his political intervention through teaching were undecided, often times leaving him fed up with what he saw as a "conservative" and "watered down" Latinx politics, and at other times hopeful and moved by the resilience and critical awareness of his students.

Furthermore, while in this section I have highlighted the overt resistance that came from the teaching and attitude of Mr. Javi, there were also frequent, however small and fleeting, moments of subversion found in the boys' actions. At times these might have looked like unproductive pleasures, repudiations of respectability, collective hopes, and loving, queer moments. These ephemeral enactments remind me that where there is power, there is also resistance. As future studies document the ways communities embrace and/or combat neoliberal shifts in urban education, I call on this research, including my own, to focus not just on structures, policy, pedagogy, and curriculum, but also on the everyday embodiments of youth resistance.

Conclusion

The interconnectedness of boy of color programming and neoliberal framings of urban education promotes the invisibility of race and racism in contemporary education. Indeed, masking the centrality of race through narratives of opportunity and freedom extended to a diverse population makes what Melamed (2006) terms "neoliberal multiculturalism" so insidious and pervasive in urban education (also see Darder, 2012). As this research demonstrates, the neoliberal framing and structuring of Latino Male Success located the problems of the boys of

Bahía as existing within their own cultural pathologies and disinterest in advancing in their own human capital. This narrative concealed the high concentration of poverty, racial segregation, and lack of public investment in their neighborhoods and community schools. Latino male underachievement was attributed to a collection of individual mistakes and missed opportunities. Latino male mentors would solve the problem for a select group of boys by role modeling the qualities of a successful Latino man valued in the neoliberal era: respectable and merit driven, entrepreneurial, and both heterosexual and patriarchal.

Despite the language of empowerment and valorization of Latino men and boys in the program, I argue that this recognition also served as a form of neoliberal subjection. As Foucault (1994) asks us, how do we become "constituted as subjects of our own knowledge?" (p. 318). Throughout my time with Latino Male Success I observed the boys excavate what were framed as innate truths about their culture and Latino identity. However, these attributes and qualities were then aligned with academic success and responsibility which were pushed by what I categorize as the neoliberal mission of the program. This prevented both mentors and boys from understanding and articulating their lives in school outside of a racialized and gendered neoliberal imaginary. This process was not without resistance, as discussed above.

As male of color initiatives and programs continue to be established and supported, the purpose of this paper is not to pass overarching judgement and condemnation, but rather to incite critical reflection and caution in this work. For policy makers, the danger in becoming complicit or perpetuating neoliberal framings of urban education is pronounced. In this way, even the most well-intentioned programs may have the effect of perpetuating racist narratives of boys of color, obscuring structural racism in schools, and directing resources and energy away from movements to address the educational inequality of all students of color of all genders. For

practitioners, this research uncovers the ways our personal histories, actions, and bodies are always implicated in discursive, meaning making processes entangled in neoliberal discourses surrounding urban education, race, gender, and sexuality. This calls for constant reflection and intentional engagement with the cultural work we perform if we are to subvert neoliberal rationalities for alternative goals and futures in education.

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