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*Coming Hard:
The Primacy of Embodied Stress Responses
in High Poverty Schools*

Abstract

Informed by nearly six years of teaching experiences in high poverty schools of New York and Amsterdam, this ethnographic comparison examines the following question: Even though they often say they “know better”, why do so many teens from low income neighborhoods behave in aggressively disruptive ways that contribute to the further destruction of their own schools? This article suggests that the long dominant oppositional black culture approach to such questions related to life in distressed urban schools promotes overly mentalist and therefore superficial analyses. A more fully incarnated, collectively impassioned, relational, and processual way of thinking about the gradual socialization and immediate coping processes behind the further devastating of physically violent schools is offered. Interrogating the state and process that students in both settings referred to with terms like “coming hard”, this article brings to life the temporarily seductive yet ultimately maladaptive *embodied stress responses* of two male students effectively forced to sever visceral connections to themselves. Probing deep into how hardening was both habituated and situated on opposite shores of the Atlantic Ocean can help us advance our grip on—and perhaps even our attempts to deal with—the ways in which teenagers’ feelings of empathy and abilities to “think straight” are crowded out during the moments that matter most in and around our worst schools.

Keywords: Stress; Embodiment; Violence; Habitus; Hardness; Poverty; Urban schools.

*The body is the vehicle of being in the world and having a body is, for a living creature, to be interinvolved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them.*¹

*“I come hard”, yeah, that’s what they say.*²

¹ Merleau-Ponty (1962: 71)

² A soft-spoken 17-year old male student, whose mother moved from Suriname to Amsterdam before he was born, commenting on the (typically male) students wreaking

havoc in his school. Originally, the comment was made in Dutch: “‘Ik kom hard’, ja, dat is wat ze zeggen.” Throughout the article Dutch terms will be italicized.

FOR NEARLY SIX YEARS I TAUGHT IN, and conducted ethnographic research in and around, two high poverty schools plagued by anxiety and intimidation. The first of these secondary schools was located in New York's South Bronx, where I taught Social Studies and History between 1996 and 1999. The second one, in which I taught English from 1999 to 2001, was in Southeast Amsterdam—or, as the locals called it, “the Bijlmer” (pronounced Bel-mer). While the violence tended to be less intense in the school backed up by a strong European welfare state, as might have been predicted, the most pressing question that emerged out of my observations in both quasi-autonomous *adolescent societies* (Coleman 1961) was unequivocally this: Even though they often say they “know better”, why do so many teens from low income families and neighborhoods behave in aggressively disruptive ways that contribute to the further destruction of their own schools?

The goal of this article is to show that, at the most fundamental level, something visceral and pre-discursive should be at the pulsating core of our answers to this question. Referring to both a gradual social *process* (way of becoming) and to an immediately situated *state* (way of being), my former students in both settings associated that which is at the root of so much suffering in high poverty schools with “hardness” and, in the coming pages, I shall do the same. Furthermore, in this article I shall attempt to demonstrate that this “hardness” may be difficult for scholars to see clearly not so much because it involves something that is experientially far away (e.g., chronic exposure to external stressors and “outlandish” levels of school violence) but, rather, because it revolves centrally around something that is often too close for comfort: signals emanating from the human body. Informed by Merleau-Ponty's key notion of the always already situated and pre-discursively “lived” body—as well as by the efforts of sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu and Jack Katz (and, to a lesser degree, by neuroscientists such as Antonio Damasio³) who have been inspired by this great

³ For an explicit link not just to Merleau-Ponty but also to William James, see Damasio (2012: 327 n 3). Leaving this crucial connection to philosophy less implicit yet getting to the heart of the matter, Damasio (2012: 101, *italics in original*) writes the following: “One cannot fully explain

subjectivity without knowing about the origin of feelings and acknowledging the existence of *primordial feelings*, spontaneous reflections of the state of the living body [...] Primordial feelings are the primitives of all other feelings”.

“philosopher of the flesh”—what follows is a carnal⁴ and comparative examination of how (be)coming “hard” results from and further propels the ongoing destruction of high poverty schools on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean.⁵

Up to this point my ethnographic descriptions have been centered mainly on the overall status hierarchies, distinctive chains of interaction rituals, and empowering habitus formation trajectories observable in and around “my” two neighborhood schools—Johnson High School in the Bronx and the Delta School in the Bijlmer (Paulle 2013).⁶ Focusing more narrowly on “hardness” while turning further inwards and adding greater precision, the empirical focus here will be on the gradually and immediately *embodied stress responses* of two male students: Derek and Jurgen. The first and second substantive sections compare the habitus formation processes and felt responses of these two dark skinned adolescents effectively forced to acquire, desire, and enact “hard” *bodily and emotional dispositions*. This sets up the third substantive portion of the paper, in which I attempt to elucidate something quite elementary about “hardening” that is nonetheless profoundly important and consistently overlooked in the overly mentalist (or cognitivist) studies remaining at rather superficial levels of analysis: the *positive short-term effects and disastrous longer-term effects of losing visceral connections to one’s self*. Especially in this third empirical section, I hope to illustrate why getting to the palpating heart of “hardness” requires probing more deeply into, and seeing more clearly what goes on at, the level of lived bodies than the long dominant framework for studying overwhelmed urban schools seems to allow. In terms of sociological theory and educational practice, the conclusion argues, building on yet also breaking with this field-defining framework may have some surprisingly practical benefits.

What, then, is the dominant framework all about and why might easing away from it matter? For a generation now, Paul Willis’s (1981 [1977]) work on the “cultural resistance” of working class “lads” and especially John Ogbu’s (1978, 1991, 2003) diverse writings on *oppositional black (or “involuntary minority”) culture* have enabled

⁴ In Wacquant’s (2004, xvii) careful and memorable phrasing, “sociology must endeavor to clasp and restitute [the] carnal dimension of existence [...] through a methodical and meticulous work of detection and documentation, deciphering, and writing liable to capture and to convey the taste and the ache of action, the sound, and the fury of

the social world that the established approaches of the social sciences typically mute when they do not suppress them altogether”.

⁵ On this ongoing devastation, see for example Alonso *et al.* (2009), Bourdieu *et al.* (1999), and Johnson (1999).

⁶ Pseudonyms are used for the two schools and all the people constituting them.

and constrained an enormous amount of research on urban schools. More specifically, the “burden of acting white” (Fordham and Ogbu 1986) proposition to which Ogbu’s general approach gave birth has been the source of a stunning amount of scholarship and argumentation (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998: 7; Carter 2005; Fryer and Torelli 2006: 4). Critical as the debate has at times been, the focus on more or less “resistant cultures” on one hand and (networks of) students associated with clearly distinct socio-economic and/or ethno-racial “groups”⁷ has remained remarkably stable. At least in part due to the existence of shared assumptions underlying these attention-grabbing debates, the oppositional black culture approach seems to have influenced *politicized public debate* about what actually unfolds on the ground in high poverty urban schools.⁸

Given our present focus on hardening what must be emphasized here, first and foremost, is the notion that this so-called opposition (to the putatively white or middle class culture of schools) has generally been understood to be highly *conscious* and *volitional*. Similarly, acting white has been associated with *willful* “code switching” based, as Ogbu suggests, on *explicit mental representations*.⁹

⁷ From the perspective Brubaker (2002) has done so much to advance—and as the data presented below further indicate—use of this term often leads to conflating the primordialist categories and substantialist discourses researchers should *empirically interrogate* and the conceptual tools researchers should use in their *analysis*. As I have addressed elsewhere how essentializing “groupist” assumptions about ethnicity, race, and nationhood are basic to the oppositional black culture approach (Paulle 2013), this point will receive only scant attention here. On the role of groupist assumptions and practices undergirding the “integration” debate in the Netherlands, see Paulle and Kalir (2013).

⁸ In the Netherlands, statements by any of the three most important right wing populists (Vossen 2010)—including Pim Fortuyn and Rita Verdonk who were *both trained as sociologists*—might serve to show presumed links between things like “drop out” rates and the “backward cultures” of “foreigners” constituting “black schools”. But let us take an example here from the American center-left. Barack Obama’s biggest applause line during the keynote address that launched

him into the (inter)national spotlight, was the following: “Go into any inner-city neighborhood and folks will tell you that [...] children can’t achieve unless we raise their expectations and eradicate the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white” (*New York Times*, July 27, 2004, “Barack Obama’s Remarks to the Democratic National Convention”).

⁹ In multiple works, Ogbu argued that code switching dated back to the ways in which enslaved Africans navigated between safe and unsafe settings in *highly conscious* ways. The implication for contemporary educational settings is that any student from an “involuntary minority” group might choose, quite willfully, to “act white” or, for longer or shorter periods of time, to act in ways that negate “white culture” and school achievement. The latter strategy, according to this line of thinking, should be understood not only in terms of “cultural resistance” but also as a self-aware act of solidarity with other members of one or more groups forced through chattel slavery and/or colonialist expansion into a stigmatized minority status and “collective identity”.

In short, the main assumption to keep in mind here is that the students' motivations for engaging in "anti-school" behavior operate *at the level of discursive reasoning*.

Elijah Anderson is perhaps the most prominent urban ethnographer presently working within the oppositional black culture approach. *Code of the Street*, Anderson's (1999) hugely influential examination of life inside the violence-plagued neighborhoods and schools of Philadelphia, might therefore be the single best exemplar illuminating how this framework continues to enable and delimit research. Against a thoroughly convincing backdrop of political economic and undoubtedly racialized oppression (*cf.* Wilson 1987, 1996; Massey and Denton 1993), Anderson explains the actual in situ behavior ripping apart inner-city neighborhoods and schools in terms of the tension between what he and his informants called "street" and "decent" codes. These codes are treated both as mask-like resources for temporarily situated performances and as enduring cultural logics (or sets of norms and rules). While relying heavily on the aforementioned notion of "code switching", in his most definitive statements on life in the high poverty schools he studied, Anderson depicted the code of the street as an elaboration of Ogbu's more general and more specific claims. "To accept the school", Anderson (1999: 97, *italics added*) argued, "would be to give in and act white, to give up the value of the street for some other thing. And the value of that other thing has not been sufficiently explained to the children to make them want to give up the ways of the street and take on the ideology of the school. [...] [T]he code of the street, and *by extension oppositional culture*, competes very effectively with traditional values. [...] Alienated black students take on the oppositional role...because they are profoundly *at odds with white culture* [...] [and] other alienated students may mimic them because they are such strong models".

To be sure, in his close-up descriptions Anderson (1999: 286-287) addressed the body-based process and state my students (as well as his informants) associated with "hardness". Yet when Anderson dealt for example with "the willingness to resolve disputes through violence", "physicality" was treated merely as a "primary value". Similarly, where Anderson mentioned "defensive postures", what remained primary in his account was the "battle for the hearts and mind" based on the dichotomy of

“conventional values” and the “culture of decency” on one hand and “oppositional culture” on the other.¹⁰

Here, in a nutshell, is the main point and what is missing. Persuasive as the more structuralist (and indeed quite materialist) moments in Anderson’s analyses are, his overly mentalist (or oddly disembodied) analyses focusing on cultural logics remain superficial.¹¹ Anderson (1999, 2008) never systemically examined or thematized how fully absorbed coping responses in high stress (educational) settings are *viscerally felt and pre-discursively embodied* rather than just thought out or shaped by mental representations. There seems to be no sensitivity whatsoever to the fundamental role played, in Merleau-Ponty’s idiom, by the *situated and lived body* understood to be “the ‘unspoken cogito’ [...] our ‘primary subjectivity’, [...] the ‘consciousness which conditions language’ while remaining a ‘silent consciousness’ thanks to an ‘inarticulate grasp of the world’” (Shusterman 2005: 151). My claim is *not* that Anderson or anyone else working mainly within the oppositional black culture paradigm fails to capture useful insights. My contention is that this prominent approach leads even sensitive and sophisticated researchers to overlook what is most vital about aggressively disruptive coping practices in objectively unsafe schools: *the largely if not wholly pre-discursive dimension of embodied responses to chronic emotional distress*. With these clarifications in mind, let us turn now to Derek and Jurgen in the order that I met them.

¹⁰ In his other major ethnographic works (and a more recent restatement of his main findings, Anderson [2008]) the same pattern can be detected. In *Streetwise*, Anderson (1990: 177) observed that the young people he studied used explicitly incarnating language (“jaws got tight”, “gritting”, “bumping”, and “looking hard”) and indeed that the corresponding somatic states “could easily be compared with threatening animal behavior, particularly dogs warning other dogs away from their territory or food”. Nonetheless, pride of place in the analysis was reserved for “cultural” logics only secondarily, at best, related to pre-discursive lived through somatic states (“The youth is caught up in a cultural catch-22: to appear harmless to others might make him seem weak”). While Anderson (1978: 178, 190-191) demonstrated in *A Place on the Corner* that “displays of toughness and fighting ability” were rewarded with “deference and attention”, in

his analytical remarks he had precious little to say about physically embodied (emotional) experience as itself a generative force yet a lot to add about “values of toughness” and how “being tough” might be associated mainly with a “code”.

¹¹ Smardon (2009) also makes use of Anderson’s contributions while, in the end, making several similarly critical points about the overly mentalist and highly agentic assumptions undergirding *Code of the Street*. From a more ethnomethodological perspective, Jimerson and Oware (2006) stress that the evidence for ideological struggles presented in *Code of the Street* comes not from what happened in real time but, rather, from “black men talking” to Anderson about what happened after-the-fact. These co-authors argue that the young men who talked to Anderson were more or less strategically performing stereotypes that helped them rationalize tragic outcomes.

Derek

In the course of the process he develops a disposition [...] which was not and could not have been present when he began.¹²

Of the ideas advanced [here], none is more central than the notion that the body is the foundation of the conscious mind.¹³

Derek moved with his parents from Ghana to the South Bronx at the age of fourteen. When he arrived, he had an unfashionably rounded haircut. He wore out-of-date jeans and he spoke English haltingly, with a strong West African accent. Largely because of how he carried himself every day in my class, I found myself thinking Derek was one of the warmest and most gentle students I had ever met. He brought the right materials to class and even did homework. Derek was years behind in terms of academic skills, like nearly all the teenagers attending Johnson High. Initially, however, I held out the hope that—effectively locked out of more dominant and energizing social circles formed by those “holding shit down” in his new educational environment as he was—this strikingly handsome newcomer might be one of the few who would make great leaps forward in short periods of time. That was in 1997.

Doors started to open for Derek and he soon began playing around with that which was indeed defined locally as an increasingly “street” way of presenting himself. At first with a shy smile, then with a more serious demeanor, he also started adopting the colloquial speech of the “rough neck” students who, when they were classified along ethno-racial lines, tended to be labeled “(just plain old) black”, Jamaican or otherwise West Indian, Dominican, Puerto Rican or otherwise “Spanish [speaking]”.

Soon enough, my observations made clear that Derek was on his way to competently embodying a new way of being in his educational world apart. As if to mark the surpassing of some sort of threshold, at one point Derek told me that the other students had started calling him “Cookie” because he was “so sweet”. His haircut, footwear, clothing and way of walking and gesturing all evolved rapidly. By 1998, Derek had almost entirely ditched even his old accent.

Clearly, the once marginalized newcomer was finding acceptance with students atop his school’s most frequently mobilized status hierarchy. Whether or not we reduce in our minds ongoing social

¹² Becker (1953: 242), summing up his classic argument on “Becoming a marihuana user”.

¹³ Damasio (2012: 20).

dynamics to individualized attributes at rest (*cf.* Elias 1978: 115) by alleging that Derek had “become” a gang member¹⁴, almost automatically, he started to move confidently through, and “live large” in, the “hot spots” constituted by the “big money players” who were certainly associated with gangs like the (predominantly African American) Crips and the Bloods.

Derek started to “get his thug on”, as the students said, more and more “naturally”. Derek started to take up posts in high visibility, high status “spots” in the seemingly “real” (authentic, credible, not consciously thought though but felt or practically sensed) ways associated with those judged to be “true gangsters”. Achieving recognition from the most frenzied and feared students, Derek “logically” started shunning the ostensibly “fake” students he used to hang out with almost completely. As the saying went, he seemed to be turning into one of those pupils who “just had that g” (“g” meaning “game”)—and who just did what those with “game” do: stick together and avoid the “nobodies”.

Excluding a mix of energy and newfound self-assurance, born again “ghetto fabulous” I’m tempted to say, “Cookie” seemed at times certain that his social ascendancy was due mainly to his (sexy) looks. As Derek put it, “They tell me I don’t look African. They tell me I look black”. Of course, whether they self-identified as African American or not, lots of his fellow students were also understood to “look black” yet only a small percentage of them were recognized as “real”. And the gossip I heard in my classes and in the halls confirmed that—whether he was taken to be “African”, “black”, both, or neither—this noticeably square-jawed and athletically built boy was perceived by symbolically empowered members of the opposite sex to be a “hottie”. Derek had been informally reclassified as dating material even in the upper echelons of his socio-emotional environment—a feat achieved by only a minority of boys attending his new school no matter how they *might* be (unconsciously) ethno-racialized.

In the language of his fellow students, Derek had acquired “ghetto fabulous” dispositions. To use a term both Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu often substituted for *habitus* (Paulle, Van Heerikhuizen, and Emirbayer 2012: 79), Derek had developed the kind of *second nature* that often operated in real time as field-specific

¹⁴ As is suggested by Garot’s (2010: 177) work on gang-related “performances” and situated “claims”, Derek may have decided not to present himself to me as a gang member in part

because, like many other students who at times “flashed colors” and partook in gang-related handshakes, he genuinely did not feel like he was one when he spoke to me.

and locally consecrated¹⁵ situational know-how. Far beneath what took place mainly in his conscious mind, Derek's at once bodily and emotional dispositions had been transformed in his new world of highly charged and systemically routinized transactions. Although he had been handsome from the start, he gradually became "fabulous" because he successfully embodied what was universally understood to be the right stuff: "hardness".

Derek knew, perhaps better than I did, about the dangers inherent in the path upon which he had embarked. In part for this reason, it seems reasonable to assume, he quickly shut down my attempts to issue predictable warnings. At this stage in his development, however, recognition from the "real niggaz"—including, for example, pale skinned members of the typically most status rich networks of pupils who, if classified ethnically, were said to be Puerto Rican¹⁶—seemed to be all-important. More with his carriage and actions than with his words, during this phase, Derek made clear that he felt his star was rising along with his sense of embodying an authentically "hot" presence.¹⁷

Predictably, as Derek's sense of genuine belonging within vivifying "in-crowds" increased to what seemed like a feverish pitch, the hold of interaction ritual chains focusing attention on "street" ideologies and symbols strengthened and his grades and attendance rates plunged. More surprisingly, perhaps, after a period in which Derek had apparently enjoyed the "thug life", he seemed

¹⁵ As another student in Amsterdam once put it, looking back on the somewhat similar conversion through which he went during his first two years at the Delta School, "By that time [...] [smile] I was a little *player*, a little *bad boy*. [Pause] *Ghetto fabulous* is like a religion". (The italicized terms were delivered in English, the rest, originally, in Dutch.)

¹⁶ In other words, terms like "niggaz" (or, for example "cats") were used to refer to boys or men, not necessarily those associated with a specific racial or ethnic category. The putatively white teacher or Irish-American cop who was "no joke" or, for example, the Korean grocery store operators who did not let students steal potato chips

and soda—any and all could be classified as "real niggaz".

¹⁷ Initially, alongside recognition from ever more status rich (and supposedly sexy) fellow students, scattered spurts of stress may have actually given Derek a boost. As Robert Sapolsky writes, "For a short time, one or two hours, stress does wonderful things for the brain. More oxygen and glucose are delivered to the brain. The hippocampus, which is involved in memory, works better when you are stressed for a little while. Your brain releases more dopamine, which plays a role in the experience of pleasure, early on in stress; it feels wonderful, and your brain works better" (Kabat-Zinn and Davidson 2011: 79).

to fall into a depression.¹⁸ The smiles evaporated. Derek became noticeably more edgy and hostile. The “sweet”, playful, and fun-loving “gangster” period was evolving into something much gloomier and more confusing. Walking the halls with his pants hanging even lower than most of the other “thugs”, Derek seemed not to notice me or nearly anyone else. It seemed obvious that “Cookie” was neither choosing to feel depressed nor merely opting to manipulate impressions of those around him by presenting a somber, detached, and bellicose frontage self. Something more profound was going on as Derek started getting sent down to the Dean’s office with some regularity, a clear sign that he was frequently engaging in aggressively disruptive behavior.

During the fall of 1998, in a cramped cubical in the corner of the Dean’s office, I witnessed a colleague and friend named Terrell scold Derek after printing out his most recent report card and attendance record. Terrell, who had also taught Derek in the past, was clearly disgusted with the fact that his former student had once again been sent to the Dean’s office. When he was finished berating Derek, while allowing more of his UK-Jamaican accent to come through than he usually did, Terrell shifted gears and tried to convince Derek that he could still alter his course. There was still hope, Terrell told Derek at the climactic moment of his intervention, because “deep down inside you are soft [...] just like me”. The blank look on Derek’s face was eerie. Especially given Terrell’s full throttle tactics, Derek’s indifferent expression and stoic body language indicating an extreme level of aloofness and insensitivity seemed to confirm that Terrell was, as he said just seconds later, “wasting [his] time”.

For months, in my own way, I had been trying to communicate exactly the same message—often framed in terms of similarly body-based metaphors and the hard/soft dichotomy. Neither (self-important) verbal admonitions from me, a man generally judged to be white, nor this rant from a teacher-administrator universally assumed to be black, was going to help. Critically, both in terms of grasping what people

¹⁸ Again here, Sapolsky might be relevant and he therefore deserves to be quoted at length: “Unfortunately, the opposite happens when stress has gone on for too long—for four hours or for four years. There is less glucose delivered to the brain. Neurons in the hippocampus do not function as well. [...] With enough stress, neurons will actually die [and ...] there is a decreased release of dopamine. [...] As a result there is no pleasure, and that has something to do with

depression. Amazingly, stress makes the amygdala—the part of the brain that is involved in fear and anxiety—work better. The neurons there grow new connections and the amygdala gets bigger, and as a result, we become trapped by fear. Finally, the frontal cortex, which helps us make decisions and control our emotions, does not work well during chronic stress, and its neurons shrivel away” (Kabat-Zinn and Davidson 2011: 79-80).

actually do (Jerolmack and Khan forthcoming) and in terms of influencing behavior in ways that might reduce collective suffering and self-destructive responses in and around high poverty schools, *talk is cheap*. Further explicating “decent” values, the best we or any other adults in Johnson High could hope to achieve were very ephemeral, surface-level results. Thanks to the deep learning that took place in countless face-to-face encounters in and around his school, in Goffman’s (1986: 125) legendary words Derek had a “‘tuned up’ body”. As such, all the recurrent micro-situational pressures and the felt understandings—or underlying “frames” (Goffman 1974) turned second nature—were as compelling as they were stringent.

Derek was still perfectly capable of reporting that he “knew better”, at least during exceptional moments like the one in Terrell’s cubical. Crucially, however, this did not help him when it counted. As another former high school teacher declared long ago, “Thought which does not exist within *ordinary habits of action* lacks means of execution” (Dewey 1922: 67, *emphasis added*). Derek was almost constantly immersed in physically and emotionally riveting transactions that made him focus on, and thirst for, the energizing sense of authentically embodying “realness” in and around his dishonored neighborhood school. What started with willful and indeed highly conscious actions related to (quasi-racialized yet above all) “street” ideologies had morphed into habitual bodily states produced by, and producing, emotional dispositions operating far beneath the level of volition and discourse. Deep down, beneath anything related to his explicit mental representations, Derek was “soft” no more.

Another student of mine, also originally from Ghana, put the calamity in perspective. During an interview in a local pizza shop she explained that Derek’s parents were “never home” because they both worked two jobs. In and out of school Derek was surrounded, she said, by “thugs” and amazing amounts of what she and Derek certainly did not have a lot of in their Ghanaian villages: “stuff” (clothing, jewelry, footwear, etc.).

Just before I stopped teaching at Johnson in 1999, Derek attempted to rob a young man who was reportedly sporting a flamboyant gold chain. Derek approached with a gun and, perhaps before he knew it, was himself shot in the stomach. He was, according to all accounts, the father of a six-month old baby at the time of the shooting.

Derek’s explicit mental representations certainly mattered. So did cultural discourses about more and less “street” ways of being in and around his school. In his case, furthermore, becoming “(ghetto)

fabulous” was undeniably tied up with up ideas about both looking and acting authentically “black”. Without denying the validity of these established insights, the challenge is to keep them in mind while also seeing that if we stick within the confines of the oppositional black culture approach we will overlook, or at least downplay in our analyses, that which is most vital. In the cases of boys like Derek, the “ultimate values, as they are called, are never anything other than the primary, primitive dispositions of the body, ‘visceral’ tastes and distastes” (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]: 474) that operate far beneath the level of volitional consciousness.

Jurgen

You see him over there? He’s fabulous because he’s such a pretty boy. And you see him, the muscular one? He’s fabulous because everybody knows that he’ll just punch you in the face. After that he might start to think about whether or not he should have punched you. Everybody in here knows that what I am saying is true—even if they do like to pretend they’re not afraid...¹⁹

Like Derek, especially in the early days, Jurgen could sound utterly conventional. Indeed during our one-on-one exchanges as well as while engaged in conversations with friends I overheard, Jurgen at times was prone to moralizing about “good” (pro-school) and “bad” (disruptive, aggressive) sorts of student practices. During a calmer moment just outside the Delta Schools cafeteria, for example, Jurgen told me how important it was for students to “keep their hands to themselves” and “not talk back to teachers”. This native of southeast Amsterdam described what went on in the highly regulated classroom of an extraordinarily effective teacher—including his own non-disruptive behavior, which I observed for many hours while sitting in the back of my colleague’s class—as “normal”.

In this particular case, the gap between lofty rhetoric and grounded practice was especially striking. Throughout the three years that I found it hard *not* to observe this muscular boy with a closely cropped afro, Jurgen struck me as the most fearsome, impulsive, aggressive, and merciless student in his school. Several times I saw him lash out against students who appeared to be, at once, his prey and his all but irrelevant playthings (*e.g.*, elbowing students aside while making his way towards Delta’s crowded front entrance and not taking any notice of their reactions). With his multiple gold chains, tight T-shirts, baggy

¹⁹ Raul, a third year student looking out into a large open space inside the Delta School.

pants, macho bearing, and cocky grin revealing two gold teeth, Jurgen could indeed seem to be Delta's ideal typical "bad boy" who "naturally" contributed more mightily than anyone else to the continuing destabilization of his school.

Students told and re-told stories about beatings Jurgen had dished out even before I arrived, when Jurgen was still a first-year student. The most famous encounter during this initial period took place when a number of students from another school came to Delta to confront him. According to (almost certainly somewhat exaggerated) local folklore, the moment Jurgen heard the news he immediately stood up and walked out of Delta on his own. All but one of the boys who had come to take revenge scattered quickly when they saw Jurgen approaching. As one of Delta's administrators confirmed, the boy who remained was taken to the hospital by ambulance after Jurgen whacked his head with a motorcycle helmet until he lost consciousness. Unlike Derek, this "hardest of the hard" students did not need to learn the ropes before becoming an effective, and seemingly stone-hearted pugilist.

A fellow Delta student once described Jurgen's background and motivation to me the following way: "He was raised in the street and he practically lives there now. Kids like him come to school to have fun, talk to the girls, and just wreak havoc (*gewoon om een bende van alles maken*)". Filling in this thumbnail sketch while sitting together in a Chinese restaurant near my office in the historic heart of Amsterdam, Jurgen reflected on his past. It seemed that other than his grandmother, who "never ask[ed] any questions"—and perhaps a brother fifteen years his senior, who at one point "started dealing" cocaine again the "day he returned from prison"—there were no adults who might have even attempted to offer Jurgen supervision and age appropriate stimulation. Jurgen repeatedly assured me that he never got involved in more than "little things", like selling stolen mobile telephones, muggings, and grabbing money out of cash registers in small Bijlmer stores. He said he did not get involved in anything "heavy" because his brother would "kill" him if he did. "My brother is dangerous", Jurgen said, "really dangerous". When Jurgen shared this, his expression and posture indicated that the beatings he had received from his brother were profoundly meaningful if not downright traumatizing. Desensitized as he often seemed (while brutalizing others), it was obvious that this topic still stirred his passions. During the years before he entered Delta, Jurgen had almost certainly been emotionally neglected and physically abused.

While he was not considered a "pretty boy", Jurgen certainly had another form of bodily capital: an intimidating physique. Briefly, I want

to turn to an everyday ritual of “realness” that, as Collins’s (2004, 2007) work suggests, charged up those physically strong enough to enact them with regular installments of emotional energy. In Delta’s cafeteria, which might usefully be described in Anderson’s (1999) language as a high visibility “staging area” for “street” performances, I once observed Jurgen repeatedly pound the chest of a short, chubby, and less forcefully built boy named Stephano. Stephano was unable to defend himself in part because he carried a drink in one hand and a sandwich in the other. The unannounced blows, as well as the oohs and ahhs from the crowd, could be heard from a distance. While the emotional energy unleashed by the “public” event certainly flowed towards Jurgen rather than Stephano, the bully seemed remarkably unfazed. Upon dishing out the second round of blows he nonchalantly turned on his heels and returned to the seemingly low-key conversation in which he had been engaged.

Soon after the incident, when I saw him alone in the hallway, I asked Jurgen what was up with him and Stephano. “Stephano’s cool”, Jurgen replied, “I was just playing with him”. Jurgen could see that I was perplexed. “Mister, look, you know, we were just playing around [...] so, it was nothing”. I reminded Jurgen of what he had shared with me about the beatings he received from his older brother. Jurgen’s expression became more serious. “Mister”, he said, “why do you get all nervous about these types of things? This is just how it goes”. That proved to be our last meaningful exchange.

Getting in touch with such here-and-now somatic and emotional states need not conceal the importance of Jurgen’s gradual socialization process. Sensing the heat of “hot spots” and moments need not blind us, that is, to the importance of how Jurgen had previously been shaped, body and soul, by regular beatings and the denial of nurturing support from adults (acting *in loco parentis*). Indeed balancing both micro-interactional and habitus formation effects may be the best way to understand why Jurgen felt he was simply doing the done thing while dispassionately pounding on boys like Stephano or, more generally, while making his way from one validating, attention focusing, and invigorating occasion to the next. Alive to immediately situated and gradually socialized pressures to act we can perhaps grasp why, no matter how pro-school and peaceful they were capable of sounding, in the flow of their more frenzied interactional routines Jurgen and other students with similarly violent second natures tended to enact “hardness” as

automatically as the most competent prep school elites embody the poise of privilege at opposite extreme of educational space (Khan 2011).²⁰

Especially among the socially ambitious, such attention focusing interactions often fired up and reinforced the practical sense that being tightly integrated into the school's (violent) elite was far more urgent—and more dignifying—than anything else going on in or around Delta. In the here and now, that is, students like Jurgen had good reason to sense that they stood to gain from such public exhibitions of (seemingly) impulsive belligerence. To some extent, that is, we have to assume that everyday performances such as Jurgen's ritualized pummeling of the comparatively meek Stephano were actively crafted in self-reflective Goffmanian attempts at impression management. Such insights, one might say, align with and reinforce the oppositional black culture approach. "But", as one of Merleau-Ponty's most devoted students reminds us, here we must immediately recall that in real time and all the way down at the most primordial level, the "self-reflection in emotions is corporeal rather than a matter of discursive reasoning" (Katz 1999: 7).

*Gradual and immediate hardening: protecting, and
losing touch with, the body*

*There is more reason in your body, than in your best wisdom.*²¹

Despite the presence of metal detectors, a squadron of security guards outfitted with walkie-talkies, and the regular presence of police in and around the school in the New York's South Bronx—and despite repeated measures taken by de facto security guards ("portiers" and roaming staff members) as well as the occasional presence of police in the school in Amsterdam's Bijlmer—physical intimidation and pervasive anxiety were basic to both schools. Teachers and other staff members tended to avert their gazes and pretend they did not see various kinds of threatening behaviors, especially outside (their) classrooms. They either gravitated towards or actively opted for this strategy in many cases because they felt compelled to avoid the

²⁰ Khan (2011: 196) hit the nail on the head when he made this remark: "[Wh]at I have called the 'trick' of privilege, is to make [...] hierarchy seem [...] natural. My explanation here has drawn directly on the work of

Pierre Bourdieu and deploys the ideas of embodiment and ease to show how such a naturalization of socially produced differences can occur".

²¹ Nietzsche, in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

negative emotional energy (or occasional threats and even violence) that often accompanied attempts to regulate the more aggressive students' movements and ritualized interactions. Severe beatings and (more or less clearly gang-related) "slashings" were far commonplace in Johnson High, and the fact that roughly twice the number of students entered the building in New York (*i.e.*, around 1,000 vs. 600) cannot fully account for this. On the other hand, threats and petty fights were common in both schools and the worst school-related victimization of a student took place in Amsterdam.²² The students knew that even staff members were attacked quite viciously inside both schools. A teacher-administrator in New York was knocked unconscious in a stairwell, for example, and, after grabbing a boy who ran into school late, a teacher in Amsterdam was bitten through the flesh of his shoulder by the student's irate mother.²³ For the adults only *formally* in charge of both schools, the golden rule—as teachers intermittently said—was simple: *don't touch the students* (*cf.* Devine 1996; Johnson 1999).

With these more general remarks as well as the specific embodied histories and situated responses of Derek and Jurgen in mind, let us get to the crux of the matter. Most obviously, hardening was related to children's efforts to deal with (temporarily seductive [Katz 1988]) external stressors. Forced to cope in hostile settings—moment to moment and year after year—their at once habituated and situated attempts to shield themselves often led to decreased clarity with regard to what went on in their *external worlds*. Less obviously perhaps, hardening was also centrally about insensitivity to what took place in their *internal environments*. More precisely, the process and state was about resisting primordial feelings of fear and vulnerability manifesting in—or welling up from—the body proper. In other words, hardening amounted to closing the mind off so that specific kinds of information and energy could not be sent up from below. In short, the desensitizing at the heart of hardening was gradually socialized and immediately lived as well as directed both externally and internally.

As we have already seen, this utterly understandable strategy without a "strategist" was repeated because it worked in the short term. Through temporary postures and durable emotional dispositions, hardening could help transform the tension of threats and the nervousness of insecurity into the (seemingly confident) "I don't care about these people", "I ain't

²² A supposedly "good kid" was stabled twice and rescued by a trauma helicopter that landed on Delta's playground.

²³ By far, the worst victimization of a staff member took place in New York, where a fellow teacher was killed in his apartment by one of his former students and an accomplice.

afraid of nobody” and “I ain’t the one to fuck with [...] pick somebody else [to victimize]” narratives that, as Anderson (1999) has shown, regularly showed up in (“black”) students’ in situ coping and after-the-fact justifications. Cultural codes and discursive thinking mattered here to be sure. At this level, “hardness” was without doubt associated with belonging to the “street” aristocracy that effectively ruled both neighborhood schools. The point is the need to see clearly what went on beneath such codes and verbalizations. In the short term and far beneath the level of discursive consciousness, being cut off from one’s “gut” feelings of insecurity—and especially being revved up by jolts of stress—could feel highly effective, energizing and even pleasurable.

As we have seen, especially in the longer term, such temporarily successful coping practices tended to have disastrous longer-term effects. Here we need to take a closer look at exactly what was lost when students effectively cut essential parts of themselves off from their subjective awareness. Immersed in institutional spaces where adults tended not even to observe negative peer dynamics let alone try systemically to regulate them—*empathy* and especially active *compassion* tended to remain bottled up. When fear and vulnerability triggered hunched over and often hooded (or otherwise covered up) “gangster strolls” through packed hallways, for example, hardening reduced the “thugged out” students’ abilities to *feel their ways into* caring social connections with others.²⁴ There were coalitions and heartfelt friendships to be sure, as there are in nearly all socially complex settings.²⁵ More generally, however, compassion towards other students, teachers, and even one’s self seemed to dissolve as students hardened. In part the mechanisms at work here can be found in simple organisms like snails that contract (into their shells) and, in so doing, take in less information from their external environments—as well as posture-specific signals about their own distressed internal environments—while seeking safety in threatening situations. If pursued for too long, the short-term benefits of such strategies can turn into durable losses and damage.

²⁴ Tellingly, *thug* comes from the Hindi term *thag* which, in turn, derives from the Sanskrit word, *sthaḡati*, which means “he covers or conceals”. *Empatheia*, in Greek, can be broken down into *em* meaning “in” and *pathos* meaning “feeling”.

²⁵ As gang-related social dynamics and interactional performances made obvious, being recognized as members of the “hardcore” elites could foster not just a modicum of safety (in the short term) but also—as terms like “family” and “brother” imply—deep senses of solidarity, status, belonging and even love.

This brings us to what might be treated as the second longer-term causality of everyday low-level socio-emotional and interactional “warfare” in our worst schools: *wisdom*. Already in a hardened state that limited incoming perceptions while shaping emotional states and interpretations, “acting crazy” (or “stupid” or “wild”) could certainly feel effective in the short term. Yet the inability to “think straight” about the past, present, and future tended to culminate in catastrophes for all involved. Consequences became all but inaccessible when chronic stressors produced the frazzled and dis-integrated bodily-mental state we are examining. Right there in the thick of high-tension encounters—and above all when crowds amplified the effects of “dirty looks” and *direct physical contact*—this “craziness” had little to do with situation transcending beliefs systems or any “decent” ideologies that needed to be made more explicit. It had a great deal to do, however, with how conventional goals for the future (*e.g.*, not getting into another fight and being forced onto a special education trajectory) were swallowed whole by tensions felt, first and foremost, in the lived body and deep recesses of the brain’s limbic system (which is most intensely involved with emotions like fear). In the regular flow of everyday stressful events—while feeling drained and degraded in the wake of a threat or pumped up after having participated (as an onlooker) in someone else’s “beat down”—the students found themselves hijacked by destructive emotional flows that made it feel all but impossible to focus even temporarily on, say, a teachers’ attempts to communicate lessons about how Bismarck unified Germany or an upcoming math test. When the failing grades, expulsions, forced transitions into “special ed” trajectories and ambulances showed up, the longer-term effects of this individual and collective flow became hard to miss.

Seeing the reality of short-term (individual) payoffs need not blind us to the fact that shielding one’s self from what was going on “in here” and “out there” ultimately led to the further destruction of Johnson High and the Delta School. Similarly, getting in touch with the power of here and now situational pressures need not conceal how pervasive hardening gradually solidified into an ever-present background of stress-related practices, self-defeating “emotional styles” (Davidson 2012), and a common stock of taken for granted meanings. Bringing together these insights can perhaps help us see that, no matter how they might have identified ethno-racially (in a given situation), and no matter what they may have said or believed during their calmer moments, “hardness” got deep under the skin of all the chronically exposed teenagers I studied—including the supposedly “soft” ones making up the hushed (if not silent) majorities of both student bodies.

Final discussion

Men are afraid, without even being aware of their fear, to recognize, the most wonderful of all the structures of the vast universe—the human body. They have been led to think that a serious notice and regard would somehow involve disloyalty to man's higher life. [Our] discussions [should] breathe reverence for this wonderful instrument [...] When such [an] [...] attitude toward the body becomes more general, we shall have an atmosphere favorable to securing the conscious control which is urged.²⁶

In contexts as diverse as the Bronx and the Bijlmer, at the most fundamental level, *embodied responses to chronic stress* appear to be what actually lead adolescent students to contribute to the ongoing devastation of their own high poverty schools. Explicit mental representations related to racial identities and volitional consciousness were not, as those working in the oppositional black culture approach would have it, responsible for self- and other-destructive coping practices on the ground in either of the schools in which I taught. As we saw, even the seemingly most “street” adolescents were unquestionably capable of reporting that they “knew better” and they certainly did not *willfully* switch to anti-school (or more bellicose) codes of honor or behavior mainly because of consciously held values (that can easily be put into words during interviews).

Once in the grip of “hot” social encounters, chronically distressed students like Derek and Jurgen could not be expected to clearly and calmly monitor either what was going directly outside or inside their living bodies. Feelings of vulnerability and empathy—as well as the ability to “think straight” and use foresight—were crowded out and minimized if not blocked completely during the moments that mattered most. While caught up in the frantic scariness and pulsating excitement of the moments that mattered most in their lives and schools, that is, such students with more and less durably impaired sets of emotional predispositions found themselves “already” physically and mentally engaged in aggressively disruptive

²⁶ Dewey, the renowned education expert, offered these words nearly a century ago in his introduction to a book written by Frederick Alexander (1918: xv-xvi), the

mastermind of the corporally based Alexander Technique (<https://archive.org/details/manssupremeinhero1alex>, Accessed November 30th, 2013).

behavior largely because they were cut off from key aspects of their own corporeal selves.²⁷

Such “strategies” often “worked” in the short term—at least in terms of the pressing need to turn anxiety into primordial feelings of well-being. Yet the state and process of hardening not only led occasionally to extreme physical violence (Derek being shot, Jurgen beating another child almost into a coma), in the longer run it also led to the depressions and burnouts of countless students and teachers while making it frequently all but impossible to teach or learn. In the longer-term, that is, hardening translated into domination (even of the typically dominant) by negative peer group dynamics. “Thugged out” and “ghetto fabulous” *techniques of the body* (Mauss 1973 [1936]) filled the void opened up by insufficient adult support and supervision and, eventually, the worst of the students’ bodily and mental dispositions tended to be triggered. All those involved were denied the means of discovering what was being lost, moment by moment and year by year.

Arguably most important among the *potentially* uplifting insights documented above is the finding that, like the rest of us, even the “hardest of the hard” students turned out to have quite diverse sets of dispositions. These complex systems of inclinations and skills certainly allowed for non-aggressive and non-disruptive if not genuinely beneficial utterances and behavior. This finding dovetails nicely with Garot’s potent (2010: 1-2) comments about the need not just for urban ethnographers but for all sociologists to utilize more processual and relational ways of thinking and speaking about the teens attending our worst schools:

Over the past fifty years, social scientists have increasingly turned from essentializing identity as a fixed characteristic to understanding identity as fluid, contextual, and shifting [...] Yet such insights tend to be overlooked when we speak of inner-city youth [...] fear clouds our thinking [...] This is unfortunate, for such fear may well play a role in maintaining the conditions that lead to the behavior we seek to redress. Out of fear arises segregation²⁸

²⁷ As Elijah Anderson (2008: 16) put it, while seeming to break with several of the basic tenets of the very approach with which he is so closely associated, “Before [they] know it, [they] are out there doing what [they] feel [they] must do. [...] Like soldiers in a war zone [...] they adopt the postures that survival [...] demands”.

²⁸ Making the same basic point yet addressing more generally the direction in which sociological categorization should be

headed, Collins (2013: 162) recently wrote the following: “When the observer is in a differentiated network looking at it from close by, they see it as complicated, fluctuating, hard to pin down except temporarily and by aid of abstractions recognized as approximations only”. This point of view, he continued, does not support “dogmatic myths [about] particularistic essences like ethnic [...] stereotypes”.

Shifting from sociological theory over towards pedagogic practice now, a related part of the preceding analysis that may prove fruitful in the years ahead relates to the promise of replacing disembodied approaches with more visceral ones. As the previous pages indicate, we might all stand to gain from replacing outdated debates about (race-based) mental “opposition” with updated conversations about (both the beneficial and adverse aspects of) contemporary surveillance and disciplining techniques capable of producing “docile bodies” (Foucault 1979; Devine 1996; Gorski 2003).

Precisely with regard to this key point about the centrality of lived somatic experience, moving forward perhaps more people will find inspiration and practical guidance in the work of John Dewey. Dewey, the ultimate American pragmatist and democratic pedagogue, is famous for arguing that our intellectual contributions should help ordinary people deal with the real problems they face. As his commanding words re-printed at the outset of this section begin to illuminate, however, there is a less well-known Dewey who for decades practiced and received instruction in an explicitly body-based approach to fostering conscious self-control and mind-body integration (*i.e.*, the Alexander Technique) (*cf.* Shusterman 1994: 137). There is no doubt in my mind that if more researchers and practitioners got to know this other Dewey many of them would demand that the perpetually overlooked place to start improving high poverty urban schools is the moment to moment experience of having and being a human body. As the quote above implies, most of Dewey’s intellectual and professional contemporaries were incapable of grasping the message that lived bodies should be taken seriously in analyses of what ails our schools and societies. Nearly a century later, thanks to the gradual mainstreaming of phenomenological (and explicitly carnal) perspectives in the social sciences and a host of body-based diagnoses and therapies undergirded by rigorous (neuro)science, there is reason to believe that the dominance of overly mentalist and superficial frameworks may soon lose their grip on us as well as our (high poverty) schools.²⁹ As a result, we may be witnessing the early stages of powerful (intellectual and research-based) movements that will eventually help mitigate the unnecessary suffering so painfully obvious from within many non-selective big city schools around the world.

²⁹ See for example the international movement, receiving powerful assists from leading contemplative neuroscientists such as Richard

Davidson (2012), to bring mindfulness-based meditation techniques from the medical to the educational domains.

Coming to a close now, I want to suggest that achieving greater depth and clarity in our sociological accounts of what is actually ripping apart so many high poverty schools can help bring about everyday educational experiences fostering greater conscious self-control (over strong emotions and situated stressors) by means of strengthening precisely that which is so often severed in our worst schools today: students' visceral connections to themselves (*cf.* Johnson 2007: 282). Whether this is realistic or not, this article has to conclude that helping more and less emotionally destabilized students reestablish firm links to their lived bodies is an ethnographically grounded goal that should be an integral part of everyday pedagogic practice—especially among children and teens born into impoverished families and neighborhoods.

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Résumé

Six ans d'enseignement dans des collèges pour défavorisés à New-York et à Amsterdam ont conduit à formuler la question : pourquoi tant de préadolescents des quartiers pauvres se livrent-ils avec une telle agressivité à des déprédations qui détruisent leur collège ? L'article suggère que l'approche, longtemps dominante par la culture oppositionnelle a produit des analyses exagérément mentalistes et, en fait, superficielles. En prenant plus en compte les corps en mouvement l'impulsionnel collectif, le relationnel. L'auteur présente une façon fortement différente, de penser la socialisation graduelle et les processus cachés derrière les violences dévastatrices. En faisant parler les élèves sur des expressions utilisées par eux telles que « y aller dur », il fait voir le pouvoir de séduction immédiate et en fin de compte inadaptée des réponses au stress ressenti physiquement de deux gars qui ont *in fine* payé physiquement un lourd tribut. La similitude des observations des deux côtés de l'Océan donne à espérer une avancée dans la compréhension de la perte sentiments et des aptitudes au raisonnable dans les pires collèges.

Mots clés: Stress ; Violence ; Habitude ; Milieux défavorisés ; Écoles urbaines.

Zusammenfassung

Sechs Jahre Erfahrung in New Yorker und Amsterdamer Schulen für Minderbemittelte haben zu folgender Fragestellung geführt: Warum richten derart viele vorpubertäre Schüler in armen Stadtteilen mit einer solchen Aggressivität Sachschäden in ihren Schulen an? Der Beitrag legt nahe, dass die über lange Zeit von einem gegensätzlichen schwarzen Kulturansatz hergeleitete Interpretation hauptsächlich zu übertriebenen mentalistischen und somit oberflächlichen Analysen geführt hat. Der Autor stellt hier eine gänzliche andere Art vor, wie die graduelle Sozialisierung und die den zerstörerischen Gewaltausbrüchen zugrundeliegenden versteckten Prozesse hinterfragt werden müssen. Anhand verschiedener Schüleraussagen zum Begriff, *coming hard* (die Sache hart angehen) verdeutlicht der Autor die direkte Verführungskraft und die unpassende Antwort auf den körperlich empfundenen Stress zweier Schüler, die mit ihrem eigenen Körper dafür bezahlen. Die Ähnlichkeiten beiderseits des Ozeans lassen darauf hoffen, dass ein Fortschritt im Verständnis von Gefühlsverlust und mangelnden klaren Gedankenvorstellungen in verarmten Vierteln möglich ist.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Stress; Verkörperung; Gewalt; Habitus; Härte; Armut; Stadtschulen.