Phantoms of Success

The Politics of Aspiration in Post-Boom Silicon Valley

Geography of a Myth

In a photograph accompanying a 2005 New York Times article titled, “Wheels and Deals in Silicon Valley,” a young, goateed white man clad in the green and blue bike-racing garb of the Webcor/Alto Velo Bicycle Racing Club leans over his bike. Behind him, similarly clad men and women straddle their bicycles, preparing for one of the club’s endurance-testing, long-distance rides. The caption reads, “Let the networking begin.”

That Silicon Valley’s information economy is founded on the practice of networking hardly constitutes news. But the hook here concerned a novel trend among Silicon Valley technology workers and entrepreneurs: the integration of extreme sports into the daily regimen of working and networking. Apparently yesterday’s “skinny-armed computer geeks . . . ” are today taking up adventure sports,

Finding that a mountain road or a cresting wave can be an exhilarating place to integrate one’s business, social, and recreational lives . . . Cycling is the new golf. And so is snowboarding, for that matter, and open-sea distance swimming, and kite-surfing [a sport that involves surfing in the air over water while hooked up to a parachute], and even abalone diving. (Williams 2005)

This article summons the Silicon Valley of popular imagination. In its vivid description of the work-time/playtime antics of Silicon Valley techno-entrepreneurs, it reinforces dearly held, enduring myths about the region that elide the multiple dimensions of its history and present: that it is a placeless meritocracy of innovators and that it exists, first and foremost, in the
mind, a province of ideas spun into technological innovation through competition and collaboration.

The techno-entrepreneurs whose extreme sports activities are featured in this *New York Times* piece represent the post-Internet boom version of the Silicon Valley myth. No longer simply the province of quiet, geeky engineers burning with intensity for technological innovation, the corporate culture of Silicon Valley reinvented itself during the tech boom of the late 1990s, becoming younger, wealthier, and hypercompetitive—a “culture mash” of risk-inclined people playing a market on a “crack high,” Po Bronson (1999) wrote at the time.

In the late 1990s this new-and-improved version of a Silicon Valley “culture” personified by competition-mad and extremely wealthy techno-entrepreneurs emerged as a commonplace of American popular, indeed global, imagination. For me, this representation produced a disjuncture. Having grown up in the area during the 1980s in a middle-class family with no connections to the region’s high-tech sector, and having worked during the early 1990s as a patient advocate at a community clinic serving low-income immigrants in Santa Clara County, the geographic heart of Silicon Valley, I barely recognized the place or the young tech workers and entrepreneurs featured in the news stories that emerged as the boom gained momentum. My own memories of the place, of a childhood spent among graduate student families on the Stanford University campus, and of an adolescence spent in an income-diverse Palo Alto neighborhood home to middle-class professionals as well as moderate-income families and retirees, seemed to belong to a parallel universe. Though it had long been a hub of high-tech industry, Silicon Valley had, within a few cyber-crazed years, become an iconic symbol of globalization at its finest: multicultural, meritocratic, and borderless, a polyglot Eden of ultra-competitive techno-entrepreneurs and engineers starting companies and “going public,” blurring the lines between extreme work and extreme play.

This mythologized representation of Silicon Valley and its idealized citizenry constitutes a social imaginary with global reach, one that, during the late 1990s, began to inspire Silicon Glens and Gulches and Deserts around the country and the world. Indeed, the powerful and pervasive influence of this social imaginary recalls sociologist Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) notion of “representations of space”. For Lefebvre, such spaces are *conceived*, defined by people such as urban planners, architects, and the like, and expressly articulated, as opposed to *lived*. In Silicon Valley, this conceived space has been defined in terms of a “Silicon Valley culture” by the region’s techno-
entrepreneurial elite and its boosters in ways that flatten the complex history of the place into a simple narrative about highly competitive people who invent technology in a postindustrial landscape of corporate campuses and cubicles. The multiculturalism of this mythologized Valley is somehow homogenized; cultural differences, though celebrated, are subordinated to the task of innovation. Moreover, such diversity seemingly exists without class divisions. In short, this regional space—the space, one often hears, of “the future”—offers a version of globalization and its subjects that is somehow conflict-free and ahistorical, a seamless cosmopolitan zone of “knowledge workers” and entrepreneurs.

This version of the region stands in stark contrast to what Lefebvre would call the lived space of Silicon Valley, in which residents negotiate increasing economic insecurity, hierarchies of citizenship (Ong 1999), and conflicting class interests. My interest in this lived space, and its clash with Silicon Valley’s dominant public culture, inspired this book. As I read and heard about the boom during the late 1990s and took in the almost evangelical talk of the information society and the “New Economy” flooding the academic and popular presses, I became preoccupied by working- and middle-class experiences of the region and its rapid social transformation, as well as such inhabitants’ perceptions of the conceived Valley and its idealized, emergent techno-entrepreneurial class. Moreover, I became fascinated by what I came to see as the instructive power of Silicon Valley’s dominant public culture for the region’s working- and middle-class inhabitants. What effect, I wondered, did representations of techno-entrepreneurial success, and emergent “new entrepreneurial” practices and values, have on the self-perceptions, self-defining actions, and imagined futures of working and tenuously situated middle-class people contending with rapid social and economic transformation?

This book explores the lived space of Silicon Valley from the vantage point of those whose experiences of social and economic transformation are particularly formative andwhose dominant notions of success and regional “culture” are especially powerful: local youth. It investigates how, as the boom morphed into a bust, working- and middle-class young people coming of age in Silicon Valley defined their aspirations and themselves in relation to a rapidly transforming social, economic, and educational context as well as to an unevenly experienced regional public culture.

I approach this subject comparatively. With the recognition that racial, class, and ethnic hierarchies as well as local educational inequalities insure no unitary experience of being young in Silicon Valley, this book examines the process of aspiration formation among youth from divergent class, racial,
and ethnic backgrounds. Focusing specifically on the children of the Valley’s low-wage service workers and those of its highly skilled tech and service professional classes, it explores how daily experiences of schooling and community shaped this process. In so doing the book considers changing expectations of conduct and norms of success that such youth confront within these social contexts, and the extent to which techno-entrepreneurial values, skills, and social practices—by now an idealized model of citizenship in the contemporary United States—have become morally and practically instructive for working and middle-class youth.

My approach to the problem of aspiration formation acknowledges the role of processes of racialization, and, for many, experiences of racism and dynamics of ethnic identification, in shaping ideas about self, family, school, one’s future, and one’s class identity, and in determining one’s relation to a dominant public culture. To be Latino, white, or Asian in Silicon Valley, or to be Mexican American, Chinese American, or Vietnamese American, means negotiating particular historical experiences of exclusion or relative privilege, and particular structural conditions and stereotypes. Hence this ethnography aims to shed light on dynamics of race and class that influence the ways in which young people forge aspirations and social identities, and thus engage dynamics of social reproduction and differentiation in Silicon Valley.

Understanding the subjective process through which young people forge aspirations and social identities, however, requires a wider focus than young people and their immediate school and community environments. Because aspiration formation is a social and political process as well as an individual one, this book considers in almost equal measure the broader social, political, and cultural forces and circumstances that have shaped, and sometimes failed to shape, processes of aspiration formation and class identification. As a result, particular dynamics within the public sphere that profoundly influence young people’s beliefs about themselves, their place in the world, and the ways they imagine their futures—such as the evolution of ideas about critical workforce skills, regional and national dynamics of educational reform, and expressions of adult middle-class anxiety—figure prominently in this book.

The dimensions of this inquiry have been defined by the volatility of the regional and national economy under conditions of intensifying globalization and recession and widening social inequality in the Valley. The tech boom and bust wrought fortune and misfortune unevenly and in divergent ways across lines of race, ethnicity, and class. For many working-class children of immigrants from Mexico, the tech boom—before exposure to Silicon Valley.
Valley’s corporate culture through school programs—meant absolutely nothing. Alternately it meant getting priced out of Silicon Valley and finishing high school in a less expensive area of California. For some of the children of white Silicon Valley tech professionals I encountered, the tech boom meant a remodeled family home, vacations to Thailand or Europe, parents who took frequent business trips, or even postponing college to start a tech company after high school. For many other middle-class youth, it meant feeling conspicuously “low-rent” in a place that seemed to be growing richer all the time.

Naturally the bust also meant different things to different people: for those performing low-wage service work such as ironing and washing uniforms for a company serving local tech corporations or working in construction, it meant an intensification of insecurity at often already insecure jobs or job loss; for an employee of a tech corporation facing job loss, with a mortgage and kids, or the person suddenly bankrupted by margin calls, it meant the potential dismantling of one’s social world.

By the time I arrived in Silicon Valley to begin my fieldwork in the fall of 2001, my awareness of such variation and flux had shaped my plans for fieldwork and given rise to more specific questions about the relationship between schooling, aspiration, and expectations of citizenship. The design of the research and its theoretical orientation are best explained in relation to structural political-economic and social transformations within the region since the 1990s, and the emergence of a regional civic agenda focused on educational reform and workforce preparedness that relates to these shifts.

The Split World of Silicon Valley

During the boom years of the 1990s the region’s wealth polarization intensified as recently arrived, highly educated tech professionals from other parts of the country and abroad filled highly paid and often stock-optioned jobs in the high-tech sector, and rents and home prices skyrocketed. At the same time Latino and Asian immigrants filled new low-paid service jobs spawned by the boom, thereby reinforcing a local racial and ethnic labor hierarchy inherited from the region’s agricultural past and maintained throughout Silicon Valley’s postwar history (Pitti 2003). The net result of this regional economic transformation was a sharper divide that outstripped by far the nation’s much-discussed wealth-polarization during the 1990s. Within the County of Santa Clara, inflation-adjusted incomes of households in the bottom twentieth percentile rose a modest 9 percent between 1993 and 2001.
compared to 17 percent nationwide. Indeed, between 1990 and 1999 wage rates of the poorest 25 percent of residents decreased by 14 percent (Sachs 1999). Simultaneously the local cost of living increased by 22 percent, making Silicon Valley 1.5 times more expensive than the national average (Joint Venture Silicon Valley [JVSV] Network 2003:19).

By contrast, inflation adjusted incomes rose 24 percent for those in the eightieth percentile income bracket. Thus, individuals with incomes in the eightieth percentile kept pace with the 22 percent cost-of-living rise during this period (JVSV Network 2003:19). Of course those Valleyites able to “cash in” during the tech boom existed in an altogether different economic galaxy: the ratio of annual income for the top one hundred executives compared to the average production worker rose from 42:1 in 1991 to 956:1 in 2000 (Benner 2002:213).

How did such socioeconomic polarization shape the social context of everyday life in Silicon Valley? The poor experienced continued socio-spatial segregation within the region: those whose incomes did not exceed the federal poverty guidelines remained concentrated in more or less the same census tracks within the county between 1990 and 2000 (Sachs 1999). In geographic terms the socio-spatial pattern observed for Silicon Valley by sociologists Manuel Castells and Peter Hall (1994) in their landmark study of “technopoles” has held true: affluent Valley residents still live in the North and West of the county, and poorer residents in the South and East.

At the same time Valley residents in the middle found themselves awash in economic insecurity; at the turn of the millennium only 18 percent of Santa Clara Valley residents could afford a median-priced home for sale in Santa Clara County. Although this number jumped to 26 percent in 2002 as a result of the tech bust, it stands in sharp contrast to a national average of 56 percent.

In experiential terms, the region’s polarization of wealth and local increased cost of living during the 1990s exacerbated the sense of a place increasingly bereft of its middle strata, and instead divided between those barely able to survive economically and those able to flaunt their new wealth. Moreover, I found that these conditions also sharpened divisions in the region between different groups all considering themselves “middle-class.” In light of my findings in this regard, I refer throughout this book to three distinct middle-class groups in contemporary Silicon Valley: a “new entrepreneurial,” affluent upper-middle class comprised of young “dot-commers” and elites working in managerial positions in the high-tech sector; an established professional—and typically older—middle class comprised of technical pro-
fessionals and others who work outside the tech sector as well as retirees; and a public sector middle class of teachers, firemen, policemen, nonprofit workers, and the like. These groups have experienced the dominant public culture of Silicon Valley, and the socioeconomic transformations in the region within the last fifteen years or so, in divergent ways. Indeed, for many of those in the established professional and public-sector middle class, economic insecurity, which ratcheted up dramatically during the recession of 2008–2009, has become a central reality.

The class polarization wrought by experiences of economic insecurity and increasing wealth differences among the Valley’s middle strata has divided Silicon Valley’s social space and intersected with local racial and ethnic hierarchies. Educated whites and Chinese, Taiwanese, and Indians often occupy highly paid technical and managerial positions in the high-tech sector, and Latino and Vietnamese, Filipino, Korean, and other Southeast Asian immigrants perform low-paid services and high-tech production work, creating ethnic and racial hierarchies and patterns of ethnic and occupational segregation (Hossfeld 1988; Ong 1999; Pastor et al. 2000; Saxenian 1996; Zlolniski 2006; Wadhwa et al. 2007). When I conducted my fieldwork this segregation was striking; Latino faces were typically absent from the companies I visited, except at the security gates or the Starbucks tent in the lobby.16 Residential patterns reflected labor force hierarchies: highly educated South Asian and East Asian immigrants and their families lived and mingled with affluent white residents of Silicon Valley, whereas working-class Latinos, African Americans, Vietnamese Americans, and other Southeast Asians tended to live apart from whites in the region. The dramatic lack of public transit only intensified sense of parallel worlds.

Indeed, the combination of wealth polarization and socio-spatial segregation along lines of race and class made for a discordant fieldwork experience, despite my familiarity with the area. After moving back to the Valley in 2001 the social distances I traveled were far longer than my traffic-filled commute. In the morning I might sit in a dilapidated office building in an area home to low-income Latino and Asian families discussing the checkered relationship between corporate Silicon Valley and the region’s Latino population or the young, white “yuppies” pushing lower-income people out of San Jose or the fact that for many families in the immediate neighborhood the boom and subsequent bust felt and looked quite similar. Later the same day I might listen to an engineer with “start-up” experience dissect the boom and bust at one of Palo Alto’s upscale cafés. Language use exposed the distance between discrete life-worlds; a Mexican American teenager I once interviewed looked
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when I mentioned “dot-coms,” whereas the acronym IPO (initial public offering) peppered the speech of my more affluent high-tech connected interviewees.

A Techno-Civilizing Process

As I learned on a visit to the region in 2000, Silicon Valley elites were aware of these sharpening social, economic, and cultural divides along lines of race, ethnicity, and class. They saw them as a liability for a number of reasons, including the need for a homegrown labor force at many levels of the economy, and they sought to address them. Moreover, for some tech leaders, involvement on regional social issues stemmed from the belief that technological know-how, skills, and access engender social transformation and democratic participation. Thus, during the 1990s boom, local tech corporations collaborated with community groups, schools, and other institutions to address a host of social problems plaguing the area, including the educational and professional disenfranchisement of Latinos within the regional information economy, traffic congestion, and the shortage and cost of housing.

Significantly, these collaborations often promoted the application of technological products (like laptops for students, educational software, and web portals) and celebrated the values and attitudes of techno-entrepreneurship—often glossed as regional “culture”—as “solutions” to social problems often the product of local industry.17 The conviction that the regional “spirit of innovation,” and the social practices and products that spawned the growth of the regional high-tech economy, would solve the region’s social and environmental problems was prevalent on websites focused on the region’s quality of life, at public forums, and in conversations I held with many people in the private, nonprofit, and public sector.

Indeed, we might understand pervasive references to Silicon Valley’s “culture,” its techno-entrepreneurial elite, and the traits of its highly skilled workforce in discourse about the region’s social ills in terms of sociologist Norbert Elias’s (1978 [1939]) concept of a “civilizing process.” Although Elias is concerned with the political project of civilizing the West, a process he links to shifting thresholds of shame and embarrassment and the emergence of new sources of fear, the broader message of his description is that the civilizing process entails a kind of self-regulation that becomes inculcated over time, and is motivated in part by fear of particular stigmas or desire for the status accorded those deemed “civilized.” Thus the civilizing process involves a transformation of self-conduct that may be manifest in subtleties of lifestyle,
and the attachment of particular emotional significance to certain everyday habits and rituals. Conversely, the act of not conducting oneself in such sanctioned ways implies belonging to a class of person deemed “uncivilized.”

In its focus on often minute, daily forms of self-discipline and presentation that define a style of self-conduct, Elias’s conception of the “civilizing process” calls to mind popular understandings of social class in the contemporary United States which tend to be conceived in stylistic as opposed to structural terms (Rouse 1995). This commonsensical understanding of social class in terms of markers of personal style, desires, and attitudes is in accord with a neoliberal rationality of rule in the contemporary United States; in a recycling of the liberal, individualist strain in American national culture that became pronounced during the second half of the nineteenth century (Emerson 1883 [1844]; Foner 1999), this form of governance stresses personal responsibility and choice. Stylistic meanings of social class promote this ideology: representations of an “underclass” with no sense of personal responsibility and a “middle class” that is morally deserving in its assumption of personal responsibility encourage the choice to adjust one’s behaviors, attitudes, and desires, and thereby attain a respectable “middle-class” status.

The egalitarian message that it is simply a matter of personal choice whether or not one becomes “middle-class” is, of course, as much of a pretense as the notion that a time will come when all are “civilized”; just as the “civilizing process” paradoxically promotes normative behavior but can only proceed by creating differentiation, hegemonic ideas about class mobility in the United States implicitly encourage everyone to speak the language—figuratively and literally—of the dominant society, to observe the same customs, and to acquire the benefits of education that make it possible to belong to a “middle class.” And yet the capitalist process requires a working class and thus depends upon socially meaningful markers of class. The requirements of a “civilized” status, like markers of class status, thus remain moving targets defined largely by the needs of capital.

The emergence in Silicon Valley during the late 1990s of a civic agenda around the local “digital divide,” a gloss for gaps in educational and professional achievement as well as in technological access along lines of race, ethnicity, and income, offered a vivid example of a kind of techno-entrepreneurial civilizing process, one that resonated with an idealized middle-class style. Focused on cultivating the skills and values of youth in particular, as well as their access to technology and technological social networks, initiatives and discourse focused on the local digital divide articulated a preferred way of doing business, organizing society, and conducting oneself. Located within
schools and other sites of social reproduction, such as workforce oriented after-school programs, agendas to bridge the digital divide often evoked Silicon Valley mythology and an idealized techno-entrepreneurial subject for pedagogical purposes, the techno-entrepreneur or highly skilled tech worker serving as a model of self-conduct and personal success. Implicitly, such modeling and emphasis on techno-entrepreneurial skills, knowledge, and values marked as “other” those lacking the right “social capital.”

Not surprisingly, the rhetoric of educational and workforce-oriented initiatives focused on the digital divide, and the cultivation of a “homegrown” workforce played with the cultural category of youth by focusing on young people as mediums of potentiality and malleability, as subjects “at risk,” and as a category of person deserving of public- and private-sector help. In particular, deservedness was often tacitly conveyed in representations of the region’s low-income Latino youth that emphasized their willingness to be exposed to new (techno-entrepreneurial) worlds, and their enthusiasm about the programs they participated in.

This regional civic emphasis on the potential of local youth provoked a number of questions. First, efforts to reform the education and training of the Valley’s young people offered a lens through which to explore the role and effectiveness of formal exposure to techno-entrepreneurship in shaping young people’s aspirations and, ultimately, patterns of social reproduction in the Valley. Second, I was interested in the ways in which local educational initiatives selectively invoked local high-tech traditions (Williams 1994), from the glorification of flexible work practices to the celebration of local CEOs who “think outside the box.” Moreover, I also wanted to understand the relationship of a local movement to bridge the digital divide to a national politics of self-improvement targeting at-risk youth, one that reflects a global context in which children are understood to be increasingly at risk and to pose different degrees and kinds of risk to the body politic, depending on racial, class, gender, and national status (Stephens 1992). In turn, these questions piqued my curiosity about how the potential of middle-class youth, whose connections to the regional dominant culture were less formal, and who confronted different kinds of risk and generally avoided the stigma of being labeled “at risk,” was implicitly and explicitly framed by local middle-class adults and youth themselves.

This research agenda took on new meaning as the time approached for me to leave New York for fieldwork in Silicon Valley during the fall of 2001. After a series of downward slides in the tech markets during 2000, the Internet-fueled tech boom came to an end, replaced by a bust with devastating
regional economic consequences. By 2003 the number of “gazelle companies”—publicly traded companies whose revenues have grown at least 20 percent for four consecutive years, beginning with one million dollars in sales—had fallen to nine, the lowest level in the region since 1992 (JVSV Network 2003:17). Real per capita income within Santa Clara County had slid for two consecutive years (ibid.:18) and large layoffs at local tech corporations were making the front page of local and national papers daily.

This shift in regional economic fortunes had a number of political and social implications. It added a bitterly ironic twist to pledges by corporate, community, and public officials to bridge the digital divide. Moreover, it placed boom-time techno-entrepreneurial success and values in a new and often less flattering light, and deepened economic anxiety for the region’s already insecure middle-income inhabitants. Perhaps most profound, the regional transformation from boom to bust heightened social and ideological contradictions that, in turn, influenced the particular aspirations of different groups of young people in different ways as well as the extent to which middle-class, public-sector service workers and an established professional middle class identified with techno-entrepreneurial values, practices, and success.

Social Reproduction and Neoliberal Governmentality

These shifts transformed the conditions and sites of social reproduction in Silicon Valley, changes “on the ground” that alerted me to the complexities of studying social reproduction within and across divergent local social and economic contexts. In practical terms, social reproduction occurs within formal institutions such as schools or after-school programs or job-training centers and workplaces, informally in public spaces such as playgrounds, and within families and communities. Thus it involves emotively charged meanings associated with community belonging and social exclusion as much as it might entail participation, in, say, a job-training course.

Young people, then, whether at work, school, or play, constitute agents of their own social reproduction, and their acts of self-definition—as impermanent as they may be—shape their futures in ways that may adhere to or diverge from expectations shaped by the political-economic interests of global capital. This perspective inspired my exploration of social reproduction from the vantage point of young people’s strategies of aspiration management. I have chosen the phrase “aspiration management,” because it highlights the active roles people play in defining self-expectation, hope, and a sense of the possible as well as the paradox of self-limitation and desire.
inherent to all aspirations. The phrase hints at the existence of internalized structures of power and meaning that shape processes of subjectification and agency, a recurring theme in this book and in earlier works addressing the relationship of schooling, regional or urban environment, and political-economic process to youth aspiration and class identification, a body of scholarship on which this ethnography builds (MacLeod 2009 [1987]; Sullivan 1989; Willis 1977; Foley 1990).

The importance of structures of power to the process of aspiration management and, ultimately, to patterns of social reproduction has focused my attention on contemporary political-economic and ideological currents shaping local educational and social institutions as well as the everyday lives of my research subjects. The economic rationality of these formal and informal contexts, and the particular forms of self-discipline and presentation that I observed in the field, recalled Michel Foucault’s concept of “governmentality,” which he defined as a historically specific “art of government” (Gordon 1991:3) operant at the level of the individual’s conduct as well as the conduct of a society or population (ibid.:36). Moreover, I found that young people’s conduct and their educational environments evoked a “neoliberal,” or “advanced liberal” (Rose 1996) form of governmentality.

Foucault and other scholars who have engaged his concept of governmentality have defined neoliberalism as not just a political-economic regime but also as a rationality of rule in which “economics . . . becomes an approach capable in principle of addressing the totality of human . . . behavior” (Gordon 1991:43). Thus neoliberalism parts company from liberalism in the following way:

Whereas Homo economicus originally meant that subject the springs of whose activity must remain forever untouchable by government, the American neoliberal Homo economicus is manipulable man, man who is perpetually responsive to modifications in his environment. Economic government joins hands with behaviorism. (Ibid.: 43).

This unification of the sphere of economic governance with individual behavior has significant implications for the dynamics of education in an American context, where education and training serve to augment human capital which ultimately can be converted into other kinds of capital. Education thus amounts to a consumer durable inseparable from its owner, a way to add value to oneself. Through education, people essentially become entrepreneurs of themselves (ibid.:44).
Hence the argument about neoliberal ideology in the contemporary United States goes as follows: the logic of the economic pervades not just society and goods and services provided by the state but the individual as well. Moreover, this penetration into the realm of the personal through renewed and reinvigorated emphasis on old national themes of individual choice, self-improvement, and picking oneself up by one’s bootstraps dovetails conveniently and purposefully with policies of economic retrenchment of the public sector and the related privatization of once public services and goods.

As some scholars of neoliberalism and American education have argued, the nation’s public educational system comprises one public good that has arguably become a vehicle for an enterprising of the self. In this view, an economizing logic now orders the ideology and pedagogy of schools; students are consumers of education, becoming “value-added” in order to compete in the global marketplace. Hence political effects of neoliberalized education occur at the individual and institutional scales. In the contemporary United States, then, public schools are both sites of social reproduction and citizenship formation; they serve to reproduce and differentiate the labor force just as they encourage children and youth to cultivate themselves in ways that meet the skill requirements of the capitalist global economy, and reflect priorities of a neoliberal state seeking to shift the burden for social and economic risk and security onto its citizens (O’Malley 1996).

In Silicon Valley I found that public education and community programs to address regional social inequality through supplementary education and training targeting low-income youth reflected neoliberal imperatives in a few particular ways. In addition to an economizing, “results-oriented” focus on standardized test performance and school accountability in the region, the emergence of local public-private initiatives (often in public schools) promoting techno-entrepreneurial skills for youth in the past fifteen years or so has resulted in the proliferation of local educational environments that encourage students—often low-income youth of color deemed at risk of not graduating from high school and, implicitly, of becoming economic burdens and delinquent—to learn the skills and acquire the desires and values of the “knowledge worker” or techno-entrepreneur. In other words, these programs focus on the crafting of identities as well as the acquisition of particular skills. Moreover, they frame the acquisition of such values and skills as a way to neutralize an at-risk status and avoid creating a burden to society, thereby privatizing responsibility for being at risk.

Like reforms that concentrate on standardized test performance and school accountability, programs oriented toward self-transformation are
asymmetrically implemented within the unevenly developed social landscape of Silicon Valley. Students attending public schools in more affluent local communities are not subject to a school environment that “teaches to the test,” and they typically have more informal connections to the techno-entrepreneurial world of Silicon Valley—connections that render techno-entrepreneurial work practices, lifestyle, and values commonsensical to them. This is not to say that neoliberal ideology does not influence local middle-class school environments or the aspirations of local middle-class and affluent youth. On the contrary, local middle-class youth who participated in this research learned, through schooling and informally within a community defined by techno-entrepreneurial success, values, and practices, to cultivate themselves in ways that suited global economic imperatives stressed within public education and that addressed the realities of eroding middle-class status and security—a status that the state, along with private industry, has failed to protect. In essence, the working- and middle-class youth who participated in my research were subject to a flexible form of governance, one that accommodates conditions of uneven development, educational inequality, and racial, class, and ethnic difference. Indeed, a central theme of this book involves the particular ways in which this neoliberal rationality of rule plays out within the educational contexts of young people, how it resonates with locally experienced political-economic conditions (also shaped by neoliberal priorities), and the ways in which it influences processes of social reproduction.

The Scope of This Book

This theoretical focus on processes of neoliberal subject formation as they occur within Valley educational institutions and communities divided by race, class and ethnicity determined the design of my research. The result is a study that is multi-sited and broad in scope, including ethnographic exploration of the daily environment and intricacies of two public high schools, everyday urban and familial worlds of youth, and the broader regional context of public-private educational initiatives designed to promote social equity across class, ethnic, and racial lines. To learn how public schooling shapes young people’s strategies of aspiration management, I attended classes, observed school rules, and interviewed teachers, administrators, students, parents, school psychologists, and college counselors. Occasionally I attended student club meetings and observed
teacher meetings and a few school board and PTA meetings. I also read program reports, collected educational and program materials, and attended field trips to corporations and school-community celebrations. Most important, I observed students and spoke with them sometimes in groups but usually one-on-one, during often intimate, informal interviews. I conducted random interviews at both schools, talking with every third student on a roll sheet. During that same period I was also on campus observing. Periodically, I went to students’ homes, interviewed parents, or attended a social function outside of the school. Generally, however, my information was gleaned on school grounds.

Throughout my fieldwork on school campuses, my focus on young people’s strategies of aspiration management meant that I paid attention to young people’s modes of self-expression, self-discipline, and judgments about themselves and others. Moreover, I sought to understand meanings associated with the specter of social exclusion and hopes for social inclusion that the young people expressed implicitly and explicitly. These meanings, as I discovered, had everything to do with constructions of race, class, and ethnicity, and sometimes gender (e.g., the stereotype of Latina girls becoming pregnant or Latino boys belonging to a gang).23

Contemplation of these meanings in turn led me to consider political-economic anxieties confronting the families of my young research subjects and the political, economic, and ideological circumstances of their educational environments. In this way I broadened the scope of the project to include not only interviews with the parents of youth but also members of Silicon Valley’s established professional middle-class. These interviews focused on their experiences of the boom and bust, the social and economic pressures they felt as a result of both, and their notions of success. In my exploration of the kinds of social and economic anxieties confronting these people, I followed what seemed to be key local issues of concern, a practice that ultimately led me to understand processes of class identification in relation to a techno-entrepreneurial ideal citizen-subject. Attention to the morally and emotively charged nature of these public discussions alerted me to the intensity of the social and economic pressures confronting particular middle-class fractions, and how these pressures shaped the aspirations, and attendant models of self-presentation and discipline, of middle-class youth.

In sum, the range of this book is quite broad. To grasp the dimensions of the argument I make, one must understand something about the divergent circumstances confronting my research subjects.
The young people whose strategies of aspiration management are explored in this book hailed from two divergent social and educational contexts. One group lived in a low- and lower-middle-income area in the large metropolitan city of San Jose, California, which boasts an ethnically and culturally diverse population of just under nine hundred thousand people, of whom approximately 30 percent are Latino, 27 percent are Asian, and 47 are white.24

There I conducted fieldwork in a state- and private-sector-supported “School to Career” Biotechnology Academy focused on developing academic, social, and technical skills and knowledge necessary to attain work after high school as a technician within the biotechnology sector of the regional information economy or to pursue higher education in the field of biotechnology. This Academy, which is limited to high school sophomores, juniors, and seniors, is a program within the public high school that I call Morton. The City Council District in which the school is located has a population that is 47.2 percent Latino, 35.8 percent Asian, and 25.2 percent white. In addition, this district had the second highest percentage of female-headed households in San Jose at 15.8%. Although the median household income for the City of San Jose is $70,243—compared to $74,335 for Santa Clara County—the median household income in the neighborhood area (meaning City Council District) surrounding Morton High School appears to be considerably lower, given that at least 54 percent of Morton students qualify for reduced-price lunches.25 Moreover, this number is probably under-reported, given that 70 percent of students in the local elementary and middle school district that feeds into the high school district of which Morton is a part qualify for such lunches.

Morton High School, then, serves primarily low- and lower-middle-income families. The school community is made up of families that inhabit modest tract homes and apartments in complexes located on suburban cul-de-sacs in San Jose, and sometimes trailer parks and garages. It is predominantly Mexican American and Vietnamese, and during the time of my fieldwork the school was beset by a high level of student transience owing to the rising cost of living and unemployment related to the tech bust. The school and neighborhood were also reputed to be gang-ridden, and beginning in the 1990s both the school and the surrounding area became the focus of suppression and prevention efforts.

Furthermore, the parents of many of the Latino students I came to know there did not speak English and were educated only to the grade school or high school level. These parents worked in a variety of service positions,
often holding down multiple jobs. Landscaping and janitorial work were typical occupations, but there were also bilingual professionals. Students also worked in low-wage service jobs. Not surprisingly, for Morton students, life outside school offered little connection to the techno-entrepreneurial world of Silicon Valley.

The other school site was a twenty-minute ride north of San Jose on the 101 Freeway, in Palo Alto, a generally affluent, mid-sized town that is home to Stanford University and many tech corporations, and that became globally recognized following the tech boom. Palo Alto is considered a particularly high-status place to live, partly because of the excellent quality of its public schools. Needless to say, it is home to many highly skilled and educated people who work in the tech sector, as well as other highly educated professionals. The median household income in Palo Alto is $140,900, and the median home price is $880,000. Approximately three-quarters of the adult residents who live there have four or more years of college, and 43 percent of adults over the age of twenty-five hold at least one graduate degree.

The public school in which I conducted research in Palo Alto—which I call “Sanders”—has a student population that is approximately two-thirds white, 16 percent Asian, 6 percent African American, and 5 percent Latino. The school district includes two high schools, and 95 percent of the high school graduates attend two- or four-year colleges. Sanders has a nationally outstanding reputation, and links to the techno-entrepreneurial world of Silicon Valley are largely informal; there is little need there to bridge the digital divide.

Moreover, talk of crime is rare in Palo Alto or at Sanders; in fact, despite student recreational drug and alcohol use, which, according to school counselors and staff, was ratcheting up, I had to actively seek out information on strategies for addressing youth delinquency, whereas I was inundated with such information at Morton.

These two schools, whose reputations and demographics remain quite different, reflect Silicon Valley’s socioeconomic and educational divide, which is locally parsed in ways that intensify the reputations of each school. Whereas Morton suffered the stigma of its social demographics and the perception that it was a “gang school”—at least in the eyes of many with whom I spoke outside the school and the district—Sanders enjoyed a reputation of excellence; when I mentioned conducting fieldwork in Palo Alto, staff at Morton often raised their eyebrows in a gesture of mock snobbery, whereas parents and teachers in Palo Alto, responding to my work in San Jose, sometimes furrowed their brows in a look of concern and sympathy.
The inequalities between Morton and Sanders, and their respective communities, are exacerbated by the state and national politics of educational funding. Since the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978, an amendment that rolled back property taxes in California by 57 percent, cutting property tax revenue for the state’s public school system by 50 percent, Morton’s school district has primarily depended upon revenue from the state based on Average Daily Attendance (ADA), a fact that makes Morton’s high rate of transience a disadvantage. The district amount per student in the 2002–2003 school year, the period when I conducted my fieldwork, was $5,332. Although Proposition 98 (1988) insured minimum funding through state and property taxes, and Proposition 39 (2000) facilitated the passage of school bonds, and even with supplemental funding slightly increasing the amount per student, such funds are often the first to be cut in times of state budget retrenchment.

Moreover, the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 has meant that schools like Morton, which are federally decreed Title I schools where over 40 percent of students come from low-income families, must meet Adequate Yearly Progress goals for the school’s total population as well as for demographic subgroups. If they fail to do so, they will lose both funds and students; if a school is classified as “failing,” students are given the choice of attending another school, and hence the linkage of state funding to attendance.

In stark contrast, the district of which Sanders is a part spent $10,670 per student during the 2002–2003 school year. The school is in what is called a Basic Aid District, one in which local property taxes equal or exceed the district’s revenue limit. Until 2003, this meant a constitutional guarantee of $120 per student in these more affluent districts in addition to property taxes.

I belabor these political-economic facts because, taken together, they constitute the structural process that compounds educational inequalities resulting from the region’s wealth polarization and socio-spatial segregation along class, race, and ethnic lines. Programs such as Morton’s Biotechnology Academy attempt to address such inequalities. With the goal of transforming not only skills but values and aspirations, such programs are designed to reverse the effects of socioeconomic and racial segregation and exclusion that determine the extent to which young people are exposed to the techno-entrepreneurial world of Silicon Valley. Indeed, Morton’s Biotechnology Academy was effective in getting students into four-year colleges, a significant achievement that should not be minimized.

But although the Biotechnology Academy might have leveled the playing field in this significant respect, I found that at Morton, and even at
Sanders as well, often contradictory school and community environments shaped students’ aspirations in ways that ultimately reinforced class, racial, and ethnic hierarchies manifest in the regional labor force. In fact, I observed two distinct patterns of aspiration among the youth: whereas students at Morton expressed interest in public-service careers that emphasized “giving back” to their own communities and to society, students at Sanders learned to value self-exploration and intellectual and personal freedom, and expressed aspirations toward creative and intellectually fulfilling careers in highly specialized fields. Notably, however, the patterns of aspiration I observed did not seem to reproduce traditional gender hierarchies. Working-class young women expressed interest in traditionally male public-sector occupations such as that of probation officer, and working-class young men expressed interest in, for example, social work. Likewise, youth from affluent middle-class backgrounds seemed uninterested in modeling themselves and their futures according to traditionally feminine or masculine career paths.

Flexible, Responsible Citizenship and Social Reproduction

Putting aside these continuities and divergences in patterns of social reproduction, the process of observing contrasting patterns of aspiration at each school and exploring these two schools’ disparate political-economic and ideological environments led me, ironically, to consider how each school and group of young people was participating in a common political project of citizenship formation in the United States, one requiring particular forms of self-cultivation among youth and their assumption of personal responsibility for social and economic conditions beyond their control. This politics of citizenship influences processes of social reproduction, encouraging young people’s responsibility for social and economic risks and insecurities that might have been managed by the state or the corporate sector in the context of an industrial Fordist economy. Moreover, this “juvenilization” of responsibility for economic social insecurity and risk differentiates youth by encouraging divergent forms of responsibility depending upon racial and class status.

How does this flexible politics of responsible citizenship actually play out in the lives of individual young people and within educational institutions? I came to appreciate, in particular, how, within each school context, modes of self-cultivation, self-presentation, and styles of discipline that reflected regional ideals of success and a morally charged model of citizenship intersected with fears and experiences of social exclusion and desires for social
inclusion borne out of everyday social and economic contexts. Such fears, experiences, and desires, whether related to one's social, economic, and political marginality as, for example, the child of someone who crossed the border illegally, or to the threat of losing one's status as a successful person within an affluent milieu, ultimately affected how young people negotiated ideals of citizenship and how they understood their place in the world. In turn, the ways in which young people engaged ideals of citizenship in the process of managing their aspirations and forging social identities helped to define local patterns of social reproduction and constituted a contested dynamic of citizenship formation.

This theoretical frame, and the evidence I provide to support it, raises questions of historical comparison, especially with regard to processes of social reproduction through education. For example, how might one compare the postindustrial, intensely globalized, and socially polarized space of Silicon Valley to, say, the industrial-era factory town in Midlands, England, that sociologist Paul Willis (1977) described in Learning to Labour? Or, to take a North American example, how to compare it to sociologist Jay MacLeod's (2009 [1987]) searing ethnographic chronicle of the “hidden (and not so hidden) injuries of class” among the white, working-class youth coming of age in a de-industrialized, northeastern city during the 1980s? What continuities exist across these times and spaces in terms of young people's strategies of aspiration and the effect of school environment and political-economic and social context on processes of social reproduction? To what extent do the disciplines, options, and pressures confronting youth diverge from past eras? In addressing these questions I suggest that in the postindustrial “New Economy” era, public schooling promotes familiar patterns of social reproduction and racial and class hierarchy. Indeed, striking similarities are apparent between the findings of Paul Willis (1977) concerning “lads” he studied decades ago in an industrial English town and the Latino youth I met in Silicon Valley. There are also striking differences between them, for strategies of aspiration management among Latino working-class, white, and Asian middle-class young people reveal a different orientation toward the state than existed on either side of the Atlantic more than thirty years ago. Moreover, all the young people who participated in my research negotiated school, community, and familial contexts of intensified social and economic pressure and risk, and poor youth of color, in particular, faced a context of increasing economic marginalization and militarization targeting their communities and schools in a post–9/11 era of expanding U.S. military engagement (Lutz 2002; Saltman and Gabbard 2003; Perez 2009).
The intra-regional design of this work and its focus on subjective responses to social and educational conditions allows us to consider the circumstances under which social change might occur. Exploring aspiration within two disparate school and community contexts affords the opportunity to see how certain social and economic contexts shaped by the tech boom and bust, and dominant ideologies to which young people were exposed, offered contradictory versions of reality. The ways in which people negotiated these contradictory versions had profound implications for how they defined themselves and their futures, and the extent to which they identified with particular ideals of citizenship to which they were exposed, whether those models specifically celebrated techno-entrepreneurship, simply the management of risk, or a more generalized and well-rounded “excellence” informed by techno-entrepreneurship in a more ambient way.

Ultimately experiences of social contradiction similarly shaped responses to morally charged representations of techno-entrepreneurship among teachers, nonprofit managers, and established professional middle-class residents of the Valley. Such people's experiences of the tech boom and bust shaped the degree to which they identified with a “new entrepreneurial” model of how to educate young people, run a public or a nonprofit institution or simply behave as a worker.

Thus, in what follows, we explore the “success” of a flexible process of citizenship formation, one that selectively deploys morally charged representations of a regional “culture” and draws on a neoliberal ideology of personal responsibility, as it plays out within divergent socioeconomic and ideological contexts. Each chapter in the book, whether explicitly focused on youth or concerned with the educational, social, cultural, and political contexts that shape young people's daily lives and strategies of aspiration management, explores the relative success of this political project. Moreover, each chapter considers the role of experiences of social contradiction in determining patterns of subjectification and agency critical to processes of social reproduction within Silicon Valley’s polarized and segregated social landscape.

A Preview of the Work

The structure of this book moves from a close-up view of two groups of young people coming of age on the downside of the tech boom and their particular strategies of aspiration management in a specific educational and social context (part 2, chapters 2 and 3) to a more panoramic view of the political, social, economic, and ideological contexts shaping processes of
social reproduction in Silicon Valley (part 3, chapters 4 and 5). Part 4, which concludes the book, identifies patterns across the work as a whole and places my findings in a larger political and theoretical context.

In chapter 2 we examine a pattern of aspiration among first- and second-generation, low-income Latino youth participating in a public school biotechnology academy with corporate connections to Silicon Valley industry. We explore their desire, despite daily exposure to the themes, values, and technology associated with biotechnological entrepreneurship, to “give back” to the community through careers in public service, especially those that monitor and serve at-risk communities such as their own. Linking this pattern of aspiration to the school’s emphasis on taking responsibility for an at-risk status and experiences of social contradiction and exclusion within their everyday school and community environments, students ultimately developed strategies of aspiration management that simultaneously supported a hegemonic social order reproducing race and class hierarchies, and reframed in ways meaningful to them a project of neoliberal governance which fused notions of personal responsibility and idealizations of the tech private sector.

Chapter 3 links aspirations and strategies of self-cultivation among the children of Silicon Valley’s tech and service professional class to school and community environments shaped by daily exposure to techno-entrepreneurial social practices, values, and success, as well as familial experiences of social and economic insecurity. Focusing on expectations of self-cultivation and norms of success in school as well as students’ fantasies of failure, we shall identify a strategy of aspiration management that involves defining particular passions and excelling in multiple areas at once. Linking this strategy to familial pressures shaped by a broader political-economic context of the erosion of middle-class security and, at a local scale, realities of the tech bust, we shall explore the effects of students’ efforts at self-cultivation and school environment on students, and the particular conflicts and fears of exclusion that students experienced.

Chapter 4 places the educational environment of the young Latino protagonists of this book in local and national context. Here we consider an emergent civic agenda around the digital divide in Silicon Valley, and explore the political implications and historical context of this regional “civilizing process.” Linking this regional civic agenda to bridge the digital divide to a neoliberal politics of educational reform on the national scale, we shall assess its political impact. We trace, in particular, the production of two kinds of disciplined “subjects” in need of saving: at-risk youth such as those we meet in chapter 2 and public educational and nonprofit social-service institutions.
In the process, we explore how the realities of the tech bust era have effectively rendered disenfranchised young people, and many who provide services to them, skeptics—not subjects—of neoliberal reform.

Chapter 5 examines the political, social, and economic milieu of Silicon Valley’s established professional middle class. We examine the ways in which, during the boom and subsequent bust, middle-class professionals channeled frustration about their eroding security and status into a politics of nostalgia for a pre-“New Economy” past, a critique of a “new entrepreneurial” present. In exploring the political implications of this “cultural politics of class” (Rouse 1995), we identify expressions of adult middle-class anxiety and political entrapment that influenced young people’s styles of self-definition and aspiration.

Chapter 6, the book’s conclusion, returns to the young people and schools at the center of this book to elaborate a comparative argument about a contemporary, flexible process of citizenship formation shaping—but not entirely determining—strategies of aspiration management at both Sanders and Morton high schools. In exploring dynamics of subjectification and agency among these youth, and linking these dynamics to adult responses to social and economic circumstances, we shall consider the conditions under which a neoliberal politics of citizenship succeeds or fails. Such conditions have everything to do with potent meanings especially associated with class, meanings whose power may be encapsulated in daily interactions or status symbols.

Throughout these chapters, the idealized citizen-subject of the techno-entrepreneur figures unevenly, as does discussion of the tech boom and subsequent bust, given divergent working- and middle-class experiences of cultural transformation and economic change. Collectively, these forces give form to the stories of success and failure that young people and adults I encountered in Silicon Valley tell themselves, and determine styles of aspiration management. This ethnography, then, is my attempt to grapple with the disjuncture—and dialectic—between the way people live their lives and the way they conceive them in relation to the dominant public culture of Silicon Valley, and to the insecure and rapidly changing conditions of the global information economy and society. It offers a representation of the space and subjects of globalization that prizes historical experience—in all its contradictory and emotive complexity—over mythology.
Aspirations of Youth in Silicon Valley