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Homies Theorizing Back: Reclaiming the Right to the Word and the World

A dissertation in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Education

by

Miguel E. Casar Rodriguez

2022

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Homies Theorizing Back: Reclaiming the Right to the Word and the World

by

Miguel E. Casar Rodriguez

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Pedro Antonio Noguera, Co-Chair

Professor John S. Rogers, Co-Chair

This dissertation responds to a critical call to challenge the “over-theorizing” and the pathologizing of marginalized youth, a phenomenon plagued with voyeurism, epistemological and ontological violence, and gross miss-representation that further benefits those who “theorize.” Through “*theorizing-back*,” a critical research methodology that honors the humanity, knowledge, and power of those whose lives are grounded in struggles, this dissertation documents how The Homies—a community of marginalized and system impacted youth—interrogate the theories that have sought to explain those who leave, are pushed out, give up on, or resist school, i.e., “them.” Born out of the relationships and insights that arose from a space of *praxis*, this project took place over a 2-year span in a youth re-entry center in Los Angeles. The study generated two primary domains of findings. The first critically documents the normalized

and naturalized silencing, violence, exploitation, and dispossession that marginalized young people have to deal with as part of “normal life.” Through *architectures of entanglement*, (a conceptual framework theorized by the youth), the Homies documented how carceral geographies change, migrate, and transfigure, both ideologically and materially, institutions that often operate under a guise of neutrality and benevolence—including schools. In direct response to those who frame “out-of-school youth” as a national emergency, the Homies declared, loud and clear, that the systems of whiteness, colonialism, and capitalism—all for which schools are a critical component—are the national emergency. The second major domain of findings focuses on *theorizing back* and chronicles the development of a “refuge”; a humanizing, transformative, counter-hegemonic, and healing community of praxis. In this community, the Homies not only ended up interrogating and deconstructing the questions and findings from prior research, but denounced the “self-serving truths” stubbornly reproduced by the ways in which scholars ask questions and look for answers and their inability to see the humanity of their “subjects.” Reclaiming their right to the word and the world, the Homies leave us with a set of questions and insights that should be central to those trying to do critical research in a context of deep and growing injustices.

The dissertation of Miguel E. Casar Rodriguez is approved.

Michelle Fine

Teresa L. McCarty

Pedro Antonio Noguera, Committee Co-Chair

John S. Rogers, Committee Co-Chair

DEDICATION

To the Homies, this book belongs to you.

To the tender hearted, the dreamers, and to all of you who dare trade cynicism for hope,
indifference for kindness, and who dare struggle for a world that you might never get to live in.

Thank you.

Para lxs cariñosxs, lxs soñadorxs, y a todxs lxs que se atreven a intercambiar el cinismo por la
esperanza, la indiferencia por el cariño, y que se atreven a luchar por un mundo que quizás nunca
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So that we heed this call to be more deeply human and to fight against all that gets in the way of the people's right to do so.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Early March 2020, largely unaware of how much the world would change during the next few years, I sat amongst friends in a circle of praxis at a youth re-entry center and independent study high school in East Los Angeles. We opened the space by wondering and talking about what was being framed as the beginning of a crisis.

“This crisis ain’t started yesterday, we’ve been in a crisis all of our lives,” shared one student. “How do I feel? I feel strange, yes, this is horrible, but it ain’t right that now, they suddenly care about human life when they have been throwing people away for forever,” another shared. “They tellin’ us to stay home, but what about those of us who don’t have one, how are we supposed to make any money if we can’t go nowhere? These are just more rules that only work for them!”

The youth’s responses were sobering, honest, and filled with the wisdom that has radically transformed me, my words, and my worlds as we have shared time and been in community for the last five years. Ever since our first conversation, I have been struck by the clarity and courage with which they experience and make sense of the very contradiction, the dismissal and dispossession, the beauty, the violence, the power, the disposability, among others, that is so deeply ingrained in the worlds and the times that we live in. In regard to schooling and education, two phenomena I have devoted a big part of my life to, it has always been similarly enlightening to witness their skill and depth as they interrogate, explain, negotiate, and navigate the tensions of seeking to be whole, to be free, to be valued, and to pursue an education while withstanding—often simultaneously resisting—a compulsory school system that tramples upon their rights, their sovereignty, and that cynically demands an inherent denial of their very identity and beingness (King, 2017). As one young man argued during one of our first conversations: “Ever since elementary, it’s been schools and the world versus me and my people.”

In what often feels like a separate world, mostly my life at the university, in schools, and amongst more mainstream and dominant publics; I hear, read, and engage sets of discourses and

stories that repeatedly, almost obsessively, explain “these” youth. Through varied frames, others theorize their lives, their choices, and the systems and structures in which “they” exist or within which their choices, or lack thereof, are shaped. Similarly, others describe the schools “they” leave, the schools that push them out, frame them, and/or the systems to which they rebel against. Sometimes the stories and explanations are heavily ideological. Sticky narratives of crime, merit, and individual choices reverberate in echo chambers that simultaneously pathologize the usual “targets” of theory while they serve the interests, comfort, wealth and power of those whose legitimacy is then wielded deliberately to both obscure and justify the conditions in which they have “made-it.” Other times, critical books, rich ethnographies, robust theories, and thorough explanations of systems, structures, and ideologies—including their roles in producing and reproducing injustice—resonate deeply. These provide nuances that have for a long time illuminated my thinking and yet at the same time, feel far removed and detached from the people and worlds that they describe. However, when I sit alongside “The Homies,”¹—a chosen by the youth for the group— when we talk about schools, when we interrogate, wonder, imagine, and theorize together, it feels different. Real. Powerful. Connected. Accountable. Nuanced. Sincere. Transgressive. Able to hold different worlds and truths together.

This dissertation project—honoring and centering the humanity, wisdom, and power of the young people that inspired theorizing back and building upon a legacy of work and scholarship that has sought to push back against oppression and injustice—explores and documents how the young people who are often framed as a “problem,” and who are typically at the receiving end of theory, can re-shape the way we theorize and understand “those who leave,

¹ Throughout this text, the group of young people that constituted and sit at the heart of this project will be referred to as *the Homies*. This term was chosen by the youth theorizers and is intentionally capitalized to both avoid its “generalization” as a further construction of the “other,” and more importantly, to represent the group’s affirmation of a collective identity as The Homies.

are pushed out, and are out of school.” Situated within a larger community of praxis and a movement for educational justice, this dissertation will contribute to the broader work of pushing back against the “collective lie” (Martin-Baro, 1994) and in turn, open up space to reimagine and rebuild anew. In this case, guided by the Homies, interrogating the strategic lies projected upon those who have been cast as delinquents and dropouts and shedding light into the sedimented shadows that enable the normative reproduction and accumulation of injustice.

The first section of this introductory chapter, “Out-of-school Youth,” begins with a short overview of the landscape, including a statistical overview of out-of-school youth and a brief description of the changing contexts, purposes, and differential benefits of schools. The next section, “Why Are Youth Out-of-School and Why Is It Important?” introduces some of the theories and scholarship that “explain” out-of-school youth; including the ways in which some of these frame out-of-school youth as a “problem” (both of these will be further developed in Chapter 2). After, the section “Over-Theorized and Misunderstood” interrogates dominant assumptions and questions about who gets to theorize—or who should be theorizing—along with a brief introduction to the critical traditions and their role in questioning and pushing back against normative and “legitimate” approaches and responses to these questions. Following, “Theorizing Back” introduces the methodology at the heart of this project, including a brief summary of the traditions from which it draws and its axiological, epistemic, and ontological dimensions. Then, I introduce this dissertation project, its research questions, a short description of the research traditions that informed the methodology, a timeline of the research phases, and an introduction to the site where Homies Theorizing Back began and where the majority of it took place. This chapter closes with a reflection of my positionality, its implications, and the

multiple roles I played in this process. Ending with a brief note on the purpose and relevance of this dissertation, including its relationship to the current times.

Out-of-School Youth

School began to reveal itself, therefore, as a child's game that one could not win.
(Baldwin, 1963, p. 31)

As of 2019, around 258 million children, adolescents, and youth around the world are out of school (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2019). Three years after the adoption of Sustainable Development Goal 4, a promise of universal primary and secondary education, progress over the last few years seems to have stalled. Across the world, upper-secondary school-age youth are more than four times more likely to be out of school than children of primary age and more than twice as likely to be out of school as adolescents of lower secondary school age (UIS, 2019). The world as a whole is moving towards gender parity in out-of-school rates. However, significant disparities remain at region, country, and socioeconomic levels (World Inequality Database on Education [WIDE], 2020). As an example, focusing on out-of-school youth, low income countries, as defined by UIS, have an average of 52% of youth out of school, in comparison with high income countries with an average of 19% (UIS, 2020).

In 2018, in the United States alone, there were 731,000 out-of-school children, adolescents, and youth of primary and secondary school age (UIS, 2019). Broadening the age bracket, in 2019 there were an estimated 2.1 million young people between ages 16 and 24 not enrolled in school and without a high school credential (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019). The status dropout rate² has decreased significantly from an overall 27.2% in 1960 to 9.7% in 2006 to 5.4% in 2017 (NCES, 2019). However, large disparities, inequities, and injustices across racial, class, and gender lines have persisted. American Indian/Alaska Native

² Percentage of youth between 16 and 24 not enrolled in school and without HS degree.

youth had the highest status dropout rate (10.1%) of all racial/ethnic groups, including youth who are Hispanic (8.2%), Black (6.5%), of Two or more races (4.5%), White (4.3%), Pacific Islander (3.9%), and Asian (2.1%). The status dropout rate was higher for male youth than for female youth overall (6.4% vs. 4.4%) within most racial/ethnic groups in 2017. When taking an intersectional approach, disparities become even starker. In terms of graduation rates, these are only part of the picture—low-income students made up 47.2% of the nation’s graduating cohort in 2017, with an average graduation rate of 78.3%. Compounded indicators that take into account race, gender, socioeconomic status, immigration status, and nationality show further and more exacerbated disparities.

In addition, striking disparities can also be observed between high schools. As an example, in a brief by the California Dropout Research Project (2008), researchers report that while 662 high schools report zero dropouts, 21 high schools account for 21% of the state’s dropouts and 73 high schools have dropout rates greater than 50%. About 58% of Black students and 50% of Latino students who made the decision to leave school were being educated in our nation’s high-poverty, low-performing schools (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010).

Context and Consequences for Being Out of School

The context and consequences for being out of school and without a HS or higher-education degree as a young person—whether framed as dropping-out, leaving, being pushed out, or simply being out-of-school, have changed over time and continue to change drastically. Rapid technological change, the globalization of economic activity, and growing phenomena like “jobless growth,” the digitally mediated gig-economy (Woodcock & Graham, 2019), underemployment and “contingent” employment, the internationalization of markets and corporations, and the dismantling of trade unions and worker rights (Lerner, 1994; Weiss, 1990), have fundamentally changed the context in which young people make decisions about school and

its relationship to their future lives and work. In a context where “a wage via formal paid employment is effectively the only way . . . to sustain life” (Edgell, 2012, p. 17), jobs that do not require higher degrees or a HS degree offer much less compensation than comparable jobs a half-century ago. Moreover, the climate of economic uncertainty has not only added a layer of precarity to students without an “education,” but also increased the pressure and the perceived “necessity” for youth to attain higher levels of schooling (for example, see: wage premiums (Goldin & Katz, 2007). Adding further urgency, not only have labor market policies and corporate practices eroded the quality of work available to “uncredentialed” individuals (Anyon, 2014; Gautie & Schmitt, 2010), but more and more students are incurring a tremendous amount of debt (Frotman, 2018). Together, these phenomena have reshaped the role of higher education in what some call a new or a second gilded age³ (Campos, 2018; Krugman, 2018; Piketty, 2013).

While “out-of-school youth” have been repeatedly framed as a national emergency, there is nothing new with young people being “out-of-school.” Indeed, that was the norm for most adolescents as recently as 1900. It was less than a century ago, in nineteenth century America, when a common ground between a broad range of theological and social views began to provide the ideological context for the creation of state school systems, which began to be institutionalized as “mandatory” (Kaestle, 1983). As the promise and hope of education as “the great equalizer” was not only accepted by most, but grew to become and to be enforced to a large degree as the official policy of White America for decades (Williams & Ladd, 1978); Black people, women, Indigenous people, immigrants, and other marginalized groups were faced with a strategic dilemma. On the one hand, many understood the both strategic and emancipatory promise that education held for themselves and their communities; the possibility and power of

³ Initially referred to the era extending roughly from 1870 to 1900, a time of immensely large and growing wealth disparities defined by the rapid accumulation and dispossession by the “one percent.”

education to, in the words of Frederick Douglass (1845/1963), make them “unfit to be slaves.” At the same time, they also recognized, had experienced, and had resisted the oppressive, violent, reproductive, nativist, assimilationist, misogynistic, and racist (among others) history and character of schooling.

Alike the legitimacy and acceptance of schools, the framings and understandings around the purpose of schooling have oscillated greatly. With these, expectations of what one must achieve and the value of different diplomas have shifted. High school, as an example, was rapidly transformed from an elite, private institution into a “public” one intended for the children of the masses during the late 1880s and early 1900s (Anderson, 1988). In 1930, 47% of the nation’s children of high school age were enrolled in public secondary schools, four years later, the proportion had increased to 60%. However, this increase was highly disproportional, “as rural whites, urban working-class whites, and the children of European immigrants had been brought systematically into the ‘people’s college,’ Black children were deliberately excluded” (Anderson, 1988, p. 188).

In regard to the “value” of schooling, the differential “returns,” both individual and collective, financial and socioemotional (among many), of school diplomas and of schooling have been thoroughly studied. The majority of these studies find that graduates of both high school and college earn higher salaries and occupy positions of greater prestige and power compared to non-graduates and out-of-school youth, who are often shown to have negative financial, personal, health, and psychosocial outcomes. Concurrently, alternate studies have further complexified and challenged many of these assumptions, interrogating who really benefits and how much? Whether the benefit derives from the skills and lessons learned or from its signaling and legitimizing value? How does benefit and value get measured? And the variety

of differences and conditions that are not taken into account as the majority of these research projects measure “benefits” and value, most of which are tethered to capitalist and individualistic logics.

Alongside the socio-economic context and the consequences of being out-of-school, beliefs and ideologies around the purpose of schooling and who should go to school have changed as well. Three centuries ago, the education of people of African descent was illegal and considered a punishable offense under state slave codes (Morris, 2016). Today, the value of schooling is quintessentially ideological. The concept of schools as “good” is normalized and taken for granted to a point where it has become what Feinberg (1978) calls a “mandatory right”; where “the benefits are undeniably advantageous whatever the beneficiary may think about the matter [he] must not be free to forgo them” (p. 106). The norm itself has shifted from one of the majority of youth not being in school to one where youth are legally mandated to be in school.

Today, a college degree has taken the “mark of a well-educated individual,” away from the high school graduate, which held it in the early part of the twentieth century (Goldin & Katz, 2007). Many conclude that a college degree is the best way for young adults to attain the skills they need, earn more, and even reverse growing inequality (Steinbaum, 2014). However, when oversimplified, these conclusions overlook important considerations, including the shifting value of certificates and associate’s degrees, research around the declining value (monetary) of college, and the differentiated benefits of a degree based on race, class, gender, etc., among many. In tandem, discourses of “not everybody has to go to college,” and initiatives to fund and promote vocational education have begun to re-gain popularity. However, these discourses and initiatives can also be a wolf in sheep’s clothing, disguising gendered, raced and classed efforts to

reproduce social hierarchies and implicitly marginalizing other purposes and possibilities for schooling and education from public consciousness.

Why Are Youth Out-of-School and Why Is It Important?

In the United States, the stories, frames and theories around young people being “out of school,” whether explained as a “loss,” a spillage, critical resistance, or part of what is normal in a hierarchical society—including the ways in which each of these implicitly references the purpose of schooling—vary, and have historically varied, greatly. Consequently, these theories and explanations create a wide range of identities and stories that “characterize” out-of-school youth. In addition, these theories and explanations work to steer the gaze: some look to macro-structures like global economic relations (Apple, 1981), racism and epistemological violence (King, 2017; Omi & Winant, 2014; Morris, 2016), and educational institutions, practices, and ideologies (Dei et al., 1997; Fine, 1991) as they purge and alienate poor and working-class youth (Fine, 1994); others that conceptualize dropping out as a failure or shortcoming of a schooling system often look to educational practices, school resources, and the needs for reform; and others, which center leaving school on individuals and their choices naturally shift the gaze towards the youth themselves⁴. The terms used to describe youth “out of school,” similarly have ranged widely: genetically or culturally inferior (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966; Reissman, 1962), social deviants (Kaestle, 1983), children “thoroughly trained in failure” (Deschenes et al., 2001), students left behind and underserved by schools, those refusing to be institutionalized (Fine, 1991) and agentic and transformative resisters to oppressive and dehumanizing systems intentionally designed for segregation, the sorting of students, social reproduction, and assimilation (see Archuleta et al., 2000; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Cummins, 1996; Erickson,

⁴ These will be thoroughly explored in Chapter 2.

1993; Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1983; Kohl, 1994; Oakes, 1985; Sanchez, 1940; Spring, 1972). Often, the term “drop-out” is constituted, and takes its negative meaning in relation and in opposition to the successful, the normal, the hardworking, etc. (Annamma, 2013; Dehli, 1994); therefore standing as a pathological marker for individual failure, family ignorance or neglect, family poverty, and barriers to opportunity (Walkerdine, 1986).

Beliefs of why young people being “out-of-school” is regarded as a “problem,” or whether it is important at all, are similarly tethered to multiple visions for the purpose of schooling; from Mann’s (1848) “great equalizer of the condition for men” (p. 669), Dewey’s (1916) vision of schools as a pillar of the continued existence and improvement of a democracy and a society, or an integral part of settler-colonialism (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Wolfe, 1999), the school-to-prison nexus⁵, and “death by education” (Fasching-Varner et al., 2014). Dominant paradigms of human capital and economic rationalism (Clandfield, 1993; Shapiro, 1989) champion narratives of “crisis” and “moral panics about dropouts” (Kelly & Gaskell, 1996). In addition, these paradigms highlight, among many: the “costs” to the country, the lifetimes of lost earning and unrealized tax revenues (Catterall, 1985), cost increases to public welfare and crime (Thornstensen, 2004), the compromise of global economic competitiveness, and a threat to what has become a “universally acknowledged truth” that education should be linked with the world of work and economic performance (Bailey, 1996), etc. At the same time, these dominant frames suggest that in regard to education, economics are positioned before politics, which is assumed as a national consensus (Apple, 1993; Dehli, 1996). Conversely, alternate paradigms and critical theories often center political visions of schools, putting forth explanations of why students being out of school or having a precarious relationship with school

⁵ The policies, ideologies, and local practices that move a select group of young people from schools to prisons (Meiners, 2011).

is not only a place from which to inquire and interrogate issues of social justice and democracy, but a key element and analytic for the interruption of an unjust status-quo, the unsettling and dismantling of a broader carceral infrastructure, and the redistribution of symbolic, political, economic, and epistemological power.

Beliefs about why young people are “out-of-school” are also importantly and consequentially connected to policy. Policy, which is deeply connected with the rationality, discourses, and assumptions prevalent at a given time, also serves as both an instrument for consolidating the legitimacy of an existing social order and a powerful vehicle for social change. As Shore et al. (2011) argue, the work of policy, whether top-down or bottom-up, also classifies and organizes “people and ideas in new ways” (p. 3). In regard to out-of-school youth, public and policy discourses are dominated by narratives of “leaving school” and out-of-school students as a “problem” that is both urgent and substantial. Moreover, policy frames, echoing current dominant discourses and the voices and interests of those with the most power, tend to economize, individualize, and reproduce sets of assumptions that pathologize out-of-school youth and simultaneously consolidate the legitimacy of schools and the ideological, material, and economic structures they uphold.

Over-theorized and Misunderstood

The lie has come to permeate our existence to such an extent that we end up creating an imaginary world, whose only truth is precisely that it is a false world, and whose only pillar of support is the fear of reality, which is too “subversive” to be tolerated. (Martín-Baró, 1995, pp. 113–114)

I feel like people don't understand. They don't want to understand. They want how they see us to be, to be true. Instead of hearing you out, the actual why. What's really going down. They put it in their own words. They put it into how they want it to be. For some we are animals and for others we need help. (Tino the Rhino)

When thinking about theory and the theories that “explain” out-of-school youth, it often seems that our ability to “understand” the educational experiences and trajectories of youth,

especially those of multiply marginalized youth with a precarious, tenuous relationship to schools, is inherently—some would argue strategically—defused by what I’ve for a long time called a problem of “the givens.” Given the legitimacy, normality, inevitability, and “rationality” of A, B, and C (usually taken-for-granted elements and assumptions of the dominant ideology), we begin our questions and hence our field of possibility, at “D.” In other words, how are the assumptions, the “givens” that go unquestioned and that we carry into our attempts to “understand” our world sabotage our ability to ask the “right” questions, with the “right” methods, alongside the “right” people, for the “right” reasons?

In her book, *Framing Dropouts*, Michelle Fine (1991) described her purpose as “trying to understand majority failure and exodus in a school that seemed so benign” (p. 3). Five years later, in the introduction to *Debating Dropouts*, she warned us of studying “drop-outs,” or out-of-school youth, in a world where, as Nancy Fraser (1989) described, they easily become “runaway” social problems. Not only do these youth become artificial hangers for a plethora of social issues, but their study—also influenced by the gravitational pull of “the givens,” ideologies, and power—can either become a political decoy to deflect our attention away from structural conditions, or if more structurally aligned, it can also be directed towards the dismantling and critique of public institutions themselves, including schools. Dehli (1996), similarly visibilizing the dangers of “the givens” in her study of policy frames around out-of-school youth, positions her goal as investigating the implicit assumptions and choice of framework, emphasizing the consequences and effects of how unexamined choices make truth claims (Alonso, 1988) and create “regimes of truth” that define problems and propose solutions (Foucault, 1982). Thus, Dehli’s aim is not to argue about truthfulness per se, but to critically

interrogate the consequences of stories and explanations, and the importance of interrogating these as part of what Althusser (2014) calls a broader ideological struggle.

Recognizing stories and theories as consequential; thinking about theory building and “explaining” as acts through which we participate in the construction, legitimizing, and transformation of the world; and thinking about the nexus between stories and policy-making as de-centered, collective “practices of daily life and a practice of power” (Levinson & Sutton, 2001); beckons us to urgently question who builds theory and for what purpose, i.e., who has the right to the word, and thus the world?

The “over-theorizing” of the marginalized, a phenomenon plagued with voyeurism, epistemological and ontological violence, exploitative and colonial logics and often, gross misrepresentation (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977); often benefits those who “theorize.” In the words of Morrison (1987), “definitions belong to the definers—not the defined” (p. 190), a consequential process that is crucial to the maldistribution of symbolic power (Hall, 1988). Correspondingly, out-of-school youth, push-outs, drop-outs, working-class youth, youth of color, etc. have been consistently on the “receiving end” of both research and theory. Often treating young people as “solely adults in the making” (Graham & Bruce, 2006, p. 52), theorizing and research rarely engage with children and youth as knowledgeable, competent, and able to construct their own perspectives of daily lived experiences (James et al., 1998). It is even more rare that youth themselves—their perspectives, questions, and their worlds—are centered in the research process, let alone guide it, and this too often means that they are overtheorized and misunderstood (Wallace, 1990).

In the field of educational practice, research, and policy-making it is rare that the voices, realities, imaginaries, and lived experiences of youth are front and center. Youth often are invited

to be part of decision-making, share their stories, or voice their concerns through committees, councils, focus groups, interviews, and other spaces. Yet these sites, emanating the larger politics and power dynamics of the larger society (Oakes et al., 2007), rarely recognize youth as critical, political agents whose decisions, understandings, and interpretations hold powerful nuances and critiques that should be at the center of knowledge construction, theorizing, and decision-making. Moreover, multiply marginalized youth and youth with precarious relationships to schools who are defined as a “problem,” are often left out of these spaces, contributing to their further marginalization and silencing by dominant, oppressive systems (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). When “included,” it is often the case that marginalized youth are ironically brought in as “tokens” to gather resources and the perks associated with being a “youth led” reputation while simultaneously excluding them from opportunities for employment and social mobility (Felner et al., 2018).

In addition, under the guise of empowerment and youth “participation,” young people are invited as leaders into decision-making spaces, like school boards, where they are put at a great power disadvantage or within performative structures that lack leverage and/or real decision-making power. In this regard, resonating with Fraser’s critique of Habermas’s conception of the public sphere, which designated specific kinds of discursive interactions as an institutional mechanism for “rationalizing” political domination (Fraser, 1990), the “trending” and parallel limiting and structuring of youth-voice and its role in educational policy-making and/or knowledge production can be similarly understood and analyzed as a project of power and domination. Just like the discourse of the public sphere touts accessibility, rationality, and the suspension of status hierarchies (Habermas, 1989), the language of youth voice, power, and participation—especially when it equally presumes a “bracketing” of inequities of contextual

status, voice, and legitimacy—also echoes discourses of inclusion and empowerment while simultaneously, and ironically, working as a potential strategy of distinction (Fraser, 1990). It is a strategy that defines legitimate spaces, legitimate topics, legitimate methods, and the movement towards single and comprehensive publics that deliberate towards a “common” good. Similarly in the case of theory, the “legitimate” explaining of the world relies on, and presupposes, similar distinctions between academic and non-academic spaces and people, each with its inventory of “protocols and decorum that were themselves correlates and markers of status inequality” (Fraser, 1990, p. 63).

The Critical, Abolitionist, and Decolonizing Traditions

The critical, abolitionist, and decolonizing traditions, with a long history of visibilizing and interrogating how power weaves itself into the structuring, signifying, and “working” of the world, have, from the beginning, actively contested what Martin-Baro (1994) referred to as a “collective lie.”⁶ Scholars, activists, and thinkers in these traditions and movements have consistently questioned and documented the role of ideas and stories in the “maldistribution” of truth and legitimacy and in the consolidation of a hegemony in which it is virtually impossible to imagine otherwise. As Angela Davis wrote when discussing the hegemonic nature of the present, “the prison is considered so natural that it is extremely hard to imagine life without it” (p. 10). Thus, highlighting the power and role of stories and theories as instruments of domination. As a result, they have created a path for us to learn and build from, a lineage of work that has brought a radical and critical inquiry to, among many: the “benevolent” role and purpose of schools; how ideological categories and subjectivities have been weaponized against and “projected onto communities.” (Torre et al., 2012, p.2); and issues of epistemic justice and sovereignty, including

⁶ A story through which an egregious, oppressive, exploitative, and unjust reality gets legitimized and reproduced.

interrogating who gets to theorize, under which conditions, for what purpose, and ultimately the theories and stories through which we understand and live in the world, and in this case schooling and education.

Reminding us that schools cannot be simply understood as “innocent,” meritocratic springboards for upward mobility, these traditions have for a long time uncovered how schools and the normalizing logics of education (Moreton-Robinson, 2016) have historically and currently served to consolidate the racial capital, settler-colonial project (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006), worked to exacerbate or perpetuate social inequities (Althusser, 1971; Apple, 2012; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 1983; McLaren & Puiggrós, 1994; Nieto, 2005), and further consolidated the carceral and punitive apparatus and continuum (Davis, 2003; Meiners, 2007; Rodriguez, 2006; Wacquant, 2000). Whether through their role as ideological apparatuses (Althusser, 1971) or in reproducing economic, gender, class, race, and a host of other inequities and injustices (Apple, 2012; Bourdieu, 1982; Delamont, 2018; Holland & Eisenhart, 1990; Leonardo, 2012), schools serve as “normalizing agencies” that essentially bring legitimacy to existing social relations and practices, rendering them normal and natural (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 23) These various critiques address how power benefits, contributes, and actively structures the exclusion, disposal, displacement, containment, criminalization, and pushing-out of multiply marginalized students as it celebrates and further legitimizes the power and value of those with accumulated privilege and advantage.

At the same time, these research traditions have contested how “science,” and its methods have been recruited to legitimate dominant policies and practices (Torre et al., 2012). Focusing more specifically on the “how” of research and knowledge production, they have brought forth and pushed for old, new, and radical ways and purposes for doing research, including among

others: using research to mobilize everyday people to challenge prevailing ideological constructions of social problems and inspire social change (Martin-Baro, 1994); see, hear, and feel the participation, resistance, and actions of all those who have contributed to our society and world (Agarwal-Rangnath, 2013); developing methodologies that iterate back and forth between the relations of the part and the whole, creating a contextualized understanding of human experience (Dilthey, 1883); taking the gaze away from the powerful and engage people to create detailed accounts of the dialectic between structures and context, like structural racism (Du Bois, 1898); conceptualizing and conducting community centered research methods like the Community Self-Survey as vehicles for democracy, justice, and participation (Allport, 1951); and involving ourselves in a new praxis, “an activity of transforming reality that will let us know not only about what is, but also about what is not, orienting ourselves toward what ought to be” (Martin-Baro, 1994, pp. 28–29), among others. Together, these traditions, methodologies, and movements continue to influence and inspire the work of many.

Focusing more specifically on work around, on, with, and/or alongside youth, by the 1990s more and more critical educators and scholars had begun to apply these theories and methods in their work with young people, offering YPAR as an umbrella term for a variety of practices that engaged youth (often marginalized, low-income, and youth of color) in rigorous inquiry in regards to public problems and the relationship between these and their personal lives (Mirra & Rogers, 2016). Together, these further contributed to a series of challenges to dominant epistemological and methodological stances of who can conduct research, how, and for what purposes. Through these traditions, youth and other marginalized and oppressed peoples’ have also been positioned and taken a role as the knowledge producers, as young scholars, as co-researchers and co-theorizers, among others.

Today, social movements, community-based organizations, and critical researchers and scholars, in furthering the goals of these traditions, continue to make important political and theoretical contributions (see: Participatory Action Research, Youth-centered critical design, Indigenous and Decolonizing Methodologies and Research Traditions, Critical and Activist Ethnography, Critical Anthropology and Ethnography of Policy, etc.). In addition, walking a delicate balance between fugitivity and counterinsurgency, these traditions and movements continue to grow in popularity and to claim more space and leverage across “mainstream” institutions like universities, community organizations, unions, government offices, and others. At the same time, the tasks of disrupting the normal, interrupting what Arendt (1958) refers to as consistency, and pushing back against power, is endless, complex, and laborious. As Payne (1984) writes, when the overwhelming insight produced by three-quarters of a century of theory is that no one has much complicity in human suffering except the sufferers and those closest to them, we should be skeptical.

It is in the spirit of joining these efforts, in the spirit of creating what Martin-Baro (1994) called a science *of the oppressed* rather than *for the oppressed*, and in the spirit of lovingly unsettling and re-membering (Torre et al., 2012) that I seek to build upon the lineage, concept and methodology of theorizing back (Tuck, 2009).

Theorizing Back⁷

“Theory” isn’t just an intellectual pursuit—it is woven within kinetics, spiritual presence and emotion, it is contextual and relational. It is intimate and personal, with individuals themselves holding the responsibilities for finding and generating meaning within their own lives. Most importantly, “theory isn’t just for academics; it is for everyone. And so, the story of maple sugar gets to (some of) our kids almost from birth. “Theory” within

⁷ A large portion of this dissertation will explore in detail the history, the relationships, and the lessons of theorizing back as it took place and was organically brought to life by The Homies. This section will instead, purposefully describe Theorizing Back as it was both, informed by its elders and theoretical traditions, and originally proposed by me during my dissertation proposal stage.

this context is generated from the ground up and its power stems from its living resonance within individuals and collectives. (Simpson, 2014, pp. 6–7)

In her chapter “Theorizing Back,” Eve Tuck (2009) describes theorizing back as “a sister component in a larger decolonizing project” (p. 112). Drawing deeply from “Researching Back,” proposed by Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) and described by Eve Tuck as “a concept and methodology of recovery, knowing, analysis, and struggle” (p. 112), theorizing-back “contains a critique of the ways in which whitestream voices are constructed as rigorous, logical, reasoned, and valid while voices outside of the whitestream are considered experiential and emotional, representing devalued ways of knowing” (Tuck, 2009, p. 112). Unlike dominant “modes” of knowledge production and theorizing, which often flatten, economize, dehumanize, and territorialize (Deleuze & Guattari, 2003); theorizing back strives to do the opposite. It seeks to un-flatten, push back against the imposition of truth and the erasure of the people who make up the world, their stories, and their imaginaries. Like the work of the critical and decolonizing traditions described earlier, theorizing back humanizes and directly addresses issues of power and its strategic mis-representation of the world. It disrupts what Paris and Winn (2014) deem a history of work that has pathologized, exoticized, objectified, and named as deficient communities of color and other marginalized populations in the U.S. and beyond (see also Kelley, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2012; Paris, 2011; Wilson, 2008). Theorizing back rejects the notion that the exclusion of certain perspectives happens by bias or omission and instead, seeks to interrogate the production of ignorance (Calderon, 2011) and of problematic “historical myths” (Levstik & Barton, 2015). It recognizes and makes space for the uncovering of what Sabzalian describes when talking about the exclusion of Native perspectives, claiming that “positioning Native students to regurgitate colonizer’s accounts of history is a profound act of attempted indoctrination and assimilation.” (p. 52)

Similarly, resonating with the critical traditions and with the spirit of critical pedagogy, theorizing back invites collectives to participate in the active transformation that takes place as we unveil oppression and re-create knowledge (Freire, 1970). Theorizing back must be dialogical, centering our ontological vocation to be free (Freire, 1970) and recognizing that “while both humanization and dehumanization are real alternatives, only the first is the people’s vocation” (Freire, 1970, p. 43).

Drawing from Indigenous traditions and methodologies, which, as explained by Wilson (2008), often center reality not as “an object but a process of relationships” (p. 73), the work of theorizing back centers relationality. Thus, the ultimate goal is not knowledge in itself but people coming together to create mutual realities (ontology), find common meanings (epistemology), and ultimately improve their worlds (axiology and methodology). Theorizing back honors, validates, and brings texture to the fabric of life so as to construct a process that makes space for wholeness, including people, their beliefs, stories, purposes, contexts and experiences; all of which are deeply interconnected (Wilson, 2008). In addition, theorizing back kindles mutual accountability, which is naturally and positively created as we see each other and are accountable to our relationships and our community.

The Radical Imagination and Theorizing Back

Lastly, countering scholarship which disregards the possibilities, dreams, and prefigurative capacities of those whose destinies and identities are ubiquitously framed as a “problem,” theorizing back honors and nurtures the radical imagination. Consequently, theorizing back calls for a research methodology that dedicates itself to animating and awakening dialogue, spaces where movements and peoples think together about their historical and social locations as part of a reflexive project of transforming social reproduction in society at large and in movement organization, culture and personal subjectivities (Haiven & Khasnabish,

2014). Similar to what Freire (1970) calls revolutionary futurity, theorizing back is hopeful and purposeful, affirming our right as people to look back as a means to understand so that we can move forward. Theorizing back is itself both an effort to convoke, to call something which is not yet fully present into being (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014); and a recognition of how this process sits in tandem with a urgent “demystifying and de-deifying of grand theory in order to revise, resist, and refuse stereotypical or erroneous analyses of us and our communities” (Tuck, 2009, p. 112).

As a final note, Theorizing Back—as will be thoroughly and iteratively explored throughout this dissertation—was ultimately the space, the lessons, the affect, the relationships, and all that was brought forth and gifted by the words and the worlds of The Homies in a radically voluntaristic, messy, honest, and “organic” process. In addition, for this project, theorizing back was both: a collective praxis around our initial question (Why do some people leave school?); and an exploration of a broader desire and yearning to be “educated,” to re-write biographies, and to reclaim ones right to the word and the world.

This Dissertation Study

This project was from the beginning, grounded in the belief that theorizing matters and that the work of theorizing back can be a springboard for new possibilities and transformation in the world of education, especially for youth who have countless experiences negotiating the tensions between an oppressive, violent, racist, and precarious schooling and a vision and desire for freedom, emancipation, stability, dignity, and education.

Towards this purpose and as an effort to build upon and contribute to the legacies of critical scholars and the movements for educational justice, this dissertation—itsself a part and drawing its lessons from the collective project of theorizing back—explores three central questions:

1. After engaging with a group of multiply marginalized young people who have a precarious relationship to schooling in a process of theorizing back about their school experiences, what insights emerge about this reflective process? What are some of the possibilities, tensions, and contradictions that arise?
2. What frameworks, imaginaries, and understandings emerge as a group of multiply marginalized young people with a complex and precarious relationship to schooling theorize back about the question “why do some young people leave school”?
 - a. How do these ideas speak to existing theories and explanations of why some youth are out-of-school?
 - b. How can a critical re-reading and re-claiming of young people’s educational histories, as part of theorizing back, prefigure and convoke new visions and possibilities for schooling and education?
3. To what extent does participation in the process of theorizing back kindle and/or forge new individual and collective identities, especially in relationship to schooling and education?

Methodology

Methodological Elders and Theoretical Underpinnings

Thinking about methodology as the destination of the research journey (Wilson, 2008), this project’s methodology is theorizing back. While theorizing back and this project were unique and greatly a result of an organic process, a set of relationships, and a context—a process thoroughly explored and described in Chapter 4—it was deeply informed and nurtured by its methodological elders and roots: the participatory action research, critical ethnographic, and Indigenous and decolonizing research traditions. In trying to make sense of these together, this project could be best, and still inaccurately, described as a Critical Ethnography of a Theorizing

Back Project that was deeply informed and inspired by Critical Pedagogy and the Indigenous and decolonizing research traditions. There is significant overlap and resonance between these research traditions, their histories, and their theoretical underpinnings. However, there are also unique and important lessons, commitments, and features of each of them that directly informed the imagining, thinking, planning, and praxis throughout this project and the writing of this dissertation.

Youth Participatory Action Research and Critical Participatory Action Research

As a methodology, the values and the commitments of critical/youth participatory action research served as a “north star” for our work as a group and for my role in facilitating the theorizing back project. In particular, in ensuring its commitment to several key ideas and goals: (a) decentralizing and democratizing knowledge “production” and purpose; (b) honoring the power and knowledge of those from whom counter-hegemonic notions derive and whose lives are deeply grounded in struggles (Gramsci, 1971); (c) engaging people in a learning process that positions them as experts in their own lives (Camarota & Fine, 2008); (d) join forces with stakeholders to ensure research is connected and grounded within broader movements for social action and transformation; and (e) centering meaning-making and the radical imagination as collective processes that happen in collective praxis. Participatory action research, as explained by Fine et al. (2003), represents a stance and “epistemology that assumes knowledge is rooted in social relations and most powerful when produced collaboratively through action” (p. 1763). Moreover, the critical participatory action research traditions offered alternate, nuanced, and important critiques and offerings to dominant conceptions of validity, reliability, objectivity, and purpose as it relates to research. Lastly, youth participatory action research offers powerful and important foundation of insights about working with youth, including their role as co-analysts

and co-theorists (Tuck & Yang, 2012) and the particular politics, power dynamics, and considerations that can, and should, be brought to this type of work. In PAR, the “researcher” aims to return to the people the legitimacy of the knowledge they are capable of producing through their own verification systems as a guide to their own action (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). This project and its methodology will constantly have to navigate important and generative questions, including: Who is considered an insider and an outsider?

Critical Ethnography

As a methodology, the power and commitments of ethnography were central to the deeply dialogic, incomplete, and situated nature of the worlds, subjects, and contexts in which this project took place. As described by Haiven and Khasnabish (2014), ethnography is not only a genre of scholarly writing or a set of research methods grounded in participant observation and immersion in “the field,” but “a perspective committed to understanding and taking seriously people’s lived realities” (p. 50). Ethnography, as conceptualized for this study, centers the world not as comprised of objects to be analyzed, but as acted and imagined into being by active, dialogic subjects, including by us researchers. Also central to this work and drawing a distinction with traditional ethnography, which strives for rich, thick and accurate interpretation of social phenomena, critical ethnography has additional goals of illuminating power differences, injustice, agency, resistance, and larger analysis of structures (Castagno, 2012). Whilst critical ethnography is not a “prefabricated” box and it looks different across different context, Castagno (2012) names five essential elements of critical ethnography, all of which informed this dissertation project: illuminating both structure and agency, highlighting both micro and macro phenomena, drawing on and building theory, focusing on various and intertwining power-related

identities and oppressions, reflecting on issues of representation and positionality, and taking a stand against inequity.

Indigenous and Decolonizing Research Traditions

It is difficult to name all the ways in which the Indigenous and decolonizing research traditions have influenced this work. Starting with my own perspective, values, and relationship with research. As written by Tuhiwai Smith (2012) on Decolonizing Methodologies, “the word itself, ‘research,’ is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary” (xi). As a “research” project, there was much for me to “own,” grapple with, and negotiate. In doing so, the Indigenous and Decolonizing Traditions were an invaluable source of inspiration and learning; both in the ways in which they illustrate and highlight the ways research can be a colonizing enterprise that subjugates, further entrenches epistemic hierarchies, denies sovereignty, and exploits multiple marginalized and oppressed people’s; and in how they present alternatives ways of: being a “researcher,” conceptualizing and making sense of the purpose of research, and ultimately doing research. For this dissertation, I was inspired and committed to the task of replacing ‘sociologies of absences’ for ecologies of knowledge/s that enables and nurtures alternative ways of knowing (Sousa Santos, 2004) and create a “un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos” [a world where many worlds fit].⁸ Moreover, this project’s engagement with theory center’s Tuhiwai Smith’s argument that theory gives us (marginalized peoples) space to plan, to strategize, to take greater control over our resistances.

⁸ A guiding principle for the Zapatista movement, a decolonial, anti-capitalist, collective resistance of Indigenous communities in the south of Mexico concentrated on recuperating land, mutual aid, exercising autonomy, reclaiming and exercising the right to Indigenous ways of life and the practice of horizontal governance, equitable gender relations, anti-systemic health care, grassroots education, and agro-ecological food sovereignty, among others. For more see the *Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle* (*Sexta Declaración de la Selva Lacandona*).

Research Phases

Although this dissertation study was not “divided” in clearly demarcated or separate steps or activities, the broader arc of the theorizing back project can be seen as consisting of four main phases: (a) The first phase took place between early 2017, when I was invited to teach a class at the center and October 2020, when we formally began the theorizing back project. This period of time—chronicled in Chapter 4—built the foundation, the trust, the relationships, and the impetus for theorizing back. (b) The second phase took place between October 2020 to November 2020 and consisted of an initial set of interviews and a collection of conversations between different “subsets” of the Homies and me. The conversations, which took place across different sites and spaces, consisted primarily in planning for our work together and talking about the “activity” of theorizing, the political dimensions and implications of being the “targets” of theory, and collectively envisioning the project of theorizing back. (c) The third phase, the theorizing-back phase, was the core of this dissertation study and took place approximately from November 2020 to June 2021. Although the consistency and attendance of our gatherings was heavily impacted by COVID-19, we met approximately once every two weeks for about 14 weeks and held a few more meetings in the following months.

During each meeting, the young theorizers engaged in collective activities to theorize back. The majority of these activities and exercises (outlined in detail in Chapter 3) grew organically out of the Homies’s collective praxis and were themselves grounded on our initial conversations around: What would be the best way to learn more about why some young people are out of school? The rest were exercises initially suggested by me (later agreed by the youth theorizers), many of which came from my own experiences and lessons from popular education, activist spaces, and critical research traditions. Often, these activities included time for self-reflection and sharing around the Homies’ own experiences and histories in schools and in the

broader communities and contexts in which schools were in conversation with. Other times, activities included interviewing each other and findings points of resonance, connection, and difference. Also as part of theorizing back, the youth explored a broad variety of literature around the political economy of “school leaving” and educational policy (Anyon, 1991), critical and “non-critical” literature on the relationship between social reproduction and school leaving, the school to prison nexus, current events, etc. (d) And lastly, the fourth phase, which consisted of cycles of collective data analysis and sense-making, writing, and member checking.

Throughout the process, we intentionally held space to dwell in the generative dialectic that exists, and one that was apparent and present in the lives of the youth, between humiliating ironies and dangerous dignities (Tuck, 2012), and pull from the radical imagination to collectively convoke alternate futures for just and emancipatory schooling. In addition, as per the purpose of the space, we continuously visibilized and sought to bring forth the relationship between our ideas and our theorizing and how they spoke to the ways in which power mediates relationships that are historically and socially constructed (Kincheloe et al., 2011). All of these ideas will be discussed in greater detail within the methodology section.

The Homies, Scholars, and Theorizers⁹

CB the Orchestrator was there from the beginning, one of the first young scholars and theorizers I met at First Street. She is agile with her mind and heart, joyful, reflexive, and able to switch quickly from joking to profound social commentary that always left us thinking for hours. Since I met her for the first time until today, I consider her one of my favorite sociologists. CB the Orchestrator is a black, queer woman in her early 20s and grew up in South Los Angeles. She, for what she described as “far too fucking long,” has had to take care of her family and

⁹ These brief introductions were written by me and edited by the Homies, who decided what to include and what to leave out.

dreams of breaking the deadly cycles that she has seen destroy her people. CB the Orchestrator and her brother were both incarcerated for the first time when in Elementary school, a wound that she carries to this day. CB the Orchestrator currently works as a mentor for young people and she dreams of being a fashion designer.

Francisco was introduced to me by a friend and mentor at the center one day. He had a big Aztec Calendar tattooed on his forearm and after I asked him what it meant to him, we were in deep conversation about Aztlan, our severed ties to our ancestors, and Lobsang Rampa. Francisco makes beats, looks at you straight into the eyes with curiosity and sincerity, is wise beyond his years, and is always keen on inviting us to think about the rhythms of the world, a metaphor that would later become part of our collective language. Also in his early twenties, Francisco identifies as part Chicano, part Indigenous, and a Christian. Francisco likes to be low-key. Marc grew up with his mom and brothers by Salazar Park. One of his first memories of school was when he was in the fourth grade when he brought a knife to school because he wanted to kill his stepdad, “I was sick of being abused and seeing my mom being abused so I wanted to be ready, that’s when I began to be treated like I was crazy and a criminal. It’s crazy because one of the first things that I thought was that I didn’t want to give my mom any more trouble.” Francisco is also a father, a husband, is a man committed to “changing the rhythms of this world,” and is in search of a bigger purpose.

Tino the Rhino first came to Free Space one Friday after going indoor rock climbing with us, something that would become a ritual every week. He joined the group for the climbing and 10 minutes into the van-ride, he was blowing our minds with facts and questions about astrology, particle physics, and the bending of the universe; something that would become another tradition. Tino the Rhino’s kindness, his dreams, and his interest for big philosophical questions

are as big as his shorts, 6XL. Tino the Rhino, in his mid-twenties, grew up in Florence, his family is from Guadalajara and Zacatecas, and identifies as Chicano. He draws his inspiration from trying to help out his family, which includes his mother, his nephew, and his sisters “and everyone in the life, you know, including myself, everyone in the struggle.” Tino loves to see others grow and wants to be a part of that, “not the rat race, you know.” He remembers the first time he went to the Natural History Museum in Elementary school where he was first convinced of what he wanted to be. He returned to the museum when he was 15 and he could see himself “sitting in a bench dreaming of who I was going to be, and then it made me think of all the shit, like the world’s true colors, being locked up, life in the streets, and how I was now a whole different person. I thought to myself, like what happened to all those dreams.”

Esperanza would often rally people into the room, she was a leader, a mother, relentless, powerfully transgressive, and carried the rebelliousness that is much needed—and repeatedly punished—in the world today. She enjoyed the back and forth, was unafraid to say what was on her mind and agile in picking up other people’s affect, and would astutely steer conversations to insightful places that nobody anticipated. Esperanza identifies as a Latina Mexicana in her early 20s, grew up in East Los Angeles, was always in and out of schools, getting in trouble, getting into fights, and being bounced from school to school to special school to “placement.” Esperanza is currently in community college and dreams of giving her son the life that was, in her words, denied from her.

Of Cortez I had been hearing for a long time, he’d been having “legendary” conversations with other students about God, free will, and obscure bible passages until one day I told him I’d heard of these legendary conversations and that I hoped he would join us one day. For him, blowing people’s minds was like dancing, and since he was very young, he was a

legendary dancer; he had YouTube videos to prove it. He'd read the bible while imprisoned and made powerful connections between its stories, his life in the streets, the values and principles that guided his work in his "click," and his choice to stay true to his ways. Cortez is a proud Chicano in his mid-twenties, grew up in East Los Angeles, is a father, and "loyal to my people."

I met Alita through her partner, another young person that had been a part of the space. Alita is an artist, a mother, and one who tended to think in silence and speak volumes with only a few words. During our sessions, she would rapidly nuance or change the nature and direction of the conversation with a couple of words. Her father was in prison and had spent almost a decade writing his dreams. Alita was an artist, and for the last couple of years, she'd been drawing her father's prison dreams, many of which had become a source of inspiration and healing. Alita is one of the youngest of the group, identifies as mixed race with indigenous roots and a person working to heal decades of her own trauma. She seeks to continue making art, inspiring others through her art, and serving a bigger purpose through it.

Gabriel was always very quiet and would often doubt his own words before he spoke them. However, in the words of others, his words "hit hard" every time he put them out there. He is a real listener, speaks with his hands and with his heart, and always brought insight and humor to both Free Space and Theorizing Back. Gabriel, a Chicano that grew up moving around until he settled in East Los Angeles, is now in his early twenties. Despite getting his high school diploma, Gabriel has been working multiple jobs to makes end meet, is trying to get into a trade, and in his words, "just wants to be able to work like a regular human being and still have time to live, shit . . ."

Santiago is one of the first youth I met at the center and one whose enthusiasm brought life to the space every time he was able to be there. When he was there, knowledgeable of the

volatility of his context, he would say: “Today we here boss, that is all we got.” Santiago was always on the move, with lots of energy and big eyes that would look straight at you and was always keen on having a conversation, bringing optimism, and speaking with humility and honesty. Santiago is in his mid-twenties, grew up in the Eastern part of Los Angeles County, and identifies as Latino or Mexican American. He was told he wasn’t made for school when he was very young and he believe it, leaving school and return many years later to get his high school diploma. He considers himself a loyal and caring person, a good uncle and trying to be a good son.

Camilo joined us through climbing, initially as a friend and volunteer and by virtue of his relationships with youth, and his own interest in deep conversation, critical texts, and in digging upon his own story, became a part of the group. Camilo grew up a decade earlier a few blocks away from some of the youth, so he was, as Francisco called him an OG in disguise. “I am not even lying, Bro, you look like healthy, Bro. This is a OG, this is an OG in disguise.” Camilo was perceptive, intentional with his words, and his commitment to learning contagious. Camilo grew up among women (mother and sisters), on the move, and he identifies as Chicano with severed, “currently healing” roots in Guadalajara, Mexico. Camilo left school for the first time in high school in order to “survive” out in the streets, he returned to school to finish high school, joined the army, and became a first responder.

Lola would often take a peek inside the classroom where we sat in a circle, ask what we were doing, and enthusiastically decline our repeated invitations to join. Most weeks, we would bump into each other and she asked how my project was going and when I told her we were trying to find out why the world was the way it was, she responded that she had all the answers. “Well you should join then” I always responded. Lola knew that the world, in her words, “won’t

like what I have to say.” Lola is in her early twenties, grew up in between Los Angeles and Mexico when her family wanted her to be away from trouble. Lola identifies as a Latina “proud troublemaker.” She brought life, wit, and joy into the space whenever she was with us.

Teo walked in one day and gracefully sat down in our circle as if he always belonged. He spoke slowly, softly, and with a pause that reminded me of a sage wise enough to know that we should never aim for prefabricated answers and that instead, we should look into reflection and meaning-making. I remember that during one of our first conversations he spoke of his dad being Native American and of the possibility of reclaiming his heritage being small. His dad was in jail and the incentives were upside-down, “we are more interested in iPhones,” he said. During our meetings, he would often use metaphors, such as equating oppression to pollution: “they say that we are cutting back more but it’s getting worse, our ozone layer isn’t just going to rebuild itself, so in a way we are still in a crisis but yet the schools aren’t really teaching us too much about these crises.” Teo grew up moving around, identifies as mixed race, is in his late twenties, is a father, and is trying to make up for the years he lost to incarceration.

Shamu walked in one day and said, “Raul told me to come here, he said that you all read books and shit.” A couple of weeks later, he walked into the space with a bunch of papers, ready to share his translation of the first chapter of pedagogy of the oppressed—which I had shared with them before—in “the words of his people.” It was powerful, moving, and at the end of our meeting I asked him if he’d mind sharing it with me to which he responded: “Perhaps someday, this is for me now.” Shamu is now in his late 20s, more than 6ft tall and 240lbs, which in his words made him a “favorite” for police. He grew up moving around the US and identifies as half Black- half Latino. When I asked him what he wanted others to know of him he said: “beware of what I will write one day.”

Diego's time with us was short and yet consequential, he would hang around Shamu who would introduce him as an inseparable friend. He was intuitive, perceptive, soft-spoken, and unable to engage with anything other than kindness and love, which tragically, in his own words, made his life really difficult. The first time we wrote a "journal" entry, he was ready for the opportunity to write what he had never given himself an opportunity to write. Diego is in his late-twenties, identifies as Chicano but does not know where his ancestors are from, something that was stolen from him. He grew up jumping between places, friends' homes, and motels, mostly in the south west part of LA County.

The Homies were between 18 and 24 years old¹⁰ and called various parts of Los Angeles County home. All of them had at some point been pushed out, kicked out, had left school and were in the process of getting their high school diploma at a given point throughout this project. The majority of them had been impacted by the carceral state, had spent time incarcerated, and more than half of them had been impacted by what Roberts (2021) calls the family policing system, more commonly (and euphemistically) known as the child welfare system, including foster care, group homes, etc. The majority of the Homies were racialized as Latinx (~57%), Black (~8%), Indigenous (~17%), and mixed race (~17%). However, when we spoke about how we identify, categories became blurry and the Homies's answers ranged from Chicano, Chicana, Black, Mexicano, Centroamericano, to "I wish I knew what I am, I don't know where my ancestors are from" (Diego) and "I know I am indigenous, it was just a part of me that was stolen when my dad went to prison" (Teo). Beyond all these characteristics, labels, and intersecting systems and identities, for each homie and for each relationship there is a story, and whilst deeply different, we kept finding ourselves together during those Friday afternoons. There were

¹⁰ At the time of Theorizing Back.

no selection criteria. None of the Homies were “chosen” for this project and while I was sometimes told by the adults at the center that had heard of Free Space that they thought “so-and-so youth” would love it so I should go talk to them, it was entirely up to the youth.

The Youth Re-entry Center

This project took place at a youth re-entry center in East Los Angeles. The center, whose goal is to support youth in their transitioning from the prison system into their communities provides multiple resources for youth, including a continuation high school that was founded on the belief that “all youth need a high school diploma” and a focuses on engaging students through Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships. The mission of the center, complemented by the work of its school, is to provide a personalized, rigorous academic, socio-emotional, and spiritual support program to traditionally underserved, marginalized youth who have previously withdrawn or are in danger of withdrawing from mainstream education, and those that have been impacted by the carceral state. The youth re-entry center is also known in the community and by its students to be a safe, welcoming, and affirmative space for youth that have previously been pushed out of schools and other “support” systems. While the school inside the youth re-entry center does not explicitly see its work as informed by critical pedagogy, its focus on reconceptualizing the “relationship” between students and school, its position as a welcoming place for all, and their approach to center relationships has created a culture of authentic trust and acceptance, which is a necessary and vital precursor to dialogue. Most importantly and often obscured by dominant “deficit and needs-centered” narratives (Delgado Bernal, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Valencia, 2012), the biggest asset of the center is the beauty, wealth, knowledge, life experience, humanity, and profound insight brought by each of the youth.

Free Space and Theorizing Back

The space that this dissertation study and project was inspired by and was born out of, referred to by students as Free Space, started in a “class” that I was invited to teach in 2017. That day, we had conversations about freedom, the criminal justice system, violence, hope and love, and the rights to reclaim our own minds and our stories. After the “class” ended, a group of youth asked if I would come back. I did, and after a couple of weeks and more youth had joined, we decided to hold that space consistently on Fridays. During our time together, we checked-in, discussed questions that were relevant and that resonated with us and we read Freire, Tupac, Levins Morales, Fanon, Lorde, and many others. Without a clear “goal” other than the joyful and sincere of asking meaningful questions together, we laughed a lot, got angry at times, discussed difficult topics, shared music, built community, and compiled many google docs with random thoughts, quotes, and lots of unfinished essays and stories with titles like “Learning how to f***ng read when you are 26,” ”Why did you protect your purse and not your baby,” and “Schools and the world versus me.”

As time passed, our meetings as part of Free Space and our broader relationships as part of the center continued to grow. Besides our thinking and dialogue together we also had opportunities to go to nature, go climbing, hiking, eating, and skating, among others. At times, the energy at Free Space was high, conversations powerful, personal, and interactions heartfelt and meaningful. Others, youth were tired and the heaviness of the world weighed down on us. At times, students didn't have time for “this shit” and it was perfectly okay. Once, I asked one student to help me think through a name for the space to put on a schedule that the center was going to print and I asked, what do we do in this class? “We talk about real stuff,” he responded. Throughout the time of Free Space, the group and the students changed constantly, a lot due to the precarious, unstable, and oppressive nature of the students’ environments. However, the

conversations continued to build, and the relationships ultimately resulted in Theorizing Back, the project at the heart of this dissertation. Most importantly, Free Space and the resulting Theorizing Back project, were a result of sincere curiosity, relationships, care, and love for one another.¹¹

Standing with the “Margins”: Participant, Researcher, Friend, Mentor, Community Member

In regards to my positionality in this space, as an initial guest—and later a participant, researcher, mentor, and “homie” (as often referred to by the Homies)—I sought to enter this work centering relationality, care, and reflexivity, and committed to the four Rs of Indigenous Research as outlined by Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991): Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility. In order to do so, it was and continues to be crucial that my subjectivity, as described by McCarty (2018), is never to be hidden or neutralized. Instead, it needs to be indeed recognized and enacted as imbued with power, meaning, and implications, all of which I sought to constantly interrogate alongside the youth.

Starting with my location and position in the world, I entered this work recognizing the settler colonial, cisheteropatriarchal, racial capitalist, oppressive and violent contexts that are egregiously etched into, and often invisibilized by “normality.” As a middle-class Mexican man, I saw as part of my responsibility to not only recognize, but to repeatedly call-out all the ways in which I implicitly and explicitly, consciously and unconsciously endorse, participate in, and benefit from these systems, many of which directly impacted the Homies, their families, and their community.

¹¹ Free Space and the relationships, conversations, and insights that led to the Theorizing Back project will be explored in detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

Despite our differing identities, there was a lot that connected us as a group, starting with our shared humanity; our desire and vocation to ask questions; our own complex and fraught history with schooling, legality, and authority; and several aspects of our culture, including being Latinx, immigrants, skaters, self-proclaimed rebels, and many more. However, I also know, and was constantly and importantly reminded, that I entered that space partially blinded by a life where I have been able to not only exercise my rights, but have been plagued by privileges and different forms of capital made “possible” by the exploitation, dispossession, and extraction of others. At times, my identity, my experiences, and my location in the world would make me comically ignorant and unable to understand cultural references and experiences. Other times, the youth would make fun of my “language,” my wanting to go to the forest all the time, and my eating habits. As Chuy used to say every time I pulled some “healthy” snack: “fucking Miguel, what green thing did you bring this time?” Other times, the power of learning from each other’s differences created nurtured curiosity, unsettled assumptions, and resulted in learning and insight. Throughout both points of connection and difference, I was committed to being honest, transparent, and relational.

Both “Free Space” and Theorizing Back were never “intended” to give multiply marginalized youth a voice or power; if something was clear to me since the beginning it was that they had and continue to have plenty of both. At the same time, the intentionality behind creating a deliberate space to honor their right to the word and the world—rights that are endemically assaulted, both ideologically and concretely—and collectively direct that voice, that brilliance, and that power towards dimensions of life that are often neglected, consistently misrepresented, and strategically misconstrued, was clearly part of my “baggage,” in the best and most honest way possible. Since the beginning, I was sincere and transparent in my belief that

the space, the relationships, and how our work together could upset, unsettle, and bring texture to “established thought” and to what is “readable.” The task of destabilizing the re-construction of consent that designs new and evolved hegemonic modes of domination (Fraser, 1990) also felt important and compelling. Moreover, this “baggage” and my purpose for doing and investing my whole self in this work—greatly rooted and inspired by the traditions I have previously referenced—was also palpable and evident to the youth. As Francisco once shared, “Then with this community, this relationship that we have here. This relationship, I think it comes down to purpose. Because I think that’s why you do what you do, because you have a purpose. When you have a purpose and that means to us, you helped us. You helped me personally . . . For you being yourself, we were able to be ourselves.” I do not share this to tout my own horn or to celebrate my “role” in this process. I say this because who we are and why we do what we do matters. It mattered to them, it sat at the center of our relationships, and it showed up in the process, its insights, and the outcomes.

As the work grew, my relationships with the Homies changed, and the theorizing itself began, it was evident that my place and positionality—and the theorizing itself—would be nurtured and challenged by delicate and critical tensions, including the blurry and yet generative space that I often walked as I sought to honor my truth, intentions, and the relationships I was accountable to and that were at the heart of this work. As I was doing this work and especially at the beginning of Free Space, I was simply doing what felt purposeful and ethical in a space where I was invited to and in ways that felt reciprocal and that honored the choices of students (the same students who invited me to return). However, as the work progressed, as we moved towards the decision to theorize back, and as we began thinking about putting a book together (and me doing my dissertation based on our work together); issues of positionality and especially

those directly connected to the Four R's became increasingly important and thus, my commitment to being completely transparent, visibilizing and interrogating issues of power, respecting and honoring their power and their choices, and centering our shared humanities, our relationships, and my accountability to them. Within that context and community and given who we were and the lives that we led, what did Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility mean and needed to look like?

Furthermore, this also mean speaking openly about these "contradictions:" about who had the power to write about others; who should decide that questions that would be asked; how stories could be used and by whom where they actively being used; the ecosystems in which these stories and theories were going to be taken up and whom they could benefit and who they could harm; and all my baggage/privilege, including all the ways in which I could step in and out or all the ways in which I could monetize and benefit from this work. As Diversi and Finley (2010) write, I always had the "choice to move from the harshness of the streets back to the safety of our homes" (p. 14), unlike CB the Orchestrator, who once described one of the hardest parts of theorizing back as having to go "back":

It's a safe haven, just somewhere that we can get it all out and then go back (our space) but see that's the shit, going back, that always gets me. I just let all that out and then I'm going back. And the next day, oh some other shit happened. You hear my sense.

In addition, I also had and continue to have the possibility to abuse my power to shape representations and interpretations of lived experience, all of which became very apparent as I tried to openly reflect and negotiate my own positionality with the Homies. After all, I too, was hypervisibilizing, or seeking to open spaces for "them" to engage in praxis, especially when we decided to embark on the *theorizing back project* and hopefully write a book together. Often, when inviting other youth to the space, members of our space would say to other students that I was "firme," a simultaneous recognition that I was an outsider, a suggestion that I could be

trusted, and that in some ways, I was “okay.” There were many moments where my “outsiderness” was evident, my ignorance flagrant—which was often comical to the Homies—and my presence complicated.

Often, the Homies talked about our space being different from other spaces or other “programs,” as they are often called at the center. When I asked why, they mostly shared it felt different and if I tried probing further, they would point out to purpose, to trust, and to it being real.

You actually got to speak to us. I think what your purpose and meaning. With you having a purpose and doing what you do made it comfortable for us to be able to open up and speak. Because if you didn’t have a purpose, if it was something else. But your enthusiasm, your integrity, you wanted to do this and so it motivated me to open up. This space right here, it makes it deeper because you have a purpose. You’re not just doing this for some sales or this and that. You want to do something. You get your degree, you’re going to do something with it. I feel like we just caught fire after that. It gave us a comfortability just for you having a purpose. (Francisco)

It was mostly to do with your energy, it didn’t throw me off, most people leave, you stayed” (CB the Orchestrator)

For you being yourself, we were able to be ourselves. For you sharing too, and then not just that, is we also relate on certain things. With drugs, our parents. School systems. We relate on these things. It just made it more comfortable for me to open up and share personal things that I probably wouldn’t share with a lot of people. (Tino the Rhino)

Circling back both the four R’s and Relationality as a core value, it is critical to name and it would be insincere to not name the importance of trust and of time. Despite the world’s, and especially racial capitalism’s frantic and demanding “pace,” this project had to move at the speed of *trust*.

“I am always open because I have trust in you.” (Francisco)

“None of this shit could’ve happen without no trust, hell no” (CB the Orchestrator)

Trust takes time and despite there certainly is cultivating and nurturing trust, there is no forcing it. In addition, trust works both ways. This was not about “getting” the Homies’ trust but about

cultivating humanizing and sincere relationships and hope was a beautiful, “natural,” and critical part of these. While this might have been a “challenge” when understood through the dominant logics of modernity, it was also a critical lesson and opportunity. This was especially true when particular attention was paid to what bell hooks (1990) calls a politics of location, which asks us to consider how do we position ourselves and our work in relationship to colonization, colonizing mentalities, and the political resistance. In this case and as a point of reflexivity, it meant constantly asking myself where I sat and stood as both an “outsider” and as someone who materially benefits from the very injustices that assault the lives of the Homies, and standing *with* the Homies to create space for a world where “there is unlimited access to pleasure and power of knowing, where transformation is possible” (hooks, 1990, p. 145).

Also, connected to my positionality and contrary to the majority of research, in which “we ask for revelations from others, but we reveal little or nothing of ourselves; we make others vulnerable, but we ourselves remain invulnerable” (Behar, 1993, p. 273); I did not seek to hide behind any cloak of objectivity, invulnerability, or neutrality. Not with the youth in this work nor with the readers. Instead, I made myself and my subjectivity visible, vulnerable, and dynamic. Reflexively and critically interrogating power, the mis-distribution of privilege, and the “benefits” that will come as a result of this work is another dimension that needs to be named here and that will be explored both throughout this dissertation. As Lyotard argues, “it seems ontologically and epistemologically foolish, at best, to ignore the visceral knowledge that we scholars walk a blurry line between empowerment and exploitation of the downtrodden.” This dialectic, and the lessons, insights, challenges and possibilities contained in it, sat at the heart of this work, were critical to its findings, and just as importantly, are also constitutive to this projects’ limitations and its possibilities.

Lastly, in regard to my “concrete” role in shaping and facilitating the “theorizing back,” it is difficult to define or to categorize my role throughout the project. During the theorizing back project, my primary role was to make the project possible. This included planning for the time and space, reaching out to the Homies, and creating the conditions necessary for the Homies to be able to sit in community and theorize back (a task that proved monumental given all that was happening in the world). Besides the “logistics” of the project, my participation often changed depending on the time and the strategy of inquiry that we were engaging on. As much as I tried to take a back seat and allow for the Homies to theorize back, it would be insincere to say that my participation did not change quickly from organizing our sessions, to bringing resources or suggesting activities that we could do together, to providing the Homies with specific resources, theories, and materials, to authentically participating in the conversations and sharing my own stories.

More importantly, how I showed up throughout this process changed dynamically, switching between a teacher and researcher, a committed activist, a caring friend, an ignorant and privileged outsider, a mentor, and at times a “worthy witness” (Winn & Ubiles, 2011). This was markedly salient during COVID-19 and especially in the beginning stages of the lockdown. During this time, the “research” took a back seat and caring for and supporting each other during difficult times became central. Consequently, my practical “role” changed and our gatherings became spaces where we could check-in with each other, lift each other up, and attend to the day-to-day challenges posed by the rapidly changing context and the heightening precarity. These would range from going on a hike so that we could take our mind “off things” to working together to look for housing, financial support, and material and socio-emotional resources.

Why Theorizing Back? Why Now?

Fine (2004), in a text foundational to this work, writes that school-leaving is a “site from which to launch important theoretical and empirical work. Because “dropping out” sits at the knotty nexus of education, economics, racism, public institutions, and questions of individual agency, it is ripe for deep intellectual work.” Similarly, in her book *Urban Youth and School Pushout*, Tuck (2012) proposes the generative and powerful dimensions that spring from the “third space” (Lefebvre, 1991) and from the tension, dynamic, and animating dialectic between the structural, at times oppressive forces of schooling and the emancipatory ideas, dreams, and dignities of young people and education. In their work around the radical imagination, Khasnabish and Haiven (2014) call for research methodologies that dedicate themselves to enlivening and awakening the radical imagination to enable spaces of dialogue, debate, and a reflexive project of transformation at multiple levels, from society at large, to culture and subjectivity. This dissertation study, born out of the relationships and insights of *Free Space*, animated by the “third space” described by Tuck, and seeking to answer this call by Khasnabish and Haiven, proposed theorizing-back as a methodology.

Overall, the purpose can be seen at three-fold. First, contribute to what we know about out-of-school youth, especially multiply marginalized youth and the dialogue between their dreams and desires, their wealth and critical wit, their dignities and their pursuit of education; and the worlds in which they leave, are pushed-out, and/or resist schools (among other institutions and projects). Second, explore what it means to examine these worlds, subjectivities, and questions through theorizing back alongside youth that have been severely impacted by multiple and intersecting systems of oppression, violence, and dispossession. Third, to be a part of a larger movement and struggle that honors and builds upon the paths laid out by many; contribute to the continuous unsettling and interrogation of an oppressive normality and challenging what

Bourdieu and Passeron (1997—when referring to the systems of meanings whose legitimacy is concealed by the power relationships that are the basis of their force—deemed misrepresentation; and bringing forth new imaginings, visions, subjectivities, and futures.

The ideas of schools as “good” and schools as a synonym to education, are in many ways quintessentially ideological. Within the realm of the “givens,” these assumptions act as a gravitational pull that tethers the narratives through which we explain and understand “those who leave” or those who are out-of-school to either a failure or insufficiency of the people or the failure or insufficiency of the system. Rarely does the narrative interrogate the broader vision of education, its contradiction with our system of schooling, and make space to escape the binaries that often frame structural vs agentic, reproductive or resistant debates. Through its theoretical, methodological, and axiological commitments, this dissertation study initially responded to Kelley’s (2001) call to restore and center the humanity of those who have been a target of theory and through theorizing back, ended up interrogating the very premise of its initial framing. As it will be further explored in the chapters that follow, theorizing back not only ended up unsettling the questions asked by this dissertation and the ways in which these are “commonly” asked, but ended up centering and affirming what was always human and yet is consistently assaulted—our vocation to engage in praxis so that we can be and set each other free.

In addition, and through its findings, this dissertation project and the insights and lessons offered by the Homies are also a denunciation of scholars and of the dominant stories’ inability to “for real for real,” as CB the Orchestrator would say, see humanity and thus; a condemnation of their systemic, repeated, and criminal vandalism of both the word and the world.

Time after time, writing this dissertation and driving home from our theorizing back project, I felt deeply torn between being profoundly inspired by the kindness, the selflessness,

the brilliance of the Homies; and outraged by the strategic propaganda continuously being produced and re-produced by the architectures of modernity. Theorizing back, and the relationships that sat at its heart, stood out in stark contrast as a process and space that was relational, personal, political, emotional and spiritual. Theorizing back nurtured deep engagement at an intellectual, moral, and spiritual level that consistently defied the stories through the world is often understood and acted upon. Theorizing back was a humanizing space for and because of the Homies, a space that centered their worlds, critically shifted the gaze, and in the process allowed them and the youth who are making their way through the world to reproduce, resist, give up, be complicit in, challenge, re-imagine, and re-claim at the same time. Lastly, this work is also a testament and a lesson in regard to how the humanity of those often deemed criminal and disposable can and should radically reshape the way we theorize, and consequently the theories, through which we understand both “those who leave,” and ourselves.

If anything has become clear during the last few years, among many through COVID-19 and the long overdue uprisings against racism, racial violence, and the role of policing and carcerality in the maintenance and further consolidation of racial capitalism, it is the precarity of the “collective lie” (Martin-Baro, 1994). It is not only necessary, but urgent, that we “give voice to those dimensions of life that all too often remain unspoken, breaking sedimented silences of history and interrupting the monotonous normative reproduction of social life and its accumulated injustices” (Khasnabish & Haiven, 2012). Likewise, the precarity of “the lie” has inherently created an opportunity. An opportunity that must be seized and a critical conversation that must take place so that we may interrogate our current context and for us educators, “the lie’s” relationship to schools, schooling, and their inherent ties to various ideological, economic, etc., projects. Simultaneously, we must ground this work on a sincere belief and commitment to

the human, ontological vocation to be free (Freire, 1970) because if we do, then it is our responsibility to put our work, and the work of schools, to the service of freedom.

CHAPTER 2: OUT-OF-SCHOOL YOUTH, CHANGING CONTEXTS, AND THE THEORIES THAT EXPLAIN “LEAVING”

Dropouts appear with the regularity of automobiles rolling off the assembly line.
(Cervantes, 1969)

“They”¹² have been called children thoroughly trained in failure and social laggards (Ayres, 1909), “the outlaw pack” (Secretary of Labor W. Willard), “the new lost generation” (James B. Conant), “public enemy number 1” (Edgar J. Hoover), “early-school leavers” (Fagan, 2005), an “unassimilable disadvantaged minority” (Cervantes, 1965), critical respondents “ who reject a doctrine of invisibility and mistreatment” (Morris, 2016, p. 19), and courageous young men and women that are bold enough to stand and resist the oppression and violence that is inherent to schools. These out-of-school youth, their lives, their identities, and the worlds and contexts that shape them and that are shaped by them have been thoroughly theorized. Each of these social theories, much more than passive descriptions only useful through how they explaining the world (Stinchcombe, 1964), actively intervenes upon such worlds. As once shared by a mentor and friend, Gopal, “people don’t tell stories, we live stories.” Stories, explanations, and the underlying logics and assumptions normalized through stories not only mediate our relationship and engagement with the world, but become part of its fabric, its institutions, its policies, and its relationships. Similarly theories not only frame or explain problems or phenomena, but actively participate and are inherently connected to our collective engagement, our solutions, and our actions in relationship with those problems and phenomena (Deschenes et al., 2001).

¹² Labeling is telling, and the labels that are given to “students who leave” (drop-outs, push-outs, etc.) contain important information, values, theories, and distribute “blame” and “responsibility” differently. For this section, I either use the “author’s language,” or, when using my own, have chosen to use out-of-school youth. It is a term that, although flawed, I believe conveys agency, relative neutrality, and an invitation to inquire upon the context.

In Chapter 1, I provided a brief landscape of out-of-school youth and the theoretical underpinnings, the research questions, and the purposes that guide this dissertation study. This chapter will expand upon the initial section of chapter 1. In the first section, “Who Leaves,” I begin with a landscape analysis on out-of-school youth, including historical trends and disaggregated data by different groups and indicators. In the next section, “The Contexts and Consequences of Leaving School,” I explore the changing contexts and the changing “consequences” and “value” of finishing, leaving, or being out of school. Lastly, in the section “Why Do Students Leave? Or is the Question, “Why Do They Stay?” I organize the different bodies of theories and explanations that make sense of why some young people of school age are out of school under three broad categories or “buckets”: deficit-centered theories and explanations, reformist theories and explanations, and critical theories and explanations. These three “buckets” are complex, dynamic, and often overlap. However, I argue that these articulate important and consequential differences.

In summary, this chapter will seek to interrogate how we’ve made sense of—sometimes naturalizing and sometimes problematizing—extremely inequitable outcomes and opportunities (Fine, 1991), normalized exclusion (Morris, 2016), and exiling so ubiquitous and normal “at least in low-income urban areas, that it requires no malevolence” (Fine, 1991, p. 26).

Who Leaves?

As of 2018, there were 1.649 billion people from 5 to 18 years in the world (UNICEF, 2019). Accounting for 16 percent of the global population, youth around the world are growing up in a world that is changing at a pace never seen before. In 2010, there were 376.1 million out-of-school children, adolescents, and youth. In 2018, the number had decreased to around 258 million, which still represented one-sixth of the global population of this age group (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2019). Today, three years after the United Nations’ adoption of

Sustainable Development Goal 4, which promised universal primary and secondary education, progress seems to have stalled. Across the world, upper-secondary school-age youth are more than four times more likely to be out of school than children of primary age and more than twice as likely to be out of school as adolescents of lower secondary school age (UIS, 2019). Whilst disparities between global regions have closed for children of primary school age, large disparities remain for youth of upper secondary school age. In Europe and Northern America, about 15- to 18-year-olds 6.7% are out of school compared with 45.5% in South Asia and 57.5% in Sub-Saharan Africa 45.5% and 57.5% (UIS, 2019). Globally, more than 20% of out-of-school children will never enter a classroom (UIS, 2019). Out of school children are concentrated in the world's poorest countries. Low income countries, as defined by UIS, have an average of 52% of youth out of school, in comparison with high income countries with an average of 19% (UIS, 2020).

While the world as a whole is moving towards gender parity in out-of-school rates, significant disparities remain in several regions. In 2000, 54% of the 376 million out-of-school children, adolescents and youth were female. By 2018, the female share of the global out-of-school population had fallen to 50%. However, these global averages mask considerable differences at regional levels. The highest disparities appear (in both directions) in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia (24.3% Male and 16.5% female), Northern Africa and Western Asia (27.5% Male and 32.3% Female) and Sub-Saharan Africa (54% Male and 60.5% Female)(World Inequality Database on Education [WIDE], 2020). In the world's poorest countries (as defined by UIS), young men leave school at higher rates than young women, 12% compared to 9% respectively.

It is important to clarify that whilst these comparative data provide useful information, they can be difficult, misleading, and problematic. While in some countries, the term “dropout” can be used to refer to young people who leave school without gaining a high school diploma, some of these terms are used rarely by other countries, statistical agencies, education authorities, and research centers (Lamb et al., 2010). In other countries, young people who leave school are called “school-leavers,” and their inability to pursue schooling is often tied to the cost of secondary schooling. In addition, measuring rates of students leaving school is further complexified by the levels of diversification of the programs themselves across different countries. Lastly, most of the data referred to in the above section contains implicit references that superimpose dominant ideologies from the global North upon our understanding of different places and peoples. Therefore, it can both misrepresent and uphold oppressive, violent, dismissive, colonial, and asymmetrical power relationships between different regions and peoples of the world. In addition, research and statistics that reproduce and/or endorse dominant claims and notions of educational progress as universal also contributes to the production of a world culture that assumes consensus and homogeneity (Carney et al., 2012).

Out-of-School Youth in the United States

In 1950, there were 47.3 million children under the age of 18 in the United States. This number increased to 74.1 million in 2010 and has remained stable since (Child Trends, 2019). Including young people up to 24 years old, there are more than 100 million children and young people in the United States. Total enrollment in U.S. public elementary and secondary schools increased from 47.2 million students to 50.7 million students between fall 2000 and fall 2017, and is projected to continue increasing to 51.1 million students in fall 2029. Including all people who were enrolled in fall 2018, there were 76.3 million people in American schools and colleges, with about 10% of k-12 students enrolled in private schools (NCES, 2018). Conversely, in 2018,

there were 731,000 out-of-school children, adolescents, and youth of primary and secondary school age (UIS, 2019). Data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) shows that between October 2015 and October 2016, approximately 532,000 15- to 24-year-olds left school without obtaining a high school credential. These event dropouts accounted for 4.8% of the 11.2 million 15- to 24-year-olds enrolled in grades 10 through 12 in 2016 (NCES, 2017). According to the National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] (2019), the status dropout rate, which is “the percentage of the civilian noninstitutionalized 16- to 24-year-old population who are not enrolled in school and who have not completed a high school program, regardless of when they left school” (NCES 2018, p. 8), was at around 5.8% in 2017 (2.1 million young people). This number, although representing a major decrease from 27.2% in 1960 (NCES, 2017), is only part of the story.

From the beginnings of schooling in the United States, educational disparities have been both foundational and persistent, both of which have a deep relationship with who and when young people are “in or “out” of school. School has historically been: a punishable offense for some, a specific project for assimilation and Americanization, an elite private institution reserved for a few, and currently, a mandatory right for all young people in the United States (among others). Being out of school has gone from the norm for U.S. adolescents as recently as 1900, to a marginal status for 1 out of 20 youth today. However, following broader patterns of educational “achievement,” disparities and inequities based on race, gender, socioeconomic status, immigration status, nationality, and other “categories” persist (Rumberger, 2011). Higher rates of dropouts are observed for racial minority groups, particularly Black and Hispanic students compared to White students, and in school districts characterized by a large proportion of poor and ethnic minority students (Chapman et al., 2011). National data shows persistent

disparities by race with Black youth (6.5%), Hispanic youth (8.2%), and Native youth (10.1%) leaving school at much higher rates than White (4.1%) and Asian youth (2.1%) (NCES, 2019). Black young men leave school at much higher rates than Black women (8% vs 4.9%, respectively), a pattern which is similarly observed with Hispanic young men (10%) and women (6.4%) and with Native American young men (11.6%) and women (8.5%) (NCES, 2019). Students living in low-income families are about five times more likely than their peers from moderate and high-income families (7.4% vs. 1.4%, respectively) (NCES, 2019). By immigration status, the gap between status dropouts born in the United States and born outside the United States was 9.8 percentage points for Pacific Islander (3.9% vs. 13.7%, respectively), 9.6 percentage points for Hispanic 16- to 24-year-olds (6.5% vs. 16.1%), and 2.0 percentage points for Asian 16- to 24-year-olds (1.0% vs. 3.0%, respectively). Although high variations in policy and accounting procedures greatly confuse attempts to estimate the magnitude of the dropout rates for special education students, the rate appears to be around 25% (MacMillan, 1991). Young people with learning disabilities are three times more likely than all youth (18.1% to 6.1%, respectively) to drop out of school (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2016) .

In the US, youth experiencing homelessness—argued by many to be the group impacted the most—leave school at a rate twenty percentage points higher than the national average (Edwards, 2019). Other groups, such as youth with unstable housing, high rates of school mobility, and LGBTQ youth, also leave school at highly disproportionate rates (Gasper et al., 2012; Himmelstein & Brückner, 2011; Hyman et al., 2011). Similar to disparities between groups, stark disparities can also be observed between schools (reflecting patterns of class, race, and other forms of segregation). A minority of high schools, sometimes called “dropout factories,” contribute to the majority of students leaving (Fine, 1991; Gonzalez, 2010; Rist,

1972). Many of these statistics, despite reports showing more than a decade of “progress” in improving high school graduating rates, reflect the stark reality that students in America still live in two different educational nations (Great American High School Campaign, 2018). In the first, 90% or more students graduate, in the second (consisting of about 1,300 high schools and contributing to 58% and 50% of Black and Latinx students who left schools), only 49% graduate, with success in college being an unrealized dream (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010; Balfanz et al., 2018).

Lastly, it is important to recognize that while these statistics provide important information, these categories, classifications, and the sets of implicit assumptions about what they represent and why it is important are also essential parts of broader ideological projects, many of which strategically reproduce and legitimate existing power structures and ongoing processes like settler colonialism. At times, while increased graduation rates are used as an indicator of progress, exit exams and other policy changes can obscure mechanisms of re-stratification, con consolidate the legitimacy and supremacy of certain epistemic bodies, and can obscure contextual changes that heavily affect young people who are out of school (to name a few). A current and relevant example is the GED. As an alternate “diploma” whose genesis was heavily influenced by the neoliberal politics of accountability, the GED has facilitated the “push” out of young people into an “alternate” form of schooling that meets the pressures of accountability by not counting the students as dropouts (Tuck, 2012). It is also important to note that the definitions, numbers, and sources that are used to “measure” the scope and distribution of the situation are quite contested. Historically, there have been multiple disagreements, discrepancies, and calls for more accurate data (Rumberger, 2011), also contributing to a general sense that the problem is unknowable and not amenable to easy remedy (Rogers, 2020).

The Contexts and Consequences of Being Out of School

Whilst this section will not directly address questions of why, and/or theories and explanations around why students leave, or stay in school, I believe it is important to begin by recognizing, and keeping in mind, the radical shifts that have occurred in the world and in the United States since the inception of mass public schooling. These changes have not been limited to the prevalence and availability of public schooling; but have also occurred in the economic, social, cultural, and historical conditions in which schools have existed. Thus, when developing and interrogating theories and explanations around out-of-school youth at different moments across history, we must recognize that these explanations and theories are situated, arising at certain moments, under certain conditions, and for particular purposes. Similarly, the perceived “necessity,” aspiration, or “right” of youth to attain certain levels of schooling, whether driven by economics and labor markets, a national political “project,” an oppressive settler-colonial project, or an emancipatory radical tradition; has also been, and continues to be, situated within a historical, cultural, and political context. As mentioned briefly in Chapter 1, being out of school went from the norm at the dawn of the twentieth century to an abridgement of a universal right by early in the twenty-first century.

In Chapter 1, I briefly addressed a couple of historical shifts, ideological contexts, and specific events that have altered the contexts in which young people leave, or stay in school. This next section will address the changing economic contexts and consequences of schooling, a few examples of policies and practices that have significantly impacted the number of students who have stayed and left school, changes in ideologies around schooling, and the changing “consequences” of leaving or completing a certain “level” of schooling. Also, reflecting the majority of the literature and the frame attached when discussing dominant portrayals and logics

of educational purpose, this section will present an abundance of “economic”¹³ contexts and consequences. I do not do this to reify, or to center the “economic imperative” as the legitimate purpose of school. I write about these to visibilize the prevalence of these narratives and discourses and as an effort to name and explore the assumptions, nuances, and logics often contained in these narratives and in turn, interrogate them.

Labor Markets and Schooling

There has always been a deep relationship between mass public schooling and the broader economy. Historically, as labor markets have changed and full-time jobs for young people have dried up, students have tended to remain longer at school and gain qualifications to facilitate labor market entry and career growth. Disproving the idea that growth in graduation rates result from better educational provision and experiences, students staying in school can be a reflection of labor market opportunities. In addition, it has been observed that at times of economic uncertainty and at times of precarious labor markets, school has also acted as a refuge for young people, leading to higher levels of upper-secondary participation.

Compared to other nations around the world, participation rates in upper education in the United States began to grow quickly at least a decade before many similar European countries. Scholars like Goldin (2001) and Benavot (2006) attribute this rapid growth to a strong public funding of education, the removal of elite models of institutional organization, and a broad model of educational provision that had a common curriculum and set of expectations. Other scholars like Furlong and Cartmel (2009) traced the changing patterns of educational enrollment and attainment in relationship with the rapid shifts in the American labor markets and the social

¹³ Note about language: When I talk about economics throughout this section, I am not referring to a broad definition of economics as “the management of our home,” but to an ideological, narrow vision of contemporary economics primary as “money counting.”

and economic contexts during the twentieth century, especially in the expansion of higher education after WWII. Many have argued that the G.I. Bill, alongside the rapid increase in higher education enrollment (more than 50% from the prewar to the postwar period) fundamentally changed the context, the labor markets, the rise of the middle class, and consequently the “necessity” and value of a high school diploma (Goldin & Margo, 1992; Olson, 1973). In fact, scholars like Sidney Burrell (1967) highlighted the G.I. Bill as one of the most important educational and social transformations in the history of the United States. However, the benefits of the G.I. Bill, like many other public policies that have sought to mitigate barriers to education, were most beneficial for White Americans (Herbold, 1994; Katnelson, 2005). Similarly, with the post-Vietnam iteration of the GI Bill, Black Americans were disproportionately impacted by the policy’s inability to take other ideological, contextual and structural factors into account (Boulton, 2007). By 1973, only 25% of African American veterans had used their education benefits, compared to 46% by White veterans.

Today, upper secondary education has become the de-facto main educational point of entry into the labor force across countries all over the world. Theories of human capital and the “returns” of education have become front and center across educational policymaking. As countries achieve higher rates of participation in k-12 schooling, numbers around graduation rates are framed as a win. However, in the absence of real economic justice and opportunities for youth, a natural consequence has been the decline in the “value” of upper secondary qualifications, or what some term “qualification deflation.” Upper-secondary qualifications have become, increasingly, a minimum requirement for labor market entry. Therefore, as markets, graduation rates, and the “need” for higher levels of schooling continue to change, young people without upper secondary or equivalent qualifications struggle more and more to find full-time

work (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2012). In addition, the increased “competitiveness” for job opportunities has made dropouts and young people who leave school without a diploma less attractive to employers (Lamb et al., 2010), enacting a complex cycle that displaces “blame” whilst upholding merit and pushing for even higher levels of education in the absence of real opportunities for marginalized young people. The pace of change in the labor market continues to accelerate, with more scholars arguing that we are living through the beginning of a new profound transformation. Alarms regarding a jobless future and a rapid technological shift that will transform access to knowledge, information, and consequently the nature and value of schooling have grown. At the same time, there is recognition that social hierarchies and the systems that they depend on, including schooling, continue to adapt and evolve.

Besides Labor Markets

Besides labor markets and economic conditions, there are several other contextual factors that have radically affected the rates at which students have left school. Some, easier to pin-point and often tied to structural shifts or particular policies have led to quick and traceable changes. As an example, the introduction of high school exit exams, like many other public policies pushed by a rising neoliberal doctrine of accountability, have been found to be associated with lower secondary school completion rates (Dee & Jacob, 2006; Warren et al., 2006). Another example also deeply tied to accountability heavy contexts and a neoliberalism that has assumed hegemonic dimensions (Parnell & Robinson, 2013) can be found in the creation of “alternative” graduation paths like the General Education Development test [GED] credential. Like many other alternatives to a “traditional” high school degree, the GED has achieved contradictory purposes. While decreasing the amount of youth without a degree, it has also proven to lead to diminished returns across multiple dimensions; post-secondary school access and completion,

job placement, life-long earnings, health, and incarceration rates among others (Tuck, 2012). In other words, even though the GED and other similar initiatives have led to an overall lower “drop-out” rate, the differential benefits of the GED diploma can be non-existent (Sipple et al., 2004). A similar pattern can be observed internationally as many countries around the world appear to have made great “progress” and achieved mass “education” systems that provide places for the vast majority of youth and students (eliminating “drop-outs”). However, many of these programs are often stratified and include multiple “levels,” preparing some for elite academic training and others for a technically and vocationally skilled workforce (Muller et al., 1987).

Pivoting slightly from the structural shifts, the ideological contexts, policy worlds, and the stories and discourses that make sense of “why schooling,” are dynamic as well, having themselves a strong impact of school attendance and the pursuit of secondary schooling amongst youth. These contexts inform how students see themselves, how society sees them, and how ideologies and perceptions translate into schooling policies and practices. Historically, institutions such as schools have been particularly instrumental in the reinforcement and reproduction of hierarchies (Sidanius et al., 2004). Building on the idea that people develop a subjective social status [SSS], or a perception of their place in the broad social hierarchy, scholars like Kilpatrick and Cantril (1960) argue that these perceptions inform people, whether covertly or overtly, about the groups they do and do not belong to (Jackman & Jackman, 1973). In regards to gender and its interaction with others’ perspectives and expectations of young people, a 2007 study by the U.S. Department of Education found that 75% of parents expected their daughters to get a bachelor’s or higher degree. In comparison, only 65% of parents had the same expectation for their sons. These statistics reflect a changing pattern in cultural norms over

time and with it, but also contribute to changing behaviors such as more encouragement and support that impact students' own educational expectations (Coleman, 1988; Dumais, 2002; Reynolds & Burge, 2008).

If we further broaden our understanding of schools as ontological spaces (not only epistemological) then learning and being in school does not simply involve a change in what students know, but also in who they are (Wortham, 2004). Identity, if conceptualized as a constantly evolving and fluid entity that is made up of stories that we tell of ourselves and stories that others tell about us (Gee, 2000; Sfard & Prusak, 2005), is thus implicated in decisions about which communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) we are to be a part of. Consequently, these changing ideological contexts are not only shifting the “value” or “consequences” of being or leaving schools, but they are also contributing to the contexts in which these identities are being negotiated, the worlds that students see as being, or not being, a part of, the worlds and spaces they see in their futures, etc. In conjunction, these ideologies and discourses are also producing policies and policy worlds that both structure the lives in which youth make decisions, and that have a “runaway effect,” actively reshaping the environments into which they have been introduced (Power, 1997).

As an example, we can look at the public and academic tides of the 1920s and 1930s, many of which systematically produced ideas and “science” that reinforced Social Darwinist and hereditarian views of intelligence and that often supported child labor due to the argument that some children were not intelligent enough to be successful at school, therefore fitted for manual labor. By 1938, as a result of many challenges, both by activists, scholars, and many others, the Fair Labor Standards Act passed, mandating new federal standards for child labor practices and signifying critical changes in the perceptions of the place of children in society. Similarly, zero-

tolerance school discipline policies, which spread quickly during the 1980s and 1990s, had a profound effect on young people's futures, leading to the exclusion from school of many, especially young people of color (Gregory et al., 2010; Sughrue, 2003). These two examples exemplify how policies have complex lives, how people and ideas interact with policies and in turn, policies shape how people enter into relations with institutions and other artifacts (Appadurai, 1986). Echoing this idea, Bruno Latour (1996), on analyzing the active lives of policies, termed them as "actants," meaning that they have agency: they shift action and, like machines, they perform tasks and are endowed with certain competencies. People and institutions, in this case out-of-school youth, are all touched by the classificatory actions of policy.

Lastly, implicit in most of these contexts is a shifting and yet continuous reference to the value and purpose of schooling, raising an important question: what has been the value of schools? What have been the consequences of being out-of-school? For whom has school reaped the biggest benefits?

The Changing "Value" of Schools

There are many ways to understand the benefits and/or the value of schooling. Internationally, there is no doubt that formal education across the globe has become increasingly valued and valuable (Carney et al., 2012). Simultaneously, there is a commitment to the logics of human capital, the knowledge economy (Powell & Snellman, 2004), and education as a human right connected to democratization, individualization, and social justice. In addition, despite a multiplicity of perspectives and contexts, we cannot ignore the convergence towards a ubiquitous and taken-for-granted conception of contemporary schooling. Economic rationality, efficiency and an "ethic" of cost-benefit analyses have, often to the detriment of many other goals, become a norm (Apple, 2001). Echoing dominant narratives and frames, the value of schooling is

predominantly analyzed through its economic “returns,” its return on “investment,” and through its relationship to the transition to the labor force. When focusing on individuals, schooling is thus framed and understood as an investment that affects and influences future monetary and psychic (intangible, such as in recognition, personal enjoyment) “income.” Looking at it more broadly, schooling can be analyzed and understood as a collective investment in human capital that can vary in the amounts typically invested, the size of returns, and in the extent to which the connection between investment and return is perceived by collectives and communities of various sizes and at various scales (Becker, 2009).

Headings like: “higher levels of education translate into higher earnings” are ubiquitous. Calculations, correlations, and projects across multiple contexts show that higher levels of education have a relationship with growth in the economy. As an example, research conducted by the Alliance for Excellent Education in partnership with Economic Modeling Specialists (2011), estimated that California’s economy would “likely accrue an additional 21 billion dollars over the lifetimes of just one year’s worth of dropouts if those students had graduated” (p. 13). In their primary economic analysis, Goldin and Katz (2007) argue that to understand the value of schooling we must look at the two most important forces: the relative supply of more-educated workers, which has mainly occurred through changes in schooling; and the change in demand (both in quantity of jobs and in the “type” of skills they require). At times of greater demand for a certain set of skills associated with schooling (less supply), the value of the product, in this case “schooling” goes up. However, if the “demand” does not grow and more and more students graduate from higher levels of education to become a part of the labor force, the value of schooling diminishes. In addition, due to limited “demand” (fewer opportunities), the value of certain groups of people (those with certain degrees from certain universities) within the broader

group (graduates) becomes more heterogeneous. Demand for those who graduated from certain elite institutions or those with graduate school degrees end up occupying the positions previously occupied by college graduates, who end up not doing as well as they did before (Goldin & Katz, 2007). Historically, the collapse of the high school wage premium from 1915 to 1950 is related to the enormous growth in the relative supply as the high school movement was set in motion. A similar phenomena can be observed with the value of a college diploma today.

Thinking of life and the possibilities outside of school is also important in understanding the shifting “value” and/or “returns” of a high school and college diploma. In prior generations, students who left high school were likely to secure an entry-level job or pursue an apprenticeship. Today, leaving high school is associated with negative monetary and financial outcomes (Campolieti et al., 2010), higher incarceration risks (Lochner & Moretti, 2004), and negative health outcomes (Grossman & Kaestner, 1997; Lleras-Muney, 2002). Also, high school graduates and dropouts are currently considered close substitutes in the labor market, which was not the case during much of the twentieth century. In the past, high school graduates were distinctly more skilled than dropouts and many positions were reserved for them. However, rapid changes to the context, including the transition from manufacturing-based to services-driven economies, the transition from tangible good to intangible or information goods (Shapiro & Varian, 1999), the offshoring of a significant proportion of the manufacturing industries, and the diminished availability of jobs quickly changed the value of a high school diploma. The vast increase in high school graduation throughout much of the twentieth century served to reduce the high school wage premium by increasing the relative supply of high school graduates to dropouts.

Other scholars remind us of the importance of looking not only at the availability of jobs, but to the type of jobs. According to many, rapid change in the nature of work, quickly accelerated by technological progress, has resulted in a growing “mismatch” between the workers’ skills and the types of jobs that typify a knowledge economy (Levy & Murnane, 1992). Early predictions on this “mismatch,” going back to debates concerning automation during the 1960s, forecasted a fear of a jobless future. Theorists like Aronowitz and Difazio (1994) argued that with new technologies, firms would be able to produce the same “output” with less workers, thus reducing the value of workers and consequently raising the value and necessity of higher levels of schooling. While many of these initial forecasts have been found to be overstated, new technological developments are beginning to raise complex and important questions about the future of labor and consequently the future of schooling. In addition, the growth of the gig-economy, the continuous assaults against labor unions and workers’ rights, the stagnation of the minimum wage over the last few decades, the further polarization of the distribution of wealth, and the increased costs of a college education, among many others, present new challenges and contexts for those trying to make sense and justify the value of education.

Despite the many definitions of “returns” and a collective agreement that “society benefits from an increase in high school graduates” (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011, p. 13), economists (and others) have generally had little success in clearly estimating the social effects of investments, education being one of them (Becker, 1964). According to Lange and Topel (2006), while there is a strong association between average earning and average education across nations and regions in the U.S., empirical support for notions of human capital, and investment in human capital as an engine of economic growth is meager. Scholars like Lucas (1988) and Uzawa (1965), condemn on the collective value of schools and human capital,

proposed that part of the value of education and investments in human capital were related to how interactions amongst agents raise the productivity of each other and therefore improve the total factor productivity. This argument was echoed by Moretti (2004), whose study of spatial wage differentials, controlling for the private returns of schooling, found higher wages in places with greater aggregate educational attainment.

Others have challenged this perspective, suggesting that the value of education lies in its signaling value, where schooling “signals” private information for which others are willing to pay, independently of productivity (Spence, 1978). Like these studies, many others have sought to further nuance our understanding of the “collective” benefits of schooling, especially when controlling for other variables and considering the distribution of multiple and intersecting forms of capital and value. Lave and MacDermott, building on Marxist frameworks and presenting a strong critique of the relationship between capitalism and schooling, argue that the value of schooling can also be analyzed within a more complex, contradictory logic where learning (learners), like labor (laborers), becomes commodified, contributing to a hierarchy of the credentialed and the non-credentialed (Lave & McDermott, 2002). In addition, contextualizing learning within capitalism and its fundamental ties to an economic “purpose,” they argue that institutionalized education has done to the “learner” what was done to the laborer: “schools have commodified learning to the point that every learner must worry more about what others know than about what might be learned if people worked together” (p. 21). Here, the productive value of schooling is further tied in a logic where ironically, the more the learner learns/produces, the more the learner becomes further impoverished, alienated, and “wretched.”

Whilst often neglected in the majority of the literature, there are many frames and studies that emphasize the benefits and value of an education in ways that do not directly speak to the

economy, the labor market, or the reproduction process. For example, work that documents the power of education in enabling individuals and collectives to participate more efficiently and actively civically and politically (File & Crissey, 2010; Miligan et al., 2003; Rogers et al., 2012; Rogers & Terriquez, 2013; Youniss, 2011). As an example, in the 2008 presidential election, 37% of high school dropouts 25 to 55 years of age voted, compared to 52% of high school graduates and 76% of four-year college graduates (File & Crissey, 2010). A third strand of literature emphasizes possible external benefits of education that do not apply directly to the production process. They are not reflected in factor payments and so they are often less amenable to empirical research. Such external benefits might arise because education reduces criminal behavior (Lochner & Moretti, 2004), because education enables individuals to participate more efficiently in the political process (Miligan et al., 2003), because education carries direct consumption externalities, improves trust and social interaction (Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2009), among many others. Like Lange and Topel (2004) argue, If knowledge of Shakespeare or Astronomy makes one more interesting, then investment in education raises the welfare of others through a form of network externality borne of social interactions, which raises welfare and has a host of other benefits without any discernible impact on wages or productivity.

In summary, whilst a majority of scholars echo and support the idea that schools are positive for both the individual and the collective, further studies have complexified and at times, problematized these assumptions. Some argue that an accelerated pace of technical and scientific advancement will result in an equally rapid obsolescence and therefore, a greater reliance on education (Powell & Snellman, 2004). Similarly, many believe that as the nation's economy grows, as technology advances, and as we collectively pursue education for all, more young people will benefit from higher levels of education. Consequently, many assert that the

“earnings” and benefits of an education will be more widely shared. However, a growing body of data suggests that while there will be “growth,” its benefits will not be as straightforward as we might assume. On the one hand, economic predictions about the returns of higher levels of schooling are mixed. On the other, research has shown that whilst the benefits of education are undeniable, it will advance the growth of some considerably more than the “growth” of others.

Differential Value of Staying/School

The differential “returns” and “value” of school diplomas and of schooling have been thoroughly studied. The majority of these studies find that graduates of both high school and college earn higher salaries and occupy positions of greater prestige and power compared to non-graduates and out-of-school youth, who are often shown to have negative financial, personal, health and psychosocial outcomes (Orfield, 2006; Rumberger, 2011). However, many studies have further complexified these assumptions, examining: Who benefits from degree attainment? Does the benefit derive from the skills and lessons learned or from its signaling and legitimizing value? How is benefit and value measured?

Looking at median weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers, there is a big difference between those who finish high school (\$730 average per week), and those who don't (\$553 per week). Looking more closely, this difference becomes accentuated when looking across certain categories. For Black people with less than a high school diploma, earning a high school diploma, some college, or an associate's degree does not have nearly the returns that those degrees have for white students, Asian students, or Latinx students. As McDaniel and Kuehn (2013) found, while the differences in employment and future wages are clear between African American high school graduates and dropouts (with more than an 11 percent difference in future employment), “the fact that African American graduates do not better in the job market than white dropouts is disconcerting” (p. 395). Black men with a high school diploma or an

associate's degree made an average of \$732 and \$793 per week, respectively. In turn, White men with a high school diploma made \$861 per week, or \$68 dollars more than Black men with an associate's degree (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018).

Similar differences exist across the board, with clear differential benefits depending on race, gender, wealth, etc. In their research of the value of schooling and the opportunities of Mexican or Haitian youth, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) came to the conclusion, that no matter how educated they are, their chances of moving ahead economically are significantly constrained by the social environment in which their group has been incorporated into the United States. For these groups, a college degree yields no improvement in earnings. This conclusion flies in the face of conventional wisdom that education equals economic advancement. Clearly, other factors—race, context of incorporation, and others—are also at work. Other studies, trying to better understand whether income differentials are associated with levels of schooling or with intelligence (as defined by their metrics), found that for the “intelligence high-ranking” sons of professional men were much more likely to go to college and earn more than were the high-ranking sons of laborers and farmers (Wolfe & Smith, 1956).

Often, statistics about high school completion (especially in studies that associate benefits or value with having “completed” high school) can also obscure important differences and nuances. Eve Tuck, in her book *Urban youth and school pushout, gateways, get-aways and the GED* (2012), argues that it is “important to look beneath the surface of the now-normalized use of the GED as a receptacle for youth who are unwanted in school (p. 160). Whilst there is a considerable debate within the GED certificate as an equivalent to the high school diploma, especially because research suggests that the earnings and employment returns to those with the GED certificate are significantly less than the returns to those with the regular high school

diploma (e.g., Cameron & Heckman, 1993; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2006). Therefore, should dropouts who attain the GED be counted as high school graduates or not? Recent international comparisons of upper secondary graduation rates are revealing, both in terms of what they disclose about the success of some countries in building mass systems of secondary education capable of delivering programs to a whole cohort, and in what they conceal about differences in access and effectiveness in terms of quality of outcomes (e.g., see OECD, 2008a). In such comparisons, systems that are the most segmented in terms of provision can appear to provide the highest levels of completion, while school systems that are formally comprehensive and have advanced further down the road of democratization can display higher levels of dropout. However, segmented systems tend to display marked patterns of social stratification across programs, while more comprehensive systems can provide greater opportunity for children from lower socio-economic status backgrounds to qualify for university entry (Lamb et al., 2010).

These unevenly distributed “benefits” of schooling are only the beginning of the story. Many argue that the real racial, class, and gender disparities lie in the negative consequences of being out of school.

The Negative Consequences

Up to this point, most of the “value of schools” has been presented from a positive (“return”) lens. However, many of the “consequences” or “returns” of being out-of-school and of leaving school are not limited to the “lack” of positive consequences or rewards, but also include “negative” consequences across multiple categories. Research about these negative outcomes often looks at the associations between out-of-school youth and numerous social and behavioral health problems that include poorer mental and physical health problems (Vaughn et al., 2014), less positive well-being (Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011; U.S. Department of Commerce, 2009) and greater “involvement” criminal activity (Lochner & Moretti, 2004; U.S. Department of

Justice, 2004). Other more critical research connects these negative “consequences” to a punitive, exploitative, and inequitable architecture of consequences that include criminalization, disposability, poor mental and physical health, dispossession, exploitation, and incarceration. Many in fact would argue that being pushed out of school is a part of a larger structure, by design, inherently connected to the school to prison nexus, an interlocking system that disciplines, punishes, and forces youth out of schools and into the legal system through a network of institutions, policies, practices, and ideologies (Meiners & Winn, 2010; Morris, 2012).

Looking at the negative consequences of drop-outs to society as a whole, scholars often focus on the economic “burdens” and the broader negative dynamics brought about by out-of-school youth. In the paper, “The High Cost of the Nation’s Dropouts,” by the Alliance for Excellent Education (2001), the authors state “obviously, dropouts are a drain on the nation’s economy and the economies of each state,” echoing a generalized assumption spread to the literature that claims “high school dropouts are costly to society” (Maynard et al., 2013, p. 289), they have an estimated lifetime cost close to \$240,000 per dropout resulting from lower tax contributions, higher reliance on public assistance, and higher incidence of criminal activity (Chapman et al., 2011; Levin & Belfield, 2007), etc. According to Rumberger (2012), taxpayers also pay for dropouts’ poor health, are two to three times more likely than high school graduates to receive government-funded Medicaid benefits, and the costs are transmitted from one generation to the next. Other theorists and scholars focus more on the impact of out of school youth on social coherency, socialization, the transmission of cultural values, civic engagement, and more generally the health of democracy. Which is especially important at a time where we are seeing a dearth of civics education and a takeover of academic priorities and test scores

(Meier, 2000; Ohanian, 2002) that is disproportionality impacting Black students and other oppressed groups of students (McFarland & Starrmanns, 2007; Rubin, 2007).

Looking more closely at individuals, research has shown that dropping out, being pushed out, or being out of school is connected to an array of negative consequences. These include bleak economic futures, unemployment, incarceration, poorer mental and physical health, and shorter life spans, among others (Rumberger, 2011). Youth who leave school are significantly more likely to struggle to find employment, especially at times of economic recessions and hardships. Compared to high school completers, out of school youth without a diploma are twice as likely to be unemployed and if employed, to make significantly smaller wages. As “dropouts” get older, their labor market prospects improve, but they still remain greatly disadvantaged relative to high school graduates (National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997). Even when they find work, dropouts are more likely to work part-time compared to high school graduates, they are half as likely to have a job offering pensions and health insurance, and even when they are able to find full-time jobs, they earn an average of 22% less than their counterparts with a high school diploma (Aud et al., 2010; Rouse, 2007). Also, while in August 2019, 62.5% of people aged 25 and over were employed, the employment—population ratio among those with less than a high school education was 44.6% while those with at least a bachelor’s degree had an employment—population ratio of 72.3% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Connected to their lower earnings, out-of-school youth and youth without a high school diploma are twice as likely to be classified as working poor and to have incomes below the official poverty level (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). In addition, these economic realities and challenges are deeply tied to a myriad of other negative consequences.

There is a well-documented relationship between education, income, and health. Consistent with this relationship out-of-school young people without a high school diploma tend to face significant social, emotional, and physical health challenges. The National Center for Health Statistics conducts an annual National health Interview Survey where respondents are asked to rate their own healthy. In 2009, the survey showed that compared to the 52% of high school graduates, only 38% of dropouts reported being in excellent or very good health (Pleis et al., 2009). Following these trends, high school graduates were 50% more likely to report being in good health, 14% to 39% (depending on how death rates were measured) to die prematurely (Xu et al., 2010), and live on average nine years less than people who graduated from high school with heart disease, lung cancer, and stroke being the diseases with the most contributions (Wong et al., 2002). As a point of clarity, it is important to emphasize that these health outcomes need to be understood in light of a privatized health care system, in a context of systemic and environmental racism that has been shown to impact the health of some, etc.

According to Rumberger (2011), “one of the major impacts of dropping out of school is related to childbearing and marriage” (p. 101). Dropouts, according to some studies, are more likely than graduates to become teen parents and have children outside of marriage. However, these relationships are far from simple and making causal connections would obscure the nuances and complexities of some of these dynamics. Due to the relationship between dropping out and lower levels of wealth, income, and employment, children born to teenage mothers have a higher risk of poor health outcomes, including low birth weight, preterm birth, and infant mortality. Teenage mothers are also more likely to experience depression (Rumberger, 2011), higher incarceration risks (Lochner & Moretti, 2004), and negative health outcomes (Grossman & Kaestner, 1997; Lleras-Muney, 2002).

Interrogating the intersection between out of school youth and the criminal justice system, the connections are clear and staggering. A 2002 study found that high school dropouts were 3.5 times more likely than high school graduates to be arrested in their lifetime (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2003a). Additionally, 75% of America's state prison inmates were high school dropouts (Harlow, 2003) and 59% of America's federal prison inmates did not complete high school (Harlow, 2003). Juvenile prisons, once founded as the "House of Refuge" to "rescue children from the degradations of the adult prisons" (Bernstein, 2014, p. 38), are now a permanent fixture of American society, functioning as a mechanism for gaining control over the children of the poor and the marginalized, depriving them of their liberty in the name of their own best interest. From the first House of Refuge, which opened its doors on January 1, 1825, juvenile detention facilities have been, from their inception, a race and class-driven enterprise intended explicitly for other people's children (Bernstein, 2014). In fact, the line between early schools for "other people's" children (like the Lyman School for boys and the Lancaster School for Girls) and the punitive/reformatory institutions like prisons were heavily blurred in the beginning. Most of these opened under the rhetoric of "refuge" and reformation but in fact, these places enacted a harsh, dark reality of physical, emotional, and social punishment and abuse (Feld, 1999). Mimicking the mainstream criminalization of drop-outs across time, these institutions further blamed the victims, contending that "the aliens had only themselves to blame for the decline of the asylum, for they were untreatable or unmanageable" (p. 55).

Compared with the benefits of schooling, the negative consequences of leaving school are even more inequitably felt and experienced by different groups. Financially, while the unemployment rate for high school completers (16 to 24 years old) was 16.2% for Whites, 17.9%

for Hispanics and 29.4% for Blacks, the unemployment rate for high school dropouts was 30.2% for whites, 24% for Hispanics, and a staggering 48.7% for Black young people (NCES, 2017).

As widely studied and thoroughly documented, racism does not merely inform the “justice” system but has been a driver at every level, from legislation to policing to sentencing to conditions of confinement and enforcement of parole (Chavez-Garcia, 2012). Race and class, more than anything else, including behavior, determines who gets locked up in this country. As many as 90% of all teenagers acknowledge having committed illegal acts serious enough to warrant incarceration, most are never arrested. Young people of color face a different reality, they comprise 44% of the youth population, but 68% of incarcerated juveniles (Rovner, 2016), with studies showing that this gap is a result not of differences in behavior but of differences in how we respond to that behavior. Black youth are five times more likely than their White peers to be incarcerated, and Hispanic youth twice as likely. Similarly, referrals to the police were disproportionately levied against students of color, mostly African American and Latino, who were already at a disadvantage (Wald & Losen, 2003). African American youth are 4.5 times more likely than White youth to be detained for identical offenses. About half of White teenagers arrested on a drug charge go home without being formally charged. Only one-quarter of Black teens catch a similar break. Black female foster youth are at a significantly higher risk of arrest (34%) by the age of 19 than females and males in the general population (3% and 20%, respectively) (Cusick et al., 2012).

In her book, *Pushout*, Morris (2016) casts her gaze specifically on the criminalization and pushing-out of Black Girls. Through an intersectional analysis, she makes a robust case for how a more sophisticated analysis about how race, gender, class, sexual identity, ability, and other identities interact (Collins, 2002; Crenshaw, 1989). Following similar patterns, the consequences

of not having a high school diploma are exacerbated for Black women, with an unemployment rate of 20% (without high school diploma), compared to 6% (with a bachelor's degree or higher). Black women are about three times more likely to be imprisoned than white women, with 1 in 19 Black women to be incarcerated at some point in her lifetime (Morris, 2016). As a scholar, Morris has tracked “how zero-tolerance policies, explicit and implicit biases, and the intersections of racism and sexism create systems where Black girls are suspended, criminalized, and herded into juvenile confinement” (xv).

Another mechanism through which some students are more heavily impacted by being out-of-school without a high school diploma or with lower levels of government sanctioned education happens in times of adversity. During times of an economic recession or of other contextual hardships, dropouts are most likely to have a higher negative impact (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). In addition, the persistence of social patterns in who is out-of-school remains a crucial issue because all these consequences remain concentrated within the same social groups. Of course, many would argue that as a part of social reproduction, this is by design. At the same time, many believe there is a need to study societal differences in how educational systems are structured as part of the processes of educational stratification (Blossfeld & Shavit, 1993).

In summary, not long ago, many children in schools were labeled as slow, delinquent, or incapable of learning and expelled, which was treated by most as “acceptable” (Deschenes et al., 2001). Finally, due to the enduring history of denial, exclusion, segregation and oppression, the benefits of staying in school have historically advanced some students more than others (Kaestle, 1983). At the same time, public education has remained the best hope for personal fulfillment and a more productive life for most segments of our population. In fact, public schools have been

the major battleground for many movements to extend civil rights and privileges, not only those having to do directly with education (Nieto, 2005).

Today, at least in theory, every American child or young person can, and until they are adults, should go to school. As Noguera writes in his book, *City Schools and the American Dream* (2003), universal access to public education was, and continues to be, central to the American promise of opportunity and to the call for “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (xiii). Why then, do young people are out of school? More importantly why do some young people, primarily children of color, financially marginalized, and young people who belong to certain groups have higher rates of being out of school? The following section, organized in three main categories, will attempt to describe how many have sought to answer this question.

Why Do Students Leave? Or is the Question, “Why Do They Stay?”

Some would argue that urban school failure is tolerated because deep down our nation subscribes to the belief that someone has to fail for others to succeed. (Duncan-Andrade & Morrel, 2008)

As I have repeated multiple times, there are, and have been historically, multiple explanations and theories about why young people are out of school. The following section will present several such theories and explanations. For the purposes of clarity, both for myself, the youth that are a part of this project, and the reader, I have grouped these theories in three main “buckets.” The first, which I titled the “deficit centered explanations,” consists primarily in theories that frame dropping out, leaving school, or not finishing/succeeding at school as a deficit, pathology, or something that is wrong or lacking in certain youth. The second bucket, which I title “reformist explanations” is a collection of theories and explanations that center the problem around an “insufficiency” or “incapability” of schools, policies, practices, structures, and a host of other mechanisms to ensure students are supported, and that their needs are being met so that they succeed in their schooling trajectory. The third bucket, which I call the critical

explanations, have at the center a fundamental critique of mainstream schooling, not as needing reform, but as an institution doing what it is supposed to do in an unequal society.

Across these three categories and their individual theories, as explained by Deschenes et al. (2001), diagnoses and explanations have led to quite different solutions, and until we think seriously about “how problems are framed, including misconceptions and omissions, they may implement solutions that may hurt children rather than help them” (p. 528).

The Deficit-centered Explanation: “It Is Their Fault”

Under our present system there are large numbers of children who are destined to lives of failure. We know them in the schools as the children who are always a little behind physically, intellectually, and a little behind in the power to do. (Ayre, 1909, p. 220)

There have been multiple terms across the history of schooling in America for those who don't do well, are expelled, and leave school. The majority of these terms reflect a vision of these students as “lacking” something: “brains,” character, work ethic, resiliency or morals. Well-grounded in meritocratic and religious values that place responsibility for behavior and achievement in the sovereign individual (Kaestle, 1983), the idea of the failing student, coupled with myths about equal opportunities and fair competition have, throughout the history of schools in America, resulted in the historically most persistent explanation: “It is their fault.”

J. Edgar Hoover, reporting on the outbreaks of violence of some Northern communities, referenced the dropout as Public Enemy Number, reifying the image and belief of the dropout as bad, lacking, and threatening to the civic order. These deficit-centered explanations, like many belief systems that explain and “morally justify” stratification and injustice, have always accompanied hegemonic projects. Schools have similarly, and persistently deployed many racist, nativist, and colonial logics. As written by Bernstein (2014), the beginnings of both institutions of public education and incarceration were informed by burgeoning “scientific” theories of delinquency, intelligence, and hereditary traits. In addition, the application of these theories of

delinquency, intelligence, heredity, and race intersected and shaped the experiences of children and youth of color who, for various reasons, ended up caught in the web of the juvenile justice system (Chavez-Garcia, 2012). Many of these theories, emerging from the fields of psychology, education, eugenics, and criminology, simultaneously did the work of criminalizing, racializing, and pathologizing “deviant” youth. Instead of critiquing the systems that stratified people, researchers classified, sorted, and segregated youth across continuums of “normalcy to degeneracy,” applying the latest theories and administering tests, fieldwork studies, and other measures on the youth families, home environments, and communities of origin. Many of these studies, ignoring and egregiously dismissing the role of social context, whiteness, and power (among many other factors), often served to reproduce and reassert assumptions that further “explained” the educational “failure” of some. The Binet-Simon Scale, a scale grounded on the work of Sir Francis Galton, founder of the eugenics movement, was itself designed at the request of the minister of public instruction of France to identify “subnormal” children “unsuited” for a mainstream education. The Binet-Simon Scale, and further iterations like the IQ test, became a lot more common in the United States.

Lewis Terman, an educational psychologist and hereditarian who revised, expanded, and marketed the intelligence test as well as the concept of the intelligence quotient (IQ), also sought to “scientifically” study the racial differences in mental traits of what he held to be the low intelligence of American Indians, Mexicans, and negroes. In 1916, he published *The Measure of Intelligence* (1916), a book that employed “every racial stereotype of the era alongside a distrust of teachers, a preference for tests, and a belief in intelligence as a unitary trait” (McNutt, 2013, p. 7). In it, he argues that reform efforts have been disappointing and a waste of energy because “they were too often based upon the assumption that under the right conditions all children

would be equally, or almost equally, capable of making satisfactory school progress” (pp. 3–4). Terman also concludes that “the children of the superior social classes make a better showing in the tests is probably due, for the most part, to a superiority in original endowment” (p. 72). Conversely, Terman described youth who test at “high-grade morosity,” as the world’s “hewers of wood and drawers of water” (p. 91), “uneducable beyond the merest rudiments of training, a level of intelligence which is very, very common among Spanish-Indian, Mexican, and also among negroes” (p. 91). Whilst many others have argued against and pushed back against these assumptions, proponents of “it’s their fault” have relentlessly pushed back, operating through a broad array of frameworks, explanations, and arguments. William Henry (1995), in response to what he saw as “egalitarian scorn,” claimed that attacks at elitism are attacks to the “very kinds of intellectual distinction-making I hold most dear: respect and even deference toward leadership and position; esteem for accomplishment, especially when achieved through long labor and rigorous education” (p. 4).

Whether through overtly racist, nativist, scientific, meritocratic, or more “refined” or “kind” contemporary iterations which focus on perceived differences in culture, deficit-centered theories and explanations tend to neglect the structures and ideologies that contribute to the fabric of injustice. Coupled with a belief in the central idea of equal opportunity (central to the “common school”), “leaving school” inherently becomes a problem of individual pupils, their families, their dispositions or their “culture” (Tyack, 1967). Multiple iterations exist, arguing that potential dropouts typically have inferior social and communication skills, and participate less in extracurricular activities (Cervantes, 1965); tend to have poor school achievement and tend to depart from school earlier (Bachman et al., 1971; Howell & Frese, 1982); lower IQ levels (Fuller & Friedrich, 1972); family size (Hill, 1979; Mare, 1980); and early marriage and pregnancy

(Howell & Frese, 1982; Marini, 1978), among others. However, as Noguera (2003b) describes when referring to those seeking to explain racial differences in school achievement, “there seems to be an insatiable appetite for work by Black scholars that blames Black people for the problems they experience” (p. 44), especially as it allows us to ignore all the other factors that influence school performance.

There have been countless peoples’, scholarships, and movements that have pushed back against these overly simplified deficit explanations. Two examples (among many) are *Learning to Labor* (Willis & Aronowitz, 1981) and *Ain’t No Makin’ It* (MacCleod, 2018). Both ethnographies navigate the inner worlds and the contexts in which young people have to negotiate education, labor, and identity and are examples of texts that illustrate the American investment in these dominant notions of both merit, and inherently deficit. Using ethnography and rich description (both methodologically similar to this project) to illustrate the complex structural, ideological, and material realities experienced by youth, both ethnographies complicate simplistic notions of why young people are out-of-school (or in the workforce) by navigating the cultural worlds, material realities, and contradictions dismissed and silenced by the tireless exposure to “accounts of the spectacular mobility achieved by men of humble origins through their own unremitting efforts that occupy a treasured place in our national folklore” (MacLeod, 2018, p. 3). Amongst a myriad of other critiques to this obsession for looking at what is missing, Gutierrez (2008) alludes to the contemporary fixation on the “achievement gap” as a “gap-gazing fetish” (p. 357) that further perpetuated highly problematic myths. Fine (1991) also problematized this framing in her groundbreaking ethnography of youth actively being framed and discarded from schools. She claimed that the more youth who drop out are portrayed as

inferior or lacking something, then all that pushes them out is rendered invisible, including their critiques.

It is important to recognize how consequential many of these deficit explanations have been, and continue to be. In extreme cases, these explanations have directly contributed to programs, efforts, and attempts at cultural genocide through forced assimilation (Mako, 2012), special schools for certain groups of children (like the Americanization of Mexican girls in California, who were “not expected to comprehend chemical terms” (Ellis, 1929, p. 19)), and other forms of coercive institutions like prisons. In less extreme cases, these explanations have informed and continue to inform the work, relationships, and pedagogy of many teachers across the country. In 1970, Finkelstein found that the majority of teachers in her study believed that the acquisition of knowledge represented a triumph of the will and the intellect. Conversely, most thought that academic failure was evidence of the students personal and moral recalcitrance. Although we might believe that things have changed, theories and explanations of “school failure” that center individual, collective and cultural traits are ubiquitous. A few examples include: theories around the development of “oppositional cultures” (Anderson, 2000), “cultures of poverty” (Lewis, 1969), “resilience” and “grit” (Duckworth et al., 2007), and the “word gap” (Hart & Risley, 2003).

While we may wonder why these theories are, and have been, so popular, many argue that deficit explanations of today stem from a history of American Social Darwinism that was quickly embraced by the powerful and the conservative as a welcome addition. “England gave Darwin the world, but the United States gave Darwinism an unusually quick and sympathetic reception” (Hofstadler, 1992, p. 5). Due to its ability to legitimize and explain social hierarchies, American Social Darwinism conveniently naturalized the slow and unhurried (“natural”) process

of social change. William Sumner, one of the nation's first sociologists and leading Social Darwinist, in 1883 book "What Social Classes Owe to Each Other" endorsed Herbert Spencer's ideas of laissez-faire government, natural selection, and survival of the fittest as a way of Nature's stamp of approval. Similarly, some propose that these "deficit" explanations have a genealogy tied to forms of social determinism and naturalism that eschew explanations of "why" (Honderich, 1990), especially in certain forms of educational determinism as those found in theories of "native intelligence" (Bagley, 1922).

In answering why "students who leave" are important, explanations in this "category" vary. Some consider it a part of the natural order and a natural consequence of maintaining "higher standards" (Reese, 1999). Some warn us of a movement towards justice where we "are more concerned with its losers than with honoring and encouraging its winners to achieve more and thereby benefit everyone" (Henry, 1995, p. 12). More moderate proponents might acknowledge the negative consequences of "leaving school" and recognize the inequities and biases that push students out of schools. However, rather than investigating the structures, systems, practices and world around them, their work primarily centers and often discursively continues to describe and focus on "those who leave."

The "Reformist Explanation": It Is Our Fault

In the 1950–1980 period, groups that had been ignored, underserved and marginalized demanded new influence over education. As part of their struggles for inclusion and justice, these groups rejected earlier diagnoses of the problem, especially those that located the trouble in individuals (Deschenes et al., 2001). Activists demanded equality of access and resources, while attacking the obvious and hidden injuries of race, gender, class, and cultural differences, as they called for adapting the school to the students instead of blaming the victims (Newby & Tyack, 1971). New names, reflecting different explanations for students who left, began to appear: the

rejected, forgotten, culturally different, etc. (Deschenes et al., 2001). Arguing against the “deficit approach” and claiming it was not a problem of individuals, cultures, families, or communities, theorists in this group attributed youth being out of school to an insufficiency, deficiency, and/or an inadequacy in schooling. This explanation, which for this chapter I am calling a “reformist explanation,” is characterized by thinking of “those who leave” as a result of schools not being able to do what they were “supposed” to do.

One of the key points of departure of reformist explanations from “deficit explanations” is the belief that all students can attain a high school credential and that schools control the conditions of success (Capper & Jamison, 1993). This key difference can and has been articulated in multiple ways and has presented specific challenges to “deficit-based theories.” For examples some have challenged deficit notions that connect IQ to dropping out and have called for us to reexamine the educational policies and practices of schools which may have contributed in subtle and unintentional ways to the pathways of students (Sewell et al., 1981) rather than IQ. Simultaneously, many have contested the very legitimacy of such tests and argue that one cannot simply look at one-dimensional systems that disregard the context in which these measurements are taking place. Another example lies in the consequential difference between cultural deprivation and the cultural mismatch or cultural incompatibility theories. The cultural mismatch theory (reformist), which emerged in the early 1970s as a counterpoint to the cultural deprivation theory (deficit based), argues that students leaving, performing poorly, or resisting school results from a “cultural clash” that gets in the way of their learning (Nieto, 2005). Many others, making similar claims, have continued to build and present similar challenges. Baratz and Baratz (1970), for example, have studied and portrayed not only the cultural mismatches between students and schools, but have condemned these, along “the underlying assumptions of intervention program

that tacitly label Negro behavior as pathological” (p. 29), as a form of institutionalized racism. Consequently, many of these reformist theorists argue that congruity between home and school culture is instrumental in the success of students. Deschenes et al. (2001), presenting a similar frame, argue that “failure became an artifact of the rigidity of a system that sought to process large batches of children in uniform ways” (p. 530).

Outcomes Based Education (Spady, 1982), a theory and paradigm that has for a long time informed the work, purpose, and practices of schools, emphasizes the need to restructure schools to meet the needs of students to achieve certain outcomes and standards. This movement, strongly tied to economics and made urgent by theories of human capital, often emphasizes the development of skills as vital for production, growth, and development. Also, like Human Capital theory, it focuses less on what is “wrong” with students and more around how to change the systems to ensure that students achieve certain outcomes. Also, it creates a sense of urgency by placing education both as a capital good and as instrumental to improving the production capacity of a population (Sakamoto & Powers, 1995; Schultz, 1971; Woodhall, 1997). This idea, that students leaving school is a “loss” in human capital became more prevalent as public schooling grew in the United States and while it didn’t necessarily posit that “all” students could succeed or achieve at the same levels, it did shift the gaze to the systems and structures that were failing of meeting their goals (not necessarily egalitarian). Often, these analyses and their explanations of why students leave also resonate with structural-functionalism, which although not widely accepted, continues to resurface with remarkable persistence. Structural functionalism approaches society through a macro-level orientation that sees society as many parts, having different functions, working together to form the whole (Aberle et al., 1950). One of the key tenets of this paradigm is that behaviors are interpreted through a framework of a single

(structural functional) social reality (Capper & Jamison, 1993). As opposed to “deficit-based” explanations, these moderate explanations acknowledge and study how both the context around these “dropout factories,” including political isolation and poverty, affect students who leave (Anyon, 1997).

Another major and important focus of the literature in this category seeks to explain and address the highly disproportionate rates of out-of-school youth for some groups, especially the profound racial inequities that pervade American Society. Many scholars have argued that the large differences in dropout rates and other measures of achievement can be explained by the large differences in social contexts, access to resources and opportunities, and other structural dimensions. Scholars like Gándara and Contreras (2009) describe these as the cumulative disadvantages that Latino children find at home, school, and their communities. Noguera (2001), with a large body of work documenting racial disparities in educational experiences and outcomes, problematizes “cultural” explanations that situate the problem with youth or a certain culture (Like Ogbu and Fordham’s oppositional culture (1986) or McWhorter’s (2000) culture of victimology) and/or families (like Coleman (1966)). Instead, Noguera (2001) illustrates the influence of the structures of opportunity within schools and the politicization of efforts to address inequities. In a similar reference and critique of these structures, Oakes (1985) describes the ways in which students are labeled and sorted into groups, with a clear racialized component, that in turn reinforces and exacerbates the “problem.” Payne (1984), in a strong critique to the conditions of the schools where the urban poor attend, writes that “what passes for education of the urban poor is a system in which a great many children never encounter a serious and sustained effort to teach them, a system that nurtures a community of low expectations and then

permits people to translate those expectations into poor teaching and lax administration and even rewards them doing so” (p. 143).

Many scholars, especially those that have sought to study the determinants that contribute to higher rates of dropping out among particular groups, have divided the factors into “school-based” versus “out-of-school factors.” Some, like Milliken in his book *The Last Dropout* argue that “the dropout crisis is not an educational issue” (p. 19). In turn he argues there is a crisis because adults have failed to create a community that cares for students and that ensures that their needs are met. Similarly, Darling-Hammond (2010) argued that once the evidence is examined, educational outcomes for youth that have “failed” at school are largely a function of their unequal access to key educational resources, both inside and outside of the school. An example of a model focused more on school factors, Wehlage and his colleagues (1989) studied how different school factors contributed to dropping out. Through their work, they attribute school leaving to issues of what they called school membership (adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, and isolation) and educational investment (lack of extrinsic motivation, learning process as too abstract, individualistic, and controlled by others, and a stultifying learning environment). Drawing on existing theoretical and empirical research Rumberger and Lim (2008) proposed a conceptual framework to understand and describe what they call “the process of dropping out and graduation, as well as the salient factors underlying that process” (Rumberger, 2011, p. 154). In it, they divide the factors in individual factors and institutional factors associated with families, schools, and communities.

Other theories like social control theory (Hirschi, 1969) contend that whilst individuals have natural tendencies (resisting being one of them), the strength of one’s social bonds to various traditional institutions mediates this tendency. Consequently, those with stronger ties are

less likely to commit and sustain deviant behavior. According to Hirschi, there are four interwoven components of any social bond: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. Theories like this one have multiple ramifications and applications to schools and the explanations for why some young people are out of school without a diploma. Some, arguing for community schools and broader architectures of support for students, often highlight the connections between life outside the school and the outcomes of schools (Balfanz et al., 2010; Cataldi et al., 2009; Kirp, 2010). Others focus more on the content of schools, arguing that students lose interest in what is being taught. As Price-Mitchell (2011) wrote as a critique to the dull and robotic tendencies of *Race to the Top*, children will race to the top when they discover passion and purpose from the inside, not because of extrinsic rewards like test scores, grades, or trophies.

Consistent with the ideology that positions schools as both, and fundamentally tied to American values, “Reformist” theories and explanations are most dominant. Consequently, if schools, at least in principle, are “good” and all students should be able to succeed in schools; then any students leaving or failing to finish school could be considered as a failure or shortcoming of the educational system or of its inability to make up for the “context” around it (not of students). Therefore, the majority of the solutions these theories and explanations propose are of reforms and of fixing the systems that are not doing what they are supposed to, often taking an acritical stance that thinks of schools as neutral, nonpolitical places (Sirotnik & Oakes, 1996). The critical traditions, conversely, have a radically different point of departure.

The Critical Explanation: “It Serves Power”

The very content of our minds takes for granted what it is supposed to explain. (Marx, 1844, p. 106)

As I have stated before, the idea of schools as “good” has become quintessentially ideological, an assumption that inherently acts as a gravitational pull that sways the narratives through which we explain being-out-of-school as either a failure of young people or a failure of the system. However, there is a long line of theories, activists, revolutionaries, and communities that have pushed back against this assumption. According to many, schools are actually succeeding at doing what they were intended to do, which included colonizing, assimilating, stratifying, vilifying, and weaving some out as they concurrently celebrate and legitimize the power of others.

At their core, the critical explanations as I have grouped them in this chapter seek to bring a radical critique and directly interrogate the legitimacy or “goodness” of schooling and its practices, interrogating what is “good,” and what serves power and injustice. Precisely because it is the work of ideology that renders certain conditions invisible, scholars and people’s in this tradition remind us that schools cannot be simply understood as “innocent,” meritocratic springboards for upward mobility. Conversely, their work uncovers how schools have served to exacerbate or perpetuate social inequities (Althusser, 1971; Apple, 2012; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 1983; McLaren & Puiggrós, 1994; Nieto, 2005). Whether through their role as ideological apparatuses (Althusser, 1971) or in reproducing economic (Apple, 2012; Bourdieu, 1982) social class (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990), gender (Delamont, 2018), and racial inequities (Leonardo, 2012), schools can be understood as both: “normalizing agencies” that essentially bring legitimacy to existing social relations and practices, rendering them normal and natural (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 23) and sites of contestation and possibility to interrupt the reproduction of the dominant culture (Giroux, 1983).

Critical inquiry deliberately shifts the gaze from “what is wrong with the person or the system” to what are the policies, institutions, and social arrangements (often by design) that help to form and deform, enrich and limit, human development?” and “how do people resist the weight of injustice in their lives?” (Torre et al., 2012). Therefore, schools and the broader institution of schooling, as a project that operates as both an ideological and structural level, specifies and produces both, the “educated” person, and the “uneducated” or “uneducable” person (Schultz & Erickson, 1982; Fine, 1991). McDermott and Lave, in their translation of the classic Marxist text “Estranged Labor” make a similar argument. Following Marx, they claim that as the learner and his learning sink to the level of commodities, not only is the learner alienated from his or her own learning, but his or her own “wretchedness” (in this case the likelihood that he will become disposable and value-less) is inversely related to the power and magnitude of his production/learning (the more they learn for someone else, the more they are deprived of the fruits of their labor). In other words, the accumulation of academic success in a few hands brings about the restoration of an even worse monopoly, producing the credentialed and the non-credentialed.

Using similar Marxist frameworks, revisionist historians and economists such as Joel Spring (1972) and Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976) suggested that schools tend to serve the interests of the dominant classes by reproducing the economic and social relations of society. Michael Katz (1975), for instance, demonstrated that from the start, public schools were “universal, tax-supported, free, compulsory, bureaucratically arranged, class-biased, and racist” (p. 106). According to Katz, these seemingly contradictory features derived from the very purpose of public schools, which was largely to train different segments of society for particular roles in life. Echoing this and connecting schools to the work of prisons, Fasching-Varner et al.

(2014) write that there is no crisis in schools nor in prisons, each institution functioning per their design and the demands of society. Noguera (2003) stated that schools sort children, which often includes disciplinary practices that bear a striking similarity to the strategies used to punish adults, often relying on some form of exclusion or ostracism.

Although critical theorists' explanations for why students leave vary greatly, their explanations always incorporate a critique and/or recognition of schools as coercive, violent, and instruments of power. This approach to inquiring upon social change, is partly rooted in Marxist ideas that invite us to think about how socio-historical change is determined (in some sense) by economics and power. As opposed to those who believe that those who leave school are a result of the school or the system not doing enough, "critical" explanations and theories argue that school practices cannot be detached from power and therefore, can be strategies for the preservation of the status quo itself (Sirotnik & Oakes, 1986). School practices include curricular violence (King, 2017), the class-based nature of school structures and methods used to legitimize individual differences (Katz, 1975), the dominant- dominated relationship between students and teachers in poor communities (McDermott, 1997), and practices of exclusion, segregation, and criminalization. Therefore, those marginalized and discarded (often youth out-of-school) are then strategically positioned as accountable for social decay (Fine, 1991).

Another important dimension and explanation of "leaving school" that is rendered legible by the recognition of schools as an agent of oppression and domination, is one that articulates, "leaving" as resistance, rebellion, or a mode of re-cognizing (Cummins, 1996; Giroux, 1983; Kohl, 1994). As such, working class youth who penetrate the school's meritocratic ideology and build subversive solidarities to undermine classroom procedures (Willis, 1981) or rebellious responses to the systematic discrediting of those who think in complexity (McNeil, 1981; Morris,

2016) can themselves be a raising of voice and collective power and a project of educational empowerment (Freire, 1985; Giroux, 1983; Shor, 1945). As MacLeod (2018) argues, decades of quantitative sociological research have demonstrated that the social class into which one is born has a massive influence on where one will end up. In his “more sympathetic and penetrating” observations, especially by paying attention to the voices and experiences of the youth themselves (an “account of what the social structure looks like from the bottom” (p. 6)), he emphasizes how the insularity of the project and the limited possibilities of youth become evident. In other words, “the general picture that emerges is dreary” (p. 6). That same “picture” is referenced in Willis and Aronowitz (1981) work, where they argue that working class culture at times has an element of self-damnation that ironically, is connected to a response or rebellion against the conditions of existence, many of which are dismissed and/or denied by the discourses of schools and state agencies.

According to resistance theory, activities and choices such as choosing not to learn or to refuse to participate can be interpreted as a form of political resistance or what Erickson also called a refusal to learn. These are especially important when thinking about refusal and resistance by those who are most negatively impacted by schools. According to Fordham and Ogbu (1986), given the long history of discrimination and racism in schools, involuntary minority children and their families are often distrustful of the education system and often resist acquiring and demonstrating the culture and cognitive styles of the dominant group and the “burden of acting White” (p. 186).

Further exploring this resistance, bell hooks, recognizing a reality of racism, spoke about “oppositional gaze.” Intentionally flipping frames about Black young women in her book, *Push-outs*, Morris (2016) argues how to be “ghetto” can represent resilience and resistance, she writes:

“to be loud” is a demand to be heard. To have an “attitude” is to reject a doctrine of invisibility and mistreatment”(p. 19). Refusals to participate with oppressive institutions are observable across human history, including in contemporary racial uprisings in the United States. In their study on Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies and Black Youths’ Performances of Resistance, Kinlock (2017) shows how students refuse to participate in a system where the maintenance of the status quo comes at the expense of the lives, literacies, and languages of Black students, many of whom are regularly criminalized inside and outside of the classroom.

In addition, these practices, along with the responses they elicit from institutions, directly speak to the observable relationship between political awareness and assertiveness with dropout rates (Fine & Rosenberg, 1983). Resistance then can be a challenge to what Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) called “mis-representation,” the systems of meanings whose legitimacy is concealed by the power relationships that are the basis of their force. Therefore, youth being out of school can also be seen as re-claiming of the mind and the subject in a Freirean notion of revolutionary praxis directed at the structures to be transformed (Freire, 1970). Lastly, these critical explanations also invite us not only to look at those who are out of school, but to look beneath the surface of the now-normalized use of the GED and other institutional responses and symbolic means to stabilize injustice “as a receptacle for youth who are unwanted in school” (Tuck, 2012, p. 160).

Lastly, critical theorists have created a wide body of scholarship, insights, and literature that have pushed multiple boundaries (both theoretically and methodologically) and articulated the multiple intersections and the significant overlap between these three bodies of theory. Even when contextualizing youth that are out of school in relation to schooling as an oppressive, problematic project; their work has continuously revisited important questions of agency versus

structure, choice over influence, etc. Through these projects and scholarships, many of which have drawn from the participatory action research and the critical ethnographic traditions, complicated nuances and intersections have emerged. In her book *Urban Youth and School Pushout*, Tuck (2012) presents what is often presented as the paradox of interfacing a structural analysis of policies and practices that pushout with the analysis of youth resistance, agency, and refusal of educational injustice and domination. However, she concludes that it is not an-either or. Instead, in this dialectical relationship lies what LeFebvre (2009) sees as the “constructor and animator of the complicated stuff of life” (p. 41).

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND THEORETICAL FOUNDINGS

While discussing the power of frames during a photography workshop months before the theorizing back project began, I asked the young scholars whether they considered themselves push-outs or drop-outs. After a couple of seconds of silence, a young woman looked at me with an incredulous and yet curious stare. Clearly recognizing that the answer exists in neither of those alternatives, she shared: “Well, I guess the schools were trying hard to push me out for a long time and at some point, I decided to drop out.”

What Do We Know? How is it Helpful?

Understanding American educational history and the current realities of youth who are out of school requires as Anderson (1988) suggests, not only that we recognize the essential relationships between popular and state education and the politics of oppression, but also our theories of the “successful” and the “unsuccessful,” the “honor roll student,” and the “dropout/pushout,” and their implications for policies and practices. Like policies and their runaway effect (Power, 1997), theories also actively reshape the environments into which they are introduced, produced and reproduced. As such, the lives and destinies of youth are actively being shaped by them. Across the three categories that I’ve delineated in Chapter 2 and in each of their theories an explanation is put forward. Often defended by how much they “make sense” or can explain, heavily tainted by what is ideologically legible, dominant theories around school leaving are rarely scrutinized for their impact or in how much they actively work to serve power. At the same time, these rarely allow what Eve Tuck (2012) argues is essential: to make space for young people to simultaneously “reproduce, resist, be complicit in, rage against, celebrate, throw hands/fists/towels up, withdraw, and participate in uneven social structures” (p. 20).

Many of us, committed to a liberatory politics of education, centering a certain ontology about young people, invoking the radical imagination not as something that we have, but as something that we do (p. 63), and recognizing the human power in youth to transform the world for the better, are thus required to ask ourselves the question: How useful are these theories as

starting points, places of interrogation, and places of theorizing back for multiply marginalized youth who occupy a precarious position in a rapidly changing world? How are these theories productive, if at all, as starting points or generative spaces from which, in this case the Homies, can, through the radical imagination, convoke new educational visions and futures? How can The Homies theorize back, as Soja (1996) puts it, to “third” closed circuits of irreconcilable binaries, of reproduction and resistance, of pushout and dropout? Perhaps more important for this dissertation: How is theorizing back able to convoke new visions and to forge, as collective pedagogy and praxis, identities and understandings that can will new words and worlds forward?

Conceptualizing a methodology as the destination of the research journey (Wilson, 2008), it is in dialogue with these questions and the journey that they point towards that this work proposes theorizing back as its methodology.

Methodology and Research Design

In Chapter 1, I established some of the main theoretical underpinnings of my methodology, outlining the different elements this dissertation built upon and borrowed from the participatory action research, the critical ethnographic, and the decolonizing and Indigenous research traditions. I drew from these with humility, recognizing that there is much for me to know and understand, and inspiration, knowing that each has informed my way of thinking about my own work and how it sits in relationship with the broader world, including my relationship to research and the broader struggle for educational and social justice. Also, “the justification of our choice and particular use of methodology and methods is something that reaches into the assumptions about reality that we bring to our work” (Crotty, 1998, p. 2). Therefore, this section is as much a roadmap to a destination as a reflection and statement about a way of thinking about being and our place in the world (ontology), what is considered knowledge and what it means to know (epistemology), and a set of values (axiology).

As I described in Chapter 1 and will further explore in Chapter 4, the space from which Theorizing Back emerged, Free Space, had been an ongoing space of praxis alongside youth. It was dynamic, rooted in relationships, and committed to a deeper understanding of a world that is not composed of objects to be analyzed, but as a space acted and imagined into being by active, dialogic subjects, including by us researchers. Theorizing back, this dissertation's methodology, was born out of that space, its insights, and its purpose. In this regard, this work, although deeply informed by many traditions and movements, was not about "plucking a methodology off the shelf" (Crotty, 1998, p. 14), but about testing, molding, and exploring the tensions and possibilities that always existed between the destination (theorizing back) and the ways in which we could get there (strategies of inquiry).

In addition, while the core of this project was centered around the Homies's theorizing back, this dissertation also asked additional questions that ran alongside the theorizing itself. These questions and the methodology that guided my engagement with them, which primarily interrogate the process, practices, and impact of theorizing back itself, were deeply informed by critical ethnography.

Site of Study

As summarized in Chapter 1, the study took place at a youth re-entry center in Los Angeles County. In the words of many of the young people who are a part of the center and its partner high school, "none of these are like traditional schools and government centers." From the first time that I walked into the center and from the first time I taught a class at its school, it was clear how the unconditional acceptance of all students was central to the center's mission and its practices. The Center's mission is as follows¹⁴: supporting youth in graduating high

¹⁴ Adapted to ensure confidentiality.

school, placing and supporting young people in their transitions from high school into employment or post-secondary education, supporting young people with a comprehensive set of wrap-around resources, and ensuring that previously incarcerated participants do not recidivate. The schools' mission is to provide a rigorous and personalized academic program and relevant life skills to traditionally underserved students who have left or are in danger of leaving schooling without attaining a high school diploma. More broadly, the center seeks to address the needs of its community by offering a comprehensive program to systems-impacted, marginalized, and disengaged youth a support system designed to meet their needs; distinct from the traditional programs that have not served them well.

The school affiliated with the center is purposefully structured with lots of flexibility, combining academic intervention and support whilst also incorporating financial, wrap-around and social support services, including on-site childcare for young mothers. As young people sign up to be a part of the center, they get assigned both an academic advisor and a case manager that serve as mentors, help them stay on track, drive them to various places and connect them with resources as necessary. In addition, they also have a big role in helping them navigate a broad array of systems that are often violent and unfriendly to youth, such as the court system, the DMV, housing and financial support systems, etc. Also critical to the work of the center are its partnerships with various organizations that provide jobs for youth and adults that are often pushed out and rejected from employment opportunities elsewhere.

Through these partnerships, the center is able to provide a job to the majority of its youth and amongst their job responsibilities is to study (especially for the youth who have not finished high school). As constantly referenced by many of the youth, and simultaneously (and ironically) commonsensical and extremely uncommon, this opportunity to earn money and finish school is

crucial to their ability to continue their schooling. In addition, the work of the center, which is also very influential to the practices at the school, is strongly influenced by a theology of radical and unconditional love and acceptance. Ever since the first time I stepped in the school and until today, the biggest asset of the school is in its students.

The Homies, Young Scholars and Theorizers

The young people that were a part of the theorizing back project, whom have chosen to be referred to as *the Homies* are from multiple backgrounds and identities. In total there were 14 young people that participated in the theorizing back project. However, due to both, an already precarious, violent, and complex context—which had already made their participation in Free Space extremely complicated across multiple fronts—and the convergence and addition of COVID-19 to a set of preexisting pandemics (Ladson-Billings, 2021)¹⁵; attendance and consistency throughout the project varied greatly. In addition, to ensure the safety and health of the youth and our communities, multiple meetings were held online and at public outdoor spaces, which also affected our ability to engage with each other as initially planned. On average, there were about 5 to 6 Homies per meeting.

All the youth were between 18 and 24 years old and have experienced, and actively experience, injustice across multiple fronts and dimensions. There were no “exclusionary” criteria for being a part of this project and it was radically voluntaristic. The majority of the youth would be racialized as Latinx (~58%), Black (~14%), Indigenous (~14%), and mixed race (~14%)(see Table 1).

¹⁵ <https://ced.ncsu.edu/news/2021/03/25/i-want-to-hold-our-feet-to-the-fire-around-justice-gloria-ladson-billings-discusses-education-after-covid-civil-unrest-during-don-c-locke-multiculturalism-and-social-justice-sympo/>

Table 1

Study Participants

Number	14
Gender Identity (self-identified)	Men 9, Women 5
Racial Identity	Latinx (8), Black (1), Indigenous (2), Mixed Race (2)
Ages	18–20: 5 21–22: 7 23–24: 2

The sampling for this study could be understood as purposeful (Patton, 2015), which calls for a sample from which most can be learned. The Homies, all of whom live at an intersection of multiple and egregious systems of injustice unquestionably hold deep knowledge, understanding, lived experience, and radical critiques that are at the heart of what this dissertation is trying to explore. Moreover, from the beginning my own commitment to this work has been rooted in the knowing, feeling, and believing that every one of the youth who have been a part of this space are powerful, insightful, and have a social critique that is urgent, poignant, and important. As described in Chapter 1, my choice to be at the center, not connected to “research,” was rooted in a long history of working at the margins, which I believe hold, as bell hooks (1990) writes, radical possibility, struggle, and resistance. Therefore, as Patton (2015) describes of purposeful sampling, the Homies are “those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry” (p. 53). However, as will be described in detail in

Chapter 4, the young people who were the heart of the theorizing back project (the Homies), came together out of trust, relationships, and collective curiosity and purpose. While the sampling could be considered a form of snowball sampling, which usually starts with a few participants and grows from there (Patton, 2015), the process of the “snowballing” was rooted in relationships, community, and purpose. It is also important to clarify that it was not a typical purposeful sampling strategy that seeks to “highlight what is typical, normal, and average” (Patton, 2014, p. 268). The youth, their stories, their brilliance, and their unique humanities were what was most valued and important.

In regard to age. The Homies are of an age with clear developmentally, socially, politically, historically and contextually distinctive and important features. Specially in regard to age, according to Arnett (2000), this development period has been often overlooked by “dropout” researchers whom instead have focused on the period of adolescence, typically until 18 years of age, or on adults as one developmentally homogeneous group. In this case, the age of the Homies was critical to their theorizing for many reasons besides the dearth of literature. These reasons include: their identities being framed as both “adults,” “children,” and “not yet adapted or functioning”; the simultaneous onslaught of stuff thrown at them and the lack of support, the multiple responsibilities and entanglements that limit and delineate the exercising of their agency; and their own sensemaking of their adultification, the right (or lack thereof) of being children, and always “having to” take on adult responsibilities while being treated like children.

Methods and Strategies of Inquiry

I want to know what all these people say about us, otherwise It feels like going to war with no weapons. (Francisco)

According to Wilson (2008), the methods and the strategies of inquiry build upon a methodology to fill in how you will arrive at the research destination (methodology), like a roadmap that helps you to get to where you want to go. As such, and connected to the goal of theorizing back, the “selection” and development of the methods and the strategies of inquiry was done in community and collaboration with the Homies. Moreover, due to the unfinished, ethnographic, and phenomenological nature of this inquiry and this larger project, which continuously sought to both uncover and construct meanings and perceptions on the part of the people participating in the research, many of the specific strategies of inquiry, or methods, were dynamic, to a certain degree unstructured, and non-directive (Crotty, 1998). As many critical ethnographies and participatory action research projects committed to unmasking hegemony, interrogating power, and addressing oppressive forces, our collective theorizing oscillated between “big picture” analyses, micro explanations and stories of the everyday, and moments of philosophizing in the abstract. Most importantly, our methodology, as a praxis of theorizing back, was dialectically transformed, changed, and dynamically guided by the affect, curiosity, questions, and priorities of the Homies.

Also, while I had proposed multiple strategies of inquiry during my proposal stage, these changed significantly. Part of this change was in response to COVID-19, the lockdown, and the difficulties brought on by the convergence of multiple pandemics. Perhaps more critically, many of these changes were brought and guided by the Homies. Borrowing from its theoretical and methodological roots, young people were positioned as experts and agents positioned to critically interrogate social injustice and to engage in social action (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Also understanding PAR and in this case, theorizing back as politic (Tuck et al., 2008) it was not a set of fixed methods and rather, an axiological and epistemic stance against colonizing,

territorializing, oppressive practices ubiquitous in research. Consequently, the project design and the research methods were collaboratively imagined, discussed, and co-constructed by the group. Also due to its commitment to people first, and given the complexities of the Homies’ lives, it was common that what we had planned did not happen, and that was ok. The majority of the strategies of inquiry that will be summarized in the following section—some more thoroughly captured in the findings sections—were organically co-constructed, tried out, tweaked, and carried out by the Homies.

Lastly, a significant part of the data, the reflections, and the words and the worlds (two concepts I will develop further in the findings) were generated as we were “hanging out,” sharing stories and testimonies, and responding to the contexts that were happening around us. The following table describes the general timeline of the study and the principal strategies of inquiry (Table 2).

Table 2

General Timeline

Phase	Dates	Action
Phase I	Early 2017 – October 2020	Free Space, Imagining Theorizing Back (see chapter 4)
Phase II	October 2020 – November 2020	Phenomenological Interviews
Phase III	November 2020 – June 2021	Theorizing Back stage. Alternate between strategies of Inquiry and group activities listed in the next section. A sample agenda for one of the gatherings is included in Table 2
Phase IV	June 2021 – June 2022	Collaborative Data Analysis, Writing, Member Checking

Initial Interviews

This dissertation study began its Phase II with seven individual interviews using a critical phenomenological (Guenther, 2019) approach that focused on the educational experiences of the Homies and the meaning they made of those experiences. The interviews took place via zoom and were open, relational, and semi-structured. As a first set of conversations, these interviews sought to intentionally create space for the sharing of stories and for the Homies to have time to make meaning and to think and consider the meaning and implications behind some of the stories that they shared. In this regard, they made space for the reconstruction of the constitutive elements of lived experiences so that they become “phenomena” that can begin to surface meaning making and when in conversation with the context, to allow what E. G. Mishler, calls *Meaning in Context* (1979). The general flow of the interviews followed Seidman’s three part interview; starting with life history that centered homie’s educational experiences; followed by focusing on the details of experience; and ending with reflection on the meaning (Seidman, 2006). Moreover, informed by critical phenomenology, the interview will also intentionally build space to “reflecting on the quasi-transcendental social structures that make our experience of the world possible and meaningful” (Guenther, 2019, p. 15) and to “suspend commonsense accounts of reality in order to map and describe the structures that make these accounts possible, to analyze the way they function, and to open up new possibilities for reimagining and reclaiming” (p. 15).

The interviews will consist primarily of open questions. These questions will be used flexibly so that it allows space for themes to arise and be explored; for participants to make meaning and feel encouraged to explore their stories and follow their thinking; and to ensure the space is open to any and all relevant responses (LeCompte, 1999). Most questions will revolve around their educational histories; the relationship between life events and their educational

trajectory; the perceived relationship between their identity, the concept of education and “schools;” the intersections between schooling, education, and justice; and how they imagine their futures.

The interview protocol can be found in Appendix B.

Phase III: The Theorizing Back Stage

During the theorizing back stage, the core of this dissertation project, we met approximately once every two weeks for about 14 weeks. In total, there were 8 theorizing back sessions. These gatherings were a participatory, collaboratively constructed space that lasted an average of 3 hours. During each session, the group pulled from different tools and activities, many of them conceived collectively by the youth. In addition, often youth came to the space with ideas, materials, and questions that would help “structure” our time together. As portrayed by Table 3, our time together always started with some community time, checking in with each other, and discussing what was on our minds from the last session and whether we needed to make any changes to our “plans,” albeit flexible, for the day. After checking in, we would move onto one of the strategies of inquiry, always leaving time for individual and collective reflection, and closing.

Table 3

Sample Gathering Agenda (4 hours)

Title	Activity	Time
Community Circle	Check-ins, thoughts and reflections on the previous week, how we are feeling?	15 minutes
Strategy of Inquiry 1	Example 1	1 hour
Reflection	Individual Reflection time/memoing/meaning-making	30 minutes
Strategy of Inquiry 2	Example 2	1 hour
Closing	Dialogue/Reflections/Lunch	20 minutes

In regard to the strategies of inquiry, although the theorizing back stage was guided by the youth and the group moved organically as it felt relevant, there were a couple of key Strategies of Inquiry and methods that the Homies engaged in (Summarized in Table 4). Some of these were initially “offered” by me and adapted by the group and others were suggested by the Homies and created in collaboration. In this work, methods, as offered by Fine and Weis (1996) were not passive strategies and they differently produced, revealed, and nurtured different kinds of identities, insights, stories, and perspectives. The following section will describe many of these methods describing the “what” we did. Chapter 5 will further reflect on “how” the Homies engaged in these strategies and in the insights, subjectivities, and solidarities that emerged as they did so.

Table 4

Theorizing Back Strategies of Inquiry and Methods

Title	Activity	Frequency
Telling our stories	The Homies designed their own interview and interviewed each other	1 time
Review of Literature and existing explanations	Review of Literature and Existing Theories	Almost every theorizing back session
Coming up with characters	Imagining and describing (written) certain “out-of-school youth” and sharing with the group	1 time
Best and worst experiences in school	Remembering, writing, and reflecting upon their best and worse memories in school	1 time
Structure and agency continuum	Placing themselves and their “Stance” on a continuum and engaging in group dialogue	2 times

Telling Our Stories: Homies Interviewing Each Other

As we began the process of theorizing back, one of the initial conversations that we had as a group was, how do we best answer the question: Why do some young people leave school? As part of Phase I and II, we had had many conversations about who holds knowledge and about some of the insights that led to the theorizing back project, including the issues of people with epistemic “credentials” and academic diplomas speaking for and about those without them. Consequently, one of the first ideas brought on by the Homies was to interview people in their communities, clicks, and at the youth re-entry center. However, due to the lockdown and the safety measures in place at the time we had to pivot, and the Homies decided to interview each other. The first step was to develop the interview protocol. That day we gathered on Zoom and

after a quick check in, we began brainstorming both the questions and the “how” the interview needed to go. Mostly guided by their own intuition and experience and after asking me a couple of concrete questions about what I thought would be “a good idea,” the Homies created (I took notes on a Google Doc) the Homies Interviewing Each Other protocol (Appendix B).

Importantly, in the creation of the interview protocol, the Homies attended to both the questions and the “how” they were going to ask those questions. This process, which resulted in the “Principles,” reflected an intuitive understanding of what should be at the root of dialogue and sincere conversation: trust, purpose, and relationships. As Tino the Rhino explained: “and we should give them a little introduction of ourselves, what we stand for, where we come from, Where you from, fool? Francisco added: Because if we’re going to learn, if you’re going to tell us some deep stuff, I feel like we should tell some stuff from the heart too.” In this regard, the protocol and plan created by the youth resonated with decolonial, humanizing, and critical methods and methodologies, especially with *pláticas* (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016) and *testimonios* (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012). As the Homies argued, the interview had to feel good and as Tino the Rhino proudly commented when we were over: “Here are some really good questions too. They will get people thinking, too. You know? So, I feel like there’ll be some pretty interesting answers that will come out.” The process of finishing the protocol took about 1 hour altogether.

After having finished the interview protocol and discussed the “how,” the Homies alternated between “leading” the interview and being the interviewee. The interviews usually lasted about 35 minutes and it was common that they led to group conversations where all the Homies began sharing stories, building with each other, and finding moments of resonance and connection. Often these conversations (as described more thoroughly on Chapter 4) moved

swiftly into what Ayala et al. (2006) describe as “healing circles” (p. 262) where youth shared stories, struggles, and listened to each other deeply. The interviews never felt like an “interrogation” and organically flowed from the actual “questions” from the protocol to new questions, new leads, and open sharing by others in the group. After all, two of the principles of the protocol was “let your feelings and gut guide you” and “the questions are just a guide, follow the people you are interviewing.”

Due to time constraints, the Homies only engaged in two “whole group” interviews where one Homie would interview another and the whole group would listen. Both of these took place in person and due to their generative nature, took longer than expected (about an hour each). After those two, we decided to organized the group in pairs so that they each interviewed each other and later shared some of their “aha’s” to the whole group. These also took place in-person.

Review of Literature and Existing Explanations

This method, which was “sprinkled” during several of the theorizing sessions (sessions 4 through 7), was similar to a literature review or an “exploration of what was said” in that the group had a chance to “review” and discuss theories that explained why young people left schools. Usually, I would bring a couple of excerpts (sometimes a pile of books) that related to the themes (justice, epistemic sovereignty, carceral geographies, pedagogy of liberation, counter-stories) and core question of our project (why do some youths leave school?). Some of these included books and articles like: *Punished*, *Framing Dropouts*, *Historian as Curandera*, *Our Word is Our Weapon*, *Borderlands*, *Bad Kids*, *Yo Mama’s Dysfunktional*, *Wretched of the Earth*, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, *Always Running*, *Girl Time*, *Hearts and Hands*, *Pushout*, *Blaming the Victim*, *Discourse On Colonialism*, *Ain’t No Making It*, and other “less critical” texts like *The Last Dropout*, *Dropouts in America*, and *High School Dropouts*, among others. In addition, the

youth would also bring books, YouTube videos, texts, songs, and other sources of explanations and theories that spoke to the questions that the Homies were asking together. As an example, one day when the group was discussing the meaning of freedom and dignity (two words that had come up the previous session), each Homie brought a song or a quote or a movie that spoke to freedom or dignity.

To begin, the Homies would select which texts we would discuss. To do this, they would often ask me what some of the books were about and whether I thought we should read them. At times, to give the group an idea of what the text was like, we would read a couple of quotes and made space for the Homies to make sense of them. In addition, as described further in Chapter 4, there was also a space for both intuition and affect to lead the “choice” of what we would be looking at, often resulting in “this book sounds interesting, let’s look at this one,” or in “I bet that was written by a white man, I don’t wanna read that.” After choosing the text, the Homies would discuss them, make sense and meaning of them, and capture important and relevant information that the group deemed important as data for the project and that we want to use as a reference (to place in dialogue with their own histories). The amount of time that this took across different sessions and readings varied greatly and often oscillated between translating, understanding and explaining terms and “big words” and putting these in conversation with the Homies’s experiences, stories, thoughts, and questions.

Resonating with one of the components of critical ethnography, the Homies looked at texts that highlighted both micro and macro phenomena (Castagno, 2012), iterating back and forth between the parts and the whole (Dilthey, 1883) and moving elegantly between their own lives and the structures that shaped their lives. By doing so, the Homies embodied that which is described by Fine and Weiss (1998) as they argue that we can no longer theorize as if groups

were isolated, coherent, and bounded and instead, we should theorize explicitly connecting the dots, articulating contradictions, complexity, and visibilizing relationships to other groups and to larger socio-political formations. Moreover, in regard to how the space was shaped and changed—and in regard to my own commitments are orientations—the process was “imbued with a profound trust in people [in this case the Homies] and their creative power” (Freire, 1970, p. 75) and consequently, it wasn’t about forcing or “organizing a process which already occurs spontaneously or to ‘fill’ the students by making deposits of information” (Freire, 1970, p. 76). Instead, resonating with critical pedagogy, the space and the Homies’s engagement with the word and the world consisted of acts of cognition, feeling, and relationships.

Lastly, it was also the case that reading the texts, especially in conversation with each other, also felt like a critical re-reading of texts, especially when the Homies deliberately asked questions like: Who wrote this? In what context did they write this? Who did this benefit? Whose power was being wielded and how? In this regard the exercise of reading, re-reading, and re-presenting (for misrepresentation, see Bourdieu and Passeron, 1997) also followed a Freirean (1970) spirit of asking questions of the world in order to transform it.

These conversations took place both online and in person and took about 30 minutes to 1 hour each time.

Coming Up With Characters

It was during the third of the second stage of Theorizing Back that, having already gone through interviewing each other, we began thinking of what our next steps would look like and what the Homies could do as a group to continue investigating and interrogating their inquiry. Given that due to COVID we would not be able to interview other’s outside of our group, one of the Homies suggested that we could think about characters that either we knew, or that represented people and phenomena that we knew, and describe them as characters that we could

share with the group. Others were enthused by the idea and they decided to do it. Further reflecting on the process and how the space was shaped, the creating and deciding of this method proved to be a powerful example of the ways in which the Homies were themselves thinking about not only engaging with their own experiences and perspectives, but recognizing the multiplicity of places and identities from which experience and multiple co-existing truths could be thought about.

That day we gathered in person at an open space and to start, the Homies spent about 30 minutes thinking about and writing the story of their characters with as much detail as they wanted and after they were all done, they started the sharing process one by one. After each one of the Homies shared, we went around as a group and discussed: (a) thoughts or things that came up for them as they heard the story; and (b) thoughts on how that story speaks or sits in dialogue with some of the theories we have been speaking about. While most Homies read their characters, some decided to improvise. “I don’t like reading off shit. I’m going to just say it from the top, fuck it” (CB the Orchestrator). While reading or improvising, it was also common that the Homies would go “off script” trespassing between the imagined and the real, the characters and themselves, as Francisco described:

“Kind of feel like when I’m talking about these stories, I’m trying not to talk about myself and I’m not, but I’m relating it to something

CB the Orchestrator: other situations

Francisco: Yeah, other situations or my friends or me.

Altogether, this exercise took about 2 hours and was to create a set of conversations that became critical to the Homies’ theorizing back.

Best and Worst Experiences of School

This method, also developed by the Homies was initially suggested by Francisco and quickly embraced by the group at the end of our third session: “if we trying to think of why do we got kicked out or left school or why are we trying to go back we gotta think of what is good and what is bad about it, right?” This strategy of inquiry, which took place on the session after the “coming up with characters,” began with individual time for each Homie to reflect on their own experiences in schools and come up with the “best” and the “worst.” As a further prompt and trying to describe what they meant by best and worst, Tino the Rhino offered that they could “think of the things in school that really pushed them out or felt wrong or made them not want to be there and the things in schools that made them want to stay, or that made them feel really good or to really want to go.” After the Homies had spent some time individually, they shared with the group, making time for identifying points of resonance, similarity, difference, and wonder.

As initially suggested by Francisco, this exercise indeed resulted in deep insight and reflection. Not only did it surface the shared wounds and enforced silences that had been imposed upon their own lives and raised powerful themes about schools that were critical to the main findings of this project, but was also an important moment for the group as they began to “feel” and own the process. In later conversations, the Homies would often refer to that day as one of building trust and feeling the power of sharing wounds and reflections with each other. Importantly, the “open ended” nature of this exercise also allowed for the Homies to raise and illuminate both structure and agency, a key component of critical the critical traditions and of critical ethnography (Castagno, 2012).

Structure and Agency Continuum

Although this strategy of inquiry could be seen more as a pedagogical tool and an exercise that was led by me to aid in the sense-making and to provide a visual reference for the group think to “organize” their findings and conversations so far; I include it in this section mainly because it was repeatedly referenced by the Homies as helpful in “shaping” inquiry. I also write this recognizing that while the academy tends to fetishize this distinction between structure and agency and present them as a binary; for multiply marginalized youth—in this case the Homies—these were neither opposites nor separable. At the same time, situated within a context—modernity—in which agency is ideologically championed, this “continuum” proved generative and powerful in expanding the scope of what could be theoretically conceived. This exercise consisted of drawing a continuum (line) that had agency on one side and structure on the other. I then explained that on the side of agency are theories that affirm that the world and our lives is shaped by choices. That we have free will and that we determine our own future by the choices that we make. On the side of structure were theories that focused on how our lives are shaped by the structures around us; that there was no such a thing as free will and that our destinies and our futures were shaped by the world around us. Then the Homies were to “place” themselves or their own understanding somewhere in the line and explain why. In addition, I encouraged the Homies to think about the data we had gathered so far, to reflect on their own stories, and to put these in conversation with the question that had driven inquiry since the beginning, why do young people leave school? Like in *The Unknown City*, where Fine and Weiss (1998) argue that we can no longer theorize as if groups were isolated, coherent, and bounded, this exercise made space for the Homies to collectively connect the dots; begin to articulate and to dwell in contradictions and complexity; and to visibilize relationships to other groups and to larger socio political formations.

Journals/Analytic Memos

Every Homie kept a journal where they had a space for writing memos and entries about their thoughts, experiences, and insights as they went through the theorizing back process. During certain times in our theorizing back sessions, we wrote certain entries together that referred to specific methods and exercises. In addition, this journal was intended to be “their own.” As such, the Homies were encouraged to write whatever ideas, fears, mistakes, confusion, and reactions to the experience, the theories and explanations, and the process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As explained by Bazeley and Jackson (2014), analytic memos are critical when dealing with higher-level concepts (such as ideology), especially as they have a role in understanding how questions arose in relationship to the concepts these represent how codes emerged, and theory was built. During the theorizing back process, it was quite common that the youth would pull their journals and share thoughts and insights with the group (often these would include and pull from diverse cultural repertoires).

I also kept a fieldwork journal and a series of analytic memos that I recorded both as audio notes (often as I drove back from our sessions) and in writing. In addition to these being the same exercises and components mentioned above, a lot of my own writing and reflection centered on the process of theorizing back. After the majority of our meetings, I took notes and wrote reflections around the Research Questions. Lastly, I consistently shared these with the Homies as a way to “member check,” bounce ideas, and as it often did, start new questions and conversations.

COVID-19 and Strategies of Inquiry

Isolation measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 and to keep our communities, especially those most vulnerable safe, meant that for those of us engaging in fieldwork during this time, we had to adapt—specifically, adapting our work to avoiding interactions that put

people at risk and instead using mediated forms that will achieve similar ends (Lupton, 2020). The bulk of this study happened during the height of Coronavirus. Consequently, our methods had to change and each one of the activities that we undertook together had to follow the most current guidelines around public safety to ensure the health of everyone involved in this project. At times, this included moving to online spaces like zoom, holding conversations outdoors whilst upholding social distancing guidelines, etc. One of my responsibilities in this project was to stay up to date with the shifting context, including the guidelines and recommendations provided by credible organizations like the CDC, the WHO, etc. and to respond appropriately.

Data Collection and Analysis

The methodology of that investigation must likewise be dialogical, affording the opportunity both to discover generative themes and to stimulate people's awareness in regard to these themes. (Freire, 1970, p. 97)

The strategies of inquiry and the methods described above created a large corpus of data, including more than 100 hours of transcripts from theorizing back sessions, interviews, conversations, free style sessions between the Homies, and voice memos; approximately 200 pages of field notes and memos (including my own reflections of process and thoughts around the Research Questions); and dozens of small, mostly illegible, diagrams that were created for us to describe and explain the Homies's theorizing. Throughout the process, I stored and organized the data chronologically and kept a data tracker sheet to keep track the data corpus. In regard to the work and the journals of the Homies, those belong to them and the only pieces that became part of the data corpus were those that they chose to share with the group. To ensure the anonymity of the youth all the data was stored and The Homies were given pseudonyms that they chose.

In regard to data analysis, at different points, depending on the research questions, we collaboratively asked questions about the process of theorizing back (Q1), the theories and

emerging understandings (Q2), and the relationship between the youth and both of those (Q3). Informed by the principles of Participatory Action Research, we did not attempt to follow a “single way to do research” (Torre et al., 2012, p. 11). Rather, both my support in facilitating the process as well as our work together was “bound by a set of critical and participatory commitments (Torre et al., 2012, p. 11).

The early stages of data analysis took place during the theorizing back sessions and centered primarily around research question 2, which seeks to explore the frameworks, imaginaries, and understandings that emerged as the Homies theorized back. Starting in the sixth of the theorizing back sessions, we began to make space during the sessions for the Homies to think about the meaning and the “lessons” of the data that we had “generated” so far, especially in regard to the question that began the Homies’ theorizing back process: Why do some young people leave school? For those sessions, I had transcribed and printed the data that the group had generated until then. At that point, the group had already gone through the initial interviews and the “telling our stories,” the “coming up with character,” and “best and worst experiences in school” strategies of inquiry. As the Homies began to look at the transcripts together, they took time individually to go through them and identify parts that stood out, to share questions with the group, and to think about what the big “aha’s,” or the big lessons were in relationship to the “questions” that they had been theorizing around. From the beginning of their analysis, it was immediately evident that the Homies repeatedly interrogated how power intersected or engaged with the “worlds” that they were theorizing around, a question that was both productive and generative. As insights emerged, these were compared, mapped, and captured by me.¹⁶ To do

¹⁶ The Homies were also encouraged to take notes around their findings, and in the process of written reflection, new questions emerged.

this, I shared a couple of different exercises and strategies for coding and the youth resonated with InVivo coding, especially as it seeks to capture the data in “the terms used by [participants] themselves” (Strauss, 1987, p. 33).

The “middle stages” of data analysis were primarily conducted by me and then “bounced with” the Homies. Pulling from the “aha’s,” the big ideas, the insights, and the codes initially identified by the Homies as they reviewed the transcripts of the first several theorizing back sessions, I constructed an initial code tree that I then took back to the group to gather their feedback and their thoughts. Once I had a more finalized version of the code tree, I coded all of the transcripts using digital software (Dedoose). Once I had coded all the data, I printed the excerpts, organized by code, and put together what the youth called my “big-ass binder.” During these middle stages of data analysis I also began analyzing the data in relationship to research questions 1 and 3, which explore the process of theorizing back and its relationship with the forging of identities and subjectivities. As expressed by Saldaña (2015), coding is not just labeling, it is linking the data to the idea and back to other data. As such, the analysis was cyclical and emerging themes and ideas were continuously shaped by an iterative process that made space for new questions, meanings, and for the cognitive and affective intuition of the Homies. In addition, it is important to emphasize that the process of identifying lessons, insights, and findings was not designed as a process for us to “agree” on a particular theory or explanation. Going back to Soja’s (1996) idea of “thirthing” closed circuits of irreconcilable binaries, the goal of our analyses was not be to land on either reproduction or resistance, it was not be to decide whether the correct term is a dropout, a pushout, or someone that has given up. On the contrary, the process sought to embrace dialogue, contradictions, multiplicity, and

ultimately to forge a set of findings that sat well, felt important, and was reflective of the Homies's theorizing.

Throughout both the early and middle stages of data analysis, the majority of the coding was done using "Pencil-and-paper" strategies, which allowed the group to engage with the data in ways that were palpable, creative, easily shared, and giving the Homies a tactile sense of physically handling and juggling with the words as they teased out ideas and themes contained in them (Bazeley & Jackson, 2014).

Later phases of data analysis consisted primarily of strategies for triangulation, member checking, and oscillation (Alford, 1998; Deleuze, 1990; Weiss & Fine, 2004). Due to methodological undergirdings and commitments of theorizing back, member checking went way beyond the traditional opportunity for the participants to check the transcripts and analyses for accuracy (Gall et al., 2007). Instead, it was an iterative and active process of writing the findings while nurturing a collective, safe, and authentic sense and space for possibility, critique, engagement, emotion, and purpose.

Member Checking and Writing

In *Speed Bumps* (2000), Weiss and Fine propose using multiple methods and engaging in constant member checks to increase the validity of our findings. Despite the collective and participatory nature of the theorizing back project, the vast majority of the "writing"¹⁷ for this dissertation was done by me. When doing so, I entered this process with what many have called reflexive criticality and a commitment to *hearing* the youth. Unlike listening, which is "going through the motions of acting engaged and allowing individuals to talk" (Brayboy, 2006, p. 440),

¹⁷ I put writing in quotation marks to destabilize the assumption that writing equals authorship, or that the ideas are mine alone. Here, writing refers to the specific activity of typing out this dissertation.

hearing meant an understanding and valuing of the Homies as people and a respect for their authority, authorship, and the cumulative knowledges that they, and their stories, held.

At the same time, despite attempting to “look closely and listen carefully in order to understand the perspectives and experiences of participants in their own terms rather than superimposing our own perspectives of what is problematic and needs to be transformed” (Souto-Manning, 2014, p. 201), I also entered this process as myself a subject with a position, a purpose, and set of blindspots and assets; all of which also participated in the writing. These tensions, both in regard to my own positionality and my role in the “writing” were not engaged with as a “problem” but as a dialectic and to move within it I made three axiological commitments that had implications for my writing and my process of checking in with the Homies as I wrote: Relational Accountability¹⁸, Impact as Validity¹⁹, and Clarity, transparency, and Reflexivity. Throughout the writing process, there were many moments of me doing the work of interpretation and often had to be weary of whether it was about me, the Homies, or the broader struggle. During these moments, I would make it an overt opportunity to go back to the Homies and share my interpretations, outlines, and get their thoughts; which resulted in multiple concrete changes in the framing, language, and the structure of the findings of this dissertation. While many of these changes are chronicled and named explicitly in multiple places throughout

¹⁸ My relationships with every single young person that I got the honor to work with and to learn from will not stop after this project and my biggest obligation is to work towards what Weis and Fine (2000) describe as a space that creates “recuperation, resistance, and the makings of ‘home’” (p. 57).

¹⁹ Conceptualized by Massey and Barreras (2013) as the extent to which research has the potential to play a role in social and political change or is useful as a tool for advocacy or activism. This work sought to take a clear axiological stance in regard to theorizing as a right –a right connected to sovereignty and self-determination– and sought to make space to purposefully nurture a “protected” space to put theorizing on the hands of those most often at the receiving hands of theory. Furthermore, by recognizing and centering theorizing as a site of struggle, their praxis is directly connected to the “culture wars” (Kelley, 2001) and the ongoing battle over representation.

the chapters, I cannot overstate how generative this process was. Often, bringing a piece of writing itself would start conversations, lead to further questions, and create new insights. Ultimately, critical reflexivity cannot be permanent nor self-verifiable, but must always be proactive, alive, and sitting constantly in dialogue with the changing context.

Methodological Tensions and Contradictions

As explained before, this dissertation study is situated within a larger project that is, at the root, grounded on humanizing and caring relationships and committed to educational justice. Methodologically, it attempted to be as participatory as possible. However, as a dissertation study that was taking place within a highly precarious time and space, there were many important tensions brought forth by structural constraints and requirements that need to be recognized and that had implications for the methodology. Some include the contradiction of me theorizing around youth theorizing-back, “authorship,” and the power over the frame. Others are more connected to all the ways in which, unlike the Homies, my location in the world afforded me the time, space, resources, and opportunities to do the theorizing, analysis, and writing work necessary for a project like this to come together²⁰. As McCarty (2018) reminds us, these are subjectivities and realities I do not attempt to “hide or neutralize under the guise of researcher ‘objectivity,’ for they are imbued with power and meaning” (McCarty, 2018, p. 232). As such, these will also be explored, exposed, and will sit in the dialectics that animate this work.

Keeping Each Other Safe

Despite feeling redundant, it is imperative to recognize that this project itself was born out of care, out of relationships, and out of a desire to be whole and a responsibility to each other

²⁰ Something that was egregiously exacerbated with the convergence of multiple pandemics, including COVID-19.

to make space to honor that desire and that right. Beyond its commitment to four Rs central to Indigenous Research as outlined by Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991): Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility, which guided many of the choices and tensions throughout the project; there were multiple layers and meanings to “keeping each other safe.” Moreover, these changed and continue to change dynamically and substantially since more than four years ago, when this project began. While these will be further explored and discussed in the chapters that follow, it is important to start by saying that there were endless “choices” behind the theorizing project, what ended in, and what was intentionally left out of this written dissertation.

Recognizing the multiple layers of epistemic (Teo, 2010) and ontological (King, 2017) violence that inundate the academic world, a central obligation of this project was not producing work that could be further used against communities already under siege. There are many stories that did not make it into these pages, knowing how easily, or strategically, they could be misunderstood. There are many conversations that were left in the “midst;” conversations that were not resolved and that were not for me to analyze but to recognize, with respect.

Many choices and tensions that were resolved collectively, and yet, despite its commitment to being as critical and as participatory as possible, as an academic dissertation study for a settler colonial university situated within a world and context that seems stubbornly and actively committed to death, injustice and exploitation, there were and are many difficult, important, and generative tensions and contradictions to confront. These ranged from collective authorship, navigating the IRB process in a rapidly changing, extremely precarious context, and working within the timelines of a world that certainly prioritizes capital rather than people. In regard to ensuring anonymity and a particular layer of safety, specific protocols were set in place to protect the Homies’ privacy, confidentiality, and consent. All the names utilized in this

dissertation are pseudonyms and any details that can compromise confidentiality have been removed. Much will be said about safety, care, and what it meant to honor the relationships that sat at the heart of this project. For now, I end this chapter with Tuck (2012), who calls for us to be a soft place for youth to land in their dangerous dignities, because it is their dangerous dignities that contain our hope for educational renewal.

CHAPTER 4: FROM FREE SPACE TO THEORIZING BACK: RECLAIMING THE RIGHT TO OUR OWN STORIES

The privileged act of naming often affords those in power access to modes of communication and enables them to project an interpretation, a definition, a description of their work and actions, that may not be accurate, that may obscure what is really taking place. (hooks, 1994, p. 62)

Four years ago, as I navigated my way through my career as an educator, activist, and PhD student, I found myself oscillating between profoundly different spaces and experiences. At times, I'd be sitting inside Moore Hall at UCLA, reading, discussing, and studying the work of critical scholars that had devoted a big part of their lives to asking questions and seeking to formulate theories and explanations that could both describe, interrogate, and, purportedly, change the worlds around them. Often, and especially in the dominant traditions, it was people with the “credentials” and the “earned” legitimacy that got to explain the lives of others, which commonly meant what some have described as “studying down,” an expression that will never sit right with me. Other times, I'd find myself on the “ground” amidst young scholars, theorists, and Homies whose “credentials” and “legitimacy” to participate in the explaining of the world, to the detriment of us all, were repeatedly deemed illegitimate and unworthy. Two years, lots of encounters, relationships, and many conversations later, I was sitting with those young theorizers, scholars and Homies sharing a space of dialogue, a space of power, and what we came to refer to as a space and a project of *theorizing back*.

This chapter, in an effort to describe the genesis of *theorizing back* and its connection to *Free Space*, begins with a brief history of the space, the relationships, and the people that were at the heart of Free Space. After, this chapter explores three foundational insights that emerged out of Free Space—a precursor to the theorizing project—and that constituted the impetus for what then became the *theorizing back* project: (a) the tyrannical and violent silencing of multiply marginalized youth; (b) the active and simultaneous pathologizing and exoticizing of the

identities and stories of multiply marginalized youth; and (c) the shared recognition that both the silencing and the pathologizing/exoticizing did not happen by “chance.” In other words, that “something fishy was going on.” Finally, this chapter concludes with a brief note on my own positionality and a brief memo that I believe captures what became the transition from Free Space into Theorizing Back.

From Free Space to Theorizing Back

It was a Thursday afternoon in October 2021 and even though, as Charisma had noted a couple of sessions earlier: “The world was pretty fucked before any of this COVID shit,” things felt like they went from bad to worse. It had been more than a year since the Homies had started *theorizing back*, usually about 6 or 7 of us, including myself; sometimes in person, in parks when possible, at the youth re-entry center when open and permitted by the health and safety recommendations, and virtually or through Zoom when unable to be physically together. There were six of us that Thursday, an odd group somehow woven together through a combination of coincidence, intention, good relationships, trust, and an enjoyment for questions and like Francisco put it, “trying to really figure out some deep shit.” That day, one of the last *theorizing back* sessions before I began writing this dissertation, I asked the Homies how they thought this *theorizing back* space came together, to which one of them responded: “It all started with that real talk space, remember, I think that is where we just began to have these conversations.” You mean Free Space? I responded. “Yea yea, that shit was hard!”

Free Space: A Space of Praxis

More than four years before, in 2017, a friend invited me to go “teach” a class to a group of young people at a Youth Re-entry Center in East Los Angeles. Affiliated to both, a large gang-prevention, spiritual, and healing centered organization and a continuation independent study high-school, the center served marginalized young people in the Los Angeles region. Most

of the youth at the center had been pushed out of school, criminalized, and deeply impacted by a whole constellation of violent, oppressive, and coercive systems, including the carceral state (Gottschalk, 2006), the family policing system (Roberts, 2021), settler colonialism (Wolfe, 1999), and the multiple features of what Rodriguez (2004) calls a society “structured in dominance”(p. 10), including White supremacy, late-stage racial capitalism and the prison industrial complex (Abramsky, 2007; Dyer, 2000; Sarabi & Bender, 2000), among many others. Unlike many youth re-entry spaces, the majority of the youth were not there by court order but as a result of the popularity and reputation of the organization, its stance of unconditional acceptance, and the multiple “benefits” of being there, which included monetary compensation. Also, many youth had family members, friends, and people in their community who were affiliated to either the center or the adult program of the same organization, which served many people in the Los Angeles region. The center was also a hub where young people could access a comprehensive system of supports including: mental health, financial, housing, and other kinds of resources. Most importantly, the center also felt like and was—unlike the majority of the spaces that marginalized youth had to navigate in their lives—a safe space where youth could hang out, wash their clothes, do school work, get food, and like Francisco described it, be “the one space where we can be chill.”

The center was also a place of deep wisdom, power, solidarity, and community, all of which quickly became apparent after the initial five minutes of my first “class.” I began our time together that day with a provocation that I’d once heard from a mentor (an old white-haired, big smile, cultural studies professor) years before. “Don’t read! Whatever you do, don’t read! I want to keep all my power to myself and for that I need to be able to manipulate you!” As was the case when I heard the question myself, the youth were immediately curious and later moved and

excited by conversations about the school to prison pipeline, the criminalization of young people, and the relationship between education, justice and freedom. Towards the end of the “class” I was asked if I’d come back, I asked whether they’d want me to. “Yes, this was fun,” they answered. And so I did.

Starting the following week, I started visiting the center on Friday afternoons and after a couple of weeks, “officially” hosting a space to continue some of the conversations we had started the weeks before. Without any concrete plans, no school credits attached, and radically voluntaristic, the intention in the beginning was to brainstorm themes and questions that would be of interest to the youth, bring relevant materials, and let the space be what felt right to all of us there. Without any particular “recruitment” plan, I’d walk the center and announce “Free Space”—a name initially decided by the youth—was happening and invite youth to join. Despite my efforts to be consistent, getting the space going felt complicated and at times disheartening due to the “inconsistency” of the group—which had nothing to do with the youth themselves—and the eventful lives that made a “stable” participation almost impossible (a theme that would one day become a reflection of the multiple entanglements that youth would theorize about). However, every single Free Space, whether we were 2 or 10, was deeply inspiring and meaningful.

Once inside, we’d sit in a circle and engage in conversations around questions and themes that resonated with us, our context, and our realities. I’d made a habit of either printing out articles, book chapters, or lyrics and passing them around to youth that had shared an interest or were becoming “regulars.”²¹ We read Freire, Levin-Morales, Lorde, Tupac, Fanon, Immortal

²¹ Regularity, consistency, or the expectation of any of these was, I quickly learned, an unjust expectation that dismissed and aggressively re-oriented the gaze away from the violent, unstable, precarious and oppressive context that the youth had to navigate as part of normal life.

Technique, the Word is our Weapon, and an eclectic and yet deeply intentional combination of pieces that felt real, ignited our imaginations, and invited powerful and transformative questions. Often, youth would themselves find texts, media (primarily songs), that they believed would resonate with the themes that constantly resurfaced and became long-standing conversations: education, family, freedom, dignity, violence, gangs, futures, dreams, choice (or the lack thereof), and plenty of others. One afternoon that I will never forget, Shamu, a big young man with an even bigger smile, a huge heart, piercing eyes and an inquisitive presence, brought photocopies of Tupac's "Words of Wisdom" and passed them around. It read:

America! America! AmeriKa-Ka-Ka
I charge you with the crime of rape, murder, and assault
For suppressing and punishing my people
I charge you with robbery for robbing me of my history
I charge you with false imprisonment for keeping me trapped in the projects
And the jury finds you guilty on all accounts
And you are to serve the consequences for your evil schemes
Prosecutor, do you have any more evidence? (2Pac)

After checking in, sharing how we were feeling from 1 to 10 and what we'd be if we were an animal (a question that they would continuously joke about), and taking some time reading the printout, Lola, a young, wise, and charismatic young woman that had been part of the space for a couple of months enthusiastically shared:

We should charge the schools, they need to be put on trial.
Anna: schools on trial one sounds interesting.
Miguel: Okay. Mark, Brian, any thoughts?
Brian: Yeah, let's do that.
Mark: Yeah, let's do that one.
We spent the remainder of that day writing to the prompt:
Schools, Schools! Schools!
I charge you with _____.

As was always the case, I walked away deep in thought that day. Their analyses were sharp, their critiques poignant, and their honesty about the world sobering. I was also grateful, deeply moved by our dialogue and progressively being transformed by what Davies and Gannon

(2009) call *pedagogical encounters*: moments of possibility, relationality, reflexivity, and of creating meaning. All of which ironically, felt like a radical departure from the “schooling” that most of us had been accustomed to, which was plagued with the trading of “over-coded, fixed knowledges” (p. 1).

I sometimes think back and wonder how we ended up in that space together and the only response that comes up is that for each case, for each of the youth, there is a story. Most often, it is a story of curiosity, dialogue, trust, and the forging of a relationship. There were the “regulars,” who would consistently go out of their way, despite all that was constantly being thrown at them, to show up and be present. And there were lots of youth who would be with us once, twice, or every once in a while. Every time they were there was a gift. Many youths, despite being a part of transformative conversations and sharing their deep desire to be a part of the space, were unable to. Some were swept back by the criminal (in)justice system, some were displaced from their homes and forced to move to far away, “affordable” cities or states, and all of them, in one way or another, had to negotiate being there with the “battling” and putting up with much more than any person should be “holding” at any time, let alone a young person. As CB the Orchestrator empathetically pointed out to the group during a conversation about inviting more youth: “remember we the ones who be battling shit all the time.”

Often, assuming the space was governed by the coercive dynamics ubiquitous in most of the institutions with which their lives were deeply intertwined, they would show up thinking they had to be there. Once they heard this was simply for “fun,” they would either brighten up and joyously participate or simply stand up and respectfully, at times comically, leave us. Altogether, the space was sincere, radically voluntaristic, and although clear about its commitment to dialogue and the asking of questions that felt sincere, highly disorganized. Some Fridays, they

would not be in the mood. Others, there would be an event or a field trip the center and there wouldn't be anybody there. Most Fridays, we'd be a group of about 6 or 7 and with time, dialogue, and trust, that group would eventually become the group, the community, the theorizers and the theorizing back project that is the heart of this broader project. As Francisco pointed out when I asked him what he thought was at the center of this project:

Miguel: So what do you think made this happen, like what was the fuel?

Francisco: With this community, this relationship that we have here. This relationship, I think it comes down to purpose.

Towards the end of Theorizing Back and during a group reflection, I asked a couple of them why they kept coming back to the space and learned that for each person there was a different reason. However, there were some important themes that emerged. Perhaps most important, Free Space, unlike many other spaces that youth were coerced into, was affirming of their humanity and of the legitimacy of their questions and their goodness. Francisco shared:

It's many reasons. One reason I came back is my heart of always being on the "bad" side of life. Wanting to try something new. I tried gangs, I tried gangs, I tried women, drugs but I never tried school. School always made me like less. When you came you made us feel or see ourselves as more. You opened our eyes or opened our minds to seeing the world from a different perspective. The way that you believe in others like you know that even if this kid or girl had a past or mask that everyone else sees but passes by. You seen more from a cultural powerful view. I felt embraced in your sessions as in I could be used for some good. I could help others. I could contribute. I'm not a drug addict or just a gang member I have a story just like so many others. (Francisco)

Tino the Rhino, centering how the space "allowed" his human vocation to be curious, shared:

For me I feel I went back because it allowed me to be more open minded and think more about problems within society that involve us but we don't really pay attention to it until the problem becomes a bigger issues or affects more people. The space helped us trade ideas and thoughts in these situations like what cause them and how can we prevent or solve them. (Tino the Rhino)

CB the Orchestrator, echoing the important of the "questions" and how they resonated with her, shared:

CB the Orchestrator: It's cause some of the questions I found interesting and I thought I'll go back, and then it got more interesting.

Miguel: What was interesting?

CB the Orchestrator: Talk certain shit about these motherfuckers and these systems I was like man somebody finally understands, somebody gives a fuck, if the shit that you said didn't make any sense I would have never have gone back, it automatically clicked because of the shit that I have been through.

The feeling that “somebody gives a fuck,” or that there is a possibility to be seen “as more than a gang member” consistently stood out as an unfortunate—and egregious—departure from what was, and had been the norm to the Homies. While this form of ontological and epistemic violence will be theorized as explored further, it is important to name that in many ways it was what made this space unique.

Free space (the precursor to the *theorizing back* project) wasn't a part of a program, it was not mandatory, it gave students no credits, had no funding, no flyers, and no syllabus. However, it was not random and there were important values, ideas and traditions that both stood behind it and inspired it, should be named and inseparable from its foundation and its values.

First, my initial motivation to show up at the center and give a talk about the school-to-prison pipeline, criminalization, and freedom was directly connected to my own trajectory as a person, thinker, activist and scholar and to the long legacy of scholars, movements, and struggles that at some point of my own life had gifted me with an understanding of what the Zapatistas call “the power of the word.” Second, while my initial inspiration to keep coming back was directly tied to youth asking me whether I would come back, it was also inseparable with my own belief of the futures that are being actively denied to the global majority and a commitment to what Freire calls *revolutionary futurity* (1970), affirming that people are beings who transcend themselves, looking forward and into the past as “means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so that they can more wisely build the future” (p. 84). And third, my own beliefs

and politics around the right and the vocation of people to ask questions of the world in order to transform it, which requires a commitment to pushing back against existing hierarchies of whose knowledge has value and whose questions need to be centered as we “document the grossly uneven structural distributions of opportunities, resources, and dignity” (Torre et al., 2012, p. 2).

While these strongly influenced my initial “why,” Free Space was ultimately nurtured and sustained by the ways in which it moved and changed every one of us. Calling it praxis, especially at the time, somehow felt overly laden with jargon, but if that wasn’t praxis, I am unsure what is. As Francisco, who would later characterize our theorizing back as an exercise of “changing the rhythm of the world” shared:

Because every time we have these conversations, it’s almost like we’re the only ones speaking on behalf, to the future generations. We’re not even speaking to ourselves, we are speaking to people in the future, so that these systems can change, and they can see the rhythm. They could see what we went through and they could relive or reimagine the history, it’s like we’re writing down history right now. Every time I come, I enjoy, I just enjoy having these conversations because I don’t know. I feel like these things right here, when I’m older, I know for sure I’m going to write some books.

Years after the transition from Free Space to theorizing back, during one of our last *theorizing back* conversations and months before beginning this dissertation chapter we collectively reflected and asked ourselves the question: How did we move from just talking about “real shit” as part of Free Space to this project of *theorizing back*?

During this reflection, the group identified three important themes and insights that arose from Free Space and that would in turn, directly create the why and the affective and cognitive energy for moving to *theorizing back* (a more deliberate communal interrogation around a more defined question): (a) How, as Francisco described, “we are being silenced”; (b) “How our identities are being subjected to the whims of others” (Camilo); and (c) the feeling, intuition, and suspicion that there were many things about the world that were impacting our lives and were invisible to us, in Ana’s words: “there’s *something fishy going on.*”

Together, the silencing, the repeated violence of being “framed” and robbed of the right to authorship over their stories, and a recognition of the suspicious “Matrix-ness” of dominant stories became the inspiration for embarking in *theorizing back*. These three insights never came up explicitly or verbatim as part of the reason for why we started *theorizing back*—these three were retrospectively identified by the youth who became part of *theorizing back*. However, these themes began to somehow shape our conversations, our questions, and ultimately fueled the group’s both rational and affective move to *theorize back*. Just as importantly, the “border” between theorizing and not theorizing (both in this space and elsewhere) is as flawed as the dominant notions that demarcate and delineate some spaces and peoples as “legitimate theorizers.” From the beginning, it was clear that every homie that participated in that space was actively asking questions and pulling from different bodies of knowledge, wisdom, cultural repertoires, and experiences to make sense, interrogate, and push back against the dominant explanations through which “they” and their lives were being framed. Directly challenging the narratives that theorizing happens only in certain spaces, the Homies were critical and sharp in their references to alternate and fugitive sites of theorizing (often bringing materials and insights from “non-academic” spaces). At the same time, it is also important to note that to them, this space still stood out as a “different kind of space,” both because of the explicit nature of our *theorizing back* and because of the “refuge,” the time, and the protected space to do so purposefully.

In the following section, I explore these three initial themes and insights, how they showed up in our conversations, and the ways in which they ultimately led us into the *theorizing back* project.

Silencing: “This is how they kill us”

They want to kill us. They killing us like that. You know? So this is how they kill you. They kill you by putting . . . Taking your money from you, or taking your education from you, or taking your home from you, or putting you around roaches, or putting you in an environment like this in your own city, or where you see all this shit every day. You see this shit every day, you come outside your house to go get food and you see somebody laying on the floor. And then silence, they punish you for speaking up. So when they do that, they succeed. (CB the Orchestrator)

Echoing Anzaldúa (1987) as she writes “el silencio nos sepulta” [the silence buries us] (p. 76), most Homies understood and felt that one of their biggest challenges as they navigated the world to be the tyranny of what we collectively came to summarize as “being silenced.” For the group, silencing powerfully came to represent a concept and a category that was able to “pinpoint” phenomena that were deeply intertwined with many domains of life, internal and external. Perhaps more importantly, silencing, as well as the silences it resulted in, were also a way for the Homies to put a finger on something that was deeply and terribly consequential in their lives, the lives of the people they loved, and in their communities.

Multiple Forms of Silence and Silencing

You know why I am tripping? Because nobody gives a fuck. (Joshua)

When we spoke about silencing, the Homies had a plethora of experiences, institutions, actors, habits, cultural domains, and ways in which silencing and silenced constituted a big part of the “mundane.” Often, the Homies referred to the silencing that occurred at the hands of schools, cops, prisons, probation officers, foster care systems, and other institutions. Consistent with what Foucault (1975) described as a critical component of disciplinary societies, these institutions and the spaces that confined the participation of youth served as spaces of enclosure. Sometimes, it was active and overt, punishing the speaking-up or the disruption of the “expected silence.” As Lola shared, “schools just had us sitting us down to be quiet all day.” In most cases, the

consequences of these silences were compounded by how they pillaged and trampled upon the Homies' right to play, to move, to speak up and "jump around." As CB the Orchestrator stated:

I got to put it into a perspective this. When I'm at home, I can't be jumping around loud and shit because my mom, she on drugs or whatever. She don't loud noise. So se be, calm down you're too energetic, too hyperactive. I go to school, they want me to sit down for eight hours, when I want to just run around, jump around and shit. I can't because this is what the fuck education is about²² . . . I really couldn't focus on the shit because of me wanting to just jump out of my own body and just run around, scream." (CB the Orchestrator)

Other times, the silencing (one which carried deep emotional consequences) occurred through a culture of dismissal, assumptions, expectations, of being accustomed to not being seen or heard or like Camilo put it: "to having the book shut down on you, swept under the rug, you are done." Silencing also occurred internally. "Self-imposed" silences at the hands of "feeling that we won't be believed" (Esperanza), "that it is not worth it to speak up because they make you feel you have nothing to say" (Tino the Rhino), or as Selena shared: silencing at the hands of "always feeling that it is my trauma that makes me imagine things." In these cases, the Homies felt the silencing came from within. Rooted in decades of judgement, disregard and dismissal that had been internalized, the Homies felt that they had to put on masks to be in the world, doubted themselves and whether what they had to say was legitimate or valuable, and operated under "silent agreements" where we "did not speak about this shit, why would we if it is all fucked up either way" (CB the Orchestrator). The Homies, reflecting on their experiences of being silenced and silencing themselves, were simultaneously affirming their desire, and the desire of all people, to be heard, to be seen. As CB the Orchestrator recounted:

Because nobody do that shit, Bro. I wish somebody could do that shit. I wish they would've asked me this shit when I was little and actually really listen. "Did that teacher really do that?" I wish I could be like, "Yes." (CB the Orchestrator)

²² The violence inherent to silence/being silenced and its deep ties to education are more thoroughly explored in Chapter 6.

Conversely, when these rights and human desires are denied:

All your emotions are cut off. All your problems are cut off. The characteristics of who you are, are cut off and you got to be this person . . . this perfect picture and you have no voice.” (Francisco)

In a conversation when we spoke about whether schools listened to us. Tino the Rhino started:

Tino the Rhino: no fool, they don’t even try to do that shit, you know, I feel like they try to—

Esperanza: They only try to see what you know and what you don’t.

Tino the Rhino: Yeah, they minimize what you actually are or what you have to say.

Esperanza: Yeah, dumb you down.

Tino the Rhino: A big ass test or something, you fail because you didn’t have time to study or think, but the teacher doesn’t even know what the fuck is going on in your life you know. And they will automatically assume, “Oh, you over there fucking goofing off or something, you know?”

In *Framing Dropouts*, one of the books that we’ve read together as a group, Fine (1991) argues, it is crucial to investigate “whom silencing protects, the practices by which silencing is institutionalized, and how the muting of students and their communities undermines a project of educational empowerment (Freire, 1985; Giroux, 1983; Short, 1980)” (p. 32). For all the Homies, it was immediately clear that their stories were plagued with experiences of being dismissed and silenced as a part of “normal” daily life. Mirroring and reproducing broader societal inequities and the expectations of quiet, still, compliant bodies placed upon children of color in schools and across different spaces (Noguera, 2003; Takanishi, 2004; Yosso, 2006); being silenced, or not having time or space to voice or think about their experiences was normative and felt like simply “going thru it.”

Trying to survive, trying to make it, you’re just in that circumstance, and you have to hide who you are, that’s silencing. It’s pretty deep. (Francisco)

What happens when you speak out? I asked once. “Well shit, you gotta pay,” Cortez responded. Once again visibilizing the architecture of the punitive apparatus, it was clear “whom silencing protects” and who the breaching of the silence punishes. For all of the Homies, speaking, and especially speaking with sincerity, from within, engaging authentically with the world often had terrible consequences, something that they’d been aware of since they were children. As is made clear in the examples below, these differing forms of punishment and consequences, and the harm that would come as a result of them, were well understood by Homies since they were children.

It ain’t that you don’t want to [speak up]. That’s what I used to have to go through too, when I was young I used to want some certain shit to stop. I didn’t want to see a lot of shit. But I never got the chance to tell nobody about it because, nigga, I know what the repercussions of me saying something can happen to other kids in the house. You know what I mean? My little brother, everybody got to go, not just me. But how I felt was really what I needed to say, bro. Which sucked. Having to hold that in, that made me kind of drop out, too. (CB the Orchestrator)

Therapist was asking me many questions, a special needs evaluation, I was confused why I was there, I barely found out in the moment. They asked me many questions . . . I tell him some truth. I smoke a lot of weed. I don’t like being at home. I tell him the truth, but not so much to save my family from being taken away. After this experience, I was questioning myself, like if there was something wrong with me, maybe I do have special needs and a million other questions. I knew I had problems at home. Only that I didn’t know how to transfer the pain or could to say it or if I should. (Francisco)

Not because your parents would always also tell you like, oh, don’t say nothing in school. Or don’t just say that in school. Because they know if you say that in school again, it’s a job or government make you worse. A government makes things worse when you ask for help sometimes. Sometimes you’re like you say something about your life, they try to get you to share and then the government makes it worse. It makes it kind of against you. So yeah (Selena)

So as a little kid, 10, 11, 12 years old, you should have to be speaking truth, but you be thinking “okay, I can say this because I might go to a foster home you know what I mean? That’s a very advanced adult way of thinking already, it’s kind of crazy. (Teo)

Silencing at the Hands of Structural Violence

One afternoon nearing the end of our theorizing back sessions, driving CB the Orchestrator back to her grandmothers', she said something that kept me thinking for a while. We were talking about what it would take to sustain a process like *theorizing back* and what it could look like and she immediately pointed out the challenge of trying to get young people to join without removing all "the bullshit." Further reflecting on her own life, she recognized the overwhelming majority of time she was dealing with so much that she felt that she couldn't "think straight":

Yeah . . . stress and clarity. You feel that people, it blinds me, the stress blinds me. So I can't see what the fuck is going on. Like right and wrong. Like it blinds . . . it takes so much out of me. It takes me from being me. It takes my personality, stress takes fucking my heart.

Hearing that initially triggered a certain form of ambivalence in me, especially as I reflected on the many times where I felt that I'd witnessed that idea, often connected to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, be deployed by people in power—especially in the education system—as a way to describe why "if a child is hungry, they cannot think." A condescending crutch that invisibilized all the brilliance, thought, and rebellion that I had witnessed in places of "hunger" and a convenient excuse that I had viscerally resisted and argued against multiple times.

Simultaneously, CB the Orchestrator's comment was also a clear and palpable example of silencing at the hands of a much more complex arrangement of structural and systemic violence, one that would continue to show up in our conversations. As Teo described, it's like "not having time to think or to focus if you don't know where you will sleep":

We have the power and we have the vision, but there is so much throwing us off as we've looking to even survive. Thinking about what's going on in our hoods, am I going to survive another day? Am I going to be dog food? Who's going to jump me. We got to handle your shit on the streets, wherever that is. You can't be thinking about these other things when you are concerned about very basic kind of like, oh, am I going to get shots

today? I'm so busy surviving, so I don't have time to think about this higher-level shit. That's not an excuse, man. (Teo)

Further documenting its deleterious impact, many Homes felt like the silencing also severed their connection with their own history, part of what we later began to call being robbed of the “word.” As Fine (1991) argues, “to not name systematically alienates, cuts off from home, from heritage, and from lived experience” (p. 35). As Selena shared during a conversation about her inability to sincerely name her own experience as she was taken from her home and mis-placed by the family policing system, “my God, I would crack my head trying to make up new stories, trying to make my life interesting. Make it a perfect life. Like, oh, it's a perfect life. That's what I was trying to like, because everyone else would make it seem like their life was great.” In his critique to the “disciplines that have robbed us of viable futures by trapping us in a past that never existed, Estes (2019) describes how distorted, misinterpreted histories are not only irrelevant and unfamiliar to actually existing indigenous people, they are also deeply disempowering. Similarly, although in a different context, the Homies consistently referred to being severed from their own voices, past, stories and consequently robbed of choice over their futures, as Joshua yelled at me once as he jumped in his car to go “put in work,” “we are aliens in our own home.” Moreover, resonating with the process of manufacturing consent²³, these debilitating silences are often “self-imposed.” CB the Orchestrator and Francisco explained:

Nah, that shit fucking . . . It's a lot of that people don't talk about. I don't talk about this shit with nobody else, bro. Not a fucking soul. Not even people that I love. I'm expressing it to y'all. That's crazy shit. That shit takes a lot out of people though because it takes you to a mold that you just been going straight ever since it happened. I never really took the time off to go back and just relax and look at what happened and been able to pinpoint it and try to regroup from it.

²³ “Effective and powerful ideological institutions and processes that carry out a system-supportive propaganda function, by reliance on market forces, internalized assumptions, and self-censorship, and without overt coercion” (Herman & Chomsky, 1998).

A lot of these things that I talk to you all about, I never even talked about. Like I said, with nobody. I'm not even playing. I literally never spoke. It was unspoken. Zero, not even myself. You just put something like a Band-aid on there, and you just keep walking. (Francisco)

Besides the overt consequences that the Homies had to negotiate when breaking silences—often instituted through schools, the carceral state, and the family policing institutions—“not talking about this shit” also bears a disproportionate and devastating impact on the inner, emotional, and spiritual lives of low-income adolescents, whose lives, pleasures, and troubles are denied expression, exploration, and critical interpretation (Fine, 1991, p. 32).

Additionally, Tino the Rhino elaborated:

Like it changed me and it was like, it changes me, and I wasn't aware of the things basically changing me, until I really started to pay attention to it and we started talking about it.

Moreover, although these consequences were most often experienced individually, kept “secret,” and commonly felt isolating; the phenomenon of silencing was clearly collective, systemic, and ubiquitous. As CB the Orchestrator explained:

With my peoples, people I'm telling you, people that I love, nigga don't tell me nothing. They just live they life. They know they going through pain. They know they sick. They know that's why they reacting the way they react. You could do something to somebody and they just be like, “What the fuck, bro? why you keep doing that?” It's because the nigga got a lot of shit in his mind. You feel me? Shit that's fucking eating them alive but he don't even feel comfortable to the people he love to talk about it to.

Selena, pointing out how people are used to “dealing” with and normalizing the silencing, further points out the contradictions that arise when different actors, in this case schools, tell them to ask questions:

Or in school too. They'll tell you, “Oh, ask questions.” But we're not already used to asking question. We're used to dealing with it. That's the word. Yeah. Dealing with it. And not dealing with it was . . . It's just, you just have to deal with it. (Selena)

In *Language and Symbolic Power*, Bourdieu (1991) wrote of institutions and their work as a verb (institutioning) and not a noun. In it he describes part of their work as “social magic,” producing both stratification and embodied identities. Teo, describing himself and the Homeboys as “all institutionalized” further described how this “social magic” was at work every day: “how are we supposed to say who we are if the answer is there.” Consistent with what King (2017) describes as a compulsory school system that demands an inherent denial of your beingness, Francisco describes this silencing and institutionalizing at the hands of multiple institutions and organizations:

That’s crazy, I just had a thought in my head, I was going to school, it’s almost like a robot, you’re just supposed to be like no feeling. You know what I mean? It’s more like just comply with the system. It’s almost like they’re systemizing us, even as children, and even the prison system. Even as jobs and capitalism. Nonprofits too

In this regard, silences were also felt and attention to our emotional registers often became a bridge towards conversations about interiority, subjectivity, embodiment, and intimate life.

Further tying these emotional responses to a broader hegemonic project, the Homies’s descriptions of how silencing in all its forms *felt* like a facet of “going thru it” is consistent to an understanding of culture as not only a “way of life,” but also “a structure of feelings” (Williams, 1982). In addition, voicing and attending to each other’s emotions was important for understanding our present and society. Resonating with Cvetkovich’s (2012) idea that the documentation of everyday life is not just an end in itself but also a way of providing and understanding systemic accounts of power and to describe broader social structures and arrangements, for our project and our space, silencing became a place of simultaneous hurt and alienation and solidarity, togetherness and inquiry. In many ways, as Teo describes, the Homies were the ones in “the back of the class . . . have a whole story behind them”:

I don’t know how to say it, but we all, we’re all like constants. We’re all institutionalized . . . special. Homeboys is a very special place. I see a very special place and the visual of

who ended up at Homeboys are there for a reason. In the visual, they have their own story. It's like really deep. It's something that is not at the same time, it's like, I feel this is this, in my head, it's like, they opened like a little book, like it's something, like all of a sudden, all of us, even some of those kids back there or even some of the youth where they're in the back of the class, but they don't even speak, a lot and have a whole story behind them, lots of feelings and they don't even say one word, they just see their name and they see how they feel, and that's it. but they're lonely, you know what I mean? They're their own little world and they're alone, they are silenced. It's like, who's there for you? It's hard. (Teo)

Further detailing the complex dynamics and intersections—the cruelty—between the silences and the silencing in a conversation about the foster care system, CB the

Orchestrator and Alita discussed:

I was going through so much shit, and I would want to tell. I was scared to tell the police and the teachers, I am not doing good in school, people were telling me off. I told my mom and she was like, “No, no, you were just dreaming” and I was scared to tell her teachers because she'll end up in foster care, you know what I mean?

CB the Orchestrator: Yeah, that shit was fucked up, I used to fucking hate that shit, too.

Ana: You know what I mean? Because you're scared of the police like, “Oh am I going to leave my mom? I want to be with my mom.”

CB the Orchestrator: But I just want this to stop.

Ana: I don't want to ruin—

CB the Orchestrator: It ain't that you don't want to. That's what I used to have to go through, too, when I was young. I used to want some certain shit to stop. I didn't want to see a lot of shit. But I never got the chance to tell nobody about it because, nigga, I know what the repercussions of me saying something can happen to other kids in the house. You know what I mean?

Across our multiple conversations about silence, we would often ask ourselves: If there is so much silencing, then who or what gets to fill up the world with stories and assumptions?

It was quickly revealed that on the flip side of the institutionalized and ubiquitous silencing, the world was everything except “silent.” Indeed, there was a non-stop machinery of stories, explanations, rationale, and theories and it was not the case that their stories, identities,

and worlds were not being explained. In fact, there were loads, often contradictory, being said about “them,” it just wasn’t them doing the explaining.

Criminalized, Pathologized or Exoticized, Which One Was it?

It was being a broke, dirty kid. Being a kid that come there . . . you could tell a kid that goes through at home. They going bring it in they backpack. Tired, shoes all fucked up. Cant’ pay attention. (CB the Orchestrator)

Ever since I set foot at First Street and began building relationships with the youth, it was clear that part of their everyday struggles was negotiating who they understood themselves to be and the multiple roles and masks they needed to wear to “accommodate” various publics, groups of people, institutions, and competing ideological categories. I still remember one of the first conversations I had with CB the Orchestrator sitting on the curb in front of the center. She saw some visitors and said: “look at them non-profit people, they here to find the best looking, most tattooed, most articulate homegirl so that they can send to their program and put them in their pamphlets.” This was long before beginning the *theorizing back* process and made me acutely aware of both my positionality and of the constant commodifying and storying of the youth and their identities. Ever since, a big insight, critique, and often the subject of emotionally charged conversations has been that of the simultaneous criminalizing, pathologizing and commodifying of the Homies. The criminalizing and exoticizing, each rendering a subject or object ranging from the “poor,” the marginalized, the underserved, the “at-risk youth,” the system-impacted youth, the criminals or the victims; whichever term proves convenient depending on the particular political and ideological project in which it is being used. Not only robbing the Homies of the right to their “words,” but also pointing how others—including ideological and political projects—are hanging on to, and invested, in the legitimacy of their story, Tino the Rhino elaborated:

I feel like some people don't understand. They don't want to understand. They want how they see us to be, to be true. Instead of hearing you out, the actual why. What's really going down. They put it in their own words. They put it into how they want it to be. For some we are animals and for others we need help.

On Being a “Problem”

It is not enough for the colonist to delimit physically, that is to say with the help of the army and the police force, the place of the native. As if to show the totalitarian character of colonial exploitation the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil. (Fanon, 1961, p. 41)

We are all from this little neighborhood that everybody already looks at us like fucking animals. (Raul)

Although the identities of the Homies were consistently being framed and portrayed in different ways, being criminalized, categorized as a problem and as “the thing against which normality, whiteness, and functionality have been defined” (Kelley, 1998, p. 3) was consistently one of the most salient.

Okay. Like they see, oh this kid's coming from this bad neighborhood. You know? So they already start to criminalize them just based off the area he's coming from. Just because, oh he's coming from a low class. (Tino the Rhino)

The assistant principal would judge me quick. He wouldn't even talk to me, he would confront me, like I know . . . even if it wasn't something I did he would go ask me and try to make something . . . it was me, my appearance . . . (Eric)

You know when they're like, “Oh, we talking about these.” We're the people that we're the untouchables. We're people that we're the criminals. We're the people that we're the losers. (Francisco)

Throughout our conversations, it was clear that the homeboys and the homegirls served as a broad container for many “terms” and stories, many of which “matched” the images and stereotypes of criminality that permeated American society and that marginalized youth had to contend with (Noguera, 2008). It was also clear that, as Hutycheon (1989) argues, representation was not considered or felt as a politically neutral or “innocent.” On the contrary, their “naming” and their framing felt intentional. It swiftly and conveniently turned them into “runaway social

problems” (Fraser, 1989) and artificial hangers for a plethora of social issues. Consistently, the Homies recalled and shared far too many stories of being “labeled” or “deemed a problem” and as they shared them, they also pointed out and recognized that these were not disconnected incidents but parts of bigger project, often intentional. In this example, Teo shared one of his first experiences at an Individualized Education Plan Meeting at school, where quickly into the meeting, he “knew” what was going on:

I asked the psychiatrist, why am I here? They said a special needs evaluation, something like that . . . oh, I see what they did. You know I was young, but I am smart enough to know what’s going on.

Building on what Teo shared, Francisco further reflected:

Because I feel like this world downs us, dehumanizes us, and makes us feel like we’re not special enough. That’s why all of us, we settle for that. I don’t know. Maybe that’s a reason why we settle for less. Because we don’t feel like we’re worth more. (Francisco)

A sometimes painful, important realization that the Homies and I often came to as a group was how many of those instances of being pathologized, criminalized, and categorized as a “social problem” had deeply impacted our²⁴ own identities and how we understood ourselves and our communities. This “social magic” was often resisted, a finding that we will explore further in a future chapter. However, this social magic was also often internalized and deeply entangled with multiple domains of how the Homies saw themselves, their identity, their community, their place, and their ability and or/value. The footprints of these messages and stories of who was what, and perhaps just as importantly (and violently) of who had value and who “belonged” were highly visible, felt, and consequential. Here are two excerpts that speak for themselves:

I think that’s what it is. People be battling they selves from when they born to when they die. I think that’s really what it be. Even when I was in school, it felt like . . . When I was

²⁴ I am purposely using we in this paragraph to include myself. While having grown up in a radically different environment where I was more a part of the oppressor and less the oppressed, I experienced many instances of criminalization and punishment in my youth, many of which we very impactful and a “place” of connection, empathy, and dialogue with the youth.

young, it felt like I was doing something wrong. You feel me? I felt like I was missing something, some shit was wrong with me. Even when I was in fifth grade and fourth grade, I always felt I was not as normal as everybody else or we can't connect. I never really felt at peace even as a kid. That shit means a lot, bro. (CB the Orchestrator)

My mom used to walk, used to come to the park looking for me. She was like, "Where's Francisco?" And I'll just be like, "Mom, go to the other side of the street." Because I'll be scared. I'll be like my Homies are going to be talking smack like, "That's your mom?" Because my mom was poor. We were poor. My mom would have ripped up shoes, ripped up pants. She wouldn't comb her hair. She'll would just be like, you know what I mean?

And I'll just be like, that's where we were. I was like that too. But when I was older, I started getting . . . Because they still would make jokes about other people in the street. And I started becoming like, "That's me." They're making fun of him off his shoes and his pants. And I'm looking at him and I'm like, "That's me, though. That's how I go to school." (Francisco)

Further considering the work of *institution* as a verb and an act of communicating, to "institution" not only expresses identifying the person being "institutioned" but it also consolidates them as a certain kind of person in discursive spaces and across different publics; all of which contain a particular story, its own set of politics, its characters, and its purpose. In our theorizing back space, we would later have multiple conversations about the "story" space and who got to fill it. However, a question from the beginning and a tension that quickly emerged is one captured clearly by Raul as he was describing how people want to see them as criminals and dispose of them, lock them away. And yet, it always feels like they also need to pity them and it was as if they were fixated with them: "they see us as animals but they are also obsessed with us."

On Being "Exotic"

We have been consistently marked as dysfunctional: ironically, dysfunctionality is both the source of the slander directed toward us as well as a source of attraction. (Kelley, 1998, p. 3)

Running parallel to the pathologizing and the criminalizing, the Homies expressed repeatedly having to contend with the simultaneous hypervisibility afforded by being the

“recipients” and targets of relentless “charity,” “the good white people” and “the nonprofits.” Like one young Asian youth shared during one of our first Free Space convenings, “it is like being the animals in the zoo, with people feeling bad for you.” At the time when this project was taking place, the umbrella organization for the youth re-entry center had exponentially grown in both, popularity and resources. Homeboy and its mission had migrated into the public sphere and had been “taken up” by celebrities, foundations, and a host of charitable organizations that wanted to “contribute.” Further resonating with what, decades earlier, Kelley (1998) described as an “explosion of interest in the inner city that cannot be easily divorced from the market place . . . there was real gold in them their ghettos since White America’s fascination with the pathological urban poor translated into massive book sales” (p. 20).

Alongside the growth of the organization’s popularity, the spectacle of “morality,”²⁵ a logical extension to the spectacle of society (debord, 1967) that surrounded and narrated the organizations “work” had also grown, often at the expense of relationships, authentic encounters, and the necessary messiness that is required for sincere engagement with the world. I will never forget the day when sitting outside of first street, CB the Orchestrator nudged at some people walking down the street as she shared: “look at the non-profit people, out here to find the best-looking, most heavily tattooed, most articulate youth to put all over their pamphlets.” This wasn’t the first nor the last time that this conversation came up—youth being asked to share their stories at charity events and fundraisers, youth being asked to hold big checks and smile for pictures amidst groups of rich white donors, youth being encouraged to tell their stories and open

²⁵ Referring to the spectacle in the spirit of what Debord (1967) described as the “modern spectacle,” one in which spectacle (narratives, performances, and prescriptions about reality) explains and embellishes “that which society could not do” (p. 25) but purports to be doing. “The spectacle is the existing order’s uninterrupted discourse about itself” (p. 24), “if defines the program of the ruling class and presides over its formation” (p. 57).

up so that they could “heal” only resulting in well-intentioned people and organizations, as CB the Orchestrator argued, “unable to deal with and traumatized by our shit,” or as Raul described, “They are opening up the doors for group of youth that then they realize their problems and go, fuck you, you are fucking bad, stay away from our building.” “How am I supposed to deal with my shit if the person supposed to help can’t handle it” (CB the Orchestrator). The Homies had implicit agreements and understood clearly what in other worlds is referred to as “poverty pimping” (Diversi & Finley, 2010). I once asked Tino the Rhino what these dynamics of feeling pathologized and exoticized felt like and, quickly visibilizing the entanglements between power and the actual framing, responded “you can’t bite the hand that feeds you and at the same time, it feels like they make all the decisions for us and they use us. It is also hurtful that they just want to hear the bad shit, it is like that is the only part of us.”

One day, talking about how people would come to their neighborhoods to film or to “steal their stories” (Skye), they described how filmmakers wanted to make movies about them, but not really “about them,” only about certain things about them.

That shit happened to me and homeboys before, and I was like 15. A motherfucker, I don’t know, if my Mama would’ve knew about that shit she would’ve been mad. But I never told her, I guess because when I signed the papers, my application to work here I signed up for some shit I didn’t even know about. So when people come with cameras, and they come asking questions, it was like I couldn’t say no because it was part of the contract of working here.

So the dude came up there when I was 15, he was like I want to make a movie. And he only talked to me, and he talked to me for two weeks straight, for an hour a day, two weeks straight. And then he said he was going to make a movie or whatever, he was going to hit me up, he was going to see the book or whatever. It’s fucking like five or six years, that nigga ain’t never hit me up, bro. I didn’t never see what he put my words into.

I really wanted to say no nigga, I don’t want to tell you nothing. But I was 15, so I let that nigga fucking . . . I told that nigga a lot of shit, bro. I told that nigga a lot of shit. I didn’t even know the nigga, and I told him a lot of shit, some deep shit. And that nigga never came back. (CB the Orchestrator)

On a similar note, Lola recounts a similar process that happened to her in school:

You know for my uh my project for eighth grade I had to write an autobiography about myself and they were like be honest and all that . . . so um that that stuck out to them, like they made me write all this shit and that of me stuck out to them so they now sent my autobiography out to all the high schools so that you know I could get into them you know but that was my shit not theirs. (Lola)

Similarly fetishizing “them” without really knowing anything about them, the Homies often described a co-opting of their culture and how suddenly the world wanted to be *barrio*, but *not really barrio*. In this paragraph, Tino the Rhino describes how outsiders show up to his hood to record themselves:

Yeah, the fuck you have to record shit. If you’re really doing it, bro, people are going to eventually . . . No, bro. I see them in the ’hood recording or somebody else is recording you. That’s just because you’re doing it for clout. You can straight tell because you see somebody else on the street and you’re going to be like, “Oh, this person’s a cholo.” And nah, that’s people doing it for clout, and unless somebody else does on their own free will and things, that’s bullshit. “Pinches doble caras de la verga.” (Tino the Rhino)

Criminal, At-Risk, Exotic, or Worthy of your Pity; So Which One was It, Then?

The ways in which the Homies’ identities and stories were framed by others as much more than just “a problem” or “exotic” could be explored much further—and have been thoroughly documented in the literature. However, what was clear to the Homies, and something that was central to the formation of *theorizing back*, was that authorship over their story, at least as it understood, portrayed and used across mainstream and dominant publics; was in the hands of those with certain forms of “legitimacy” and power. Moreover, this authorship was being used for various self-serving and strategic purposes. Further resonating with Morrison’s (1987) claim that “definitions belong to the definers—not the defined” (p. 190), their “framed” identities as criminals, “poor” children, or “victims, often served the definers in ways that resonate with what Malwhinney (1998) calls *moves to innocence*, problematically serving to appease the oppressor’s complicity and to, as Tuck and Yang (2012) wrote, “rescue settler futurity” (p. 3). As Esperanza once observed as she explained why she refused to talk at a charity event: “they want us to make

them all cry with our story and then make them feel good when they give us a big check and we are supposed to smile.” In addition, no matter whether it positioned them as victims or as criminals, it was always an overly simplistic story of what was very wrong or very right with “them.” Camilo, describing the ways in which he understood, and resisted, these convenient or self-serving narratives, shared:

I would see their faces turn into frowns and their pity would come pouring out. Their pity was a clue as to how I was supposed to feel.

Francisco and Tino the Rhino, contrasting those imposed stories with what they were doing as a group together, conversed:

Francisco: Yeah, and even right now, we’re not doing this for clout. We’re doing this to put light on where we come from and put light in the beauty that we have, and to see the truth. It’s there but its hidden behind it. They hide it.

Tino the Rhino: Yeah, it’s hidden behind that ugliness, [crosstalk 00:13:12].

Francisco: Yeah, it’s behind this image they all . . . It’s bad to be a gang member. Latino, we’re criminals. We’re bad. We don’t go to school or we are poor and have no choices.

Tino the Rhino: But that’s not really how in fact it is.

Francisco: Yeah, this is how we’re seen.

Consequently, in contrast to “normal” children, who (presumably) find themselves at a “successful” or adaptive place in the world, the Homies also saw how they were used as pathological markers for various things including school failure, family ignorance or neglect, family poverty, and barriers to opportunity (Walkerdine, 1986).

In addition, they, too, were effectively triggered and moved by how these framings both flattened the complexity of their lives (Kelly & Caskell, 1996, p. 19) and how they worked actively to silence and erase it. In addition, these overly simplified portrayals also invisibilized the emotional registers and the complex humanities that could in turn, highlight particular

structures and features of society and lived experience; a common feature of “uncritical and unreflective academic prose” that “defines, charts, maps, knows, discovers, captures, and recovers within the limits of an utterance, phrase, or word” (p. 148). As Camilo raised when talking about how he was supposed to see his own life: “And this is all this other shit. You know what I mean? And we’re in here doing battle, unable to write it down or think about it and yet they [people with power, white people, people writing the books] are speaking about us. You know what I mean?”

Labeling us criminals or addicts or dumb. Poor, uneducated. All these labels, and then how you carry them. How they take the words away from us. (Francisco)

Throughout our sessions, the Homies were also clear and critical of the ways in which “taking the words away from us” obscured the conditions, the violence, and the entanglements that, despite the public’s and the people’s around them reticence to name them, the Homies still have to negotiate as part of daily life. As multiply marginalized youth, the “frame” that the world was attempting and forcefully pushing onto them and their subjectivities echoed what Annamma (2017) describes as part of a “prison nation” working to dismiss the possibility and right of youth to be treated as thinkers, students, and literary human beings. In one of multiple conversations where the Homies discussed one of the many terms through which they are framed, “dropouts,” CB the Orchestrator, Francisco, and Tino the Rhino quickly pushed back and sought to visibilize all that is erased by the term:

CB the Orchestrator: How you just going to call them the dropouts but what the fuck did you do to help the dropout? Drop out, nigga. Where is the fucking support? The unsupported youth.

Francisco: I got one, the resistant humans. Resist humans. Humans that resist. Because we’re humans, we have emotions. And we resist, we’re not only just, “Do this, do this, do that, do that.”

CB the Orchestrator: Yeah, that shit is crazy. It’s a lot of shit that’s mixed in.

Tino the Rhino: Yeah. It's like, okay, these are my strengths. These are my weaknesses.

CB the Orchestrator: This is all this other shit.

Echoing some of these thoughts on a separate occasion when Francisco shared his experiences of being only “seen” as a drug addict, he shared:

Someone could see me in the street and judge me as a drug addict. Some people still see me as a drug addict. He's a drug addict, going to go to hell. Who I am to you is not who I am, who I really am. What you think I might be is not who I really am. Only I know myself, and sometimes I don't even know myself. I make my own story, so I create my own glory.

Once again, what was “seen,” the logics that it enabled, or what was made hypervisible through a particular frame also influenced what was not seen. The more the Homies reflected on what was not seen, the less innocence the “blindness” became. As Francisco reflects:

How just things don't add up in this horrible show. So there's some fishy going on...

Something Fishy Going On/ Time to Theorize Back

Still in our early days of getting together, when we were gathering at Free Space and after finishing an enthusiastic conversation about dignity, I asked the Homies why did they keep coming back?

Joshua: It's cause we tripping on life.

Jose (who had been silent for a long while suddenly seemed exited): I am always tripping on life, you seen that *Truman Show*?

Santiago: *Truman Show*, that movie?

Jose: Simon, it's about this guy that they put in a world that was created intentionally, it was kind of like a play and he wakes up every day and is like, “Oh, this is my wife and this is this and this is that,” but in reality, his wife is actually that comes from the outside and all this.

Esperanza: He's in a dollhouse basically.

Jose: He starts to see that doesn't make sense. He begins to trip on life. Some shit that they tell him don't make sense like and I will tell you what I think. I think that—

Tino the Rhino: The technology where they got that advanced, if they don't even realize he's being controlled. They could have just start controlling into your brain.

Jose: But hear me out, hear me out to this. I think that the reason why we are tripping on life is a gift.

Joshua: Yeah, it's self-awareness, fool. It's consciousness.

Miguel: What do you mean by consciousness?

Jose: It is a gift. It allows us to see behind the bullshit. It's a feeling, it's a gut feeling and it's also—

Santiago: Why do you have that feeling though? That's the thing. Who gave you that feeling?

Esperanza: Where does it come from?

Jose: I say it comes from consciousness—

Joshua: I think that's what makes us us—

Jose: To me, being a human means to be able to see—

Esperanza: Intuition.

This “fishy going on,” as Francisco and Alita described it, became the third pillar of what the youth argued motivated the group to embark on the theorizing project. Across our conversations there was always a resurfacing feeling, doubt and intuition about the legitimacy, incongruency, and “convenience” of the logics and the “truths” that prevailed across the capital S “Story.”

Many of our conversations would quickly go into this “fishyness,” sometimes into distrust, often of the government, sometimes towards anger or resentment, and often into a “doubt” that would be a critical component of the group’s future collective inquiry. In this sense, as Cvetkovich (2012) argues, affective investment and “following our gut” was a powerful starting point for theoretical insight and conversely, a springboard for theoretical insight that would in turn never work to deaden, flatten, or negate affective experience or investment throughout our process.

Responding to a question of an example of something that we intuitively knew, Teo began:

Teo: Like history, they control but then we buy into it. Like for example prisons, they are now owned by rich people and they pay people nothing. It's a corrupt organization and then we go out in the street and do crazy shit and get locked up.

Tino the Rhino: Like if we were pawns sometimes.

Teo: Yeah yeah, I know what you mean, like we get ourselves in these cycles and we choose to fight.

Miguel: Is that it or do you think it's that we don't know?

Teo: I am pretty sure that most people know it is just like having like a voice, there is a voice to be said, but for that to get out is sometimes hard . . .

On separate occasions, the Homies would point to both the ubiquitous-ness of ideology and of the power of the channels through which, like Mannheim (1954) describes, ideology “obscures the real conditions of society both to itself and to others and thereby stabilizes it” (p. 36).

And you don't even see those subconscious little issues that are brainwashing. Right? But now, when you're able to see things, you can see the person who wrote the script, you can see the person behind the camera or pulling government. You see the president, like, “Oh my God! The president.” Once you're able to see with the liberated eye, you're like, “Oh man, he's just a man. That's just a man. And this is just people ruling over people.” I used to think the laws and the fleet is a huge system. And it was like, oh, this is just what it is. Now, I'm just like, [inaudible 00:57:45] just like me, “Dude, just like me, you ain't shit. Just like me, dog.” And this is the operation map sharing. (Esperanza)

We've got the radio destroying minds. And it's not even. It's like self-consciously brainwashing the youth, brainwashing our people, we got gangs around here that don't know how to use the channel . . . The schools even having control or us getting time. They have the higher power, they have control of what we see, what we learn. (Teo)

Together, it was a combination of: (a) the silencing and silences, (b) the onslaught of the limiting and ruthless “regimes of truth” (Foucault, 1982) through which their stories were being framed and their identities and lives understood, and (c) the sensation and realization (both cognitive and affective) that “something fishy was going on”; that led to group questions about who speaks for who, the value of unpacking our own stories, and ultimately our transition into the *theorizing back* project. In her work with young women inside the prison system, Wynn (2011) describes the power of a transformative, dignifying, and humanizing opportunity “to show others—namely

the naysayers, probation officers, family, a weary public—that they should not be defined by their incarceration . . .” (p. 91). Similarly, in this opportunity to *theorize back*, the Homies were excited to both challenge the “naysayers” and to delve deep into their stories.

Francisco: You look at, they look at us as like statistics and just like that. Like more like, just like um . . .

Tino the Rhino: More based off like data that’s not even factual than . . . Well, not factual, but it’s just that they then . . . Rather than on the reality of stuff, they hear it more from a white person.

Francisco: Cause they have their own perspective too. When they’re breaking down, they’re not breaking it down. And they’re breaking it down from their reality, from what they live from. So they see it differently. From a different side.

Tino the Rhino: From their history. They way break it down. We’ll get all those points that they, they can’t get.

Miguel: Yeah.

Tino the Rhino: They don’t, they don’t haven’t lived that.

Camilo, adding to the conversation a few minutes later, shared:

And then the other thing I wanted to say was as far as stereotyping . . . It’s like, man, how do we take control of the stories that we tell about our people? Especially something like, Hollywood, we could tell that story for real. And it’s like, who’s writing that script? It’s just somebody who heard through the grapevine, what it’s like in the hood or they have some saltines or is that you and me writing these stories. This is how we can take the power in our own hands and start telling our own stories and whatnot. And make some money while you’re doing it, too.

Powerfully addressing all three “insights:” the silencing, the simultaneous pathologizing and exoticizing, and the need to theorize as she was asked, CB the Orchestrator “dropped the mic:”

It just sounds like some fucking person just put everybody’s story in one, and didn’t even let the motherfucker like me . . . See if we’re going to write a book nigga, I’m going to write my own fucking book. You’re not going to write that shit for me, bro.

To end this chapter, I share an excerpt of a memo I wrote as I got home after a Free Space session where we began to brainstorm what our *theorizing back* would look like:

January 17, 2020:

I didn't record our conversations today, and yet I am still struck. I can still feel how the air and the vibe felt today. I brought Robyn Kelley's *Yo Mama's Dysfunctional* to class and we began talking about what Kelley calls the *culture wars*, and the ideological warfare that pathologizes and frames the lives already at the receiving end of violence as social problems. Besides funny comments about "patholo-what?!" I shared how Kelley, a Black man in the university, found his people to be "the prime subjects of a cruel, high-tech game of the dozens that has continued nonstop since the first slave ships embarked from West Africa to the New World" (p. 2). I was struck by how unsurprised, and yet how passionate some of the youth were. CB the Orchestrator quickly spoke about her grandma being like Kelley's grandma, exactly what people talk about all the time and yet how nobody should be talking 'bout her grandmother. Many in the class were enthusiastic and spoke about the idea of writing our book together, speaking back and how it felt like "shit" that others were talking 'bout us . . .

That day was one of the first times we dreamed of writing a book together and pushing back against all the ways in which their own lives and identities were frenetically and convulsively explained, theorized, and misrepresented.

Sitting together, being in relationship with each other, and jumping from a to z back to a, from structure to belief systems, from schools to family to prisons all in the space of a few minutes while grappling with these questions of "how our stories are told" made evident that they, the Homies were transformative thinkers and amazing theorizers, and artificial "hangers" for a host of social problems. As the Homies began sitting with the idea, one that felt real and emotional, that they were those children "at risk" that were consistently written about. They recognized that is was not only, as Fine (1991) describes, that the public spotlight was on them, obscuring the perverse structures, policies, and practices that place them "at risk" (p. 26); but it was also a more robust and obscure infrastructure of explanations and ideas that were being mobilized to frame them. Given that, not only was there indeed "something fishy going on," but it was time to *theorize back*.

It is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment. (Lorde, 1984, p. 45)

CHAPTER 5: THEORIZING TOGETHER AND THE RESTRUCTURING OF THE ARCHIVES

Silence is what Power offers our pain in order to make us small. When we are silenced, we remain very much alone. Speaking, we heal the pain. Speaking, we accompany one another. Power uses the word to impose his empire of silence. We use the word to renew ourselves. (Clandestine Indigenous Revolutionary Committee, Zapatista National Liberation Army, 2022, p. 76)

Most of the time we don't have conversations because we're too busy with our own lives, or too busy living lives, or fucking fake shit, I don't know. Just it's a lot of hard shit. And then when we here, you are like, "Damn bro, you went through that too." That shit's real. That's not fake. So you can't really not notice it. You have to engage into it because this is real shit. We both went through this. "Then what else happened, bro? Oh, shit." "I went through that, too." You know what I'm saying? So it helps because they try to divide us into different places and make the same everybody is separate and we all just got different lives. But we're saying, we all have different personalities and we all need different approaches. But a lot of times we all go through the same shit and we don't notice until we sit down and talk about it. (CB the Orchestrator)

Yeah. I think for sure this conversation was touching a deep part of my life that I never really talked about with anybody. Not even my mom or my wife here. To the most personal person that I know. Mine and God himself. Not even myself. Some of these conversations, I've never even had with myself. I thought it was almost revealing my hidden scars. You know what I mean? Just being able to embrace where we come from in this journey that wasn't just our fault. Sometimes you feel like nothing sometimes. But it's not always this. Sometimes it's the systems that make us like this. So it's deep. (Francisco)

Around May 2020, we started meeting to *theorize back*. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the transition was not discreet, nor did it happen from one day to another. The world was undergoing major changes and the convergence of multiple pandemics had added additional and deleterious pressures to an already precarious world, strongly impacting the lives of the youth who were a part of our group. Ironically, despite the context being far from ideal, a group of youth that had been "framed" repeatedly throughout their lives as uninterested, unworthy of, disengaged, illiterate, rebellious, criminal, and seeking to leave schools,²⁶ found themselves on

²⁶ On a separate occasion, highlighting a similar irony, Esperanza critiqued assumptions being made about a young homie: "But the mother fucker from all the way past the valley is still coming over here making his way on a bus and putting his life at risk and he don't care?"

Zoom, with terrible internet connections, some on their phones, and yet committed to interrogating what became the question from which we started our inquiry: Why do some young people leave schools?

This question, initially brought to the group much earlier during one of our Free Space sessions, had initially been inspired by our shared troubles with school, my own trajectory in trying to interrogate the role of schooling in society, and later solidified when our conversations about school-leaving indeed became a powerful “site from which to launch important theoretical and empirical work” (Fine, 1991). Since the first time it was brought up, school leaving and interrogating our relationship with schools was deeply generative, both intellectually and affectively. Here is a brief excerpt of one conversation where we were suggesting beginning with that question:

Miguel: Who gets pushed out of school? Who drops out of school? And maybe come up with three or four . . .

CB the Orchestrator: I been thinking about that question for two weeks straight!

It was clear, that indeed dropping out, leaving school, or being pushed out of school sat at a nexus of both choice and structure, agency and oppression, the personal and the public, racism, sexism and a desire for stability, peace, dignity, and freedom.

It is fucked up that on the one hand we want education, then schools keep pushing us out and pushing us out, then we leave, and then here we are, trying to finish school. (Noemi)

The results and the insights of our theorizing around this question were powerful and insightful and will be explored starting in Chapter 6. However, before discussing the results of our theorizing, this chapter will describe three critical aspects of the *theorizing space*: (a) How *theorizing back* felt like “a different kind of space” and one that stood in opposition to most of

the spaces that the Homies occupied and were a part of; (b) the emergence of critical insights and a collective critical consciousness that in turn changed the way we all looked at things in the rest of our worlds; and (c) the solidarities, subjectivities, and relationships that emerged as the Homies theorized together. To do so, this chapter will draw from three *theorizing back* sessions that took place towards the end of the project where we collectively analyzed some of the transcripts of our previous conversations.

A Different “Kind” of Space

I don’t talk about this shit with nobody else, bro. Not a fucking soul. Not even people that I love. I’m expressing it to y’all. That’s crazy shit. That shit takes a lot out of people though because it takes you to a mold that you just been going straight ever since it happened. I never really took the time off to go back and just relax and look at what happened and been able to pinpoint it and try to regroup from it” (CB the Orchestrator)

When I tried to describe the *theorizing back* space to others, I would always wonder what the space “was” or how the space felt to the Homies. During one of our sessions together, I asked them what the space was like or how they would talk about it with the rest of the world. They responded:

It feels like different from the rest of the world . . . it is like we are paying attention. (Teo)

I dunno, it is hard to explain and I dunno if this makes sense but it’s kind of like a rhythm, and we get to take time to listen and to change the rhythm. (Francisco)

It’s like figuring out if a historical fact is accurate, you test it against all the different . . . did they really go through this? Was this person really here? Is this evidence really have DNA? We doing that, and then we are also talking about the reality of our own lives, going to see if it really aligns . . . it is like having a box of Legos and seeing how they are all together built in a certain way to create something and to find those pieces we have to start thinking and looking deep. (Tino the Rhino)

What was “different,” to the Homies was, as Esperanza shared: “hard to explain,” and different Homies had different ways of articulating what made it different. However, what we were doing together clearly stood out to them as a departure from both the spaces and the activities in which they participated outside of *theorizing back*.

Often, both their interactions with others as they spoke about the space and in their own reflections on what the space felt like, the Homies referenced the “rest of the world,” “the streets,” “schools,” “our communities,” or “the shit we have to deal with or be a part of” as markedly different, a point about “what it is not,” and often antithetical to what we were doing together. Here is an excerpt from a conversation with another young man who walked into the classroom where we were in dialogue:

(another student walks into the room)

Youth: What are you up to?

Teo: We are having conversations.

Youth: What do you mean?

Teo: Yeah, instead of playing around we are having powerful conversations about real shit, it is not like school or a class or anything, you should join.

Like “playing around” in this conversation, the Homies often referred to our “conversations” in contrast to what was expected of them: being in the streets, messing around or doing meaningless work. In addition, many of them struggled with multiple things in life that prevented them from being able to join consistently and would associate the group, or being able to be in the group, as part of a desire (affective) and a pursuit (cognitive) to do “good.” As Tino the Rhino, a Homie who would always ask when we were getting together again because it helped him get out of trouble, described:

I feel like deep down I know that this is the type of shit I want to be doing. Not all that dumb shit, and I know this and am trying to it is just hard, like I said before, I don’t do no hard drugs or nothing but it is the streets that are my addiction.

On a separate conversation with CB the Orchestrator, I asked what she thought about being in that space and with the group.

CB the Orchestrator: that shit cool as fuck. It felt we had more connection than we actually knew . . . I love that shit. I wish I could do that every day. But then shit happens COVID and shit. So we can't really be close, you can't, some people can't go back to where they need to get back that good feeling again.

Before beginning this project and this work with the Homies, I had always had a “problem” with reifying the distinction between what type of questioning or inquiry was theorizing and which wasn't and which kind of research was “legitimate” research and what wasn't; especially as those distinctions have been weaponized against oppressed peoples and radical movements throughout history. However, the Homies constantly reflected on how the creation of deliberate and “protected” spaces to share, ask questions, read other people's theories and explanations, and delve deep into each other's lives to further interrogate the structures, beliefs, and cultures that impacted us, and the imagining of alternate futures; was extremely rare. Moreover, both the “what we were doing” and the “how we were doing it” of *theorizing back* was and had been almost completely inaccessible to them previously, which always brought important questions about how “normality” was actively getting in the way of this type of collective praxis. Naively, I remember asking why we couldn't begin doing this more in our own “cliques” or our own families and communities, to which youth responded with grace and with the patience given to someone who does not fully understand:

When the fuck are we supposed to do this is we are going thru it all the time. (Santiago)

It's like we don't speak of the things that we know we can't do anything about, it would just be painful. (CB the Orchestrator)

I feel like those type of moments and things that you know make you in away though. How you go about that situation, like yeah, all this bad shit could be happening with you, they can be degrading the fuck out of you, but when you can't change things, it's how you get around it, how you move around it, you don't talk about it. (Esperanza)

Every statement, albeit differently, spoke to the encroachment of normality upon their lives, the silencing, the active dismissal, criminalization and disregard, alongside the consequential nature

of speaking up, that constantly and actively got in the way of engaging in this type of praxis elsewhere. As Tino the Rhino further elaborated:

Trust me fool, I'd love to fucking have these conversations, we out there killing each other for what, you know I lost my brother-in-law, now my sobrino and sister don't have him and for what, I wish I could go talk to his Homies and be like what for? I wish we could have conversations like these.

Unlike the “banking approach” that had been so prevalent throughout their experiences and that seeks to “turn women and men into automatons—the very negation of their ontological vocation to be more fully human” (Freire, 1970, p. 74), the Homies understood what we were doing together as a “for real” (Tino the Rhino) interrogation of reality.

In addition, understanding well what Césaire had long before claimed as he wrote: “the essential thing here is to see clearly, to think clearly—that is, dangerously—and to answer clearly the innocent first question: what, fundamentally, is colonization?” (p. 32), the Homies repeatedly argued that a “for real” asking of questions would be inherently counter hegemonic and importantly dangerous and threatening to the capital “S” (dominant) Story and consequently to the oppressive project.

Cause all of us, but it's a lot of us, we don't have that knowledge of how special we are. We just think that we're just normal. Like we were just created and big bang and we're not special. If you can, nothing special about us. We're just another human being but if we find out who we truly are, I feel like we'll fight for a whole 'nother world. (Francisco)

[talking about sex and queerness] That's a topic that people don't like to talk about. I do though. Nobody does. Everybody's trying to run from certain topics that we need to talk about. we kill each other within so that we can't have a stronger fight with other powerful people and white people. (CB the Orchestrator)

In addition, they also recognized that precisely because this questioning of the world and of what is really going on, if done authentically, would be threatening for the oppressive project, it has to be, and to a large degree has been, actively stopped by the “day to day.”

In this case, Joshua reflects on how that was particularly important to, in his words, “control us” in prison.

If you think about it, they do like that with us, fool. It’s like that in the fucking county [prison] . . . No, nigga, it’s Homies going up to you like, fool, like California nigga and in the United States is fucking . . . they know that we got more power, the prisoners, fool, so they fucking lock us down, do all that shit. [imitating guards] “we got watch towers with guns.”

Moreover, their continuous reflections made more and more evident how the erosion and confinement of the processes of theorizing was indeed directly connected to the silencing of critique and resistance and therefore vital to the settler colonial, racial capitalist, neoliberal, and oppressive project. One day, some of the Homies were talking about bringing some of their homies to theorize with us and Francisco started:

I am trying to tell them this is different, I was telling Jose some educational stuff, we’re learning about what’s going on, we’re breaking down the system. Learning about why we didn’t like regular high school, and why we dropped out and now we’re here. Why everything turned out the way it is. And then he was like maybe, something like that. But I felt like he wants to go, but he doesn’t know you like that.²⁷

CB the Orchestrator, again naming the presence and importance of the oppressor’s visceral knowledge of hegemony, responded:

I think he would like it, he’s been in there (prison), he knows what’s up, he would do it here.

When we asked ourselves what made the space different, one of the themes that came up was how theorizing back was also an exercise of hearing each other and talking about things that were directly connected to them (relevant) and yet indicative to a larger “system.” In that regard, our theorizing perpetually oscillated (Deleuze, 1900), moving rapidly from the inside to the outside, from the concrete to the abstract. As Francisco reflected:

²⁷ Another reference to the centrality of relationships and trust described in Chapter 1.

I think hearing CB the Orchestrator speak up. Hearing Tino the Rhino speak up, I was able to understand, see that these same systems that failed me, it also failed other people. Even though they're from a Black community from South Central . . . over there in Florence.

We come from different walks of life, and we went through different things, but it's the same system. We got screwed over. It failed us. It was the same system that left us with scars. It's the same. I feel like them explaining maybe opened up to as well. When they explain certain things, I don't remember exactly because we spoke about a lot of stuff. But even Tino the Rhino, when he spoke about the cops harassing him, it made me think about when I got harassed by the cops. In the same city, but in another location, the same system was being used. It was like, but it's the same rhythm. It was just in a different song. But it's all universal. It's all one. It's just deep stuff. (Francisco)

Often referred to as “what school should have been” (Esperanza), theorizing back also felt humanizing. There was space for full people; space for affect, sometimes grief, sometimes joy. Talking about “real shit,” as the Homies called it, was deeply personal and emotional and for our conversations and our theorizing to be sincere it required to what Ali and McCarty (2020) argue is a fundamental commitment for transformative Critical Youth Studies: relationality, reciprocity, responsibility, and genuine care. Sometimes simply talking about what had happened in an affirming space was healing, as Francisco shared:

just being able to embrace where we come from in this journey that wasn't just our fault. Sometimes you feel like nothing sometimes. But it's not always this. Sometimes it's the systems that make us like this. So it's deep.

Sometimes, and especially during COVID, when the Homies felt stuck in their homes and were struggling with multiple things at once, emotions would come up and regardless of whether the “problem” was shared by other youth, they were able to share as much as they wanted to, as in this case when Lourdes checked in at a 1 out of 10:

Because it's a lot of bullshit happening, I feel like comfortable talking but then I'm going to start crying and getting mad. So I just don't want to talk. Now it's just frustrating, I kind of want to go back to work. I want to go scrub fucking floors, I really do.

Other times, it was ok to be angry or to voice rage, and it was beautiful and hopeful to witness how the Homies were able to hold space for each other's emotions. These communal practices

emerged from the space and reflected a critical empathy, resonating with what Hypatia (2019) calls “infrapolitical ethics of care.” As they engaged with pain and trauma, knowing at a personal and profound level how difficult these contexts could be, the space and the dialogue brought forth a deep sense of togetherness, empathy, and care. As in this conversation, where CB the Orchestrator started to share:

CB the Orchestrator: I really ain't telling that all yet. Cuz I haven't got all of it out. It's just some rage that I've gotten out. And I blame a lot of things for my mama's shit. I blamed them givin her free money when she had a kid. How would you give her free money for welfare when she got a kid and that's just going to keep her in that same position to have more kids and more kids. And because it's easier for her to get free money. Why wouldn't you want to help her change her life for her kids to be successful so I could have seen some other shit besides putting me in the middle of these projects with 80,000 other families that's going through the same shit. [palpable frustration and anger] And just there, that's just what we are going through— [pause]

Francisco: You ok, CB the Orchestrator?

Tino the Rhino: we got you we got you here

Miguel: we can always take a break if you wanna take a breath

CB the Orchestrator: nah, I need to get this shit off my chest

Beside all the ways in which this critical love, mindful of the “worlds of bullshit,” as CB the Orchestrator would say, it was also the case that affective insights and responses by students would “lead” the group and the theorizing back into (or away from) new trails, questions, lines of inquiry, readings, and methods.

One time, as we were going to discuss a book I'd pulled out of my bag called *Bad Kids; Race and the Transformation of the Juvenile Court*, CB the Orchestrator said: "That sounds fucking scary. I don't think I want to read that piece of shit." We did not read it that day and instead, we started looking at *Blaming the Victim* by William Ryan, which Selena suggested and it resulted in quite generative discussions.

On another session, as we were about to begin interviewing each other, Francisco suggested we start the interviews with sharing our favorite moments in life, “we should start from a place of deep joy, and we can share ours too, that way we can connect.” This suggestion, despite it taking us “away” from our “main activity,” (to interview one another about our educational experiences) led to another deep and insightful conversation that jumped from connecting to place, our roots and our neighborhood, and some of the Homies’ shared love of Harry Potter. More importantly, it was the intuition of the Homies and how it oriented our inquiry that repeatedly result in authentic dialogue, generative themes, and stronger relationships, consciousness, and praxis. Here is a short excerpt from that conversation about our most joyful moments:

Tino the Rhino: I went to the Great Salt Lake. It was badass, It was froze and I seen these big ass bison, I seen a gang of bison. I seen the mountains, there was like big ass slopes too, like just huge, I was 18 and never really seen snow. You look like you’re in fucking Narnia.

CB the Orchestrator: That nigga said Narnia, what the fuck!

Francisco: Like living in a fairy tale.

CB the Orchestrator: That was like one of my favorite movies. I love Narnia. Not more than I love Harry Potter, though. Harry Potter’s the shit, bro.

Francisco: Just read that. LA H-P.

CB the Orchestrator: LA H-P (with Latinx accent).

Camilo: La Huntington Park (laughs).

Francisco: They used to call me H-P cause the hood not the movie.

Camilo: That foo Harry Potter! (laughs)

While easily dismissed, it was conversations like these that became foundational to mapping our geographies, to delving into our connections to place, to tapping into desire and its contrast with all that perpetuates death, and ultimately to the Homie’s theorizing and praxis. Similarly, in

another session where we were thinking through how we would interview others outside the group about their educational experiences, the Homies intuitively raised the importance of their own subjectivity and of reciprocity:

Tino the Rhino: Yeah. And we should give them a little introduction of ourselves, what we stand for, where we come from. Where you from, fool?

Francisco: Because if we're going to learn, if you're going to tell us some deep stuff. I feel like we should tell some stuff from the heart, too.

Miguel: yeah, absolutely, that's powerful.

Tino the Rhino: I feel the same

In further thinking about what made the space “different,” the Homies also referenced and appreciated the opportunity to think and nurture the “otherwise.” Despite the continuous assault upon their right to the word and the world, the Homies described their situation as the one Pacheco (2012) describes as a double bind; full of dilemmas, contradictions, and conflicts that create a generative space for resistance and imagination. Most of the Homies were repeatedly asked “what you want to do with your life? “How far are you from finishing high school?” and “What will you do after you graduate?” hundreds of times. However, not only was the question not “for real for real,” but it worked as a “double-bind” because they knew and felt that the answer to the question was virtually impossible given a sincere assessment of their context. Those questions could indeed be an opportunity for resistance and imagination, which were intuitively felt as necessary given the hegemonic nature of “normality.” However, it was rare that both, the questions were sincere, and that they had access to deliberate and intentional spaces to theorize what and how these resistances and futures would look and feel like. Resulting in what historian and political theorist Neil Roberts (2015) describes as freedom that remains undertheorized, partly because of the repeated centering of a white gaze that dismisses counter-hegemonic historical narratives and non-dominant voices, stances, theories, and understandings

of the world. As Francisco reflected, “nobody had ever asked us to imagine a different rhythm where we could be free.”

One session when we started talking about closing the *theorizing back* with the radical imagination, the Homies’ enthusiasm and readiness to jump in was evident:

CB the Orchestrator: What do you mean by radical imagination?

Miguel: I think most people, or at least I understand radical as from the root, as being able to imagine and re-imagine and change from the root . . . like what would it be like to create a utopia, to write whatever we want to write into being?

Esperanza: That would be badass.

Tino the Rhino: Yea fool, utopia and you will see everybody’s own version of like a perfect world.

Esperanza: Yeah, their life, where their head’s at.

Gabriel: Everybody’s own perspective and everything.

Abel: Yeah.

Tino the Rhino: That sounds cool.

Miguel: That sounds fucking spectacular!

Esperanza: I feel I would have police but not armed police. I don’t know . . .

Joshua: Hell no . . .

In this case, this collective engagement with the idea of “radically different” as a possibility for us and our people quickly moved into a sense of theorizing back as *marronage* (Roberts, 2015). As such, it nurtured the possibility for spaces and communities of “liminal” agents that could (and should) participate in the epistemic reordering of politics and futures.

Simultaneously, engaging in these activities made space for what Machado de Oliveira (2021) describes as hospicing modernity as the *single story of forward*²⁸, especially as current

²⁸ In her book “Hospicing Modernity,” Machado de Oliveira describes modernity as the air we breathe, as a single story of progress, development, human evolution, and civilization that is omnipresent.

arrangements of reality of both thought and action were both: deeply intertwined with the Homies's lives and their people, and made them "aliens to our own stories" However, it was also in this collective "alien-ness," in this shared dialectic of dignity and resistance and humiliation and oppression, that sat what Spinoza described as "potential," collective and subversive power from "below." Moreover, as we began to tap into that potential, a form of collective critical consciousness began to emerge and the Homies began to purposefully chip away at what Noguera and Cannella (2006) describe as the distortions that have been, and continue to be perpetrated through the prevalent and ubiquitous one-dimensional portraits of urban youth. In one of the meetings where this began to be evident, the Homies were having a conversation about what had been destroyed about our past, what we don't know about ourselves, and how our stories had been stolen (earlier that day, we had read an excerpt of *Historian as Curandera* by Aurora Levin-Morales, 1998). Building on the idea that all cultures, needed to know who we are, Francisco added:

We will be like, "What the hell?" And none of us would settle for less. And there'll probably be a civil war or something. Cause all of us, but it's a lot of us, we don't have that knowledge of how special we are. We just think that we're just normal. Like we were just created and big bang and we're not special. If you can, nothing special about us. We're just another human being but if we find out who we truly are, I feel like we'll fight for a whole 'nother world. That's why I want to gain my knowledge. So I could at least speak to whoever I can. (Francisco)

"And None of Us Would Settle for Less": Collective Critical Consciousness

Reality which becomes oppressive results in the contradiction of men as oppressors and oppressed. The latter, whose task it is to struggle for their liberation together with those who show true solidarity, must acquire a critical awareness of oppression through the praxis of this struggle. (Freire, 1970, p. 51)

They never be like, "oh, I just want to be a killer, so I'm going to come here and kill you all." They're going to say like, "Oh, no. We are civilized, we are the good guys. We're here to help you. We're here to give you the teaching, for example, of Christ, we are the

Additionally, the idea of hospicing modernity beckons us to think deliberately about "assisting systems to die with grace and to support people in the process of letting go" (xxii).

messengers of Christ and we're going to tell you the truth and that's why you need to renounce your gods and you need to give us all of you. (Joshua)

As our work together progressed, our conversations further directed our questions and our praxis towards the oppression and the violence that was “taken-for-granted.” As part of this, the language of oppression also began to raise the question of the “oppressor,” in the case of the previous quote, the “*they*.” Who or what the “they” was, would become an important topic of our theorizing. In the following example, Shamu was commenting on an example shared by Diego in which he had to work for the city as part of a government jobs program (“put the bright jacket”):

They are making us destroy our own homes²⁹ and we gotta to do this shit to keep our jobs, put the bright jacket and go destroy our homes. Shit's twisted and yet we got no choice, unless we all know and we all speak up and the world knows. (Shamu)

One day reading Freire (a text that we had read at different points starting all the way back in Free Space), we were talking about “what was in the interest of the oppressors?” and how did those interests relate with dominant ideas and stories about the world . . . “they lie in changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation that oppresses them” (p. 74).

Miguel: So what do you all think Freire is trying to say?³⁰

Ana: So instead of helping them with their problems, they try to make them think that the problem—

Francisco: They try to switch it around for them.

Ana; It's like saying, “struggling is a part of life.”

²⁹ As part of a city program, some youth were employed and as part of their work, had to clean/destroy the homes of people going through houselessness. Often, the youth were going through houselessness themselves.

³⁰ There were instances, like the one above (and many others) where the space very naturally moved and felt more like a “class,” where one of us with expertise would share with others, pulling out from different pedagogical tools to help “explain” or to make create space for meaning making, in this case it was me asking questions.

Tino the Rhino: That way you think that all is normal, you believe that fake shit and do nothing about it.

Ana: And then we are the problem.

Francisco: and you don't even see those subconscious little issues that are brainwashing. Right? But now, when you're able to see things, you can see the person who wrote the script, you can see the person behind the camera or pulling government.

In contrast to the “successful” and prevalent psychological project of late capitalism—getting the poor (and school “failures”) to hold themselves accountable for their own miserable outcomes (Fine, 1991, xv)—our theorizing back created spaces for the Homies to critique and name the structures and systems and worlds that they knew had a momentous bearing on their “outcomes.”

Further resonating with critical PAR projects, which document the grossly uneven structural distributions of opportunities, resources and dignity; trouble ideological categories projected onto communities (delinquent, at risk, damaged, innocent, victim); and contest how “science” has been recruited to legitimate dominant policies and practices (Torre et al., 1998); the work that we were doing together was systemically chipping away at these dominant ideologies and making space for the Homies to consider other possibilities for what had impacted their lives. In Tino the Rhino’ words, you begin “connecting the dots.” In this conversation, the group reflect on the conditions that impacted them and their communities.

Esperanza: and then you ask, why was my mind thinking of that? And they say, ho, well I was going through homelessness because of this. And then you recognize that there was a housing policy.

Tino the Rhino: Yeah or there was a new sheriff in town or a new law. Or they close the high school and they send all these kids, you know?

Esperanza: you start to connect and understand that our stories

Francisco: or your mom couldn't pay the rent. And that affected you because she was stressed out and she had to be with someone she didn't want to be with, or whatever.

Tino the Rhino: yeah, you are a victim of something you don't even know.

Francisco: it's crazy too because for my parents, they didn't even have . . . My mom's grandma, my grandma, my mom's mom came from Mexico. Her way of providing was picking up recyclables at 5:00 AM. And that's what they called my mom before she would go to school, she has to pick up recyclables and pick up woods and basically other people's trash and that's how they would survive and sell ice cream and corn. And that's how . . . you gotta survive

Not surprisingly, but certainly a direct challenge to the plethora of literature that dismisses the insight, the cultural wealth, and the knowledge that oppressed young people draw from as they participate in inquiry, social critique, and theorizing; the Homies' grasp and understanding of critical theory was not only immediate, but heavily nuanced, situated, grounded, and personal.

Moreover, unlike theorizing someone else, their theorizing had skin in the game and was affectively and materially connected to their own lives and futures. As Francisco was telling Gabriel during one of our larger meetings (explaining theorizing): "we gotta understand the structure before we disassemble it. "Further resonating with Deleuze's (1992) description of the environments of enclosure, Francisco continued: "if not they just move us from one thing to another, from one institution to another." Another day, in a group conversation about hegemony, I asked the group: How can you use psychopathy as a hegemonic structure? To which Ana, after asking what psychopathy meant, responded:

Oh, you could probably . . . they could probably classify what type of psychopathy is. And they can probably use that to be like, "Hey, you're a psycho." Maybe they can label you since they have power, they can probably . . . I don't know, put you away.

Miguel: and then they give you some medicine

Tino the Rhino: and you get hooked on that medicine, and then you really have some problems, the thing that's wrong with you is not even the thing that they prescribe you medicine for . . .

Throughout the Homies' theorizing, there were multiple opportunities for me to "teach," mostly explaining concepts and terms that we saw in the literature or eliciting examples I believed could illustrate some of the concepts. However, it never felt as if we were "learning" critical theory or

if there was any expectation to know anything. Power and its entanglements with the structuring and signifying of the world were already deeply understood by the Homies. However, we were certainly creating a deliberate space to use the “concepts” to interrogate, ask questions, and theorize back. Additionally, concepts—especially those that “stuck”—became real as the group brought experiences, texts, and media that was familiar to them, ranging from academic texts to music, to art, to dreams and experiences. For many of the youth, art had been a space to heal, critique, and to voice long nurtured resistances. In this example, Alita responded to a discussion on the “consent” part of ideology by describing her art:

For me it’s like when I wanted to start drawing art that had a big meaning to it. I started sketching some, there was one where is this kid looking through a fence and through his eyeball you can see his mother or his parents getting deported by ICE. Then I had another one where there’s this baby watching the TV, right? And you can just see like a little thing popping out of her head like she is just being brainwashed so that she doesn’t get anywhere in life.

Often, messages of resistances and counter-hegemonic frames connected directly to multiple sources of cultural wealth and art that youth. When this happened, it was always an invitation to bring these different media, to question them together, and to further make connections. Here are two examples out of dozens where the Homies would quote and bring lyrics to the space:

You should check up Mos Def, he’s a dope rapper, actor, kind of cultural icon. He’s got a song called mathematics. And the talks a little bit about that [stopping the oppressed from asking questions]. How are our young kids . . . I don’t know what’s up in school, shutting down questions but its fucked, and then you get Playstation and TV and all that fills their minds. How just things don’t add up in this horrible show. (Francisco)

Working class poor better keep your alarm set
Streets too loud to ever hear freedom ring
Say evacuate your sleep, it's dangerous to dream
But you chain cats get they CHA-POW, who dead now
Killing fields need blood to graze the cash cow
It’s a number game, but shit don’t add up somehow. (Mos Def, 1999)

It’s like that song Caged Bird by J. Cole, listen to it, Miguel. You’ll like it, it also is about people look at us and its part of the plan. (Tino the Rhino)

Knowing that they hate us
Knowing that they make us feel like we evil so we kill our people
Without a second thought, in every lesson taught by OGs
We full of real nigga wisdom, so we proceed
Like real niggas who been stripped of our humanity
I see the judge's eyes, I know that he ain't understanding me

...

I started as a king
Turned to a slave
Put us in our chains
We was forced to entertain
Thinking bout the present day I'm living off the stage
Wonder if a nigga ever get up out this cage
As I sing

A caged bird (Yeah, a caged bird)
(Let this little caged bird sing) Caged bird. (Cole, 2015)

Francisco, who would repeatedly use musical metaphors to describe life, described this new way of looking at things—this critical consciousness—as tapping into a different “rhythm.” For Francisco, this “deep rhythm” goes unacknowledged until you begin to pay attention together:

We come from different walks of life, and we went through different things, but it's the same system. We got screwed over. It failed us. It was the same system that left us with scars. It's the same. I feel like them (his peers) explaining maybe opened up to as well. When they explain certain things, I don't remember exactly because we spoke about a lot of stuff. But even Tino the Rhino, when he spoke about the cops harassing him, it made me think about when I got harassed by the cops. In the same city, but in another location, the same system was being used. It was like, but it's the same rhythm. It was just in a different song. But it's all universal. It's all one. It's just deep stuff. (Francisco)

Teo, also describing this collective critical consciousness, further connected it to the “dismantling” of what many have described as settler-colonial replacement myths. Stories that have sought to erase and replace the past, including the subjectivities and futures contained therein.

We were having conversations and one thing I told her was that what we have in this world is so unfair. Because before we were Aztecs, Indigenous, we were rich. We had food. We had land. We had our families. We were all wealthy. It wasn't no poor people that didn't have nowhere to sleep, somewhere to shower. I feel like that point. It's like if

we found out who we are, and where we come from and like, we found out the truth about, not just our indigenous ancestry, but who we are then when we find out the truth and that we are all special individuals. (Teo)

Further building on the affective component of this “tapping into a rhythm,” it was evident that critical consciousness was also an affective process of allowing oneself to feel, and for that feeling to move you or “us” into “fucking burst out loud and get this shit correct.” In this way, the space was full of hope, sadness, joy, grief, solidarity, rage and aspiration, among many.

In my heart, it is motivated. My pains motivated me. My struggle. It’s just, I feel in my heart when I talk about this, a rage. And when I feel that rage, it’s not bad, but a lot of people will probably react on it. I’m feeling this way. I’m feeling this because of all this shit I’m going through and this pain and it’s sad and I shouldn’t need to be sad about it. No, this shit is, it’s making me want to fucking change it. It is making me want to fucking just burst out loud and get this shit correct. It’s not making me want to . . . (CB the Orchestrator)

Moreover, as previously argued by Teo when describing the oppressed as not having “that knowledge of how special we are,” the group progressively began to follow those questions, asking who then “does get to tell us who we are? Who defines our lives?”

In a conversation about legitimacy and who gets to write things into the Homies’ files and records and therefore to be a part of their “story,” Francisco shared that he felt that the police, probation officers and other people with power over their stories could “just write shit” than was then official, read by someone else and that had big consequences. CB the Orchestrator responded:

CB the Orchestrator: Oh! The police? Fuck the police.

Francisco: Right. But they have legitimacy.

CB the Orchestrator: No they don’t.

Miguel: Well . . .

Francisco: They have government, they are official. They too busy [inaudible].

Miguel: But you see what I'm saying, though, right? That, that, it's the same thing, it's like who gets to write a book? Who gets to go to UCLA? Who gets to go to university?

CB the Orchestrator: Fuck that's cold, they make you do that on everything, huh? Legitimacy? Oh, he's black and broke, he can't come here cause we charge this, and he's supposed to come here cause he makes it and his mom works hard for it . . . Some bullshit. Bullshit.

In this conversation, it is clear that for CB the Orchestrator legitimacy was not only something that impacted them “individually” as different people have power over their records, but that it is also part of a bigger, racialized and classed project (“he’s black and broke”) that is embedded across institutions and their meritocratic and capitalist logics. Alongside the emergence of this critical consciousness, and the recognition that “story” and the “storying of the world” was deeply intertwined with the oppressive project, the Homies were quick to both, interrogate who was filling up the story space, and borrowing from Lomawaima and McCarty (2014), asking “what hidden agendas might this ideology serve? Who benefits from this ideological stance?” (p. 2).

Francisco: It was systems and stories that were made and made the parents, it's like a cycle. Like the schools that are teaching them how to be like, like teaching the woman how to do housework, the stories of why you must be a housewife, you know that's taught to the next generation, those things so they stay in their place

CB the Orchestrator: Yeah bro, never taught how to dream bro.

Furthermore, as we sought to understand the reasons for the stories, the power of the stories became tangible and apparent. These now “evident” reasons made sense of the urge, the centrality, and the criminality of dismantling what Foucault (1982) called “regimes of truth.”

Not only did these narratives work to flatten the complexity of their lives (Kelly & Caskell, 1996, p. 19)—“they look at us as like statistics and just like that” (Francisco)—but also to fill the story space and “frame” their identities and realities to the benefit of others. These “regimes” and the processes through which they were maintained were also something to which

they responded viscerally and emotionally when reading theory especially because they saw how in their daily lives they were consistently and forcibly pushed to use “dominant” theories and their underlying ideologies as references to make meaning and sense of their own experiences (Fraser, 1989).

In this powerful illustration of how the Homies made sense of both their own resistance to the “ideology” and the ways in which the system forced them to contend with it (because of the consequences of now doing so), Francisco explained:

The people that go in jail and they . . . they resist, like we get in trouble or we get criminalized, we see the system for what it is. We see all how messed up it is and we’re like, no we’re not going to take this but then it’s like we gotta fall in line, you know? You’re worth this much money so you gotta fall in line. (laughs)

Making a similar statement about control, the illegitimacy of oppressive systems, and how the “curriculum of schools” is deployed to further consolidate the story, regardless of the crimes it protects, Joshua argued:

It’s fucked up fool, the more police harass us the more people start resisting and then they need to control us more, and then more schools need to teach them [youth] what is right or they need to think. (Joshua)

Here is another exchange that surfaces a similar tension and that again points out how the Homies were contending with the authorship, legitimacy, and the consequences of what Apple (1993) calls official knowledge, in this case part of an oppressive American Project wedded to meritocracy:

Tino the Rhino: so most people if you ask them why people are poor, or why we fail at school they will say, “Oh, cause they didn’t try hard,” “oh, it’s because their parents told them worse, they didn’t educate them.” “Oh they’re evil, because they get into gangs”

Francisco: the people that are saying that are probably the ones that are really like, they were already have success brought in—

Miguel: the colonizers.

Francisco: like you know, we got all the resources

Tino the Rhino: we know like we are the suckers in the area that have like 10 properties, but you change your belief . . .

Moreover, adding to and also in contrast to Halls' (1991) argument that the credibility of these theories or explanations lies in part due to how they resonate with people's own understandings, in this case the Homies understood that the "credibility" of these theories also had to do with the concrete and material consequences of not buying into "official knowledge" (a reality they were forced to contend with). It wasn't that the explanations resonated with them, but who had to, In Tino the Rhino' words: "change their beliefs." Moreover, "official knowledge" and the dominant ways in which they had to make sense of their lives felt like "they don't work, regardless of what you do." As CB the Orchestrator further argued: "If you don't react, then they're going to think you're a bitch and if you do react, they're going to be like, "Oh yeah, he's too aggressive."

In some sense, the status of these "stories" as official knowledge was rubber stamped not because of the legitimacy of its authors or how much it actually explained the worlds of the Homies but through the material consequences of not buying into it. This tension, one that we would interrogate as we questioned the why of our own theorizing, would get to bigger questions of whether theorizing will inherently lead, or not, to social change. Moreover, it was also clear how mapping "life" into a binary often fetishized in the academia (structure vs. agency) made no sense, other than to invite different dimensions that described the "dialogue" between the two of them. During a conversation between a couple of us after one of our theorizing sessions where we had discussed structuralism and had drawn a continuum of agency vs. structure³¹, Francisco asked Tino the Rhino: where do you think you are now?

³¹ This exercise, more thoroughly described in the methods, consisted of us drawing a line where on one side we had "agency—we choose to act upon the world and our destinies are primarily a result of what we choose" and on the other side we had "structure – structures and constrains define our choices and therefore have a huge impact on our lives." We would often reference this continuum and ask ourselves how different stories or arguments would "fit" or speak to both structure and agency.

Tino the Rhino: I feel like right now . . . before I feel like I was more in this right area [choice], but I feel like I'm more towards the side of the structures and how choices are limited, but it is also like the risk.

Francisco: what you mean the risk?

Tino the Rhino: yeah like you can't go to our PO and say like the structures are the problem or like schools are the problem or I didn't show up to drug test because of the structures, you know what I mean?

Francisco: they are gonna be like what the fuck do I care?

The consequences of “official knowledge,” in this case notions of individual choice and bootstrap ideologies, and how power wields these to continuously “kick them when they are down” were evident,³² familiar, and something they had to contend with as part of “going thru it.” However, as Fine and Weiss write about the project of silencing, in this case with this enforcement of official knowledge: the silencing as a practice, does not work—the move to silence is an often ineffective and ironic move of power because as was very clear, it goes against our ontological vocation.

“From the very center of structured silence can be heard the most critical and powerful” write Fine and Weiss (p. 1). In this case, *theorizing* back was both space and a collective activity to critically unveil both story and storyteller. Moreover, “by unraveling who has been privileged by these practices and policies, the deeply institutionalized character of silencing becomes visible.” (Fine & Weiss, 1993). As the Homies began to think about who privileges from the stories being told the active, ubiquitous, and institutional nature of “silencing” was indeed, becoming more evident.

Miguel: Who has time to write books?

³² This is consistent with Delpit's (1993) claim that those with less of a certain kind of power “are often most aware of its existence” (p. 123).

Angel: The people with the big fat houses and they can sit around and write books and talk about shit, right?

CB the Orchestrator: That shit is fucking weak

Angel: And we don't.

CB the Orchestrator: Yeah, we don't.

In addition, as we theorized back, this micro social level of interaction between the Homies also became a vital site of critique and, like Mawhinney (1998) writes, in the relationships and interactions that emerged, lied “opportunities for understanding and effectively resisting systems of domination which organize (but do not determine) and social lives and our very identities” (p. 10).

Francisco: So trying to think how we're trained to blame our families and our parents.

Tino the Rhino: Yeah, we're trained to think that everything has to do something at our home.

Francisco: Yeah, it's our fault.

Tino the Rhino: It's our, or our parents.

In a powerful example of how these opportunities for naming, understanding, and resisting systems of domination across multiple sites and how these carry over across contexts, CB the Orchestrator shared a story of a trip she and Bryan, a lifelong friend, took to Michigan. As they were walking in the streets of Flint, they were invited by some of “her people” to have a smoke with them:

Yeah bro, then they start telling me stuff about how Flint to where it is, why they doing that shit to them out there. It was a pretty impactful moment for me. I like it.

Miguel: What did you learn from the about Flint?

CB the Orchestrator: What I learned about Flint is that, white people trying to take over they shit. They don't want the Black people there, they trying to push them out. Push them out of that part of Michigan, because I guess they water not really fucked up, they put lead in it, like their government did that shit to them just to take over that little part of the land, like they do us here. But they don't tell that story

Francisco: Wait, the Native Americans?

CB the Orchestrator: No nigga, Black people.

Similarly, on another group conversation where Selena suggested we needed to talk about the foster care system, Francisco, himself recognizing how little he had thought or spoken about the foster care system despite having been impacted by it himself, shared:

I think it will be good to look at different perspectives of what is the foster care system or flaws and all the research first. And then from there, I'll ask a question. But just off the bat, I don't have much. I just was part of it, you know? So, I never really thought what is this, why are you doing this. I always thought it was normal. The system that was created forced our parents to make bad decisions, not almost forced, but narrowed down their decisions to fall into these bad decisions and then these bad decisions, they came from the same system that they created for us to fall into, and police disciplined us, and took them away, and then that creates more hurt and more pain.

Alongside this collective critical consciousness that emerged as we interrogated power and its claim upon the truth, the Homies also began to recognize particular themes that stood out and that they were continuously forced to contend with, resist, and negotiate (often all at the same time). Many of these were ubiquitous across popular images, academic descriptions, non-profits, carceral institutions, and dominant deficit-based and damage-centered paradigms (Tuck, 2009). Moreover, the Homies felt like these stories felt like a foregone conclusion, it was easier that way. As CB the Orchestrator emotionally described:

I seen it, like they wear what they're thinking on their face. It so easy to just put a label on something and just run with it. This is what's wrong with America. They're just fucking so weak that it . . . Seriously. (CB the Orchestrator)

The Homies argued the world, as Delpit (1993) writes, had “found us [them] genetically inferior, culturally deprived, and verbally deficient” (Delpit, 1993, p. 127). In addition, these representations were “stuck in time.” The world clearly did not, as Francisco put it: “read the whole fucking book. In fact, the book is actually still being written.” Connecting to the project of incarceration, Camilo reflected:

I think people in jail or prison, it's the same deal. When you think of people in prison or hear the stories. Maybe you hear about what happened for them to get arrested, or trial, the case. Maybe someone who spent 25 years in prison and all the trauma they had to go through. The violence. Or what about the person who got a GED in prison? Wrote a book in prison, writes poetry, paints in prison. Maybe learned how to read in prison. There is so many stories like that. (Camilo)

Further recognizing (and having to contend with) “the gaze” and the dominant stories that were written about them and their communities, the Homies always resisted, challenged, and humanized. Here a conversation between Lola, Francisco, and Tino the Rhino:

Lola: My mom always told me not everything that people think is bad is bad, I had to put that in my head, since my mom used to drug deal everybody else thought it as bad, everybody else seen it as, “Oh, you're drug dealing” not as that was our rent, that's for our food on the table, for beds, for a roof over our heads. That was for us to grow up to have something.

Francisco: Me and you, we're from the neighborhood and we learned traits from being with our Homies. We learned traits like defending the neighborhood. We learned traits like respect. We learned traits like trust and having each other's back.

Tino the Rhino: Yeah, and being courageous and little shit that you couldn't think about though, because I have seen that shit, we get down . . . that fearlessness.

Francisco: Yeah, and certain things we learn from our neighborhoods, from our families, from our parents. Even though my mom went through abuse. She went through drug abuse, drug addictions, foster homes, we got our house burned down, all kinds of stuff. Even through that storm, I still learnt love . . .

Another dimension of this emergent collective critical consciousness and pointing out the implicit ontological violence of not being seen and of one's story being reduced to a “foregone conclusion”—a theme that will be thoroughly explored in the following chapter—the Homies would feel the need to clarify and expand the scope and definition of resisting, here is a brief exchange between Tino the Rhino and Francisco:

Tino the Rhino: not even resisting as like fuck you, but it's like refusing to buy into what they're telling you about yourself.

Francisco: Yeah. Refusing to let them decide who you are.

Importantly, these conversations were never about reinforcing simplistic dichotomies of good and evil. These conversations were not simply about “flipping the script in order to paint a noble, unblemished portrait of the black urban poor” (Kelley, 1998, p. 4). Instead, they were about real people and therefore including the “good and the bad.” The conversations were difficult, heavily nuanced, critical and hurtful, healing, and humanizing. Moreover, and precisely because these were deeply personal, they were also respectful and accountable to the relationships that kept the conversations grounded.

When the Homies would share something that could contribute to a “negative” or “pathological” representation, they deeply understood the importance of considering where, to whom, and for what were these conversations being had. As such, their findings reflected an internalized accountability to values around epistemic and ontological sovereignty and self-determination and thus, were also a direct condemnation of those speaking about and profiting from explaining the lives of others. During one discussion around whether it was ok to write about others, CB the Orchestrator argued that a White person could not write about a Black person, Tino the Rhino continued:

Tino the Rhino: They talk and hear it more from a white person.

Francisco: 'Cause they have their own perspective. When they're breaking down, they're not breaking down. They're breaking it down from their own reality, from where they live from and is best for them. So they see it differently.

Tino the Rhino: They can't get.

Francisco: They don't, they haven't lived that.

In another conversation where we were discussing the lack or not of role models, CB the Orchestrator responded to Esperanza's assertion that she never felt she had a role model, but she couldn't speak bad about the adults in her life because she felt they couldn't do any better.

CB the Orchestrator: I say that about my mama a lot.

Esperanza: And you have a right to.

CB the Orchestrator: Yeah, because I seen it, I was observing it, we grew up together.

Miguel: What would you feel if somebody else said it? A professor or something?

CB the Orchestrator: I'd be like shut your ass up, nigga you don't know, you don't got a say so, you don't know who knows better over here. You don't know shit about my mama.

Moreover, the voicing and sharing of as Francisco put it: “who we truly are . . . and how special we are” nurtured powerful solidarities and intimacies that were both healing and generative. Not only did it directly challenge “deficit” views, but created space to allow for new forms of subjectivity, both individual and collective to emerge.

Hearing you say that, kind of validates me in a way. Because I feel like my whole life, I just sulked away. A lot of times I don't know the proper definitions to certain words. I know what I am trying to say, I just don't have the words to say it. So now I'm just like fuck it, I'm going to say whatever I want to say anyways. (Camilo)

Being seen, able to reclaim the word, and finding solidarity in shared experiences and truths was empowering in both the recognition that they “knew,” and in the multiple ways in which what the Homies knew as a collective was powerful, important, and dangerous.

Bryan: It is because people who have been receiving injustice is so powerful is because we have a different kind of knowledge about the world. There's a lot of knowledge that we have. The problem is that without the space and the time to . . .

Tino the Rhino: To mold.

Miguel: To unpack it, to look at own key stories and say, what the fuck happened to me?

Tino the Rhino: Yeah.

Miguel: Right? And this is what I was speaking to my advisors today. I was saying theorizing requires time. It's not that . . .

Tino the Rhino: It requires a deep thinking.

Miguel: Yes.

Tino the Rhino: Like really getting lost in the ocean of thoughts and how I told you, just feeling out every little single deep thought, and sometimes be like damn. Because

sometimes you think about shit like damn. Like in middle school. Damn, I started fucking around and messing up around this time. And then you're like, but why? And then you start to think about it like, "Damn, oh, I was going through this or my mind was thinking this at this time and stuff like that. So, It's just different things."

Bryan: And then you ask, why was my mind thinking of that? And they say, "Oh, well I was going through that because of this. So suddenly I am a different person"

Francisco: Or your mom couldn't pay the rent. And that affected you because she was stressed out and she had to be with someone she didn't want to be with, or whatever.

Tino the Rhino: It's like the big things that are unseen. Or not even unseen, but they're enacted on. You know? Yeah, like you're a victim of something you don't even know. And to me, this is giving . . . I don't . . .

Francisco: Us a voice.

"Giving Us a Voice": The Solidarities, Subjectivities, and Relationships that Emerged as the Homies Theorized Together

When there is many of us doing this, they can't shut us down no more (Shamu)

With this community, this relationship that we have here. This relationship, I think it comes down to purpose. (Francisco)

Since the beginning of theorizing back, we often wondered how our different stories would either build "agreement" and reveal similar structures and explanations, or whether our asking of questions would lead to disagreement and to a multiplicity of contradictions. Just as importantly, a question that constantly lingered on the back of my mind was how a process of collective theorizing could in fact "negotiate" difference and disagreement. Reflecting on the lessons of this space, I quickly learned that the many of the answers to those questions lay in the solidarities, subjectivities, and the relationships that emerged as we theorized together. Often, what we found was a tapestry of lived experiences, subjectivities, and ways to negotiate the multiple dialectics that we found plagued the world of theorizing. Did we choose, or were choices structured for us? Were we wealthy, poor, or was the move from "we are poor" to "we are wealthy" a move that could further stabilize the safety of an oppressive system working

against us? Those were not just powerful questions because of their answers but important and consequential in their collective “asking.”

Further resonating with a resistance to totalizing and territorializing forms of theory that “erased” their subjectivities and solidarities and as Deleuze and Guattari (2009) argued, respond to the fascist in us and only project an image of reality at the expense of reality itself; the Homies consistently pushed back against dominant, simplistic, detached, and irresponsible representations of their lived experience. Instead, they quickly pulled “answers” back and placed them in dialogue with reality as experienced and as felt, making way and space for a humanizing messiness and de-centered (rhizomatic) complexity that was critical to the solidarities, subjectivities, and relationships that would emerge as their theorized together. In this conversation, the Homies celebrated and affirmed the importance of their individual and collective stories:

Camilo: That’s why I think it’s so important for everybody to tell their story, our individual stories are so important because they’re not just our stories, you know what I mean? They’re collective stories, when I started telling my story, Francisco was like, “Oh, yeah.”

CB the Orchestrator: He can understand.

Camilo: I had a similar thing. I grew up down the street and I know you’re not the only one, you’re speaking for a whole.

CB the Orchestrator: A whole lot of people, and you are unique, too.

Camilo: You’re speaking for a whole community type of shit. That’s why, man it’s so important to get it out.

This conversation, among many, contributed to the construction of new social arrangements and solidarities. In some ways, the Homies simultaneously reclaimed the word and put it in dialogue with both shared and individual worlds in ways that resulted in sharp, courageous critiques and that rendered new “versions” of themselves and their people. A powerful example was in their

theorizing, understanding, and relationship to who they were and charity as a political project. The Homies consistently pushed back against how their stories and subjectivities were theorized and represented by those “wanting to feel better about themselves.” In this case, having to thank and “play victims” as they simultaneously understood the concrete reality of what was happening was, as Tino the Rhino put it: band-aids on a bullet wound. During multiple of our theorizing-back sessions, the Homies enthusiastically and at times, clearly enraged, shared their experiences of having to tell their stories, be grateful, hold big checks, and “make white people cry” only to have to return home to sleep in the streets.

It is like having to thank your abuser for stopping to hit you in the face. (Esperanza)

Besides calling for a radical rearrangement of “the story”—one resembling of Wilson Gilmore’s (2007) analysis of the shadow state and the non-profit industrial complex³³—the Homies were also demanding a challenge to the dominant ideologies that their lives and identities were being “storied” into, including their positioning as grateful and passive recipients of aid that were trying to change their lives for the better. Moreover, they were also calling for a reorganizing of the emotional and political dimensions of affect, in this case “hope” and more specifically in how it was traded with a certain form of “cruel optimism”³⁴ in many of the spaces that they occupied. As the Homies saw and felt the over-reach of multiple institutions, including non-profits, into their lives, they experienced the closing in of systems over which they had little agency and were simultaneously supposed to feel hopeful, excited and grateful. Often, they had

³³ As Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes, foundations as “repositories of twice-stolen wealth that can be retrieve by those who stole it” (p. 46), a shadow state forbidden to advocate for systemic change, and also as having put some resources into community projects and critiques of the status quo itself.

³⁴ “a relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project” (Berlant, 2011, p. 1).

to participate in activities of being “thankful” and of celebrating “victories” that were supposed to contribute to a feeling of gratefulness, happiness³⁵, and hope. At the same time, they saw their ability to exist without them as less and less, which brought despair. “Where the fuck am I supposed to live?”³⁶ (CB the Orchestrator). This sentiment, along with their clear critique of these systems resonate with what Freire called “false generosity” and an exercise of rationalizing “guilt through paternalistic treatment of the oppressed, all the while holding them fast in a position of dependence” (Freire, 1970, p. 49).

And indeed, this did not do. The Homies were not only aware, but quickly began to collectively navigate the contradictions, to plan and strategize, to negotiate dignity and humanity in the midst of in-humane and oppressive systems, and in that process, to do “the labor which brings into world this new being, no longer oppressor nor longer oppressed, but human in the process of achieving freedom (Freire, 1970, p. 49). During one of our conversations around “poverty pimping,” Esperanza, who’d once shared how she refused to tell her story as part of an event for funders, argued that at some point they needed to choose how to tell their stories “in ways that don’t let them [people with power] believe the stuff that keeps society like it is, like we shouldn’t depend on their checks and shit.” Francisco, responded, “I have my own story, I’m writing my own story, still putting it together, and that is for us to tell. They don’t own us.” “They do have power over us, but they also depend on us,” Esperanza replied.

³⁵ This critique on the assumptions of happiness could be further unsettled by the feminist critique of scholars like Sara Ahmed, who writes “feminist histories thus offer a different angle on the history of happiness. Or perhaps feminist history teaches us that we need to give a history to unhappiness” (p. 573).

³⁶ During the majority of the duration of *Theorizing Back*, CB the Orchestrator was going through houselessness. Despite holding a full-time job and actively looking and applying for housing, it was, in her own words, “impossible.” Often, the only “solution” was through housing “programs” ran by community organizations and non-profits, many of which were convoluted, hard to get into, and temporary.

Because we have the power and we are in the vision, we all can make a difference, especially if we understand these systems. (Francisco)

Moreover, they resisted essentialist identities or dichotomous conceptions of subordination/domination and instead nurtured and understood subjectivities in ways where they were agents, victims, and resisters (among many others) at the same time. The Homies and their theorizing in this space, although markedly different, was connected and informed by the ways in which they had previously made sense of situations, contexts, and challenges in order to “go through them” (Tino the Rhino). Responding to a context of “not being seen or heard,” and connecting their subjectivities and in this case, their affiliation to gangs, to a form of resistance and theorizing back—a theme that will be explored further in the next chapters. Tino the Rhino and Francisco reflect:

Tino the Rhino: [talking about how gang affiliation didn't let him into any schools and mimicking teachers/deans/principals] “There was Tino the Rhino from a hood or whatever and shit, he's a criminal.”

Miguel: but who gets labeled a criminal? What are the consequences of the labels?

Francisco: it's crazy because let's say we're in gang, that's kind of our way. I see it as my way, of when I was younger and didn't really have the wisdom or have the access to certain knowledge and doors. That was my way of theorizing back. Was being the gang member, that was my way of fighting back. That was my way of going against all the problems and the stress, the cycle that we were taught by our older Homies and the system and the structural system.

Tino the Rhino: then we learn how to theorize back in a different way. We're still doing the same way. We're talking, we're coming up, that's the same way you're in the hood and you're thinking of strategies. How am I gonna get this fool right here? How are we going to sell this dope right here? Or, oh, we're going to do this. It's the same thing, but it's the same way that we're pushing back, Right? Theorizing back, it's the same way that we're theorizing back now. You know? That's how I see it.

Also connecting the “word” and how the process of coming together and asking questions together changed the way they understood themselves, Francisco shared:

That's it, for sure. Because not even, some of the stuff I didn't hear. I really start questioning a lot of things. A lot of systems. Even myself and my own decisions. Yeah.

Similar to Francisco, the practice of asking questions began to have consequences on the way the Homies understood themselves and what they had been taught of what they “knew” as related to who they were and who they could be in the world. Their engagement in these practices also resonates with what Espinoza (2003) and Gutierrez (2008) describe as a dynamic process of becoming a historical actor “where youth negotiate everyday dilemmas, push against the intentions of systems and their designers, repurpose tools towards new ends, and resist local and historical sociopolitical inequities” (Gutierrez et al., 2019, p. 291). Below are a couple of quotes that illustrate how the Homies were contending by different facets of dominant narratives and engaging in a critical reclaiming of identity, subjectivity, and of the right to “story the world”:

It’s reclaiming your own identity. Like saying “fuck being normal.” I’m special. But being special means this stuff and I’m not going to settle for you calling me poor because I’m not. Does that make sense? Because I ain’t, we’re amazing and have all this power, right? (Shamu)

But because society is so unjust, you have prisons and police because people are going to resist. The more unfair it is. and then they throw all these things in like our lives without us even realizing it. And it’s like very few and actually like, get to realize, you know, what they took part of, you know, and what was actually happening, but it is also like we all realize in ways and fight also. (Tino the Rhino)

And to kind of expand on that a little bit is because I feel like I’m coming from the, like the bottom of the barrel, the bottom of the barrel in terms of not being able to see. I was completely blind and I still am in a lot of ways. But yeah, once you get a certain awareness, you realize that we’re all just people. (Camilo)

Once you are able to see with the liberated eye, you’re like, oh man, he’s just a man. That’s just a man. And this is just people ruling over people. I used to think I was small and like, oh, this is just what it is. Now, I’m just like, you’re just like me, I am like you, we are people and this is operation map sharing. (Gabriel)

As show in the quotes above, a big part of theorizing back was to better interrogate the strategic misdistribution of symbolic power, which naturally unsettled dominant understandings of, in the words of CB the Orchestrator, who is who? Moreover, a resulting insight of questioning symbolic power was indeed the recognition that a big part of *potestas*—power from “above”—

relied on our consent and “ignorance” (often policed and manufactured) and conversely *potentia*—collective power from the ground up—was connected to “awareness” or to what Gabriel describes above as “seeing with the liberated eye.” As such, there was also an emergence of what Negri (2000), building on Spinoza’s ideas, calls an ontology of power that points to both our individual beings as expressions of infinite power, and the ability to increase our power through co-operation and community with others. As both Shamu and Justice describe: “I’m not going to settle for you calling me poor because I’m not ... we’re amazing and have all this power, right? Just as importantly, these processes of coming into or tapping into critical consciousness (and the dialogue between this consciousness and individual and collective subjectivities) were not static and because theorizing back was not a disjointed exercise of mental gymnastics, but one that was deeply intertwined with our lives and how we went ahead and lived those lives right after we theorized, they did not stop once we left the room. In this way, as Rose (1997) describes, participation entailed more of itself, regenerated itself, and that was its purpose. That is why it never ended, nor it should.

As referenced in the heading of this section, these emerging forms of consciousness and subjectivity were not only individual but collective. Therefore, these were intimately tied to the relationships and interactions that emerged out of the Homie’s theorizing together. Among these many interactions, theorizing together was full moments where the Homies pushed each other’s thinking, lifted each other up, challenged each other, and further nuanced the arguments that were brought forward. Below are a few examples, starting with a conversation where Esperanza and Joshua were discussing whether utopias were possible and if so, how they negotiated the individual and the collective.

Esperanza: It's [utopia] what's best for you though. It's like that's why you can't put a name on it. Perfect is what accommodates to your situation at that time, you get me? Like you run through it or you get struggles and it's placed in your way just like to.

Joshua: But is it perfect or is it convenient?

Esperanza: It's perfect . . . you're right, you're right.

Joshua: It's convenient because it's your situation. I think perfect is for everybody. Like everybody is all going to come together and decide.

Esperanza: But then perfect isn't the same definition to everyone. You could think something's perfect and then everyone's.

Joshua: exactly. That's what perfect is, fool. Perfect is everybody's perfect. You feel me?

While some of these conversations might seem trivial and would often go off in tangents, it was precisely in these instances of dialogue that a common language was being cultivated and that the nuances of ideas—like the meaning of freedom—that would become foundational to our collective theorizing were being hashed out. In this case, utopias were a springboard to talk about the limits of our freedom, how “like everybody is all going to come together and decide,” and in this case, the tensions between an individualistic *convenient* and a *perfect* that required a recognition of the collective. Similarly, it was often powerful to see how the Homies made connections with each other's stories and found commonalities that were relevant to the questions at hand. In the following examples, starting with dialogue around some of the reasons marginalized youth leave schools, the Homies started talking and connecting around the natural “human” desire for places that feel safe:

CB the Orchestrator: Yeah because we all said some of the same shit right now, bro.

Miguel: how so?

CB the Orchestrator: What you said, the rebellion and how you found things in books, what Francisco you said about your mom coming to the park. What I said with them being with the Homies, you know what I mean? It's like finding places where you be more comfortable like that.

Mark: Like a sanctuary.

CB the Orchestrator: Know what I mean? And you (pointing to Santiago) sounded like you was more in the streets, you know what I mean? So you were more attached to the streets or safe in the streets than you probably was at school or in books.

Francisco: To the park.

CB the Orchestrator: To the park, you know what I mean? To the park every day. That's what I used to do, too.

Throughout the Homies' theorizing together, it was powerful to witness that beyond and underneath the "back and forth" and the trading, connecting, and interrogating of each other's ideas; there was always a sincere care for each other and their right to the word and the world (a theme that became central to this project). Testaments to the values that were central to this project since the beginning—the commitment to moving "at the speed of trust," and the ontological vocation that was honored and centered throughout—the conversations, interactions, and relationships that show up and emerge out of the transcripts are filled with the Homies lifting each other up, attending to each other's affect and emotional, and consistently celebrating each other as teachers, wise, and experts of "blowing our brains."³⁷ In an exercise where the Homies read each other's journal entry, Francisco shared a reflection about one of his classroom experiences of being shamed and CB the Orchestrator responded:

CB the Orchestrator: Yeah. That shit's fucking deep shit, bro. This dude right here, bro. He goes deep. Shit, man.

Camilo: Dope man. I like that. The last two sentences reminded me of taking your life in your own hands

Sky: Yeah. I agree with what you said. To live for yourself.

Francisco: Thank you. I appreciate it.

Sky: I appreciate you, too.

³⁷ Including a hand gesture of brains being blown away.

Francisco: (to the group) Honestly Sky is a teacher. Whatever you wanted, whatever you want she teach.

Often, as a sign of respect and as a beautiful gesture to signal the depth and the resonance of each other's ideas, the Homies would signal how their brains were "heating up." In this conversation, the Homies were discussing the role of ideas in maintaining order in an imperfect world, an idea proposed by Esperanza and further elaborated by Abel.

Santiago: It's because this world has to be imperfect. It ain't perfect.

Esperanza: There's something that has to be said and a story told so you don't go crazy and have a mad ass town going fucking crazy.

Abel: That's how I feel like if this world was made to keep us calm.

Joshua: My head is fucked up right now (making signs as if his mind is being blown).

Esperanza: [humorously] his brain is overworking right now!

Joshua: Yeah, what the fuck to say to that.

As yet another sign of how many of our collective insights moved through resonance, it was common that the Homies would finish each other's sentences:

Santiago: But then when we looked at our own lives, we see that we have no better choices often, it was actually very.

CB the Orchestrator: Complex.

Santiago: Yes, complex.

As the Homies finished each other's sentences, pushed each other's thinking, and celebrated and affirmed each other's brilliance reality emerged more and more, as explained by Wilson (2008), as "a process of relationships" (p. 73). It was in the weaving together of relationships and in the putting together of shared languages and imaginaries that the Homies began to see each other and to further connect their individual lives into a collective story, ultimately nurturing trust and togetherness.

In turn, this trust also made space to the affective to guide our process and our methods, something I believe is critical for humanizing work. Often, affective insights would shape and guide the Homies' inquiry in ways that were critical to both the nurturing of relationships and to the "languages" that would become foundational for our theorizing back. As an example, per the suggestion of the Homies, before starting our interviewing of each other—a strategy of inquiry I had initially suggested—we'd spend some time talking about some of our favorite moments. As Tino the Rhino offered, "we also want to connect on the joyful stuff, you know?" And we did. During this sharing of our favorite moments at the start of the interviews, we found connections with each other, references to cultural wealth, struggle, and hopes and aspirations. During Francisco's interview of Camilo, Camilo began recounting a time where he began wanting to travel and learn more about the world outside of his, in his own words, "little world":

Camilo: I always had these ideas, like man, I wanna go places you know.

Francisco: Yeah!

Camilo: And when I finally did it and I started like getting on buses and going places, like the unknown and the unexpected, those feelings of possibilities and like what's going to happen.

Francisco: You don't know what to expect.

Camilo: Yeah, you don't know what to expect I was like on an adventure. So that was some of the best memories you know.

Francisco: I want to travel too, you know the only place I ever been to was Tijuana, I always been in LA, it's always LA. I wanna travel, you know, I could imagine myself like you know with my journal, some books, you know just on a journey, finally being with the traditions, with my traditions, just learning you know.

Camilo: Straight up, man. Learning. See my family is from Michoacán, you know.

Francisco: Yeah my dad, too, my grandma and my grandpa.

Camilo: Hell yeah, from the motherland, with the roots, you know.

As the Homies engaged in dialogue and connected with each other, theorizing became a collective and relational process. Moreover, because of how explicit the space was about the importance of relationships and how we exist in relationships, and are connected, with our community there was an inherent and important connection and accountability to the Homies's relationships outside of the theorizing back space. Because the Homies were part of the community and to the stories that they were theorizing around, tossing around simplistic and decontextualized "rights and wrongs" was both impossible and absurd. Also through that multiplicity of relationships, the complexity of the context, the situatedness, and the nuance that was palpable, felt, and inseparable from their lived experience; it was impossible to disconnect theorizing from the people and contexts that it was not only going to explain, but to impact. Like CB the Orchestrator argued, this was something people with power do: "just explaining your way out of actually having something to do with it and being a part of the 'problem'." And this was also a matter of the comfortable possibility of many for not taking responsibility.

I don't think nobody want to take responsibility for shit. That's all it is . . . Nobody wants to say that they played a role or nothing. Nobody wants to be the bad guy. It is always somebody else.

And lastly, an inspiring part of the Homies theorizing together was how it spoke to what is both possible, and human. As the young theorizers made sense of the "entire" experience and we had our final conversations about the process, it was clear that, as Francisco argued, "these tools are, anybody could possess them, how to break down systems." Moreover:

I feel like that's what gives the tools meaning. Or purpose. Other people that haven't experienced it firsthand, or they might have had just realized, oh, I can do this. But when they use the tools, they don't have a meaning put into it. When we use these tools, we have a meaning, so it's more real. It's not false. It's real. It's legit, and then it gives what we're talking about a purpose. It's deeper than us. It's not just like, "Oh, we're doing this for us. We're doing this for future generations. We're doing this for the world. It's an impact." It's not just, "Oh, we're doing this for . . ." You know what I mean? It has a big purpose. That's why I feel like this is deep, because it's a purpose. I feel like that's one of the ultimate things you could do in life is have a purpose, for sure. (Francisco)

While theorizing itself did not necessarily result in hope, especially not in the kind of context-detached hope that could help power redeem the legitimacy of its project—a critical component of rescuing settler futurity—there was a palpable sense of possibility and potential that was intrinsically connected to future and to futures. This was as much true for me as it was for the Homies.

Once, Sky asked me why I did this work in education, or why I chose to do this work, to which I answered:

Honestly, to me, it is so that one day kids can exist in the world and be respected, feel that they are worth gold, so that we can be clear on the all the stuff that we need to change so that some of these things that we talk about never happen to anyone.

Sky: That they belong here.

Miguel: Yes, and that they are amazing.

Sky: I hope someday we get more teachers like that.

As clearly juxtaposed with the realities of dismissal and disregard that Sky was alluding to, the young theorizers often pointed and centered their personal “why” for their theorizing back and its connection to a sense of purpose and to a sense of self:

That’s what I’m fighting against. The image that the government or the higher ups or whatever the elites have made these people feel dependent. You know the shit that they oppressed on them to where they think it’s okay to live underneath the fucking shoe of these people, bro. No, you got a one, better. I’m a servant at the end of the day. I’m a servant to the younger people that I love. I’m a servant to my family. (CB the Orchestrator)

I don’t want my kids or the kids after me to you know go through what I did so I’m trying to change that. I want to flip the script, don’t want to keep that going and ready to change to something different you know? (Bryan)

And it was in these gifts, in these beautiful offerings to the fabric of reality that what Freire (1970) calls a gesture of love may be found, these beautiful practices and acts of rebellion, refusal, resistance to participate in the reproduction of oppression and instead, nurture the “desire

to pursue the right to the human” (p. 56). A practice that despite, as Estes explains, “despite the horrific histories working against them” (p. 12), they were eager to be a part of.

Although much more could be written about the space, at its center and more than anything, it was a deliberate space and a protected time to honor the Homies’ human vocation and right to enact those humanities, to ask questions of the world in order to transform it, and to do so collectively, nurturing new possibilities.

Having described the theorizing back space, in the following chapter, I move into some of the Homies’ biggest findings as they theorized together, starting with what they felt needed to be necessary, setting the tone, and moving into the “entanglements” that were inseparable to any attempt to answer our initial question:

Why are some youth out of school?

CHAPTER 6: SETTING THE TONE ON OUR TERMS: VIOLENCE, INNOCENT INSTITUTIONS, AND A CRIMINAL NORMALITY

The capitalist machine does not run the risk of becoming mad, it is mad from one end to another... and this is the source of its rationality. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 373)

But it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence that constitutes the crime. (Baldwin, 1962)

We get beat down while we already down. (CB the Orchestrator)

The last two chapters chronicled both the transition from Free Space into Theorizing Back, and some of the most critical components of the Theorizing Back space and project. This chapter, delving deep into the words and the worlds that were uncovered as the Homies theorized together, will, in the terms used by them, “set the tone on our terms;” an exercise the Homies deemed critical to theorizing back and one that resonates with what Martin-Baro (1994) argued should be one of the three urgent tasks of liberation psychology, the “de-ideologizing of everyday experience” (p. 31). As Esperanza explains:

I think for people to really get where we coming from they need to understand all the shit that doesn't stop, not only what we've been through but all that we have to go through all the time.

As argued by Esperanza, “setting the tone” was both, essential as a starting point for their theorizing,” and a critical component to sharing their theoretical work with people “outside.” In this case, the Homies claimed that for them to be in dialogue with you, the reader, first the reader has to “understand where we are coming from.”

Honoring this call, this chapter will attempt to follow the Homies as they name, describe, explore, and theorize: (a) the violent, dehumanizing, and oppressive non-stop normality and the worlds of unjustly distributed pain and violence that marginalized young people have to deal with as part of “going thru life”; (b) the “terrible timing,” hypocrisy, inadequacy and deleterious outcomes of support and safety systems; and (c) the theft of childhood, the misdistribution of

punishment and the simultaneous punishment and co-opting of resistance. Following, this chapter ends with several insights around what it meant “to set the tone on our terms” within the context of theorizing back.

Now, let us in the words of the Homies “set the tone.”

“We ain’t even got over the first problem, now, I got this other problem”: A Violent, Dehumanizing, and Oppressive Non-stop Normality

We have the power and we have the vision, but there is so much throwing us off as we’re looking to even survive. Thinking about what’s going on in our hoods, am I going to survive another day? Am I going to be dog food? (Teo)

What does it mean to set the tone? I asked the Homies. “Basically, it’s just for people to know, like to actually know all we have to put up with and all the shit that is thrown at us” (CB the Orchestrator). Thus, in the spirit and tradition of what Haley (2016) describes as documenting or excavating “freedom transcripts” (p. 3), let us make space to “set the tone” by allowing for the speaking of truths, the illumination of how ferocious state³⁸ violence gets mobilized, and the bringing to the front of what to the Homies felt needed to be upfront: a reality that has felt and acted, for as long as they can remember, like a defeating, dehumanizing, debilitating, and violent barrage of “stuff” that they, and their people, have had to endure, negotiate, “deal with,” and actively reject and refuse as part of their “normal” lives.

Since the beginning of our conversations together, it was clear that each one of the Homies’ stories bore the ubiquitous footprint of macabre and oppressive systems of terror, structures of economic and political subordination, and decades of epistemic and ontological violence. Albeit these ongoing processes and architectures of death and dispossession were different in both impact and visibility, all were meticulously and systemically operating through

³⁸ Using “state” here as a broad category that speaks to an array of carceral, capitalist, white supremacist, settler colonial structures and processes (not state as “government”).

a complex intersection of hegemonic and oppressive structures and systems and ideologies that move efficiently through race, gender, class, and other domains and constructions of human life and history.

Much has been written about these “worlds of death” (Apple et al., 2003). However, that doesn’t make these testimonies and these stories redundant or less important. Every case is tragic and in “reclaiming the power of the word” and speaking and writing them into existence, we—in the spirit of the Zapatistas—“give form to that walk that goes on inside us so that we can heal the pain, know and touch the heart of another, and defy the empire of silence that uses silence to hide its crimes” (Marcos & De Leon, 2011, p. 76). Moreover, the repeated naming and recentering of these injustices renders the oppressor’s passivity and complicity ever more criminal and egregious. In addition, the possibility of describing and analyzing the context in conversation with “dystopias”³⁹ served also as a powerful tool to denaturalize normality, as an “education of perception” (Varsam, 2003, p. 209) that “attunes us to death, dispossession, and disposability as codices to interpret reality” (Shange, 2019, p. 13). Also importantly, as the Homies described and theorized these worlds of death, they resisted “separation” and “fragmentation,” pushed back against binaries, and viscerally resisted fixating their gaze on “small” or reductive questions and flattening explanations. Instead, they repeatedly reminded each other that many things needed to be lifted up (texture and multiplicity), arguing that these “normal” worlds of death and dispossession ran, as Francisco described it “as far as the eye can see.” So where to start?

³⁹ Throughout our time together, we would mobilize the concept of both dystopia and utopia, sometimes to describe, sometimes to imagine.

“Shit bro, where to fucking start,” said CB the Orchestrator as I asked the group what they felt could be a good place to begin naming what was thrown at them. “How about just in how much a human being can handle, when this shit must stop,” she responded.

Sometimes with my therapist because I go tell her one thing and on God come next week it'll be a whole different story. She be like damn we didn't even get done with that part. You feel me bro? Because it's like, at the end of the day it's a lot. Like I go talk to her talk to her about one problem, boom, disappear, come back in the next two three days, it's a whole new problem. We ain't even got over the first problem, like we ain't even went through the steps of healing through that and now, I got this other problem. (CB the Orchestrator)

Without exception, the Homies often described their realities and what they had to go through as a “constant” and relentless barrage of “bullshit” and violence that felt as if it kept getting bigger quicker than they could understand, making it insurmountable not only to them, but to any human being. Also consistent with the endless literature, testimony, and community knowledge that has documented both the nature and gravity of the oppression and violence marginalized peoples face as part of life, the Homies were also clear on the deleterious impact this violence brought upon them and their people. At times, what they went through made them “unable to think or act (Skye),” other times, it made it “impossible to choose” (Francisco), and other times, it led them to “giving up” or to say “fuck the system, imma do my thing”(Tino the Rhino).

Incessant Exposure and Experiences of Multiple Forms of Violence

I am trapped on a desert of raw gunshot wounds
and a dead child dragging his shattered black
face off the edge of my sleep
blood from his punctured cheeks and shoulders
is the only liquid for miles (Lorde, 1978)

By structures we mean social relations and arrangements—economic, political, legal, religious, or cultural—that shape how individuals and groups interact within a social system. These structures are violent because they result in avoidable deaths, illness, and injury; and they reproduce violence by marginalizing people and communities,

constraining their capabilities and agency, assaulting their dignity, and sustaining inequalities. (Rylko-Bauer & Farmer, 2016, p. 47)

During one of the multiple meetings in which we interrogated that which is erased by “normality,” another one of those words that would become references and building blocks for our collective theorizing, Francisco began by sharing some reflections he had had after our previous theorizing back session:

I started thinking about a lot of stuff. It was a lot of stuff, but some stuff that it made me really think about was how messed up it really is growing up, but how it's normalized as something that I felt like was really... That's something that I really got out of it, and how so many of us, we go through all this mess as children, stuff not even for adults, and all this violence, and all these things, and it's normal. It's a normal thing. Someone got shot in the head across the street, it's normal, but how is it normal?

Resonating with Francisco's reflection, having a space and opportunity to both broaden and interrogate the meaning and the “type” violence and to be “allowed” to voice and name the violence that they had experienced raised critical and important questions. Among them: What is violence? How can broadening our understandings of violence help us “see what's going on”? and how did/does all this violence become normal?

In regards to the first question, what is violence, we had multiple conversations about the “definition” of violence, and often, it was deep experience and intuition that guided the Homies in articulating all the ways in which violence happens, takes shape, and is experienced. During one of our conversations—which initially began as a conversation about Marxism and how economic structures related or not to drug use—Francisco, Tino the Rhino, and myself discussed the multiple “shapes” of violence, in this case leading to Francisco arguing that violence was not only verbal or physical and in turn, describing “violence to the spirit,” a form of ontological violence that resonates to what King (2015) describes as psychic violence:

Francisco: and this is how beliefs can be violent, it is not only verbal, physical

Tino the Rhino: but also to who you are, when somebody doesn't believe in you, when someone thinks you are not worth anything.

Miguel: right, that could be understood like ontological violence—

Tino the Rhino: and sometimes it can be the mis-direct or direct.

Francisco: Say a kid shows up to school and asks “why is the sky blue” and the teacher says “why wouldn't it be,” and maybe cause they think the kid is a criminal, he dressed like a homie you know?

Tino the Rhino: it's a put down, it's a way de decir tus preguntas no importan, “the kid like he's trying to find out why”

Across many of our conversations, as in this one, the Homies recognized that the scope of the violence—and the extent of its harm—went way beyond the concrete, “material” violence that is most legible, overt, and that they were used to talking about. Thus, this possibility was also invitation to think about the less “evident,” at least to broader society, forms of ontological, epistemic, and axiological violence.

In regard to the concrete, and not to be minimized, direct exposure to violence had been a constant in the lives of the Homies since they were young. All of the Homies expressed an intimate relationship to worlds of death and harm, something that they'd seen and experienced since they were too young. In the following examples, CB the Orchestrator and Chuy describe early memories of witnessing, and being traumatized, by violence:

Down the street from my school, one of my big Homies and I saw this young kid. He was shot in the head, in the back. Some young kid. (CB the Orchestrator)

. . . it was far worse than that, and us being traumatized of being victims of our community is at a very young age . I was with my mom buying vegetables she was making “caldo,” at a very young age at 7 years old I witnessed somebody getting shot. Broad daylight it was 2 or 3 o'clock in the afternoon, right next to me, I am leaning over from the curb, using this curb to reach out to grab an apple or whatever that I was trying to grab and I see some man run and you could tell he was running from someone and then another man just comes from behind him and shoot him while he is in the ground right in front of me. (Chuy)

Besides witnessing violence, the Homies also experienced violence directly, another subject that was normalized and yet would come up sporadically in our conversations. When speaking about their experiences of being punished and policed, Joshua added that it wasn't only police, "because the whole world was whippin me, my mom whatever the fuck, nigga in the hood. Go home and get that ass whooping, go outside, same shit." Eric, responding to a brief check-in question where we shared our power animal, began "I always been treated like a dog, that why I choose a dog: Family beat my ass, the school beat my ass, cops beat my ass, the hood beats my ass." Affectively disorienting and egregiously normalized, violence popped its head repeatedly through statements that were also always accompanied by its consequences: "at some point you don't know what the fuck or give a fuck no more" (Joshua).

When you get to your teenage years, nigga beat your ass every day at school, or your mom getting beat up and shit, yeah that shit matter. That shit do matter. (CB the Orchestrator)

Equally critical, the Homies found that when theorized collectively, violence, which was initially mostly experienced and understood as "individual," quickly became "shared," structural, multifaceted, connected, consequential, connected to power, political, and increasingly unacceptable. Moreover, as the Homies theorized together, it was also clear that violence contributed to the shaping of subjectivities and that the experience of violence, both individual and collective, shaped their political reading of the world.

Lastly, in the worlds described by the Homies, violence was a constant across actors, spaces, and institutions. However, as several Homies argued, some of these actors and institutions were more "honest" about it. This thought, initially brought up by Eric while pointing out the hypocrisy of the "good" institutions that say they help or "that we should be going there" but are actively participating in the "beating," would eventually become a powerful insight about

responsibility, honesty, and the ideological nature of dominant stories: “At least my hood is honest about it.”

Further thinking about these different sites, spaces, and institutions brought a multiplicity of insights and lessons. While these are impossible to capture within the boundaries of this chapter—or those of this dissertation—the following sections will speak to those that were chosen by the Homies as critical to “setting the tone.”

“All that shit happened at school”: Violence at the Hands of Schools

Perhaps at no other time in U.S. history did the church and state work so hand in hand to advance the common project of white supremacy as it did during the period of missionary domination. During this era, missionary groups acted as the primary developers and administrators of schools while the federal government served as the not-so-silent partner . . . it was the duty of all employees in government/funded missions, particularly teachers, to promote U.S. policies aimed at “civilizing” Indians. (Grande, 2004, p. 16)

“Sounds like shit’s still the same” (Francisco, seconds after reading the quote above)

As someone who has devoted a big part of his life to fighting for the possibility of what schools and education can be, this was a difficult section to write. While refusing to homogenize or characterize “schools” or the experiences of multiply marginalized young people in schools as only “violent,” this section was written under the belief that if our commitment to the liberatory and transformative potential of schools is sincere, then we must be bold in naming and confronting the historical and contemporary violence and harm that has, and continues to occur through, in, and at the hands of schools. More importantly for this project, this wasn’t only a non-negotiable for the Homies, but also a springboard for considering new possibilities in the world of education, especially for youth who have countless experiences negotiating the tensions between an oppressive, violent, racist, and punitive schooling and a deep desire for freedom, emancipation, stability, dignity, and education.

As Francisco and Lola shared, “there were those few people who saw me, those moments where I could be myself,” “that one teacher who would pull me to the side and ask me how I was doing, she saw past the gang stuff.” For each of them, their lives had been marked by small moments where their subjectivity was not only “not a problem,” but an actual place of power, wealth, and possibility. As Jose Miguel once described of an encounter with a teacher at the juvenile hall, “I remember she told me I could be a lawyer and fight for my people and I was like, me, a lawyer? I never thought of myself like that.” Unfortunately, these moments and possibilities were overshadowed by what Bryan once described as “the world as schools versus me;” a cruel and devastating irony when contrasted with the beautiful dignities, hopes, dreams, and desires for education that every child gifts the world with.

During one of the first theorizing back sessions, the Homies recommended starting our interrogation of schools and education by recounting some of our best and worst experiences in school. That first conversation turned into several, and what emerged was an honest, reflexive, vulnerable, difficult, and transformative sharing of stories that were to become a foundation to the groups’ relationships, its shared languages, the authenticity and relevance of what would be discussed, and ultimately the Homie’s theorizing. Following are a few of those stories and conversations. While painfully recognizable and “mundane,” especially for those of us “critically” familiar with the reality of schools in “urban”⁴⁰ America, each story reveals all the ways in which the Homies, who are conveniently and repeatedly flattened as “objects” to scrutinize, become subjects, theorists, researchers, and analysts and through their make visible how unevenly history and structures distribute resources, opportunities, and dignity (Fine, 2016).

⁴⁰ While the term urban is a term that typically refers to cities and “developed” spaces, the term has also taken on a racialized meaning, not only because of concrete migration and displacement patterns, but also because of hegemonic representations of that which is urban (Noguera, 2022).

Don't call on me.. I told her I didn't know how to read

CB the Orchestrator: Then my turn comes, bro. I told my teacher, “Bitch, you weird.” She kicked me out. I had to go to the principal because I cussed her out. And I had told her, “Don’t call on me.” Popcorn, none of that shit. She did that shit, bro, and I cussed her out, bro, and I had to go to the fucking principal, but I told the bitch I didn’t know. I didn’t know how to read.⁴¹ I told her I didn't know how to read.

Tino the Rhino: Yeah. So she was chingando. She was putting you on the spot.

CB the Orchestrator: I thought she was trying to be funny.

Tino the Rhino: Yeah, yeah.

Camilo: And I think that that speaks a lot to your teacher as a person. That’s not a compassionate—

CB the Orchestrator: I told her though.

Camilo: That's even worse.

CB the Orchestrator: I told her, “Don’t popcorn pick.” I told her. I walked to her desk and told her. I ain't tell her in front of the class. “Don’t call on me. I can’t read.” I told her because I didn't want nobody else to know and she still did the dumbass shit.

Tino the Rhino: Fucked up. Yeah.

CB the Orchestrator: I was like, yeah, this bitch got me fucked up, bro.

As is made clear by CB the Orchestrator’s story, the violence—and the harm and trauma engendered by such violence—went vastly beyond the physical and material violence that plagues the media and the narratives around “inner city schools.” Instead, it was the ubiquitous and insidiously normalized “small” practices and instances of ontological and epistemic violence, the denial of authorship and sovereignty, the assault upon one’s value, and the shaming and dismissal, among others; that sat at the heart of the wound. Moreover, while these wounds had deep linkages to racialized, classed, and gendered discrimination as forms of societal

⁴¹ The theme of learning how to read was important for CB the Orchestrator as a simultaneous point of “hurt” and a place for authorship, dignity, and self-determination. During Free Space (a couple of years before theorizing back), we worked on a set of free style writing pieces and her piece was titled “Learning how to fucking read at 22.”

violence, all of which exacerbated the effects of exposure to other types of violence (Brondolo et al., 2009; Goff et al., 2014; Sanders-Phillips, 2009); they were also an affirmation of the humanness and the dignity of students. As Esperanza once shared: “it hurts cause we feel, it hurts cause we want to be seen and respected.”

Like with many other accounts and stories of harm, the experiences of violence, especially violence “to the spirit,” was most often experienced as something that happened to each one of them as individuals and that had been kept a secret. However, as these secrets were revealed, a collective language and different forms of solidarity emerged. In this example, a few minutes after CB the Orchestrator shared her story of being “popcorn picked” and humiliated, Tino the Rhino, who, to this day continues to be defined by his endless curiosity and desire to learn about everything from parallel universes to particle physics, began with a memory that “chases me [him] to this day”:

He pushed me down. When I asked my teacher, “Oh, why is the moon round,” and they told me, “Why wouldn’t it be?” Instead of telling me, “Let’s find out,” they just told, “Oh, you think it would be a square?” this and this. They put you down. So, that’s why I told they kill the spirit, and there’s a lot of stuff they do like that. And sometimes when a kid fails, they’ll be like, “You didn’t study enough” and this and this. But they don’t know. What if that kid has an abusive mom or dad or anything going on at home that they can’t study? They have a lot of shit going on. So, and teachers already, they’re quick to judge before they help.

Consistent with the epistemic and ontological violence at the hands of schools that has been thoroughly documented by marginalized peoples throughout history, Tino the Rhino not only had to endure his dismissal by others as a “bad and gang kid,” but he also had to affectively negotiate the anger provoked by the clash between his desire to “always wanting to learn and ask questions” and a reality where the right to questions was stripped away from him. Further illustrating the depth of the wound and the magnitude of the contradiction, Tino the Rhino would often reminisce in memories of his mom walking him over to the library “whenever she had time

so that we could watch Discovery Channel documentaries,” his dream of going to space one day, and the countless times he attempted to “change, you know, to do good in school,” only to “not be seen or laughed at or seeing how people just thought I couldn’t be anything.” Like Tino the Rhino—and consistent with the work that has shown how youth of color are regarded as a problem, pathologized, and denied an opportunity to learn (Noguera, 2018)—all the Homies had to live with the contradictions between their dreams and their sense of agency and dignity and the identities, deficiencies, and criminalities that were repeatedly imposed as part of the mundane.

Creating shared words and “languages,” greatly because of the worlds referenced and made possible by such words was an important part of the Homies’s theorizing together. Unsettling and interrogating known words like violence or freedom and learning new concepts like hegemony or “racial microaggressions”—subtle forms of discrimination, often unintentional and unconscious, that send negative and denigrating messages to individuals and groups in societies that are stratified by race (Huber & Solorzano 2014; Nadal et al., 2015)—would often give the group language to name and to put a finger on things that might have been relatively invisible or disguised as “normal.” Similarly, and relevant to Tino the Rhino’s claim to a right to ask questions, discursive turns or “shifts in frame,” were equally important. In regard to violence and in this specific case directly connected to both schools and the bigger project of education, deepening our dialogue around the meaning of violence was powerful both in terms of its theoretical and political implications and in its importance in revealing wounds and consequently, essential to both healing and transformation.

During one of our sessions, I shared a framing that had personally transformed my own understanding of violence. In it Freire states “any situation in which some individuals prevent

others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence. The means used are not important” (Freire, 1970). This particular shift in frame, similar to those who position the word and self-determination as a human right immediately built space for the Homies to re-member many instances of their lives, their experiences in schools and to situate their affect, including its implications for their subjectivity, from a radically different standpoint. Putting this frame in conversation with Tino the Rhino’ story and the dismissal of his endless questions, not only was it a right for him to ask questions but something that was “right” and beautiful in him.

After hearing Tino the Rhino share his story of being humiliated for asking why the moon was round, Francisco responded with a thought and story that further illustrate not only the “theft” of questions, but the presence of a dehumanizing “gaze” and a set of expectations that were both, inescapable and ready to unjustly distribute shame. He began:

We are also are forced to do all this shit so that the world doesn’t shame us and treat us as less or think of us as less. We’re trying to all show up with dignity. But at the same time, we all have to hide all these things, and we have to pretend all these things. We have to do all these things just so they don't shame us.

Returning to a memory that he had once shared when talking about his worst moment in school with the group. Francisco continued:

It’s like the story with the roaches. I was in like 3rd grade and would always keep my backpack on me. I always had a nightmare that one day I would open my backpack in the classroom and roaches would come out and everyone would make fun of me, you know? I was going through it, struggling, we were staying in someone’s garage with my mom and the teacher one day asked me why I didn’t do my work you know, she was getting at me and wouldn’t let me just be. She then asked me what I had in my backpack and I said nothing you know? She then starting spitting and yelling at me and took my backpack and opened it in front of the whole class. Just drop everything out and I saw the roaches came out, never knew if they did or not but I felt they did, I could not think there. I was frozen too. After, she kicked me out too. She just kicked me out like that, and I was like, “What the heck?” I don’t know what I think. I might have just been walking around the school the rest of that day. Because I was like, “What the heck?” Just kick me out of classes and did me like that. I didn’t come back, never did. You know what I mean?

I remember hearing that story for the first time and thinking how is it that we continue to punish and harm those already being harmed and punished by the crimes of the state? How was this backpack that never opened, that never left his back, serve as a metaphor and window into the inner lives of young people who are walking into our schools; the unreasonable, panoptic, and violent gaze that is placed upon them; and the criminal pathologizing of financial poverty. Tino the Rhino, who empathized with Tino the Rhino and who himself had suffered and been harmed by bullying connected to his broken-down shoes and clothes, responded:

That happened the same shit to me. Not the shit like that but because I had shit like that too in my backpack and I had so many roaches in my house, bro. Because we live in the ghetto. You know how much you clean it, bro. I swear you could clean the house good, like no food, the dishes washed, everything on time, everything limpiquito, and sometimes even the cockroaches will still fucking end up going into the house bro. So I remember one time too, I went to school I took out my binder and it was una cuarachota [a big cockroach] in my fucking binder. I was like, “What the fuck?” I was like, “Throw that shit away bro.” I was like, “Oh my God, like what the fuck? I always felt like I had to hide my stuff like that.”

Across both their examples, as with many stories that the Homies shared throughout our process, schools, with their spatial and ideological “insulation” from the lives of youth, tacitly and explicitly deployed infrastructures of violence through shame and dismissal. Sometimes, it was the expectation of “whiteness” and the seemingly panoptic white gaze (Morrison, 1998) that rendered their ways of being, their gifts, and their wealth “out of place;” other times, like with the backpack, it was keeping “home”—and all the ways in which it was implicitly criminalized, pathologized, and seen as “less than”—tucked away from the possibility of being exposed, shamed, or punished.⁴² Sometimes, it was their priorities and questions that didn’t belong, superimposing an irrelevant and harmful curriculum and affectively tearing them apart.

⁴² This also builds on the silencing mechanisms, many of which were attached to consequences like family policing and separation, described in Chapter 4.

A couple of minutes after Francisco shared his story, CB the Orchestrator responded with an emotional anecdote describing the deep chasm between what was in her heart, “*why are we hurtin,*” and that which was required from her by school. Her story, which brought “tears of rage” as she recounted it that day, was evocative of what Joyce E. King (2015) describes as the psychic violence that harms the spirits, identities, questions, and right to know of Black students and of the annihilation of Black Identity that Sylvia Wynter (1989) theorized when reflecting on her own experience in colonial Jamaica. In her story, CB the Orchestrator cathartically described being stuck in a classroom hurting, not knowing why she was there and being “taught” what felt offensively irrelevant and dismissive of her right to make sense of her own world:

They had me, I don't know what the fuck that shit was, but that shit was bullshit. It had fucking the cave man turn it into a white man. You want me to see how this caveman turn into a human?⁴³ Like that's not really real, bro, like what the fuck. I know that bitches have sex with a nigga to have kids. Like this is how I looked at it. That's the history you want me to believe? I'd rather go smoke a blunt, bullshit it's some fairytale. A cave man turn into a white man. And I'm what the fuck? But what about my grandmother? Why she all on crack? Why are we hurtin. Fuck that. Why did they all on crack? Oh, why did the government . . . like shit that I really had to go through, that's don't fucking okay man [crying]. Trying to . . . no cave man turn into a human. That's not history. That ain't history. I don't know what the fuck that is.

CB the Orchestrator, who had already been criminalized, policed, and incarcerated by and at schools, was describing an alienating and aggressive experience of dismissal: “that’s the story you want me to believe.” Instead of being able to ask what was important to her, “what about my grandmother . . . why are we hurtin?” What CB the Orchestrator and the Homies repeatedly described and experienced was not only a manifestation of color-blind ideologies that are the antithesis of any kind of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2009), but a direct

⁴³ In this case, what could be considered a “neutral” subject was within that context, presenting a particular vision of literacy and of what is of value consistent with one particular Western tradition (Giroux, 1987).

assault on her right to a world, an identity, and a perfect example of what Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernandez (2013) describe as a curricular imposition of settler colonialism and white supremacy, two ongoing projects and processes deeply intertwined with the project of American schooling. Often, we think of the “lack of” culturally relevant practices or culturally responsive curriculum and in this case, the wound is not only connected to the absence of something, but to the presence of something else, a curricular violence exercised through all that is made invisible by its status as “official knowledge.”

Further reflecting on “why we hurtin?” and the ways it intersected with what happens at schools, it was clear to the Homies that violence “inside” schools existed in conversation with both what sat outside the gate, and all that “jumped the gate.”

I was in the 8th grade. I remember a dude. He hopped the gate. He was 20, over 20. He had a beard and everything. Me and my Homies are walking. He fucked my homie up. Boom, boom. The security guard seen. But didn't do nothing until he hopped the gate back out, then ran back over there. “Hey, hey.” That's still trauma. That's still shit that I have to see and live. You know what I mean? And then we said, fuck going to school. We going to go fight him. We going to find the fucking dude get his ass. Now what? Now we are not at school, now we in the streets, that shit happened at school, which didn't protect us. (CB the Orchestrator)

Furthermore, it wasn't only the fact that violence hopped the gate, but the premise that they were expected to operate as if that which happened outside did not exist. In that regard, the hypocrisy of the school as they “didn't do nothing until he hopped the gate back out” further highlighted the school's inability to “be real.” Like Tino the Rhino described, it was like the school was selling us “false things.” Telling us we could be anything or that they would protect us when “we know its bullshit.” However, unlike the schools, who could get away with lying and pretending, the Homies had to “be real.” In CB the Orchestrator's case, they had to return to the neighborhood, “find the fucking dude” and “do what we do in the streets.” As Tino the Rhino described, they also had to go back to school, which itself brought about lots of danger:

"Fuck, I'm going to school, but I might get killed on my way to school or coming back from school. Because either way, I would still get back to the hood or come back to the bullshit or something something. I got jumped like two times right there, how am I supposed to think about homework or something."

CB the Orchestrator, speaking to these complex intersections between schools' and their broader context, the school's embodiment of carceral and coercive logics and practices, and ultimately the compounded assault on her personhood, shared:

I got to put it into a perspective this. When I'm at home, I can't be jumping around loud and shit because my mom, she on drugs or whatever. She don't loud noise. So she be, calm down you're too energetic, too hyperactive. I go to school, they want me to sit down for eight hours, when I want to just run around, jump around and shit. I can't because this is what the fuck education is about . . . I really couldn't focus on the shit because of me wanting to just jump out of my own body and just run around, scream."

It is also in examples like these where the concrete impact and work of schools is only made possible when putting it in conversation with other systems, both material and ideological, contemporary and historical. In this case, sitting around for 8 hours, a practice both ubiquitous and normatively "pedagogical," becomes particularly criminal in conversation with a broader spatial constellation of precarity, confinement, and dispossession. Moreover, it was CB the Orchestrator's lived experience that informed her theorizing and its refusal to dislocate schools from the rest of the world and forced a conversation with the broader ecosystems. As Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes of those deeply steeped in ecosystems, different and intersecting levels are dynamically interacting, creating continuities and discontinuities across sites, including day to day interactions and broader institutional configurations and ideologies that shape structures and policies in the broader society, including the broader historical context.

At the level of subjectivity and similar to the conversation around the "lack of" culturally relevant curriculum, the Homies often clarified that the extent of the ontological violence was not only "not being seen or valued" or when one identity and culture was less valuable than

other, e.g., case indigeneity versus whiteness⁴⁴; but it was another case when what was “less” was also a source of shame, a place from which to be assaulted, and one that was concretely dangerous. In a telling exchange where the Homies were talking about the ability or inability to be themselves across different spaces, CB the Orchestrator and Francisco responded to a statement by Lola where she shared that because she was the gang member’s kid, even before she walked into school, she “already had a special desk in the office.”

CB the Orchestrator: suddenly you are one of the smokers that be in the back on the side of the building

Mark: like “you’re a gang member”

CB the Orchestrator: if one person did something, you all did it. One person don’t get to be. That’s crazy, though.

As CB the Orchestrator claims at the end, it was also the consistent production and re-production of a group identity that assaulted their dignity and their right to authorship and self-determination:

One person don’t get to be. That’s crazy.

Moreover, reading these “small” instances of violence as connected with broader processes of social reproduction and settler-colonialism reveals how the mundane denial of worlds participates in the ongoing processes of assimilation and erasure. Moreover, this process of superimposing subjectivity over the Homies was as much about the replacement of ones identity for another than it was about fabricated blindness towards who they were. As John Trudell argued: “Historically speaking, we went from being Indians to pagans to savages to hostiles to

⁴⁴ Using whiteness here as described by Lipsitz (2006): “whiteness is, of course, a delusion, a scientific and cultural fiction that like all racial identities has no valid foundation in biology or anthropology. Whiteness is, however, a social fact, an identity created and continued with all/too/real consequences for the distribution of wealth, prestige, and opportunity” (vii).

militants to activists to Native Americans. Its five hundred years later and they still can't see us. We are still invisible" (John Trudell Quotes, para. 1). As CB the Orchestrator described, "I wasn't paying attention to school because nobody was paying attention to what was going on at home. Like nobody wasn't paying attention to me . . . So you want me to come here and pay attention to what the fuck you saying? Nah, I would laugh and I would make a joke out of everything."

As Tino the Rhino put it, "I was sitting right in fucking front of you and you still couldn't see me, and when you saw me, it was the problem it was the little things and how they made a whole ass scene," it was how "since we were very young I noticed my teachers would look at me, down on me. I swear I would know them. I would hear. They would look at me, bro, like I was like something . . ." "like really fucking trash," Camilo jumped in.

"Like a bad kid, Yeah I swear, I used to talk to one teacher always, I told her, "Hey, Miss, why do you always talk to me like you're mad at me? What the fuck?" And she was like, "Oh, I don't have nothing to answer." I was like, "Oh, well like you always like you have some type of attitude."

Each one of these stories, and their telling, pushed back against what Paris and Alim (2014) describe as "the fallacy of measuring ourselves and the young people in our communities solely against the White middle-class norms of knowing and being that continue to dominate notions of educational achievement (p. 83). These were also an indictment of all the ways in which colonization works through schools to "civilize" marginalized youth, and more specifically Indigenous communities, to superimpose Western society's ideologies, knowledge, and power structures (Brayboy, 2005).

In the spirit of setting the tone, and in continuing to honor what was named by the Homies, schools, despite playing a critical and complex role in each one of the Homies's lives, were only a part of a broader context that contributed to all that was "thrown at us." As CB the

Orchestrator explained, “It’s not just school, it’s the scarcity, the crime rate, everything going higher and higher. Fucking putting fentanyl on weed now nigga, people be overdosing on weed. Plus new viruses, just more shit and more shit.” “It isn’t rocket science,” Lola agreed, “same shit, drugs, racism and violence, poverty, housing insecurity, gun violence, displacement, all that.” These weren’t surprising and much has been written about them. “Drugs, drugs has got to be in there,” Francisco argued.

“Drugs”

During various of the theorizing back sessions, drugs would come up. To the young theorists, drugs were many things: a “way out of depression and to separate myself from the street life” (Francisco), “one of the only ways to make real money for many of us” (Eric), “a government plan to stop black people’s success and turn their brain to smooch” (CB the Orchestrator), “something we saw all over since we were kids” (Raul), “a way to get their pain away” (Jose), “something our people get punished for” (Esperanza), among many.

Many of the Homies, their families, and their communities had witnessed and struggled with the deep complexities and the multiple layers of “drugs,” including: drug use, abuse, addiction, sale, and the simultaneous and unequitable pathologizing, and criminalizing of those who use or sell them. As a youth described: “I used to do drugs like hard drugs, I was 13 I used to sell crack, and I used to sniff the cocaine crack, smell the crack. So I would be fucked up, cause I already went through that shit with my family. It was kind of a hard drug to stop though. That shit’s hard as fuck, bro.” As it is clear, the footprint and the scale and scope of the impact of drugs—including its historical and temporal dimensions—was massive and complex.

The Homies were honest in naming and reflecting upon the impact of drugs on their worlds, recognizing the deep and hurtful losses that were directly connected to drugs and yet never shying away from their own agency and responsibility and actively making meaning of all

the ways in which drugs had been, were, and would continue to be a part of their lives. The impact and harm ranged from all the people that they knew directly that had overdosed (including the rising number of youth who are currently overdosing on the synthetic drug that are flooding the streets like fentanyl), those who had “drank and just drugged themselves to death,” and those lost and kidnapped by the unjust policing and criminalizing of drugs, to how, as Jose describes “That shit fucked up my brain,” or as Francisco reflected: “Two years later. You don’t even remember crap, it would go weeks that I didn’t even know where I was, now I can’t remember, I remember some things. That’s why I write everything down now. When I watch YouTube, I have to write down. I read a book, I write stuff down.”

As they theorized and explored the intersections and relationship between drugs and their lives and communities, the Homies would also reject the binaries through which drugs are usually understood. Resonating with the axiology of desire-based research frameworks (Tuck, 2010), the Homies consistently “thirded” the irreconcilable binary of the either/or and instead re-centered the both/and (Soja, 1996), in this case that which simplifies drugs as “bad.” The Homies understood and were quite clear on the “negative” impact of drugs on their wellbeing and on the lives of the people that they loved; which included the broader political implications and the historical and racialized dimensions of the crack epidemic, the war on drugs, and the criminalization of certain drugs over others. “I seen what it did to my family. It stopped the generational wealth and stuff, the generational healing and stuff. It's the same shit over and over. When crack hit Black people, when the government put it in the hood, I think that shit flushed a lot of things that they knew out they brain . . .” Moreover, the Homies were critical and sharp in how they further theorized the active politics of and the relationship between individual trauma and systemic trauma, articulating how drugs could be many things at the same time: a political

strategy of white supremacy, a collective strategy to deal with the pain and the trauma carried by multiple marginalized people, and wisdom and medicine that has been used from times immemorial. As CB the Orchestrator critically reflected:

“That’s what it do. That’s what dope do. Erasing dreams. Erasing memories both so that we forget the pain but also we forget our history.”

The Homies also pushed each other in their thinking as they theorized, often unsettling the oversimplification of drugs as the “only” addiction and considering addictions more broadly as an escape, as an anesthetic to the violence and the lack of purpose, and as a way to negotiate dignity in a world that sought to take it away from them. Tino the Rhino, sharing his experiences with addiction started, “you could say I never had a drug addiction, I’ve done the shit and I’ve never had an actual drug problem. The real addiction has been the streets. That’s where I escaped and feel that rush.” CB the Orchestrator, again putting the “addiction” in conversation with bigger forces, structures, and the context that get people to “do” the drug, added:

Some people don’t get as lucky as you, like how you’re saying that you don’t have a drug problem because it’s not really the drug that you’re addicted to. It’s something else causing people to do the drug, which probably is the streets, or where you come from, or just trauma. So you know my problem is not based upon drugs, it’s based upon what the fuck got me to do the drug.

Further humanizing those who “got hooked into drugs” and pushing their thinking beyond irreconcilable and evidently absurd binaries of drugs being good/bad or yes/no issues, the Homies highlighted the precarious nature of their lives. A precarity that was full of moments where their stories could have radically changed, whether through overdosing or falling further and deeper into drug use. “It could have easily been me, in fact it was luck that it wasn’t,” Diego reflected. Moreover, this precarious state was also full of antagonistic and contradictory emotions that oscillated between “this is going to help me a lot, this is going to get my pain away

and I don't want to overdose." For some, she [mother] kept telling me, "Mijo, leave the drugs. I'm telling you right now, if you do this, something's going to happen to you." Other times, drugs were also moments of refuge and community themselves, "When I got to sit with my aunties and share stories," or just "chilling with my girlfriend, help get our minds off things."

Regardless of the multiple roles and relationships that each one of the Homies had with drugs, their presence was ubiquitous and overwhelmingly impactful. This impact, the Homies theorized, was further compounded by the lack of support, the growing and continuous tightening of the oppression around their, and a dehumanizing and violent pathologizing of those who were already suffering deep and complex, often intergenerational, wounds. Just as importantly, their theorizing around drugs was not about passing out blame like a "hot potato." In contrast, it was both deeply connected to responsibility, agency, complexity, and criticality; and also clear in its stance against how drugs and drug use are consistently weaponized against them and their families." And lastly, it quickly became clear that countering these narratives while being sincere about the cycles of trauma and harm that were indeed connected to the people around them, including their families was, in the words of Eric, necessary "so that shit can change."

Blaming the Victims: Family and Accumulated Trauma

. . . and then my brother, rest in peace, and my other sister, rest in peace, my family is very we're very open, we're outspoken, you know were a really strong family. Um, like just like everyone else we've all been through you know, hell, my mom used to drug deal, you know she's a gang member, my dad's a gang member, we're all, everybody in my family is a part of something [ok], you know and it's either something small or something big you know, but the way we use our voices, [mmhm] we come off as powerful [ok], we don't like to keep quiet about anything. We work together you know, like everybody we all have a past that were not proud of you know, we do a lot of shit that's not supposed to be done, but we live off it and you know we grow. my mom, I think she said she was 12 when she got into a gang, and she was always by herself, she grew up in a tough life, she was out in the street all the time bagging clothes. My dad, same thing with my dad when my dad was young all his Homies were into something and so he was like you know what these are my Homies I'ma ride for them. Why not? I'm

already here. I didn't think it was bad, to everybody else it was bad, but a lot of shit happened to us when we were little. (Lola)

Setting the tone for Lola, like for many of the Homies, required both, recognizing the wounds and the intergenerational harm that lived in her and her family, and unsettling normative and simplistic depictions of them as criminal, bad, gang members, predators, dangerous, and a whole host of labels and stories that were repeatedly thrust upon them. However, it wasn't about "defending" or pushing back with another simplistic binary. Instead, they dared to ask questions, sat humbly and often hurtfully in the contradictions, and brought "in" the inter-relationships with other systems and other spaces. They felt a need to push back against what Lola would call the "white world's frame" and what CB the Orchestrator described as "the real shit with real consequences that happens in our homes."

As some of them reflected upon what these tensions meant and felt like while growing up, they recognized how the symbolic violence of these frames led to simultaneous feelings of "protecting them [their families]," "not wanting to be like them," "to have to hide who they are;" and to, "fight it [the gaze]." CB the Orchestrator, who often spoke of the endless cycles, starting with her grandfather going to Vietnam and the crack epidemic sweeping her neighborhood, that deeply impacted her family, also recognized that she needed to "speak that shit out to break the cycle":

Look how my mama is. She's so dependent. She's scared to get her own house because she's scared to make money. The more money you make, the more bills you got, the more problems you have. But since she lives in the projects and it's more simpler, she don't have to do too much. Like no, that doesn't make any sense to me, but that's just how my family was raised and I'm like being rebellious towards it. I'm fighting it. I don't want it.

Often, this rebellion against the frames imposed upon their people would lead them to embrace countercultural identities and stances reminiscent of the lads in *Learning to Labour* (Willis, 1981). Taking about his experiences growing up without a father and encountering people with

power, Camilo reflected, it was “as if their pity was a cue of how we were supposed to feel. Fuck that!” Other times, these tensions brought multiple and contradictory feelings that often led to powerful questions, like in the following exchange:

Francisco: My mom used to walk, used to come to the park looking for me. She was like, “Where’s Francisco?” And I’ll just be like, “Mom, go to the other side of the street.” Because I’ll be scared. I’ll be like of my Homies are going to be talking smack like, “That’s your mom?” Because my mom was poor. We were poor. My mom would have ripped up shoes, ripped up pants. She wouldn’t comb her hair. She’ll would just be like, you know what I mean? Now I embrace it because before I was little, I was kind of like, “Oh, I don’t want talk Spanish.” You don’t even want be a Mexican really. Because “oh Mexican this, Mexican that.” Selling tamales.

CB the Orchestrator: Your mom used to sell tamales?

Mark: Yeah tamales, Easter, we used to sell on the swap meet every Sunday. We used to get free food at five in the morning. We used to do all kinds of stuff.

CB the Orchestrator: And your dad?

Francisco: And my blood dad, he was, I don’t know. He was in and out of juvie. I don’t really know much. He was only 17, so I don’t really know much from him, but my cousins, and I . . . Where I grew up, all my best friends, his sister was from the gang, his brother was from the same crew. His dad was from prison. His whole family was like there are cousins within the same gang, gang banging, and their other cousin was with these gang members, and they were five deep, eight deep. It was family, everybody seen them, the whole gang. Little Joel, little . . . It was someone that I just hung out with, so it’d become normalized to me, to go to this cousin’s house, we were tight. We were not really the “go to town” kind, but they’ll be smoking weed and we’ll be like, “Want to get some weed, let’s go to the town,” and they’ll be running around, balling, banged out. Gang banging. Going in and out of jail, gang fights, getting shot. We just see this. We’ve seen pulling out pistols when we’re eight, nine, in the dresser, just in front of the house. It’s not just hidden. It’s just right there. People might see this as bad or irresponsible but nobody wants to ask why, why do they put them there in the projects, why do the cops harass them, why is there no support?

In both his claim that “nobody wants to ask why” and its subsequences set of questions, Francisco surfaced a powerful idea and an important concept that would become central to their theorizing back: responsibility. Unlike blame, which is forever “passed around” and

consequently never gets anywhere, responsibility is only to be “picked up” and consequently, regardless of whether connected to structure, agency, or both, inherently beckons the question, who is to pick it up? Moreover, how are questions, especially when asked in a deeply unjust society, inherently connected to responsibility?

Initially, some of what the Homies shared could have been more indicative of what many have described as either internalizing failure (McLeod, 1987) and the logics of oppression, or resistance and refusal to buy into the “dominant frame.” However, as we continued to theorize together and to theorize back, the questions became more complex. It wasn’t simply “why do they [white people] put them there in the projects” or “why do the cops harass them [people of color]?” but one of “why does nobody want to ask why?” This layering of questions and the questioning of what Meiners (2007) called willful public ignorance was to become an important feature of theorizing back.⁴⁵ Especially as we moved forward in our theorizing back, the Homies were deliberate—as they understood the violence and the racism embedded in the dominant narratives that inflicted pain and harm to their people⁴⁶—in pushing back, humanizing, and celebrating the cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), power, resilience, and beauty of their people. During one of the first “inter-group interviews” where the Homies had an opportunity to interview each other, Francisco asked Camilo about his family and what his family was like:

Camilo: What is my family like?

Francisco: How is your family like, you know?

⁴⁵ These critical components of theorizing back are summarized on pp. 248–249.

⁴⁶ This was a critical consciousness and understanding that was there from the beginning. However, the time to theorize, engage in dialogue, and reflect gave the homes language, clarity, and a deeper sense of how these “bigger” systems of injustice “did their work” in ways that showed up ubiquitously in their worlds and experiences.

Camilo: Yeah, I mean they're workers man, you know, working class from the Rancho, you know, their food pickers, factory workers, gangsters, gangster ass foos. Yeah, fucking, they're cool, man. They make it happen. Strong people.

Francisco: You got, you got a like thick bloodline, you know? Like your genes are strong, you know?

Camilo: Yeah man, I fucking come from part of Michoacán, there's some crazy motherfuckers.

Francisco: Yeah I feel like you know those genes like those, those strong characteristics like working hard, you know like, never like never like being lazy always like being there providing, you know I think that's something that we get you know from the Mexicans. As the raza, I feel like we get that you know. Like I see my mom and my mom, you know, she go to work, come home at like one in the morning, she's like still looking for cans for an hour. She comes home and she has like a bag of cans. And I'm like damn, I'm just trippin out, like damn that's only like five bucks. She's like I still need more money, I need to feed you, to feed the kids. Yeah, she's so hard working and she's like a woman, you know.

Camilo: For sure and I grew up in a basically, like there was really no men in my family, you know. It was all women you know like my grandma, with no husband, my mother with no husband, like all my sisters. And it's just like a bunch of women.

Tino the Rhino: Yeah and I had like my dad but like my dad I would see him on the weekend, you know, and I, He was a good dad you know but like it's just that my dad didn't give me the kind of schooling to like you know like know what's up. I just picked up off like he worked a lot, you know, he always wanted me to do better than him but he wouldn't like he didn't really like tell me to follow this stuff [academic/good/education stuff] you know.

In their theorizing back and while describing their families, the Homies were both intuitively tracing a map of dominant frames and hegemonic ideologies that were repeatedly imposed upon their mothers—lazy, non-caring about their children, passive—and contesting these characterizations through critical, loving and humanizing testimony. Often, contesting these frames was also a healing exercise, a way of connecting and reflecting upon the assets and the humanities that had made a mark in their lives. In this regard, their theorizing was also connected and guided by their love and relationships; responsible and accountable to the worlds to which it referenced,

Like Francisco, Tino the Rhino, and Camilo in the previous conversation, the Homies were honest, humble, and sincere in the way in which they spoke about people and the worlds and contexts in which they lived, which were inseparable. Bryan, responding to a question about his mother and her struggles, reflected: “don’t get me wrong, there was a lot of bad stuff . . . yeah, single mother, 7 kids, so it was kind of hard for her. She did her best, I love, I love her for that. I got to give it to her because of all the hard work that she does for us not just for me but for all 7 of us.” Lola, similarly contesting the “white gaze,” spoke about the resistance, solidarity and sense of community that was critical to her family and their pride: “she [mom] looks very gang-related but she’s really really cool . . . we [family] come off as powerful, we don’t like to keep quiet about anything. If we don’t like something we all speak up. If one of us is too shy to say something, one of us will speak up you know? We work together.” In this case, Lola was not only challenging colonial mindsets of competition, where people “should be more rooted in individualism,” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 438) but also affirming heritage and community practices (Paris, 2012) that are dynamic, counterhegemonic, and situated.

During the break of one of our last theorizing back sessions, we were sitting outside looking at a new mural of Malcolm X and CB the Orchestrator, sharing an emotional story about her father and the cultural wisdom and the resistance that, despite “loosing himself,” her father left with her, began:

see that Malcom X right there, my middle name X because of him. It’s like “damn, so my dad was thinking how I was thinking.” He left a little piece of power, he didn’t, couldn’t leave a lot because now, actually smoking Sherm shit. He didn’t got him off meds and he’s in the psych hospital. So he can’t talk to me at all, but he left little shit like that in me.”

Like this particular story, the Homies compassionately understood that people around them were complex and that alongside their struggles, their stories and humanities were full of “gifts.”

Among these were gifts of resistance, selflessness, solidarity, courage, loyalty, and love.

Francisco, brightened by the warmth that comes from remembering the gifts of our elders, spoke to his mother's generosity, something that she had also left in him:

I still get traits from my mom, like love. My mom is the nicest person, super kind. She always helps out people. She'll help out homeless people. She does a lot of stuff and I see that and I learned that from her. We would go get food, we would sell food]. We would get free food and give it to homeless person. Go give them a champurrado or they would be selling tamales. And then all right and I'll go give it to him. We had nothing and she gave everything.

Immediately after finishing, further empathizing with CB the Orchestrator and affectively reacting to the stubborn presence of that violent and pathologizing frame, Francisco—who had himself experienced a difficult period of drug abuse and addiction—continued:

I always felt a lot of people say, "Everybody has a bad side to them," and I feel like everybody has a good side to them too. Even the crazy person that's in the streets talking to himself or a sick murderer that just wants to kill everybody that's come near, the coldblooded gangster, the drug dealer. There's a good side of them. There's a reason why he's like that. He didn't just become that. The system's formed him. He's a product of his environment, of the system. That failed him. Just like it failed me.

In thinking about how much their parents and their families impacted them and their lives, the Homies would often oscillate between wanting their parents to take responsibility for their own destinies, and the recognition that just like them, their parents are also at the receiving end of the bullshit. As Lola once responded to CB the Orchestrator when talking about the need to take responsibility, "we all have a past that we're not proud of, but we live off it and you know, we grow." Here, the Homies again discussed the issue of responsibility:

Tino the Rhino: Yeah so either way if they had a parent or not a parent, a person chooses their own life, you know. But also getting stuck you know with the trauma, it does impact your conscience you know, psyche or whatever, you know—

CB the Orchestrator: Take some responsibility.

Camilo: Take some responsibility but also recognize like where our parents did fail us. Not because like they sucked though or whatever but because like you said like their parents and their parents. They live in structure right? So, but as parents, you know, you got to recognize where they did fail us. Like maybe there was a lack of affection or lack of this or that, that maybe pushes us away but it's not to like blame a finger, it's like to say, "I do have trauma, and I do have pain."

CB the Orchestrator: So I need that help.

Camilo: And we, my mom had it too, you know. And her mom had it, you know, and we just keep passing it to each other like that.

CB the Orchestrator: Yeah, I'm not just one of the kids that just came and just everything was planned, they have the nursery, boom. I just came out, things are ready, auntie got everything, good baby showers, grandma gave them some money for me so when I go to college, boom, I'm straight. I didn't get none of that shit, bro.

Francisco: It's like the Monopoly thing that you said, we're playing that game and then, you know, after you know when you lose, it's like . . . It's like an on and on Monopoly game. We pass it to our kids and they're like, oh you're in that situation, it's your parents fault but they still started with the same school. They didn't have the same, the same.

Camilo: That's what makes me sad bro.

As Camilo claims at the end, recognizing the influence of "structures" and their hold upon their lives was emotionally difficult, especially because it was consequential. Together, exposure to all these forms of violence and trauma were also compounded by the frustration and hopelessness inherently tied to their perceived and felt "inability" to get through the structures and the systems dispersing the violence. In addition, it was debilitating to feel that no one other than themselves and their families would take responsibility for any of these systems. As Chuy described when recounting his feelings as a child:

You going to get jumped in or you are going to get shot at. So I was forced to be in a house, waiting for my brothers to come home sherned out, coped out or drunk. Can't say anything, no one to help, what to do?

CB the Orchestrator, similarly describing that feeling, the perpetual cycles of that hopelessness, and the silences that allow for their reproduction, reflected:

Even with my peoples, people I'm telling you, people that I love, nigga don't tell me nothing. They just live they life. They know they going through pain. They know they sick. They know that's why they reacting the way they react. You could do something to somebody and they just be like, "What the fuck, bro? Why you keep doing that?" It's because the nigga got a lot of shit in his mind. You feel me? Shit that's fucking eating them alive but he don't even feel comfortable to the people he love to talk about it to. Now, everything that's happening to them. It's happening to me. And I'm not really around out the right people to help me with the resources and shit that I need to heal from what I was going through then and what I'm going through now. (CB the Orchestrator)

As is made clear by CB the Orchestrator, despite the knowledge and recognition that "shit that's fucking eating them alive," the Homies also understood that there was no one to help and that ultimately, it was them who had to take responsibility and live their lives. As Tino the Rhino argued during one conversation about the role of identifying structures: "You can say whatever the fuck, sociologist and talk about the structure or whatever, but at some point we got to go back to our lives and live them." However, the question of how to live their lives while continuously being assaulted, oppressed, and dispossessed was just as true, present, and conflicting. As Selena put it: "how are we supposed to get back up if we get kicked when we are down."

"It ain't no pickup, we get beat down when we already down"

Besides the temporary relief and protection provided by moments of community, joy, solidarity, humanity, and the spatial ease provided by liminal and subaltern spaces—many of which are rapidly being eroded—certain support systems, well intentioned people, or institutions that were trying to help them; the Homies recognized that there was a limit to what a person could handle and a limit to what they could do to stay afloat. In reflecting upon their emotions and their hurt, their theorizing urgently called for what Haines (2019) describes in her book, *The Politics of Trauma*, as a need to see trauma and harm in a much more complex way, recognizing that it is not only about the violation/event that has an impact, but also the social denial and blaming of the victim, the relationship to the "offender," the lack of a collective response, the

silencing, all of it. CB the Orchestrator, describing decades of harm and how she was “super broken since she was young,” shared:

I’ve never been up. I never been up. I never got picked up. My mom watched me fall and be like, “You get your ass up. You figure out how the fuck to get up. You go and you do whatever you got to do until you get up.” Hmm. Even if I got fucking mentally abused and failed and probably become a drug addict, you get up, you figure it out. Not I’m going to help you figure it out. And that’s what comes with a lot of kids from poverty. People like me. People like that’s hanging around after school with nowhere to go. Exactly. They don’t get picked up. They never had a pick up. You know what I mean?

As the Homies collectively spoke about violence as part of “setting the tone,” they also questioned “how much violence was too much?” making important and powerful claims that challenge the prevailing discourses around “needs” and push back against the idea of “not getting enough help.”

“We don’t need no fucking help, we need the bullshit to stop!” Lola expressed enthusiastically as the Homies spoke about the institutions and systems that could support them, “we get beat down when we are down.” Similarly, Tino the Rhino, critically responding to a phrase used to describe them that has become ubiquitous, began: “High needs this, high needs that. Bitch, what high needs? To stop being harassed and a place to sleep?” “Fool, it’s bullshit,” Joshua agreed. It was clear to them—and urgent for us [dominant publics] to understand—that there was a fundamental flaw in the way in which their context and identity was being framed by those seeking to “help”. The Homies were everything except, as I just heard a couple of weeks ago at a meeting of school superintendents in Los Angeles “the neediest of the needy.”

“You want to find needy kids, go to Beverly Hills,” CB the Orchestrator joked.

It was the continuous assault upon the most basic rights that was at the heart of the issue. It was working two criminally low-paying jobs, finishing at 3am, having to drive around the block for two hours when you get home from work because there are 15 people living in each house in a

city with a useless public transportation system, having more than a thousand dollars of parking tickets, and having to sleep in your car—not the tiny garage-turned-studio that you can barely afford—so you don’t get towed and can make it to work in a couple of hours. That if you don’t get pulled over by the police because . . . well, because.⁴⁷

Adding further complexity (and criminality), it wasn’t only like Noguera (2003) describes, that those who are most marginalized are also most frequently punished, there was a temporal dimension as well. It was too often during the moments when the Homies struggled the most when they felt that the world would further entangle them, kick them, dismiss them, expect more of them, criminalize them, punish them, and make things worse.

Terrible Interventions, Worse Timing

Cause when I was little, when I was like in eighth grade, I wanted to smoke. I wanted to smoke weed and, and I really wanted to smoke. Why? Because I was in pain. And that made me forget about my problems. And let me forget about them. But then when I needed help I was punished for it. (Eric)

Like in Eric’s reflection above, it was common that when the Homies felt at their lowest, when they felt that they needed to be seen, heard, understood, and supported—which often meant taking “oppressive stuff” away from their context—whatever happened would only worsen their situation. Many of the “interventions” that were supposed to “help,” mostly embodying deficit frames, carceral logics, and an absolute “misreading” of the situation, did not. In this case, Francisco describes the deleterious impact of incarceration on not only himself, but on the family system:

When we come back [home], it's even worse. We don't find help. It's this circle. It's jail, and we get used to it. We go to our relationships with divorce. Our kids get taken away. Your dad is on dope, for him its harder because he'd been to jail already, he got in trouble with the cops already, no support, it's just worse now.

⁴⁷ This paragraph was based on a reflection written by Tino the Rhino

Bryan, describing an instance that felt like a betrayal that had a profound impact on his and his family's life, began:

There was a therapist she would come every now and then I was young so she kind of manipulated me she got in my head telling me like I'm going to help you I got you just told me everything and I'm going to find some way to make it right I mean of course I felt like she told me I got you and then I told her everything and then she flipped on me. she like did me dirty pretty much she threw me under the bus and most of us all of us actually. and I remember one day the therapist and two police officers came in the house and I was in my bunk bed me and my little brother and they're telling us that let's go I'm going to take you guys or ever and I remember I was holding onto the bed and they're pulling me like let go and she was telling me if you do this now you will get through it's like easier and quicker so I let go but I remember being in the back of the van like leaving from my mom and she was like fucking tears and I was young so I didn't really know much.

As is clear, while often disguised or cloaked by good intentions and by the “benevolence” of the institutions and the actors responding, a large part of what to the Homies felt like “kicking them when they were down” came infused with the all-American and too familiar ways of punitive and carceral logics and “solutions.” Like CB the Orchestrator argued, “why the shit that we allowed to keep going through, to keep seeing... it sucks that people have to go through it, figure it out on their own. And they don't, they can't and they fuck up and they are punished then.”

Further nuancing the inadequacy or insufficiency of the programs that were honest about wanting to help, the Homies argued that the problems were much bigger and complex than the capacity and understanding of those “support systems.” As described by CB the Orchestrator and Selena in a conversation about well-intentioned adults and organizations:

Selena: they [talking about people who want to help them] just don't know, they can't help what they don't understand.

CB the Orchestrator: Yeah. That is what it is.

Miguel: But what about that.. Is it about them being afraid of knowing? Is it about them not wanting to take responsibility to that point?

CB the Orchestrator: Yeah. I think it's too much, can't feel like they are failing, gotta appear like they do something.

Miguel: What they would need to be able to support you, or—

CB the Orchestrator: Yeah. I think it's too much for them to handle or understand.

Expressing a similar sentiment about the schools' insufficiency in ensuring she could be successful, CB the Orchestrator started:

Because I can go to school, I can learn math and shit. I also learned math out here at five years old selling dope . . . I can go to school and learn math, but still, I'm going to go back to what I just said. I'm going to leave this place and go sell dope. So it's cool to learn math . . . but that's not life, that's just eight hours out the day. It's eight hours, 12 hours. You really wanna help you would got to do schooling for a whole 24 hours for certain people. Even people like me. If I had schooling for more than eight hours, like 12 hours, take it home with me. I could take y'all home with me and you could help me even more with these different type of questions. I probably would've been way more different in school.

In another conversation between CB the Orchestrator and Tino the Rhino about teachers and their disregard for their struggles when they “needed it the most,” Tino the Rhino began by recounting how often the only place where he could actually get or seek help with school was during class, the rest of the time he “had to be surviving.”

CB the Orchestrator responded:

CB the Orchestrator: Yeah. I couldn't get no tutor to come to my house.

Tino the Rhino: When we're actually in the class, that's is the only time I really could ask you, “Please try help me out. I know you have other kids,” but she's over there trying to be with the kids who know how to do all this shit good instead of being over here with me or the other kids who are having problems with it. After, when she'll tell us, “Oh, why aren't you doing this shit?” “Why be like that, just being rebellious?” So after the point when I knew the teachers wouldn't help sometimes, I would just be like, I'll put on my earphones, try to do the work, try to concentrate a bit more and shit and they would be like, “No, you got to take them off,” and shit and everything.

CB the Orchestrator: They want to get done with this class and they got another class after this or they just want to get done with the shit. They don't want to fucking take the time out to really break it down to certain people. I felt that a lot of times. That's why I'd

just be like . . . I would act like I knew what I was doing, but I really didn't just because I knew it would save us all the time in the day and I wouldn't get embarrassed.

Tino the Rhino: sometimes you go to school, I swear the teachers will not even give you a chance to even talk about what the fuck happened and shit. Say you missed a big ass test or something, or you fell because you didn't have time to sleep or eat or think but the teacher doesn't even know what the fuck is going on in your life, you know. And they will automatically assume, "Oh, you over there fucking goofing off or something, something, you know?"

Deeply resonating with what Noguera, in his book *The Trouble With Black Boys* (2008), writes; one of the "challenges" of the Homies was that most of them "never have a chance to be thought of as potentially smart and talented or to demonstrate talents" (xxi). This rejection of a possible identity as "good students" was also at the root of their distancing from the bigger project and purpose of schooling. In response to questions from his Homies about whether he felt that the gang path was pulling him or that schools were pushing him away, Lola responded:

It is a little bit of both, cause I started getting less help or attention and ok. I come from a different struggle, homeless, struggling with a lot but still wanted to learn, but as I started getting ignored and ignored like, not ignored, but you know like you know. Nobody would pay attention, thought much of me, or was able to help.

Other times, it was in their stories that lived a direct indictment of both: what Victor Rios calls a "culture of control" that subjugates Black and brown youth, especially those from impoverished communities to suspicion and harsh discipline at multiple levels; and of the dismissal of the validity and value of the Homies truths, their questions, and their dignity. Like Bernstein (20014) argues, we further trap children and youth into systems that while ostensibly designed to protect and improve children (a claim that neither I nor the Homies would agree with) have done the opposite, "scarring a generation after another, and—after decades of institutional impunity—leaving today's youth vulnerable to practices we would decry were they perpetrated anywhere but behind prisons walls."

On another recounting that again, serves as a horrible and accurate example of “beating us when we are down,” CB the Orchestrator discussed her experiences of being criminalized in and imprisoned through school.

He was going to put his hands on me. Like, no, you are wrong. I’m just like fucking whatever. I ain’t going to stop. I’m not going to let you tell me I was wrong when I know I was right [principal was trying to tell her she was wrong]. I was taking care of myself. Like, what the fuck. You white man going to tell me that. He was able to come in the bathroom and do whatever the fuck he wanted. “Oh he wasn’t.” No, but you’re going to take me to jail. Try to beat it into my head. I still don’t think that shit was right, to this day. Even though they did do all that shit. Never could that happen to a white kid. I had to admit that I was wrong. I had to admit that I was wrong just for the shit to go away. I still got the paper to date. I still got the jail paper to this day, bro. But that shit fuck me up, too.

CB the Orchestrator was incarcerated for the first time when she was in the second grade. While deeply unethical, harmful, and perhaps to many, unbelievable; her story and many of the stories of the Homies are consistent with the literature and testimony that was thoroughly documented the infiltration of the criminal justice system into schools, the hyper-surveillance, the over policing and over-disciplining, and its inequitable and egregious impact upon the lives and identities of Black girls (Aldridge, 2018; Crenshaw et al., 2015; Hines-Datiri & Carter, 2017; Morris, 2016).

Just as importantly, her story is also about refusal and resistance. To this day, CB the Orchestrator refuses the logics through which her own incarceration and confinement was justified and the ways in which schooling was indeed, reproducing what Haley (2016) calls the carceral life of race and gender ideology; producing “racially determined and defined gendered subject positions” (p. 7). In addition, both her testimony and her theorizing back offer critical understandings of the disparate impact of zero-tolerance policies in schools and of how the humanities and dignities of multiply marginalized youth navigate schools’ mimicking of the

disciplinary and carceral technologies, surveillance, pedagogies, and philosophies espoused by prisons and jails (Saltman & Gabbard, 2003).

This example was one of many the Homies felt schools deepened harm and heightened the gravity of their struggles during the times where the Homies were hurting and struggling the most.⁴⁸ While the Homies recognized schools as complex, contested, and having good people, caring spaces, “real” and critical classrooms and teachers, and sincere efforts to help them and their education; the schools that the Homies theorized were far from “benevolent” or “well-meaning” institutions. On the contrary, the primary character of schools as experienced and understood was closer to what Fasching-Varner et al. (2014) call “death by education.”

“Benevolent Institutions,” Antagonistic Outcomes

As will be made more evident in the following chapters, the Homies’ lives were deeply intertwined with a broad and rapidly growing constellation of systems, institutions, non-profits and community-based organizations, among others. Many of these, while embodying an ethos of support, charity, and “benevolence”; were becoming pseudo-mandatory. As Tino the Rhino described: “It’s like we can’t live by ourselves no more, we gotta be part of these programs to survive.” Furthermore, despite their good intentions, the Homies would repeatedly reference “small,” and yet gravely consequential, examples of organizations “not knowing and not listening to us,” “creating more problems,” or “taking our agency away.” In this example, the Homies were speaking about how an organization’s program and its—despite knowing that they are “supposed to be different”—misunderstanding about street politics can result in endangering youth:

CB the Orchestrator: Because at the end of the day. It’s a program, that’s a system. This place is supposed to be different, different from where a regular school is, because we are

⁴⁸ This will be explored further in the next section: Entanglements.

different, got lots of other shit going on. Know what I'm saying? The shit that fucking makes it harder for people to become successful, for people to get out of the ways that they live in.

Joshua: And yet they blame our parents, they blame us, when we try, you know, you come all the way from Huntington Park or Long Beach, you know come a whole hour or two and sometimes they don't pay attention to all that is going on.

CB the Orchestrator: like what happened yesterday. We didn't have shit to do. Nigga you went, they didn't even have our check. We standing outside in front of the building, my niggas from big fellas up there. Niggas from class rolling past. About to kill a nigga you don't even know. I'm telling Nick and I both like, I know you always stay with a gun, you feel me.

Joshua: fool can be killed, they don't listen fool.

In the following example, one brought by Diego during one of our earlier days of getting together and later discussed by the group, the harm was done through a much darker, complex, and ironic set of oppressive realities and relationships that would suggest what Tino the Rhino would later theorize as a perfect example “rich people and government haciendose pendejos,” aka intentional or systemic ignorance. While we didn't record our check-in conversation that day, the following are two texts that are directly connected with Diego's story; the first from a journal entry Diego wrote two days before our conversation and the second from a memo I recorded during my drive home the day of our initial conversation.

Diego's Journal/Thoughts (March 9, 2019)

I am currently living with my best friend & his family. Today his extended family came over today for a carne asada. They are Salvadorian & we got on the topic of speaking about the human caravan moving through central America. I know as a Mexican that we have a history of being well assholes towards our latin brothers & sisters. I feel like this would be an interesting topic to discuss. I'd like to think that I'm an individual that I'm my own person, not being weak minded and conforming to others people's agendas, social structures, & perceptions of me but at my job I guess I leave my dignity behind, not only at my job but everywhere else I feel trapped & I'm not sure it is what i want, what is suffocating me?

Excerpt from Analytical Memo (March 2019):

Shamu and Diego showed up today for our little space, and I still can't shake off what Diego shared. He, through school, started working with the city in a program to give young people a "chance" and a job. Last week Shamu had brought and read his translation of Freire and we'd spoken about violence, the stopping of the youth questions, and the silencing nature of normality. Both Diego and Shamu were excited and it felt like both were having all kinds of conversations about Freire and some of the concepts around oppression and how they apply to their own spaces. The two are inseparable and it was clear that something was happening when they walked into our space today. During our check in, Diego shared that he felt depressed. Through his job, he was being sent to "clean" parking lots throughout the city. In his words, they were there to destroy people's homes and he could not bring himself to do it, he had to keep his job, and it felt wrong. It was clear that all the youth understood at a visceral level why it was bullshit, many of them, including himself as he later shared, were going through homelessness . . . how could I destroy someone else's home and also not be destroying my own. There are days like today where the real fucking horrible nature of this mess rears its head and feels so wrong that it is ironic. The complicity, the irony. These are the good programs, it is like Marx's shoemaker that can't afford his shoes to the nth power, this is you having to participate in your own destruction so that you can remain in the program meant to help you. . . Reminded me a little bit of Sartre in his intro to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* and kind of another sobering reminder that some of the greatest harm is cloaked under the guise of "humanism"

First, we must face that unexpected revelation, the striptease of our humanism. There you can see it, quite naked, and it's not a pretty sight . . . A fine sight they are too, the believers in non-violence, saying that they are neither executioners nor victims . . . the blinding sun of torture is at its zenith; it lights up the whole country. Under that merciless glare, there is not a laugh that does not ring false . . . not a single action that does not betray our disgust, and our complicity. It is enough today for two French people to meet together for there to be a dead man between them? (Fanon, 1963, pp. 24–25)

Diego's example, as many others brought by the Homies, was also distressingly indicative of how naturalized and normalized assumptions about the (non) rights to the city and the (non) value of certain human lives—especially when superimposed with the value of capital— could turn "good programs" into criminal and violent actors and programs. Moreover, in this case this program, neglecting a host of criminal enterprises like displacement, real estate conglomerates that continue to spread like a virus, and the theft of land for the sake of profit, narrowed the "feasible" or imaginable solutions. So much so that without attention to any of those broader

given, the Homies had “turn against themselves”⁴⁹ to keep a job, and as Diego put it, “to leave my dignity behind.” This example also echoes that which Savannah Shange (2019) describes as a feature and symptom of a progressive dystopia, a “perpetually colonial place that reveals both the possibilities and limits of the late liberal imaginary” (p. 11). In regard to this program, the limits of the liberal imaginary, deeply tethered to the project and the assumptions of a settler-colonial modernity, tragically turned a program meant to “support inner city youth” into cynical cruelty.

Diego, like many other Homies that work on similar “good” programs, quit that job, left the school, and moved across the country a couple of weeks later to find family members and the possibility and promise of an elsewhere in which he could have a job, afford a place to live, and keep his dignity. His presence was and continues to be missed. Diego was a big, kind, curious eyed and soft-hearted young man who had lived a life nobody should ever have to. He asked sincere questions and his pursuit to know more was rooted in a deep love for life, his people, and the possibility of a better future. Like Diego, many of the Homies had to simply take these violent blows, disguised as a “choice,” coming at them during their hardest moments. Confronted by the generalized assumption, the given, that these “systems” were not to be changed, the Homies faced impossible choices between: “you can either bite the hand that feeds you,” change yourself, or put up with it... we do all of them at the same time” (Lola) Adding insult to injury, the Homies were also “made” to feel or to internalize that, because of dominant portrayals and implicit assumptions of their “value”—one of being less than, or less deserving of—they could

⁴⁹ Adding insult to injury, these practices resonate with decades old strategies utilized by police and other state actors to infiltrate movements, break apart community groups, and further criminalize people of color.

“put up with” or should be grateful for mediocre, insufficient, and in this case violent “supports.”⁵⁰

CB the Orchestrator: Basically think (people) since we go through shit, that we okay with going through shit and that we supposed to be thankful for their help.

Francisco: Yeah. Maybe a kid like you, “oh, he’s a criminal. He’s smoking weed. He’s gone through abuse, I am helping you.”

CB the Orchestrator: Yeah, “he smoking weed. Cause he’s on the street. He’s been on the street. He should not be smoking weed.” [switching back to explaining] He’s depressed. Or he’s dealing with the wrong kids at school. He’s smoking weed because of that. They already know not to smoke weed. They would not if they could . . . They in the streets. That’s bad but what you expect. That’s fucked up, it’s like an excuse for them to use anytime. But it’s true.

Miguel: Yeah.

CB the Orchestrator: We get beat down while we already down.

Miguel: Right.

CB the Orchestrator: For sure. For sure, bro. It ain't no pickup.

“Never had a chance to be a child”: The Adultification of Multiple Marginalized Youth

I never had a chance to be a child, and how do you figure that out, I don’t know. That has to be a part of setting the tone. (Selena)

The current schizophrenic formulations of youth—dependent and vulnerable or independent and responsible—enables states to selectively choose between the two constructs to manipulate young people’s legal status, to maximize their social control, and to subordinate their freedom and autonomy. (Feld, 1999, p. 9)

Much has been written about the adultification of multiply marginalized youth, including: the multiple responsibilities that many of them have to take on from their early years, the institutional perceptions for engagement of Black and brown children as adults, the early

⁵⁰ This same assumption carries over to other consequential areas of their lives, including in the further criminalization. As Arnold (1990) found, it is often assumptions about marginalized youth, especially Black girls from lower socioeconomic classes, that will lead to much harsher punishment, including incarceration for non-violent crimes.

exposure to what some term “precocious knowledge,” parentification, adultification as a feature of juvenile “corrections;” all of which have been shown to have multiple, inequitable, and consequential racial and gendered dimensions (Bolin & Applegate, 2016; Burton, 2007; Chase et al., 1998; Dancy, 2014; Epstein et al., 2017; Gonzalez, 2018; Roy et al., 2014; Schmitz & Tyler, 2016).

As clearly conveyed by Tino the Rhino as he spoke of having to deal with the “theft of his childhood,” all of the Homies recounted situations and conditions in which their right to be children had been taken from them. Through the repeated exposure to things that children should not have to deal with, needing to take on adult responsibilities, being seen as adults so that their criminalization “made sense,” and a lack of support; the world, the Homies argued, placed a cruel demand on them to be someone that they “should not, and could not, be” (Lourdes). In her statement above Selena, like many other marginalized youth, recognized how her own inability to be a child was not something that happened in the past, but something they had to negotiate as they made sense of their subjectivity and their future. In a separate conversation that took place online during the height of the lockdown between two young women, Lourdes and Esperanza discussed their struggles with managing responsibilities in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had exacerbated many of their struggles:

Lourdes: I feel like because we’ve been through so much and we’ve gone through it, people depend on us to do everything.

Esperanza: Exactly.

Lourdes: Because at the end of day, we’re the fucking people that are less of ourselves.

Esperanza: Exactly. Our parents depend on us. We need parents too. What the fuck? We act like the moms of our family.

Lourdes: Exactly, dude.

Esperanza: That's right. We end up going through more shit than an adult, a regular adult goes through, you know what I mean? And we're still trying to do everything and then people be like, "You're not doing this right." Okay. Well, what the fuck? You're not doing it at all. I'm doing it, you're not doing it at all.

As clear in their claims, having been adults and having even cared for adults throughout their lives, there is a dignified demand by them to be able to "be themselves" and at the same time, a recognition of human interdependency and their needs, especially as children and youth, for others: "we need parents too." As CB the Orchestrator explained, "I never seen nobody picking me up off my feeling or off my ass when I fell and say, can I do it again? Or are you okay, let me hold your ass. No, nothing like that." Absent choice, the Homies had been forced to be "adults," enduring high levels of responsibility and having to develop unfair levels of resiliency, a resiliency for which they were often celebrated (Luthar, 1999). However, as the Homies argued, centering this resiliency as something aspirational or as part of any kind of solution further invisibilized the violence that was being done to them: "I don't want to be resilient anymore, how about a fucking break from that?" (Esperanza).

"How about the fact that we never got to be children because we were already criminals?" Tino the Rhino, bumping into a long American tradition—and racial project—of adultifying and criminalizing youth of color (Dancy & Brown, 2012; Desai & Abeita, 2017) asked. For many of the Homies, being a "criminal was, as Esperanza half-joked, "el pan de cada dia." "When it's about the system, I am a fucking criminal and not a child and when I need to pay my bills and do all the shit then I am supposed to be an adult but I am also irresponsible and a 'kid.'" Through and within these contradictions the young theorizers were repeatedly thrust upon a liminal space as the one described by Gilmore and Bettis (2021) where Black children are denied childhood status, lack autonomy, but carry adult-like culpability. In addition, and as was often the case, it wasn't only that they had to be adults and to take on adult responsibilities, but

they also had to do so while enduring being treated, silenced, and dismissed as children. As Lola explained, “I do everything for myself. I set up my own appointments, I sign my own self into school. I do everything by myself, you do what I mean? And still people be like, you a child . . . they don't listen to your opinion.” This combination of adultification and dismissal as children was especially salient in schools, where, as Diego described “we are invisible until we are criminal.” In addition, despite decades of research in the fields of childhood education, learning sciences, and developmental psychology that shows that children learn through moving around, discovery, observation, helping out, collaboration, and exploring in shared endeavors over time (Gopnik, 2012; Paradise & Rogoff, 2009), the Homies—like a large proportion of students of color in the US—never got a chance to do any of that. Instead, “I go to school, they want me to sit down for eight hours, when I want to just run around, jump around and shit. I can’t because this is what the fuck education is about . . .” (CB the Orchestrator). Unlike the large majority of White and rich students, the Homies being denied the right to be or to be seen as children, and consequently the right to move and to play. Furthermore, placed at the receiving end of a racial capitalist system where they were being forced to earn what others received without question or effort (Wynter, 2006), the Homies had to “earn” the right to play.

Mis-distribution of Punishment

“Cruelty” is what Esperanza called the punishing of some against the celebration of others. Besides the theft of childhood that was attached to the punishment described in the previous chapter, it was not remiss to the Homies that punishment, like rights, were not distributed evenly. “Consequences for who? Them white kids can party and there's no problem” (Lola). Consistently, the Homies would push back against race/class/gender “neutral” explanations of rights, privileges, and punishments. During one of the first sessions where we began to think more explicitly about race, class, and how certain rights were distributed unevenly

certain groups of people, CB the Orchestrator, pulling from her lived experience and talking about “even the right to clear water,” shared a story of a visit she took to Flint, MI years before:

They skin was peeling. Kids, nigga. Kids. Little black kids, bro. Not no white kids . . . it was just like the tub water, the tub water was breaking out the kids and shit. I'm pretty sure black people are still showering in it (CB the Orchestrator)

The Homies were strongly critical of the collective assumption that consequences and rights were “equally distributed” as they understood and had to contend with how both were classed, racialized, gendered, and “very different depending who you are.” Moreover, this mis-distribution also applied to their right to be happy or to make mistakes, Noemi, once describing how institutions treated them as if because they were “fucked up,” then they needed to be in programs that denied their right to be happy or to experience joy: “it is almost like being a part of any of these programs [a drug rehabilitation program] means you can’t be a teenager anymore, honestly it is almost as if suddenly we don’t even have a chance to have fun anymore.” In this conversation, which began an interesting dialogue on whether it is our bad choices or the unjust consequences to us just being human and making mistakes, Tino the Rhino began:

Because when I heard you say that, “Oh, I can either go kick it and party, or whether I should do some extra work.” I’m like, it’s horrible. Rich kids, they can go kick it and they play.

Francisco: They’re partying.

Esperanza: And they party but there's no consequence. They get to party, they get to play, take time off, but they still get to wherever they want to get.

Tino the Rhino: They still have the money.

Reflecting an instinctive understanding of how this argument could be taken by dominant publics as if partying was something bad, deviant, or negative, Francisco immediately broadened the conversation with “human” things that we all do and experience:

Francisco: It is not only for things like partying though, like having arguments with family, it is not like white families don't argue with each other. But they perhaps slept like 10 hours or got to play on the weekends, they're not as pissed off

Tino the Rhino: And also when they fight, they each go to their rooms.

Esperanza: [mockingly] They go to their own house, take a little breather.

Francisco: In my own house with my wife, I was like, "damn, we need to get . . ." I was like, " I wish we had another room so I could just go . . ." Because when I do my studies, we have to be right next to each other. Because we live in a studio. That's all we could afford.

Tino the Rhino: [talking about his own living space, where he lives with his partner] So, our studio's like this, and her workshop is like right there, and I'm like right here. And it's [signaling to a short distance] the farthest we get from each other. And sometimes it's just we need to be alone.

Besides the evident misdistribution of space and how it impacted their relationships and families, the Homies also recognized that when put together, these injustices further compounded the "bullshit" they had to put up with and consequently, fueled their defiance and rebellion. "The fact that we are punished for being human, what the fuck are we supposed to do?" asked Diego when talking about "crime." The Homies simultaneously owned their "criminal" actions and critically understood the feeble and ironic nature of "who are the thieves, for real for real?" as Bryan would ask. In addition, they also saw and theorized their resistance as a lot more complex and nuanced than some of the categories or frames that are often superimposed over their "resistance;" like Solorzano's and Delgado Bernal's (2001) Reactionary, Self-Defeating, Conformist, and Transformative Resistance. Not only did they understand the four of these to be happening all the same time, but also critically interrogated how often these assumed certain kinds of futures, ignored the possibilities of revolutionary collective action that was not "legible" to dominant publics, and ignored their particular contexts.

The Homies also pointed out the hypocrisy of ignoring that the vast majority of Americans go through a period of “delinquency” at some point during adolescence. In fact, fully 80 to 90 percent of American teenagers have committed an illegal act that could qualify them for time behind bars, and one-third of all teens have committed a serious crime (Bernstein, 2014). “Any honest person knows that, they just fucking lie to themselves,” Cortez argued. Most, however, never see the inside of a cell, or even a police car (Bernstein, 2014, p. 8). Of course, the Homies were not a part of that majority and hence it was clear, as described by Haley (2016), that the maintenance of the contradiction—the strategic ignorance—required the production of stable, marginalized, and “criminal” subjects, and all necessary to the white supremacist and settler-colonial projects.

“Malcolm X This and That”: Simultaneously Punishing and Co-Opting Resistance

There were many more examples of the inequitable consequences of “being human” that were raised by the Homies as part of their theorizing back. Besides highlighting the serious and inequitable consequences of less “prominent”—often given less attention—things like parking tickets, schedules, and homework; they were also theorizing a deeply intersectional, interrelated, and connected set of structures and systems whose “real work” needed to be understood intersectionally. Whether the money amount on a parking ticket was the “same” for everyone, its consequences were radically different based on where you sat in the world. Furthermore, the unjust ways in which these consequences played out in people’s lives were evident in each of their stories. One that often stood out to me, and one that the Homies felt that needed to be raised, was the inequitable consequences of speaking up, pushing back, or demanding to be treated with dignity. One day, sitting outside on a terrace and reflecting on a mural of Malcolm X that we could see from where we were sitting, CB the Orchestrator commented: “it’s bullshit that we now paint this fucking fist all over the place, celebrate resistance, Malcolm X this and that,

probably teaching it in school now and here we are, getting punished from trying to stop this shit.”

On May 25, 2021, Minneapolis police officers arrested George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, after a convenience store employee called 911 and told the police that Mr. Floyd had bought cigarettes with a counterfeit \$20 bill (Hill et al., 2020). Seventeen minutes after the first squad car arrived at the scene, Mr. Floyd was unconscious and pinned beneath three police officers, showing no signs of life. A couple of days later, we were back on zoom, discussing the possibility of joining the protests, especially considering the violence against the protesters that we’d started to see on the streets of cities across the country:

Esperanza: But nothing was being done, nothing went down south, you know? But people over there got tear gassed for no fucking reason. This is what sparked the whole mess of them running into buildings and fucking destroying shit. They, we don't know how to cope with their emotions, they're angry. They're angry that they can't protest. They can't have their voice heard. Hell, when can we speak up. they're angry that, you know, a person in their community is dead. How many people in our community are dead?

Gabriel: Or are they going to hear a bunch of people, organized? Are they afraid?

Esperanza: They don't say nothing on the Trump protests. They don't say nothing . . . those white people were over there screaming in the faces of the law officers.

Gabriel: But that's just life. And that's the fucked up country that we live in.

Esperanza: We’ve been waiting for that, you know?

Miguel: Yeah, I get that.

Esperanza: you want us to stop. Get them to stop being aggressive towards us.

David: Also, regarding the violence. It's not about the violence, but it's the historical monopoly of violence. The state, the power it has...

Miguel: Right. The school.

Esperanza: and we can't even protest because if they get our ass, we already got all kinds of problems. I bet probation will be all up on our shit.

David: That has allowed to be violent, but the people are not allowed to be violent. That's the difference, right?

Gabriel: That's right. That's right.

David: So it's not even about the violence. It's about who is in control and who gets to use violence as a measure of control.

CB the Orchestrator, connecting the violence, the intergenerational harm, the “building-up” of legitimate rage⁵¹, and the need to protest to her own experiences in Flint, shared:

Yeah. That's what they're doing right now again. That's like what I was saying about the water in Flint. That's something like that to cause they gonna think about that shit forever. Those kids won't grow up like, oh we went through that. You know what I mean, it's gonna mentally abuse them. Why did their government just fuck their water up, and then you can go to Detroit and you got good water. You just go one block that way and it's Flint, the poorest motherfucking city in Michigan. That shit has to stop, otherwise people have to stop it.

Together, many of the experiences and the theorizing back of the Homies would begin to surface critiques directed at what Scott (2004) describes as a non-negotiable modernity: a structure of power “shaping material and epistemological conditions of life and thought” into which marginalized people were forced to live by and to become its objects. More importantly, besides interrogating this modernity, they were also putting it in conversation with their right to be human, asking whether, how, and when, too much is too much?

It is way too fucking much, we're past that shit. (Lourdes)

One day, during one of our Zoom theorizing back sessions during the height of what Ladson Billings (2021) termed an intersection between four pandemics—COVID-19, racism, the threat of economic collapse and impending environmental catastrophe; the “stressful” and added

⁵¹ Theorizing rage as a justified response to unlivable circumstances (Malatino).

precarity of the contexts in which the Homies were moving became increasingly apparent.⁵² As we began checking in with each other, Lourdes and Esperanza began how stressed they were because of the compounded effects of being on a lock-down, and being in temporary housing:

Chuy: Have you tried walking or going outside for a walk?

Lourdes: I do, I try, I fucking try, but it's just hard. That's the topic, especially when all of us have to be home at the end of the day, it just sucks. Because it's we have pretty much our back against the wall, it gets stressful and I'm not even going to lie. It doesn't eat us up or I don't know. It's just like, it really fucks with us mentally, it really does. And all right, I try to use my fucking coping skills, I try to fucking contact my therapist, but it is too much.

It was often evident that despite trying hard to deal with what they were going through—before and after COVID-19—it was too much; overbearing, blinding, and both literally and metaphorically killing them. Here, Tino the Rhino and CB the Orchestrator share their thoughts:

I try everything, going home, I swear. Because I smoke weed too at home. But this time I want to exercise be healthy. I make sure like i leave the streets and I get home , and swear I smoke weed and shit. And then boom, I'll shower up, and then after I'll smoke I'll just knock out and boom. I just wake up like 12 and I can't go back to sleep, and my head is exploding. (Tino the Rhino)

Yeah. Stress and clarity. You feel that people, it blinds me, the stress blinds me. So I can't see what the fuck is going on. Like right and wrong. Like it blinds . . . it takes so much out of me. It takes me from being me. It takes my personality, stress takes fucking my heart. That's why I don't stress because the way it wears and tears on your body bro, is going to kill me. It's going to kill me bro. Before I hit 30, I'm going to be one of those people that have a stroke or something because it's fucking poverty and it's being homeless. Hell nah, I don't want to die young. (CB the Orchestrator)

Setting the Tone On Our Terms While Theorizing Back

And it's been fucked up for me for a long ass time. So I don't know if it's going to change. I try to have faith. See it can change, but you never know, I don't know how to explain it. You never know how much shit you actually let affect you, till you know, like damn bro I'm really fucked up. I need to figure out something, basically what we were doing [referring to theorizing back]. (CB the Orchestrator)

⁵² The intersection between these was also consequential for our ability to come together in the theorizing back space. Despite the youth's efforts, the added conditions of precarity and violence often made it impossible for them to join us. This will be described further in the limitations (Chapter 7).

While it feels redundant to have to write this and while the previous two sections of this chapter do not mean to illustrate the “totality” or even a fraction of the “stuff” that is thrown at and experienced by multiply marginalized youth, and in this case the Homies, the Homies were adamant in reminding themselves, each other, and in this case whichever “public” was to read their theorizing that the “totality” of these worlds and contexts had profoundly egregious and deeply inequitable consequences that needed to be known. Setting the tone *in their terms* had an implicit claim that for us [the Homies and the broader public] to be in dialogue, for the forging of shared understandings to be possible and for theorizing to be meaningful, the world needed to “understand” something that was clearly invisible to far too many.

Furthermore, and just as importantly, as the Homies “set the tone,” they were also making important claims about theorizing itself. The next section will briefly describe two of these claims. The first: “Resisting the small and the one dimensional.” The Second: “We are not walking around with prefabricated answers.” Afterwards, the chapter ends by summarizing six of the most salient features of theorizing back (these are all described in further detail, including concrete examples, through this and the following chapter).

“You Ain’t Going to Understand Shit”: Resisting the Small, the Separate, and the One Dimensional

It was on September 29, 2020 that I defended my dissertation proposal and on that day, Dr. Fine, responding to some of my proposed methods, shared a thought that despite being apparent in the lives of the young people that I had been working with for a long time, I had underestimated in its importance: “being able to separate or to distance schools from all these other oppressive and coercive systems and experiences is a form of entitlement and privilege.” Months later, in one of our first theorizing back sessions, the Homies and I began talking about

how it would be best to ask the question of why some young people were out of school. Here is a brief excerpt from that conversation:

Miguel: I guess as we are trying to ask this question of why do young people leave school or get pushed out or drop out, we can think of what happens in schools but we can also think about all that happens around schools.

Francisco: It's all together. It's no way. It's tangled and it's . . . no way to keep it separate. Eight hours, 10 hours, that's like your second home basically and you can't be who you are there, you're afraid to show your world.

CB the Orchestrator: but what about all that other, what about all that shit I just got beat on my back for, you feel me? Is some sick shit.

Camilo: the shit that I am carrying.

CB the Orchestrator: Well, that's why I've been thinking about it. It is not just about the dropout, I mean it's not just about the dropout. If y'all gonna talk about this, we need to get deeper to this and start from, start from why. Get the fucking why and the how first, that's connected to a whole bunch of shit nigga. How did this happen and why is this happening, and then you can find out how, you feel me.

Francisco: get to the root of it.

Miguel: I'll tell you something that I was told a while ago and I thought it was a really powerful thing for me and kinda goes to your point, she told me that thinking about dropping out of school or asking the questions as if you could separate it from all this other shit is a privilege.

CB the Orchestrator: yeah, stop thinking about only that drop out shit, it is too narrow.

After the conversation organically went elsewhere for a while, Camilo, who had been clearly reflecting and connecting some of our conversation to a book I had shared with him on some of our previous meetings, decided to bring us back:

Camilo: I wanted to say something about, not being able to, or maybe what you were saying you went up to your professor and said you wanted to do a research project on dropouts. And they said don't think of it as dropouts, like, right? So this is what I read from the book that you gave me, it said, "an analysis of exclusion says very little about

the context in which exclusion becomes a powerful force, and even less about how to transform it.”⁵³ You know, so, definitely bro.

Francisco: Say again, I was like half asleep bro.

Camilo: Well basically saying, um trying to understand, dropping out without understanding all these other factors you know what I mean like the pain, the violence, the whatever you're going through at home or you know all these other things and systems were, you know benefiting. Trying to understand dropping out or being pushed out without understanding that it's like, then you're missing the point. And not only are you missing the point, you're not even taking the steps to actually try to change something for the better. Something like that.

CB the Orchestrator: You ain't going to understand shit.

As was quickly made clear in this conversation, directing our “gaze” only towards what happened in schools was missing a great deal of what shapes and informs why “youth are out of school” and perhaps more importantly, the ways in which their departure from school makes sense and contributes to the normative reproduction of social hierarchies. Not only, in CB the Orchestrator’s words, were we “ain’t going to understand shit,” but attempting to sever what happens in schools from what happens in the rest of the world was also a form of privilege and violent in all the ways in which it erased both the infinitely complex architectures of death being deployed and the infinitely beautiful humanities and questions actively engaged in struggle and resistance.

The Homies, well aware of the perils and consequences of the dominant ideology, a normalized mythology and a set of “officially-certified nonfacts and respected untruths” (xiii) preventing many from seeing processes of oppression and victimization as a total picture (Ryan, 1976), resisted separating schools from prisons, the past from present and future, the individual from the collective, and agency from structure (among many others). In addition, they

⁵³ A quote from Fine (1991, p. __), a book that from which we read excerpts together and that Camilo wanted to take home to read

consistently resisted this separation because it “felt wrong,” affectively guiding conversations and questions towards wholeness and pointing to the violent nature and reproductive consequences of separating, silencing, and severing the “whole” worlds that they and their people had a right to live in. Moreover, this was a separation that they were being asked to do and to “believe” repeatedly.

During one of our exercises together, each young theorizer imagined and wrote down an example of a “young person who had a difficult relationship to school,” their lives, and the multiple explanations or reasons of why they might have left or been pushed out of schools. As we shared our examples with each other and reflected on some of the common themes, one of the “buckets of reasons” for leaving school that came up contained families, family and community struggles, adults, and the lack of role models. The Homies were at the same time very familiar with and also affectively triggered by this narrative. Citing a recent example to explain, Francisco began:

Mark: yeah man someone is actually interviewing people at Homeboy exactly about that, a survey of why youth join gangs and stuff, I got the survey.

CB the Orchestrator: fucking people always want to think of that.

Francisco: That’s a small problem. That isn’t even the real problem.

CB the Orchestrator: It is petty as fuck . . . You know what I noticed bro when I went into somebody house who had money, the shit that they cry about, like what the fuck, you’re weird. Like I complain about real shit, I go through real shit, that is just like one part of being a dropout student. That’s not . . . The impact, not having like two fucking parents, either your mom or your dad, it’s a little, it’s not as big as like . . . They probably wrote a whole fucking . . . One whole page of it, you know, try to make a whole story about it.

Francisco: Yeah, mm-hmm, we good, we good. So trying to think how we're trained to blame our families and our parents.

As evident in how young theorizers, were “reading the world” (Freire, 1970) and building from a broad range of experiences, knowledges, and literacies; they were also beginning to pull together

intersecting layers of epistemic oppression⁵⁴—including that of research—the predatory and abusive, albeit normalized relationships and interdependency between privilege and oppression, and the “relationships between groups to structures of power, social policies, to history, and to large sociopolitical formations” (Weis & Fine, 2012, p. 173). In addition, as Francisco powerfully theorized at the end of that passage, the oppressive and ubiquitous phenomenon of “blaming the victims” was also clearly understood by the Homies as connected to the broader project of pathologizing, feeling bad for, and making less of those most marginalized.

Conversely, when the Homies theorized the whys, when they engaged in the telling of stories and in the questioning and interrogation of the world; complex, contradictory, connected, collective, messy and immensely human worlds quickly emerged. On an emotional, multilayered, and “humanly” cathartic recounting of part of her family history, the broader contexts, and all the complex ways in which these worlds all come together ultimately impacting and shaping her, CB the Orchestrator began:

My grandfather went to the army and my grandmother married him like at 18, they ain't married, but he had a first kid with him . . . He went to Vietnam, came back really fucked up, drinking, started beating her and ass and shit. Now her kids are watching it. Now my mom got to go through it. Got my grandmother on drugs, so mom couldn't go to school because she got to take care of her brother. You know what I'm saying? Back then they didn't give a fuck. But Ronald Reagan was the fucking president and his bitch ass wife, that stupid ass D.A.R.E. Program, they had all that shit that they thought they [government] did when they put that shit [crack] there [South LA]. My mom already was fucked up. I was the one that was happy to go to these D.A.R.E. Program and learn about it. But she needed to learn about that shit. That shit should have been like, should never happened because when drugs got into my mom, when drugs got into my granny life from her getting beat up by my grandfather because of something that the world did to him, because he didn't have a choice, couldn't say no to going to the army. He had to fucking go. You know what I'm saying? So once that happened, my mom had to be a mom to her sibling because my grandmother was so fucking tore up. She couldn't

⁵⁴ By epistemic oppression I refer here to the replacement of their knowledge by “official knowledge” that directs violence and blame at their and their families, in this case, as Francisco explains, that knowledge which seeks to “train them to blame our families and our parents”

fucking even think. So now she didn't go to school and here I come, here I come in her life. Now she taking care of me.

As made clear above, the more the group spoke about and interrogated the worlds, the reasons, and the structures and choices that shaped “leaving school,” the more a sincere, vulnerable, and critical interrogating of our stories surfaced the deep complexities, intersections, and all the worlds that touched their lives, the lives of their people, and their collective and individual destinies. Just as importantly, their stories—if “we were to be real”—demanded a recognition of both the humanity and the reasonableness that had guided many of their (and their families’) “bad” and “good” choices (as dominantly understood), and the convoluted, cruel, infinitely complex, and unavoidable webs that “trapped them” in their lives, limiting their freedom and turning their own agency into “handcuffs.” And through this demand, the Homies were also contesting and shattering feeble binaries of good and bad; forcing a reckoning, one repeatedly and conveniently pushed out of the conversation, with historical, social, political, and psychological context.

“We are not walking around with prefabricated answers: When you get to theorize, break down your life... you start to see”

From the beginning of our theorizing back project, a question that ran parallel to the theorizing and one at the heart of the project was: how did this process of naming and asking questions our worlds different from those which take place outside of a theorizing back space?

How do you basically theorize why you came out yourself, how did that affect you? Because you basically dissected your whole life. And you look at all the little bits and pieces and stuff and after reviewing everything how you went through . . . when you ask a kid: “why did you fail school? Why this and this?” And they just answer. It's not something they really get to think about. It's just an answer basically at the top of their head. So, but when you get to, like I said, theorize, they sat there and break down your life and how everything was in school, and you go over it, le rascas, it changes you in a way esta cabron. That's crazy that happened to me and this and this and you start to break it down and you start to see

As Tino the Rhino describes, people don't walk around life with prefabricated answers and it is rare, especially for those who have got to "put up with all the bullshit," to have ample time to "dissect our whole lives." Furthermore, while the Homies had given many of their struggles and their most pressing questions lots of thought, it was even rarer that they had a deliberate, organized, and "protected" time to ask these questions collectively and to what Lola described as a trip: "to get to see what others are saying about us."

As Francisco also repeated during one of our last reflections together, it was the "how" these things were brought up and spoken about that was both transformative and critical. As active producers of selves and knowledges (Ibrahim et al., 2014), youth were, and had been, acting upon the world and enacting their subjectivities upon their context. However, partly per the pressure, assumptions, and the dangers associated with challenging the silences already described thoroughly by them; "doing what we are doing here, no, never . . ." (Tino the Rhino). Thus theorizing-back, by creating a space for the group to critically dissect, to create and to reclaim the people's right to the "word," by challenging the silences imposed both by what is silenced and what it said and assumed as true, and by honoring the vocation of people to be curious and to cast their inquiry upon their worlds; changed not only the theories that emerged, but also the ways in which the young theorizers went about theorizing.

Circling back to the question of how the process of naming and asking questions our worlds different from those which take place outside of a theorizing back space? Here is a summary of the themes that emerged from our analysis of the previous chapter: (a) the more the Homies theorized, the more they recognized, denaturalized, and pushed back against hegemonic ideas; (b) the Homies refused binaries as unreal, violent, absurd, and insufficient in trying to understand or describe their worlds and the more they theorized together, the more they

“thirded” these and dwelled in the both/and. (c) The Homies recognized that everything existed in context and as they theorized together, they engaged in a deliberate placement of ethnographic, narrative, and theoretical material in relationship with multiple worlds, times, spaces, etc.⁵⁵ (d) At all times, the Homies were sensitive and responsive to the ways in which the “truth” would be taken up and framed to further the legitimacy of certain oppressive projects. (e) As theorizing back progressed—especially in the naming of the violence—the young theorizers began to affectively respond to “what was evident and nobody wants to see,” pointing to, at best, structural indifference (Noguera, 2008), or to what Meiners (2007) calls willful public ignorance. (f) When Theorizing Together, the Homies repeatedly checked in with each other and also checked each other's ideas, pushing their thinking and forging shared repertoires and languages that then impacted how each understood both their individual and their collective histories and identities. (g) Throughout their theorizing, young Homies were always bound, connected, and inspired by a sense of responsibility, guided by their love and relationships, to the people and the worlds that were often being implicitly or explicitly referenced.⁵⁶

Lastly, it was also clear that all of these “ways” of theorizing, many of which are consistent with a plethora of scholarly, decolonial, revolutionary, and critical traditions; were powerfully informed by the Homie’s own intuition, situatedness, and of a sincere and relational engagement with a deeply buried and shared question that resonates with that posed by W.E.B. Du Bois (1903):

⁵⁵ a “deliberate placement of ethnographic and narrative material into a contextual and historic understanding of economic and racial formations (Sartre, 1968).

⁵⁶ Many of these strongly resonate with what critical bifocality (Weis & Fine, 2012), a conceptual grandchild to Du Bois’s veil in which we (a) interrogate critically the empirical claims of dominant stories; (b) document the vast, contradictory, and pulsing landscape of counter narratives; (c) reveal the predatory relation between the two; and (d) generate reparative accounts of the betrayals, wisdom, and desires of those who have paid the most intimate price for sustained injustice. (Fine, 2016)

How does it feel to be a problem and investigate the structures and historic conditions that produce inequity and how ascriptions of deficit, terror, or damage adhere to some bodies and not others?

When honored and respected, the right to theorize resulted in both powerful theories and a transformative and powerful praxis. Now we turn to one of those theories: Entanglements.

CHAPTER 7: “MULTIPLY ENTANGLED YOUTH”; “INNOCENT” INSTITUTIONS, ARCHITECTURES OF ENTANGLEMENT, AND CRIMINAL OUTCOMES

I knew that prisons were social institutions, presumably founded and maintained by society to cure the criminal of his criminal ways,” wrote Kate Richards about her own prison experiences, “yet when I arrived in prison I found that by the workings of the prison system, society commits every crime against the criminal that the criminal is charged with having committed against society. We want to teach them not to lie and defraud, and the prisoner is forced to live one long lie, and can exist only by becoming party to fraud. (Richards O’Hare, 1998, pp. 85–86)

Every time I would go to the playground there was always like three staffs right there keeping an eye on me like there were like “oh ya she’s good” on the walkie talkie “ya she’s good.” So I felt like, you know, I felt like enclosed, like damn like, can’t I’m a kid, let me breathe [yea right] there was always eyes on me. (Lola)

Initially, to collectively make meaning and better define what we started calling entanglements the young theorizers described what looked and felt like a spider web. As Francisco described what was both an affective and a cognitive phenomenon, “The more you move, the more you try to escape, the more you get stuck. It’s a web” A complex and forever tightening web constituted by a series of interlocking systems that severely limited the worlds, the freedom, the life, and the “choices” of oppressed and multiply marginalized youth. Building from, adding, and in dialogue with what Wacquant (2000) calls a “carceral continuum”⁵⁷, the architectures of entanglement theorized by the Homies seek to add a metaphor through which we can further nuance, describe, and enhance our understanding of the logics, actors, and institutions that make-up carceral geographies. Carceral geographies and archipelagos that as described by Foucault (1977) are intertwined with broader soy via ‘carceral circles,’ which like ripples in water, extend far from the prison. These ripples and carceral spaces extend well beyond the concrete and into, among many: emotional geographies (Crewe et al., 2013) and the embodied spaces of the self (Moran, 2015). Ultimately, as will be made clear by the Homies theorizing, these carceral geographies,

⁵⁷ A circuit between the ghetto and the prison that is relayed in large part by the punitive system of social welfare (Wacquant, 2000).

including the architectures of entanglement, have a profound impact on the lived experiences and the worlds of young people who are at the receiving end of multiple systems of oppression and result in the further reproduction, legitimizing, and consolidation of injustice.

Furthermore, through the architectures of entanglement, the Homies contribute to the task of documenting all the ways in which injustice and oppression evolve. In this case, while cynically capitalizing on people's freedom and agency as it further "entangles" and traps them into a system of punishment, coercion, criminalization, dispossession, and exploitation. Ultimately, it is also these architectures that, as the Homies argued, force upon multiply marginalized youth strategically limited sets of choices—and worlds—that are criminally dehumanizing, not their own, and virtually inevitable.

Besides the capacity of this theoretical construct to help the Homies analyze the processes and the systems and the institutions (architectures), the concept and metaphor of *entanglement* was also helpful and illustrate of how these carceral geographies contain just the right amount of "wiggle room" to entertain a notion of "choice" and agency. As the Homies later theorized, this "wiggle room" allowed for the continued normative assumption of the "neutrality" and in some cases, the benevolence, of the institutions, the logics, and the practices that constituted "the crime." To make matters worse, these normative assumptions were also forced upon the Homies, furthering their alienation and the tensions between what they "should be thinking or others think that they should be thinking" and "what I feel in my body and what I experience" (Tino the Rhino) that pull them apart. Also, the Homies theorized, this "wiggle room" and these false sets of assumptions, cynical in nature, also helped nurture a "cruel" form of unrealistic hope and optimism that was both violent and concretely counterproductive.

Another metaphor and heuristic that the group used to think and to theorize about the logics and ethos of the architectures of entanglement was, as Esperanza described “an unfair and endless game of monopoly” that, as Francisco added: “goes on and on, we pass it to our kids and they’re like, oh you’re starting with debt, no properties, and now roll the dice, don’t land in jail.” In this “game,” as in many of the structures and contexts that had a bearing in the lives of the Homies, there is no leaving without further consequences. You must “roll the dice” and deal with the consequences of “your” play, regardless of whether you want to play, whether the game is fair, or “whose fucking game is it anyway?”

I still remember one of the first times that we spoke about the metaphor of the monopoly game (it was during one of our Free Space sessions) and CB the Orchestrator, immediately connecting it to her own goals, pulled out her phone, opened the notes app and began sharing her list of goals: Stop selling dope, pay my debt (more than \$8,000), get back my license, get my grandma off the streets, get off probation, find a place to live, help my little sister and my mom, learn how to fucking read (she would later author a small essay titled Learning How to Fucking Read When 22), finish college. . . Her list, a testament first to her boundless aspirations, selflessness and humanity, was also a stark indictment of the cruelty of modernity, the myth of meritocracy, and the “never ending, rigged monopoly” that she could not escape.

Collectively, theorizing the Architectures of Entanglements was a way for the Hoimes to name and put a finger on what Martin-Baro (1994) and Freire (1982) would call “limit situations” in their own terms. It was also a generative—at times frustrating and enraging—space from which to navigate the very contradiction of being both a “product” of our context and structures and at the same time a historical agent within a context in which as CB the Orchestrator argued “nobody will take fucking responsibility, I still gotta go back and live my

life.” Thus, entanglements became an important metaphor to engage in dialogue beyond the limiting binaries of structure and agency, making space for the youth to creatively think about the meaning and manifestations of agency in dialogue with structure. For example, theorizing the ways in which agency could be a “tool” for hegemonic power to further consolidate its hold upon their noose and thus challenging conventional and dominant notions of agency. In this regard, the theorizing of the Homies also enhances our understanding of the limits of what Shange (2019) calls carceral progressivism and of the liberal imagination, which repeatedly pours resources into “avoiding the school-to-prison pipeline” and into restorative practices (and in this case, a variety of “benevolent” institutions) while failing to recognize the carceral, racial capitalist logics of punishment and disposability.

Moreover, these entanglements also expand on what Rodriguez (2006) describes when analyzing the growth of prisons in this country and their association to profit, arguing that “most parolees are effectively convicted for “life,” regardless of their sentences, when they are barred from jobs, educational opportunities, or social benefits, thus forcing them into prison. In this case, theorizing the architectures of entanglement allowed the Homies to further nuance this claim and “add” to these carceral geographies a web of expectations, limitations, and entanglements that expand the scope and scale of incarceration outside the prison and far away from what we often consider carceral institutions. As Tino the Rhino argues: many of them [organizations, schools, nonprofits, welfare institutions] are all like prisons and contribute to the whole system, no matter what they are wearing or what they put in their pamphlets. Francisco agreed:

They systemize us, even as children, and even the prison system. Even as jobs and capitalism.

Further thinking about these architectures and webs of entanglement illustrated the infinity of touch points, the moments, policies, the institutions, the decisions and nondecisions by different actors that made for the entrapment and entanglement of the Homies into these webs. Moreover, as the Homies analyzed where and how they became further “entangled,” the architecture of the “whole” began to take on new meanings, making it more and more evident that regardless of what these different elements intended to, or thought they did, their “real work” and their impact came to life and showed up in the lives of multiply marginalized youth as a “whole.” In turn, it was understanding their “work as a whole” that dangerously subverted and unveiled “good intentions,” innocent actors, and neutral institutions; all effectively playing a significant part in terrible and oppressive outcomes. Despite being less visible than Foucault’s (1975) environments of enclosure, these architectures of entanglement were indeed similar in that they were able to produce a force much greater (and egregious) than the sum of their parts. In a telling example of how these systems work in conjunction Diego once tried to explain during a theorizing back session:

If I just had to go to court and had nothing else to do, I’d go to court. But I gotta go to school. Let’s say I miss school, show up in court, and it turns out I had a ticket I never knew about cause I got nowhere to get the mail cause I am homeless. Now I owe a bunch of money, don’t even earn shit, now I got a warrant, plus I will now miss school, get locked up, owe more money... what the hell are we supposed to do?

Consistent with the theorizing of Dylan Rodriguez (2007) when exploring the work of prisons, the Homies argued that these architectures of entanglement are similarly constituted not only of a broad set of systems and institutions but also containing and enacting sets of practices of domination and control. To further explore these and in an effort to illustrate many of these touchpoints and intersections, this chapter will begin with a couple of what the Homies found to be some of the “critical components” within architectures of entanglements. After, the chapter

will conclude by considering and interrogating the implications of these architectures when considering agency and circling back to the question that began the theorizing back project, why do some young people leave school?

The Schoolhouse as Mandatory Entanglement

They got too much fucking power with people's life. How the does the education system have that much power? If I did not go to school, I wouldn't be able to eat. That's weird as fuck to me. That was really what fucked me because if I didn't go to school, they going to call my mom down to the county building and be like, your daughter ain't went to school for 30 days. You're cut off the county, put her in school. I'm like wait, what the fuck? Like hold on. All right. I go for two days out the whole 6 days, one day a month. All right. That was cool then for them. But then they started to tip the order I got. So then I had to go more, more and more, but it's—[wiping away tears]. Let me get another napkin really quick. (CB the Orchestrator)

It is affectively unsettling to begin this “accounting” of the institutions central to the architectures of entanglement with schools. However, the choice to place schools next to policing, the prison system, probation, and capitalism was first and foremost a sincere, critical, and intentional choice by the Homies. It was a choice not intended to homogenize “schools,” contribute to an “good/bad” binary, nor to erase the long-standing struggles—including their important victories—to reclaim schools as placed of liberation, self-determination, and education. Just as importantly, this choice “holds” many things at the same time: the “for real” experiences of the Homies in schools; love, gratitude, and solidarity towards those people in and around schools that have created moments of care, love, fugitivity, and education (often despite schools); a recognition of the ideological character of schools, their assumed “benevolence,” their normalizing logics (Moreton-Robinson, 2016), and their taken-for-grantedness within contemporary “developed” societies; and a worry that any such critique can, and if uncontested will be used by the growing neoliberal and conservative forces that actively work to erode public schools and institutions.

For the Homies, as is made clear in the previous chapters, its mandatory quality was not connected to undeniable benefits, but most often to experiences of hurt, harm, dispossession, violence, and particularly relevant to this chapter, entanglement. Undeniably and for most of the Homies, schools had been central to their incarceration in all its forms and it was often the case that as we theorized and we explored the “pivotal moments” and the ways in which our lives had been shaped by different institutions that we would get to a conversation like this one:

CB the Orchestrator: when did you think things changed [referring to involvement with gangs]?

Tino the Rhino: Elementary and the middle school, because that’s really where a lot of stuff starts happening too, where a lot of people start being rebellious against their teachers. And I mentioned an option of maybe yeah, there might be one little bad kid, but there’s always, in middle school somewhere, there’s some kids that do want to get it. And sometimes they, like me, the stuff that I had like experienced and shit, after I had got arrested and I was like 11 or 12 when I had got caught up with weed in middle school, I just had weed but they made a whole ass scene. And I told you I feel like the badass like when they handcuffed me and shit but I also knew it was going to be so bad for me.

Camilo: it’s always how can school feel so bad and be good?

CB the Orchestrator: For real, bro. That was me too.

Tino the Rhino: Yeah.

As is clear in this conversation, the Homies often argued that it wasn’t only that the “rest of the world” started strongly influencing what was happening in school, but schools were also “where a lot of stuff starts happening too.” Moreover, one of the reasons why schools and schooling kept coming up as such a place of entanglement was not only because of its “mandatory” nature and all that happens there, but because of how much they were stuck at the center of a contradiction. Schools were a place where, as Lola described it, “we knew and we know that we are supposed to do school, but it feels like the last thing you want to do, everyone hates you there, you don’t

get shit, they teach you lies, from when I was young, they already looked at me like what are you doing here? Eric agreed:

We keep hearing get your education get your education, if it's so important, why don't you make it better? We just get taught lies and given nothing to do.

In Eric's claim, and in many of the Homies's reflections, the Homies understood and critiqued both "the objectification of human beings as things to be known and acted upon" (Freire, 1970, p. 75) and a banking education attempting to integrate and "incorporate" the marginals and deviants to the "healthy society that they have 'forsaken'" (p. 74). However, despite recognizing this and being critical about schooling and its purpose, the Homies and their families had to grapple with its location, both within entanglements and ideologically, as a gatekeeper to "being in the world" and accessing power, resources, and dignity:

Mark: Education is like a program, by the government to keep everybody at the same pace.

Miguel: Okay.

Mark: Everybody runs this program, and nobody is different. Everybody has to take the same shit. Yeah, you can take different classes, but everybody has to go through their program. So it's like a system that they built. You have to do this, or you can't do your own thing, you can't study this about the government, you have to take these classes.

Miguel: Uh-huh (affirmative). And what would be the goal of that?

Mark: To teach everybody control. But we also kinda have to, there's no choice?

On another conversation where Eric was navigating similar tensions, he shared:

I knew respect but I just wouldn't give it. I guess after so much events and after all that time I guess you lose that respect for school or like, school is nothing, like you would think about it like, I will just go to work and I will be fine. Like that used to be my thing like ok I won't make it to college, if I don't go to high school. I don't know, it gets me thinking about like, like . . . arghhh don't know how to explain. That is the point, we grow up and then we realized it's BS but that it is all about work, the schools here to help us how to live, like to live, like the school here is here to help us to be smart about stuff so that in the future we don't struggle. I think that that is the purpose, that is supposed to be the purpose. But a lot of the schools over here, they don't help, it is not about that.

Sabzalian (2019), in her book *Indigenous Children's Survivance in Public Schools*, documents how children and communities within contexts of colonial violence that “undermine self-determination and sovereignty” (xv), not only resist and defy colonial contexts but also engage in “creative practices of survivance that forward Indigenous theorizations of the present and future” (xv). Similarly, the young theorizers and their families consistently had to negotiate the perpetual violence at the hands of schools (documented in the previous chapters), the entanglements that were facilitated by schools, and their own dignity and survivance.

Reflecting on conversations that she used to have with her mother and responding to Tino the Rhino' comment that for families who went to school here (unlike recent immigrant families) and how they “already knew they [schools] were shit,” CB the Orchestrator added:

And like she'll [mom] be like, okay, fuck it, fuck that school anyways is racist. When it's time for me to go, when it's time for her to get that EBT she's like, No, you gotta take your ass to school. I'd stay for a week, but it was never like I had to do anything. I never had to do shit. And that's bad, you feel me?

As part of their theorizing, the Homies recognized that their understanding of the purpose of schools and their strategic place in their own “success” had changed throughout their lives. They often felt that as much as schools and diplomas “did matter in theory,” these were also a trap and consequently a site for entanglements:

Brian: Well life has changed me. But it also has changed my ideas of school, good and bad. Like at first I started of liking it, between, no, and now, I am liking it cause I know if I do the things I want to and get it to college and university and follow the traits I want I could do something, I could be somebody like a . . . an architect for example and I like to travel around, that would help. Having all these degrees will, could, help, will help me enjoy my time and my family. School can have a point but how realistic is it? Like we have been talking about and looking most often it is a lie that we can do it, so what is the point?

Francisco: That's a hard question because you can answer it in so many ways. All right. Well, I'm going to just say it. I feel like education is a system, hold on. Education like in schools, or just education . . . Because you can get educated in the streets, there's

different kinds of education. I feel like education is to learn about how the world works, and . . . how do I say it? It's hard to say it.

Anna: Education is a scam.

Miguel: How so?

Anna: Because you go to school since you're in kindergarten, right? How many years is that? Just graduated from high school, and you've been going to school since kindergarten.

Mark: 12 years.

Anna: 12 years. And then you have to go to college, and you still have to put in more years. I don't know, I feel like it's a scam. I feel like schools should teach you . . . they should teach you what you want to do with your life. And when you go to college . . . I don't know, I don't know . . .

Brian: I feel like education is a way . . . I'm not talking about school, or what the government wants me to know. I'm just talking about education in general. when you read certain books, your vocabulary changes, your perspective changes. So I feel like education is something that is necessary, but it's better to be self-taught because you don't have a pattern, it's all on you. If every day you could learn something new, and every day is different, I feel like the best thing for you to do is learn something new every single day, no matter what it is. It can be numbers, it can be a word, it can a language, or regardless of what it is, as long as you're learning something every day, then you're able to grow. I read this somewhere. It said something like when you stop learning, that's when you start dying. And I feel like that's powerful because you have to learn, you have to be able to feed your mind something new. You have to be able to teach yourself things that nobody's going to want to teach you.

Anna: that's what I mean, it's like schools they don't want to teach you. So it is not education.

Brian, echoing one of the “common” ways in which many adults at the center, and some of the youth, temporarily justified the “value” of schools and diplomas (play the game so that you can then beat them at their game)—one of the appeasing myths of the liberal imaginary—and also knowing that schools were not by or for them, shared:

Say for example you go into a room full of people with suits, the typical people that wear suits and stuff. And you're like us but you get your diplomas so they let you in but still like us, you just walk in, and they look at you, they're like, “Look at this guy, what is he doing here?” And, “Who does he think he is?” And boom, you start talking, you start

saying things that they do not understand, you start getting to their level, that's powerful because just because of the way that you look doesn't mean it defines who you are. So that's why I feel like it's very powerful to learn.

Tino the Rhino, "backtracking" the conversation and unsettling the idea of "to their level" (he had spoken about the education in the streets) responded:

Okay. Do you think education is the same thing as school?

Camilo: No. Hell no. I think education is something that . . . I think school is, I mean, the way I imagine it, as soon as you said, it was the public school system that we went to, we had to, the building that we went to with the teachers and first through sixth period, that was school, but education, it can happen in school, but most of it happens outside of school and life and you get educated through your experiences. You get educated through the readings that you do outside, so they are two very different things. For me education came from when I decided to take hold of my . . . When I decided to, okay, I want to educate myself. And I started to educate. I started going to the library and I started reading books. It necessarily didn't happen in school. In school I felt like I was . . . It was a totally different ballgame in school. I wasn't being taught, they really didn't care. I was there to fuck around. I was there to meet girls. I was there to, whatever. Everything but actually learning.

CB the Orchestrator: I never really . . . Let's see. Let me see something. I never really learned . . . Most of the shit I know, I don't know it from school. I got education, but it's mostly of shit I observed and shit I seen. It's not because of a book or anything like that. It's starting to be because of books because I'm grown. I know I need to make my mind better, make my brain move more, you got to read. You got to work it, exercise it out. So I know that now, but when I was young, I don't even fucking know how to read, bro. I used to get mad, nigga. When the teacher would be like, "Read," I'd be like, "Bitch, why would you even call me? You know I don't know how to read." I know how to comprehend but the fluency, you know how you niggas, they get their books. They get that little . . . What is it? Comprehension and fluency test. They get that shit. They be reading that shit fast as a motherfucker.

Anna: Probably like if you don't get an "education," you won't succeed in life. I feel like that's also a fear that they put into some people.

Tino the Rhino: and it is all so you had to have this fucking paper that says you passed.

Francisco: Good grades.

Tino the Rhino: Yeah, that's the thing because school's not even really an education. It's just placement. That's where they're going to place you.

Francisco: They're just training us . . . They're just placing us, "Oh, okay, you're just smart. You're going to be a doctor. You're valuable."

As is made clear, the praxes of the Homies, their sense-making, their resistance, and their survivance all look different. However, all deeply resonate to what Gerald Vizenor (2007), an Anishinaabe scholar, describe as survivance stories, "invariably true and just in native practice" (p. 12), that create "a sense of presence, natural reason, active traditions, narrative resistance, and continental liberty" (pp. 12–13). Thus theorizing back, as both a space for counter-stories and stories of survivance (Sabzalian, 2019; Vizenor, 2007), highlighted how the Homies actively negotiated and reclaimed purpose, meaning, education, and self-determination within oppressive, colonial, carceral, and racial capitalist contexts refusing victimhood and instead, nurturing possibility, dignity, and future. Further putting these stories in conversation with entanglements, and the "stickiness" of schools as a project, it was also clear to the Homies (and their families) that although schools "wanted" them and would continuously harass them and their families, schools "didn't really want them there" (Selena), weren't actually honest about shit (CB the Orchestrator), and required them to pretend or force them to be someone else (Francisco). In multiple ways, schools were simultaneously pushing them away and pulling them in, and through both; furthering tightening the architectures of entanglement. In this conversation, CB the Orchestrator and Francisco discuss this "push and pull."

CB the Orchestrator: When somebody tells you: "you got to sit there and you got to do this like this, it'll stop you from being you"

Francisco: that schools forces you to be somebody else because of the way that you're schooled and in somehow you're connecting to this fake person that people need—

CB the Orchestrator: Be.

Francisco: . . . be in. And do you think that that's also connected to—

CB the Orchestrator: The gun violence and the gang member. Yeah. I see what I'm saying. They're all connected.

Francisco: people are home are chill. They just want chill and be in peace but when they go to school and in school they do all this—

CB the Orchestrator: Yeah, my mom, she dropped out of 9th grade. My dad, he never went to school. My grandmother, she never went to school. Her grandmother, I mean, my mom . . . My grandmother's mom, she never went to school. School never helped anybody in my family. And I don't know if this a good thing or a bad thing, but when I was young, she used to be you got to go to school because, I'm going to get in trouble. And I don't want you to go to school. I want you to be here with me because this is what you need, love, eat home. But in order for us to eat, or us to be going to the doctor, you got to go to school.

Most of the Homies remembered always knowing and feeling that schools wanted only to systemize them. They argued that because of was what already assumed about them, schools never really wanted them as people or wanted to educate them. Like CB the Orchestrator put it: "I always seen it, like they wear what they're thinking on their face." Furthermore, this experience of having a "special place" in schools immediately resonated with most of them as they spoke about being seen as "those bad, poor, criminal gang kids," being segregated and pushed around in schools. Here are a couple of excerpts from their testimonies:

in middle school it changed, like, as they would consider me as a thug or what not. Therefore, they would start, I don't know like caring less. "Alright you didn't come," "it's fine, it's him." "Oh, he showed up, maybe send him to some other classroom or to the office." (Eric)

. . . simple stuff as they would discriminate, he dresses that way so he is a bad influence. Sometimes when they would, I think, suspend me, they would make it extra-long. Cause it was different, it was more like a private school, the first middle school I went. A charter school, so after a while, they kept trying to push, like say, discriminate. He is not worth being, him being here. (Gabriel)

I had returned to school after a long time . . . I was putting in work and I was doing good. And in one of the classes I was talking and he was screaming at me and he was spitting on my face. He was like, "Oh, you're a loser. You're never going to be anything in your life." He's like, "Get the out of my class." So I got out of his class. I just never showed up again. I didn't even get my credits and all that whole semester was gone. (Francisco)

On a similar conversation between the group as they were interviewing Tino the Rhino about his experiences in school, he began:

Tino the Rhino: But after that one moment [when he felt things changed in middle school], what I noticed is sometimes my teachers would look at me, down on me. I swear I would know them. I would hear. They would look at me, bro, like I was like something—

Camilo: Really fucking trash.

Tino the Rhino: Like a bad kid. Yeah. I swear, because I remember I used to talk to one teacher and one teacher always, I told her, “Hey, Miss, why do you always talk to me like you’re mad at me? What the fuck?” And she was like, “Oh, I don’t have nothing to answer.” I was like, “Oh, well like you always like you have some type of attitude.”

CB the Orchestrator: Animosity.

Tino the Rhino: Yeah, yeah.

CB the Orchestrator: I can feel you. I can feel you.

Across these examples there was also a notion of subjectivity that was being produced and one that was being contested, resisted, and sometimes internalized. Consistent with what Duncan (2009) posits as “race making” institutions, schools were actively participating in creating rationales for why certain groups of students were being denied their educational rights and were not entitled to freedom, dignity, or education. Moreover, “different” as it applied to them was not neutral. Conversely, it was directly connected to a broader process described by Annamma (2017) as criminalizing difference, especially within the context of multiply marginalized students of color whose voices and identities are frequently wrapped in labels of deviance and disability. Affectively, as mentioned before in this chapter, active pathologization and humiliation were triggering and enraging for the Homies and yet, even if they were “not wanted in schools,” considering normalized and legitimized systems of punishment and incentives, they

“chose” to keep “playing the game or staying in the game and its rules,” making further entanglements mandatory:

Francisco: “Oh, you don’t want to go to school. I’m going to give you a fine, because you have to go to school. I’m going to fine you, I’ll fine your mom that is selling trash to pay rent. Like why isn’t your kid at school?”

Tino the Rhino: Yeah.

Francisco: I make you go back to the race [the metaphor of the inescapable and unjust race they were being forced to be a part of], give you a punishment, so now you are worse and angry at the race.

CB the Orchestrator, building on Francisco’s comment on the punishment “if you leave, punishment if you stay,” and illustrating how students had to negotiate the false “divide” between the schools and the community and the harm perpetuated by school’s attempts to pretend they could “leave their community” outside, continued:

It didn't happen at home because our people would killed the nigga and not disrespect. But since I was at school, everything that happened is the school went, “oh no, you all, you all be smoking, you all be gang banging. That's what you all get” Like what? I protect myself. I don't need you to protect me. But when I'm trying to hop out the gate, I'm trying to leave to take care of my shit, you going to get kicked out or “oh, now your mom's going to get in trouble. I'm call your mom,” like stupid. It's a lot of shit that doesn’t make any sense. That school where I first started smoking weed, at school. In the back of the bungalow house. Some girl brought a big ass bong. I don't even know where she got it from, but I was like fucking 11 in the back of the school. Nightingale, it's middle school right here, Cypress park. That was a fucked up school. I hated going there, fucking hate that shit. They had me be in a wood shop, we ain’t in the fucking forest what you have me in a wood shop for, I got no food, people be dying in the street. I hated that school.

Resonating with the “irrelevance” of what was taught and the emotion of hating school, the Homies continued the conversation; further connecting curricular irrelevance with the broader, and aggressive, project of curricular whiteness and what Calderon (2011) describes as actively producing the very ignorance that education we supposed to fight against:

We learned history in her class and I hated that class. It's boring. The class is about some white people that are heroes, that's the only thing they show in history class. They show

that white people are heroes. They never tell you that they executed all that people. That's all they show. At school, they show about how the presidents have discovered it and how this is now. But they don't talk about when people were here already. They don't talk about the people that were here already. And some white people just came over and took over the land. And they don't talk about them. And they only talk about how they found it. And now it's theirs because they found it. They just fight and they're theirs. That's the only thing. I want to say with the heck. Like you just learn about how white people are like good people. Yeah. How the United States is a good place.

Lola, who had been quiet for a while, added:

I believe that schools don't really set a goal to say, cause most schools they just teach about history and there is a lot of corruptness in history. Schools don't want you to really know your things and be smart in order to go in . . . the system is not really teaching us to our full potential.

I asked: what do you mean by corruptness?

Let's see. You know how the government they want us to know certain things. We are limited to certain knowledge that we don't know what knowledge is true, you know? Like history books were written by somebody who isn't 100% accurate.

Despite having to face multiple sources, forms, and layers of repeated violence and dismissal, many students had, at different instances of their lives, decided that they "had to go" to school to avoid punishment, only to be punished when they were there.

Altogether, these punitive and dismissive processes, practices, and logics placed schools as one of the institutions at the center of the architectures of entanglement. Again contradictory when placed in dialogue with dominant understandings of the work of schools, these processes, practices, and logics made perfect sense in conversation with all the literature and testimony around the school to prison-nexus, the reconstitution of schools following zero-tolerance and high stakes accountability policies (Rodriguez, 2003), the lucrative industry that reshaped public schools into "techno-fortifications, the politics of containment crucial to the ongoing settler colonial project, and all the work that has documented the historical and contemporary relationship between social reproduction, criminalization, settler colonialism, and schooling.

Moreover, while zero-tolerance as a philosophy and set of logics and policies (especially de jure) hides behind a race and class neutral vocabularies, the realities of the Homies's stories were also plagued with the footprints of race, class, gender, disability, and a host of other marginalized identities. These worked to "normalize" expectations for incarceration which in turn have profound and deleterious consequences for poor youth of color (Meiners, 2007), including among many a widening of the educational debt that is owed to students of color (Ladson-Billings, 2006) and an active denial and infringement upon the rights of students, including their right to be literate (Winn & Behizadeh, 2011).

It is also only in this contemporary dystopia and through these lenses where the tyrannical, state-sanctioned kidnapping of a 6 or 8-year-from school to take them to prison (as was the case with two of the Homies who were a part of this project), is not only possible, but, for "certain kids," normal.

At school, he had long, pretty hair, a girl tried to drag him by his hair. He went to jail for it. He beat the out of her at school, fucking pre-K or first grade and they took him to jail without my mommy even knowing. Off school campus, and the girl mom tried to press charges and then they brought him home like at 6:00 PM. This happened at 10:00. So he was sitting in a cell from fucking 10:00 in the morning to 6:00 PM as a fucking eight, he was like six years old, six years old. Told my mom nothing. They just went in there and took him because he's pretty, he looks a girl and I don't know how to explain it, but it's fucked up. I went to jail when I was a kid too, second grade. The jail was right across the street from my school, bro. You ever heard of 75th elementary, you know where 77 department is? It's right across the street. They'll pull up, take us right there in the car. Leave us in the shit because some boy . . . I went in the girls' bathroom, some boy tried to come in the girls' bathroom with me. I guess it was something that his mom was teaching them, doing in front of them at home. Tried doing it to me. I pulled the shit, twisted in. I had to fucking go to jail for it, but I was crying and crying and crying. Nobody was coming, nobody was... Had to pee, pee over myself. They was treating me like how they treated me as an adult going to jail. And I already know because the community I was in, it's because of how much control they had. (CB the Orchestrator)

I was sent to the cops because I got into it with my teacher. I threw a book at my teacher. She didn't want to check my work, She didn't want to check my work. She didn't like me, so I, uh gave her my book so she could check it. And she still didn't check it. I threw my book at my teacher, so she could check my work and she still didn't check it. It was

my English work, that's why I wanted her to check it. I had written a paragraph about growing up. I had write it. So, she was going around stamping everybody's paper. And I told her I was done, she didn't stamp my paper, she graded everyone else's paper and she didn't stamp my paper. (Lola)

Furthermore, as we thought about the “webs” of entanglement and spoke about schools in relationship to other systems, the connections were deep and wide, ranging from the direct connection to the criminal (in)justice system and to policing, to a broad array of other “caring” and “youth serving” institutions whose work, in conjunction with all the other systems, only resulted in more entanglements. These “real” consequences both contradicting the intended purpose of such organizations and reflecting their deep nexus with schools, were clearly known, critiqued, resisted, and acted upon by youth and their families. In the next two examples, the Homies describe some of these “connections” as well as their knowledge of these:

here was a therapist she would come every now and then I was young so she kind of manipulated me, she got in my head telling me like I'm going to help you. “I got you just tell me everything and I'm going to find some way to make it right.” I mean of course I felt like she told me I got you and then I told her everything and then she flipped on me. she like did me dirty pretty much she threw me under the bus and most of us all of us actually. And I remember one day the therapist and two police officers came in the house and I was in my bunk bed me and my little brother and they're telling us that let's go I'm going to take you guys or ever and I remember I was holding onto the bed and they're pulling me like let go and she was telling me if you do this now you will get through it's like easier and quicker so I let go but I remember being in the back of the van like leaving from my mom and she was like in fuckin tears and I was young so I didn't really know much (Santiago)

Not because your parents would always also tell you like, oh, don't say nothing in school. Or don't just say that in school. Because they know if you say that in school again, it's a job or government make you worse.(Selena)

So how then, do schools entangle students? I asked Tino the Rhino during one of our last sessions together? He answered:

Well first they force you to go, or not force but it's good for you to go, even when you are an adult, but then they don't want you there, and you have to be someone else and teach you all this shit, which never works, or you say true shit and then they bring the

cops and hurt your family or bring these other people that want to help but can't really help but have expectations of you or you resist and then they call the cops and now it's another fucking problem. It's like we've been saying all just like the web, and it is always framed as if it was us who are getting stuck or doing stupid shit but really its getting in the spider web you know but even when you try to get away you are sucked back in."

“That’s all I remember, ambulance and then foster home”: The Family Policing System

I could see them fighting, and I'm just like what. I just remembered after that the ambulance. That's all I remember. Ambulance and then just foster home, I was five, on my birthday. It was on my birthday. (Francisco)

a person who got a lot of problems at home. In a home, physical abuse, mental abuse, trauma. You can't talk to the teachers and stuff like that because then you end up going to foster care about being open and trying to take their word for it. You know what I mean? The counselors and shit telling you, "Oh everything going to be okay. You can tell me everything." But then they turn around and go tell the law. Get you taken away from your family. (CB the Orchestrator)

So, my first was with my mom. I remember kindergarten a little bit. I remember it was fun. It was like, you just do fun things, like very fun things little kids would like. And that's all I remember doing. Little parties, and little stuff, like fun things. And foster youth that's where I learned more, because I remember more. Well, because I was in foster care, it was very awkward. I didn't get to be myself at school. (Selena)

In her article, *Abolish Family Policing, Too*, Dorothy Roberts (2021) begins by asking a question: “Imagine if there were an arm of the state that sent government agents to invade Black people's homes, kept them under intense and indefinite surveillance, regulated their daily lives, and forcibly separated their families, often permanently” (p. 67). In her piece, she argues that indeed this racist structure exists in the United States today under the mantle of the “child welfare system” and as an assemblage of public and private child protection agencies, foster care, and preventive services. Moreover, she also posits that as part of the “carceral machinery in Black communities” (p. 67), the child welfare system has been, and continues to be a powerful state policing apparatus that functions to regulate poor and working-class families—especially those that are Black, Latinx, and Indigenous—by wielding the threat of taking their children from them.

For the Homies, Robert's words resonate deeply and this apparatus, mostly referred by them as DCFS or simply foster system, was both omnipresent and overpowered. Whenever we spoke about entanglements and of the institutions and webs that were always there, waiting for them to "fuck up or become more entangled," (Tino the Rhino) DCFS⁵⁸ or foster care was one of the usual suspects. The family policing system had historically and continued to present infinite challenges for them and their families. Moreover, and yet again, its location and legitimacy as a permanent fixture in the fabric of their worlds, as described by Francisco, "was painfully normal."

I just was part of it, you know? So, I never really thought what is this, why are you doing this. I always thought it was normal. The system that was created forced our parents to make bad decisions, not almost forced, but narrowed down their decisions to fall into these bad decisions and then these bad decisions, they came from the same system that they created for us to fall into, and police disciplined us, and took us away, took them away and then that creates more hurt and more pain.

Our conversations about the Family Policing apparatus surfaced a plethora of hurtful, complex, and often never-spoken-about emotions and experiences. Often, these were plagued with a puzzling sense of senselessness, layers and layers of sedimented and accumulated silences, strong emotions of shame and hurt, an internalized sense of wrongdoing and guilt, unspoken and deep trauma and often numbness. As the Homies theorized, they would pull from "small" and yet deeply meaningful and telling moments, like in this case Selena, who recounted her experiences during court appointments:

On the court I went, there's two rooms, two spaces. For younger kids, and for the older kids. Because I've been in foster care for seven years desde que era chiquita so, I went to one room to the other one in years. When I was in that little room and we didn't use to talk at all, because it was this awkward silence. We would get there, get our name tags and just color, or read books. And then after later on, we'll go to a little room, little theater room, and they'll bring animals, like a zoo, like little thing will come, and they bring. They just used to do cool things for kids. And it was pretty entertaining. Once we

⁵⁸ Department of Child and Family Services

go to the other side, it's a little more dark. It's a little more, because everybody knows what's happening. Some people been there for years, like me. Some people were in foster care for years. So we know there's all this bullshit.

Francisco, also moving to small moments and resonating with what Selena shared, added:

For me, it was weird. It was like we were not . . . We were just some people that lived in a house with someone. It wasn't like we didn't get no type of love or what we needed. At that certain time, we needed more love because we're away from our parents, we're long distance, and we're in this random person's house in a room just forced to stay there and can't even come out. We can't even watch TV. We have to ask to go to the restroom. It's weird. It's all programmed. And then the kids, they could just run up and down. They could just play Xbox. They could go get cereal, come out in the middle of the night. They could go in and out. I remember I would . . . Just to watch TV, I remember I would massage her feet. I would be like, "I'll massage your feet," because she watches and then I could watch TV. So I was out massaging her feet, I was watching novelas, because I'd never seen TV. You know? It was funny. It was weird.

Bryan, describing one of his “first” experiences with DCFS and illustrating the “web of punitive threads” (p.32) and the persistent nexus between, schools, family policing and broader policing structures (Meiners, 2007) like in this case the LA County sheriff's department⁵⁹, shared a story of trusting a social worker at school, only to find himself and his family on a nightmare scenario:

I had a mattress there and I was sleeping on it. then the sheriff's came and it woke me up they woke me up like the first thing I saw was the barrel of a gun and I was like shit I was probably like 14 maybe 15 at the time so I was young I didn't know what the fuck what's going on but yeah I was scared because they couldn't take me in and then also to foster care me and my family got taken away from my mom for a year and 3 months and like . . . during that time I can honestly say that's when I said fuck the system you know they did me dirty.

Not only were the actual experiences and encounters with these systems violent, traumatic, and disruptive, but they also began to forge a relationship and understanding of the architecture and character of the “system.” In this case Bryan, who had previously described the ways that the rupture of his family had punished his mother instead of supporting her with everything that was

⁵⁹ This is the same sheriff's department that is currently under investigation for a long history of violence towards the community, lack of accountability, and gangs (Castle, 2021; Tchekmedyian, 2022).

happening to her, was also speaking to the violence that results from strategic misrepresentation, from what Harvey et al. (2021) describe as a systemic indifference by CPS to the adverse community conditions that “cause such less-than-ideal circumstances” (p. 17). On another conversation that illustrated the “fear” of being “seen” youth had to navigate within systems of punishment, Francisco begun:

Mark: But she would be scared to tell the police and the teachers because she felt like whatever is happening at home and why she's not doing good at school, she couldn't even tell her mom because she told her mom and her mom would be like, "No, no. You were just dreaming." And she was scared to tell her teachers because her parents wouldn't even listen. And she was scared that she'll end up in foster care. You know what I mean?

CB the Orchestrator: Yeah, that shit was fucked up.

Mark: And she was scared to tell the police.

CB the Orchestrator: I used to fucking hate that shit too.

Mark: You know what I mean? Because you're scared of the police like, "Oh am I going to leave my mom? I want to be with my mom."

Besides the threat, another feature of the Family Policing Apparatus that the Homies raised was how it led to the creation of power asymmetries that were utilized and leveraged by different actors and organizations and often weaponized against them and their families. Sometimes, “you gotta say you got problems and get involved with DCFS or say that you are crazy and shit so that you can get help from other organizations that actually do help you, like with housing and shit like that.” In this case, CB the Orchestrator’s claim, consistent with what Harvey et al. (2021) found in their research, shows how due to flawed public policy often CPS or DCSF become “a prerequisite to access services, creating perverse incentives to overreport families to the family regulation system,” (p. 19) or in this case, for multiply marginalized youth to further “entangle” themselves in this broader architectures. Moreover, it was also these power dynamics that

resulted in complex dynamics and abuses. In these two examples, Diego and Selena reflected on how parents, teachers, and police use that power asymmetry with their foster children:

Or they will threaten you with, if you say this, I'll say that. And if I say that, you're not going back with your mom. Every kid, well, mostly every kid wants to go back to his mom. (Diego)

I remember going to court and they always had the threat of don't do this or don't say that or you never see your mom again. (Selena)

Further illustrating the nexus between capitalism, financial precarity, exploitation, and the family policing system⁶⁰. Tino the Rhino argued that this wasn't only blaming the victims, but also punishing them:

That's one thing, they'll try to... A parent won't have money because they can't have a good job. So, they have to be working a lot of jobs. And they're not with their kid they got to work far away. And then they'll be like, "Oh, they're neglecting their child because they're not there, because of the work." But they'll be like, "Well, they're going to work because they had to support the child, because they can't get hired nowhere else. So, they have to get multiple jobs." Or this and this. And then they'll be like, "Oh, they're neglecting them." But because of... They're not neglecting them, but that's what they're going to say. (Tino the Rhino)

In his argument, Tino the Rhino wasn't only highlighting whose perspective is "taken" and whose is dismissed as these situations get framed, but he was interrogating and rearranging responsibility and pushing back against the dependency of these institutions in the "blaming the victims" so that they could punish them. Moreover, when we spoke about family policing systems as contributing to the architecture of entanglements, Tino the Rhino described the "stickiness" of their webs because of how much you couldn't shake them away: "It is like once someone files a problem or takes it to CPS it's never ending, now it is like a game of never being

⁶⁰ As Harvey et al. (2021) further elaborate, "the impact of public policies such as redlining, the war on drugs, and welfare reform are compounded by the impact of mandated reporting and resulting surveillance by CPS that further resulted in the concentration of Black families residing in adverse community environments" (p. 15).

able to be good enough for your children, especially if you are poor or a single mother or something like that.”

In 2018 alone, Child Protective Services (CPS) received referrals of nearly 8 million children suspected to be victims of maltreatment. Intake workers weeded out reports regarding 4.3 million of these children as inappropriate for CPS involvement. But the screening process still leaves millions of families subject to state investigation each year. (Roberts, 2021)

The Homies were graceful and understanding of how much their families were struggling. They recognized how these complex situations—including the “faults” and challenges of their parents -- and cycles of violence indeed resulted in situations that were not safe for them. However, they also understood their parents' struggles as connected to broader oppressive and hegemonic systems and structures and therefore, they were aware of the dangers of “pathologizing their own.” More importantly, none of them saw the violence inflicted by the family policing system as a real solution, knowing first-hand the deep and lasting impact it had had on them and their communities. As both Selena and Francisco describe:

Because right away when they think you're in foster care, they think your mom didn't want you. That's the first thing they think. That's offensive, because it's not that they don't want me, it's that they can't. They're going through shit like everyone else and they're not getting help, many times it doesn't have anything to do with them, and we're just not safe. So instead of helping, they need to take me away for a while. It wasn't a while, it was seven years, almost my whole life, but yeah. (Selena)

I was struggling, my family was struggling, so help us, don't punish us.
(Francisco)

Highlighting the ubiquitous presence of the Family Policing apparatus and its deep relationships, even affectively, with the broader punitive and carceral infrastructure, it was often the case that conversations about “other things” would quickly take the Homies to talking about it again. As Francisco reflected: “CPS is part of the game for us. You poor, your mom has to work three jobs, now you can't but get entangled on this other system that is just looking for you to make a

mistake, like probation, just waiting to take you in.” Following, Selena describes her experiences going to a police station to get an award:

I don't know it's probably off topic, but when I went to get the award and we went to a police station, and I told David, "Oh, I feel uncomfortable. It feels weird, because the first memory I have of a police station is when I got taken away from my mom at a police station." So being there was weird, but I got used to it. But yeah, I got taken away in the police station. My mom found out that they were looking for us. And then my mom ran away. We kept running and running away. And then the police convinced her to come. Told her, "Oh, we just want to see you. We just want to see the kids." But they end up taking us away that day. I remember, I was playing with blocks on the floor. I remember I was playing with my little sister. There was only three of us, They had a bucket with blocks, and me and my sister were playing. She was small, she was four. I was six, about to turn seven. I got taken away on October 2nd. Yeah. And it was a month after I turned seven, because my birthday is in November, so yeah. Yeah, I remember the day, and my mom came out, and her eyes were kind of watering. She told me, "Oh, you guys are going to get taken away." And for some reason I know what that meant. I have never heard about foster care or anything, but I knew it was me not being with my mom. So right away I started crying.” (Selena)

“Where are your gang member friends?”: Policing, Carceral Structures, and Probation

The prison is considered so "natural" that it is extremely hard to imagine life without it. (Davis, 2003, p. 10)

Much has been written about policing, carceral structures, and probation as a permanent presence in the lives of multiply marginalized and oppressed youth in the United States. The reach of the carceral state extends, concretely and metaphorically, far beyond what is collectively imagined. On any given day, more than seven million people—1 in every 32 adults—are incarcerated or on probation or parole or under some form of community supervision (Glaze & Bonczar, 2006). Moreover, as described by Marie Gottschalk (2008), “even these startling figures hardly hint at the enormous and disproportionate impact that this bold social experiment has had on certain groups in US society” (p. 236). As Victor Rios writes in the preface of his book, “Punished” (2011), “criminalization was a central, pervasive, and ubiquitous phenomenon that impacted the everyday lives of the young people I studied in Oakland” (xv). Such was the case for the Homies. For them, cops were not only a part of the physical infrastructure of their city, but of

their psychological “programming” and their mental and emotional landscape. As Francisco suddenly described during one of our check-in questions:

Francisco: You just gave me a little flash of when, a memory, kind of. I remember, when I was little, I'd just be smoking weed, and the police would come and be like, "Where are your gang member friends?" This time, I'm 11. I don't even know what that word means. I'm like what do you mean? What is that? These are just my friends. Some of them are tatted, some of them have guns, some of them ... I don't really know. These are just my friends that we smoke weed with and I just kick it with, and I hang out with them. They buy me drinks, and they buy me food and candy, and they just watch over us and protect us, and I remember when they came they're like, "Come up. You're a gang member. I heard it before." I get that in my memory, where they're programming me almost, so like you're a gang member, but I'm like I'm just a regular little kid smoking weed. What are you talking about, gang member? He's like, "Yeah, you're a beaner too, and you're a gang member." You're programming us by having that discipline, that kind of discipline, see it similar, like how you're saying to the schools.

Tino the Rhino, immediately continued:

It also has to go based off of communities too because the wealthy and rich from wherever you live at. So, what? Poor and rich. Even when they say, I was 14/15 and I got pulled over even when I was younger. But, when I started seeing more how everything was, well, first, when I was young, if you get pulled over or something, you're not even thinking about gang banging. You're not thinking about all this shit but they already label you. So once they start labeling you like that, I'm not even from the hood, I'm not doing anything bad and I'm already getting harassed by the cops. So I think somewhere, that little piece of thing that you trip out at that, it goes somewhere into your subconscious and it starts to make you think, "What the fuck?" And you're like, "Oh, well," you start thinking, "Fuck, well..." you start thinking about it like that every time you stress. And then every time, every day I'm going to be walking like a cop's just going to pull me over and some shit and fuck, I don't know, shit, something could happen or whatever. And you start feeling like, well fuck, if I'm already going to get harassed, might as well go in the shit that I'm going to get harassed for. You're like because I'm trying to go do my school shit or whatever or do this. At school, they don't take me serious, the teachers and shit, they think I'm going to fail. Cop? I'm not even trying to do anything bad but they already think I'm a gang member and doing bad shit. So I might as well just start going that way. They're not really trying to support me in that way.

As “pinballs within the youth control complex,” (Rios, 2011, xiv) the Homies were consistently hypercriminalized, dehumanized, disrespected, and harassed by police. Similarly, regardless of what the “intentions” or the stated “purpose” of what Joshua called “the biggest gang,” the footprint of the police upon the lives of the youth was and continues to be troubling. Every single

one of the Homies had had multiple direct experiences (including during the course of this project) with policing in which they had experienced willful and intentional “harm,” sometimes even cynically “recognized out loud” by police themselves:

Lourdes: Hey, remember that day that they harassed me to saying I was from Rosetta, they said if I didn't say I was from Rosetta, they were going to put out my record I was from Fast Pace

Esperanza: I remember that.

Lourdes: I had three homegirls, three of my homegirls are in there right now. So I go in, saying I'm from Fast Pace, if my record states I'm from Fast Pace, I'm going to get fucked up. I was like, "I'm going to get fucked up." They didn't care, they knew I was going to get fucked up and they knew what they were doing.

However, partly because of the nature of entanglements, police and policing (including policing and punishment done by the probation department) came to be a part of a debilitating ecology and dehumanizing infrastructure that perennially attempted against them and their dignity. As Gabriel emotionally described in response to a conversation about dignity:

So it's kind of like you identity. It's like your identity just basically how people will treat you. So say for my thing I put when they are stopping us or they take us and shit, it's just like . . . like animals, I felt that police take our dignity as people. When it comes to policing because the majority of the cops from my experience, they don't really respect us . . . not as civilians but just like the people that they detain and stuff, because sometimes when you're asking them before you even touch anything, like why am I getting pulled over or some shit and then the cops turn around and start yelling at you . . . you lose your sense of dignity I think because when you're asking something, they don't even fucking care about what the fuck you say, you know? Even now . . . riding back, I was taking her home yesterday, and the police got behind, so... It's hard to explain when you've got a fear that's automatically come over you when folks get behind you, it takes over you and brings so many feelings

As is clear, the carceral logics and beliefs about “good” and “bad people” that were repeatedly projected and forced onto the Homies, their people, and their families were absurd, offensive, and yet mandatory to contend with. Their inescapable nature part of their predicament. Here Raul and Selena elaborate:

You are guilty by association, so can you imagine kids getting harassed every single day because they are walking through the streets back and from the projects. You have one barrio here, patrolling the borders of what is the projects and you have another gang right here patrolling the other border. As a kid who wasn't from the gang, who was a victim of guilty by association, it fucking sucked, it sucked in every single day (Raul)

Everybody has an image that once you go to jail, you're bad person. It's just an image to the world. To the United States. Once you hear, oh, he's in prison. Oh, he's in jail. That's a bad guy. You don't want to be like that person. "oh, this person went to jail. Oh, they don't even matter." (Selena)

Furthermore—and building on a previous argument by the Homies that these structures impacted them during their hardest moments—even when faced with complex and life-threatening situations, the Homies and their families often found themselves in the predicament where knowing that police would only bring further harm, there was no way around it.

My mom had to call . . . The police had to come because people got shot, right? My brother and Brian, they got shot. Police has to come, even we don't want them to come nigga. They let them come. And all this shit, they interrogate you, they ask you questions. Motherfucker my brother and Brian, they got shot. (CB the Orchestrator)

My mom, she has 40 years and she's still scared of the cops because her parents are scared of the cops, and the cops were the ones that took me away from my mom to a foster home. But then we are in situations where there is no way around it. (Francisco)

Also, especially in moments where the Homies were trying to exercise their agency to disentangle themselves and to “do positive shit” (Tino the Rhino), police and policing continued to be an integral part of the “sticky” web that kept them from doing so. In this case, CB the Orchestrator describes the spatial dimensions of policing and the political geographies that “people in the hood” had to navigate:

I know too many people that want to get out the hood, but they can't. Because of the shit that we were saying, the policing, and probation and guilty by association and shit like that. And they ain't going to go too far, they're going to have to go back to where they just started. It's impactful.”

“Similar to a concentration camp”: The Projects as an Ongoing Relationship to Space

The neighborhood where I grew up in, which is Pico gardens and the eastside village are next to each other. It was... Just to make sure people are hearing this, was considered the

largest public housing west of the Mississippi. What does that mean? It means that you have more gangs, more families, a dense population that get very congested areas, public housing on the west coast is similar to concentration camps. Where they just threw everyone in there. And not provide the resources to them. (Chuy)

“We’ve spoken about jails, cops, DCFS, probation, what about the projects?” Selena suggested.

“It is impossible to think of our lives growing up without the projects,” Chuy affirmed. Not only did every one of the Homies lived, at least for a period of their lives, in the projects, but as the Homies reflected, it was like a world inside a world. The projects contained stories, relationships, histories, and among many other things, ways of understanding themselves, their people, and their relationships to the “outside.” Besides these, the Homies theorized, the projects were also part of these architectures of entanglement. Here is an excerpt from a conversation where the Homies discussed the projects and entanglements:

Tino the Rhino: I think they are, especially because I live in my hood, that's the one thing. It's not like I could just be like I got fucking all the money right now I need, and I could just move out somewhere else. I can't so the world is pretty fucked up.

CB the Orchestrator: how the fuck you thinking we can get out if this place, these projects, were built to keep us in. Putting around roaches, putting you in an environment like this of its own city, or where you see all this shit every day . . . you come outside your house to go get food and you see somebody laying on the floor.

Thinking about space, and especially in reference to “urban” space not only as a physical location but also as a construct that describes both space and people (Noguera, 2004), the Homies theorized the projects as an “enclosure” that acted like a gatekeeper of both interactions and subjectivities. “I think it is an entanglement, because it puts you close to certain things, it makes you go to a certain school, and it makes you think you are a kid from the projects.” (Selena). The “ghetto,” the “inner city,” and for the young Homies especially, “the projects” were both home, family, community, and cultural wealth; and a profoundly unjust space

demarcated by clear social, cultural, economic, and racial boundaries that resonate with that described by Douglas and Massey (1993) as the American apartheid.

As a space of community, tradition, culture, and a long history of resisting violence in its multiple forms, the projects were also deeply intertwined with gangs, which played a significant and complex role in their lives. As Francisco suggested:

Where I grew up, all my best friends, his sister was from the gang, his brother was from the same crew. His dad was from prison. His whole family was like there are cousins within the same gang, gang banging, and their other cousin was with these gang members, and they were five deep, eight deep. It was family, everybody seen them, the whole gang. Little Joel, little . . . It was someone that I just hung out with, so it'd become normalized to me, to go to this cousin's house, we were tight.

Chuy responded:

For me, in junior high you had to work on whether someone was going to jump you on your way to school. Going to school, if you woke up late, and your mom made you unos burritos de frijoles con huevo, no ma, I don't want to be late. Mom thinking, I don't want to be late because I want to improve my academics. Mom doesn't understand that if I run late, the chances I get caught by the vultures by me being on the street are higher, so I'd rather go when everybody else goes. To sneak in and hide from everyone else.

Despite varying in their relationship to gangs and the “politics” of their projects, the Homies resisted the de-contextualized, ahistorical, and overly “agentic” or “structural” explanations for their, and their peers, engagement with gangs. For some, being a part of gangs “runs deep in the family and is a source of power” (Lola), and for others “it makes the most sense you know, to get into to stay safe” (Francisco), or what “made me feel alive and like things had purpose.” (Tino the Rhino) When framing gangs in relationships to entanglements, like with every other part of the web, the reasons “how” the Homies became entangled or “chose” to become entangled, ranged from “very willingly” to “the world choosing for them.” As Rios (2011) argues, any sincere account of the why must “take into account macro processes of power and domination that shape the everyday lives of social subjects” (p. 172) and also the ways in which live

experiences of the social actors, make space for human action, and the creative responses the YouTube people enact. Here are Tino the Rhino and Francisco theorizing around the “why:”

Francisco: it's almost like you want that respect. You want that, because I feel like people do it for is respect. Respect, the money, the fame. Some people do it for their families.

Tino the Rhino: You're always in tension, and there are things that pull you in, and then there are things that pull you away from these things, like me others are addicted to drugs for me it's the streets.

Francisco: for me it was everything. Maybe pain, maybe not being able to be a man for my mother, or protect the house, be wanting that respect too. Then I just circled into it. Then I just circled into it. You catch a spot and you cross them off. They cross you out. You guys shoot each other, you guys knock each other out, you guys stab each other, and then they get into their neighborhood. We're Titans, and just started smoking dope, and then it started escalating and I started thinking differently, and I started getting into fights, and it started getting more violent. I lived right in front of the park. They'd be able to go to my house, so I was pressured, and even got to start packing heat.

The Homies never spoke about gangs as either “good” or “bad” and were also clear to historicize and acknowledge how gangs have been a feature of unjust societies and violent spaces that was both connected to place and culture⁶¹. “Gangs,” often made intelligible by the “stream of images and commentary that serves to pathologize and demonize” (Kontos, 2018, p. 261) that result in draconian laws that ensure lifelong entanglement with the criminal (in)justice system; were for the young theorizers experientially, historically, and ontologically a very broad container for many things; some beautiful and powerful, some terrible and violent. Here is an excerpt from a conversation:

Francisco: I feel like this whole lifestyle, the gangs, it's part of our culture, and Chicano culture. It's almost like the low riders riding down with you in East LA. The Mexican flag and the lifestyle, even the Aztecs, the Aztec religion, or whatever it is. You have in the prison system, how we adapted to it and changed it into something it's gang. You want to earn something, something like that, you've got to do some stuff for it, do you

⁶¹ Borrowing from Nieto (2010) in defining culture as dynamic, messy, contradictory values, traditional, social and political relationships, and worldviews created, shared, and transformed by groups of people bound together by a combination of factors; and existing in particular social, historical, political, and economic conditions.

know what I mean? It's this whole gang lifestyle is weird. I feel like it manifests itself. It's something different than what we think it is. I feel like for us, we just think it's normal, but I think it's something that we've been knowing since the beginning of time.

Miguel: How so?

Francisco: Because everything I see, I see it from Christian lens, you could say, so when I see something like that, I see a lot of it is the Italian system. If you look at gang banging, you look at how you get into a gang, you get jumped. You look at what you get, what do you expect from a gang? You want money, you want fame, you want women. Those are the three main things. You want power, respect, and all these three things are literally, those things are, like you want money, but what we do for the money, we kill people from the money. We sell drugs and dope to our own people for the money. It's violent. To get to where you want to be in gang bang, it's almost a death, and it's glorified in our culture. You want to be a gang member.

Miguel: When you say, "In our culture," what do you mean?

Tino the Rhino: family, care, respect, also gangs have been about protecting our community from the police, or feeling safe, do you know what I'm saying?

Francisco: That's something that did and does exist. I think the gangs did have good strong intentions, of course, like Black Panthers, Crips and Bloods. You've got the Pachucos, you've got the White Fence⁶², You've got all these gangs, and they were mostly being in started in 1930s, that were fighting the whites, because they would embarrass the Mexicans, take women. They'd bully us, so we ganged up. That's why it's White Fence. Keep the whites out, so I think it started with good intentions, but quickly got devoured by our own sense of pride and greed, because even with dignity you could still become prideful of things, and that could eat you up. I feel like with the gangs, they overpower. We glorified the gangs so much, that the gangs took control of us, and now we become a slave to our own.

Tino the Rhino: What we created we are slaves to that now. If you're in a gang now, you've got to go to prison. You've got to put in work. You've got to do this for your gang. If you don't put in that work, you're not a real one. If you don't go shoot this fool, you're not a real G. but we're all family. We're all brothers and sisters. We're all one, and we're just killing each other, and I feel like this system, it just got twisted. It's all messed up now.

⁶² White Fence is the oldest gang in Los Angeles. The gang itself claims its history goes back as far as 1900, although the gang did not emerge until the 1910s in the form of the all-male sports team associated with the La Purissima Church In Boyle Heights. The group was originally referred to as La Purissima Crowd, but gradually changed its name to White Fence, after the white picket fence that surrounded La Purissima Church. The gang's name has also been interpreted as a "symbolic barrier" between the white residents in the area and the Hispanic residents of the neighborhood, at a time when racism plagued the area.

The Homies theorized that gangs were not architectures of entanglement in the same way as the “system” or the government that was created to keep their people down. Instead, these were instead connected to a history of oppression and to a fight for sovereignty, safety, and self-determination, “they’d bully us, so we ganged up “(Francisco). However, gangs were also seen as structures, many of which they “were born into,” with a strong grasp upon their lives and the amount of agency they could exercise within this limiting “web” of choices, especially forced choices when negotiating dignity with the punitive and coercive grip of the state. Here, Tino the Rhino and Francisco try to make sense of gangs in conversation with other systems:

Tino the Rhino: I don’t think the gangs, I still see them the same way, but I don’t blame them. I feel like it’s not the peoples’ fault. That’s the system. The same way I still see them, but there’s this system of the prison, and you’ve got to go get your stripes. You’ve got to go put in work, and then stab a cop, and then you get 20 years or life, do you know what I mean? You’re in jail for the rest of your life, and that’s the way . . . That’s your life. It’s normal and you’ve got to work for it.

Francisco: You’re working, making Starbucks cups in prison. It’s all messed up. It happens like this, and it’s like it’s their fault. They’re animals, the system, they created this system, and they twisted what we created for something positive. Everything that we try to build, they break it and twist it into something, and then we get conditioned and we follow those systems. I feel like we’re so used to it, that our parents, our uncles or our cousins, it’s just like it’s program time. It’s time to put in that work. It’s time to go in the hood. It’s time to gang bang. It’s time to get in the hood, and it’s normal.

Theorizing the projects as more than a physical space and a part of a broad “panoptic” carceral infrastructure and geography, the Homies consistently spoke to “la mirada” [the gaze] placed upon their space. Whether through direct policing, helicopters flying up high, surveillance, raids on people’s homes, or the judgment placed, as described by Selena, upon “us as a space as if we had no choice but to be criminals or fuck-ups.” During one of our conversations around what made “la mirada,” Francisco brought up the disproportionate responses that felt as “it’s like their trying to deliver a message to us.” CB the Orchestrator responded by sharing a recent experience of a disproportionate response:

CB the Orchestrator: Look at this shit, man. They had to do barricade inside the building and shit.

Miguel: Why?

CB the Orchestrator: SWAT team and all type of shit. That crazy was crazy. Yeah, that shit be crazy. They didn't let us leave. I couldn't leave out. I was inside. I was on the top of one of the buildings. They made sure nobody came in or nobody leaves out.

Miguel: What was going on in there?

CB the Orchestrator: The dude just had a knife and they couldn't go in there and get him, they had to call the SWAT team and all type of weird ass shit, bro. He had himself barricaded inside of his own house and we couldn't out of our houses. Like we were held on hostage too. We were barricaded too. Like they barricaded us. I was like, we all like, "What the fuck? Like this is weird. Like how the do you have so much control over us that we got to be on hostage too?" But this is part of a lot of shit.

As made clear by CB the Orchestrator, the enclosure, both concrete and metaphorical, was "like we were held hostage too." Together, these bigger panoptic technologies and policed carceral geographies ran deep into the projects and contributed to both, a sense of disconnection from space (one that gangs would repeatedly seek to claim back, as Francisco had theorized before) and a feeling of precariousness; but they also denied the Homies what Harvey (2008) calls the right to the city and their collective power to reshape the life, activity, and processes that made and remade the city: "The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights" (p. 23). The Homies knew that their cities, their spaces, were not only not theirs, but deliberately being rearranged to serve others interests, whether the projects as a place to "pack us all in the same place or send us elsewhere so the hipsters can move in" (Esperanza). Chuy, further speaking to the non-rights to the city and bringing attention to how the projects are now rapidly changing and their communities being displaced, shared:

So this community has changed so much that the diversity doesn't exist anymore and people are trying really hard to deny that part of the Boyle Heights culture. Are gueros

moving in, not all gueros, hipsters, I don't really know what the fuck to call them no more. People are moving into this community who are paying two times, three times more the rent than the hard-working mom and dad [yeah . . .]. Is that our fault? No, is it the landlord's fault, is it not the guero who is moving in? Is it the guy who is coming from New York with his family? Is it the hierarchy of the guys who were born with the golden spoon in their mouth who had all these resources that were handed down to them? For a family that is struggling to keep up with their mortgage and now you come to offer me three four times more of the value . . . a la madre!! Who do you blame for that?

“The one ring to rule them all”: Capitalism and Precarity as Inescapable Entanglers

Capitalism produces exploitation while denying it, obfuscating it, rationalizing it, legitimizing it, and mystifying it as freedom, agency, democracy, and fulfillment. (Ratner, 2014, p. 194)

“So thinking about this Monopoly game, about these webs and these systems that we can't escape, how do you think these are connected?” I began. “It's all fucking money if you think about it,” responded Tino the Rhino, “it is like the one ring to rule them all type of shit.” Money and all the ways in which economic injustice moved and structured the lives of the Homies came up repeatedly in their theorizing. The Homies were tired of “not having enough” and hated scarcity. Capitalism and capitalist exploitation and dispossession, concepts virtually absent in traditional psychological literature (Ratner, 2014), would trigger strong and legitimate affect and emotion. Money and its profoundly unjust distribution, an inescapable aspect of their worlds, “seems to be always what denies us from being able to be in the world in peace.” As Bryan shared:

Hell yeah . . . everything I mean I have to pay for public train and I get a ticket and they say you live free in this world but you know, these are things that people just want to manipulate us to fuck with us telling us we gonna give you this and that and blah blah blah but what the fuck is that compared to what you got. All this shit, everything. like I have to pay for public train, if not I get a ticket, like how do I move . . . they say you live free in this world, but if you think about it nothing in this life is free, not even one thing, water, something that the nature came, like, it's just bullshit you know. (Bryan)

I remember a long time ago when I read Piketty's (2014) *Capital in the 21st Century* and thought: What would the world look like if we could simply upload this book to everyone's brain

“a-la-Matrix?” In one of the concluding thoughts of the text, Piketty claims that “refusing to deal with numbers rarely serves the interests of the least well-off” (p. 402). While as part of this project we did not necessarily pay a close attention to “the numbers,” it was indeed true that the more we looked closely at the distribution of certain forms of capital, and thus de-normalized it, the clearer its ugliness became. Here, Francisco reflects on his own family:

It’s crazy too because for my parents, they didn’t even have . . . My mom’s grandma, my grandma, my mom’s mom came from Mexico. Her way of providing was picking up recyclables at 5:00 AM. before going to school my mom had to pick up recyclables and pick up woods and basically other people’s trash and that’s how they would survive and saw ice cream and corn. And that’s how they do, and they are told you can’t have a home . . .

Moreover, partly because they understood the impact of dispossession, the Homies repeatedly denied “wanting” more for the sake of more. “I wouldn’t want it to be rich like that,” Selena began. Tino the Rhino followed, “I just want a safe house, because like, when I am trying to concentrate, I try to sit down sometimes, read a book, but with all the craziness around, it’s impossible.” Francisco echoed the sentiment:

I just want to, basically, I don’t want to struggle financially and work a minimum wage job. I don’t really have no options. You only get so much money making \$15 an hour. If you try to go to school full-time, your wife is pregnant. She can’t work, then how you going to go to school full-time and work full-time? Doesn’t make sense. You can’t make sense. (Francisco)

Again, theorizing and further pushing back on the “charitable frame” and the naturalized understanding of poverty as some people “not having”—instead of some people having too much—the Homies critically saw capitalism and precarity as an ongoing project to further manipulate and dispossess. As Tino the Rhino elaborated, “It is just something that these people that just want more, they manipulate us, they fuck with us telling us like we give you this and that. What the fuck is that compared to what you guys have? A lot of people have billions, you

know how many families they could take care of with that, how much they you had to steal? CB the Orchestrator responded:

CB the Orchestrator: And that's just all it is. Let me see how I can put it, it's not complex. And money isn't a need, it's a necessity for people like us. We don't need it, it was never a priority for us. It was never like this money is going to make me be this fucking man on top. Money is just to survive. Money is a necessity. You know how certain people that got money, they idolize it like I can't do this, or I'm going to go buy this but I'm not going to do this, because fuck those homeless people. They idolize the money, the image of it. But we don't do the shit we do, and we don't come from those type of areas just to be flashing shit like that. I go, bro. If I got something I'm going to do what I have to do with it. If I got extra then I'm going to do what I want to do. But first I'm going to have to do what the fuck I have to do first, that's always.

Francisco, responding to the idea that nothing is free, not even a spiritual life, continued:

Nothing is free, It's 80 hours of work. You have to let go of your body and your physical and your mental, spiritual. You got to let go all that stuff. Even going to church. Even that has been an issue for me too. Because I know a lot of the people that go to church, they become fully dedicated. Not just dedicated in life, but dedicated with their time. For me, that's hard because now I have to sacrifice school and my finances. Even physical. Physically, a lot of stuff.

As is clear and was always clear throughout of work together, money had very concrete consequences in the everyday life in ways that are invisible to most, this ranged from being able to grab the bus and come to school, to being a ticket away from a hold on their license, hundreds of dollars of debt, and a couple of months later, eviction. At some point in their lives, all of the Homies who were a part of the space had experienced houselessness, homelessness, and or housing insecurity. As Lola put it: "For us, if you have a house or apartment, you are one bad choice away from being on the streets too. You are on the same plane." Further humanizing those struggling with houselessness, Lola continued: "People feel like, oh you can't look them in the eye, you have to brush them off, when they talk to you, you have to look the other way. Or give them a dollar real quick and get out of there. Maybe make yourself feel better, or maybe you feel guilty a little. You don't need to pity these individuals."

In other cases, stories shared by the Homies illustrated how capitalism and dispossession intersected with schools of other institutions to render violent and inequitable dynamics and outcomes. In the following example, Francisco and CB the Orchestrator describe a form of “cruelty done by schools and capitalism” connected to how schools expected them to be something, and that being was connected to money; a naturalized and common feature of schooling:

CB the Orchestrator: I was tired of, yeah, just the whole fucking, like being fucking, I don’t know, depressed. That’s how I felt. I felt too intense at school, bro. Every school I went to, I felt like I got to, fuck it, keep on my shit, Bro.

Mark: You got to be cool too, put up appearances.

CB the Orchestrator: It’s too much expectations when you go to fucking school, nigga. Like, okay, I don’t got a book or nothing. “Oh your parents got to get you this book.” Like, nigga, my mama don’t got no money. Now I got to go do something to get this money. That’s how it was, bro. Even in high school, nigga, they wanted me to have a Five Star notebook. I used to hate that shit, Bro, the Five Star notebook. They used to make sure I get it. You know what I’m saying?

Mark: It has to be that one, not the one for \$ 0.99. That one.

CB the Orchestrator: I used to have to go to staples and stealing the shit. So it’s a lot of expectation in school too, bro. Nigga, school shouldn’t be that difficult than it is. Even in private schools, you got to come dressed like this. You can’t be doing that. You can’t be over there with that bullshit.

Mark: Got to wear your uniform.

Discussing another instance where schools and their “expectations” of students quickly became consequential and in this case problematic within a capitalist world, Francisco began by theorizing that “if schools are not helping you be independent, but you need to survive and the world does not give a shit, then schools become a problem”:

Tino the Rhino: And sometimes, even though they’re doing good in school you are homeless and you need money, you have to go and you have to talk to a counselor or something. Say you want to try to get a part-time job. And sometimes you go, and even though you’re doing good in school, sometimes just because they want to discriminate or

something like that, or they'll be like, "Oh, we don't think you're ready for the job," they won't give you a permit. What does the kid, if a kid needs money, say he's trying to help up his mom out or something, and the school doesn't want to help him with a permit, he can't get hired without a permit. He's going to be like, what choice do I have? I got to go back to slinging. Stuff like that.

Gabriel: that shit happened to me

Tino the Rhino: So I feel like that's another way too these schools get us caught up in systems and be racist and stuff because sometimes they really leave it up to one person to really decide whether the person should get a permit or not, basically. It's up to you too also, because the grades and stuff, you have to get good grades and stuff in school. But sometimes, because I had people that I've known too, like me and Juan, have good grades, so that's why I didn't get no shit like that.

But I have people that I know that they've done good, really good in school. And they try to get a permit just to go work at McDonald's or some shit after school, Jack in the Box or whatever, and they don't give them their permit. And they're like, dang, you know fuck, I'm trying to get money too. He's like, "Yeah shit, my parents are doing this."

Francisco: a lot of people are trying to become independent themselves too. So I feel like that sometimes that messes kids up because they're trying to get responsibility in some sort of way, be better. They're trying to get their money, that gives them a sense of responsibility. So sometimes when schools be like, "Oh no, we think you're not ready for this," they don't want to give it to them. So that kind of pushes kids in a kind of bad way. You know?

The touchpoints, the complexities, and the limitations imposed by money and the ways in which these played out in relationship to different areas of life where endless, most of them naturalized to a degree where despite them being terrible, any other way was almost inconceivable.⁶³ "As Esperanza explained: "soon as you wake up, in your house, because of the type of house with its rules and shit, You go outside, you got work, you got to follow those rules too, you gotta contribute to the house, you gotta pay expensive food outside \$13.00 for food, \$12.00 an hour. Everywhere, it's natural." Eric continued: "Say like, I were to like, if I break that chair, the

⁶³ As Wilson Gilmore (2007) describes when referring to prison, policing, courts, and the military: these institutions enjoy such legitimacy (in this case schools) that it may seem to observers as if there was never a time where things were different. Gilmore continues: "Thus normalization slips into naturalization, and people imagine that locking folks in cages or bombing civilians or sending generation after generation off to kill somebody else's children is all part of "human nature" (p. 43).

window, break my leg, get a parking ticket . . . who's gonna pay for it? I'm pretty sure I'm gonna be the one paying for it cause I broke it. But how the fuck? So, we can't make mistakes really." Joshua, further interrogating the legitimacy of the rules and the racialized dimensions of consequences for breaking these, continued: "If we didn't have to pay for it, nigga, I'd be breaking everything! 'Cause the rules I don't believe in. Cause you know, cause you know, we ain't got it like white people. You can't just buy out your mistakes, There's no money."

On a similar conversation where the Homies moved across the multiple dimensions, consequences, contradictions and dilemmas, and touchpoints of capitalism and precarity, Francisco began:

Mark: Sometimes I know I don't got the money. Like right now for the rent I'm like fuck, well

CB the Orchestrator: I got to pay rent if I want to sleep comfortably, right?

Mark: Yeah. I'm going to go try to do whatever I can do. Then I got a little bit of money and I say I'm get a little haircut. Because tomorrow I've got to get ready, tomorrow is my girl's birthday and shit.

Tino the Rhino: my last shift, I wasted my check getting her stuff. I had told you, I didn't smoke or do nothing. Because that's something I'm going to remember, that's something—

CB the Orchestrator: That's something that means more to you than the other shit. You can always get that shit. It's the two weeks you've got to survive to get it again. And that's what sucks, bro. That's when you know—

Mark: The real struggle right there.

CB the Orchestrator: Having to wait those two fucking weeks. That shit, I have never felt like that. Having no money in my pocket, I hate it. I hate that shit. I hate being broke. I don't like to be having money and then go right back. That broke feeling, it's like damn I was just here last week. I'm here again.

Tino the Rhino: I feel like a lot of shit, right now I'm broke. My Homies that hit me up yesterday and the day before to go fucking steal some shit. It's quick money, Bro, but I'm like fuck I don't want to go. And then I get locked up.

CB the Orchestrator: You've got more to lose.

Tino the Rhino: Yeah, I've got more to lose. I don't want to resort to this shit, but what the fuck am I going to do if I'm broke?

CB the Orchestrator: You know what I used to tell myself when I used to steal and shit? I used to rob people's houses and shit like that. I used to tell myself God let me get through this today. Honestly, that's going to be the last time I sell drugs, the last time I steal. And he would actually get me through it. I used to fuck with my head and be like I deserved that God. Let me go out there and steal and accomplish the goal, because look at everything else I'm going through. You don't think I deserve it? I don't still do that shit.

Mark: I never liked to rob innocent people, but I'd like to just go rob somebody who sells drugs. I'd be like they're hurting people, go rob somebody who's selling drugs. That's where I go. I'm on that shit, because it sucks when you're going through a lot of shit like this.

CB the Orchestrator: No, it just sucks being broke. That's all it is. Coming from nothing, not having nothing, and staying like nothing. That shit is not a good feeling.

Tino the Rhino: With stealing and stuff, people only resort to—

CB the Orchestrator: To situations that are their last resort.

Tino the Rhino: Yeah, it's a last resort. I have attempted to resort to some shit, I'm not going to lie. But straight up, I've been struggling. I'm going to be broke because everything is going to go to my rent in two weeks, and I have to put stuff in my fucking fridge and all that shit, the food stamps are lagging. So right now I'm going to be broke for the next few weeks. So I'm like fuck, what the fuck am I going to do? Right now I was thinking about selling my TV and shit, but now I'll be thinking like hitting up the Homies.

CB the Orchestrator: It's a last resort. You'd rather have that, you'd rather have what you want, with your girl, and where you see yourself at with your girl and your family, than what the fuck you have materialistic and what comes and goes. I tell my girl all the time, this money ain't shit to me. Right now I'm getting kicked out of my house because I owe some fucking money. It's simple, it ain't nothing else. You can try to find something, but it's not, it's just the money thing. If you don't give a person what they want, they're going to have to find a way to get it.

“A big fucking prison”: Agency Within Architectures of Entanglement

The wholesale sacrifice of a young person's future that incarceration often reflects is all the more tragic because it is so very unnecessary. (Bernstein, 2014, p. 10)

Put Together, these architectures of entanglement constituted, as Joshua once described it, “a big fucking prison, no matter if you walk or not because it’s impossible not to fool.” In this regard, these architectures of entanglements constituted a set of simultaneous projects, practices, logics, and institutions that together, made up a massive, complex, tight, and sticky web that both relied upon and limited the Homies’s “choices.” As a set of practices and performances, these architectures resonate with what Rodriguez describes as “a technology of domination that exceeds the narrow boundaries of that very same juridical-carceral structure.” (Dylan & Joy, 2006). Moreover, entanglements were both a symptom of the logics of carcerality and also part of how carcerality, in its contemporary iterations, was able to negotiate its innocence and do its work. Furthermore, extending well beyond the “bad” or the “neutral” institutions often associated with the carceral infrastructure (prisons, probation, etc.), these architectures of entanglement and their carceral work have effectively and “naturally” migrated into the realm of the “good” institutions (schools, non-profits, etc.).

In his ecology of human development, Bronfenbrenner (1979) wrote: “behavior evolves as a function of the interplay between person and environment, consequently one would expect the sciences, particularly the social and psychological sciences to give substantial if not equal emphasis to both elements, the person and the environment. However, what we find is a convenient and ideological asymmetry, a tendency and practice of theory and research focusing on the properties of the person and only the most rudimentary conception and characterization of the environment in which the person is found” (p. 16). The theorizing of the Homies and their formulations of entanglements countered such attempts and instead, immensely nuanced and illuminated mechanisms through which these “ecologies of development” exist in dialogue with the humans that live, act, and love inside them. Moreover, precisely through illustrating and

nuancing the multiple mechanisms through which carceral societies can continue to function, their theorizing also stood as a strong indictment and a demand to “rethink our frames.” As Francisco argued:

It’s almost like one person has a lottery ticket, and there’s one in a million chance that he’s going to end up in jail, and we have a lottery ticket and there’s one in million chance that we’re not going to jail.

Negotiating the tensions between “choice and agency” and “structure and determinism,” the young Homies’s theorized beyond the “good” and the “bad,” and recognized that it was in interaction that society “traps and incarcerates.” This, they theorized, results in a world where “nobody wants to, or will, take fucking responsibility” (CB the Orchestrator) and where “two good choices end up being two bads” (Tino the Rhino). The resulting tension between a dystopia of binaries, aka “you are supposed to go to school,” and a complex and human life of “how the fuck am I supposed to school,” was felt, experienced, and yet constantly dismissed by the world. This dismissal, contributing to a denial of authorship over life and story also contributed to emotional and affective registers of anger, fear, complacency, hopelessness, resistance, and many more. However, as we theorized—reclaiming authorship—it was also within these emotional registers that lay a blueprint for better understanding and naming these architectures of entanglement and their “work” within broader social structures and arrangements (Cvetkovich, 2012), in this case including those impacting our initial question: “why were some youth out of school?”

All these prisons, the history, all the laws, what is it our forefathers. They created these laws so we can be in a corrupted space so we would be divided. I don’t know, it feels as if things can’t be done, I don’t know. (Lola)

One of such affective registers, and one that had strong implications for how the Homies nuanced the “corrupted space” in which their agency bumped into structure, and one often

resulting in “leaving school,” was the feeling of inevitability. Here a conversation about freedom:

Joshua: We’re free in this country, we're free in this country. [repeating jokingly and mockingly)

Gabriel: Common really, I mean, that’s the stupidest shit, for what though? For something dumb, like what kind of chips It’s hard to explain. I don’t know, there’s no freedom. I really don’t like Life trips me out. It really does.

Joshua: What did I tell you earlier, fool? What did I tell you early? This freedom is only for them to feel like they got an excuse of choices, they only say the same shit.

Francisco: But choices are out of control, you know? If you put someone in a cage, what choices does he have? He has to carry the knife even if he tries to follow his heart or tries to do better. He still has to carry the knife. He still has to protect himself. And that’s something that he has to deal with. You put someone in the cage. Some of them, they have to kill people to be able to survive in there. [in reference to both jail, the projects, schools] And what choices does he have but to kill someone or get killed by their own people in another 20 years? They have choices. They’re always down with the system. They take away our resources and our opportunities.

On another conversation with a similar theme that took place one day that we were placing our names on a continuum that ranged from structure to agency, the Homies pushed back against a condescending explanation that had been weaponized against them: “they don’t know any better:”

CB the Orchestrator: It’s about what you gotta do like sometimes you don’t have a fucking choice.

Camilo: Yeah, like when I when I hear you say like, what I interpret, like you don’t know any better. It’s not like you don't know any better, it’s that . . .

CB the Orchestrator: You don’t have anything better to do. That’s where I fucked up too. I’m not saying, I fucked up by not going to school, I fucked up just setting my brain off to education. Not reading any books, just smoking weed, smoking weed with my mama, smoke weed in the house, smoking weed with my brothers, smoking weed with Brian. It stopped my brain. I don’t know how to say it. I should have . . . never had the resources to help me get the schooling that I need for me mentally. some can do that shit. some can sit there and just sit there. And the ones that can’t just sit there and sit there. The ones, they're the fucked up ones that go to jail.

Never did the Homies question the agency they had nor the reasons for why they chose what they chose. In fact, one of the points that the Homies found important and powerful about entanglements was that in no way did these architectures negate their agency. Agency could never be taken away from them and that was powerfully connected to a sense of worth and dignity. However, it was also that their choices were being used as a “pass” to preserve the innocence of criminal systems that were directly limiting those choices and dictating their consequences. Moreover, adding to the inevitability, the systems and their actors had “the advantage”⁶⁴ of common sense, which made them sit as a huge disadvantage, “I just want a chance to fight back, shit.” (Tino the Rhino) Combined, these formed a particular form of “cruelty” that pinned their hopes to an impossibility. Tino the Rhino, trying to describe this cruelty shared that “it’s like you can’t avoid trouble when it comes looking for you . . . fuck that, I rather my family visit me in prison than in the grave, shit.” Selena, resonating with that feeling of impotence, responded by sharing some of her experiences going to court:

I remember going to court and new foster kids, they put you in a room with different kids. And I remember little kids was like, “Oh, I’m going to go back with my mom.” And I used to feel so sad, because I knew that, that would not be true probably. Probably they were not going to go back with their mom. And they have their hopes up. Little kids have their hopes up, “Oh, I’m going to court, I’m going back with my mom.”

CB the Orchestrator: That shit’s cold . . .

Besides anger and grief at the structures and systems that entangled them, it was important and powerful to the young theorizers to recognize how much a “reframing” of their own life, including the naming and analyzing of the architectures in which their choices led to further entanglements could in turn lead to healing. This “finding,” one that repeatedly surfaced amongst

⁶⁴ Youth often referred to them and their people as being at a disadvantage, both at the “storying” plane and at the material and the concrete sense, arguing that they sometimes wishes they just had a “fighting chance”

the group and became more and more explicit during one of our last theorizing back sessions, I ended up calling “structuralism as healing.” Here is a brief conversation between the Homies where naming structures is also connected to an opportunity to re-claim and re-member their own stories and consequently, their subjectivities and identities.

Francisco: I always felt a lot of people say, “Everybody has a bad side to them,” and I always feel like everybody has a good side to them too, it always felt wrong to judge. Even the crazy person that’s in the streets talking to himself or a sick murderer that just wants to kill everybody that’s come near, the coldblooded gangster, the drug dealer. There’s not only a good side to them but there’s a reason why he’s like that. He didn’t just become that. The systems have also formed him. He’s a product of his environment, of the system. That failed him. Just like it failed me. I don’t ever thought but it has made me think of my life very different, it allows me to feel like yes I was a drug addict, and yes people might judge me but we are also beautiful people going through shit you know?

Gabriel: Just being able to embrace where we come from in this journey that wasn’t just our fault. Sometimes you feel like nothing sometimes. But it’s not always this. Sometimes it’s the systems that make us like this. So it’s deep.

Tino the Rhino: I feel like sometimes They don’t have the choice whether they’re criminalized or not either way, because just like we seen, based on the color of your skin, or whatever, where you’re coming from, they’re going to do it. I feel like our mistakes or what we do sometimes that gives them the ink to get the stamp and just be like, boom, he’s criminalized for sure, type of thing. Seeing that process, all the LEGOS⁶⁵ that are put together, it helps me forgive myself.

Connecting to the idea of re-framing and naming structures as healing and bringing the conversation back to her experiences in Foster Care and all the ways it “entangled” children and families, Selena shares how thinking about her own experience made her understand and process many of her own emotions:

And then when we are going to go to court, little kids have their hopes up, I had my hopes up “Oh, I’m going to court, I’m going back with my mom.” And when they get there, they find out something from the mom and now no. You’re not going to go back with your mom, court next six months. And any little thing the parent does wrong, the court finds it out quick. Anything, so they can’t and it’s hard as a child because you think

⁶⁵ Tino the Rhino had previously spoken about theorizing back as looking at the DNA of our lives and how the different LEGOS were put together to make the end result.

something's wrong with my mom, you get angry, or with me or my family. When you think of the whole process and how the system works it is easier to process.

Another key part of this healing, this “re-membling” of lived experience and the theorizing around entanglements was exploring the situatedness of the small moments, the choices, and the events that had a profound impact in their lives as connected to and occurring within social, historical, political, and economic contexts. Here, the Homies discuss the architectures of entanglement with the historical context, their family histories, and their own lives:

Francisco: It's like the Monopoly thing that never ends, we're playing that game and then, you know, after you know when you lose, it's like . . . It's like an on and on Monopoly game. We pass it to our kids and they're like, oh you're in that situation, it's your parents fault but they still started with the same school. They didn't have the same, the same.

Camilo: That's what makes me sad, Bro.

CB the Orchestrator: That shit does make me sad to have kids. But that's what I was going to get back to, what you were saying bro, like nigga, my mama never went to college, my grandma never went to college, my grandpa. He was in the army, they fucked him up, he came back out here, drinking. PTSD, fuck my Granny up, she starts smoking crack, fucked all her kids up, you know I'm saying. But nobody wanna take responsibility⁶⁶ for taking him over there to fucking Vietnam and shit, and letting this nigga watch all this crazy ass shit happen, and then send him back to a fucking family.

Francisco: Couple thousand in chump change?

CB the Orchestrator: No, they didn't have shit, nigga. Welfare building. Go sit at the county. That's what they said, go sit at the county building when you get to California.

Francisco: That's a war that they say that . . .

CB the Orchestrator: That fucked a lot of peoples.

Francisco: That was an unnecessary war.

CB the Orchestrator: It was an unfair war, they didn't even need to do that, they didn't even need to kill them folks like that.

⁶⁶ Resonates with responsibility theme that emerged throughout, consistent with the innocence of the system.

Francisco: They didn't have to do all that for nothing, like that war it fucked up a lot of people.

CB the Orchestrator: It fucked up a lot and no damn reason for it. United States is lying, nigga. But they fucked people up you feel me, including me. But, if I, back to what I was saying, I'm the first person in my whole entire family that graduate high school. I'm be the first person who graduates college. Then hopefully my little brother see that I had graduated, graduate too. That's the first step. I learned that too growing up. Not cause of my mama, not cause nobody else, nigga, I was trying to get some money, and I was like damn. Why do we keep saying high school diploma? Why do we keep saying GED? None of y'all ever had to do through this when y'all was trying to find jobs. Oh, we didn't work, we never applied for a job. I gotta get through this first step. Ain't nobody asking for no middle school diploma, nigga. They asking for a fucking GED, a high school diploma, just to get a job. So now I gotta get that first step, then boom. But that's the first step of life anyways, graduating high school. Feel me? They gonna look at you like, do you even know how to read, nigga? But that's the first level of life, bro, high school bro.

Camilo: It's a pattern. Gotta break it, gotta break the structures but also recognize that it isn't us that's wrong.

Francisco: It continues if it doesn't get fixed.

Is School Leaving Even Possible? Choice When Deeply Entangled

When I finished writing this section on the architectures of entanglement I remember thinking: "Well, that was a lot. Now, how do I make sense of the thousands of ways in which these entanglements are connected to leaving school?" A week before, I had had a conversation with a good friend and mentor where I had shared some of my wonderings and he asked whether I thought the Homies were theorizing or questioning whether asking "why youth were out of school" was perhaps the wrong question. As I have done often throughout the thinking, sense making, and writing process, I called and texted the Homies. Is school leaving even possible? "Think about it nigga, how many times we left school, how much do we not want to do school and we still here, is there a choice?" CB the Orchestrator wondered. Once again, her understanding of entanglements was much better than my own. It was indeed the case for each

homie that at one point, or at multiple points we⁶⁷ had left school, had been pushed out of school, had refused school, resisted or avoided school, or simply left our “full selves” out of what CB the Orchestrator accurately described as “whatever the fuck that was [school].” However, the Homies had at no point in their theorizing conflated education with school, and that, as Francisco had previously theorized: “they can’t push us away from education, that belongs to us always and we can choose that. But schooling is more of a negotiation you know?”

So, what then, do entanglements teach us about leaving school or about some youth being out of school? I end this chapter with the question that started our theorizing together: Why are some young people out of school? The answer from the Homies: Because it was the most reasonable and human thing to do at the time. “It’s because of all of the reasons above and more, it is not the just one, like the LEGOS as how they are set up, the DNA, it is like for each of us it made sense you feel me? It happened in some moment and some place and we chose to do it but we also had only a few choices and we could only think of certain things.” While it made perfect sense for them to leave or whether they were pushed out because of the broader logics and systems that require their disposability, the Homies also understood and theorized school leaving as an entanglement itself, a further entrapment (even if understood as getting away) into these webs of consequences, of expectations, and of systems that further limited their freedom. As Joshua described: “fucked if you do, fucked if you don’t because you are trapped in all these systems.”

As we have repeatedly seen throughout this chapter, the Homies described the shifting engagements and relationships with schooling (including its inherent and ironic ties to education)

⁶⁷ Including myself.

as a process that existed in time, context, and that shifted quickly. Here are a couple of examples to illustrate that:

Changes quick, You know what I mean? The counselors and shit telling you, “Oh everything going to be okay. You can tell me everything.” But then they turn around and go tell the law. Get you taken away from your family. got no family. So now you're going to school with foster kids in they foster home. So now that’s breaking you down. So then eventually, you know what I mean, you want to keep going, but you can't. So you probably just quit school. (CB the Orchestrator)

Junior high, why did that happen, fuck I remember man, that was a crazy summer. Just graduated from elementary, and the game was real now . . . the guys that were hanging out in the swings and the slides playing football kicking the can and beating each other up for fun are now talking about getting tattoos and selling dope and carrying guns, and we are only what, 13 or 14 years old. School was out of the picture now. (Raul)

I’ve seen that everything was moving fast. Once I got onto the gang, I was running around, I was getting into fights. I was doing my thing here and there in the neighborhood. school, I wouldn’t really be there a lot, but I would be there, and I’d only kick it with certain people, because I don’t really trust them. I wouldn’t like to be there alone, because I’m going to be walking around without guns. With them, they don't play games. People, they go hunting daily. People get shot, people get stabbed. It’s no games over there. What pulled me out was slowly I started realizing how fast it was going and how it just not what I needed to do.

Well my parents split, my mom and my step dad were goin’ to split. And going back to house to house to house, it becomes reality. Ok there is school but there is more to it that I There are all these problems and ok, I am going to go make some money to help mom. I think that is where it changed, then with money there is bad influences, I think that is where it shifted . . .

For the Homies, “why do youth leave school?” was indeed a powerful question precisely because it held so many contradictions and because it sat at the crux and the intersection of so many aspects of everyday life, including understandings and perceptions of self, others, and future.

In her book, *Working Class Without Work*, Louis Weis (1990), argues “that schools serve largely to reproduce the existing social order—a social order marked by great disparities of wealth, power, and privilege”—and claims that “the question is, how?” (p. 3). While this was evident to the Homies, they intuitively gravitated towards the how, each pulling from the

conversations, the dialogues, the metaphors, and the analyses that they had built to interrogate whether the question itself “Why do youth leave school” could distract from the worlds around schools and from understanding the work of schools in relationship to those “injustice and reproduction producing” worlds. Moreover, it was indeed a frustrating and angering question when asked by and for those whose attachment to the world as is, and all the benefits they derive from it, enticed them to repeatedly, as Francisco put it, “miss the point”; an indictment of what Paris (2019) describes as research that “names communities not as they are but as the academy needs them to be along damaging logics of erasure and deficiency.”

As shared in the next couple of testimonies, the explanations of why they each, at different times, had left school were quite obvious, self-explanatory, and human; each connected to context and clear nurturing the further consolidation of injustice:

I know why I didn't go to school. You want to know why? You want to know why I didn't go to school? Because I went to jail at school. I had weed and I went to jail at school, nigga, and they put me on probation and that fucking school was like, “Oh, she's a threat to the school.” They kicked me out. I didn't even kick myself out. Those niggas was like, “You're dangerous.” (CB the Orchestrator)

“Why did I leave school, the programming? Come up. You're a gang member. I heard it before.” I get that in my memory, where they're programming me almost, so like you're a gang member, but I'm like I'm just a regular little kid smoking weed. What are you talking about, gang member? He's like, “Yeah, you're a beaner too, and you're a gang member.” You're programming us by having that discipline, that kind of discipline, see its similar, like how it started happening in the schools. (Francisco)

“It's like you wanna know why youth leave school? [critiquing some of the books we had read about “dropouts”] You know. How about you get them good choices? Get them good jobs, invest in schools, give them health care, jobs and before you let go of them, make sure they're in schools, make sure they're in trades, make sure they're in things they need to be before you kick 'em out. Maybe get them a bus pass. Less walking here, maybe they're late all the Goddamn time, get a bus pass. Things that they sense instead asking stupid questions” (Esperanza)

Furthermore, reading Esperanza's response and her frustration at the question is telling of the ways in which this question is repeatedly asked by a world obsessed with “fixing them” or “their

problems” while neglecting the obvious. Calling us to do what Fine and Ruglis (2014) offer as “a circuits analysis that deliberately torques our critical gaze away from asking ‘what’s wrong with these victims’ and towards analyzing instead how structures, histories, and dynamics of injustice travel into communities and bodies;” Esperanza passionately argued against the “bullshit language around high needs kids and high needs, blah blah blah.” She pointed out: White kids have high needs! I just want a place to live.” Similarly critiquing how the frame “misses” the point and making a similar discursive pivot, CB the Orchestrator argued: I need no fucking help, how about they just stop the bullshit?” This response also reminded me of the first conversation I had had with Eric during a small window of time we spent asking questions of each other as a brief check-in for one of our first theorizing back sessions.

Miguel: Why do you think you left school?

Eric: What do you mean? The world, who I was.

Miguel: Like if I asked you in Elementary school, who are you? What would you have said?

Eric: I would have said that I was a boy who liked math and would go skate after school. And then I don’t know...

Miguel - In middle school?

Eric: Same but I guess the world actually... I took a step on reality so the world hit everything. Ok you are kids but then reality comes, you get a reality check.

Miguel: how about high school?

Eric: wasn’t even there anymore, was in all this other shit.

With the architectures of entanglement, the Homies and their theorizing did not offer a way out or a reductionist explanation that can salvage schools, modernity, or our attachment to these. Instead, they offered us a metaphor and a set of insights, a tool and a new set of questions to think about contemporary iterations of power, of the carceral state, of settler colonialism, and to

interrogating what Orren and Skowronek (2004) call a “durable shift in governing authority.” Just as importantly, their process of asking questions and the “how” of their theorizing around “leaving school” carries important lessons and implications for the ways in which others ask and go about researching “those who leave school” in a world in which, as described by Francisco: Nobody wants to be in a race that takes away your humanity and your freedom. That’s why we don’t race. That’s why we drop out or push off, get off the race.” CB the Orchestrator replied:

Dropout from where? Out of a bitch ass school?

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

Dropouts? Pushouts? How About the Resistant Humans? Theorizing Back and Reclaiming the Right to the Word and the World

Miguel: So what then would we call “them” [youth who leave school]?

CB the Orchestrator: I call them confused and misled. They lost ones. I would call it the lost ones.

Miguel: You think that they’re lost?

CB the Orchestrator: Not really. Lost is a big word. I should’ve never used that. Let me get my vocabulary right. I don’t think it’s lost. I think it’s misled. The misled youth. I think that should be what it’s called. The misled youth.

Miguel: You think so?

CB the Orchestrator: Yeah because the dropout is fucking harsh. Misled is sitting in the wrong direction. So yeah.

Mark: Dropout is like this label.

CB the Orchestrator: Yeah. A misled one you can use-

Mark: Whenever you think of a dropout you think of like “Oh like your future cannot be bright. You cannot go nowhere because you’re a dropout.”

CB the Orchestrator: Don’t nobody else wants to admit to—

Mark: Because no matter where you go—

CB the Orchestrator: You gonna stay in there. We got to come up with a better name. I was going to say that one that I said would be cool. But everybody else need to take consideration for what the fuck they have to play their part, too. People don’t take consideration in what the shit they do. How you just going to call them the dropouts but what the fuck did you do to help the dropout? Ain’t no drop out, nigga. Where was the fucking support? The unsupported youth. Dropouts that shit's fucking stupid. Who came up with that weird ass shit, bro? Who came up with that word? Damn, I’m be telling you all. God, it got to be.

Mark: I put the people with power

CB the Orchestrator: I bet you it’s a White person.

Mark: Maybe.

CB the Orchestrator: We could bet a hundred dollars that a White person came up with that.

Mark: I got one. The resistant humans. Resist humans. Humans that resist. Because we're humans, we have emotions. And we resist, we're not only just, "Do this, do this, do that, do that."

CB the Orchestrator: The un-consistent youth.

Mark: Yeah.

CB the Orchestrator: Un-consistent. because dropouts don't even say. It's not even direct. You don't even know, nigga. An adult can be a dropout. Anybody can be a dropout. That word is not precise at all.

Mark: Yeah.

CB the Orchestrator: Dropout, like what are you going towards? What the fuck is dropout? How are you going to put two words together then it's just that? That's what I tell you about English, it's fucking stupid. Dropout. Dropout from where? Out of a bitch-ass school?

It is normal across most research that the conclusion begins by returning to the core research questions and describing what the research "found." However, as I learned during my time working with the Homies, what is 'normal' needs to be unsettled. Throughout this dissertation project, there were two important and simultaneous "paths of inquiry." The first aimed to explore what it means to theorize, who gets to theorize, and what happens when a group of young people who have been at the receiving end of theory get to theorize back. The second was a more specific question that sits at a powerful juncture between multiple worlds, systems, and projects: When we theorize back, what do we learn about "leaving" school and about the way our society "works"? Succinctly, the first inquiry was about *theorizing* and the second was about the "fruits" of the theorizing.

This chapter, as a temporal and hopefully unfinished reflection of this work will flip the order around. Why? Because in the words of the Homies, we shall do it "in their terms." This means not only "answering" the questions, but interrogating whether those are indeed the right questions, whether the right people are asking them, and whether we [those most often asking

those questions] want “for real” answers—answers that may disturb our understandings about who we are and the worlds that we take for granted. This chapter will then consider some of the lessons, implications, and limitations of this study.

In the end, this chapter will leave us, as this work has left me, with more questions than answers. And this is as it should be when we demythologize and unsettle “normality” from, with, alongside, or while centering the “margins.” These questions, most of them demanded by the Homies and their theorizing, I will argue should be central to our work as critical and activist researchers and an imperative as we negotiate our work and positionality within a modernity that has extended well beyond the material and external and into the imagination, the modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, systems of imagines, modes of signification, the modes and patterns of expression, the beliefs and images with references to the supernatural, among many more (Quijano, 2007).

Another Note on Positionality

Lastly, before I begin this chapter, I once again return to the question of authorship, subjectivity, and positionality. Multiple times throughout this project I have been asked, and have asked myself: To what degree and in what ways does this project reflect me theorizing about youth theorizing back? While I recognize that this “dilemma” is not, and should not be approached as, an either-or; rather, it is indeed an important tension and contradiction that I have sought to enter with reflexivity and responsibility. Having said that, this chapter is perhaps the most “me theorizing about their theorizing.” Throughout the four previous findings chapters, I have actively sought to follow the lead, the language and the theorizing of the youth, which included repeated collective sense-making, analysis, sending paragraphs to the youth and consistently asking for feedback, and more. This chapter, whilst grounded in the same critical

principles outlined in my methodology, including my commitment and accountability to the youth and our relationships, contains more of my own reflections.

“For Real for real” Theorizing and the Unmasking of the Savagery

First we must study how colonization works to decivilize the colonizer, to brutalize him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism; and we must show that each time a head is cut off or an eye put out in Vietnam and in France they accept the fact, each time a little girl is raped and in France they accept the fact, each time a Madagascan is tortured and in France they accept the fact, civilization acquires another dead weight, a universal regression takes place, a gangrene sets in, a center of infection begins to spread; and that at the end of all these treaties that have been violated, all these lies that have been propagated, all these punitive expeditions that have been tolerated, all these prisoners who have been tied up and “interrogated,” all these patriots who have been tortured, at the end of all the racial pride that has been encouraged, all the boastfulness that has been displayed, a poison has been distilled into the veins of Europe and, slowly but surely, the continent proceeds toward savagery. (Césaire, 2001, pp. 35–36)

As Michelle Fine (1991) writes in *Framing Dropouts*, “to write about an institution that routinely and traditionally has reproduced social injustice, despite even the best intentions of its educators, is to tell a social secret many have committed to silence” (xi). For the Homies, theorizing back was indeed about telling secrets. Circling back to the first of this dissertation study’s research questions, we started the theorizing-back process interrogating what frameworks, imaginaries, and understandings would emerge as a group of young people with a complex and precarious relationship to schooling theorize back about the experiences of out-of-school youth. So what did we learn?

As is made evident in Chapter 6, the Homies had a profound and unending amount of insight, knowledge, and experience to share, document, and interrogate. Through their theorizing, the Homies give us a lot to think about. They documented the normalized and naturalized violence, exploitation, and dispossession that multiply marginalized young people have to deal with as part of life. And they offered a deep analysis of how *architectures of entanglement* both deploy an inescapable “web” that encroaches upon their rights and freedom

and leverages what is framed as their agency to further entangle them. The Homies also articulated how oppressive structures change, migrate, and change both ideologically and materially, describing a statecraft (Rodriguez, 2004) qualitatively transforming and expanding the existing prison apparatus over and above a mere refinement of its existing juridical or punitive technologies. In this regard, the Homies also chronicled all the ways in which “public” and “benevolent” systems evolve with, and are entangled in, carceral geographies. Thus, these insights demand a shift away from understanding conceptualizing these systems as isolated and conversely theorizing that their real—often criminal and oppressive outcomes—become legible only when understanding these systems and their work in relationships with and within complex constellations and carceral geographies that have extended far beyond jails.

Moreover, the Homies’ affective insights and intuition further visibilized how these entanglements and carceral geographies strategically frame their “agency” and “choice” to entangle and incarcerate while preserving the system’s “innocence.” This, the Homies added, is done with a cruelty that seeks to appropriate and pin their hopes into a form of what Berlant (2011) describes as cruel optimism. In this regard the Homies and their stories remind us over and over again that the “perks of modernity/coloniality,” the “goodness” of its mythical axiological thrust, and the ways in which it results in notions and “constructions” of “who is who” are—and have been—produced and re-produced by what Machado de Oliveira (2021) describes as “historical, systemic, and ongoing processes that are inherently violent and unsustainable” (p. 18). Also, as we further consider the implications of the Homies’ theorizing, including the “synergy” between a violent normality, the architectures of entanglement, and the dominant ideological systems and stories that are used to explain and to frame both, important lessons arise. First, their work adds to the literature and work that points to the dynamic,

systemic, and “inevitable”—absent a critical re-membering of the ways in which we understand these issues—production, re-production and broadening in both size and scope of the dispossession, violence, and injustice. And second, the more these dominant “frames” about people and reality crystalize as *the story* through which people “ought to” make sense of the world, the bigger the dismissal and theft of the beautiful humanities, the imagined futures, and the possibilities brought forth and gifted by our humanity. In direct response to those who frame “out-of-school youth” as a national emergency, the Homies declared, loud and clear, that the systems of whiteness, colonialism, and capitalism—all for which schools are a critical component—are the national emergency.

However, their theorizing back gave us much more than answers to that “first” question. Resonating with what many have repeatedly lifted up, the theorizing of the youth was poignant, critical, and counter-hegemonic. Rather than coming up with convenient and “safe” solutions for salvaging “schools” and other institutions of capitalism/coloniality/modernity, the youth and their theorizing pushed back against the question that was asked (Why do some young people leave school?) and pushed back with a question of their own—one I believe needs to become a central question for many of us: Are we asking these questions “for real for real?” And if so, are we ready for the answers?

Dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming. (Freire, 1970, p. 88)

The Homies, all of whom cognitively, materially, and affectively understood silencing and dismissal, were also familiar with the dismissal that takes place when people ask questions but do not want answers, rather seeking to use “asking questions” as a strategy to superimpose their “own perspectives of what is problematic and needs to be transformed (Souto-Manning, 2014, p. 20).

CB the Orchestrator: [talking about the multiple times she'd been asked what she needed or approached by researchers asking questions] you all come with all questions, but nah, how about you pay attention, do good, be helpful.

Intuitively and through their theorizing back, the young homies remind us of the distance between the “real real world,” and the “bullshit people be believing about the world” (CB the Orchestrator). Their theorizing was more than an indictment of these bigger architectures and worlds of violence, it was also an indictment of the “self-serving truths” stubbornly reproduced by the ways in which we ask questions and we look for answers, all working as *moves to innocence* (Malwhinney, 1998), problematically serving to appease the oppressors' complicity and, as Tuck and Yang (2012) write, “rescue settler futurity” (p. 3). As such, their theorizing was also an indictment on how a mainstream way of thinking about educational research can indeed participate in the “covering up” and, following Deleuze (2002), produce a new hegemony that has evolved from a disciplinary society to one of control:

the disciplinary societies one was always starting again (from school to the barracks, from the barracks to the factory), while in the societies of control one is never finished with anything-the corporation, the educational system, the armed services being metastable states coexisting in one and the same modulation, like a universal system. (p. 3)

Within these societies of control, the young homies were actively negotiating the tension, dynamic, and animating dialectic between the violent and oppressive forces of schooling and the emancipatory ideas, dreams, and dignities of young people (Tuck, 2012). Reducing “dropping out,” or out of school youth to the violence of the “single story,” was absurd and robbed them and the people that they knew and loved of their humanity, partly by forcing an erasure of context, history, and situatedness. It stole something that had been repeatedly and systemically plundered from them, the right to both the word and to the world. Youth, who clearly were not either completely “in” or “out” of school were not “leaving school,” they were making sensible,

human, and situated choices. Whereas we as researchers are socialized to come to “investigations” with a desire for answers, what emerged here was a process of humanization, a process of creating shared knowledges—shared words and worlds.

Their theorizing back revealed the obvious and yet uncommon frame that the Homies are “just” people juggling more than what most humans could or should be juggling, the denial of which is both criminal and ubiquitous. It also highlighted the extent to which our “civilization” “uses its energy and power for trickery and deceit” (Césaire, 1955, p. 31). What asking the question of “why some youths were out of school for real for real?” reveals is how sophisticated and convoluted our collective trickery is and to what great lengths we’ve gone to explain, normalize, and naturalize our, borrowing from Césaire’s: *savagery*. As Tino the Rhino would say, “dejense de hacerse pendejos” [stop pretending you are dumbasses].

Besides theorizing and naming the *savagery*, the more they theorized, the more unacceptable and uncomfortable the myth was. In dialogue with critical consciousness and what Freire (1970) calls problem posing education, it was not necessarily that “that which had existed objectively but had not been perceived in its deeper implications begins to “stand out,” assuming the character of a problem and therefore of challenge” (p. 83). The Homies had already perceived and had deep knowledge about “the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves” (p. 83). However, what was indeed markedly different was that theorizing back created a safe and intentional place to do so. Moreover, the “use” of a central question, in this case, “Why do youth leave school?”—a question that sits at the core of so many of this modernity’s many contradictions—springboarded the task of demythologizing by making space to interrogate the heavily ideological and overly “familiar” experience of school.

“This is the weapon, brothers and sisters”: Who Gets to Theorize and the Ontological Implications of Theorizing Back

This is the weapon, brothers and sisters. We say, the word remains. We speak the word. We shout the word. We raise the word and with it break the silence of our people. We kill the silence, by living the word. Let us leave Power alone in what the lie speaks and hushes. Let us join together in the word and the silence which liberate. (Clandestine Indigenous Revolutionary Committee, 2002, p. 84)

In the introduction of this dissertation, and before the theorizing project began, I wrote that unlike dominant modes of theorizing, theorizing back would seek to be markedly different. It would be relational. It would consistently seek to unflatten and push against the imposition of externally produced truths that erase the people who make up the world. It was committed to humanizing and directly addressing issues of power and its strategic mis-representation of the world. It would pursue the disruption of what Paris and Winn (2014) deem a history of work that has pathologized, exoticized, objectified, and named as deficient communities of color and other marginalized populations in the United States and beyond (see also Kelley, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2012; Paris, 2011; Wilson, 2008) and as such, to invite collectives to participate in the active transformation that takes place as we unveil oppression and re-create knowledge.

In the end, theorizing-back was all that and much more. Resonating with the traditions in which this project was rooted, theorizing back was similar to YPAR and Ethnic Studies in how it created “opportunity structures” for critically processing, analyzing, and responding to experiences and systems of discrimination (Cohen et al., 2018) and for deep identity work for both youth and adults. Similar to the literature that portrays YPAR that involved youth of color as providing youth to see themselves as leaders with a sense of purpose and a sense of individual and collective efficacy (Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012), theorizing back created a “protected” space, an epistemic and ontological refuge that reaffirmed the Homies right to authorship and hence, power over the story. However, the affective registers brought forth, felt, and analyzed

did not result in a sense of purpose per se. While, as expressed by Francisco,” the theorizing process felt purposeful,” it often resulted in what Esperanza described as a “mixed bag of emotions,” especially as the hypocrisy of the myths and the stark contrast between their theorizing, and the ideologies and realities that they had to grapple with once they left that space became more apparent. In this form, theorizing back resonates with what Gutierrez (2016) describes as a collective Third Space, interactionally constituted, in which forms of literacy and interaction privilege and are contingent upon students’ sociohistorical lives. Unable to disentangle themselves from their sociohistorical, political, cultural, and affective location, youth resisted simplistic, anesthetic, and convenient notions of “hope and purpose.” Moreover, they recognized that in these oppressive affective economies, both “hope and purpose” were persistently used by power in ways that were often weaponized against them and at the same time, hope and purpose were also theirs to reclaim. Thus their theorizing beckoned many questions that have continuously arose for me throughout the process: How much of what we are asking of multiple marginalized youth, including their affective buying into hope and purpose, is pinned on our own fears? Perhaps most importantly, what are we implicitly and explicitly asking youth to place hope on and how does this project or modernity that we are asking them to have hope in directly participate in their death and confinement?

in scenarios of cruel optimism we are forced to suspend ordinary notions of repair and flourishing to ask whether the survival scenarios we attach to those affects weren’t the problem in the first place. (Berlant, 2011, p. 49)

When asked what theorizing back meant to them, the Homies described it and made meaning of it as “many things at the same time.” Sometimes it felt as a deep cognitive exercise, as thinking, asking questions, and interrogating realities that were had previously been taken for granted:

deep thinking and as getting lost in the ocean of thoughts, feeling out every little single deep thought and be like damn, and then you are like, but why? (Tino the Rhino)

Other times, the Homies described theorizing back as a collective process of sharing and learning with and from others. A space where we could be vulnerable, share, be “touched” and changed by others; a healing space and practice radical love to self and others.

having conversations that touched a deep part of our lives that I never had with anyone, not even myself . . . as revealing my hidden scars and being able to embrace where we come from in this journey. (Francisco)

Often referencing the “outside world,” theorizing back was a space and exercise that “feels different from the rest of the world . . . it is like we are paying attention” (Lola); “Like figuring out if a historical fact is accurate, and also talking about the reality of our own lives, going to see if it really aligns” (Tino the Rhino); “It’s crazy shit . . . I never really took the time off to go back and look at what happened [in life] and been able to pinpoint it and try to regroup from it.” In this regard, theorizing back was also described as an opportunity to “connect the dots,” to see, critically, as Francisco described it “the Monopoly game.” As captured by this conversation:

Tino the Rhino: And then you’re like, but why? And then you start to think about it like, “Damn, oh, I was going through this or my mind was thinking this at this time and stuff like that. So, It’s just different things.”

Bryan: And then you ask, why was my mind thinking of that? And they say, “Oh, well I was going through that because of this. So suddenly I am a different person”

Francisco: Or your mom couldn’t pay the rent. And that affected you because she was stressed out and she had to be with someone she didn’t want to be with, or whatever.

Tino the Rhino: It’s like the big things that are unseen. Or not even unseen, but they’re enacted on. You know? Yeah, like you’re a victim of something you don’t even know. And to me, this is giving . . . I don’t . . .

Francisco: Us a voice.

Theorizing back was indeed about documenting pain and violence, but also about wisdom and hope. As such, it reflected the axiology central to desire-based research frameworks that are “intent on de-pathologizing the experiences of dispossessed and disenfranchised communities so that people are seen as more than broken and conquered” (Tuck, 2012, p. 20). Perhaps more importantly, theorizing back was a methodology shaped by desire itself, by a group of young people who were purposeful, intentional, agentic, strategically accumulating expertise and deploying it to resist, to humanize, to disrupt, rage against, hold each other up and see each other.

Theorizing back was radicalizing in the most beautiful of ways. It was radicalizing in that it turned the group toward the “roots,”⁶⁸ it made space for interrogating the source, unsettling the “givens,” and thus broadened the scope of what the Homies “could” question. By doing so, the space allowed for and nurtured what was already possible through our ontological vocation. Through that vocation, theorizing back simultaneously allowed for the uncovering of how the oppressive systems “covers its tracks”⁶⁹ (Veracini, 2011), to interrogate unexamined truth claims (Alonso, 1988) and to pick away at the “regimes of truth” that define problems and propose solutions (Foucault, 1982). Furthermore, this space to dig deep and ask questions, all of which was moved by the Homies’s compassion, curiosity, care for each other and humanity, deepened our commitment to people and therefore lessened our “tolerance” for the systems and structures and belief systems that unceasingly work against people, their freedom, and their right the word and the world. Therefore, theorizing back was abolitionist praxis. It was a call to abolish the

⁶⁸ Radical was first an adjective, borrowed in the fourteenth century from the Late Latin *radicalis*, itself from Latin *radic-*, *radix*, meaning “root.” And the earliest uses of radical are indeed all about literal roots, hinging on the meaning “of, relating to, or proceeding from a root.”

⁶⁹ In this case, Veracini uses this expression to refer to settler colonialism.

punitive, oppressive and violent. The more the Homies reached for the roots and asked questions, the more “the collective lie” (Martin-Baro, 1990) was unveiled and hence, through the naming of these structures and systems and the simultaneous possibility of reimagining anew, abolition became more palpable and concrete.

Just as importantly, resonating with the belief that the ultimate goal is not knowledge in itself but people coming together to create mutual realities (ontology), find common meanings (epistemology), and ultimately improve their reality (axiology and methodology); theorizing back was profoundly relational. As described in Chapter 4, youth held space for each other’s words and worlds, pushed each other’s thinking, and ultimately began to forge relationships, shared languages, and mutual understandings that translated into concrete subjectivities and ways of being in the world. As discussed in Chapter 5, it was also the emergence of a collective critical consciousness, made up of individuals, creative, powerful, unique, yet bound together with a recognition of what Spinoza called *potentia* and of the possibility of co-action and therefore a collective political ontology.

And lastly, theorizing back was about radical love. It wasn’t only a space to see, to be seen, to feel, to make freedom palpable, to be vulnerable, and to be with each other; but also a space for the future.

“Changing the rhythm”: Reclaiming the Right to the Word and the World as a Gesture of Love

There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. (Freire, 1970, p. 87)

During the last of our theorizing back sessions, we had a long conversation where we discussed what was at the root of our “human” nature and why we were “drawn” to do this type of work. After all, we were voluntarily getting together in the middle of a convergence between

multiple pandemics, while navigating substantial challenges and priorities, without any monetary compensation or a clear and concrete “reward,” to theorize back.

Francisco: Just comes down to life, honestly. Just caring for life. That’s what I think. Because every time we have these conversations, it’s almost like we’re the only ones speaking on behalf, to the future generations. Because we’re not even speaking to ourselves. We’re speaking to people in the future. So that these systems can change, and they can see the rhythm. They could see what we went through, and they could relive or reimagine the history. It’s almost like people write down history. It’s like we’re writing down history right now. Every time I come, I enjoy. I just enjoy having these conversations because I don’t know. I feel like these things right here, when I’m older, I know for sure I think I’m going to write some books.

Miguel: What you’re saying is rooted in a love for others. I’m partly wondering where does that come from, or why . . .

Francisco: I think it’s human nature, honestly. We’re made to love each other. It’s just, I don’t know. It’s human intentions. Systems are created. Certain systems, certain people screw it up for everybody. They want more. They’re just thinking about them. They’re not thinking about the rest. We’re thinking about everybody. It’s not just your family. It’s not just for my family. It’s for everybody. It’s for that kid in South Central. It’s for the Cryp, the Blood. It’s for all of them. It’s for all of them. That’s what makes it deeper.

Ultimately, this reclamation of the word and the world as both our vocation and our right was also a profound gesture of radical love, especially as it became evidently clear that the Homies deeply believed that accessing this rhythm was for everybody, it was human nature. The Homies, who had repeatedly been denied both the word and the world, recognized that it had to be “for all us.” As Francisco reflected:

Nobody’s limited to our group. We don’t exclude anybody. No matter what walk they have. No matter where you come from. Even you could probably even see a person that became a rapist. Something happens to him that made him become like that. Maybe if you don’t respect what he does, I don’t respect what he does. He became that person because of the system. He fell in because something happened at home. Because it passed on some generational trauma. It’s like love. It’s human nature, I think. It’s like a rhythm. It’s a rhythm. It’s instruments coming at it.

It was also in these reflections and these conversations that a revolutionary futurity was being nurtured. It was as Freire describes, prophetic; affirming “people as being who transcend

themselves, who move forward and look ahead.” It was also this revolutionary futurity and the nurturing of critical consciousness that forces us doing this work to contend with, as Michelle Fine once shared, “the day after.” What does it look and feel like to step away from this space, or with the insights of this space, and step back into a coercive, oppressive world? As CB the Orchestrator had previously described, “we gotta go back to livin our lives, and we aint got a place to live.” These questions not only address the ethics of doing critical participatory work and a plethora of questions around the “bounds and implications for” the four R’s⁷⁰, but is also a critical part of understanding the impact of doing this work alongside multiply marginalized youth.

As we reflected upon the question of impact, we found that it was true that, as Freire wrote, there was no authentic dialogue that wasn’t at the same time praxis. “We never walked out the same,” Selena reflected. However, it was also true that as much as every Homie was transformed by the dialogue and the theorizing, the worlds and context to which they returned were often threatened by what they’d learned. When I reached out to the Homies with this question, it was quickly evident that there are many “truths” held together when reflecting upon these questions. For some and at times, theorizing back was “positively transformative,” led to better relationships, a feeling of agency and intentionality, a critical reclaiming of their right and love for education, and the pursuit of paths to help their people and to break cycles of harm. For others and during other times, this critical consciousness—dangerous to the status quo and itself a motor for a host of important new questions—has been met by further coercion and created a chasm and frustrating tension between what the Homies believe is “right” and the negotiations necessary to “succeed” in the world as it stands.

⁷⁰ Respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991).

Thinking more concretely (at least as dominantly understood) about the impact of this work upon the lives of youth, the Homies were each “changed” in different ways. With their reclaiming of the word and the world, each took the insights and lessons into radically different contexts and consequently the “outcomes” were different. Besides the broader collectively insights that have been already discussed—like a general criticality towards the world and a solidarity and commitment to justice—there were also many specific ways the Homies shared when thinking about how these insights resulted in specific decisions critical to their lives, careers, and relationships. For CB the Orchestrator and Tino the Rhino, it solidified a commitment and ignited a passion for work with youth. Currently, both are working as mentors to young people in youth serving organizations in Los Angeles. For Francisco, his understandings of economic justice and his responsibility as a father and husband fueled a desire to form a business, a “fair, collective, and for the people business” as he would describe it. For Selena, her reflections shaped her understandings of her family history and a desire to better understand psychology so that she can help her and her family heal. For Gabriel, his lessons have changed the way he looks at his job and the rights of workers. He is now part of the union and is actively questioning to build power to “make things fairer.” For Lola, this work began a path of actively finding her indigenous roots, he is working to take care of his family and plans to start taking classes on his culture and hopefully be able to share that with his people one day. For Camilo, the task of reclaiming the right to the word was deeply connected to re-membering his own story. As described by him, it has led him into a journey of writing: “I realized I had a lot of shit I never processed that I need to get out.”

As mentioned above, collectively there was a general “turn” and commitment of each of them to education. This meant both the “formal” or “strategic” getting of their high school

diplomas, enrolling in community colleges, and planning their paths towards higher education; and the fugitive, critical education for education's sake work of reading, writing, and coming together to ask the questions that must not to stop. This turn has also meant, for several of the Homies, a commitment to share this work with others, which has already resulted in the group planning a new theorizing back project led by the Homies. As Francisco reminded the group during one of our last sessions: "we now gotta inspire you know, get more to pay attention to the rhythm, create our own rhythm."

This new rhythm, critically calling for a different way to think about impact, reminds us that the fabric of our world has been, is, and will continue to be woven by the stories we tell, the stories through which we explain our worlds, the characters in such stories, the assumptions and givens rendered invisible by such stories and conversely, the possibilities and futures nurtured by such stories. In this regard, the Homies theorizing was not only deeply impactful but also began to rearrange the "elements" of the story and consequently, to participate in the transformation of the world. Among them: what does it mean to be a human being? During our last group conversation on the journey of theorizing back and how it was or had changed us that CB the Orchestrator, affectively shifting the conversation like she often did, began:

CB the Orchestrator: I probably would've been way more different, nobody was paying attention to what was happenin' to me.

Miguel: In some ways, if we go back to this idea of changing us, what is at the center?

Francisco: At the center is people who want to fucking do good. Yeah. And be hopeful.

CB the Orchestrator: And cared for.

Miguel: Feel good and be cared for—

CB the Orchestrator: And heard out.

Miguel: And listened to.

CB the Orchestrator: Yeah. Hell yeah.

And like that, the Homies courageously re-humanized our conversation and brought it back to the center, to a yearning to be whole, to be respected, to be human.

Time after time, writing this dissertation and driving home from our theorizing back project, I've felt this deep frustration, a horrible feeling of being deeply inspired by the kindness, the selflessness, the brilliance of what was so palpable and moving in that space, while also profoundly conscious of the strategic propaganda continuously being produced and re-produced by the architectures of modernity. Every time, since the beginning of Free Space, Theorizing back stood out as a process and space that was relational, personal, political, emotional and spiritual; it nurtured deep engagement at an intellectual, moral, and spiritual level that stood starkly as an extraordinary counterpoint and counterargument to many of the assumptions and the subjectivities and ontologies that our worlds, and our schools, are built upon. This work is as much an invitation as it is a response to this frustration. As Brayboy (2005) reminds us, "theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways, such that scholars must work towards social change" (pp. 429–430).

I hope that this dissertation can further push for research, and in this case theorizing as a right of all people and when this right to theorize is taken seriously, then we must attend to both: disrupting the ways and abolishing the structures and practices through which theorizing is being punished, policed, and silenced; dismantling assumptions about theorizing as being about a fascist imposition of capital T "Truths" or a process of finding "capital T" Theories that are to territorialize the rest of them; and nurturing radical spaces where theorizing can be connected to our self-determination and sovereignty as people; to the beautiful work of building many worlds. The work of healing and chipping away at that which, as Shamu describes, seeks to rob us of our special:

It's reclaiming your own identity. Like saying "fuck being normal." I'm special. But being special means this stuff and I'm not going to settle for you calling me poor because I'm not. Does that make sense? Because I ain't, we're amazing and have all this power, right?

To my fellow educators, these years and relationships were for me a simultaneous testament of all the beauty that we are as people, and of the horrible and normalized shit that we do every day in schools that gets in the way of who we are and what we can be. I know many of us know this and that we feel it in our hearts. It remains an important question for all of us whether we believe that schools in the contemporary context can or cannot be a "strategic" space that we can reclaim to put in the service of justice, democracy, self-determination, and sovereignty. What is clear is that regardless of which strategy informs our struggles for educational liberation, the biggest gift that we have lies in what is our greatest vocation, our humanity.

At its core, my "part" in this work and what my heart walks away with resonates with what Machado de Oliveira (2021) describes as hospicing modernity. I believe that it is important that we are sincere in lovingly and courageously putting this disaster to rest, learning the lessons that modernity has to offer in its decline; understanding, transforming, and letting go of all the ways in which we are connected to it; and collectively build with each other to work for the otherwise—a process for which we must engage in a humanizing, critical, counter hegemonic, and collective praxis. Theorizing back was not all of this and it certainly was not perfect. However, within theorizing back, critically reclaiming the right to the word and humanizing relationships and practices moved us to "to experience and observe manifestations of modernity and ourselves within it differently, with more sobriety, maturity, discernment, and accountability" (Machado de Oliveria, 2021, p. 18), which was a process desperately needed and long overdue. To hospice this disaster, schools included, we must not turn to a prefabricated,

“sectarian,” process of “replacement” but do the courageous, painful, complex, collective process of imagining and building anew.

A Few Cautions and Considerations Moving Forward

Time to deploy common sense back into our consciousness. Time to triangulate our way back to meaning. Time to laugh more and bear witness to the deeper truth of why we do what we're doing. Time to see how we can connect and help others. Time to work on behalf of our lands, water, and air. Do you see how we are all on the path of sovereignty, and ultimately, of freedom? (Meyer, 2014, p. 235)

I don't think I could have finished this book without offering a brief reflection on both cautions and considerations. Mostly because of my own “hiccups” and much of what I did not know. As a dissertation, this work is deeply limited in multiple ways, including the language it employs, the conditions over authorship, its connection with the very questions of who has the right to say what, and to whom? These questions were made particularly difficult and at the same time more important, due to the character and timing of this project. This project started with relationships and shared questions, not with my own academic pursuit or quest for a particular answer, which raised important contradictions with it also becoming my dissertation project. . Thus, a serious commitment to sovereignty and the people's right over the word and the world summons urgent, unsettling, profound, and generative dialectics for how we can and must move and negotiate contested, often deeply problematic spaces like the academy, our scholarship, our movement work, and our strategic engagement with them. That said, throughout this work, I chose to engage with these questions and contradictions with honesty and transparency, in dialogue with the values that informed the project since the beginning, with humility, and with the Homies. This work and project was born, as described in Chapter 4, as a collective response to the silencing and pathologizing, and as a commitment to counter, highlight, and unsettle what have been flagrant, strategic, and unjust epistemological stances. However, as contradictory as it is,

this work will, due to my own power of interpretation and authorship, itself be filled with epistemological and theoretical blindspots.

Just like the discourse of the public sphere touted accessibility, rationality, and the suspension of status hierarchies (Habermas, 1989), I fear that in this case, the language of theorizing back can potentially resonate and can be co-opted as many of the discourses of inclusion and empowerment. However, absent its history—one rooted in relationships—and a recognition of context, something clearly demanded by the Homies, inclusion and empowerment could themselves do more work in the service of containment and further exclusion. Ironically and yet not surprisingly the biggest limitation of this study was in how theorizing back was actively being stopped in a myriad of ways. It was always ironic that in the middle of a pandemic, in the middle of extreme precarity and dispossession, young people who had a thousand things to worry about, were actively reaching out so that we could get together and theorize. However, the Homies couldn't come if they were incarcerated, they could not come if it wasn't safe for them to leave their home, or if they were sick, or if they did not have money for the bus, or if they were being policed, harassed by their probation officers, and or dealing with the dread and the hopelessness that was only human. All of these happened multiple times, and despite the Homies willingness to participate, just making it to our meetings was a real challenge. In other words, theorizing can't happen if there is no time, resources, access, safety, relationships, etc. This similarly happened as we collectively sought—and continue to seek—to move into “action.” Not only did we bump into the difficulties of very limited time, scarce resources, and precarity (all of which severely impacted the ability to sustain this project over time), but also into the ongoing tension of relevance and as CB the Orchestrator, “what we gotta do to survive.”

Throughout this project I would often stop and ask myself if this sharing of stories was indeed for a better, bigger project or if it was just another convoluted way of negotiating morality and justice within a space as problematic as the academy and a university. How do we make issues visible and yet protect people? How do I continue to honor “relationships of care and dignity and dialogic consciousness raising for both researchers and participants” (Paris & Winn, 2014, p. 11). How will this work be taken up and what will my role be as this work moves forward in ways that honor reciprocity, respect, and accountability to the community of praxis that led and moved this work? These questions can indeed be paralyzing or ones to take forward and to repeatedly explore in community, alongside the Homies. There were times where I was indeed paralyzed, often disheartened by how “difficult” the context made the work and its movement into action. Every one of those times it was also the Homies that repeatedly claimed that we needed to pursue this and that reaffirmed the purpose that animated the work:

Camilo: You’re speaking for a whole community type of shit [in response to Francisco sharing his story]. That’s why, man it’s so important to get it out.

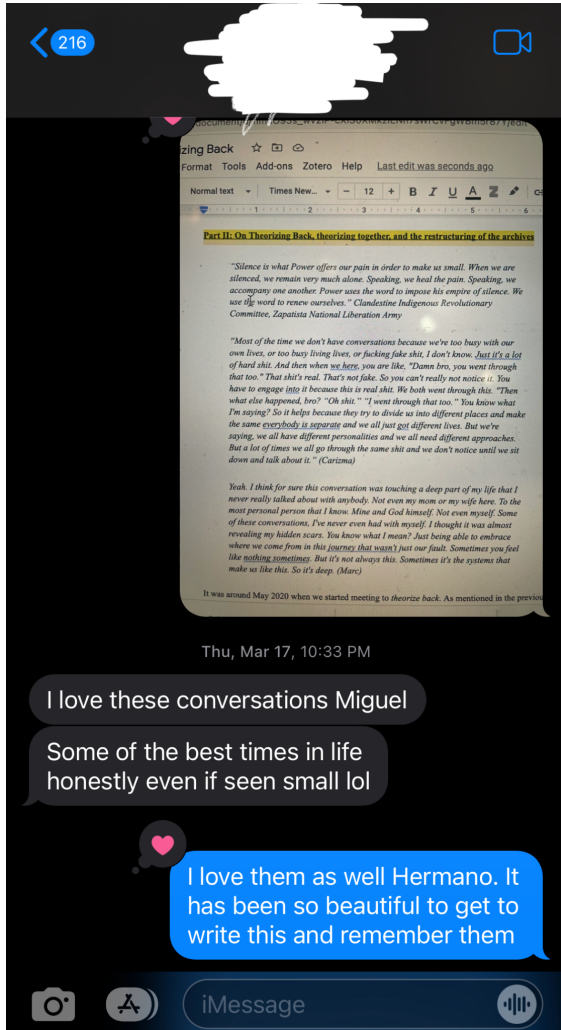
Bryan: It is because people who have been receiving injustice is so powerful is because we have a different kind of knowledge about the world. There’s a lot of knowledge that we have. The problem is that without the space and the time to . . .

Tino the Rhino: It’s like the big things that are unseen. Or not even unseen, but they’re enacted on. You know? Yeah, like you’re a victim of something you don’t even know. And to me, this is giving . . . I don’t . . .

Francisco: Us a voice.

It is profoundly ironic that the same young people that are actively dismissed, disregarded, criminalized, and pushed out of schools are the same people who joyfully and willingly show up to be with each other, ask questions, and theorize back! If this isn’t a simultaneous testament for the futility and absurdity of what we now call the systems of “education,” and of the beauty and power of what is possible for us as people I do not know what is.

During one of the long nights that I spent writing this dissertation, I got a message from Francisco asking how the writing was going. I had at multiple moments of the writing process reached out to them to ask questions, bounce ideas, and make sure what I wrote felt right and true to what the Homies had theorized. In response to his text, I sent him a photo of what I was writing at the moment, here is his response:



APPENDIX A: INITIAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

<p>Part 1: Focused Life and Educational History – Focusing on Educational Experiences, Ideologies, and Rationale for Decisions</p>	<p>Please share what you feel comfortable sharing around your educational experience and history</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversation about childhood, family, growing up, Where did you grow up? How was your family like? Your community, first memories, what stands out? • What were your first memories of school? • Do you remember when you first heard about school from your parents, what did they think of it? • What do you remember about your teachers? About your classmates? • Do you remember what you learned about? What was your favorite subject or what did you want to be when you grew up? • Do you remember any particular transitions or insights at any point in school? • How was your life outside of school and your life in school different? Did they complement/support each other? Your friends in school, same as out of school? • Do you remember any incidents that changed the way you looked or interacted with school? • What did you want to be as an adult while growing up? Do you have memories of how that has changed? 	<p>Part 2: Details of Experience- contextualizing place and space (current school), and focusing on being in/out, and or a part of versus an outsider in educational spaces</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you come to this school? What do you think has been most salient in your path to here? • Have you been out of school at any point? If so, what do you think contributed to being out of school? (Part 3) • What educational activities do you engage in on a daily basis? (Explore: With whom, when, where, etc.) • When do you feel most comfortable in schools, how does that space, teacher, peers, look/feel like? • What are some of the things you grew up thinking school was (details)? • Did you have a teacher, or school at any point that made you feel motivated (meaningful)? Who, why? • How did your peers, parents, and community interact with the schools? • What has been the hardest thing about staying or being in school? • What (and who) has kept you motivated along the way? How so? 	<p>Part 3: Meaning Making- Relationships with Schooling, Education, and the identity in relationship to schooling/education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you believe is the current relationship between school and who you are? Is that different for education? • How do you believe that your identity and life experiences have informed the way you understand school? • Looking back, what assumptions about life, school, or the future do you feel have changed? • Why do you think you believed/assumed some of those things? Who do you think that benefits? • When you have had moments of insight or where you have changed the way you see things, have you felt isolation from your peers? • Once the way you look things change, is it hard to begin changing behavior and decisions? What might be some of the biggest challenges? • Do you think that different students experience education differently? Why? • Is education and school necessarily the same? What lessons have been critical to your life that you learned outside of school? Should we teach these in school? • What do you think every student deserves? What inequalities do you believe exist in the way students experience school? Why do you think these arise?
<p>The transcript of these interviews will be shared with the youth. Collectively we will create our educational histories (as a timeline of events, beliefs, and things that stand out). After both the interview and the educational histories have taken place, we will critically interrogate both, asking questions like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do you think that this is the case? • Do you think that others experience the same things? • Who do you think benefits from this? • What do you think could be a way to re-read what happened? Is there a way a different interpretation could distribute power differently? • Thinking about the micro and the macro, how do you think these two interacted? (how much was choice, how much was not having a choice?) 			

APPENDIX B: HOMIES INTERVIEWING EACH OTHER PROTOCOL

Homies Interview Protocol
November 6, 2020

Principles:

- don't be afraid to share your own and to connect
- let your feelings and gut guide you
- the questions are just a guide, follow the people you are interviewing
- make sure you say that anything that is shared is "wanting to be shared," no pressure

Start with Hello, how are you doing? and introduction (we must tell them about ourselves a little bit before them telling us about themselves)

1. How old are you?
2. Where did you grow up?
3. What is one of the best memories you have? (we should also relate to them)
4. What is your family and community like?
5. What do you think about education?
6. What are some of your first or most important memories of school?
7. Do you think education is the same thing as school?
8. What pushes or drives you farther away from school?
9. What pulls you or drives you closer to school?
10. What was your favorite class ever? What was it about that class? What was it about that teacher?
11. What do you think is the best way to describe or to call someone who is out of school? (drop-out, push-out, and someone who resists or rebels)?
12. Were you ever out of school or leave school? Why?
13. What do your parents think about education?
14. What beautiful and powerful things that you take or that you learned from your family continue to push you, or support you, or inspire you, or you carry with you?
15. How could we improve the teaching?
16. What would make you feel welcome in schools?

APPENDIX C: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH FORM

University of California, Los Angeles

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Name of the Research Project: **Push-outs Theorizing Back**

Principal Investigator: Miguel Casar, from the Graduate School of Education and Information Science at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) is conducting a research study.

You were selected as a member and participant in this project and study because you have been a part of Free Space and/or are part of the student body at Learning Works. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?

Firmly rooted in the belief that schools can empower school communities to come to a place of critical consciousness and transformation and that youth who have had a precarious relationship with schooling have powerful insights and experiences, this study will bring the voices of young people and engage them in a critical process to theorize back. This study will invite young people to be a part of a space where we will collectively review and study existing theories and explanations, establish a dialogue between these and their own stories and experiences and work together to create new explanations and visions for schooling and education. We will engage in dialogue and various exercises to review existing theories about young people that are out of school, review and interrogate our own educational histories, and will reflect upon the process of doing so. We will also engage collaboratively in the analysis, coding and the writing up of our findings. The primary goal of this study is to honor the voices and stories of youth, alongside their insights and reflections, in guiding a process of theorizing back.

What will happen if I take part in this research study?

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will participate in various collaborative activities, including:

- Be a part of two initial interviews centered around educational histories and meaning making

- Collaborative observations (for some students) - the youth in the study and the researchers will observe different spaces together, ask questions, and record the conversations
- The research team (the youth and the researcher) will collaborate during around 12-14 sessions of theorizing back. These will take around 4 hours each. During these, the research team will review the literature and existing theories, engage in various exercises to discuss and analyze data, and engage in conversations that draw from their histories and educational experiences. Through these activities, we will talk about our personal histories, identities, and our educational trajectories.

How long will I be in the research study?

Participation will take a total of 8 months, starting in September 2020 and ending in March 2021.

Are there any potential risks or discomforts that I can expect from this study?

- The participants may share sensitive information that could revive difficult memories or sensitive information. In addition, conversations as a group may be difficult for some. At all points, the researcher will disclose this possibility, create multiple opportunities for the youth to reflect on their engagement with their process, and offer services of emotional support and healing if requested at any point.

Are there any potential benefits if I participate?

You may benefit from the study by engaging in self-reflection and analyses. The goal of this study is to dismantle and revise assumptions and ideologies that are often tied to oppressive systems that we live in, ultimately empowering young people to recreate and reclaim their own stories. Additionally, this research will create opportunities to engage in further participatory work and to learn about the research process, ultimately creating a place for youth to theorize.

In addition, the results of this research are intended to help the development and implementation of critical pedagogy practices in schools and other spaces. Additionally, the research methodology is designed to empower those who are a part of the study to take ownership in theorizing and meaning-making. Whilst this exercise is not explicitly tied to a certain “outcome,” the

Will information about me and my participation be kept confidential?

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify you will remain confidential and only shared with the group (with your authorization). It will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of Pseudonyms (unless otherwise requested by Participants) and all participants will have an opportunity to look at the findings and will be given the last word on what is included or not.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

- You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study, and you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time.
- Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you, and no loss of benefits to which you were otherwise entitled.
- You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

Who can I contact if I have questions about this study?

- **The research team:**

If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can talk to the one of the researchers. Please contact:

Miguel Casar
312.391.8863
mcasar@g.ucla.edu

- **UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP):**

If you have questions about your rights while taking part in this study, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers about the study, please call the OHRPP at (310) 825-7122 or write to:

UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program
11000 Kinross Avenue, Suite 211, Box 951694
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1694

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

SIGNATURE OF STUDY PARTICIPANT

Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

SIGNATURE OF PERSON OBTAINING CONSENT

Name of Person Obtaining Consent

Contact Number

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

APPENDIX D: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH FORM (SPANISH)

University of California, Los Angeles

CONSENTIMIENTO PARA PARTICIPAR EN UN PROYECTO DE INVESTIGACIÓN

Nombre del Proyecto: **Push-outs Theorizing Back (Push-outs teorizando de regreso)**

Investigador Principal: Miguel Casar, de la escuela de Educación y las Ciencias de la Información de la Universidad de California Los Angeles.

Has sido seleccionadx como un miembrx y participante en este proyecto y estudio porque eres parte de Free Space y/o un alumno en el centro de reintegración social de Homeboy Industries. Tu participación en este proyecto es voluntaria.

¿Por qué se está haciendo este proyecto?

Arraigado en la creencia que las escuelas pueden empoderar a las comunidades escolares para llegar a una conciencia crítica y de transformación, y en la creencia que los jóvenes que han tenido una relación compleja y precaria con las escuelas tienen experiencias y conocimientos muy importantes, este estudio busca traer las voces de lxs jóvenes e invitarles a un proceso de teorizar de regreso. Este estudio invita a los jóvenes a ser parte de un espacio en donde se revisarán teorías y explicaciones ya existentes, y crear un diálogo entre estas y sus propias historias y experiencias, creando nuevas explicaciones y visiones para las escuelas y la educación. Juntxs, dialogaremos y tomaremos parte en varios ejercicios para revisar estas teorías y para criticar nuestras propias historias educacionales. Al final, trabajaremos juntxs en el análisis, la codificación y el resumir los resultados. La meta primaria de este estudio es honrar las voces y las historias de lxs jóvenes, incluyendo sus conocimientos y sus reflexiones, en este proceso de “teorizar de regreso.”

¿Qué va a pasar si soy parte de este proceso?

Si decides participar en este estudio, serás parte de varias actividades que incluyen:

- Dos entrevistas iniciales que se centrarán en hacer significado de nuestras historias educacionales

- El equipo de investigación, que te incluirá, colaborará durante el programa normal del centro de reinserción social de Homeboy durante alrededor de 10 sesiones de teorizar de regreso. Estas van a tomar alrededor de 4 horas cada una. Durante estas, el equipo revisará las teorías existentes, la data que hayamos recolectado durante las entrevistas, y hablaremos sobre cómo nuestras trayectorias están en diálogo con la teoría.

Cuánto tiempo va a durar este proyecto de investigación?

La participación va a durar alrededor de 7 meses, empezando en Diciembre 2020 y acabando en Mayo del 2021.

Hay riesgos que puedo esperar al participar en este estudio?

- The participants may share sensitive information that could revive difficult memories or sensitive information. In addition, conversations as a group may be difficult for some. At all points, the researcher will disclose this possibility, create multiple opportunities for the youth to reflect on their engagement with their process, and offer services of emotional support and healing if requested at any point.

Are there any potential benefits if I participate?

You may benefit from the study by engaging in self-reflection and analyses. The goal of this study is to dismantle and revise assumptions and ideologies that are often tied to oppressive systems that we live in, ultimately empowering young people to recreate and reclaim their own stories. Additionally, this research will create opportunities to engage in further participatory work and to learn about the research process, ultimately creating a place for youth to theorize.

In addition, the results of this research are intended to help the development and implementation of critical pedagogy practices in schools and other spaces. Additionally, the research methodology is designed to empower those who are a part of the study to take ownership in theorizing and meaning-making.

Will information about me and my participation be kept confidential?

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