(IN)DISPOSABLE YOUTH: “AT-RISK” SUBJECTIVITIES AND LATINX STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL

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by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the racialization of urban Latinx youth in alternative school settings. Set in a predominantly Latinx neighborhood in inner-city Houston, the research catalogues everyday Latinx student experiences and the ways they experience, navigate, and survive educational systems of structural inequity. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork and a feminist framework that purposefully privileges the voices and the immediate emotional needs of the youth participants, I took seriously respondents’ claims of feeling unwanted, tossed aside, and ignored in educational spaces. I then use students’ own descriptions of their schooling as a starting point to theorize the production of Latinx student as “disposable” and to further develop emerging theories of disposability. Specifically, I traced how educational systems route “undesirable” Latinx students into alternative schools. These structural and institutional processes of dispossession are juxtaposed with rich and complex student narratives that demonstrate how students actively resist, rework, or accept their positioning as “at risk” and/or “troubled.” Finding illustrate how urban education systems are partly reliant on the removal and invisibility of vulnerable youth and how the racialization of Latinx subjects is central to the production of their disposability.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The Myth of Youth Disposability

At-risk of Becoming Badasses (November 25th, 2015 – Lunchtime at Juan Diaz High School in Houston, Texas)

Standing in the hot sun beating on concrete in front of a taco stand, I couldn’t help but to think of my Momma. Momma always brought food to every event. For hours and hours, Momma would toil away, her hands crafting sustenance and excellence. If Lala—Momma’s nickname—was coming, there was gonna be food. Get it while it’s hot!

At the window of the taco stand, I ordered in self-consciousness Spanish, hoping to conjure that lineage. Momma taught me not only that food is a precious gift, but also a useful social tool. After thirteen children and over a hundred direct descendants, she learned how good food could help generate a sense of connection between people, place, and food. It was but one form of care that my mom taught me—an ethic of care that led me to want to feed the students I was working with that day, but it was also the broader ethic of care that would guide me throughout this dissertation. She tried to teach me to speak Spanish fluently too, but like many of the youth participants in the study, I resisted. Now, my tamed tongue and thickly Americanized Spanish is an anxiety that is inflamed, and I particularly felt that anxiety as I moved through my research in the barrio of the East End. I couldn’t help it. I desperately wanted to belong. I feign as if I am thinking about my order while ordering so I can go slow.

“Quince tacos por favor…hmmm…Cinco de pastor…cinco de tripa…and… cinco de fajita…and…con todo. Oh...and two Mexican coke’s please.”

The two Latinas making the order in gas station parking lot in humid Houston looked young enough to go to the school one block away. I wondered if they too, like many of the students I was working with at
Juan Diaz High School (JDHS), balance multiple jobs, school, and everyday life in the barrio in the East End. Arms full, I walked back to JDHS with the goods in hand, and entered the building a few minutes before the lunch bell rings.

Billy, per usual, was the first to show up to lunch. “Bro, you got my chips?” he asked me. I gave him a smile and nod as if to say, *Of course!* I reached into my backpack and pulled out the tacos, a bag of green and red salsa, two Mexican cokes, and bag of Takis and Xxtra Flamin’ Hot Cheetos.

Billy took all the goods in with wide eyes, “Hell yeah Dude! This is dope! We living like kings!”

He sat down on the red bar stool next to me. The table was long and dark brown with brightly colored seats that hug its sides in an orderly fashion—a familiar sight in many gymnasiums and cafeterias across the United States. Surrounding us were dense canary-yellow brick walls that somehow amplify and muzzle sounds. School posters plastered the walls reinforcing the schools’ at-risk investments and code of conduct, the tone somehow seemed more ominous in relation to the obdurate canvas. “Stop, Think, Choose.” “No one is perfect, that is why pencils have erasers.” “Your mind is like a parachute, it only works if it is open.” “Respect starts with you.”

Behind the spread of tacos, spicy flavored chips, and sour gummy candies, young mothers were gracefully minding their children who ranged from newborns to toddlers. Diapers, baby bottles, and backpacks rested on tables and the ground, foregrounding the communal and maternal care taking place. The women were attentive and compassionate, playing games and feeding their children. While sitting at the table with them, I began to wonder when they would get the time to feed themselves. Slowly the others began trickling in and the mix of laughter and squeaky shoes reaches a low roar.

There were eight of us, including myself. All of the students were juniors at Juan Diaz High School, a “last chance” alternative school in downtown Houston. Carla, Elezear, Billy, Adeline, Dee Dee, Victoria, and Teresa circled around the lunch layout. Carla was the last to sit down and punched Billy in the arm on her way to her seat.

“Hey, what did I do!?” Billy yelled in surprise and then slowly transitioned into a knowing grin.
Carla looked to Billy. “Bitch, you lie! There is no test today in Mr. Phan’s!” she said in frustration as she plopped on the flat circular seat.

“Yeah, but I had you studying though, right?” Billy (each student is a pseudonym they chose) replied and gestured in her direction with double handguns.

“I can’t.” Carla, eyes already rolling, put her hand up in frustration to dismiss Billy. Her eyerolls were legendary. The rest of us chuckled along and the conversation continued in between bites. At times we conversed in unison, at others the conversations fractured and multiplied.

During a lull in conversation, I asked nobody in particular, “So, after spending some time here at Juan Díaz, how would you describe this school to other students your age?”

Before I could even finish the question, after I said “school,” Carla responded with her usual blunt and concise wisdom, “Don’t come.”

The way she said “Don’t come” made it sound not so much sarcastic, but desperate. I got the sense that Carla wanted to get ahead in the framing of Juan Díaz. Perhaps, it was Carla’s way to cut through the niceties of small talk and gesture to the urgent stakes.

I watched Adeline make eye contact with Carla.

Eleazar answered, “No school spirit.”

“Yeah,” Adeline said shaking her head in agreement, “Don’t come.”

“Easy,” Billy chimed in.

“It’s easy? What do you mean?” I asked, hoping to get them to elaborate some more.

“It’s, like, simple.” Victoria paused and took in the question. “And overdramatic too.” Victoria would often raise this point about Juan Díaz. The set of relations between students, teachers, and administrators at Juan Díaz she suggested, were often weighed down by a lack of understanding and generosity. Instead, the escalation of conflicts was the norm according to her.

“It’s…” Billy stopped mid-sentence, pointing to his mouth to signal he was finishing chewing his food. “It’s weak,” Billy finally says.
Teresa chuckled uncomfortably, and I wondered if perhaps she thought Billy’s comment was directed at her and if she was stung by what Billy said.

“Uh... yeah... that’s what you are,” she said pointing at taco spillage on his shirt and the table hooted at his expense.

Teresa turned from Billy to look at me, “I would describe the school as kind of boring. Like low on income,” she said matter of factly.

“Low on income,” I repeated, unsure how to respond. I wanted to know more, but I couldn’t help but wonder of these characterizations of the school—and in turn them—were frustrating, or even hurtful to them. “I remember, Teresa, that you didn’t like that Juan Diaz is called an ‘at-risk school.’”

“Yeah. I mean don’t really like it. Like when I first…,” Teresa trailed off.

“It’s true,” Elezar interrupted. He looked Teresa in the eyes. Keeping eye contact he added, “It is though.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Teresa conceded. “They are not lying. Because I think they can take away your credit or something. That’s why you can’t leave. Like when you failed one test your average becomes too low or something like that.”

“Wait. What?” I was surprised by what Eleazar said. “You can’t leave the school?”

“Yeah, bro. It’s hard to leave,” Billy said in a somber tone.

Dee Dee said nothing, but nodded her head vigorously agreement.

Victoria looked to me, she adds “Yeah.”

I remember being struck by these accounts of Juan Diaz. This was such a strong, clear, and important accounting of the school from the group collectively and I took it seriously. Even in that moment, I recognized the gravity of their words and the need to substantively engage this experience in my research. I made myself a note to follow up on this more in future conversations, and looked back in Teresa's direction to ask, “So, what do you think about people calling you an ‘at-risk’ student attending an ‘at-risk’ school? Like what should they call you?”
The spotlight often made Teresa uncomfortable and at times I worried that my questions came off as an intrusive. Exactly this was going through my mind when Teresa’s cheeks turned slightly red and her eyes darted around the table, seemingly reluctant to answer.

“Me? Oh… ugh… well….” She trailed off, before blurting out her answer in a quick burst of frustration, like Carla earlier. She spoke her truth with annoyance, “Like I dunno…that we are just a charter school with students!”

“Yeah,” Billy added, “At risk of becoming badasses!”

There were collective groans, points, yells. It was an absurd and radical proposition, rich with layers of truths.

**Situating Myself**

I was in my late-twenties when I began my research at Juan Diaz High School in Houston, Texas. I began this project hoping to investigate how schooling shaped Latinx youth subjectivities in an alternative school. In particular, I sought to understand the educational mechanisms that often devalued them, made them feel less than, and constrained their opportunities. My scholarly exploration of this topic was guided by a rich literature about deficit models of education, racialized criminalization (including in schooling), and poststructural work on subjectivity. However, the topic was (and remains) deeply intimate and personal to me as well, as much of what I write about I have also lived. Thus, I cannot tell the story of this research without talking about myself and my family.

My mom, Candelaria—who is the inspiration for so much of what I do—was born in 1941 in Brownsville, at the borderlands of Texas and Mexico. She married at a young age to a man who was abusive to her, and began having children shortly after. She had 12 children with her first husband—my ten older sisters, one older brother (living) and another who passed away in the 1970s when he was just a baby (a loss my mother carried with her throughout her entire life). I was born nearly 10 years after my nearest sibling, and my father (who entered the picture later in my mom’s life) was an undocumented man from
Mexico. He left me and my mom when I was a small child. So, I was raised by my mom alone, but nested within a wide web of siblings, cousins, nieces nephews, and more who were constantly circulating within and around my childhood home.

While we spent a few years living in Houston and a lot of time around family who had moved into the city, most of my childhood was spent living in a trailer in the small country town of Crockett, Texas (100 miles north of Houston). It was there that I most potently learned about what it meant to be Brown, to be Mexican, to speak Spanish, and to be poor in Texas. It was in my public school that the Spanish I learned as a child faded. While today, my incomplete Spanish feels like a lingering wound, as a child, I learned to be ashamed of it. I also learned to be ashamed of my skin, my big lips, my wide nose, and of other Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. I leaned hard into the conservative ideologies of the community and my white peers, internalizing and adopting right-wing rhetoric throughout high school. In so many ways, I yearned to be white.

As I was acculturated into performances and ideologies of whiteness, I also became more academically successful. I was top of my high school class, hard-working, and well-liked, but my success was often spoken about as an exception to the rule. I distinctly remember adults telling me that they liked me because I wasn’t like “other” Mexicans or people of color—I was one of the “good” ones. While I didn’t turn away from my family, these compliments were like nonetheless like knives that cut me discursively from my ability to identify with Latinx community and my own identity. Thus, the processes of cultural devaluation, redemption through assimilation to white norms, and community alienation were therefore acutely visible to me when I saw them unfold at Juan Diaz.

Likewise, I could see the experiences of my many cousins, nieces, and nephews come into focus through the lives of the students in this study. While I experienced cultural alienation and internalized racism alongside my academic achievement, I also saw how others in my family faced criminalization and the disinvestment in their futures. Some dropped out of high school, some spent time in gangs, some got pregnant young, and some even spent time in alternative schools. They were always as capable, intelligent, and creative as me, and as I began the process of studying education as an academic topic in college, I
slowly became more adept at recognizing the systems that had also—but differently—constrained their lives.

This process of learning and unlearning began when I started college as an 18-year-old at the University of Texas. It was there that I took my first classes in Mexican-American Studies, and began to come into a critical consciousness about structural racism, including in education. For example, Angela Valenzuela, whose work I draw on throughout this dissertation, was an early mentor and her teaching deeply shaped my thinking about how Mexican Americans experience the US education system. The topics she wrote about spoke to my lived experience.

In these years of my undergraduate education, I also began grappling with my own internalized racism. Throughout my childhood, everyone around me had called me Junior (because I was named after my father), but it was at this time that I started going by the name Hilario. I stopped apologizing for the difficulty that white, English speakers had when speaking my name aloud—I asserted that my Mexican name was important, not inconvenient. I also slowly reclaimed a pride in my skin and my body, and I started to lean more intentionally into expressions of Mexican-American culture through dress, music, and food. Finally, I started to learn about how white supremacy had (and continues to) create the conditions for so much harm, violence, exclusion, and marginalization in the lives of youth of color—like myself and my family. I began to see how white supremacy manifested in the hierarchical valuing of people in U.S. schooling—and how that had stripped of me and others of so much potential, life, community, and care. As I changed, my politics changed. I would no longer accept the systems of disposability unfolding around me.

My graduate education—and ultimately, this dissertation research—are a reflection of my on-going investment in responding to these harms and challenging the way they continue to impact Latinx youth. My experiences and my feelings about my own skin, body, language and culture run throughout this dissertation. My own subjectivity and background as a Latinx man growing up in Texas also naturally colors how I approach the topics of this study. Regardless their actions, I know that no one in my family was ever disposable and neither are the youth at Juan Diaz. However, my positionality (I believe) also granted me unique skills to see the myth of Latinx youth disposability at work. These processes were
intimately visible to me when I heard the youth of this study talking about being “bad,” the need for redemption and correction, or institutional discussion about language, family, and community as risk factors.

Finally, my lived experience and my raced and classed positionality shaped my approach to youth knowledge. Anthropology has long grappled with the implications of Western, white, and colonial approaches to knowledge production, which anoint some as subjects and knowers, and others as objects of study. Such approaches constrain our ability to see the students of this study as theorists of their lives—but they are. My mom never finished elementary school, but she had a deep understanding of the world around her. I believe she was the wisest person I have known, and the ethical models of care she taught me guide my life, my work with youth, and even the theory I articulate in this document. Knowledge is not held only by those who carry the credentials of higher education, those whose voices reflect the norms of Western knowledge production, or those with the authority of age. As such, my young student participants—like my family members—are knowledgeable, despite the way institutions devalue them and their minds. They have astute, powerful, and theoretically accountings of their lives that I take seriously throughout this document. Thus, while my positionality shaped my approach to this research, ultimately this dissertation is guided by their thinking, their words, and their accounts of the way their school functioned as a site of racialized disposability. Alongside them, I assert that these systems of disposability are morally and ethically wrong, and at the most basic level, things that are wrong need to change.

Disposability at Juan Diaz High School

In the introduction to her ethnography twenty years earlier on Mexican American youth attending Valenzuela’s Juan Seguin High School in the same neighborhood as Juan Diaz High, Angela Valenzuela (1999, p. 3) inquires, “what if each weekday, for eight hours a day, teenagers inhabited a world populated by adults who did not care – or at least did not care for them sufficiently?” From my first day at Juan Diaz High, I was reminded of this poignant question Valenzuela posed over two decades ago, and it has continued
to percolate long after I left the field. The sharp, contemplative, and biting analysis and reflection from the small group of students I met had shaken my assumptions about researching with presumably vulnerable Latinx youth. I wasn’t receptive enough to their brilliance and honesty. One of the first questions I had asked the group was to simply share a little bit about themselves and what it was like to attend Diaz High. I had expected the group to be shy and timid, but their responses were stark—an indication of the students’ profound understanding of their socio-cultural conditions.

“This is a school for bad kids.”

“We are the kids nobody wants.”

“Most of us are here because we got kicked out.”

“I am here because I have to be.”

“Even when you try to go back to your school, you always end up here again.”

“Those schools didn’t want me.”

The students at Juan Diaz regularly navigate their positioning as “at-risk” students—a position reinforced through the school, which aims to correct such students from the failures and precarity that are assumed to characterize their life and educational history. Most students are sent to an alternative school, like Juan Diaz, after having issues with their previous school, and their description as “at risk” or “troubled” is a subject positioning they both internalize and resist. It is a subject positioning that got them kicked out of previous schools, and a subject positioning that continues their displacement. I took seriously these stories of feeling unwanted, tossed aside, and ignored in educational spaces. And yet, because of my own assumptions about their experiences and capacities, I too underestimated them. I heard only their emotional reactions such as displeasure and frustration with their education, and while I took this quite seriously, it took many more weeks to really uncover and deconstruct their complex, sophisticated theorizations about schooling. What became evident as I came to know the students was a deep and pervasive sense of alienation and disposability among the students based on their schooling experiences. Moreover, through the course of my fieldwork, I came to see that their feelings were more than justified. A lesson I could have learned on the first day was that the students were gesturing to more than their just displeasure and
frustration: they were also illuminating a systematic process of disposability taking place within the everyday order of U.S. schooling.

Following Valenzuela, if we are to take vulnerable racialized youth and their experiences, expressions, and theorizations seriously as sites of study and analysis, it demands we listen closely to—and care about—what they say about their lives. What does it take to produce conditions where Latinx youth feel so displaced and disposable? What kinds of policies, discourses, institutions, and systems are entangled in producing an “educative” space where students feel left out, behind, and replaceable? What if many of the youth most vulnerable to systems of domination, racialized criminalization, and violence inhabit a world where their precarity is pathologized, igniting a “machinery of disposability” (Giroux & Evans, 2015, p. 66) eager to extract value and brand them replaceable? And, for scholars and educators concerned about equity and justice, how can we all reassert an indisposability of youth, not just in educational practice, but as a broader ethical and moral framework for challenging systemic inequality?

In this dissertation, I seek to answer these questions by using students’ own descriptions of their schooling as a starting point to trace and theorize the production of Latinx students as “disposable” and to further develop emerging theories of disposability. Set in a predominantly Latinx inner-city neighborhood, this dissertation describes the ways students within a “second chance” alternative charter school must navigate and endure educational processes and institutions that dispossess, branding them “at risk,” in need of correction, and, ultimately, disposable. Schools like Juan Diaz and official labels like “at risk” are ostensibly supposed to aid an educational system in identifying and providing students additional support and resources. Yet in practice they often do the opposite, funneled groups of students in precarity into schools that are structurally inequitable and under-resourced. This misdirection, I argue, is purposeful. Housing large numbers of “at risk” students and providing them redemptive and punitive based-schooling that is almost always deeply underfunded has a long history in the United States (Kelly, 1993). Despite the lack of research to match their significance, alternative schools, like warehouses and waste management, are integral to U.S. education systems (ibid). School districts, as well as individual schools, systematically benefit from this warehousing of students, thus calling into question the glaring inequalities evident between
institutions. Yet, as this dissertation will make clear, the students enmeshed with these disposable processes are always more capable and valuable than the labels that are designated to their bodies, neighborhoods, and schools.

Systemic and institutional processes and discourses produce ideas and practices of human disposability—particularly for racialized subjects in a white supremacist society—that have material and psychic consequences. However, those in the ruins are not actually disposable. Disposability is a myth. Melissa Wright (2006, p. 3) describes myths as “a form of discourse”—or “depoliticized speech” (Barthes, 1972)—that are thought to explain how the world works. Myths make violence—like the logic of youth disposability—seem natural, normal, and common sense. In other words, while myths are discursive constructions, they have immense power. As Asad writes (2003, p. 29 as cited in Wright, 2006, p. 4), “Myth [is] not merely a (mis)representation of the real. It [is] material for shaping the possibilities and limits of action. And in general, it appears to have done this by feeding the desire to display the actual.” A myth is a story we tell ourselves and others about how something works or where it comes from. There are all sorts of myths—partial truths—for example, about the US as a nation. We celebrate the country’s “founding fathers” while actively erasing their legacies of slavery, and we talk about this country as an “immigrant nation” while failing to address the people who already lived here, or the many people who were brought here against their will (Ngai, 2014; Smith, 2021). Myths can seem so normal that they are taken for granted. But, importantly, a myth is a story that often troubles truths—at the very least, it is incomplete. And tracing myths can provide window into our values and ethics. As Wright (2006, p. 5) says, a myth can be “a tool of interpellation,” and examining a “myth as an object of study” can help us expose and oppose its effects.

Within this research, I demonstrate how educational systems—and the unique technology of alternative schools—reproduce the myth that vulnerable Latinx youth are disposable. What can we learn by tracing these myths? What has to happen to position youth as disposable? What systems, policies, and cultural practices have to align to make young Latinx as expendable, replaceable, or irredeemable? And how can identifying this myth help us challenge these systems of violence? The myth of disposability is one the Latinx youth in this study know all too well, as they learn that they are seen this way, as they
internalize these ideas, and as they resist them. Like the Juan Diaz students themselves, we must see and challenge the ubiquitous educational discourses and practices that work to produce “at risk” youth subjects within a hierarchical valuing of “good” or “bad” kids, redeemed and unredeemable, disciplined and undisciplined, educational success and failures, and deserving and undeserving subjects. These dehumanizing frameworks, which permeate the educational spaces of this dissertation, always produce a positive and a negative: one who is valued and one who is not. More often than not, the ‘negative’ is a reflection of deep structural systems of racism and white supremacy. Other words, as the next section will elaborate, throughout this dissertation, I see disposability as intimately tied to race. And for the students, like those at Juan Diaz, their positioning as racialized “at-risk” subjects creates the conditions for them to be treated as disposable. I wish to expose how this myth and machinery of disposability operates in order to dismantle it. Thus, in tracing this production of disposable youth, this dissertation presents a challenge to the myth of disposability, and underscores that the students at Juan Diaz are most certainly not disposable.

**Road Map to the Dissertation**

In what follows, this dissertation research seeks to address the production of youth disposability within an alternative school though a commitment to youth standpoints at Juan Diaz. Chapter 2 offers a literature review and theoretical framework for the dissertation. The chapter begins with an overview of the history of alternative schools, including background to their origins and a summary of their specific role within the state of Texas. I then describe how I make sense of this history through theories of disposability, which provides the basis for my argument that alternative schools have been (and continue to be) produced as sites of racialized disposability. This is followed by a subsequent overview of the literatures and theoretical conversations that inform and guide my approach to alternative school as sites of disposability for presumably at-risk Latinx youth. First among these is a discussion of the relationship between disposability and white supremacy, where I outline my approach to race in the dissertation and describe how the disposability of at-risk Latinx youth is tied to broader structures of white supremacy. Finally, I describe the
three literatures that guide my approach to understanding “at risk” student subjectivities within this landscape of racialized disposability: 1) the anthropology of becoming, which offers tools for thinking about the shifting and incomplete nature of at risk youth identities, 2) Critical Youth Studies, which provides ethical tools for thinking about youth knowledge and experiences, and 3) feminist theories, which offer tools for denaturalizing ideas of objectivity and power throughout the research process. These literatures will also underscore the methodologies and politics that inform and shape data collection, analysis, and findings (elaborated on in Chapter 3). Together these theoretical conversations all help me make sense of Latinx student experiences and subjectivities within Juan Diaz High School, and provide the framework for my argument that alternative schools operate as sites of racialized disposability. Beyond this, however, these literatures also guide the political imperative of this dissertation. In particular, as I’ll describe, they provide radical conceptual tools to challenge youth disposability, demand structural change, and assert the indisposability of anyone.

With the conceptual foundations of the dissertation established in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 then turns to specific methods of the dissertation. This includes a discussion of the study site in Houston, which asserts that the treatment of youth as disposable in the school is deeply connected to the treatment of their neighborhoods and communities. Thus, I discuss how the context of the city shaped the context of the school. I then shift to an explanation of my “Research Toolbox” that includes an overview of the school and participants, a discussion of ethnographic writing and vignettes, and the particular methods that I deployed in data collection. While describing these tools, I wish to also underscore the ways theory and methodology work in tandem to inform not only the way I engage with vulnerable participants in the field, but also the kinds of responsibility and ethics that follow in analysis, findings, and dissemination.

Chapter 4 then begins my exploration into the ethnographic findings of this dissertation. The chapter describes how students end up at Juan Diaz alternative school by cataloging the push and pull factors that drive students away from comprehensive traditional high schools and into a disciplinary alternative school. I argue that the processes and structures of the contemporary education create the conditions of student disposability. The chapter pays particular attention to how high stakes testing and
neoliberal education policy enable certain students to be positioned as unwanted and disposable within public schools—how they become “the students nobody wants.” I then document how these processes shape the educational context of Juan Diaz by juxtaposing student-centered vignettes with Texas state education policy that works to constrain or reroute opportunities and resources available for vulnerable students.

Chapter 5 “‘At-Risk’ Subjectivities, Redemption, and Youth Experience,” attends to the production of “at risk” student subjectivities in Juan Diaz. Drawing on interviews and ethnographic observation, the chapter explains how discourses of risk, correction and redemption operate within the school, shaping curriculum, classroom practice, student-teacher relationships, and how students think of themselves. The chapter pays particular attention to how students navigate, internalize, and resist stigmas and labels like “at risk” or “troubled,” that were prolific in the everyday discourses of the school.

Finally, Chapter 6 acts as the conclusion of the dissertation by offering an overarching analysis of the dissertation, a discussion of the implications for students and scholars, and a critique of the systems that produce the myth of disposability. In particular, I work to put the rich analyses of students that I shared throughout the dissertation into conversation with theories of human value in order to address the implications of the dissertation for thinking about the educational mechanisms of student (de)valuation and disposability. In doing this, I draw on the work of critical ethnic studies scholar Lisa Marie Cacho to discuss how the determinations of the social value of youth shapes the education system. For Cacho, the societal determinations of human value and deservingness always reinforces its opposite: the unvalued and the undeserving—the disposable subject. But youth—and human value—isn’t determined by the educational achievement, a student’s redemption, or other metrics used to define “good” kids. Cacho reminds us, when “re recuperating those deemed deviant means trying to make others’ lives more acceptable and sympathetic” (Cacho, 2012, p. 168), we merely reproduce the good/bad binary framework that got us into this mess in the first place. Thus, I conclude by arguing that the findings of the dissertation present a fundamental challenge to the normative frameworks of disposability used to value youth. I argue that no student or youth subject—no matter how deviant—is ever disposable. I discuss the implications of this assertion, not just for alternative schools and educational research, but for imagining a more just world for our children.
CHAPTER 2

Literature Review & Theoretical Framework: Understanding Alternative Schools as Sites of Racialized Student Disposability

The fabrication of disposable peoples throughout history points to the permanence of a specific construction of otherness, in which the excess of enjoyment is expressed through the transformation of a human being into matter. (Vergès, 2001, p. 11)

Over the course of my two years in Houston—and my year of ethnographic research in Juan Diaz High School—students regularly told me that they felt like they had been tossed aside, that they were unwanted, and that they were (or had been) “bad.” Throughout this dissertation, I argue that these comments were not merely the trivial complaints of moody, ornery teenagers. Rather, the students were offering a critical and much-needed analysis of how the education system positioned them as at-risk Latinx youth, and subsequently treated them as disposable. Within the education system, the alternative school acted like a warehouse or dumping ground, where traditional schools could route those they didn’t want. This process wasn’t accidental and it wasn’t neutral—it reflected the way racialized youth are often treated as a problem. It was directly from the Juan Diaz students’ knowledge and experiences that the core argument of this dissertation emerged: alternative school acts as a site of disposability for racialized youth.

Making deeper sense of this process and charting these complex institutional structures of disposability, however, requires engagement with numerous literatures and theoretical conversations. This chapter endeavors to layout the key literatures and theories I draw on to make my arguments. In it, I work to put often divergent disciplinary fields into conversation with one another, including work in education and youth studies, critical scholarship on race (including but not limited to, Black and Latinx studies), feminist theory, and poststructural theories of identity and subjectivity. The chapter is roughly divided into three key sections, each of which will contain subsections: 1) a literature review of scholarship on
alternative education, 2) an overview of theories of disposability, and 3) an explanation of the theories that inform my approach to youth subjectivities and youth research.

The first of these sections therefore begins with a detailed review of the literature on alternative schools, including their historical origins, their contemporary operation, and their specific functioning within the state of Texas. This background to alternative education provides the fodder to argue that such schools operate as sites of disposability.

The second section extends this discussion of alternative schools, by describing how they operate as sites of disposability, and in particular as sites of distinctly racialized process. I argue that we cannot understand the way Latinx youth are treated as disposable without taking white supremacy seriously as a process that systemically devalues the lives of people of color. This engagement, which outlines my use of race throughout the dissertation, is deeply informed by work in Black Studies and Latinx Studies. These literatures also greatly inform my political call for structural (even abolitionist) change to address systemic racism within education and alternative schooling.

Finally, the third section of this literature review turns to the theoretical approaches that inform my approach to youth subjectivities, and that guide my fieldwork and analysis. Drawing on Biehl and Locke’s (2010) “anthropology of becoming,” I describe how poststructural ideas of subjectivity treat it as something shifting, incomplete, and constantly in a state of ‘becoming.’ These theories will guide how I make sense of subject categories, like “at-risk” and “Latinx,” as unfixed and contested throughout the dissertation. Next, this section describes how Critical Youth Studies informs my ethical stance toward research with youth, wherein youth are taken seriously as holders of knowledge. These values then dovetail with a discussion of feminist theories and methodology, which also account for the importance of attending to positionality and power in the production of knowledge. Together these three sets of literature and theory form the backbone of the empirical, institutional, and conceptual framing of this dissertation.
Overview of U.S. Alternative schools

The terrain of alternative schooling in the U.S. education system is “famously diverse” (Zyngier et al., 2016, p. 179). The philosophy, pedagogy, resources, and missions can be drastically different depending on the state, district, and school. In many ways the varied types of schools in the U.S. is a manifestation of its decentralized education system (Rury, 2020). What constitutes the alternative in alternative education is contested and can gesture to widely different schooling traditions, with some usages referencing more constructivist models of schooling that serve more privileged student populations, while others draw from the contemporary legacy of the free schooling movement (Kelly, 1993). Yet within the research of this dissertation, the focus is narrower, referring to contemporary discourses surrounding alternative education and youth labeled “at-risk.” Despite a sustained increase in enrollment since the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002 (Dunning-Lozano, 2015), “There is no consensus on a standard definition of alternative education” (Carver & Lewis 2010). The U.S. Department of Education (Carver and Lewis, 2010, p. 1) describes them as “designed to address the needs of students that typically cannot be met in regular schools.” Consensus emerges among U.S. alternative schooling not in its approach or educational style, but rather the target group – youth that are “typically at risk of educational failure (as indicated by poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, pregnancy, or similar factors associated with temporary or permanent withdrawal from school)” (ibid). As Kelly (1993, p. 35) illustrates in her widely cited ethnography of a continuation school in California, “there has been a significant continuity in the student body” throughout the history of alternative schooling. What educators, administrators and policy makers have called students who attended these non-traditional schooling sites has changed over the decades, from “savage” (ibid) to “at risk” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), as new groups were targeted for enrollment. Yet, as this section will demonstrate, what unites alternative school students through the last 100 years of U.S. education is their status on the periphery and in the margins of whatever constitutes a “normal student.”
Early education researchers established parameters for what qualifies as alternative schooling: “the educational program must not require students and families to bear additional costs; must be available to all students within a given district; must have administrative autonomy; and, must be voluntary” (Slaten et al., p. 42). However post-NCLB these early distinctions have largely eroded as (ibid) “in more recent scholarship, alternative schools and education refer almost without exception to educational programs for students at risk of failing from traditional schools due to truancy, pregnancy, learning challenges, and/or behavioral problems.” Students who are either forced or consulted out of their traditional comprehensive schools attend alternative schooling sites that “take the form of high school programs, community schools for suspended and expelled students, and state detention facilities” (Guerin and Denti, 1999 as cited in ibid). Alternative schools are often referred to by different names depending on the context such as “continuation schools”, “remedial schools” or “disciplinary schools” with each term gesturing to a particular tradition and history (Kelly, 1993). The number changes depending on the data source due to “large discrepancies in school enrollment data between traditional and alternative schools, making it difficult to determine the actual number of students attending alternative schools” (Glasett, 2012, p. 4). Nonetheless, research points to over half a million students enrolled in “over 12,000 alternative schools” across the country (Slaten et al., 2012, p. 42).

While highlighting concerns regarding the gaps and incompleteness of alternative school data, in 2019 GAO (United States Government Accountability Office, pp. 12-13) published a report using 2015-2016 data that indicated “Black and Hispanic boys and girls, and boys with disabilities, were overrepresented at alternative schools in 2015-16, and White and Asian boys and girls were underrepresented.” The GAO report (ibid) also highlights that “these overrepresented groups also made up a larger proportion of enrollment at alternative schools than they did at nonalternative schools” meaning that for example that “Black boys accounted for 8 percent of students at nonalternative schools and 16 percent of students at alternative schools.” The “at-risk” net that is cast by the federal government is wide reaching, including “a school aged individual who is at-risk of academic failure, has a drug or alcohol problem, is pregnant or is a parent, has come into contact with the juvenile justice system in the past, is at
least 1 year behind the expected grade level for the age of the individual, has limited English proficiency, is a gang member, has dropped out of school in the past, or has a high absenteeism rate at school” (NCLB, 2002). These “at-risk” students are the key targets of the corrective education at alternative schools, like Juan Diaz. However, as the participants in my research described, what is framed as “help” is often experienced as disposability, as traditional schools treat disproportionately low-income and racialized youth as unwanted, route them into under-resourced alternative schools, and entrench them within a culture of correction, assimilation, discipline, and low expectations. This form of alternative education is not new. Throughout the history of public schooling in the United States, schools have had students who were deemed less desirable, who were determined unwanted, marginal, or burdensome. Since the 1930s, alternative schools have acted as a space to send such students (Kelly, 1993; Dunning-Lozano 2015). As this section will describe, while alternative school grew and changed over time, they more broadly became a space to send the marginal or unwanted—the disabled, the nonwhite, the criminalized, and the abnormal. Despite much of the contemporary rhetoric about alternative schools, they are not merely places to offer better-tailored resources to those in need (e.g. Fulton et al, 2016; Gross, 2017; Perlez, 1986; Rimmer, 2004). My research findings, however, show they are a space to get rid of the unwanted—to dispose of them. This pattern, in turn, benefits and sustains traditional schools, creates an economy of corrective education, and re-entrenches normative ideas of ideas of education and student subjects. This history of alternative schools as places designed for youth considered non-normative or in close relation to precarity can be read as one of disposability. Doing so is not only analytically rich and revealing, but I believe is also, an ethical response to the sensing and storying of vulnerable youth. Reading the preciousness of human life though a lens of precarity and disposability is an admittedly melancholic (Cheng 2001; Muñoz 2020) endeavor. It hurts to think about. To reckon with the violent organization and systemic abandonment that is present in the very structuring of education spaces that we position as institutions of care is to acknowledge that we have been failing and continue to fail youth. This failing, that can be threaded to the earliest iterations of U.S. schooling (Rury, 2020), is intentional and targeted. Naming this process as ethically wrong is important. While there have been exceptions—namely when the primary
student group is wealthy, able-bodied, male, and white—their normative function is as spaces to house or get rid of, youth who are allegedly struggling, unsuccessful, or troublesome in comprehensive traditional schools (Dunning-Lozano, 2015; Glassett, 2012; Kelly, 1993).

In this section, I review the history and academic literature on alternative schooling in the U.S in order to demonstrate how disposability is central to their production and their functioning. In it doing so, I now turn to a review of the historical formations of U.S. alternative schooling, illuminating the ways these schools and programs have operated as warehouses for students read as non-normative since the progressive era of U.S. schooling (Kelly, 1993). Here, I underscore the policy impetus for the continued presentation of alternative schools as a redemptive space for vulnerable students categorized as “at risk.” I describe how early ideas of alternative education as a space to hide away and “adjust” non-normative others foreshadows contemporary educational landscapes. This will be followed by a review of contemporary scholarship demonstrating the form, function, and impact of alternative schools in a post-No Child Left Behind landscape, and describes how they often act as dumping grounds amid the criminalizing and neoliberal logics of the school-to-prison pipeline (Dunning-Lozano, 2015; Giroux, 2009; Giroux 2012; Kim and Taylor, 2008). Finally, I’ll describe the specific landscape of alternative education in Texas, which will provide the context for Juan Diaz High School within this system. Together, this review of alternative education will lay the groundwork to read alternative schools as sites of disposability in Section 2.

**Historical Origins of Alternative Schooling in the U.S.**

The progressive era in education is widely cited as the origin of alternative schooling in the U.S., beginning the early 1900s (Kelly, 1993; Glasett, 2012). Yet, I wonder if we can trace it back even further. While outside the scope of this work, there is a strong argument that deaf and blind schools were the first form of alternative schooling in the United States. Likewise, we may situate the Indian mission and boarding schools within this history of alternative education, which removed Indigenous children from their communities and used schooling to punish and erase Indigenous language, culture, and community. While
the contemporary at-risk alternative schools have different missions and functions clearly apart from early deaf and blind schools or Indian boarding schools of the colonial era, the U.S. educational legacy of providing state-sanctioned segregated and structurally inequitable schooling to non-normative and racialized student populations with assumed deficiencies continues to this day.

One such thread that emerges clearly throughout the history of U.S. alternative schools, are the ways that alternative school settings continue to be used as a technology that can civilize children and youth positioned as naturally deficit through a set of practices, relations, and curriculum premised on their non-normativity. The civilizing project of U.S. schooling was intensified with the rise of Taylorism, efficiency, and capitalist logics at the turn of the 20th century. Dominated by debates about compulsory schooling, child labor, and best practices of assimilation of immigrants and other minoritized students, the progressive era of education laid the institutional, political, and financial groundwork for the contemporary form of U.S. Schooling (Tyack, 1974; Tyack and Cuban, 1995).

Within the era emerged the initial distinction and comparative missions of alternative schools and traditional comprehensive schools, wherein traditional schools were designed for students from “more privileged backgrounds” and alternative schools that “were originally designed for young workers” (Kelly, 1993, p. 39). According to Kelly (ibid, p. 37) in its original form, “continuation education took place largely in compulsory part-time schools designed to provide young workers [primarily immigrants], aged fourteen to eighteen years, with four to eight hours per week of schooling aimed at increasing their “civic or vocational intelligence.” Thus, while there was a normative project of assimilation tied to early alternative education, it nonetheless fundamentally relied on and reproduced hierarchical divisions of class and power. As the education system expanded amid the opening up of public education nationally, so did the bureaucratic structures and drives for efficiency that continued to rank, categorize, and segregate students (Rury, 2020). The mechanism of universal schooling in the U.S., arising under the assimilatory notion of common schooling, worked to unify students toward a narrow definition of U.S. culture predicated on white supremacist ideologies (ibid). Here, the distinction of student and worker among youth is key at this critical juncture in U.S. educational history, as it gestures to the uneven investment and subject positioning that
continues to haunt alternative schools. These uneven investments are justified through the racializing (hierarchical and essentialist differentiation) of students and their perceived cultural and social backgrounds.

Over the 20th century, racial boundaries and categories have been malleable as they respond to current demands of the U.S. settler state (Fields and Fields, 2014; Paperson, 2010; Shange, 2019). The value of youth positioned as students, rather than workers, lies in the orientation to the future. Youth as student assumes an eventual metamorphosis, through state and community investments, into (a particular class of) worker, politician, and/or owner. The value and futurity of youth as worker, however, is tethered to their ability to produce in the present. The discursive landscape in the U.S. for worker, student, child was drastically different in the beginning of the 20th century as compulsory schooling and child labor laws did not emerge until the 1910s. The social, cultural, and legal protections of children and youth as a protected category is a relatively recent occurrence and continues to be deeply asymmetrical for some groups. The differentiation that emerges from worker and student in U.S. educational context is key in that schooling, and alternative schooling in particular, are positioned as an acceptable space to engage in the learning of “work.”

Vocationally focused alternative schools proliferated after the passage of the 1917 Smith-Hughes Vocational Education Act, which provided funds for vocational education and specifically reserved “at least one-third sum” for “part-time schools or classes for workers over fourteen years of age” (ibid, p. 40). The passage was a win for “members of businesses and professional elites, including school administrators,” who “urged that schooling be adapted to social stratification” (Tyack, 1975, as cited ibid). These part-time schools designed for youth workers reached their height in the 1930s, but were eventually refocused to “adjustment education” (ibid). This form of education sought to normalize “school rebels” (CSDE, 1934, 150 as cited in Kelly, 1993, p. 40) as opposed to the prior focus on vocational training of youth workers. According to the Handbook on Continuation Education (1950, p. 3 as cited in ibid), which reflected scholarship of the time, the maladjusted consisted of: “students who are retarded in school, students with little interest in the school program, students in need remedial work in certain fields, students with limited
physical capacity, student returning to school after long periods of absence, transfers, late enrollees, students needing special guidance such as habitual truants, juvenile court problems, behavior cases, health problems, and student requiring rehabilitation.” According to scholars at the time, maladjustment was believed to be caused “personal, family, and environmental “handicaps” (CSDE, 1950 as cited in ibid). The solution for these youth was psychological, describing the need for counseling to overcome “disturbance from within” (Morena, 1953 as cited in ibid, p. 137). These students who were positioned as maladjusted were believed to be the cause of juvenile delinquency and crime, an issue often presented as an epidemic, then and now (ibid, p. 52).

The civil rights era amended the focus of many alternative schools. A strong vocational component remained, but “in response to a changing, hierarchically structured economy and an influx of immigrants, professional educators were experimenting with ways to deal with students, particularly boys, who could not or would not conform to the dominant culture and class standards” (Kelly, 1993, pp. 65-66). This experimentation lead to a diversity of types of alterative schooling and programming, many of which were locally controlled (Reyes, 2001) and emphasized “a non-competitive, student-centered approach” (Glassett, 2012, p. 14) where many schools sought to offer “flexible instruction for kids who weren’t thriving in traditional classrooms” (Vogell, 2017). The diverse pedagogical and curricular topography for alternative schools was short lived, as many schools did make it past the 1970s “because of structural or financial mismanagement” (Kim and Taylor 2008, p. 207). Despite these changes in U.S. schooling, ushered in large part from liberal social reformers, comprehensive traditional schools “did not have to accommodate students in all their diversity; rather, those who did not fit the mainstream mold could transfer to separate, almost always devalued institutions” (Kelly, 1993, p. 66). Social reformers at the time believed that alternative schooling could be a “humane, preventative response to these individuals neglected needs” (ibid). Demands for inclusion from marginalized communities during this time also aligned well with needs of “policymakers and school administrators” who “looked for solutions to the [supposed] problems of juvenile delinquency, push outs, and teen pregnancy” (ibid). Alternative schools, with their potentially more flexible curriculum, smaller class sizes and vocational focus, “were a ready-made solution” (ibid) albeit as
the “stepchild” of secondary education (Hucks, 1945 as cited in ibid). With serious federal support from the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act “alternative programs flourished as a response to a public school system thought, by some, to be restrictive and limited culturally” (Glasett, 2012, p. 13).

By the 1980s the “maladjusted” were no longer considered merely subjects to be redeemed—they also needed to be monitored and controlled. Thus, in this era, such youth were now more directly tethered to criminalization, surveillance and national safety (Reyes, 2001; Muñoz, 2004; Kelly, 1993; Dunning-Lozano, 2016). The Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention, an office of the U.S. Department of Justice, began promoting alternative education programs as tools of delinquency prevention in the 1980s (Cox, 1999, p. 323). As Cox (ibid) writes, “programming was designed based on the premise that schools could play a significant role in curbing youth crime,” specifically by “remov[ing] disruptive students from traditional public schools and provid[ing] them with a chance for success in smaller and more supportive environment” (ibid). Removal, however, rarely meant more resources or support—it meant disposal from the traditional schooling environment and a ramping up of youth interactions with the criminal justice system. Amid the dominant discourses of tough on crime and zero tolerance that in full force by the 1990s, minor infractions and conflicts once seen as the domain of the school were now within the purview of the law enforcement and the criminal justice system (Giroux, 2012; Lipsitz, 2015). In 1994 the Gun-Free Schools Act passed by the Clinton administration helped popularize “get-tough” policies that supposedly “aimed at reducing school violence with expulsion and stiff punitive action for possession of weapon on school grounds” (Tajalli. and Garba, 2014, p. 622). One result, however, was that more students were identified as delinquent and at-risk, and “school districts, county offices of education and state were encouraged to place these students into alternative education programs” (U.S. Department Of Education, 1996 as cited in Glassett, 2012, p. 14). Predicated on “the notion that schools could only keep order by refusing to tolerate any potentially unsafe behavior, even first-time or minor incidents,” zero-tolerance policies provided school districts with wide discretion to remove students marked at-risk or disruptive (Vogell, 2017). The need to find educative spaces for the burgeoning population of students who had been
expelled or suspended, “fuel[ed] a proliferation of alternative classrooms through the 1990s and 2000s” (ibid).

These changes, which Saltman and Gabbard (2003) and Evans and Giroux (2012) argue, worked to both criminalize youth and position alternative schools as a site for disciplinary correction, cannot be separated from the racism (and specifically anti-blackness) that pervaded “tough on crime” policies of the time. As a growing number of scholars have described in work on policing, mass incarceration, and the school-to-prison pipeline, these policies overwhelming targeted and impacted Black and Brown communities in the United States (Fabelo et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2010). As Angela Davis (2003, p. 30) and others describe, throughout American history, the has been a tendency to “impute crime with color” and these rhetorics of criminality that feed alternative schools are fundamentally tied to histories of racial control.

Knowledge of the deep, systemic, and entrenched relationship between white supremacy, policing and imprisonment are fundamental to growing scholarship and activism around movements to defund and abolish policing and prisons. The policies that shaped policing and prisons today also shaped alternative schools within their foundations. Thus, engagements with alternative schools are not separate to efforts happening elsewhere to challenge racism and anti-blackness through a rejection of our systems of crime and punishment. Abolitionist projects demand we examine all the systemic and structural factors that contribute to the maintenance, growth, and logics of incarceration. In this effort, alternative schools are one piece of the puzzle—but one that needs more attention. As we will see in the next section, these issues are particularly important within the contemporary landscape of alternative education.

**Contemporary Alternative Education**

In this dissertation, I draw on the current definition of alternative schools utilized by the federal Government Accountability Office (2019), who define contemporary alternative schools as “public schools with a disciplinary or academic focus that serve students who have been expelled or suspended from school, or
are at risk of educational failure.” Historical and contemporary research on alternative schools in the U.S. is limited relative to its persistence and significance in U.S. education. As Tajalli & Garba (2014, p. 621) note in their review of literature, “although nearly half a million students are annually sent to disciplinary alternative programs, there is a scant scholarly literature on the issue.” As described in the last section, much of the early research (e.g. Arnowe and Strout, 1980; Clark, 1967; Raywid 1981; Raywid, 1983) was focused on distinguishing alternative schools from other forms of schooling such as special education programs (Slatten, 2015). Yet, since the 1950s, educators and researchers have underscored issues of equity and efficacy with alternative schools (Kelly, 1993). In what follows, this section reviews contemporary scholarship on alternative education in the U.S., highlighting the ways alternative schools exist as a primary artery of U.S. schooling for particularly vulnerable minoritized youth—a population group that is also distinctly racialized.

“Operat[ing] under a wide range of organizational arrangements” (Zyngier et al., 2016, p. 179), contemporary alternative schools “are smaller, have lower student to teacher ratios, and have a greater degree of autonomy than their traditional counterparts” (Glasett, 2009, p. 16). Funding of schools varies depending on the state and nature of the program/school, but they are “often funded in an ad hoc manner, resulting in fewer resources than traditional schools” (ibid). The metric for what constitutes success in alternative education lags in contrast with traditional schools, cementing its secondary-tier status. As Hemmer et al. (2013, p. 658) outline in their review of Aron (2006), “historically, the success of these programs has been measured in terms of improved grades, attendance, and graduation rates; decreases in disruptive and violent behavior; and students having developed an improved sense of self and the choices they make.” These alternative school “measurements” of success according to Hemmer et al. (ibid) “are remnants of competency-based performance standards.” In particular, the academic standards are based primarily on standardized test scores, which alternative schools are judged on post-NCLB. In many states, including Texas, these standards are lower for alternative schools than traditional schools (Reyes, 2001). Indeed, school-wide success within alternative schools remains largely elusive and “few seemingly effective alternative programs have been identified and studied” (Glasett, 2009, p. 4). Hemmer et al. (2013,
p. 658) underscores some of the issues of equity that emerge in educational administration under this uneven accountability system, such as “when alternative school principals fail to promote student success because they know they operate within a weaker school accountability system.” Instead of focusing on excellence, teachers and principals of alternative school principals too often focus solely on the lower-expectations of “core basic courses, credit recovery or accelerated credit” (ibid)—a trend students in this study described as easy, ‘dumbed’ down, and boring coursework. In other words, this focus within alternative schools results in students having little to no access to a challenging and rigorous curriculum (Kim & Taylor, 2010).

True to its origins, “some degree of vocational training exists in most alternative programs” (Glassett, 2012, p. 16). Beyond vocational education, curriculum is organized in three related student tracks depending on the type of alternative program. Specifically, “students can use their tenure at most continuation schools to make-up deficient academic credits, return to a mainstream school, or to earn a high school diploma from the continuation high school” (Dunning-Lozano, 2016, p. 436). In her review of alternative education scholarship, Glassett (2012, p. 28) highlights “the lack of rigorous academic standards as a weakness in the alternative schools” as common finding across studies. Likewise, Muñoz (2004, p. 14), in his qualitative study of an alternative school, found “academic standards were lacking, pedagogical consistency was absent, and an institutional effort to self-evaluate was tacitly discouraged.” The consequences of this environment were stark for students in the study, as with few students graduating, matriculating back to their parent school, or continuing their education beyond high school (ibid). As I will elaborate later in the dissertation, these patterns were clearly present at Juan Diaz High School in this study as well. Moreover, access to critical or supplemental education resources like libraries or science and computer labs is often limited or non-existent in alternative schools making it more difficult for educators to provide robust learning environment (Foley and Pang, 2006, p. 19). It is important to note that the combination of remedial curriculum with a vocational focus can certainly be accompanied by supportive and caring school environments, staffed with thoughtful adults (Glassett, 2012, p. 28). Nonetheless, Glassett (ibid, p. 24) argues that the “dichotomy between creating a caring, supportive environment and delivering rigorous academic instruction” still “contributes to a socially unjust educational system.” Specifically, the
dynamic continues to reproduce dominant hierarchies of class (and, in turn, race) by applying culturally-biased norms resulting in the uneven disenfranchisement of students in traditionally underserved populations.

In addition to the diminished student experience, research on teachers within alternative schools also suggest a constrained and demeaning environment (Muñoz, 2004; Kim, 2011; McNulty and Roseboro, 2009). Kim and Taylor (2008, p. 215) found “alternative school teachers felt that they were treated as second-class citizens and [were] dissatisfied with the way that the school district treated them.” Like many of their students, teachers within alternative schools are often an afterthought with resources diverted elsewhere. Alternative schools, as Kim (2011, p. 79) underscores, can be “dumping grounds” for students and teachers alike, both of whom are often waiting to leave school entirely. In some instances, teaching in an alternative school is even used to "discipline" teachers who are not performing well at traditional schools, further fueling uneven dynamics within the school, wherein schools may then also struggle with less qualified than teachers than in mainstream programs (Geronimo, 2011, p. 435). Professional development among teachers in alternative schools is often limited with teachers having “no extended training to work with chronically disruptive students or students with special needs” (McNulty & Roseboro, 2009, p. 419).

Students attending alternative schools (Hemmer et al., 2013, p. 657) “have traditionally not had success in regular public school.” However, the criteria for success are not neutral and object, and research demonstrates how students are often “excluded from mainstream schools for violating white, middle-class norms” (Glassett, 2009, p. 30). In particular, students of color, low-income, and disabled student are more likely to be labeled as at risk of school failure “no matter how much potential they may have” (Kim, 2006, p. 2). Students typically end up in alternative schools because of “poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, suspension, pregnancy, and other similar factors associated with an early departure from high school” (Hemmer et al., 2013, p. 679). Relative to their peers in traditional schools, youth within alternative schools are considered “vulnerable to a variety of social and emotional risk factors” (Slaten et al., 2015, p. 44) including “poverty, peer victimization, family turmoil...mental health concerns (ibid, p. 42)” as well as “experience physical or emotional abuse, neglect, or abandonment...have fewer support systems; earn poor
grades; and live in high-crime neighborhoods” (Hemmer et al., 2013, p. 657). Moreover, these students are more likely than their peers at the traditional high school to have “higher mobility, live in foster care or with a relative other than a parent, be dependent on alcohol or drugs…” which means they are also likely to attend any school (including their alternative schools) for shorter durations of time (Glassett, 2009, p. 16). Consistently high pushout and recidivism rates plague students within alternative schools, and in Texas in particular, alternative education programs have a dropout rate five times higher than mainstream education programs (Geronimo, 2011, p. 435).

Research shows that students themselves are often aware of the unequal and disciplinary quality of their educational experience and are frustrated by it. Students describe alternative schools as constraining environments, where they feel they are “controlled, as opposed to being in control of their destiny.” (Glassett, 2009, p. 19). Glassett (ibid) also describes student’s perceptions of their achievements or failures often being determined by external factors, demonstrating their consciousness of the structural forces that shape their lives beyond their control. These feelings of control may be tied to the ways students attending alternative schools are stigmatized by the labels, like “deviant” (ibid, p. 19), that are applied to them by the educational system (McNulty and Roseboro, 2009; Sagor, 1999; Dunning-Lozano, 2016). This is in tandem with a broader public perception of alternative schools as places for presumably “bad” students who are “disruptive, deviant, and dysfunctional” (Kim, 2006, p. 3). These are deeply stigmatizing labels, and ones that many students carry with them and internalize throughout their education, a trend evident in my work at Juan Diaz. For example, McNulty and Roseboro (2009, p. 418) highlight the ways that the stigma of attending an alternative school can haunt students schooling experiences. They found that “alternative schools...serve to incubate stigmatized students in a collective with others who share their stigma,” and through this experience students “solidify their stigmatized identity” (ibid). In other words, alternative schools entrench stigmatized identities and make them permanent among students. If this is true (which based on my own fieldwork, I too, believe it is), it suggests that alternative school may “never be a normalizing space in the way that it was intended,” (ibid). This tension between alternative as deviant and traditional schools as “normal” intensifies a stigma that is often reinforced in many spaces by staff, other
students, teachers, and community members. Ironically, the effect is to encourage rather than eliminate antisocial behaviors (Glassett, 2009 p. 19). Not only do students (and some faculty) carry the heavily weighted stigma that comes with learning and teaching in an alternative schooling, but even the space of the school itself is often stigmatized as a site to contain the troublesome. Schools and programs themselves must contend with being positioned as spaces “to exist to keep all the “troublemakers” in one place,” thereby separating and protecting those who remain in traditional schools (Kim, 2006, p. 3). This logic is not unlike the logic of the prison itself, which is designed to separate danger or criminality from the population, and clearly demonstrates that the goal and function of alternative education goes far beyond offering “alternative solutions for students whose needs are not being met by traditional schools” (ibid). As I argue throughout the dissertation, this system is therefore more accurately described as one of warehousing and disposability.

The warehousing of students labeled “at-risk”—and undeniably racialized category (O’Connor et al., 2009) in alternative schools is well documented within educational scholarship (CSBE, 1950; Kelly, 1999). As I mentioned earlier, these structural critiques, which have been raised by scholars since the 1950s, underscore the ways “alternative schooling tends to perpetuate social, political, economic, and educational inequalities and continues to be an undercurrent of education without scrutiny” (Kim, 2006, p. 2). Alternative schools have been referred to as an educational “dumping ground” (Kim and Taylor, 2008), as “cooling out” spaces (Clark, 1968), as “warehouses for [the] academically underprepared” (Kelly, 1993, p. 12), as last-chance programs (Brown and Beckett, 2007), and as a release valve for traditional schools (Vogell, 2017a; Vogell, 2017b; Vogell and Fresques, 2017). This scholarship highlights the ways that comprehensive schools rely on alternative schools to disproportionately house and dispose of students living in precarity who “have arguably the highest need for social and emotional learning” (Slaten et al., 2015, p. 42) and yet are sent to under-resourced alternative programs that do not result in improved academic achievement” (Glassett, 2012, p. 4).

Connor et al. (2009, p. 2) demonstrate how data on these processes is often aggregated in ways that obscure “the variation in achievement that occurs within and across racial groups.” In particular, they
document how racialized academic gaps—a term/idea that many scholars, like Rosa and Flores (2017) claim is rooted in white supremacy and racism in and of itself—aren’t pre-existing prior to entering schools, but rather the gaps are actually produced within schools, as students of color are treated differently and subsequently marked and categorized as unsuccessful. This then works to “selectively highlight some achievement gaps and indices of underperformance and not others” (Connor et al., 2009). Because of this, the meaning of risk within schools often lacks coherence, is not static, and it is difficult to “make sense of risk as a social category” (ibid) outside of its racialized and racializing dimensions. Demonstrating the subjective and raced dimensions of labeling students “at-risk” (and the subjective interpretation of risk within a school) is therefore vital in denaturalizing the way that this category operates to structure the experiences of students of color.

The Texas Alternative Schooling Landscape

Alternative schooling in Texas is divided into three forms of schooling: Alternative Education Campuses (AEC) of choice, Disciplinary Alternative Education Program (DAEP), and Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program (JJAEP). DAEPs are defined as “an educational and self-discipline alternative instructional program, adopted by local policy, for students in elementary school through high school grades who are removed from their regular classes for mandatory or discretionary disciplinary reasons and placed in a DAEP” and “provides for the educational and behavioral needs of students, and that provides specialized supervision and counseling for its students” (TEA, 2007). JJAEPs are DAEPs “operated under the authority of a county juvenile justice board” (ibid), which are “exclusively mandated in urban areas for youth who are on probation or deferred prosecution” (ibid). In other words, these types of programs are explicitly disciplinary, closely tied to the criminal justice system, and mandated for large school districts. Students entering these programs have little choice in enrolling in a DAEP & JJAEP.

In Texas, alternative education is deeply entangled with disciplinary and criminalizing practices within schooling (Reyes, 2001; Vargas 2018). The Texas Legislature first established alternative schooling
policy aimed at discipline in 1969 with the establishment of the “Discipline: Law and Order,” subchapter in the Texas Education Code (Campell-Rhone, 2014). This policy “provided school administrators with the authority to suspend “incorrigible” students, and even bring proceedings in juvenile court against students “who persistently violate the reasonable rules and regulations of the school” (ibid, 21). Here, the state of Texas could claim to continue following the federal mandate of ‘education for all,’ but through an uneven and hierarchical system. From the state’s perspective, troublesome students who could not participate in (or were pushed out of) the traditional educational environment received a “complementary education” that was ostensibly supposed to be attentive to their needs, while “simultaneously promot[ing] an educational culture conducive to education for all traditional students” (ibid). The policy impetus for amending the way student discipline was handled at the state level was better surveillance and control in educational settings for “troubled” youth.

As argued by Texas Representative Alvin Granoff (a primary architect of state alternative education policy), instead of suspending youth and providing them an “unsupervised furlough to commit crimes,” alternative schools and programs offered a segregated space where “troubled” youth could be placed in in a “supervised educational setting” (ibid). In other words, a key purpose of alternative education is to surveil criminalized youth, and discipline them in an effort to prevent deviancy. In 1995, legislation for DAEPs were updated “requir[ing] each school district to provide a DAEP for the purpose of removing dangerous students from their classrooms without interrupting their education” (ibid). The amendments to the Texas Education Code mandated student placement in DAEPs if a student had committed or engaged in: “felonies, assaults or terrorist threat, using, providing, or possessing drugs using, providing, or possessing alcohol, glue, or aerosol chemicals, public lewdness or indecent exposure” (Reyes, 2001, p. 542). New offense codes, like the prohibiting of tire deflation devices, are added and updated nearly every legislative session to the Texas Education Code (Reyes, 2001). Here the legislation adapted the “Texas Education Code to require each school district to develop a DAEP [Disciplinary Alternative education Programs] for students found guilty of serious or persistent misbehavior” (ibid, p. 541).
The category of JJAEP was added in 1996 to address students who had been convicted, or in some cases simply accused, of a serious crime in addition to those students expelled for violations of the Student Code of conduct while placed in a DAEP. Through these JJAEPs, Texas created an “educative” space and new tier of schooling “reserved for the most dangerous students” (Reyes, 2006), and alongside existing models of disciplinary alternative schooling, the schools worked to warehouse primarily urban youth (in particular, youth of color) living in precarity. Housed under the Department of Juvenile Justice, rather than Education, the Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program (JJAEP) is designed specifically for urban areas, as juvenile boards are mandated to operate JJAEP in Texas counties with populations greater than 125,000. While the atmosphere of many alternative schools is more disciplinary than traditional schools, the JJAEP programs often have much more restrictive and stringent environments. In Houston, multiple JJAEPs have been accused of severe violation and unsafe environments (Berradi et al., 2017). And yet, enrollment in JJAEP is often court-mandated, but “the largest number of JJAEP referrals comes from DAEPs and other school district referrals for the discretionary violation of "serious and persistent misbehavior"” (Reyes, 2006, p. 88).

The 1993 the Texas legislature mandated the formulation of accountability systems for all Texas schools, including DAEP programs. For alternative schools, “a set of alternative performance measures for campuses serving at-risk students” was developed in 1995 cementing different metrics for schools designated as alternative. The new accountability system in addition to the creation of a charter school system in 1994, enabled schools like Juan Diaz to emerge as the initial cap of 100 charter holders was waived “for any school that agreed to take on enrollment with more than 75 percent of students meeting the state’s definition of “at-risk” of dropping out” (Thevenot, 2009). It is within this context that Alternative Education Campuses (AEC) became a viable, and often preferred, schooling placement when compared to DAEP & JJAEP. Where those types of schools were positioned as corrective, mandatory, and constricting, AEC, which could either be charter or public, were envisioned as a space designed specifically for the accelerated remediation of vulnerable youth. AEC are defined as “a campus at which at least 75 percent of students are considered at risk of dropping out of school and at least 50 percent of students are enrolled in
grades 6–12” (TEA Accountability Manual, 2018). Critically, AEC “must provide accelerated instructional services” to their students in the hopes of getting them back on track to graduation.

As the next two chapters elaborate on, there is an economy of vulnerable youth that are marked as “at-risk”, devalued, and positioned as expendable by schools across Houston. In Chapter 4, I describe in more detail how these processes are exacerbated by the system of standardized testing, wherein test scores work as a key indicator of student desirability to a school and a main reason for student push out to schools like Juan Diaz. However, alternative schools are not immune to the pressures of the testing system that shapes push out from traditional schools. For Juan Diaz, accountability begins and ends with standardized testing. It was a dominant force that largely exacerbated Juan Diaz’s status on the periphery.

As an AECs of choice in the state of Texas, Juan Diaz is subject to an alternative form of accountability, different from traditional schools. DAEP and JJAEP alternative schools are not assigned accountability ratings and “the attendance and performance results of a student” are “attributed to his or her home campus” (TEA, 2018). In contrast, however, as an AECs of choice, accountability at Juan Diaz is governed by AEA (Alternative Education Accountability), which is “comprised of a modified graduation rate component calculation in the Student Achievement domain and modified cut points across all domains.” For example, with different (lower) metrics of accountability, what would be a failing test score within a traditional school is weighed as a passing score within an alternative school. According to the TEA (2007), because of the guideline that states that “accountability advisory groups consistently recommend evaluating AECs by separate (AEA) provisions due to the large number of students (at least 75% of the student body must be considered at risk) served in alternative education programs on AECs and to ensure these unique campus settings are appropriately evaluated for accountability.” In this way, the marker for success and acceptable performance at Juan Diaz was structurally lower because of the assumptions about the abilities and capacities of the student body—and these are low standards students both complained about and internalized (as I’ll elaborate more on in Chapters 4 and 5). Yet despite this, Juan Diaz continually struggled to meet AEA standards as the change in standards was not accompanied with a change in resource allocation or support.
What’s more, the structure of accountability in the state incentivizes the pushing out of youth positioned as “at-risk”. Juan Diaz is positioned by the state as a school specifically tailored to addressing the needs of at-risk students, yet in practice it struggles with the task at hand as it is limited by forces largely out of its control. Instead, its purpose, like many other alternative schools across the country is to warehouse vulnerable youth, in order to ease the pressure for surrounding schools (an argument I’ll develop more in Chapter 4). The students caught in this machinery of educational disposability are “the throwaway (object) in production,” and face the brunt of the impact (Khanna, 2009, p. 186). They are the ones who go through school feel like an afterthought or unwanted or worse and are expected to accept their “vulnerabilities without…the tools for genuine transformation of those systemic processes that render [them] insecure in the first place” (Evans and Giroux, 2015, p. 4).

This section described the decades of evidence accounting for the ways that alternative schools are treated as dumping groups for non-normative and marginalized student populations, and then systemically under-supported in their efforts to support the (supposedly) most vulnerable. Why given this do alternative schools nonetheless continue to be proposed as an educative, if not redemptive, mechanism for vulnerable youth? Perhaps other forces are at play. Moreover, what if this structural disadvantage is more than just an unfortunate result of a struggling system, but rather a key—even purposeful—outcome? What if that purposeful outcome of structural inequity is a vital mechanism of U.S. schooling systems? Rather than envisioning alternative schools through a reformist framework that argues simply tweaking the system would allow them to achieve their stated mission, what emerges when we examine them is rather a deeper imperative for structural change. I argue that the structural inequity and depression of alternative schooling—unevenly aimed at racialized, non-normative bodies—is actually a technology to secure the normative structure of traditional comprehensive schools. This system is one of disposability and it is part and parcel to the larger unethical and damaging devaluation of racialized youth.

Even when cast as benevolent—when offered to Black and Brown populations as a solution to their exclusion from white institutions of learning—I argue the alternative school serves as a critical salve that helps maintain broader systems of inequity. The functioning of alternative schools as sites meant to absorb
and contain surplus or unwanted subjects is not a recent phenomenon. This argument has been touched on, danced around, and implied in the existing literature on alternative education. And yet, while some scholars have pointed to the way that alternative schools have functioned as spaces of disposability, their response is often reformist. The message seems to that if we simply “destigmatize” or reduce the “warehousing” quality of alternative schools, they—like their students themselves—might be redeemed. Throughout this dissertation I press against this reformist response to the harm that happens in and through systems of alternative education. I argue that the inequity that persists in alternative schools (and the impacts on students and staff that comprise them) is purposeful and useful, and mere reform cannot address their deeper role in producing harm and asymmetrical power relations. Thus, as the next section makes the case that alternative schools work as sites of disposability, I also hope to lay the foundations for later discussions within this dissertation’s conclusion that question whether alternative schools can (or should) be reformed, or even exist. The next section will develop this argument, situating it directly within the literatures on disposability.

**Theories of Disposability**

We, especially as U.S. Americans, are used to non-human things being disposable. Buy, use, throw away, replace. Yet, the ease in which we practice the rhythm of disposability, which is both banal and widely understood, does not mean that its existence is arbitrary or (perhaps even worse) innocent. The process and practice of disposability in all its iterations, is deeply race, classed, and gendered. And also fundamental to the reanimation of our late capitalist, settler colonial, and racist systems and institutions. The management of waste, excess, and surplus, often hidden in plain sight, is a core component of any contemporary/neoliberal corporate/business endeavor. Perhaps, we, as US educators, are more comfortable discussing the disposability of the inhuman—the water bottles that we recycle or don’t, our easily broken iphones, the food we ingest (or don’t). But, add humans to the machinery of disposability and our comfort turns to anxiety, particularly within education circles.
This discomfort may lie in the ways that discourses surrounding schooling practices and education policy in the U.S. are often read through reformist or incremental frameworks. This research draws on theories of disposability and waste to examine the processes and machinery that position vulnerable Latinx students and the alternative school that houses them as disposable. The issues and problems that lie in education, such as tracking and segregation, through these dominant approaches require “tinkering,” (Tyack, 1995) rather than wholesale structural and institutional change. For example, de facto segregation within schools is presented as problem with a solution (integration) rather than symptomatic of larger violent socio-political and historical forces such as racism, White supremacy, and settler colonialism. Here I follow Paperson (2010, p. 8) in a “view[ing] the dislocation of people into subordinated positions as part of the modern school system, rather than an accident of discrimination.” This framing of schools as integral the settler colonial project (Tuck and Yang, 2012), presents the practices and politics of education, not as happenstance, but as deeply intentional, reflective of the long and continued history of violence and discrimination in U.S. schools. Alternative schools as structurally inequitable schooling institutions, which house some of the most vulnerable youth, is not an accident or oversight on the part of education stakeholders. They are integral to schooling systems, yet largely overlooked and under resourced. Alternative schools are an example of what scholar Espritru (2003, p. 5) calls “differential inclusion,” where minoritized peoples are “deemed integral to the nation…but integral only or precisely because of their designated subordinate standing.” School systems, particularly those in urban districts, are deeply interconnected impacting each other’s funding, resources, student populations, and academic performance. The ways schools are connected however, is purposefully inequitable. As a warehousing space for “at risk” youth who typically deserve greater resources, to what extent do nearby comprehensive traditional schools rely on structurally inequitable alternate schools? How might success at one school be predicated on the structural failure of another?

With roots in Marxist and Feminist thought, disposability theories expose the way late capitalist institutions and systems, such as education, position human bodies and experiences, particularly those that are most vulnerable, as expendable and replaceable (Giroux, 2012; Wright, 2006). For scholars engaging
in theories of disposability, “the very notion of “human disposability” is fundamentally normative in nature,” (Rocoo, 2016, p. 108) particularly inflamed within neoliberal frameworks, an “inevitable outcome of modernization, and an inseparable accompaniment of modernity” (Razack, 2016, p. 299). Disposability is an essential thread in our U.S. social systems that binds, organizes, and differentiates. Here I use follow Giroux and others in deploying disposability cautiously and purposefully. As Evans Giroux assert, (2015, pp. 64-65) “[Disposability] centers our attention more on the verb to dispose, thereby moving us beyond the unavoidable production of excess waste to take into account the activity (who and what is being disposed of), the experience (the subjective stakes), and the state of relations (the machinery of disposability) that permit particular forms of wastefulness.”

Practices of human disposability are not new, the logics or beliefs underpinning the objectification reformat and shift depending on the context. Within the U.S education system, neoliberalism has dominated and colored discourses on schooling. The public component of U.S. schooling has come under scrutiny as “the infusion of market-based mechanisms in education increasingly leads reformers to frame and approach public schools more like private goods to be sourced based on supply, demand, competition, and consumer (e.g. family) resources rather than ensuring that high quality education is provided to all students as a civil right,” (Wilson, 2015, p. 6). The privatization efforts in U.S. schools are not only emblematic of larger changes in the U.S. late capitalist economy, but also a critical component a “much broader political and economic movement to erode public property, space, infrastructure, and government,” (Ibid, p. 7). In context of schools, answers to questions such as “where will our money be best spent?” or “who or what will provide the greatest return on investment?” have deep material consequences for students, teachers, and schools. The solutions to complex educational issues such as tracking are to be solved, presumably, by competition and privatization in a zero sum and dog-eat-dog educational landscape. As Lipschitz (2015, p. 303) underscores, “one recurrent feature of neoliberalism is the assertion that capitalist market relations should be the model for all social relations” and “in practice, this often means that exchange value has innate social value and that people are consumers, investors, and owners rather than workers, citizens, and community members.” Student success and worth is tethered to neoliberal ideas
of normative progression, property/ownership, and discipline. Mirroring the logic of disciplinary alternative schools, “systemic social problems are attributed to the private and personal failings of unworthy individuals to be solved not by political deliberation and decision making, but by a combination of external technocratic expertise and internal self-management,” within neoliberal education systems (ibid, p. 316). In this pull yourself up by your bootstraps educational terrain, the myth of meritocracy and equal opportunity enable success and failure to be naturalized – you ostensibly get what you earn. Here “the dialectical relationship between exceptionality and disposability” is a “key element in the neoliberal educational philosophy,” (ibid, p. 305). The few who are recognized as succeeding under structural inequitable schooling conditions “are judged to be exceptional, while writing off the rest as disposable,” (ibid).

In 2017, investigative journalists, Vogell and Fresques (2017) found that high achieving schools in Tampa had “dodge[d] accountability ratings by steering low achievers to alternative programs.” The alternative program in Orlando, Sunshine, would accept (ibid) “cast-offs from…Orlando high schools in a mutually beneficial arrangement” where local high schools could maintain a high graduation rate and state ratings, while “Sunshine collects enough school district money to cover costs and pay its management firm, Accelerated Learning Solutions (ALS), a more than $1.5 million-a-year “management fee,” 2015 financial records show — more than what the school spends on instruction.” This practice of (ibid) “funnel[ing] thousands of disadvantaged students… into alternative charter schools” provides students a severely limited educational experience, “where hundreds of them [students enrolled in Sunshine] exit quickly with no degree and limited prospects.” This practice was not only limited to the Orlando education system, but revealing of a (ibid) “national pattern” where their analysis found that “Orlando is one of 83 school districts, from Newark to Los Angeles, where regular schools increased their graduation rates by at least one percentage point from 2010 to 2014 while sending more students into alternative education” (ibid.) The value of students at Sunshine, like those at Juan Diaz, is reoriented, emerging in relation to “normative students.” Here, the “condition of disposability” (Rocco, 2016, p. 108) is “fundamentally normative in nature” (ibid)—meaning disposability is a product of the devaluation of non-normative subjects. For
students in alternative schools, one’s disposability “reflects a view of a societal status that exists in liminal spaces outside the institutional principles, spaces and activities that structure the normative boundaries that define the “normal,” the “legitimate,” the “rational” and “the legal” on the one hand, and the “foreign,” “strange,” “outsider,” “threat” and “criminal,” or “unruly” on the other” (ibid). Students in alternative schools occupy this liminal schooling space with little governmental oversight and on the periphery of U.S. schooling policy, concerns, and research. As I’ll continue to argue throughout the dissertation, the production of racialized students as “at-risk” functions to enable their disposability—a process with deep implications for schools and students themselves.

Disposability & White Supremacy

In tracing educational mechanisms of disposability within alternative schools, this dissertation is also deeply shaped by the long history of scholarship and activism on white supremacy and racial control. There is an expansive body of literature that establishes the way that racialized subjects are produced, devalued, dehumanized, criminalized, surveilled, stripped of resources, subjected to violence, and alienated from their identities, communities, and cultures (e.g. Cacho, 2012; Golash-Boza, 2018; Moon-Kie and Vargas, 2021). While race was rarely spoken of among my respondents, the processes I’ll describe throughout the dissertation are embedded within institutional and social worlds structured by white supremacy. Thus, in understanding the mechanisms of disposability at work, I argue we must attend to the way that the marking, devaluing, and disposability of students is tied to race.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I align myself with racial scholars who conceptualize race as a social construction aimed at producing and sustaining systematic, structural oppression. Race has been variously defined and is conventionally understood as “the belief in visible, permanent, hierarchical differences between human groups defined in terms of biological, physical appearance, or ancestry” (Fleming 2018, 11). However, conceptions of race as a static—even essential—aspect of one’s being belie the realities of race as an on-going set of socially constructed discourses, categories, and materially
produced realities. Thus, critical scholars of race have long argued that race is not fixed or natural but rather produced historically, politically, and socially (e.g. Omi and Winant, 1994; Fields and Fields, 2012; Ngai, 2014).

In particular, contemporary categories of race were socially constructed and naturalized by Europeans “for the purpose of justifying their exploitation and domination of people they conveniently depicted as inferior” (Flemming, 2018, 11). Thus, the production of race was central to the ideological foundations of imperialism and settler colonialism (e.g. Tuck and Yang, 2012), slavery and anti-Black racism (e.g. McKittrick, 2015, Jackson, 2020; Hartman, 1997; Hartman 2007; Gilmore, 2007), and anti-immigrant nativism and xenophobia (e.g. Ngai, 2014; Cacho, 2012). The historical and contemporary process of racialization and the production of race has functioned (and continue to function) to naturalize race, producing privileges and benefits for those considered white. These are the structures that characterize white supremacy, defined as “the social, political, and economic dominance of people socially defined as ‘white’” (Flemming, 2018, p. 15). Similar ideas are embedded within concepts of structural and institutional racism (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967), which demand we look at the ways racist harm and control happen through institutions of our society. Institutional or structural racism, can therefore be defined as, “the policies, programs, and practices of public and private institutions that result in greater rates of poverty, dispossession, criminalization, illness, and ultimately mortality” (Taylor, 2016, p. 8). Boiling this down even further, Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007, p. 28) defines racism as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group differentiated vulnerability to premature death.” In these usages, white supremacy and racism not limited to individualized “racists,” those in the KKK, or neo-Nazis.

In fact, racist intent matters less than the racist outcomes. Thus, white supremacy is all around us: embedded in our media, in our laws, in social practices, in linguistic norms, and in our institutions—including our schools. While certainly individually racist teachers and school administrators exist, within this landscape, the far more insidious problems are structural. Even amid schools, classrooms, and educational environments ripe with the best of intentions and supposedly colorblind practice, racially uneven outcomes speak to a structurally racist system.
The entanglement of schooling and white supremacy has long been established and studied by scholars (e.g. Fine 2004; Provenzo, 2012; Sanchez, 1940; Vaught, 2001). With the field of education, Critical Race Theory (CRT) has had a particularly impactful legacy in developing an analysis of the deep entrenchment and banality of racism in U.S. educational institutions—for example, asking why unequal education and re-segregation remain intractable problems even after desegregation and the victories of the Civil Rights era. Interventions from scholars such as Tara Yosso (2006), Patricia Hill Collins (1995; 2019), Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998), Cheryl Harris (1993), William Tate IV (1995), and Adrienne Dixson (2006) expose white supremacy in education and challenge the racism with dominant educational discourse and practices, including (but not limited to) deficit models education (e.g. Valenzuela, 1999), meritocratic notions of student “grit” that ignore structural barriers, and the racial implication of metrics for measuring achievement gaps. Additionally, innumerable scholars have contributed to the analysis of schools and schooling as both a product of race and as a space where race is produced in concert with other systems and institutions (e.g. Ferguson, 2000; Shange, 2019; Rosa and Flores, 2017; Rosa, 2019; Pacinci-Ketchabaw et al., 2014; Paperson, 2010). This work in CRT and other critical work on race in education demonstrates the subtle ways racialization and white supremacy shape curriculum and students schooling experiences in asymmetrical ways. For example, in introducing the concept of “subtracting schooling,” Valenzuela (1999) describes how public education functioned to extract identity and culture from Mexican American youth in the education system. Likewise, Paperson (2010) describes similar (and deeply damaging) processes of assimilation into empire and whiteness as a form of “colonial schooling,” and the wide writing on the notion of a “hidden curriculum” establishes the ways education reproduces social hierarchy, normalizes whiteness, and works to discipline and assimilate non-white students into normative ways of being. Thus, the literature on race and education establishes how the very metrics of success in schooling are often predicated on whiteness as the norm, and for students of color this is both alienating, and can also expose them to criminalization, surveillance, and other forms of disciplinary control. These processes—including the assimilationist, subtractive, and disciplinary dimensions of white supremacy—will be evident throughout this dissertation study of Latinx youth at Juan Diaz High School.
In addition to the often subtle and routinized forms of racialized assimilation and disciplinary correction for non-white students, examinations of white supremacy in school settings also unevenly expose students of color to more explicit and direct form of control, surveillance, criminalization, violence, and even pre-mature death. The work of Ann Ferguson (2000) in *Bad Boys*, for instance, highlights the ways anti-Blackness and masculinity work through everyday U.S. schooling to criminalize the behavior, expressions, and ways of being for Black boys in elementary settings. Ferguson’s text, like much of the scholarship that draws on CRT, brings to the fore the way whiteness and white supremacy operate as the norm against which racialized students are measured, surveilled, and disciplined—as well as how criminalization operates as a form of racial control (e.g. Alexander, 2012; Davis, 2003; Gilmore, 2007; Kaba, 2021) not just for adults, but for children as well. These processes are accounted for within the large and growing body of research on the school-to-prison-pipeline, which exposes the deeply entangled and co-constitutive relationship between the U.S. educational system and the U.S. criminal justice system, such that youth of color and low-income youth are disproportionately disciplined, policed, and routed out of school and toward futures of incarceration (Ferguson, 2000; Meiners, 2010; Giroux, 2009; Kim et al., 2010; Saltman and Gabbard, 2003; Ayers et al., 2001; Lopez, 2003; Skiba et al., 2002; Winn, 2011). Policing, racialized control, and discipline are often at the center of these examinations, which work to expose the everyday carceral logics and logistics that are asymmetrically applied to racialized students, teachers, and schools. Such criminalizing processes will be evident, once more, in Chapter 5, where I will demonstrate how racialized Latinx students at Juan Diaz were treated like a problem, marked as “bad” and risky, at times criminalized, pushed out of their schools, and routed into an alternative school that was often also very carceral in its functioning.

In addition to the scholarship on race and white supremacy in education, my thinking about race within this dissertation is also greatly guided by scholarship that thinks about how race operates in demarking the bounds of who is counted as fully human (Cacho, 2012; Hartman, 1997; Hartman, 2007; Jackson, 2020; Mbeme, 2019; Mckittrick, 2015; Weheliye, 2014). This theorizing has been particularly rich within Black Studies, Black Feminisms, and other work on anti-blackness (Browne, 2015; Mckittrick,
that chart how ideas of the human have been predicated on a racialized other. Within my own work, I chart how racialized youth are also differentially valued within the education system. While my dissertation largely engages with Latinx experiences and identities, I have learned to take seriously the way that anti-Blackness shapes ideas of Latinidad.

For example, critical scholarship on Blackness and Brownness has challenged the way Latinidad has often erased the experiences of Afro-Latinos, while indirectly benefitting from a proximity to whiteness that is contrasted against Blackness and through anti-Blackness (Vargas, 2018). Here, my own thinking about Latinidad therefore draws on ideas of Latinidad that are examined relationally alongside other racialization processes (e.g. Pulido, 2018; Shange, 2019), as well as those who continually assert that fluid, shifting, and instability of racial categories and identity (Muñoz, 2020). In Chapter 5, in a section exploring Brown subjectivities, I draw on the work of José Estaban Muñoz (ibid), whose work on Brownness describes race as an affective assemblage that is constantly in flux—producing both depressive conditions (e.g. the feeling of being a problem) as well as opportunities for creativity and community (e.g. in the idea of a “Brown Commons”).

Ultimately, across these various and wide-reaching literatures, I am most guided by the political demands of this literature on structural racism, power, and identities. Much of the ever-growing drive within the literature on racism and structural violence, criminalization, racialized control—as well as in the calls of anti-racist activists—has been to forge an abolitionist politics that works to imagine new ways to structure society outside of the current systems of white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism, and heterosexism (Davis et al., 2021; Gilmore, 2007; Kaba, 2021; Wolcott, 2021). If structures are violent, they argue, we must abolish those structures. Violent and racist systems cannot simply be tweaked and reformed, but rather require working towards entirely new systems of organization and relation with one another. Within the context of this research, these political interventions that demand radical change to structurally racist problems (ibid), deeply informed my approach to alternative education, wherein (over time) I became increasingly skeptical about the potential to reform a system that functions to reproduce racialized,
structural harm for so many young people. Within the machinery of disposability, it is not the people are
should be treated as disposable—but rather the machine itself.

Youth Subjectivities And Youth Research

This research develops a structural critique of the way that the education system produces alternative
schools as sites of racialized disposability. However, this argument is most centrally guided by my work
directly with youth within this system. Youth here are not simply passive subjects upon whom discursive
constructions are mapped. Rather, they constantly navigate the way that are positioned within the education
system, and how they make sense of their subjectivities alongside their schooling. Making sense of the
experiences and subjectivities of presumably at-risk Latinx youth, therefore, requires thoughtful
consideration of student identity as something shifting and unfixed. It also requires ethical frameworks that
take seriously youth knowledge about their identities and their lives, and is attuned to dynamics of power
in the production of knowledge about youth subjects. This section elaborates on the three core literatures
that guide my approach to these issues: 1) the anthropology of becoming, 2) Critical Youth Studies, and 3)
feminist theory and methodologies.

Anthropology of becoming

Walking through the school parking lot back to my car after my first day, I wondered if my plan to enlist
student research participation is going to work. The goal was to conduct a youth participatory research
project, but when I introduced my research plan to Mr. Phan’s (pseudonym) class on the first day, few of
the students seemed interested. The planning and organizing was already in order. I had permission, space,
and questions. I only needed the students to work alongside. I couldn’t help but think I was the problem.
Was I coming off as trustworthy? Maybe they thought I would be a snitch? Their skepticism of teachers
and administrators at Juan Diaz felt like it bled onto me. I tried to dress and speak in ways that
communicated a sense of openness and care, but I got the feeling that what they were looking for was reciprocity that persists over time. Anyone can be nice once, but what about when things go awry? They would have come across people like me before – degree and raced educators who use million-dollar words, gesture to niceties, but rarely stick around through the trouble. My brown skin was common there, and it invited skepticism as much as it did camaraderie. After spending so much time experiencing the dislocation of being in predominantly white spaces I was not used to feeling this dislocation among those who looked like me. After a week passed, and I began to have serious doubts about whether or not I was going to be able to make entry or even be able to consistently engage with students. Most students worked after school, some were habitually absent, and others had family obligations before and after school hours. I secretly wondered if I was qualified to do this. Another week later, and my worry flowered into disorientation. It was clear then that my dissertation would take a different form than I intended. I just didn’t know where to look. “Hey mister,” someone half-yelled, half-whispered from across the room. I looked up and saw a small group of Latinx students gesturing for me to come closer. “Why don’t you just come and chill with us during lunch and shit?” I left my laptop and the accompanying list of questions behind me at the desk. Looking back at that generous moment of invitation, I wonder if they had been reading my anxiety of feeling like an outsider all along. It was in this way that my research participants chose me, and that I realized I needed to think differently about my approach to anthropological research.

Embracing a focus on the idea of “becoming” allowed me to move past my assumptions about the research process and my participants. It allowed me to follow the emergent pathways that took shape through my work with youth, recognizing their entanglement in social systems, while also rejecting the idea that these stories could define or contain them. In adopting these approaches to becoming, this project is deeply informed by the work of medical anthropologists João Biehl and Peter Locke. In 2010, Biehl and Locke introduced these ideas in a now widely-cited article in *Current Anthropology*, titled “Deleuze and the Anthropology of Becoming.” Drawing heavily on the work of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, they read anthropology alongside and through Deleuze’s concept of becoming to “reassert the symbiotic relationship between close empirical engagement with people (through fieldwork) and
theoretical innovation in anthropology.” The authors highlight their concern with how readily anthropologists have deployed grand meta-narratives and theories to understand dynamic, ever-unfolding processes. A Deleuzian reading of anthropology gestures to multiplicities, entanglements, and co-constitutions.

Deleuze understood becoming as a departure from Platonian thinking where “being and identity” are foundational (Stagoll 2005, p. 25). For Deleuze, this form of arboreal thinking provides the basis of Enlightenment thought that continues to dominate in the West. “This does not mean valuing becoming over being,” as cultural theorist Claire Colebrook (2002, p. 125) underscores, but rather “it means doing away with the opposition altogether… there ‘is’ nothing other than the flow of becoming.” While becoming might often represent for many a transition from one state to another or “something that a being does or goes through,” Deleuze conceptualizes it differently (ibid, p. 145). “Rather than a product, or final interim,” Stagoll (2005, p. 26) writes, “becoming is the very dynamism of change, situated between heterogeneous terms and trending towards no particular goal or end state.” Within this conceptualization, there are no beginnings or endings, but rather only the ever-unfolding middle where “the present is merely the productive movement of becoming, the moment correlating to the productive threshold of force” (ibid, p. 27).

For Biehl and Locke (2017, p. 4), Deleuze’s notion of becoming is a useful means to understand contemporary ethnography, where “we always begin our work in the midst of social life, within asymmetries and constraints of all kinds, traversed by myriad flows that are of indeterminate origin and destination, both vital and deadly.” The entanglements we, as humans, find ourselves in are every-unfolding and an anthropology of becoming attunes ethnographic fieldwork to the dynamism of our worlds. Biehl and Locke outline three “distinct, though, related dimensions” (ibid, p. 5) of the anthropology of becoming: a) the plasticity and entanglement of our material worlds (including between the human and inhuman), b) the open-ended incompleteness of life and history, and c) the attentiveness to the unknown as a productive element of research and theory. These insights each guide this project in distinct ways, and I engage them
each separately in the sections below in order to demonstrate how they took form in the theories and methodologies of this dissertation.

**The Entanglement of Subjects**

Biehl and Locke (2017, p. 6) assert that the first dimension of the anthropology of becoming “emphasizes the plastic nature of human-nonhuman interactions and acknowledges that people belong simultaneously to multiple systems that themselves are made up of people, things, and forces with varying degrees of agentive capacity” (ibid, p. 6). Biehl and Locke (ibid, p. 8) argue that “the concept of becoming destabilizes the primacy of being and identity in the Western Philosophical tradition,” the widely recognized origin of both U.S. cultural anthropology and U.S. Education Studies. They suggest that a focus instead on becoming (ibid) engenders anthropologists to “attend… to [the] shifting sets of relations and the ongoing production of difference in the world.” The anthropology of becoming gestures away from a stable, static, and fully autonomous and knowable “I” as well as analytics/frameworks that position “people in terms of core principles or as fully bounded by structure or form” (ibid).

Within much of educational research, U.S. schools have traditionally been studied as a “bounded system, a container of classroom processes and curricular texts, an institutional shell waiting to be filled up by the actions of teacher, students, and administrators.” (Nespor, 1997, p. xi) While useful in many regards, this approach limits the scope of where, when, and how teaching, learning, and other critical processes take shape outside what is considered the “educational context”. As Nespor (ibid) illustrated in his now canonical study of a North Carolina elementary school, “educational effects” in U.S. schools are “jointly produce[d]” and “inextricably connected” to “cities, politics, neighborhoods, businesses, and popular culture.” Schools like Juan Diaz, are deeply interstitial spaces iteratively produced and ever-unfolding through a confluence of people, policy, and state control that reaches far beyond the walls of the classroom. The Latinx youth within Juan Diaz are a deeply embedded part of these processes and thus, intermeshed in more than systems of education. The criminal justice system, immigration and enforcement, the labor
economy, U.S. neoliberal school reform, the drug economy, and environmental politics are just some of the many systems that the youth found themselves entangled with. The landscapes of these entanglements, however, are deeply uneven and contextual with different intensities among individual students, dependent on their particular set of relations at any given time. For example, a student given a citation to appear before court because of truancy can be understood as an emergent set of relations between systems of education and a system of incarceration that occurs through the embodied experiences of the student. Additionally, U.S. schools have long and continuous investments in the asymmetrical and hierarchical categorization of students. Categories such as at risk, disabled, and English Language Learner are positioned as objective and accurate labels, but in practiced are deeply raced, classed, and gendered attempts to capture the unruly lives of students. Becoming usefully undermines the stability of these categories and the way they produce difference for students catalogued as bad, at risk, and susceptible.

**Incompleteness**

Becoming, Biehl and Locke (2017, p. 6) argue, has a way of “occup(ying) its own kind of temporality that unfolds in the present: a dynamic interpenetration of past, future, actual, and virtual.” In other words, the present is a temporal agglomeration of dynamic forces. Becoming is not without constraints, and yet, as Biehl and Locke highlight, it is “the indeterminacies that keep history open, and it [becoming] allows us to see what happens in the meantime of human struggle and daily life” (ibid). Undertaking ethnographic work positioned alongside notions of becoming challenges us to widen our anthropological scope to include an open-ended vision of life that is “immanent and open to new relations-camaraderie-and trajectories” (ibid, p. 317). Individual lives are not pre-determined and institutions are rendered not as static and complete structures that control our lives, but instead for what they are—as incomplete mechanisms riddled with paradoxes, contradictions, and gaps. Structures and institutions are not discarded, but are instead constructed in a way so that everyday lives and “actions are contingent without being inevitable,” and exist as sites of possibility and becoming (ibid, p. 321).
As outlined in greater detail below, the experiences of racialized youth in the U.S. are often presented through narrow tropes that do little to complicate the richness of each life. Colonial, racist, sexist, ableist and heteronormative stereotypes structure so much of the worlds that youth occupy in the U.S. When we, as educational researchers, focus on the experiences of marginalized peoples it is often only to reify a totalizing sense of victimhood through parochial stories of pain (Tuck, 2009). At Juan Diaz, violent assumptions about at-risk youth (e.g. assumptions of laziness, sexual promiscuity, lack of self-control, and apathy) were mapped onto the students’ bodies in ways that were painfully familiar to me as a Latino. I’ve felt the way that the white gaze often frames by skin and body through fear. Time and time again during my fieldwork, I saw the students I worked with being dismissed and/or ignored. Their thoughts and ideas about the world were usually thought to be unoriginal or inexperienced. Without much basis, people (community members, teachers, admin) thought they knew completely who these students were and what they were capable of. Perceptions of students being stupid, lazy, violent, promiscuous, loud, and unappreciative hung thick, like smoke, in the air. Guided by my own ethical stances towards doing research with youth (informed by anthropology of becoming, as well as CYS, feminism, and critical race theory), I rejected these perceptions of youth, and sought to work against them throughout the research. I regularly asserted their intelligence, hard work, and knowledge when I spoke to them about themselves, their capacities, and their futures. I wished for them to see why I cared about their voices in this research itself, but more importantly for them to know that they were smart, good, and valued. This was an ethical stance of my research methods, but it also informed how I theoretically approached their subjectivities.

The trajectory of most of the students at Juan Diaz, as they made clear to me in interviews time and again, was already written. But, what would it mean to understand and present their lives as incomplete, always partial, and pregnant with potential? How might this ethic of intangibility be used to buttress against the abundance of static tropes and narratives that racialized U.S. youth living in ghettoized communities encounter on a daily basis (ibid) The incompleteness of fieldwork and analysis that the Anthropology of Becoming embraces is a powerful ethic (and useful analytical tool) to engage with the experiences of racism or the “state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to
premature death.” (Gilmore, 2007, p. 28). The multiplicity and open-endeness that follows an anthropology of becoming seeks to disrupt tidy narratives of racialized and fully knowable subjects by drawing on the intangibility of our collective lived experiences, gesturing to creative and liberatory futures.

**(Un)knowing**

The third dimension of an anthropology of becoming “involves an attentiveness to the unknown, both as a critical feature of people and materials worlds and as productive force in research and conceptual work” (Biehl & Locke, 2017, p. 6). The “imponderabilia of everyday life” (to borrow from Branislow Malinowski, 1961) becomes a central subject, which emerges to challenge, extend, and possibly rupture theory and structural constraints. Understanding human subjects and their entanglements through becoming “creates the conditions of possibility for moments of surprise and the sustained, open-ended engagements that wonder, itself always historically and locally situated, precipitates” (Biehl & Locke, 2017, p. 6). In this way, empirical research is always incomplete and unfinished.

The contradictions, paradoxes, and surprises that emerge in everyday life are spaces that move and complicate theory, helping me to frame my understanding of schools, youth, institutions, and policies as fractured, incomplete, and produced in the present. In practice, this meant being open to efflorescent lines of flight in fieldwork that may or may not be directly related to the overarching research project. Participant observation within this framework embraces the emergent and intangibility of ethnographic fieldwork with human subjects. Sometimes this meant going along with students as they traversed their many worlds. Other times it meant slowing and taking notice of something that caught my attention. A policy, a word, a feeling — could be an impetus to follow, inquire, and dive deeper. Sometimes I wandered way off track wondering along the way if it was even helpful to my research project. Often these were the moments that were the richest and most impactful. Biehl and Locke (2017) describe the “hubris of claiming to know,” which puts “communities into service of evidence production,” rather than the other way around. My project takes this idea seriously by carefully considering how the analysis and writing of my research makes claims that might
constrain the youth and communities I work with. Instead, I acknowledge both the strengths and limits of my knowledge—not as a detriment to ‘objective’ research, but rather as an invitation to continue examining the unfolding of new possibilities.

Critical Youth Studies

“The food here sucks,” Carlos tells me and the others as he reaches in for another handful of Takis.

“That’s why we always be sneaking out and going to the corner store. As long as you don’t get caught, no one cares.” He finishes chewing and continues. “I mean teachers ask for shit from the store anyways. Their ass would be in trouble too.”

It’s lunchtime for most freshman and sophomores and the cafeteria, which is full of off-white round tables, buzzing with laughter, Spanglish, and high-pitched sneaker squeeks. The smell of Valentina drenched Hot Cheetos mixed with a faint locker-room sweat weighs heavy in the air. I ask Carlos what school has been like for him.

With a bundle of neon-red Takis resting on the pouch of his hoodie, he begins theorizing. “It’s like this. They don’t listen to us. Like we be trying to tell them it’s hard out here. Like we got to make moves, but they don’t understand. It’s like they don’t even want to understand.” Carlos’ analysis has struck a cord with the table. Several heads nod along, affirming the lack of understanding and care he experienced.

He pauses, perhaps contemplating if he wants to continue. Carlos sizes me up in this moment and determines how much to reveal. “I’m not even gonna lie, I got kicked out from August High because I got caught selling weed. It wasn’t even that much man, and some bitch snitched me out so that was that. I tried to tell them why I had to make some money, but they didn’t want to hear shit. They just wanted me the fuck out.” With an exasperated look on his face, he snorts, “And now they got me in rehab. For fucking weed dude.” The necessary moves that enable life to unfold and continue, Carlos illustrates, are the very ones that target him for discipline and control.
Carlos was not alone in his frustration in being continuously infantilized, dismissed, and punished in school. Most students I engaged with at JDHS shared his sentiments and these feelings are representative of how many student youth, particularly youth of color, are positioned within U.S. school systems. Indeed, deficit (Valencia, 2010) and subtractive (Valenzuela, 1999) perspectives about vulnerable youth remain a defining characteristic of many models of schooling within the U.S. Within educative spaces dominated by deficit thinking, youth are rendered through developmental frameworks, where one’s age dictates the “appropriate” amount of agency and potential of rational thought. In this vein, one’s cultural, familial, and ethnoracial background becomes a static and pathologized variable in explaining an individual students’ academic success or failure. As Valencia (2010, p. 2) highlights, “the deficit thinking model, at its core, is an endogenous theory – positing that the student who fails in school does so because of internal deficits or deficiencies.” Deficit thinking is characterized by a hyper-focus on individual learners, where their perceived weaknesses and deficiencies are the sole reason for difficulties and struggles in school.” Here the social and collective learning processes of youth are flattened and siloed. Students alone are to blame for any social, cultural, or academic issues that arise in school – they are obstacles to overcome. The problem, it seems, lies not in structural, historical, or institutional processes of discrimination and domination that have afflicted U.S. schools since their inception, nor in the school itself, but rather in the constitution of students. Students who don’t do well in school are broken, the logic goes, and as such they need to be fixed.

I didn’t see any broken students at JDHS. Nor did I meet a student whose ethnicity/race, gender, sexual orientation, or family background was to “blame” for their struggles in school. What I did witness over the course of a full school year was an educational apparatus that at nearly every stage of their academic careers attempted to position their ethnoracial background, academic status, familial make-up and community as naturalized deterrents to their success in schools. In many ways, students at JDHS had to “overcome” what made them who they were. Yet, this subtle, but violent reframing, I argue, is quite common in many schools, particularly if those schools have a significant population of minoritized students. Entering into this research project, I was fully aware of the pervasiveness of deficit thinking in schools and its impact on students.
As such, I drew explicitly on a methodology that works to challenge and undo deficit frameworks—critical youth studies (CYS). CYS is a methodological and political approach to research with youth that centers their experiences, ways of knowing, and creative expressions as both valuable and necessary. For much of the 20th century, psychological and developmental frameworks dominated academic scholarship on children and youth (Best, 2007). Much of the research produced reflected an adult-centered approach where children and youth were not able, or trustworthy to understand, change, and dictate their collective and individual experiences. New Childhood Studies (NCS) emerged to call into question and “challenge the reigning developmental paradigms that had largely directed studies on children and adolescence” and provide “a more complex portrait of young people as meaningfully engaged, independent social actors whose activities and practices influence a variety of social context and settings” (Best, 2007, pp. 9-10). CYS borrows heavily from the insights of NCS, but where the later focuses primarily on children (typically understood as ages 0-12), CYS focuses on youth (typically understood as 12-19). Moreover, critical social theory and its emphasis on the politics of liberation, particularly scholarship influenced by education philosopher Paulo Freire, is a key characteristic of CYS.

In this way, CYS is not simply a set of concrete methods to conduct research with/on youth, it is also “a sustained concern for and consideration of, the complexities of power and exploitation in the research encounter” (Best, 2007, p. 9). Youth in the U.S. are enmeshed in paternalistic systems and worlds that constrict their autonomy largely on the basis of age and geography. The experiences, ideas, and expressions of youth are so often dismissed as sophomoric. In attending to this uneven landscape, CYS positions youth as experts of their own worlds. As Cammarota and Fine (2008, p. 4) assert, “young people have the capacity and agency to analyze their social context, to engage critical research collectively and to challenge and resist the forces impeding their possibility for liberation.” To approach research with youth from a top-down model is to miss the richness that emerges from their particular standpoint(s) (Harding, 1987). Within educational spaces, the standpoint of marginalized youth provides a comprehensive viewing of systemic power in schools (Mohanty, 2003).
In the context of this research, Latinx youth at JDHS have a unique insight into the machinery of alternative education. Their everyday experiences and negotiations are particularly rich nodes into the uneven landscape of an urban education system. As students they experience first hand the contradictions and tensions between what schools say they do and what they actually do (Verenne & McDermott, 1998). As such, I purposefully privilege how youth experience and understand the world around them. Yet, within this research, this privileging of youth is not accompanied by a dissection of their life choices. Nor is this research invested in analyzing how individual students could do better or overcome some perceived deficit or obstacle. Instead, my analytical gaze works in tandem with Latinx youth experiences at JDHS to focus on the role of racialization, inequity, and disposability. More specifically, by analyzing Latinx student experiences alongside the particular policies, discourses, and practices that shaped those experiences, this research shifts the analytical gaze away from individual student decisions to the structures, systems, and institutions that attempt to position youth as disposable.

**Feminist Theory & Research Ethics**

The original intention of this research was to conduct a youth participatory action research project (YPAR) that examined the role of Latinidad, place, and family with Latinx youth at JDHS. Yet, the project, for a host of reasons, quickly became impractical. As such, within the first two weeks of my ethnography, I found myself wondering what I was actually researching at the school. Much of the discussion and interaction with youth had been driven by my own desire to conjure particular ideas about identity. As I reflected on my fieldnotes and jottings from my initial visits at JD, I realized that I had been extractive in my inquiries. I was dominating conversations with my questions, looking to mine as much data as possible from every conversation. What was clearly missing in most interactions was a sustained dialogue where I was a compassionate, curious, and thoughtful listener. I had been too anxious to ask the next question, rather than listen and engage with the articulations of my youth participants. When I finally did stop to think through and genuinely care about what the Latinx youth were saying, I came to the conclusion that they had more
than stories to share - they also had profound working theories of how schooling, disposability, and racism operate. Coming to this critical research juncture through critical reflection and vulnerability was made possible through the work of feminist theory and methodology.

In my short academic career, feminism has been the primary thread running throughout my work. The constellation of ethics, analytics, and politics (which are often contested and contradictory) that comprise feminist thought is the interstitium that binds and guides my epistemological and ontological orientations. More specifically, feminism has been the ethical map I have relied on the most in this dissertation research. When I was distraught and/or disoriented in the research process (and it happened often), it was feminist scholarship that I turned too for guidance and sustenance. As I’ll describe below, there are two aspects of feminist scholarship that guide this project. First, I draw on feminist approaches to power and knowledge, which critique traditional ideas of objectivity, engage emotion, take seriously the voices and experiences of those who are often not seen as holders of knowledge, and work to mitigate unequal power dynamics that so deeply pervade the history of Anthropology and other social science disciplines. Second, I am inspired by some of the work done by feminist of color that shapes my approach to identity and the potentially radical practice of writing and research that centers liberatory politics. This includes a discussion of Chicana feminist scholarship and the value of carino, or care, which I took on as a central research ethic.

The first way I draw on feminist scholarship is through an attentiveness to power/knowledge relations, which remains a central task of feminist scholarship. This includes not only areas of study, but also by critically questioning assumptions and relations embedded in research projects. Who gets to speak for who? What stories are we (re)telling? What stories are for sharing? What will our stories be used to support, prevent, and/or deny? Both Anthropology and Education Studies have a history of prioritizing supposedly “objective” researcher practices that, through positivist logic, enable a more complete and “scientific” analysis and finding. For many feminists, however, these attempts at “objectivity” only obfuscate the power relations that exist in any and all research-subject relationships. The focus instead within feminist research is to begin with the understanding that objectivity has been defined historically
(and continue into the present) in masculinist ways that limit who is seen as a holder of knowledge and what constitutes knowledge. Moreover, attempts at objectivity have often dismissed important sites of knowledge and theory that are outside predictive and static variables, such as emotion, which I take seriously throughout my research practice and writing. Emotions are treated throughout this dissertation as an important source of knowledge and learning. This also means considering the subjective nature of my interpretations, as well as the way my emotional reactions, personal ideologies, and political and ethical objectives shape my interpretation of data. While I am not objective, this does not mean the research is not rigorous, and instead I employ reflexive praxis throughout that examines my positionality as it shapes the research process. These approaches are greatly guided by feminist interventions into science and research (e.g. Barad, 2007; Behar, 1996; Harding, 1987; Nash, 2018).

The second area where I am informed by feminism, is through the many ways that feminists of color draw attention to intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). Additionally, I am inspired by the groundbreaking work of Black feminists (and others) developing concepts of racialization, white supremacy, and a politics of abolition that creates radical new imaginaries beyond structures of racial control. On a methodological level, I am deeply guided by the brave, radical, and liberatory politics of Black feminists who reject many of the conventions of research and the academy due to their lineage in securing white power (Fleming, 2018; Hartman, 1997; Nash, 2019), and who center a revolutionary political goal within their writing and claims. In this spirit, I seek to write in ways that at times buck convention in order to more authentically reflect the voices of my young Latinx participants, and my own voice as a racialized cisgendered Latinx man. I am most mindful of this when utilizing creativity in the research process through poetic storytelling and vignette. Additionally, I have sought not to temper the force of my own critique or the breadth of my calls for change, thus being inspired by the radical, brave, and expansive calls for abolition and structural change that are often led by Black women.

While Black feminisms often inspire me and give me the strength to be brave in writing for radical change, as a Latinx man I have also long been informed by the contributions of Latinx feminisms, and in particular Chinanx feminism. Departing from the more incrementalists/reformists politics that dominated
in the immediate wake of WWII, the Chicanx movement emerged in the late 1960’s and 70’s, with a significant assist from the U.S. Black activists, to challenge and reframe the long history of violence against the Mexican-American community. Yet the Chicanx movement, like many ethnic nationalists movements at the time, was heavily marbled with misogyny, racism, and heteronormativity. It was within this space that Chicana feminism emerged as an identifiable set of politics, theory, and praxis. Yet, as Alarcón (1990, p. 249) underscores in her review of Chicana feminism, “Chicana feminists have been there from the beginning.” For many Chicanxs in the 1960s and 70s (and the practice still continues today) Chicana feminist concerns were seen as counterproductive to its narrow ethnic nationalist politics. Moreover, many Chicanx activists and scholars understood the coalescing of the Chicana feminist movement as a colonial imitation of U.S. White feminists (ibid). This of course, if far from the truth, as Chicana feminist scholarship is predicated on liberatory and anti-colonial politics (Anzaldua, 1987; Arredondo, 2003; Castillo, 1994; Garcia, 1997).

Educational Anthropologist and Chicana feminist, Angela Valenzuela (1999) draws on the work of Educational philosopher Nel Noddings (e.g. 1992) to examine the ways care operates among teachers and students in a high school in the East End of Houston. She finds that many educators in the school comprised mostly of Latinx students, fail to build caring and reciprocal relationships with students, which in turn negatively affects students schooling experiences. Despite witnessing students strong desires to learn, her student participants often experience their school as cold, uncaring, and uninterested in their overall well-being. Schooling for her works best when, “students’ learning [is centered] around a moral ethic of caring that nurture and values relationship” in addition to a “more profound and involved understanding of the socioeconomic, linguistic, sociocultural, and structural barriers that obstruct the mobility of Mexican Youth” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 109). Valenzuela argues for a carino that is deeply political and attentive to systemic and institutional power that students inevitably navigate. Carino is not enough to transcend the processes of domination, violence, and suppression that permeate U.S. schooling, curriculum, and policy, but it is still a necessity, within learning spaces, particularly for minoritized groups (ibid). Throughout her
text, Valenzuela demonstrates the need for people who work with vulnerable youth to be vulnerable, sensitive, and deeply compassionate, understanding care as a reciprocal process rather than expectation.

I carried the spirit of Valenzuela’s concept of carino with me in the field at Juan Diaz, particularly with youth. I was well aware of the kinds of subtractive educative process that are ubiquitous in the state of Texas. I experienced this first hand in my own public schooling in rural East Texas and the scars of neglect and subtraction remain with me. So often the youth at Juan Diaz were achingly self-critical, doubting their capacities, background, and futures. They would beat themselves up for past “mistakes” like failing a math test in 6th grade or for not doing more to help their families. They sometimes would call themselves stupid, bad, or not worth shit. Sometimes they talked about their futures as though it was a privilege, doubting they would live past twenty-one. Sometimes they whispered that didn’t think they could make it in college, in the job market, or as a parent. I knew I had little in the way of offerings for these youth, especially given my limited position as a graduate student with no external funding. I could help with college applications and be a conduit for information and resources, but that was only if they were interested or comfortable enough to ask me. What I could do on a daily basis was treat them with dignity, compassion, and kindness. I could treat them as fully human and worthy as they are constituted. I could attempt at every verbal self-infliction to provide affirmation of their needed existence and beauty. I could tell them I was proud of them for who they were today, not what they will be. I could defer to their expertise and position them as fully capable and knowing. I could listen to their stories, worries, and wonderings with purpose and care. I could dialogue sincerely and reciprocally, sharing pieces of myself as I asked them to share with me. I could do little things, like take note of their likes and joys and, to the extent that I could, share in their embrace. I resented being positioned by teachers and staff at JD as exceptionally smart or gifted, always in contrast to my student participants, but my heart smiled biggest when students would call me super nice, a good guy, a real one, or Buena gente (good people). Perhaps my biggest achievement, it was an honor to be seen as caring amongst such brilliant and kind-hearted youth.

In summation, what began as a desire to conduct a YPAR project alongside youth, ended as an ethnography of Latinx youth navigating a largely hierarchical, degrading, and constricting urban schooling
system guided by neoliberal ideologies and technologies. Mapping this intricate and banal process, which unfolds within the following chapters, requires a kind of methodological plasticity (McKittrick, 2021) that warps, stretches, and enfolds methods and technologies of social research to center collective care, health, and liberation. Doings so enabled me to engage more deeply with the unknown, unthought, and unspoken during my fieldwork—the continual processes of becoming that center incompleteness and fluidity. In her creative examination of Black life, Science, and the Academy, Black Feminist Geographer Katherine McKittrick (2021) gestures to anti-colonial and liberatory politics and ethics as the crux of methodology, rather than positivist purity as means to address the colonial and capitalist partnership that emerges in working in the academy. Taken together, the anthropology of becoming, CYS, and feminist thought are my particular way of conducting rigorous and ethical research with students living in vulnerability. Following McKittrick (2021, p. 5), the politics embedded in each provide a pathway to “methodological practices where we read, live, hear, groove, create, and write across a range of temporalities, places, texts, and ideas that build on existing liberatory practices and pursue ways of living in the world that are uncomfortably generous and provisional and practical and, as well, imprecise and unrealized.” As I move now to the next chapter, I will describe how an understanding of the present—the current mechanisms of disposability and the shifting becomings of Latinx youth identity—must also be historically situated. Ultimately, through attention this interplay between both past and present, and institutions and lived experiences, we can expose the myth of racialized disposability in order to then fundamentally challenge how such systems operate.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has offered a review of the literature on historical and contemporary alternative schooling, setting up the analytical framework of disposability that I’ll use throughout the dissertation. In arguing that alternative schools operate as sites of racialized disposability, I also draw on literature about race and white supremacy to make sense of the way that at-risk Latinx youth are devalued. With this foundation, I argue that alternative schools were designed to systemically fail, thereby enabling the production and sustainability of “traditional schools,” while providing a warehouse to dispose of students that traditional
schools did not want. Whether it be academics, life skills, or redemption/correction, the hyper-majority of alternative schools provide and produce the inverse of what one would expect to find in an ethical, democratic, and evidence-based school systems. The few alternative schools and students whose normative success are held up as pillars and celebrated emblems of excellence generate a faulty basis upon which the others—the majority—are justified. However, the cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) encouraged through this symbol of redemption and “success” often work to eclipse the institutional and structural barriers, and thereby only serve to inflame an already problematic set of power relations that exist in all schools and classrooms (Freire, 1970).

Students within this system, however, have their own understandings of their lives and subjectivities that are far more complex and difficult to pin down than the institutional narratives that are told about them. These are stories of frustration and disappointment, but also of resilience and creative re-definition of their own lives. Thus, I’ve described how I rely on poststructural theories of becoming, Critical Youth Studies, and feminist theory in order to take youth seriously as holders of knowledge about their lives and identities. Ultimately, looking at the experiences and knowledge of youth about their lives also allows us to see them as wholly human and valuable within a system that too often devalues them and treats them as disposable. When we spend time with youth, it brings into sharp focus that youth are fundamentally indispositional. With this history and theoretical framework in mind, the dissertation will now move to account for the specific methodological tools used to uncover these experiences, and the ethical and political approaches to telling their stories.
CHAPTER 3

Unfinished and in the Middle: Methodology and Methods

In the last chapter I described three theoretical-methodological traditions that most directly inform my research. First, I discussed the emerging idea on an “anthropology of becoming,” most notably advanced by Biehl and Locke (2010). Borrowing from the work of Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Biehl and Locke’s anthropology of becoming provides a pathway to consider the messy entanglement of youth subjects within broader social and material processes. More importantly, however, this approach embraces an ethic of incompleteness that, for educational anthropology, inherently pushes back against the categorization of youth and their futures. Such an embrace of unknowability “creates the conditions of possibility” (Biehl & Locke, 2017, p. 6), which allow youth—and specifically youth of color—to break free of the often-violent scripts that have been written about them, their families, and their lives.

These investments dovetail closely with the second and third traditions that informed my research methodologies: Critical Youth Studies (CYS) and feminist theory. Both CYS and Chicana Feminism reject deficit approaches to youth that cast Latinx youth as deficient and incapable of their own analyses of their lives. For Latinx youth, deficit approaches have a long history of naturalizing ethno-racial differences and erasing the way inequity is produced through policy, history, institutions, and other systems of supremacy (e.g. Valencia, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999). Thus, while a CYS approach takes youth seriously as political and social subjects with their own meaningful analyses of their worlds, feminism guides the ethics of my work by centering the voices of Latinx students in order to reveal and challenge systems of violence in their lives.

Biehl and Locke (2017) write that becoming is a process of creation. Becoming “invokes the capacities of people to endure and live on as they reckon with the overdetermined constraints and resources of the worlds into which they are thrown, while also, crucially, calling on their ability to approach the open-ended, to imagine worlds and characters that do not—but may yet—exist” (ibid, p. 9). The Latinx students in this study endure educational and social worlds that can constrain and attack them, but they also
continually reimagine their own futures outside of the stories that are written for them. Together, the anthropology of becoming, CYS, and feminism allow me to help tell these open-ended stories of entanglement and possibility. These approaches offer the foundations that inform the specific methods of the project, including how I collected my data, how I interacted with participants, and how I write about my findings. In this chapter, I will outline these specific methods that I used throughout my work with Latinx youth in Houston.

The first section of the chapter begins with a brief discussion about how I consider the violent history of anthropology, even as I engage in anthropological research myself. In considering the violence of anthropology, I am referring to the ways that anthropology as an academic discipline, body of scholarship, and network of relations continues to be an extractive, hierarchical, and biopolitical technology deployed by states and corporate entities to asymmetrically catalog, surveil, punish, and control people, land, and non-human organisms (Berry et al., 2017; Sharma and Gupta 2006; Price, 2008; Price, 2011). Anthropology has been a critical technology in constitution of the human as a thing apart and above all else. The ideological foundations of white-supremacy, colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and ableism continue to color the form and type of stories we write about inter-related lives of humans, culture, and ecology. As a tool of colonial projects, anthropology has a long history of harm that unfortunately continues into the present. Thus, the first section acknowledges this harm while describing how my methods endeavor to work against this violence and reduce any harm in the research process.

The second section offers an overview of the study site. While school ethnographies conventionally focus on solely the school at the “site” of research, I treat place as more permeable. Throughout this research, student lives—and my own—unfold both inside and outside of the walls of the school. Thus, it is important to account for both my own and the students situatedness within the community and city. As I will describe, I draw connections between the treatment of the students as disposable, and the broader treatment of their neighborhood as disposable within the city. I will discuss how the pollution of the petrochemical industry and the neglect of the barrio by those in power results in treating the community as a site of waste. However, like the students themselves, the community is rich and alive and far more difficult
to define that the institutional narratives that characterize it as dangerous, “bad,” or undesirable. Thus, this section offers a more complex accounting of place as it was approached in this research.

The third section describes the specific data collection processes I used in this research. This section describes the school site, my participants, my use of participant observation, individual interviewing, group interviews (through which I adopt an approach called *platicas*), the use of artifacts, and my work shadowing. Together, these encompass the various modes of data collection and my approach to working with my participants.

Finally, the last section discusses my approach to ethnographic writing throughout the dissertation. In particular, I describe how I use vignettes for storytelling—a method of writing with strong traditions in Chicana feminism and critical anthropology written by minoritized subjects. I find particularly utility in the writing of vignettes as a way to center the open-ended and unfinished nature of ethnographic analysis. Moreover, such stories allow student voices to come through front and center in the telling of their stories, rather than purely centering my interpretation through every account and interaction. Finally, I argue that this approach to writing helps to bring the student subjects to life, to center their humor, creativity, and their own critical knowledge in making sense of their educational experiences. These vibrant voices and ideas stand in opposition to the blank, passive, and dehumanizing representations that are so fundamental to the production of Latinx youth as disposable. Thus, storytelling is a mode to assert the value of youth—to stake out their indisposability.

**On the Violence of Anthropology**

The academic enterprise of anthropology continues to *discipline* what constitutes the human and culture(s). Much of the research on marginalized peoples that emanates from anthropology continues to work in service of a colonial and supremacist project, rooted in Enlightenment thought, meant to know and categorize the in/human. Within the field of education, anthropology is often reduced to a set of widely recognized qualitative research methods allowing researchers to “scientifically” and perhaps “objectively”
analyze schools and the people and things that inhabit them. Here the extraction of voices, stories (the more painful the better), and wisdoms are key in reiterating findings, conclusions, and problematics. The educational anthropologist, with their etic and emic perspectives, is believed to “see” the (objective) Truth and is now ready to fill prescriptions and/or reforms.

In the last chapter, I catalogued the primary theoretical approaches of this research, including describing fields that push back against these traditions of anthropology—in Critical Youth Studies, poststructural anthropology, and feminist scholarship. And yet, it is nonetheless important for me to begin with a melancholic introduction to the discipline. The ongoing violence of anthropology must be continually foregrounded within the discipline, and these concerns deeply inform my own practice of anthropology. As McKittrick (2021, p. 36) notes, “discipline is empire... disciplines stack and bifurcate seemingly disconnected categories and geographies; disciplines differentiate, split, and create fictive distances between us.” Following Tuck and Yang (2014), my relationship with cultural anthropology is rife with refusal and hesitation. There are some stories I will not share, tactics I will not utilize, and wounds that I won’t reveal.

Anthropology (Price, 2011) and educational research (Rosa & Flores, 2017; Tuck, 2009) can easily be weaponized and misshapen to enable or enact violent and discriminatory practices. Following other critical scholars (e.g. Fine & Cammarota, 2008; McKenzie & Tuck, 2014), I depart from a research hierarchy where positivist and post-positivist ontologies drive the general direction of methodologies, emphasizing generalizability, objectivity, and “Truth.” This line of thinking is particularly strong among education scholarship circles where research is strongly tied to interventions and/or prescriptions. Rather, I follow scholars who are not only experimental (e.g. Gordon, 2015; Morrill & Tuck, 2016), speculative (Haraway, 2016; Hartman, 2019), and performative (Muñoz, 2009; Villenas, 2019) in their research practices, but also display a deep commitment to evocative, artful writing and expression. Each of the traditions is grounded in a liberatory politics that demonstrates a commitment to cultivating the artful possibilities that emerge in the interplay between listening and purposeful storytelling. The work of these scholars/activists/advocates in anthropology, education, and other disciplines is the groundwork for this
research. These traditions, often at the margins of academia, inform my methodological approach, my theoretical engagement with my research, and the ethics that underpin both. Thus, despite my deep reservations, I continue to see possibilities for radical thought and action as an educational anthropologist, including in the discipline’s engagement with reflexive practices, writing and analysis, and everyday processes, which I drew on often in this research.

As I describe my research methods and tools throughout this chapter, I will regularly draw connections to the ethical and political investments of the methods that informed my work with Latinx youth in Houston. When methodology is less about producing the ‘best’, most ‘objective’ scientific research, new space is opened to engage creatively with theory, ethics, and the lived implications of our work. Informed by the fields of CYS, anthropology of becoming, and feminist theory, I will describe how I engage in research creatively by approaching data collection, analysis, and writing as a dynamic, open-ended process. Moreover, as I describe my methods, I will highlight how I approach processes as partial and ever-unfolding, how I think about power and care in research, and how I take youth knowledge seriously through my methods. Each of these approaches I see as central to countering the violent legacies of anthropology and embodying a more radical vision for the disciplines’ future.

**Study Site**

Nearly all fieldwork for this study took place in Houston, Texas with a particular emphasis on a neighborhood of Houston called the East End, where Juan Diaz High School is located. The East End is located (as one might assume) in the East side of Houston’s sprawling landscape, and it runs from the East of downtown outward to the Southeast. It’s buttressed on one side by I-45, one of the main thoroughfares of Houston and by Buffalo Bayou and the Houston Shipping Channel on the other (as the Bayou widens, it becomes the Shipping Channel). The parts of the East End closest to downtown are rapidly gentrifying, as condos replace old warehouses in the real estate landscape nearest to the active city center. Further to the Southeast, however, the neighborhoods become more low-income and entangle with petrochemical
landscapes that run along the shipping channel (making it much less desirable real estate to potential gentrifiers). These parts of the East End are overwhelmingly low-income and Latinx and it is still a key cultural hub for Houston’s Mexican American community. Overlapping with the former Second Ward of the city’s old ward system, these neighborhoods are still called Segundo Barrio.

I moved to the East End with my wife in August of 2015 and stayed there until December of 2016 in a house we rented. While I had not lived in the East End previously, I had lived in Houston for significant periods of my life, both as a child and as an adult. There is no denying it. I love Houston. The city has been the context for much of my life. My ten sisters and brother (and most of my extended family) all live within an hour of the city limits, and were a part of my life throughout the time I was doing this research. In my early 20s, I spent over 3 years traversing the city in a large yellow van, as I worked staining fences for residential and commercial properties. Over time this experience of traveling throughout the city limits and borderlands, enabled me to witness the sheer diversity of landscapes and people within the monotonous patterns of strip malls, suburbs, and highways. I know much of the geography and cultural markers of the city well as a result, and I drew on this knowledge as resources throughout this research. In many ways, this ethnography was conducted in a place I call home, and it is difficult to disentangle my experiences of the city (as both home and as ethnographic context) from my understandings of student lives at Juan Diaz. Nor would I want to.

As Nespor (1997) argues, what happens inside a school is deeply entangled and constituted by what happens outside of the school. Thus, to make sense of student’s everyday experiences within a disciplinary alternative school, I needed to also take seriously the worlds they navigate and move through in the city of Houston and the East End. The politics of the city shaped where students lived, their employment, their relationships to police and the state, where they spent their time, and intricacies of schooling. In other words, the schools and student experiences are intimately connected to the conditions and politics elsewhere. As it became clear to me during my fieldwork at Juan Diaz High School and Houston itself, the neglect, ghettoization, and beauty of the student’s communities and homes is deeply tied to the ways students themselves are treated. For example, the industrial pollution that marrs so much of Houston’s land
and water—particularly in neighborhoods like the East End—is indicative of the ways racialized communities were valued. Place and people are co-constituted, and the disposability of students is constructed alongside a disposability of peoples and place. A core function of disposability in a late capitalist endeavor is to actively disconnect the ways institutions, business, and the like are deeply interdependent. Trash, waste, and excess must come from somewhere and importantly, go somewhere else. In what follows, I attempt to ‘set the scene’ for understanding Houston and the East End as the context for this research.

This ethos of capitalist disposability is ubiquitous in Houston. Houston is sometimes called an “ephemeral city,” where “its existence is formed in a series of conjunctive episodes that hold onto their relationship for relatively brief periods,” and “time conspires to fashion a sense of place” (Webb, 2003, p. 7). Tear down. Build. Repeat. Both “wide open and impenetrable,” the city has been described as a real-life monopoly game (ibid, p. 4). Capitalism reigns, and there is no time or need to preserve the past, conserve resources, or worry about the consequences. The present and very near future is all that matters. It is a city of highways galore and suburban sprawl defined by its relative lack of zoning laws and the dominance of the petrochemical and oil industry in the city’s economy. The lines between commercial, industrial, and residential areas blur in many neighborhoods, particularly those in more ghettoized areas. An apartment complex next to an oil tanker. An art museum amidst a collection of row houses. A school blockaded by industrial recycling plants with a natural gas pipeline snaking through the football field. A yerberia next to a strip club. Whenever you go, the humidity is unrelenting. Air conditioning for every Houstonian that can is a must. As a city of diverse ecotones, you can begin in a thick forest of Longleaf Pine and end in a swamp, beach, or grassland. And yet, each year more concrete covers the ground and more CO2 fills the air, exacerbating the effects of climate change. Twenty and Hundred-year floods are becoming annual occurrences (Blackburn, 2017; Chapa 2020; Gonzalez, 2021; Johnson, 2021).

Still, driving remains essential. Living near the city center without a car is practically possible, if you’re lucky to be near one of the few rail lines and don’t need to travel far, but it certainly adds another exhausting layer to life as lived daily by those in living poverty in Houston. Living in the suburbs or
outsskirts of the city without a ride is next to impossible. A culture of driving dominates the landscape of Houston. Spending hours in a car is a daily ritual for many. Driving distance gives way to driving time. “Always a victim of its own success,” (Scardino & Webb, 2003, p. 3) Houston’s constellation of freeways “have become, like those in Los Angeles” described by Reyner Banhan (1971, p. 5) as “a single, comprehensible place, a coherent state of mind, a complete way of life, a fourth ecology.” After a few months living in the city, a 30-minute drive is like walking a few blocks – just right down the road. For many Houstonians, driving around the city can be a reprieve from the stresses of everyday life. With an air-conditioned box that moves fast, a radio, and good food at every exit, it’s an escape, it’s familiar, and sometimes it just feels good to keep moving. Still, despite the highways and driving culture of the city, the lives of many of the students were often contained within the communities where they lived, as the sprawl meant other parts of the city often felt like other cities entirely.

For most of the students I talked with at Juan Diaz, their experience of Houston was much different from the one the city would like to project. The soon-to-be third largest city in the U.S., Houston prides itself as being the most diverse city in the country, with over 50% of Houstonians born outside of the country (Leighton, 2019). Some neighborhoods are harbors for all kinds of ethnic communities, with some community high schools having over 20 languages spoken. But, when I shared these statistics with one Juan Diaz student, Marcos, he replied “I just don’t see it bro. The only people I see in the H are Hispanics and Blacks and like every so often some Chinese people. The first time I really saw White people in big groups and stuff was in Austin.”

What Marcos gestures to is the entrenched segregation that exists in Boom Town (one of Houston’s nicknames). There is a long history of Latinx students being channeled into second rate schools either via de jure segregation or de facto segregation policies (Miguel, 2001; Bullard, 1990). Even within districts and schools that contain an overwhelmingly Black and Brown student population, many students continue to be further separated by language, ability, and so on (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012). For example, educational scholar Angela Valenzuela (1999), demonstrated these processes in her now canonical text set in Houston called Subtractive Schooling. She described the ways in which Mexican-American youth in an
East End high school were “de-mexicanized” via educational practices and largely routed into working class jobs. Additionally, the work of historian San Miguel (2001) documented how the Houston Independent School District circumvented integration by attempting to only integrate Black and Brown students. Thus, despite the cosmopolitan projections of being the self-proclaimed “cultural capital of the South,” Houston continues to be one of the most racially segregated cities in the country.

Lawndale, Marcos’ barrio in the East End, is over 95% Latinx. His lived experience of Houston is one of homogeneity. Spanish-speaking bodies dominate the places he visits on a regular basis, the Mercado, parks, high school, neighborhood streets, and weekend job at the tortilla factory. Outside of school, he rarely has to speak in English. Diversity, English, and large groups of White people are in malls, on the freeways, the suburbs, in Galveston, but not at home in the barrio. He like, most other Houstonians, knows that the hipsters and gentrifies don’t come further into the East End than train tracks in Harrisburg (Rodriguez, 1997). They never seem to make it past Ninfa’s, the city’s most celebrated Mexican restaurant. The things that mark Houston, the recognizable cultural signifiers, the glamour, the glitz, the Galleria, the stadiums, and the energy corridor are predominately located west of I-45. Tourists were absent in the East End, and during my fieldwork folks from other parts of Houston often tacitly or explicitly conveyed to me that everyone here knows that “East Houston smells like shit.” This is not to say that I didn't notice any of this when I lived in Houston earlier, I often wondered about the smells I encountered in my own back yard, less than a mile from several Petro-chemical plants. Traversing the bayous waterways and adjacent neighborhoods, the registering of different smells was just one way to catalog place and time. It wasn’t until I left and then returned Houston that this registered as factor.

This chemical smell is a function of the oil and petrochemical refining that happens here, as are the eyesores of the industrial infrastructure on the landscape and the high cancer rates among the low-income Latinx population. Adjacent to the East End is the Houston Ship Channel, a critical element of the Port of Houston, one of the busiest ports in the world. The large Ship Channel Bridge crosses the water in the East End, and gives you a brief glimpse of the contradiction, desecration, and vibrant beauty of Houston. A tale of two cities. One cosmopolitan and consumptive, the other industrial and productive. Driving across the
bridge—a ten lane freeway—the official skyline of fancy downtown buildings lies in the distance, but immediately in front of you, the industry dominates. Here, you will see why we they call Houston the “Energy Capital of the world.” Here is where the oil sausage that fuels the Bayou City is made, living alongside the people who craft it, and suffer from it.

As Robert Bullard (1990) aptly demonstrated in his now famous book on Houston, the city’s intimate relationship with the petrochemical industry has historically been and continues to be one of its defining features. Yet this point of pride for city officials, plays out differently in the communities directly affected by industrial scale razing of land and people. Despite a long history of environmental racism in the Houston-Galveston region (Márquez, 2013), the Houston community developed a national reputation as a place largely uninterested in local issues of sustainability and environmental justice. Local environmental justice activists run “Toxic Tours” of the neighborhoods where my informants live—an effort to try to bring awareness to the urgent problem. In my time in Houston, I became friends with some of these activists. When taking the Toxic Tour myself, one of them lamented to, “I just wish we would care more about this stuff. They are doing everything they can to poison us and sweep it under the rug.” The health impacts of environmental racism in the East End lay bare how processes of waste and disposability encapsulate material land, racialized humans, and other organisms. Many of the students, teachers, and community members themselves describe their schools and communities as dumping grounds. There is a sense that the neighborhoods and the people harmed are simply natural casualties of the more important processes of capitalism and industry. They are treated as disposable.

Still, there is a beautiful art of “making do” in the East End. The neighborhood is often unfairly painted as a singularly dangerous and polluted place, a wasteland full of roaming animals with its residents entrapped in cycles of violence and poverty (Valenzuela, 1999). You might mistake the incongruency of homes, business, churches, trailers, and vehicles for incivility and apathy instead of rasquache, or the Mexican-American art of transforming things deemed trash or broken into art, utility, creativity, and resistance.
“What is there to even do in the Eastside?” I often heard people ask. In my experience, the richness of the barrio emerged in the banal interruptions of everyday life. The East End and greater East side of Houston is teeming with life and creativity. Many of the suburbs felt stale in contrast, repetitious with little difference or cultural expression. Here though, the churches, strip clubs, discos, taquerias, streets, cantinas, fishing holes, and parks were full of devotees. I felt as though my neighborhood was living, breaking wayward in the borderlands of policies, regulations, and zones: a lover’s quarrel at the taco stand, packs of dogs roaming insubordinate and curious, roosters that crow loudly in the morning and then stop abruptly, leaving behind a silence that wanders, the kiss from an icy limonada on a hot and sticky day, ominous clouds of ornery Great-tailed Grackle that gossip asynchronously, cats that groan hot at night and the human voices that attempt in vain to arrest them, gunshots that caution or usher in a celebration, lights and sirens that herald us back into our homes, peering out windows with vulnerability, old men who look like centaurs in bikes askew, bells dancing to announce the array of goods to eat, paletas, crunchy chips with Valentina, fresh fruit and more, candied cars as ornately decorated as magnolias, sending deep, rhythmic growls of warning to some, and SLABs (Slow Loud and Banging) of solidarity to others, the regal bayou bath of a traveling crane, quinceras, pachangas and baptisms that burst onto the sidewalks, streets, alleys, and soundscapes, cantinas that are libraries of travel, regrets, and boasts, puperterias that double as karaoke bars with dancing and singing that is borderless, weekly neighborhood garage sales that tease a thriving underground economy of entrepreneurs and hustlers, the flavorful absence of BBQ smoke hidden and afar, vacant lots that become legendary soccer fields, and flocks of teenagers and children that coagulate on bikes exploring the wilderness and waterways among the sprawl. This ethos of vibrant survival, expression, resistance, and ingenuity speaks to what I saw in the schools: neighborhoods—and people—treated as disposable, but reasserting their right to presence and their inherent life and value.
Data Collection

This section chronicles the pragmatics of doing a school-based ethnography in Houston’s East End, including sources of data, particular methods utilized, and details about the school research site and participants. The purpose here isn’t to provide an exhaustive list that seeks to further cement the validity and rigor of my arguments. The number of interviews I conducted or months spent at a field site will not, through my perspective, present a more complete version of the “Truth.” What I gesture to instead in what follows is a purposeful cultivation of select tools and details I think are necessary in order to more fully read and interpret the many strands of this research. Here, I ask what information is necessary to illuminate the stories and theorizations, for the reader. The particular epistemologies, methodologies, and theoretical frameworks drawn on for this research were explained in detail in Chapter 2.

Formal Research Site(s)

While, as the previous section describes, this study was informed by ethnographic observation throughout Houston and the East End, the primary research site was an alternative school in the East End neighborhood called Juan Diaz High School. Most of my time with my youth (and teacher, staff, administrator) participants was spent in and around the school. The Juan Diaz Community Center (JDCC) serves the East End and was created in the mid 1960s to specifically provide support to the Chicanx Community. JDCC provides adult education, community outreach, counseling services, preschool care, houses a rehab facility, and also operates Juan Diaz High School. JDHS is an alternative charter school with an explicit mission to serve “at risk” Latinx students. Using data from the Office of Civil Rights and the Texas Education Agency, the demographic make-up of the school contains around 400 students in grades 9-12 (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2015). Most students have transferred in because of a previous issue, such as an early pregnancy or behavioral problems. Latinx students make up over 95% of the school and JDHS has increasingly large population of Central American refugees (ibid).
I reached out to several schools in the East End neighborhood in the hopes of conducting long-term ethnographic research. After securing initial permission to do research at another school and having the school change its mind, I reached out to administrators at Juan Diaz. After meeting the administrators from Juan Diaz, I gained entrée to the school. In my perception, this process of securing access was aided by my affiliation with the University of Houston, where I was working as an adjunct in Mexican American Studies at the time and the principal was interested in building this potential link. The principal introduced to me a veteran teacher, Mr. Phan, to make arrangements to center my observations in his class. After what felt like a short period of feeling me out, Mr. Phan generously gave his approval for me to sit and, and I finalized arrangements to visit his science class of juniors. The principal had shared with that Mr. Phan’s class had a good mix of different kinds of students at JD and that Mr. Phan was one of his best teachers. Early in the semester I solicited students in Mr. Phan’s class to participate in the study and the seven that agreed to the weekly lunch meetings would become my primary research participants.

Research Participants

Carla, Elezear, Billy, Adeline, Dee Dee, Victoria, and Teresa are the seven primary participants of the research study. They are the ones I spent the most time with at Juan Diaz and also the perspectives that I work to center. Each of the students was from the Houston area, identified as Latinx, and were juniors in Mr. Phan’s class. They were classmates, but also friends and companions to one another. During lunch and lulls during the day, one could often find an assortment of the seven of us talking, laughing, or arguing. As I became more of a regular fixture in the cafeteria, classrooms, and hallways, students became more aware that I was not interested in policing, fixing, or surveilling them to report back to their teachers. As result, I think, students felt more comfortable and over time more students asked to be included in the research.

In addition to student participants, this research included other stakeholders at Juan Diaz to provide competing visions of the school, its purpose, and its function. This included teachers, principals and assistant principals, security resource officers, library staff, truancy officers, counselors, community
volunteers, support staff, former students and teachers, and parents. In order to understand Juan Diaz’s relation to the East End and broader local Houston education system, I drew outside of the school’s universe. This included interviews and conversations with administrators and teachers from other East End schools, education activists, environmental activists, local politicians, current and former Houston Independent school board members, and long-term community members.

**Participant Observation, Jottings, Fieldnotes, and Analysis**

Following Biehl and Locke (2010; see also Nespor, 1997), I considered Juan Diaz to be a fractured institution (as opposed to a complete and bound) comprised of many moving and related (but also compartmentalized) spaces that are deeply intertwined with nearby and faraway educational, social, and cultural processes. This interstitial framing requires participant observation to be multi-sited (Marcus, 1995) as well as emergent. With student participants this meant in school I would follow them in class, hallways, hiding out, or during school-related events including field trips, graduations, and after-school programming. Outside of school I went along with students to their place of employment, restaurants, shopping, and court appearances. In these moments of participant observation with youth, I sought to be purposeful in building caring and reciprocal relationships by immersing myself in pieces of their worlds. I tried to practice a genuine curiosity about things they cared about. When they brought up music, movies, shows, and dating I made it point to listen, watch, and learn. Just as important as writing up my daily jottings was investing time to listen to Green Day or watch the latest episode of Keeping Up with the Kardashians. It was not enough to just know cursory details, I wanted to be able to understand and speak to the nuances of the dating status of the Kardashians. As Eisenhart (2001, p. 23) argues, “only by watching carefully what people do and say, following their example, and slowly becoming a part of their groups, activities, conversations, and connections do we stand some chance of grasping what is meaningful to them.”

This type of participant observation in (and around) high schools as a non-school-affiliated adult, is fraught with constraints (e.g. Ferguson, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999). Adults often have strong expectations
about what high school aged youth should be doing, saying, and thinking (Fine and Cammorata, 2008). There can be an assumption of mentorship or chaperoning among researcher-youth relationships, which I was at times placed into, at times stepped into, and at other times resisted. These methodological navigations were amplified in an alternative charter school, where most youth were positioned as racialized subjects in need of redemption and discipline. By no choice of my own, others often introduced me on these terms – as a highly educated Chicano who overcame great odds, and if students were lucky or talented enough, they could be mentored by me. I did my best to challenge this narrative and reminded students they were the experts of their own lives and I was here to learn from them. Of course, I nonetheless offered advice when they asked. Perhaps some of the relationships I formed with students might be considered mentor-like, however, I believe that would be a simplistic characterization on the whole as it washes away the riches and lessons many students shared with me. While I hope we learned from each other, I know I learned from them.

To document participant observation systematically, I took detailed jottings after every school visit and important events in either a journal or laptop. These jottings included observation details, dialogue when possible, and documented my affective experience in the field. At times, this arose interest in the classroom. Students would ask what I was writing about and sometimes would like to see. The quick clacking of laptop keys or scribbling in my journal could stand out in an otherwise quiet classroom. While there are circumstances where I would not, in every instance I was asked in a classroom I encouraged youth to read what I was writing. I wanted to be openly accountable and illicit polyvocal responses to my account and interpretation of events. This typically caught their attention for less 30 seconds, and I think to them it was generally regarded mundane detail or gibberish. However, in the handful of times students lingered reading, it could lead to rich and thoughtful discussions, or a lot of laughter. These daily jottings were turned into daily fieldnotes. Fieldnotes (Emerson et al., 1995) are more systematic and detailed presentation of jottings, including reflections, cursory analysis/interpretation, and questions. Fieldnotes provided a space to reflect on and attempt to make sense of what I experienced that day. It was a place to process my emotions, build patterns, and draw connections. Every two weeks I read through my jottings and field notes.
to create memos. Here, I would read alongside academic literature to begin to analyze and interpret data, building theory in the process. In this way I could invite my primary informants to interpret alongside me at various stages of fieldwork. Within memos I would assess recent artifacts collected, what strands of research to follow up or dismiss, and events, theories, or ideas to be further processed.

**Individual Interviewing**

In addition to informal, unrecorded conversation (namely with students), I completed fifty-three formal one-on-one semi-structured interviews over the course of this research. These included Juan Diaz students (n=14); faculty, staff, and administrators (n=28) at Juan Diaz; and Houston and East End community members, and local educators, and activists (n=11). Formal interviews were audio recorded in an environment the participant felt comfortable in and averaged around 50 minutes. Questions sought to understand participants views of community, the East End, Juan Diaz, and education in Houston.

**Placticas**

At least two times a week, I ate lunch with my seven primary participants (often times others). Like group interviews, these meetings were originally meant to have a clear focus, agenda, and questions. What this produced in practice was a lunchtime that was largely unenjoyable, uncomfortable, and extractive. I walked away from that first lunch feeling disconnected as though I had let them down. Could I really ask these students to spend their 30-minute lunch answering pointed questions and listening to me lecture? I had wanted to contain the “lines of flight” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1977) in their responses, and needed to rework my approach.

After reflection, I dropped most of my questions and expectations. Instead, I work to engage in dialogue reciprocally, acknowledging the demands and desires of the people in front of me. As I moved away from approaching lunch as a group interview, I drew inspiration from the idea of a *plactica* – or space
of dialogue and discussion. As described by Mendoza (2016), placticas are largely unstructured, open to emergent topics, and emerge from Latinx and Latin American Studies. While I still had questions and topics to raise, I wanted students to drive the conversation. Sometimes this meant dialoguing about dating or which place in the city has the best hot wings, while other times we talked about the school and their educational experiences. Answers to questions I had rarely came directly after the question was asked. Instead they usually emerged indirectly through stories and free associations, sometimes hours or days after.

I would usually bring a large assortment of tacos from the nearby taco stand or a large bag of Mexican sweet bread to our lunches. This helped create a more comfortable and communal environment. When weather permitted we escape the noisy cafeteria for the quiet of the outside gazebo with its accompanying picnic table, adding to the sense of intimacy. After a short time, lunch placticas felt like a reprieve from the everyday happenings at Juan Diaz. Others would ask to join during lunch and soon students would seek me out to ask about our meetings. It wasn’t uncommon during lulls (especially in 6th and 7th period) for students to gather a couple of classmates and ask if I wanted to talk and hang out. Throughout the day during testing (or practice testing), one could typically find me outside or in the hallways talking to a group of students. When feasible and with permission, these placticas were audio recorded, and this resulted in 29 recorded group interviews of various lengths (ranging from 10 minutes to an hour).

Artifacts

Throughout the research, I examined and collected a wide range of ephemera and artifacts pertaining to Juan Diaz or the experiences of students. Artifacts here refers not only to physical materials, such as school pamphlets, but also to virtual (e.g. websites) and legal (e.g. educational policy) sources as well. The resulting collection of artifacts provide a way of systematically organizing and documenting relevant data in addition to outlining the greater context of the ethnographic research. At Juan Diaz, I paid particular attention to promotional and advertising materials, student work, school board meeting minutes, and school
policy handbooks. Outside of Diaz, I focused on the more official text-based objects that conditioned and constrained the school and/or students. Here I examined relevant legal statues from the Texas education code that structured the day-to-day experiences of Juan Diaz. Additionally, I collected pertinent artifacts from related agencies and organizations in the form of flyers, policy briefs, and public presentations.

**Shadowing**

The method of shadowing is exemplified by Harry Wolcott (1973) in his sustained ethnography of one elementary school principal. In this work, shadowing provides Wolcott a means to follow the day-to-day routine and get an intimate feel for not only the participant, but also the worlds, institutions, and peoples the participant interacts with on a daily basis. In the spirit of Wolcott, I shadowed students, teachers, and an administrator at Juan Diaz. Shadowing typically took place during school hours where I would follow participants throughout the day. For the administrator this meant being present during meetings with staff, discussions of behavior with students, and the monotony of administrative paperwork and documentation. For teachers, this meant staying in their classroom as different groups of students filtered in and out. With students however, shadowing took place outside of the schools as well. Here I would go along to after-school activities, work, restaurants, their homes, and other spaces students would hang out.

Together these methods and approaches constitute the materials I draw on throughout this dissertation. They constitute the “data” of this ethnographic study. As the next chapter will describe, however, our methods are inevitably shaped by our theoretical and epistemological investments. As I continue, I will discuss how my own politics and theoretical approaches—guided by Critical Youth Studies, feminist theory, and poststructural thought—shape the way I analyze and write.
Ethnographic Writing and Vignettes

Throughout the writing of this dissertation, I follow in the traditions of Chicana Feminism and Critical Anthropology, which include both traditional academic writing (with its focus on precision and explication), as well as the more creative, open-ended prose of vignettes. In the *House on Mango Street*, acclaimed writer Sandra Cisneros (1994) deploys vignettes, brief, but rich stories that culminate around an event, place or person, to tell the coming of age story of Esperanza in 20th century Chicago. In the text, each vignette can stand on its own, as a story in *media res* to tell an important piece of Esperanza’s life. At times they read more like poems, at others they appear more like traditional short stories. Taken together however, they work similar to panels of a comic, building an imprecise universe that relies more on the space between nodes of thick description to build a sense of wonder and liveliness. This liminal space between the text is at times expansive and seemingly not enough. The vignettes serve as guideposts, gesturing our wonderings in particular directions while sharing cultivated and intimate events. There is a clear trajectory, but you have to wander in between.

In my reading, what emerges in her novel is an ethnographic text that is purposefully open-ended. Echoing the work of Cisneros, much of the writing within this dissertation follows a vignette structure. Here the writing oscillates purposefully between ethnographic prose and academic writing. The collection of stories told through creative prose present, at times, different points of view from my time researching in Houston. Here I hope to capture the unfinishedness of ethnographic research (Biehl & Locke, 2010), the ways some strands are cultivated and others dropped, unexplored and without explanation, the ways characters, whether human or not, bloom and sometimes wither. While the vignettes included here are most guided by the work of Sandra Cisneros (1987), the writing is also deeply influenced by work in critical ethnic studies (e.g. Morrill and Tuck, 2017; Moten, 2017), critical youth studies, (Rosas, 2012; Valenzuela, 1999), queer studies (e.g. Anzaldua, 1987; Muñoz, 2009), critical theory (e.g. Gordon, 2017; Limon, 1994), and feminist studies (Haraway, 2016; Hartman, 2019).
Like any bustling urban school, the dissertation writing has fits of formality and tradition that are interrupted by bursts of energy and affect. The vignettes are a direct response to the ways students in alternative schools are positioned as dangerous, at risk, incapable, and ultimately disposable. Like a counter-spell of sorts, I utilize the tradition of evocative prose within feminist studies and critical anthropology to craft layered and intra-connected stories that foreground the indisposability of the youth I researched. I am deeply weary of placing these vignettes alongside the burgeoning economy of sad tropes of one-dimensional Latinx youth. In this vein, I am intentional in presenting youth as they appeared to me in the field, as experts and teachers in understanding their world and the ways it works.

Not all moments from the field are presented as vignettes. The ones that are, are done so with the intention of a collective testimonio that, “articulate[s] an urgent voicing of something to which one bears witness” (Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012, p. 525). I realized in the process of researching the students at JD how closely tied my family was to the same machinery that displaced and dispossessed. I needed to write in ways that provided the youth at JD the same dignity and complexity I would provide my own family members ensnared in the worst parts of the Texas educational system. The brilliance I witnessed at JDHS was eerily similar to brilliance I witnessed as a young man among my many teenaged family members. I imagine that some of the bravest and most courageous of us, those that are willing to speak out and bear witness to inequity are systematically enveloped by violent processes and institutions long before high school graduation. Institutions call them bad and kick them out of school, but I think their audacity is well placed. They have a sense of vision I desperately admire.

**Conclusion**

Together the methods described in this chapter account for the way that data was collected for this dissertation, as well as my approaches to representing and sharing this data. I have described how these data collection tools are informed by a poststructural “anthropology of becoming,” Critical Youth Studies, and feminist theory—as well as how they are designed in opposition to the historical (and on-
going) violences that are too often committed through anthropological research. As we shift now into the findings of the dissertation in the next chapters, we will see this data come to life to tell a story of alternative schools as sites of disposability. However, more so, we will hopefully see the fundamental indisposability of youth asserted through the way that youth subjects are written about and the way their stories are told. Thus, the methods of the dissertation are not only tools of data collection, but also tools of critical persuasion—asserting an ethical stance toward at-risk racialized youth through the form of the dissertation itself.
CHAPTER 4

Texas Heat: Accountability and Disposability at Juan Diaz

The Monstrosity of High-Stakes Testing and Accountability

In this chapter, I describe how metrics of accountability are an undeniable monstrosity. In particular high stakes testing, function to produce systems of disposability for young people at Juan Diaz. Within the educational waters Dee Dee and other students like her navigate, testing is a monster made of machines that constantly marks the value, worth, and desirability of students. Everyone talked continuously about it, especially when it wasn’t around. They talked about how you had to constantly feed and think about the monster, or else somehow it might find out. You have to keep it high, people would tell me. When the monster gets too low, bad things happen. If you were a teacher or administrator, it could take away your job. If you were a student, the monster could keep you in school longer. If it wasn’t happy, it would make bad things happen—the monster would like make you appear stupid, at risk, abnormal, and less human. The curriculum bent to its will.

Within the confines of Diaz, time did too. Days, even weeks, were devoted entirely to the monster. You see, it always gets to eat first and the most. To this day, its appetite knows no bounds. Some people say loudly, with charts and tables under their arms, that if you do enough math and science you will see why the monster and its shadow of violence are necessary, but I do not believe it. It requires ritual sacrifice and it must be, always, in the shape of a bell curve. The monster makes you practice before the sacrifice—a lot. It scares parents, teachers, and students alike. So strong, it seems as though it can bend the future. Nearly everyone I know hates the monster, but we all must respect it, out of muscle memory alone. Some people get anxious just thinking about it. Some of us practice for hours so that we are more comfortable when it comes around. Those who have disappointed the monster—even years in the past—find themselves
surrounded by an invisible membrane that always manages to remind you and the people around of its previous judgments. We all pretend to see beyond its judgement, but we secretly want the monster to like us. It helps if it likes you, and we all know it. We must, at the very least, acknowledge its ugliness and its omnipresence before we even begin to imagine life without the monster. Pieces of the monster are marbled into our education system, and its pulsating machinic wires have a deep hold in locations far and wide.

The monster of high-stakes testing, with its wide-reaching tentacles, were a dominant force at Juan Diaz. Performance on standardized state exams could impact the livelihoods of the school’s educators, a student’s self-worth, or even the continued existence of the school itself. A deep frustration and unfairness with the state’s accountability system was present throughout my interviews and conversations with Juan Diaz staff, teachers, and administrators. Yet, accompanying these feelings of frustration was often a desire for students and the schools as a whole to perform better on standardized exams. This paradoxical position is a pragmatic response to the very real constraints many educators face. Teachers were well aware of the limitations of the state’s accountability system (and the boredom it generated), yet they also understood the importance a score on a standardized test could have on a student. In this way, the real desires of educators to subvert testing culture, curriculum, and pedagogy was rendered moot by structural accountability forces that are inscribed in education policy at the federal, state, and local level.

The state’s system of testing is one of—but not the only—the main forces that marks students and routes them into alternative schools like Juan Diaz. This chapter examines describes how students end up at Juan Diaz alternative school by cataloging the push and pull factors that drive students away from comprehensive traditional high schools and into a disciplinary alternative school. I argue that the processes and structures of the contemporary education create the conditions of student disposability. The chapter pays particular attention to how high-stakes testing and neoliberal education policy enable certain students to be positioned as unwanted and disposable within public schools—how they become “the students nobody wants.” I then document how these processes shape the educational context of Juan Diaz by juxtaposing student-centered vignettes with Texas state education policy that works to constrain or reroute opportunities and resources available for vulnerable students.
High Stakes Testing and Texas

In a country obsessed with standardized testing, the state of Texas stands out as particularly enamored. The origins of standardized testing in U.S. education are often traced back to Iowa in 1935 and the creation of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, but the contemporary testing monstrosity that dominates education systems is traced back to *A Nation At Risk* (1983), a seminal federal report from the Regan administration that dramatically increased the stakes and usage of testing and “shepherded the notion of risk and the “at risk” label into educational and popular discourse” (O’Connor et al., 2009, pp. 1-2). The document asserted the stakes in stark terms: “The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people… if an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war (United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).”

After this, the drive to increase test scores was no longer simply a local or state concern, but instead directly tethered to national security and the future health of the U.S. empire. *A Nation at Risk* also enabled a departure from “the prevailing policy paradigms of equity or efficiency” and instead oriented schooling and education with the now dominant modes of “standards, quality, and excellence” (Horsford et al., 2018, p. 28). The educational discourse that followed *A Nation At Risk* “set off what we now think of as the current education reform movement that has transferred what many consider the failure of the corporate sector onto public schools, replacing public investment strategy with school choice and high stakes testing” (ibid, 24). These were market-based strategies, first posited by Milton Friedman (1962), wherein markets replace or supplement all facets of society—an idea that went “from a fringe idea of the Libertarian right to a mainstream thought in a mere four decades” (Rury, 2020, 24). Yet as Horsford et al. (2018, pp. 24-25) illustrate in their examination of the contemporary U.S. education policy landscape, the “market-based approach to school reform is fundamentally flawed. It fails to understand that if people are treated as customers instead of citizens, the skills of citizenship and political engagement will atrophy.” This
approach also “changes the ethos of public service as commitment to a common good, changing what it means to be an education professional… moreover, market-based approaches do not support state intervention in redressing racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic discrimination” (Horsford et al., 2018, p. 25).

The passage of No Child Left behind in 2002 supercharged the move to more neoliberal approaches to schooling with standardized testing as a core component driving funding, curriculum, and notions of excellence, quality, and equity. NCLB was “supposed to address the achievement gap,” but “there has been scant evidence of its success” (Rury, 2020, p. 217). Instead, NCLB placed “enormous pressure on schools to conform to prevailing conceptions of excellence, defined largely in terms of academic achievement” and instead has “resulted in powerful forces of coercive isomorphism, narrowing curricula in many institutions and focusing attention on test scores” (ibid). For school administrators, the implementation and demand for market-based logics in educational settings has left them with less autonomy as federal and state education institutions have “mandated everything from high-stakes testing to teacher evaluation policies” (Horsford et al., 2018, p. 134). The logic of standardized testing as a means to appropriately and scientifically access student academic achievement is not just ubiquitous in K-12 schooling in the U.S. but increasingly institutionalized through colleges of education and departments of education (ibid).

For the state of Texas in particular, the policy inspiration and basis for the wide-scale implementation of NCLB and its standardized testing mandates was Texas’s own accountability system under then-Governor George W. Bush. As governor in the 1990s, Bush built on the work of previous Texas Governor Bill Clements, who in the late 1980s tasked a state commission with examining how schools were preparing students for a changing economy, “providing the framework for the accountability standards that the state would later adopt” (Mckenzie & Kress, 2015). In his 1994 gubernatorial campaign, Bush highlighted “three education initiatives: charter schools, accountability, and vouchers (Loyola, 2016),” foreshadowing what was to come at the national level. With the backing of former Democratic
Lieutenant Governor Bob Bullock, in 1995 Bush passed his landmark education reform bill (designated SB 1) which, “established charter schools in Texas,” altered school governance to “a more corporate structure, in which the education commissioner reports to the governor, with the SBOE [Texas State Board of Education] retaining some decision-making power but otherwise stripped of most managerial and regulatory authority”, and “established one of the country’s first statewide accountability systems for public school” (ibid). A key technology of these incoming education reforms were the implementation of an annual high stakes examination for students in Texas public schools (Valenzuela, 2005). Underpinning the logic of this form of accountability for Bush’s administration was the colorblind idea that “if Texas made all the schools give the same tests, the state could redirect resources where they would do the most good, and eventually African American and Hispanic kids would catch up to the White kids” (Stanford, 2013). These shifts in contemporary testing culture in Texas paved the road for national policy, and George W. Bush touted his education policy as the “Texas Miracle” (Valenzuela, 2004). As scores in tests in Texas rose, this “miracle” became a major talking point during the George W. Bush presidential campaign in 2000. After his election to U.S. president, the talking point then provided legitimacy for the bi-partisan passage of NCLB at the federal level in 2002.

The supposed rise in scores, however, was a mirage, created through a systematic effort to manipulate data, “hiding as much as [it] reveal[ed]” (ibid, p. 1). For the state, “Texas-Style Accountability” lead to 70,000 students a year leaving school, “most dropping out before they had to take the 10th grade tests that would count against the school” (ibid). Despite the growing chorus of evidence documenting the ways “policies supporting high-stakes testing [were] harmful to all children, especially for children from poor, minority, or non-English speaking families” (ibid), subsequent Texas Governor Rick Perry doubled down. What had started out in the 1990s as one standardized exam that students needed to pass in order to graduate high school had become, under Perry’s leadership (2000-2015), a near totalizing accountability system that required students to pass 15 exams throughout K-12.

The latest iteration of Texas’ accountability system is “The State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness” (STAAR) program, which was implemented in Spring of 2012, and includes annual
assessments for reading and mathematics in grades 3-8, writing at grades and 7, science at grades 5 and 8, social studies at grade 8” (TEA, 2018). Additionally, students must pass “end-of-course assessments for English I, English II, Algebra I, Biology, and U.S. History” (TEA, 2018). Despite changes over the year, Texas style accountability, predicated on high stakes testing, continues. Moreover, as I will describe in the remainder of the chapter, high stakes testing and the accompanying pressures greatly impacted Juan Diaz as a disciplinary alternative charter school, further cementing its disposable status in the Houston educational economy.

**Accountability at Juan Diaz**

“Our School is Alone Out Here” Accountability and Funding

The principal of Juan Diaz, Mr. Cortina, (pseudonym) is not wearing a fedora today. No tie either. It is near the end of the academic year and the weight and worry he carries in his face is familiar. I’ve seen it before on many an educator. He has asked to see me today. I had been trying throughout the year of my study at the school to find time to meet with him one-on-one, and this came as a surprise. I was initially worried that I had done something wrong, but the exhaustion in his voice pointed in a different direction. I think he just really wanted someone to talk to—someone to sit down and listen, someone who was not there to judge, nor even necessarily to give advice—just someone to understand that the job is hard, institutional actors make it harder, and he is trying his best. I couldn’t help but think of the irony, because so many of his students wanted the same thing.

When I knocked to enter, the room was more messy than usual and the candy tray, which had always been full, was now empty. He waved me in and began the conversation with a deep sigh, eyes closed, shaking his head slowly from side to side, perhaps in disbelief. “Everything okay, Mr. Cortina?” I asked still worried I might be in trouble, like when I was a kid myself.
“You know, Mr. Lomeli, this job is incredibly difficult. And the state and the city, they don’t make it any easier. The pressure this school is under...” He trailed off, chortling angrily at the thought. I leaned back in my chair and breathed a little easier. He just needed to vent. I realized sitting there in his office how easy I had it. How low the stakes were for me in comparison, as an outside researcher in the school. “I can’t imagine Mr. Cortina,” and my eyes slowly make their way to the floor. I hoped this gesture conveyed both empathy and grief, but I am not so sure.

“No, you can’t,” Mr. Cortina said bluntly and truthfully. My desire to lash out catches me off guard, but I keep quiet as my eyes rise to meet his in silence. “Look...” he says and takes a deep breath. Frustration is tattooed across his face as he continues:

It’s just a lot and it feels like sometimes our school is alone out here...It always wears me out around state testing in the spring semester. I’m always worried about that because what they measure you on. They measure you on a kid. They don’t measure you on the fact that you took in that kid who started at our school with 60 missing days and now he has missed another 15 more days. You know, they don’t measure you on a kid who is new to country, only been here three years and couldn’t speak a word of English. Now he is reading at 8th grade level, but he’s an 11th grade student so they’ll measure you on that. Or how you had a kid strung out on drugs and now he’s clean because of the counseling. There’s a lot they’ll measure you on. The only thing they’ll really assess at the end of the day is if there is enough kids who that passed that test. Did enough ESL kids pass? Did enough “special ed” kids pass? Did enough at-risk kids pass? Pass the test. That’s all they want to measure you on. You know you start the year five thousand dollars in the hole because the state didn’t give you enough funding. That not an excuse, but it’s always been a worry to me because we’re taking kids from other schools who didn’t pass their test. We’re doing our best to get them to pass, but you know, the fact of the matter is that they may not. And if they don’t, you know, they’re going to say that you have a bad school. They might not know you saved some lives in the course of the time, but at the end of the day you didn’t pass. (Principal Cortina, Interview)
The pressure to raise scores and survive another round of testing from TEA was palpable for nearly everyone at Diaz. For Mr. Cortina testing represented an exercise in inequity. The tool the state used to measure student progress, teacher and school quality, and ultimately his effectiveness as a school leader was not just unfair, but corrupt. A score didn’t capture the complexity of the work being done at Juan Diaz. His job required him to attempt to understand students in all their complexity – to be attentive to the social, emotional, and physical dynamics. Yet the means through which he and his school were judged seemed to extract the richness of those very experiences, and simply marked them as “at-risk.” Report cards of schools in Texas contain aggregate data points and subcategories, not narratives and non-linear progress.

The stories and backgrounds of students are important to Mr. Cortina, because they often remind him of the progress and possibilities at Juan Diaz. For him and others I spoke to, accepting students from other schools with an open enrollment policy was a source of pride. Yet, this practice also negatively impacts their state school evaluations, which in turn affects their funding, hiring practices, and curriculum. What made Juan Diaz special in the eyes of Mr. Cortina is also what caused the school to draw increasing and unwanted scrutiny from the state. Accepting students who had largely been pushed out from other schools is expensive according to administrators at Juan Diaz. School finances are often fixed annually, leaving little wiggle room, constraining the ability to respond to changes in the needs of students, faculty, and schooling resources. With a heavily transient student population, flexibility and adaptation were a coveted by school leaders at Juan Diaz. Often students enrolling in JD require additional support services, such as infant toddler care or ESL programming. For a charter school with limited funding, this often meant making difficult choices and cuts. Funding and the proper allocation of resources was a constant source of frustration and anxiety at Juan Diaz.

As an assistant principal with over a fifteen years of teaching experience across the Houston area, Mr. Soto (pseudonym) explained:
I mean living in the state of Texas, coming from this school district or you’re coming from another underserved school district, you are always worried that you’re not going to get the funding that you need to provide for these kids. Charter schools don’t have the same binds. We don’t have a tax space. We sit in Houston’s’ tax base. Their schools benefit, but we’re not a part of Houston ISD, so we don’t get any tax dollars. So, what the state gives us—I mean what the federal government gives us—that’s all we have to pay for the education for these children. As we start to sit down and work on budgets for next year, we are always figuring out how much we’re going to need for this – how much money to fill this gap – try to write the grants we will need so that we can supplement this or that gap. The worry is that we are going to have to figure out what to cut and keep. You don’t want to cut staff because they are the ones helping the child, but you know you also don’t want to turn away children because you don’t have the staff. These are everyday worries.

Mr. Soto shrugs as he finishes. The problems he poses are clearly untenable and perhaps unsolvable. During our interview, I can’t help but feeling like another education expert with little tangible advice for how to navigate his everyday realities at Juan Diaz. Mr. Soto shares his analysis with what I read as a sense of contempt for the way the local schooling system is structured against Juan Diaz. In the interview, he tells me he seen similar issues regarding a lack of adequate resource elsewhere in the city, but his last two years as an assistant principal at Juan Diaz have keyed him into the ways that inequity is baked into the design and structure of the school. Mr. Soto outlined the perpetual state of crisis that goes along with annually funding a growing charter school designed for “at-risk” students. Such a student population often deserves additional academic and social support, which costs money the school doesn’t have. Mr. Soto underscores the impossibility of the situation. For him, finding additional sources of funding in the form of grants, fundraisers, or donations is a matter of survival for the school. What is provided is simply not enough to operate in way that he and others see as ethical.

And yet, as the next section will describe, the financial pressures experienced at JD—in large part due to the contemporary accountability system—are not isolated from surrounding schools in the district. The removal or push-out of supposedly at-risk students from their previous schools and their entry to Juan
Diaz are deeply tied to the financial calculations of accountability. While Juan Diaz ekes by each year, what kinds of reprieve and release are these other schools experiencing by removing students who are positioned not only as troublesome, but also as costly? And how is student disposability tied to the economic calculus schools make when evaluating students in their schools?

“Why did So Many of These Kids Fail?” At Risk & Expensive students

With enrollment determining annual funding for Houston schools, competition for K-12 students is fierce (Carpenter, 2019). While enrollment has slightly increased for Houston overall, the number of students in public HISD schools has decreased as competition from charter schools grows (ibid). In this Houston economy of students, students are grouped, categorized, and appraised. Value is assigned and ads and marketing targeted. The city is peppered with school advertisements and recruiting campaigns—on billboards, radio, and television. Amid this free-market line of thinking, students marked as newcomer, immigrant, ESL, or “at risk,” are positioned as undesirable in relation to the assumed value of “regular” and “exceptional” students. Here, labels become naturalized and implicitly ranked. In a competitive market, with the possibility of a financial or academic crisis looming nearby, schools can turn to deficit approaches to quickly read and assume the capacities of groups of students. Through this neoliberal orientation, the problems of the school lie in the backgrounds and capacities of students and a school’s ability to filter accordingly. The educational system that constructed the conditions remains unexamined.

The geographical location and mission of Juan Diaz positions the school precariously within this landscape. ESL or recent arrival denotes poor scores on standardized tests, which in turn affects funding, the viability of the school, employment, and resource allocation. And yet, the East Side of Houston continues to change with a growing population of Central American and Indigenous Mexicans, who are often seen by traditional schools as both demanding of their limited resources and likely bad test takers. These ideas position such students as expensive to surrounding feeder schools. It is therefore no coincidence that JD experiences an explosion of enrollment as other traditional schools quickly funnel these students,
many who have been dispossessed by at least two governments, out of their schools. Underscoring the ways changes in enrollment impacts JD, Mr. Soto explains:

“...You look around our communities and our community has changed. This year, just yesterday, we took the temporary language arts state assessment. We had 190 kids testing and 120 of them were ESL students. You know around 70% of the kids that were taking it yesterday, English is not their native language. That test was all English. There are extensive reading passages that are for a certain high school level and most of these kids have been here in the country three years or less. It’s going to take you a while to master academic fluency and these kids are being asked to take a test and they are newly fluent and have just arrived in this county. So that scares me a bit. That’s a worry because the state is looking at it like – why did so many of these kids fail? What are you doing? You are a bad school. When we had an influx of Central American immigrants that came here about two years ago, we heard about them referring people to our campus and we weren’t going to turn them away. Now here they are a year or two later and they’re taking state assessments and they’re going to count this year. At the same time, I worry that there is nobody out there that will take them and they’re wonderful people you know. We know we are going to get our hands tied behind our back, but let’s do it so. (Mr. Soto, Assistant Principal)

Alternative schools, like Juan Diaz, are of constrained in their ability to respond to rapid enrollment changes. The allocation of funding in public schools and public charters is based on the previous year’s enrollment, which constrains the already limited ability of school administrators to be proactive in making necessary changes or requests as new students—in particularly those with higher needs—arrive. For schools like Juan Diaz that have even greater fluctuating student enrollment, this problem becomes amplified. Already overwhelmed, Mr. Soto’s words above speak to the dilemma this creates for JD. The structure of high-stakes testing disincetivizes surrounding traditional schools from accepting and fostering recent arrivals from Central and South America. Instead, these students who have already been displaced from their home and country are also actively displaced from traditional public schools, and into JD. In turn, JD continues its status as a “bad school,” while surrounding public and charter schools continue to tread water.
While Juan Diaz frames the acceptance of such students as part of their mission, this also positions them precariously within state educational system. “The TEA [Texas Education Agency] came to us and told us, either you do better and re-check these kids or you'll get shut down,” Mr. Phan, a veteran high school teacher of over 15 years at Juan Diaz, shared with me in a tone that I read as ominous. The word re-check lingered in the air like an open threat. What were they supposed to re-check? Students documented status? Their applications to schools? Their English proficiency? Their juvenile records? And to what end? Who would rechecking serve?

Mr. Phan picks up on my discomfort and there is a brief pause between us. I ask, “And, what happens if the state takes over your school?” He looked at me and stated matter-of-factly – as though he had run through this nightmare scenario on multiple occasions:

They will come down and let all the teachers go. They'll bring their own principal and they will bring their own state mandated leaders to make sure that our school is going to survive. What they are going to do is try to say that we don’t want all these ESL kids. We don’t want them here because they can’t pass English one and two [required courses for graduation]. Their [the TEA] leadership is going to say no we don’t have the money—it takes a lot of money to help these kids and we’re not going to provide the services. Even if we do provide services, their performances are going to be low—exactly what we were getting. So, this principal has to wake up. Just because they want to come to the school doesn’t mean you accept them. The survival of the school depends on your accepting some, but not a bunch of them. The last two years we had a lot of ESL kids come in from the other schools that didn’t want them. So, they came to our school, where we accepted them. Our scores were horrible last year. Terrible. And so, the state said, either you correct this problem or we are going to have to shut down your school and that’s the problem. (Teacher Phan)

The “wisdom” and advice of the TEA official speaking with Mr. Phan was unofficial. Mr. Phan explained that the official pulled him aside and spoke in a low voice, like a big brother giving his younger brother advice. This was not for public consumption, these were suggestions for survival and sometimes that meant bending the rules or using them to your advantage. The discriminatory practices the TEA official
suggested (on more than one occasion and to multiple people) are illegal and against official state and school policy. In a crisis, however, the rules, the stakes, and logics must adapt in make-shift ways to the state of things. Sacrifices “have to be made” for the school when the livelihood of the staff and viability of the school is at stake. The educational discourse shifts in crisis, focusing on survival and ‘good enough’ outcomes, rather than on support and excellence. Student numbers and label ratios become ever important and the large-scale gaze of the TEA official constrains the vitality and dignity of what the data points actually represent: the real, complex, and rich lives of young people.

The urgency of “keeping the lights on” became an (un)ethical call from administrators for staff and teachers to work more for less (a hallmark of efficiency and neoliberalism) that I observed in one faculty meeting. The message and warning of the after-school meeting was to work harder or find somewhere else. The teachers and staff alike, Principal Cortina shared forcefully in that meeting, are replaceable. The effect of that meeting on teacher morale was palpable, according to Teacher Garza (pseudonym). He lamented in an individual interview, “What kind of message does that send to us teachers? Who wants to work in that environment?... We should be helping one another.”

Standardized testing in Texas is a sorting mechanism that operates through the auspices of validity, intelligence, comprehension, and normative progress. The standards and metrics of each iteration of the test have been thoroughly called into question, at times culminating in the invalidation of entire tests by the state itself (Swartz, 2019). To be marked as a failing student due to scoring poorly on a standardized test is to come under deep suspicion by the state. Something is awry. The score becomes a thumbprint of sorts for students. No context, no body, just the mark that can write a piece of a student’s story without their consent. When that scores connects with other designations of ability, background, and experience, the cocktail that is produced places such students within metanarratives and statistical groupings. High stakes testing culture, either indirectly or directly, contributed to most of the students at JD leaving their traditional schools and attending JD. Poor scores on tests are used as an objective indicator of a student’s current state at JD. Low scores were pathologized and haphazardly fused with issues of mental health, pregnancy, substance abuse, and turbulent home life. Being exceptional or best were afterthoughts in relation to good enough. This
sensibility was pervasive not just in the articulations of teachers, students, and admin, but also in evident in the culture of the school itself. There was a tacit understanding among students and staff that JD was not a place to excel academically. It was a place to catch up and graduate. As Mr. Garza underscored, “If you are a successful student doing well academically, would I recommend you to coming here to Juan Diaz? [Chuckles to himself] Absolutely not. We don’t have any kind of programming to offer them. I would tell them to look somewhere else.”

For administrators at Juan Diaz, testing and recognizable academic success represents a Catch-22. Administrators are stuck trying to navigate the mission and purpose of the school to serve at-risk students alongside preventing a perpetual financial and existential crisis. Mr. Soto and others continued to point out the impossibility of their situation. It seemed there was no real way to progress, in the ways they desired, in the long term. They rarely had the time or space to ask those kinds of long-term questions or search for their answers. For many of the staff and leadership at JD, it was an arduous and exhausting process tending to the daily business of the school and the structural inequity made it feel paradoxical, like sweeping sand on a beach. The logics of this perpetual crisis brought on by standardized testing makes little sense when examined in practice at the individual school scale. It does not serve the student, staff, or school well. Testing is not an educative aid for JD, but rather a seemingly demoralizing process that continues to cement the school’s status on the periphery. Yet, the logic of this process becomes clearer when JD is placed as an integral part of a city-wide schooling system that transgresses district and neighborhood boundaries. The purpose of the alternative charter school in this way, moves away from perpetually struggling to provide vulnerable youth adequate schooling, to instead providing a constant source for traditional schools and administrators elsewhere to warehouse unwanted youth.

The label of ESL is totalizing for students under these conditions, as regular conversations with teachers and administrators describe a seeming fixed educational pathway of limited success for students in ESL. Their stories and educational capacities are already written. They are positioned as a “problem” for the school and their immediate schooling futures are fixed. Mr. Phan gestures to some arbitrary balance of the right kinds of students, and the idea that once this proper ratio of students were achieved the school
could supposedly regain its footing. But I wonder how long JDHS has been in a state of worry. It seems, based on interviews with longtime teachers, that the school has been on the brink since its inception. “Don’t accept so many” is Mr. Phan’s limited solution. The school, according to him, already is hampered in its ability to educate and even an influx of resources wouldn’t bring up their scores enough. Mr. Phan is well aware how difficult a test in another language can be and knows two years or less of ESL instruction is not enough to adequately prepare you. For him, turning away students is the humane and honorable thing to do. But where else are they supposed to go? How does Juan Diaz become—even seemingly—the only option for the students who wind up there?

“Their Hands Were Tied” School Push-out

With students positioned as risky and undesirable, how do traditional schools actually carry out the work of disposing of unwanted youth? Student participants shared that there are many practices that affected how they were encouraged—or forced—to leave their previous schools for Juan Diaz, including truancy, low grades or test scores, childcare and pregnancy, zero-tolerance, and limited ESL services. When I asked my primary participants why they decided to leave their previous schools, they each replied that didn’t know it was even an option not to—it wasn’t framed as a choice to them. For students labeled as troublesome, strict behavioral contracts, a heavy police presence in schools, and punitive school policy meant minor infractions could unwittingly result in their push-out from previous schools.

Bryan, a senior planning to attend the University of Houston, shared with me that he had spent nearly 6 years at a selective charter school in the East End only to be kicked out his senior year for being a passenger in a minor car crash between students in the school parking lot. “They told me their hands were tied. It was school policy or something. All that time man. Fucking wasted. Down the drain for some shit that wasn’t even my fault.” For Bryan, the selective charter school that pushed him out was a source of hope to make it out of his neighborhood and living situation. Most of friends were at that school and now, according to him, their lives were set on very divergent pathways.
As the oldest of four, he worried about how his displacement might affect his younger brothers as they “really look up to him.” In my observations of him, Bryan was often read by students and teachers alike as a statesman of sorts. His even-keeled sensibility was welcomed and celebrated in most social circles, but every so often his frustrations and laments would bubble to the surface. “This place [Juan Diaz] isn’t that bad,” Bryan shared during a plactiva, “but, the schoolwork is a fucking joke. At my other school they were always on your ass about work and college. Here it’s like they don’t care – just finish the worksheet or whatever.”

Adeline, a junior at Juan Diaz, shared a time during the 7th grade at a nearby school where she was pressured by administrators to press charges against a fellow 7th grader who had shoved her, an interaction she described as “not a big deal.” As she recalled in an interview:

“They [the administrators] were waiting for her to have one more fuck-up so they could kick her out of school… and I was like, “No, I don’t want to press charges,” and they were like, “Are you sure?” because they wanted to make sure I was positive. I mean we were little and I think it was overdramatic. Like they are trying to give her a ticket and lock her ass up. That’s why I didn’t want to press charges.”

Additionally, students who are struggling academically are often times pushed out as they are not perceived as contributors to the school system, and specifically the school’s need to passing tests. This was especially prevalent among the more selective charter schools in the area. A number of the students at Juan Diaz had previously attended selective charter schools, such as KIPP and Yes Prep, but were eventually pushed out, in large part because they needed additional academic and social support. As Victoria shared, “They were really cool and I want to go back, but they told me I wasn’t trying hard enough. They said I was a better fit here.”

A running joke at Diaz was that once you came to the alternative school, you could never leave. Students shared stories of trying to return to their former schools only to be turned away or convinced to leave by counselors and administrators. It had seemed for many students that attending Diaz, even for a short period of time, was a permanent marker for surrounding schools that you were a problem student, and thus transfer away from Diaz was difficult.
Snapshot Day: The Economic Calculus of Counting Students Before Push-Out

Snapshot day is an important driver for the movement of students into Diaz. Snapshot day, which typically occurs in last Friday of October, is the nickname for the time where schools across the state are required to submit their student enrollment data. The enrollment data they submit, in part, helps set the amount of funding the school will receive the following academic year.

As Juan Diaz counselor Mendez (pseudonym) explained, “Snapshot day [is] where students who are in the [school] building would get funded for that for following [academic year]. So, on that day, for example, if they got a thousand students in the building, for that next year they'll get funded for a thousand students. It doesn't matter if they have 800 or 1500 in their building (the following year). They're gonna get funded for 1000 students because that's how many students were on the campus the year before in October.”

Teachers and administrators at Juan Diaz shared that their enrollment numbers spike every year after snapshot day, as students are pushed out through various means from their previous schools—but only after they’re counted. The logic appears to be: keep a student to be counted for funding, but get rid of them before testing time rolls around. Here, counselor Mendez explains how this affects Diaz:

After Snapshot Day what happens is that a lot of school districts will then start to weed out the kids that they don't want—the problem kids—because problem kids take a lot of resources away from you. They tie down your administrators. They tie down your counselors. You know, they're the ones that don't come to school. There are the ones that impact your state accountability and on test day they tend to fail to impact. So, is not usual for schools that don't have the resources or enough of the manpower or the wherewithal to work with them to push them out or will encourage them to leave. A lot of times when they are looking at the kid or the family and looking for a place to put them, they will say things like “you might want to consider Juan Diaz because I heard good things for students like your son or daughter.
Snapshot enrollment day is also a moment for schools to capture a potentially dynamic and transient student body. Administrators are required by the TEA to not only record the number of students, but also the type for the funding purposes. For administrators and counselors under pressure to perform each year with limited resources, student Snapshot day functions, in some respects, as an expiration date. Students who are constructed as difficult or as problems are no longer deserving subjects post-Snapshot Day. Prior to leaving their previous school, many Juan Diaz students and school staff shared that counselors (and staff that held similar positions) at other schools in the area were one of the primary means of referral to JDHS. Many students reported that they were told they could no longer come back to their previous school, and that they should attend JDHS for a semester to recover credit. In other cases, they would simply be told they would be a better fit at an alternative school. In this situation, counselors (who all educators seem to know are stretched thin and under tremendous pressure) at other schools are critical fulcrum that direct “at risk” students (often with the best of intentions) into alternative school systems. Amid the calculus schools make, these students were not merely disposable—their disposability was framed as a matter of survival and viability for traditional schools.

**Pull factors to Juan Diaz**

While the push-out of students from traditional schools is vital for understanding how students end up at Juan Diaz, there are also particular ideas, languages, and practices that draw students to the school—the pull factors. One of the most important of these is credit recovery. As an AEC of choice, Juan Diaz is mandated by the state to provide accelerated instructional services for students. This takes place in the form of credit recovery, seen as an alternative to course repetition when a student had previously failed a course needed for academic promotion or graduation. Programming is typically offered via online instruction, teacher-guided instruction, and computer software that is intended to provide students to earn high school credits in a condensed time-frame. What would normally take a semester, could take as little as a week or two. For example, a student who failed chemistry at his previous school could recover those credits by
taking and passing an online education program on chemistry. The types of programming available vary widely and operate with little oversight as “the Texas Education Agency does not regulate credit-recovery courses or even track their proliferation” (Thevenot and Butrymowicz, 2010). According to multiple students I spoke with during my time at Juan Diaz High School, a major draw of attending Juan Diaz was the opportunity to recover credit quickly and easily.

I found that a sure-fire way to get the youth at Juan Diaz talking was by bringing up the topic of credits. Instantly, students who were typically quiet or asleep would raise their heads and become engaged in the conversation at hand. There were lessons to be had and insights to be gained in these discussions. The savvy student could maneuver through credits quickly. Certain teachers, courses, and programs could be instrumental in gaining the academic credits needed to graduate with a diploma. Without enough of them, high school graduation wasn’t an option and at schools like Juan Diaz, completion of high school is the overarching goal. Students would poke fun at those who were senior or juniors and lagging far behind in credit. “Keep messing around and you will end up in the backyard.” The “backyard” was the name students gave the small satellite building on campus grounds where local GED and adult education programs were run, often housing many former Juan Diaz students.

The majority of the student body at JD entered into the school in part, behind their graduation timeline and in need of making-up graduation credits in order to graduate HS on time. Offering accelerated credit to at risk youth is one of the requirements for alternative schools like JD. The large number of students in the Houston area who were behind on credit was interrelated to surrounding schools Teacher Cano (pseudonym) explained to me. Mr. Cano was a veteran teacher of fifteen years, ten of which took place in HISD schools. He shared his frustration at neglectful schools or districts that would allow their students to fail so far behind in credit and then eventually send them to Juan Diaz. In his experience, rather than address the underlying issues that caused waves of freshman and sophomores to attend school without gaining education credit, his schools came to rely on it as a means to make AYP. Speaking about his previous years in HISD, Mr. Cano explains some of the confusion students experience:
It is very common for kids to call themselves “Freshmores.” Kids came in as freshman and they didn’t have enough credit based on attendance, based on not passing their core classes. So, they were still classified as 9th graders for the second year they were in high school. Sometimes the third year they were in high school, sometimes the fourth year they were in high school – they never really accumulated enough credit. So, in their minds they think, they call themselves tenth graders or eleventh graders or twelfth grader, but on paper they were still classified as freshman.

When students are in a position where they must make up such a large amount of credits, Juan Diaz becomes one of the few options to do so. Often students transfer in with the intention of staying only a semester to make up credit, but find it difficult, for a host of reasons, to then return to their previous school. Those that have fallen behind in credits are candidates to be routed into Juan Diaz. Some schools had become notorious at Juan Diaz for sending students who were severely behind on credits. As school counselor Mendez explains:

My heart breaks every time I see it a student from Basic Prep Academy, because I know that they have been screwed over. I will look at their transcripts and they have taken the same class for three years or they are missing credits where they were not awarded. Something that they should've been aware of and it makes me heartbroken to see that they're basically being screwed over by the system. Knowing that no one is checking up on anything and it’s basically not somebody doing their job. It is probably a lot of somebodies not doing their jobs and you know we will look at their records and it will be horrible. A twenty-year-old ninth grader who should be an 11th grader technically, but because of some issue or the administrator keeps putting him in the same class… or in this case they didn’t know any better to speak up for themselves, they have lost three years of instruction. But they’ve been doing their part -going to school and passing classes. You know it’s just crap like that that we see from a lot of the schools, but especially Basic Prep Academy. The students that should be in special ed that don’t get diagnosed until they come here. They have passed every test thrown at them, but maybe failed every single math class they taken… Why? Nobody stopped to ask why? It’s probably because they were not doing their work.
Once at Juan Diaz, students in need of credit recovery were placed in a credit learning class. The amount of time devoted to the class was dependent on academic status and time to graduation. For some it was an hour-long class in their schedule, for others it made up the majority of their day. The classroom was essentially a large computer lab where students could ostensibly work quietly at their own pace. In practice, the room was often a space where students slept, watched videos, listened to music, doodled and occasionally worked on the mind-numbing online curriculum. Billy broke the students in the class into two groups: the students, like him, who finish their work early and then goof off, and students who goof off and wait until the last two weeks to finish. In an interview, Ms. Mendez explained the class and her frustrations with it:

They [the students] work on the computer to do like a virtual classroom. Basically, they will have all these folders for the website, like geography. Like they didn't get credit for the second part of half of that class so they will be on the computer and they have to do the work. The issue with that is that it is on the computer and the teacher in there is, I don't want to say horrible, but hands off. He doesn't monitor them really. So, they can sit there all year long and not do anything. Pretty much just look at videos on YouTube and so I am the one that has to go through and basically say, ‘Hey, you haven't done anything in a month. What are you doing? You know, you have all these credits you have to get back because you are a 19-year-old sophomore.’ You know, I have to have those come to come-to-Jesus kind of talks with them…

While students can be encouraged to be more focused, there is often little incentive to do so, as success is defined through such a low bar and as there is little other push (in or out of class) for students to do more than the bare minimum.

Thus, between the entangled mechanisms of school push-out from traditional schools, on the one hand, and the pull factors into Juan Diaz on the other hand, students are treated as problems in need of correction. In particular, these discourses and processes situate student value in relation to metrics of achievement, namely testing, and reinforce the idea that those who may need more support our resources
are too burdensome and expensive—and therefore unwanted. These logics linking achievement and student value naturalize the myth that those students marked as “at-risk” are disposable. But they are not.

Conclusion

In their now canonical study of Adam, a student traced over time, educational anthropologists Varenne and McDermott (1999) highlight the ways the U.S. educational system is in the business, quite literally, of producing success, failure, and successful failure. Their research demonstrates the deep link between entitlement and exclusion, and privilege and oppression, in the form and function of schools. Determining who or what is valuable in schooling contexts is only one side of the coin though. Tracing the outlines of value and worth will inevitably position some on the margins and others outside the lines entirely. For Latinx Studies theorist Lisa Marie Cacho (2012) the ascription of value is at the center of processes of dehumanization and disposability. As she argues (ibid, p. 18), “the production and ascription of human value are both violent and relational, both differential and contextual….value is ascribed through explicitly or implicitly disavowing relationships to the already devalued and disciplined categories of deviance and non-normativity.” For Cacho (ibid, p. 13), following Barrett (1999), the relationship between value and negativity is innate considering “value needs negativity”—in other words, the valued subject is only legible in contrast to the devalued subject. This is because (ibid) “the object” of value needs an “other” of value,” where “the negative, the expended, the excessive invariably form the ground of possibilities for value.” Such systems of dehumanizing valuation are not neutral in their mechanisms of evaluation. She writes (ibid, p. 17), “recuperating social value always requires the devaluation of an/other and that other is almost always poor, racialized, criminalized, segregated, legally vulnerable, and unprotected.” In the context of U.S. schooling, “the space of privilege produces, and is agonistically constituted by” the continued and large-scale disenfranchisement and dispossession of minoritized groups (Paperson, 2010, p. 12). In this way, students attending alternative schools like Juan Diaz are (Rodríguez, 2007) “indispensable but disposable” in relation to the Houston urban school system.
The stories my informants shared in this chapter clearly indicate an economy of vulnerable youth that are marked, devalued, positioned as expendable by schools across Houston. What’s more, the structure of accountability in the state incentivizes the pushing out of youth positioned as “at-risk”. Juan Diaz is positioned by the state as a school specifically tailored to addressing these issues, yet in practice it struggles with the task at hand as it limited by forces largely out of its control. Instead its purpose, like many other alternative schools across the country is to warehouse vulnerable youth, in order to ease the pressure for surrounding schools. The students caught in this machinery of educational disposability are “the throwaway (object) in production,” and face the brunt of the impact (Khanna, 2009, p. 186). They are the ones who go through school feel like an afterthought or unwanted or worse and are expected to accept their “vulnerabilities without…the tools for genuine transformation of those systemic processes that render [them] insecure in the first place” (Evans and Giroux, 2015, p. 4).

But what does it mean to the students themselves to feel like the ones “no one wants”—to feel like their schools see them as “bad,” to perceive that their schools are trying to get rid of them, or traverse an educational space that is trying to redeem them? While students are constantly navigating what it means to be seen as “at-risk” with the educational institutions they occupy, the meaning of riskiness to the institutions and the students alike is not fixed. Rather, as the next chapter describes, students variously internalize, rework, and push back against the way that the education system and school frame them as both at-risk and disposable. While there is serious harm done through the “victim blaming,” meritocratic, and alienating discourse of risk—discourses that shaped their pathways into Juan Diaz—we also see how at-risk, racialized student subjectivities are not static. Moreover, they can even be sites of creativity and a shared political community.
CHAPTER 5
“At-Risk” Subjectivities and Redemption in the Brown Commons

A lot of the kids come in with that (at risk) stigma because \textit{mimicking a student voice}, ‘Oh, I couldn’t make it there or I had nowhere else to go,’ or ‘I was supposed to go to CEP (a juvenile detention facility) but I didn’t want to do time there. Mister I hear that this is not a good school, that this is where the bad kids go.” And I tell them this is a great school. Every school is a good school. It’s what you make of it… (Teacher Garza)

Escaping Testing Day (April 1\textsuperscript{st} 2015, Early Afternoon)

It is a little over an hour before school is officially over for the day and the students are buzzing with the kinetic energy of being contained for 8 hours. It is the last day in a marathon of 4 consecutive test days where teachers, students, and admin were in a mostly silent and collective understanding that test days were serious businesses, literally and figuratively. Hours of instruction, practice, and repetition had been practiced and performed by all. Jobs and graduations were at stake. Students and teachers alike knew not to mess around during testing. Under the rubric of testing day, demands of student silence, bodily compliance, and performances of appearing “ready to learn,” were intensified and noncompliance risked stiff penalties for students and teachers. The leash for punishment and the kinds of behaviors that would pass muster—like going to the restroom on one’s own accord—would be met with serious skepticism. In my interviews, observations, and placticas, no one I came across seemed to enjoy speaking about or enduring test days. Yet, like myself, we were all well practiced in the mundane regulations of testing.

With the last bell of the day, the students could barely contain their eagerness to be done with the day, semester, and year despite another month of classes. Class had just begun and students filling the classroom were clearly restless, not only a day of testing, but from possibility of having to stay quiet for
another hour. During test days Mr. Singh (pseudonym) was almost militant in his demand for student silence. Go to sleep or read a book. No listening to music and absolutely no talking. Moving yourself or something too quickly would also get you a stern look that seemed to telegraph to most that Mr. Singh would follow through on his silent threat. As students and staff alike confided to me, everyone knew Mr. Singh had a quick trigger finger. In each of my interviews with administrators and lead teachers (eight total interviews), they directly named or alluded to Mr. Singh’s penchant for write-ups. Nearly every student that I came across that had enrolled in his class had shared that they had been written up by him at one point or another.

He would not only write up students for minor infractions which would usually result in an office visit and the student being sent back to class, but he would also write students’ tickets. These tickets as the students referred to them, were citations written in collaboration with Houston Sheriff’s Deputies who were hired by and worked in the schools. A citation meant that you had to see a judge and address your alleged infraction in juvenile court. It could potentially result in a student’s forced transfer out of JD and to a DAEP or JJAEP. The citation had to be signed off by a teacher and written by a deputy on site. Tickets were ostensibly reserved for “major” and “dangerous” infractions, but in practiced I observed them being dispensed for relatively minor issues. Billy for instance was issued a ticket for saying “fuck you” to Mr. Singh. As Mr. Singh reported in our interview, he as the teacher, had the discretion as to whether the fuck you that Billy uttered was considered a threat. He shared that he knew it was not a real threat, but wanted Billy to learn a lesson. It was my reading, based on the smirks that emerged in his retelling, that Mr. Singh had taken satisfaction in action. The citation meant that both Billy and his father had to take a day off from work and school to attend the citation hearing at the Harrisburg courthouse. At least three of my primary participants were issued a ticket by Mr. Singh over the course of fieldwork.

Some students, it seemed, came to use Mr. Singh quickness to write up to find reprieve from the day, preferring instead to sit alone outside of the assistant principal’s office. I once caught up with a student, Anita, that was kicked out of Mr. Singh’s class for raising their voice. It seemed out of character for the
seventeen-year-old mother of two and star basketball player. I was late to observe Mr. Singh’s third period class that day, when I noticed yelling coming from the classroom.

“Get out and go to the office!” I heard Mr. Singh yell to Anita who was standing with her arms folded. I hesitated to open the classroom door, wanting to avoid the conflict, but they saw me standing through the small rectangular window that cuts through the door.

“Fuck this,” I hear Anita mutter under her breath as she began to open the door amplifying my feelings of voyeurism. I never quite knew what to do with my body in these instances. Looking back, I often fought back the urge to intervene in conflicts like this. I wonder if I made the right decision. “He’s such an asshole!” she says in my direction and loudly grunts in frustration. Mr. Singh and I make eye contact. He looks worried and I am not sure why. I made the choice to follow Anita to the office rather than begin my classroom observation. I think this worried Mr. Singh even more. As Anita and I made our way down the stairs toward the main office, I ask her what happened. With a smirk that surprises me, she shared that she just needed a break from a long night of childcare and an early morning of basketball practice.

Her outburst in class was intentional and calculated. “Fuck that guy,” she laughed laying out her backpack and sweater onto the well-worn couch. “I needed out of there….he [Mr. Singh] won’t even let us rest of our heads on our desk!” She sounded exhausted and I began wondering if my notetaking is in bad form. She looked at me suspiciously while I jotted down a few notes and explained to me, perhaps in anticipation of a question I didn’t ask, “I did my stupid ass worksheet already. Like I am done for the week.” “I am understand,” I replied sheepishly and immediately wished I had thought of something more substantial to say.

Anita stacked her sweater onto her backpack and created a makeshift pillow. She laid her head down and yawned, quietly signaling for me to leave her alone too. “Finally. I can sleep,” she told the room as she closed her eyes. She spent the next two periods resting and sleeping on a couch outside of Mr. Soto’s office.

On this testing day, I thought it was going to be a long and dreadfully boring hour in Mr. Singh’s class, but before I could settle into my desk, Carla, asks if I would like to do an interview with herself and
Blanca. “Mister,” she says in my direction before turning to smile at Mr. Singh, “don’t me and Blanca need to finish that interview with you… right mister?” The high pitch in Carla’s voice alongside her head nodding in eagerness to the direction of the exit communicates to me, like flashing neon lights, that she wanted to avoid Mr. Singh’s class. There were no formal plans for an interview of course, but Carla clearly understood an opportunity had emerged.

I don’t have time to formulate a response, before Carla quickly asks Mr. Singh for me. “Mr. Singh can we go finish our interview with Mr. Hilario? We aren’t doing anything in class.”

Mr. Singh looks worryingly at me, and before I could answer again, Carla spoke on my behalf. “Don’t worry Mr. Singh. We won’t say anything bad about you,” she tells him with a sticky sweet smile.

“I guess.” Mr. Singh says with a little resignation. Carla, Blanca and myself walk to the exit, when several other students ask if they could join us.

“We got to finish our interview too,” they tell Mr. Singh who looks on skeptically.

Mr. Singh turns to me and asks “Are you sure you want to take all of them? That is a lot to handle.”

Carla tugs on my arm sleeve and answers for me, “We will be fine.” I nod in way that doesn’t seem to inspire much confidence with Mr. Singh.

Half the class has joined and as I shut the door to his classroom Mr. Singh reminds and warns me, “They are your responsibility now.” With that, a mass of twelve of us walk toward the covered gazebo outside as Carla says loudly and to everyone, “he [Mr. Singh] is such a bitch.”

Under the protection from the impending rain, the student’s backpacks adorn a red bench while we huddle close around the picnic table. I am near the center of the table with my laptop as the centerpiece and bags of chips and other snacks pepper the tabletop. Initially there were a few conversations taking place. Billy, Blanca, and Adeline are discussing the prom theme, why it is stupid, and why it sucks no one cares about prom. “I’m still looking for a dress,” Blanca shares. Carla continues to lead a discussion on Mr. Singh and his “bitchiness,” encouraging others to tell their stories and complaints. Daniel discusses a fight that took place at his apartment complex between JD students. “It wasn’t even really a good fight,” he shares with a couple others, “they were both pussies.”
Marcos, a tall senior leaning against the nearby handrail, redirects our collective attention when he mentions a shooting that took place in his neighborhood the previous night. All other side conversations stop as we lean in to focus.


Marcos tells a detailed story that was familiar to many others I heard at Juan Diaz. Cars driving by. Guns. Drugs. Violence. This time, no one died. “They shot up his crib, but missed him and his homies,” Marcus shares and then says it again, but this time in Spanish.

Questions and speculation emerge from the group. “Will they come back?” “Will they get revenge?”

“I don’t know” Marcos replies, “but my brother thinks its payback for last week. Y’all remember that shooting on Broadway?”

Carlos’s rich narration of his neighborhood inspires others to share stories from students about gunshots, fights, and their own neighborhood drama. The students at Juan Diaz are seemingly well-practiced narrators and they share their stories with excitement and eagerness. There is lots of laughter, yelling, and one-upsmanship. They go back and forth, attempting to find out who has the craziest story about life in the barrio. A camaraderie is being built amongst melancholy and absurdity: a brown commons.

After about fifteen minutes of discussion, I notice Blanca and two other students packing their bags. I am keenly aware that school is not yet out as the final bell has not rung and I begin to wonder if something is up. There is still about thirty minutes left. The three students send secret messages with their eyes and giggles and I stand up and ask where they are going, failing completely at trying to hide my increasing worry. They didn’t hear or chose not to respond, but all three continue walking unabated, now near the school parking lot fifty yards away. “Hey guys!” I yell out. “School isn’t out yet. Come back…” I survey our discussion group and begin running through scenarios, hoping someone might clue me in or maybe even help out. They are quiet for the first time. “Shit.” I mutter under my breath but loud enough for those left to hear.
Carla who is sitting across the picnic table finally answers for them. “They are just going to the store with their mom Mister.” I look at her, likely with sirens of anxiety all over my face and begin to walk toward the parking lot where Blanca and the others were headed. Carla reads my face and gets up from the concrete bench. Standing, smiling, and perhaps attempting to be reassuring, Carla calmly says, “Don’t worry Mister. We ain’t bitches. No one is gonna snitch…”

I interject because I can’t control myself, “What about Mr. Singh?”

She snorts and standing next to me, her body shifts away from mine. “What about Mr. Singh?” she says in quick response and then laughs out loud at what felt like the ridiculousness of my assumption. In a paternalistic and frustrated tone, she tries to explain the ritual to me. “He don’t care about us no more. We aren’t his responsibility now. Who is gonna actually check on us, Mister? The day is pretty much over and like everyone is busy. We’re good. As long as you don’t fuck around and you finish your test nobody cares whether you leave or stay.”

Carlos says from behind me, still sitting, and to an audience of nodding heads, “Everybody knows this, Mister. We do it every test day.” He looks around and snickers to himself knowingly, “To be honest, a lot of us already left.” Suddenly the quiet lunchroom and hallways today made sense. He continues, “I mean if they get caught, it’s on them. They were stupid enough to actually get caught. So, you’re good mister.”

Carla walks back to the picnic table and sits back down as I remain standing, unsure of that to do. “Mister,” Carla calls out again. I turn to face Carla and the other students at Juan Diaz who still, despite the weight of the day and potential to leave, wanted to continue sharing and dialoguing. With forgiving, yet stern compassion in her voice Carla reminds me, “You couldn’t stop them anyways.” With that, I turn and rejoin the collective.

It is amidst these stories, that Hector, a senior at Juan Diaz, decides to slightly alter the conversation. He shares a conversation he had with one of the few teachers who had been at Juan Diaz for more than three consecutive years. “I asked him, like, Mister, why are you still here? Like why don’t you want to
leave to somewhere better? Don’t they pay better at the other schools? He’s always complaining how bad we are and shit, so I wanted to see what he had to say,” Hector recalled.

“He didn’t get mad at you, bro?” Billy asks, dumbfounded and eager to hear his reply, “He’s seems like he is always mad at the world.”

“Nah,” Hector says as he shakes his head from side to side and continues “He just said straight up – I am needed here. This is a school for students who are suffering the most.”

I don’t keep my cool and I immediately interject, “He said what?! The group catches on to my level of surprise.

“Yeah bro. It was wild,” Hector said running his fingers through his sparse chin hair. “He was just so chill about it, like it was a fact, you know?”

I lean forward and ask, “How do you feel about that, Hector? How does it feel to have a teacher talk about you and other students in that way?”

“Well,” Hector paused to collect his thoughts. “I mean it’s nice and all, but still. We are not all fucked up, ya know?”

**Value at Juan Diaz**

The discourses that ran through this exchange are indicative of three things: 1) A sense of camaraderie and knowledge that emerges through their collective sharing vis-a-vis identity-in-difference (Alarcón, 1990) 2) the ways that students are often positioned in Juan Diaz High School 3) that they these dialogical experiences are also a way to index and map the uncaring terrain these youth find themselves traversing. Hector’s retort that they are “not all fucked up” illustrates how the weighty labels of being “at risk,” troubled, unstable, or worse, haunted and hounded students at Juan Diaz. The subject categories used to describe the students, the school, and their communities regularly reinforced presumptions of precarity and danger. These discourses are of course not unique to Juan Diaz. In particular, the expansive literature on the criminalization of youth and the school-to-prison pipeline demonstrates how subject categories like “at risk” and “bad” function to mark disproportionately low-income students of color as dangerous and in need
of surveillance, correction, and discipline (e.g. Ayers et al., 2001; Ferguson, 2000; Giroux, 2009; Kim et al., 2010; Lopez, 2003; Meiners, 2010; Saltman & Gabbard, 2003; Skiba et al., 2002; Winn, 2011). These discourses and subjectivities are particularly pervasive in “last chance” charter schools, like Diaz, which explicitly aim to redeem and correct the at-risk racialized youth subject. As described in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 of this dissertation, ubiquitous discourses about “at-risk” students are fundamental to the broader carceral and punitive logics that underpin alternative schooling cultures (Selman et al., 2019). At Juan Diaz, the school’s explicit mission was to help Latinx “at-risk youth” overcome. These discourses and affective registers were everywhere you looked, constantly reminding students that they must do better than they did before. Whether the students themselves felt as though they needed saving or recovery was not of importance.

As Lisa Marie Cacho (2012, p. 13) describes in her work on social death and racialized dehumanization, “Value is made intelligible relationally.” Good kids and bad kids. School success and failure. At-risk students who are corrected, and those left uncorrected. Those who are redeemed, and those who are unredeemed—or even unredeemable. Redemption (a central mission of Juan Diaz), like success, is one-side of a binary. But what exactly does riskiness mean in a school like Juan Diaz? For those are marked with the label of at-risk, what does it mean to be corrected or redeemed? And how do students themselves navigate their own subjectivities amid ubiquitous discourses of failure and redemption?

In this chapter, I build on the work of critical race scholars of education (e.g. Ferguson, 2000; Lopez, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999; Winn, 2011) who investigate how schools represent and produce racialized “at-risk” student subjectivities, and how students themselves experience their positioning as subjects. In Ann Ferguson’s (2000, p. 22) book *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*, for example, she traces how institutional practices of the school “produce social identities of ‘at-risk,’ troublemakers, “unsalvagables” for Black boys. However, she also documents (ibid) how Black students “recoup a sense of self as competent and worthy under extremely discouraging work conditions.” Her work demonstrates the deeply subjective practices of labeling and categorizing children, the impacts of such categories on young people themselves, the way the categorization of children is tied to the production of
race, and how kids themselves cope. In tracing student subjectivities at Juan Diaz, I similarly describe how discourses of riskiness and unruliness work to mark and categorize racialized Latinx youth, while also paying attention to how students experience and navigate these subject positionings. I examine the production of these at-risk subjectivities in the first section of this chapter. The process of this subjectivation, I argue, positions such Latinx students as disposable within the school system—an experience echoed in the words of students themselves who regularly asserted that they were “the kids no one wants.”

The second section builds on the previous section in order to investigate the specific ways that the production of at-risk subjectivities work alongside the school’s *raison d’être*: redemption. Alternative schools are weighed with heavy discourses of students’ past failure, which permeate not only broader policy discussions on alternative education, but also ideas about schools, curriculum, administrators, and individual students. Students at Juan Diaz often come to the school carrying histories of negative academic, social, and/or emotional experience in their previous schools. Juan Diaz presumably offers the students the opportunity to correct these past failures.

However, I argue that discourses of redemption have some insidious implications that are too often overlooked. First, like many U.S. urban school settings with large populations of racialized students, ideas of redemption are flooded with discourses on grit, deservingness, resilience, and “making it”. These neoliberal bootstrap ideologies erase structural inequality while elevating problematic notions of meritocracy. Second, to be positioned as a Latinx student in need of redemption often requires the students to produce and find deficits in their lives, families, and communities. Here, student’s cultures, families, languages, and communities are framed as obstacles and barriers to their success—they are treated as a source of riskiness, rather than a symptom. Such discourses and practices of “saving” youth and children from their cultures and communities (not to mention themselves) are pervasive in harmful deficit thinking models (Shields et al., 2005), subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999), colonial schooling (Paperson, 2010), and assimilationist education. Thus, I argue, we should be alert to how models of redemption are predicated on cultural alienation and erasure. Finally, in critiquing the meaning of redemption at Juan Diaz,
I argue that ideas of the redeemed “successful student” are still riddled with a culture of low-expectations. Redemption at Juan Diaz is largely defined as simply doing what is needed to check a box, complete high school, and enter the economy as a (generally low-income) worker. By focusing on the day-to-day operation of the school, the classroom, and the curriculum, I demonstrate how the school functions through a hidden curriculum of reproducing social hierarchies of race and class. Certainly, stories of redemption are economically and socially productive for Juan Diaz in supporting its publicly-stated mission. And yet, discourses of redemption do not challenge the fundamentally unjust juxtaposition of good versus bad kids, redeemable versus unredeemable, or risky versus safe. As Cacho writes, “(re)valueing always implies devaluing a not-valued “other” (2012, p. 17). Redemption merely opens the door to some, in a limited way, while naturalizing the persistent exclusion and disposability of others.

Finally, in the third section, I turn to how Latinx students engage with the subject categories that are marked onto their lives and bodies. As Hector illustrated when he declared that they aren’t all “fucked up,” the students at Juan Diaz are not simply blank canvases upon whom these discourses are passively mapped. Instead, they variously accept, rework, and resist the ways they are positioned as at-risk subjects within the school. Within such an environment, youth respond with a variety of strategies of resistance, meaning-making, survival, and alienation. Students, for example, would find their own ways to talk about their identities and their futures, sometimes by finding ways to reassert their value and deservingness, and other times through obstinence or claiming space and recognition within a system that treats them as disposable. Thus, the final section addresses how students affirmed their sense of self through collective and individual acts of subversion against unjust or irrational actions and policies—by skipping class, listening to music, working together on class problems, and at times even overtly rejecting the way they were positioned within the school. Here the work of Muñoz (2020) illuminates the ways collective sense making emerges in the depressive position of alternative schools. Despite the deep and long-lasting consequences of at-risk subjectivities, redemption narratives, and the concomitant production of disposability, students at Juan Diaz continue to creatively practice, search for, and/or make indelible and indisposable life.
“We Are Not All Fucked Up” At-risk subjectivities at Juan Diaz High School

Juan Diaz sits by a busy highway, with a run-down apartment complex nearby. The front of the school has a strange appearance that looks slightly like office buildings, and yet there is a large metal fence that obscures the front entrance. It looks carceral and punitive, and even the students see it that way. “It looks like juvie,” the students said. “Yeah, I thought it was CEP.” CEP stands for Community Education Partners, one of many notorious for-profit disciplinary alternative schools in the city (Carr et al., 2017). The conversation had started when I had asked them what they think people who drive by think about the building. Another student chimed in. “Yeah. Like, whenever I first passed by here and I saw the building, I thought it was a bad kid school.”

Of course, the sense of Juan Diaz as a “bad kid school” was not only a reflection of the carcerality of the physical structure itself. Whether one was simply observing the building (and its surrounding environment) or actually knew about Diaz’s reputation, there was a sense that it was a “bad school” with “bad kids.” Natalia continued, “When people ask me where I go to school and I’m like ‘Juan Diaz’, they’re like ‘where is that at?’ and I tell them the school by such and such place, they’re like ‘Oh, why do you go to a place like that? That’s the school for only bad people.’ They have this negative thinking that basically this is just for bad people. They’re like, ‘They sell drugs in there. They are all crackheads.”’

Elezar jumped in and described a time he had returned to his old elementary school to give a presentation to the kids—an assignment he was getting credit for in Mr. Phan’s class. The presentation went well, but when his former elementary school teachers asked him where he goes to school now and he said Juan Diaz, they automatically lowered their expectations of him. He told them he wanted to go to Texas A&M after graduating, and they told him he should try community college instead. “They were putting up all these barriers,” he recalled. “People see us here, and they judge right away. They see me as ‘at-risk’.”

“Do you feel at-risk?” I asked.

“I don’t,” said Elezar.
“No,” said Dee Dee.

“No,” said another.

“It sucks, because they are criticizing us. And they don’t even know us. They don’t even know how much effort we put into this. They just see so low of you.”

“I don’t care what people say about me,” Carla quipped.

The student’s experiences indicate how the school marks the students themselves. Their very affiliation with the school seemed to reproduce them as risky or “bad” subjects in other people’s eyes. It was not just that they were sent to the school because they are deemed “bad kids” previously—they are also regarded as “bad kids” simply because they go there. This production of the Juan Diaz students as “bad” or “at risk” subjects is regularly reinforced in discourses about the students, both outside and inside the school.

Inside the school, labels like “at risk”—or even “bad”—often take on the appearance of logic and fact within educational contexts, as bureaucratic discourse and practices naturalize the terms. Cloaked in ideas of meritocracy, the subjective nature of these evaluations is depoliticized and the practice of categorization is normalized, made routine, and treated as a useful descriptive fact about youth. However, as Ann Ferguson describes in her ethnography with Black boys, these categories are far from objective. “[T]here is an uneasy connection between the subjective and objective modes of evaluation of worthiness and potential in schools. Both these modes draw on and reflect hegemonic cultural forms and values” (Ferguson, 2000, p. 61). Ferguson argues that teachers and school officials play a key role in the “subjective evaluation of students’ character and behavior,” which can have a powerful effect on how students—and particularly students of color—are constructed as problems.

This was evident at Juan Diaz as well, where teachers discourse about students focused heavily on their behavior, academic weakness, and precarity. “We have some difficult kids here that nobody wants,” said Mr. Phan. “Difficult in discipline, difficult in learning, difficult in attendance, difficult in poverty.” While he expressed a genuine care for trying to help the students (e.g. “you really want to show your respect and concern for the kids”), discussion about students often centered around how to overcome the heavy weight of their “at-risk” status. As he said, “the problem is that our programs are not that strong because we are
more focused on the at-risk population.” At-risk had multiple meanings here: poverty, family life, being undocumented, behavior issues (ranging from acting up in school to criminal history), drug use, attendance problems, and academic issues (ranging from learning disabilities, to being a non-English speaker, to not working hard enough). Said Mr. Phan articulated “If they’re having discipline issues, they’re having academic issues, and probably attendance issues.”

While ideas about what it meant to be “at-risk” varied, the most pervasive use was to describe the kids as troublesome, undisciplined, and disrespectful. This meaning was evident, for example, in Mr. Singh’s description of his students. Mr. Singh was a first-year math teacher, struggling with teacher anxiety which he himself highlighted in our two interviews. He was arguably underprepared, having had limited pedagogical training and limited institutional support from the school. Mr. Singh graduated with a degree in Engineering from Texas State and the only teacher training he received was the two-week workshop the summer he was hired. In this context, his instinct for classroom management was punitive. He described entering the classroom with students who weren’t used to a teacher, having had a substitute for a few weeks at the start of the semester. “It was like chaos. It was just students doing whatever they want. So, I had to implement a lot of steps to bring them under control.” He described the students as immature and disorderly, with limited retention power for his material. He turned to handing out write-ups—over 78 in less than a semester—until the assistant principal finally stepped in and told him they’d reached “a limit on how many students they can expel, because they get paid by their student body size.”

The dynamic in Mr. Singh’s class, however, was not an inevitable product of “bad kids.” The tension he had with students, I believe, may have been a reflection of his own posture toward the students as “at-risk” subjects. Namely, he acted like what they most needed was discipline, and he took every opportunity to come down on them. If students were handing assignments in to a stack on his desk, simply setting an assignment down a little askew was a cause of correction, and when students didn’t properly model respect for his authority, he would attempt to assert dominance over them. From the student’s perspective, he didn’t treat them with respect. Moreover, he saw their lack of retention of their material as a reflection of their educational shortcomings as “at-risk” students. “They tend to have a blurred memory,” he said. “They have
to constantly be taught the same thing over and over again.” There was little reflection on how his pedagogical methods—which reflected what Freire (1970) would call a banking model of rote memorization—might have shaped student learning. Failure was treated as a reflection of the student’s qualities. I empathize with the difficulty that Mr. Singh faced. The situation he found himself in, as a teacher with little formal training and with no mentor guidance (he shared in an interview is feeling that none of his colleagues or supervisors at JD liked him), would be difficult for any first-year teacher. From my perspective as a teacher-educator, I saw in Mr. Singh what I see in many of my pre-service teachers—a deep anxiety over control and discipline. Mr. Singh in my classroom observations would often assume that students were always on the edge of infraction, and then escalate tension with students in his attempts to maintain control, rather than moving to understanding and de-escalation. Perhaps in another setting that approach would work—although I have my doubts, but in JD where most of the students had encountered many teachers like Mr. Singh before, the students had fleeting patience for teachers learning on the job, let alone those who they didn’t see as treating them with respect or care.

The “at-risk” label attached to students also affected how teachers described themselves, in particular emphasizing their presumably unique levels of patience or sacrificial role in dealing with the students. As the ESL teacher—a white woman name Ms. Jones—said, “For me, it’s very rewarding, but I also think you have to love it to do it anywhere, but especially here.” Similarly, Mr. Phan described his “love and passion” for making a difference, in contrast to other schools where the kids were unwanted. Undoubtedly, the teachers faced incredible challenges in the teaching, with limited resources to address the needs of their students who were certainly dealing with various forms of vulnerability. However, such framing did not challenge the positing of “at-risk” students themselves as undesirable or burdensome, but rather elevated the value of the school for stepping in to deal with such kids.

While the school did face immense pressure to meeting state high stakes testing metrics, the continued reproduction of the students as “at-risk” subjects arguably was also vital to the very existence of the school. It was a ubiquitous theme in the literature and promotional materials for the school, and dealing with “at risk” students was central to how the school framed its purpose—and even secured its funding. This was
evident in the accounts of Mr. Green, a white man who had been teaching at Juan Diaz since 1989 before moving recently to teach at a public school. He described the process this way:

You know, we used to joke at Juan Diaz, but it is actually true that you have to improve and not improve in different areas over different years...So, schools get additional programming and funding to help them improve test scores of a certain sub-population that aren’t progressing enough. Say the special ed kids aren’t improving enough compared to the gen ed kids—then the school can put on a review and extra monitoring so they qualify for grants that give them the ability to support [at-risk student] progress. *(laughs)* So, you have like three years to raise scores or you get spanked, but afterwards you just shift the sub-population you are improving on. So, for example, like, in the third year they are like, okay, get rid of that program—we aren’t under review for that anymore. Now we got ESL and it’s okay, because to keep the ESL program we don’t need as many special ed kids anymore. It’s all about how much money you have and what you can do with it if you know how to use the rules. *(Teacher Green)*

The process he describes is one in which various “at-risk” student subjectivities are mobilized strategically to maintain funding and purpose for the school. As Mr. Green says, “If you want to save more kids, you need more money,” but the process revels the deeply subjective (and motivated) ways that schools—including Juan Diaz—actively work to reproduce “at-risk” subjectivities.

While students, like those described at the beginning of this section, at times push back against their production as at-risk subjects, they also internalized the regular way they are categorized as “bad” kids. Natalia, for example, told me about how she carried this status with her from all the way back in elementary school.

Tugging at the sleeves of her oversized hoodie, Natalia nervously confessed to me during an interview, “I was a real bad kid back in the day.” I was surprised, both by her admission and sense of guilt. Natalia is an exemplary student by most accounts. Teachers and administrators often invited Natalia to speak to other students about becoming a high achiever.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “How were you bad?”
Natalia leaned back in her chair and readjusted her hoodie. “Dude. I failed second grade.” She paused, perhaps reading my reaction. “Like, I just stopped caring about school. Then I would get in trouble too because I hung out with the wrong crowd, and then that summer I had to go back and retake the STAAR test. I remember them trying to get help me, but I just didn’t care.”

I did my best to remain calm, but I was boiling with rage at the system that made a sixteen-year-old Latina feel this way about her seven-year-old self. She continued, “Like, I felt remorse because, ya know? I saw all my friends going to third grade.”

I didn’t hold back anymore and interrupted her. “But, Natalia, you were just a little kid. Don’t you think that the school should have done a better job helping you and supporting you? How does that make you feel?” I wonder if she sensed the anger in my voice.

“I dunno,” She replies. “I just should have done better. I should have seen it from a different point of view.”

The process of becoming (Biehl & Locke, 2010; Muñoz, 2020) an “at-risk” subject began so young for Natalia, and yet it continued to operate as a weight of shame and embarrassment that she carried with her for years, coloring Natalia sense of herself, her childhood, and her education.

Dee Dee told a similar story of becoming an “at risk” subject. Despite her high number of school absences, Dee Dee was on friendly terms with nearly every student in her classes. It was her fourth year at Juan Diaz and she was a junior with sophomore credits, having started at the school in 8th grade. As we sat outside and talked about her life and experience at the school, she explained how she came to transfer into Juan Diaz. In the 8th grade, Dee Dee failed her standardized math test, a requirement to pass onto the next grade. As a result, she was counseled by school administrators to repeat the entire 8th grade. Rather than face the humiliation of being retained in the same school, Dee Dee, was encouraged and chose to attend Juan Diaz in the hopes of starting anew. Before attending Diaz, she recalled her sense that the school was for “bad kids.” “I never thought I would be here. Because I would drive by and be like I am never going to that school. That’s the one for bad kids. Yeah... And now I’m here.”
Natalia and Dee Dee’s stories indicate how labels like “bad” and “at-risk” get fixed upon children, even at a very young age, and carried with them for years after an initial academic problem or indiscretion. These students are not “bad”—the are produced as “bad” within an institutional structure that leaves little room for low-income, racialized youth to deviate from the bounds of the norm. Again, Billy’s experience of becoming “at-risk” within this educational institutional structure was all too similar. For Billy, this process of becoming “at-risk” in the eyes of the education system and his schools likely began when he was caught for the first time with cannabis in school in 7th grade, accidentally dropping it on a school issued laptop. “It just crumbled up too small bro. I couldn’t get it out of the keyboard. It smelled up the whole room,” he explained to me. The tiny fragments of the recently grinded and strong smelling cannabis filled the room and made it impossible for Billy to escape blame. He was issued a citation and suspended. He shared that his slightly older brothers, who were regular users, brought on his usage. “It was just fun,” Billy told me underscoring he had very limited resources and thus access to only small quantities. For Billy, these recollections about his previous educational experiences were colored by his time in court-mandated rehab for cannabis use during his middle school years. For him, those early years preceding middle school were formative according to him, laying the foundation for the struggles he experienced in 8th and 9th grade. “I was just a follower when I was little. I would just do what my brothers would do,” he once shared with me in conversation about why he had a hard time in school. He would regularly describe his past self as a “fuck up.” Thus, the production of Billy as troublesome and bad within his schooling, also shaped his own perception of himself, even years later.

The stickiness of “at-risk” subjectivities—and their affiliation with Juan Diaz—also shaped a student’s ability to leave the school and return to a traditional public school. There was the sense that students become marked by the “at-risk” or “bad” label, such that even if they were doing well academically, they were subsequently always unwanted, and thus stuck at Juan Diaz. The public schools did not want them back. The frustration with this situation for the Juan Diaz students was palpable—even painful—as evident in this story documented in my field notes:
Elezar, Carla, and myself stood huddled near the exit of Mr. Phan’s class waiting for the bell. The other students were in their desk, when Carla cracked a joke about learning Juan Diaz. “You can leave?” Carolina turned to ask Elezar and Carla. Her face leaned forward, and the urgency, optimism, and volume in her voice abruptly stopped our laughter. Maybe she overlooked something, something she might not have known. Maybe there was a chance for her to get back and she needed to know - badly.

Her question, however, was met with silence. I think maybe the three of us were caught off guard. Standing near the student-made posters of different types of human cells, we weren’t entirely sure she was talking to us. Carolina rarely spoke in class and when she did it was almost always in Spanish and in a voice that barely registered. This time, however, it was in English and loud and firm. Her eyes didn’t waver with the silence and she asked again, “You can leave? Like for real how did you do it?”

From across the classroom, Adeline, who I thought had been sleeping, answered in voice more rich in acceptance than frustration. With her face nestled between her forearms, inches from her desk she responded, “Bitch, you stuck here like the rest of us. Can’t nobody leave this shitty school. We can’t go back. You shoulda learned that by now.” Her voice is deepened from the reverberations of the desk and everyone in the class now turned to looks at Adeline, whose head remained resting on the desk.

Mr. Phan looked up from his desktop, halfway opened his mouth, and opted to exhale slowly and with intention. He waited. Our eyes instinctively turned to Carolina, awaiting her response.

“Nobody was asking you, Adeline. Why don’t you go back to sleep? Mind your own business.” Her words fired rapidly in English. “Asshole,” Carolina said under her breath, but loud enough for us to make out the sound.

Adeline’s eyes rolled as she shook her head and whispered a few curse words in Spanish.

“Ladies,” Mr. Phan said in a tone that sounds tired. “Class is almost over.”

“Whatever,” Adeline unenthusiastically responded. Her hands reached back and she shielded the rest of her head with her hooded school sweatshirt. Her fingers rustled in her front pocket and she turned her headphones all the way up.
Carla took two steps away from the line forming at the door, closer to Carolina’s desk. Concern covered her face. “I’m sorry,” she said facing Carolina who had turned red with frustration or anger or both. “We were just joking, you know? I mean you might be able to transfer, but I was just… My bad, chica. I wanna leave too. It fucking sucks…” she said with a deep sense of tenderness. “I was…” and the bell interrupted the scene. Carolina quickly collected her things, stuffing them into her sparkling purple backpack. Not stopping to respond, she walked past Carla and quickly out the door...

Later over a bag of Hot Cheetos in Ms. Garza’s class, I asked Carla and Billy to break down what happened. “Why was she so upset? Did we say something wrong?” I asked.

“It wasn’t really us, mister. It’s cuz she hates it here.” Billy told me. Carla added, “She has tried to leave twice, but she had to come back. Each time she was like super pissed and didn’t really talk to anyone for a while She’s been trying to leave for like the last two semesters… it’s fucked up cuz she is like super smart. She was like ranked really high in her class or something”

The everyday way that discourses about “at-risk” Juan Diaz students circulated and were spoke about points to the ubiquitous nature of these subject positioning. Such subject categories—and their associated discourses—had consequences in many aspects of school activity and student life. It affected how students perceived themselves and spoke about their intelligence, skills, and life histories. It affected how adults spoke about and treated the students. And, it most certainly affected the approach to teaching and curriculum across the school. In particular, it established a framing of Juan Diaz’s purpose as one of redemption—of saving these “at risk” students from themselves, their communities, and their cultures. In the next section, I’ll examine how at-risk subjectivities took shape alongside ideas of redemption and correction.

**Redeeming Subjects**

In the previous section, both Natalia and Billy described the becoming of their past selves as “bad,” and recounted how they carried this categories with them for years after they had been labeled as such. In both cases, however, becoming “bad” and “at-risk” also set up the changing consequences of their positioning
over time. Becoming is, however, inherently a shifting and unfixed process. For many students at Juan Diaz, becoming “at-risk”—and even carrying that category with them—also meant their past failures were also regularly juxtaposed against their redemption (or at least their potential for redemption. For example, Natalia would assert, “Now, I am different though,” perhaps wanting to change the subject from the difficult topic. With a warm smile that didn’t completely hide her worry, she assured me, “Like, I am nothing like I was. I try hard and I keep to myself. I’m a better person now.” For Billy, he would describe two “Billies”, split by pre- and post-rehab, “the fuck up” versus the new version of Billy who tried hard in school and didn’t smoke weed anymore.

Billy and Natalia are not unique in this framing. At-risk youth are regularly positioned as in need of redemption—a goal of Juan Diaz itself. The students themselves learn to position themselves through this narrative structure. The students in the study were frequently reminded that they were in an alternative school because they alone did something wrong (and if they felt otherwise, they needed to get over it). The mission of the school reiterated the precarity of Juan Diaz students through the mobilization of “at-risk” language to reassert the necessity of redemption within the goal of producing successful students. Indeed, framing childhood educational experiences as failures is vital to the production and becoming of teenagers as redeemable subjects. Here, it is not only their literal experiences of early childhood education that matter, but also the way the school creates narratives to package and mobilize childhood failure for their own representational needs. The school’s aesthetics, mission, promotional materials, worked in tandem to subtly remind students of their need to overcome. Within this educational context, students are expected to embody and ascribe to the existing model of redemption in order to access the full range of resources and support they desire. Often reflecting on their schooling experiences, students would highlight how they used to be “bad kids” and describe how their current educational success was based on a split from these early educational experiences. Unfortunately, however, in separating themselves from their childhood and their educational pasts, many students also drew barriers between themselves and their fellow students, their communities, and families.
The at-risk positioning of youth at Juan Diaz is accompanied by an assumption that students are broken and in need of not just help, but saving and correction. As Mr. Phan said, “our goal is to have the kids and put them back together and just be a productive part of society.” The expectations of the school are stunted ostensibly to account for a false sense of reality where students’ capacities and futures are fixed. Here, the pull of the cycle of poverty is thought to be near totalizing, save for a few hard-working students. For example, for many, the liminal status of undocumented—and thus also foreign—is assumed and identified as the cause of student’s low expectations and decision to leave school. Here, we find again that it is the student’s (and their background’s) fault for any failing, despite attending a school where barely enough is the modus operandi. Such discursive and experiential landscapes demand we ask: What happens when you assume students are broken? What kinds of curriculum emerges alongside this subject positioning? Why do low test scores or undocumented status for instance, translate so easily into ideas about the pathology of culture and community, or the failure of parents?

I understand the discourses and practice of redemption for “at-risk” youth, in part, through the idea of the hidden curriculum, which has been written about by numerous educational scholars (Anyon, 1980; Giroux & Penna, 1979; Ferguson, 2000; Jackson, 1968; Jay, 2003; Kenli, 2009; Langhout & Mitchell, 2008; Margolis et al., 2001; Willis, 1981). Giroux and Penna (1979, p. 22) describe the hidden curriculum as the “unstated norms, values, and beliefs that are transmitted to students through the underlying structure of meaning in both the formal content as well as in the social relations of school and classroom life.” Thus, to understand what is truly being taught to “at-risk” students, we need to take seriously both the formal academic coursework they are given, as well as the informal messages that are presented through classroom and school management and discourse. Both the hidden and the overt curriculum for “at-risk” students is couched in ideas of what needs to be done to redeem and correct the student. However, there are additional important implications of the messaging this curriculum sends. Jay (2003, p. 6), for example, describes how “the hidden curriculum can serve as a hegemonic device for the purposes of securing, for the ruling class (and other dominant groups in society) a continued position of power and leadership.” In other words, the hidden curriculum serves as a key arena for the social reproduction of class, race, and power. Margolis et
al. (2001) describe this as “finishing,” and point to how the hidden curriculum reproduces what Dorothy Smith (1990) called “relations of ruling,” or “elements of superstructure, including the curricula of class consciousness, whiteness, patriarchy, heterosexuality, and of the west” (Margolis et al., 2001, p. 3). These normative structures are central both to what Valenzuela (1999) calls “subtractive schooling” wherein Mexican American youth are stripped of culture through schooling, as well as what Paperson (2010) calls “colonial schooling,” wherein students are expected to be inculcated into empire, whiteness, and assimilation. Thus, the hidden curriculum within a school for at-risk racialized youth, operates to redeem “at risk” subjects while simultaneously reinforcing the reproduction of race and class hierarchies that got the students there in the first place.

A look at the daily social structure of the school and the management of students is revealing of how the hidden curriculum takes shape ‘in-between-the-lines’ of everyday life in the school. On the surface, Juan Diaz has the features of a regular school: standard facilities, a lively lunch in the cafeteria, a gym, a library, a basketball team. Most of the facilities were rather nice, aside from the bathrooms, which were rarely cleaned because, it was said, the students would just mess them up again. However, below the surface was a quiet sense that the students were always on thin ice. Behind the school where I spent my time was a live-in juvenile facility. Student from this part of the building weren’t integrated into class, but they’d sometimes move throughout the school or the cafeteria in groups, their presence acted like a reminder hanging over the heads of the other students that this was indeed a carceral space and their condition could worsen if they mis-stepped.

The carceral and punitive nature of the space was evident as well in the presence of various officials tasked with security and enforcement: an armed police officer who always worked the room in school spaces as if he was always surveying and surveilling, a school security guard (who students got along with better because he’d joke with them), and a truancy officer who would check in on students about missing class. School administrators also filled a surveilling and disciplinary function, and I’m reminded of the first time I met the school principal: he was standing at the top of the stairs overlooking the students, telling
young men to pull their pants up. The atmosphere was one in which “at-risk” youth subjects were treated as always potentially more dangerous.

The dynamics in the classrooms varied, with some teachers taking more strict disciplinary approaches, while others were lax almost to the point of indifference. However, in both contexts the redemptive goal was relatively consistent: keep the bar low so students can earn their credits and graduate. A not-so-hidden curriculum of low expectations was reflected in both the informal operation of the classroom and the formal curriculum itself. One of the most common findings in alternative school research is a simplified curriculum that students experience as easy or unchallenging (Glassett, 2012). This was certainly the case at Juan Diaz, where every student and teacher I talked with on the subject described the school’s formal curriculum as easy. The pre-conceived conceptions of at-risk students in an alternative school designed to aid them, dictates the level of curriculum they receive. Despite the plethora of ways students are at-risk, the prescription is the same: a culture of low-expectations. In particular, this was characterized by a banking-model curriculum that is predicated of rote memorization and repetition. Numerous teacher interviews reflect this as was the case when I interviewed the science teacher, Mr. Ramos (pseudonym):

We not about critical thinking in education. We don't have that here. They can’t write a paragraph, they can't do complex math. We just get them through for the moment, and of course, they are not going to be successful. If they want to excel they have to take intermediate classes at HCC [Houston Community College]. The majority of our kids when they come here, when they graduate, their skill set is horrible. So, when they go to HCC they have to be tutored back to the basics of writing and math. And some can't do that either. They just drop out. I mean we don't talk about that here. We act like everything is alright.... We don't think about taking them to college. The majority of our kids don't go to college. Their job is just to survive. To make it, to have clothes on their backs, and they are just happy to be here. I hate to call the minimum, but this is what we’re serving. And with the population of our school - you know out of a hundred graduates maybe ten actually apply [to college] and maybe out of that ten only one graduates. That's pretty much what we’re serving. I mean we encourage them. They're good for one or two years but, after two years they
don't have those encouragements, that push from our school. They lose interest because, you have to remember - they hear word about getting a job. Sometimes they can do both. They can do school and take up a job. But a lot can’t. (Teacher Ramos, Interview)

Thus, the at-risk subject positioning and the accompanying labels came to shape the low expectations for students—not only at Juan Diaz, but for their futures. Success and redemption at Juan Diaz meant something very limited: getting through high school. Check the boxes, get your credits, and graduate. A recurring sentiment that emerged in reviewing individual interviews with teachers and students was that academic standards and expectations were bare minimum and college an unrealistic pathway.

In an interview with Mr. Phan, he explains, “Our goal is just to get them through high school…Their goal is just to get a job” Some teachers attributed the low standards to student’s motivation or existing academic skills. The standard position among the faculty was that there wasn’t any point assigning work, because the students wouldn’t do it, and then they’d fail. Student work ethic was regularly held to blame for their performance in class, reinforcing (at least to an extent) neoliberal ideas of meritocracy. Jackson (1968, p. 35), however, describes how “not trying, as we have seen, usually boils down to a failure to comply with institutional expectations, a failure to master the hidden curriculum.” And for students themselves, they often expressed frustration about how constrained ideas of educational success were for them. When I met the former valedictorian of Juan Diaz, for example, she told me she was going to the local community college. I asked if she had considered the University of Houston, and she was shocked that it was even an option. “I could do that?” she asked.

The simplicity and lack of rigor was surprising and at times demoralizing to the students, as it reflected how the school thought about their potential. Dee Dee, for example, said, “[The school work is] just nothing like where I come from. Where I was, it was a lot of work. Worksheet after worksheet, bookwork after bookwork, stuff like that you know? Over here she's like one worksheet for the whole week. I'm just like whoa, oh my God what is this? It's so easy.”
Adeline echoed her, “Like, were not learning anything here. It always something easy. Like, in Mr. Phan’s class we just study definitions for a spelling test. I mean, the whole year that’s all we been doing. It's too easy.”

As did Teresa: “When I first got here I was like, school is easy. Like, this school is too easy. I’ll be in one class and were learning this thing and then in the other class were learning it again. And then in this other class they’re going over it too. So, I just wish it were a little… I guess it because it’s a low-class school or something. Like the kids are at an ‘at-risk’ school so I guess that’s why it’s like that.” For Teresa, she drew clear connections between their framing as both “at-risk” and “low-class” and the subsequent diminished expectations.

Alongside the formal curriculum, the low expectations also unfolded in between course work itself. In the classroom, there seemed to a sense that there were some kids you could push and they’d eventually complete their work. Then there was another segment who were positioned as antagonistic, and who teachers dealt with more cautiously (like Carla). And there was a smaller group, who were just always checked out. They’d sleep. It was silently understood that they were going to leave and it wasn’t worth trying to work with them. The students who would finish their work would be rewarded with whatever they wanted—they could talk, listen to music, maybe even leave the room. In one class, their assignment for an entire week of class was simply to complete two worksheets and copy definitions—work that would take 45 minutes of solid work. That was it.

For some students, like Natalia, they would come in on Monday and get everything done the first day. After that, she could do whatever she wanted for the rest of the week. The credit recovery class was a particularly strong example of this pattern, as students had an entire semester to complete a relatively small amount of work. Many would hang out the bulk of the semester, and then just wait until the end of the entire semester to finish their work. That class wasn’t even led by a teacher—it was led by a truancy officer. But again, as long as one wasn’t getting into trouble, they could pretty much do whatever they wanted and slide through. The teachers that were most genuine—or “real” to the students—were the ones the students gravitated to, even if they weren’t teaching them things. The well-liked teachers were willing to talk to
them about non-academic things—about their lives or their interests. For example, in the computer class, the instructor was relatable. She would talk to them about their lives and make jokes, but the work was miniscule. Billy would go in and there would be a “warm-up” activity as simple as googling something, and then the rest of the class he’d sit and watch the tv show COPS. With these teachers, there would be joking, banter, and laughter. In contrast, in other classes the students would just try to get by not getting in the teacher’s way. Almost every teacher in the school talked about the low quality of work, but that was generally framed as the fault of the previous schools and the students. Some teachers were almost embarrassed by how easy the work they were giving the students was.

In justifying the focus on just getting students to graduate so they could ‘go work,’ I argue Juan Diaz reinforced a hidden curriculum of class reproduction. In his canonical work, *Learning to Labor*, Paul Willis (1981) describes how the hidden curriculum of schooling “is the most important in determining the reproduction of class relations in schools.” The way that the redemption of “at-risk” students was framed as “just” graduating and getting jobs (and usually low-wage jobs at that) is revealing of these tendencies within Juan Diaz as well. The students at Juan Diaz are overwhelmingly low-income. Thus, simply to go and get a job with their high school diploma generally functioned to reproduce their class standing.

Finally, discourses of failure within the school also meant that students who were more successful situated their success via alienation from their classmates and their school. For example, a student who intended to go to community college after graduation would describe this in terms of not being like their friends and classmates. The implication of this was that to be academically successful, students must alienate themselves from their peers. For example, one day Elezar and I are discussing his academic future when he explained to me why he thought he has been academically and socially successful at Juan Diaz.

“This school is easy,” he tells me with a slight air of arrogance. “The kids here don’t give a shit—excuse my language. They don’t care about education.”

I responded, “So, you feel that you are very different than the other students here?”

“Hell yes,” he replied.

“This is a ghetto school, full of ghetto students. I’m gonna make something of myself.”
Thus, redemption and “becoming something” meant a distancing from his community, peers, and (given the way “at-risk was racially and culturally situated) arguably even his cultural identity. While on the surface redemption seems an admirable goal for youth who are so often under-served and dealing with challenging conditions in and out of school, I argue, the ultimate result this narrative (and concomitant practices) only serves to reinforce and naturalize the idea of “bad” and “good” kids, of redeemed and unredeemable. The violence of this hierarchical valuing of racialized youth fails to fundamentally challenge the system of inequities and that unevenly mark low-income racialized students as “at-risk” in the first place. Instead, models of redemption naturalized meritocratic notions of grit and “making it” that erase structural violence and individualize responsibility. Moreover, when redemption is tied to a hidden curriculum of assimilation to normative whiteness and a reproduction of unequal class and labor relations, we must be deeply attuned to just what “at-risk” students are supposedly being remade into. And yet, as we’ll see in the next section, the students themselves are attuned to this. While in many ways they do clearly internalize their becomings as “at-risk” subjects—often in painful and alienating ways—their responses to this discourse also demonstrate how unstable such racialized categories are in the lives of Latinx students themselves.

“At Risk” & the Brown Commons

Racialized categorizations can be sticky, but they are also unstable, shifting, fluid, and even sites of creativity. The students in this study were not merely passive victims of the subjectivities that were mapped onto them. Rather, they found ways to survive, play with, and even resist the impacts of their discursive becoming as “at risk” subjects. Students were well aware of their community context and did what they could to make do and thrive. They knew they lived in the ghettoized communities where hardship was common, but it was not absolute. Student resented and resisted static portraits, especially when they themselves were positioned as victims without agency. They functionally were “at-risk” students in the eyes of the school, because they had been defined as such by the educational institutional systems they were
in. And yet, while the discourse of riskiness was ubiquitous, being framed as not only “at-risk” but also a victim of one’s condition was in direct contrast to their lived experiences, where they were active participants in the shaping their communities and own lives. They had jobs, responsibilities, children, and high expectations. Yet, in the school little of this mattered. The gaze of suffering is constraining and demoralizing if not coupled with the machinery that produces it. The students at Juan Diaz were highly perceptive; they understood the kinds of assumptions and consequences that go along with being framed as at-risk in a school specially designed for at-risk youth.

In thinking about these discourses, subjectivities, and the way racialized students made sense of their own position in their schools, I find particular utility in following the lead of thinkers in discard studies (e.g. Bennett, 2010; Liboiron, 2021), who challenge systems of disposability by seeking ways to breathe life into things, people, and places that are treated as trash, waste, unwanted, or disposable. Staying with the trouble (Haraway, 2016), mapping life courses and vibrancy, and attending to assemblages of connection are all tools to critique capitalist systems that treat matter and humans as disposable. They do this in order to assert both the fact of indisposability (i.e. things don’t just disappear), as well as to demand new ways of organizing life that are no longer predicated on disposability. In other words, any challenge to disposability is also a call for structural change.

In my own efforts to account for student indisposability, I too want to ask us to witness the vibrant assemblages of life for those students marked as “at-risk”, marginal, and disposable. I find the work of the late José Estaban Muñoz (2020) particularly useful in these efforts. In the next two pieces of this section, I elaborate on why. The first portion provides background to Muñoz and his theories of racialization and the brown commons, as a framework for thinking about Latinx identity and experiences. The second portion then tells stories from Juan Diaz that resonate with this idea of the brown commons in order to demonstrate the vital, indisposable assemblages of student life.
José Esteban Muñoz, Racialization, and the Brown Commons

In this work I most closely follow the scholarship of the late José Esteban Muñoz in theorizing and examining processes of racialization regarding “the people who are rendered brown by their personal and familial participation in South to North migration patterns” (Muñoz, 2020, p. x). Drawing from the Black Marxism, Chicana Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Performance Studies, and Queer Studies, Muñoz’s posthumous book Sense of Brown (2020), represents an “intervention into Latinx studies and the contradictions of Latinx racialization… provid[ing] alternatives or supplements to what he saw as the dominating positivist trends in Latinx studies” (Perez, 2020, para. 4). Latinidad, Latinx, and other similar markers have been increasingly called into question as scholars have reexamined these concepts and the ways they have been deployed in the service of settler nations, vapid neoliberal formulations of multiculturalism, and capital working to erase claims of sovereignty, indigeneity, and Blackness (Jung & Vargas, 2021; Pulido, 2018; Ramirez, 2018; Sexton, 2008; Zamora, 2017). Critically Muñoz’s theorizing of Brown includes a deep engagement with Anti-Blackness, noticeably missing from many other engagements in Latinx Studies. Muñoz leans into a long and continuing history of Anti-Blackness within the Caribbean and Americas to demonstrate the ways Latinidad, Mestizaje, and Brown function in proximity to Whiteness and Empire at the expense of Black peoples. As ethnic studies scholar Roy Perez (ibid, para. 9) posits in his review of Muñoz’s work, “is brown theory fundamentally a manifestation of possessive whiteness, an erasure of Indigenous and Afro-Latinx existence, and a retreat from Blackness?” What emerges from Muñoz’s meditations on Black and Brown life is a “sense of brown [that] should not — must not — attempt to supplant, resolve, or transcend the Black/white terms of American racism” (ibid). Instead, Muñoz gestures to a share sense of being singular plural (Nancy, 2005) that emerges in (Muñoz, 2020, p. xxxi) “being with, between, across, and alongside each other in various positions of striving flourishing, and becoming” that is “provoked into existence by a shared sense of harm” (Bennett, 2011, p. xix as cited in Muñoz, 2020, p. 6). Thus, “the brown commons are only worth mapping — are perhaps only possible — if the work shoulders a critique of latinidad itself, deconstructing Latinx aspirational whiteness (what we
mean when we say “Hispanic”), and enabling conspiratorial alignment with and for Black life. In other words, brown can never leave Black behind” (Perez, 2020, para. 9)

Within this work, I attempt to draw on the set of ethics put forth by Muñoz in theorizing the experiences of students at Juan Diaz. Muñoz’s work, much like that of Biehl and Locke in the Anthropology of Becoming (2010), is guided by French philosopher Giles Deleuze and Felix Guttari. Through their work Muñoz maintains an antagonistic relationship with static and fixed notions of Latinx and Latinidad which work to reify and strengthen claims to empire and capital. Gesturing instead to becomings and assemblages rather than identity Muñoz draws heavily on Chicana Feminist Philosopher Norma Alcron’s notion of identity-in-difference to highlight the “structuring role of difference as the underlying concept in a group’s mapping of collective identity” (Muñoz, 2020, p. 9). As he moves away from investigations into identity as sameness, Muñoz brings attention to the ways ideas of Latinx have always failed to underscore the dynamic lived realities of those who find themselves under its rubric. He writes: “[T]he theoretical incoherence of the identity demarcation “Latino” is linked to the term’s failure to actualize embodied politics that contest the various antagonisms within the social that challenge Latino and Latina citizen-subjects…this problem has to do with its incoherence, by which I mean the term’s [Latino] inability to index, with any regularity, the central identity tropes that lead to our understanding of group identities in the United States” (ibid, p. 8) Thus, Muñoz gestures to Brown and Brownness as a means to “index” while reasserting that they are “not fixed within the racial and national contours of Latindad” (ibid, p. xxiv).

Within the current socio-political climate, to be Brown “connotes a sense of illegitimacy” for Muñoz (ibid, p. 3), wherein “Brown indexes a certain vulnerability to the violence of property, finance, and to captial’s overarching mechanisms of domination.” Against the backdrop of white supremacy majoritarian affective register he underscores (ibid), “things are brown by law insofar as even those who can claim legal belonging are still increasingly vulnerable to profiling and other state practices of subordination…People are brown in their vulnerability to the contempt and scorn of xenophobes, racists, a class of people who are accustomed to savagely imposing their will on others.” “Brownness” Muñoz writes, “is a kind of uncanny persistence in the face of distressed conditions of possibility” (ibid, p. 4).
Within the current socio-political climate, to be Brown “connotes a sense of illegitimacy” for Muñoz (ibid, p. 3), wherein “Brown indexes a certain vulnerability to the violence of property, finance, and to capital’s overarching mechanisms of domination.” Against the backdrop of white supremacy majoritarian affective register he underscores (ibid), “things are brown by law insofar as even those who can claim legal belonging are still increasingly vulnerable to profiling and other state practices of subordination…People are brown in their vulnerability to the contempt and scorn of xenophobes, racists, a class of people who are accustomed to savagely imposing their will on others.” “Brownness” Muñoz writes, “is a kind of uncanny persistence in the face of distressed conditions of possibility” (ibid, p. 4). As he notes “there may be considerable value in thinking about the problem of feeling like a problem not simply as an impasse, but instead, an opening” (ibid, p. 37). While registering the ways feeling Brown emerges through a violent White Backdrop “Muñoz also understood brown feelings as the grounds of shared consciousness and even insurgent action. For Muñoz, feeling brown is a conduit to knowing, sharing and being with others (who have been blackened or browned by the world) in a collective attunement to the revolutionary potentials of what he called the “brown commons” (ibid p. xv).

Within his work Muñoz focuses initially on the feeling of Brownness and in his later work shifted to the sense of Browness. This shift Perez (2020, para. 6) underscores “represents a pivot through which the singular subject can be envisioned as part of a commons made up of multiple, attuned selves and their histories. Feeling and sense are two vectors of relation toward a network of shared experiences of racialization. If feeling is the immediate experience of being racialized — inward and reactive — then sense is about sharing, touching, and experiencing that feeling in the immanence of a collaboratively fashioned commons. Muñoz’s shift to sense adds precision and complexity to the affective life of race” Feeling Brown then (Muñoz, 2020, p. xvi), is “a conduit to knowing, sharing and being with others (who have been blackened or browned by the world) in a collective attunement to the revolutionary potentials of what he called the “brown commons.”
“No School Spirit” The Brown Commons at Juan Diaz

With this model of the brown commons in mind, I turn now to some stories from my participants that I see as representative of the ethics and politics Muñoz seeks to encourage. The depressive condition that Muñoz describes of “feeling Brown” and “feeling down”—of feeling like a problem—is evident throughout student stories about their lived experiences in and out of school. However, Muñoz’s theorization the importance of affective life in all its complexity is also a rich tool for moving beyond the totalizing sense of suffering and marginalization that is often used to talk about “at-risk” racialized youth. In particular, this idea of the brown commons as “a sphere of being with, between, across, and alongside each other” within a collectivity offers up a powerful way to think about how the students at Juan Diaz connected with one another and made sense of their lives. In the remainder of this chapter, I turn to stories that bring this brown commons to life.

A Snapshot of Billy

Billy was caught smoking weed in 7th grade. To tell this story of himself, which he brought up almost daily, Billy would be absolutely unforgiving in his description of his former self.

He shared in an interview, “I was a fucking pothead bro. I was a druggy. I didn’t care about nothing. All I wanted to do was smoke weed and skip school.”

Often I observed Billy share, unprovoked, how he was in rehab—even with people he had just met. The frequency with which he told this story almost acted as though it were a shield or even a call to be recognized as human, or perhaps more likely (and this my interpretation), a disarming gesture to say, “Don’t worry. I was bad, but now I’m good.” He did this most with teachers and school resource officers he admired.

A key part of how Billy framed his good self in the present and future was through his desire to become a cop and, in his words, to “fix this place.” For Billy, his constant watching of cops shows, the purchasing
of an old former police car, and his weekly ritual of attending the local sheriff explorers’ programs, is perhaps his form of engaging in a type of respectability politics, in which respect and dignity can be conceivably earned through institutions like policing.

A Snapshot of Elezar

I am interviewed Elezar about his experiences at school when he proudly shared he is in the process of becoming a DACA recipient. The way he says it, makes it seem like DACA could be an acronym for the honor roll. His chest swells and he flashes his trademark mischievous grin. He looks around and notices some students walking by. He says it again, but this time louder, so other people can hear.

Later at lunch, Elezar and a handful of students began discussing college. One student at the table shared with us that his goal is to go Houston Community College and hopefully transfer to the University of Houston. Elezar replied to the student only partially joking, “Bitch, I’m gonna get DACA. You know I’m going to a university. Your ass is gonna get deported!” Some at the table chuckled, while others rolled their eyes and smiled.

Carla, who always seems to be around to keep Elezar in check quickly replied, “Shit! That ain’t gonna protect your big ass. You gonna get that tattooed on your forehead?”

Later in the semester, Elezar and I sat on the cold floor in the hallway sharing stories. He told me he wants to be a lawyer—an immigration lawyer in fact. He shared with me that he wants to help his community. He wants to give back like his Abuelo in Mexico. As Elezar told me me, “It's something that my mom said is in my veins, because my grandpa used to help out the community a lot too. I’m gonna be like him.”

Billy overheard our conversation and can’t help, but interject. “Hey Elezear,” he yelled from the other side of the hallway, “when I get locked up, will you get me out?”

Without missing a beat Eleaer replied emphatically, “Hell no!” followed by chuckles anda big grin.

“Aw man, that’s messed up,” Billy lamented playfully.
With a big smack of the lips (a sound familiar to those from the Southwest) that signaled his jest, Elezar winked and replied, “You know I got you bro.”

**A Snapshot of Marcos**

“Hey mister” Marcos said softly - nodding that he wanted me to come a little closer – hinting at a possible secret. I moved across the library to a desk next to his.

“Yeah what’s up Marcos” I’m intrigued – Marcos is well liked in the school, but typically reserved – not one to usually strike up a conversation electing instead to keep to himself and his tight-knit crew.

“Well” he said and then paused. I saw him correcting his thoughts. “Do you really think I can get DACA?” I could feel both the precarity and optimism lodged in his question. “I mean,” he continued, “like my sisters and brothers are legit, but do you think I have a shot? Like I even heard there might be something for my parents to get too.”

I pulled a laptop out of my bag and opened it. “I’m not sure”, I told him, “but let’s find out.”

About 30 minutes passed and our search began to wind down. The bell rang, and now Marcos finally feels comfortable asking the question he wanted to ask me all along. He stood and began packing his up notes and books. With both a deep sense of sincerity and worry he asked “Do you think he can really win? Like can he just kick us out like that?”

I don’t remember what my response was – but whatever it was – it wasn’t good enough.

**A Fieldtrip Downtown with Principal Cortina (February 16th, 2015)**

I gingerly opened the door, slowly turning the handle, hoping not to interrupt. Class started five minutes ago, and in the past, I have projected to much onto Principal Cortina’s blank stares when I have observed his class. But, he isn’t here yet and I let out a inaudible sigh to celebrate the small victory. To my surprise
few students noticed when I walk in. They are all crowded around Carla, Dee Dee, and Victoria’s desk recollecting, laughing at, and coping with what happened yesterday.

When I typically observed in Mr. Cortina’s “Life Skills” class the students are more constrained relative to other classrooms at JD. This made sense as Mr. Cortina is the principal and is primarily in charge of punishment and consequences. “If you fuck up, you gotta see Mr. Cortina,” Billy student explained to me. So to have Mr. Cortina as a teacher is like removing the safety rail. The stakes are higher and fuse, perhaps shorter. Mr. Cortina is all too well aware of this effect on the students in his classroom.

Two days ago, Mr. Cortina was getting the class ready for a field trip to Shell’s corporate headquarters located in downtown Houston—about a 15-20 minute drive from JD. Standing in the front of the room with a green fedora and excellent posture that somehow made what he had to say feel more serious, he monologued: “We have been working on getting ready for this field trip for the longest. Everyone should have their questions and resumes completed. These need to be on your person tomorrow. I have almost - almost - everyone’s permission forms. Carla and Dee Dee, I need those forms or you cannot go. And not going is not an option. I expect everyone here by 6 am and dressed professionally. Ladies, we have had this talk. No scandalous outfits. Same goes for the men.”

He pauses, smiles, and his eyes survey the room, maybe hoping the students get the joke. I think they did, but no one laughed. He continued:

Billy, you had better find an iron for your shirt this time, boy. We all have to look professional. Everyone, and I mean everyone better be on their best behavior. We are guests representing JD. This means being polite and respectful. Remember, Shell and your mentor engineer have taken the time out of their busy days to give back and the least we can do is be present and respectful. Oh, and Mendoza charter and Khan Prep school will be there as well.” (Principal Cortina)

He pauses again and takes a few steps until he is directly in front of Victoria’s desk. Looking directly at her he says slowly, “I will only say this once. Leave their students alone.”

The day after the field trip, the students are surprisingly quiet. Class had not yet began in Mr. Cortina’s class and there seemed to be a nervous energy that ran through the room. I settled in to an empty desk and
overhead Adeline recollect the field tip with contempt. They were some stuck up bitches. Just cuz their school has money, they think they are hot shit.” “Oh, look at me,” she said mockingly to no one in particular, “I have this gay uniform and I am so smart.” The collective of students chuckled and nodded along in agreement.

Billy spoke up playfully, pursing his upper lip and raising his eyebrows quickly, “Those uniforms were so stupid bro. Maybe… Maybe they were just haters cuz we look so good. Ya know?” He smiled, deeply content with himself.

Thick with sarcasm and playfulness, Carla replied back. “Billy. You know they weren’t looking at you.”

Cackles and hoots erupt from the collective, but it suddenly got quiet when Teresa noticed me sitting on the periphery.

“Oh. Hey mister,” she said looking around as if to notify other students of my presence. A knot in my stomach is formed and I felt like I disrupted a moment as a few dozen eyes waited for my response.

“Hi Teresa,” I said weakly. I was too nervous to think of something else and asked to no one in particular, “So, where is Mr. Cortina?”

Elezaear answered, “We don’t know, mister, but,” he paused for a beat. “He’s gonna be super pissed at us,” he warned me.

“Yeah, we are going to have to put up with BS for the whole freaking class,” Dee Dee added.

“He’s totally gonna lecture us.” Adeline confirmed.

Slightly confused I tried to get some context, as I was not able to go along with them. I replied, “Wait. What happened exactly? You guys went well to Shell downtown right?”

Without hesitation a cacophony of groans, raspberries, and curses in English and Spanish were unleashed. Through the chorus, I heard overlapping voices eager to express their displeasure.

“They were f-ed up. Like forreal.”

“I should have slapped a bitch.”

“Puras Pendejas.”
“Haters bro. They were haters.”

After a few moments, Adeline cut through the orchestra to answer the question more directly. She replied, “Yeah, mister we went downtown super early. That was kinda cool, but there were other schools there that were, like, super mean to us.”

Elezear quickly added, “Like, we literally didn’t do anything except show up and they were already talking mad shit.”

In an gesture I read as anticipatory, Adeline continued “I mean, I know we can start a lot of shit—I mean stuff—but they were making fun of us saying that our school had no money and calling us THOTs and...”

Carla quickly interjected, “Bitch didn’t say that to me or I would have popped her in the mouth.”

Nodding approvingly, Teresa adds “I know that right,” and the two high five.

Confused I tried to get a better sense of politics and place by asking, “Wait, so what other schools were there?” They told me that the two schools that were also there with Juan Diaz were well respected and well-established lottery based private schools serving mostly vulnerable Latinx and Black youth. “So,” I asked continuing probing for context, “if the other schools were causing all the drama and being mean, why is Mr. Cortina going to be mad at y’all?”

With a hint of exasperation, Adeline replied without missing a beat, “Cuz we talk back. Like, mister, we can’t just let stuff like that go.”

Billy leaned in closer as if to suggest a change in tone, “Yeah, bro. Like, they are not even exaggerating. They were just straight up punks to us. What else could we do? We gotta stick up for ourselves.”

Julian who had been quiet up until now exclaims, “Yeah, bitch we ride or die!”

The collective erupted in confirmation and laughter and a chain reaction had started.

“You mess with us and we coming for ya son!”

“Imma find them watch.”

“We don’t die we multiply!”

“Yeah bro I got your back.”
As the high energy of the group began to simmer down, I reorient the tone again “Wow.” I said looking at Adeline, “That sounds awful. I’m really sorry they did that. Did that ruin your time with the mentors?”

Adeline responded, “Nah, that part was cool. I mean mine was just okay, but it was pretty boring to be honest.” Several other students nodded in agreement.

“My guy was cool,” Billy said, “We got to eat lunch downtown. He told me I could order anything I wanted.”

“Damn!” Julian replied, clearly envious, “Mine just took me to the cafeteria.”

But, before we could continue, Juan, who had been periodically standing watch at the door yelled out, “He’s coming! He’s coming!”

The collective disassembled and quickly scrambled to their seats.

The lone exception is Carla who seemed unfazed by Juan’s warning. She walked back to her desk at the back corner of the classroom at her own pace. When Mr. Cortina entered the class, 15 minutes late and with a different colored fedora, he and Carla are the only ones standing. As he walked in with a solemn, military-like seriousness on his face, I noticed the slight surprise in his eyes as he sees Carla walking to her desk. They locked eyes for a brief moment and Carla calmly began to get in her desk. The sound of the scraping metal against the tired laminated floor is inflated next to the stillness of the room. Five seconds passed and Mr. Cortina is now in front of the room with his hands firmly on his hip - no change in his frumpy expression. Another fifteen seconds passed and Mr. Cortina finally broke the silence he created, “I am just so upset, I can barely speak. I am doing my best to control just how much I am disappointed I am in all of you.”

Elezear quickly raised his arms, perhaps hoping to protest, but Mr. Cortina waves him off. Mr. Cortina looked Elezar menacingly in the eyes as he said, “I don’t want to hear any excuses. I don’t care what they said. I expect all of you to act professional and courteous.”

From where I was sitting, I noticed Carla roll her eyes. Mr. Cortina noticed too and couldn’t resist, “Carla do you have something to say?” With an expressionless face Carla leaned forward and after a few beats responded to the paradoxical invitation to speak with two slow shakes of her head.
**Teresa Finds Something Precious**

At the very beginning of this dissertation, I shared the insights Angela Valenzua (1999) wrote from her research, wherein she recounted how the Latinx youth she worked with felt like they existed and were educated within a system where no one really cared for them. The students at Juan Diaz certainly needed and desired care, even as their “at-risk” marking routed them toward more disciplinary and uncaring spaces.

Take Teresa herself, who tells her story below:

> I like to play basketball and run. I am real quiet and shy if I don't know you, but a real fun person too. I don't like to be mad. If I'm mad its cuz something happened at home, but I'm usually not mad. When I entered middle school it was hard because my mom would work all day. I wouldn't even see her. She would drop me off at school around six and she wouldn't get home until super late. She would be cleaning houses, so I wouldn't even see her. We would live, like, in a little house—like, it was only one room, with five people. I wanted my own privacy and I couldn't have it. It was too crowded—like, it wasn't good. I remember it was cold one time and the lights went off and it was so cold in there. My oldest sister, she told us to get in the sofa and we were all laying down there and my mom wasn't even there. My oldest sister was like my second mom and she was always taking care of us. And she still is. Then in middle school everybody had Jordans and all of that. And I wanted to be like everybody else, so I started hanging around a group of kids and by the second semester, I was selling pot and coke to get money and try to put money in my mom’s purse. And I would. And sometimes she would ask us, “who put this money here?” And we wouldn’t say nothing. She would always say, “Oh! Thank you, God, for this money! I don't know how I got this money, but thank you. It’s a miracle.” And I would start to get money and get money and get money and get money. So, I mean, it felt good, because I had money, but I felt bad because I didn't tell my mom. That happened in sixth grade. In seventh grade, I kept on selling it. And then one time I went
to an apartment with this guy. And, then this old guy he just—with the gun—he put it in my face. He was all, like, that I need to give him all the money, because he thought I had stole money from him. So, he put the gun in my face and he said that I shouldn't do that because that's not right. He basically called me a rat and all those types of words. So, then I got scared but I had to keep on, because I couldn't get out. They said I knew too much. And I couldn't get out, because they said they were gonna look for me. They were going to hunt for me. Eighth grade is when I told a guy friend that I went to school with that I couldn't keep on, because I knew my mom was going to find out sooner or later. He told me that he told the older man that I had left the city. So, I haven't heard nothing from them no more. But in eighth grade is when I started to do coke. Like for a whole semester I did coke in school. And it felt good, but then it would pass time and I would feel bad. I was doing it because I think it was the time when I needed my dad to be around me. And he wasn’t there… so… (Teresa, Junior at Juan Diaz)

As a young Latinx woman with a background using and selling drugs, growing up poor, and encountering violence in her attempts to survive, Teresa fits many of the ideas of riskiness. Within the institutional structure of the school system, Teresa was framed as troublesome—even “bad.” However, Teresa isn’t bad. She’s valuable. And, she’s not valuable simply because she gave money to her mom, or because she stopped selling and doing drugs. Likewise, the empathy she deserves does not emerge only because she continued selling out of fear, or because she did drugs to cope with the absence of her dad. Her life is valuable regardless, and she merits care regardless of meeting any normative standards of respectability, deservingness, or redemption.

One day at Juan Diaz, I walked back from an interview with a teacher when a subtle chirping caught my attention. The irregular rhythm of the high pitch stopped me in my tracks. I looked around the empty courtyard for someone to confirm the existence of the sound. Just me though. I stepped off the cool concrete sidewalk to the still moist morning grass, inching closer to the sound. When I saw it, I think it’s a bat and I
subconsciously took a step back. Bats, they told me, carry disease. There are signs across the city reminding you that they are dirty, infectious creatures. “DO NOT TOUCH.”

Regaining my courage, I kneeled to inspect the alien-looking animal. It’s a mocking bird chick, with what looks like a broken wing. It’s was not moving, just chirping, perhaps hoping its alarm will result in salvation. I thought for a second about what to do. Should I leave it here knowing that same alarm might result in its demise? For a second, I imagined what might happen if I leave it. Ants. Fire ants to be particular. It will die a death of a thousand cuts and I can see the bird’s tiny skull and yellow beak, flesh exposed and feathers removed, covered in a swirling mass of tiny red sunsets, angry, hungry, and eager to share with their queen. I shook off the vision and thought about taking it with me. I saw myself gently picking it up, cradling it like La Virgen, driving home, telling my wife about, building a nest for rehab, and giving it a cute name. I let myself feel the joy of imagining it fly away in full health. But, I chose to walk away from it, and left it still untouched in the exact spot in the dewey grass. I was swayed by the impracticality of the situation. I mean, I can’t just walk around with a chirping, probably dirty bird all day. That is no way to research, I thought to myself as I walk away. Something felt different though. I felt relieved, and maybe even absolved. I guess, I just didn’t feel as bad and the chirping wasn’t as loud or urgent. Somehow I managed to feed myself with my good intentions.

An hour passed and I had forgotten about the bird, but I was still tingling from the sensation of thinking good thoughts as I roam the hallways. I felt a light tap on my back shoulder and turned around to see Teresa beaming, her face full of pride.

“Hey, Mister,” she said with a knowing smile. “Check it out.” From the front pocket of what is likely her favorite hoodie, a chirping if not injured mockingbird chick emerged.

I felt blood suddenly rushing to my cheeks and I was flooded with a mix of surprise and guilt, but I failed to summon the courage and vulnerability to tell her that I saw it earlier. And that I left it.

She told me with a light right tilt of her head, “I think it fell off a tree or something, cuz it was on the ground by itself. Plus, I don’t think it can move this wing.”
“Oh no! That’s awful,” I said in a voice that probably overcompensated for my anxiety. “What are you going to do with it? Do you think you might…” and Teresa interrupted.

“I gotta help it, Mister. I couldn’t just leave it there. That would be messed up,” she said perhaps mourning the thought.

“What the Hell?? The hell is that? A mouse or what? Oh damn! It’s a baby bird,” Elezaear interjected enthusiastically and with a tinge of caution. Teresa and I look at one another in surprise, and before we can answer Elezear asked another question, “Where did you find it? It’s so cool looking—but kinda ugly too. Are you its Momma or what?”

Giving it serious thought, Teresa waited two beats before responding, “I don’t know. I mean, if I can find its nest I’ll put it back. If I can. But I don’t know maybe I gotta look up videos of how to take care of birds or something.”

Lather that day during lunchtime and the chick became the talk of the table. “Do you think birds eat pastor?” Teresa said, putting the tomatillo salsa on her tacos in one hand and cradling the bird in her other.

“Nah. It probably likes chicken though,” Billy joked and leaned his body toward the spread of food. With a chick-sized piece of chicken tinga between his fingers, Billy got within a foot of the bird before Adeline smacked him in the back of the head sending the crimson color taco filling flying across the gazebo. “Ow. What the hell?” Billy exclaims as the rest of us laugh.

“Don’t be stupid, Billy,” Adeline explained, “You can’t feed a bird chicken. That’s, like, fucked up or something.”

Still rubbing his head and slowly raising one corner of his mouth, Billy replied “But what about chicarron?” He followed this with a giant bite of his taco.

“No, Billy. Just no. We need to give it real food, no?” Adeline asked looking around the table for confirmation.

“Yeah, I gotta find some worms and build like a nest of something.” Teresa added and then turned to look at me. “Right, Mister?”
Catching me off guard, I fumbled my response “Uh. Yeah. I think so, but honestly, I’m not sure. I don’t know much about birds or really how to care for them. What about Mr. Phan? Don’t you think he might have any ideas?”

Maybe surprised by the suggestion or by the ignorance of it, Teresa answered with a sigh and a sense of exasperation, “Um. I haven’t really showed any teachers. I don’t…” and her voice trails off.

Maybe sensing Teresa’s hesitation, Adeline interjected, “It’s cuz we are not supposed to have pets or animals inside the school. She can’t show teachers cuz they might rat her out. Teachers be like that.”

I replied, wondering if it is the same bird, “Oh. But you found it at school, right? I mean you are just trying to help the little guy out.”

“Yeah, I found it right over there in the grass,” she said pinpointing where I saw it earlier. “I just felt bad for it ,ya know? I saw some sixth graders looking at it and I was worried they might mess with it and accidentally kill it,” she said turning to face the bird. Her palms are cradled like a basket, head is slightly tilted, and the over-sized Maya Blue hoodie frames her layered expression of worry, subversion, and compassion. Eyes fixated only on the creature, she said with a deep sense of sincerity, “I don’t want them to make me put it back. It deserves better.”

Carla smiled enthusiastically and added, “Aww…that is so sweet! Good for you, girl,” and reached over the table to grab another pastor taco. “I think that is a nice thing to do.”

Adeline replied playfully pursing her lips, “It’s kinda ugly looking, but it’s kinda cute too. You are going to make a great bird mom.”

The students continue eating their lunch, strategizing ways to subvert and support.

**Conclusion**

A favorite saying of abolitionist and geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore is, “Where life is precious, life is precious” (as cited in Kushner, 2019). I read this phrase to be a challenge to ourselves, our institutions, our policies and laws that dictate the terms of life and death. A call to follow through on an ethics of care—it’s
both an analysis about the uneven way that life is and is not treated as precious, but also a demand and call to see it as precious. In the abstract, perhaps we might feel this to be true—that all life is worth preserving with dignity, but it is clearly so difficult to remain true to this in practice against the backdrop of capitalism, colonialism, and heteropatriarchy—systems which constantly create hierarchical rankings of the value of lives. These ideological forces—ones that all too often render some lives disposable—are, in my estimation, diametrically opposed to the ethic Gilmore highlights. This is an ethic of care, and an ethic that rejects the normative values of uncaring structures.

The preciousness and care with which Teresa treats the baby bird is a demonstration of this ethic in action—preciousness regardless of the extractive demands and regulations that configure our social and material relations. Above Teresa accounts not only for the preciousness of life, but practices it as such. Having worked in Early Childhood Education settings, where so many young children are rightfully treated and situated as precious, I couldn’t help but wonder why this sensibility was absent at Juan Diaz.

Within this chapter, I have described how the school system treats supposedly undesirable youth as disposable through their production as at-risk subjects. However, I endeavored to push back against the positioning of both at-risk subjectivities and youth disposability in order to assert a politics of indisposability for all youth, regardless of their embrace of normative redemption. To do this, I draw heavily on Muñoz’s notion of brown commons (2020) as an insightful way to reread these Latinx youth experiences, providing space for the contradictions and creativeness that unfolds in the collective experience. Rather than focus on individual identity and expressions, positioning Juan Diaz as a form of the brown commons draws our attention to both the depressive position students find themselves in and the ways they collectively draw on this positing to rewrite and reassert their value.
CHAPTER 6

Conclusion and Epilogue: The Indisposability of Youth

“This is a school for bad kids.”

“We are the kids nobody wants.”

“Most of us are here because we got kicked out.”

“I am here because I have to be.”

“Even when you try to go back to your school, you always end up here again.”

“Those schools didn’t want me.”

The dissertation began with the words of the Juan Diaz students describing the feelings of being unwanted and tossed aside. It also began with the assumption that youth are experts in understanding and navigating their own lives (e.g. Valenzuela 1999). Together these starting points demanded that I take the words of students seriously, recognizing the knowledge and critical analysis that was rich within their accountings of their schooling. Thus, throughout this dissertation, I examined Latinx student experiences in an alternative school in order to expose the institutions and education systems where they experienced this feeling of disposability. However, while I sought to illuminate how the students were positioned as disposable, more fundamentally wished to I questioned about how myths of disposability come to be naturalized in the U.S. educational system, and how we could confront them.

In many ways, the implications of this research are asserted elsewhere in the literature on alternative education, albeit in different terms. As I described in Chapter 2, the idea of alternative schools as warehouses for unwanted students who then receive relatively subpar education is well-established in the educational literature. My own fieldwork reinforced this characterization, by illuminating how the
alternative school acted as a site of racialized disposability within the broader public education system. Again, the myth and functioning of disposability was brought to life most vividly by the knowledge, words, and stories of the students themselves. They described a wide-range of reasons that had been used to push them out of their traditional schools: truancy, low grades or test scores, childcare and pregnancy, zero-tolerance, and limited ESL services. Brian for example, was a passenger in a car accident in his school’s parking lot. Billy spilled weed on a school lap top when he was in middle school. Dee Dee failed a math test and was going to be held back a year. Natalia and Teresa said they used to be “bad,” and (as the students regularly repeated) Juan Diaz was “a bad kid school”—a “bad school” with “bad kids.” They described counselors and other school administrators who encouraged and pressured them to go to the alternative school—for many they even didn’t know they had a choice. As Victoria said, my last school was “really cool and I want to go back, but they told me I wasn’t trying hard enough. They said I was a better fit here.”

While the students saw these reasons for winding up at Juan Diaz as variously frustrating or justifiable, they clearly understood that their schools had marked them as “at-risk”—even “bad”—and that this label affected how their schools, teachers, and communities thought about them. This label justified their pushout, explained why they were at Juan Diaz, and kept them there permanently after arriving. The students collectively recounted how just being at Juan Diaz marked them as bad, such that (as Billy said) it was “hard to ever leave.” Elezar, for example, reflected that, “People see us here, and they judge right away. They see me as ‘at-risk’.” However, as scholars of race in education have long demonstrated (e.g. Ferguson 2000, p. 61), categories like at-risk and bad are not natural or objective, and teachers and school officials play a key role in the “subjective evaluation of students’ character and behavior.” Such labels can have a powerful effect on how students—and particularly students of color—are constructed as problems. Thus, this process of categorization must be situated alongside an analysis of the racialized criminalization of students of color, deficit models of schooling that devalue non-Western ways of being and knowing, and the broader racialized production of “at-risk” subjects.

As I traced the production of “at-risk” subjectivities, I saw the consequences of this negatively marked category of risk come to into focus. Student descriptions of their disposability—their suspicions
that adults just wanted to get rid of them—were reinforced in the institutional accounts of school counselors, teachers, and administrators. These adults described a process where racialized students who were marked as “at-risk” were regarded by traditional schools as burdensome—as students to get rid of. As Mr. Phan said, “We have some difficult kids here that nobody wants.”

Central among the narratives of pushout were the monstrous role of neoliberal high stakes testing and funding regimes, which resulted in the devaluation of certain students (e.g. English language learners, students with disabilities, bad test takers, etc.). These students sucked up resources, and traditional schools therefore sought ways to get rid of them. This was perhaps most evident in the behind the scenes look that counselors and educators offered of Snapshot Day—a day in the fall semester when school enrollment is tallied to determine the next year’s funding, after which students who are seen as troublesome are pushed out. Perhaps the students weren’t good test-takers. Maybe they skipped school a lot or didn’t do their work. Maybe their linguistic backgrounds, disabilities, or other factors meant they demanded too many resources. Perhaps they were even involved in criminal activity, and were seen by their teachers (or themselves) as “bad kids.” These factors made them a burden—and disposable.

As one counselor described: “After Snapshot Day what happens is that a lot of school districts will then start to weed out the kids that they don’t want—the problem kids—because problem kids take a lot of resources away from you…and on test day they tend to fail to impact.” Amid the free-market line of thinking, students marked as newcomer, immigrant, ESL, or “at risk,” are positioned as undesirable in relation to the assumed value of “regular” and “exceptional” students. Faced with the possibility of looming financial or academic crisis, schools then turn to raced and classed deficit approaches to quickly read and assume the capacities of groups of students. The economic calculus of student value and subsequent school push-out was thereby regarded as an unfortunate, but necessary, process to secure the productivity of traditional schools. Once marked as “at risk,” the disposability of these youth was normalized and naturalized, regardless of the impact and harm on the students themselves.

Of course, push-out from traditional public or charter schools was just half the story. Once they were in Juan Diaz, their unequal schooling continued. As Mr. Soto described, the “student population [at
Juan Diaz often deserves additional academic and social support, which costs money the school doesn’t have.” I argue that alternative schools are a key technology of U.S. K-12 education that intentionally targets vulnerable youth of color, providing them with schooling and curriculum that is structurally inequitable. This systematic and historical abandoning of alternative schooling—in the form of inadequate resources, training, and funding, alongside the large-scale warehousing of youth positioned as expendable to traditional schools—enables the continued operation of local charter and traditional public schools. The continued threat of failure and crisis generated structurally by the organization of alternative schools crafts a largely uncaring and disinterested schooling experience for students, like those at Juan Diaz. Here, students who are collectively positioned as in need of redemption and extra support instead wind up in a deeply carceral and policed space.

Despite their devaluation, this dissertation also described how students found ways to creatively reassert their value. The students themselves were attuned to their situation. They variously internalized, made the best of, played with, and resisted their own positioning as “at-risk” and disposable. As Hector said, “We are not all fuc*ked up, ya know?” While the discourses and practices of their educational experiences were often painful or frustrating, they also forged community, and expressed care for one another. In this way, they demonstrate that these categories that mark racialized youth are not static or fixed, but rather are constantly taking new shape. While the experience of being Brown, as Munoz (2020) describes, can be depressive when one is positioned as a problem, there is also room for creativity and connection within the common experience of Brownness.

In sum, through my fieldwork, I came to understand racialized youth experiences and subjectivities in alternative school through the lens of systemic disposability, and such disposability wasn’t neutral. Instead, disposability distinctly functions as a mechanism of white supremacy. This analytical framework, I argue, is vital for understanding how alternative schools operate as sites of not just disposability, but racialized disposability. The production of racialized Latinx youth as at-risk subjects was central to the way they were routed into under-resourced, disciplinary spaces where little was expected of them beyond compliance. In the face of this structural oppression and inequity, this work strives acts as a call to reassert
the indisposibility of youth—not just in educational practice, but as a broader ethical and moral framework for challenging systemic inequality. The implications of this are important. As I’ll turn to discuss in the section below, these implications can be understood through a call for structural change—even abolition—that challenges the devaluation of youth by asserting the preciousness of each student and centering an ethic of care towards them.

Implications: Abolition and Care

In developing this analysis of the myth racialized disposability and crafting a conceptual response to the problem, my own thinking and politics has evolved over the course of this dissertation. I began this ethnography in 2015. As I finish writing this conclusion, it is 2021. In that time, both the world and my own life has changed. Trump, Black Lives Matter, climate-induced natural disasters (including the devastation of Hurricane Harvey in Houston), the COVID-19 pandemic. I had my first child. When I began the research, the way I made sense of social problems in the world, and in this study, was different. But I have changed as I have watched the world change—or at least as I have learned to see between what was already unfolding. In the years that have passed, I have learned from the radical calls of anti-racist organizers and academics calling for the abolition of prisons and police, both on the streets and in scholarly journals. I have listened MeToo activists, feminists, and the survivors of sexual violence in my own life who have continued to raise the call for dismantling patriarchy and sexism. I have watched the increasingly frequent catastrophes of climate change, and mourned the on-going valuing of capital over human life during the COVID pandemic. Beyond learning from crises unfolding in our world (and the concomitant conversations about such crises within radical academic spaces), I also learned from this research. What I have learned is that when the problems are so urgent, so big, and so structural, we can’t wait for change. Moreover, we can’t pin our hopes on minor, reformist approaches that have merely allowed structures of violence to adapt, while keeping the systems intact. Thus, in the time since I began this dissertation, I now strive to advance abolitionist thinking in this scholarship and in my life.
As I learned about calls for abolition in other spaces (e.g. prisons, police, borders, etc.), I couldn’t help but see the parallels in the ways that the violences of structural racism also cut through the alternative school. As I described in the literature and theory of Chapter 2, I am deeply informed by work on the topics of white supremacy and disposability, which are increasingly geared toward advocating for radical structural change. Thinking about my student participants’ feelings of being disposable and uncared for alongside the literature on the violence of capitalism and white supremacy has led to me radically question what type of educational future I want to work towards. Thus, I conclude this dissertation with a call to rethink the racialized and capitalistic systems of value and care in schools broadly—and to consider the implications for alternative schooling in particular.

Much like the best forms of schooling, care is at the center of an abolitionist ethic. With all too many of our social systems and institutions structured in individualistic, uncaring, carceral, punitive, disciplinary, or extractive ways, it is unsurprising that care would matter. Valenzuela herself (1999) centered care as an ethical response to deficit models of education that harmed the Mexican American youth she worked with—harms which continue to ripple through the schooling of Latinx and other youth of color. Care within an abolitionist framework must be even more wide reaching though—it must reject the hierarchical valuing of worth that naturalizes care for some and violence, indifference, and disposability for others.

Here, I find the work of Lisa Marie Cacho (2010) particularly useful. In the conclusion of her now-well known text on social death, she describes the death of her cousin, Brandon. Within most normative metrics of human value, Brandon might be characterized as deviant. She writes that amid her family’s grief, they “couldn’t talk about Brandon as valuable not only because he was marked as “deviant,” “illegal,” and “criminal” by his race and ethnicity but also because he did not perform masculinity in proper, respectable ways to redeem, reform, or counter his (racialized) “deviancy”” (ibid, 148). But just because normative criteria position a subject as the devalued “other,” does not mean they actually lack value. Instead, Cacho argues, “Examining how “value” and its normative criteria are naturalized and universalized enables us to uncover and unsettle the heteropatriarchal, legal, and neoliberal investments that dominant and oppositional
discourses share in rendering the value of nonnormativity illegible” (ibid, p. 149) We don’t need to redeem
or recuperate more subject into value; we need to destabilize “the binaries and hierarchies of value” (ibid)
that continue to render some valuable (and worthy of care) and others not.

The question of how we can come to care for those that don’t fulfill our normative metrics of
value—such as at-risk youth who are positioned as burdensome or troublesome—is deeply relevant to the
educational structures this study examined. Just as Cacho (ibid) describes the need to uncover the normative
investments of human value, I too have sought to account for the subjective and deeply racialized processes
that marked Latinx youth in this study as “at-risk,” (de)valued, in need of correction. Juan Diaz operated
within this landscape of redemption and disposability, wherein “bad” and “at-risk” kids were sent to Juan
Diaz for a “second chance.” The mission of the school itself was to rescue and redeem these at-risk youth
subjects. The student sentiments of redemption and disposability were internalized, resisted, and creatively
reworked. However, redemption is not the same as care, and within Juan Diaz, correction most often
entailed discipline and getting students to succeed within a culture of low-expectations. They were bored.
At times they were simply ignored, other times they surveilled. They were told that the most that could be
expected of them was to graduate and get a (generally low-wage) job. Thus, even redemption was predicated
on a reproduction of existing hierarchies of race, class, and power. The logic of redemption leaves the
structures of valued/devalued, good/bad, and redeemable/irredeemable in place—the very logics that had
positioned the students as disposable in the first place.

Adopting an abolitionist stance reasserts the necessity for care in the face of—and in opposition
to—hierarchal ways that education systems measure and respond to normative ideals of student value. Well-
known writer, activists, and prison abolitionist Mariame Kaba (2021) argues that abolition requires
envisioning a more caring world. She writes that abolition centers “a vision of a restructured society in a
world where we have everything we need: food, shelter, health, art, beauty, clean water, and more things
that are foundational to our personal and community safety” (Kaba 2021, p. xviii). In other words, contrary
to public fears, abolition is not about tearing down the old and leaving us with nothing to keep us safe or
meet our needs. Instead, it is about building something new, including finding new pathways to address social harms without relying on institutional structures of oppression.

While the normative criteria for labeling a student “at-risk” are deeply problematic (as established in Chapters 4 and 5), there nonetheless remain serious issues of precarity, insecurity, and social harms facing youth. This insecurities include, but are not limited to, poverty, addiction, disability, trauma, criminalization, and structural racism. In the face of these harms, a probative set of abolitionist questions might include: If alternative schools are institutional structures of oppression and disposability, how else can we confront to the social harms that shape youth lives? Can we envision a response to the precarity of youth that does not resort to sending them to alternative schools? What if—if instead of routing youth into the under-resourced, carceral spaces of alternative schools—we instead created mechanisms of care that are responsive to their material, social, and emotional needs?

These questions are posed to provoke a deeper, more radical consideration of abolition, alternative schools, and care for youth. However, they can also guide us in thinking about the more tangible implications of this research for policymakers, educators, youth, and scholars. In other words, an abolitionist politics and ethic of care can have multiple implications for the various stakeholders concerned with educational policy and practice. In the sections below, I will gesture toward these implications for these different groups.

**Implications for Policymakers**

Informed by both the knowledge held by the students at Juan Diaz and the abolitionist politics described above, I question the very continuation of alternative schools given their structurally violent and racist implications. If alternative schools operate as sites of racialized disposability (as evidenced in student stories and argued throughout this dissertation) should they continue to exist? I recognize that calling for the abolition of alternative schools is likely too radical—and therefore unpalatable—to most policymakers. It likely sounds impractical, abstract, or even reckless. This is a response that abolitionists often face. For
example, writing about prison abolition, Angela Davis (2003, p. 9) describes how “abolitionists are dismissed as utopians and idealists whose ideas are at best unrealistic and impractical, and, at worst, mystifying and foolish.” These characterizations of abolition, she argues, reflect the difficulty of envisioning a different “social order that does not rely on the threat of sequestering people in dreadful places designed to separate them from their communities and families” (ibid). This expansive vision of a different world, requires, in turn, working expansively to find alternative ways to address harm “without relying on structural forms of oppression or the violent systems that increase it” (Kaba, 2021 p. xviii). This envisioning is not only possible, but also necessary.

Luckily, the work of prison abolitionists again offers useful models for thinking about incrementally dismantling racist institutional structures. In their 1976 guide “Instead of Prisons: A Handbook for Abolitionists,” the Prison Research Education Action Project (as cited in Washington 2018) lays out three pillars of abolition: 1) “moratorium” on the construction or expansion of new prisons, jails, and detention centers, 2) “decarceration”, or the practice of finding ways to get people out of prison, and 3) excarceration, or the practice of finding ways to divert people from ever entering prisons by solving social problems without resorting to incarceration. While the mechanisms of alternative schools are clearly different, these three pillars remain useful, as I’ll elaborate.

First, tangible educational policy responses might acknowledge the harm that historically and contemporarily happens within alternative schools, and commit to not expanding that system (i.e. moratorium). This includes divesting from any new contracts with the industry of privately-run disciplinary alternative education schools (DAEPs, described in Chapter 2), where alternative schools are run essentially like juvenile detention centers with little oversight or accountability.

Second, policymakers should be thinking critically about steps that would ease students in the process of leaving alternative schools (i.e. decarceration). As evidenced throughout this dissertation, students who enter alternative schools like Juan Diaz face serious social and institutional challenges leaving and returning to their previous schools. Remember Brian, for example, who was kicked out of a selective charter school after a minor car accident. As he saw the lives of his friends at his old school setting them
forward on very different tracks for their futures, he was left with no pathway to rejoin them. For other students, they described how just being at Juan Diaz had marked them as “bad,” and thus undesirable, in ways that foreclosed pathways to return to traditional schools. If alternative schools are purportedly intended to help youth get back on track, that should include formal support to exit the alternative school and return to traditional (and less carceral) educational spaces.

Third, exarceration entails finding ways to divert people from entering prisons in the first place—to deal with a social problem without relying on an oppressive system. Applying that thinking to alternative schools would mean intervening to prevent youth from ever entering the alternative school to begin with by addressing the underlying reasons they wind up there. Educational policymakers can readily target the many of pathways that contribute to students going to alternative schools. End high stakes testing that contributes to the devaluation and push-out of students who are seen as bad test-takers (e.g. ESL students, students with disabilities, etc.). Provide traditional schools more funding and resources to support students who need additional help (e.g. counselors, ESL resources, credit recovery, etc.), such that caring for them and meeting their needs are never experienced by schools as a burden. Intervene in processes like Snapshot Day to prevent schools from using this as an opportunity to get rid of presumably undesirable students. Institutionally work against the application of “at-risk” categorizations that stigmatize, minoritize youth, and create a discursive and material justification for their surveillance, criminalization, and removal. End policies that work to criminalize students (in particular students of color) within schools—the presences of police in schools, zero tolerance, and collaborations with the criminal justice system that result in students ending up in court.

There are undoubtedly more points of intervention—places where providing students with care, support, and resources at the initial point of need would prevent students from ever being sent to alternative schools. Ultimately the core goal of educational policymakers should be creating security, care, and youth well-being. Thus, policymakers should work to provide educational spaces that are well-resourced, supportive sites of care, not carcerality, rather the continuing to route students towards institutional environments where they are then structurally under-supported.
Implications for Educators

When the students in this study spoke about their teachers, a core idea that shaped their relationships with educators was how the teachers treated them. In my estimation, the students seemed hungry for caring and reciprocal relationships with adults. They rejected the notion that they should be respectful to adults who didn’t, in turn, treat them with respect. This may seem like a rudimentary recommendation to educators. However, a persistent lack of care remains just as important today as it did when Valenzuela (1999) recounted the feelings of Mexican American students of not being cared for in their schools. Within my fieldwork as well, “They don’t care,” was a regular refrain that the students when speaking about their teachers. Instead, classroom dynamics frequently remained focused on discipline and control, as evidenced in the story of the students’ experience with Mr. Singh, who frequently resorted to arbitrarily strict rules and write-ups as ways to enforce respect. However, it was in doing this that he lost their respect. Thus, an ethic of care should include active listening, reciprocal exchange, and a move away from criminalizing and disciplinary approaches to teaching.

Relatedly, teachers themselves need to reject the criminalizing and stigmatizing approaches to youth that results through discourses of “at-risk” students. As this dissertation describes, these labels mark students in ways that are deeply harmful to them in terms of their treatment within educational institutions, not least of which contributing to push-out and the school-to-prison pipeline. Moreover, when teachers paint with a broad brush about student subjectivities, students themselves feel misunderstood. “We’re not all fucked up,” said Hector when recalling a teacher who told him he taught at Juan Diaz because the students are “suffering the most.” Thus, inculcating teachers into a critical analysis of discourses about (and practices for) “at-risk” students could help inform better approaches to teaching students faced with various forms of precarity.

Finally, throughout this dissertation, I have described how deficit models of education produce structurally unequal standards that devalue non-Western, non-white culture, expression, language, and
ways of being. Beyond just caring for students, educators critically need to adopt a political consciousness that rejects deficit learning, and embeds awareness of culture, structural inequality, and identity. This isn’t merely about lip-service to the value of diversity, but rather a more fundamental challenge to the standards that shape curriculum, ideas of learning, and the measurement of knowledge.

Implications for Scholarship

There are multiple contributions that this research makes to scholarly discussions in and across various disciplinary spaces. First, this research offers a valuable addition to educational literatures about alternative schools, which are relatively under-studied. Amid a literature that already establishes the warehousing function of alternative schools, my research has particularly implications for thinking about the mechanisms of push-out that feed students into alternative education spaces from traditional schools. For example, the look at Snapshot Day offers important insights for the institutional ways that neoliberal educational policy feed systems of student disposability. These insights are also particularly valuable in demonstrating how the disposability and warehousing of certain students is treated as a structural necessity for traditional public schools. Here, we can see parallels with what Espiritu (2003, p. 5) calls “differential inclusion,” where minoritized peoples are “deemed integral to the nation…but integral only or precisely because of their designated subordinate standing.” The subordinate position of the alternative schools as sites of racialized disposability, in this case, is structurally reinforced by the broader educational system.

This research engagement with disposability as a racialized process in alternative schools has important implications for how white supremacy operates in the alternative schooling landscape. Here, I argue it is particularly useful to merge the literature about alternative schools with research and theory about race, white supremacy, and structural violence in schooling. Through this engagement, we can better attend to the structural devaluation of minoritized students (e.g. through the production of “at-risk” subjectivities)
that in turn feeds the alternative education system. There are important overlaps here conceptually and in practice with the literature about race, deficit models of education, and the school-to-prison pipeline.

Putting alternative education in conversation with this literature on white supremacy also has implications for the types of changes we call for, and, for me, it uniquely motivates and supports my calls for structural change, abolition, and care as responses to the violence unfolding through alternative education. From my own reading of the literatures about alternative education, this particular framing in relation to abolition is novel and, I believe, there is potential to expand work at the nexus of abolition and educational research in future work.

Next, the application of poststructural theories of becoming and Muñoz’s (2020) ideas of “the Brown commons” offer fruitful directions for on-going work about the subjectivities of racialized students. Drawing on anthropological fieldwork that centers the voices and knowledge of youth themselves alongside these theories, helps to demonstrate both the impacts of discourses of “at-risk” youth, as well as the incompleteness of these categories. Rather, youth of color (like all of us) are constantly in a process of becoming. While structural constraints and discourse undoubtedly shape youth subjectivities, they are not totalizing, and these theoretical approaches offer useful strategies for challenging the often-harmful valuation, pathologization, and disposability of youth through attention to the contradictions and incompleteness of subjectivity.

Finally, I believe that exposing the myth of racialized disposability is valuable for scholars who wish to challenge the way youth of color are categorized, criminalized, marginalized, and disposed of. Instead, this approach to disposability centers on the goal of denaturalizing disposability—and reasserting the indisposability of racialized youth.

In sum, in this dissertation, I traced how the myth and machinery of student disposability operated in Houston, in the education system, in alternative schools, and through the production of “at-risk” subjects. However, my ultimate argument is to assert the indisposability of youth—regardless of the way they meet normative educational criteria of value. They’re valuable if they smoke weed, if they commit crimes, if they do drugs, if they don’t come to class, if they get in a fight, if they don’t succeed in school, if they don’t
speak English, and if they don’t ‘work hard’ or care about their homework. A politics and education system that believes in student indisposability is fundamentally one that cares about all youth—that abolishes the normative metrics of value, as well as the institutions that reinforce them.
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