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Insurgent Learning:
Confronting Neoliberal Assaults on Public Education in Los Angeles County in an Era of
Accountability, 2000-2015

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Ethnic Studies

by

Lizette Arévalo

June 2019

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The Dissertation of Lizette Arevalo is approved:

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Committee Co-Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to:

Past, present, and future generations of South Los Angeles' insurgent learners.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Insurgent Learning:
Confronting Neoliberal Assaults on Public Education in Los Angeles County in an Era of
Accountability, 2000-2015

by

Lizette Arevalo

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Ethnic Studies
University of California, Riverside, June 2019
Dr. Dylan Rodriguez, Co-Chairperson
Dr. Jennifer Rose Najera, Co-Chairperson

Insurgent Learning examines neoliberal assaults on K-12 public education in Los Angeles County during an era of No Child Left Behind, from 2000-2015. In an era in which so-called “failing” public schools were accountable to rising academic expectations from the state, a movement to privatize public education, fueled through national, state, and local policies, enabled an outgrowth of corporate charter schools. Inspired by the author’s quest to understand the political landscape in education that led the non-profit, Parent Revolution, to organize in the city of Compton to invoke the “parent trigger law,” *Insurgent Learning* reveals the policy architects behind the movement to privatize public schools in Los Angeles County.

The dissertation expands beyond geo-political boundaries often defined by city limits and school district boundaries to present the region of South Los Angeles as a zone where structural violence is permissible in which the school apparatus is a form of domestic warfare. Through an interdisciplinary analysis, the author relied on interviews, archival research, and her own auto-ethnographic experience to employ a *muxerista* portraitist sensibility that captures competing visions for public education. Collectively, *Insurgent Learning* is an archive of insurgent knowledge that contributes to a genealogy of Black and Brown grassroots radicalism in the region of South Los Angeles as it centers communities at the forefront of efforts to reclaim and regenerate the democratic potential of public education.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE URGENCY FOR AN INSURGENT PRAXIS FRAMEWORK

Introduction

I moved to New York in the fall of 2010 to build on a prior summer research project that examined what I observed to be the *McCharterization of public education*: public-private partnerships influenced by neoliberal education policy reforms, the elimination of traditional public schools in historically underperforming communities, and the proliferation of charter schools. When I first studied this phenomenon, I observed that families who were predominately low-income, Black, and Latinx, were perceived as “consumers” of education as opposed to active agents. In fact, when families exercised their agency in oppositional ways, they were often excluded from critical decision-making processes. The growth of charter schools in communities such as Harlem was marketed to families in the name of school-choice, where charter schools offered families options beyond attending their traditional neighborhood public school, which is often dictated by a student’s zip code. In Harlem, I observed how charter school operators such as the Harlem Success Academy monopolized public school space through co-location with traditional public schools and how this process was enabled under Michael Bloomberg’s mayoral control of the nation’s largest school district. Little did I know at that time, this study provided me with foundational knowledge to understand the controversy that surrounded my former elementary school in the city of Compton, California.

In December of 2010, a group of parents in the city of Compton who had organized for four months under the leadership of the non-profit organization Parent Revolution invoked a new education law, the *California Parent Empowerment Law*.¹ The law, better known as “the parent trigger law,” allowed parents of children attending schools designated by the state as “low-performing” to petition for the implementation of one of several interventions to reform the school, including the school’s conversion to a charter school. The parents presented their signed petitions to the Compton Unified School District (CUSD). The petitions requested that McKinley Elementary School (“McKinley”) convert to a charter school under the management of Celerity Educational Group (“Celerity”). *Insurgent Learning* derived from an investigation into *how* the state law, better known as the parent trigger law, came to exist and *why* Compton was chosen by Parent Revolution.

Those simple *how* and *why* research questions led me to uncover a network of education policy architects who either wrote, inspired others to write, sponsored, and/or funded local, state, and federal education reforms. Given the history of White architects²

¹ In January of 2010, California’s legislature passed the Parent Empowerment Law under Article 3 of Senate Bill 5X4.

² I borrow the framing “White architects” from William Henry Watkins, *The White Architects of Black Education: Ideology and Power in America, 1865-1954*. (Teacher College Press, 2001.)

in the education of Black children,³ Indigenous children,⁴ and Latino children,⁵ I was not surprised to learn that the history of anti-Blackness, white supremacy, patriarchy, and racism that governed and funded the education of Indigenous children and children of color continued into our contemporary era.

As I pursued my intellectual curiosities, I read the literature on the privatization of K-12 public education and studied how it manifested across distinct areas such as New York, Chicago, New Orleans, and Philadelphia.⁶ I understand the privatization of public education to be the outsourcing of public schools and services to corporate, private entities. I found that there was insufficient scholarly literature that examined this

³ William Henry Watkins, *The White Architects of Black Education: Ideology and Power in America, 1865-1954*. (Teacher College Press, 2001.); Noliwe M. Rooks, *White Money/Black Power: The Surprising History of African American Studies and the Crisis of Race And Higher Education*. (Beacon Press, 2006).

⁴ Waziyatawin, *What Does Justice Look Like? The Struggle for Liberation in Dakota Homeland* (Living Justice Press, 2008); Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*. (Duke University Press Books; Reprint edition 2015) Adams 1995); David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875–1928*. (University Press of Kansas, 3rd Printing Edition, 1995)

⁵ *Chicano School Success and Failure: Past, Present, and Future*. Ed. Richard R. Valencia (Routledge; 3rd edition, 2010); Patricia Gandara and Frances Contreras, *The Latino Education Crisis: The Consequence of Failed School Policies*. (Harvard University Press, 2010); *Latinos and Education*. Ed. Antonia Darder, Rodolfo D. Torres, and Henry Gutierrez (Routledge, 1997).

⁶ Diane Ravitch, *The Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools*. (New York: Knopf, 2013); Pauline Lipman, *The New Political Economy of Urban Education: Neoliberalism, Race, and the Right to the City*. (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2011); Kristen L. Buras, *Pedagogy, Policy, and the Privatized City: Stories of Dispossession and Defiance from New Orleans*. (New York and London: Teachers College Press, 2010); Kenneth J. Saltman, *The Failure of Corporate School Reform*. (Taylor and Francis, 2012)

phenomenon in California, and especially in Los Angeles County. An ambitious undertaking, my pursuit to understand the privatization of K-12 traditional public schools through the growth of charter schools in Los Angeles County led me to develop multiple research questions:

- Who are the key players in education initiatives, what are their connections, and how have they shaped public education?
- What are the dominant discourses and reforms that have enabled the proliferation of charter schools and the elimination of traditional public schools?
- What schools were subject to key education reforms, and what was the response of students, parents, and teachers?
- What alternative visions for public education exist among the students, parents, and teachers who are in closest proximity to these reforms?

In an era presumed by many to be post-racial, color-blind, and multicultural, *Insurgent Learning* contributes to our understanding of the neoliberal structural assaults on K-12 public education from 2000 to 2015 that disproportionately targeted historically minoritized communities in Los Angeles County within the era of accountability marked by the federal education policy No Child Left Behind.

This study inhabits the crossroads of two fields of study, critical ethnic studies and critical education policy studies, to examine K-12 education initiatives within an era of accountability in Los Angeles County. As the contributors to the anthology *Critical Ethnic Studies* (2016) provide a radical response to the neoliberal appropriations of multiculturalism by way of critical interrogations of intersectional formations of race and

ethnicity,⁷ *Insurgent Learning* contributes to the scholar-activist trajectory of the field as it marks this critical turn and as the field continues to provide insurgent critiques of and confrontations against racial capitalist state violence. Additionally, Erica Fernandez and Gerardo R. Lopez (2017) for the anthology on *Critical Approaches to Education Policy Analysis*, state:

Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) reminds us that policies are both visible and invisible; simultaneously textual and discursive... CPA reminds us that our job, as critical policy scholars, is to interrogate the world around us in order to better understand the various structures, discourses, and systems that shape our world and give it life. It also calls for us to recognize how these discourses contribute to inequitable outcomes in order to rethink what we take for granted and radically transform our world.⁸

This critical study into K-12 education policy initiatives makes legible the visible and invisible, textual and discursive, to understand the structural violence produced through education, what we may otherwise take for granted as normative structures and processes in education. Along this line of thought, Dylan Rodriguez (2010) reminds us in “The Terms of Engagement” that:

⁷ Critical Ethnic Studies Editorial Collective, *Critical Ethnic Studies: A Reader*. (Duke University Press, 2016)

⁸ Erica Fernandez and Gerardo R. Lopez “When Parents Behave Badly: A Critical Policy Analysis of Parent Involvement in Schools” in *Critical Approaches to Education Policy Analysis: Moving Beyond Tradition*. Ed. Michelle D. Young and Sarah Diem. (Springer, 2017): pp. 127

Behind the din of progressive and liberal reformist struggles over public policy, civil liberties, and law, and beneath the infrequent mobilizations of activity to defend against the next onslaught of racist, classist, ageist, and misogynist criminalization, there is an unspoken politics of assumption that takes for granted the mystified permanence of domestic warfare as a constant production of targeted and massive suffering, guided by the logic of Black, brown, and indigenous subjection to the expediencies and essential violence of the American (global) nation-building project.⁹

Insurgent Learning strives to provide evidence for the unspoken politics of assumption in education that makes the permanence of domestic warfare seem aberrant rather than normative. The crossroads of critical ethnic studies and critical policy studies allows me to situate this study with the premise that the K-12 educational apparatus is a form of state-sanctioned domestic warfare. The insurgent portraits that I document are testament to the normative structure of education as racialized state-sanctioned violence, while they simultaneously offer competing social visions for the schools and communities in which they are situated.

The following sections offer a brief historical overview of major turning points in K-12 public education policy to provide historical context for how we arrived at the

⁹ Dylan Rodriguez, “The Terms of Engagement: Warfare, White Locality, and Abolition.” 36 no. 1 (2010), page(s): 151-173

conjuncture¹⁰ of accountability in K-12 public education policy. This section is inspired by Clyde Woods' (2017) use of "regional blocs"¹¹ in *Development Drowned and Reborn: The Blues and Bourbon Restorations in Post-Katrina New Orleans* to understand the historical roots of the white plantation elite's dominance in the Mississippi Delta region, which enable us to understand the not-so-natural disaster produced by hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Similarly, I draw inspiration from a policy regimes framework¹² that positions historical context as critical in understanding the inseparable formations in education policy and U.S. politics.

Drawing from Patrick McGuinn's (2006) analysis of three key shifts in federal education policy, from equity to excellence to accountability,¹³ I am similarly able to situate what Woods identified as competing social visions of development, which in this case emerge as competing visions for public education between the ruling neoliberal elite class and working-class, Black and Latinx communities of Los Angeles County. In an ambitious attempt to model my methodology after Woods' work, where he archived and

¹⁰ For a conjunctural analysis of neoliberal racial regimes, see: Jordan T. Camp, *"Incarcerating the Crisis: Freedom Struggles and the Rise of the Neoliberal State"* (University of California Press, 2016).

¹¹ "By regional blocs Woods means dynamic regional power structures that consists of diverse segments but are united in their effort to 'gain control over resources and over the ideological and distributive institutions governing their allocation'" (page xxiv). Clyde Woods, *Development Drowned and Reborn: The Blues and Bourbon Restorations in Post-Katrina New Orleans*. (University of Georgia Press, 2017)

¹² For an example of the use of a policy regimes framework see, Patrick J. McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind and the Transformation of Federal Education Policy, 1965-2005*. (University Press of Kansas, 2006)

¹³ Ibid.

uncovered what he referred to as the “blues epistemology,” a vernacular domain of culture, epistemologies, theories, methods, policies, and visions that emanate from makers of the blues, *Insurgent Learning* offers ruptures to the neoliberal assault on public education as they are produced by insurgent learners.

Turning Points in K-12 Public Education Policy: A Conjunctural Analysis

The landmark Supreme Court ruling in *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka (1954)* that declared state laws that upheld racial segregation to be unconstitutional served as a critical turning point in education policy under a doctrine of equal opportunity. The ruling served to quiet the global critique of the U.S.’s racist policies, as historically racialized communities continued to propel forward historic struggles for civil rights in education, housing, health, and employment. Derrick Bell (1980) critiqued the racial remedies of desegregation and integration school reforms proposed under the *Brown* decision. Bell theorized an “interest convergence dilemma,”¹⁴ which is the theory that the nation-state will support racial justice only to the extent that there is something in the state’s interest - that is, only to the extent that there is a “convergence” between the interests of White people and Black plaintiffs. Bell cautioned that the desegregation/integration efforts rallied under the banner of school-choice were insufficient to improve the education of Black children because it championed racial balance in schools over the material conditions that shaped Black schools and

¹⁴ Derrick A. Bell, “Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma.” *Harvard Law Review*, 93 no. 3 (January 1980): pp. 518-533.

neighborhoods. As sociologist and activist W.E.B. Du Bois (1935) warned in *Black Reconstruction in America*,¹⁵ the nation continually experiences missed opportunities for White and Black communities to go beyond racial solidarity and to challenge what Cedric Robinson (1983) in *Black Marxism* identified as racial capitalism, the ways racism materializes through the unequal accumulation of capital.¹⁶

Scholars have since critiqued multiculturalist approaches to education that do not address the fundamental structural realities of historically minoritized communities. In the following three sections, I will briefly offer a conjunctural analysis of three critical turning points in racialized education policy. As Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci has noted, a conjunctural analysis is a methodology to analyze the relationship between economic, political, and cultural forces.¹⁷ These relations of power have never been totalizing nor complete. I understand the state's deployment of racial capitalist education reforms as a direct response to strategies for liberation that derived from communities, particularly from Black communities. In fact, the failure of the state's control over communities in struggle is why racial capitalism must continuously refashion and reinvent itself.

¹⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935)

¹⁶ Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000)

¹⁷ Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity" *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 10, no. 5 (June 1, 1986); Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. ed Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. (International Publishers Co; Reprint, 1989 edition)

The War on (the Culture of) Poverty: Solving Poverty through Equity, Inputs

Under President Lyndon Johnson's Administration (1963–1969), the Great Society Era of the 60s was an era concerned with overcoming the continuous crisis of poverty through social programs. This era of social interventions known as the “War on Poverty” was marked by policy makers’ attempt to address social issues within the nation’s most impoverished neighborhoods by extending student rights to equal educational opportunity and access. The emergence of an equity regime in education was directly shaped by social movements for civil rights in communities that were historically denied access to education as a public right. The policy regime’s landmark piece of legislation, Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 is commonly viewed as the moment that Congress first passed federal legislation in education,¹⁸ which created and enforced regulations on state and local levels.¹⁹ For example, ESEA funneled money for states to aid the nation’s educationally underprivileged, defined as children whose families earned less than \$2,000 a year. Among the most prominent policies passed under ESEA to advance the educational opportunities of disadvantaged children were the passage of Head Start, Upward Bound, and Title I, which gave poor states and schools financial assistance. The ESEA focused on educational “inputs,” by providing additional resources and federal monitoring of states to ensure educational equity.

¹⁸ In actuality, boarding schools for Native American children, which was a federal initiative, was the first.

¹⁹ However, under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, any federally financially assisted programs in schools were prohibited from enforcing a system of segregation. Therefore, for states to receive federal money they had to desegregate their school systems.

While a pervasive equity-oriented rhetoric played out in government, the federal investment in education aimed to prepare the integration of human capital into the existing economy defined by Fordism. Fordism was an industrial manufacturing assembly line era focused on standardization of mass production for mass consumption. The Vocational Education Act of 1963, for example, aimed to better prepare high school students with skills necessary to enter the workforce, while equal protection laws under the Civil Rights Act of 1964 aimed to curtail racial and gender discrimination. That era experienced an expansion of the government's role in the economy, what critics often refer to as a "big government," in which the government intervenes in the economy without restrictions.

The Civil Rights Act mandated that after two years a national survey would examine the state of racial segregation in schools. Sociologist James S. Coleman and his colleagues conducted the report, *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (1966), a report known as *The Coleman Report*. Among the findings, they revealed that school finances and resources did not significantly influence student achievement. These findings influenced social policy by suggesting that a student's background was the source of social issues that prevented them from becoming successful. The Coleman Report served to affirm initial claims made by Sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan on the state of Black families, officially known as *The Negro Family: The Case for Action* (1965) and now widely referred to as *The Moynihan Report*. In the report, Black poverty was attributed to a matriarchal family structure that as Moynihan indicated, led to the

“deterioration of the Negro family.”²⁰ National reports such as these gave credence to what anthropologist Oscar Lewis theorized as a cross-generational and transnational “culture of poverty” among Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Indian families.²¹ The culture of poverty theory merged with these reports to fuel the perception that Latino and Black motherhood was the source of pathology and poverty. Essentially, they solidified the idea that Women of Color were to blame for the reproduction of a so-called culture of poverty.

In education, such cultural deprivation theories served to promote integration efforts for Black students in poverty to attend school among White students who could provide access to white middle-class cultural capital.²² However, in the aftermath of urban rebellions in the 60s, such as the Watts rebellion of 1965, and along with White resistance to mandatory school busing programs, the nation experienced a flight of White residents away from its urban cities. White flight, the movement of White residents away

²⁰ “Chapter II: The Negro American Family.” Office of Planning and Research. U.S. Department of Labor. March 1965.

²¹ The term “subculture of poverty” that later became “culture of poverty” was first written in Oscar Lewis’ (1959) ethnography, “Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty.” Other works included *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* 1961; *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—New York and San Juan* (New York: Random House, 1966); *A Study of Slum Cultures: Backgrounds for La Vida* (New York: Random House, 1968);

²² Gerald Grant “Shaping Social Policy: The Politics of the Coleman Report.” *Teachers College Record*. 75, no. 1 (September 1973).

from urban cities into suburban neighborhoods,²³ along with racialized policies that discriminated against Blacks was crucial in the construction and intensification of America's urban cities as "ghettos."²⁴ As white flight intensified and Black people moved in to cities that were built on the racial exclusion of Blacks, such as the city of Compton,²⁵ it was clear that more than demographic changes would be required to alter structural barriers, such as those found in the city's educational system, which were constructed to privilege a white dominant class. Nationalist movements such as those demonstrated at the time by the Black Panther Party, Brown Berets, Young Lords Party, American Indian Movement, and Asian American movements served to critique the limits of integration efforts as they proposed alternative visions that called the nation-state into question. The root causes of poverty and exclusion were left uncontested as

²³ For a reading on the federal government's role in suburbanization as experienced in the South, see Matt D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South*. (Princeton, 2007).

²⁴ Albert M. Camarillo, *Mexican Americans and Ethnic/Racial Borderhoods in American Cities, 1850-2000*. (Oxford University Press, 2013); George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York, 1993); Scott Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton, 2008); Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley, 2003); Douglass Massey and Nancy Denton. *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993)

²⁵ Dollarhide became Compton's first Black mayor in 1969, a historical moment that symbolized the struggle for the Black community to seize control of the city. By 1970, the Black community was the majority and had gained political control of the city. This was also the decade that experienced an influx of Latino migrants, mainly of Mexican descent.

dominant cultural deprivation theories and reports blamed individuals as opposed to the structural factors that shaped their shared experiences of struggle.

The activism and unrest of the late 60s solidified the connection between struggles for public education and criticism of the government's role in financing society's social safety net, which is the government's attempt to address poverty and inequality through publicly funded programs, entities, and services for individuals that qualify.²⁶ An equity regime in education policy was challenged by rising conservatism regarding an expansive social safety net because as Patrick McGuinn points, an equity regime "fueled the growing perception ... that federal education policy ... had become more about providing entitlements and protecting rights than about enhancing opportunity or demanding responsibility."²⁷ Whereas an equity framework allocates more resources (i.e. entitlements) where they are most needed, an equality framework allocates resources equally across groups, in spite of the reality that some groups may have greater need. Once families of color were granted greater access to the social safety net, White resistance against "special interest groups" that received greater access to the social safety net grew as well.²⁸

²⁶ The social safety net is also referred to as the welfare state. Examples include unemployment insurance, food subsidy programs, government subsidized housing, social security, head start, Medicare, tax credits.

²⁷ Patrick J. McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind and the Transformation of Federal Education Policy, 1965-2005*. (University Press of Kansas, 2006): pp. 39.

²⁸ Jill Quadagno. *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

The apolitical and ahistorical stance taken by proponents of an equality framework ignored histories of racial exclusion and continued racial discrimination. Racially coded language of “taxpayer” versus “tax recipient”²⁹ surfaced and resulted in highly contested debates on how the federal government should allocate money and how that money should be accounted for. As a result, an equity regime in education shifted into one concerned primarily with excellence. After all, federal social programs were for the first time going to Black and growing Latinx populations in communities where a growing ‘moral panic’ over the perceived deviancy of those communities fueled the idea that they needed to be reformed.”³⁰

Neoliberalism as Market-Solution to Crisis

In 1969, when discussing the welfare system, Nixon’s Chief of Staff, H.R. Haldeman, recalled in an interview with Dan Baum, “[Nixon] emphasized that you have to face the fact that the whole problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to.”³¹ It is under President Nixon’s

²⁹ For a reading on the racialized discourse of “tax payer” and “tax recipient” as it is attributed to notions of citizenship in education, see Camille Walsh, “White Backlash, the ‘Taxpaying’ Public, and Educational Citizenship” *Critical Sociology*. 43 no. 2 (2017) 237–247; Thomas B. Edsall and Mary D. Edsall. *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights and Taxes on American Politics*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992).

³⁰ Loïc Wacquant. *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, “Politics, History, and Culture” series, 2009)

³¹ Baum, Dan. 1996. *Smoke and mirrors: the war on drugs and the politics of failure*. Boston: Little, Brown.

Administration (1969-1974) that “the whole problem” of Black people was tackled under the so-called “War on Drugs” in which money for law enforcement was doubled, while social programs experienced severe budget cuts. The war on drugs was a direct response to the success of activism in the 60s and 70s, specifically from Black activists, as the era championed to restore “law and order” meant to discipline and criminalize communities in resistance.³² The formation of the FBI’s COINTELPRO (1959-71)³³ was among the counter-insurgent tactics mobilized against revolutionary organizations such as the Black Panther Party (BPP). Those tactics aligned with the LAPD’s newly formed SWAT, as demonstrated in a shootout against the BPP at their headquarters on 41st and Central Avenue.³⁴ Consequently, this era solidified the formation of a contemporary prison regime that led to the incarceration³⁵ and assassination of an entire generation of leaders.

³² *All Power to the People! The Black Panther Party and Beyond*. Directed by Lee Lew Lee. Electronic News Group, Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen. 1996.

³³ The FBI formed the Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) to pacify and eliminate dissent from nationalist political organizations that were perceived as terrorist and communist organizations. See, Huey P. Newton’s doctoral dissertation, “War Against The Panthers: A Study Of Repression In America” University of California, Santa Cruz, 1980.

³⁴ *41st and Central: The Untold Story of LA Black Panthers*. Film. Directed by Gregory Everett. Ultra Wave Media, 2010; *Bastards of the Party*. Film. Directed by Cle Sloan. Fuqua Films, 2005

³⁵ Dylan Rodriguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minnesota Press, 2006); Among those incarcerated political prisoners of the time included, Assata Shakur, Mummmia Abu-Jamal, Angela Davis, and Geronimo Pratt.

Nixon's war on drugs appropriated public anxieties over the political unrest of Black urban spaces by targeting drug consumption and distribution at a time exacerbated by what David Harvey (2005) in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* described as a "serious crisis of capital accumulation"³⁶ for an elite white class. The economic crisis of capital accumulation in the 70s introduced a new economic framework of neoliberal capitalism that promoted a minimal governmental role in the economy, removing restrictions to corporate growth and capital accumulation, and incentivizing the privatization of public goods, entities, and services. Among those who opposed a strong government role was economist Milton Friedman,³⁷ who later became economic advisor to President Ronald Reagan. Friedman opposed Keynesian government policies, and instead proposed a neoliberal economic theory that outsourced public goods and entities to an unregulated marketplace. As the crisis of this era intensified, the nation's urban centers experienced deindustrialization, with companies in the city of Los Angeles such as Bethlehem Steel Plant and Firestone Rubber escaping the demands of labor movements as they outsourced to cheaper sources of labor abroad. These neoliberal shifts in the economy affected Black

³⁶ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. (Oxford University Press, 2005): p 12.

³⁷ In his 1955 article, "The Role of Government in Education," Friedman proposed a model of schools that was privately operated and publicly funded through a system of school-choice referred to as vouchers. In this system, the government provides families with school vouchers that aid the payment of attending a private school of choice. The "Chicago boys" who were students of Friedman at the University of Chicago, were called upon to aid the new Chilean neoliberal economy after the coup of Pinochet in 1973, and implemented a school voucher system.

manufacturing workers the most, and particularly Black men, who were unemployed at high numbers.

It was during this period of time that critiques of how the capitalist economy shaped education were brought forth in Samuel Bowel and Herbert Gintis (1976) book *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life*. Bowel and Gintis argued that schooling was shaped by the “correspondence principle” of the labor market; therefore, schools reflected a hierarchical organization and culture that was determined and reproduced by social and economic inequalities.³⁸ While their argument of a correspondence principle in schooling reflected the alignment of capitalism and the U.S. tradition of education with one another, their analysis ignored the racialized political economy. In *Keeping Track: How Schools Shape Inequality* (1985), Jeannie Oaks argued that schooling varied for low-income students who were tracked into vocational courses as opposed to middle-and-upper class students who were tracked to attend universities.³⁹ As economies were deindustrialized, vocational courses in schools in LA were eliminated alongside other elective courses. In Compton, Spanish-speaking students were unjustly placed in special needs classes as their lack of English proficiency was viewed as a disability. These xenophobic practices led to the

³⁸ Samuel Bowel and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life*. (Haymarket Books; Reprint edition, 2011)

³⁹ Jeannie Oakes. *Keeping Track: How Schools Shape Inequality*. (Yale University Press; 2nd edition, May 10, 2005)

formation of Latino organizations such as the *Concerned Parents of the Community*, who condemned discrimination specific to the Latino community.⁴⁰

As urban schools and cities experienced the changes of deindustrialization and disinvestment, the racialization of the welfare state through popular cultural deprivation theories continued to gain traction. Reagan's deployment of the racialized and gendered trope of the so-called "welfare queen" throughout his 1976 presidential campaign trail demonstrated the growing binary of White "taxpayers" versus Black "tax recipients."⁴¹ Black women's reproduction was targeted as they were viewed as "breeders" of an imagined crisis and of "deviant" Black culture. As Martha Escobar has argued, the perceived threat of Black motherhood and attempts to curtail their reproduction was transposed onto Latina bodies.⁴² This was evidenced from 1969-1973 at LA County's USC Medical Center, where hundreds of Chicana and Mexican immigrant women were involuntarily sterilized. These sterilizations were challenged in a class-action lawsuit where the judge ruled against the women and in favor of the doctors. Among the justifications, the women were described as set back because of their own deficient culture.⁴³ Public fears of Black population growth in the 70s, merged with anxieties over

⁴⁰ Emily E. Straus, *Death of a Suburban Dream: Race and Schools in Compton, California*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

⁴¹ Josh Levin, *The Queen: The Forgotten Life Behind an American Myth*. (Little, Brown and Company, 2019)

⁴² Martha Escobar, *Captivity Beyond Prisons: Criminalization Experiences of Latina (Im)migrant*. (University of Texas Press, 2015).

⁴³ *No Mas Bebes (No More Babies)*. Film. Directed by Renee Tajima Peña. Moon Canyon Films: 201

growing numbers of Latino immigrant communities, resulted in states like California having the highest number of sterilizations.

The disinvestment in public education was fueled by the racialized tax revolts of the late 70s and early 80s that made school districts more dependent on state budgets. This White backlash enabled policies such as Proposition 13 in California⁴⁴ that signaled a critical turning point for the finance of public education, as school district budgets became heavily dependent on state finance. Previous to the passage of this law in 1978, public schools collected as much funding as was needed from local property taxes. This meant that neighborhoods with higher property taxes could collect more money for per pupil spending. Proposition 13 set a 1% property tax limit across the state, where the assessed value could not grow more than 2% a year. However, property taxes were capped at the original purchase price and did not account for increase in property values (this also applied to large commercial and industrial corporations). Since local control of school finance was limited through this law, the state was then required to supply local school funding. The state, however, was either not financially able or willing to supply that needed finance. As a consequence, the most impacted were school nurses, counselors, and librarians, vocational education, music and art programs, adult education, and summer programs that were viewed as excess to the core academic curriculum.

The white backlash pushed the notion that a comprehensive social welfare system would not address perceived inherent differences with the darker races and believed that

⁴⁴ Daniel Martinez HoSang, *Racial Propositions: Ballot Initiatives and the Making of Postwar California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

simply funneling more resources to provide equity and access was counterproductive. The argument shifted: if poverty could not be alleviated through government “handouts,” Black and Brown youth could only be given a “hand up” to escape their unfortunate conditions of poverty. Essentially, these dominant explanations had become woven into the fabric of society to justify a “bootstraps ideology” that required Youth of Color to *learn* their way out of poverty and to do it through their own *will*. This hyper-individualistic approach to social and economic mobility required Youth of Color to conform to the prevailing status quo that shaped education policy. The status quo of education changed, from one primarily concerned with providing equity through “inputs” in education to one obsessed with providing student-based, measurable “outputs” that could be evaluated and held accountable.⁴⁵

Shift to Excellence in Education: Obsession with Educational Outputs

By the 80s, policy makers reasoned that simply funneling more money to the poor would not alleviate the conditions of poverty, and may in fact exacerbate those conditions. It was throughout Ronald Reagan's campaign for presidency in 1981 that the radical proposal to abolish the newly created⁴⁶ federal Department of Education was

⁴⁵ Patrick J. McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind and the Transformation of Federal Education Policy, 1965-2005*. (University Press of Kansas, 2006)

⁴⁶ The Department of Education was relatively new, created in 1979 under Jimmy Carter's administration.

promised to the nation.⁴⁷ The country was shifting to an era in which federal education policy would campaign for “excellence,” at a time when there was an increased number of immigrants from Latin American and Asian countries.⁴⁸ Coinciding with a rise in foreign-born populations, a discourse of excellence in education cohered to push forth an assimilationist educational agenda.

Soon after the Supreme Court ruled in 1982 that a state statute in Texas was unconstitutional for denying funding for K-12 public education for undocumented children,⁴⁹ Secretary of Education Terrell Bell appointed a Commission to produce *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (1983). This national report analyzed the “rising tide of mediocrity,” and declared, “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.”⁵⁰ The report made education a national priority unlike before. Through stoking heightened fear that the nation was falling behind in comparison to the rest of the world, essentially the report equated

⁴⁷ United Press International, “Education Dept. Won't Be Abolished: Reagan Backs Down, Citing Little Support for Killing Agency.” *Los Angeles Times*. January 29, 1985. (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-01-29-mn-13948-story.html>)

⁴⁸ Juan Gonzalez, *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*. (Penguin Books; Revised edition, 2011) and Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History*. (Simon and Schuster Paperbacks: 2015).

⁴⁹ Plyler vs. Doe (1982)

⁵⁰ United States. National Commission on Excellence in Education. *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, United States Department of Education. Washington, D.C.: The Commission, 1983.

educational failure to a national security threat. Specifically, it was the first time, as Erica Fernandez and Gerardo Lopez (2017) explained, “the Commission single-handedly named parental involvement as a focus of concern while formally introducing parental involvement into the national conversation surrounding school reform.”⁵¹ The report marked the shift in education toward excellence, as it advocated for higher standards, greater parental involvement, and a system to measure and evaluate student academic performance.

As the number of children of migrants and migrant children increased, existing re-enculturation theories of assimilation into American culture became heavily emphasized, particularly for Mexican immigrants, who were viewed as culturally inferior and subordinate.⁵² Two examples of the prevalence of assimilationist views were California’s Proposition 63 (1986), which made English the official language of the state, and Congress’ passage of the *Immigration Reform and Control Act* (IRCA), which created a pathway to legalization for undocumented immigrants who fit a set of criteria in exchange for border security. Xenophobic and assimilationist views merged, as represented in Reagan’s announcement of *What Works* (1986), a “practical guide” that emphasized the importance of school discipline and was a collaboration between the Department of Education and the Department of Justice. The guide also inculcated respect for hard work and recommended the implementation of tougher academic

⁵¹ Fernandez and Lopez, *When Parents Behave Badly*, 123

⁵² HoSang, *Racial Propositions*

standards. That same year, the National Governors Association produced the report *A Time for Results* (1986), better known as the Governors' Report, which focused on monitoring states to improve school quality by the year of 1991.⁵³ The report championed the logic that would inform charter schools six years later: it stressed the importance of parental choice in school selection, critiqued "heavy handed state control," and advocated for schools and school districts to have more freedom in exchange for better results.⁵⁴ Collectively, these reports and policies represent the nation's growing xenophobic, assimilationist, and tough approach to education reserved for poor, Black and Brown communities.

Meanwhile, the portrayal of urban schools as pathological, deficient, decaying, and failing was captured through popular media productions such as the iconic *Stand and Deliver* (1988) and *Lean on Me* (1989), which were both based on true stories.⁵⁵ *Stand and Deliver* focused on math teacher Jaime Escalante, from Garfield High School in East Los Angeles, who raised expectations and instilled the *ganas* (motivation, willpower) in his students. The success of his pedagogy was proven when his students passed their AP Calculus exams. In *Lean on Me*, Joe Louis Clark, a principal of a failing high school in

⁵³ Chairperson of the report was Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton.

⁵⁴ Lamar Alexander, "Time for Results": An Overview. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 68 no. 3, (1986): 202-204.

⁵⁵ Another film that was produced a few years prior is *The George McKenna Story*, later released as *Hard Lessons* (1986). This film was based on George McKenna, who began as a principal at Washington Preparatory High School in South Central LA. Principal McKenna became notorious for shifting the school from a "violent school" to one that under his leadership had a waiting list of over 300 students.

New Jersey that was on the verge of losing its accreditation, transformed the school by removing all the perceived troublemakers.

Whether it was a more empathetic figure, such as Mr. Escalante, who instilled the *ganas* necessary for Latino children to excel on test scores, or whether it was a merciless figure like Mr. Clark, who walked around campus with a bat ready to push out the school's most troublesome kids, both patriarchal figures are endemic of the rising culture of neoliberalism in public education, in which education is no longer a "right" entitled to everyone, rather it is a "commodity" only for those deemed as deserving. The films represent an era obsessed with finding the "silver bullet" to fix the most underperforming schools in America, with a specific focus on the nation's public high schools. The films cemented the idea that punitive, neoliberal approaches to educational governance were not only effective in the production of better academic results for those who *wanted to learn*, but also necessary to restore order and safety.

The Governors' Report of 1986 was the basis for the "Governors Education Summit" convened in the fall of 1989 by the recently elected George W. H. Bush, who had served as Vice President under Reagan and aspired to become "the education president." It was at that summit that the expected results and goals for the nation's schools germinated into Bush's *America 2000: An Education Strategy*. As the memorandum given to the President by the Secretary of Education, Lamar Alexander, stated, "This strategy grows directly out of the Administration's well-known emphasis on recognizing and rewarding excellence, outcomes rather than inputs, accountability for

performance, parent choice, and strong partnerships with the Governors.”⁵⁶ Unlike the passive parental involvement framework stressed in *A Nation at Risk* where parents were encouraged to support their children at home, Bush’s *America 2000* stressed an active role for parents through school-choice. In a 1991 Address to the Nation, George H.W. Bush declared:

We can encourage educational excellence by encouraging parental choice. The concept of choice draws its fundamental strength from the principle at the very heart of the democratic idea. Every adult American has the right to vote, the right to decide where to work, where to live. Its time parents were free to choose the schools that their children attend. This approach will create the competitive climate that stimulates excellence in our private and parochial schools as well.⁵⁷

The shift from a passive parent involvement framework to a proactive parent engagement framework promoted through school-choice aligned with a growing culture of market competition in education. Although *America 2000* died in the Senate, it was instrumental for “providing a legislative blueprint for education reform based on academic standards common to all students, it moved the federal agenda progressively closer to the mainstream instructional program within schools.”⁵⁸ *America 2000* also served as a

⁵⁶ Bruno V. Manno, “George H.W. Bush: The Education President” The Walton Foundation. December 7, 2018.

⁵⁷ U.S. Government Publishing Office, Address to the Nation on National Education Strategy. Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George H. W. Bush (1991, Book I). April 18, 1991.

⁵⁸ Lorraine M. McDonnell, “No Child Left Behind and the Federal Role in Education: Evolution or Revolution? *Peabody Journal of Education*, 80 no. 2 (2005): pp. 28

blueprint for the then-governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton, who served as the Chairperson for the 1986 Governors' Report.

In the late 80s and early 90s, an “underclass” theory gained popularity from sociologists such as Charles Murray, who supported culture of poverty theories, and added that a cycle of poverty was sustained through welfare dependency common in the ghettos of America.⁵⁹ Again, these theories racialized welfare, blaming unemployed, single-parent households, out-of-wedlock births, and criminality on the behavior and culture of Communities of Color. These prevalent theories did not account for structural conditions such as the state’s disinvestment in public education, economic recession, a high unemployment rate, or a deindustrialized economy.⁶⁰

Scholars have identified the transition from a War on Poverty to a War on Crime, otherwise known as the transition from “welfare to warfare,” as the state’s attempt to massively incarcerate,⁶¹ militarize, and produce prisons as a “prison fix” to the crises of land, labor, finance capital, and state capacity.⁶² As the state invested heavily in the

⁵⁹ Other works include, William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 13, 182-183.

⁶⁰ João H. Costa Vargas, *Catching Hell in the City of Angels: Life and Meanings of Blackness in South Central Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006)

⁶¹ Rodriguez, *Forced Passages*

⁶² Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *The Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2007).

expansion of the prison industrial complex, the nature of schooling for Black and Brown youth changed to one heavily impacted by punitive zero-tolerance policies that not only tracked youth into a corresponding prison pipeline, but through which schools themselves reflected the same organizing logic of prisons.⁶³ The correspondence of vocational schooling with an industrial Fordist era was effectively over; schools now had to correspond to an emergent racialized neoliberal economic order. As neoliberalism became more hegemonic⁶⁴ in shaping the discourse of education, the self-regulating nature of market capitalism would provide the “hand-up” necessary for perceived failing students and their schools. The hand up was defined by debates over curriculum content and higher standards for students, and greater accountability in the form of measurable outputs for local school districts. This punitive approach to schooling and to shaping the nature of institutions would result in continual attacks in the form of loss for communities where Black and Brown youth are in the majority.

Growing Accountability on Failure: Charter Schools as Solution to Crisis

In the early 90s, predominately Black and Latina/o neighborhoods of Los Angeles were represented by mass media as zones of violence stemming from racial unrest. In

⁶³ Damien M. Sojoyner, *Black Radicals Make for Bad Citizens: Undoing the Myth of the School to Prison Pipeline*. *Berkeley Review of Education*. Vol. 4 No. 2 (2013): 241-263

⁶⁴ Vijay Prashad describes this shift into “New Racism” and summarizes the emergence of the neoliberal state into four critical aspects that include the elimination of the social wage, expansion of the police state, an unregulated corporate sector, and cultural ideologies. See, Vijay Prashad, “Second Hand Dreams,” *Social Analysis*, vol. 49, no. 2, (Summer 2005).

particular, images of antagonistic Black and Brown youth in the city's high schools demonstrated that racial coexistence was impossible. Fox News captured a Latina mother's desperation in front of Inglewood High School, "Why are you fighting, because you're Black and I'm Mexican? You are both, together, killing yourselves. There is no reason why you guys fight like that." It had become a norm to hear of brawls during moments of ethnic celebration⁶⁵ such as during Black History Month and Cinco de Mayo, as the surveillance intervention of police through "lockdowns" became normative as a means to restore order.⁶⁶ The 1992 Los Angeles rebellion further cemented the idea that the nation's poorest neighborhoods, Black and Brown communities in particular, were unable to govern their own affairs, let alone "get along" with one another.⁶⁷ These

⁶⁵ Fox News (1990). Blacks & Mexicans fight at Inglewood H.S. May 1990. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHO0gJ6DWPc&feature=related>)

⁶⁶ Fox News. (1992). North Hollywood High School coverage (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-gamC24n3M>)

⁶⁷ João H. Costa Vargas (2008) in "The LA Times Coverage of the 1992 Rebellion: Still Burning Matters of Race and Justice" described how newspaper coverage portrayed images that acknowledged racial difference as a way to restore the social order. The portrayal of "community" required a representation of multiculturalism as cooperation and social harmony that complied to the reestablishment of state law and order; while at the same time, "community" provided a platform to dichotomize those who were non-compliant to its restoration. Those who engaged in a politics of refusal, even if done across racial and cultural lines, were not portrayed as community nor as a form of multiculturalism. Instead, the non-compliant were portrayed as a form of Blackness that represented criminality, irrationality, disorder, and chaos. This polarization allowed for a group within a group to be targeted in such a way that the "restoration of peace and community" allowed a means to defend multiculturalism and justified the punishment of those thought of as "deviant." See, João H. Costa Vargas, *Never Meant to Survive: Genocide and Utopias in Black Diaspora Communities*. (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008).

portrayals emerged at the same time that the recession of the 90s hit and forced school districts such as the LAUSD to cut their budgets and lay off teachers, acts that the UTLA declared as “the death of public education,” as evidenced in their mock funeral for public education in the fall of 1992.⁶⁸

The crisis of the early 90s forced policy makers to entertain alternative school-choice initiatives. In 1992, California Governor Pete Wilson signed the second charter school law in the country when Senator Gary Hart from Santa Barbara presented Senate Bill 1448, a bill drafted by Sue Barr, to allow for the creation of 100 charter schools in the state. For Senator Hart, charter schools were an alternative to the threat of vouchers,⁶⁹ which would provide school-choice without the need to provide public taxpayer subsidies to private schools, which in his mind, violated the separation of church and state.⁷⁰ The charter school option rose in California at a time when voters were debating Proposition 174 (1993), a school voucher initiative. Ultimately, Californian voters defeated the initiative, as it would have made a state constitutional amendment that would have

⁶⁸ John T. Donovan, “Helen Bernstein and United Teachers-Los Angeles, 1990-1996.” *Southern California Quarterly* 83, no. 4 (2001): 399-414. Also, United Teachers of Los Angeles, “History of UTLA.” (<https://www.utla.net/about-us/history-utla>) Accessed March 27, 2019.

⁶⁹ Gary K. Hart and Sue Burr. “The Story of California's Charter School Legislation.” *The Phi Delta Kappan* 78, no. 1 (1996): 37-40.

⁷⁰ John Fensterwald, “Gary Hart, author of California’s charter school law, reflects on its impact” *EdSource*. August 13, 2018. (<https://edsources.org/2018/gary-hart-author-of-californias-charter-school-law-reflects-on-its-impact/601212>)

funneled public taxpayer funding for K-12 public education to private schools.⁷¹ UTLA argued against Prop 174 stating that local public schools would lose more money and further exacerbate the crisis. Teachers unions opposed SB 1448, and in an attempt to reach a compromise and support, a provision was included that required charter school operators to obtain a petition of support from teachers. To Hart's surprise, the provision "did not lessen union opposition."⁷²

Unlike vouchers, charter schools were not a ballot decision left for California voters to make. Charter schools are essentially autonomous privately operated schools that adhere to their approved charter, a five-year renewable contract made between the school and their authorizer. In California, the State Board of Education, County Offices of Education, or local school districts serve as authorizers. The charter model is a deregulated model of education, a partnership between public and private entities that operates under the guidelines and scrutiny of specified state charter laws, regulations, and policies, in exchange for greater autonomy in pedagogy, curriculum, and management. In exchange for greater accountability on student academic performance, charters generally only receive per-pupil funds. Unlike publicly elected school boards that must operate publicly, charter school boards comprise appointed positions that operate much like the executive boards of a corporation. This proposal encouraged new players to enter the

⁷¹ California Ballot Pamphlet. Special Statewide Election. November 2, 1993. Secretary of State. California State Archives. (https://web.archive.org/web/20110921100100/http://holmes.uchastings.edu/ballot_pdf/1993s.pdf)

⁷² Hart and Burr, The Story of California's Charter, pg. 39

education arena to implement new ideas that aligned with the charter’s particular educational vision. The assumption was, charters could do “more with less” money, while serving as “incubators” that could provide innovative models of learning for failing traditional public schools to learn from and adopt. In these ways, charter schools represented the ideal neoliberal paradigm for public education, as charters benefit from limited public scrutiny and funds in exchange for operating within a private marketplace of education.

Charter schools were relatively uncommon throughout the 90s. In *The Charter School Experiment*, Christopher A. Lubienski and Peter C. Weitzel (2010) describe how charter school advocates initially “envisioned small-scale, autonomous schools run by independent mom-and-pop operators who would be best positioned to respond to local community needs.”⁷³ Charters embodied the idea of “letting a thousand flowers bloom,” as charters were structurally allowed to design their own system of accountability and to measure their own progress. As Miron explained, “charter school accountability was more closely linked to a school’s fulfillment of both its unique school mission and the terms of the contract with its authorizers or sponsors.”⁷⁴ In these ways, charter schools epitomize multiculturalism, what Jodi Melamed (2011) indicates is the spirit of

⁷³ *The Charter School Experiment*. Christopher A. Lubienski and Peter C. Weitzel. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2010): pp. 5.

⁷⁴ Gary Miron, “Performance of Charter Schools and Implications for Policy Makers,” in Lubienski, C. & Weitzel, P. (Eds) *The Charter School Experiment*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2010): pp 74.

neoliberalism.⁷⁵ In a so-called, “post-racial” society, charter schools as a new model of school-choice exemplify multiculturalism as they render “neoliberal policy as the key to a postracist world of freedom and opportunity.”⁷⁶ The logic of charter schools is that the neoliberal marketplace of education can do a more effective⁷⁷ and efficient job at educating, and hence at addressing poverty. Charter schools, therefore, merge cultural re-enculturation theories that rely on a bootstrap ideology for poor children of color with a diminished government role, as private interests gain control of the education for those children.

As charter schools emerged on the scene in California, Bill Clinton's Administration (1993-2001) enacted into law the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* in March 1994, which laid the groundwork for a shifting discourse that called for standards and outcomes based assessments in education. This shift was evidenced later that year with the re-authorization of ESEA, as *Improving America's School Act* (IASA). IASA provided Title I money under the condition that within a year, states establish standards based assessments in mathematics and English language arts or reading. Under Title X,

⁷⁵ Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*. (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2011)

⁷⁶ Ibid, pg. 42.

⁷⁷ As examined in the first academic book on charter schools, *Inside Charter Schools: The Paradox of Radical Decentralization* (2000) the goal of radically decentralizing public authority is to enhance democratic participation at the grassroots level in such a way that school choice options will “help raise children more effectively” than traditional schools. Bruce Fuller, *Inside Charter Schools: The Paradox of Radical Decentralization*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000): pp. 11.

“Programs of National Significance,” \$15 million was allocated for school districts via their state if the state agreed to establish charters schools.

These national changes to education coincided with a tide of national and state laws that in the mid-to-late 90s disproportionately targeted and criminalized Black and undocumented immigrant communities. Proposition 187 (1994), for example, was an initiative that in its title proclaimed to, “Save Our State” so long as California created a state-run citizenship screening system to deny undocumented immigrants public social services (health care and public education). On the same ballot, voters approved Proposition 184 (1994) the “Three Strikes Sentencing” initiative that in efforts to curtail crime, instituted mandatory life sentencing on third felony convictions. This same year, Clinton signed *The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act* of 1994, a law aimed to increase sentencing for repeat offenders, while it provided billions of dollars for local police departments and prison expansion projects. Growing anxieties over crime and drug use in urban cities specifically blamed Black youth as the source of these problems, as evidenced in 1996, when the nation’s first lady, Hillary Clinton, expressed:

We need to take these people on, they are often connected to big drug cartels, they are not just gangs of kids anymore. They are often the kinds of kids that are called superpredators. No conscience. No empathy. We can talk about why they ended up that way but first we have to bring them to heel.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Hillary Clinton, “Mrs. Clinton Campaign Speech” at Keene State University. C-Span. January 25, 1996 (<https://www.c-span.org/video/?69606-1/mrs-clinton-campaign-speech>). Also, criminologist John Dilulio first galvanized fears of so called “superpredators” in “The Coming of the Super-Predators” in November 27, 1995.

Hillary Clinton applauded the efforts of law enforcement in targeting Black youth delinquency. That year, three federal laws were passed: *Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act* of 1996 (IRAIRA), the *Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act* (AEDPA), and the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act* (PRWORA). Collectively, these three federal laws heightened the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border, required citizens to work for limited welfare assistance, expanded the notion of aggravated felony for non-citizens, and in some cases eliminated judicial review and required mandatory detention/deportation for non-citizens.⁷⁹ By the late 90s, it was clear that poor, Black and Brown communities were read as zones of violence and lawlessness, meanwhile serving to prime the conditions for incarceration, detention, and deportation.

These laws surfaced at the same time the effects of the *North American Free Trade Agreement* (NAFTA) led to many American companies moving overseas as the displacement of Mexican farmers increased their migration to the U.S. The perceived threat of Latin American immigrants as an invading force in the U.S. enabled what Leo Chavez (2008) identifies as a “Latino Threat Narrative,” a xenophobic discourse that blames immigrants, specifically Latina immigrant mothers, as the reproductive threat, altering the demographic makeup of the nation with unassimilable “anchor babies.” These xenophobic fears gave way for California’s Proposition 227 (1998) “English Language in Public Schools,” which called for the elimination of all bilingual programs

⁷⁹ Tanya Maria Golash-Boza, *Deported: Immigrant Policing, Disposable Labor and Global Capitalism*. (New York University Press, 2015): pp. 105

that assisted English language learners (ELL). Instead, ELL must be immersed in one year into an English-only classroom. After he successfully eliminated most of Garfield HS's bilingual education classes because he believed they held students back, Jaime Escalante served as Honorary Chairperson of the "English for the Children" campaign that supported the proposition.⁸⁰

Meanwhile, in 1997, President Clinton visited California's first charter school in San Carlos to express support for what he saw as a model for the nation.⁸¹ Among the first comprehensive studies on California's charter schools, Amy Stuart Wells and her colleagues (1998) outlined several shortfalls in the policy structure.⁸² Among their fifteen crucial findings, they saw charter schools were not yet accountable for enhanced academic achievement, public funding ranged widely, charter schools exercised considerable control over the types of students they served, and charter schools' racial/ethnic requirements were not enforced. While this study should have served to caution policy makers on the future charter schools could create for public education, especially in regards to the education of Students of Color, it did not. Instead, in 1998, the charter school cap in the state was lifted to allow for an additional 100 new charter schools each year. It seemed as if the idea of charter schools as "friendly competition" to

⁸⁰ Jaime Escalante letter to Ron K. Unz. October 10, 1997.
(<http://www.onenation.org/escalante.html>)

⁸¹ Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton, 1997. September 20, 1997 (pg 1194).

⁸² Amy Stuart-Wells, et. al. "Beyond the Rhetoric of Charter School Reform: A Study of Ten California School Districts." UCLA Charter School Study, 1998.

spur change and innovation throughout traditional public schools was long gone before it even began. The role of charter schools in the movement to privatize k-12 public education would become clearer with the looming threat under the banner of No Child Left Behind.

No Child Left Behind: An Accountability Regime in Education

At the turn of the century, the fate of traditional public schools' existence was no longer a given. After much debate, "Education reformers were convinced that if states, with federal assistance, helped establish academic standards and then held schools accountable for having their students meet standards, educational performance would improve."⁸³ These ideas gained popularity among Republicans and Democrats who found common ground in education on the perceived need for higher standards, testing, and accountability.

The bi-partisan effort to reauthorize the ESEA as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was solidified in 2001 under George W Bush Jr.'s Administration. Essentially, politicians of both major political parties viewed the need for the federal government to step in and hold states accountable for creating and mandating local districts to implement measurable state standards. Therefore, what students were expected to learn in schools was outlined through state-mandated standards in all core academic subjects and monitored to ensure that all students acquired a common set of knowledge. State standards were assessed by annual state-mandated testing for grade levels 3-8 and once in

⁸³ McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind and Transformation*, p. 90.

high school. Student achievement data was broken down by different subgroups, such as race, ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, migrant status, disability, and gender. The subgroup data was meant to identify and “close the achievement gap” across groups.

Under NCLB, schools had to meet the rising expectations of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), which was heavily determined by test scores. NCLB therefore created a structure for how to identify low performing schools alongside a structure for accountability. The ultimate goal of NCLB was that by the year 2014, all students were to perform at grade-level proficiency levels for English language arts and mathematics. Schools that failed to meet AYP were classified as “School in Need of Improvement” (SINI) and were held “accountable” through the following punitive “corrective” sanctions:

- After two consecutive years of failure, parents have the right to transfer their children to a better performing public school or charter school, where the school district pays for transportation.
- After three consecutive years of failure, students are given supplemental educational services such as summer school, tutoring, and remedial programs.
- After four years of failure, schools must take corrective action by replacing staff, curriculum, or hiring an expert.
- After five consecutive years of failure, schools must plan for restructuring. School restructuring plans include charter conversion, replace staff, major governance changes, state takeover or private operator takeover.
- After six consecutive years of failure, schools must implement restructuring plan.

These corrective sanctions essentially served to punish schools for failing to meet NCLB's utopic visions of one hundred percent proficiency by 2014. Under the regime of accountability in education that NCLB solidified, public schools classified as "SINI" are only valuable to capital as they are subjected to reforms and outsourced to private entities, such as charter school operators.

Capitalizing on Academic Failure of Public Schools

Insurgent Learning contributes to the research on education during the era of NCLB, an era governed by neoliberal multiculturalism. Jodi Melamed (2011) argues in *Represent and Destroy* that since the 1990s, multiculturalism within emerging neoliberal regimes has become a policy rubric for US governmentality⁸⁴ domestically and internationally. While on one hand liberalism valorizes freedom of choice, individual autonomy, and openness; the hallmarks of multiculturalism,⁸⁵ which are liberal recognitions, incorporations, and representations of difference, serve collectively to leave

⁸⁴ Wendy Brown's use of Foucault's framework of governmentality in *Regulating Aversion* (2008) allows us to see how the state's deployment of liberal discourses such as multiculturalism does not challenge state-sanctioned violence but reinforces it. See, Wendy Brown. (2008). *Regulating Aversion. Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire*. Princeton University Press.

⁸⁵ "Multi-culturalism promotes formal diversity and canalizes complex social communities on racial/cultural lines. It assumes that people's races or cultures have a discrete history and that this separation provides ontological meaning in social life. What is needed now is simply for the state and the old social classes to celebrate this diversity. Class divisions and gender oppression can be subsumed into the fabric of difference, and power differentials on racial lines can be displaced onto cultural celebration" (Prashad, *Second Hand Dreams*, pp. 195-96).

racial capitalism unquestioned and unchallenged. Dylan Rodriguez (2011) explains in *Forced Passages*, that the “multiculturalization” of white supremacy is an:

ongoing and complex relation of hierarchy, discipline, power, and violence that has come to oversee the current and increasingly incorporative ‘multicultural’ modalities of white supremacy, wherein ‘people of color’ are selectively and incrementally solicited, rewarded, and absorbed into the operative functioning of white supremacist institutions (e.g., the military, police, and school) and discourses (e.g., patriotism). This multicultural turn is effectively the neoliberal and neoconservative assimilationism of a post-apartheid state and civil regime.⁸⁶

The hallmarks of multiculturalism similarly operate in education policy and discourse to mask and uphold the permanence of racist state violence through the strategic use of buzz words in education policy such school-choice, friendly competition, and turn-around.

This language was used strategically by charter school operators and non-profits, as they additionally employed social justice language such as parent revolution and *animo* (spirit) justice, as a means to appeal to communities who wanted better educational experiences.

NCLB’s policy regime of accountability laid the groundwork for the privatization of K-12 public schools, in which public schools are outsourced to charter school operators, functioning as a neoliberal multiculturalist racial project.⁸⁷ Essential to the

⁸⁶ Dylan Rodriguez, “Multiculturalist White Supremacy and the Substructure of the Body” in *Corpus: An Interdisciplinary Reader on Bodies and Knowledge*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

⁸⁷ Omi and Winant (1994) in “Racial Formation” identify “a racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize and distribute resources (economic, political,

privatization of public schools was the branding of low-performing schools as SINI, which made them vulnerable to state sanctioned educational reforms. The era I examine in this dissertation was obsessed with quantifying, evaluating, and eliminating public school failure. Key to this agenda of identifying failure was the use of standardized testing. Many scholars and activists have criticized NCLB for its implementation of high stakes attached to testing,⁸⁸ which resulted in a test-driven school culture that incentivized pushing low-scoring students off school rosters, thus strengthening a school-to-prison pipeline.⁸⁹

Rising critiques against NCLB made education historian Diane Ravitch, who was once a conservative advocate of NCLB and who worked for the federal Department of Education under three administrations, become among the strongest opponents. Ravitch recalled attending a conference in late 2006 to learn about the impact of the law's first years of implementation. She was surprised to know that families did not want to leave

cultural) along particular racial lines. Racial projects connect what race means in a particular discursive or ideological practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized, based that meaning” (pg. 56). Additionally, “a racial project can be defined as racist if and only if it creates or reproduces structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race” (pg. 71). See, Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, Second Edition. (New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁸⁸ Alfie Kohn, “Test Today, Privatize Tomorrow: Using Accountability to ‘Reform’ Public Schools to Death,” in *The Assault on Public Education. Confronting the Politics of School Reform*. Ed William Watkins. (Teachers College Press, 2012); Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American Public School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education*. (Basic Books, 2010).

⁸⁹ Nancy A. Heitzeg, *The School-to-Prison Pipeline: Education, Discipline, and Racialized Double Standards*. (Praeger, 2016)

their neighborhood public school, even when they were given the right and means under the law to do so.⁹⁰ Instead, she witnessed that the growing number of schools identified as SINI were at times schools considered by members of the community to be successful schools, but that had high enrollment of students with disabilities. Meanwhile, the law served industries devoted to meeting the demand created by NCLB, such as for testing and tutoring services, and their profits grew in the billions.⁹¹ She explained, “I realized that incentives and sanctions were not the right levers to improve education; incentives and sanctions may be right for business organizations, where the bottom line — profit — is the highest priority, but they are not right for schools.”⁹² In spite of the criticism that emerged against the law regarding its overreliance on standardized test scores, school districts, such as the LAUSD in 2012, advocated to link teacher evaluations to student test scores.⁹³

Additionally, the mere classification of schools as SINI under the NCLB law did not account for the struggles they faced, such as lack of adequate funding and resources, and the high rates of Teach for America teachers who are underprepared both

⁹⁰ Diane Ravitch, “NCLB: Measure and Punish” in *The Death and Life of the Great American Public School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education*. (Basic Books, 2010).

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid, pg. 108.

⁹³ See, Doe et al. vs. Deasy (Case number: BS 134604); LAUSD Superintendent John Deasy invoked the Stull Act, which allows for student performance to be an indicator of teacher evaluations. The Stull Act was amended in 1999 to include this component when Antonio Villaraigosa introduced it as speaker in the state assembly.

professionally and culturally. The deployment of “failure” in educational discourse that is often attached to these schools must be understood as a racial logic. In particular, the continuous portrayal of urban schools as pathological, deficient, violent, and failing, served to justify corrective sanctions such as those under NCLB that are meant to improve academic achievement. It is as if the governing logic of the NCLB was that traditional public schools and the communities that make them need to be called to order by policies, programs, non-profits, charter schools, and school police departments.

Throughout the dissertation, a few examples of these initiatives include Green Dot Public Schools, Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, Teach for America, Los Angeles Parent Union, Parent Revolution, the LAUSD’s Public School Choice policy, the California parent trigger law, and the Compton School Police. At a time when the Great American Recession of 2007 exacerbated the historical disinvestment from public education and the communities of regions such as South Los Angeles, venture philanthropists,⁹⁴ such as The Broad Foundation and The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, stepped in to further fund corporate charter school operators to take over traditional public schools. Initiatives such as these further destabilize communities in and out of schools, as the corporate charter school market share is additionally increased and incentivized through federal tax credits. This dissertation provides a window into the

⁹⁴ Sarah Reckhow, *Follow the Money: How Foundation Dollars Change Public School Politics*. (Oxford University Press, 2012).; Kenneth J. Saltman, “The Rise of Venture Philanthropy and the Ongoing Neoliberal Assault on Public Education: The Eli and the Broad Foundation,” In *The Assault on Public Education: Confronting the Politics of School Reform*. Ed William Watkins. (Teachers College Press, 2012).

neoliberal structural assault on public schools, a phenomenon that NCLB enabled and incentivized, but with historical roots that led to its making.

The aforementioned conditions created the conjunctural context for an insurgent learning praxis. Communities have always confronted violent and oppressive structures in education as they simultaneously work toward bringing to life competing visions for their public schools. Throughout the dissertation, insurgent portraits provide examples for how communities resist and confront the neoliberal impulse created by an elite network of power that created and advocated for neoliberal education reforms that directly profit those that comprise that network. In particular, the dissertation highlights the collective desire of high school students who, among their lists of demands for their schools, demanded ethnic studies courses, mental health resources, A-G approved courses, youth programming, and administrative accountability. There are many cases in which communities have risen in defense of their teachers who provide the type of education they value and envision as normative as opposed to the exception. Among those insurgent learners are also parents, such as those in Compton who demanded the removal of the Compton School Police, as it was used as a counter-insurgent force to pacify their unwavering demands. These are among the insurgent learners whose collective vision and demands were not only left out of critical decision-making, but who an elite network of power actively worked to push out of the district's public schools.

Insurgent Learning: A Praxis Framework

“Insurgent learning draws from convivial practices that celebrate locally rooted wisdoms to collectively construct tools to solve local problems that regenerate the community. In opposition to low intensity education, insurgent learning subverts and transcends state and corporate strategies that convert knowledge production into an artificial system of meritocracy and commodified knowledge for the purpose of social control.”⁹⁵
-Manuel “Manolo” Callahan

The dissertation was informed by *insurgent learning*, an epistemological, theoretical, and methodological framework. This framework derived from conversations with insurgent learner and convivial researcher Manuel Callahan and de-professionalized Mexican intellectual Gustavo Esteva, along with many others who collaborated in projects that emanated from Universidad de la Tierra Califas (University of the Earth California), an autonomous and convivial learning space that began in Oaxaca, Mexico and is now situated across many geographies.⁹⁶

I understand insurgent learning as a framework inspired by paradigms in critical pedagogy that originated from Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968).⁹⁷ For

⁹⁵ Manuel Callahan, Convivial Research and Insurgent Learning. Mitote Digital. (<http://cril.mitotedigital.org/insurgentlearning>)

⁹⁶ Universidad de la Tierra began in Oaxaca. U.S. Canada, etc. To read more about Universidad de la Tierra, see Gustavo Esteva (2006), “Universidad de la Tierra (Unitierra), the freedom to learn” in *Emerging and re-emerging learning communities: old wisdoms and new initiatives from around the world*. Sgeeka Ounoarem and Carmela Salzano. UNESCO.

⁹⁷ It is significant to note that Freire was writing about a particular condition of coloniality and underdevelopment in Brazil, and students who exist under conditions of peasantry and landlessness. While students and teachers do not exist in the same or even similar material-institutional conditions in the U.S., Freire’s framework on the pedagogies that emerge from oppressed people remains significant and applicable to the specific context I examine. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Bloomsbury , 30 edition, 2000)

Freire, critical pedagogy was a call to action for students to understand the structure of their oppression and positionality in the world for the purpose of transformation (critical literacy). Freire critiqued the banking system of education⁹⁸ as oppressive and dehumanizing, a process that negates student agency, critical thinking, and the development of what he referred to as *conscientization* (critical consciousness). Instead, Freire urged that liberation from oppression is a *praxis*, a cyclical process of reflection, theory, and action. In this context, learning-by-doing is central to praxis because to learn, one must have a level of engagement. Praxis is therefore a theoretical orientation and methodology for oppressed people to strive toward liberation.

In my research, I frame *insurgent learning* as an *insurgent pedagogy* within the tradition of critical pedagogy.⁹⁹ We must study¹⁰⁰ oppressive structures in education as we work to confront, transform, and/or make them obsolete. As Gustavo Esteva once pointed out, when we study education as a noun, a place where students go to learn, it

⁹⁸ According to Freire, “In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (pg X). The banking concept of education reinforces a deficit model of education, where teachers hold the knowledge and students are perceived as empty vessels.

⁹⁹ Since Freire’s seminal work, many have built on critical pedagogy to bring into conversation critical theory and other radical philosophies, such as those in critical race theory, feminist theory, and queer theory.

¹⁰⁰ In “The Act of Study,” Paulo Freire provides a thorough discussion of study as an act of critical engagement, where the one who is studying is a subject who in the act produces a new text. Freire further states, “To study is not to consume ideas, but to create and re-create them” See, Paulo Freire “The Act of Study” in *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1985): pg 4.

implies a dependency on the state for learning to occur.¹⁰¹ Along this line of thought, education, refers to the institutional structures where students are sent to learn, and is synonymous with schooling, the instructional processes that take place in those institutions. This is why we must not allow, for example, numerical academic outcomes determined by the state to determine what is or is not of worth, especially when it comes to students, teachers, and schools. Instead, as Esteva pointed out, when we focus on learning as a verb, the act of generating knowledge through experience,¹⁰² the focus shifts away from dependency and toward agency.¹⁰³ Learning, therefore, is placeless, it can occur everywhere, at any time, and by anyone. Centering insurgent learning allows me to center the insurgent knowledge, articulations, visions, and lived experiences often rendered problematic, illegible, deficient, and dispensable within dominant educational structures.

In a study on K-12 public education, insurgent learning as a framework allowed me to have a reading of power where I can value and center the insurgency as it manifests within, outside, and against educational institutions. Therefore, insurgent learning and insurgent knowledge can emanate from students, but also teachers, parents, and other community members engaged in acts of insurgency. I define insurgency as any action,

¹⁰¹ Gustavo Esteva has made this point at a UCR lecture on February 24th 2012.

¹⁰² This line of thought is similar to what Ivan Illich proposed against the institutionalization of learning through education. See, Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York and London: Marion Boyars, 1972), 49.

¹⁰³ Madhu Suri Prakash and Gustavo Esteva, *Escaping Education: Living as Learning in Grassroots Cultures*

thought, and/or mode that engages in a politics of refusal¹⁰⁴ and resistance¹⁰⁵ against an established order. Throughout the dissertation, individual and collective acts of insurgent learning are expressed and manifested against oppressive educational structures. For example, insurgent learning is demonstrated as students write counter-narratives that explain why racial tensions exists between Black and Latinx youth (see chapter two); as a community rose up in defense of their teacher and an education they value (see chapter three); as students blocked a main street in South Los Angeles and marched for five miles to the headquarters of a charter school operator in protest of the sudden closing of their school (see chapter four); as a mother sacrifices her own dreams for that of her family and by default, the community she left in her homeland (see chapter five); or as a community rises against the neoliberal impulse of school board members (see chapter six).

My reading of state violence is guided by scholar-activist, such as Joy James (1996) who *in Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender, and Race in the U.S.* reminds me that power is not only top-down, it is a dialectical, never complete, always fractured process, and with an acknowledgment that the process of subjugation is constantly critiqued, challenged, negotiated, and traversed by those who have been most

¹⁰⁴ For a discussion on the politics of refusal as a contrast to the politics of cultural recognition as a mode through which Mohawk sovereignty is expressed see, Audra Simpson, 2014, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*, Duke University Press Books

¹⁰⁵ Daniel G. Solorzano and Dolores Delgado Bernal “Examining Transformational Resistance Through a Critical Race and LatCrit Theory Framework: Chicana and Chicano Students in Urban Context.” *Urban Education*, 36 (2001): 308-342.

vulnerable to state violence. To understand the importance of the practice of power among those most vulnerable to state violence, James provides a key distinction between power and domination:

Resistance presupposes power, just as domination presupposes violence. If power is not a synonym for domination, then there are possibilities for social transformation without violence. Those who differentiate between power and domination in order to link power to communal goals for social and cultural freedoms, economic sufficiency, and radical democracy posit a vision of political community as the context for human development. Recognizing the diverse experiences and powers of oppressed peoples is essential in order to challenge subordination and exploitation.¹⁰⁶

This distinction is key to acknowledge the power that is always generated from communities that experience oppression. Similarly, João Costa Vargas in *Never Meant to Survive* offered, when reading the oppression against Black communities, a *revolutionary imperative* exists because of an anti-Black genocidal continuum.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, insurgent learning exists because of oppressive educational structures. And while educational structures are oppressive, they are never complete. As the incidents of insurgent learning

¹⁰⁶ Joy James. *Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender, and Race in the U.S.* (Minnesota University Press, 1996): pp. 243.

¹⁰⁷ João H. Costa Vargas, *Never Meant to Survive: Genocide and Utopias in Black Diaspora Communities.* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008).

highlighted throughout this dissertation demonstrate, those oppressive structures and processes are never totalizing.

The local,¹⁰⁸ situated,¹⁰⁹ ordinary,¹¹⁰ insurgent knowledge that emanates from conditions of impossibility creates the imperative and possibility for change. Insurgent knowledge can take many forms and expressions, such as was described by education philosopher and Catholic priest, Ivan Illich (1980) when he wrote on the importance of “vernacular domains” as a source of regeneration.¹¹¹ As David Bollier (2011) succinctly summarized:

The vernacular domain, as Illich calls it, is the realm of everyday life in which people create and negotiate their own sense of things – how they should educate themselves, how they should embrace their spirituality, how they should manage

¹⁰⁸ For a reading on local knowledge as a starting point for pedagogical action, see Clifford Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures*. (NY: Basic Books, 1973).

¹⁰⁹ A note on situated knowledge: Donna Haraway (1988) points to perspectives that have been rendered invisible, and highlights how those perspectives can make significant connections and possibilities because “situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals” Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective” *Feminist Studies*, 14 no. 3 (Autum, 1988): pg. 590

¹¹⁰ Robin D.G. Kelley (1994) offers examples of everyday “race rebels” who through expressive cultures such as hip-hop and rap, there are critiques and confrontations to domination. Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture Politics and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994)

¹¹¹ Ivan Illich, “Vernacular Values,” *Philosophica*, 26 no.2 (1980): 47–102

the resources they need and love. Vernacular culture consists of those spaces that exist for self-determination in the broadest sense of the term.¹¹²

The vernacular domains that exist within communities are sources of power that when taken seriously can regenerate communities. Therefore, it is important to document collective forms of power and agency for the historical record and to continue shaping the course of history.

This dissertation documents insurgent processes of conviviality that emerged as communities in and out of schools confronted, challenged, and subverted conditions of oppression within the context of K-12 public education. Ivan Illich in *Tools for Conviviality* (1973) proposed a vision of conviviality described as, “A convivial society would be the result of social arrangements that guarantee for each member the most ample and free access to the tools of the community and limit this freedom only in favour [sic] of another member’s equal freedom.”¹¹³ Therefore, much space was given in this dissertation to contextualize what I understand to be assaults to K-12 public education. This study refused to frame people or communities in struggle as the problem or as merely passive consumers of education; instead, insurgent learning and knowledge identified and framed structural conditions of oppression as problematic. In fact, this study revealed how often those structures failed to serve the needs, demands, and visions of the people they proclaimed to serve.

¹¹² David Bollinger, “Ivan Illich and the Enclosure of Vernacular Domains” January 1, 2011. (<http://www.bollier.org/ivan-illich-and-enclosure-vernacular-domains>)

¹¹³ Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*. (Harper and Row, 1973): pp 13.

My aim is neither to romanticize nor glorify communities in struggle. This study is not an attempt to categorize any struggle as reformist, progressive, or revolutionary, nor is it an attempt to distinguish whether acts of resistance are self-defeating, reactionary, or revolutionary. Neither is this study about whether race relations are of unity or conflict nor to determine whether schools are in fact successful or failing. While those classifications and binaries are at times useful in other research studies, my hope is that my documentation of certain events, incidents, and actions represents a more nuanced perspective that is at times contradictory and incomplete. Insurgent learning as a framework does not claim a closed vision of the world. It offers many possibilities, or as the Zapatista's have reminded us for over twenty-five years, *un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos* (a world where many worlds fit).

Insurgent Portraiture

Guided by portraiture,¹¹⁴ *Insurgent Learning* seeks to locate the “goodness” as Lawrence-Lightfoot demonstrated in her first portrait, *The Good High School: Portraits of Character and Culture* (1983).¹¹⁵ The quest to locate “goodness” is an asset-based method in pursuit of truth and knowledge. This method is especially useful for me to locate the goodness in schools vilified as pathological and failing, in addition to locating the goodness in students, teachers, parents, and activists who are often pushed out of their

¹¹⁴ Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis, *The Art and Science of Portraiture*. (Jossey-Bass, 1997).

¹¹⁵ Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot. *The Good High School: Portraits of Character and Culture*. (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

school communities because of their insurgent learning praxis. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) conceptualized portraiture to capture the culture of institutions, the life stories of individuals, stages of human development, essential relationships, processes, and concepts. The authors described portraiture as the following:

Portraiture is a method of qualitative research that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life. Portraitists seek to record and interpret the perspectives and experiences of the people they are studying, documenting their voices and their visions—their authority, knowledge, and wisdom.¹¹⁶

Portraiture can include, but is not limited to, institutions, people, concepts, and relationships. The authors highlight five core elements to portraiture: context, voice, relationships, emergent themes, and aesthetic whole.

Building on Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis' (1997) portraiture, Alma Itze Lopez (2017) introduced *muxerista portraiture*,¹¹⁷ which contributes to portraiture through Chicana Latina Feminist Theory and intended to examine the lives of Chicana Latina women. For Lopez, a Chicana Latina Feminist sensibility in portraiture builds on the five core themes to produce a *muxerista portraiture* that I summarize as the following:

¹¹⁶ Ibid, pg. xv

¹¹⁷ Alma Itzé Lopez, “Muxerista Portraiture: Portraiture with a Chicana/Latina Feminist Sensibility.” UCLA Center for Critical Race Studies, Research Brief Issue 7. (June 2017).

1. *The Borderlands as Context* – Acknowledges systems of oppression that produce intersectional identities, but also accounts for the ways Chicana Latina women specifically challenge binaries to create third spaces.
2. *Translating Voice* – Accounts for the literal translation of language (such as Spanish to English) and figurative translation (such as interpreting to an academic audience) to reflect on how translation of voice must always be negotiated.
3. *Relationships and Spirituality* – Highlights the spiritual as the interconnected nature of relationships, such as between muxerista portraitist and research participant, that should be nurtured and serve as a basis for social change.
4. *Cultural Intuition in Emergent Themes* – Situates cultural intuition as an asset to guide the portraitist in identifying emergent themes that account for cultural expressions and rituals, community memory, and collective history.
5. *Aesthetic Whole, Piecing Together Coyolxauhqui* – Utilizing Anzaldua’s Coyolxauhqui imperative that highlights the importance of spirituality and healing, the muxerista portraitist must engage in the troubling task of sorting and weaving together stories in the pursuit of wholeness and goodness.

Insurgent Learning is a collage of portraits, an assemblage of institutions, policies, and people all intertwined in a discursive context. Utilizing Lopez’s *muxerista portraiture* as a guide to tell stories of communities engaged in insurgent praxis, I briefly reflect on the five contours that give shape to the collage of portraits that comprise this dissertation.

My hope is that through these five contours, the reader will understand the context of my research, the evolution of my positionality during the time of this research process,

and the principles that guided my process of critical inquiry. As demonstrated, the contours of these portraits are not finely drawn lines and are often blurred, overlapped, and shared. I offer *Insurgent Learning* from my subjectivity as the first generation in my ancestral lineage of resilient P'urhépecha people to speak English, to be born in the U.S., and to attend American public schools through the entire educational pipeline. As a Xicana scholar-activist who was a public high school student in the early years of NCLB in the city of Compton, I offer *Insurgent Learning* as a work that is deeply informed by my subjectivity as a former student and now as a mother, scholar, activist, and teacher. To this end, I conclude *Insurgent Learning* with a self-portrait.

Context: Borderhoods in Los Angeles County as Zones of Permissible Violence

This study takes place in Los Angeles County and crosses geographical-political boundaries such as those often relegated by city limits and school district boundaries. *Insurgent Learning* shifts across two school districts in Los Angeles County: the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and Compton Unified School District (CUSD). Together, these school districts serve students in over twenty cities, including unincorporated areas. *Insurgent Learning*, however, focuses on specific education reforms that disproportionately target traditional public schools through a discourse of educational failure.

The public schools of focus in this dissertation are situated in neighborhoods identified by Compton-raised historian Albert Camarillo (2015) as racial borderhoods. Camarillo draws from Gloria Anzaldúa's theorization of borderlands to analyze

neighborhoods that are “the products of ideas and ideologies about group differentness that were often channeled into policies and practices of exclusion that profoundly affected people of color.”¹¹⁸ As geographer Laura Pulido (1997) explored in *Community, Place, and Identity*, space is not merely an object or physical locations, rather space is shaped by and produces social relations.¹¹⁹ Therefore, if we take prison abolitionist and geographer Ruth W. Gilmore’s definition of racism as the “state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death,”¹²⁰ we can see how space is inherently marked by the intersections of difference and relations of power that can make communities more susceptible to premature death. The Alameda Corridor is an example of how environmental racism such as the proliferation of toxic waste sites in areas of concentrated poverty¹²¹ also translates to children exposed to higher levels of toxic lead on and off school grounds (see Chapter 3).

Given that this study is primarily focused on the schools and neighborhoods of South and South Central Los Angeles, I utilize La Paperson’s (2010) reading of ghettos

¹¹⁸ Albert M. Camarillo, “Navigating Segregated Life in America’s Racial Borderhoods 1910s-1950s” *The Journal of American History*. 100, no. 3 (December 2013), pg. 645-662.

¹¹⁹ Laura Pulido, “Community, Place, and Identity” in J. P. Jones III, H. J. Nast, and S. M. Roberts (Eds.). *Thresholds in Feminist Geography: Difference, Methodology, Representation*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997): pp. 11-28.

¹²⁰ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *The Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. (Berkeley: University of California Press 2007), 28.

¹²¹ Daniel G. Solorzano and Veronica Vélez, “Using Critical Race Spatial Analysis to Examine the Boisian Color-Line Along the Alameda Corridor in Southern California” *Whittier Law Review*, 37 (2016): 423-438

in *The Post-Colonial Ghetto* as spaces racialized as Black.¹²² The racialization of spaces¹²³ as Black explains why cities such as Compton and Watts continue to exist as Black cities in popular American culture and imagination, in spite of the fact that these are predominately Latina/o/x communities. As Denise F. De Silva (2007) makes legible, spaces inhabited by people of color are continuously perceived as operating “outside the law” and therefore justify the need to be called to order.¹²⁴ Hence, La Paperson’s reading of spaces such as South Los Angeles as “zones of permissible violence” focuses our attention away from how violence is naturalized through dominant discourses that narrate the violence that happens in the ghetto, to how that violence is allowed to happen there.¹²⁵ While a structural and systemic analysis of state violence in predominately Latina/o/x communities of LA is necessary, it is important to highlight how Black

¹²² La Paperson, “The Postcolonial Ghetto: Seeing Her Shape and His Hand” *Berkeley Review of Education*. 1, no. 1 (2010): 5-34.

¹²³ George Lipsitz, “The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape” *Landscape Journal* Vol. 26, No. 1 (2007), pp. 10-23

¹²⁴ Denise F. De Silva, *Toward A Global Idea of Race*. (University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

¹²⁵ La Paperson, “The Postcolonial Ghetto: Seeing Her Shape and His Hand” *Berkeley Review of Education*. 1, no. 1 (2010): 18; Also, Vargas describes in *The Denial of Antiracism: Multiracial Redemption and Black Suffering*, “As occupied zones of dispossession, Black residential areas across the diaspora also tend to have the worst schools, health care facilities, urban infrastructure, and overall living conditions, including disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards. Zones of social and physical death by preventable, manageable causes.” See, João H. Costa Vargas, *The Denial of Antiracism: Multiracial Redemption and Black Suffering* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

communities continue to have higher concentrations of permissible violence (see Chapter Six).

Translation and Voice

“Resisting violence is a mandate. If our writing suffers because we see more than we can articulate, that’s fine. At least we tried. Residing in the dead zone, at the nexus where the flight from violence meets the deeper immersion within it, our only achievement will be to stop fetishizing achievement and romanticizing or condemning dysfunction and despair. The crossroads’ dead zone becomes a threshold, a potential site for working for emancipation” -Joy James¹²⁶

This excerpt, taken from Joy James’ (2009) phenomenal analysis of state violence captures the urgency for those whom inhabit the dead zone to undertake the dual task of articulation and translation as acts of resistance for the purpose of liberation. I align myself with the colonized, oppressed, and marginalized who inhabit the dead zone and hope that *Insurgent Learning* can work toward justice for our communities.

Translation is a constant terrain of struggle for any writer in academia who incorporates the voices, perspectives, and lived experiences of communities that have historically been and continue to be relegated to the margins of society. As Dolores Delgado Bernal (1998) reminds us, when incorporating oral histories in our writing, “The struggle to reclaim history is a contention over power, meaning, and knowledge.”¹²⁷ As I wrote this dissertation, I constantly felt challenged by an inner voice that questioned my

¹²⁶ Joy James, “The Dead Zone: Stumbling at the Crossroads of Party Politics, Genocide, and Postracial Racism.” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 108, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 473

¹²⁷ Dolores Delgado Bernal, “Grassroots Leadership Reconceptualized: Chicana Oral Histories and the 1968 East Los Angeles School Blowouts” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 19 no. 2 (1998): 113-142.

research process, asking, who am I to write these stories and why do I get to decide what to incorporate, amplify, or omit? After all, what to include or omit is inherently a political act. This was especially the case when translating interviews that were conducted in Spanish, where I often resisted but eventually gave in to translating into English. Self-critiques such as these were a source of strength throughout my writing as I also reminded myself that I should be alarmed if I ever felt too comfortable when engaged in this responsibility.

While my voice is present throughout the entire dissertation, I recognize that my voice is distinct from that of others who are incorporated. Those whom were interviewed by me verified that my interpretations reflected their reality, even if years passed since the events written about. As interdisciplinary scholar Maylei Blackwell (2011) demonstrates in *Chicana Power!: Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement*, retrofitted memory “is a radical act of remembering, becoming whole in ways that honor alternative and non-normative ways of being.”¹²⁸ Therefore, the voices incorporated are less about whether memory is a reliable source of history¹²⁹ and more about a situated knowledge, which cultural theorist Donna Haraway points out, “are

¹²⁸ Maylei Blackwell. *Chicana Power!: Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* (University of Texas Press, 2011): pp 11

¹²⁹ “The first thing that makes oral history different, therefore, is that it tells us less about events than about their *meaning*... Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did” in Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different” in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (State University of New York Press, 1991): pp 50.

about communities, not isolated individuals.”¹³⁰ I align myself with historians who contend that histories are merely *interpretations* of the past and that there can exist multiple perspectives of the past.

Lastly on translation, this dissertation at times translates from Spanish to English to make the text legible to a broader academic audience. However, there were many times when I refused to translate because, in translating, the cultural significance and specificity carried through the person’s voice was lost. This is yet another terrain we must negotiate when engaged in the work of translating to an academic audience.

Relationships and Spirituality

“Sometimes we are blessed with being able to choose the time, and the arena, and the manner of our revolution, but more usually we must do battle where we are standing.”¹³¹
-Audre Lorde

Audre Lorde (1984) expressed these words in *Sister Outsider* during her last battles for life against cancer, and she captured the urgency in struggling where you are at and not where you cannot be. This sentiment resonates throughout the dissertation. My inquiries were driven by the people I met (or did not meet) and the relationships that followed (or did not). As João H. Costa Vargas (2008) succinctly summarize, “there would be no research if there were no involvement.”¹³² My involvement varied across

¹³⁰ Haraway, *Situated Knowledges*, pg. 590

¹³¹ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Ten Speed Press, 1984)

¹³² João H. Costa Vargas. “Activist Scholarship: Limits and Possibilities in Times of Black Genocide” in Charles R. Hale, ed. *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics,*

time, and hence shaped my relationships and my activism. As George Lipsitz (2008) in “Breaking the Chains and Steering the Ship” explains, “In the process of struggle, activists develop new ways of knowing as well as new ways of being.¹³³” Therefore, my relationships with people in my community who informed my work and my scholar activism evolved over time. These processes were authentic, organic, and never forced. This is why I did not force myself to find what was not available to me and instead focused on building with what was presented to me (See Part II). In following my intuitive inner voice, an expression of my authentic self, I was able to pursue an intellectual journey that enabled me to heal from the traumas produced through my own educational experiences. Therefore, while I hope that *Insurgent Learning* can do the same for others, I have come to honor that even if it only transformed me, the labor of love and sacrifice it took to bring this to life, was good enough.

In educational reform there are things that we find inherently problematic but yet, we cannot, not want them for lack of viable alternatives. My hope is that the critiques offered in this dissertation are not read as dismissals of peoples lived experience or choices, but rather are read as critiques of the ways our lives are structured in dominance where people are limited in the choices they have to make. I recognize that we are all

and Methods of Activist Scholarship. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008): pg. 172.

¹³³ George Lipsitz, “Breaking the Chains and Steering the Ship: How Activism Can Help Change Teaching and Scholarship” in Charles R. Hale, ed. *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008): pg. 91.

relational beings and hope to offer critiques as an act of love. Spirituality plays a crucial role in social transformation by recognizing an individual's sacred interconnectedness with all aspect of life, what Anzaldua defined as spiritual activism.¹³⁴ Therefore, while I understand that "reform" is not enough for liberation from oppression, I also understand that many in the communities where we come from cannot, not work toward short-term, immediate solutions in public education.

As Ruth Gilmore (1993) cautioned in "Public Enemies, Private Intellectuals," "there is a war on," and we must utilize the intellectual resources of the university to produce intellectual work that is useful for communities in struggle.¹³⁵ I accept this *cargo*, a communal obligation, to produce intellectual work that can hopefully serve as a tool for the public good. In creating insurgent portraits of schools, people, and policies, much like an "artist,"¹³⁶ my activist-scholarship is not "art for art's sake," but for the sake of life and the regeneration of our communities. For we must understand the past to understand where we are at and control where we are going.

¹³⁴ Gloria Anzaldua "Shifting Perspectives: Spiritual Activism, Social Transformation, and the Politics of Spirit" in AnaLouise Keating (eds) *EntreMundos/AmongWorlds*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

¹³⁵ Ruth Wilson Gilmore. "*Public Enemies and Private Intellectuals*." *Race and Class*, 35 no. 1 (1993): 65–78.

¹³⁶ Artist is an identity that was created by of two identities: artist and activist.

Cultural Intuition in Emergent Themes

Necesitamos teorías that will rewrite history using race, class, gender, and ethnicity as categories of analysis, theories that cross borders, that blur boundaries—new kinds of theories with new theorizing methods. . . . In our mestizaje theories we create new categories for those of us left out or pushed out of existing ones.¹³⁷ - Gloria Anzaldua

Insurgent Learning hopes to honor Anzaldua’s call for new theorization, which emerges when we take seriously our cultural intuition. Delgado Bernal (1998) proposed that for Chicana and Latina women researchers, our cultural intuition was an asset in the research process.¹³⁸ Cultural intuition tapped into and brought forth perspectives from a multitude of experiences (personal, collective, and professional experience) and sources of knowledge (communal memory, existing literature, analytical and research process). My cultural intuition was informed by the evolution of my positionalities over a decade as student, activist, researcher, teacher, and mother. I challenge claims to objectivity by positioning myself within a collective experience marked by both oppression and resistance relational to the stories captured throughout this dissertation. I utilized my cultural intuition to inform every step of the way; my cultural intuition was a source of strength that offered insight and gave meaning to certain incidents.

I am one of four daughters to working-class, Mexican immigrant parents and I grew up in a predominately Black neighborhood on the West side of Compton. The K-12 public

¹³⁷ Gloria Anzaldua, “Haciendo Caras, Una Entrada” in Gloria Anzaldúa (ed), *Making Face, Making Soul: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*. (San Francisco, Aunt Lute Books, 1990) pp. xxv-xxvi.

¹³⁸ Dolores Delgado Bernal, “Using Chicana Feminist Epistemology in Educational Research.” *Harvard Educational Review*, 68 no. 4 (1998): 555–582

education I experienced was impacted by the fact that my first language is Spanish, and that as a child, I endured the xenophobic assaults of the 1990s. I graduated from Centennial High School in 2006, a school that during my time lost its accreditation and was continuously exploited by *Fox News* to capitalize on Black and Brown racial tension. My coming of age was defined by mobilizations against HR4437 that was instrumental to my activist trajectory into academia. As a former student in the era of NCLB in LA County, the era and region central to this dissertation, my cultural intuition shaped the development of *insurgent learning*, a praxis framework that allowed me to amplify the stories of certain schools, people, policies, and struggles.

Aesthetic Whole & Piecing Together Coyolxauhqui: Wholeness and Goodness

“In all community approaches *process* – that is, methodology and method – is highly important. In many projects the process is far more important than the outcome. Processes are expected to be respectful, to enable people, to heal and to educate. They are expected to lead one small step further towards self-determination”¹³⁹ -Linda Tuhiwai Smith

As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2002) identifies, one of the key elements, if not the most significant element in the activism of scholarship, is the research *process*. It is significant for activist scholars to use their position of power and privilege in the university strategically, as some may say, “to be in the university and not of the university.” I wanted to engage in a process of research that did not objectify communities in struggle, but that instead, as Tuhiwai Smith states, respects, enables, heals, and educates. As a researcher writing on the structural violence of education

¹³⁹ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. (New York: Zed Books, 2002): pg 128.

reforms in Los Angeles, it was difficult, a balancing act, to identify how education reforms were made possible and to accurately capture communities who continue to persist against all odds.

In the use of portraiture as a method, Alma refers to Anzaldua's fifth stage in the pathway toward *conocimiento*, a higher consciousness, which includes putting together Coyolxauhqui, who was broken to pieces by her brother Huitzilopochtli, who represents patriarchy. Coyolxauhqui's story is a reminder that the process of creating wholeness is a process of healing. I understand this process to entail putting together pieces fragmented by white supremacist patriarchal state violence for the purpose of creating wholeness. I also understand that the process of creating wholeness can look differently for everyone. Perhaps Coyolxauhqui, broken into pieces, reinvents herself, and gives rise to an alternative way of being, proving once more patriarchy's failure to destroy her. As a story-teller that uses portraiture in this dissertation, writing allows me to control the narrative, which for me was a crucial process of creating wholeness and locating the goodness in the struggle of our communities. Moreover, it allowed me to see that there is beauty in spaces, places, and relationships that are often rendered problematic and in the way of "progress."

Organization: Chapter Breakdown

Part I: The Silver Bullet of Public Education presents four chapters driven by an investigation into my research questions:

- Chapter Two: "*Capitalizing on Failure: Neoliberal Education Policy Architects*

and their Failure to Seize the LAUSD, 2000 - 2007” begins with Steve Barr, the founder of Green Dot Public Schools, whose vision to “start-up” 100 Green Dot charter schools in the LAUSD changed to “turning-around” existing public schools. It reveals how Barr’s vision merged with Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa’s vision for mayoral control of the school district in 2005, and highlights The Broad Foundation’s role, as one of the venture philanthropists that funded these efforts. While documenting how they capitalized on narratives of violence and educational failure attached to public schools in South Los Angeles, the chapter exposes the failure of these neoliberal architects in their attempts to seize control of the LAUSD as a means to pursue private, corporate interests.

- Chapter Three: “*Radical Self-Love as a Weapon Against Psychological Warfare: Student Uprising in Watts, 2007-2008*” contextualizes how the Great Recession that began in December of 2007 exacerbated conditions of a historically underfunded and overcrowded school district, worsening educational conditions for schools such as Jordan in Watts, where teachers such as Ms. Salazar became a glimmer of critical hope. The chapter follows a student-driven campaign to reinstate Ms. Salazar, who was pink-slipped in the district’s attempt to meet budgetary constraints. The student campaign exposed contradictory visions for public school reform for Jordan between students and school administrators.
- Chapter Four: “*¡Tenemos Ánimo, Pero No Justicia!: Confronting Neoliberal Education Reforms from the LAUSD to CUSD, 2009 - 2011*” connects key neoliberal policy architects that enabled the alignment of market-oriented

solutions to the economic downturn through local, state, and federal education policy. This chapter speaks back to school closure policies, such as when Green Dot unexpectedly closed one of its schools in 2011, resulting in a community revolt that exposed the fraud multiculturalist spirit of neoliberalism in education policy. Additionally, it demonstrates the de-stabilization that charter schools create in communities that are already faced with housing displacement, economic precarity, etc.

Collectively, the first part of the dissertation reveals a network of power comprised of politicians, philanthropists, charter school operators, non-profit organizations, among others, who methodically planned and enacted an assault on the public schools of Los Angeles County with the desire to replace them with charter schools.

Part II: *La Revolucion Comienza Desde El Hogar* was driven by my search for the parent organizers who partook in Parent Revolution's effort to convert McKinley to one of Celerity Educational Group's charter schools. Instead, what I learned was that there were a group of mothers, who are mainly immigrant and Spanish-speaking, whose stories represent a glimpse into parent activism in Compton. This part of the dissertation provides a portrait of one parent, who courageously fought to transform the city's public schools.

- Chapter Five: "*La Educacion Comienza desde el Hogar: Insurgent Pedagogies of the Homeland, From Oaxaca to Compton*" introduces the story of Yolanda Hernandez Lopez, a parent activist in the city of Compton. It traces the impetus for her activism in education back to her homeland in Oaxaca, Mexico. In doing

so, it chronicles how her subjectivity as a Zapotec migrant woman deeply shaped her worldview of justice, *communalidad*, which served to inform her activism in Compton.

- Chapter Six: “*We can think, we can act, we can make a difference*”: *A Zapotec Mother’s Non-belonging as Impetus for Compton’s Transformation*” continues with Yolanda’s story. It marks a drastic shift in how school district administrators perceived her from a parent volunteer to parent activist. In following Yolanda’s activism, stories of other parents, students, and community activist emerge to produce a larger, often unseen, insurgent portrait of the city. As a result of the success of her activism, Yolanda was continually harassed and eventually displacement from politics. For a Zapotec woman in Compton, the continuous displacement she experienced was not unfamiliar, and yet provides a perspective into how one mother’s non-belonging can be the impetus for Compton’s transformation.

Collectively, the second part of the dissertation exposes the political repression of parent activists in Compton, who are only welcomed as school site volunteers, as opposed to active agents of change who can play a key role in education reform. Through the subjectivity of a Zapotec mother in Compton, this section reveals the larger contradiction of parents who are supported only when they push initiatives such as those carried out by Parent Revolution.

Part II of *Insurgent Learning* contributes to the growing body of literature known as Critical Latinx Indigeneities. Critical Latinx Indigeneities is an emergent paradigm

within hemispheric literature¹⁴⁰ that centers the experiences of Indigenous (im)migrants from Latin America in the U.S. It focuses on the overlapping colonial histories (what Blackwell identifies as hybrid hegemonies) of Indigenous migrants who expand notions of *Latinidad* beyond U.S.-based identities, such as Latinx and Chicanx.¹⁴¹ This section of my dissertation contributes to Critical Ethnic Studies, specifically to the field of Chicana/o/x Studies, which still requires a stronger engagement with conflicting claims to indigeneity and land. Additionally, even though it was not my intention, many of the people that emerged in my research and that are highlighted throughout the dissertation complicate essentialized notions of Latinx identity, such as those who identify as Afro-Indigenous, Salvadorian, Mexican-Honduran, Zapotec, Afro-Mestizo, and Guatemalan. This is testament to the diaspora and diverse experiences of people in Los Angeles.

The concluding chapter, “Coming Full Circle: *Luchando Por La Educación*” is a self-portrait, where I offer my educational *testimonio* because behind the production of any portrait there is an author with their own inspiration for producing it. For me, this project was deeply informed by my own lived experiences and relationship with education and my own insurgent learning praxis.

¹⁴⁰ Bianet Castellanos, et al., *Comparative Indigeneities of the Américas: Toward a Hemispheric Approach* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012).

¹⁴¹ Maylei Blackwell, Floridalma Boj Lopez, Luis Urrieta, “Special Issue: Critical Latinx Indigeneities” *Latino Studies*, 15 (2017): 126-137

PART I: THE SILVER BULLET OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

CHAPTER TWO

CAPITALIZING ON FAILURE: NEOLIBERAL EDUCATION POLICY ARCHITECTS AND THEIR FAILURE TO SEIZE THE LAUSD, 2000 – 2007

“One Saturday morning the LA Unified came out with a study that said that they were one hundred schools short of serving the population of Los Angeles. It was the front-page article in *the Los Angeles Times*, and I am reading it, and there was a map of Los Angeles and it had green dots where the need was the greatest-- the red dots, where the need was and the green dots was where there were already enough schools. So obviously the red dots, predictably were all through South Central, Boyle Heights, Inglewood, just along the 110 and the 105, if you can imagine on the freeway map of Los Angeles, where the high-need areas where. One hundred schools short and two-thirds of the need was in high schools.”¹

In an interview meant to document oral histories for the book *The Founders: Inside the Revolution to Invest (and Reinvent) America's Best Charter Schools* (2016),² Steve Barr was profiled among the top charter school founders for his organization, Green Dot Public Schools (“Green Dot”). In the excerpt above, Barr describes how the inspiration for the name Green Dot emerged from a newspaper article featured on the front page of the *Los Angeles Times*.³ According to Barr, the article focused on overcrowded schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), and

¹ “A School Founder's History: Steve Barr, Founder, Green Dot Public Schools” The 74. August 25, 2016. (<http://thefounders.the74million.org/explore-the-oral-history/#>)

² Richard Whitmire. *The Founders: Inside the Revolution to Invest (and Reinvent) America's Best Charter Schools*, 1st ed. (The 74 Media, Inc., 2016)

³ The only front page cover of the *Los Angeles Times* that featured the LAUSD schools was, Kristina Sauerwein, “LA Unified May Need High Schools to go Year-Round” *Los Angeles Times*. April 16, 2000. In another interview for *LA Weekly*, Barr gave a conflicting account on how the name for his charter school operator emerged. See, Judith Lewis, “The Secret of his Success,” *LA Weekly*, December 6, 2006. (<https://www.laweekly.com/news/the-secret-of-his-success-2146560>)

identified the highest need for new schools at the high school level in low-income communities throughout Los Angeles County. At the time of that article, in the year 2000, the school district had not constructed new high schools in over 30 years. From that moment forward, Steve Barr, a man who had spent his life organizing political campaigns for Bill Clinton, made it his mission to create “green dots” in the county’s highest need areas.

Barr was introduced to charter schools through his mentor, California Senator Gary Hart, who wrote the second charter school law in the country,⁴ California’s Charter Schools Act of 1992 (SB 1448). Senator Hart advised Barr to meet with Reed Hastings,⁵ who at the time was a co-founder of the Californians for Public School Excellence, an organization that effectively campaigned for the passage of the California Charter Schools Act of 1998 and lifted the cap on charter schools in the state. In 1997, Barr visited a charter school in San Carlos for the first time; this was also the same visit President Bill Clinton made to express his support for charter schools (see Chapter 1). In what Barr described as a mid-life crisis, in 1999 he decided to utilize his life savings of \$100,000 and embark on a journey to create one hundred new charter high schools in Los Angeles.

⁴ In 1991, the first charter school law was in the state of Minnesota.

⁵ Reed Hastings is most known today as the founder of Netflix. Hastings teamed up with Don Shalvey to advocate for the Charter Schools Act of 1998 and opened Aspire Public Schools that same year. In 2000, Hastings donated \$1 million to pass Proposition 39. He was appointed by the Governor Gray Davis to the CA State Board of Education in 2000.

This chapter provides a portrait of some of the key players of the charter school movement during its formative years (2000-2007) within Los Angeles County. In following the story of Green Dot, this chapter offers a close examination of Steve Barr's political influence in the 2005 mayoral race where Antonio Villaraigosa became mayor of the city of Los Angeles. In the effort to highlight Green Dot's growing network of charter high schools in the LAUSD, I chronicle the formation of two of Green Dot's sister organizations: The Small Schools Alliance (SSA) and the Los Angeles Parent Union ("LA Parent Union"). I document how Green Dot's efforts to expand its network of charter high schools aligned and coalesced with Mayor Villaraigosa's effort to seize mayoral control of the LAUSD. The effective resistance of the district's communities, teachers' unions, and school board members against Green Dot's takeover of Thomas Jefferson High School ("Jefferson") and Mayor Villaraigosa's takeover of the LAUSD led both Barr and Villaraigosa to change their strategy.

For Green Dot, their change in strategy included a shift from "start-up" charter schools to the "turn-around" of existing traditional public schools. Through this shift, Green Dot accounted for a central missing component to its charter school expansion movement: the role of parents, which led to the formation of their second sister organization, the non-profit organization Los Angeles Parent Union ("LA Parent Union"). As a result, Green Dot successfully took over Locke High School ("Locke"). For Mayor Villaraigosa, his defeat in seizing mayoral control through the state legislature resulted in the formation of a Political Action Committee (PAC) for his school board candidates of choice to seize a majority vote of the LAUSD's governing school board.

Additionally, the mayor formed the non-profit organization Partnership for Los Angeles Schools (PLAS) as an alternate way to seize control of the district's public schools (see Chapter 4).

As the chapter demonstrates Barr and Villaraigosa's visions to control the LAUSD's public schools, it highlights the role of the richest man in the county of Los Angeles, Eli Broad. In 1999, Eli Broad and his wife Edythe Broad took a strong interest in education when they created The Edythe and Eli Broad Foundation ("The Broad Foundation") to pursue what he referred to as "venture philanthropy"⁶ in education, medical research, contemporary art, and civic projects in the city of Los Angeles. While Eli Broad's wealth derived from real estate development and his ownership of an insurance company, by 2002 his foundation led The Broad Center, a non-profit organization that houses an academy for up-and-coming superintendents of school districts, The Broad Superintendents Academy. The Broad Foundation prepared superintendents with the goal of transforming the nation's lowest performing urban schools in districts such as the LAUSD, and simultaneously, the foundation played a leading role in support of Barr and Villaraigosa's plans to seize the school district.

This chapter produces a portrait that offers a glimpse into an elite network of charter school founders, non-profit organizations, politicians, and wealthy philanthropists whose visions to "reform" public schools in Los Angeles County contradict and are at

⁶ Broad explains the difference between charity and venture philanthropy, which is modeled after venture capital as the following, "We are looking for a return, not just checks to maintain the status quo." See "Eli Broad Explains Venture Philanthropy" For a TV. (<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/xvltop>) Last accessed June 11, 2019.

odds with the work and visions that emanate from activists, parents, students, and school communities. In particular, this chapter documents counter-narratives that offer insurgent knowledge from students at Jefferson who speak back to the corporate media frenzy that portrayed their school as a site of racial violence at the height of the LA mayoral race. Additionally, it documents how teachers and administrators at Santee Educational Complex (“Santee”) turned Mayor Villaraigosa’s photograph opportunity moment into a call to question his self-positioning as an education expert for the district. The production of a portrait that captures this elite corporate network is necessary to understand the insurgent praxis engaged by communities such as those at Jefferson and Santee that oppose top-down, neoliberal education reforms for public schools in Los Angeles County.

The Green Dot Pledge

In the early 2000s, Barr created what he referred to as “The Founding Five,” the first five Green Dot charter schools. Each of Green Dot’s high schools incorporated *Ánimo* in the name of the school, a Spanish word that translates to strength of spirit. *Ánimo* Leadership Charter High School, Green Dot’s first school, began to operate in the year 2000 in the city of Lennox, a 1.31 square mile region in Los Angeles County known for its proximity to the Los Angeles International Airport. As Barr canvassed the community seeking support for his new charter school, he described three things he learned from the people of Lennox:

One, Lennox was the place people from Inglewood were afraid to go. Two, because it was unincorporated it, the kids and the families used to call it ‘Little TJ’ because there was no Burger King, or supermarkets or nationally-known things, it’s unincorporated so it looked like a little Latino-Mexican village. If you have ever driven around Mexico, which I spent a lot of time driving around Mexico, this really looked like Mexico. And [three,] 7 out of 10 kids weren’t graduating.⁷

For Barr, it was his mission to create a high school in Lennox, which he described as a Latino-Mexican community that people in Inglewood and even major corporations were too afraid to enter. After middle school, students typically attended Hawthorn High School (“Hawthorn”), a school that Barr reminisced about as, “Where the Beach Boys went. Now it’s a dropout factory.” For Barr, Lennox was a Mexican community where high school students attended Hawthorn’s “dropout factory,” a high school that the Beach Boys had once attended. Barr’s racially charged language juxtaposed the current state of Lennox against a time when Hawthorn was exclusively White; after all, it had been known as a sundown town,⁸ meaning that Black people could not live nor be seen in town past dark. Hence, racial restrictions in housing and daily life created ethnic enclaves in neighboring cities such as Inglewood and Lennox. For Barr, Lennox was the perfect

⁷ “Steve Barr: On Serving the Highest-need Students in the Highest-need Neighborhoods” The 74. August 25, 2016. (<http://thefounders.the74million.org/explore-the-oral-history/#>) Last accessed June 11, 2019.

⁸ James W. Lowen. *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism*. (Touchstone, 2006.)

location for his new Green Dot school because it was also in an unincorporated region of Los Angeles County, meaning that it was governed by the county as opposed to by a city.

Together with Lennox Elementary School District Superintendent Dr. Bruce McDaniel, Barr wrote the first Green Dot charter.⁹ It was during this time that the California Board of Education created the Advisory Commission on Charter Schools in 2001,¹⁰ where Barr was appointed to serve from 2001-2005.¹¹ By the early 2000s, Barr was established as a charter school CEO and political influencer. It was only a matter of time before Barr created four additional Green Dot schools. Together, Barr's charter schools were spread across five cities: Lennox, Inglewood, Boyle Heights,¹² South Central Los Angeles, and Venice, the majority of which were in cities whose public schools were governed under the LAUSD, with the exception of Lennox and Inglewood.

Green Dot's charter schools were unique from most charter schools at the time.

Barr took a bold approach in his aim to educate high school students, for at the time,

⁹ A charter is the contract established with the authorizing entity (school district, county, or state authorizer) that outlines how the school will operate. The charter often details, for example, curriculum, pedagogy, discipline, parent engagement, and how it will address students with special needs, etc.

¹⁰ The Advisory Commission on Charter Schools was created through Senate Bill 740.

¹¹ Information confirmed by Sandi Ridge, California Department of Education Charter School Division, through e-mail correspondence with author.

¹² After Green Dot received a \$1 million-dollar donation from Oscar de la Hoya, Green Dot created the Oscar De La Hoya Ánimo Charter High School in 2003. "Oscar De La Hoya Makes \$1 Million Donation and Joins Green Dot Public Schools to Open Oscar De La Hoya Animo Charter High School." Business Wire. July 9, 2003. (<https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20030709005213/en/Oscar-De-La-Hoya-1-Million-Donation>)

charter schools in Los Angeles served only elementary and middle school students. Moreover, Green Dot schools function as independent schools with a common understanding that its schools adhere to a set of principles, what Green Dot refers to as its “Six Tenets”:

- 1) Small, safe, personalized schools
- 2) High expectations for all students
- 3) Local control with extensive professional development and accountability
- 4) Parent participation
- 5) Maximize funding to the classroom
- 6) Keep schools open later

The Six Tenets allowed Green Dot to market a charter school model distinct from the district’s traditional public schools, which were historically known as large, overcrowded, and low-performing schools. In contrast to surrounding public high schools, Green Dot parents were required to conduct 35 hours of service each academic year. School principals were treated as Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of their schools, where they could make direct decisions regarding the budget, hiring and firing, and school governance.

Teachers, unlike teachers at most charter schools, unionized under Green Dot’s teacher’s union, *Asociación de Maestros Unidos* (AMU),¹³ under a “just cause” contract, meaning that teachers do not have tenure nor seniority, and principals can fire teachers

¹³ *Asociación de Maestros Unidos* (AMU) is an affiliate of California Teacher Association (CTA) and the National Education Association (NEA)

with what they identify as reasonable cause. In spite of this lack of protections, new teachers at Green Dot schools received starting salaries that were typically 10% more than those of new teachers in the LAUSD. These were among the reasons that Green Dot's model, from its inception, gained popularity.

Green Dot's neoliberal model of schooling promotes "choice," "parental participation," and other buzz words such as "local control," yet it's network of schools operate under the leadership of its executive board, which is comprised of non-elected appointed members. Unlike district school board meetings, these executive board meetings are not open to the public nor do they offer their meeting minutes to the public. Moreover, while Green Dot promotes greater school-choice for students, families must apply before the deadline to the school's lottery system. The "choice" offered through this model can be misleading when we take into account students who are most often excluded: foster youth, non-English speakers, migrant families, families that face housing precarity, families that do not have the cultural capital to know how to apply, etc. These are circumstances that can also impact a family's ability to meet the 35 hours of required "parental participation."

As Green Dot's new charter high schools grew throughout Los Angeles, Barr utilized his extensive experience in politics to influence the 2005 Los Angeles city mayoral race. Throughout the election cycle, voters continuously cited education as their top priority, yet the mayoral candidates had not presented bold views for the city's educational system. After all, except for a few exceptions across the U.S., it was not

common for a city mayor to weigh in heavily on the city's local school district, since that power resides with school district governing boards.

The Small Schools Alliance

During the election cycle, Barr created and led the Small Schools Alliance (SSA), a sister organization of Green Dot, which was formed to create an alliance of business leaders, including billionaire Eli Broad, to fundraise in support of LA's next mayor. As was reported by the *Los Angeles Times*, in one night alone the SSA fundraised \$1.5 million dollars.¹⁴ As the Chairperson of the SSA, Barr presented all the mayoral candidates with letters that requested an endorsement of the SSA's pledge. The pledge outlined Green Dot's Six Tenets but did not mention Green Dot's charter schools specifically. By signing the pledge, the candidates endorsed small schools, since after all the Six Tenets never explicitly mentioned that those small schools had to be charter schools. However, one can assume that because the Six Tenets in the pledge were Green Dot's organizing principles, by signing the pledge, the candidates strongly aligned themselves with charter schools in general, and Green Dot schools in particular.

The SSA's rise in political influence was evident when two of the mayoral candidates took on the challenge to present the boldest plan for the LAUSD. At an SSA event held at one of Green Dot's schools, *Ánimo South Los Angeles High School*,

¹⁴ Jean Merl, "Charter School Crusader Makes Waves in L.A." *Los Angeles Times*. October 10, 2005 (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2005-oct-10-me-profile10-story.html>)

incumbent Mayor James Hahn was the first to sign the pledge in support of the Six Tenets. With this pledge, Mayor Hahn announced that when re-elected as mayor, he planned to seek the power to select three of the LAUSD's seven school board seats, launch five new charter schools per year, and pay teachers \$15,000 in bonuses to teach in the city's lowest performing schools.¹⁵ For Barr, Mayor Hahn's proposal was a great start, but he wanted LA's next mayor to take an even more aggressive approach to education.

Meanwhile, LA City Council member Antonio Villaraigosa was leading a thriving campaign for mayor, as his campaign reached the maximum limit on fundraising, \$1.8 million dollars. In a meeting over dinner meant to discuss the mayoral race, Barr recalled Villaraigosa's reservation about the SSA's pledge, "He said nothing in the city is going to change unless there is widespread parental revolt."¹⁶ As a former United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) union and community organizer, Villaraigosa identified the missing link in the SSA's agenda to create smaller schools across the LAUSD: a strong parent base to rally in support. In spite of Villaraigosa's initial reservation with the SSA's pledge, only two days after Mayor Hahn's announcement of his endorsement of the pledge, Villaraigosa also signed on in support. The SSA

¹⁵ Jessica Garrison and Jeffrey L. Rabin, "Hahn Seeks Say in L.A. Schools." *Los Angeles Times*. April 20, 2005. (<http://articles.latimes.com/2005/apr/20/local/me-mayor20>) Mayor Hahn's announcement came at a time when the LAUSD's board voted to create a commission to study the district's governance, structure, and funding.

¹⁶ Joe Williams and Tom Mirga, "LA Story: Can a Parent Revolution Change Urban Education's Power Structure?" Education Sector Reports. July 1, 2006. (<https://www.issuelab.org/resources/536/536.pdf>)

effectively made education a “front-burner issue for the major candidates”¹⁷ through its strategic use of the pledge.

With Villaraigosa’s announcement of his endorsement of the pledge, his vision for education seemed to have changed overnight. While at first, Villaraigosa had expressed that as mayor his role in the city’s school district would revolve around small education initiatives that supported after-school programming and universal preschool,¹⁸ Villaraigosa’s vision suddenly changed to mayoral control of the LAUSD. Justifying his shift in vision, he stated, “I think there is a critical mass of support out there where people want to see one person accountable. I think that should be the mayor.”¹⁹ As mayor, Villaraigosa wanted complete control of the LAUSD’s public schools.

By the end of April 2005, Villaraigosa’s stance on mayoral control of LAUSD’s public schools was drastically different from his stance only a few months prior, when California Senator Gloria Romero introduced Senate Bill 767: “The Mayoral Leadership to Improve Education in Los Angeles Act.”²⁰ Senator Romero’s bill aimed to give the mayor of LA city ultimate control and oversight over the LAUSD, and it would have

¹⁷ Jean Merl, “Charter Schools Promote Reform.” *Los Angeles Times*. Feb. 17, 2005. (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2005-feb-17-me-school17-story.html>)

¹⁸ Jessica Garrison and Jeffrey L. Rabin, “Hahn Seeks Say in L.A. Schools.” *Los Angeles Times*. April 20, 2005. (<http://articles.latimes.com/2005/apr/20/local/me-mayor20>)

¹⁹ Rick Orlov, “Mayor’s Say So in LAUSD Backed: Villaraigosa Builds on Hahn Proposal.” *Los Angeles Daily News*. April 22, 2005. p. N3.

²⁰ SB 767 was introduced February 2005. For the LAUSD to qualify, the district must be deemed an “educational failure.”

allowed the mayor to appoint school board members once positions became vacant. However, Villaraigosa was not in favor of mayoral control at the time that Romero first introduced the bill in February of 2005.²¹ Now that Villaraigosa was advocating for mayoral control of the entire school district, there were two options to achieve that: placing it on the next ballot for local voters to decide, or advocating for a bill through the state legislature.

Villaraigosa's and Green Dot's Plans to Take Over LA's Public Schools

Given that the LAUSD is the largest school district in the state of California and the second largest school district in the country, any attempt for a city mayor to gain control of the district was certain to be met with resistance. The LAUSD is made up of seven elected board members, and each member represents a distinct geographic district. The LAUSD governs public schools throughout 26 cities other than the city of Los Angeles, including unincorporated areas such as Lennox, Willowbrook, and East Los Angeles, among others. Unsurprisingly, an effort for LA mayoral control of the LAUSD was met with resistance from constituents in cities with their own elected mayors. As Villaraigosa campaigned with a platform to take over the LAUSD, fights broke out across the district's lowest-performing high schools in South Central and South Los Angeles. These incidents became the focal issue in education debates. Since education was a central issue of the mayoral candidates' platforms, narratives of uncontrolled racial

²¹ Tony Castro, "Eli Broad: The King of L.A." April 8, 2007. (<http://www.tonycastro.com/Gatsby/Broad.htm>)

school violence became the scapegoat to rationalize why the next mayor of LA needed centralized power to control public schools in the LAUSD.

The start of 2005 began with a series of fights that broke out within the largest high schools in the LAUSD and surrounding school districts. While these incidents manifested across many high schools, not all of the high schools received the same corporate media attention that Jefferson received. Jefferson was targeted because it was the district's lowest-performing high school. The media frenzy that surrounded Jefferson depicted racial tensions between Black and Latinx students and school administrators who could not control what was presented as an escalating situation, as police in riot gear were called to intervene and restore order.²² Jefferson, like many schools throughout South Central and South Los Angeles, was no stranger to these types of school incidents; after all, the school lockdown model originated at Jefferson.²³ These were the types of public schools that candidates such as Villaraigosa promised to transform under mayoral control, and his strategic exploitation of narratives on Jefferson that depicted a failing school riddled with racialized school violence, was in large part what led to his election.

²² Mandalit del Barco, "Racial Tensions Overheat at L.A. High School." NPR. June 5, 2005. (<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4678680>)

²³ A school lockdown is modeled after prison lockdowns, meaning, in an emergency situation (i.e. police activity nearby, active shooter, riot, etc), typically when the safety of students, staff, and faculty is threatened, certain safety protocols take place. The school lockdown model originated in the 1960s at Jefferson High School. See, Damien M. Sojoyner, *First Strike: Educational Enclosures in Black Los Angeles*. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: The University of Minnesota Press, 2016): pg. 92.

Villaraigosa’s Plan to Take Over the LAUSD: Capitalize on Jefferson’s Failures

Mayor Villaraigosa’s election in May of 2005 was historic, as he was the city’s first Latino mayor in over a century. Born in Boyle Heights and raised in City Terrace by his single mother, for many in the Latinx communities of LA, Villaraigosa represented working-class aspirations and signaled a new beginning for the city.²⁴ While many were not fond of the idea of mayoral control of the LAUSD, many were also relieved to know that someone had finally taken a bold approach to fixing the district’s schools. Before the school year ended at Jefferson, Mayor Villaraigosa made it a point to visit the school for the first time. Reflecting on that first visit, Villaraigosa described, “Jefferson was in a literal lockdown. It was a living lesson in what happens when adults stop believing. Kids roamed unsupervised, graffiti was everywhere, and police in riot gear patrolled the corridors. A combustible mix of gangs and failing academics, the campus was a powder keg waiting to explode.”²⁵ In the midst of these types of narratives that portrayed the district’s public high schools as chaotic, unsafe, and failing, Villaraigosa unraveled the details of his vision for mayoral control.

In his bid to serve as Mayor of Los Angeles city, Villaraigosa envisioned centralized mayoral control. Throughout the campaign trail, Villaraigosa openly

²⁴ Antonio Villaraigosa first ran for mayor in 2001 and in his defeat campaigned for a bid on the LA city council, in which he was elected in 2003.

²⁵ Antonio Villaraigosa, “A New Contract,” State of the Union Address. Delivered at Thomas Jefferson High School in April of 2011. For full transcript see, “Mayor Villaraigosa’s State of the City Address; The Theme: ‘A New Contract.’” The Planning Report. May 2, 2011. (<https://www.planningreport.com/2011/05/02/mayor-villaraigosas-state-city-address-theme-%E2%80%98new-contract>)

referenced Michael Bloomberg’s New York and Richard Daley’s Chicago models of mayoral control.²⁶ Informed by the SSA’s pledge to uphold the Six Tenets, Villaraigosa wanted to break up the school district’s largest high schools into smaller schools, including charter schools. Villaraigosa’s vision of mayoral control of the LAUSD was supported by Eli Broad, who admitted, “I’m a big believer in mayoral control” and whose foundation money already supported mayoral control in New York City.²⁷

In the aftermath of what transpired at Jefferson in the first months of 2005, students from the school were compelled to respond to the negative media portrayal that surrounded their school. In a report featured in *LA Youth*²⁸ titled, “Jefferson High Students Speak Out: Why Did the Fights Happen?”²⁹ 26 out of the 130 students that attended Jefferson through an off-campus location in LA Trade Tech College³⁰ provided

²⁶ Adolfo Guzman-Lopez, “Why Antonio Villaraigosa fell short of LA’s Education Mayor.” KPCC. March 19, 2013. (<https://www.scpr.org/blogs/education/2013/03/19/12949/will-villaraigosa-be-remembered-education-mayor/>)

²⁷ Sarah Reckhow, *Follow the Money: How Foundation Dollars Change Public School Politics*. (New York, Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁸ *LA Youth* was an independent newspaper created by and about teenagers in Los Angeles County. It ran from 1988 until 2013, when it stopped publishing due to the economic downturn and lack of funding. To read more on founder Donna Myrow’s perspective on the newspaper see, “When The High Court Cuffed Student Journalists” *Daily Journal*. January 2, 2018. (<https://www.dailyjournal.com/articles/345450-when-the-high-court-handcuffed-student-journalists>)

²⁹ “Jefferson High Students Speak Out: Why did the fights happen?” *LA Youth*. May 23, 2005. (<http://www.layouth.com/jefferson-high-students-speak-out-why-did-the-fights-happen>)

³⁰ It should be noted that after the student testimonies were published, two letters were sent to the editor that criticized the lack of Black student perspectives in the testimonies.

written explanations for why the fights broke out.³¹ Student explained that the main campus' culture had become one where teachers, counselors, and security did not care, a place where there was a "lack of hope" and where adults were only present for a "paycheck."³² While there were many other high schools where students were involved in similar fights, students such as Gabriela Penaloza denounced the disproportionate media coverage Jefferson received:

The fights at Jefferson High School made me feel even less proud of the school because I knew that the school was bad academically and everything, but I never thought that the students would riot. Now everyone knows that the school is bad and they are going to think that everyone is as bad as those students involved in the fights.³³

In response, two students at Jefferson's off-campus site stated that out of the 130 students who attend, there was only one Black student. As one of the students, Patricia Tobar stated, "We told him that he could speak up and write his comments, but he decided not to. One student would have been enough to give a statement about the issue, but we couldn't force the guy to do and say what he didn't [sic] to say. We all respected his decision." See, Letters to the Editor. *LA Youth*. September 2005. (<http://www.layouth.com/letters-to-the-editor-september-2005/>)

³¹ Nicholas Shields and Rong-Gong Lin II. "Another Brawl at Jefferson High School. Los Angeles Times. May 25, 2007. (<http://articles.latimes.com/2005/may/27/local/me-jefferson27>); Mandalit del Barco "Racial Tensions Overheat at L.A. High School." Los Angeles Times. June 3, 2005. (<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4678680>)

³² Ana Granados, Rosa Flores, Derrick Alfaro, and Francis Partida, "Teachers don't encourage us to be successful" "Jefferson High Students Speak Out: Why did the fights happen?" *LA Youth*. May 23, 2005.; Ibid, Alejandra Samaniego, Daria Macias, and Evelyn Ramirez "Lack of hope."

³³ Ibid, Gabriela Penaloza, "I wish those fights never happened."

Student-written testimonies served as counter-narratives³⁴ to the corporate media's sensationalized coverage of Jefferson, which depicted Jefferson as a school that was violent and out of control. Instead, as Patty Gutierrez explained, "I don't think the fights were about racial tension or gang-related. I think it was about the students not wanting to go to class."³⁵ While the media focused narrowly on violence among students, which served to re-instill narratives of dysfunction and racial pathology, while supporting culture of poverty theories, the students at the off-campus site instead articulated that the source of the problem was the school and the larger conditions that structured their lives.

For example, extreme poverty was among the reoccurring threads in their written testimonies. Students discussed their parents' need to work 8-12 hours only to earn the minimum wage of \$6.75 an hour. Jorge Chan provided an account of how, at the age of 14, he was robbed by a "gangster" as he waited for the bus to take him home, explaining, "One neighborhood issue is that there is a lot of poverty, which makes people rob other people for their stuff."³⁶ This student was aware that people in his neighborhood resorted to stealing out of their circumstance of extreme poverty. Similarly, students' reflections

³⁴ As opposed to a dominant narrative, counter-narratives arise from the vantage point of groups that have been historically minoritized and marginalized. Since counter-narratives emerge from those who have been relegated to the margins of society, they disrupt power relations, acting as a form of resistance. See, Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso, "Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research." *Qualitative Inquiry* 8, no. 1 (February 2002): 23–44.

³⁵ Patty Gutierrez, "Students didn't want to go to class" in "Jefferson High Students Speak Out: Why did the fights happen?" *LA Youth*. May 23, 2005. (<http://www.layouth.com/jefferson-high-students-speak-out-why-did-the-fights-happen>)

³⁶ Ibid, Jorge Chan, "Poverty leads to crime like robbery."

revealed that their peers resorted to stealing, gangs, and drugs to cope with their circumstances. Students cited that they were the fortunate ones who were able to find positive outlets such as boxing and poetry to funnel their daily anger and frustration.³⁷

Unlike the denial of racial tension often professed by administrators and politicians, students admitted that Black and Latino students often positioned themselves against one another due to the fact that “they were defending their culture” in an environment where resources were minimal and awareness of each other’s culture was lacking.³⁸ Interestingly, as students compared Jefferson’s main and off-campus locations, many explained that they chose to opt for the off-campus location for the same reasons the fights broke out at the main campus. In other words, whether it was the *fights* among students or *flight* of students, students were not the source of these patterns and problems. Through their written *testimonios*, the students at Jefferson contextualized these patterns within a larger structure of neglect, abandonment, disinvestment, and scarcity.

Throughout the controversy over Jefferson, Barr called on the school district’s superintendent to hand over the school for Green Dot to manage. Up until this point, Barr’s Green Dot high schools were “start-up” charter schools, meaning they were newly created schools from the ground-up. Now, Barr’s proposed takeover of Jefferson adopted a “turn-around” strategy, meant to turn-around existing underperforming schools. With a student population of 2,500 and with the public spectacle that surrounded the school,

³⁷ Ibid, anonymous, “Too many people turn to gangs and drugs.”

³⁸ Ibid, Nataly Gutierrez, Edward Morales, and Gabriela Penaloza, “The students were defending their culture.”

Jefferson was the perfect high school for Barr to test this new strategy. The plan was to take control of Jefferson and transform it into small clusters of Green Dot charter high schools. As Green Dot made plans to take over Jefferson, Villaraigosa, now as the newly elected Mayor, continued pushing for his office to seize control of the school district.

Many critics referred to the Mayor's plan as a takeover. Among the strongest opponents were the UTLA³⁹ and CTA, who had an established a strong relationship with the school board and viewed mayoral control as a strategy of disempowerment that would render the school board ineffective. In an interview for *the Los Angeles Times*, Villaraigosa recognized that his administration was positioning itself against powerful teacher unions, admitting, "It's going to be an absolute war here. They're going to go nuts when [we] do it. I think we've got a shot at it. I'm going to use my capital."⁴⁰ Villaraigosa's use of terms of war to describe his administration's approach to mayoral control of the LAUSD was not merely rhetorical. Rather, it signified his acknowledgement that much like when at war, his administration required a strategy with tactics to execute a plan of action, which certainly required the use of his political and financial "capital."

Villaraigosa, however, was also cautious of the language he used to describe mayoral control. As he stated in an interview with Claudio Sanchez from NPR, he wanted

³⁹ UTLA endorsed and heavily campaign for Villaraigosa to become LA's mayor.

⁴⁰ Joel Rubin and Duke Helfand, "Details of School Takeover Emerge" *Los Angeles Times*, April 13, 2006. (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2006-apr-13-me-schools13-story.html>)

to make it clear that, “The term I use more often than not is the term accountability; mayoral oversight for the purpose of ensuring accountability and success in our schools. A takeover sound more like, you know, a power grab.”⁴¹ Among the most vocal critics of Villaraigosa’s plan was UTLA President AJ Duffy, who criticized the plan’s justification regarding failing schools as, “A lie that says this is a failing school district. Don’t tell me this is a failing school system.” UTLA President Duffy believed the mayor was really after control over the \$7 billion budget, referring only to the district’s operational costs.

Opposition to the mayor’s plan resulted in the formation of a legislative bill that was more of a compromise than the original plan intended. Senator Romero and Senator Fabian Nunez teamed up to craft Assembly Bill 1381: “Los Angeles Unified School District: Gloria Romero Educational Reform Act of 2006.”⁴² The bill was better known as The Gloria Romero Act of 2006, and proposed a shared control of power across a council of mayors from across Los Angeles County, as opposed to the centralized control of one mayor. The bill proposed to revise the governance and operation of the LAUSD in four major areas: it broadened the district superintendent’s authority; limited the authority and responsibility of the district school board; established a Council of Mayors with specified roles and responsibilities; and established the Los Angeles Mayor’s Community Partnership for School Excellence to administer and improve academic performance

⁴¹ Claudio Sanchez, “Mayor Attempts to Take Over Los Angeles Schools” NPR. April 18, 2006. (<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5348272>)

⁴² In one of the senate hearings for SB 1381 that took place on July 27, 2006, parents are seen wearing yellow shirts that read, “Parents -- Not Politics.”

among the lowest performing schools. Among the opposition that denounced AB 1381 was the formation of the coalition “A Call to Action for Equity and Excellence in L.A. Public Schools.” Meanwhile, the LA City Council President and the LAUSD school board President joined to form The Presidents’ Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance and hired the RAND Corporation to investigate the LAUSD governance structure and make recommendations.⁴³

During one of the AB 1381 hearings in Sacramento, Barr, who was in attendance, was caught by surprise when a group of 50 parents were bused from LA to Sacramento in opposition of the bill.⁴⁴ Barr witnessed the power of parents who organized against a bill that proposed allowing a Council of Mayors to control the LAUSD. Upon returning to LA, he announced the creation of the non-profit organization the Los Angeles Parent Union (LA Parent Union), a sister organization of Green Dot that was meant to serve as an activist alternative to the Parent Teachers Association (PTA). Ben Austin, who started his career in the Clinton Administration before jumping into the educational scene as a communication strategist, was appointed as the Executive Director of the LA Parent Union. It seemed that Barr had finally created the missing component that Villaraigosa foresaw: the parent component.

⁴³ After a year of studying both district and governance issues, the commission recommended decentralizing the district.

⁴⁴ The LAUSD Superintendent Roy Romer and President Marlene Canter wrote a letter to Jack Scott, the Chair of the California Senate Education Committee, expressing strong opposition to SB 1381.

The LA Parent Union was created to generate power among parents much like the power that teachers have under a union contract with their local school district. The LA Parent Union intended to have local chapters at each school community that could bring parents together under the non-profit. The LA Parent Union's first major appearance was when Green Dot attempted to take control of Jefferson. The LA Parent Union used tactics often used by grassroots organizers to build political campaigns in support of efforts to seize Jefferson. Barr hired a field staff from the local neighborhood and worked directly out of a housing project across the street from Jefferson to organize a petition drive. The organization showed up to offer coffee to teachers in Jefferson's parking lot in an attempt to garner teacher support. Through their efforts, they successfully garnered the support of the Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles and the Hispanic Clergy Council.

By November 2005, Barr, with the growing organized power of the LA Parent Union, collected 10,000 signatures from parents in support of the initiative to take over Jefferson. In a two-mile "March of the Parents" to the LAUSD's headquarters, parents rallied in support of this initiative and delivered the petitions. The school district's Superintendent, Roy Romer, was aware of Green Dot's plans to take control of Jefferson and met the march. As was described in the report titled, "L.A. Story" by Joe Williams and Tom Mirga (2006), "Romer greeted the energetic crowd and acknowledged its concerns but refused to turn over the campus. Instead, Superintendent Romer used the event to announce a plan to divide Jefferson into six smaller learning communities."⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Joe Williams and Tom Mirga. "LA Story: Can a Parent Revolution Change Urban Education's Power Structure?" Education Sector Reports. July 1, 2006. Quote reproduced

Superintendent Romer’s plan to divide Jefferson into six small learning communities was different from Barr’s intended turn-around strategy, a plan that intended to create new Green Dot charter schools as opposed to multiple academies that would remain as one public school.

The Wasserman Foundation⁴⁶ provided a \$6 million grant to Green Dot to help open a cluster of charter high schools, for what Green Dot referred to as a parent “zone of choice” for the following 2006-2007 school year. With the foundation’s financial support, Barr prepared to meet Superintendent Romer’s resistance with applications for five new charter schools. Barr’s new charter schools were intended to surround Jefferson, a strategy Green Dot also referred to as the “Jefferson Cluster,” where students traditionally expected to enter their neighborhood high school, Jefferson, now had the “choice” to enter a lottery to attend one of the new surrounding Green Dot charter high schools.

from R.W. Dellinger, “Parents March to Break Up Jefferson High School,” Tidings, Nov. 25, 2005.

⁴⁶ As stated on the foundation’s website, “In 1952, Lew and Edie Wasserman created the Wasserman Foundation from funds garnered through Mr. Wasserman’s decades of leadership at MCA/Universal. The Wassermann’s served as benefactors for lasting cultural, educational, and health institutions including the Los Angeles Music Center, CalArts, the Motion Picture and Television Fund, the Jules Stein Eye Institute at UCLA, and Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. The Foundation currently funds in the areas of education, arts & culture, health, service and global initiatives.” The grant money received by LA Parent Union was referece in Joe Williams and Tom Mirga. “LA Story: Can a Parent Revolution Change Urban Education’s Power Structure?” Education Sector Reports. July 1, 2006.

The emergence of the non-profit organization the LA Parent Union, as a sister organization of Green Dot and as an alternative to the long established school-site-based Parent Teacher Associations, necessitates a critique of what scholar-activists identify as the rise of the “non-profit industrial complex” (NPIC) regime.⁴⁷ It was precisely during this time that INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence produced the first edition of *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex* (2007)⁴⁸ to offer critiques of how privately funded organizations appropriate grassroots social movement methods to redefine the conditions and material context of “community organizing.” In this case, the formation of the LA Parent Union enabled Green Dot to organize and mobilize parents to pressure the school district superintendent to hand Jefferson over to Green Dot. It is precisely because this “parent movement for school-choice” is removed from actual grassroots, radical visions for educational justice that emanate from key stakeholders at Jefferson, that white philanthropic foundations such as The Wasserman Foundation and The Broad Foundation are instrumental in financing Green Dot’s initiatives.

⁴⁷ Dylan Rodriguez defines the non-profit industrial complex as “a set of symbiotic relationships that link political and financial technologies of state and owning class control with surveillance over public political ideology, including and especially emergent progressive and leftist social movements.” See, Dylan Rodriguez. “The Political Logic of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex,” in *The Revolution will not be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, ed. INCITE! Women of Color against Violence (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007), 21-40.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Green Dot’s “School Transformation Plan”

Charter schools in the LAUSD were relatively uncommon during this time. There was not much visibility or awareness around how charter schools operated or how families could enter their children into a lottery system. Up until this point, charter schools employed the start-up model and had never taken over a traditional public school. While there were only a few charter school operators in Los Angeles County, Green Dot emerged as the most prominent and the one with the boldest plans.

After Green Dot’s Los Angeles schools garnered national attention from their first few years in existence, the LAUSD’s Superintendent Romer requested that Barr create a plan for school transformation. With the assistance of Marco Petruzzi, who at the time was a partner at global management consulting firm Bain & Company, Barr produced a report that was finalized in March of 2006 titled, “The School Transformation Plan: A Strategy to Create Small, High-Performing College-Preparatory Schools in Every Neighborhood of Los Angeles.”⁴⁹ After the report’s introduction, a section titled “The Perfect Storm” opened with a statement from Barr that rhetorically mused, “Los Angeles has an unprecedented opportunity to transform the entire school district. What other school district has \$19 billion to grow itself out of its problems?”⁵⁰ The “perfect storm,” it seemed, was clearly attributed to the 64% of voters in Los Angeles County that

⁴⁹ Steve Barr and Marco Petruzzi, “The School Transformation Plan: A Strategy to Create Small, High-Performing College-Preparatory Schools in Every Neighborhood of Los Angeles.” Bain & Company. March 2006. (<http://www.schoolinfosystem.org/archives/greendottransformation.pdf>)

⁵⁰ Ibid, pg 4.

approved Measure K, the “Safe and Healthy Neighborhood Schools Improvement Act of 2002,”⁵¹ a school bond to repair/renovate existing schools and create new schools in the district to relieve overcrowding. The bond measure was set to terminate in June of 2006.

The central idea of the 24-page plan, better known as “the Bain plan,” was to take the largest comprehensive high schools in LA and break them up into 500 high-performing small schools within the next ten years. The plan outlined Green Dot’s “Six Tenets” to serve as the new paradigm by which small schools could be managed. In support of the success of this plan, the report compared the 2005 API scores of seven charter schools (five of the seven were Green Dot Schools) that opened in the past six years with ten traditional high schools in the district.⁵² Together, the new charter schools had an average API score of 682 while the traditional high schools scored an average of 558. According to the plan, this was sufficient evidence to conclude that while it was not a requirement for a successful school to be a charter school, in this case, the charter schools were more effective at implementing the Six Tenets because they were *new* schools. The key here was that existing “Six Tenets high schools” were successful

⁵¹ School Construction Bond Citizens’ Oversight Committee. LAUSD. Last accessed, June 11, 2019. (<http://www.laschools.org/bond/faq>)

⁵² The so-called “Six Tenets high schools” included Animo Leadership Charter High School, Animo Inglewood Charter High School, Oscar De La Hoya Animo Charter High School, Animo Venice Charter High School, Animo South Los Angeles Charter High School, California Academy for Liberal Studies Early College High School, and College-Ready Academy High School. The traditional high schools referred were Hawthorne High School, Leuzinger High School, Inglewood High School, Morningside High School, Roosevelt High School, Garfield High School, Washington Prep High School, Venice High School, Manual Arts High School, and Belmont High School.

because they were *re-opened as new schools*, meaning they operated under new management that did not have the restrictions that traditional public schools have when they operate under the district.⁵³

In the plan, Jefferson was presented as the example for how the “worst-performing LAUSD high school” would be transformed into a cluster of six new schools. If guided by the Six Tenets and the report’s proposed implementation of four-year transitional phases, Jefferson was certain to have “a strong likelihood of success.”⁵⁴ The use of Jefferson as an example in the report was not only intended to demonstrate how to “turn-around” the lowest performing high school into a high-performing school, it was a strategy to convince Superintendent Romer that Jefferson needed to be handed over to Green Dot.⁵⁵ Jefferson, after all, was only the entry way for Green Dot’s ultimate vision of turning-around all forty-six of LA’s lowest performing high schools by creating 500 new small high schools by the year 2016.

Deploying the language of “turn-around” crucially veered away from the negative connotations associated with existing language of school takeovers, which were overwhelmingly perceived as hostile, invasive, top-down, and undemocratic. From a business perspective, the “turn-around” charter school takeover model that the Bain plan

⁵³ Ibid, pg. 6.

⁵⁴ Ibid, pg. 12.

⁵⁵ Peter C. Beller, “Watts Riot,” Forbes. July 20, 2007. (https://www.forbes.com/2007/07/30/barr-education-schools-biz-cz_pb_0730greendot.html#fc97c9a6d0ad)

advocated for was also a cost-saving strategy for a charter management organization. “We were trying to figure out how to get out of the charter-school business, and how to get into the helping-schools-transform business,”⁵⁶ Barr later reflected during an interview for *The New Yorker*, as he explained why Green Dot employed the turn-around model in 2005. Unlike in the past, where start-up costs for charter school operators included buying land or leasing a building, etc., the so called “turn-around model” came with an entire school building, including everything in it, ready to be used.

The Broad’s Concerns for “True Mayoral Control” amidst Anti-Immigrant Terror

Green Dot’s school transformation plan was released at the height of mass student-driven walkouts against the recently passed HR 4437: “The Border Protection, Anti-terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005.” The bill was meant to heighten the criminalization of undocumented communities by making the civil offence of unauthorized entry into a felony and criminalizing anyone who aided undocumented immigrants, whether it be teachers, clergy, or medical personnel. Among the most noticeable students engaged in these acts of civil disobedience were high school students, especially students across Los Angeles County,⁵⁷ who walked out on several days to

⁵⁶ Douglas McGray, “The Instigator: A Crusader’s Plan to Remake Failing Schools.” *The New Yorker*. May 11, 2009. (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/05/11/the-instigator>).

⁵⁷ The walkouts began on March 10 in Chicago and spread throughout the U.S. For student perspectives in Los Angeles see, “Thousands of Students Defy School Lockdowns.” *Democracy Now!*. March 29, 2006. (https://www.democracynow.org/2006/3/29/thousands_of_students_defy_school_lockdowns)

express their outrage against the bill and to demonstrate their solidarity with immigrant communities. The walkouts were followed by a mega-march of over 1 million in downtown Los Angeles. Not only were these mobilizations successful, as they prevented HR 4437 from passing in the Senate, they also demonstrated the political power of a growing Latinx presence in Los Angeles County.

In the midst of anti-immigrant terror and resistance, the debate over AB 1381 continued. Resistance from the UTLA, CTA, and community organizations culminated in a revised bill with limited mayoral control. Earlier components of the bill were dropped, such as increasing the number of charter schools within the LAUSD. Essentially, many who supported the initial plan for mayoral control now saw the bill's revisions through ongoing negotiations with stakeholders as a watered-down version. On June 30, 2006, Eli Broad and his wife wrote a private letter to Mayor Villaraigosa to denounce the revised bill, which they implored did not represent "true mayoral control." On The Broad Foundation's letterhead,⁵⁸ the letter requested Villaraigosa to seek true mayoral control and provided revisions to the existing bill, making the letter worthy of quoting in full:

Dear Antonio:

We have been friends and I have been an active supporter of yours for almost ten years. As you know, many of your supporters and I believe that true mayor control of the Los Angeles Unified School District is vital for the future of our city. The history of mayoral control in Boston, Chicago and New York is one of progress, improved student achievement and closure of the gaps among income and ethnic groups.

⁵⁸ The letter was released to the public by Villaraigosa's office per the request of *LA Weekly* and other media outlets.

A number of us supported Senator Gloria Romero's bill, which would have given the Mayor the option to control LAUSD. Unfortunately, you were not ready to support it at that time.

I believe that a campaign for mayoral control could have succeeded with a coalition of centrists, Republicans, progressive union leaders, the Chamber of Commerce, EdVoice and others. It is regrettable that you did not want to wage a campaign for true mayoral control, but rather, saw fit to negotiate with UTLA and CTA.

I regret that I cannot support, in its present form, the bill that was passed by the Senate Education Committee on Wednesday. Without reviewing all the reasons in detail, I will simply say that we completely agree with the editorials which appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* with regard to the proposed legislation. If significant changes are not made, we may be better off having the bill fail.

The following changes would lessen our concerns.

- The Superintendent must be allowed to exercise complete control over hiring and firing of principals.
- The collective bargaining agreement with the unions should be negotiated by the Council of Mayors – not a union-controlled school board. The unions can spend millions to elect school board members, and thereby have a seat on both sides of the bargaining table. Serious campaign reform is needed to prevent single special interests from controlling a majority of the board.
- The budget must be approved by the Council of Mayors.
- The progress that has been made in Los Angeles, Boston, Chicago and New York is a result of having the Superintendent offer a uniform curriculum, rather than allowing teachers at each school to determine the curriculum, textbooks, etc.
- The Inspector General must report directly to the Council of Mayors.
- The powers of the Mayor in the partnership schools are not clearly delineated in the legislation. These schools should be treated as a separate district, accountable directly to the Mayor.

Antonio, I hope the above changes can be made between now and the August reconvening of the Legislature.

Edye and I send you our best wishes.

In the letter, The Broad Foundation laments that Villaraigosa did not “wage a campaign for true mayoral control” due to his negotiations with teachers unions (CTA and UTLA). Their letter represents the neoliberal vision for school reform that The Broad Foundation promotes, where a centralized power structure rests among the Council of Mayors, which is necessary to push for education reforms that might otherwise be challenged by the power of organized teacher labor.

Not coincidentally, the first point for revision is that the superintendent must “exercise complete control over hiring and firing of principals,” a revision that aligned with the foundation’s role in producing superintendents through The Broad Academy. Moreover, in the foundation’s vision, the school board’s role is minimal to the point that it might as well be obsolete. Broad attributed the “progress” of Boston, Chicago, and New York to a “uniform curriculum” that stripped away teachers’ autonomy to determine instructional material and content at their school site. While debates over curriculum at this time were not prominent, it is worth noting that the proposed neoliberal vision for education includes a “uniform curriculum.” If the revisions for “true mayoral control” were not met, Broad cautioned, a negotiated bill might as well fail.

But what do wealthy philanthropists, a city mayor, and a charter school businessman all have in common? Clearly, Eli Broad’s investment in Mayor Villaraigosa’s plan to control the LAUSD aligned with Green Dot’s plan to transform the district’s schools. After all, the month prior to receiving the Broad’s letter, Villaraigosa appointed Ramon C. Cortines to the post of Deputy Mayor for Education, Youth and

Families. At the time of his appointment, Cortines served as an education consultant to the Broad Foundation.⁵⁹ Throughout Villaraigosa's negotiations for AB 1381, he simultaneously spearheaded the Coalition for School Reform (CSR),⁶⁰ a Political Action Committee (PAC) that provided the financial pull and influence for his candidates of choice to be elected to the LAUSD.⁶¹ Major donors to the PAC included Eli Broad. In March of 2006, with the CSR's support, Monica Garcia was elected to LAUSD's District 2.

Moreover, The Broad Foundation's letter mentioned that Mayor Villaraigosa failed to push for "true mayoral control" due to a lack of "a coalition of centrists."⁶² However, alongside the Republicans, progressive union leaders, and Chamber of

⁵⁹ Cortines previously served as Chancellor of Education in the 1990s, was superintendent of LAUSD in 2000, Deputy Mayor 2006-08, and became superintendent of the LAUSD in 2014-2016.

⁶⁰ The Coalition for School Reform (CSR) grew out of an organization formed in 1999, initially named Coalition for Kids, and founded by former Mayor Richard Riordan. For a list of major donors see: Los Angeles Unified School District Elections, 2013. Ballotpedia. Last accessed June 11, 2019.

([https://ballotpedia.org/Los_Angeles_Unified_School_District_elections_\(2013\)#Coalition_for_School_Reform](https://ballotpedia.org/Los_Angeles_Unified_School_District_elections_(2013)#Coalition_for_School_Reform))

⁶¹ Political Action Committees are meant to be independent committees that raise and spend money for political campaigns. The CSR, founded by former Mayor Riordan, was created for the purpose of electing school board candidates. See David Pierson, "Forces Behind the Vote A Riordan-backed coalition and teachers union go head to head in school board races." *Los Angeles Times*. February 16, 2003. (<http://articles.latimes.com/2003/feb/16/local/me-laUSD16>); The limit on campaign fundraising and spending was eventually lifted in 2009, which would significantly influence the next elections.

⁶² In politics "centrists" refers to politicians whose political positions are neither fully Republican nor Democrat.

Commerce referenced, the letter also listed EdVoice. EdVoice is a California, statewide, pro-charter school political lobby non-profit organization created in 2001 by Reed Hastings, the same person who was at the forefront of the charter school expansion movement in the 90s and who would later become the owner of Netflix. EdVoice includes a network of wealthy philanthropists, such as Eli Broad, who donate to advance legislation that will enable charter school growth in Sacramento.

Central to this plan to transform the LAUSD was the capitalization on the discourse of failure and violence attached to public schools in general, and high schools specifically. On August 13, 2006, the *Los Angeles Times* named Eli Broad, Antonio Villaraigosa, and Steve Barr among the 100 most influential people in Southern California.⁶³ As the newspaper praises these three key players in the neoliberal agenda to privatize public schools in Los Angeles County, it does not come as a surprise that three months later, Eli Broad placed a bid to purchase the *Los Angeles Times* among other major news sources.⁶⁴ Clearly, controlling corporate media news outlets is a central component to shaping the coverage and dominant narrative regarding public education.

⁶³ “The West 100: Our list of the most powerful people in Southern California” *Los Angeles Times*. August 13, 2006

⁶⁴ James Rainey and Thomas S. Mulligan, “L.A. Tycoons Join Bidding for Tribune.” *Los Angeles Times*. November 9, 2006 (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2006-nov-09-fi-tribune9-story.html>)

Green Dot's unwavering requests to seize Jefferson, coupled with their plan for how it could be done, resulted in the LAUSD school board authorizing Green Dot in September 2006 to open five new start up charter schools in the surrounding neighborhood of Jefferson (Ánimo Pat Brown, Ánimo Ralph Bunche, Ánimo Jackie Robinson, Ánimo Justice, and Ánimo Film & Theater Arts). At the start of that school year, half the incoming freshman at Jefferson applied for a chance to attend one of Green Dot's charter high schools through their lottery systems.

That same month, AB 1381 became law when Governor Schwarzenegger signed it on September 18, 2006. In response to the signing of the bill, the LAUSD filed a lawsuit on October 10, 2006, along with the Association of California School Administrators, the Associated Administrators of Los Angeles, the California School Boards Association, the League of Women Voters of Los Angeles, a member of Congress and former LAUSD Board member, two Parent Teacher Associations, one LAUSD Teacher, and six LAUSD parents. Senator Romero, in support of her bill for mayoral control, declared, "I am at a point where I would say, 'Blow up the system. It doesn't work and we are sacrificing entire generations of young people, predominantly Latino kids, low-income kids. Let's really shake up the system.'"⁶⁵ On December 21, 2006, a judge ruled in favor of the school board due to the unconstitutionality of the bill. Justice H. Walter Croskey ruled, "The citizens of Los Angeles have the constitutional right to decide whether their school board is to be appointed or elected," which confirmed

⁶⁵ Ina Jaffe, "L.A. Mayor Hopes to Take Over School District." NPR. December 1, 2005. (<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5033867>)

the sentiment of many who opposed the bill's undemocratic nature. "If the citizens of Los Angeles choose to amend their charter to allow the Mayor to appoint the members of the Board, such amendment would indisputably be proper," he explained. Judge Croskey's final ruling on the case was the following:

We conclude that the Romero Act is an unconstitutional attempt to do indirectly what the Legislature is prohibited from doing directly. The Legislature cannot overrule the LAUSD's voters' determination that their Board is to be elected rather than appointed, nor may it transfer authority over part of the school system to entities outside of the public school system.⁶⁶

The Mayor appealed the judge's ruling on AB 1381 twice. Mayor Villaraigosa likely realized that mayoral control or any other version of that was not what the people of Los Angeles wanted, otherwise a charter amendment would have been placed on the ballot for voters to make that decision. By circumventing the voters and advocating through the state's legislature, Mayor Villaraigosa might have finally realized the unconstitutionality of his vision. In his failed attempt to seize any control of the district's public schools, Mayor Villaraigosa changed his strategy and decided to create an educational non-profit as an alternative entryway into the district's public schools.

⁶⁶ Mendoza et al., v. State of California et al., (Case No. B195835) (<https://caselaw.findlaw.com/ca-court-of-appeal/1195393.html>)

The Mayor's Partnership for Los Angeles Schools



Figure 1. Student disrupts mayor's school safety campaign.⁶⁷

On February 27, 2007, the front page of the *Los Angeles Times* released this photograph of a student (Figure 1), “Zoner,” who tagged a bus that happened to be ridden by the mayor during a photo op moment at Santee Learning Educational Complex (“Santee”).⁶⁸ The mayor was promoting a school safety plan by utilizing a recently added bus stop in front of the school, which would avoid having students walk through the neighborhood. While for many in the community, tagging and graffiti was a common

⁶⁷ Photographer, Anne Cusack. Reproduced from *Los Angeles Times*, February 27, 2007.

⁶⁸ Angie Green “Graffiti Mars School Media Event” *Los Angeles Times*. February 27, 2007.

sight, in the perspective of the *Los Angeles Times* and the mayor, the student vandalized the wrong bus at the wrong time.

The student was arrested, booked, and charged with vandalism, which resulted in a misdemeanor. In response, the school's administration took an empathetic approach and mentioned that it was a student's "cry for help." Villaraigosa, however, expressed that his hope was that the student be punished and mentioned that counseling was not enough, the student should do 100 hours of community service cleaning "vandalism" off buses.⁶⁹ The mayor thought that a tough approach was what the people of LA would say should be done. This incident exposed the larger contradictions at hand: on one side, the Mayor attempted to promote safety under his leadership, as the new bus stop prevented students from walking through their neighborhood; while on the other side, one student's daily routine disrupted the mayor's portrayal of safety, which further compelled the people of LA to critique his style of leadership.

When Santee first opened in 2005, it was a historic moment given that it was the first new public high school to open in LAUSD in 30 years. A teacher at the school mentioned that the incidents that transpired were a "cry for help not from one student. From ALL of us here at Santee. Help."⁷⁰ Santee was a newly constructed school, yet at only two years old it was already considered a "failing" school for those who worked and attended the school. The Mayor attempted to save his face by stating that he would be a mentor to the student; however, the principal said that they are better equipped to do that

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

job and that the mayor would have to apply (fingerprinting and all) if he wanted to be considered for that position.⁷¹ The school did not agree with the approach of mentorship that was proposed by the Mayor, and further maintained that he would not be exempt from the protocols that all mentors must undergo. School administrators invoked the securitization of Santee as leverage to remind the mayor that they are the education experts who are best equipped to decide how to approach student mentorship and discipline. Interestingly, Santee resurfaced once more as the mayor worked up a plan to manage Santee through his newly established non-profit.

The mayor established the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools (PLAS) as an independent educational non-profit organization. Unlike charter school operators, PLAS does not create new schools; instead, the non-profit operates alongside district schools to act as a school management partner, which only requires the approval of the school board. An August 28, 2007 press conference held at John Liechty Middle School, a new school in the Westlake-Pico Union District, announced the mayor's non-profit, and the LAUSD board members were in attendance (Figure 2).⁷² At the press conference, Villaraigosa announced that the partnership between the LAUSD and PLAS would allow him to oversee two high schools, Santee and Roosevelt High School, as well as the middle and elementary schools that fed into them. At the time of the announcement, the school board had not voted to approve that pending partnership, a clear violation of the Ralph M. Brown Act, which was created to ensure transparency and public comment

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² "Mayor Steps Up Role in L.A. Schools," *Los Angeles Times*. August 30, 2007. B-4.

before a vote. It is safe to conclude that the school board members' appearance at the event was a clear endorsement of the mayor's non-profit and intent to manage LAUSD's public high schools.



Figure 2. Mayor announces Partnership for Los Angeles Schools.⁷³

The non-profit was created with the intention that the mayor's office, along with other stakeholders, would partner with the LAUSD to govern a few clusters of schools. Even though AB 1381 was ruled unconstitutional, if it were to have been implemented, the bill's language mandated that, aside from a Council of Mayors, the Mayor of LA

⁷³ Photographer, Al Seib. Reproduced from the *Los Angeles Times*, August 30, 2007.

would form a partnership with three clusters of schools; each cluster would have one of the lowest performing high schools and its feeder middle and elementary schools.

Essentially, PLAS intended to operate as if it were its own small school district or what is referred to as a portfolio of schools. The portfolio-management model is a network of schools that are managed under the same non-profit or charter school operator. The portfolio phrasing was borrowed from the stock market, where the businesses – in this case, the managed schools – are of prominent interest to those who heavily invest in them, such as the foundations, philanthropists, and politicians.⁷⁴ In this case, the school district also serves as an investment banker by providing the educational management non-profit with a school building and students. Even though PLAS is not a charter school network, under PLAS's model, the set of schools it manages can still be described as a portfolio.

Starting in the 2008-2009 school year, the schools under the mayor's partnership were expected to report to the non-profit instead of to the district, yet the board and district continued to have ultimate control. The non-profit was given greater control over budget, hiring, and curriculum. The schools under the partnership were intended to operate like charter schools, meaning they would not operate under the LAUSD's policies, but they were still accountable to state and federal law. Unlike charters, however, the PLAS schools continued to abide by the LAUSD union contracts. The

⁷⁴ See, *Between Public and Private: Politics, Governance, and the New Portfolio Models for Urban School Reform*, eds Katrina E. Bulkley, Jeffrey R. Henig, and Henry M. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2010).

partnership was a five-year renewable contract between the non-profit and the school district. Under this partnership, the school district's superintendent and governing school board had ultimate control and could terminate the contract after five years if the school's performance did not improve. The Mayor and his Deputy Mayor of Education, Ramon Cortines, appointed the five-person educational board. In February 2008, Angela Bass, a 2005 graduate of the Broad Academy for Superintendents, was appointed as superintendent of PLAS.

The month after PLAS launched, a press conference announced that PLAS received a grant of \$50 million dollars donated by real estate developers Richard and Melanie Lundquist, the second largest donation ever given to public schools.⁷⁵ The PLAS governing board received \$5 million dollars each year, for ten consecutive years, under the conditions that schools demonstrate academic achievement. Shortly after the time of this donation, Melanie Lundquist also served on the board of PLAS alongside Marshall Tuck, Green Dot's former President.

After securing District 2's school board position with the election of Monica Garcia in 2006, Villaraigosa campaigned aggressively with the finances from the CSR in the 2007 school board election. Lundquist also donated \$100,000 to Villaraigosa's effort to elect his preferred candidates. The campaign spending for the 2007 election was record breaking for the history of LAUSD's school board elections.⁷⁶ The results were

⁷⁵ Duke Helfand and Howard Blume, "Mayor Gets \$50 million for Schools" *Los Angeles Times*. September 27, 2007 (<http://articles.latimes.com/2007/sep/27/local/me-mayor27>)

⁷⁶ Los Angeles City Ethics Commission, "2007 LAUSD Election." Last accessed June 11, 2019. (<https://ethics.lacity.org/elections/#S140>)

promising for Villaraigosa, as three more seats were secured for his candidates of choice. In total, of the mayor's preferred candidates, Monica Garcia represented District 2, Tamar Galatzan represented District 3, Yolie Flores Aguilar represented District 5, and Richard Vladovic represented District 7. By the fall of 2007, the CSR and Villaraigosa gained the majority vote on school board decisions, a political influence that remained until 2013.

Green Dot's Takeover of Locke

The first controversial decision the new LAUSD school board made regarded Alain Leroy Locke High School ("Locke"), in what was known as the "Locke Transformation Project." On September 11, 2007, school board members voted 5-2 to hand Locke over to Green Dot, an operation scheduled to begin the fall of the next school year (2008-2009).⁷⁷ That was the first time in the LAUSD history that an outside entity, in this case, a charter school operator, was granted the authority to operate an existing district public school. Rather than resort to a lottery system, Green Dot was the first charter school in Los Angeles required to accept all students within the school's attendance boundaries.⁷⁸ This meant that students did not have to apply and hope that a

⁷⁷ Joel Rubin and Howard Blume. "Green Dot charter organization to take over Locke High School." *Los Angeles Times*. September 12, 2007. (<http://articles.latimes.com/2007/sep/12/local/me-laUSD12>)

⁷⁸ Green Dot's takeover of Locke HS and requirement to accept all students within the school's attendance zone became the model that inspired the LAUSD's Public School Choice Initiative.

lottery selected them for admission. Instead, students who were within the attendance zone were automatically granted the right to attend their neighborhood school.

Locke's transformation to a Green Dot school was uniquely inspired by a "teacher revolt." Like many schools throughout South LA, Locke was in the news for school brawls and the shooting of a student while on campus. Locke was among the district's lowest performing high schools. Ironically, Locke was a school that opened in 1965, after the Watts Rebellion, as an attempt to restore hope in the community. After many years of "chronic failure," the teachers believed Locke could never be able to restore that hope. The hope of teachers at Locke was rekindled with Green Dot's model. That past academic year, Steve Barr had been in negotiations with the Superintendent of the LAUSD, David L. Brewer, to hand Locke over to Green Dot. When the plans stalled, Barr realized he needed to take an aggressive approach. In an interview for *The New Yorker*, Barr recollected his experience with the school district:

You ever see that movie 'Man on Fire,' with Denzel Washington? There's a scene in the movie where the police chief of Mexico City gets kidnapped by Denzel Washington. He wakes up, he's on the hood of his car under the underpass, in his boxers, his hands tied. Denzel Washington starts asking him questions, he's not getting the answers he wants, so he walks away from him, and leaves a bomb stuck up his ass (laugh) I don't want to blow up L.A.U.S.D.'s ass. But what will it

take to get this system to serve who they need to serve? It's going to take that kind of aggressiveness.⁷⁹

Barr's reference to the violent scene from the 2004 drama *Man on Fire*, where Denzel's character blows up the Mexican police chief whose has "run out of time," was how he described his negotiations with the district. Superintendent Brewer wanted to work with Green Dot but wanted a longer timeline to do so. Among those negotiations, the teacher's unions advocated for Locke's teachers to remain with the district's unions. Green Dot did not want more time to negotiate and was prepared to take an "aggressive" approach in seizing Locke.

The turn-around began to build momentum earlier that year when President George W. Bush's Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, stopped to visit one of Green Dot's schools in Inglewood on May 3, 2007. In attendance was Dr. Frank Wells, Locke's principal of three years, who in a room full of reporters courageously spoke up at the event to talk about Locke's small academic gains and efforts to remove it from the top of the list on crime statistics. The following day, the *Los Angeles Times* released an article titled, "Locke Principal Rips L.A. Unified."⁸⁰ Principal Wells was quoted, "Nothing is going to change in the lives of [Locke] kids unless we do something

⁷⁹ Douglas McGray, "The Instigator: A Crusader's Plan to Remake Failing Schools." *The New Yorker*. May 11, 2009. (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/05/11/the-instigator>).

⁸⁰ Joel Rubin, "Locke Principal Rips L.A. Unified" *Los Angeles Times*. May 4, 2007. (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2007-may-04-me-locke4-story.html>)

revolutionary overnight.”⁸¹ For many, it was clear that night that the principal expressed strong support of a Green Dot takeover of Locke. Even though Principal Wells had previously been dismissive of charter schools because he believed they only admitted the cream of the crop since parents had to take initiative in enrolling their children into a lottery system, he “changed sides” and joined Green Dot’s takeover efforts.⁸² That weekend, teachers organized with the assistance of Green Dot and the LA Parent Union to acquire the necessary petitions. Principal Wells did not only allow for teachers to sign the petition, he encouraged them.⁸³

Under California’s Charter School Act, permanent status teachers – teachers with two or more years at a school – could sign a petition in favor of a charter school conversion.⁸⁴ Essentially, this provision served as a “teacher trigger” that could allow Green Dot to seize Locke. The week after Principal Wells was featured in the *Los Angeles Times*, the signature gathering process began. The petition needed at least 37 of the 73 tenured teachers to reach a majority vote; on the second day, the petition received

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Donna Foote, *Relentless Pursuit: A Year in the Trenches with Teach for America*. (Knopf Publishing Group, 2008). Pg. 332-333.

⁸³ Ibid, pg. 333.

⁸⁴ AB 544, 1998 Amendments, “In the case of petitions for establishment of charter schools by converting an existing public school, the bill would permit filing of the petition after the petition has been signed by at least 50% of the permanent status teachers currently employed at the public school to be converted”

65 signatures, of which 43 were from tenured teachers.⁸⁵ Soon after the petition gathering process was underway, the district's area director arrived on campus only to announce that Wells had been relieved of his duties as principal and reassigned to the district office.⁸⁶ Before the end of the week, Barr held a press conference in front of Locke to announce Green Dot's intent to take over Locke, stating, "So here the revolution starts, in Watts."⁸⁷ Many students felt that their African American principal was unjustly targeted by the district for expressing his concerns about the school, and a school fight broke out as a result of these incidents.⁸⁸ Wells, no longer principal of Locke, was immediately hired by the LA Parent Union to serve as a consultant.⁸⁹ In doing so, Well joined Green Dot's team of hired policy consultants, such as Ben Austin who served in that capacity from 2006 to 2009. That summer, Green Dot received \$7.8 million from The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to fund the takeover of Locke through the creation of ten small charter schools.⁹⁰ Under a new majority on the LAUSD school board, in the fall of

⁸⁵ Alexander Russo. *Stray Dogs, Saints, and Saviors: Fighting for the Soul of America's Toughest High School* (Jossey Bass, 2011): pg. 22

⁸⁶ Ibid., *Relentless Pursuit*, pp. 333

⁸⁷ Peter C. Beller, "Watts Riot" Forbes July 30, 2007.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., *Relentless Pursuit*, pp. 333

⁹⁰ Ibid, pg. 334; Green Dot Receives \$7.8 Million from Gates Foundation. PND by Candid. July 11, 2007. (<https://philanthropynewsdigest.org/news/green-dot-schools-receives-7.8-million-from-gates-foundation>)

2007, the teacher petitions were approved and Locke was converted to a Green Dot school.

Green Dot's successful takeover of Locke generated nation-wide interest. Among the many that wrote about Locke's transformation,⁹¹ *Newsweek* journalist Donna Foote (2008) wrote the book *Relentless Pursuit: A Year in the Trenches with Teach for America* (2008), which documented life at Locke during the 2005-2006 school year, a year before its transformation into Green Dot. Foote's account tells the story of the "relentless pursuit" of Teach for America (TFA) teachers, who constituted the majority of teachers at Locke. "Under Wells, Locke became a TFA factory, home to the largest cluster of corps members in the Los Angeles region."⁹² This was a direct result of a contract that was signed by former LAUSD Superintendent Rousseau, who allowed Locke to become a TFA training camp during summer school.⁹³ Principal Wells explained that he hired nearly two dozen TFA teachers because "The TFA teachers come here with a missionary zeal."⁹⁴ These were teachers who signed away Locke's future to Green Dot. Ultimately, only 80 of the 140 teachers were re-hired under Green Dot's management.

⁹¹ In another account, investigative journalist Alexander Russo's *Stray Dogs, Saints, and Saviors: Fighting for the Soul of America's Toughest High School* (2011) chronicled Locke's transformation to Green Dot.

⁹² Ibid., *Relentless Pursuit*, pg. 27

⁹³ Ibid, pg. 26

⁹⁴ Ibid, pg. 27

What Makes a Great School?

In a promotional video produced two years after Locke's transformation titled, "What Makes a Great School?" Steve Barr was followed by a camera throughout the new Green Dot school as he described, "Our mission is simple: I want to change the whole system, not just create a whole bunch of charter school." As he continued to describe how Green Dot's Six Tenets transformed Locke in only two years' time, he discussed why the takeover was historic, "This is the first time we inherited a whole school and the property." He ends with, "When we liberated this school- we took the school from the school district and enacted No Child Left Behind- we took over \$26 million dollars away from the school district. That hurt. And we took 150 members of the United Teachers of Los Angeles. That hurt."⁹⁵ For Barr, the district was not efficient nor effective in utilizing money and unlike the UTLA contract, at Green Dot, teachers could easily be fired under a "just cause" contract.

Even after receiving Locke, Barr "was already planning his next assault on the district," something he described as an "Armageddon," in which clusters of Green Dot charter schools would surround the largest, worst-performing schools in LA.⁹⁶ Under this plan, the district would have two options, "dissolve most of the central bureaucracy, and turn over hiring, firing, and spending decisions to neighborhood schools, or surrender

⁹⁵ "A 21st Century Education: The Takeover of Locke High School in Watts." The Pearson Foundation and The Mobile Learning Institute, 2009. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=15&v=A6K7Jm9HSMs)

⁹⁶ Douglas McGray, "The Instigator: A Crusader's Plan to Remake Failing Schools." *The New Yorker*. May 11, 2009. (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/05/11/the-instigator>).

leadership of the schools to Green Dot.” If the district refused either option, Barr planned to open his Green Dot schools, taking thousands of students and the per-pupil funding that goes with them. “If I take ten Locke High Schools, they can’t survive,” Barr later stated.

Things were promising for Green Dot as evidenced by the financial backing they received in November of 2007. A fundraiser event hosted by Green Dot, “The Green Dot Ball: A Benefit for Public Education,” was held at the Griffith Observatory and intended to raise money to open ten new schools in Watts. According to Danielle Rauschendorfer, who attended the benefit, Barr honored:

champions of great public schools: including, renown [sic] businessman and philanthropist, Eli Broad; SEIU President, Andy Stern; boxer, businessman and philanthropist Oscar de la Hoya, and Green Dot Educators for all their support on behalf of Green Dot. The event attracted over 800 distinguished guests including City Councilman, Tom LaBonge and Senator Gloria Romero.⁹⁷

Among the donations received that night, Green Dot received a \$10 million donation from Eli Broad.⁹⁸ This was a surprise to many, given that The Broad Foundation had donated \$10.5 million in December of 2006, only one year prior, when Green Dot had attempted to seize Jefferson.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ “Green Dot Public Schools, Inc.” *Schools Matter*. November 3, 2007. (<http://www.schoolsmatter.info/2007/11/green-dot-public-schools-inc.html>)

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Judith Lewis, “The Secret of His Success.” *LA Weekly*, December 6, 2006. (<https://www.laweekly.com/news/the-secret-of-his-success-2146560>)

Additionally, from 2005 to 2008, it was reported on the tax exempt form (Tax Form 990) that The Broad Foundation gave a total of \$4,469,040 to the LA Parent Union, where Steve Barr was listed as the board's CEO/President.¹⁰⁰ LA Parent Union's funding helped Green Dot's hostile efforts to claim Jefferson and then Locke; meanwhile, the organization expanded to create LA Parent Union chapters throughout the city. According to The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's 2007 Form 990-PF-Return of Private Foundation, the foundation awarded Green Dot \$3,850,538 for the Jefferson cluster, along with \$9,900 for operational costs;¹⁰¹ and \$2,992,500 for the Jefferson cluster in 2008.¹⁰² And as was mentioned previously, , Green Dot also received a \$7.8 million dollar grant from The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, in support of Locke's transformation.¹⁰³

Conclusion

This chapter provided portraits of some of the key political players in the movement to privatize public schools in LA County from 2000 to 2007. It began by

¹⁰⁰ LA Parent Union, Tax Form 990, 2005 - 2008.

¹⁰¹ 2007 Form 990-PF-Return of Private Foundation, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. (<https://docs.gatesfoundation.org/Documents/2007-foundation-form-990-pf-public-disclosure.pdf>)

¹⁰² 2008 Form 990-PF-Return of Private Foundation, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. (<https://docs.gatesfoundation.org/Documents/bmgf-2008-990PF.pdf>)

¹⁰³ "Green Dot Receives \$7.8 Million from Gates Foundation." Philanthropy News Digest. July 11, 2007. (<https://philanthropynewsdigest.org/news/green-dot-schools-receives-7.8-million-from-gates-foundation>)

following Green Dot's emergence into the educational landscape of the county, and how the founder, Steve Barr, began with a vision to create 100 new charter schools, a vision that over time expanded to 500. By chronicling Green Dot's efforts to expand its charter school network, I demonstrated how Steve Barr founded two sister organizations: The Small Schools Alliance and The LA Parent Union. Capitalizing on the racialized narratives of school violence in the first months of 2005, Villaraigosa, who was running to become LA's next mayor, justified mayoral control of the LAUSD; similarly, Barr used the momentum to pressure the district into handing Jefferson over to Green Dot.

In response to the corporate media's spectacle regarding Jefferson, students from the off-campus location provided written testimonies that collectively responded to the question posed by *LA Youth*,¹⁰⁴ "Why did the fights happen?" Their testimonies archive insurgent student perspectives as they speak to the issues most pressing in their lives: extreme poverty caused by housing and job precarity of their families; the educational disinvestment in ethnic studies, arts, and extracurricular youth programming; and the lack of teachers and administrators who demonstrate an ethnic of care for students. Whether it was because of student fights at Jefferson or flights from Jefferson, students were not the source of the problem. These were the same sentiments shared by teachers and administrators at Santee, who came to the defense of one of their students who was caught vandalizing a bus ridden by Mayor Villaraigosa. Their refusal to allow the mayor

¹⁰⁴ Ironically, *LA Youth*, the independent news outlet that promoted youth-driven journalism stopped operating in 2013 due to lack of funding.

to mentor the student was testament to their positioning of themselves as the education experts at a time when the mayor attempted to seize control of the district's schools.

In resistance to the unionized labor power of teachers in the LAUSD, Green Dot formed The LA Parent Union to generate power among parents and to present their efforts to take over traditional public school as parent-driven initiatives. When Green Dot could not take control of Jefferson, they created a “zone of choice” around the high school to take away Jefferson's students. Green Dot's failed attempt to take over Jefferson through the organized efforts of the LA Parent Union moved it to try a new strategy in their attempt to take control of Locke. The successful use of a teacher trigger to “turn-around” Locke was in large part due to Locke's notoriety as a TFA campus; as we now know, most TFA teachers do not remain teaching in the same low-income schools they were appointed to for longer than five years.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, when Mayor Villaraigosa could not take control of the district, or as he preferred to state, hold the district “accountable,” he successfully pushed for his candidates of choice on the LAUSD school board and created his non-profit education management organization, Partnership for Los Angeles Schools. The elite network of power and their strategic use of words like “choice,” “turn-around,” and “accountability” aligned with the national discourse established by the NCLB Act and allowed for these efforts to appear as if they are designed and led primarily by parents.

¹⁰⁵ Donaldson, M.L. & Johnson, S.M. The price of misassignment: The role of teaching assignments in Teach For America teachers' exit from low-income schools and the teaching profession. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 2010, Spring, 32 (2), 299-323.

Conflicting visions for public education that emanate from students, parents, and teachers will be more deeply explored in the following chapter, where I provide an insurgent portrait of a student-led campaign at David Starr Jordan High School in Watts. Together, these insurgent portraits contextualize the educational landscape in South Los Angeles, where the suppression of insurgent learning and praxis of teachers, students, parents, and community activists is ongoing.

CHAPTER THREE

COMBATING PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE: STUDENTS RISE UP IN WATTS, 2007 – 2008

At this press conference, Wadsworth UTLA, The Association of Raza Educators, and Parents of Wadsworth will DEMAND that the Los Angeles Unified School District to [sic] remove Wadsworth from the *Prop. 39 Schools with Available Classrooms List*. Prop. 39 requires the LAUSD provide public classroom space, if there is [sic] open rooms, for charter schools. However, THERE IS NO ROOM on the Wadsworth campus which operates on 4-tracks due to OVERCROWDING. We will also be publicly stating that the Teachers and Parents of Wadsworth do NOT want Celerity Charter School on the Wadsworth Campus.¹

This excerpt is from a press release published in April of 2008 by the Wadsworth Avenue Elementary (“Wadsworth”) community of teachers and parents, who pushed back against an announcement by the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) that it planned to co-locate Celerity Achernar Charter School (“Celerity Achernar”) on their campus. The announcement to co-locate Celerity Achernar on the Wadsworth campus was made at the same time that teachers, who a month prior had received an R.I.F. (Reduction in Force) notice, also known as a “pink slip,” obtained confirmation that they would not be reinstated for the next school year.

While co-location and pink slips were not uncommon for the LAUSD, the district’s decision to do this was exacerbated by the unprecedented fiscal crises, known as The Great Recession, that had hit a few months prior, in December of 2007. The recession forced the state to cut back public programs and services, which in turn

¹ Jose Lara, “For Immediate Release: South LA School Resisting Charter Invasion.” *Los Angeles Indymedia: Activist News*. April 17, 2008. (<http://la.indymedia.org/news/2008/04/216793.php>)

devastated local school districts. Among the consequences for the 2007-2008 school year were the higher number of teachers who received layoff notices compared to previous years and the increase in teacher contracts that were not renewed for the next academic year. The school district also responded to the economic downturn with a temporary change to the UTLA's (United Teachers of Los Angeles) agreement, by exercising their right under Article 18, Section 1.5, which allowed for the district to increase class size.² The mass layoff of teachers coupled with an increase in class size resulted in what is classified as "unused" public school space under Proposition 39. Also known as the *School Facilities Local Vote Act of 2000*, Proposition 39 ("Prop 39") was written to ensure "that public school facilities should be shared fairly among all public school pupils, including those in charter schools."³

While at the time there were just over ten charter schools co-located with traditional public schools in the district, co-location was certain to increase with the introduction of 50 charter school applicants that requested "equivalent" facilities from the district under Prop 39.⁴ Mandated by Prop 39, the district was pressured to respond to

² Daniel Barnhart, "2008 is Calling and it Wants its Class-Sizes Back: Why Section 1.5 is a potential strike issue" UTLA. September 21, 2018. (<https://www.utla.net/news/2008-calling-and-it-wants-its-class-size-numbers-back>)

³ See Education Code Section 47614. In 2003, under Prop 39 it became mandated for school districts to provide equivalent facilities to charter school operators who made this request. Prop 39 mandated that charter school facilities be contiguous (located together, not spread across campus or multiple sites), similarly furnished and equipped, and located near the area in which the charter wished to locate.

⁴ Howard Blume, "LA Unified is Rethinking Offers of Space." Los Angeles Times. April 26, 2008. (<http://articles.latimes.com/2008/apr/26/local/me-charters26>)

charter school operators, who in some cases had submitted multiple applications. More than seventy parents as well as teachers from Wadsworth spoke at an LAUSD board meeting to protest their co-location with Celerity Achnar. The community refuted the idea of “unused space” at the school and cited their 4-tracks as evidence of an already overcrowded school.⁵ The Wadsworth community’s resistance, much like the resistance of other public schools during that time, successfully halted charter schools from co-locating on their campuses.

As communities of traditional public schools fought the elevated pressure of co-location brought by the rise in charter schools, students at David Starr Jordan High School (“Jordan”) in Watts rose up in defense of a teacher who was among those pink-slipped, Ms. Karen Salazar. This chapter provides a glimpse into the school district’s initial response to the fiscal crises, which created a teacher shortage, increased class size, and ultimately served to exacerbate conditions already present in schools such as Jordan. The student-led uprising at Jordan debunks the narrative of teachers as saviors of Students of Color, a narrative too often reinforced by films such as *Freedom Writers* (2007), where a White middle-class woman is portrayed as the drive for ethnic solidarity at a working-class school in the neighboring city of Long Beach, CA. It is of utmost importance to debunk savior teacher narratives, at a time when those narratives are reinforced by non-profit organizations, such as Teach for America (TFA), that place

⁵ One of the challenges that co-location presents is that “unused” space is often marked as spaces not occupied throughout the entire day, such as parent centers, computer labs, or storage facilities.

culturally and professionally unprepared recent college graduates into low-income and under-performing urban schools.⁶

This chapter provides an insurgent portrait of students and teachers that rose up in and around Jordan in defense of a public education they envisioned for their community in Watts. It documents the formation of a student-driven campaign, *Students 4 Salazar*, and reveals insurgent learning as a praxis that emanated from students and teachers at Jordan. This chapter is primarily informed by the insurgent knowledge, articulations, and theories derived when Students of Color gathered in solidarity to critique an education they do not value and, more importantly, to defend an education that they do value.

This chapter documents voices, visions, and direct actions too often marginalized from the historical imagination of Los Angeles education reform. At a time when Green Dot Public Schools (“Green Dot”) received millions of dollars from venture philanthropists such as The Broad Foundation and The Gates Foundation (see Chapters Two and Four), the historical disinvestment and abandonment of schools such as Jordan were exacerbated with the economic downturn. In documenting the student-driven campaign that began at the end of the 2007-2008 school year at Jordan, this chapter offers alternate community-driven solutions for Jordan’s future. Producing an insurgent portrait of a historic student-driven mobilization in Watts, when contextualized within a larger educational landscape driven by laws such as the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) that hold schools such as Jordan accountable for their academic failure, further

⁶ Lisa A. Miller and Victor W. Harris, “I Can’t Be Racist—I Teach in an Urban School, and I’m a Nice White Lady!” *World Journal of Education*, Vol. 8, No. 3; 2018

reveals the importance of centering the insurgent knowledge that emanates from the students, teachers, and community activists.

The insurgent portrait of the communities that rose up at Jordan are of utmost importance given that during the time of the campaign, market-solutions to the economic downturn were made at every level of government. The decisions and partnerships made by an elite network of power (see Chapter Two and Four) comprised of politicians, philanthropists, businessmen, and non-profit organizations resulted in Jordan's co-location with two other schools: a Green Dot school and a school managed by Los Angeles Mayor Villaraigosa's Partnership Los Angeles Schools (see Chapter Four).

A Glimpse of David Starr Jordan High School's History in Watts

Jordan was not unlike many high schools in this region of South Los Angeles that were deemed "chronically failing" years prior to, but increasingly during, the era of No Child Left Behind (NCLB).⁷ NCLB was effective in identifying and targeting schools such as Jordan that were to be punished for failing to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). These punishments, or "corrective actions" make schools identified as failing schools, such as Jordan, vulnerable to the latest experimentations in education policy reform. Rather than citing another official report of scores and evaluations to confirm what everyone already knows, which is that schools such as Jordan are struggling to meet

⁷ Zeus Leonardo. "The War on Schools: NCLB, Nation Creation and the Educational Construction of Whiteness." *Race Ethnicity and Education*. Vol. 10, No. 3, September 2007, pp. 261-278.

sanctioned metrics and have been for decades, I argue that failing to meet the NCLB criteria does not mean that learning does not take place. In fact, as this chapter reveals, the school community's wealth of insurgent knowledge about Jordan and what it is like to live and work in Watts articulates visions that can fundamentally address structural inequities and injustices.

Jordan is situated in Watts on the historic Alameda Corridor near Imperial Avenue and bordered by public housing projects. As one math teacher described for the *Los Angeles Times*, she kept the shades in her classroom down because, "You look out that open window and you see the projects." Ms. Henderson, who taught at Jordan in 2008, explained that she kept the blinds down because she wanted her students to think about where they can go, not where they are from.⁸ Jordan was constructed on land that at one point served as a recycling center for the city's waste. In 2008, only a chain link fence separated the school from the recycling center next door. For Mr. Sean Leys, a second year English teacher who began teaching at Jordan in 2001, Jordan was a "war zone." In a 2003 report he wrote titled, "On Bombs, School Reform, and Student Power," Mr. Leys recalled an incident the year prior, when a bomb dropped on the school from the recycling plant next door:

The school's buildings shook from the explosion of a World War II artillery shell being recycled at the neighboring scrap metal yard. The shell of the bomb launched into the air and landed on campus, skipping between buildings, tearing

⁸ Sandy Banks, "Formula for Success." *Los Angeles Times*. December 13, 2008. (<http://articles.latimes.com/2008/dec/13/local/me-banks13>)

up chunks of asphalt. It nearly killed a passing teacher. If the explosion had happened during lunch, 20 minutes later, it would likely have killed tens of students. The school was evacuated. The explosion was barely mentioned on the news. After the school closed for a day, students returned. Many were overwhelmed with feelings of fear, anger, abandonment, and helplessness.⁹

While these teacher perceptions may seem like uncommon and exaggerated portrayals of everyday life at Jordan, they point to the larger region of South LA where the school is situated, an industrial zone of toxic waste and permissible violence (see Chapter One). The people in Watts, like the students and teachers at Jordan, had become accustomed to historical abandonment and displacement. These structural realities are felt everyday by students such as those at Jordan and communities in South Los Angeles such as Watts.

Additionally, Jordan faced significant shifts in administration and reform, which further contributed to the ongoing instability of the school. The 2,600 students at Jordan during the 2007-2008 school year came from various parts of South Los Angeles, most notably Watts, South Gate, and Compton. It was a school where 65% of the youth were classified as Latina/o and 35% as African-American. At the time, Jordan students were separated into four small learning communities: Starr Academy, Law and Justice

⁹ Sean Leys, "On Bombs, School Reform, and Student Power," *UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access*. Vol 3, No 1-7. (2002-2003).
<<https://tcla.gseis.ucla.edu/reportcard/features/5-6/jordan.html>> Accessed October 2, 2017.

Academy, Magnet Health and Science, and Magnet Science and Technology.¹⁰ Jordan's principal of four years, Mr. Stephen Strachan, implemented a very tough, zero tolerance approach to discipline students, to the extent that he ordered 743 student suspensions in his first year.¹¹ For Mr. Strachan, it seemed that Jordan needed better management through stricter discipline, as he implemented an unofficial practice of separating classes by gender to deter what he perceived as "distractions" among students. Principal Strachan's punitive style of school governance was revered by many and even financially sustained by philanthropists, as Jordan received millions of dollars in grants from The Gates Foundation during that time.¹²

Teaching at Jordan

Toward the end of the 2007-2008 school year, Ms. Karen Salazar completed her UCLA graduate education and her second-year as an English Language Arts teacher at Jordan. Ms. Salazar, who at first glance may be mis-identified as Latina or Chicana,

¹⁰ To read more on the learning communities at Jordan see, LAUSD, "STARR Academy Proposal Application for David Starr Jordan High School." June 2006 (http://www.lausd.net/SLC_Schools/temps/jordan2/jordan_starracad.pdf);

¹¹ Sandy Banks, "Success? That's not an Elective." *Los Angeles Times*. November 2, 2006. (<http://articles.latimes.com/2006/nov/02/local/me-strachan2>)

¹² The LAUSD received a grant of \$3,057,087 from The Gates Foundation to help implement the small learning communities in 2005 for Jordan and Carson high schools, See "LAUSD Unveils Major Plan to Improve Academic Achievement in Low-Performing High Schools" The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. November 2005. (<https://www.gatesfoundation.org/Media-Center/Press-Releases/2005/11/Improve-LowPerforming-High-Schools>); The Gates Foundation also funded the district to implement block scheduling.

identified as Afro-Indigenous¹³ from El Salvador. Ms. Salazar was not an ordinary teacher at Jordan, as some may say that she taught through an ethnic studies lens. She began the first day of her English classes with a quote from South African revolutionary Bantu Stephen Biko, most known for propelling the struggle against apartheid in South Africa: “The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the minds of the oppressed.” Guiding her students through this quote, Ms. Salazar asked them to define each word in their dictionaries, asking them along the way:

What does potent mean? What are weapons? What makes a person an oppressor? What makes a person oppressed? Who are the oppressors? Who are the oppressed that Steven Biko is referring to? Why are the minds of the oppressed the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor?¹⁴

Ms. Salazar went beyond the basic purpose of an English Language Arts high school course, which is to teach grammar, vocabulary, written communication, literacy, and reading comprehension through diverse literature genres. Her courses allowed students to analyze and explore complex ideas, foster critical and creative thinking skills, and promote self-reflection about the different positions they inhabit in the world – what

¹³ Karen Salazar interview with *Pocho Hour of Power*. KPFK 90.7, Los Angeles. July 11, 2008.

¹⁴ In a workshop that I attended at the 2009 Annual Association of Raza Educators State-Wide Conference, themed “Rethinking Social Justice in Education,” Karen Salazar presented a workshop to participants where I observed how she begins her first day of instruction.

education scholars refer to as critical literacy.¹⁵ From the first day of class, Ms. Salazar's students left with an understanding that they were among the oppressed of the world, but more importantly, that they did not have to be.

Ms. Salazar's teaching pedagogy was heavily influenced by the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, who critical pedagogy is attributed to. Inspired by critical theory and other radical philosophies, critical pedagogy is a teaching approach that strives to engage students beyond reading written texts and to enable students to learn to read the world critically. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1978), Freire defines praxis as a pedagogy in which reflection and action is central to teaching and learning, a process that both students and educators engage in. Through praxis, oppressed people can acquire *conscientization*, an in-depth understanding of the world that leads to critical awareness of their own conditions and contexts. It is through praxis that students and teachers can struggle for liberation.

Critical pedagogy is contrary to the banking method of education often employed in traditional education classrooms. In this traditional model, teachers hold all the knowledge that students will receive and ultimately reiterate on evaluative assessments. For schools such as Jordan that were continuously deemed as failing schools, the banking system of education is often a preferred method for teachers to ensure that students improve their scores on standardized testing. This model of education does not promote

¹⁵ Gary Anderson and Patricia Irvine (1993) define critical literacy as "learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one's experience as historically constructed within specific power relations" (pg. 82), see *Critical Literacy: Politics, Praxis, and the Postmodern*, Eds Colin Lankshear and Peter L. McLaren (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993).

critical thinking, complex problem-posing, or problem-solving. It certainly does not ask students to consider and imagine what liberation may mean for them, their community, and oppressed people of the world.

For an urban school environment such as Jordan in a community such as Watts, a critical pedagogical approach is not only ideal, but necessary. Ms. Salazar described the schooling of her students as “psychological warfare,” in which students are continuously reminded by their school environment “not only do we not love you, we genuinely hate you.”¹⁶ This was a reoccurring issue that was brought up by Ms. Salazar, when she described the school climate and environment at Jordan:

It is dehumanizing to be a Student of Color in an institution that hates you, and that’s the reality of it. Our institutions of “education” hates us. They look at the color of our skin and they treat us with hate. It is not something accidental, coincidental; it is very much on purpose, intentional, methodical, and systematic. As educators, we understand that we have a responsibility to use the classroom as a space for students to understand and analyze what’s going on around them. As both Ana and Mona explained, they knew that things were messed up. They can tell from the first day you step foot on campus that things are not the way they are supposed to be. You know when you walk around what it feels like to be persecuted, you know what it feels like to be dehumanized. No one needs to tell

¹⁶ Karen Salazar, interview with author, May 2009.

you what that's like. What you may need is some help with is understanding why.¹⁷

In this statement, Ms. Salazar expressed the institutional and systemic nature of racism that both Students of Color and Teachers of Color experience in academic institutions.¹⁸ By signifying that the normative experiences at Jordan were “psychological warfare,” it is clear in her analysis that the mental and emotional well-being of students was constantly under attack. For Ms. Salazar, the warfare experienced by students through education was not “coincidental,” but rather part of the normative operation of schools. Her reflections on the normative operations of schools contribute to what scholars and abolitionists identify as domestic warfare (see Chapter One). In this case, the educational apparatus is an extension of the domestic warfare already experienced in the communities where students come from.

For Ms. Salazar, her role as an educator was to enable her students to begin a process of healing from the psychological warfare in their school and, I would add, the domestic warfare that has devastated their communities. She equipped students with the analytical tools and resources to help them understand *why* education is dehumanizing, because, after all, Students of Color do not have to be taught that they are oppressed. It is the role of educators such as Ms. Salazar to provide students with critical and creative

¹⁷ “Karen Salazar and Jordan Students Speak Out!” Panel Discussion with Ms. Salazar and students at the 5th Annual Malcolm X Day at Virginia Park, Santa Monica, CA. August 15, 2008 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9QlXapF3L4>)

¹⁸ Rita Kohli, “Behind School Doors: The Impact of Hostile Racial Climates on Urban Teachers of Color.” *Urban Education* 53, no. 3 (March 2018): 307–33.

thinking skills to understand the complex nature of *how* their oppression is structured as a means for them to transform that structure's intended consequences, such as psychological warfare.

Jordan was not unlike many schools in the region of South Los Angeles that endure a permanence of conflict, violence, and oppression. Ana Graciela Exiga, a Honduran-Mexican student at Jordan during this time, explained how she viewed her school:

The school system is set up for Black and Brown youth to fail. A lot of people that drop out—I don't like to call them drop out. They don't decide, "I'm going to leave school." I call them push out, the disappeared. Once they leave, *donde estan?* They are being pushed out because there is no hope. The reason there is no hope is they see what is going on in their communities and schools. They see that there isn't a quality change. Teachers do not care at all if they are failing and they are not devoting time and effort to help those students. My principals and administrators are being tyrants in their regime, going around in the whole area patrolled by police, makes you wonder, am I in a school or a prison?¹⁹

In this statement, Ana reveals how for her, the educational system was "set up" to fail and "push out" Students of Color. Ana already had a rigorous analysis of her positionality at Jordan, as she indicates that her peers, friends, and community "disappear" once they are

¹⁹ "Karen Salazar and Jordan Students Speak Out!" Panel Discussion with Ms. Salazar and students at the 5th Annual Malcolm X Day at Virginia Park, Santa Monica, CA. August 15, 2008 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9QIXapF3L4>)

pushed out of their schools, much like the way students are pushed out of their communities and into prisons.²⁰ There is a lack of hope because nothing ever changes as “careless” teachers and “tyrant” administrators only serve to perpetuate the status quo of education. With these structural conditions, how can students such as Ana not question whether the place where they are supposed to learn is a school or a prison?

In efforts to combat the psychological warfare that students experienced at Jordan, Ms. Salazar believed that self-love was a weapon to defend and protect oneself against the normative structural violence and neglect. While there are many ways that one can achieve this within the classroom context, Ms. Salazar encouraged her students to undergo a process of self-actualization by using culturally relevant texts, but also by having her students question the books assigned to her courses.²¹ Ms. Salazar explained, “Our students went through their world history books, they’ve gone through their history books, literature books, and about 95% of the material has nothing to do with People of Color.”²² Although Ms. Salazar taught traditional English Language Arts courses, she layered the lessons in her curriculum through an intersectional lens, as she created space

²⁰ The work of Damien Schneider (2008) helps us articulate how the logics of containment and punishment often associated with prisons can be translated outside of prisons, and manifest in schools, for example. See, Damien Schnyder. “Enclosures Abound: Black Cultural Autonomy, Prison Regime and Public Education.” *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 13, no. 3 (Sep 2010): 349-365.

²¹ Allyson Tintiango-Cubales et. al. (2015). “Toward an Ethnic Studies Pedagogy: Implications for K-12 Schools from the Research.” *The Urban Review* 47, no. 1 (2015): 104-125.

²² ARELosAngeles, “KTLA, Save Ms. Salazar, Press Conference” June 12, 2008. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPKf02NPvJE>)

for her students to think about the lack of diverse racial, ethnic, and gender representation within the school's texts.

Radical Self-Love: Un-learning to Learn to Become Whole Again

In one of Ms. Salazar's lessons, she included a 3-page excerpt from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, a district-approved text. In this excerpt, Malcolm recounts the first time he conked his hair, a popular hairstyle from the 1920s-60s among Black men who chemically straightened their natural hair texture to resemble that of White men. For this lesson, students read Malcolm's reflection on the internalized racism and oppression that shaped his identity in his younger years:

This was my first really big step toward self-degradation: when I endured all of that pain, literally burning my flesh to have it look like a white man's hair. I had joined that multitude of Negro men and women in America who are brainwashed into believing that the black people are 'inferior' – and white people 'superior' – that they will even violate and mutilate their God-created bodies to try to look 'pretty' by white standards.²³

While Malcolm is most widely known for his contributions to the Black Power Movement, through this excerpt, students were able to study a historical Black figure who fought for Black liberation and to remember that he also went through a process of

²³ Alex Haley and Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. (New York, Grove Press, 1965): pg. 64.

what Freire called *conscientization*. Ms. Salazar further elaborated on the power this lesson carried for her students:

One of the major lessons we can take from Malcolm is his humility. He was an extremely humble man to be able to reflect on who he is and be critical and recognize that he has faults, I think that's one of the major lessons learned from Malcolm - is that he was constantly reflecting on his identity... Education should be a space to develop our own identities on our own terms, to develop who we are.²⁴

The power that Ms. Salazar's lesson carried was not only that it taught students through American literature the power of the autobiographical genre; it also carried with it important lessons on radical self-love, self-preservation, and self-actualization as powerful tools for liberation. Through self-reflection, Malcolm was able to confront the ways in which self-hatred produced by internalized racism was used as a weapon of psychological warfare. The process of critical self-reflection required a process of un-learning, letting go of ideas and practices that no longer served him. Ms. Salazar's lesson enables all students, and especially Students of Color, to critically reflect on why they may adopt behaviors that can be self-destructive and self-defeating.²⁵ Students can

²⁴ Interview with Karen Salazar and Mark Gonzalez by Sonali Kolhatkar on *Rising Up*, KPFK 90.7 Los Angeles, August 15, 2008.

²⁵ Delgado Solorzano and Dolores Bernal. "Examining Transformational Resistance Through a Critical Race and LatCrit Theory Framework: Chicana and Chicano Students in an Urban Context" *Urban Education* 36 (2001): 308.

identify how ideas and practices they have adopted may no longer serve them and begin a process of transformation that begins from within, and extends outward.

Moreover, Ms. Salazar's lesson taught students the power of writing and documenting their own stories. Ms. Salazar's classroom was the type of classroom students like Ana desired. In an interview with Ana, she remembered her excitement in her history class because students were scheduled to learn about the 1960s. Since Ana was self-educated on organizations such as *Las Adelitas de Aztlan*, Brown Berets, Young Lords, and the Black Panther Party, she was excited to know that she was going to begin a class lesson on a time period when many of these organizations emerged. As I sat with Ana, she reflected on that classroom moment seven years later. "I will never forget," she was eager to let me know. Ana expressed disappointment that in that entire chapter of her history textbook, "There was no mention of these groups. The Black Panther Party was only referenced in one sentence and they were depicted as a terrorist group."²⁶ Ana recounted her disappointment with her history teacher who was Japanese-American and survived an internment camp as a child during World War II, but who "demonized radical organizations" in his teaching. In a school environment such as Jordan, there are many students such as Ana who are eager to learn, but whose interest in learning becomes continuously squandered with constant disappointments such as these. Ana wanted an educational system that accurately reflected the historic struggles and victories of minoritized groups.

²⁶ Ana Graciela Exiga interview with author, July 14, 2016.

In a school environment that offered no hope for students and teachers, classroom spaces such as Ms. Salazar's were glimmers of critical hope²⁷ for students such as Ana, who were eager to learn about the significant contributions that People of Color have made in the world, but more importantly for a curriculum that enabled student's agency.²⁸ Although Ana was not one of Ms. Salazar's assigned students, she often visited Ms. Salazar's classroom during lunch or after school:

When I would go into her classroom - her classroom had posters from Freire, very progressive political posters. I would tell myself, "I wish I could take her class." I was tired of being in an English class where I could not relate to anything. Once you stepped into her classroom you saw *Lakota Woman, The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and she would teach parts of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and students would relate to it. These were the things that students were experiencing since day one of their K-12.

Ana recalls reading books from Ms. Salazar's classroom library that translated to her lived experiences, explaining, "I used my life experience to understand." She further explains how it made no sense to study theory, even if it were by People of Color, if it was not to encourage students to apply it in their lives, stating, "It doesn't matter to

²⁷ Jeffrey M.R. Duncan-Andrade "Note to Educators: Hope Required When Growing Roses in Concrete" *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 2 (Summer 2009).

²⁸ De los Rios theorizes on the importance of cultivating a classroom space that reflects what students will learn in the curriculum. See, Cati de los Rios and Gilda L. Ochoa, "The People Divided Will Never Be Defeated: Reflections on Community, Collaboration, and Chance," *Journal of Latinos and Education* 11 (2012): 271-279.

memorize all of Gloria Anzaldua's and Audre Lorde's writings. To me, if you can take that and put it into action, that's what matters."²⁹ Ana offered a sobering critique against dominant multiculturalist approaches in education that often tokenize ethnic people, cultures, and historic struggles.

For students like Ana, education was best achieved when it encouraged what Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* defined as praxis: critical reflection, theory, and action. It was not enough for Ana to learn about social change and justice if the culturally relevant curriculum did not simultaneously promote student agency and their quest for social justice. Students such as Ana did not only want to learn about oppression, she wanted to confront it in her daily life. Ana wanted to transform oppressive structures, and, like many students at Jordan, she wanted to begin that process by confronting the inequities they faced every day at their school.

The Watts Student Union's 26 Point Plan

The collective desire of students to change their school environment led to the formation of the Watts Student Union (WSU) at Jordan High. WSU was a student organization that formed because students wanted to identify and address problems within their school. Students collectively decided that WSU was not going to register as a chartered school club. Students were intentional about this since they did not want to have any limitations that may come with student government and administration. Ana recalled how the WSU was initially a group of "nerds" and "popular kids" who were part

²⁹ Ana Graciela Exiga interview with author, July 14, 2016.

of the magnet academy that she was also a part of at Jordan. WSU garnered more visibility when they began a survey to identify the most pressing issues on their campus. With the development of the survey, other students who were not in the magnet academy, who she described as the “*cholos*” (gangsters), began to notice and join. This was important because the “nerds” in the magnet academy at Jordan developed the survey and identified needs across the other three academies, which drew the interest of students from those academies.

Students who already questioned the disparity in resources across the four academies began to unify as a collective student body under the WSU. With a stronger body of students, the WSU created a *26 Point Plan* that was inspired by the Black Panther Party’s *Ten Point Platform*, a platform that arose through an assessment of the social and economic conditions in the Black community.³⁰ Similarly, for the WSU, their points identified and addressed a range of school-based issues including: accountability, curriculum, mental health, resources, budget decisions, and transparency.³¹

For example, that year students grew very concerned when the principal, Mr. Strachan, used unauthorized school funds to place a metal detector at the school’s main entrance. Students were outraged to know that money that could be used for student

³⁰ For more on how the Black Panther Party’s use of ten point platform can be used in the classroom see, Wayne Au, “What We Want, What We Believe: Teaching with the Black Panther’s Ten Point Program,” *Rethinking Schools Magazine*, 16, no. 1 (Fall 2001). (<https://zinnedproject.org/materials/black-panthers-ten-point-program/>)

³¹ The author was never able to retrieve the list of points. These points were brought up through the author’s interviews with Ana Graciela Exiga and Karen Salazar. The points noted in the chapter are based on their recollection.

programming or upgraded instructional material was instead used in a matter they felt made their school environment more prison-like. Students were very critical of the high number of suspensions and of classrooms that were separated by gender. None of these reforms were done in consultation with students, teachers, or parents. When the principal got word that students conducted the WSU's survey, the principal mentioned to the students that surveys were forbidden on school grounds, even if the students created them. Hence, by disseminating the survey across Jordan's four academies, the students could be punished. The repressive sentiment experienced by students was also felt by teachers, as turnover rates for the school were high. Ultimately, Jordan had become a school where students, teachers, and parents alike could not play a significant role in critical areas of decision-making.

Consequently, the students of Jordan collectively listed the changes they wanted to see implemented in their school and brought those issues to the attention of administrators. While it was not perceived or received positively by administration, the students were doing the job of their administrators, and in effect, they were transforming the established power relation that situated them as consumers of education instead of agents of change. It was not until the students were viewed as a threat to what had become the status quo that administrators began to take note of their organized efforts. The WSU maneuvered through this situation by making last-minute changes to the date, time, and location of their meetings. They even met off-campus at a local community center run by the non-profit organization Community Coalition ("CoCo"), where they were able to obtain resources to print and share materials that helped their organizing

efforts. Some students, such as Ana, already had an established relationship with CoCo, because they were part of a larger youth-led coalition, the South Central Youth Empowered Thru Action (SC-YEA), that was based out of CoCo.

The SC-YEA had created a different survey a year prior that had been disseminated across high schools in South Los Angeles.³² That survey collected 6,008 student responses from December of 2007 to February of 2008.³³ On April 24th, 2008, the findings of that survey were released at the CoCo office during a youth-led forum with 150 in attendance. The forum was titled, “The Uncensored Truth: The Reality of South Los Angeles Students Face.”³⁴ Included among the survey’s seven key findings were, for example, that 93% of students wanted their school to offer more college-preparatory courses,³⁵ only 27% of students felt safe at school, 63% of students wanted youth programming as an alternative to gangs, and two third of the students indicated they

³² The schools surveyed were Jordan, Crenshaw, Dorsey, Fremont, Locke, Manual Arts, and Washington Prep. Students from Gardena High also participated, but the survey was conducted outside of the school.

³³ The youth also received technical guidance from Loyola Marymount University’s psychology department.

³⁴ Diana Escobar and Joseph Walker, Manual Arts High School students interviewed with Sonali Kolhatkar on Up Rising With Sonali, KPFK 90.7 Radio Los Angeles. April 25, 2008. (<https://uprisingradio.org/home/2008/04/25/school-security-and-college-prep-are-biggest-concerns-for-south-la-students/>)

³⁵ In 2005, due to demand from communities such as those from Community Coalition, the LAUSD passed a resolution to implement A-G college preparatory courses in all of its high schools by 2012.

wanted ethnic studies classes.³⁶ Soon after the forum, the *Los Angeles Times* published an article titled, “In Poorest Schools, Fear, Despair Rule,” where the survey’s results were shared. LAUSD school board President Monica Garcia was quoted stating for the newspaper, “This is energizing. This is encouraging. We need the consumers of our services to be advocates of change.”³⁷ However, the main focus of that *LA Times* article was on a follow-up survey conducted with 52 of the students by professors at Loyola Marymount University, who revealed that the students displayed symptoms of clinical depression.

In fact, the dismissal of Ms. Salazar was a result of administrative backlash to these youth-led initiatives across South Los Angeles and within Jordan, in which students organized to identify the issues in their respective high schools and across other high schools in South LA. As Ms. Salazar recalled regarding the moment leading to the announcement of her dismissal:

Things really escalated when again another group of students from Jordan’s Youth Empowered thru Action, which is a community coalition in LA, organized, passing out surveys to identify student needs in schools. *The LA Times* published a report based on some of the research the youth had done on how the lack of

³⁶ Diana Escobar and Joseph Walker, Manual Arts High School students interviewed with Sonali Kolhatkar on Up Rising With Sonali, KPFK 90.7 Radio Los Angeles. April 25, 2008. (<https://uprisingradio.org/home/2008/04/25/school-security-and-college-prep-are-biggest-concerns-for-south-la-students/>)

³⁷ Mitchell Landsberg, “In Poorest Schools, Fear, Despair Rule.” *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 2008 (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2008-apr-26-me-survey26-story.html>)

culturally relevant education and a quality education often times leads to mental health issues among young people, including depression. It was an embarrassment for the school. At this point, I was the faculty advisor for the youth. At this time, it just so happened that I was teaching a section from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.³⁸

Ms. Salazar was notified two weeks after she had had a classroom observation – the same observation in which she was teaching the 3-page excerpt from the book – that her contract would not be renewed for the following school year. Evidently, Ms. Salazar was seen as one among those to blame for student-driven initiatives that identified and sought ways to address the issues within and across South LA schools.

Administrators engaged in tactics to pacify student organizing, such as calling parents, but these tactics did not work. Instead, parents such as Ana's also questioned why administrators called if normally that was the role of teachers who directly worked with students. It was only after the failure of administrators' efforts to stop students that Mr. Strachan and other school administrators shifted their attention to teachers, Ms. Salazar among them. Ms. Salazar recounted this sudden shift in focus:

I was working with a group of students in terms of their own personal development. They were ready to take action and formed the Watts Student Union with a list of 26 demands that ranged from up-to-date academic records, ethnic studies, technology for the school, and time off on permanent traumatic stress days. They were on point. At first the administration thought it was cute little kids

³⁸ Karen Salazar, interview with author, May 2009.

wanting their education, but when they realized, wait, we are going to have to be accountable to these student demands? It is not just these cute little things and that they actually mean what they say, and they want concrete changes to improve the quality of school life. That is when the backlash began against students. Students were pulled into the office, searched, and when they saw that students are not easily intimidated, they went after teachers.³⁹

Ms. Salazar was known on campus as one of the few teachers who always opened her classroom doors to students, and she stayed after school and helped students with additional tutoring on weekends. She thus became a prime target for administrators. While most teachers are evaluated no more than 4 times a year, Ms. Salazar was evaluated 15 times that school year. It was toward the middle-to-end of the school year that suddenly her evaluations changed from satisfactory to unsatisfactory, and administrators retroactively changed previous evaluations to unsatisfactory, claiming the wrong forms were initially used.

Ms. Karen Salazar was notified in April that after the completion of her second year at Jordan, her contract would not be renewed the following year, and that she would be effectively laid off. Ms. Salazar was conflicted. She was unsure if she should tell her students that she would not return to Jordan the following year because her students already had so much on their minds at the time. She did not want students to have yet another issue to worry about. After much consideration, she made the difficult decision to tell her students that she was not scheduled to return the next school year. Little did she

³⁹ Karen Salazar interview with author, May 2009.

know at the time, the students were compelled to ignite a seven-month campaign with the goal of re-instating their teacher.

“Students 4 Salazar” Rise in Defense of their Public Education

Only after the administration at Jordan could not stop the students from organizing on behalf of their *26 Point Plan* did they go after the faculty that supported the students’ visions and efforts for school reform.⁴⁰ Speaking to the backlash experienced by faculty, Ms. Salazar explained, “A colleague, Mark Gonzalez, and I were accused of being the masterminds. We were split up when at the time we were in the same small learning community. Mark was sent to a 9th grade academy and given scripted curriculums.”⁴¹ As a counter-insurgent tactic, the administration separated Ms. Salazar and Mr. Gonzalez by relying on the school’s divided structure of small learning communities, and, as if that separation was not sufficient, Mr. Gonzalez was given scripted curriculums to follow.⁴²

Principal Strachan presented multiple reasons for Ms. Salazar’s dismissal. In addition to submitting negative evaluations of Ms. Salazar’s teaching during the school year, the principal later stated that Ms. Salazar was laid off for indoctrinating students,

⁴⁰ Interview with Karen Salazar and Mark Gonzalez by Sonali Kolhatkar on *Rising Up*, KPFK 90.7 Los Angeles, August 15, 2008.

⁴¹ Karen Salazar interview with author, May 2009.

⁴² For a reading on the negative impact scripted curriculums have on both teachers and students, see Rocio Dresser, “The Impact of Scripted Literacy Instruction on Teachers and Students” *Issues in Teacher Education* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2012)

promoting militancy, and diverging from the California English Language Arts standards, and due to budgets cuts.⁴³ In one written evaluation that went into her file, Mr. Strachan referenced the lesson where she used the 3-page excerpt by Malcolm X to state that she was “brainwashing” her students and forcing “extremist viewpoints” on them based on that lesson.⁴⁴ Mr. Strachan thought her lessons were biased and “Afro-centric.”

Conversely, a veteran teacher who mentored Ms. Salazar observed the same lesson on the day she was evaluated. This teacher concluded that those statements were inaccurate.⁴⁵

One of these evaluations was based on a class observation where Ms. Salazar was teaching her British Literature senior class, and students were studying Shakespeare and sonnets. Ms. Salazar reflected on the administration’s unjust evaluation:

At the time of the Jena Six case, I had them do a cross textual analysis of the Jena Six trial, Emit Till’s case, and their own experiences with law, police enforcement. Then they had to write their own analysis in the form of a Shakespearean sonnet. The administration said I was creating militancy with the students without saying anything about their analysis or writing skills. Everything

⁴³ Los Angeles Unified School District meeting, September 2nd 2008. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPKf02NPvJE>)

⁴⁴ “LA School Teacher Fired for Being too ‘Afrocentric’; Arizona Bill Proposes to Prohibit Teaching Critical of Western Civilization” Democracy Now! June 18, 2008. (https://www.democracynow.org/2008/6/18/la_school_teacher_fired_for_being)

⁴⁵ Howard Blume, “School Rallies Around Dismissed Teacher.” *Los Angeles Times*. June 12, 2008. (<http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jun/12/local/me-jordan12>)

was satisfactory except for a two-page statement on how it is unacceptable to create militancy.⁴⁶

Throughout the school year, these types of remarks, inconsistent statements, and unannounced observations of her classroom made Ms. Salazar feel harassed, as she was continuously singled out by administrators.⁴⁷ When students learned of Ms. Salazar's dismissal, they immediately began to organize with the help of the surrounding community. Students spent countless hours toward the end of the school year. Some of the seniors involved were preparing for prom, graduation, and completing their coursework. In spite of the unexpected call to action in defense of Ms. Salazar, students organized relentlessly.

After pressure from the students and larger community at the LAUSD's school board meetings, Superintendent Raymond Cortines released a statement that indicated: "The principal was exactly right in removing the teacher. She was presenting material to the students in ways that did not meet state standards."⁴⁸ After this statement was released Ms. Salazar demonstrated that her curriculum was aligned with the standards. In response, a spokesperson for the Superintendent later stated, "course materials are

⁴⁶ Karen Salazar interview with author, May 2009.

⁴⁷ Los Angeles Unified School District meeting, September 2 2008.
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPKf02NPvJE>)

⁴⁸ ARELosAngeles, "KTLA, Save Salazar, Press Conference" June 12, 2008.
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPKf02NPvJE>)

appropriate, but the advocacy may have crossed the line.”⁴⁹ Student advocacy was always the problem for administrators. After all, as Ms. Salazar pointed out when speaking to school board members at a district meeting, she did not see how a lesson on Malcolm X was problematic if teachers are constantly encouraged to provide multicultural and culturally relevant material to students. It was okay for Ms. Salazar to teach about Malcolm X as long as students did not apply the principles he fought, lived, and died for to their own lives. While teachers were encouraged by the district to teach multicultural material, they were not encouraged to enable their students to translate that knowledge to their lives.

The visibility of student organizing garnered mass public attention and led administrators to change Ms. Salazar’s once satisfactory evaluation to unsatisfactory as a way to justify her dismissal. The school administrators explained that the wrong form had been used, therefore she had to be re-evaluated with the new form. Evidently, the administration laid out the groundwork to be able to effectively have her dismissed. In every space that Ms. Salazar had an opportunity to control the narrative of the growing student-led grassroots struggle around her dismissal, she reminded spectators that it was not about her. She continuously pushed back against the savior narrative often associated with educators that teach in low income communities where the majority of the students are students of color. Instead, she reminded everyone that the problems at Jordan were historically constructed to deny self-determination to people of color:

⁴⁹ Diana Escobar and Joseph Walker, Manual Arts High School students interviewed with Sonali Kolhatkar on Up Rising With Sonali, KPFK 90.7 Radio Los Angeles. April 25, 2008. (<http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jun/12/local/me-jordan12>)

I want to remind you that this is not about me. This is so much bigger than me.

This has to do with an entire system that does not listen to us. This has to do with an entire system, a school system that has historically been a project of colonization. A school system that historically has been used to rob people of color of our identities. A school system that has been used to make us forget who we are so that we hate ourselves instead of loving ourselves because the minute we love ourselves we defend ourselves from the attacks that come down at us.⁵⁰

In this statement, given to a crowd of parents, students, and teachers who stood outside of Jordan, Ms. Salazar spoke back to the historical origins of public education for Children of Color. The lack of community control in public schools is not new. The fact that this entire incident began because students were trying to have more control over how the school was governed, speaks to this statement. Rather than contributing to the narratives of deviancy often associated with Youth of Color in communities such as Watts, Ms. Salazar continuously reminded her students that their activism were acts of love in defense of their community and that their courage was honorable.

It was important for students to have the support of teachers in their community who embraced their collective refusals and provided support. Ms. Salazar's case was further amplified because she was a part of an organization of teachers that fought in defense of their communities. She described:

⁵⁰ "Fire in Watts: Jordan Students Rise for Ms. Salazar" Six Sun Productions. Last accessed June 11, 2019. (<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2w458o>)

One of the major reasons why my case was able to get a lot of attention was because I am already a part of an organization that does a lot of work. I am a member of the Association of Raza Educators, having that organized space already set up to do that work, to defend our people, when the [teachers] union is not going to defend our people, students, families, and communities.⁵¹

Many ARE teachers were actively involved in helping students mobilize and amplify their campaign. For example, Mr. Ron Gochez, an ARE member and history teacher at Santee High School (“Santee”) in South Central who supported the campaign, reminded students, “You are on the right side of history. You are correct.” These positive affirmations by teachers were a constant theme throughout the campaign. At one rally, Mr. Jose Lara, another high school teacher in South Central and also an ARE member stated, “A culturally relevant education means that our voices, our stories are being told inside of our classrooms, validated by our teachers, and where we can learn how to defend ourselves.” Mr. Lara’s statements speak to Ana’s concerns that she did not just want to have the voices of People of Color incorporated into her classroom curriculums if students could not translate that knowledge into their lives.

One Among Many Teachers Pushed Out

Due to the effective organizing efforts of the communities in and around Jordan, the “Students 4 Salazar” campaign acquired national attention. The campaign reminded

⁵¹ Interview with Karen Salazar and Mark Gonzalez by Sonali Kolhatkar on Rising Up, KPFK 90.7 Los Angeles, August 15, 2008.

the communities that watched it unfold that the case at Jordan was not an isolated incident. For example, the campaign referenced another case that was almost identical to what transpired at Jordan: the story of Ms. Amitis Motevalli, an Iranian art and art history teacher who was fired from Locke High School in 2001. Ms. Motevalli refused to allow security guards to “randomly search” students for weapons⁵² while her class was in session, and in one incident when they attempted to do so, students walked out in protest.⁵³ The random searches of her class were a direct result of the support she provided to students at Locke who formed the Locke Student Union (LSU). In response to the administration’s disciplinary action against Ms. Motevalli, students created a list of 10 demands that were interpreted by the principal, Ms. Webb, as “teacher demands.” The demands were reported for *LA Weekly* as such:

First on the list was "an immediate end to brutality toward students, including illegal searches and seizures, unlawful arrests, constant surveillance, and excessive use of force." They demanded qualified teachers in every class, and that teachers stay awake and not talk on cell phones. They demanded books and materials, the hiring of additional counselors, more extracurricular activities and sports, a well-rounded curriculum. They demanded an end to standardized tests like the Stanford 9, which they considered racist, and to be informed of their right to opt out of taking such exams. They demanded more "positive social events"

⁵² Since 1993, it was district policy to conduct regular random weapon searches.

⁵³ To read more see, Ben Ehrenreich, “Locke Down” *LA Weekly*. February 6, 2003. (<https://www.laweekly.com/news/locke-down-2135920>)

like dances, field trips and, tragically, vigils. They demanded access to the school's budget to see how funds were being spent. In short, they demanded the right to have a voice in their education, and, more basically, they demanded an education. Before the semester ended, they would have to add an 11th demand: "The freedom to express injustice without retaliation toward teachers, students or parents."⁵⁴

When Ms. Motevalli did not align with the school's normative securitization, she was seen as an obstacle who not only refused to cooperate, but who incited her students to also refuse to comply.

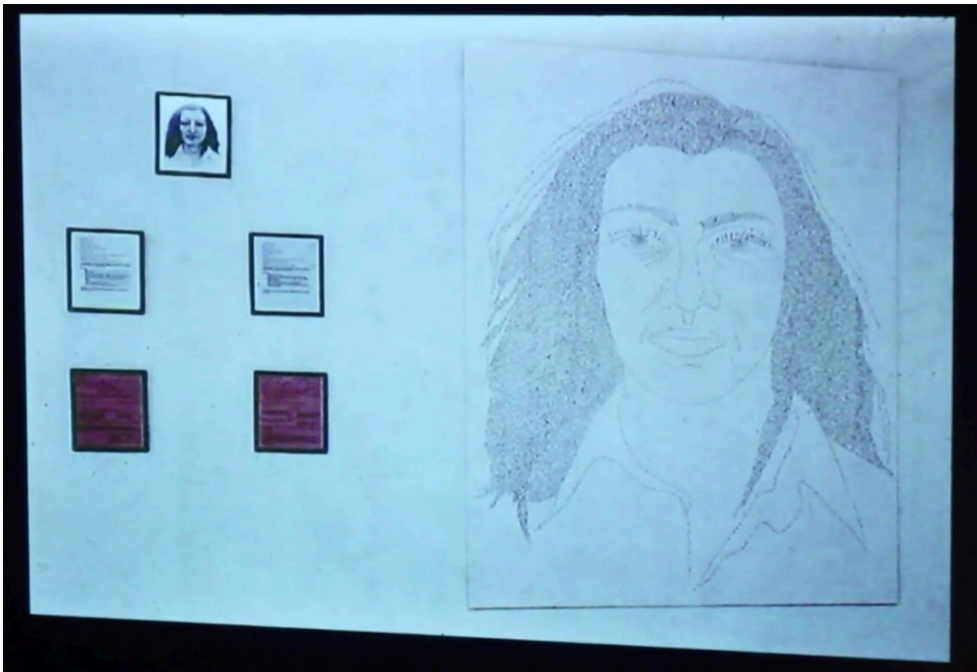


Figure 3. Ms. Motevalli's self-portrait.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Screenshot captured from "Artist Talk: Amitis Motevalli" MOCAD. October 16, 2012. (<https://vimeo.com/52342178>)

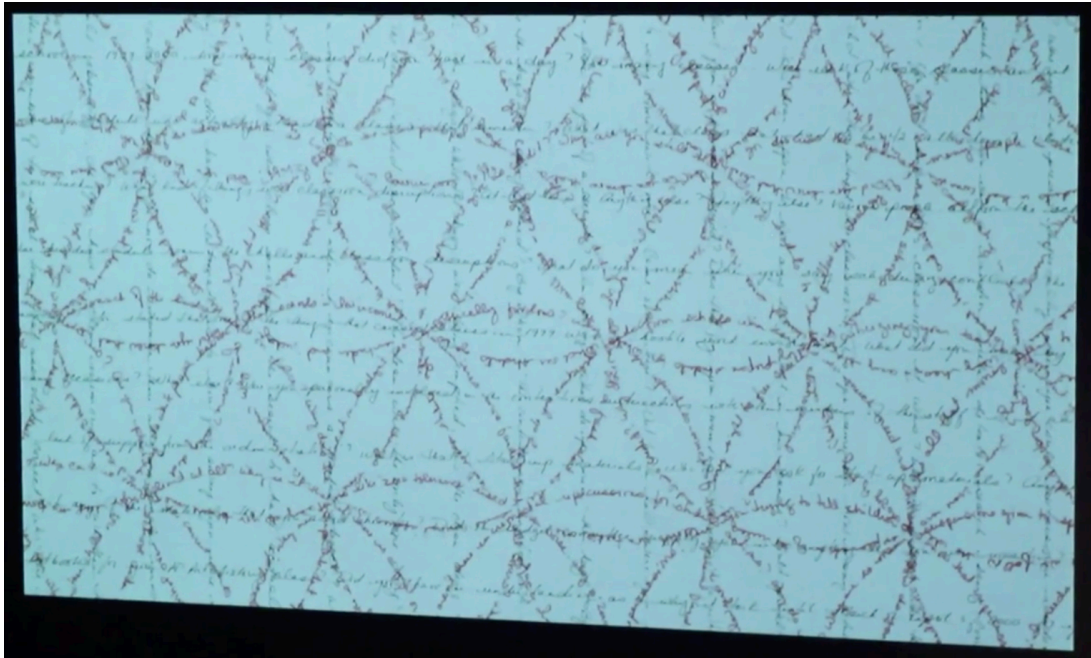


Figure 4. Locke student narratives as part of Ms. Motevalli's self-portrait.⁵⁶

Ms. Motevalli experienced retaliation for her student's dissent and for her insubordination by being fired from Locke. In the midst of her lawsuit against the district,⁵⁷ Ms. Motevalli produced a self-portrait as part of the lesson the class was completing. In a public lecture a decade later, she recalled the self-portrait she produced with her class in the following way:

At that point, my students and I started to create a lot of work, and this was one of the pieces. This was recreating one of the lesson plans that I had, we did a self-

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ *Amis Motevalli v. Los Angeles Unified School District* (Case Number: B165380)

portrait, this was my self-portrait. In the big one it is all the story of how the students and I organized, and the conditions at the school. It is all written in text.⁵⁸ Ms. Motevalli utilized the student momentum around her defense to produce art such as her self-portrait that used the text-drawing medium to incorporate student truth-telling of what everyday life was like at Locke (Figure 3 and 4).

Additionally, throughout the Students 4 Salazar campaign, speakers constantly referenced two middle school teachers from Celerity Nascent Charter School (“Celerity Nascent”), a predominately Black charter school, who only a year prior were fired for an incident that involved one of the teacher’s use of the book *A Wreath for Emmett Till* (2005) in her class. The book was written by Marilyn Nelson and Philippe Lardy for young readers, and was based on a narrative poem on the life of Emmett Till. In 1955, Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old Black boy from Chicago was lynched by a mob of White men in Mississippi while visiting family for allegedly whistling at a White woman. Emmett’s mother courageously left her only son’s casket open for the world to see the horrors of lynching. Ms. Marisol Alba, a seventh-grade social studies teacher who had taught at Celerity Nascent since it opened in 2005, only two years prior, scheduled her class to recite the poem at the school’s Black history month assembly.⁵⁹ The principal, Ms. Grace Canada, cancelled the assembly altogether due to the scheduled student

⁵⁸ Amis Motevalli, “Artist Talk: Amis Motevalli.” MOCAD. October 16, 2012. (<https://vimeo.com/52342178>)

⁵⁹ “Teachers Fired over Emmett Till Poem.” NPR. March 28, 2007. (<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=9184608?storyId=9184608>)

performance. For the principal, whistling at a woman was equivalent to sexual harassment and she would not tolerate a poem with that content for an assembly with kindergarteners.⁶⁰

Defending the principal's decision to cancel the assembly, in an article for the *Los Angeles Times*, the co-founder and Executive Director of Celerity Educational Group ("Celerity"), Vielka McFarlane, was quoted stating the following:

Our whole goal is how do we get these kids to not look at all of the bad things that could happen to them and instead focus on the process of how do we become the next surgeon or the next politician. ... We don't want to focus on how the history of the country has been checkered but on how do we dress for success, walk proud and celebrate all the accomplishments we've made.⁶¹

The statement given by Celerity's founder reflects a sentiment that was also felt by some parents at the school who believed Black History Month was about celebrating success and not about commemorating those who had given their lives and propelled the Black freedom struggle forward. Ms. Alba and another teacher who expressed strong support for the performance, Mr. Sean Strauss, were immediately fired. Given that the charter school's contract allowed for the school to fire teachers with or without just cause, their contract was immediately terminated. The entire school community, including students

⁶⁰ Carla Rivera, "Not the Lesson They had Intended." *Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 2007 (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2007-mar-19-me-newcharter19-story.html>)

⁶¹ Ibid

and parents who established a strong connection with their teachers, were devastated with their loss (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Ms. Alba at Celerity.⁶²

As the school year ended, Ms. Salazar appeared on *Democracy Now!* with Amy Goodman alongside Professor Rodolfo Acuña, whose book *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* had recently been identified among the list of books to be banned from Arizona's Tucson Unified School District (TUSD). Other books on the banned list included Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*. Since 2006, Arizona's Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tom Horne, had worked actively to eliminate the state's Ethnic Studies Department, which he believed instilled racist values in students, and the TUSD's banning of books was one result of his

⁶² Reproduced from the *Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 2007.

campaign.⁶³ During the airing, Ms. Salazar shared her story and viewers were able to see how the campaign for her re-instatement was connected to larger attacks on ethnic studies.

Campaign into the Summer

Ms. Salazar was present throughout the summer campaign to affirm the students of their strength. “You embody what it means to be a warrior-scholar, a freedom-fighting intellectual. You are part of the long legacy, the strong history, of fighting back.”⁶⁴ It can be frightening for Students of Color who express dissent toward authoritative figures, therefore, it is important to provide reassurance that people in authority are not always correct. Students are constantly reminded when they are wrong, so it is important that they see adults, especially those in positions of authority, acknowledge when they are wrong. Moreover, Ms. Salazar made the point to state that the dissent expressed by students was not anti-intellectual. Rather than excluding or attempting to pacify the collective refusal of youth, adults should listen more carefully to the concerns of students. Ms. Salazar reminded her students that they are part of a longer tradition of fighting for justice. In other words, students were not only studying important historical figures such as Malcolm X, they were contributing to the Black radical tradition that he was a part of. People of Color have made significant intellectual and political contributions that should

⁶³ Tom Horne. “Open Letter to the Citizens of Tucson.” June 11, 2007.

⁶⁴ Howard Blume, “School Rallies around Dismissed Teacher.” *Los Angeles Times*. June 12, 2008. (<http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jun/12/local/me-jordan12>)

be studied in the classroom; equally important, space should also be made for the intellectual and political contributions that Students of Color could make to their schools and communities.

Students organized press conferences and rallies in front of their school to draw attention to this cause. At rallies it was common to see students holding signs that read, “Learning about ourselves = loving ourselves,” “Our education is at stake!” “Out with repressive administrators. In with heroic teachers such as Salazar,” “I love Salazar and Malcolm X,” “Saving Salazar, by any means necessary,” and “Salazar = Teaching REAL History!” While holding these signs, students along with the community would yell out chants such as, “Teaching is not a crime!” “We want Salazar!” “Salazar si, Strachan no!” and “We’ll be back! We’ll be back!” Among the most vocal student leaders was Ana, who at one of the rallies stated:

She [Ms. Salazar] encourages her students to continue on. She gives them the push. She doesn’t give up on students. She says, “Okay, if you are struggling in my class, I will take time off and help you after school.” Most teachers don’t even do that. And the fact that she is teaching us about our culture and things that are relevant to us, that’s what they are afraid of. They are scared of a teacher who does that because that involves critical thinking. They don’t like students who question or who think critically. They just want students to observe everything and then regurgitate back to them.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ “Fire in Watts: Jordan Students Rise for Ms. Salazar” Six Sun Productions. Las accessed June 11, 2019. (<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2w458o>)

The problem was that the critical pedagogy practiced at Jordan threatened a school culture of complacency, a culture embraced by standards-driven curriculum that were the norm for similar schools throughout Los Angeles. Students had become active agents in the process to change the conditions of their own school, and when the school terminated Ms. Salazar's contract, the students at Jordan were given even more reason to organize in defense of the type of education they wanted.

Punishing Teachers and Students

In targeting Ms. Salazar, other supportive teachers were caught in the crossfire, such as English Language Arts teacher Mr. Mark Gonzalez. As discussed previously, Ms. Salazar was separated from working with Mr. Gonzalez, who co-taught certain periods with her. Mr. Gonzalez at the time was a well-known poet and activist. After he was prevented from co-teaching with Ms. Salazar, he was given "scripted curriculums" that gave him word-for-word scripts to teach his students. Mr. Gonzalez was vocal throughout the campaign, as he continuously criticized the administration. For example, at a press conference, he was critical of the lack of up-to-date student records, decrying how "Students are being put in class that they have already passed. Why are you having to repeat and retake a class that you have already received a C, B, an A in, and not be transferred out for 4 weeks because we are still trying to figure out the master schedule."⁶⁶ This was a common concern that students expressed in their demands. For

⁶⁶ "Fire in Watts: Jordan Students Rise for Ms. Salazar" Six Sun Productions. Las accessed June 11, 2019. (<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2w458o>)

Mr. Gonzalez, teaching was not just a job. Mr. Gonzalez described the dismissal of Ms. Salazar as, “It’s a deliberate action to send both a message and a precedent.”⁶⁷ By the end of the campaign, it was reported that 15 teachers resigned in protest, including Mr. Gonzalez. In his letter of resignation, he expressed making the painful decision as a result of the attacks and harassment experienced by both educators and students.⁶⁸

The stakes for engaging in political behavior are extremely high for both students and educators. Toward the end of the campaign, Ms. Salazar expressed at a school board meeting that she felt “punished” by the actions taken by administration at her school and in the district. She stated that although she was still eligible to be hired in the district, no school would hire her because of the incident at Jordan.⁶⁹ Essentially, Ms. Salazar was blacklisted from teaching in the LAUSD’s public schools. At a panel, Ana stressed to a crowd of community members from throughout Los Angeles that:

If we don’t stand up then there will be other people coming to our school saying that they want to change our school, but without student input, without even recognizing that we have a voice, we have rights. Students need to realize that.

⁶⁷ Interview with Karen Salazar and Mark Gonzalez by Sonali Kolhatkar on *Rising Up*, KPFFK, August 15, 2008.

⁶⁸ A letter of resignation by HBO Def Poet and Educator, Mark Gonzalez. June 2008. (<https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/blackleftunity/2X16g0kA26Y>)

⁶⁹ Los Angeles Unified School District meeting, September 2nd 2008. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPKf02NPvJE>)

Don't be scared. I used to be scared too. It's like, why should I be scared? I'm trying to help my fellow comrades.⁷⁰

Ana's statement, informed by her lived experiences in Watts, was visionary and premonitory, as she predicted precisely where Jordan was headed. The following year, in 2009, the LAUSD drafted a new policy, known as Public School Choice (PSC), meant to address the district's persistently failing schools. The subsequent chapter presents the district's response to the fiscal crisis through market-oriented solutions that outsourced the lowest performing schools to private entities, such as charter schools and non-profits. Ultimately, Jordan was subject to the second implementation of the PSC policy and again emerged in a controversial spotlight as Jordan became a co-located school campus with the Mayor's non-profit Partnership for Los Angeles Schools (PLAS) and the charter school operator Green Dot Public Schools.

Conclusion

As reported by the *Los Angeles Times*, before the end of the 2008 school year, LAUSD took a bold step in voting to cut \$400 million from its budget by laying off hundreds of administrators and clerical staff, including 65 math and reading coaches, 19 school nurses, and 19 counselors.⁷¹ While many cuts were made, LAUSD's School Police department was left untouched, which signaled the district's prioritization of

⁷⁰ Jordan Youth Empowered thru Action Panel with students, May 2008. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3sIO8Oh6OtE>)

⁷¹ Jason Song and Howard Blume, "L.A. Unified to cut 507 Staff and Clerical Jobs" *Los Angeles Times*. June 11, 2008. (<http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jun/11/local/me-laUSD11>)

campus “security” over a quality education. These conditions further exacerbated the disinvestment in public education and led to the district PSC policy decision, which essentially allowed market forces to determine the fate of traditional public schools by outsourcing them to private entities.

This chapter presented multiple portraits of students and teachers engaged in insurgent learning in spite of and in response to the district’s recession-exacerbated disinvestment in public education. From the WSU at Jordan to the LSU at Locke, it is evident that when students rise in defense of an education that they value and demand their administrators to provide for them, the stakes are high and punitive. The Student 4 Salazar campaign that took place in 2008 around the Jordan school community is testament to the untethered brilliance that emanates from both students and educators when they are given the resources, support, and means to dictate the structure and daily operation of their schools. From the demands for ethnic studies courses to mental health resources, students and teachers alike know what is best because they are and have always been at the frontlines of the struggles in public education. The visions that emerged from these incidents directly contradict and are at odds with the visions that emerge from an elite network of power comprised of politicians, philanthropists, and businessmen who are invested in a neoliberal agenda of education.

As the next chapter examines, both the LAUSD’s PSC policy and President Obama’s national approach to the recession through the competitive grant Race to the Top (RTTT) created an education policy landscape that enabled the formation of the California law known as the parent trigger law (PTL). These changes all aligned through

the efforts of the non-profit Parent Revolution, which between 2009 and 2011, succeeded in co-authoring education policy, one at the local and another at the state level: LAUSD's PSC and CA's PTL.

CHAPTER FOUR

¡TENEMOS ÁNIMO, PERO NO JUSTICIA!: COMMUNITIES OF SOUTH LOS ANGELES IN DEFENSE OF THEIR PUBLIC SCHOOLS, 2009 – 2011

“You seem to have cracked the code,”¹ President Obama’s newly appointed Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan,² told Steve Barr, the founder of Green Dot Public Schools, at a late March 2009 meeting intended for Duncan to learn about Green Dot’s takeover of Alain Leroy Locke High School (“Locke”) in Watts, California. Duncan wanted to know the secret to this bold, first of its kind, charter school takeover. At this meeting, Duncan revealed to Barr that he planned to commit billions of dollars from the education stimulus package to a “Locke-style takeover” meant to transform the lowest 1% of schools across the country. Duncan referred to President Barack Obama’s *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009: Education Jobs and Reform (ARRA)*, a \$787 billion stimulus package signed the month prior in response to the Great Recession.³ The ARRA stimulus package was meant to create jobs and encourage education reforms. Duncan particularly admired Green Dot’s focus on creating charter high schools:

¹ Douglas McGray, “The Instigator: A Crusader’s Plan to Remake Failing Schools.” *The New Yorker*. May 11, 2009. (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/05/11/the-instigator>).

² Arne Duncan previously served as Chief Executive Officer of the Chicago Public Schools and authored the controversial Renaissance 2010. See, Pauline Lipman and Nathan Haines, “From Accountability to Privatization and African American Exclusion: Chicago’s ‘Renaissance 2010.’” *Educational Policy* 21, no. 3 (July 2007): pp. 471-502;

³ The *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009: Education Jobs and Reform (ARRA)* was signed on February 17, 2009.

The toughest work in urban education today is what you do with large failing high schools... Teach for America, NewSchools Venture Fund, the Broad Foundation—all these folks are doing extraordinary work in public education... Nobody national is turning around large failing high schools.⁴

In response to Duncan's admiration of Green Dot's takeover of Locke, Barr thought, "If you'd asked a month ago, 'What about Green Dot America?', I would have said, 'No way.' But if this President wants to get after it I'm going to reconsider." In fact, Barr's meeting with the Secretary of Education inspired him to launch Green Dot America,⁵ a project intended to take Green Dot's model and network of charter schools to a national level.

The idea to expand Green Dot nationally emerged at a time when Green Dot's sister organization, the Los Angeles Parent Union ("LA Parent Union"), a non-profit organization meant to serve as an alternative to the Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) in Los Angeles, seized on the momentum of President Obama's inauguration to expand its sphere of influence beyond Los Angeles. The inauguration of President Barack Obama on January 20, 2009 was for many a historic turning point into a post-racial era that symbolized change and restored hope for the nation. Yet, as critical ethnic studies scholars have noted, even with the ascendancy of the nation's first Black president into

⁴ Douglas McGray, "The Instigator: A Crusader's Plan to Remake Failing Schools." *The New Yorker*. May 11, 2009. (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/05/11/the-instigator>).

⁵ Green Dot America was the initial idea, however, his national charter school management organization was ultimately named The Future is Now.

the White House, racial violence and inequity continued to define life in the U.S.⁶ Amidst these contradictory realities, Obama's ascendancy to the highest office informed and shaped neoliberal logics and discourses of multiculturalism that governed and shaped education. As Executive Director of the LA Parent Union, Benjamin Austin, recalled, the LA Parent Union changed the organization's name to Parent Revolution⁷ the weekend of Obama's inauguration.⁸ The rebranding of the LA Parent Union to Parent Revolution strategically served to remove regional specificity that limited Green Dot's network from expanding beyond Los Angeles.

For the next two years, Austin, as Executive Director of the newly rebranded Parent Revolution, played a leading role in the creation and implementation of two key education policies, one at the local level and another at the state level. The policy implemented at the local level, the 2009 Los Angeles Unified School District's (LAUSD) Public School Choice (PSC) Initiative, served as the blueprint for the state-wide 2010 California Parent Empowerment Law, better known as the "parent trigger law." This chapter discusses the implementations of the LAUSD's PSC policy and California's

⁶ Dylan Rodriguez, "The Black Presidential Non-Slave: Genocide and the Present Tense of Racial Slavery" in Julian Go (ed.) *Rethinking Obama. Political Power and Social Theory*, 22. (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2011): pp 17-50.

⁷ Parent Revolution's mission is "to empower parents to transform their children's underperforming schools through community organizing." (www.parentrevolution.org)

⁸ The Los Angeles Parent Union (LAPU) and Parent Revolution use the same Employer Identification Number (EIN: 20-2207418) as evidenced in the 2008 and 2009 Return of Organization Exempt From Income Tax (990 tax forms) where Benjamin Austin signed as Executive Director. Prior to 2008, Steve Barr served in that position.

parent trigger law to reveal the relentless struggle from communities in Los Angeles County against charter school takeovers of traditional public schools.

In the midst of these neoliberal structural reforms in education, the chapter provides insurgent portraits (see Chapter One) that reveal opposing visions to the neoliberal agenda to privatize public education. The insurgent portraits are community-driven grassroots struggles to reclaim public education. Specifically, the chapter documents a teacher-driven grassroots educational campaign against the LAUSD's PSC policy that is a testament to a larger opposition against the "charterization" of the time. Moreover, the chapter highlights a student-led revolt against the sudden closure of one of Green Dot's charter schools that exposed Green Dot's contradictions: it promoted a social justice charter school, yet excluded students, teachers, and parents from the decision-making process to close the school. Additionally, the chapter documents the first attempt to implement the parent trigger law in the Compton Unified School District (CUSD), which revealed how non-profit organizations such as Parent Revolution prey and capitalize on the academic failure of traditional public schools; in response, communities in Compton rose in defense of their traditional public elementary school and by extension of their city.

This chapter contextualizes a political landscape in education marked by heightened competition between charter schools and public schools, as a movement to expand charter schools through school-choice policies operates at the same time that traditional public schools are held accountable to rising academic expectations. While these incidents occurred over the span of three years throughout multiple schools and two

school districts in South Los Angeles, collectively, these insurgent portraits are histories that provide a glimpse of community-driven resistance against the privatization of public education in Los Angeles County. As communities of teachers, students, and parents struggled in defense of public education, this chapter exposes how neoliberal, corporate-driven agendas such as those carried out through Parent Revolution, Green Dot, the LA city mayor's Partnership for Los Angeles Schools (PLAS), and The Broad Foundation, prey upon parent discontent with public education in low-income communities.

In 2009, Steve Barr announced that he was stepping down from the daily operations of Green Dot Schools, the charter school network he founded in Los Angeles, to focus on his next project, Green Dot America, a national charter school management organization. In an interview for *Education Week*, Barr reassured that his ultimate vision remained, which was to “set the conditions” where all public schools had “charter-like funding,” and to eradicate “the middleman,” meaning local school districts.⁹ This chapter demonstrates how the merging of key neoliberal architects propelled the movement to aid the closure of traditional public schools alongside the expansion of charter schools, which together represent a unified elite and corporate vision to dismantle public school districts altogether.

⁹ “Founder of Green Dot Charter School Network Steps Down” *Education Week*. November 23, 2009.

LAUSD's New Way to Privatization: The Public School Choice Policy

Green Dot's takeover of Locke High School was historic in many ways. Nationally, it inspired the Secretary of Education in D.C. to find a way to replicate Green Dot's takeover model on a national level. Locally, in the LAUSD, a new district policy emerged to target the district's lowest performing traditional public schools and place them up for bid to the best private school operator. In an interview given to a reporter at *LA School Report*, newly elected school board member Steve Zimmer¹⁰ recalled that at his first school board meeting, Benjamin Austin and Marco Petruzzi (Green Dot's newly appointed CEO) were the first speakers for the day. At that meeting, they introduced a new policy proposal to the board, what they called the Public School Choice (PSC). Zimmer, who ran his campaign as "a bridge candidate," soon realized that the PSC proposal was "a declaration of war" against the district; as he described, it was like "having a loaded gun to my temple."¹¹ The PSC policy was not an attempt to reform a few failing schools, it was a declaration of war against the entire school district and anyone who stood in the way of the charter school expansion agenda.

The idea of a PSC policy was immediately sponsored by three school board members who were heavily backed by Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's political action committee (PAC), Coalition for School Reform (See Chapter Two): Yolie

¹⁰ Steve Zimmer moved to Los Angeles in the early 1990s as a recent college graduate for his Teach For America appointment at Jefferson High School. Zimmer was elected to the school board March 3, 2009.

¹¹ Hillel Aron, "Stuck in the Middle: Steve Zimmer" *LA School Report*. September 4, 2012. (<http://laschoolreport.com/stuck-in-the-middle-a-conversation-with-steve-zimmer/>)

Flores Aguilar, Maria Garcia, and Richard Vlodovik. While it had first been presented by Austin and Petruzzi, when the 5-page resolution, titled, “LAUSD Public School Choice: A New Way,” was formally presented, it was credited to School Board Member Flores Aguilar, and was co-sponsored by School Board Members Garcia and Vlodovik.¹² After two years of serving as a School Board Member, Flores Aguilar reflected in her personal blog on why she authored the resolution, stating she wanted to “shake things up” throughout the district:

My Public School Choice resolution attempts to do that. I believe that choice is a strong lever for change. My proposal is that we develop a process that invites internal (LAUSD) and external (partnerships, charters) stakeholders to submit proposals to run our newly constructed schools that will open up, starting September 2010. In a period of four years, we will have over 50 schools.

The centerpiece of my resolution, however, is that parents and students will weigh in on the decision of which plan to approve. They will play an important role in determining WHO should run their neighborhood school and HOW.¹³

Flores Aguilar thus envisioned greater choice in *who* and *how* the district’s newly constructed schools would operate. Rather than assuming the district would operate the new schools, she believed parents and students should help make that determination.

¹² Los Angeles Unified School District. *Public School Choice: A new way in LAUSD*. August 25, 2009.

¹³ Yolie Flores, blog. Untitled. *It’s Yolie*. July 10, 2009. (<http://itsyolie.blogspot.com/2009/07/public-school-choice.html>)

However, contrary to Flores Aguilar’s statement on her blog, the resolution’s language did not intend to target new schools, nor did it include any mention of her vision for parents and students to be a part of the decision-making. The resolution was proposed to target existing underperforming schools that under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) guidelines met the following criteria: Schools In Need of Improvement (SINI) for 3+ years; less than 21% proficiency in either Math or English Language Arts; zero or negative growth in API for the 2008-2009 school year; and, for high schools, greater than 10% drop out rates.

The PSC criteria made 260 out of 800 schools in the LAUSD eligible for operation by whichever entity presented the best proposal. The resolution cited successful models already in operation, including the Belmont Zone of Choice,¹⁴ as models for collaboration among key stakeholders. While organizations and teachers could create a proposal to manage a school, they would be placed in the very difficult position of competing with charter school operators. Many criticized the resolution as a school “give away” policy to the best “bidder,”¹⁵ knowing full well that parents and teachers who envisioned an alternative plan for school management would have to compete with charters and non-profits that were more established and had the financial and political

¹⁴ In 2007, the LAUSD and the UTLA formalized a partnership with the Pico Union community to create the Belmont Zone of Choice (BZC), which includes ten small theme-based, pilot public schools. The BZC initiative was led by a coalition of over 40 local organizations. To read further see, Jeremy Nesoff, “The Belmont Zone of Choice: Community-Driven Action for School Change.” *Horace* 23, no. 4 (2007)

¹⁵ Sarah Knopp, “LA’s Charter School Giveaway” *Socialist Worker*. August 31, 2009. (<https://socialistworker.org/2009/08/31/la-charter-school-giveaway>)

capital to present more formalized packages. It would also allow for 50 new schools to begin construction within the next three years. While the fate of low performing schools was yet to be known, what the PSC policy made clear was that the district had shifted toward a competitive policy framework.¹⁶ Essentially, the 260 schools identified were positioned in a marketplace of education where key stakeholders, such as parents and teachers, could compete against established charter schools or non-profits who were already in the business of managing public schools.

In the same month that the PSC resolution was formally introduced by the LAUSD school board members, Parent Revolution held a press conference in the courtyard of Alliance Gertz-Ressler High School in South Central Los Angeles. This event was intended to formally announce the launching of Parent Revolution. The speakers of the day included Mayor Villaraigosa and Green Dot founder Steve Barr, who faced a crowd of mostly parents. The parents held signs for their respective LA Parent Union chapters, standing to embrace and applaud the non-profit's transition to Parent Revolution.¹⁷ Collectively, the speakers' testimonies were a reminder to the parents that the district was a failure. Benjamin Austin, for instance, declared to the crowd, "We are learning every single day that the LAUSD is failing because it is simply not designed to succeed." The collective sentiment among those in attendance was that if the district

¹⁶ Julie Marsh, "The Political Dynamics of District Reform: The Form and Fate of the Los Angeles Public School Choice Initiative" *Teachers College Record* 118 no. 9 (2016): pp. 1-54

¹⁷ Parent Revolution. "Launch of the Parent Revolution." Youtube. May 27, 2009. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQIUPrNcTcE>)

would not be redesigned for success, it should be handed over to private operators who could do a better job.

As Parent Revolution rose in support of the PSC policy, many throughout Los Angeles simultaneously prepared to rise in opposition to the policy. Among those opposing this new policy was the Association of Raza Educators of Los Angeles (see next section). Additionally, as the 2008-2009 school year was near completion, students and teachers experienced increased class sizes that were a direct result of the LAUSD's prior school year decision to lay off teachers throughout the district (see Chapter Three). In protest of the school board's decisions, fifteen students at John Liechty Middle School, a school that opened in 2007 near downtown Los Angeles, organized to protest their middle school graduation's commencement speaker, School Board President Monica Garcia, by collectively giving her their back.¹⁸ In support, the parents of the students involved in the protest refused to clap for her. Those students were reprimanded for their behavior by the principal and were not given their diploma at the time of their graduation.

Meanwhile, on a national level, President Obama announced on July 25, 2009 that the allocation of \$4.35 billion to a competitive federal grant program designed to encourage and reward states that implemented education reforms: the State Incentive Grant Fund, better known as Race to the Top (RTTT). Obama framed this program in terms of the economy, stating, "In an economy where education is the most important commodity a person and country have to offer, the best jobs will go to the best

¹⁸ John Cadiz Klemack, "No Apology? No Diploma: A principal withholds graduation certificates over student protest." *NBC News*. July 16, 2009.

educated—whether they live in the United States or India or China.” Obama’s reference to the commodification of education in relation to upward mobility was a clear indication that education is no longer a public good, a right for everyone. Obama’s reference also reinforced the neoliberal logic of market competition often embedded in education discourse. As Obama clarified, “rather than giving it up and handing it out, we are letting states and school districts compete for it. That’s how we can incentivize excellence and spur reform and launch a Race to the Top in America’s public schools.” Under RTTT, education was meant to serve a dual purpose; on the one hand, RTTT reinforced that education ensured a society governed by meritocracy where “the best jobs will go to the best educated,” and on the other hand, it proposed that education, when instilled with competition, was the gateway to fixing America’s economy.

RTTT grant competitors had to out-do one another in education reforms that “turned-around” the bottom 5%, or 5,000 “chronically underperforming schools.” President Obama highlighted how local districts had turned schools around through one of the three options:

- 1) Replacing principals and staff
- 2) Inviting non-profits to help manage
- 3) Converting public schools to charter schools

In highlighting these three “turn-around” options, President Obama also defined for the nation what a turn-around model looks like. State applicants were scored on a point system based on a set of criteria, such as lifting caps on charter schools, evaluating teachers based on student test scores, adopting common standards, and implementing

data systems. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation was among the foundations that assisted qualifying states with \$250,000 and assistance in creating strong and competitive applications.¹⁹ Out of a pool of 41 state applicants that included California, in the end, only 19 states were awarded, and California was not among them.

The LAUSD passed the Public School Choice policy exactly a month after the announcement of RTTT, (on August 25, 2009) in a 6-1 vote.²⁰ As Parent Revolution later recalled regarding their organizing efforts leading to the vote, “We ran a grassroots campaign that generated over 4,000 supportive postcards from parents and then organized 3,000 parents for a rally on the day of the vote. When we passed LAUSD’s Public School Choice policy we gave birth to the parent empowerment movement.”²¹ Parent Revolution credited its organizing efforts to the passage of the PSC resolution. With Benjamin Austin in charge of Parent Revolution’s on-the-ground organizing of parents, hundreds of parents from various LA Parent Union chapters gathered outside the LAUSD headquarters in celebration. In support of the resolution, parents wore blue shirts that read “My Child. My Choice.” In front of a large Parent Revolution banner backdrop, Mayor

¹⁹ The Gates Foundation funded the organization, New Venture Fund, to offer financial support. In November 2009, New Venture Fund received \$2,736,543 from the foundation.

²⁰ PSC was funded through the district’s Investing in Innovation (i3) grant. To see the application for the grant, see, LAUSD, “Los Angeles’ Bold Competition: Turning Around and Operating Its Low- Performing Schools,” Investing in Innovation Fund, Department of Education, May 2010

²¹ Parent Revolution. My LA 2050 Archive. (<https://archive.la2050.org/parent-revolution/>) Last accessed June 11, 2019.

Villaraigosa stood on a podium and addressed the large crowd that rallied in support of the resolution.

Meanwhile, opponents of the resolutions spoke out during the school board meeting's public comment session. A.J. Duffy, UTLA's President, addressed the school board during public comment and contested, "When all is said and done, you would have sold this district down the road for political gain."²² This was the larger sentiment shared with opponents who also rallied outside the school board headquarters with signs that read "Business Interest Does Not Care 4 Kids." Parents that opposed the resolution rallied as well. Some called for a recall of School Board Member Monica Garcia, who was viewed as doing the mayor's work. In a press conference immediately after the school board's decision, Mayor Villaraigosa, alongside School Board Members Yolie Flores Aguilar and Monica Garcia, invoked language of war as he proclaimed, "We will no longer be held hostage any longer by a small group of people."²³ It was as if the PSC policy finally freed Mayor Villaraigosa and his school board candidates of choice from being "held hostage" by "a small group of people," which was clearly in reference to the teacher's unions. The passage of the PSC resolution was a victory for the majority of the LAUSD school board members, Parent Revolution, Mayor Villaraigosa, and Green Dot, who all coordinated these efforts and had a vested interest in the policy's implementation.

²² Howard Blume and Jason Song, "Major Shift for L.A. Schools" *Los Angeles Times*. August 26, 2009. (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2009-aug-26-me-laUSD-schools26-story.html>)

²³ Ibid.

Throughout that summer, many more communities rose in opposition to the PSC proposal. Among the many organizations and individuals who opposed the policy was the Association of Raza Educators chapter of Los Angeles (ARE-LA). At the time, Ms. Salazar (see previous chapter), served as the chair of ARE-LA and was a new teacher at *Ánimo Justice Charter School*, one of Green Dot's charter schools. The irony of ending up at a Green Dot charter school was that after being pushed out of Jordan and the school district altogether, Ms. Salazar could only find employment in non-district schools, which were overwhelmingly charter schools.²⁴

ARE-LA's Education Campaign Against the Public School Choice Policy

There was a consensus at the time among teachers in ARE-LA that the UTLA did not have a strong or militant enough stance that was fully supportive of teachers, such as the teachers union in Chicago.²⁵ ARE-LA's approach to the PSC policy resolution was to begin a political education campaign to learn about charter schools and education privatization. ARE-LA member, Miguel Zavala, authored the article, "Organizing Against the Neo-liberal Privatization of Education in South Los Angeles: Reflections on the Transformative Potential of Grassroots Research," where he discusses the organizations action-research approach into the PSC policy. In Zavala's reflections, he outlines ARE-LA's approach to the policy, describing it as a demonstration of public

²⁴ Karen Salazar interview with author, May 2009.

²⁵ Miguel Zavala interview with author, May 2018.

pedagogy that transformed the knowledge generated through the research and it's participants,²⁶ which aligns with what I identify as an insurgent learning praxis.

On August 16, 2009, the ARE-LA launched the Action Research Committee (ARC), a four-month action research project driven by their own critical inquiries and proximity to the privatization of public education in LA County. Two of ARE-LA's members were teachers at an elementary school in South Central LA, a school that its members felt was certain to go up for bid under the PSC policy if it was implemented.²⁷ In addition to forming a campaign to defend the schools, the ARC engaged in their own political education. They met with parents, presented at neighborhood councils, attended conferences, participated in radio interviews, and utilized other platforms to both learn and share with the community the information they collectively gathered. In one of those interviews, conducted by ARC member Miguel Zavala with a parent, he recalled the parent asking him to explain directly, “¿*Como beneficia?* (How do charter schools' profit?)”. Miguel recalled how difficult the question was for him to answer and how it served to further catalyze their political education campaign.²⁸ For ARE-LA members, their campaign needed to be able to answer concrete questions such as what is privatization in education and what were the profit incentives behind charter schools?

²⁶ Miguel Zavala, “Organizing Against the Neo-liberal Privatization of Education in South Los Angeles: Reflections on the Transformative Potential of Grassroots Research” *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 29, no. 2 (November 2, 2013): pp. 57-71

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Miguel Zavala interview with author, May 2018.

The ARE-LA members that comprised the ARC campaign took a learning-by-doing approach, where they did not position themselves as the experts of education privatization; rather, they were co-learning alongside the community. In two months of generating information, organizing, and creating awareness about what they learned, ARE-LA members produced a position paper against the LAUSD's PSC policy. Their position paper is a testament against the privatization of public education in general and is worth quoting in its entirety.

A.R.E. Statement on Public Education in the Context of 'Public School Choice: A New Way at LAUSD'

**By the Association of Raza Educators, Los Angeles Chapter
October 12, 2009**

WE STAND FOR A FULLY FUNDED, CULTURALLY RELEVANT PUBLIC EDUCATION

We believe in a fully funded and truly public education. This means that federal and state bureaucracies should be responsible for providing an adequate and quality education for every child; and that all education policies and practices be fully inclusive of the voices of all stakeholders. Public education should remain a right and not a commodity that only a select few can purchase.

A.R.E. supports culturally relevant teaching, a curriculum that fosters critical thinking in our students, and an education for social justice grounded in students' lived experiences. Without these, education reforms become complicit in the reproduction of particular ideologies: students who do not think for themselves, district officials who cannot see beyond a marketizing approach to education, and teachers who are de-skilled and removed from community organizing.

OUR VISION OF REFORM

We believe that education reform must be based on the principle of self-determination, where the voices of the primary stakeholders of public education – i.e. teachers, parents, and students – provide direction in the education process. Thus all school governing bodies should include teachers, parents, and students in conjunction with democratically elected school officials. We strongly oppose the Los Angeles Unified School District's (LAUSD) hierarchical, top-down, model of leadership.

Nevertheless, we recognize that leadership restructuring is not enough. However democratic schools become, inclusion of community voices in the education process will not change the education, political, and economic realities of poor students of color. Currently, 60% of Latino/a and 56% of African-American students in LAUSD are pushed out of school and tracked into the low-wage labor market, with a significant number entering the prison system.

The LAUSD motion, *Public School Choice: A New Way at LAUSD*, comes about in the wake of a budgetary crisis. As a quick fix to the historical abandonment and de-funding of public education in general, district officials are completely misguided in their attempt to ‘reform’ the crisis of public education without (a) a comprehensive understanding of the historical, political and economic institutions that have shaped public schools, and (b) without proper input from all stakeholders. Absent the voices of people, LAUSD district officials have allowed themselves to be swayed by corporate and local political interests that have made this motion possible. Absent a historical analysis of the political and economic interests that have served to undermine public education, district officials fail to understand the education reform requires a restructuring of other institutions, such as the political, legal, and economic systems geared to reproduce the inequalities that we see today.

WE STAND AGAINST CORPORATE CHARTERS

Given the privatization history of *corporate* charter schools, and how these schools apply selection criteria that exclude the participation of second language learners and students with special needs among others, the Association of Raza Educators Los Angeles Chapter opposes corporate charters and charter management companies (CMOs), such as Green Dot, that claim to offer a ‘choice’ for poor communities of color. Because parents in poor urban neighborhoods have been historically underserved, they are enticed by LAUSD’s market ‘solution’ to education that purports to offer ‘choice,’ ‘equity,’ and ‘access’ to quality education through charterization and leadership restructuring.

WE SUPPORT THE ENDURING STRUGGLE FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION

ARE stands in support of the efforts by teachers who are working to include community voices in this struggle for public education. Although opposed to corporate charters and charter management companies, we are not opposed to the educators who are working within these schools, especially those who are developing culturally relevant and liberating forms of teaching in their classrooms. We believe that collective struggle will require the formation of new generations of student activists, and we hope that the teachers and students everywhere develop a critical awareness of the colonial and capitalist forces that

are shaping public education, with the goal of forming a unified, national effort to reclaim public education for all.²⁹

Read within a context of neoliberal education policy formations, ARE's position paper against the LAUSD's PSC policy is testament against corporate privatization of public education. Their statement speaks back to a national neoliberal discourse in education that presents education as a "commodity" as opposed to a public right.

More important than individualistic gains and upward economic mobility, ARE's members highlight the importance of culturally relevant teaching that can be in the service of social justice, a political project where district officials, teachers, and students are equally engaged. This is particularly significant given the exclusion of activism among teachers and students in this era, as was demonstrated in the cases at Jordan High School and Fremont High School in Watts (See Chapter Three). ARE-LA's position paper against the PSC policy affirms that public education is a public good, and therefore must not only be democratic in how it functions and but must also serve a larger function of creating a more democratic society. In this way, public schools can be responsive to and transform the communities where they are situated.

ARE-LA's stance explicitly named corporate charter schools as problematic and provided Green Dot as an example of a problematic corporate charter management organization that utilizes civil rights discourse of "equity," "access," and "choice" to appeal to families discontent with their inept public school options. Cautiously, their bold

²⁹ Association of Raza Educators, Los Angeles Chapter, "A.R.E. Statement on Public Education in the Context of 'Public School Choice: A New Way at LAUSD.'" ARE Position Paper. October 12, 2009.

stance against privatization does not shame teachers or even families who choose to send their children to charter schools. This critique may have been informed by the fact that some ARE-LA members were also charter school teachers. As discussed previously, Ms. Salazar, who served as the chairperson of ARE-LA during this time, also taught at Animo Justice Charter School, one of Green Dot's schools in South Central LA. Ms. Salazar was essentially black-listed from the LAUSD after what transpired at Jordan HS (See Chapter Three) and could only find employment at charter schools.³⁰ This is often the case for new teachers as well, who have a difficult time finding employment at traditional public schools. Ms. Salazar revealed that while Green Dot is problematic in many ways, the autonomy the school gave teachers in their curriculum development allowed for her to teach English Language Arts through an ethnic studies lens, the very thing that Jordan HS administrators and the LAUSD superintendent proclaimed to be the source of the problem. This inherent contradiction is emblematic of how traditional public schools are disciplined under the NCLB to prioritize content knowledge essential only to high stakes, state-mandated standardized testing, a disciplining that charter schools have been able to curtail as they are held accountable for meeting their unique charter vision, in addition to the NCLB's test provisions.

For the members of ARE-LA, an alternative vision of reform went beyond the realm of expanding school choice, and proposed a horizontal structure that engages key stakeholders in critical decision-making processes that can shape schools and their governing bodies. Their alternate vision recognized that education cannot simply be

³⁰ Karen Salazar interview with author, May 2009.

reformed without “a restructuring of other institutions, such as the political, legal, and economic systems geared to reproduce the inequalities that we see today.” This structural analysis takes into account the historical disinvestment in public education and the conjuncture that shaped the landscape of education. Rather than taking into account ARE-LA’s sobering analysis and the critiques of other communities that rose in opposition, the LAUSD proceeded with the implementation of the PSC policy.

As fall approached, implementation plans for the PSC policy were drafted. A series of amendments to the resolution’s implementation plan were introduced as communities pressured the district to provide restrictions, protections, and representation. Each time an amendment was introduced, it was eventually struck down. For example, among the amendments brought forth, one included a provision to protect teachers’ rights to union representation under new partnerships. That amendment ultimately changed to state that unions would only represent workers in schools that remained within the control of LAUSD. Another amendment proposed that high school students, parents, and teachers should be able to vote on the reform proposals that would impact their school site. This amendment later was modified so that it became an advisory vote. Students, parents, and teachers would not have decision-making power. Instead, the superintendent and school board members would make the final decisions.

As implementation plans continued, an additional amendment was added to the list of criteria to determine a school’s eligibility under PSC, which stated, “If a Program Improvement school of 3-5 years gathered 51% of signatures from parents whose children currently attended or whose children would attend (parent of children who attend

feeder schools).”³¹ Essentially, this added amendment was meant to serve as a “parent trigger” for a school to qualify under the PSC resolution. This amendment was eventually removed from the final implementation plan. However, while this parent trigger amendment did not make the LAUSD PSC policy, it became the inspiration for the state’s parent trigger law. As the PSC implementation finalized, Green Dot founder Steve Barr announced his formal resignation to focus on the growth of Green Dot America, an initiative to expand Green Dot beyond Los Angeles, to a national level. During this transition, Barr was re-appointed to the Advisory Committee on Charter Schools for California’s State Board of Education, where he could directly influence charter school policy at the state level.³²

The Broad Foundation’s School Closure Agenda

Meanwhile, in 2009, a teacher in the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), Sharon Higgins, created an online blog, *The Broad Report*, after she witnessed the state appoint three superintendents in her district – all of whom were graduates from the Broad Academy of Superintendents – during the district’s state takeover.³³ The blog was created to serve as a watchdog and expose the political influence of the Broad’s network in Oakland. Higgins was certainly on to something. As it was later revealed, during that

³¹ LAUSD “Operating New Schools and Improving Underperforming Schools” Public School Choice Implementation Process Draft. October 23, 2009.

³² He had a previous appointment from 2001-2005.

³³ The Broad Report. Last accessed June 11, 2019. (<http://thebroadreport.blogspot.com/>)

time, The Broad Foundation circulated an updated version of their book manual on how to close public schools titled, “School Closure Guide: Closing Schools as a Means for Addressing Budgetary Challenges.”³⁴ The manual was informed by school district operators associated with The Broad Foundation across school districts in the U.S., including the OUSD.³⁵

As school districts throughout the nation continued to face budgetary constraints, this book presented a guide on how school closures can alleviate budget shortfalls in a rapid 12-18 month timeline. The manual presents challenges and mitigation strategies, templates to construct messages to stakeholders, techniques to garner consent, and criteria for the selection of schools. Throughout the manual, scenarios based on real experiences are presented for the reader to learn from and avoid. In one case, for example, the manual indicates:

WARNING: TRUE STORY PITFALL

The facilitator who was hired to mediate a regional community meeting fails to gain the respect of local community members and was sidelined within the first half hour of the meeting. A junior district office staff member ends up in the position of having to calm a room of 250 angry parents.

LESSON LEARNED: Ensure that facilitators of every meeting are both skilled and respected by the community. Some external facilitators have proven to be effective, but special care must be taken in vetting them.

Figure 6. True Story Pitfall. Source from The Broad Foundation’s *School Closure Guide*

³⁴ The Broad Foundation, “School Closure Guide: Closing Schools as a Means for Addressing Budgetary Challenges.” September 15, 2009.

³⁵ According to the manual, contributors include Boston Public Schools, Charleston County School District, Chicago Public Schools, Dallas Independent School District, District of Columbia Public Schools, Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Oakland Unified School District, Pittsburgh Public Schools, St. Louis Public Schools, and Seattle Public Schools.

In this example, the manual clearly indicates that facilitators of meetings intended to translate the process of school closures to the community must be selectively chosen, and that it is preferable to choose someone with established rapport to avoid an angry group of over 200 parents (Figure 6).³⁶ At first, the manual circulated only among those closely tied to The Broad Foundation's network. The Broad Foundation trained administrators involved with the closing of schools in Boston, Charleston, Chicago, Dallas, Washington, D.C., Miami-Dade County, Oakland, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and Seattle. The culminating effects of this report were revealed when the manual was leaked in 2013, following the controversies that surrounded the largest closure of public schools in Chicago's history.

From LAUSD's Public School Choice to CA's Parent Trigger Law

In efforts to increase the likelihood of winning RTT funds, California passed a series of laws between in January of 2010. As the Democrats for Education Reform described, "there's been more state legislation [around education reform] in the last eight months than there was in the entire seven or eight years of No Child Left Behind, in terms of laws passed."³⁷ Among those laws, on December 15, 2009, Senator Romero and Senator Bob Huff presented Article 3 of Senate Bill of X 5-4, the Parent Empowerment Act, better known as the parent trigger law. The parent trigger law was heavily inspired

³⁶ The Broad Foundation, "School Closure Guide: Closing Schools as a Means for Addressing Budgetary Challenges." September 15, 2009. Pg. 25.

³⁷ William G Howell, "Results of President Obama's Race to the Top" Education Next. Vol. 15, No. 4. (Fall 2015).

by the recently proposed PSC framework in the LAUSD. As Senator Romero later admitted, “I had a discussion with Ben Austin and he said, ‘Why don’t you look at this idea?’” referring to the LAUSD’s PSC resolution.³⁸ Senator Romero was inspired by Austin’s idea of greater school choice for parents, given that for her, “The zip code has become the definitive great divide, a profound separation between high-poverty, minority youths and the American dream.” Senator Romero’s law was a remedy for “kids who are trapped in failing schools” since their zip code constrained them to their neighborhood schools. The law instead gave their parents power to petition to change their school. As Romero further stated, “But the power of parent trigger is true to the principle for which it stands: We, the people, have the right to petition our government for change, and when it fails to act, we have the power—with our own ‘John Hancock’—to tell the government to get the hell out of our way. Our children’s futures are at stake, and we will no longer be complacent or silent.”³⁹

On January 7, 2010, less than a month after the senate bill’s introduction of the parent trigger law, California’s Governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, held a special legislative session to address the RTTT reform areas. At the session, Governor Schwarzenegger signed a series of laws, including the CA Parent Empowerment Law

³⁸ Beau Yarbrough. “Romero: Parent Trigger Law is ‘The Little Engine that Could’” *The Sun*. October 4, 2013.

³⁹ Gloria Romero, “Why I Wrote the Parent Trigger Law,” *Education Week*. November 5, 2013. (https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/11/06/11romero_ep.h33.html)

(Article 3 of SB X 5-4).⁴⁰ The parent trigger law was written to provide greater political empowerment to parents or legal guardians of children at low-performing schools.⁴¹

Under the law, parents/guardians of children at targeted schools are allowed to circulate a petition requesting their existing public school to go through one of four intervention options:

- 1) Charter conversion: hand the school over to a charter operator
- 2) Re-budget: make changes to the way money is allocated
- 3) Turn-around: replace the staff and create a new administrative structure
- 4) Closure: close down the school site altogether

Any one of the four options could be invoked through the law in the form of a petition signed by 51% of the parents/guardians of students currently attending or a combination of half of the parents/guardians of students who will matriculate in the future. As stated in California's application for RTTT funds, one of the four turn-around options presented in the parent trigger law mirrored those presented in RTTT,⁴² which referred to the charter conversion of traditional public schools.

⁴⁰ U.S. Department of Education, Race to the Top, Phase 1 Applications: California. Last accessed July 2010. (<https://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase1-applications/california.pdf>)

⁴¹ Low performing schools are: schools that do not meet "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) for 3 consecutive years, are in "corrective action" status under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law for at least one year, and have an Academic Performance Index (API) score of less than 800.

⁴² "CA Race to the Top Application for Initial Funding CRDA Number: 84.3954," Submitted by the State of California on January 19, (pp. 10) (<https://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase1-applications/california.pdf>)

This was the first law in the state of California that would leave the fate of the school in the hands of parents/guardians. It gave parents and guardians the agency to petition for one out of four choices to reform their school. The law was especially significant for communities with large numbers of undocumented parents/guardians who otherwise cannot vote for the elected officials that represent them and lead the institutions that govern aspects of their community, such as elected school board members that govern the education of their children.

Interestingly, while the parent trigger law was designed to give parents a sense of political empowerment, charter schools are infamous for their lack of transparency and accountability. In fact, because charter schools are private entities, much like Walmart or any other major corporation, charter school organizations operate through their executive boards, which are non-elected positions. As such, they do not have to disclose minutes from their executive meetings, their executive meetings are not open to the public, and members of the executive board may present a conflict of interests. For example, Green Dot's Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Marco Petruzzi,⁴³ simultaneously served on the executive board of Parent Revolution. During his earlier tenure with Green Dot, he simultaneously served as Vice President in Bain & Co.'s Los Angeles office, a global management-consulting firm; in this role, he helped co-author "The School Transformation Plan" (2006), which aimed to take over Jefferson High School alongside

⁴³ Petruzzi served on Green Dot's executive board since 2006, see "Green Dot Public Schools CEO to Step Down after 12 Years." September 13, 2018. (<https://blog.greendot.org/ceo-to-step-down/>)

other major high schools in the LAUSD (see Chapter Two). While these connections may seem irrelevant or even coincidental, it is worthwhile to ask why a global management consulting firm is heavily invested in the agenda to privatize public schools. The lack of transparency and accountability that charter school operators such as Green Dot operate under was called into question in March of 2010, when Green Dot's newly appointed CEO suddenly decided to close one of its schools.

Ánimo Without Justice: Community Revolts Against Green Dot

Even though California was rejected in the first round of RTT, the parent trigger law, along with all the other laws passed, remained in the books.⁴⁴ In protest of the budgets cuts that hit education across the nation, thousands took to the streets on a national day of action for the defense of public education.⁴⁵ While California worked on their second application for RTT funds, in Los Angeles, Green Dot announced that for the first time it was scheduled to close a few of its schools. One of those schools, Ánimo Social Justice Charter School (“Ánimo Justice”), was created as one of the five “cluster schools” Green Dot opened four years prior, in 2006, after Green Dot's failed attempt to take over Jefferson High (see Chapter Two). Ánimo Justice was created with the intention of offering an alternate choice for high school students who would have normally entered Jefferson in South Central LA.

⁴⁴ California applied for round two and three of the RTT competition, but also did not win.

⁴⁵ March 4th was designated as the national day of action in defense of public education.

Since the school opened in 2006, Green Dot’s executive board struggled to find a permanent location for *Ánimo Justice*. While the school was only in existence for four years, it already had a history of moving three times with three different principals. The school at one point moved to East LA, requiring that students get bused for seven miles. The instability of the school changed when Green Dot found *Ánimo Justice* a permanent location at a site that used to house an industrial plant on 27th street and Long Beach Avenue, across the street from the Metropolitan Blue Line.⁴⁶ This is also the school where Ms. Salazar started teaching after she was black-listed from teaching within the district’s public schools (see Chapter Three).

In a letter dated March 19, 2010, Green Dot’s CEO, Marco Petruzzi, announced that it was closing the school due to financial constraints, writing, “In this difficult budget environment, Green Dot cannot afford to supplement the costs of an under-enrolled school without impacting the quality of programming.”⁴⁷ The school community was not invited to provide input in the decision to close the school, and teachers were only notified days before the formal announcement was made. “We had no idea that closing was even a possibility, and then we received the information on Friday morning,” stated

⁴⁶ Howard Blume, “Green Dot to Close Justice Charter High School.” *Los Angeles Times*. March 22, 2010. (<http://articles.latimes.com/2010/mar/22/local/la-me-greendot23-2010mar23>)

⁴⁷ Robert D. Skeels, “Taking on a Charter School Closing” *Socialist Worker*. March 26, 2010. (<http://socialistworker.org/2010/03/26/charter-school-closing>)

science teacher, Ms. Judy Riemenschneider, who viewed the announcement “at odds with Green Dot’s principles, which call for teacher input into critical decisions.”⁴⁸



Figure 7. Students refuse to go back to class at Ánimo Justice.⁴⁹

Two days after the announcement, students organized a sit-in in the school’s hallway that lasted five hours (Figure 7). Their protest escalated when students took their

⁴⁸ Howard Blume, “Green Dot to Close Justice Charter High School.” *Los Angeles Times*. March 22, 2010. (<http://articles.latimes.com/2010/mar/22/local/la-me-greendot23-2010mar23>)

⁴⁹ The picture was reproduced from Fred Klonsky’s blog, see “Animo Justice Shutting Down. Students are Sitting In.” March 22, 2010. (<https://preaprez.wordpress.com/2010/03/22/green-dots-animo-justice-charter-shutting-down-students-are-sitting-in/>) Accessed June 12, 2019.

sit-in to the streets, blocking the main intersection where their school was located (Figure 8). On March 26, students, along with their parents, led a roughly five-mile march to Green Dot's headquarters on Figueroa and 3rd St (Figure 9). In protest, the crowd of over 400 chanted, "We want justice" and "Who are we? Justice!" Students carried placards, including one that read "*¡Tenemos el Ánimo Pero No Justicia!*" (We have the spirit, but no justice!). Marlon Silva, a junior at *Ánimo Justice* who partook in the march, stated, "Green Dot's motto is parents and students have a voice and input, but when this decision was made, the only thing Green Dot cared about was money. It's a business behind a mask of a school."⁵⁰ Silva's discontent with Green Dot's decision proved to him that *Ánimo Justice* was a business first and foremost, masked as a school, because if the CEO and the executive board truly cared, they would be transparent and seek community input. Much like any business that decides to close down, Green Dot was not accountable to the community it built its school within and around. Now, the communities in and around *Ánimo Justice* were ready to take justice into their own hands and hold Green Dot accountable.

⁵⁰ Dora Taylor, "Six Reasons Why We Don't Want Green Dot Charter Schools in Seattle" Seattle Education, March 18, 2018.



Figure 8. Animo Justice students block street intersection.⁵¹



Figure 9. Animo Justice march to Green Dot headquarters.⁵²

⁵¹ Screenshot captured from “Animo Justice Protest” EveLyn9301. March 22, 2010. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h36w7OK7PE8>)

⁵² Miguel Zavala, “Animo Justice Students and Parents Protest School Closing” *Intersections South LA*. March 28, 2010.



Figure 10. *Ánimo* Justice students demand answers from Green Dot CEO.⁵³

When the students and parents arrived at Green Dot’s headquarters, they were escorted into an auditorium where Petruzzi mentioned he would speak with students under the condition that the news media leave the building (Figure 10). Students and parents took turns speaking, and in an impassioned speech that was secretly recorded on camera by a community member present, a student, whose name is unknown, read the following speech:

On March 22, 2010, we at *Ánimo* Justice started our stand. We are here today because we want to expose all of the lies Green Dot has told to us. We want

[\(http://intersectionssouthla.org/story/animo_justice_students_and_parents_protest_school_closing/\)](http://intersectionssouthla.org/story/animo_justice_students_and_parents_protest_school_closing/)

⁵³ Ibid.

everyone to see that everything Green Dot has told us was nothing close to what we got. We deserve better and so does our parents. How do we know that this won't happen to other Green Dot schools? How can we get guarantee that other Green Dot schools won't get closed down? We face a lot of our lives through this school. We, as students of color, don't get the resources and education that we deserve 'cause this school was everything it meant a lot to a lot of us. They think that just because we are people of color, we won't want to fight back for our school and our education. They try to silence us by not giving us a chance to voice our opinion about the idea of closing down our school, but just like Martin Luther King stated, our lives begin to end the day we stay silent about things that matter. We are tired of being marginalized and oppressed, not given what we need and what we deserve to survive in this society. We will not let our people get pushed around get kicked out of our second home like we are animals. We will not stand around and keep our mouths shut while our school gets shut down like some sort of lab experiment. So that is why we are here, again, taking a stand to fight for what we love and to reveal to anyone that Green Dot is not what they say they are. We are here, Friday, March 26, 2010, to get our voices heard, let Green Dot know that they aren't going to silence us because one person silenced is like murder, but if we all stay silent that is genocide. But if it is wrong that we are

trying to fight for our school and prove that Green Dot has lied to us, then go ahead, punish us, we are guilty.⁵⁴

In response, Petruzzi told the students, “We have no money. We’re a nonprofit. We don’t have a rich guy that gives us extra.”⁵⁵ Students and parents walked out of Green Dot’s headquarters after listening to Petruzzi’s explanation for why, out of its 19 schools, *Ánimo Justice* was chosen for closure. For the *Los Angeles Times*, Petruzzi explained, “*Animo Justice* never quite hit its annual enrollment targets, accumulating a \$1 million deficit.”⁵⁶ Instead, Green Dot intended to use the former *Ánimo Justice* property for a middle school and to redistribute *Ánimo Justice* students to nearby Green Dot high schools.

The *Ánimo Justice* community joined teachers and students from Fremont High School at a community forum on March 26th, held at the Centro Cultural Francisco Villa in South Central LA.⁵⁷ Fremont had been notified in December 2009 that the school was

⁵⁴ MiguelStranded, “AnimoJustice2010” Youtube. March 28, 2010. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4CV9VscDJXM&t=5s>)

⁵⁵ 4LAKids, “Fremont High, *Ánimo*/Green Dot Social Justice Charter, Menlo Adult School” April 26, 2010 (<http://4lakidsnews.blogspot.com/2010/04/fremont-high-animo-green-dot-social.html>)

⁵⁶ Howard Blume, “Green Dot to close Justice Charter High School.” *Los Angeles Times*. March 22, 2010. (<http://articles.latimes.com/2010/mar/22/local/la-me-greendot23-2010mar23>)

⁵⁷ “Jose Lara 0105 Video Blog [Animo Justice]” JoseLaraVideo. Youtube. March 29, 2010 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbtUUBS3eO0>)

scheduled to undergo reconstitution.⁵⁸ Under the NCLB law, reconstitution was one of the punitive corrective provisions for consecutively underperforming schools. In this case, Fremont’s entire faculty was planned to be laid off. Superintendent Cortines called an emergency faculty meeting a few months prior to notify teachers that they would have the chance to reapply. “We are not going to reapply for the positions we are fired from, as an act of resistance, we are not going to go ahead and give validity to this unjust and opaque process” stated math teacher Mr. Joel Vaca at the forum.⁵⁹ At a different forum held at the Community Coalition center (“CoCo”), the Fremont community presented their visions for reconstitution, which included:

- (1) Creation of Comprehensive Mental Wellness programs that have peer health promoters, peer-to-peer counseling, after-school arts and recreation activities and group therapy, as well as student and parent support groups;
- (2) Establishment of a School of Health and Science as part of its theme-based academies to include career and A-G linked curriculum, hands-on experience and certification and partnerships with unions and universities;

⁵⁸ Kevin Douglas Grant, “Two South LA High Schools Combine Efforts as They Fight to Save Themselves,” Neon Tommy. March 27, 2010

⁵⁹ JoseLara Video, “Jose Lara 0106 Video Blog [Fremont Reconstitution]” April 4, 2010. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44YsZIZYBJ0>)

(3) A Drop-Out Prevention Intervention and Recovery Program that provides immediate student accessibility, parent intervention and plan of action, on-going phone calls and home visits, and personalized wraparound services.⁶⁰

The CoCo, along with the communities at Fremont, envisioned the restructuring process as an opportunity to reform the school from within (Figure 11). As was later reflected in CoCo’s publication, *Leading Change from Within* (2011), “Fremont represents an enormous opportunity to create a quality, high-performing public school and to demonstrate a community-driven reform model within the Los Angeles Unified School District.”⁶¹



Figure 11. Save Fremont campaign.⁶²

⁶⁰ Larry Aubry, “Freemont High: Radical Change or Just a Face Lift?” LA Sentinel. July 1, 2010. (<https://lasentinel.net/fremont-high-radical-change-or-just-a-face-lift.html>)

⁶¹ Community Coalition. *Leading Change from Within: 20 Years of Building Grassroots Power in South Los Angeles*. 2011. Pg 46

⁶² Ibid, pp. 45

As the Fremont community elevated their campaign,⁶³ they joined in solidarity with the community of *Ánimo Justice*. Collectively, their insurgent solidarity speaks against structural assaults under the NCLB law's regime of accountability, assaults that include a rise in charter schools that prey on the discourse and policy of failing traditional public schools. Ultimately, charter schools exacerbate these issues as they operate like corporations while utilizing public money.

The revolts that surrounded *Ánimo Justice* reveal how charter school operators, in this case, Green Dot in the selection of its school name, utilized social justice language only as a marketing strategy to appeal to the community. The student-led uprising exposed Green Dot's contradictions and hypocrisy, as students made legible that they had the *ánimo* (spirit) but had yet to receive justice from Green Dot. As Robert Skeels reported, "This was especially poignant given that Green Dot's so-called 'Parent Revolution' group, which claims to be the voice of parent empowerment, was nowhere to be found when *Ánimo Justice* parents needed support."⁶⁴ The community at *Ánimo Justice* was left to organize on its own, with little to no coverage from major news outlets. The injustice experienced by the community of *Ánimo Justice* is a reminder that charter schools continue to operate as private entities that can "go out of business" and make sudden decisions without community input and without being accountable to local, state,

⁶³ The campaign formed a website to create awareness and document their struggle to save their high school. (<http://savefremont.org>)

⁶⁴ Robert Skeels. "Taking on a Charter School Closing" *Socialist Worker*. March 26, 2010. (<http://socialistworker.org/2010/03/26/charter-school-closing>)

and federal governments. At a traditional public school, such a process would require at least some levels of transparency and accountability. These were the same insurgent sentiments members of ARE-LA cautiously warned against only half a year prior in their position paper against the district's PSC policy, in which they named Green Dot as a problematic corporate charter school.

While the students rose against Green Dot's decision to close down their school, their collective actions spoke to the structural trauma that is produced when students are continuously dislocated from their communities, including in this case, from their school. The students, teachers, and parents at *Ánimo Justice* created a sense of belonging and community in the midst of unstable management. They were the ones who chose to pair "Social Justice" with Green Dot's naming of its school, "*Ánimo*," and they were the ones who chose the school's colors and mascot.⁶⁵ After all, these were the same students who remained with the school as it was re-located three times in only four years. The students and parents invested so much of themselves into creating a school community, and they held Green Dot's CEO accountable when it did not live up to its mission or to two of its Six Tenets: local control and accountability, in addition to parental engagement. As Green Dot's failure to live up to its promise surfaced, its sister organization, Parent Revolution, prepared to invoke a new law, nearly nine miles away, at an elementary school in the city of Compton that was in the Compton Unified School District (CUSD).

⁶⁵ Bertha Rodriguez-Santos, "Green Dot's *Animo Justice* Charter School: What Happens When A Charter School Fails?" *New America Media* (Featured in *La Presa San Diego*), December 17, 2010

Manufacturing a Parent Revolution in Compton

In the summer of 2010, Green Dot and Parent Revolution broke formal ties, a decision made at the same time Parent Revolution began to organize in the city of Compton to invoke the parent trigger law.⁶⁶ This was also around the time that Benjamin Austin was appointed by the Governor to serve on California's State Board of Education. Just in time to aid the organizing of parents under the new parent trigger law, Parent Revolution received a grant of \$100,000 from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation in July⁶⁷ and a \$700,250 grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in September.⁶⁸ These changes aligned with the airing of an NBC Special titled "Education Nation." Aired in a series of segments, "Education Nation" broadcast a two-day summit held in New York City on September 27th and 28th of 2010. As Miguel Zavala later recalled, the summit was a blatant assault on teacher unions and progressive curriculum, while at the same time, hypocritically claiming to be concerned for the educational needs of "America's Children" (ARE, 5). These same critiques surfaced in response to the now highly criticized film *Waiting for Superman* (released October 29, 2010) as it debuted across the country. Funded by the Walden Foundation, the film was designed to garner

⁶⁶ Parent Revolution is a pro-charter school nonprofit that was funded primarily by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Wasserman Foundation, the Eli and Edyth Broad Foundation, the Hewlett Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation.

⁶⁷ Los Angeles Parent Union for General Operating Support. William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. July 19, 2010 (<https://www.hewlett.org/grants/los-angeles-parents-union-for-general-operating-support/>)

⁶⁸ "Purpose: to support parent empowerment and the teacher effectiveness effort" granted to Los Angeles Parent Union. Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. September 2010.

consent over charter schools. It appeals to the hearts of Americans by portraying families of color as helpless and without alternate choices to their failing neighborhood public schools. Among the pro-charter school advocates featured in the film, Mayor Villaraigosa and Steve Barr both express their support for charter schools, which are portrayed as the “Superman” that will save the nation’s ghettos through this new school choice option.

That same month of October, before the parent trigger law was ever invoked, let alone implemented, the conservative think tank the Heartland Institute presented their version of the parent trigger law to the American Legislative Exchange Council’s (ALEC) Education and Workforce Development Task Force. ALEC is notorious for creating model bills backed by their right-wing state legislators and major American corporations, such as Walmart. In fact, ALEC drafted their version of Florida’s “Stand Your Ground” law that led to George Zimmerman’s acquittal in the shooting of Trayvon Martin and, in another case, presented their version of Arizona’s SB 1070 that would have justified racial profiling and further criminalized undocumented immigrant communities. Two key differences from the original California parent trigger law and the version of the bill presented by the Heartland Institute was that parents who invoked the law would not have to have their children in underperforming schools and that it would give students from all schools a 75 percent per pupil cost voucher. This meant that all public schools, not only failing schools, would be subject to the parent trigger law model. In December of 2010, ALEC’s Education Task Force approved their model of the parent trigger law at a meeting held in Washington, D.C. Like all of ALEC’s model bills, the

intent was to present a template in the hope that state legislatures could easily and rapidly create similar policies across the U.S.

Compton's Refusal of Parent Revolution's Charter School Takeover

“The PTA represents a 20th century way of thinking about education reform. The role of parents is to do bake sales. The role of parents is to show up for volunteer days. Now, that of course is a role of parents, and it's an important one. But the PTA is not an organization that is designed to empower parents to go into battle against powerful defenders in the status quo.”⁶⁹ -Benjamin Austin

These are the words of Benjamin Austin, who in the first five minutes of the documentary film *We the Parents* (2013) discussed the urgency that parents feel in wanting to create change in their children's schools. Parents do not want to do bake sales or volunteer. Instead, parents want to “go into battle” against their school districts, teachers' unions, and any others who are “powerful defenders in the status quo.” This is exactly the message that this documentary delivers: parents fighting for change against a reluctant school district, the Compton Unified School District, which stands in the way of parent-driven progress.

The documentary chronicled the initial stages of Parent Revolution's campaign in Compton. After the parent trigger law was passed, and worried that the law may be repealed before it was invoked, Parent Revolution rushed to locate a school that fit two essential criteria: the school needed to be a failing school and it needed to be a small sized school. Out of 75 schools in the state that fit the law's criteria, Parent Revolution

⁶⁹ *We the Parents*. Film. Directed by James Takata. Go For Broke Pictures, 2013.

narrowed their list to three schools within Los Angeles County. As the film showed, Parent Revolution stumbled upon a report conducted by Compton Unified that demonstrated the district's underperformance. In the film, Austin explained that after hearing about the report, "Compton was a logical place to go because they were running objectively terrible schools."⁷⁰ While Parent Revolution "did not have not one friend" in the city, they required 250 parent signatures to convert their chosen school, McKinley Elementary School ("McKinley"), into a charter school to be operated by their chosen charter school operator, Celerity Educational Group ("Celerity").

In the film, the viewer is introduced to Mary Najera and Shirley Ford, who were paid field organizers of the petition drive. Mary Najera, who was born and raised in East LA, admitted, "I had never worked [with] the African American communities. And, uh... much to my surprise the drive is still there, the passion. And I think it's more the mother in me that makes me want this even more."⁷¹ Shirley Ford, a Black mother whose sons attended *Ánimo Inglewood Charter High School*, one of Green Dot's first schools, had a unique history with Green Dot. Shirley firmly believed in Green Dot's success and after her sons graduated, she continued her relationship with Green Dot and became a founding member of Parent Revolution at the time that it transitioned out of the LA Parent Union.⁷²

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Shirley Ford, "Commentary: All families deserve good school options," LA School Report, February 12, 2016. (<http://laschoolreport.com/commentary-all-families-deserve-good-school-choice-options/>)

The documentary film also introduced three Latina mothers who express why they chose to sign the petition. The parents organized under “McKinley Parents for Change,” a group not affiliated with McKinley’s long-standing PTA. In fact, neither the PTA nor the district had any idea that the petition drive was underway at the school. The petition drive garnered attention from many people in the surrounding community, including Pastor Kerry Allison, who welcomed Parent Revolution to create a headquarters at the school’s neighboring church.

After five months, 270 parents/guardians signed the petition and Parent Revolution was ready to deliver the signatures to the district’s headquarters (Figure 12). What followed after this was completely unexpected for outsiders like Parent Revolution, but not for those who are more familiar with Compton’s political history. As Dr. Carl Cohn confirmed, “Compton’s leadership feels like they have been picked on by the media over the years. Negative editorials and media coverage of, ‘Oh, well, we’ve been criticized therefore we ought to go ahead and cooperate’ --that is a Naive point of view, if you understand the community of Compton. They love a good fight.”⁷³ In what seemed to transpire overnight, all of the major news outlets focused in on Compton’s school district, and the nation watched what the district would do next.

⁷³ Ibid, *We the Parents*



Figure 12. McKinley parents for change⁷⁴

As the nation watched, Compton district officials were confronted by the multi-million dollar non-profit organization Parent Revolution, and pressured by local leaders, including the neighboring Los Angeles city Mayor Villaraigosa, who visited the parent group “McKinley Parents for Change” at a home in Compton to express his support.⁷⁵

For a school district such as Compton, which never in its history granted a charter school the authority to operate within its district, the petition’s request to convert McKinley to Celerity was a struggle that divided the district and some parents, but overwhelmingly served to unify the community in defense of its traditional public

⁷⁴ Image was originally featured in the *Los Angeles Times* on December 7, 2010. It was captured by photographer Allen J. Schaben.

⁷⁵ Howard Blume and Teresa Watanabe, “Effort to convert Compton school to charter draws fire.” *Los Angeles Times*. December 11, 2010.

elementary school. At the following school board meeting, parents publicly rescinded their signatures and stated they were misled or intimidated into signing. Parents throughout the city denounced the proposed reforms. Many parents believed they signed in support of a school beautification project. During the school board meeting, crowds of community members shouted, “Compton! Compton! Compton!” in defense of their public school and against the proposed conversion.

Don’t come here and diss---. Yes, there is a problem in Compton. Yes, there is. But we will take care of it. We are going to defend our school district, and our city, and our children and our people.⁷⁶

Among the vocal opponents, was McKinley’s PTA President, who expressed offense that parents did not inform them of the petition drive, given that the PTA was part of the school’s long-standing leadership, where in some cases, members had served longer than a decade. As McKinley’s PTA President exclaimed:

And I only have one thing to say to these charter school people and to these parents that signed for that-- where have you been, when we had all these meetings at McKinley? (the public claps and cheers in the background) Where have you been? If you really cared about your children, how come I’ve never seen you there? I’ve been there for fifteen years as a volunteer.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Name unknown, Compton Unified School District School Board Meeting, December 14, 2010

⁷⁷ Ibid.

The PTA later reported in an interview for *The LA Weekly* that many of the parents were intimidated into signing and some were even threatened with deportation.⁷⁸

The district responded by sending a letter to every parent that signed, with a request to show up to the district with official identification to verify their signature. The parents in favor of the change expressed that the district request was an intimidation tactic, especially for parents who are undocumented and may not have official forms of identification. With the support of Parent Revolution's attorneys, the pro-charter conversion parents filed a lawsuit against the district, citing intimidation, harassment, and abuse. They were granted a restraining order and temporary injunction against the district.⁷⁹ On February 24, 2011, however, the petitions were rejected by a unanimous vote by school members who stated the petition was insufficient to be considered.⁸⁰ This decision was ultimately confirmed by a judge's decision over a missing date box.

As he reflected on what transpired in Compton, Benjamin Austin admitted there were many mistakes made by Parent Revolution, stating, "Our biggest problem with Compton was that we [Parent Revolution] chose what was going to work for Compton

⁷⁸ Simone Wilson, "'Parent Trigger' Petitions Fend Off Accusations from Compton Unified, McKinley PTA – Not California Board of Education," *LA Weekly*, December 17, 2010.

⁷⁹ Ben Austin on the CA Parent Trigger Story, Choice Media, Youtube. January 19, 2012 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VaR-Xrlw7SU>)

⁸⁰ Teresa Watanabe, "Compton School Board Rejects Parent Trigger Effort," *Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 2011 (<http://articles.latimes.com/2011/feb/23/local/la-me-0223-compton-school-20110223>)

not vice versa.”⁸¹ Parent Revolution’s top-down strategy did not work for communities such as those in Compton, where its residents were used to outsider interventions that engaged in a “savior complex.” Compton does not need saving, and charter schools are not the answer for Compton’s struggling public schools. This was clearly the case, as Austin later stated, “We did a lot of things wrong. We did most of the work. We were the ones who chose the school, we were the ones who gathered the signatures, we were the ones that chose the charter.”⁸² As the parents in favor to maintain McKinley as a traditional public school repeatedly expressed, the school community was best positioned to address the school’s needs. After all, McKinley’s vibrant community of long-established volunteers, parents, PTA members, teachers, and administrators actively worked to improve the school’s academic progress.

The LAUSD PSC 2.0: The Struggle to Reclaim Jordan and Clay

As the end of the 2009-2010 school year approached, the LAUSD implemented the second phase of the PSC policy, which was referred to as PSC 2.0. Under PSC 2.0, third party entities could submit proposals to operate one of the identified focus schools. These entities could be comprised of teams of teachers, charter operators, and non-profits. Among the eligible schools was Henry Clay Middle School (“Clay”), a school in

⁸¹ See also, “Lessons of ‘parent trigger’” *Los Angeles Times* Editorial. November 14, 2011. (<http://articles.latimes.com/2011/nov/14/opinion/la-ed-trigger-20111114>)

⁸² Beau Yarbrough, “Parent trigger group applies lessons from Compton, Adelanto efforts to L.A. school takeover,” *The Sun*. February 3, 2013. (<https://www.sbsun.com/2013/02/03/parent-trigger-group-applies-lessons-from-compton-adelanto-efforts-to-la-school-takeover/>)

the West Adams community of Los Angeles County, which was identified as the lowest performing middle school in the state. It was also a school known for its large concentration of students with special needs. In total, the district received three PSC applications to operate Clay: two from teacher-led teams to operate pilot schools and one from Green Dot to operate two small start-up schools.

Before the end of the year, the LAUSD's Superintendent Cortines announced to the staff at another school – David Starr Jordan High School (“Jordan”) – that, under NCLB, Jordan was identified as a school to be reconstituted the following school year. As part of NCLB's sanctions for Jordan's failure to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), Superintendent Cortines needed to develop a School Improvement Plan (SIP). The Superintendent took an unusual move, much like he did previously in the case of Fremont, and gave the teachers at Jordan a chance to present a SIP for him to consider. The teachers, with the assistance of staff, parents, and students, developed a SIP that was ultimately rejected as it “laid blame on the economically disadvantaged Jordan community and its challenges. The plan contained unrealistic benchmarks and lacked a clear understanding of what it means to deliver strong instruction.”⁸³ Disappointed with the teacher's plan, the Superintendent announced that Jordan was to instead reopen the following school year as three small high schools.

⁸³ UTLA vs LAUSD, 2011. Case No. LA-CE-5546-E

At the start of 2011, the fate of Clay and Jordan was announced. Under NCLB, the district board authorized Green Dot, Alliance, and PLAS⁸⁴ (two charter school operators and one non-profit organization) to operate three new small high schools. Teachers and staff were told they had to reapply for their jobs at the new co-located schools. Under PSC 2.0, the district board members went against the Superintendent's recommendation for Clay to become two schools: one teacher-driven and the other Green Dot managed. Instead, the school board approved the formation of two Green Dot schools, Middle School 3 (Ánimo Western Charter Middle School) and Middle School 4 (Ánimo Phillis Wheatley Charter Middle School).

The LAUSD school board's decision was met with resistance from teachers at Clay and Jordan, who fought to keep their traditional public schools. In June, the UTLA filed a lawsuit against the district.⁸⁵ In their case, the UTLA claimed the district's decision was not in line with The Charter School Act under Education code 47605. UTLA specifically referenced a provision that requires teacher approval for new charter schools, the same code invoked years prior in Locke's conversion to Green Dot (see Chapter Two). Judge James Chalfant denied the UTLA's case and ruled in favor of the school district. According to the ruling, the school district was in line with state (Race to

⁸⁴ The district ultimately decided to co-locate a new Green Dot school, Animo College Prep Academy, and a Partnership for LA Schools (PLAS), Partnership Academy for the Arts.

⁸⁵ UTLA vs LAUSD, 2011. Case No. LA-CE-5546-E

the Top) and federal (NCLB) policy that allowed for Schools In Need of Improvement (SINI) to undergo charter school conversions.

Growing opposition to the LAUSD implementation of PSC 2.0 led to a series of amendments. The Advisory Vote was changed to Regional Academies that were meant to provide written feedback to the school board when considering school operator applicants. By the summer of 2011, before the start of the new school year, the board decided to make an additional amendment to the selection criteria for school operator applicants under PSC 2.0, stating that the district should prioritize in-district applicants. The district also created a memorandum of understanding (MOU)⁸⁶ with the UTLA titled, “Local School Stabilization and Empowerment Initiative,” which allowed for greater decision-making power in the hands of principals, teachers, and parents at each school. Established to be in effect until 2015, the MOU allowed individual schools to waive aspects of the teacher’s collective bargaining agreement and specific district policies.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the implementation of the PSC policy in the LAUSD and the parent trigger law in the CUSD. It demonstrated how, at the height of the recession, neoliberal policy architects seized on the crisis exacerbated by the recession to push for

⁸⁶ Memorandum of Understanding Los Angeles Unified School District and United Teachers Los Angeles, “Local Stabilization and Empowerment Initiative” December 2011. (<https://www.utla.net/sites/default/files/UTLA-LAUSD%20LSSEI%20Agreement%20Dec2011.pdf>)

school closures, charter expansion, and charter conversion of traditional public schools. Additionally, it provided portraits of the opposition to these efforts through, for example, the ARE-LA's campaign against the LAUSD's PSC, the mobilization of communities at Ánimo Justice against Green Dot, and Compton's refusal of Parent Revolution's efforts to convert McKinley into a charter school. Together, these collective acts of resistance, while they took place at different times and in different locations, provide a window into the insurgent learning of communities who envisioned democratic solutions for public education.

As the events presented in this chapter unfolded, in May 2010, journalist and author Juan Gonzalez was the first to reveal that in 2000, Congress passed a federal tax break called New Market Tax Credit (NMTC).⁸⁷ This revelation was born out of Gonzalez's extensive years of coverage of charter schools and attempts to understand how-- beyond the for-profit companies that assist charter school management-- hedge fund managers, wealthy philanthropists, and major banks profit, since they have heavily invested in charter school growth. As Gonzalez revealed, the NMTC provides federal tax credit to banks and equity funds that invest in community projects located in low-income communities: "Under the New Markets program, a bank or private equity firm that lends money to a nonprofit to build a charter school can receive a 39% federal tax credit over

⁸⁷ In November 2014, the New Markets Tax Credit Coalition signed a letter for congress to extend. The NMTC Coalition continues to lobby for the NMTC to be a permanent part of the tax code. NMTC Coalition was created in 1998. (<http://nmtccoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/Sign-on-Letter-in-Support-of-NMTC-11-18-2014a.pdf>).

seven years.”⁸⁸ In addition to receiving a 39% tax credit, investors are collecting interest on the loan, meaning their investment can double in only a matter of several years. The federal tax break was created to incentivize banks and developers to invest in low-income communities that they would otherwise not invest in because they are regarded as “economically distressed” and would thus raise concerns regarding the flow of capital and their investment return.

Gonzales’ breaking news coverage made a critical connection that explained the profit incentive behind a growing charter school industry in low-income communities that are predominately Black and Latinx. The seven-year period of the NMTC provides start-up or turn-around charter schools with facilities financing, which aids where charter school operators choose to locate. To create permanent facilities for two of its schools – the *Ánimo Ralph Bunche Charter High School* and the *Ánimo Jefferson Charter Middle School*, both in the city of Los Angeles – Green Dot was given \$10 million in NMTC from JPMorgan Chase in partnership with LIIF, a community development financial institution (CDFI).⁸⁹ For the investors, this equity investment will trigger the 39% credit of \$3.9 million in this case. In July of 2008, Green Dot was given \$7,750,000 in NMTC for *Ánimo South Los Angeles Charter High School* in Watts.⁹⁰ In December of 2009,

⁸⁸ Juan Gonzalez, “Albany Charter Cash Cow: Big banks making a bundle on new construction as schools bear the cost” *New York Daily News*. May 7, 2010. (<https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/education/albany-charter-cash-big-banks-making-bundle-new-construction-schools-bear-cost-article-1.448008>)

⁸⁹ Green Dot 27th Street. Capital for Healthy Families and Communities. Last accessed June 11, 2019. (<http://www.liifund.org/projects/schools/green-dot-27th-street/>)

⁹⁰ Green Dot Public Schools, Buck Financial. July 2008.

Green Dot was given \$9,285,715 in NMTC from Buck Financial for Animo Watts Charter High School, located next to Earvin “Magic” Johnson Park.⁹¹ These are a few examples of the financial infrastructure that aids, enables, and makes profitable charter school operators’ expansion of their network of schools.

As a growing movement to incentivize the growth of charter schools continued, Steve Barr officially launched his national project Green Dot America, which eventually changed its name to The Future Is Now. Through Barr’s transition, he was re-appointed as a member of the California Department of Education’s Advisory Committee for Charter Schools. Meanwhile, Benjamin Austin was appointed to serve as a member of California’s Board of Education in 2011, during Compton’s parent trigger controversy. Both Barr and Austin, who were key players in the education reforms documented throughout this chapter and chapter two, clearly have their eyes set on obtaining larger political influence. This was confirmed in 2016, when Barr placed a bid for the LA mayoral race.

In 2012, a controversy involving Mayor Villaraigosa circulated around Santee Educational Complex (“Santee”), this time over history teacher Mr. Ron Gochez, who was pushed out due to his political involvement in spite of his tenure at the school. Mr.

⁹¹ “As the facility is located in a qualifying census tract for New Market Tax Credits, the Buck Financial Advisors team worked with Green Dot to structure a tax-credit financing that provided numerous benefits to Animo Watts. These benefits include interest-only for the 7-year tax compliance period, as well as the accrual of equity in the project at the end of the financing – at that time the project will only need to refinance about \$6.7 million of the original \$9.3 million debt,” Green Dot Public Schools, Buck Financial. December 2009.

Gochez actively organized the year prior through the organization Union del Barrio against the towing of cars at sobriety checkpoints, which disproportionately impacted undocumented immigrants, who at the time were not allowed to obtain a state driver's license. Once the car was impounded, there was a 30-day hold, which amounted to several thousands of dollars to retrieve the car. For Mr. Gochez, winning that campaign was the last straw for Mayor Villaraigosa who "led the charge of stealing cars from undocumented people via their impounds from cars... a \$40 million statewide source of revenue for the state."⁹² Since Santee was one of the mayor's PLAS schools, where Marshall Tuck served as the CEO, displacing Mr. Gochez was clearly retaliation. Moreover, many in the community saw this as an assault on ethnic studies since Mr. Gochez was one of the few social justice teachers at the school. When confronted about this attack, Tuck, "In front of a room full of people he said that Ethnic Studies was not important and that he was getting rid of it at Santee."⁹³ Marshall Tuck eventually ran a campaign to become California's next superintendent of instruction in 2014.

In August of 2012, I took the long drive from Compton to Beverly Hills with my friend Stephany to watch the last screening of *We, the Parents*. I remember seeing Benjamin Austin present at the theater that day and wondering where all the parents featured in the film were, or if they had ever been given the access to watch it. As I drove back, I asked Stephany what she thought about the film and in a few words she captured a shared sentiment, "They just use us." As we witnessed how parents in Compton and their

⁹² Ron Gochez conversation with author, June 2019.

⁹³ Ron Gochez conversation with author, June 2019.

struggle to better their school was preyed upon by Parent Revolution, we wondered what the parents thought about it all now. Later that year, the parent trigger incidents in Compton and Adelanto inspired the drama, *Won't Back Down* (2012), which was produced by Walden Media, the same film studio that released *Waiting for Superman* (2010). I was eager to know the perspectives of parents in the aftermath of all the drama that unfolded in Compton regarding the parent trigger law. As the next section of *Insurgent Learning* presents, instead, what I found was Compton's revolution, which gave life to the second part of this dissertation.

PART II: *LA REVOLUCION COMIENZA DESDE EL HOGAR*

CHAPTER FIVE

INSURGENT PEDAGOGIES OF THE HOMELAND, FROM OAXACA TO COMPTON

In the summer of 2013, Compton youth gathered to reclaim the “Compton Cookout” from a racist theme party hosted under that name three years prior in San Diego.¹ As solidarity within and across university campuses strengthened in response to what transpired in San Diego, high school students in Compton rose up to express similar sentiments of anger, outrage, and insult.² Once more, Compton’s negative media spotlight amplified the normative misrepresentation of the city and its residents. These were the sentiments that brought us together in the summer of 2013, as Compton residents, myself included, reclaimed the cookout and strengthened solidarity across our differences. Organizing this *encuentro* (encounter) alongside other passionate young people throughout the city was my entry back into the city.

At the cookout, I hoped to build meaningful relationships with the people in my community, with the aspiration that perhaps over time I could meet the parents involved with the parent trigger law incident at McKinley Elementary, which had taken place two years prior (see Chapter Four). At that time, I did not realize my attempt to locate and

¹ The racist theme party was set for the month of February with the intent to mock and ridicule Black History Month. The incident was not an isolated event, as noose and swastika sign were later found at the UC San Diego campus. These incidents reflected a larger pattern of institutional racism across university campuses.

² Larry Gordon. “After ‘Compton Cookout’ scandal, UCSD forges a more positive association with the city.” *Los Angeles Times*. May 3, 2010.
(<http://articles.latimes.com/2010/may/03/local/la-me-compton-20100503>)

interview those parents would be more difficult than originally imagined. Instead, at the cookout there were families, students, and activists who were just as eager to build authentic and nurturing relationships rooted in justice for the people of our city. This was the first time I met Yolanda Hernandez Lopez, a mother of two who was well-known throughout the city for her vocal opposition to corruption, inequity, and discrimination.

Yolanda is a Zapotec *mujer* with long braided hair and a memorable *copete* that distinguishes her from the rest. She always wears a large wooden cross necklace, boldly signifying her strong commitment to her Catholic faith. While Yolanda at first sight seems like a petite woman, this changes as soon as she speaks. Her vocal posture can attract any audience willing to listen. This was the case at the cookout, where Yolanda had a group of younger women at a table fascinated with her stories of victory and defeat over the years. As she spoke to them in Spanish about her experiences, she leafed through a large three-ring binder full of plastic slip covers that contained everything from certificates, newspaper trimmings, flyers, notes, and pictures. As she explained, she quickly pulled out a document, as if to carefully reference at hand the validity of her claims. I thought, “This *mujer* is a walking archive!” I was amazed at all of her accomplishments, her experiences, and her sense of communal memory about the city’s schools.

At that time, I did not realize that Yolanda had courageously placed a bid for a position to serve on the school board for the Compton Unified School District (CUSD). Nor did I realize this *encuentro* with Yolanda signaled a shift in *Insurgent Learning*. While my aspiration was to meet the parents involved with the parent trigger law incident

at McKinley Elementary, instead I encountered a group of mainly Latina immigrant mothers, who, like Yolanda, carried their own insurgent archives of knowledge, experience, and wisdom generated through their own struggles with the CUSD. These mothers were eager to share their stories with anyone willing to listen. They wanted people to hear their stories, validate their experiences, and support their struggles. After repeated failed attempts to reach the parents organized under Parent Revolution's efforts in Compton, my project shifted to focus on the Latina mothers right in front of me. These revolutionary Latina mothers were never handed the multi-million-dollar support that the parents of Parent Revolution had received, enough to equip an army of non-profits, lawyers, corporate media, politicians, and philanthropists. This chapter is written to honor the labor of love and revolutionary spirit embodied through their efforts to transform the public education of Compton's children.

Yolanda's insurgent portrait depicts a larger portrait of the city of Compton and the struggle for justice in its educational system, specifically as that struggle is experienced through her subjectivity as a Spanish-speaking Zapotec immigrant, mother, and activist. Out of all the mothers I was privileged to meet and build relationships with, I chose to center Yolanda's story in this chapter simply because she wanted her story documented and trusted me to be the documentarian. In telling Yolanda's story, the stories of others who she struggled alongside are weaved in, together representing a collective insurgent subjectivity³ informed by their intersectional identities as

³ Collective narratives are commonly used throughout Latin American literature and Chicana/Latina work on testimonios. For examples, see Elisabeth Burgos-Debray and Rigoberta Menchu, *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (Barcelona,

immigrants, English-language learners, Latin American, Indigenous, Women of Color, mothers, and activists engaged in the struggle for justice in Compton's educational system. Their collective subjectivity re-imagines Compton through visions to transform its school system.

In Latin American culture, there is a *dicho* (popular saying) that goes something like this, “*La educación comienza desde el hogar,*” and is often used as a reminder of the importance of learning manners and values from the home. In this saying, *educación* does not translate in English to education. Whereas in English, an education is something that can be measured by the years a person has attended school; in Spanish, an *educación* can only be measured by a person's actions, which are a reflection of their upbringing, family, values, and where they come from. In Latin American cultures, to have an *educación* is more significant than accomplishing high levels of education, as people who have education without *educación* are often frowned upon. While this *dicho* adheres to a politics of respectability, as marginalized groups of people often use it to regulate their own or others' actions, behaviors, and attitudes to align with what has been considered normal, appropriate, and acceptable, I challenge this assertion. I expand the notion of *hogar* (home) to extend beyond traditional notions of home that are limited to the “place where a person lives permanently, especially as a member of family or household.”⁴

Spain: Editorial Argos Vergara, 1983) and Latina Feminist Group, *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (Duke University Press, 2001).

⁴ Oxford Dictionary. Home. (<https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/home>) Accessed June 12, 2019.

Specifically for (im)migrant families, the notion of home is more complex and can carry multiple meanings. I question, is home where you live permanently, where your ancestral lineage is from, the places you have lived, the places where you long to be, where you feel safe, comfort, and a sense of belonging? One thing that these vast meanings have in common is that home is somewhere, whether it is a physical location, space, or in the flesh. This chapter explores themes of *educación*, education, and home in the pursuit of educational justice in the city of Compton. As immigrant Latina activists in the city sought to transform the lives of their children and community, they engaged in insurgent pedagogies. Dolores Delgado Bernal (2001) defines *pedagogies of the home* as:

the communication, practices and learning that occur in the *home* and community...and serve as a cultural knowledge base that helps Chicanas ...negotiate the daily experiences of sexist, racist, and classist microaggressions.⁵

This chapter expands on Delgado Bernal's definition to include Indigenous migrant women from the Global South whose pedagogies of the home extend beyond the U.S. and include pedagogies of the home(land). Yolanda's story demonstrates how these insurgent pedagogies of the home(land) have served as cultural knowledge foundations for her activism and impetus to protect her ancestral lineage, heritage, and communities.

⁵ Dolores Delgado Bernal. "Learning and Living Pedagogies of the Home: The Mestiza Consciousness of Chicana Students." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 14 no. 5 (2001): p 624.

Los Angeles is home to the largest Indigenous communities outside of Latin America, and the Zapotec people make up over 60,000.⁶ A focus on the experiences of Yolanda as a Zapotec woman in diaspora allows me to make legible how her indigeneity shaped her conceptualization of home and justice in Compton, a non-Zapotec community. Yolanda's subjectivity as a Spanish-speaking indigenous Zapotec migrant, mother, and education activist in Compton shapes her insurgent knowledge – knowledge derived through her lived experiences from Oaxaca to Compton. In this chapter, I document Yolanda's migration story, to highlight how even through migration she was able to practice *comunalidad* (communal community), an indigenous Oaxacan belief system that is practiced through a person's way of life. Zapoteco Serrano anthropologist and musician Jaime Martínez Luna in *Eso Que Llamam Comunalidad* (2010) describes *comunalidad* as:

Somos Comunalidad, lo opuesto a la individualidad, somos territorio communal, no propiedad privada; somos *compartencia*, no competencia; somos politeísmo, no monoteísmo. Somos intercambio, no negocio; diversidad, no igualdad, aunque al nombre de la igualdad también se nos oprima. Somos interdependientes, no libres. Tenemos autoridades, no monarcas.⁷

(We are Communal Community, the contrast to individualism, we are communal territory, not private property; we practice communal sharing, not competition; we

⁶ Lisa Kresge, "Indigenous Oaxacan Communities in California: An Overview," California Institute for Rural Studies 1107 (November 2007): pp. iii.

⁷ Jaime Martínez Luna, *Eso Que Llamam Comunalidad*. (Colección diálogos, Pueblos originarios de Oaxaca, Conaculta, 2010): p. 17.

are polytheism, not monotheism. We are exchange, not business; diversity, not equality, even though at the name of equality we are also oppressed. We are interdependent, not free. We have communal authorities, not monarchs.)

As Indigenous scholars have claimed, Indigeneity is not an ethnic category.

Comunalidad challenges neoliberal education practices and reforms that center around individualism as opposed to collectivity. Documenting Yolanda's practice of her ancestral knowledge of *comunalismo* in the U.S., an insurgent pedagogy derived from her homeland in Oaxaca, allows me to identify both possibilities and impossibilities similarly endured by other parent activists, students, and community members.

When Yolanda ceased to be perceived as a parent volunteer and instead as a parent activist, she became an unwelcomed presence for school board members and the Compton School Police. This shift in perception aligned with the polarized mainstream depictions of immigrants as either "good immigrants" or "bad immigrants," a binary that adheres to a politics of respectability to regulate and pacify immigrant behavior. I argue that even though Yolanda was initially perceived as a parent volunteer and thus non-threatening, her Zapotec worldview of *comunalidad* always informed how she perceived everyday schooling and the larger school structure. In fact, it was only when her worldviews of justice for Compton's schools became legible to school district officials that she became seen as an activist that needed to be eliminated. Additionally, I document Yolanda's story as an indigenous migrant woman situated in a city that is predominately Latinx and Black, and reveal how her non-belonging is in fact the impetus to transform the city and its schools (see Chapter Six).

Desde las Sierras de Oaxaca

“*Comenzó desde allá,*” (It began from over there) Yolanda responded to my question of *when* her activism began. I quickly learned that the time period sought by the framing of my question was not as important as knowing *where* her activism and visions of justice emanated from. Yolanda was referring to her homeland in Oaxaca. Oaxaca is in the southern part of Mexico, between the states of Guerrero to the North and Chiapas to the South. These three states are referred to as Mexico’s most impoverished states. Of the three, Oaxaca has the highest rates of poverty and illiteracy, but also has the nation’s largest number of Indigenous nations.⁸ In 1964, Yolanda entered the world as the first-born child to parents who formed part of Oaxaca’s Indigenous Zapotec community.

Yolanda remembered that her childhood abruptly ended at the age of ten. She recalled, “*Yo no quise crecer*” (I did not want to grow up). Even as a woman who was now in her early 50s, her voice still carried nostalgia for her childhood. Yolanda was raised to “*ser humilde*” (be humble), and as the oldest of five children, as older siblings often do, she saw it as her duty and desire to place the needs of her family first. “My parents came from a small village *en la sierra* before moving to Oaxaca to raise a family of nine.” Yolanda’s family migrated from *la sierra* (the mountain ranges) of San Juan Evangelista Analco to Oaxaca de Juarez, a major city in Southern Oaxaca. The internal migration experienced by Yolanda’s family is a pattern that many Indigenous Oaxacan

⁸ “Pobreza a nivel municipio 2010” Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social. (<https://www.coneval.org.mx/Medicion/MP/Paginas/Medicion-de-la-pobreza-municipal-2010.aspx>) Last accessed June 12, 2019.

communities partake in to seek more economic opportunities.⁹ Unlike the *sierras*, Oaxaca's cities provided economic employment opportunities in commerce, industry, and services.

The economic displacement that compelled Yolanda's family to migrate to a city in Oaxaca was a result of a modernization project meant to carry out Mexico's erasure of Indigenous people and their sovereignty,¹⁰ which is tied to their ancestral land. As Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (1996) explains in *Mexico Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization*, "Mexico profundo" are the Indigenous people of Mexico who have persisted in spite of genocide, colonialism, and state violence:¹¹

The Mexico profundo, meanwhile, keeps resisting, appealing to diverse strategies, depending on the scheme of domination to which it is subjected. It is not a passive, static world, but, rather, one that lives in permanent tension. The peoples of the Mexico profundo continually create and re-create their culture, adjust it to changing pressures, and reinforce their own, private sphere of control. They take foreign cultural elements and put them at their service; they cyclically perform the collective acts that are a way of expressing and renewing their own identity. They

⁹ Jeffrey H. Cohen, *The Culture of Migration in Southern Mexico*. (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2004)

¹⁰ This is carried out through de-indianization, which Guillermo Bonfil Batalla defines as "a historical process through which populations that originally possessed a particular and distinctive identity, based upon their own culture, are forced to renounce that identity with all the consequent changes in their social organization and culture" Pg 17

¹¹ Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (Translated by Philip A. Dennis), *Mexico Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization*. (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1996)

remain silent or they rebel, according to strategies refined by centuries of resistance.¹²

The dislocation of Indigenous peoples is, according to Bonfil Batalla, meant, “to restrict the scope in which cultural continuity is possible and makes any ongoing cultural development more difficult.”¹³ The cultural continuity of Indigenous peoples is threatened as they are displaced from their ancestral lands, removing them from their traditional forms of governing, such as *usos y costumbres* (customary law), and subjecting them to cultural alienation when their Indigenous languages and cultures are no longer legible.

In spite of the challenges Yolanda faced in Oaxaca, she viewed education as a way to overcome “*barreras*” (barriers) that constrained her entire family. From a young age, Yolanda’s father instilled in her the importance of education, and with the palms of his hands open, he showed his children the physical manifestation of the exploitative labor he endured as an *albañil* (brickmaker), “*Miren, yo no quiero esto para ustedes*” (Look, I do not want this for you).¹⁴ As the oldest of nine children, she knew that working in Oaxaca’s tourist economy only maintained her family in a state of survival, where they barely had enough to provide for their basic needs. A witness to her parent’s labor, Yolanda knew that the tourist industry could never provide opportunities for them to

¹² Ibid, *Mexico Profundo*, p. xvii

¹³ Ibid, *Mexico Profundo*, pg. 18.

¹⁴ Yolanda Hernandez Lopez interview with author, June 27, 2018.

thrive, where the pursuit of their dreams could become a realization. Yolanda knew that an education was a way to break *barreras* (barriers) to provide more opportunities in life.

Yolanda aspired to become an attorney; she wanted to become a legal advocate for people like her parents in her community. When she found an opportunity to leave her home to pursue that aspiration, she did. After six months of balancing the university and work, she felt overwhelmed with the guilt of her decision to leave her home to pursue her dream. At that time, a university education seemed like a selfish decision that could only benefit her, not the rest of her family. If Yolanda was going to leave her home in pursuit of helping her parents and siblings, and by extension her community, she needed to make the ultimate sacrifice and migrate to the United States. The decision Yolanda made to leave to “*el Norte*” (the U.S.) meant that she had to sacrifice her own dream of one day becoming an attorney.

Migrating to *El Norte*

After repeated searches for someone who would migrate North with her to the U.S., Yolanda was able to locate another woman amongst her friendships who would take the perilous journey with her. Yolanda’s migration to the U.S. was part of a larger pattern of Mexican migrants who sought work with the aspiration of sending remittances back home. At the beginning of the 1980s, Mexico’s economy was devastated as it experienced the nation’s worst recession since the 1930s. In 1982, the repeated devaluation of the peso exacerbated conditions of poverty. The underpaid labor in Mexico and the presence of higher wages in the U.S. served to push Oaxacans in search

of work and pulled thousands of Mexican migrants to the U.S. While the number of Oaxacans who migrated to the U.S. was lower than the number of migrants from most other Mexican states, Yolanda was part of the mass migration of Zapotec Oaxacans who entered the U.S. during that era and settled in Los Angeles.¹⁵

Mexican Indigenous migrants, such as Zapotec migrants in Los Angeles, often endured double exclusion. On the one hand, they were excluded from mainstream American society, and on the other hand, they were excluded from their Mexican mestizo compatriots. After spending weeks in search of a job, spending only \$2 a day to get by, Yolanda was able to find a job in the garment industries of Los Angeles. Even though Yolanda found herself thousands of miles away from her homeland, she relied on her social capital¹⁶ to secure this job through someone who was from her same *pueblo* (hometown) in Oaxaca. In fact, in Los Angeles there are growing and thriving communities of indigenous Oaxacans who form mutual-aid societies in the face of being relegated to the margins of society by mainstream economies and public spheres. Oaxacans in LA county have demonstrated a strong presence through the formation of hometown associations, organizations, and cultural practices such as *kermeses* (social fundraisers), *convivencias* (exclusive social gathering), and *ventas de comida* (food

¹⁵ Gaspar Rivera-Salgado. "From Hometown Clubs to Transnational Social Movement: The Evolution of Oaxacan Migrant Associations in California." *Social Justice* 42, no. 3-4 (2016): 118.

¹⁶ Social capital is the ability to generate resources such as jobs through social networks such as friendships and other social contacts.

fundraisers).¹⁷ As Daniel Melero Malpica describes, “By coming together and seeking community, Zapotec migrants have eased the settlement process through the sharing of social, cultural, and economic resources.”¹⁸ These are all some examples of how Zapotec migrants continue their practice of *comunalidad* in the U.S. and ensure the prosperity of both their indigenous ways of life and the essential networks they’ve created to navigate society.

Yolanda struggled as most female migrants do when they first arrive to the U.S. Yolanda described working late into the night, only to begin working as soon as the sun rose the next day:

From minimum wage working often from 6 AM to 1 AM in a clothing shop, sometimes 7 days a week, I was able to send money to help my next oldest brothers. I only have one sister who is much younger. Helping my brothers with my earnings led to them becoming professionals who have successful careers and family lives in Mexico. One is an engineer, another a medical doctor, another a computer technician, and my sister a surgeon's assistant married to a doctor.¹⁹

¹⁷ Daniel Melero Malpica, “Mexican Migrants in a Modern Metropolis” in *Latino LA: Transformations, Community, and Activism*. ed. Enrique Ochoa and Gilda Ochoa. (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2005)

¹⁸ *Ibid*, pg. 114.

¹⁹ Yolanda Hernandez Lopez, Campaign [Auto]Biography for Compton Unified School District School Board Elections 2013.

In spite of earning \$3.25 an hour, Yolanda never forgot about her family in Mexico. This occupation enabled her to send money back to her family in the form of remittances, as migrants do.²⁰ In order for her siblings to realize their own career paths, she was willing to sacrifice her own personal dream, explaining, “I had to forgo my desire to become an attorney.”²¹ Like many migrants who journey to the U.S., Yolanda took it upon herself to be the first in her family to make the ultimate sacrifice in an attempt to secure the well-being of her entire family.²²

In spite of her dream deferred, she was able to see her siblings pursue their dreams, and this meant everything to her. “*Yo nunca quise ser rica, ni aquí, ni allá. Yo solo quiero ver a mi familia moverse adelante*” (I never wanted to be wealthy, not here or there. I only want to see my family move forward). All of her brothers became professionals in various careers. Yolanda’s oldest brother was able to pursue a career that allowed him to help Yolanda’s youngest and only sister. For Yolanda, sacrificing her own career dreams were worth it because all of her siblings were able to pursue their own dreams. In doing so, from a young age, Yolanda put to practice the principle that

²⁰ Fernando Lozano Ascencio (1993). Bringing it back home: remittances to Mexico from migrant workers in the United States. Monograph Series, 37, Center for US-Mexican Studies, University of California at San Diego.

²¹ Yolanda Hernandez Lopez, Campaign [Auto]Biography for Compton Unified School District School Board Elections 2013.

²² Leisy Abrego in *Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love* similarly documents how this is very similar for Salvadorean transnational families, where mothers in particular make the sacrifice of fleeing to the U.S. to ensure the economic well-being of their children and families who remain in their homeland, a new family formation referred to as transnational motherhood.

education is not individualistic or for self-gain; rather, education is about lifting up your family and community. In effect, Yolanda chose to walk away from a university education that would have allowed her to realize her dream of becoming an attorney in Mexico, and instead she endured precarious employment and unstable housing conditions in the U.S., a sacrifice rooted in *comunalidad*. The practice of her indigenous way of life in the U.S. through *comunalidad* is an example of insurgent learning, where she courageously paved the way for her family's educational and economic well-being, and by extension that of the communities where her families are situated. Yolanda's brother, for example, became a medic and frequently provides free services to the people in the *pueblo* where they were raised before moving to the city.²³ Moreover, in spite of being thousands of miles away, Yolanda maintained strong ties to her family, and in effect practiced a transnational family formation across national borders, time, and space.

Yolanda's living situation during her first years in the U.S. was never stable; she continuously moved from one home to another. Yolanda relied on her network from her homeland to find people who would be willing to help her in the U.S. She lived at first with the friend she traveled North with, then with a Oaxacan family in Huntington Park. Moving from one place to another meant her jobs changed as well. As she explained, "I worked in Los Angeles in a sewing shop, packing assembly line, and for a while in Central California picking strawberries."²⁴ While working in the fields of California's

²³ Interview with author, May 25, 2019.

²⁴ Yolanda Hernandez Lopez, Campaign [Auto]Biography for Compton Unified School District School Board Elections 2013.

Central Valley, Yolanda found an opportunity where, as she described, “In that job I was able to take advantage of the new amnesty and work permit laws for agricultural workers.”²⁵ In the late 80s, many undocumented immigrants benefited from two programs. One was designed specifically for Special Agricultural Workers (SAW),²⁶ and the other was a general amnesty program called Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA).²⁷ Many SAW also applied for IRCA; in 1987 and 1988, more than one million immigrants who listed their occupation as farm worker applied for legalization under both. By the early 1990s, the majority of these farm workers obtained Legal Permanent Resident (LPR) status. Yolanda was among the 2.5 million who comprised the labor market in agriculture during the time that she benefited from the general amnesty program and work permit for agricultural workers.

Creating a home in a city of “racial unrest”

Yolanda moved to Compton in the early 1990’s and was among the many Latinx immigrant families that composed the majority of the population in the city and the school district.²⁸ For Latinxs, repeated attempts to gain political power and representation

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ The Special Agricultural Workers had to demonstrate that they had worked in U.S. fruit, vegetable, and horticultural agriculture for 90 days during the 1985-1986 season.

²⁷ The General Amnesty workers had to show they had lived continuously in the United States since January of 1982.

²⁸ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1990): pg. 304.; Emily E. Straus, *Death of a Suburban Dream: Race and Schools in Compton, California*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

were unsuccessful and often met with racial antagonisms from politicians in the Black community, who for decades had also struggled to achieve the same. This is largely why even though the Latinx community had a strong presence in the city since the 70s, it was not until 1991 that Pedro Pallan became the first Latino candidate to runoff in the mayoral election.²⁹

For the Latinx community, it was a constant battle over representation, resources, and rights to the city similar to what the Black community experienced against an all-White power structure. The issue over representation in Compton's city council and school board were firmly rooted in identity politics. In the school district, the Latinx community had a particular set of needs regarding language and legal status that many felt could be best represented by someone from that community who could make policy decisions and allocate resources to target their specific needs.

Coincidentally, the same year Yolanda moved to Compton, the school district was the first district to experience a "takeover" by the state's Department of Education, meaning the elected school board lost all of its decision-making power and the state appointed an emergency manager. State Assembly member William H. Murray Jr. proposed the bill that allowed the governor at the time, Pete Wilson, to sign off in agreement with this takeover. Commenting for a *Los Angeles Times* article, Assembly member Murray noted, "I had the state Department of Education do some research as far

²⁹ Ibid, *Death of Suburban Dream*.

back as they could go, and since 1984, Compton has scored at the absolute bottom.”³⁰

The failure of the district was largely attributed to cronyism, mismanagement, and lack of leadership. The district never adequately addressed bilingual education for English-language learners, and since the district was majority Latinx, this was a concerning issue. In disagreement, district officials indicated that test scores could not be the only indicators, especially for a school district of 32,600 students who were mostly living in poverty and where a third spoke limited or no English. Compton’s failing educational system at this time was largely attributed to the fact that it was a Black city with a growing Latinx population that experienced a unique set of needs. Indeed, predominately Black school districts are more likely to be taken over across the U.S.³¹ However, the issues that arose due to the demographic changes were not unique to Compton.

Compton’s demographic changes were part of a larger demographic shift throughout the U.S., what scholars often refer to as the “Browning of America,” and lawmakers mobilized anti-immigrant sentiment in an attempt to maintain the status quo. In Nicholas C. Vaca’s book *Presumed Alliance*, he describes this wave of change as a “tsunami,” invoking that like a tsunami, the increase of Latinxs was a destructive force

³⁰ For a school district to qualify to be placed under state receivership, “Compton students must place in the bottom 1% on statewide standardized tests, the bottom 5% in dropout rates or the bottom 5% in the percentage of students who complete requirements for admission to the University of California.” See Howard Blume, “State Takeover of Compton Schools Awaits Wilson’s OK.” September 3, 1992. (http://articles.latimes.com/1992-09-03/local/me-7224_1_compton-unified-school-district)

³¹ Domingo Morel. *Takeover: Race, Education, and American Democracy*. (Oxford University Press, 2018)

that produced tensions as people fought for their rights to access, resources, and survival.³² Anti-immigrant sentiments throughout California paved the way for Proposition 187, the 1994 Save Our State (SOS) initiative.³³ The majority of California's voters voted in favor of Proposition 187, which was meant to create a state-run citizenship screening system and to prohibit undocumented immigrants from using non-emergency health care, public education, and other public services. Proposition 187 was significant because it also required public officials to report anyone suspected of being undocumented to authorities, while at the same time, it created new sanctions for the distribution and use of false citizenship documents. The SOS initiative exemplified how prevailing notions of criminality were merged with notions of state dependency.³⁴ As one of the most vocal supporters of this initiative, California's Governor Pete Wilson was re-elected largely because of his xenophobic campaign ads that served to instill fear and racial tensions.³⁵

³² Nicholas C. Vaca, *Presumed Alliance: The Unspoken Conflict Between Latinos and Blacks and What it Means for America* (New York: Rayo, 2004).

³³ Daniel Martinez Hosang, *Racial Propositions: Ballot Initiatives and the Making of Postwar California*. (University of California Press, 2010)

³⁴ Martha Escobar contextualizes how xenophobic propositions, media coverage, policies, etc. prevalent in the 90s and meant to target and discipline immigrant communities, existed in relation to ideas of deservingness and criminality linked to Black motherhood. See, Martha Escobar, *Captivity Beyond Prisons: Criminalization Experiences of Latina (Im)migrant*. (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2016)

³⁵ Ibid, *Racial Propositions*

In Compton, Mayor Omar Bradley explained to the *LA Sentinel* that in his opinion, many in the Black community favored a Republican initiative because “illegal immigration has placed the African American in the position of having to compete for resources that are few and far between.” Admittedly, Bradley expressed that the Black community felt politically threatened by immigrants from Mexico and Central America who now had to compete for a political structure the Black community had struggled to gain for over thirty years. He continued, “We’ve seen a lot of Latino groups come to us and say ‘we want the power, we demand the power... the question is not black versus Latino, the question is American versus non-American.’”³⁶ Bradley’s xenophobic expression of “American” versus “non-American” certainly did not represent the sentiment of all Black communities such as those in Compton and Los Angeles. Rather, the xenophobic expression was normative in mainstream discourse and was often invoked by politicians at the time, regardless of their race.

A similar sentiment was echoed throughout the state since the late 70s in the racial discourse that pitted “tax payer” against “tax recipient.” Interestingly, while the discourse over taxes was rooted in anti-Blackness – portraying the Black community, and particularly Black mothers, as lazy, dependent welfare recipients who were prone to criminality and underserving of “hard-working, tax payer” money – in the case of Compton, the same discourse over deservingness resurfaced to create a wedge between

³⁶ Ibid, *Death of Suburban Dream*, pg. 200

the Black and Latinx communities, this time perceived legal status and nationality was its driving force to pit two communities that have more in common, especially in regard to their structured oppression.³⁷

The racial and gendered construction of immigrants as undeserving of belonging because they take from services, resources, and programs provided by tax payers essentially portrays immigrants as a strain on the public.³⁸ This “public charge” targets Latina immigrants specifically because, regardless of whether they are undocumented or naturalized citizens, they are viewed as reproducers of “anchor babies” who have a birth right to citizenship granted by the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Thus, immigrant Latina mothers are held responsible for and to blame for social problems in education, employment, and the economy.

It was because of these divides that many Latinxs during this time united against the school district. At the start of the 1994-1995 school year, for example, Latinx parents organized under the group Union of Parents and Students of Compton United and refused to send their children to McKinley Elementary School on the first day of school to protest discrimination.³⁹ As John Ortega, lead counsel of the association, described for the *LA*

³⁷ Ibid, *Captivity Beyond Prisons*

³⁸ For additional readings on migrant women’s bodies perceived as racialized threats to the nation, see Dorothy E. Roberts, “Race and the New Reproduction” *Faculty Scholarship at Penn Law*. (1996) pp 1154; Eithne Luibheid *Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Elena R. Gutierrez *Fertile Matters: The Politics of Mexican-Origin Women’s Reproduction* (University of Texas Press, 2008).

³⁹ Ibid, *Death of Suburban Dream*, pg. 199

Sentinel, “The Compton Unified School District is like Mississippi.” He continued, “In Mississippi, they didn’t want to educate blacks in the ’50s, and in the ’90s, Compton doesn’t want to educate Latinos.”⁴⁰ This larger sentiment is supported by Sarah Sentilles who in *Taught By America: A Story of Struggle and Hope in Compton* (2005) provides an autobiographical account from her vantage point as a newly appointed Teach For America first grade teacher in the district at the time, beginning in the 1995-1996 school year.⁴¹ On her first assignment as an elementary school teacher in Compton, Ms. Sentilles was assigned the only bilingual class in the school because she was perceived as the first teacher hired with “qualifications,” given that Ms. Sentilles took high school courses in Spanish and was required at her university to take courses in a language other than English.⁴² Such examples of the inept education that Spanish speaking students were given and the levels of exclusion their parents vocalized remained evident before, during, and after the state took over the district.

It was only a year prior to the experiences Ms. Sentilles recounts in her book that Compton launched its first multicultural summit sponsored by Compton College, the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), and the MALDEF (Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund). The symbolic gesture of racial solidarity represented by national African American and Mexican

⁴⁰ Bryan Cotton, “Hispanics Boycott Compton School,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 22, 1994, A1.

⁴¹ Sarah Sentilles. *Taught by America: A Story of Struggle and Hope in Compton*. (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2005).

⁴² *Ibid*, pg. 4

American organizations' sponsorship of the summit, speaks to the fact that many communities wanted to come together and uplift each other's similar and distinct struggles. In Compton, there have always been vibrant communities that come together through their commonalities and across differences, even while structural inequities maintain uneven access, opportunities, and outcomes.

Even amidst these possibilities, for community members such as Yolanda, this was a particularly challenging time. Yolanda moved into Compton at a time when her subjectivity for not only being a part of the Latinx community in general, but for specifically being an undocumented immigrant, a non-English speaker, and an Indigenous Zapotec woman made her a prime target and easy scapegoat for all social problems in Compton and California.

Yolanda's Civic Engagement in Compton

Yolanda's life began to stabilize when she was able to secure a loan through a bank to pay for her cosmetology school expenses. Cosmetology is often an accessible vocation for low-income, undocumented, immigrant women who want to pursue an education that can open financial opportunities in self-employment or as entrepreneurs. For seven years, Yolanda worked as a cosmetologist, and for the first time since she arrived to the U.S., she had a steady flow of income. With time this vocation gave her the opportunity to pay back her loan and have a greater sense of financial stability and independence. She worked at the same local salon until her son was born:

In 2000, my first child, a son, was born. I became a full time mother. Five years later when he entered Kindergarten, I became involved in his school, McNair Elementary. Four years later, [after her son was born,] my daughter, was born. From being a full time housewife and mother, I added a full time [workload] of community volunteer work mostly in my children's schools at first.⁴³

The birth of Yolanda's first child was a turning point in her life. Yolanda made the conscious choice to leave her job as a hairdresser and devote her time entirely to her home and family. Among Latina mothers, immigrant Latina mothers are more likely to choose to stay at home when their partners are working. In Yolanda's case, raising her child was a full-time occupation that required attentive care and dedication. Choosing to stay home to care for the children was something Yolanda's mother had done, and she wanted to do the same. Similar to when she lived in Oaxaca and made the courageous decision to stop her education to seek employment that could help her provide for the education of all her younger siblings, Yolanda once more, selflessly and willingly, chose to put her family before her own aspirations and dreams.

When the time came for her son to enter preschool in 2004, Yolanda's role as a mother extended beyond the home to include her son's education. Yolanda's constant presence at her son's school caught the attention of teachers, including one Latina teacher in particular who motivated Yolanda to become more involved. This teacher expressed her own frustrations at the school site and felt limited in the advocacy she could do for

⁴³ Yolanda Hernandez Lopez, Campaign [Auto]Biography for Compton Unified School District School Board Elections 2013.

the children because she feared the loss of her job. The teacher reminded Yolanda that she was a parent and that parents had a right to advocate for their children. By becoming more involved in the education of her son, not only could he directly benefit, but other students at his school could benefit as well.

Yolanda inquired about the process to obtain a volunteer badge and took the necessary steps to do so. It took Yolanda an entire year to receive her volunteer badge. After repeated attempts to check on the status of the badge at the district office, a front desk receptionist confessed to her that most applications with Spanish surnames are thrown away. Yolanda could not believe that Latinx parents were being denied this right. If she had not persisted in asking about the status of her volunteer application, she would not have received it. These initial experiences with the district were eye opening for Yolanda. Rather than deter her from continuing her efforts to become a volunteer at her son's school site, it served to re-fuel her commitment to her son's education. From that moment forward, she realized that if she wanted to become involved in her son's education, she could not enter any school district space with the assumption that it was a welcoming space for her.

Yolanda was described as "*El ángel de la clase*" (The classroom's angel) by her son's teacher, because even though she was not in her son's classroom all the time, she occasionally entered to deliver things to the teacher. The mere idea that a parent could enter the classroom at any time, unannounced, changed the classroom culture. Yolanda was reminded of the importance of her presence at the school site by other teachers who motivated her to continue her work as a volunteer. One teacher in particular took notice

of Yolanda's commitment as a volunteer and told her that if she truly wanted to make a bigger impact, she had to attend district meetings, which were held a few times a month, and join district committees where she could influence decision-making on particular issues. Acting on this suggestion, Yolanda joined the Charles Drew University of Medicine and Science, Head Start Policy Council, where from 2006 through 2008 she received certificates for perfect attendance and participation.

As a volunteer, she began by helping to transport the children's food from another city to the school site. In doing this work, she gained insight that most parents did not know regarding how the food was prepared and transported. For Yolanda, the lack of a kitchen on site was a great injustice to the children. As a volunteer, she gained first-hand access to the school's protocols, processes, and material resources (such as in this case, food). Equally significant, she developed critical analytical insight as to how the public school structure was not constructed to support student health and parent decision-making, among other critical components. She organized tirelessly for three years, meeting with district administrators, until a kitchen was built at Ronald McNair Elementary School. This was a victorious project for Yolanda, one that she felt very proud to play an integral role in.

From the time her son was born in 2000 to the time her daughter was born in 2005, the school district went through several major changes. In 2001, CUSD was no longer under state receivership. In 2002, the district appointed a new superintendent, this time a Latino, Dr. Jesse Gonzales. For many in the community, a Latino superintendent represented a fresh start for a district coming out of state receivership. That same year,

however, was the first year of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Under NCLB, the district's public schools were required to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), and if they failed to meet AYP, were held accountable through a series of punitive sanctions. While the school district finally emerged out of the state's control, the NCLB federal legislation monitored and held the schools accountable to meeting rising yearly academic expectations; this law, the NCLB Act, would shape the school district and its schools until 2014.

“Bad Immigrant” Parental Engagement in an era of NCLB

During the time that Yolanda served as a parent volunteer, she also took initiative to expand her education. She began taking classes at the Compton Adult School to learn English and simultaneously began the process of becoming a naturalized citizen through the Maxine Waters Employment Preparation Center. For Yolanda, learning English and becoming naturalized were two additional sources of strength she could leverage as she became a stronger parent advocate. She was dissatisfied with the opportunities for parents who wanted to become more involved in the district. Parents were invited to yearly workshops, as Yolanda recalled, “*Enfermedades sexuales, salud mental, y como llevarnos bien con la policia*”⁴⁴ (Sexually transmitted diseases, mental health, and how to get along with the police). These workshops were educational, but did not offer parents information on how they could become advocates for their own children's education. As a parent,

⁴⁴ Yolanda Lopez Hernandez and Elizabeth Aguilar interview with author June 27, 2018.

Yolanda wanted to get more involved and play a stronger role in shaping the education of her community.

Yolanda also began attending school board meetings regularly and orienting herself within the structure of the meetings. At these district meetings, she learned that community members could express their concerns directly to board members through a timed three-minute public comment. For Spanish-speakers, a translator translated to the school board members, and the time it took to translate was also included in their three minutes, limiting the amount of time Spanish speakers could express their comments. For parents such as Yolanda, this was an injustice because Spanish-speakers did not have ample time to let the public record reflect their concerns. Yolanda became known as someone who always arrived before the start of the meeting to sign up for public comment, before the secretary removed the sign-up list.

In speaking up, Yolanda had the opportunity to deliver the grievances she witnessed, experienced, and was informed of by teachers, students, and other parents across the district. During a school board meeting in 2008, Yolanda complained about the low quality of sound on the headphones used to translate to Spanish-speaking parents who attended the district meetings. Newly appointed Superintendent Kaye E. Burnside stepped down from the stage where the board members sat and wanted to see for herself what the quality was like when using the translation headphones. She agreed with Yolanda that the equipment needed to be replaced, and after the meeting told her privately that there was money in the budget that could be used specifically for this, but that *she* would have to request it publicly. From this request, Yolanda was able to secure

\$19,000 to provide for the new equipment (Figure 13). This was a historic moment for Yolanda and for the Spanish-speaking community at large. Yolanda felt victorious to see that her advocacy made a long-overdue yet positive impact.



Figure 13. Yolanda secures interpreting system for non-English speakers. ⁴⁵

Describing how her reputation as an advocate grew, Yolanda explained, “As more parents asked for my help, I became known in about every school in Compton.” Yolanda knew the major issues at almost every school in the district. From pest infestations to teachers calling out sick due to the untreated mold in their classrooms, Yolanda was the first to find out. Teachers who were afraid of speaking up confided in her to do

⁴⁵ The newspaper clipping was obtained from Yolanda’s personal files. The original source is from the *Compton Bulletin*, November 19, 2008.

something about the issue(s). For instance, when students at Willowbrook Middle School needed textbook sets at school and home, she filed a Williams Uniform Complaint⁴⁶ with the district and it was addressed within the same school year. Mr. Kessler, the principal of McNair at the time, asked Yolanda with admiration, “How did you do it? I’ve been begging for a year.” When teachers and parents complained about the dirt parking lot at McNair Elementary that was known for blowing dirt on windy days and creating mud piles on rainy days, Yolanda worked aggressively until it was paved.

Yolanda was a member of the Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) at McNair and Willowbrook, where her children attended school. Yolanda admitted that she never felt comfortable in those spaces. She was always made to feel like an outsider. Yolanda recalled a time when the PTA council had to be re-elected because the body did not want to have an all-Latinx PTA. Yolanda witnessed mismanagement of funds and school employees participating in meetings even though they were neither parents nor teachers.⁴⁷ Instead, she focused more on being a member of the District’s English Language Advisory Council (DELAC), a district level advisory committee designated to advise district officials on English language learner programs and services.⁴⁸ Yolanda felt

⁴⁶ California Education Code (EC) Section 35186 created a procedure for the filing of complaints concerning deficiencies related to instructional materials, conditions of facilities that are not maintained in a clean or safe manner or in good repair, and teacher vacancy or mis-assignment.

⁴⁷ Yolanda Hernandez interview with author June 2018.

⁴⁸ If a school district has 51 or more students that are designated as English language learners, that district must develop a DELAC unless a subcommittee for this purpose already exists.

welcomed in DELAC by other parents who were mainly Spanish-speaking Latina immigrant mothers of children who were classified as English language learners. DELAC was a hub where Latina mothers across the district gathered to express concerns at certain schools and to play a role in the allocation of funds through the district's Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP).

It was during this time in 2009 that many of the Latina mothers in this group began to organize with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and other organizations⁴⁹ who approached the group of parents with the awareness that issues regarding English Language Learners existed within the school district. The ACLU at the time was building a case comprised of school districts across the state of California where it could be proven that services and/or differentiated learning was not provided to English learners. Although federal and state funds are specifically designated to educate English learners properly, classrooms for English Language Learners are often lacking basic instructional material.

The ACLU needed to identify parents and students in Compton who were willing to provide testimony to develop their case against the state's Department of Education. In Compton, it was not difficult for the ACLU to gather witnesses and testimonies. The only challenge for the ACLU was that parents who came forward expressed a similar sentiment: they would only share their stories if their names remained anonymous. Yolanda among other parents signed off on participating under the condition that their names would not be associated with the case. Parents feared that exposure of their

⁴⁹ Asian Pacific American Legal Center also assisted.

identities through this case would single them out and heighten their vulnerability to retaliation from the school board.

By 2010, Yolanda accomplished significant changes throughout the school district and was hopeful now that the ACLU, a law firm nationally recognized for protecting the rights of immigrants, had taken interest in the needs of Compton's English language learners. This sense of optimism, however, soon changed when Compton's school board voted to place Superintendent Burnside on administrative leave in May 2010. The board claimed that she utilized the district's credit cards for personal use. In her defense, Burnside commented to the board during public comment that she was unaware personal charges could not be made since for the past 26 years, previous administrators had done so.

For Burnside and others who came to her defense, the board's decision was perceived as retaliation. Burnside reflected, "I had the courage to make decisions that moved the district forward. In doing so, I undoubtedly stepped on some toes... The manner in which I have been treated clearly smacks of retaliation and harassment."⁵⁰ Among Burnside's supporters, Yolanda expressed disapproval of the board's decision, stating, "Burnside took pains to reach out to previously disenfranchised Latino families by providing translated materials and improving the district's programs for students

⁵⁰ See also, *Burnside v. Compton Unified School District* (Case Number: TC025929); Abby Sewell, "Compton schools chief ousted after probe found \$14,000 in personal charges to district credit card." *Los Angeles Times Blog*. October 13, 2010. (<https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2010/10/compton-school-chief-ousted-after-probe-found-14000-in-personal-charges-to-district-credit-card-.html>)

learning English as a second language.” For Yolanda, Burnside was a strong community ally, especially for Spanish-speaking, Latino parents, who not only listened to their specific needs, but who went out of her way to address them. “When the superintendent came, she listened to the parents’ complaints – she opened the door,” Yolanda commented for a *Los Angeles Times* blog.⁵¹ Burnside’s termination came shortly before the incident at McKinley Elementary on December 7, 2010 that broke national headlines regarding the parent trigger law (see Chapter Four). In replacement of Burnside, acting Superintendent Karen Frison was placed in that position. For Latinx parents, Superintendent Burnside’s termination was the school’s board way of retaliating against her for being a strong parent ally. The school board’s backlash against anyone who challenged their authority was precisely why parents such as Yolanda only joined the ACLU’s case under the condition that they remain anonymous.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I introduced Yolanda’s story. As the first generation in her family to leave her homeland of Oaxaca, Yolanda made the ultimate sacrifice. She sacrificed her life, well-being, and her own aspirations of becoming an attorney to see her family prosper. By sending money back home and maintaining strong ties with her family, Yolanda created a new family formation, a transnational family, where she became the breadwinner that enabled all of her siblings to pursue careers. Due to her sacrifices,

⁵¹ Ibid.

Yolanda gave back to her family and by extension, her community—a practice of *comunalidad* (communal living) central to her Indigenous Zapotec identity.

When she finally began to establish roots in the city of Compton, Yolanda entered a city that was withered by historical disinvestment, corruption, and neglect through its political structure. When her first born attended school, once more, she placed her career as a beautician as secondary to the priority of being an active participant in her son's education. In the first years of Yolanda's involvement, she was widely perceived by district officials as a "good immigrant" someone who was on a pathway toward legalization, took evening classes to learn English and earn a high school diploma, and served as a volunteer at her children's schools. When Yolanda was no longer perceived as parent volunteer and instead as parent activist, the way she was perceived shifted as well, from "good immigrant" to "bad immigrant," someone who was no longer integrating into the existing structures, but who challenged and demanded for those structures to change. Even though the way she was perceived by district officials changed, her practice of *comunalidad* remained consistent.

Yolanda's active involvement with the daily operation of public schools in Compton gave her insight into the lack of basic needs regarding health, safety, and access. The next chapter will document the school district's changing perception of Yolanda from volunteer to activist and will demonstrate the repercussions many parent activists faced as a result.

CHAPTER SIX

“WE CAN THINK, WE CAN ACT, WE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE”: A ZAPOTEC MOTHER’S NON-BELONGING AS IMPETUS FOR COMPTON’S TRANSFORMATION, 2010 – 2015

As December 2010 news headlines covered the fiercely contested debate over parents’ invocation of the parent trigger law for the first time in California’s history at McKinley Elementary School in the city of Compton, Mayor of Los Angeles Antonio Villaraigosa visited a parent petitioner’s home to “praise the effort and condemn what he described as harassment by opponents.”¹ At the same time, from Sacramento, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger echoed Mayor Villaraigosa’s sentiment and condemned what he described as “intimidation tactics” by charter school opponents. However, Parent Revolution’s four-month petition drive suddenly spiraled out of control as parents rescinded their signatures from the petition that had been delivered to the Compton Unified School District (CUSD) earlier that week on December 7. Some parents claimed they were misinformed by Parent Revolution organizers who had explained that the petition was meant to beautify the school, not to hand McKinley over to a charter school operator. While some may have thought Mayor Villaraigosa’s visit to a petitioner’s residence in Compton would serve to garner support for the petition, on the contrary,

¹ Howard Blume and Teresa Watanabe, “Effort to Convert Compton School to Charter Draws Fire” *Los Angeles Times*. December 11, 2010. (<http://articles.latimes.com/2010/dec/11/local/la-me-1211-compton-school-20101211>)

residents protested outside the home, as they chanted, “No charter school!” and carried signs that read, “Our Kids Are Not for Sale!”

The school board meeting that followed the parent trigger scandal was full of parents and community members offering both support and opposition to the petition. Among the community members in attendance was Yolanda Hernandez Lopez, a parent activist known for never missing a district meeting. Yolanda, however, was present that day to vocalize a completely different concern. At the previous district meeting, she had been involved in an altercation with a Compton School Police (CSP) officer, and she wanted the public record to reflect her testimony of that incident. She recalled her exchange with the CSP officer, who aggressively grabbed her by her shirt, pushed her back, and ordered her to get out of the district’s conference room.

CSP Officer: “Get out. Let’s go outside.”

Yolanda: “Why?”

CSP Officer: “What are you doing? You are not supposed to be here.”

Yolanda: “*Oh pues, dime, donde dice que yo no puedo estar aquí. Yo soy un papa.*” (Oh well, tell me, where does it say I cannot be here. I’m a parent)

CSP Officer: “Que haces?” (What are you doing?)

Yolanda: “*Agarrando mi bolsa.*” (Grabbing my bag)

CSP Officer: “Que tienes en tu bolsa?” (What do you have in your bag?)

Yolanda: “*La quieres ver? Quieres un sándwich?*” (Do you want to see? You want a sandwich?)²

² Yolanda Lopez interview with author, June 27, 2018.

Yolanda, like she had done on many prior evenings, prepared a bag of sandwiches for what she was certain was going to be a longer than usual district meeting. According to Yolanda, the verbal and physical harassment that members of the community were subject to by CSP officers was the norm and not the exception.

Building on Yolanda's story from the previous chapter, this chapter marks the shift in heightened levels of exclusion, harassment, and violence experienced by community activists such as Yolanda. While in 2005, a teacher had described her as the "angel of the classroom" for her involvement as a volunteer in her son's school, by the end of 2010 Yolanda had become an unwanted presence for the school board and the district's school police. Yolanda, known as a fierce and vocal advocate, defended anyone in the school district who experienced an injustice. For this, she became a target of the school board and school police. Yolanda recalled how school board President Micah Ali once implored, "What more do you want?" to which she responded, "You have not given *me* anything, you are giving students what they need, what they are entitled to. Until you pay my rent and put food on my table, you have not given *me* anything."³ Yolanda believed that school district officials misinterpreted the concerns and grievances she presented to them as a personal vendetta. On the contrary, Yolanda strongly believed elected officials and public sector workers, paid through public tax dollars, were there to serve the public. She viewed her advocacy and activism as a way to hold them accountable, create greater transparency, and create justice.

³ Ibid.

As the Governor of California and the Mayor of LA rose in defense of the harassment experienced by parents in Compton, residents such as Yolanda, who worked tirelessly to improve the city's educational system, were not only abandoned to struggle on their own behalf, they became a threat that needed elimination. This chapter will continue to follow Yolanda's story to illuminate how the school district administrative officials shifted their perception of Yolanda from parent volunteer to activist, ultimately leading to her displacement, a displacement that for a Zapotec migrant woman in Compton was not unfamiliar. This chapter follows Yolanda's story and provides a glimpse into the struggles of those who she advocated for. In doing so, this chapter challenges notions and desires of belonging that immigrants are often attached to, including the façade of the city of Compton as being a majority-minority, post-racial city. In fact, Yolanda's activism extended beyond the Latinx community and included all of those who experienced exclusion, including its Black residents.

A Change to Compton's City Council Elections

Compton's history of Latinx underrepresentation in elected positions resurfaced in December 2010 as well, when three Latina women joined in a class-action lawsuit against the city of Compton. The lawsuit claimed that the lack of Latinx representation in the city council was due to "at-large" voting, where all of Compton's voting population voted for all city council members as opposed to "by district" voting, where each district

votes for its own city council representative.⁴ The plaintiffs' defense invoked the California Voting Rights Act of 2001, the first state voting rights law created to strengthen existing federal voting rights. The state law was authored by civil rights attorney Joaquin Avila, whose Mexican immigrant parents raised him in the city of Compton. In a historic gesture, Avila returned to his hometown of Compton as author of the law and as the plaintiffs' attorney. For the next two years, Avila worked tirelessly to prepare a strong case against the city with the central argument that the Latino vote was diluted with the existing at-large voting structure. The case pressured the city of Compton to place Measure B on the June 5, 2012 ballot for voters to decide if the city council voting should remain at-large or transition to by-district.

In the official sample ballot mailed out to all Compton city council voters, the plaintiffs offered a statement in favor and the city's former clerk offered a statement in opposition. The arguments in support of Measure B offered by plaintiffs Enelida Alvarez, Felicitas Gonzalez, and Flora Ruiz stated:

We are voting Yes on Measure B because voters should be allowed to choose leadership from their own neighborhoods. District elections empower residents because each City Councilmember is accountable to people living in his or her

⁴ *González et al. v. City of Compton*, Los Angeles Superior Court (Case No. BC 450494). The plaintiffs are represented by Joaquin Avila, Director of the National Voting Rights Advocacy Initiative at Seattle University School of Law, and by Rosen, Bien & Galvan, LLP of San Francisco. The City of Compton is represented by City Attorney Craig Cornwell and his deputy, Jose Paz, and by the Marin County office of Nielsen Merksamer Parrinello Gross & Leoni LLP.

own district – not to political or economic interests, but to the constituents of their own neighborhoods.⁵

These women envisioned a Compton city council that was localized and created more accountability, where the people of each district could choose their city council leader and in turn be more accountable to their smaller number of constituents. Many in the community echoed these sentiments, expressing that each district had its own set of needs that could be better represented when one person was held accountable. In opposition to Measure B, Charles Davis stated the transition would not “foster better district representation,” arguing:

In actuality this charter change would achieve and create the following problems, to name a few, (1) cause more dissention between councilpersons (2.) subject your city councilperson to be controlled by a few citizens (3.) increase the, you scratch my back and I will scratch yours syndrome, among the councilpersons vs. doing what is good for the total city.⁶

Davis described his extensive experience working for the city, and highlighted how he worked for the city when the voting was structured by-district and at-large. In fact, the

⁵ Measure B: Argument in Favor. Argument and Rebuttal Form. Compton City Records. June 5, 2012.

(<http://www.comptoncity.org/civicax/filebank/blobdload.aspx?BlobID=23996>)

⁶ Measure B: Argument Against. Argument and Rebuttal Form. Compton City Records. June 5, 2012.

(<http://www.comptoncity.org/civicax/filebank/blobdload.aspx?BlobID=23997>)

city's election system had previously undergone changes twice, changes that had been meant to disrupt incumbents from maintaining their elected positions.⁷

Knowing and understanding this history, one would think that perhaps the Black political elite would be more sympathetic to the demands of Latinx residents who wanted to change the electoral system. Instead, Davis' statement reflected concerns that the proposed change could cause more antagonisms between councilpersons and heighten what he described as a quid pro quo.⁸ If Measure B passed, the predictions of demographers concluded that one of the four districts was likely to elect a Latino candidate. Ultimately, Measure B was approved by the voters in Compton, and the city council elections changed to by-district voting.

Ten Critical Points to Reform Compton Unified

Meanwhile, in the school district, the school board searched for a new superintendent for Compton, and appointed Darin Brawley to the position in September 2012. Brawley moved to Compton after serving as superintendent of the Adelanto Elementary District for three years. Perhaps not coincidentally, Adelanto had become centerfold in a controversy earlier that year when parents invoked the parent trigger law at the district's lowest performing school, Desert Trails Elementary School. Parents wanted to change their school into a charter school, but met opposition, similarly to what

⁷ Charles Davis, email correspondence with author, March 5, 2019.

⁸ As Davis stated, "you scratch my back and I will scratch yours" which is a quid pro quo.

had occurred two years prior at McKinley in Compton. Among those strongly opposing this change was Superintendent Brawley, who recommended that the school board reject the petition, which they did.⁹ Unlike Compton, however, Adelanto became the first school district to successfully invoke the parent trigger law after a San Bernardino Superior Court judge ruled for the district to honor the signatures and comply with the law. Shortly after this incident, Brawly resigned from Adelanto and was appointed by Compton's school board members.

Yolanda and other parents were excited about the possibilities that a new superintendent could offer. They hoped that they could have a fresh start for parents to experience a different type of leadership and that they could potentially have a strong parent ally as they did with the prior superintendent. Only two weeks into his new position as superintendent, eight parent leaders who were both Latinx and Black scheduled a meeting with him. At this meeting, everyone went around to introduce themselves and when it came to Yolanda's turn, she introduced herself as an activist in the community who had served the community for the past decade. Brawley followed up by asking, "Since you say you are an activist for so many years, what changes have you done?" Yolanda was surprised at the tone of his question. For Yolanda, Brawley's question did not seem like a sincere gesture to get to know about her work, but rather it seemed to question her work. She responded that with due time he will know, since he only recently joined the district. Yolanda is a witty woman with a quick sense of humor, but a humor that not everyone found entertaining. As she recounted this moment to me, I

⁹ Adelanto parents, anonymous, interview with author, June 2015.

could sense her frustration. I knew that part of her frustration came from people who placed her in a position where she had to prove herself as worthy of being in that space and that her advocacy was often minimalized as insignificant.

At that meeting, Yolanda showed the superintendent API scores that she researched and printed out the night before in preparation for the meeting. These scores compared Compton schools with surrounding district schools. Compton had the lowest scores. As she showed the superintendent the scores, she told him, “Those are quality schools or will you tell me I am lying? I just downloaded them yesterday.” Yolanda wanted to hear what his ideas were and how he envisioned doing something different for the district. For Yolanda, that meeting was not for the parents to prove themselves to the superintendent, but vice versa. The parents wanted to know what the superintendent’s plan of action was for their failing school district.

In preparation for that meeting, the parents met to discuss what they envisioned for the district. Through their meetings, they collectively generated a list of *Ten Critical Points* most urgent in the district:

- 1) Remove School Police
- 2) Respect Parent Involvement
- 3) Increase Student Achievement
- 4) Provide Student Support Services
- 5) Provide After School Programs
- 6) Alternatives to Student Discipline
- 7) Renovate Facilities

- 8) Provide Transitional Kindergarten
- 9) Increase Campus Safety
- 10) End Practice of Nepotism¹⁰

Yolanda explained these points to me two years after they were drafted, yet she made sure that I understood that first on their list was to remove the district's Compton School Police. This demand went hand in hand with their demand to increase campus safety and provide alternatives to student discipline. The parents felt a great sense of disrespect from the school board, administrators, and even other parents. The only parents who were respected were those who complied with the decisions of the board and administration and never spoke in opposition. The demand for respect of parental involvement went in hand with their demand to end nepotism. The parents wanted everyone, including employees, to be treated with equal respect. They called for an end to biased practices throughout the district when it came to hiring, firing, promotions, and signing contracts.

Moreover, students were not provided with adequate support services. Among those students least served were English Language Learners and students with an Individual Education Plan (IEP). There needed to be more aids, counselors, psychologists, and nurses who could provide the resources students needed to achieve academically. Since students are not required to enter school until the age of six, parents

¹⁰ Yolanda, interview with author, May 2015. While the numbering of the list is not of importance, Yolanda was clear to let me know that removing the Compton School Police was at the top of their priorities.

believed that early childhood education through more awareness on transitional kindergarten programs in the district was a way to begin.¹¹

After the parents presented their list of concerns, the superintendent asked the parents to narrow it down to five. With a shorter list, the superintendent could spend more time working on each of the five points. For the parents, the list was already condensed, and to condense it any further would be very difficult. As Yolanda remembered this meeting, she expressed, “*Va a tomar mucho más para arreglar la ciudad*” (It will take much more to fix the city), reaffirming to me that she acknowledged an introductory meeting was not the real work itself. Rather, in her mind, this meeting was meant to set the tone for a working partnership with the district, as she stressed, “*Roma no fue construida en un día. El debería de escuchar por que acaba de llegar*”¹² (Rome was not build in a day. He should listen because he just arrived). Yolanda left that first meeting with the superintendent without the good first impression she was hoping to find. The superintendent came off as arrogant and as if he was only meeting with parents because they requested it, not because it was a priority of his to develop a partnership with parent leaders in the district.

Many of the points the parents generated in their list of demands in the fall of 2012, continued to resurface in the next few years. The rest of the chapter will present incidents that demonstrate why the parent’s points were valid, urgent, and necessary.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Compton Unified Sued for Racial Profiling of Latinos

Coincidentally, later that month on September 27, 2012, the issues parents expressed came to light when a parent, her son, and his friend were physically harassed and beaten by Compton's School Police. The parent, Raquel Espinoza, was an immigrant Latina mother who had closely organized alongside the other mothers that were involved with the District's English Language Learners Advisory Committee (DELAC). Since 2009, the parents had been involved with the ACLU's case in defense of English learners (see Chapter Five). Even though the parents opted to remain anonymous, according to Yolanda, who was involved alongside Raquel and other parents, it was not difficult for the district to identify who the ACLU gathered information from.

On the day of the incident, Raquel drove her van in front of Compton High School to pick up her son after school. She had received word shortly before that her son would not be suspended for a fight at school that he was suspected to have been involved in. In a verbal testimony given to the Spanish-language news editorial *La Opinion* half a year later, Raquel re-lived the horror of that moment through her testimony:

Cuando la directora dijo que no estaba suspendido mi hijo, el guardia de seguridad, el Afro-Americano, se enojó, parecía que le estaba pasando lumbre por los ojos, y dijo "Ok yo no sé nada." En eso fui, lo recogí, mi hijo se subió, junto con un amigo de él, los recogí a los dos. Yo estaba estacionada. Cuando yo vi a una patrulla que estaba en frente de mí, entonces se bajó el policía, y fue a hablar con el guardia de seguridad, entonces después el policía se fue y camino, sin darme ninguna explicación, abrió la puerta del carro, se sacó a estirones y

*empujones a mi hijo. Me estaba ahorcando, yo me baje. Entonces en ese momento cuando lo estaba ahorcando, a mi hijo, se desvaneció hacia atrás. Entonces se logró a zafar de las garras de su agresor que lo estaba ahorcando. El policía se llama Donald Hue. El policía iba de atrás de él y cuando vio que no lo alcanzo se dirigió hasta mí, amenazándome. Me agarro de esta mano, la mano izquierda, que todavía la traigo lastimada. Me aventó contra un cerco de metal y me empujo brutalmente, me torció la mano. Me sentí impotente pero dios siempre estuvo con nosotros porque si no ahí nos hubieran matado.*¹³

(When the principal said my son was not suspended, the security guard, an African-American man, got mad, it seemed like if there was fire in his eyes, and said, “Okay I don’t know anything.” In that moment I left to pick up my son, he got in the car with his friend, I picked up both. I was parked. When I saw a police car in front of me, the officer got off, and he went to talk to the security guard, than right after the officer left and walked, without giving me in explanation, he opened the car door, he picked and shoved my son out of the car. He was chocking me, and I got out. Then in the moment when he was chocking my son, he tumbled backwards. Then he was able to escape from the grasp of his

¹³ Esmeralda Fabian-Romero, “Estudiantes de Compton Relatan Historias (video),” *La Opinión*, May 13, 2013 (<https://laopinion.com/2013/05/13/estudiantes-de-compton-relatan-historias-video/>); Esmeralda Fabian-Romero, “Latinos Demandan a Compton por Abuso Racial,” *La Opinion*, May 14, 2013 (<https://laopinion.com/2013/05/14/latinos-demandan-a-compton-por-abuso-racial/>) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1A_ZaUHh8rk
Raquel Espinoza et al., Plaintiffs, v. Compton Unified School District Police Department, et al., Defendants. (Case number: CV 13-3519 GW)

aggressor that was choking him. The officers name is Donald Hue. The officer was after my son and after realizing he couldn't catch up to him he went after me, threatening me. He grabbed me from this hand, my left hand, which I still hurting. He pushed me against an iron fence, pushing me with brutal force, he also twisted my hand. I felt powerless but GOD was always with us because if not for him he would have killed us.)



Figure 14. Compton parents face retaliation from Compton School Police ¹⁴

The violence Espinoza, her son, and her son's friend experienced were a direct result of her activism within the school district. Espinoza was among the Spanish speaking parents who by then experienced daily harassment as a result of their unwavering protest against

¹⁴ Screenshot captured from video news coverage by *La Opinion*, May 13, 2013. See, *Ibid*, *Estudiantes de Compton*.

the district, and specifically because they were all providing ongoing support to help ACLU build a class-action lawsuit against the district.

As a result of that incident, Raquel along with other plaintiffs filed a federal class-action lawsuit that accused the school district and its school police of racial profiling Latino parents and their children. In the 46-page lawsuit, details of the daily harassment revealed a pattern of “unlawful arrest, excessive force, racial profiling and racial discrimination.”¹⁵ The lawsuit described:

Latino and Hispanic schoolchildren and their parents were singled out for arrest by police officers acting in concert with school security guards, school board members, school district personnel, and in at least one instance, a city of Compton code enforcement officer. School police physically assaulted several of these persons for no reason at all other than the color of their skin, their race and/or voicing their concern against police and school abuses. Several of the plaintiffs and others similarly situated were racially profiled and then illegally deported, without due process. School police routinely and systematically threatened others with deportation. Similarly situated African American students, in a school run predominantly by African American leadership were not subjected to such treatment.¹⁶

¹⁵ Rebekah Kearn, “Latino-Black Relations on Edge in Compton” Court House News. May 20, 2013. (<https://www.courthousenews.com/latino-black-relations-on-edge-in-compton/>)

¹⁶ Ibid.

The lawsuit claimed the harassment to be a “systematic” denial of constitutional rights. It contrasted the backlash Latinx parents and their children experienced with that of Black students. The lawsuit cited incidents in which parents and students were threatened with deportation and one case where a parent was in fact deported. In redress, the plaintiffs sought \$40 million dollars. Many people in the community talked about stories of people who experienced retaliation for their political involvement, but finally a law firm was able to gather sufficient evidence to present a case against two of the strongest and largest institutions in the city.

Unwanted Stranger

“Over the last few years, my depth of knowledge of the school district's operations have resulted into being treated like an unwanted stranger.” -Yolanda Hernandez Lopez¹⁷

By 2013, Yolanda had become a part of a small community of parent advocates comprised mainly of Latina mothers. These were parents who met one another as volunteers at school sites, district meetings, or other public events. Among the parents Yolanda encountered was Elizabeth Aguilar, a mother of two boys. Elizabeth and Yolanda met in November 2012 through the DELAC. Elizabeth’s involvement in the DELAC at CUSD came naturally, as she was actively involved in the DELAC at the school district that her children attended previously, LAUSD. “*Y ahí comenzó la*

¹⁷ Yolanda Hernandez Lopez, Campaign [Auto]Biography for Compton Unified School District School Board Elections 2013.

historia,” Elizabeth recalled, referring to meeting Yolanda through the DELAC;¹⁸ the shared experience of having children who were classified as English Learners and the struggle to re-classify them is what brought them, like many other Latina mothers, together.

Yolanda and Elizabeth gained a wealth of knowledge through formal training received through the DELAC. Dr. Ramon Zavala, Interim Assistant Superintendent of Accountability, Instruction and English Learning for CUSD, played a key role in helping the parents educate themselves on legislation, district protocols, and how to advocate on behalf of their children. During this time, Dr. Zavala was on the board of the California Association for Bilingual Education (CABE) for several years, serving as President and Vice President. Through the DELAC, he spearheaded CABE’s curriculum “Project 2 Inspire,” a parent training model based on 30 years of research on how to shift parents “from a paradigm of parental involvement, to a paradigm of engagement and action.”¹⁹ In these workshops, parents decide the topics that they want to learn about. After completing the three levels – (1) Awareness, (2) Mastery, and (3) Expert – participants are awarded with an Expert Level certificate. Yolanda, Elizabeth, and the rest of the parents in the DELAC who completed level one, took level two through Roosevelt Elementary School’s Parent University and continued to complete the entire program.

¹⁸ Yolanda Hernandez and Elizabeth Aguilar interview with author, June 27, 2018.

¹⁹ This curriculum was funded through grants by the Investing In Innovation Fund (i3). California received these grants through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA). (<https://edsources.org/2012/california-wins-millions-in-school-innovation-grants/23790>)

One of the aspirations of this program is for parents who have completed the training and reached expert level to offer training to other parents as a way to cultivate a strong community among parents. Yolanda and Elizabeth were among the group of parents who were already doing the work of encouraging other parents to be advocates in their children's education. Equipped with this training, and welcomed to lead the level one sessions, Yolanda and Elizabeth took on the challenge and led the level one curriculum to a new cohort of parents.

When I asked both Yolanda and Elizabeth about the impact Dr. Zavala had on them, Elizabeth responded that he was there to encourage and guide their work, reminding them "*Ustedes fijense, quien son los lideres. De un grupo grande va a ver dos lideres. Con dos en cada escuela es un comienzo*" (Look to see who are the leaders. Out of every group there are two. With two at each school is a start). Working through the DELAC and under the guidance of Dr. Zavala, Yolanda and Elizabeth felt validated for the work they had done in the past and the work they wanted to do in the future. With time, they slowly built a strong group of nearly twenty parents, all of whom were Latina mothers. Elizabeth reflected on the sense of empowerment she felt through the trainings, "*Éramos mujeres que queríamos un cambio no solo para nuestros niños si no para nosotros padres*" (We were a group of women who wanted a change, not only for our children, but for us parents as well).²⁰ The significance of the training the parents

²⁰ Yolanda Hernandez and Elizabeth Aguilar interview with author, June 27, 2018.

received was not only that it was to change the lives of their children by improving their education, but also that in the process, they changed as well.

Among the lessons learned through this training was how to file formal complaints. Elizabeth recalled Dr. Zavala warning the parents in their trainings, “*Déjense de andar hablando, documéntenlo vía escrito, teléfono. Eso aprendimos y empezamos a aplicarlo aquí. De a partir de ahí todo fue escrito, documentado*” (Stop talking, document everything via writing, phone. That’s what we learned and we started to apply it here. From there on everything was in writing, documented).²¹ Through the trainings, the parents learned about their rights to public district meetings under the Brown Act and how to file a Williams complaint. Among the lessons learned through the curriculum, parents were taught how to navigate the state’s system of accountability and parental rights under No Child Left Behind (NCLB). By learning that they could overpass the district to ensure accountability by going to the state’s Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, the parents found a sense of hope in a situation that seemed deadlocked. Yolanda recalled reading the entire NCLB law, a document that was over 1,000 pages long. She learned that under NCLB, parents had the right to transfer their children out of their failing public schools. This knowledge gave parents such as Yolanda a sense of empowerment, and she helped countless parents who wanted to exercise that right.

After knowing Yolanda for only a few months, Elizabeth attended her first CUSD board meeting – which also happened to be the first district meeting of 2013, on January 8 – and there she experienced physical and verbal harassment. When she recalled this

²¹ Ibid.

incident, Elizabeth expressed the emotions she felt and how it was a turning point that informed her activism in education:

Era mi primera junta en la mesa directiva. No tenían idea de mí. Ellos pensaban que era padre cualquiera, que podían asustar. Esto me dio tanta rabia y sentimiento. Esto ya lo había platicado. Tenía unos 2-3 meses de conocer a Yolanda. Ya me lo había platicado, pero vivirlo si le da a uno rabia, impotencia de saber de otras personas, pero ya cuando te pasa a ti en vivo y sientes eso. Sentí una gran impotencia que dice, esto debe de cambiar. Esto no debe de suceder. ¡No más! Ni conmigo, ni con cualquier padre de familia. Ya fue una meta. Una meta que hasta este día se ha trabajado de que no vuelva pasar a otro padre lo que nosotras pasamos.

(It was my first school board meeting. They had no knowledge of me. They thought I was like the other parents, that they could scare off. This gave me lots of rage and sentiment. I have talked about this. I had about 2-3 month of meeting Yolanda. She had already talked about it with me, but when you live it you do feel rage, impotence of knowing about other people, but then when it happens to you in life you feel that. I felt a grand impotence and told myself this has to change. This cant be happening. ¡No More! Not with me nor with other parents. It became a goal. A goal that till this day has been put to practice that no other parents should ever experience what we have experience.)

During this incident, she was kicked out of the district's board room by eight CSP officers and asked to show her "immigration papers." For Elizabeth, the school district

utilized the CSP to their own advantage and interests. When I asked her if she could elaborate how so, she responded furiously, “*Como es que están utilizando la policía escolar? Para intimidar, acosar, y amenazar los padres.*”²² After the incident at Elizabeth’s first district meeting, she filed a complaint with the district’s human resources office, but never heard back. As a result, she filed a discrimination complaint with the California Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights. An investigation into the CSP began that resulted in the state demanding the CSP to change their badges to reflect their rank in the CSP alongside their name. While the change seemed miniscule in comparison to what she experienced, the fact that the state made the school police make even a slight change made Elizabeth feel a sense of validation.

Later that month, after two years of organizing with the ACLU, the moment the parents had been waiting for finally arrived. On January 23, 2013, the ACLU warned in a demand letter that they would file a lawsuit against the California Department of Education for the denial of services to students who are considered as English Language Learners (ELL).²³ The ACLU had spent the previous two years working to build a case by interviewing families throughout California. Yolanda, Elizabeth, and Raquel, among other parents in Compton, served as key witnesses in this case. They found seven districts, including Compton Unified, where services were paid for but not received. As

²² Ibid.

²³ Mark Rosenbaum, on behalf of ACLU, Asian Pacific American Legal Center, and Latham & Watkins, LLP. Demand letter to State Superintendent Torlakson and State Board of Education President Kirst. January 23, 2013.

the case disclosed, “In Compton Unified, 1,697 of 10,505 English learners (16 percent) get no services,”²⁴ even though \$158,000 was supposed to go into ELL. In their eight page demand letter, the ACLU warned that they would pursue legal options if the state failed to immediately take action. When the state did not respond, the lawsuit was filed in late April.

Three weeks later, on May 13, 2013 Raquel Espinoza, along with other plaintiffs, announced they had filed a racial profiling lawsuit against the CUSD and the Compton School Police. Yolanda attended the press conference and stated for *La Opinion*, “*En nuestras escuelas no solo hay abusos, hay mala educación, y mala nutrición para nuestros niños*” (In our school there is not only abuse, there is bad education, and bad nutrition for our children).²⁵

²⁴ John Fensterwald. “ACLU Warns it will Sue State Over 20,000 unserved English Language Learners.” EdSource. January 24, 2013. (<https://edsource.org/2013/aclu-warns-it-will-sue-state-over-2000-unserved-english-learners/25965>)

²⁵ Esmeralda Fabian-Romero, “Latinos Demandan a Compton por Abuso Racial” *La Opinion*. May 14, 2013. (<https://laopinion.com/2013/05/14/latinos-demandan-a-compton-por-abuso-racial/>)



Figure 15. CUSD Project 2 Inspire Ceremony.²⁶

Later that month, on May 28th, Dr. Zavala organized a graduation ceremony with 19 parent graduates who completed the CABE Project 2 Inspire parent training program. Yolanda along with Elizabeth had trained three schools across the district that year (Figure 15). The district did not recognize the CABE Project 2 Inspire advocates nor the courageous parents who took initiative in training other parents until half a year later, on January 28, 2014. Given the delay in recognition, one can conclude that the district may have been trying to restore their appearance now that it was facing two major lawsuits, one accusing the district of racial profiling and the other claiming a lack of services for ELL students, both addressing unmet needs and issues for the Latino community. This maneuver may be read as a way for the district to create the illusion that the board had a good relationship with Spanish speaking parent leaders in the community. Furthermore,

²⁶ Sentinel News Service, “Project 2 Inspire Parents Honored at CUSD Meeting” *LA Sentinel*, February 6, 2014. (<https://lasentinel.net/project-2-inspire-parents-honored-at-cusd-board-meeting.html>)

the fact that the Sentinel newspaper was called to record the event also calls the sincerity of the district's recognition into question. Yolanda, however, received a Certificate of Recognition awarded to her by the California Legislature's 52nd Assembly member, Isadore Hall III, as the certificate stated, "In recognition of your dedicated service to the students and families of the Compton schools."

Replace the Compton Unified School Board

In the first city council election after the transition from at-large to by-district voting, Isaac Galvan became the "first Latino"²⁷ councilperson when he was elected in the city's second district on June 2013. The success of Galvan's election was a direct by-product of the re-districting effort brought forth by the three Latina plaintiffs who sued the city in December 2010 under the CA Voting Rights Act (2001). Soon after the city council elections, Galvan put together an event to gauge interest and potentially endorse candidates interested in the upcoming school board election. Francisco, who was completing his community college coursework and preparing to transfer to California State University, Los Angeles decided to attend since he actively monitored school board meetings and local issues. Prior to the event, Francisco had only considered placing a bid for the school board. This changed soon after he met Yolanda for the first time.

²⁷ "In 2013, he became the youngest and the first Latino councilman in Compton's 125 year history." from "Isaac Galvan, Councilman District 2." Compton City Council Official Site. (<http://www.comptoncity.org/officials/district2/default.asp>) Accessed June 12, 2019.

At city council member Galvan's event, he asked if anyone was interested in running for school board. Yolanda was one of the first to state her intent to run for the upcoming school board race. She showed the crowd her 3-ring binder of accomplishments and recognitions in the city. Francisco felt disturbed at how Yolanda was quickly dismissed by Galvan, who ignored her and proceeded to ask again if anyone wanted to run for the school board.²⁸ That was when Francisco reached out to Yolanda and expressed his support. Soon after, Yolanda and Francisco collaborated and ran a slate for school board.

Throughout the campaign trail, Yolanda and Francisco received both support and backlash from many in the community. In the two months before Election Day, Yolanda noticed that their banners were torn down almost immediately after they went up. In one incident, three men were waiting outside her home to report to her that they had been offered \$1000 to take down her campaign posters. One of the men in the group took it upon himself to visit her home and stated he could not do that to Yolanda since she helped his own mother years ago when he came across a troubling situation as a student in the school district. The backlash that Yolanda experienced for running for school board was evidenced in the month before the election when she posted the following on her social media account:

I have been refused entry onto some campuses and public meetings. Uniformed school police have denied me access and commonly follow me even when I walk

²⁸ Francisco Orozco interview with author, June 25, 2018.

my daughter to her elementary school. I can sense the animosity directed at me while so many parents, residents, and students cheer me up with their acts of kindness and words of encouragement.²⁹

Yolanda repeatedly used social media to create visibility regarding the issues she experienced throughout her campaign for school board. In spite of the daily harassment that she and now her daughter experienced, many in the community supported her unwavering spirit to overcome. On the day before election, Yolanda shared a news article on her social media account that was written by *The Guardian* titled, “Indigenous Women in Latin America Remain Invisible, Warns UN.”³⁰ Along with this article, she expressed:

There still exists a mentality that indigenous women have little to offer and therefore deserve no rights. Tomorrow will be a landmark day for me as a naturalized U.S. citizen of Oaxacan/Zapotec ancestry running for elective office. I am still subjected to biased treatment by other races and even other Latinos who put me down for being “muy india” and for speaking no English. They judge me and other indigenas by our appearance which is prejudiced due to their own superiority mindsets. We can think, we can act, we can make a difference.³¹

²⁹ Yolanda Lopez, posted on personal Facebook profile, October 17, 2013.

³⁰ Dan Collyns, “Indigenous Women in Latin America Remain Invisible, Warns UN.” *The Guardian*. November 1, 2013. (<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2013/nov/01/indigenous-women-latin-america-un>)

³¹ Yolanda Lopez. Posted on Personal Facebook, November 4, 2013.

Yolanda understood that she was dismissed because she was read as “*muy india*” (too Indian) by both Black and Latinos. Indigenous people were often read as ignorant, backwards, and incapable of making a difference for the future. Yolanda’s bid for school board was not successful in securing her election, but it was effective in making her a prime target of the school board and the district.

In the aftermath of an unsuccessful bid for a position on the school board, Francisco began the Compton Democratic Club (CDC), which was Compton’s local chapter of the Democratic Party. The organization’s membership included parents, teachers, and CUSD alumni who came together after the election to strategize on next steps. One of the members, Monica Rincon, a CUSD and UCLA alumni, partnered with Francisco to produce an online blog for the club. Their common interest in politics, history, and accountability resulted in their production of several blog posts in the span of a year to serve as a watchdog for the school district and city council.

In one instance, their article titled, “People of the Swap Meet,” captured the disgruntled perspectives of vendors, some of over 30 years, who had set up shop at the Compton Fashion Center, which was most commonly known to the people of Compton as the “Compton Swap Meet.” The article, written at the time vendors received sudden notice that the swap meet would close down forever, reads as a homage to the swap meet its residents remembered. In reference to the development of the Compton Gateway Towne Center in 2007 and now the closure of the swap meet, the article states, “Compton elected official have promoted the move of big business into the city as a triumph, but

small shops that first instilled the Compton culture are now taking a large hit.”³² The swap meet was subsequently replaced by a Walmart. These were all part of the larger renewal projects throughout the city that began in 2006 after the launch of the city-wide rebranding and “Birthing A New Compton” initiatives. It was blog articles such as these that captured the attention of many readers within the city, including former residents who wanted to stay informed about politics in Compton.

Among the blog’s most controversial articles was one that revealed that the School Board President, Micah Ali, provided false information to the public about receiving an Ivy League education.³³ None of the articles, however, received nation-wide attention, with the exception of the article that covered a school-wide policy in the summer of 2014.

School Wars

“It was the summer. The attendance at school board meetings in the summer are very low. After seeing Wu’s brief presentation, I thought, surely this policy will not pass. He gave examples of mass shootings that weren’t relevant to Compton. And the board voted to pass it. I remember walking out of the meeting and calling Francisco.” Monica recalled the July 8, 2014 district meeting where the Urban Police Rifle Policy was

³² Francisco Orozco and Monica Rincon, “People of the Swap Meet,” Compton Democratic Club, date of publication unknown. (www.comptondemocrats.com)

³³ Francisco Orozco, “The President of Compton: School Board President Micah Ali misleads residents about attending Stanford and Yale” Compton Democratic Club, date of publication unknown. (www.comptondemocrats.com)

approved. The CSP's Chief, William Wu, had delivered a presentation that claimed the district's school police department needed to prepare in the case of a mass shooting. As alumni of the city's public schools, Monica and Francisco were both shocked. For them, the board's decision seemed out of context.

One-by-one, Chief Wu's justifications were addressed and debunked a month later through Francisco's opinion editorial titled, "Assault Rifles on Campus: School Board Gets Wu'd." Francisco critiqued the school board policy, citing lawsuits regarding the Compton School Police officers' use of excessive force, racial profiling, and false written reports.³⁴ Among the students and parents who experienced harassment at the hands of the Compton School Police, Francisco states, "Parent advocate Yolanda Lopez, who in the past 9 years has only missed 3 school board meetings described her share of intimidation by the District, 'during board meetings I would have two school police officers stand near me, ready to throw me out of the board room at Micah Ali's order.'"³⁵ While the Compton Democratic Club's blog was widely-circulated among local political circles, no one anticipated that an editorial opinion article that covered CUSD's new rifle policy, what became known as "Compton's AR-15 policy," would make national news.

Soon after, Francisco's coverage was picked up by KPCC's *Crime and Justice in Southern California*, where Francisco stated, "The school police has been very notorious

³⁴ Francisco Orozco, "Assault Rifles on Campus: School Board Gets Wu'd," Opinion Editorial, Compton Democratic Club Blog. August 7. 2014. (www.comptondemocrats.com)

³⁵ Ibid.

in the community and in reality has never had to shoot anyone before. So this escalation of weapons we feel is very unnecessary.”³⁶ In fact, the rifle policy must be read as a direct response to nationwide protests and uprisings against police departments after the shooting of Trayvon Martin in 2012. For the two years prior to the rifle policy’s passage in Compton, a generation of Black leaders had risen with the proclamation, Black Lives Matter. Consequently, as police felt victimized by the rise of BLM, the countermovement Blue Lives Matter responded with policies to classify police officers as a protected class under hate crime laws.

The CDC’s opposition to the rifle policy was expressed through their blog, interviews with major news outlets, and social media. Francisco produced creative drawings that captured his sense of sarcasm. The following two images were shared on the CDC’s Facebook page.

³⁶ Rina Palta. “Compton School Policy Authorize to Carry AR-15 Assault Rifle Weapons.” Crime and Justice. August 18, 2014. (<http://www.scpr.org/news/2014/08/18/46025/school-police-assault-rifle-policy-raises-question/>); David Tobia, “Military Rifles in the Hands of Compton School Police,” Medium. December 12, 2014. (<https://medium.com/@DavidTobia/military-rifles-in-the-hands-of-compton-school-police-415c316d8851>)

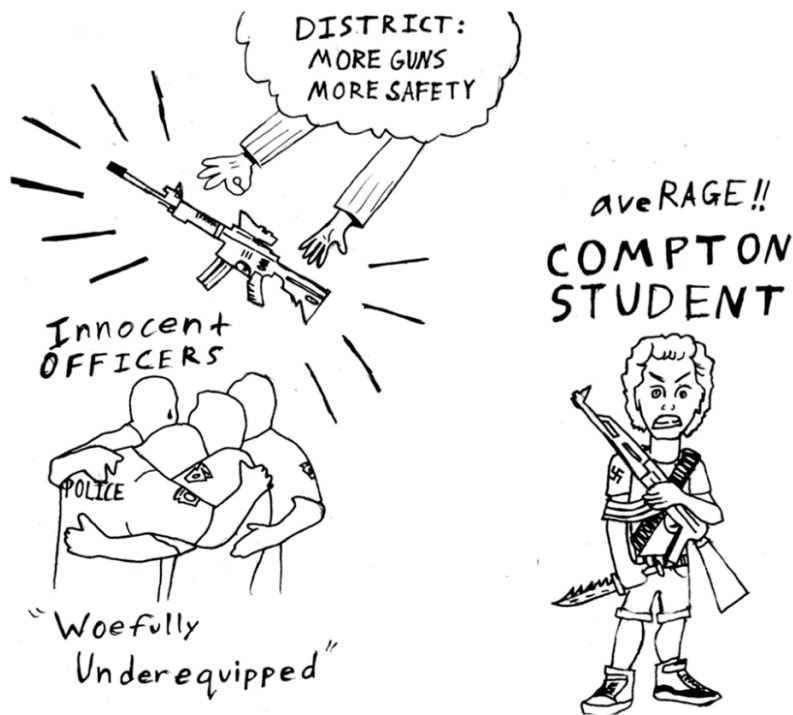


Figure 16. Compton School Police ridiculed.³⁷

The first image mocks the sentiment that school police officers felt victimized by the threat of enraged Compton students (Figure 16). Francisco’s art speaks back to the framing of school police officers as helpless victims in contrast to an “aveRAGE” student armed with guns, knives, and ammunition. In Chief Wu’s justification to the board, he declared the police officers were “woefully underequipped,” a statement that Francisco quotes to ridicule what was viewed as an exaggeration. In that same image the school district is presented as savior from above by passing a policy that arms the officers with rifles. Again, in mockery of the district’s decision, Francisco points to and rebukes the underlying rationale that somehow “more guns” equates to “more safety.” The CDC did not believe militarizing the school police created more safety on campus. This was the

³⁷ Illustration created by Francisco Orozco, 2014.

same sentiment parents such as Yolanda had articulated a year prior, when they created the list of Ten Critical Points for the superintendent, where they called for the elimination of the entire school police department.

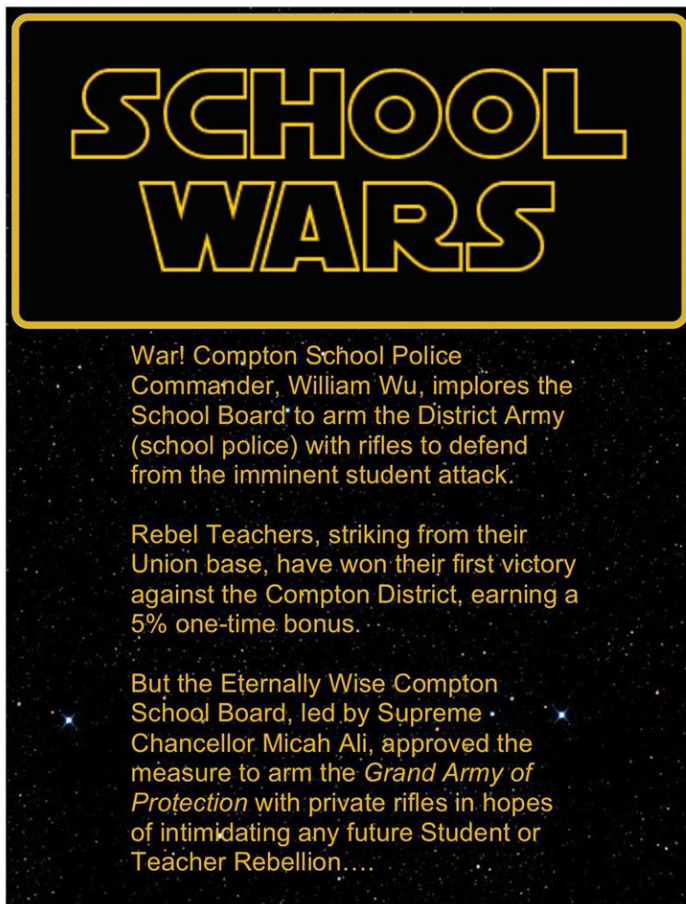


Figure 17. School wars against Compton rebellion.³⁸

The second image, with the title “School Wars” at the top, parodies the introduction to the science-fiction film series, Star Wars (Figure 17). This image served to contextualize the rifle policy with a few concerns from the past year: high school students had walked out of Compton High School to demand smaller class sizes, and

³⁸ Illustration created by Francisco Orozco, 2014.

teachers in the union (Compton Education Association) had organized a sick-out, meaning they called in sick for the day, across the district to pressure the district to agree to a better union contract.

This second image compelled the Compton School Police Officers Association (CSPOA), the union for school police officers, to respond to the CDC's Facebook post of the "School Wars" image. In what read as a letter to the club, the CSP officers association wrote the following:

Dear, Compton Democratic Club

Compton School Police Officers are not planning to attack the Galaxy of Teachers and Students.

Currently, the following School Districts authorize their Police Officers to deploy these weapons; Los Angeles School PD, Baldwin Park School PD, Santa Ana School PD, Fontana School PD, San Bernardino [sic] School PD.

If we encounter an active mass murderer on campus with a rifle or body armor, our officers may not adequately be prepared to stop that suspect. School Police Officers will undergo a training course, followed by a shooting proficiency test on a firing range and a written exam. The rifles are designed for increased accuracy and use rifled ammunition than can pierce body armor. The safety of our Students, Staff, and Parents are very important to us.³⁹

³⁹ Jean Trinh. "Compton School Police Will Be Armed With Semi-Automatic AR-15 Rifles." Laist. August 19, 2014. (http://laist.com/2014/08/18/compton_school_police_will_be.php)

The CSP officers association refuted the idea that they were in any way against students or teachers. What they were doing was enacting a policy no different than what was already the norm in school police departments in other school districts.

Later that same month, on August 28, Compton's NAACP chapter held a press conference in front of the district's headquarters. They displayed a poster that read, "CUSD Police Beat Student Handcuffed Jontierra Fletcher," with a screenshot image of the video which showed Jontierra being dragged out of a school police car window by her hair while handcuffed (Figure 18). The image depicted an incident that occurred on *Cinco de Mayo* at Centennial High School after an altercation that allegedly involved Jontierra and another student. Jontierra's family unsuccessfully sued the school district and city council for the post-traumatic stress that resulted from that incident.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ The incident occurred at Centennial High School on May 5, 2014. Jontierra Marie Shakur Fletcher et al v. City of Compton, et al (Case number: 2:16-cv-03117). Attempted to sue the city and the claim made on November 5, 2014, was denied due to the city being a third party to the case. City Minutes December 9, 2014. Quintana Howard (mother) and Willie J. Howard (grandfather) due to posttraumatic stress.



Figure 18. CUSD beat Black female student while handcuffed.⁴¹

Among the crowd of protesters were also Raquel Espinoza and her attorney Eric Morris, who shared his perspective:

And that's what's missing here. It is an 'us and them' tactic. And what sucks, it's very frustrating to see as a civil rights lawyer, the officers- the school police officers- use their guns as an intimidation tactic to silence the voice of the activists on the campuses that are fighting for students' rights. They do it so consistently and on a consistent basis that this is one more tool on their arsenal that is completely unnecessary and overwhelmingly a threat to parent activist and

⁴¹ This is a screenshot captured from "Compton Parents NAACP React to School Board Decision," JuvenileJustice Information Exchange, September 18, 2014 (<https://vimeo.com/106404895>)

student activist simply that want to air their grievances to their government officials and make it a better place to learn. A safer environment is not through assault rifles.⁴²

For attorney Morris, the district's decision to arm the CSP officers was further evidence of the intimidation tactics used to silence activism across the district. Among the crowd of protesters, parent Jessica Escobar attended with her daughters, who shouted in protest of the rifle policy, "No more guns" and "Education not intimidation!" The family held signs that read, "IT'S BECAUSE I'M BLACK ISN'T IT?" and on top of the words that read "I'M BLACK," the words "BROWN &" were added to signal that for Jessica and her family, the rifle policy was a Black and Brown issue. For Jessica, however, the policy was not only a racial issue, it was also an issue that could disproportionately impact students with learning differences, such as her daughter who had an IEP (Individual Education Plan).

These same sentiments were echoed two months later on October 24, as Compton youth, in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter chapter of Los Angeles, staged a die-in at the major intersection of Rosecrans and Wilmington Avenue in the city of Compton. As Mark-Anthony Johnson stated during the protest, "We want to give people a very vivid image of what it looks like when Black and Brown bodies are on the ground."⁴³ Martha Camacho-Rodriguez, a special education teacher at Dominguez High School in Compton

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Jory Rand, "Protest Held Against Arming Compton USD Officers with Assault Rifles" ABC 7 News. October 24, 2014. (<https://abc7.com/education/protest-held-against-arming-compton-usd-officers-with-assault-rifles/365179/>)

stated, “No student is carrying a sign that says, ‘I have a disability’ and so they would be an easy target.” In response to this protest, Chief Wu again repeated similar statements to justify the policy, claiming, “These rifles give us greater flexibility in dealing with a person with bad intent who comes onto any of our campuses. The officers will keep the rifles in the trunks of their cars, unless they are needed. It should also be pointed out that many other community and school law enforcement departments already have weapons.” For Chief Wu, the fact that the school police departments in Los Angeles, Baldwin Park, Santa Ana, Fontana School, and San Bernardino already had similar weapons at hand was also justification for why Compton should do the same.

Even though Latinxs students make up the majority of the school population, Black students make up the majority of students who experience in-school suspension.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, during this time, the district’s statistics show that suspension for possession of weapons were in the minority.⁴⁵

“Como Podemos Tener Nuestros Niños Así, Sin Seguridad?”

Elizabeth and Yolanda experienced their own set of challenges with the district. By the start of the 2014 school year, Yolanda had transferred her children to the neighboring Lennox school district. When the district sent her children’s files to the new

⁴⁴ Data collected by the California Department of Education (CDE) through the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS). Aggregate data files are provided by the CDE – Data Reporting Office at: (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/sd/filesd.asp>) and (<https://www.ed-data.org/district/los-angeles/compton-unified>)

⁴⁵ Ibid.

district, they included everything except for documentation that proved her children were no longer classified as English Language Learners. After months of attempts to have her children's complete records sent to the new district, Yolanda filed a complaint with the CA Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights.

On September 9th, Elizabeth and Yolanda requested an official list of volunteers after only Elizabeth received an invitation to a ribbon cutting ceremony scheduled to take place on January 29th of the following year at McNair Elementary. The ceremony was meant to introduce the new STEM science laboratory, a project that both Yolanda and Elizabeth had worked on. After Elizabeth requested a list of volunteers, the principal ridiculed, threatened, and barred her from entering the school premises. The principal accused Elizabeth of assaulting her and immediately called the CSP.⁴⁶ Later that month, Elizabeth and her youngest son witnessed how school staff physically and verbally assaulted an elderly Latinx couple whose four grandchildren attended the same school:

Mi hijo aún sufre por eso, vio grave la agresión. Llego la policía, se iban a llevar a los abuelitos. Los subieron a las patrullas. Otro policía custodio a los nietos, todos los que agredieron eran afro-americanos, a abuelitos Latinos, además el abuelito era incapacitado y lo golpearon cuando estaba dentro del carro, a mí no me dejaron ir y trataron de quitar mi teléfono. Corrí junto con mi hijo y me encierro, pero no me dejan ir, llamo a Yolanda que me AYUDE, llamo a mi esposo, Yolanda llama a Morris y dice no diga nada cuando viene el detective me

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Aguilar text message correspondence with author, July 6, 2018.

*preguntando que miré y le digo la verdad no me creyeron, y cuando les dije que tenía gravado inmediatamente sueltan a los abuelitos, me dejan ir.*⁴⁷

(My son still suffers from that; he saw the serious aggression. The police arrived; they were going to take the grandparents. They put them inside the police cars. Another officer took the grandkids, all the aggressors were African-Americans, towards Latino grandparents, by the way the grandfather was disable and was assaulted inside the car, they didn't let me go and they tried to take away mi phone. I ran with my son and locked myself in, but they didn't stop, I call Yolanda for help, I call my husband, Yolanda calls Morris which says not to say a word, than the detective arrives asking what I saw and I tell him the truth, they didn't believe me, and when I tell them that I have everything recorded they immediately release the grandparents, they leave me alone.)

The heightened hostility that Yolanda, Elizabeth, and other Latinx parents/guardians experienced was a direct result of the federal lawsuit filed against the school district for racial profiling. Both Yolanda and Elizabeth had become witnesses to countless abuses of power and served as witnesses in the federal lawsuit.

On November 24, Elizabeth was subpoenaed in regard to the federal racial profiling lawsuit against the district. On the 26th, she received a text message from Raquel's attorney that recommended she leave town that weekend. Elizabeth was confused and alarmed yet did not question the validity of the attorney's statement. Since it was a holiday weekend, Elizabeth decided her family would leave to visit a relative's

⁴⁷ Ibid.

home out of town. On their way there, she realized she had forgotten one of her son's prescription medicines. They returned back home and to her surprise experienced a home invasion. Elizabeth recounted the horrific details of this experience as she described how four men attempted to break into their home knowing that they were inside. They broke a window, tore down a door screen, pounded on the front door, and attempted to enter the home through the side of the house. The whole time, her youngest son hid in a closet on the second floor of her home. Elizabeth called the police, but no one ever showed up.

At the school board's first meeting of the next year, parents spoke up during public comment on issues regarding a change in the autonomy parents were given in their involvement.⁴⁸ One parent expressed that she always made sure to document the hours she was in and out, time that she willingly devoted to the school without pay. She expressed disapproval of new changes the school implemented: the parents were given the exact times and dates that they were allowed to be at the school. "There has to be guidelines and parameters as to how parents engage," responded Board President Micah Ali. Board member Emma Sheriff expressed concern that perhaps parents were not aware of the policies and guidelines and that a meeting to explain them could clarify the issues.⁴⁹ Ali stressed that these issues were only present at one particular school, not the entire district. Even though school board vice president Satra Zurita arrived late to the district meeting and did not hear the parents' concerns, she immediately joined the conversation:

⁴⁸ Compton Unified School District meeting, January 13, 2015.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Those parents were disruptive on the campus, not only were they disruptive at the campus, they are disruptive at the school board meetings. As well as I have messages on my phone where one was playing on, harassing me. I am saving those messages as proof that no one is being singled out, but you cannot come and disrupt the day or the program for every other tax payer's child. When people's children are in school they expect them to be learning in a nice, safe, pleasant environment and all of those distractions are counterproductive. I think we've kind of said it all as it relates to a series of events.

The "disruptive" parents Zurita referred to were Yolanda and Elizabeth. As public comments proceeded, an elderly Latino couple took the microphone. These were the grandparents that months prior experienced verbal and physical abuse from the CSP. The central concern of their comments was the abuse their four grandchildren experienced not only in the altercation with the CSP, but on a daily basis. The guardians were not notified when one of their grandchildren was injured at school nor when another experienced bullying. "*Como podemos tener nuestros niños así, sin seguridad?*" The grandmother questioned how they can send their children to school without a sense of security and safety. Clearly, the negligence of school personnel and abuse at the hands of district police were the reasons for this lack of security and safety.

From that point forward, both parents were alienated, prohibited from volunteering, and removed from school grounds by district police. When Yolanda and Elizabeth attempted to enter the ribbon cutting ceremony event, both were refused entry. The school police officer at the front gate falsely stated that there was an order of

restriction that prohibited them from entering the event. The targeting of Yolanda and Elizabeth had devastating consequences for their children. Overwhelmed with a sense of defeat, Yolanda made the following post on her social media account:

It has been some time since I have posted on Facebook as my children are now enrolled in a new school district although not without trouble. My youngest did not have complete and updated transcripts and Compton USD has delayed in showing how they had not corrected or forwarded her language and GATE qualifications. Her current enrollment in appropriate classes at her higher ability has been delayed one semester. Meanwhile, certain Compton USD personnel, especially police officers, have waged a campaign to ban and restrict me from exercising my rights as a taxpayer to remain involved in parent volunteer activities. Yesterday, I was threatened with arrest by a school police officer if I returned to the campus where my youngest transcripts are fouled up. A campaign of falsehoods, discrimination, and retaliation have encircled me and it is very apparent that this must be made public and voiced out loud for all to become aware. I have been threatened repeatedly and my family harassed. The struggle continues and now I feel better knowing that my children will not be part of or witness the gross actions directed at me. Justice will prevail.⁵⁰

Yolanda's daughter was a straight-A student who was a part of the school's Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program. Since CUSD did not send her daughter's complete

⁵⁰ Yolanda Lopez, Facebook, January 30, 2015

academic file, Yolanda attempted to make these requests at her daughter's school site but was threatened with arrest by the CSP.

Similarly, the next month Elizabeth attended her son's high school for a Black History event where he was scheduled to appear as the Marshal for the school's marching band. Elizabeth expressed the humiliation she felt after she was publicly escorted out of her son's performance:

... otra vez la policia nos sacó no podíamos estar aquí, supuesta investigación, mucha gente se dio cuenta de esto, que nos sacaron custodiadas además que no podía participar como voluntaria por ningún motivo, siento una gran tristeza y horror de todo esto. ¡Al salir estas mujeres estaban a carcajeada abierta burlándose de nosotras, que impotencia!!!!!! Prometi que eso tenia que CAMBIAR.⁵¹

(...once again, the officer kicked us out, we couldn't be here according to the investigation, a lot of people witness, that they kicked us out, that I couldn't participate as a volunteer for no motive, I feel a deep sorrow and horror from all this. As we were going out some ladies were having fun laughing at us, what impotence!!!! I promised this had to CHANGE.)

By 2014, parents such as Yolanda and Elizabeth were immediately removed from school property without any grounds to do so. The harassment they experienced as parents trickled down and impacted the education of their children. This was the reason why

⁵¹ Elizabeth Aguilar, personal text message correspondence with author, July 6, 2018.

Yolanda chose to remove her children from the district. Elizabeth was proud that her son, someone who overcame a lot of personal difficulties, had risen to become the marching band's Marshal, a position that takes courage for a Latino male student. After all, Centennial's marching band had received national recognition and awards after alumni and renowned rapper Kendrick Lamar had donated \$50,000 to the school's music program the prior year. As the program's lead director and music teacher, Mr. Castaneda, with gratitude for Kendrick's generous donation, described, "If it wasn't for him, I don't think my program would have the success or the attention that it has received."⁵²

Rather than pass policies that support the militarization of Compton's schools, policies that could have resulted in greater harm for students, parents, and grandparents who had been involved in incidents during the past year, the district should have listened and worked toward their collective demands. The district should have invested in funding music programs such as Centennial's, smaller class sizes such as the students from Compton High demanded through their walk out, a better teacher union contract as teachers expressed through their district-wide sick-out, mental health services for students who experience violence in and out of school, and integration of parent/guardian demands such as those of Yolanda and Elizabeth who vocalized all these issues at every school board meeting.

⁵² Mr. Castaneda started teaching at Centennial in 2012 and the music program has since won awards and recognition. Popsugar Entertainment. May 26, 2017. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UuGHfxpDeA>)

Criminalizing Public Dissent

“You do not pay taxes, you do not own a home, your children no longer attend Compton schools - I don’t understand why you are always here yelling and accusing us. You are here only to cause trouble.”⁵³ - Micah Ali

These were the words that I heard come from Compton’s school board president on March 10, 2015. It was my second time attending a school board meeting since I had moved back to Compton. After attending a Compton Democratic Club meeting at the city’s local IHOP, I was pleasantly surprised to see Yolanda and other parents in attendance at that meeting. I was the new person in the group, and I was encouraged to attend the next school board meeting, where this incident occurred. The following reflection is an excerpt of my ethnographic account of that day:

As I pulled into the district’s parking lot, I saw that Yolanda and Elizabeth were already parking their car, they had carpooled to the meeting. As I started making my way out of the parking lot, I tried my best to catch up with the parents, when I noticed that the school board president was talking to the parents as he was leaving his own car. By the time I got close enough to them, that is when I heard him utter those words. He had not seen me yet. There was no one else in sight and I was right behind him. It really struck a chord with me. It sounded to me as if he was harassing them. I was completely speechless. The parents were visibly upset and accused him of lies. He then noticed that I had seen what had just happened and rushed inside the board meeting room.

⁵³ This quote is from the author’s ethnographic account on March 10, 2015. Micah Ali was heard stating this to Yolanda Lopez at the Compton Unified School District parking lot.

Once inside, Yolanda and Elizabeth met up with a group of mothers who were waiting for the meeting to begin. I sat a row away in front of them. I could hear Yolanda and Elizabeth telling the parents about the incident that just happened. As I pulled out my laptop to take notes, the school board president suddenly called me forward to the front of the board room. I was stunned. It was clearly out of the norm for him to do this and it felt really awkward. Everyone was looking at us. “Those parents, all they do is come here and cause trouble.” I felt at the moment as if he thought I was a journalist covering a story. I could sense that he felt that he had to tell me something before I made my mind up about what I witnessed. Clearly, he was trying to save face from what I had witnessed, but it was too late. I interjected, telling him that what he said was not justified. It came off as racist and xenophobic. I expressed that I was offended because any of those mothers could be my mother. His response before going back up was, “They are telling lies. Don’t believe what they say, they are troublemakers.”⁵⁴

My first-hand introduction to the Compton School Board was not a positive one.

Everything I had heard felt confirmed in that moment. A student, Robert Moseley from Dominguez High, had recently been shot in his neighborhood and a teacher, Mr. Curry, held up his phone during public comment for the student to address the board from his hospital bed. The student spoke about the lack of safety in the school. After his statement, the student board member who also attended Dominguez confirmed that there is a lack of safety on campus and attributed the issue to administrators not doing their job properly.

⁵⁴ Author’s ethnographic account March 10, 2015.

Another student spoke during public comment regarding this same issue, stating that he felt safe in his class, but that students need to feel welcomed and accepted by those who work there, again referring to administrators and staff. After listening to the student speakers, the board's president confirmed that later that month there would be a special meeting for the Board members to further listen to students.

At this meeting, many other community members spoke out against the way particular teachers were pink slipped and administrators were re-assigned. Dr. Zavala was identified as one of the administrators demoted from his position, as he was scheduled to be a classroom teacher the following year. Among the parents that spoke out against Dr. Zavala's demotion was Elizabeth. When she approached the microphone and before the translator walked up to the podium, she turned to the back and asked all the parents who were a part of DELAC to stand with her at the podium. During this time, the clock started, and Elizabeth asked that it not start until all the parents join her. The three-minute timer for public comment usually began after a speaker stated their name and address for the record. As the mothers approached the podium, Elizabeth pleaded that her time be respected (Figure 19). Board member Zurita responded that she had 2.5 minutes and that she should respect her own time. With the limited time given, Elizabeth introduced the group as parents of students classified as English Language Learners who were part of the district's DELAC. She made the following public comment:

We are here to respond the question that you asked 15 parents on March 6th: Why do parents want to get their kids out the district? You make incorrect decisions and they impact students. We are here as representatives that do not accept Dr.

Zavala to be changed to a classroom teacher. We do not accept it. If you take that decision you are making us leave the district. You are not listening to us parents or to our request. This has happened too many times. This is why on this evening a lot of people are upset with you. I ask please consider leaving Dr. Zavala in his position. If you change him, it would affect a quality education. We, the parents, are here. I hope you hear our request.⁵⁵



Figure 19. Compton parents speak up at district meeting.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Compton Unified School District meeting, March 10 2015.

⁵⁶ Screenshot captured from public comment session during Compton Unified School District meeting, March 10 2015.

The mother's request for the board to maintain Dr. Zavala in his administrative position was not honored. Rather than be demoted to classroom instruction, Dr. Zavala sought an administrative position in a different school district.

Later that week, Compton's School Police Chief, William Wu, was honored at the Peace Officers Association of Los Angeles County with one of the 2015 Centurion Awards for Excellence.⁵⁷ This award came only eight months after the AR-15 controversy broke national news. In a desperate effort to restore the public image of the CSP, the district lauded on their district website, "Lead by Chief William Wu, the department has undergone dramatic improvements over the past couple of years. For example, the Compton School Police Department was the only school police force honored at this year's Peace Officers Association of Los Angeles County (POALAC) Awards banquet."⁵⁸

Given all the issues that were raised and unaddressed at the March 10th board meeting, the next meeting continued the momentum.⁵⁹ The first public comment was delivered by Robert Mosely, the Dominguez High student who was the victim of a drive-

⁵⁷ March 15, 2015

⁵⁸ Compton Unified School District, School Police, Last accessed on August 2017. (<https://www.compton.k12.ca.us/departments/school-police/home>); Later that year, in further efforts CUSD release a "Ride-Along with CUSD Police Chief Wu." October 20, 2015. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?fbclid=IwAR1htzRESJRNGKzJeAs6HNYOUUfIMBj0lqyCNNHHmXkw_bteS2beb-jRLO8&v=kWM5uNCFhn4)

⁵⁹ Compton Unified School District meeting, March 24, 2015. (http://video.compton.k12.ca.us/cusd_videos/BoardMeetings/2015/boardMtg03242015.mp4)

by earlier that month. Robert reminded Micah Ali that he stated in the prior meeting that he would visit him at the hospital but did not. In his heartfelt speech, Robert shared that the first request he made in the hospital was to have his homework sent to him because he did not want to fall behind in school. He wanted the board to know how much he cared for his education and asked the board president, “Do you care?”⁶⁰ After Robert’s public comment, Student Board Member Keith Harris asked the board to address what would happen to the Graphic Arts and Design Program at Dominguez if the teacher that leads the program was pink-slipped. Board members answered that the program would continue. The student board member pressed the board president about the meeting that was promised at Dominguez at the last school board meeting, but never happened. Zurita clarified that district meetings are not public forums for questions and answers, stating, “We do have some adults who misbehave, for lack of a better word, and it is disrespectful, and it is not a great example for you all. For that I apologize. Often times, young people mimic what the adults around them do. In this case, that’s not a great thing to do.”⁶¹ Board member Zurita’s condescending attitude explained that there was an alternative process for expressing concerns, “because you should be at home doing homework and not with people misbehaving.”⁶² The students and teachers in the board meeting stood up in disappointment at her statement. Mr. Curry shouted, “This is an

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

emergency!” and the board president called the meeting to recess since by then the public had risen in protest.

When the meeting was called back into session, the board president made a statement on how the adults incite the students and proceeded to read the board’s policy on audience misconduct, which included, “utterance of loud threatening or abusive language, whistling, applauding, stomping of feet, or other acts which disturb or otherwise impede the orderly conduct of any board meeting.”⁶³ He went on to deliver a warning to the entire public present and threatened to “eject adults” from the meeting. A Dominguez High student delivered a petition with 391 student signatures requesting to have Mr. Curry re-instated. A Centennial High student spoke about the importance of his auto-tech class and made a plea for the teacher that leads the class to not be pink-slipped. A Compton High student complained about the insufficient lunch time to eat and delivered over 400 signatures from the campus requesting sandwich vending machines. Elizabeth waived a file with 400 signatures on behalf of parents and teachers demanding that Dr. Zavala remain as director of English Language Services.

⁶³ Ibid.



Figure 20. Yolanda’s last district meeting.⁶⁴

Yolanda refuted all the claims the board members made during the meeting, noted that the students were being misguided on how to file formal complaints, and exposed the board president’s connection to a new land development project in the city (Figure 20). The entire public in attendance cheered after her comment. Unknowingly, this was Yolanda’s last school board meeting and deliverance of public comment.

Town Hall at Dominguez High

That Friday, the board held a town hall meeting at Dominguez as was promised at the previous district meeting. While the intended audience was high school students,

⁶⁴ Screenshot from Compton Unified School District Board meeting on March 24, 2015.

since it was a district special meeting, parents and community members were in attendance. One after another, students provided oral testimonies about the horrible experiences they had endured at their school.⁶⁵ Among the reoccurring issues was campus safety. Students complained that there weren't first aid kits in the fields during practice, that they were using broken helmets, that trash cans set on fire were a common sight. They also brought up fights, a broken window in the choir room, vandalism that was left there for months, a lack of hot water in the locker room, a lack of AC in the gym, flooded hallways during rainstorms, and a lack of school supplies.

"Thank you for being here and it's nice to know you. Because, first of all, I have never met you," a student stated, as Yolanda sat in the background and shouted in Spanish, "*Solo cuando anda en campaña*," referring to the board members' presence in the community only when they are campaigning for re-election. The student continued:

I'm not saying this to be harsh on you, but this is a school that you guys are in charge of, right? So, how come none of us know you? ... If it weren't for this meeting, would you guys know about this AP night? I participated in the Black Student Union Assembly, I did not see any of you. Correct me if I'm wrong, aren't you all African American? Believe it or not, we are going to be raised to take your spots. [Students clap] Do you want me to repeat? No? Because I don't like to wait in line for the bathrooms because girls are smoking. Where is the

⁶⁵ Compton Democratic Club. "Dominguez High School Special Meeting." April 12, 2015. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4Ea_hXginc)

security for that? I have to use the restroom. My education, my future should not be handed a pink slip.⁶⁶

Micah Ali announced that the next speaker would be the last since there were only 7 minutes left before the AP event was scheduled to begin. After the student spoke, Melany Aguilar approached the microphone. She had prepared a written speech to address the board with the following:

Fellow Board Members, I was at the last board meeting and I'm here today also because I am concerned about the policies that are affecting me and the people I see every day. Now I have a question: do you really care about us? In this room. Even now I question, do you still really care about us? Because if you did, you wouldn't have been seeming mad last board meeting and we wouldn't be here right now.⁶⁷

Melany walked away from the microphone stand with the microphone still in her hand and stood directly in front of the board to question whether they cared about the students. The passionate speech had the students rallying in support, as she continued:

I can't even be sure about anything that comes out your mouth. You, as our advocates are supposed to do everything in your power to guarantee us the best and only the best. Everyone is worthy of the best in life. Everyone in this room is

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

worthy of the best! ... I'm very surprised Mr. Brawly, that you are sitting here:
not slouching, not texting. Because last time – ⁶⁸

Students clapped in approval throughout, while the crowd interjected into Melany's speech, yet she continued, "Last time it seemed like you didn't really give a shit about us. Stop being fake! You're not fooling anyone now!" Melany approached the superintendent and as she kept talking to him without the microphone, she handed him her written speech. As Melany walked away from the superintendent, the sound of coins as they fell on the ground was heard by everyone in the auditorium.

Board Member Margie Garrett lifted her hands up in shock as Superintendent Brawley rose off his chair and pointed at the Compton School Police then toward Yolanda, who sat at the front row of the gym's bleachers. Board President Micah rose as well and announced the meeting was adjourned. In a last attempt, a student took the microphone and stated, "Whether you listen or not, the students have a right to speak!" To everyone's surprise, Yolanda tossed a few coins in the air as a sign of protest. This bold statement was meant to represent that the board was not interested in creating real "change" throughout the district, instead they were only invested in money. It was as if Yolanda, by tossing the coins in the air, was giving them the type of change they wanted. It was a rebellious gesture that symbolized that the board members had become sellouts. Clearly, no one was injured from a few coins tossed in front of them, but this was not the way the board members interpreted the incident. For the board, Yolanda had given them the ultimate leverage to use against her.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Yolanda was served with a restraining order on behalf of the Superintendent and board members. As if preventing her from entering any district property was not enough, civil and criminal charges were filed against her. Yolanda's political life was made impossible after that incident. She could not serve as a school volunteer, attend district meetings, or attend public forums in non-district spaces. For example, at a public forum on Measure S that was hosted at a community center in the city, Yolanda had to leave the event once she noticed that the Superintendent had arrived. When the Superintendent noticed Yolanda in the crowd, he immediately called the police. When the police arrived at the forum, Yolanda had already left. The police tried locating her at her home, but she was not there. At her next court appearance, Yolanda's attorney notified her that the judge was going to have her arrested for violating her restraining order the day of the public forum. It did not matter if Yolanda was at the event first or that it was a non-district event, Yolanda could not be anywhere where the board may be. The only reason Yolanda was not arrested by the judge was because she had kept the flyer for the forum, which did not indicate the Superintendent would be present. Since Yolanda left immediately after she saw him, she was not arrested.

When Election Day arrived, Yolanda was not allowed to vote at her scheduled polling place because it was at one of the district's schools. Yolanda lived walking distance from multiple district schools. Since she relied on public transportation, she could not wait for the bus near her home because it was within school boundaries. She had a target on her back and knew district officials would use anything in their power against her. Yolanda lived a life in fear, where her daily activities became constrained

and impossible to do. Everywhere she went, even the sight of a Compton School Police car would frighten her. She began to self-regulate her every move, constantly asking herself, was she near a school or were any of the board members around? Immobilizing one of the strongest parent leaders was the ultimate retaliation the board achieved.

Conclusion

“Yes, one day I’m patted on the back and the next I’m slapped with a ban,” Yolanda reflected back on a picture where the superintendent congratulated Yolanda as she received an award from the district. Yolanda’s experience of exclusion from the school district and ultimately from the city was a result of her unwavering demands for change. “*Ellos solo piensan que soy ignorante, chismosa, y problemática,*” (They only think I am ignorant, problematic, and someone who gossips). Yolanda repeatedly expressed in our conversations about her experiences with the school district. Those words became a catch phrase for her to capture how she believed school district officials perceived her. For them, she was just a trouble-maker who made noise at every district meeting.

Yolanda’s traumatic experiences with the district reminded her of what she saw first-hand with her own mother, “*Lo mismo que me está pasando a mi ahora, es lo que le pasaba a mi mama*” (The same that is happening to me now, happened to my mother.)⁶⁹ Yolanda explained that her mother only spoke their Indigenous Oaxaca dialect, Zapotec,

⁶⁹ Yolanda Lopez interview with author June 2018.

not Spanish. From a young age, Yolanda served as her mother's translator, shifting from Zapotec to Spanish, to help her mother navigate. People in the community would look down upon her mother for not speaking Spanish and not knowing how to write. Yolanda was able to connect the humiliation she witnessed her mother face for being an Indigenous woman in Mexico as the same type of humiliation she faced in the city of Compton for being a working-class Indigenous Mexican immigrant mother. "*Es por eso que no me gusta ser ofendida. No me gusta que la gente sea maltratada por cómo se viste, por lo que tiene...*" (This is why I do not like to be offended. I don't like people to be mistreated because of how they dress or for what they have...).⁷⁰ Witnessing her mother be discriminated against for her dialect and lack of Spanish literacy, signifiers of her mother's Indigenous identity, informed Yolanda's worldview of inequity and justice.

Yolanda strongly believed everyone should be treated with respect, in spite of their differences. Yolanda believed that respect was not something that was given merely because of their position of authority; rather, respect was earned through reciprocity. Through her own experiences in Compton, a city where Yolanda was viewed as an immigrant foreigner by city and school officials, Yolanda identified with her mother's experiences of racism and discrimination in Oaxaca. This time, however, it was Yolanda's children who witnessed the daily abuses, humiliations, harassments, and discriminations.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

In an interview with both Yolanda and Elizabeth, I asked the mothers the toughest question, “¿Como les ha impactado a sus hijos?”⁷¹ I wanted to know how their experiences with the district impacted their children. As Yolanda released a deep breath, she quickly broke down into tears. Yolanda’s daughter witnessed first-hand the harassment and discrimination her mother experienced. The experiences her daughter was subjected to as a result of her mother’s experiences with the district led Yolanda to seek mental health services for her daughter. Elizabeth also shared how after the home invasion she experienced, her son was severely traumatized and needed to undergo therapy. She explained that her son was very young and did not understand how people in the world could do cruel things to other people. When Elizabeth sought therapy services and resources from the district, she did not receive any assistance, and ended up finding and paying for services on her own. Elizabeth wanted me to know the negative experiences she endured with the district impacted her own well-being, as she had to seek mental health services for herself.

Coincidentally, during the time that Yolanda was prohibited from any district property or events, a federal lawsuit was filed against the school district regarding what has been identified as complex trauma.⁷² “Trauma,” as described in the complaint filed:

⁷¹ Yolanda Lopez and Elizabeth Aguilar, interview with author, June 27, 2018.

⁷² Peter P. v. Compton Unified School District Case number: LA CV15-3726 MWF (PLAx). Filed May 18, 2015. Filed by Public Counsel Opportunity Under Law and Irell & Manella LLP.

stems from such causes as exposure to violence and loss, family disruptions related to deportation, incarceration and/or the foster system, systemic racism and discrimination, and the extreme stress of lacking basic necessities, such as not knowing where the next meal will come from or where to sleep that night.⁷³

Similarly, “[c]omplex trauma stems from the exposure to multiple persistent sources of violence, loss, and other adverse childhood experiences (‘ACEs’).” The complaint described in detail examples of children’s exposure to adversity and the impact of this exposure on their lives. The adversity experienced by children in Compton such as Yolanda’s daughter was a result of the educational structure.

In conversation with Melissa Harris Perry, Perry asks, “Should we consider growing up in Compton a disability?” As a guest on her show, Micah Ali was present and responded that the federal lawsuit is “moot” given that the district provided mental health services to students. In response, Melissa questioned why the district did not join the plaintiffs rather than stand in opposition to them. Dr. Pedro Noguera joined in agreement with Melissa’s assertion, and compared Compton to Topeka, Kansas, where the federal case that ended racial segregation took place, “Topeka wasn’t the only one discriminating on the basis of race but set the precedent ending racial discrimination throughout the country. Compton’s been picked on but they could have picked on, they could have picked Oakland, they could have picked on many, many other places that have the same issues.” This moment magnified the position the district continually took each time anyone brought forth issues, concerns, or grievances. Rather than failing to acknowledge,

⁷³ Ibid.

address, and remedy the situation, as in this case over issues regarding complex trauma, Compton's school board could have instead rallied with the plaintiffs, acknowledged its own institutional shortcomings, and been a part of what could be a historic precedent for the nation.

Yolanda's story is Compton's story. Until the city and school district make transformative changes in their policies and culture, there will be many more generations displaced.

CHAPTER SEVEN

COMING FULL CIRCLE: LUCHANDO POR NUESTRA EDUCACION

“You only are free when you realize you belong no place — you belong every place — no place at all. The price is high. The reward is great.”¹ Maya Angelou

I received a call late one night while I was living in New York from my mentor, Professor Clyde Woods, who wanted to check in with me as I was near the completion of my first year at Columbia University’s Teachers College. I remember my excitement in sharing with him that I was admitted to UCR’s Ethnic Studies Department. I longed to be closer to home so that I could be at the forefront of what was transpiring in the city where I was raised. The California parent trigger law had recently been invoked for the first time at my former elementary school, and I wanted to learn more about how that happened. “You’ve come full circle” Professor Woods stated, and I knew he was proud of me.

The decision to come back home at that critical time was not easy. I needed to finish my two-year graduate education program in a year and, since I made the decision to pursue a doctoral degree in ethnic studies, I could not claim my Gates Millennium Scholarship, which was designed to pay my education until I completed my doctoral degree (The Gates Foundation did not fund graduate programs in ethnic studies). In spite of these challenges, I was determined to, as Professor Woods stated, “come full circle,”

¹ “A Conversation with Maya Angelou.” BillMoyers.com. November 21, 1973. Accessed June 11, 2019. (<https://billmoyers.com/content/conversation-maya-angelou/>)

which I thought meant returning to Compton. It took eight years for me to make meaning of Professor Woods' last words to me.

To come full circle was not about returning to a place of origin, it was about the realization of my authentic power and acknowledgment that it was not defined by anything outside of myself. I hope to offer my reflections on these realizations through my educational *testimonio*, a self-portrait, as part of the closing of *Insurgent Learning*.

Rebellion is Not A Choice

I started preschool in the wake of the LA rebellion and at the start of the state of California's takeover of the Compton school district.² As a result of the state takeover, my elementary school, Mark Twain Elementary, was identified for closure. At the age of six, I vividly remember Black and Latinx families gathered to protest against the closure of our elementary school, demanding, “¡No sierren la escuela! Don't close our school!” We had protested in a similar formation only a few months earlier, when my family marched in the streets of Compton against Proposition 187, the so-called “Save Our State” initiative. California somehow needed to be saved from people like my parents who were undocumented, working poor, non-English speakers, and who were raising four so-called “anchor babies” on the West side of Compton. Families like mine were continuously portrayed by the corporate media as a drain on resources for publicly

² The state's “receivership” of the district on July 1, 1993 was due to both financial and academic failure. Compton was the second district to experience receivership, but the first for academic reasons.

funded programs and services. We were an “invasion,” underserving of protection, love, and belonging.

Before the closure of my elementary school, I recall a positive learning environment where in kindergarten we were taught to sing songs such as “*De Colores*,” and in first grade we learned to read and write in the only language spoken at home, Spanish. I vividly recall when all the first-grade classes had students pair up, and I was paired with a Black boy from a different class. We didn’t speak the same language, but in spite of that, we held hands and played together during recess. It was not a perfect school, but it was a school where teachers recognized and valued the culture of a growing Spanish speaking community in Compton. This was the mid-90s, and in spite of everything that happened outside of the school’s walls, somehow the leadership at the school was able to create a welcoming and loving school environment. When the school closed down, our education was suddenly disrupted and our entire neighborhood was destabilized. As my school closed its doors forever, students were transferred to neighboring public schools, and I was transferred to McKinley Elementary for two years before entering fourth grade at Vanguard Learning Center.

During that time, I experienced the effects of the passage of Proposition 227, the “English Language Education for Immigrant Children” initiative. I now understand that the Black teacher who punished me in front of my entire fourth grade class for speaking Spanish during recess was perhaps more concerned with the way speaking Spanish held me back than what I felt at the time, shame and humiliation. When I was not allowed to cross the graduation stage in fifth grade due to my low academic scores, I attended

summer school to make up for it. I vividly recall walking in on the first day of summer school and seeing all the students who were classified as “English Language Learners” and had been pulled aside in 2nd and 3rd grade at McKinley. We were the English Language Learners who had been cornered away from the rest of the class to learn from the teacher’s Spanish speaking Latina teaching assistant. At the age of ten, I did not have the words to express what I felt, but I knew it felt wrong. Not being able to graduate with my fifth-grade class devastated me, but it also made me *trucha* in school. I did not want to accept that I was the problem, and from that moment forward, I promised myself that I would never allow myself to be held back.

I wanted my Black teachers to see that I was as smart as the mostly Black students who were in GATE (Gifted and Talented Education). After all, all of my teachers from that point on were Black, and while I now see the value in how unique of an experience that was, it was difficult for me to grow up in an educational environment where the only teachers that looked like me were my foreign language teachers in high school. After years of feeling like my teachers beat the Spanish out of me in middle school years, then knowing it would be taught to me as a “foreign language” in high school, how could I not become a rebellious student? I was enraged at the entire educational system for reminding me every day that I did not belong as I was.

Stay Trucha

There was always a part of me that wanted to escape my city and its public schools. This is why students in eighth grade, students that my English Language Arts

teacher referred to as “the cream of the crop,” left to non-district schools such as the California Academy of Mathematics and Science (CAMS) and King Drew Magnet. We all knew those were the schools where the “brightest” students were admitted, those who had a guaranteed pathway to the university. So, when I was denied from both, I made up my mind that I’d prove to everyone my intellectual brilliance, that students who attended the “worst” high school in Compton, Centennial High School, which was my neighborhood high school, could also make it. While at Centennial, it was most-known for losing its accreditation, racial tensions among students, and winning the state championship in basketball every year. Every semester, our school lost countless numbers of students. By then, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was fully in effect, and our principal, Dr. Richard Chavez, rode his bike around campus with a bubble machine to remind us as our teachers always did, “Make sure to fill in all the bubbles.” As a “failing” school, our school’s existence depended completely on our annual standardized tests. Now I understand why in tenth grade Dr. Chavez gave us a one-hour lesson on test-taking strategies; I never knew we could answer questions without actually reading the passage or solving the math equation.

In high school, I was the student called out in front of a school assembly for refusing to pledge allegiance at the height of Bush’s war in Iraq. I was a Math Engineering Science Achievement (MESA) student who attended school every Saturday and looked for any excuse to stay after school. I was the student who refused to be placed into the Puente Program because everyone in the classroom had Spanish surnames and it triggered prior trauma of being labeled an English Language Learner. I was the student

who applied to over 30 scholarships my senior year because I was uncertain how I would pay for college, and I still thank Dr. Chavez who looked the other way when I left campus early to make sure I mailed my applications on time. I was also the student whose college-career counselor refused to write a letter of recommendation for my application to the Gates Millennium Scholarship, but when I received it after my MESA mentors stepped in to assist me, she was the first to receive credit for it. I was among the students who walked out of our first period class in protest of HR 4437, and I continued organizing with neighboring high school youth I met in the streets of South Los Angeles. I was also the student who graduated second in my class of 120 graduates, but who was refused the right to give the Salutatorian speech. They probably thought I'd provide a truth-telling testimony as my friend did the year prior, when through his Salutatorian speech, he revealed he could not attend UC Berkeley due to the financial hardships of being a Central American undocumented student.

My coming of age was marked by my resistance to the sense of failure I internalized, rage against the educational system, and a clear realization that I needed to be *trucha* because the system was designed to see me and my peers fail. I found community in hanging out with other *roqueras/os*, who were also the highest achieving kids. I was grateful for the continuous mentorship I received from my MESA advisor, Jaime del Razo, who assisted countless of students in Compton to also attend a university. After my admissions appeal to UC Berkeley was denied, I fled to UC Santa Barbara, a campus I only read about due to my self-education on the origins of MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana/o Aztlán) and *El Plan de Santa Barbara*. I needed to go

somewhere far enough from home where I could begin anew. Little did I know, as I prepared to attend UC Santa Barbara's freshman orientation and looked up driving directions, it was only two hours away.

Brown Grrrl Fly³

I went into the university with thick skin; I was proud to say I was “Straight *Outta* Compton.” Those simple words were a defense mechanism that worked to back anyone away from me. But I quickly realized that at UC Santa Barbara I didn't have to defend myself against anyone. My professors, Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) counselors, and classmates believed in me more than I even believed in myself. I was not used to the unconditional support and love expressed by the communities I was a part of at Santa Barbara.

I took every opportunity to return back to Los Angeles and was excited to know that all of my roommates, who were also a part of El Congreso, were willing to take a trip to LA on May 1, 2007, to affirm the rights of migrants and workers. This was particularly significant for me to return as a recent university student, given that I was part of the mega-marches and student-led walkouts the prior year. None of us anticipated the sudden mass presence of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) as we arrived at McArthur

³ This heading title is inspired by Kendrick Lamar's “Black Boy Fly” from the 2012 album *Good Kid, m.A.A.d. City*. In this song he expresses the collective sentiment children, Black children specifically, experience growing up in Compton when faced with limited options and role models on how to make it out. It is also inspired by Bikini Kill's “Rebel Girl” from the 1993 cassette *Our Troubled Youth* which describes a young girl's fascination with a rebellious queer girl in her neighborhood.

Park. Rubber bullets were shot everywhere, and I recall *abuelitas* and mothers with strollers caught in the crossfire. The march we were a part of was peaceful and it became clear to us that the LAPD viciously planned to attack the protestors indiscriminately.⁴ These were the type of lived experiences that I walked into my university classes with.

I wanted students back home to have access to the wealth of knowledge that inspired me and gave me the language to articulate the realities I experienced, which I knew were shared experiences. My Sociology, Chicana/o Studies, and Black Studies professors encouraged me to develop a research project based on my growing intellectual curiosities about the power of critical pedagogy and Ethnic Studies for Black and Latinx youth in Compton. I visited my high school at every chance I got, and in one of those visits Mr. Hembrick, Mr. Baslee, and Mr. Ramirez all supported my vision of creating an after-school club named TRUTH (Teaching Racial Unity Through History). I was deeply inspired by Ernest Morrell and Jeff Andrade Duncan's then newly published book *The Art of Critical Pedagogy* (2008), and wanted to create a space where students could creatively and critically express their own perceptions of Black and Brown conflict and solidarity at my former high school.

⁴ "Journalists Covering Los Angeles Immigration March Assaulted by Police," *Democracy Now!* (May 3, 2007), (http://www.democracynow.org/2007/5/3/journalists_covering_los_angeles_immigration_march)



Figure 21. “Da Otha Art Gallery” at Centennial

Perhaps what I learned most from the after school program I facilitated was that students were not as interested in expressing their perceptions on how their school was perceived by outsiders; instead, students just wanted a space to engage in critical and creative projects. I was thankful for Mr. Ramirez, who allowed me to use his classroom. He was known at Centennial for being a strong student ally, and he served as the MESA advisor, school yearbook club advisor, and girls’ soccer coach. During my time back at Centennial, I vividly remember when a Black girl walked me throughout the entire school, pointing out everything broken, the empty vending machines, and stated, “We fight because it is fun. It gives us something to look forward to.” A skater crew of both Black and Latino boys that stayed after school mentioned that they called themselves Prism. I asked, “Why Prism?” and one of the Latino boys responded, “Have you ever

looked into a prism? When you look into a prism, you see all the colors, and that is who we are. We are a prism.” The students at Centennial were brilliant. In efforts to give students a goal to work toward, I signed the students to showcase their art work at an art gallery organized by the district at Centennial. When we arrived, one of the administrators notified me that we were not scheduled in the program. I was devastated, but made the sudden choice to create a “pop-up” gallery right across from the district’s event, which we collectively decided to titled it, “Da Otha Gallery” (Figure 21).

A teacher of over twenty-years, Mr. Birdsong, sat with me one of those days and explained to me that six years prior, in 2002, Fox News had broadcast a special segment on the “Black and Mexican Conflict in Compton and Los Angeles.” The segment began with images of “gang” youth fighting lavishly as Mr. Birdsong interjects, “this is the worst I have ever seen it.”⁵ In this news segment, viewers saw what the news reporter described as a “gang war which is also a race war,” as the reporter followed Alex Alonso, a doctoral student at USC who was documenting the Mexican and Black gangs in Compton. Mr. Birdsong revealed in my interview with him that he gave the Fox News reporter a video he recorded of students fighting, but not for the purposes that it was used for by the media:

I videotaped the situation and gave it to a reporter that happened to be there, which was a mistake. They took it out of context, switched so many things around, made it bigger than what it really was, and it was on Channel 11 News

⁵ Fox News. Black and Mexican Conflict in Compton and Los Angeles. Original Air date: April 24, 2002 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SNBUe52zYc>

for, I don't know how long. Even today they may put it back on like if it happened yesterday. A year or so ago I saw the same video tape and it was like it happened yesterday. It did not happen yesterday. It happened almost 3 - 4 years ago... The media is not about trying to find a solution to the problem. There are so many young kids that have been killed and you do not hear on the news. If a kid got shot in Newport Beach that's the number one news. But if a kid gets shot in Compton you don't even hear about it.⁶

Mr. Birdsong recorded the incident and gave it to the reporter that visited the school because he wanted people to see youth violence in one of Compton's schools within the context that those tensions emerged from. He expressed that if people understood why schools in the ghettos of LA are vulnerable to the occurrence of violence, then maybe we could begin to identify the roots of the problems. When he stated, "this is the worst I have ever seen it," he clarified to me that he referred to the conditions of the school and larger community—not racial tensions among students. For Mr. Birdsong, Compton youth were disposable in the eyes of the state and no one cared to even know about it.

Because of these experiences, when I heard during that time that Ms. Salazar was pushed out of Jordan High School in Watts – only three miles away from Centennial – for being "too Afrocentric," I wanted to understand why teaching Black and Latinx histories was perceived as a problem. I followed the student-led campaign Students 4 Salazar, conducted interviews, and participated in spaces where the campaign was discussed. I soon learned that Ms. Salazar was pushed out of Jordan because she was viewed as the

⁶ Mr. Birdsong interview with author, May 2009.

impetus for students who organized under the Watts Student Union (WSU) and the South Central Youth Empowered Through Action (SC-YEA) to reform their school. District and school administrators could not grasp that students were capable of making clearly articulated demands and displaced the blame onto Ms. Salazar's curriculum.

In following what transpired at Jordan, I began to see how it was easy for anyone to blame the Black principal for firing a "Latina" teacher. It was easy for the media and for people outside of the Jordan community to reproduce the narrative of Black and Brown conflict. However, when I dug deeper, I learned that Ms. Salazar, an Afro-Indigenous Salvadorian teacher who was deeply inspired by the Black radical tradition, continued that legacy by pushing back against all those narratives. She was not a "savior" of Black and Brown youth in Watts for teaching English Language Arts through an intersectional, ethnic studies lens. In fact, as I later learned through my friendship with Ana Graciela Exiga, a student who was one of the lead student organizers in the campaign to re-instate Ms. Salazar, students demanded a culturally relevant education rooted in praxis. Ana, a Honduran-Mexican girl who grew up in one of the housing projects of Watts, didn't just want to learn about social justice and later be reprimanded by school officials for engaging in social justice work. For students such as Ana, the school needed to honor the agency of students, teachers, and the community it was situated in.

A year after the after-school program and the campaign to reinstate Ms. Salazar at Jordan, Mr. Ramirez at Centennial was notified that he was scheduled to transfer to a district middle school the following school year. The principal made a rash decision to

demote Mr. Ramirez in efforts to save the school \$36,000. When Mr. Ramirez began packing up his classroom, students and teachers took notice. One teacher in particular, Mr. Stuart, told Mr. Ramirez that he should leave campus immediately because he received word that students were very upset with the principal's decision. Mr. Stuart warned Mr. Ramirez that only by leaving campus would he not be blamed for organizing student dissent. Mr. Stuart's intuitive warning was correct. That same day, students gathered during lunch and in protest refused to go back to their classes (Figure 22). Students remained informed through their social media accounts. If Mr. Ramirez was transferred to another school, with him went all of the after-school programming and AP History courses scheduled for the following school year. Students' unwavering demand worked, and Mr. Ramirez remained at Centennial.



Figure 22. Centennial students refuse to go back to class.⁷

⁷ Author unknown, photograph was shared with author by Mr. Ramirez at Centennial.

That year, 2009, I took a course with Professor Tara Yosso. By then, I was a familiar face during her office hours, as I was always eager to learn more about what we were learning in class. In one of those visits, I remember asking her to tell me more about so-called “charter schools” that were briefly mentioned in class. I was fascinated with the concept of autonomous schools, and she told me that if I wanted to learn more, I should look into Academia Semillas de mi Pueblo (“Academia”), an Indigenous K-12 school in El Sereno, CA. For her class, we had to create a group project on a school, and our group chose Academia. The *mujeres* in my group were all part of El Congreso and MUJER (Mujeres Unidas por Justicia Educacion y Revolucion). Because we were all engaged in social justice work on and off campus, choosing this school for our project made sense. For this project, we drove out to El Sereno and interviewed the school founder and principal, Marcos Aguilar, who taught us about the school’s larger purpose in the community. We were shocked to learn that the school received bomb threats and wanted to further understand why the school was perceived as a threat. This was my first introduction to charter schools.

That summer, I completed a summer research fellowship program at Columbia University, where I had the opportunity to closely study New York’s school district, which is under mayoral control. After graduating from UCSB the following year, I returned to Teachers College, Columbia University as a graduate student to continue building on that summer project. I wanted to understand why communities in New York were against charter schools, given that my introduction to charter schools was through Academia, a social justice, Indigenous, and community-based school. I recall reading,

“Nothing about us, without us, is for us” on a flyer that publicized a protest against the Success Academy charter schools in Harlem. I was moved by this and soon learned that there was a clear distinction between corporate charter schools that aim to monopolize the public education of predominately working-class, Black and Latinx communities versus grassroots charter schools that derive their educational practices from needs and solutions collectively identified by the community.

Graduate School

In my first semester as a graduate student at Teachers College, I was honored to finally have a chance to take a class with a professor who I greatly admired for all of her critical work on charter schools in California. In one of those class sessions, a Black female student in our class who was a single mother missed a prior class session due to issues with childcare and decided to bring her child to avoid missing another class. My classmate was kicked out as soon as her infant began making her presence known. I could not believe it. There we were learning about the “War on Poverty” and our white female professor kicked out a Black mother for bringing her child to class. The disappointment in myself for not walking out in solidarity stayed with me. I realized that the elite status gained from attending a university was not as important as the relationships you build with the people around you. I began to question whether I should be at Columbia University and in New York.

The following month, news broke that parents in Compton invoked the parent trigger law. I couldn’t believe that my former elementary school was in the news

regarding a group of parent who wanted to convert McKinley to a charter school. This is when I decided to apply to UC Riverside's newly created Ethnic Studies doctoral program and entered as part of their third cohort. Unlike Columbia, in my new department I didn't have to prove objectivity as a criteria for my project's validity. My subjectivity and biases were a source of strength that provided me with the lenses and insight necessary to critically understand what was transpiring in Compton. As my mentor, Dylan Rodriguez reminded me, "Ethnic Studies is what you make it." After struggling with housing instability during my first year and finally feeling settled during my second year, I began to connect with friends from Compton and we started a women's circle.

The seven-week women's circle included *mujeres* throughout South Los Angeles. Staphany Bravo Garcia named the women's circle Chicas Charlando, and we met at Sacred Heart Church in Compton, where they provided us with a space and resources. The goal of this space was to build healthier relationships, which we believed were at the core of building stronger communities. We made it an exclusive space for women because we also believed women were at the center of movement building and creating change in our communities. That summer, we provided an activist tour of Compton to mostly immigrant Central American youth from a surrounding community and we organized the Compton Cookout event. At the cookout, we met many people in the city who were actively involved in politics. This event is where I met parent activist Yolanda Hernandez Lopez and recent Dominguez High School graduate Francisco Orozco, both

of whom were among the candidates running for a seat on the school board at the upcoming November election (Figure 23).



Figure 23. Compton Cookout in Compton, 2013.⁸

During this time, I was interested in meeting the parents involved with the parent trigger law; however, I found that this was more challenging than I anticipated. Before the end of the summer, Staphany and I drove all the way to Beverly Hills to catch the last screening of the new documentary, *We The Parents (2013)*, a film that captured the parent-led campaign to convert McKinley in Compton to a charter school. This was a special screening with a Q&A session with the director James Takata. I was visibly disturbed with the documentary's portrayal of the Compton school district as standing in

⁸ Photograph was taken by author at Compton Cookout in 2013.

the way of a parent-driven campaign. It certainly portrayed a Black school district standing in the way of a progressive, mainly Latinx, parent movement. I asked the director why he chose to leave out any history or context to help viewers understand why the school district might push back on reforms such as charter schools. Takata explained that what I described was a different project that was better fit for a book, not a documentary. I was genuinely shocked and thought to myself, isn't that what documentaries are supposed to do? On our drive back to Compton, Staphany and I expressed similar disappointment with the film and its ahistorical and de-contextualized portrayal of Compton.

Moving Back to Compton

After watching *We The Parents*, I was eager to learn what the parents portrayed in the film thought about it now that the dust of all the media frenzy had settled. After completing my course work at UCR, I moved to Compton. Unable to locate the parents depicted in the film, I instead began building relationships with more people in the community who were engaged in activist work. I was eager to learn from their experience and knowledge. This was how I became involved with the Compton Democratic Club, and in addition to Francisco and Yolanda who I had met a year prior, I met Monica Rincon, Lynn Boone, Elizabeth Aguilar, and many more community activists throughout the city. At the time, the Compton Democratic Club organized against the AR-15 rifle policy, a policy that was only exposed because Monica happened to be at the school

board meeting when the policy was voted on that summer. That summer Ezell Ford died after being shot by an LAPD officer and Black Lives Matter in LA rose up.

By 2015, my research into the formation of the parent trigger law was clear. I made critical connections across two school districts in Los Angeles County, which became the first part of my dissertation. The relation that extended beyond city limits and school district boundaries was that the communities subjected to the policies I examined were perceived as “failing.” I wanted my research to capture how neoliberal policy architects capitalized on academic failure and narratives of school violence, but also to capture how communities in resistance imagined alternative visions for their schools. The urgency of my research was solidified when I learned at the end of that summer of a report leaked by the *Los Angeles Times*, titled “The Great Public Schools Now Initiative.” The 44-page report was produced by The Broad Foundation and outlined a plan to place half of the LAUSD’s students into charter schools. Former Mayor of LA Antonio Villaraigosa expressed his support for the plan after an event he held at USC titled, “Creating a 21st Century Education System.”⁹

The community I was building with and the importance of having elected leaders on school boards that truly represent the interest of the public, compelled me to place a bid for the Compton school board. By then, I had witnessed the retaliation community activists such as Yolanda and Elizabeth experienced at the hands of the Compton School

⁹ Howard Blume, “Former L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa Endorses Charter Expansion Effort” *Los Angeles Times*, September 25, 2015. (<https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-villaraigosa-endorses-charter-effort-20150929-story.html>)

Police and district officials. Yolanda was restrained from entering school district property and Elizabeth underwent personal constraints that meant neither of them could run for the upcoming school board. After I was asked to consider running, I felt it was my *cargo*, a communal obligation to my community, to amplify and address the issues that had become status quo. Anyone who ever knew me closely, knew that I never aspired to become a politician. Yet, I ran for the school board because I realized the importance of having a seat at the table of decision making. Francisco and I ran together and named our campaign, “A Better Education. A Better Compton.”

We produced a manifesto outlining our vision, goals, and objectives for the district and created a platform that appealed to like-minded people who also wanted to see radical changes in the district. I met many brilliant teachers, parents, current and former students, and activists in the community, but their voices were not reflected in the policy decisions of the school board. The majority of people who I met throughout my campaign for school board were women, and I decided to bring the women together through a women’s *circulo*. It was not enough for us to hold space and talk about issues in our community. We wanted to create a political campaign with tangible goals. These sentiments were fueled after our eventual defeat on the school board race, and by the continual attacks on our communities. We began our *circulo* the same month that cell phone footage was released of the shooting the year prior of Noel Aguilar by an LA sheriff from Compton’s station.

We wanted to build our relationships through organizing and came to a consensus that a campaign that pushed for the implementation of ethnic studies courses across all of

the district's high schools was a tangible starting point. We were inspired by how school districts across California were leading the way, and we wanted Compton to join that movement. We knew that while we could not control everything in our city, beginning with the classrooms in our school district was a great starting point because at the core of ethnic studies is not only an analysis of power, it is also a confrontation and transformation of power. As one of our founding members, Elizabeth Perez stated, "By transforming our education, we are transforming our lives, and in effect transforming our city." This was the motto that guided the formation of Ethnic Studies Now, Compton. It was during this time that I became involved with the Association of Raza Educators in Los Angeles and played a role in the founding of Sowing the Seeds of Praxis Institute, better known as the Praxis Institute. This institute was created to aid the growing demand for K-12 ethnic studies courses. While I did not consider myself an expert, I soon realized that I could make significant contributions given my experience as a student, teacher, researcher, and activist in both ethnic studies and in Los Angeles County.

In 2016, Ethnic Studies Now in Compton worked tirelessly to garner the support necessary to pressure the school board to pass a resolution in favor of implementing ethnic studies as a high school graduation requirement. Our first attempt to garner support was when we reached out to Kendrick Lamar, who we knew believed in ethnic studies given the year prior he had visited Mr. Mooney's "Hip-Hop Lit" classroom at a magnet high school in New Jersey. While that attempt was unsuccessful, we received support at an event where Kendrick was given the symbolic key to the city from DIVAS of Compton and Centennial's Marching Band (Figure 24). By April, we presented to the

school board the importance of ethnic studies along with scholarly evidence that supported our claims. By the summer, my friend Arlene Mejorado, who was part of *Mujeres en Medio* (Women in Media), produced a short documentary of the campaign.¹⁰ Our campaign went as far as drafting the resolution that we envisioned the implementation process to initiate. While it may have seemed as if we had a mass group of people directly involved in organizing the campaign, it was only a few of us who met every week in my living room to share our visions for a better education (Figure 25).



Figure 24. Compton DIVAS support Ethnic Studies Now.¹¹

¹⁰ Mujeres en Medio. "Ethnic Studies Now, Compton: Language of Power" October 27, 2016. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OAK1wJHvjAw>)

¹¹ Photograph was taken of Compton DIVAS by author.

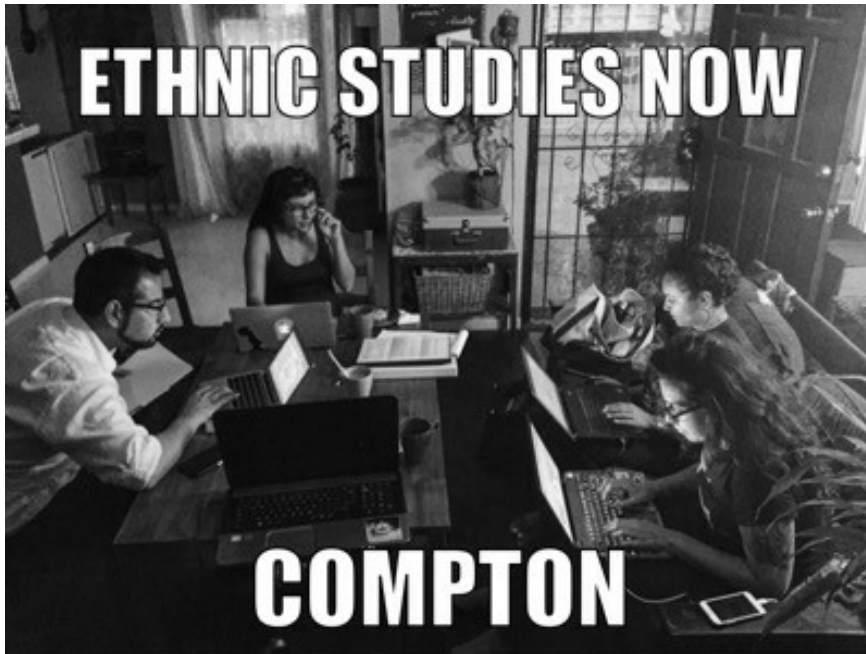


Figure 25. Ethnic Studies Now Compton Meme.¹²

La Revolución Comienza desde el Hogar

I became a mother at the start of 2017 and gave birth to my child in my homeland, which is where my parents moved to retire. The birth of my child made me realize that “giving back to my community” needed to begin with the newest addition to my community, my son. My time was extremely limited as I was teaching four classes across three universities and simultaneously serving as a teaching assistant with three sections at UC Riverside. As I thus taught Monday through Saturday across four universities to make ends meet, I realized I needed to finish what I began in the fall of 2011, my doctoral program. Several people who I had spent the past years researching emerged

¹² Photograph was taken by Max Molina.

during the 2016 and 2017 election cycles. Steve Barr, founder of Green Dot Public Schools, ran against Mayor of LA Eric Garcetti because he did not like Garcetti's hands-off approach to education. Former LA Mayor Villaraigosa also announced his bid to become California's Governor. Witnessing their campaigns unfold gave me the additional fuel to finally write my dissertation. At the last Compton school board meeting of 2017, the school board unanimously voted in favor of creating an ethnic studies advisory committee to make recommendations to the superintendent for implementation. It was a victory as three of our campaign members, including myself, were appointed to serve on that committee.

I started writing my dissertation in the summer of 2018 just as a new coffee shop opened in Compton, Patria Coffee.¹³ I remember my youngest sister warned me about the coffee shop after she attended one of Patria's fundraisers, where Patria fundraised to pay for costs associated with its opening. She was appalled to see many White families from a neighboring church, and among them, she spoke with an older white man who happily claimed that their "mission" was to make Compton "the next all-American city" like they did by moving their church to Paramount. In spite of these warnings, I wanted to know for myself and began the writing of my dissertation at Patria, where I had the opportunity to meet the owner, Geoffrey Martinez. Over the course of many coffees, I got to learn from his story.

¹³ As defined on the website, Patria: "Spanish for Motherland. Besides being a physical space its [sic] the feeling you get by anything that reminds you of home. It could be anything from a song that your neighbor played on a loop to the mural painted on the corner wall by the bus stop. Patria is as unique as you!"

Geoffrey made it clear that Patria was not some Trojan horse with an agenda to gentrify the city, but he acknowledges how coffee shops have become a part of that problem. “While coffee shops have become iconic of gentrification, they started as spaces where thinkers, creatives, and the people came together to strategize on how to undermine the systems in place,”¹⁴ Geoffrey explained how Patria strives to be the latter. As an Afro-Mestizo from Guatemala, he was reclaiming the coffee that grew in his homeland. While he began roasting coffee in his garage on the East side of Compton, he embarked on a journey to “go beyond coffee” by opening a coffee shop that was “anchored in the past, but where we could decide what it’s like moving forward.”¹⁵ Patria was created with the “for us, by us” principle as a space for the people of Compton who shared the same *sentimiento* and sense of longing for their *patria*, wherever that may be.

At first I was skeptical as any Compton-raised resident would be that a coffee shop had ties to City Church, a “multi-cultural” church that I recalled from when I was canvassing the streets of Compton during my school board bid. I remember being struck by the fact that there were White families living almost as if they were in their own little world right in the midst of a Compton neighborhood. I was also shocked to learn that in the past,¹⁶ Patria donated coffee to the Compton Initiative, a “just do good” initiative that began in 2006 as a planned 40-year initiative to revitalize the city by painting houses,

¹⁴ Geoffrey Martinez, email correspondence with author, June 10, 2019.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Martinez, interview with author, June 7, 2019.

¹⁶ Patria no longer supports Compton Initiative. Also, Patria has donated to non-profits like Youthbuild, TxT: Teens Exploring Tech, Cultural Alliance of Long Beach.

schools, and churches. While these initiatives are well-intentioned, the fact that this initiative began at a time when thousands of families were losing their homes is testament to the fact that these non-profits are more invested in the feel good that comes with missionary work than the actual work it takes to address structural displacement. These were the *sentimientos* I shared with Geoffrey, who shared similar conversations with others that stopped by the space, which enabled him to embark on his own praxis.

It was through listening to all voices and through critical reflection that Geoffrey realized that while Patria did not have an agenda, it did need to be an intentional space. This was when Geoffrey, with the help of people in the community, produced a sign that hangs inside of the coffee shop (Figure 26). For Patria, as a small business in Compton, it was important for Geoffrey to create a space that was “relational and not simply transactional,” while also realizing that making it a space “for us, by us” meant that he would place community needs and visions for the space over what was merely profitable. In the first year since the coffee shop opened, Patria has hosted panels, open mics, fundraisers, and workshops that demonstrate Compton’s ability to come together to address its own issues.

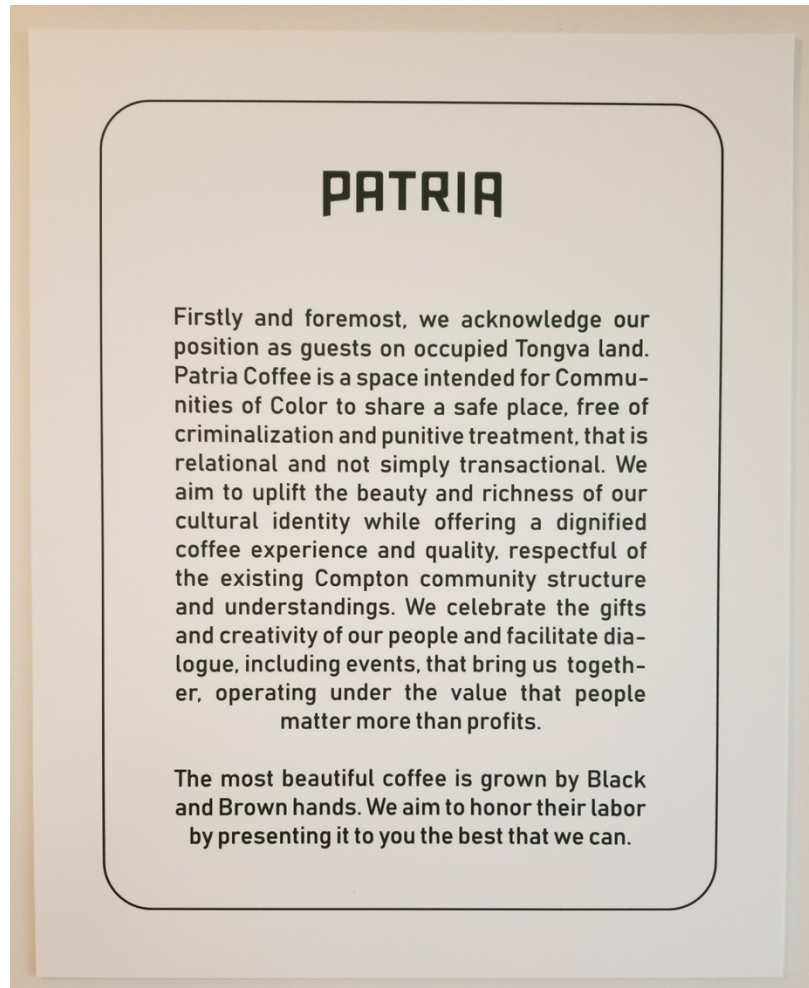


Figure 26. Sign at Patria Coffee.¹⁷

Additionally coinciding with the time that I began writing, Joaquin Avila, the civil rights attorney who authored the California Voting Rights Act of 2001, passed away. Avila's passing occurred at the same time that Pedro Pallan, Compton's first Latino mayoral candidate, who was now in his 80s, sold his property where the San Antonio Bakery continues to thrive off Rosecrans Avenue. He was finally ready to retire from politics in Compton, but not without one last fight. In commemoration of Avila's work,

¹⁷ Photograph was taken by author, June 2019.

Pallan, with the assistance of Avila's colleagues, began the process that eventually led to a change in the school district's election system from at-large to by-district voting. In efforts to make the school district democratic and representative of the people within the school district boundaries, Francisco Orozco, Monica Rincon, and myself became plaintiffs in a lawsuit against the school district.¹⁸ Our efforts to transform our city by starting with its schools has truly been an intergenerational struggle.

Authentic Power

Writing the closing to my dissertation made me reflect deeply on the meaning of home and what it meant as an activist-researcher to "come back home" with a much larger tool box than when I escaped the city at the age of 18. I still contemplate what it means to belong to Compton and to my *patria*, my ancestral homeland. Writing forced me to reflect deeply on how my longing to belong "home" was rooted in structural trauma developed through the ongoing exclusion I experienced as the first generation in my family to be born in the US, attend American public schools, speak English, grow up in a rapidly changing Black neighborhood, and attend public/private American universities. For a long time, I longed to belong to the places I called home, but this has now changed.

The production of this labor of love was certainly a full circle moment for me. I realized that to come full circle was not about coming back home to Compton or even to

¹⁸ Arevalo, et al vs. Compton Unified School District, 2017 (Case Number: 048928)

Michoacán. It was about my courage to stand alone and to embark on the path least taken. This journey provided the realization that I am already whole, without the need to belong anywhere outside of myself, and that I needed to allow my authentic power to lead the way. Coming full circle was always about praxis, and I thank all of my teachers in and out of school whose legacies continue to shape my work.

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