Truancy as Resistance: Cutting Class and the Crisis of U.S. Schooling

by

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What I’m here to talk about is how our whole approach since day one has been like this: Kids are jumping out the windows of burning buildings, falling to their deaths. And we think the problem is that they’re jumping. This is what we’ve done: We’ve tried to find ways to get them to stop jumping. Convince them that burning alive is better than leaving when the shit gets too hot for them to take. We’ve boarded up windows and made better nets to catch them, found more convincing ways to tell them not to jump. They’re making the decision that it’s better to be dead and gone than to be alive in what we have here, this life, the one we made for them, the one they’ve inherited.

-Tommy Orange, There, There
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Author’s Note

Young people are often the object of studies on education, deviancy, and youth culture, but they are rarely allowed to speak for themselves. Unfortunately, due to institutional barriers and the rightfully strict protection of juvenile records, I was unable to speak to any current truant youth for this project. Instead, to construct this work, I have relied on my own experiences and observations during the fourteen years I spent as a DC Public School student, the anecdotes of adults who work closely with truant youth, and, when possible, youth voices and perspectives mined from ethnographic sources and public opinion surveys. I therefore recognize that this work is limited, and hope it serves as a call for further studies on the experiences, perspectives, and opinions of truant youth, underneath whose disobedience lies an urgent critique that deserves to be heard.
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Introduction: Why Skip School?

In 2018, Ballou Senior High School, a public school in one of Washington, DC’s poorest neighborhoods, reported that for the first time every single graduating senior had applied to and been accepted into college. This was an extraordinary achievement that garnered national media attention. Yet shortly after this announcement local journalists revealed that more than half of Ballou’s historic graduating class had missed more than three months of school their senior year, and twenty percent of the class had missed more days than they had attended, in clear violation of DC Public Schools’ (DCPS) graduation requirements. Only nine percent of Ballou students had passed the citywide standardized English test, and none had passed the math.\(^1\) Subsequent investigations found that citywide more than one in ten students who graduated from DCPS in 2017 missed more than half the school year.\(^2\) The scandal sent shockwaves through the city, generated responses from educators across the country, prompted an FBI investigation, and contributed to the eventual resignation of DCPS’s Chancellor.\(^3\)

From 2011 to 2015 I attended Woodrow Wilson High School, a DC public school a few miles away from Ballou. Back then, I skipped a lot of class. I convinced security officers that I had a free period when I did not. I left campus for lunch and did not come back. I took naps in the library during class periods. My senior year I

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missed enough days to be labeled truant. When I was threatened with a court date, my mom convinced the school to excuse my absences. So, understandably, the scandal piqued my interest. I spent hours poring over the coverage and talking to my former classmates. As I read, I became increasingly dismayed. Every new article seemed to miss the crux of the scandal. *NPR*, the *Washington Post*, and others told a story about corruption and school accountability. They reported that teachers felt pressure to pass students who were failing their classes, failing to even show up, and that DCPS was more focused on graduating students than ensuring that they had developed the necessary skills to succeed once they graduated. These reporters were focusing on the wrong issue. The question was not, how could the system let these students graduate? But, why were so many students missing so much school in the first place? I knew the answer to this question that no one was asking. Students were skipping in resistance to the daily injustices, indignities, and insufficiencies that they experienced in their schools. This, at least, is what I had done.

I chose to cut class because I found my time in school to be mostly meaningless and sometimes soul-crushing. Although wealthier and less racially segregated than Ballou, my high school was eighty percent students of color, with more than forty percent students qualifying for free and reduced lunch. Classes were overcrowded, and the school often ran out of basic materials like textbooks, paper, pens, and pencils. Further, it was apparent that my teachers did not respect me enough to provide challenging assignments and well-rounded lesson-plans. My freshman year biology teacher spoke to me in a baby voice the entire year because she found me “annoying.” The young woman who taught our required course on DC history, one of
the few classes I had been excited about, had moved to the area two weeks before the start of the school year. She had never lived in the city. Meanwhile, several of my best teachers were fired because their students’ standardized test scores were too low. These classroom experiences, and countless others, made it difficult to take my schooling seriously, especially since those responsible for it never seemed to.

Most of the coverage on the Ballou High School graduation scandal failed to include the perspectives of students. When reporters did talk to students, their explanations of why they skipped school matched my own. One student told reporters “I came to school when I wanted to… I didn't have to be there; I didn't want to be there.” Another student attributed his absences to the fact that during the 2016-2017 school year more than a quarter of Ballou’s teaching staff resigned, leaving substitute teachers to pick up the slack; he told reporters, “What am I going to keep showing up to this for a substitute for? He ain't gonna teach nothing.” A third student was paying rent and could not justify daily school attendance financially.⁴

These examples are illustrative, yet they fail to capture the daily drudgery of high school, which was often an equally motivating factor in my own decision to cut class. To start, there was the seemingly constant standardized testing and the endless time devoted to test prep, which was genuinely mind-numbing, devoid of any critical thinking or creativity. For two weeks every spring, classes would cease entirely, and we would fill in bubbles for five hours a day. I found the long-lists of school rules—no chewing gum, no wearing hats, no entering the building through side-doors, no touching, no idling in the hallways, no using the bathrooms during the first or last

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⁴ Quoted in McGee, “What Really Happened at the School Where Every Graduate Got into College.”
fifteen minutes of class—to be exhausting and with no apparent purpose. In the end, with classes often jam packed with thirty-five or more students, it did not seem like anyone noticed whether or not I was there.

If I, who went to one of the best public high schools in DC, skipped as a response to systemic problems I experienced in school, it seemed obvious to me that students at Ballou, a school consistently rated one of the city’s worst, would have all the more reason not to attend. Thus, unlike other commentators on Ballou’s graduation scandal, I could understand both why students were skipping so much school and why teachers and administrators were allowing them to graduate anyway. School staff had two options. They could hold students back from graduating and attempt to keep them in an understaffed school where, as one teacher reported, they were barely learning how to read or write.5 Or they could acknowledge that the school was not meeting the needs of these students, allow them to graduate, and hope that they would be better off with than without a diploma. It was not unreasonable that they chose the latter.

Disappointed by the shallow take on the scandal that the media provided, I began to conduct my own research on truancy. I read all of the policy literature I could find and spoke to everyone involved in truancy enforcement who would talk to me—police, probation officers, prosecutors, policymakers, judges, advocates, and school attendance officers—trying to get a sense of how “experts” understand truancy, and how their perspective might differ from my own. Unfortunately, I found that the mainstream discourse on truancy had many of the same pitfalls that had

5 McGee, “What Really Happened at the School Where Every Graduate Got into College.”
initially frustrated me in the coverage of DC’s graduation scandal. Nowhere in any discussion of truancy could I find a single suggestion of what was so obvious to me—that skipping school was a justified response to systemic problems within public education, a form of resistance to the injustice in (and of) our schools. Instead, I found a set of problematic assumptions about school attendance and analyses of skipping that did not match my own experience or that of the students at Ballou.

One conversation I had, with Officer B.B. a truancy officer in DC’s first district, and her supervisor, Commander Kane, provides a telling example of the narratives about truancy I frequently encountered. First, Kane explained to me that enforcing truancy is essential to the police mission in DC because it prevents both juvenile delinquency and the victimization of young people that can occur when youth are left unsupervised. Thus, according to Kane, truancy prevention fits into two crucial police missions: crime prevention and protection. Yet neither of these were the primary reasons she cared so much about her officers rounding up truant students. Instead, it was her understanding of the importance of school. She told me, “We’re going to pick them up as many times as we have to. It has to be done. They have to make it.”

Kane’s comments illuminate an unquestioning belief in the idea that ensuring young people are in school is absolutely necessary and inherently good, which dominates understandings of truancy both in DC and nationally. This is what Kane meant when she said, “It has to be done.” As a Black woman, a mother, and a resident of the first district herself, Kane saw the chronically absent young people in her district as her own kids, nieces, nephews, and neighborhoods. She believed that if

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6 Morgan Kane and B.B, interview by author, August 28, 2018.
they were not in school they would “fail,” ending up in the criminal justice system that she herself, as a twenty-plus-year member of the Metropolitan Police Force, knew the devastating consequences of first-hand.

Secondly, B.B told me that when she catches students skipping she often drives them to Chick-fil-A and buys them breakfast on her way to drop them off at school. Her generosity in making sure that students were not showing up to school hungry, speaks to a second trend within the discourse around truancy—a consensus that when young people do not go to school it is because of specific individual barriers preventing them from doing so. It might be hunger, the lack of a clean uniform, the responsibility of caring for a younger sibling, or unmet mental health needs. Many acknowledge these barriers to be symptomatic of widespread, racialized poverty, yet the idea is that they can be overcome by genuine but one-off acts of kindness and better service provision to individual students and their families.

This idea—that keeping young people in school would ensure that they “make it,” and keep them out of the criminal justice system—contradicted what I had observed in high school, and the idea of barriers denied other truant youths the agency that I myself had acted on when I chose to skip class. B.B. and Kane’s assumptions about truancy also hint at the paradox at the heart of compulsory education, which is that, to ensure that young people succeed, we force them to attend school regardless of the reality within their schools. In other words, compulsory education protects the legitimacy of schooling by allowing schools to continue to exist, without having to actually meet the needs or desires of students. Regardless of how racist, underfunded, overcrowded, and meaningless schools may be, students are
still required to attend—a mandate enforced against both young people and their parents by force of law.\textsuperscript{7}

Stemming from my frustration with these dominant narratives of truancy, this thesis aims to provide an entirely different framework for thinking about skipping school. Instead of assuming that students must be in school and viewing absences as an indication individual failure, this work takes seriously the decisions that students make when they choose not to show up. I will argue that our collective investment in the idea of school as the great equalizer impedes our ability to understand skipping school as a reasonable choice. I demonstrate that by considering the historical trauma of schooling for youth of color, the increasingly carceral nature of schools, and the role our education system plays in reproducing racial and economic inequality, we can begin to understand truancy as not only a reasonable choice, but also as a latent critique of our educational institutions. Arguing that truancy should be understood as a form of resistance is not the same as saying students are better off when they miss school. There are, without a doubt, long-term economic and social consequences associated with truancy. At the same time, considering truancy within a framework of resistance allows us to see the legitimacy behind the choice to skip, given the inequality, social control, and daily suffering that so many young people experience within their schools. By acknowledging the critique that truant youth are making we

\textsuperscript{7} Truancy is treated as status offense, a category of noncriminal acts which are considered illegal only because of the offender’s status as a minor. Other status offenses include running away from home, curfew violation, and underage drinking. Different jurisdictions handle truancy differently, but in DC if a student is fourteen or older, their schools are legally required to refer them to Family Court for prosecution once they accumulate fifteen unexcused absences. See also, Skipping School Can Get Kids Locked Up?” Vera Institute of Justice, August 16, 2017, https://www.vera.org/research/skipping-school-can-get-kids-locked-up.
can begin to imagine a future educational system in which truancy is not only
decriminalized, but in which students have no desire to skip in the first place.

The understandings of truancy that B.B. and Kane developed through their
daily experience in enforcement is upheld by much of the literature on truancy. My
research in DC revealed truancy to be a priority not just for the police, but also for
various agencies and across multiple levels of the city government. This is true
nationally as well. The U.S. Department of Education has labelled truancy a “hidden
educational crisis.” In 2010, California’s Attorney General and current Senator and
Democratic presidential hopeful, Kamala Harris, also referred to truancy a “crisis.”
She boasted in a speech about her decision to ramp-up prosecutions of the parents of
truant youth. Harris spent years pushing first for San Francisco and later the state of
California to get “tougher” on truancy, which she argued would not only ensure that
all youth were getting an education but would reduce crime as well.

This language of crisis and the desire for bolder interventions to guarantee
attendance stems both from the scale of truancy and mainstream understandings of
the individual and societal value that education holds. During the 2015-2016 school
year, more than one in five high school students missed more than fifteen days of
school, and sixteen percent of the total U.S. student population were chronically
absent. That is a total of more than seven million truant youth annually. Attendance
rates, like many other measures of educational attainment, are racially stratified.

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Nationally, 19 percent of white high school students are chronically absent compared to 24 percent of Hispanic students, 26.4 percent of Black students, and 30.8 percent of American Indian students.\(^\text{11}\) In DC, truancy rates are higher than the national average, and the racial disparity is also more pronounced.\(^\text{12}\)

Beyond the individual value of keeping young people in school that Kane identified, for many, truancy prevention has become a tangible intervention in larger systemic issues in DC and elsewhere. Marcelo Suárez-Orozco explains this best when he writes “From poverty to inequality, from crime to incarceration, from global competition to sustainability, from health to well-being, in la pensée Américaine, education is the answer regardless of the question.”\(^\text{13}\) And, of course, education can only be “the answer” if young people are actually showing up to school. This line of thinking is evident both in Harris’ “war on truancy” and in DC’s response to the 2010 “South Capitol Street Massacre.” After four teenagers were killed in a drive-by shooting following a dispute related to a missing bracelet, the DC city council passed the South Capitol Street Memorial Act of 2012, which in part, strengthened the city’s truancy regulations.\(^\text{14}\) The connection the council drew between this act of violence enacted by and against young people, and a supposed need for enhancing truancy laws, is strange considering that the shooting did not take place during school hours, and out of the fifteen young people involved, only one was school-aged. However, it stems from the belief that school not only incapacitates youth but provides the moral

\(^{11}\) U.S. Department of Education, “Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation’s Schools.”
education and the economic skills that set young people on the path away from criminality and towards productive citizenship.\textsuperscript{15}

As I have already begun to suggest, the problem with this particular way of thinking about truancy prevention is that it is linked to an idea of school and not the lived reality of schools. Mainstream discourse suggests that students should be made to stay in school in order to prevent incarceration down the road, yet at my high school there were police who roamed the halls, ready to arrest misbehaving students. Truancy literature often cites attendance as the key to economic equality, yet there was very little evidence for my classmates that a high school diploma from a DC public school was sufficient for finding middle-class employment.\textsuperscript{16}

Further, accepting the universal good of schooling as a given, without actually looking at what occurs at the level of schools, can lead to a breakdown in the logic used to justify compulsory education. The headline for a 2015 report by the Marshall Project on the criminalization of truancy reads: “Inexcusable Absences: Skipping school is a problem. But why is it a crime?” The article claims that, “Absence from school is an undeniable problem. We know it is correlated with lower grades, with dropping out of high school, and with trouble with the law.”\textsuperscript{17} Thus, because school is

\textsuperscript{15} The idea of schooling as crime prevention dates back to assertions made by Chicago school sociologists in the 1920s and 30s that “disorder” in poor urban areas caused delinquency. They posited that institutions which could assimilate and instill positive values in working class and immigrant youth like schools, sports leagues, and mentorship programs could counteract this “disorder.” These theories have been criticized by contemporary criminologists as racist and xenophobic and ignoring the effects of structural inequality. See, Clifford R. Shaw and Henry D. McKay, “Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas (1942),” in Criminological Theory: Past to Present, ed. Francis T. Cullen, Robert Agnew, and Pamela Wilcox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 107-113.

\textsuperscript{16} Laura Jimenez and Scott Sargrad, “Are High School Diplomas Really a Ticket to College and Work?” Center for American Progress, April 2, 2018.

\textsuperscript{17} Dana Goldstein, “Inexcusable Absences Skipping School is a Problem. But Why is it a Crime?” The Marshall Project, March 6, 2016.
always already taken as necessary and inherently good, staying in school and doing
good in school become the primary justifications for going to school. A Johns Hopkins
study states quite plainly that “being in school leads to succeeding in school.”18 By
interrogating the roots of the rhetorical relationship between education and equality,
as well as the contradictions between this discourse and the reality of schools, this
thesis refuses to assume that our educational ideals match the daily practice of
schooling, and points out the many ways in which this is, in fact, not the case.

The second major departure that this thesis takes from mainstream truancy
discourse is in the identification of truancy’s root causes. While I believed my own
skipping to be the result of a decision-making process in which I weighed the
supposed benefits of being in school against the disrespect and drudgery I actually
experienced in school, B.B. thought that young people were not going to school
because they were hungry. I heard other stories: prosecutors told me about students
who did not have clean clothes for school, judges described students who were not in
school because they could not get the Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) they
needed, and probation officers explained that young people skipped because they had
been victimized in school.19 Reporting has also identified family instability, bullying,
lack of transportation, and the absence of safe passages to school as factors causing
truancy.20 Interestingly, laundry machines have become a widely touted solution to

18 Robert Balfanz and Vaughan Byrnes, The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism
in the Nation’s Public Schools (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of
Schools, 2012), 3.
19 Dave Rosenthal, interview by author, August 17, 2018; Yvonne Williams, interview by author;
August 27, 2018; Steven Dean, interview by author, August 22, 2018.
20 Farah Z. Ahmad and Tiffany Miller, The High Cost of Truancy (Washington, DC: Center for
American Progress, 2012); Balfanz and Byrnes, The Importance of Being in School; Development
Services Group, Inc., “Truancy Prevention: Literature review,” Office of Juvenile Justice and
Delinquency Prevention, 2010.
truancy, the idea being that instead of students skipping because they are embarrassed by dirty clothes, they can just do their laundry at school.\textsuperscript{21} The obstacles identified by B.B. and others are certainly legitimate impediments for many students, particularly low-income students of color, and they should be dismantled. However, I am skeptical of analyses that focus solely on those obstacles, as doing so denies that the unjust structures of schooling may also be at the root of truancy.

Even though B.B. identified hunger specifically and poverty more broadly as the cause of truancy, her job as a police officer points to the less sympathetic understanding of truancy—that truancy is a result of deviance and is ultimately a stepping stone on the path to more serious criminality. This idea can be linked to the racist assumption that youth and communities of color do not properly value school and would rather be out on the streets engaging in criminal activity.\textsuperscript{22} Several reports use racially coded language, citing “lack of ambition,” “lack of family support,” or “cultural barriers” among the root causes of truancy.\textsuperscript{23} The problem with both the “barriers” and “deviancy” explanations of truancy is that they deny young people’s agency and therefore fail to see the latent critique of schools that lie within students’ decisions to skip. Neither of these understandings acknowledges the possibility of a larger disengagement with school—that students might simply not believe that being in school is worth their while. It is not that they do not value school, but that their schools do not meet their needs or expectations.

\textsuperscript{23} Ahmad and Miller, \textit{The High Cost of Truancy}, 17; Alex Peerman, Rebecca Brink, and Eduardo Ferrer, \textit{How DC’s Truancy Policy Fails Students and Steps to Turn it Around} (Washington, DC: DCLY and DC’s Children’s Law Center, March 2015), 7.
A full understanding of truancy requires that we zoom out from individual decisions and circumstances to a consideration of schools as institutions embedded in fraught histories. Thus, the Chapter One will analyze deeply rooted discourses around schooling and equality that facilitate the framing of poor attendance as a “crisis” and justify the criminalization of truancy for young people’s “own good.” It will consider how this vision of equality manifests itself in policy conversations, educational philosophy, and historical grassroots movements to improve the access to and quality of schools. While emphasizing the centrality of this vision of schooling in public consciousness, the chapter will also build on a Marxist critique of schooling to demonstrate how schools are used to reproduce inequality, suggesting that this contradiction may be at the heart of young people’s disengagement from school.

Chapter Two utilizes a Foucauldian analysis of schools as a key site of disciplinary power to interrogate the specific mechanisms in schools used to maximize social control and perpetuate intersecting forms of colonial, racial, and gendered oppression. The chapter draws on the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American Indian boarding schools to illustrate how schools have been part of carceral projects used to maintain racial and economic domination. These boarding schools constituted a specific program of violent assimilation for native communities but were also a site for educators and policy makers to test out apparatuses of control that could be used on other populations deemed by the state to be politically threatening.

Finally, Chapter Three considers whether or not truancy can be understood as a form of resistance to our dominant understandings of schools, or more specifically,
the ways in which the promise of schooling does not match the lived experiences of many young people, especially the most marginalized. To answer this question this chapter draws on theories of resistance developed by James C. Scott and Robin D.G. Kelley, among others. Posing this question makes way for the possibility of understanding young people, especially young people living under conditions of racialized poverty and marginality, not merely as victims of their circumstances, but as agents, making deliberate choices and responding to the injustices that structure their lives.

Guiding this work is an understanding that most of us believe in, or at least hope for, an educational system that can radically transform the lives of young people, inspire critical thinking and creativity, build the next generation of thoughtful, passionate citizens, and bring about racial and economic equality. I have no doubt that Officers B.B. and Kane, the reporters outraged by the Ballou graduation scandal, and the many others enforcing and researching truancy have a genuine commitment to seeing the young people in their communities succeed. However, their work centers around a fundamentally flawed understanding of truancy. By incorrectly locating the problem in students and their material surroundings, rather than in major contradictions within our vision of schools, this type of analysis inherently produces the wrong solutions, which simultaneously find young people at fault and deny them agency. A recent NPR headline proposed the following solution: “Want to Make a School Better? Get Kids to Show Up.”24 This thesis proposes the opposite: want kids to show up? Make schools better.

Chapter One: “The Best Lie”: Schooling as the Great Equalizer

In a 2009 speech to high schoolers in Arlington Virginia, President Barack Obama told students,

At the end of the day, the circumstances of your life—what you look like, where you come from, how much money you have, what you've got going on at home—none of that is an excuse for neglecting your homework or having a bad attitude in school. That's no excuse for talking back to your teacher, or cutting class, or dropping out of school.1

Obama’s message was one about truancy and personal responsibility. It was deeply tied to his belief in the equalizing potential of schooling. In the speech, he told the story of an immigrant student who moved to the U.S. not speaking any English, but who worked hard in school and got a scholarship to an Ivy League university. He also told the story of a kid in Chicago’s foster system who got good grades, started a youth outreach program, and was on her way to college. These are American Dream stories and school has long been at the heart of the American Dream.

The quintessentially American promise of equal opportunity is inextricably linked to the presumption that all Americans have equal access to quality schools. Jennifer Hochschild writes that public education is “the place where Americans seek to transform the ideology of the American dream into practice.”2 Immigrants have crossed borders, young Black students have been pelted with rocks, and poor and working-class families have accumulated thousands of dollars of debt just for a chance to take part in this equalizing vision of schooling. Belief in school’s

2 Jennifer Hochschild, “Public School and the American Dream, Dissent (Fall 2001): 35.
emancipating potential is so ubiquitous as to be almost unquestioned in contemporary society. While understandings of the problems in our education system and their solutions vary, professed desire for good public schools transcends political, class, and racial identifications in a way that almost no other issue does. Both today and historically, the demand for better education has been trumpeted both by Democrats and Republicans, grass-roots activists and major capitalists, canonical liberal thinkers and radical Black intellectuals. Obama, for example, in his speech at the 2012 Democratic National Convention affirmed that, “Education was the gateway to opportunity for me. It was the gateway for Michelle. It was the gateway for most of you. And now more than ever, it is the gateway to a middle-class life.” At the Republican National Convention that same year, Governor Mitt Romney declared he was running for president to help create “An America where every parent knows that their child will get an education that leads them to a good job and a bright future.” While Obama and Romney disagreed on affirmative action and school choice, their overall message was the same: a quality education was the key to a better, more equitable future for all Americans.

Education reform is also one of the major tenants forwarded by the Movement for Black Lives. On the coalition’s website they write, “We demand investments in the education, health and safety of Black people, instead of investments in the criminalizing, caging, and harming of Black people.” Specifically, they call for

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divestment from prisons and police and investment in schools. They argue that access to quality educational programs can provide a “meaningful pathway to higher education and social mobility.”

Using surprisingly similar language, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation promotes education as one of their key issue areas. The Foundation’s website notes that the goal of its K-12 U.S. education project is to “Significantly increase the number of black, Latino, and low-income students who earn a diploma, enroll in a postsecondary institution, and are on track in their first year to obtain a credential with labor-market value.” Much like the Movement for Black Lives, the Gates Foundation suggests that a good education is “a proven path to social mobility and economic prosperity.” The Movement for Black Lives is a radical coalition devoted to the collective liberation of Black communities, and the Gates Foundation is a mainstream philanthropic organization, yet like Obama and Romney, both platforms present the importance of school reform by drawing on this broader discursive connection between schooling and equality.

Despite the often-touted claim that minority youth and their families place less value on education, an assertion that is used to explain racialized differences in school achievement, graduation rates, and attendance, studies have shown that Black and minority youth place a high value on education, sometimes higher than their

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white peers.\textsuperscript{9} Nearly seventy percent of African American youth report that education is their top priority.\textsuperscript{10} Further, Black and Hispanic parents are significantly more likely than white parents to believe it is important for their children to obtain a college degree.\textsuperscript{11} When we consider this fact that young people, especially youth of color, are immersed in and accept the connection between education and equality, the decision to skip school seems all the more extreme. The weight of this decision, given our collective understanding of the value and possibility of school, should be a call to consider what happens in schools that make students willing to give up on the equalizing promise of school.

While these first pages have demonstrated how widely shared the belief in schools as the great equalizer is, the following pages will consider the deep historical roots of this belief, expanding briefly on how various thinkers, reformers, politicians, and activists have rearticulated a common vision of equalizing education across a wide spectrum of both historical and ideological positions. The chapter will then conclude by addressing how schools actually function to reproduce inequality, reflecting on the position students are left in when the ubiquitous discourse on education and equality does not match their lived experience in schools, and how this might help us understand young peoples’ decisions to skip school. First, however, it is necessary to clarify the distinction between education and schooling, as the terms are

\textsuperscript{10} Meredith B.L. Anderson, \textit{A Seat at the Table: African American Youth’s Perceptions of K-12 Education} (Washington, DC: UNCF, 2018).
\textsuperscript{11} Renee Stepler, “Hispanic, Black Parents See College Degree as Key for Children’s Success,” \textit{Pew Research Center}, February 24, 2016.
used semi-interchangeably in this chapter and throughout this thesis. Education refers to the experience of learning which can happen inside or outside of schools, while schooling denotes institutionalized instruction that occurs specifically within state-sponsored schools. When Obama, Romney, or the other thinkers discussed in this chapter discuss the promise of education, they see schools as the specific mechanism through which this promise is achieved. Thus, they are really referring to the promise of schooling. In other contexts, thinkers and activists have theorized and enacted liberating forms of education that occur outside of state sponsored institutions, but this chapter is specifically concerned with the discourse around and function of schools.

Education and Equality in Historical Context

This equalizing vision of schooling has deep historical roots. Horace Mann, who led the nineteenth-century Common School Movement in New England, emphasized moral and civic education in his writing, but also posited his vision of common schools in economic terms. He wrote, “education, then beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men […] It does better than to disarm the poor of their hostility toward the rich; it prevents them from being poor.” Notably, Mann’s common schools took off around the same time as the rise of the factory system in the Northern and Midwestern U.S., making the logic of the Common School Movement not so different from the framework provided by Obama more than 150 years later. Just as Obama and others have suggested that

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coding classes, for example, will prepare young people for jobs in the technology economy, Mann suggested that common schools would prepare young people for jobs in the growing factory economy, and thus give way to economic equality.

Nearly a century after the Common School Movement, Progressive Era school reformers also placed equality at the center of their mission. John Dewey, a key figure in modern educational philosophy and the intellectual core of the Progressive Era educational reforms—which made a high school education the norm for the first time in U.S. history—wrote, “School facilities must be secured of such amplitude and efficiency as well in fact and not simply in name discount the effects of economic inequalities, and secure all the wards of the nation equality of equipment for their future careers.” 14 Yet, Dewey did not primarily discuss economic equality, he instead focused much of his thinking on the democratic potential of education. He wrote, “the inequalities in the distribution of powers, achievements, and goods that occur in society should be strictly proportionate to the natural inequalities.” 15 Thus, for Dewey, schooling as the great equalizer did not consist merely of reducing class inequality, but also equalizing the “distribution of powers.” Dewey’s vision of a just society was one in which the apportionment of power and resources reflected only “natural” or inborn inequalities and not socially imposed ones, for example on the basis of class, race, or gender. According to Dewey, the way to achieve this just society was through schooling. 16

16 Although progressive for its time, there was also an underlying assimilationist logic to Dewey’s logic. He argues that mass immigration created the need for schools that could provide a homogenizing environment for youth. He also emphasized that schooling is part of the “natural” development from
While education and equality were central to Mann and Dewey, whose works fit squarely into the canon of white male liberal thought, the relationship between schooling and equality is also at the center of one of the most famous debates in African American intellectual history. In the postbellum era, Booker T. Washington advocated for self-help and the improving of African Americans marketability through industrial education instead of directly challenging Jim Crow segregation and political disenfranchisement. He wrote, “I plead for industrial education and development for the Negro not because I want to cramp him, but because I want to free him. I want to see him enter the all-powerful business and commercial world.”

For Washington, economic freedom would, over time, allow African Americans to prove their self-sufficiency and preparedness for full inclusion in democratic citizenship. Washington was a nineteenth-century subscriber to the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” ideology of the American Dream. He saw industrial schooling as the key to African American upward mobility and eventually economic equality.

W.E.B. Du Bois, on the other hand, made similar arguments to Dewey about the democratic role and politically equalizing potential of schools. Unlike Washington, Du Bois did not believe that Black people needed to accept second-class citizenship and saw schooling as the path towards liberation and inclusion in the democratic community. In *Souls of Black Folk*, he describes the development of a liberating vision of schooling in the years following Emancipation:

“savage” to “civilized” societies. This is particularly disturbing, although not uncommon, choice of language given the forced removal of Indigenous youth to “civilizing” boarding schools that was ongoing during the early part of Dewey’s career.

A new vision began gradually to replace the dream of political power, — a powerful moment, the rise of another ideal to guide the unguided, another pillar of fire by night after a clouded day. It was the ideal of “book-learning”; the curiosity, born of compulsory ignorance, to know and test the power of the cabalistic letters of the white man, the longing to know.”  

Du Bois argued that education would ultimately liberate Black people by allowing them to lift the “veil” which prevented them from seeing themselves outside the roles prescribed to them by dominant white America. He wrote that education “changed the child of emancipation to the youth with dawning self-consciousness, self-realization, self-respect.” Du Bois saw an equalizing education as the means of disrupting white hegemony. He argued that the rise of schools in the South during the reign of the Freedman’s Bureau was met by intense opposition and even violence precisely because it was perceived to pose a threat to white dominance. He writes that the opposition “was not wholly wrong; for education among all kinds of men [sic] always has had, and always will have, an element of danger and revolution, of dissatisfaction and discontent.” Although Washington and Du Bois were, in many ways, ideologically opposed, they both rearticulated a belief in the relationship between schooling and some form of equality.

The claim of the equalizing promise of schools affirmed by Mann, Dewey, Washington, and Du Bois has been rearticulated by many in the contemporary context. This chapter has already pointed to the campaign promises of prominent politicians like Obama and Romney and the agendas of the Movement for Black Lives and the Gates Foundation as sites in which this legacy of discourse around

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20 Du Bois, 32.
school and equality lives on. It also endures within the discussion around truancy. The U.S. Department of Education’s webpage on chronic absenteeism explains that “Education can only fulfill its promise as the great equalizer—a force that can overcome differences in privilege and background—when we work to ensure that students are in school every day.”21 As is true in the context of education reform generally, conversations about the problem of truancy are typically framed in economic terms. The first line of a 2015 report by the Center for American Progress on truancy reads, “Today’s students will be tomorrow’s workers.”22 The report goes on to claim that students who miss school may “face lifelong economic consequences,” adding that the future prosperity of the American economy as a whole is also put at risk when students opt out of school.23

Most of the people I interviewed involved in truancy enforcement in DC also justified their belief that young people absolutely must be in school in relation to economic justice. In my interview with Officer B.B., I asked her what she said to the young people who skipped because they did not see the point in school. She told me that she would ask these kids what kind of cars the wanted. When they settled on a car, she would tell them, “you need math to count your money.”24 Implicit in this joking encounter was the belief that a high-school degree is necessary for economic success. It is striking that B.B. did not tell young people that they would need math (or a high school education) to make money, just to count the money that they would

21 “Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation’s Schools,” U.S. Department of Education.
22 Ahmad and Miller, The High Cost of Truancy, 1.
23 Ahmad and Miller, 9.
24 Kane and B.B, interview.
have—money often promised by teachers, politicians, and celebrities—if they can just manage to stay in school.

At the same time, our commitment to seeing young people remain in school is also connected to a more expansive notion of equality. The U.S. Department of Education’s website suggests that schooling can help young people “overcome differences in privilege and background,” hinting at a connection between schooling and, for example, racial or gender equality. Notably, it was precisely this broader notion of equality that was the professed justification for compulsory education laws in the early twentieth century. Further, this widely held belief in the profound possibilities unlocked by education, beyond just economic possibility, undoubtedly contributes to our sense of outrage and urgency over the nation’s seven million chronically absent youth. If schooling is the true path to economic equality as well as racial and gender equality, then anyone committed to these causes must also be deeply devoted to combating truancy and keeping marginalized youth in schools.

Movements for Equality through Education

The fervent belief in education as the great equalizer has not just belonged to scholars and politicians, but also to the activists, educators, parents, and students who have banded together throughout U.S. history to demand the right to a quality public schools. This has been especially true for marginalized communities who have often viewed the denial of schooling as a form of exclusion from mainstream democratic institutions. Black America has had an especially fraught relationship with schooling,

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which will be the focus of the following pages, as the Black struggle to gain inclusion into schools is often evoked in discourse around truancy. At the same time, an intersectional approach requires that we acknowledge that other marginalized groups including female, immigrant, LGBT, disabled, and non-black students of color have been part of overlapping and connected struggles over their exclusion from educational institutions and the denial of equitable schooling.

Preventing enslaved people from receiving an education, or more specifically from becoming literate, was fundamental to the maintenance of slavery in the antebellum South. Enslaved people with the ability to read and write would disprove the belief that they were unthinking and thus less fully human than whites. Literacy would also allow enslaved people to propose alternative narratives to the hegemonic representations of slavery by the master class.\(^\text{26}\) This is not to say that enslaved people did not construct their own alternative narratives, but that these forms of truth-telling were necessarily underground forms, part of what James C. Scott calls the “hidden transcript.”\(^\text{27}\) Further, it was not only learning to read and write that was prohibited through anti-literacy laws, but also any form of education, like mathematics, that would give slaves (and often free Blacks) marketable skills that could detract either from slave masters right to exclusively profit from their property or allow free Blacks to compete with lower class whites.

Thus, because prohibiting education was so fundamental to the maintenance of slavery, it is unsurprising that the right to schooling and literacy became deeply

tied to notions of freedom among enslaved populations. This right has also been a central demand of Black activists from Reconstruction to the Movement for Black Lives. Returning to the distinction between education and schooling, enslaved people were legally denied the right not specifically to schools but to education in a broader sense, yet it was schools that were believed to be the means for overcoming this denial.

In the newly free South, Freedpeople utilized a variety of strategies to access schooling. They built their own school houses, met in churches and homes, rebuilt when their meeting places were destroyed by the KKK and retaliatory whites. They trained their own teachers and relied on white northern missionaries. Because of the demands of Black communities in the 1860s and 70s, Reconstruction governments created the first public school systems in most Southern states.\(^28\) Claiming a right to education was a radical demand on the part of Black activists, considering that there had not been public schools, even for white students, prior to Reconstruction.

Despite the fact that African Americans were successful in the fight to establish the right to schooling in many states through persistent community demands, Black students did not gain access to equally resourced or racially integrated schools.\(^29\) Starting in the 1930s, the NAACP began challenging school inequality and eventually won a ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* which stated


\(^{29}\) Vanessa Walker Siddle argues that it is insufficient to discuss racially segregated schools only and inherently as inferior. According to Siddle, segregated and unequal are not necessarily synonymous. Although segregated schools pre-*Brown* were often characterized by injustice, Black communities went to great lengths to ensure that their schools were caring and intellectual rigorous environments. Regardless, apparent disparity between Black and white schools led to a fraught battle for desegregation and demands for equality. See, Vanessa Walker Siddle, “Valued Segregated Schools for African American Children in the South, 1935-1969: A Review of Common Themes and Characteristics,” *Review of Educational Research* 70, no. 3 (200): 253-285.
that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.” While the lawsuits leading up to Brown were led by Thurgood Marshall and the legal defense arm of the NAACP, the victories depended on the activism of students and their families, who staged walkouts of segregated schools, put themselves in extreme danger by attempting to enroll in white schools, and agreed to serve as plaintiffs in lawsuits. Activists’ arguments and the Brown decision itself were inextricably linked to the vision of school as the great equalizer both in economic and democratic terms. Separate was not equal and equal was necessary because schools lay the foundations for all other spheres of life—social, economic, and political. In the majority opinion Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote that “[education] is the very foundation of good citizenship… it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education.”

Importantly, Black activism around schooling did not end after Brown. As just one example, in 2016 seven Black and Latinx students sued the state of Michigan over the failure of Detroit schools to meet their most basic educational needs, including access to literacy. Their complaint alleged that the conditions of Detroit schools make it “nearly impossible for young people to attain the level of literacy necessary to function—much less thrive—in higher education, the workforce, and the activities of democratic citizenship.” In other words, according to these students, the neglect they experience in schools impedes their ability to become equal citizens. Like Mann, Dewey, Washington, and Dubois, these successive generations of

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students, teachers, lawyers, and activists who have fought for the access to better schooling have reified the collective belief in the relationship between schools and equality.

While these are merely fragments of a longer and more complex history of Black activism around schools, they provide some context to the present-day demand by the Movement for Black Lives for the government to make real on the promise of an equal and equalizing education. This abridged history also helps us understand why well-meaning educational reformers and concerned stakeholders like Commander Kane and Officer B.B. are so committed to making sure young people of color are attending school. As previously alluded to, this long history and ongoing struggle to secure educational opportunity for marginalized and in particular Black youth is often evoked to condemn truant students. Heather A. Williams concludes her book on the education of Black Southerners during slavery and Reconstruction by writing that, “[African Americans] went to extraordinary lengths to gain this literacy: in slavery they defied laws and disobeyed owners; in freedom, they sacrificed scarce material resources and their personal safety.” She then refers to this sacrifice to decry how sad it is that “some black people, either unaware of the histories of African Americans’ struggle for education or weary from the daily battles within classrooms, internalize negative assessments of both their abilities and their values and opt out of the fight.”32 In other words, she suggests that Black youths’ decisions to opt out of school are not only self-harming but also render centuries of struggle meaningless.

32 Williams, Self-taught, 202.
This incomplete outline of several of the intellectual and historical moments in which the discourse of politically and economically equalizing schools has emerged most strongly, demonstrates how deeply this discourse is embedded in our national consciousness and how widely it is shared across the ideological spectrum. Consequently, we have seen how the idea of schooling as the great equalizer has seeped into how we think about and treat truancy. Students find themselves operating within a totalizing discourse about schools and equality that, on the one hand, stems from top-down narratives proposed by politician’s and influential academics, and on the other, from centuries long grassroots battles for rights and recognition within schools. Yet, critical historians of U.S. education have noted that, rather than to be equalizers, the true purpose of schools has always been to forward hegemonic political, social, and economic agendas.

*Schools and the Reproduction of Inequality*

Marxist scholars of education have argued that, contrary to the narrative of schools as the great equalizers, U.S. schools are not designed to create commensurate economic opportunity, but to create docile bodies for exploitation in the labor force. This is the thesis in both Bowles and Gintis’s *Schooling and Capitalist America* and Herbert Kliebard’s *Schooled to Work*. Kliebard argues that major economic transformations in the second half of the nineteenth century necessitated a rethinking and restructuring of the aims of education and specific aspects of the American curriculum. Manual training programs, which began to emerge in the 1870s, taught the use of practical tools and basic mechanics, and aimed to instill in students the “Protestant work ethic,” an ideology which had been a major part of moral education
in schools throughout the nineteenth century, but was also well suited to the needs of the rapidly industrializing economy.  

Manual training was promoted primarily as a pedagogical tool to instill proper values, not explicitly as a resource for conditioning laboring bodies. However, the support it garnered opened the door for what would become a far more expansive and pervasive change in American schools: vocational education, which was expressly justified as a means of training laborers for the growing industrial workforce. Vocationalism would come to be “the most successful curricular innovation of the twentieth century,” ensuring that work preparedness would emerge as the main justification for schooling.

While Kliebard, Bowles, and Gintis all focus primarily on vocational education and the capitalist mission of schooling in the North, a similar argument has been made about schooling in the South. The narrative of the rise in African American educational attainment presented earlier in this chapter, of extreme risk during slavery, demands and perseverance during Reconstruction, and legal battles during the early Civil Rights Movement, is not necessarily inaccurate. However, Saidiya Hartman approaches this history from a different angle. She highlights how schooling was also used as a tool to indoctrinate the freed Black population into a work ethic suited to the free labor market and to condition Black people into accepting degrading and unfair labor conditions and wages. She writes, “the issue was not simply whether ex-slaves would work but rather whether they could be transformed into a rational, docile, and productive working class… through

education, religious instruction, and when necessary, compulsion.” In particular, work was made compulsory through vagrancy laws, which mandated that Freedpeople work at the threat of imprisonment and accompanying prison labor.

Hartman’s analysis allows us to see how compulsory work and compulsory education constitute part of the same overarching project. Both truancy and vagrancy laws make idleness criminal, are rooted in fears of particular racialized groups congregating in public, are related to the creation of a disciplined working class, and are often justified by claims that they are in the “best interest” of those they are enforced against. Hartman’s account of the African American schooling in the South as a means of securing a subjugated Black laboring class calls into question the type of freedom and equality that access to schools has actually enabled for people of color.

Although schooling for industrial jobs has largely died out, vocationalism has not. Instead, training for industrial jobs has been replaced by programs for the service and technology industries and college preparatory programs. Education writer Johnathan Kozol has documented how urban schools serving low-income students of color have, in the last several decades, become increasingly structured to prepare students for the corporatized economy. He describes one school that hung posters in a kindergarten classroom asking students, “Do you want a manager’s job?” Kozol notes that these students of color, unlike wealthier white students in other schools, were not being offered the chance to aspire to creative or intellectual job pursuits. He

also argues that while the corporatization of schools is often couched in egalitarian language, advocacy for contemporary vocational programs in urban schools tends to come from business leaders and conservatives who have been otherwise hostile towards addressing segregation and unequal funding in public schools.37

Damien M. Sojoyner also notes that since the rise in mass incarceration began in the 1970s, schools in low-income communities of color have increasingly tracked students into jobs that support this sector of the economy.38 A further example of this is Anacostia High School in DC which, in 2016, launched its Public Safety Academy to track students into law enforcement jobs. DC Mayor Muriel Bowser said the program would “provide students with a unique opportunity to learn about the field of law enforcement and create a pipeline that will help strengthen the Metropolitan Police Department.”39 Anacostia’s study body is ninety-nine percent Black and 100 percent “economically disadvantaged.” Completion of the program guarantees students admission into community college and a starting salary of $30,000 once they graduate high school.40 Thus, at Anacostia, a school with otherwise low graduation and college acceptance rates, one of the few paths for students to realize the “equalizing” promise of school is to become part of a police department that has a long and ongoing history of terrorizing their own community.41 This sketch of the

37 Kozol, The Shame of the Nation, 104.
38 Damien M. Sojoyner, First Strike: Educational Enclosures in Black Los Angeles (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 60-61.
historical terrain of vocational education as well as these contemporary examples belie the idealistic gloss of the narrative of schools as the great equalizers.

The following chapter will go into further detail about the specific technologies used within schools to secure a docile, subjugated, and racialized labor force, but the key point here is that behind the rhetoric of schools as the great equalizers, there lies the unseemly fact that schools have consistently been used to create laboring bodies to meet evolving economic needs. The cooption of schools to maintain a labor force is not in and of itself incompatible with the equalizing promise of schooling. It does, however, become incompatible when we consider the ways schools are used to legitimize unfair and unequal distributions of labor and wages. This is the crux of Bolwes and Gintis’s argument. “Education,” they write “reproduces inequality by justifying privilege and attributing poverty to personal failure.”42 This the myth of the meritocracy—schools’ maintain the appearance of equal opportunity and therefore divest us of the responsibility of doing anything to change the economic structures, which in practice, guarantee inequality.

Educational resources are not, and have never been, distributed equally across racial and class lines. Throughout U.S. history, poor and working-class students have been denied access to the same levels and quality of schooling as white students from wealthy families. For one, the elite have rarely sent their children to the “common” or public schools intended neutralize class stratification. In New England, elite boarding schools began to emerge at the end of the nineteenth century, the same moment that common schools were increasingly attracting working-class students.43 Similarly,

42 Bowles and Gintis, Schooling in Capitalist America, 114.
43 Kaestle, Pillars of the Republic, 51, 116.
when Black youth began attending public schools in South during Reconstruction, many white families began sending their children to private Christian academies or removing them from school altogether. To this day, primarily due to the persistence of housing segregation, schools remain deeply segregated, and urban schools with high concentrations of low-income students of color remain under-resourced. The segregation of schooling based on race and class has facilitated the creation of curriculums that track low-income and students of color into jobs on the lower rungs of the economic ladder, perpetuating racial and economic inequality. As Kozol notes, not all young people are pushed into second-class jobs within the corporate economy; it is specifically low-income students of color. The same is true, according to Sojoyner, of the grunt jobs that support the prison industrial complex.

It is not just vocational programs but resources in general that are distributed unequally. A 2012 report found that across the U.S., schools with ninety percent or more students of color spend $733 less per student per year than schools with ninety percent or more white students. Further, it is not only in these schools with the highest levels of racial stratification that we see this inequity. In some states, like Vermont, just a ten percent increase in students of color at schools is associated with as much as a $762 decrease in per pupil funding. This unequal distribution of monetary recourses manifests itself physically in the schools and classrooms of low-income students of color. These students are more likely go to schools with crumbling infrastructure that lack basic materials and supplies like textbooks, pens and pencils,

44 Williams, Self-Taught, 186-187.
desks, chairs, and even toilet paper. They are more likely to be stuck in larger classes and with underqualified teachers, and are less likely to have access to Advanced Placement courses or challenging academic and elective classes.47

Students are certainly aware of the physical manifestation of inequality within their schools. They also often come to understand the contradiction between the grand narrative of equality and the actual function of schools to condition them for work in specific jobs that reproduce racial and class inequality. My high school regularly ran out of toilet paper, which I was cognizant did not happen at Sidwell Friends School, a private school less than a mile down the street where Obama’s daughters and other children of Washington’s dignitaries attended. The difference in the quality of my own schooling relative to that of students at nearby private schools certainly contributed to my attitude that school was not worthy of my consistent attendance. Even within my school, however, because of my own racial and class privilege, I was tracked into advanced classes and not our school’s hospitality service program, which as far as I knew, was made up exclusively of students of color. Thus, many of my classmates did not even need to look to private schools to find disparities in opportunity; the stark inequality was on display within the walls of our own school.

The beginning of this chapter noted that seventy percent of Black youth report that education is their top priority. The flipside of this, however, is that fifty-four percent of Black youth believe they receive a poorer education than white youth, and only eighteen percent believe that they have an equal chance to succeed in the U.S.48

47 Gary B. v. Snyder, 16-CV-13292.
In Celina Su’s fieldwork at a high school in the Bronx she encountered Jorman Nuñez, who wrote in a poem, “If you were told that school are equal, then you were told the best lie.” ⁴⁹ He rooted his own disengagement from school both in the poor conditions of his school and in his own understanding of the “lie” that is equal education.

A further example of how these statistics play out in the lived experience of students of color, is the story of another Bronx student, Melania, who was the subject of a 2015 episode of the NPR program “This American Life.” The episode described an exchange program between two schools in the Bronx, University Heights High School, a ninety-seven percent Black and Latinx public school in the nation’s poorest Congressional district, and Fieldston a seventy percent white, private school, where, in 2015, tuition cost $43,000 per year. ⁵⁰ For Melania, a University Heights student, stepping foot on Fieldston’s campus was a traumatic experience. Her teacher described her as going pale, screaming, and crying, “this is unfair […] I don't want to be here.” Melanie told the NPR reporter that this was a response to the inequality she was witnessing first hand, saying, “everything kind of is a fucking lie…It's like, OK, this is not free. This is not available for kids of color. This is something that only privileged or the elite can have.” She added that she looked at the campus and thought, “I know that we're only being taught to flip burgers in Burger King or McDonald's or to hold doors for students like them that will probably live in those buildings on Madison Avenue.” Melanie’s teachers reported that despite being a

gifted, committed student, after this experience at Fieldston, Melanie stopped coming
to class. When Melania saw that her school was teaching her to “flip burgers” while
other students were being groomed for elite careers, she lost interest in remaining part
of what was so clearly an education system designed to reproduce inequality.

As another way of understanding why students opt out of school, a teacher in
L.A. testified in a lawsuit, that she believed her students started skipping class
because “During the first 2 weeks of school, some students had to stand up because
we didn’t have enough desks and chairs for them. At the same time, there were over
50 students in the class. After that some students just stopped showing up because
they felt like there was no room for them at school.”51 A Chicano student echoes this
sentiment explaining that, “it’s a basic lack of respect to have us in classes that don’t
even have enough desks or books. I see some students just ditching when they don’t
have a place to sit in their class.”52 These examples clearly show students skipping
school for reasons that are neither related to individual barriers due to poverty nor for
a lack of appreciation of the importance of school. Rather, they demonstrate that
students hold a profound belief in the value of school and, therefore, a deep sense of
betrayal when schools fail to meet their expectations.

Students’ articulations of their frustration and even heartbreak at the
contradiction between the equalizing discourse around schools and their lived
experiences of schooling, allow us to imagine how a deep sense of injustice may be at

51 Cited in, Jeanne Theoharis, “I Hate it When People Treat Me Like a Fxxx-Up”: Phony Theories,
Segregated Schools and the Culture of Aspiration Among African American and Latino Teenagers, in
Our Schools Suck: Students Talk Back to a Segregated Nation on the Failures of Urban Education
52 Tara J. Yosso, Critical Race Counterstories along the Chicana/Chicano Educational Pipeline (New
York: Routledge, 2006), 82.
the heart of students’ decisions not to attend school. We might also see student’s refusal to attend not just as a resistance to the failure of schools to produce equality, but also as a quasi-anti-capitalist stance, suggesting that they are not interested in the type of equality produced through a market economy.

This chapter has demonstrated both the massive historical and ideological reach of the discourse around schooling and equality, which means that when young people, especially youth of color, chose to skip school they are not making isolated decisions, but they carry with this decision the weight of a deeply embedded cultural understanding of schools as the great equalizer. Thus, the extremity of the decision to skip school should point us towards, as it has here, an interrogation of what happens in schools that makes students willing to give up on this equalizing promise.

Robin D.G. Kelley notes that after Michael Brown was killed by Officer Darren Wilson, his status as a student was often evoked to argue that his death had been unjustified. However, he asks what Brown’s education really meant, considering he was a graduate from one of the lowest performing, most racially segregated school districts in the country, and the college he planned to attend was a for-profit trade school that was being investigated for its high tuition and failure to provide students with the skills and accreditation necessary for employment? Even more so in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the idea that working hard and getting an education will guarantee meaningful, stable work and a middle-class lifestyle is becoming increasingly unbelievable. It is in exactly this context that this chapter has pointed

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towards truancy as a form or resistance to the suffering caused by the contradictions at the heart of our schools. The following chapter will build on argument, focusing on the specific technologies within schools that both condition productive laboring bodies and reproduce structures of white supremacy, colonialism, and heteropatriarchy by suppressing anti-hegemonic modes of being and thinking.
Chapter Two: Schools as Prisons: Schooling and Social Control

In Ded Prez’s “They School” the duo raps, “The same people who control the school system control/the prison system, and the whole system/ever since slavery.”

They go on to list a litany of abuses in schools from over policing (“in the hallways, the popo was always present”); to Eurocentric curriculums (“they seemed to only glorify the Europeans”); racialized discipline (“to advance in life, they try to make you up pull your pants up); the curriculum of work (“they ain’t teachin us nothin but how to be slaves and hard workers”); and school’s failure to produce equality (they ain’t teachin us how to get our rent paid”). This oppositional discourse on schooling, although common in rap, is largely absent in popular representations of school, and is wholly missing from mainstream discourse on truancy, even as it might go a long way to explain why low-income youth of color are opting out of school at alarming rates. The following pages will explore how a number of these forms of control outlined by Ded Prez operate in schools today, and their deep historical precedent.

In the last several years the term “school-to-prison pipeline” has emerged in mainstream educational discourse to describe one way in which punitive control in school functions. The framework describes how schools have become increasingly criminalized spaces, with the introduction of metal detectors, school resource officers, and other forms of surveillance. The pipeline metaphor is characterized as:

An amalgamation of a number of different trends—from the overrepresentation of students of color in special education to the rise of zero tolerance school discipline policies; from an increased fear related to school

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safety to perverse incentives from test-based accountability systems to push out low-performing students.²

Angela Davis writes, “When children attend schools that place a greater value on discipline and security than on knowledge and intellectual development they are attending prep schools for prison.”³ We can also think about the school-to-prison pipeline in the context of what Jonathan Simon calls “governing through crime.”⁴

Simon explains that “The merging of school and penal system has speeded the collapse of the progressive project of education.”⁵ Writing in 2007, he noted that more than ninety percent of schools had implemented “zero tolerance” policies for weapons possession, more than eighty percent had recently made school disciplinary codes more punitive, nearly seventy-five percent had been declared “drug-free” zones, and over half had begun initiating locker searches.⁶ These measures have only increased in the intervening years, even as some school districts have reined in suspensions and expulsions and implemented restorative justice alternatives. Simon connects the rising penal nature of schools not only to the growth rise in crime-control-oriented policy solutions dating back to the 1960s, but specifically to the Bush era Safe School Act which tied the introduction of stricter safety and discipline measures to state and federal education dollars.

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⁶ Simon, 216.
Yet, by presenting the school-to-prison pipeline as the side effect of the post-September 11th security state or a remnant of the tough on crime era, what the school-to-prison pipeline rhetoric misses, is the fact that schools have always been and are in their very nature disciplining and criminalizing spaces. Due to the very fact that schooling in the U.S. is compulsory, and failure to attend school is regulated and enforced by law enforcement agencies, schools necessarily create criminals. Students who are most targeted by school discipline—students of color, LGBT and gender non-conforming youth, students with disabilities, and low-income youth—are caught in a double bind.7 When they enter school buildings they become entangled in a web of criminalized discipline, but if they opt not to show up to school, they risk being found by truancy officers, brought to court, and, in the extreme case, incarcerated.

This chapter will explore both the overt and the more invisible, but nonetheless traumatic, forms of discipline and social control that exist in schools both today and historically. The last chapter demonstrated that despite the narrative of schools as the great equalizer, schools have been used throughout U.S. history to reproduce inequality. Building from this argument, this chapter will explore the specific resources schools have used—from disciplinary practices, to security apparatuses, school rules, dress codes, and curriculums—to maintain inequality and uphold structures of colonialism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy.

**Off-Reservation Boarding Schools for American Indian Youth**

Arguably the most extreme case study of the disciplining nature of American schools are the “civilizing” off-reservation boarding schools that many American

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7 NAACP, *Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline*. 
Indian youth were forced to attend during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. David Wallace Adams writes, “The white threat to Indians came in many forms: smallpox, missionaries, Conestoga wagons, barbed wire, and smoking locomotives. And in the end, it came in the form of schools.” These boarding schools were founded with the mission of stamping out the “savage” upbringings of Indigenous youth and reeducating them consistent with white norms of “civility.” The civilizing project worked on various levels. First, by simply relocating and sequestering Indian youth from reservations and tribal communities, it was believed by proponents of the schools, that Native youth could be assimilated into dominant white society. According to Wallace, this explains why off-reservation boarding schools surpassed both reservation day schools and reservation boarding schools, which, it was thought, could not adequately separate youth from negative tribal influences. Secondly, the schools mandated certain modes of being and appearance. Students were often required to cut their hair and wear uniforms that corresponded with respectable (read: white) forms of dress. This was one way of stamping out cultural identity. Other methods included forcing Native students to change their names and prohibiting them from speaking in their Native languages.

The mission of “civilizing” and assimilating Native children through discipline was also manifested in the boarding schools’ curriculums. For one, Indian students were required to “study American history and in the process come to internalize the national myths that were central to it, including the idea that the

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westward sweep of the American empire, that is to say, the dispossession of Indian land, was clearly justifiable.”¹⁰ In other words, in order for Native youth to be assimilated into American citizenship they would have to accept the legitimacy of the American project, including their own people’s genocide. In a particularly harrowing example of this, Wallace details scenes of Native youth celebrating Columbus Day and being forced to decorate the graves of U.S. soldiers who had slaughtered their families and tribal communities.¹¹

Indian youth were also taught to believe in and accept the American Dream and its accompanying industrial capitalism. In his study of student labor at Sherman Institute, an off-reservation boarding school in Riverside, California, Kevin Whalen argues that labor comprised a key tenet of the curriculum and civilizing mission of the school, both through students’ construction and upkeep of the school, and through “outing” programs where Native students worked for white families and businesses. American Indian youth were to be assimilated into white Protestant society, but only as common laborers at the “bottom of a racialized working class.”¹² Across off-reservation boarding schools, the Office of Indian Affairs called for the implementation of curriculums that divided students’ time evenly between academic courses and labor-related tasks. However, Whalen suggests that over time boarding schools became “a series of glorified labor agencies” and outing programs began to

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¹⁰ Adams, Education for Extinction, 24.
¹¹ Adams, 191.
focus less on “uplift” and “more on satiating the desires of white households and businesses for Native laborers.”

This description of the relationship between schools and labor is consistent with the Marxist critique of schools outlined in the first chapter. We might think of American Indian boarding schools as a site where vocational education and other racialized forms of school-based control were implemented and tested. Historically, the height of these off-reservation boarding schools corresponded with peak federal support for vocational education. Because of the federal control of American Indian schools through the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), compared to the localized control of non-reservation school districts, the federal government had total authority to experiment with various forms of discipline and indoctrination that could then be exported to other schools nationally and even globally.

While these “civilizing” boarding schools might be widely condemned today, many similar forms of discipline and indoctrination go unremarked on in contemporary schools and classrooms. However, drawing on American Indian boarding schools to reveal these forms of control that continue to operate in mainstream public schools is not intended to draw equivalences between them. These

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13 Whalen, Native Students at Work, 29.


“civilizing” boarding schools were part of a specific project of elimination and entailed a particular harm to Native youth and Indigenous communities, the legacy of which is ongoing.16 Notably, American Indian students have by far the highest rates of truancy in the U.S. today, a fact that will be explored in the next chapter. We should not separate the current disengagement of Indigenous youth from this long history of harm within schools and therefore a justified mistrust of the aims of schooling. In short, connecting American Indian boarding schools to U.S. schools more broadly, demonstrates that the strategies of containment and control through schooling used against Native students did not occur in a vacuum, nor are they isolated in history, but are part of a more expansive and ongoing project of schooling in the U.S.

_Schools, Factories, and Disciplinary Power_

The regimentation of everyday life at off-reservation boarding schools is mirrored in many mainstream public schools today. In 1914, Dewey cautioned against “[turning] schools into preliminary factories supported at public expense.”17 He observed that the rise of vocationalism entailed a broad reconfiguration of schools as factories. Despite this early warning, many schools today are still organized like factories, even though industrial training has been replaced, as the previous chapter described, by new forms of vocationalism. Bowles and Gintis explain that “the structure of social relations in education not only inures the student to the discipline of the work place, but develops the types of personal demeanor, modes of self-

17 Quoted in, Kliebard, “Subject Realignment and Vocationalism, 146.
presentation, self-image, and social-class identifications which are the crucial ingredients of job adequacy.”¹⁸ In particular, the hierarchical relations between administrators, teachers, and students within schools reflect the hierarchical division of labor in factories. The alienation of students from their work and their lack of control over the curriculum is akin to the alienation of factory workers from the work they produce. And, the external motivation produced by grade-based systems of schooling is certainly factory-like. Even elements as basic as the school bell signaling transitions between classes can be understood as a vestige from the factory system’s technique of organizing time. In short, U.S. schools were modeled both “in the interests of industrialism and in the image of it.”¹⁹

The standardization of schooling into a factory-like system has arguably increased since Bowles and Gintis were writing in the 1970s. With the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001 and the adoption of Common Core in 2010, there has been a movement over the last several decades to create conformity and uniformity both in the content taught in schools and achievement levels of students, measured through the proliferation of standardized testing. With this in mind, Michel Foucault’s genealogy of disciplinary power is one analytical tool that can help illuminate exactly how modern schools have functioned to produce maximum control.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault links schools and factories as two sites that operate through the exercise of disciplinary power. In particular, he notes that certain practices, including the operation of schools according to a timetable, the architecture

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of classrooms designed to facilitate total surveillance, the reliance on testing, and the collection of school records function to produce docile, controlled, and economically productive subjects. According to Foucault, discipline in institutions like schools is “a unitary technique by which the body is reduced as a ‘political’ force at the least cost and maximized as a useful force.” In other words, through schools, discipline produces economically efficient laboring bodies, while simultaneously reducing capacities for resistance.

Foucault argues that disciplinary power within schools operates through three interconnected processes: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement, and examination. Hierarchical observation suggests that individuals, students in this case, can be controlled simply by being observed. The infrastructure within contemporary schools—such as metal detectors, security cameras, police, security guards, and administrators roaming the halls—allow for maximum surveillance and thus maximum control. Secondly, normalizing judgement is realized in schools through aforementioned achievement standards as well as through dress codes, uniforms, and codes of conduct, all of which function to create the “normal” student in contrast to the “abnormal” student who does not adhere to these standards and is therefore deviant and deserving of punishment. Finally, the examination is a “normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish.” The examination manifests itself in schools through standardized testing certainly, but also in daily checks to ensure compliance with dress code, and the collection of

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21 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 221.
22 Foucault, 184.
attendance data. Foucault also notes that the examination leads to the production of “administrative documentation,” such as transcripts as well as attendance and disciplinary records which “engage [individuals] in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them.”

Although Foucault’s work lacks a racial or gender analysis, it should be clear that norms are never neutral, but are constituted around the normative subject who is cisgender, straight, white, male and able-bodied. The following pages will demonstrate exactly how schools enforce specific norms by looking at gender and dress codes, race and practices of disciplinary respectability, and curriculums that perpetuate problematic national myths.

Schools and the Regulation of Gender

Thus far, the discussion of the relationship between schools and labor has focused on race and class, arguing that schools are designed to prepare non-white, poor, and working-class students for low-wage jobs and white, upper-class students for elite careers. However, it is important to add gender to this equation. Schools have long been used to impose gendered divisions of labor and enforce norms of white femininity. This was evident in the gendered sorting of Indian students in off-reservation boarding schools, both in terms of the subjects they were taught and the jobs they were placed into as part of the outing programs; male students were trained in manual labor and farming while female students were conditioned for domestic labor. This reflects the broader sorting of young men into “shop” or industrial arts

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23 Foucault, 189.
classes, and young women into home economics classes throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—reinforcing the notion that women belonged in the home.24

Although home economics and shop classes are far less common in U.S. schools today, a contemporary version of this gendered tracking can be seen in the underrepresentation of women, particularly women of color, in STEM fields.25 As industrial jobs have become scarce, job preparedness programs for the modern economy, like the coding classes touted by Obama, de-facto exclude women and girls, reinforcing the same centuries-old division of labor along gendered lines. And, while home economics may seem like a relic of the past, Kozol notes that “Courses in hair-dressing (‘cosmetology’) have also been offered to black females in our nations segregated schools for decades, starting as long ago as the 1950s.”26 According to Kozol, low-income Black and Latina students continue to be encouraged or even required to take these types of courses. An intersectional lens forces us to acknowledge how gender, race, and class render female students of color particularly subject to the control apparatuses of schools.

Schools are further used to reinforce gender norms beyond the scope of labor. School uniforms and dress codes, for example, often operate on a binary, mandating certain types of dress for female students and another set for male students. Although DC Public Schools formally prohibit gender-specific rules, thirty-five percent of DC high schools have different dress code rules for male and female students. Both the

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26 Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation*, 186.
rules themselves and their enforcement fall disproportionately on female students, operating around the sexist logic that unregulated displays of female bodies will necessarily distract male students. Dress codes often work to enforce ideas of what it means to be “lady-like,” asking students to conform to a white, middle-class type of femininity. A recent report on school dress codes in DC concludes that, “These rules aren't neutral: many target girls, and especially black girls, by regulating skirt length and headwraps,” adding “the rules aren't applied equally, either […] black girls, and especially curvier students, are disproportionately targeted.”27 This report backs up the plethora of stories in recent years of Black female students nationwide being sent home or disciplined for wearing their hair naturally or dressing “inappropriately.”28 This regulation of hair in particular evokes the traumatic forced cutting of Indian youth’s traditional hair, which Wallace identifies as a crucial step in the civilizing process. This comparison suggests that the regulation of modes of appearance for female students of color is part of a larger attempt to suppress non-white forms of cultural expression.

Interviewees in the DC report also describe that enforcement depends on body type, suggesting that dress codes function to enforce normative forms of embodiment and to discipline bodies that do not conform. The gendered application of dress codes also runs the risk of reinforcing rape culture, perpetuating the myth that women and girls who wear revealing clothing are “asking for” unwanted attention or advances.


And, school rules often give teachers and administrators discretion in determining violations and punishing violators, sending the message that female bodies are subject to scrutiny, regulation, and even touch, especially if they are deemed to be operating outside the norms of acceptable femininity.

Dress codes and the regulation of gender in schools also affect male identifying, and certainly transgender and non-binary, students. Many schools prohibit male students from wearing jewelry or other “feminine” articles of clothing, reinforcing hegemonic images of masculinity. Further, by watching the enforcement of dress codes against female students, male students may internalize the idea that it is appropriate to comment on their peers’ dress, promoting an environment of sexual harassment. For transgender and non-binary students, school dress codes, which often mandate cisgender modes of dress are especially problematic. One student interviewed in the DC report describes being forced into clothes that did not match their identity as a “traumatizing” experience.29 Thus, across the gender spectrum, when students remain in schools today they are forced to conform to harmful norms of gender expression.

Many students have linked forms of gender and sexuality-based discrimination as reasons for feeling unsafe in school, and as factors in their decisions to skip. Interestingly, although truancy rates are about the same for male and female students in elementary and middle school, a higher percentage of female students are chronically absent in high school than their male peers.30 Whether this can be connected to gender inequity and sexism within schools merits further study;

29 National Women’s Law Center, Dress Coded, 13.
30 Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation’s Schools,” U.S. Department of Education.
however, it is certainly a reasonable hypothesis. One student cited in a study of the policing of Black girls in schools, describes the use of metal detectors and searches when students enter her school building as akin to “sexual harassment.”31 Another student told researchers that the repetition of this invasive process day after day made her not want to show up.32 Further, a national survey has found that more than a third of LGBTQ students report missing school because they feel unsafe or uncomfortable.33 One student describes a friend who started skipping because his school “bothered him for wearing makeup” by claiming it was a “distraction” and that other boys in his class “felt harassed by it.”34 Other trans and gender non-conforming students have reported skipping, sometimes missing months at a time, to avoid the “toxic environments” of their schools.35 These students’ self-described decisions against attendance reflect a refusal to subject themselves to attempts by school officials to control their gender and sexual expression.

Enforcing Respectability

School dress codes not only enforce dominant modes of gender and sexual expression, but also white respectability more broadly under the guise of creating safe and productive learning environments and preparing young people for the “real world.” The idea of respectability politics was first articulated by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham to describe a strategy of accepting mainstream, middle-class social

32 Crenshaw, Black Girls Matter, 30.
34 Palmer, Educational Exclusion among LGBTQ Youth, 28.
35 Paler, Educational Exclusion, 17.
values and practices in order to contradict racist images of Black people and gain access to certain rights and privileges. Yet, within schools, respectability has transformed itself from a bottom-up form of limited empowerment to a top-down disciplinary practice.\textsuperscript{36} Fredrick C. Harris writes that respectability has become “a governing philosophy that centers on managing the behavior of black people left behind in a society touted as being full of opportunity.”\textsuperscript{37}

School uniforms, for example, which often take the form of khaki pants and collared shirts in white or blue are not neutral forms of dress; rather, they evoke a specific white and white-collar form of presentation. Regarding the compulsory uniforms at off-reservation boarding schools, Adams writes, “Students must have seen the emphasis on uniforms for what it was: yet another aspect of the school’s design to turn Indians into carbon copies of their white overseers.”\textsuperscript{38} The same might be said of dress codes and uniforms at mainstream schools. Further, lest the management of Native youths’ cultural expression through schooling be placed in the past, in 2015 a seven-year-old member of the Seneca Nation was removed from class because of his traditional mohawk hairstyle. The school requested that he cut it off, saying it was a “distraction,” and therefore prohibited by school policy.\textsuperscript{39} Similarly, the prohibition of baggy or “sagging” pants in many schools, a norm of respectability that Dead Prez called out in their song, is also a specific way of signaling out styles associated with youth of color for regulation.

\textsuperscript{38} Adams, \textit{Education for Extinction}, 108.
Through his fieldwork in a majority Black public charter school in Boston, Freeden Oeur identifies two forms of respectability, which he terms “respectable minds” and “disciplined bodies.” At the school he studied, respectable minds were produced through the schools mandatory Latin curriculum, which Oeur notes is a racially coded subject, historically available only to “well-to-do white Protestant families” and signals respectability because its rigor requires an “absolute commitment to obeying and mastering its rules.” Secondly, respectable bodies were produced through school uniforms, which were carefully inspected daily as students entered the school and were deliberately chosen for their association with white, professional, middle-class attire.

This type of respectability, especially as it relates to Black youth in particular, is typically justified on two grounds—ensuring physical safety and promoting economic mobility. Administrators at Ron Brown High School, an all-male of color public college preparatory school in DC, argue that teaching respectability is necessary both to protect students from becoming targets of police scrutiny or violence and to set students up for success at elite colleges and in the job market, where forms of white respectability are prerequisites. These justifications are problematic because they place the burden on young people of color to change the way they behave in order to avoid victimization by the police, instead of working to dismantle the racism that structures policing in the U.S. This is especially problematic when we know that forms of behavior coded as white and middle class do not always

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protect people of color from becoming targets.\textsuperscript{42} As Zoé Samudzi and William C. Anderson put it, “it is a myth that our enemies with love us or value us more as people if our appearance and behavior are more respectable.”\textsuperscript{43} Further, as Oeur argues, emphasis on respectability in schools can function to “draw moral and social boundaries against disreputable and undisciplined neighborhood boys.”\textsuperscript{44} In other words, students who adopt modes of “respectable” dress and behavior are deemed deserving of educational and economic opportunity in specific contrast to Black youth who do not.

Further, this type of “code switching” is not simply encouraged or taught as a resource that students can chose to utilize; it is enforced through strict discipline and naturalized as the “normal” mode of being, with all other forms of dress, behavior, and speech being labeled deviant or criminal. Emphasis on respectability, combined with the strict policing of noncriminal behaviors in schools, leads to a scenario in which students of color’s failure to adhere to norms of white respectability becomes an issue to be dealt with both through exclusionary discipline and apparatuses of the criminal justice system. In his ethnographic study of inner-city Black and Latino boys in Oakland, Victor Rios describes a variety of instances when police were called to schools for students “talking back, cursing, or other minor school-rule transgressions,” noting that, for many of these boys, “school represented just another space where they were criminalized for their style and culture.”\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{43} Zoé Samudzi and William C. Anderson, \textit{As Black as Resistance: Finding the Conditions for Liberation} (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2018), 64.
\textsuperscript{44} Oeur, “The Respectable Brotherhood,” 1064.
The enforcement of disciplinary respectability is just one site in which students experience racism and particularly anti-blackness in schools. Eduardo Ferrer, a Georgetown Law professor who spent many years representing youth in truancy proceedings in DC, identified this type of discipline as a key factor in student disengagement from school. “Kids are smart,” he told me, they pick up on cues that they are not respected or valued in their schools and as a result become “resigned to the fact that they’re just not welcome in those spaces.”

As Chapter One described, students of color are constantly chastised for their failure to properly value schools, yet their schools clearly do not value them. Students are promised if they show up to school they will gain access to the limitless possibilities of the American Dream, yet when they do attend they are made to feel inferior because of how the dress, look, and act, and told they cannot succeed unless they change who they are. They are told they must go to school, but they are made to feel unwanted when they do. It is not difficult to imagine why students would skip to avoid this relentless stigmatization.

Curriculums and the Perpetuation of National Myths

As already discussed in relation to off-reservation boarding schools, a major way in which schools discipline and indoctrinate students is through a curriculum designed to perpetuate certain myths, not only instilling in students a Protestant work ethic necessary for the functioning of the capitalist economy, but also communicating specific stories about U.S. history and the legitimacy of the American project. Post-colonial theorist, Paulo Freire writes that subjugation through education “is accomplished by the oppressors’ depositing myths indispensable to the preservation

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46 Eduardo Ferrer, interview by author, August 16, 2018.
of the status quo: for example, the myth that the oppressive order is a ‘free society.’”⁴⁷ As one example, in his famous 1963 speech to teachers, James Baldwin argues that the African American student schooled in the U.S. educational system is taught “that he [sic] has never contributed anything to civilization – that his past is nothing more than a record of humiliations gladly endured.”⁴⁸ Detailing all of the fictions taught in American history classes and textbooks would be an extensive project, however it is worth briefly exploring a few of these myths and their effects on students.⁴⁹

Returning briefly to the postbellum South, in one case study of indoctrination through school curriculums, Hartman analyzes a number of the textbooks distributed to newly freed slaves in the South and concludes that they had the intent of not only conditioning a free but subjugated Black laboring class, but also communicating a particular narrative of slavery and freedom that exculpated slave owners and placed the onus of racial reconciliation on the formerly enslaved. She writes, “If literacy was the avenue to humanity, the lesson to be gleaned from [textbooks] was that the price of entry entailed silencing the very factors that determined the condition of degradation and impoverishment. Not only was the violence of slavery expunged, but also the productivity of slavery denied.”⁵⁰ This trend of rewriting American history remains essentially ubiquitous—from the ways in which elementary school students are taught about Christopher Columbus, emphasizing discovery and ignoring

⁵⁰ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 137.
genocide, to the way in which the Civil Rights Movement is incorporated into high school curriculums, emphasizing the success of nonviolent strategies and pitting them against or excluding more revolutionary ideas. In short, U.S. history is often presented as a story of progress: a country founded on a radical democratic vision that gradually but surely expanded to include previously excluded groups.

In general, “melting pot” narratives that focus on democracy, freedom, pluralism, and equal opportunity as guiding principles in American life, are privileged in school curriculums over any serious interrogation of nationalism, racism, sexism, or histories of slavery and colonialism as constitutive elements of U.S. society. Even the more progressive modes of teaching U.S. history, under the umbrella of multicultural education, often work to perpetuate colorblind ideology. Sojoyner describes that the multicultural curriculum at the school where he taught, writing, “it was as if particular groups from around the world were born with innate cultural practices that distinguish them from other communal groups. The result was the removal of political counter-narratives that were central to the development of cultural practices.”

Sojoyner refers to these curricular practices as “ideological enclosures” because they deliberately prevent students from learning about non-white forms of cultural expression or political identities that challenge Western hierarchies of difference.

According to Freire, the effect of these types of curriculums—which present histories and current realities that contradict the lived experiences of many marginalized students—is alienation. For Freire, the type of curriculum that would

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51 Sojoyner, 58.
not alienate students would be one that provided “an increasingly critical knowledge of the current historical context” and presented “the principle contradiction of society.”52 Yet, U.S. history courses rarely present a version of U.S. history in its full contradiction or, as Baldwin puts it, a U.S. history that “is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said.”53 Like the curriculum of work, the enforcement of gender norms, and disciplinary respectability, the narrative of U.S. history promoted in schools is a form of social control and indoctrination.

Young people have a lot to say about the estrangement they feel from the material they are taught in their classrooms. Jorman Nuñez explains that he and his friends cut class because “we were bored out of our minds.”54 In another poem, he writes:

These teachers can’t engage me, so I just sit there, fighting off sleep
And they tell us we’re all different, that our minds are unique at their best
But two minutes later, we suddenly have to take a standardized test
They tell me to think critically, “Don’t just follow the mass
But if I ask a challenging question, I get kicked out of class 55

For Jorman, it was clear that despite rhetoric to the contrary, his school’s curriculum was not designed to challenge him, teach him to think critically about the world around him, or allow him to express his unique worldview, rather he was being conditioned through constant testing to accept class material in precisely the form it was presented to him.

52 Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 176.
53 Baldwin, Price of the Ticket, 332.
More commonly cited in literature on education than Jorman’s sophisticated critique of his school’s curriculum, are students expressing some variation of “school sucks.” Suárez-Orozco points out that in an experiment asking students to complete the sentence “School is…” the overwhelming response was “boring.” In Ann Arnett Ferguson’s study of elementary-school-age Black youth, she found students as young as eleven expressing sentiments such as, “There isn’t a single thing about school for me.” Another student described his least favorite thing about school as “My teachers. Homework. And classwork, yeah, class.” The “what’s the point,” “school sucks,” “class is boring” genre of critique leveled by students is often dismissed in educational literature as evidence that minority youth do not properly understand the value of education. However, as Jeanne Theoharis explains, “school sucks,” is not actually an expression of youth disposition towards education as a whole, but rather is a “a factual, if vernacular, description of the conditions of their schools.” Instead of interpreting these negative assessments of school as a lack of values—which, as previously discussed, is inaccurate—we can understand them as a reflection of the alienation that schooling necessarily produces when it is used to condition young people to accept the myths of an unjust society.

**Containment and Enclosure: Schools as Carceral Spaces**

What are often viewed as the most offensive aspects of American Indian boarding schools are not all of the forms of control that occurred behind school walls,
but the fact that youth were coerced or forcibly removed from their homes and kept in these schools, often against their will. As explained earlier, the first step in civilizing American Indian youth, as imagined by proponents of these schools, was their physical removal and sequestration. Closed off behind school gates, and separated from outside influence, the process of indoctrination and assimilation would be far easier. Yet, containment of students expands beyond nineteenth- and twentieth-century American Indian boarding schools. The compulsory nature of education makes all schools, to some degree, carceral. Foucault writes, “Discipline sometimes requires enclosure, the specification of a place heterogenous to all others and closed in upon itself.” He lists secondary schools as one of these such enclosures.

Drawing on Foucault, David Gabbard argues that we need to move away from an analysis of the route from schools to prisons and towards an analysis of schools as prisons. According to Gabbard, the relationship between prisons and schools is far more complex than the school-to-prison pipeline model allows. He describes his own feeling as a high school student that, “students were analogous to prisoners, condemned to serve out a thirteen-year sentence. The teachers functioned as guards, assigned to pace us through our daily drills. The principal, of course, was the warden, charged with maintaining the good order of the entire institution.” He, like many other students, daydreamed of a “school break,” suggesting that the security and disciplinary apparatuses of school’s function not only to keep threats out but keep students in. This was certainly true of my high school, where the doors were

\[60\] Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 141.
programmed so that trying to exit would trigger an alarm and the doors would remain locked for twenty seconds. Similarly, in his study of what he terms “educational enclosures” in LA, Damien M. Sojoyner describes his shock when he first saw a school—which, unlike the schools in his own South-Central LA—was not enclosed by fences, gates or barriers. He describes the architecture of the schools in his own community writing, “Ranging from large, black, steel, arrow-tipped gates to metal detectors, the physical manifestation of these barriers continues to serve as the literal and metaphorical device for the multiple forms of enclosure that Black youth face both inside and out of school.”62 We can therefore think about compulsory education as functioning to prevent the mobility of young people of color, locking them in where they can be subjected to the disciplinary power of schools. Foucault writes, “One of the primary objects of discipline is to fix; it is an anti-nomadic technique.”63

Many students have specifically cited the prison-like feel of schools as a factor in their decisions to avoid school. In Monique M. Morris’s study of the treatment of Black girls in public schools, she cites a focus group in which one participant, Michelle, described the various schools she had attended as looking like “mini-prisons.”64 Another student, Leila, told Morris, “If you’re born poverty stricken, you ain’t got no recess. The only time to talk is during lunch or after school. Y’all ain’t got no sports. Y’all ain’t got no activities. You don’t have nothin’ to be proud of at your school…. You just come from nine [o’clock] to four or three-thirty.”65 The stringent regulations of socialization and recreation she experienced within her school

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62 Sojoyner, First Strike, x.
63 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 218.
64 Morris, Pushout, 74.
65 Morris, 83.
certainly mirrored the types of control you might encounter in prison. A third student explained that she was most frustrated by the fact that “school [in a more affluent neighborhood] was not like jail” unlike the high-poverty, majority Black school she attended. These descriptions demonstrate that students are aware not all young people are stuck in hyper-punitive, prison-like schools. A student in Rios’s study of Oakland youth made this explicit, telling Rios, “By age thirteen, I learned that the system did not want me to spend my eighteenth birthday free. The system was trying to teach us to be docile, versus rich people taught to be creative.”

Policy experts have argued that zero tolerance suspension and expulsion policies push low-income students of color out of schools, and while this is certainly true, these student perspectives suggest that there is a less direct effect as well. Students are not only being forced out against their wills as schools become more punitive, but the prison-like nature of schools create hostile environments that students are actively deciding they want no part in. Theoharis evocatively sums this up, writing, “American society supports [schools] that warehouse students but somehow expects young people not to act as if they are being warehoused.”

Starting with off-reservation boarding schools for American Indian youth, this chapter has traced several key ways in which schooling has been used to maintain various intersecting forms of oppression and forward specific political aims. American Indian boarding schools regulated forms of appearance and speech and built curriculums to condition students for industrial and agricultural labor and to

66 Morris, 74.
67 Rios, Pushout, 165-166.
68 Theoharis, “I Hate it When People Treat Me Like a Fxxx-Up,” 92.
accept the legitimacy of the U.S. colonial project. These schools were a clear attempt to suppress cultural and political resistance to white domination. Beyond the walls of these boarding schools, a Foucauldian lens sheds light on how mainstream public schools have also used disciplinary power to enforce normative modes of being and create docile bodies. This is achieved through rules that mandate forms of dress and enforce respectability as well as through curriculums and testing that teach conformity. In short, this chapter has described schools as a site of often intense suffering for marginalized youth. The harm caused by racialized and gendered forms of discipline and alienating curriculums as described in this chapter, is further compounded by the loss of hope caused by the apparent role schools play in the perpetuation of economic and racial inequality. When policymakers and researchers claim young people skip school because they are irrational or lack clean clothes, it diminishes the legitimacy and immensity of this suffering.

This chapter has provided various ways to conceptualize the relationship between schools and prisons. Whether schools criminalize and push students into prisons as the pipeline model suggests, or if schools themselves are an analogous form of racialized containment, this comparison reveals an understanding of schools that is at odds with the ubiquitous rhetoric of schools as the great equalizer. Can schools really be described as emancipatory for students of color if they are either funneling them into the prison system or themselves containing these students? Since the social control of schools is not wielded neutrally, and discipline not enacted universally, can school really feel like a site of equality when, through the everyday

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69 Michael J. Dumas, “‘Losing an Arm’: Schooling as a Site of Black Suffering,” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 17, no. 1 (2014).
experiences of discipline, students with non-normative identities are taught their bodies and their cultures are deviant? Chapter Three will take up a final question: what possibilities are revealed when students refuse to subject themselves to this system of control?
Chapter Three: Truancy as Resistance: The Politics of Cutting Class

In her poem, “Indian Boarding Schools: The Runaways,” Louise Erdrich (Obijwe) takes on the perspective of young Native students who dream of escaping their confinement in boarding schools. “Home’s the place we head for in our sleep,” she writes. Escape was not just something students dreamt of; many students resisted the boarding school project by running away. In her analysis of letters written home by these Native students in the early twentieth century, Brenda J. Child finds that “running away was the most popular form of protest used by boarding school students.”¹ It was so common, in fact, that one school official described it as an “epidemic of desertion.”² In their letters, students cited confinement, loneliness, the strict regimentation of life, and their general mistreatment in the boarding schools as their reasons for fleeing. While some students manifested their opposition to the boarding schools by running, others, with the support of their families and communities, refused to attend in the first place, ignoring compulsory education laws.³ Looking at this history, it is evident that whether students were running away or refusing to attend, they were engaging in justifiable acts of resistance to an oppressive experience of schooling.

In December 2018, the New York Times ran a front-page article entitled “I Feel Invisible: Native Students Languish in Public Schools.” The article painted a

² Childs, “Runaway Girls, Resistant Boys,” 91.
³ In the 1890s, nineteen Hopi men were imprisoned on Alcatraz Island for refusing to send their children to off reservation boarding schools. See, Childs, “Runaway Boys, Resistant Girls,” 90.
devastating picture of a school in rural Montana where Native students were denied access to advanced placement classes and mental health services, where a teacher was banned from developing a Native-centered curriculum, and where, last year, one Native student, Jayden Joe, committed suicide after being berated by the school’s principal for his truancy.\^4\ The article cited graduation rates, suspension data, advanced placement enrollment, academic achievement statistics, and even suicide rates as evidence of the discrimination and neglect that Native students face in public schools across the country. Yet, the article failed to mention that nationally, Native students also have the highest rates of truancy. Not unlike the height of the boarding school era, American Indian students continue to flee their schools at alarming rates. During the 2015-2016 school year, more than thirty percent of American Indian high schoolers were chronically absent, making them sixty-five percent more likely than their white peers to miss three or more weeks of school a year.\^5\ That today close to a third of Native students are missing “unacceptable” levels of school is, indeed, staggering. But, given both the specific historical trauma associated with schooling for Native students and the current reality of their schools, it should not be surprising.

The reality is not so different for other students of color. Black and Hispanic students have the second and third highest rates of absenteeism respectively, and low-income students are two to three times more likely to be truant.\^6\ At the same time, as the previous chapter demonstrated, African American and Latinx students are far

\^5\ “Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation’s Schools,” U.S. Department of Education.
more likely to be criminalized in schools and subjected to racialized forms of discipline. And, as the first chapter detailed, they are more likely to attend segregated public schools with a majority of low-income students, receiving substantially less funding than whiter, better resourced, middle-class schools. Further, as already outlined, female high school students, many of whom report facing gendered discipline and the policing of their sexuality in school, are somewhat more likely to be truant than their male counterparts. Drawing this connection between skipping school and racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of discipline and inequality in schools should seem obvious, yet it is rarely part of the discussion on truancy.

The Misrecognition of Skipping School

The introduction analyzed the two dominant theories as to why low-income students are disproportionally truant. This chapter extends this analysis to demonstrate how these approaches serve hegemonic purposes by diverting attention away from structural issues and towards individuals. The first approach is to pathologize these young people, suggesting that their skipping school indicates an underlying laziness, deviance, or a lack of values. This assumption is latent in the popular admonishment to “stay in school” often targeted at low-income students of color. When Obama told students that their “personal circumstances” were no excuse for disengaging with school, he evoked the common stereotype that people of color do not adequately value education. This hypothesis has been posited by a number of prominent scholars, including Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson who controversially forwarded a “cultural explanation of black male self-destructiveness” to explain why Black American men were not succeeding in schools or the
workforce, and Berkeley anthropologist John Ogbu, who argues that Black students deliberately underachieve because doing well in school is associated with “acting white.”

The problem with the “deviancy” approach to thinking about truancy is that, even as it is promoted by figures who appear to have the best interests of youth of color in mind, it ignores the profound effects of racialized poverty, suggesting that these “circumstances” can be overcome by determination and a good attitude. Ta-Nehisi Coates has described this type of discourse as “black conservatism.” Political theorist Tommie Shelby argues that policymakers often pathologize the deviant behaviors of the urban poor which leads to “attempting to integrate them into an existing social system rather than viewing their unwillingness to fully cooperate as a sign that the system itself needs fundamental reform.” In other words, the solution is to fix young people’s attitudes towards school not the schools themselves—an approach that even further marginalizes students by making them the locus of blame.

The second approach is to think of truant students as “victims” immobilized by their circumstances. This is, as described in the introduction, the approach typically taken by current policy literature on truancy, which tends to focus on eliminating barriers to attendance, such as bullying, lack of transportation, or family obligations. Unlike the “deviancy” framework, the “victim” approach takes seriously the obstacles students face because of poverty. However, to the extent that truancy

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8 Ta Nehisi Coates, “‘This is How we Lost the White Man’: The Audacity of Bill Cosby’s Black Conservatism,” *The Atlantic*, May 2008.
literature attends to these larger structural issues, it does so in an extremely limited way, considering whether truant youth can afford transportation to school, for example, but not asking if the absence of a road to meaningful employment with a high school diploma in our globalized economy might affect working class students’ faith in the equalizing promise of schools. Or, by acknowledging the trauma associated with bullying as a barrier to attendance, but not the trauma associated with being subject to racialized surveillance and criminalization in schools.

We therefore might think of these two dominant frameworks as a convenient or deliberate misrecognition of the actions of so-called deviant youth. This particular misrecognition is convenient because it allows for an analysis of the problem that blames the actions and circumstances of individual students as opposed to the structure of schools. If these larger structures were taken into consideration as a cause of truancy, it would require a far more radical change, and might disrupt deeply-held beliefs about the purpose and power of schools.

Towards an Alternative Framework

Lack of access to transportation, clean clothes, mental health care, and educational accommodations, do act as real barriers preventing low-income and students of color from consistently attending school. More work must be done to dismantle these barriers and ensure that all young people who want to be in school can be. However, his chapter suggests that these barriers also work in combination with the suffering, loss of dignity, and risk of criminalization that being in school entails for many of these students, as well as the evident failure of schools to live up to their emancipatory promise, making the cost of school attendance too high and the
reward too low for some young people. Like the runaways from Native boarding schools, when marginalized youth skip school today they may be engaging in a reasoned choice, a form of resistance, or (and) a political act. Thus, this chapter moves away from the popular admonishment to “stay in school” and the policy language of “barriers to access” in order to open up a space that allows for consideration of young people’s intellectual and political capacities in our discussion of truancy.

As already suggested, arguing that truancy is a form of resistance is not equivalent to saying that young people are better off for choosing not to attend school. On the contrary, school attendance is clearly linked to school achievement and graduation, which are tied to an increasing likelihood of employment and a decreasing likelihood of incarceration.10 When weighed against the equalizing vision of school as described in the first chapter, skipping school does seem completely irrational—the privileging of temporary freedom over the lifetime of open-doors supposedly provided by a good education. However, when weighed against the totalizing social control described in the second chapter, truancy begins to seem more like a legitimate—albeit—limited means of securing dignity in circumstances seemingly intent on eroding the humanity of these marginalized youth. It is also possible, as this chapter suggests, that skipping school may not only be a form of self-protection, but also a political act of resistance with transformative possibility.

Theorizing Resistance

The failure to understand the decision to skip school as a form of resistance fits into a trend of undertheorizing forms of resistance that marginalized people utilize when operating under systems of domination or within oppressive institutions. Political theorist James C. Scott and labor historian Robin D.G. Kelley have suggested that we must expand our definitions of resistance in order to understand the full scope of political activity that subordinate group members engage in. According to Scott, “much of the active political life of subordinate groups has been ignored because it takes place at a level we rarely recognize as political.”\(^{11}\) He argues that these subversive political acts that go unnoticed, often by necessity and design, make up what he calls a “hidden transcript.” The activities that make up the hidden transcript he terms infrapolitics, defined as the “circumspect struggles waged daily by subordinate groups.”\(^{12}\) Kelley further insists specifically on including young people in the study of Black working-class resistance, as they are active in “creating new cultures, strategies of resistance, identities, sexualities, and in the process generating a wider range of problems for authorities whose job it is to keep them in check.”\(^{13}\)

While Scott and Kelley open up infrapolitics as a field of study, scholars like Cathy J. Cohen, Tommie Shelby, and Victor M. Rios build the field by theorizing deviance as a specific strategy of resistance taken up by groups living in oppressive societies. Cohen argues that even within the study of Black politics and resistance, deviance as a strategy is often overlooked in favor of studying, mass mobilization. In

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\(^{11}\) Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 198.
\(^{12}\) Scott, 183.
particular the resistance of young people of color is often hidden by the various levels of marginality they experience and is easily dismissed because of the disavowal of young people’s rationality. These scholars have coined several useful terms to frame this concept of deviance as resistance. Cohen uses *intentional deviance given limited agency* to describe how the most marginalized individuals in Black communities “act with the limited agency available to them to secure small levels of autonomy in their lives.”  

Rios coins a similar term, *deviant politics*, to describe the “political actions—the resistance—that youth labeled by society as deviant use to respond to punishment that they ubiquitously encounter,” and to gain “redress for the humiliation, stigma, and punishment that they [experience].”  

Finally, Shelby, using the term *political ethics of the oppressed*, posits that some actions of the urban poor which are labeled deviant or pathological are actually moral responses to injustice.

One question this literature prompts is how to distinguish between acts of defiance which aim to preserve self-respect by refusing to comply with unjust requirements or normative modes of behavior, and acts that can alter unjust systems and redistribute power. Shelby writes that “there is an ethic of resistance aimed at liberation and ethic of resistance aimed at living with self-respect despite insurmountable injustice.”  

Cohen, in particular, insists on distinguishing between deviance, defiance, and resistance. She suggests that “many of the acts labeled resistance by scholars of oppositional politics have not been attempts at resistance at

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16 Shelby, *Dark Ghettos*, 5.
17 Shelby, 221.
all, but instead the struggle of those most marginal to maintain or regain some agency in their lives.” At first glance, it might seem like truancy would fall into this second category. It is hard to imagine how individual decisions to skip school could alter the racist disciplinary mechanisms of school, the segregation and underfunding of schools, the economic structures that prevent schools from making good on their equalizing promise, or any of the other dynamics of schools from which truant youth might be dissenting.

However, what makes a deviant act a form of political resistance, according to Cohen, is the “intent to defy laws, interaction, obligations, and normative assumptions viewed as systemically unfair.” Thus, deviant acts do not necessarily have to possess the expressed aim or be effective in changing unfair arrangements in order to rightly be considered resistance. Instead, those engaging in the acts must simply understand their behavior to be intentional responses to conditions they deem unjust. Through this definition, it is fully possible to consider truancy a form of politicized resistance.

Both Cohen and Kelley further argue that within these everyday acts of defiance lie the possibility for more transformative modes of organizing. Kelley writes that “Daily acts of resistance and survival have had consequences for existing power relations,” which is evidenced by the fact that “the powerful have deployed immense resources in order to avoid those consequences or to punish transgressors.”

This is certainly true of truancy. In DC and elsewhere, there are police officers,

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19 Cohen, 39.
20 Kelley, 9.
probation officers, school administrators, prosecutors, and judges whose entire workloads are dedicated to finding those not in school and enforcing their attendance. This suggests that skipping school poses a threat to established norms, enough so that it affects how state power is wielded.

These scholars also suggest that even if every day acts of individual resistance are not necessarily actively intent on transforming social realities, they can lay the groundwork for more radical political possibilities. Cohen writes that, “The cumulative impact of such [deviant] choices might be the creation of spaces or counter publics” where “seemingly deviant, unconnected behavior can be transformed into conscious acts of resistance that serve as the basis for a mobilized politics of deviance.”

Rios similarly notes that, for some of the boys he studied, their deviant responses to their own criminalization transformed into more sustained political critiques and actions. A number of the Oakland youth he observed participated in protests after the police killing of Oscar Grant at the Fruitvale BART station in 2009. They connected the murder of Grant to their own experiences of being targeted and abused by the Oakland police both inside and outside of school. Rios concludes that, for these boys, “deviance led the development of oppositional consciousness and political activism, which in turn, empowered some boys to become agents who fought to dismantle punitive social control and transform other forms of oppression.”

Similarly, skipping school may be the first step in taking an oppositional stance towards institutions that underserve and actively criminalize people of color. These scholars not only do the important work of laying the theoretical groundwork for an

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21 Cohen, “Deviance as Resistance,” 43.
22 Rios, Punished, 121.
analysis of truancy as resistance, but also point to deep historical precedent for this type of resistance.

*Historicizing Deviance as Resistance*

Another way to think about truancy is through queer theorist Stephen Dillion’s concept of fugitivity. Dillon argues that in the 1960s and 70s, as prisons became a primary mechanism for dealing with economically surplus and politically threatening populations, fugitivity, as a means of escaping the carceral state, became a primary form of resistance.²³ Although Dillon discusses political fugitives of the era, including Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, and underground radical groups such as the George Jackson Brigade and the Weather Underground, his description of the figure of the fugitive is also a particularly apt way to think about truants. He writes, the “fugitive is a figure we can turn to as a site for an immanent critique of the state’s policing and penal powers—a figure produced by those same formations.” The fugitive demonstrates what it means to be “unfit for subjection,” and embodies possibility of escape.²⁴ In this vein, if truancy is in fact a response to the disciplinary regimes of schools, then truants are also simultaneously produced by schools and a critique of schools. They demonstrate that subjection to school norms and discipline is not the only option.

According to Dillion, the key mode of resistance for the fugitive was mobility. He writes that envisioning a freedom beyond merely the absence of coercion, “many

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political fugitives conceptualized freedom through metaphors of movement.”²⁵ This centering of mobility allows us to think about schools and compulsory education in relation to the ongoing history of institutions and laws designed to restrict the movement of working-class people of color. We might think not just of prisons and jails but also the Fugitive Slave Act, Indian reservations, broken-windows style anti-loitering laws, debt peonage, redlining, ICE and Border Control, among other resources used to prevent the mobility of racialized subjects. Alongside these ever-evolving means of containing these populations, there have always emerged forms of resistance. As one example, Hartman comments on the phrase “stealing away,” to describe how an enslaved person’s claiming of space apart from the totalizing subjugation of the plantation, however temporarily, was viewed as a form of theft and criminalized. According to Hartman, stealing away involved “unlicensed movement,” and therefore “transgress[ed] the policed space of subordination.”²⁶

Considering labor struggles in the twentieth century, Kelley further posits that mobility has long been a key strategy in Black working-class resistance. The ability to seek work elsewhere afforded workers the freedom to search for better working conditions and some power to negotiate with employers for better treatment. Yet, in response employers and their political allies developed creative tactics to limit Black mobility including vagrancy laws, debt peonage, black listing, and often terror. Despite this, Kelley claims that “the most pervasive form of Black protest was simply to leave.”²⁷ In other words, when other avenues of protest and organization were off-

²⁵ Dillon, Fugitive Life, 56.
²⁶ Hartman, Scenes of Subjection, 69.
²⁷ Kelley, Race Rebels, 25.
limits to Black workers, exodus and absenteeism became key instruments of resistance. Because employers saw the threat that this freedom to move posed, they criminalized Black working-class mobility in order to ensure a static, permanent, and docile Black working class.

From “stealing away” under slavery, to absenteeism in the factory, and fugitivity during the rise of the carceral state, truancy certainly seems consistent with this long history of resisting racialized and classed forms of containment. Gabbard’s recollection of his school age fantasy of a “school break,” described in the previous chapter, is a particularly apt metaphor for thinking about skipping school as a form of physical escape. In other words, when students opt out of school they resist the limitations on their freedom of mobility that compulsory education entails.

In a sense, the relationship between the racialized systems of containment and visions of freedom based in mobility is a dialectical one. Sites of total control like plantations, factories, prisons, or even schools, engender in contained subjects a vision of freedom that hinges on movement. Yet, this mobility necessarily serves as a threat to state power, which in turn leads to an extension of policing into previously unregulated spaces. This phenomenon is clear in relation to truancy. Schools are used to contain and neutralize the radical imaginaries of marginalized youth; thus, youth opt out of school in order to reassert their freedom. In response, the state dispatches truancy officers, social workers, and judges to intervene in the community and family lives of these young people. Skipping school is seen as threatening because it takes students out of the controlled environment of schools and thus has to be channeled into another form of control, the criminal legal system.
Hartman, Kelley, and Dillion all also point to another facet of resistance worth mentioning in relation to truancy and deeply related to mobility: congregation. Part of what characterizes the spaces created by “stealing away,” absenteeism, or fugitivity is the possibility they open up for forming collectivities that would otherwise be prohibited in dominant spaces. This is also what Cohen suggests when she discusses counter publics that “through the repetition of deviant practices by multiple individuals” create “new identities, communities, values, and politics” (emphasis added). Dillion writes that, “the fugitive is not a solitary figure,” but makes up part of the “collectivity of the underground.”

When students get away with skipping school, they often congregate in ways disallowed by school rules or regulated by school officials. B.B. told me that when patrolling for students skipping school, she rarely encountered individual truant students, but rather knew to be on the lookout for groups of young people. While school may seem like the ideal place for young people to gather and build connections, not only are schools often hostile environments in general for marginalized youth, but groups of students congregating in the hallways between classes or breaks are often viewed as a security threat and are policed. Jonathan Simon writes, “the corridors, the site of most significant social behavior in high school, are wholly the space of security personnel.”

Congregation outside of policed spaces, like schools, allows for the production of collective political identities. Dillion argues that the underground space

29 Dillon, Fugitive Life, 149.
30 Morgan Kane and B.B, interview by author.
31 Simon, Governing through Crime, 211.
in which the fugitive operates facilitates the production alternative epistemologies and conceptions of freedom. He writes that from this space, “new ways of knowing power and theorizing subjection emerge.” Congregation in these “underground” spaces creates room for discussions of shared experience of marginality, criminalization, and oppression, which facilitate an analysis of how power operates, and thus the development of alternative epistemologies, making these spaces deeply threatening to existing power structures.

But what exactly are new epistemologies emerging from the alternative space created and occupied by those skipping school? This framework of the underground allows us to see that truant youth are not only conceptualizing a form of freedom in direct contrast to the capture and incapacitation that schools physically engage in, but also the forms of freedom articulated in normative conceptions of schooling, that of market freedom. In other words, by skipping school, truant youth demonstrate a disbelief in the myth that if they stay in school they will gain access to an equitable middle-class life, or a belief that working towards this specific ideal of freedom is not worth the sacrifices that it demands. Thus, truancy can be thought of as both a refusal to willingly subject oneself to the disciplinary apparatus of schools, and as a refusal to accept the myth of an equalizing, American Dream style education as the only (or even a real) path to freedom.

Starting with runaway youth from off-reservation boarding schools in the twentieth century, a seemingly obvious example of when the choice to flee school was a form of resistance, this chapter has sought to trace how and why contemporary

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32 Dillon, Fugitive Life, 13.
forms of truancy, absenteeism, or skipping school should also be considered resistant behaviors. By connecting skipping school to other actions taken by subordinate group members to secure their freedom of mobility and right to congregate, we have seen how increasingly prison-like schools and the criminalization of truancy fit into a larger pattern of containment-based forms of racialized social control, and the emergence of forms of escape.

By accepting the dominant frameworks for thinking about truancy and failing to recognize young people’s agency in choosing not to attend school, we are refusing to listen to the broader critique that millions of students who are truant may be making through their actions about their schools and our system of education more broadly. If, instead of labeling the marginalized youth who are disproportionately truant as irrational and lazy, or as immobilized by their poverty, we considered that these young people might be making a reasoned choice not to attend school, we would then have to ask far deeper questions about our schools. We would be forced to consider the harms marginalized students are experiencing that make schools so unappealing. We might then also look to truant youth as a guide for radically reimagining what schooling in the U.S. looks like. Cohen notes that “some of the most interesting political work around the country is happening among organizations trying to mobilize those segments of society too often deemed deviants—young people who are unemployed, not in school and possibly struggling.”

Taking seriously the idea of skipping school as a legitimate form of resistance, therefore, is the first step towards a mobilized politics of truancy.

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Conclusion: Compulsory Education and Abolitionist Futures

I started this thesis with a quote from Tommy Orange’s book *There There*, a novel about a Native Americans community in Oakland. He writes, “What I’m here to talk about is how our whole approach since day one has been like this: Kids are jumping out the windows of burning buildings, falling to their deaths. And we think the problem is that they’re jumping.”¹ This too, is the approach we have taken to truancy. We are so focused on the “crisis” of students fleeing our schools that we fail to notice our schools are on fire. Instead of looking at the millions of students around the country deserting schools as a smoke detector, a warning that something is deeply wrong with our schools, we have developed discourses that condemn, pathologize, and criminalize those who run. And, we have invested in increasingly creative ways to keep students in these schools that are, in a sense, burning them alive.

As this thesis has detailed, U.S. schools have a long history of conditioning low-income and young people of color for a subjugated workforce, enforcing heteronormativity, policing non-white modes of cultural expression, and erasing problematic legacies of settler colonialism and white supremacy from our national history. Yet, in the name of progressive reform, we have built gates, locked doors, sent police officers to roam hallways and neighborhoods, and armed judges with court orders and the threat of incarceration all to keep young people in these schools.

One fundamental question that has been alluded to throughout this thesis, but remains unanswered, is, why is truancy a crime? As has been suggested, the idea that

the state compels young people to attend school because it is in their best interest, is a flawed explanation. If schools were as transformative as we hold them out to be young people would not need laws, truancy officers, or judges to coerce them into attending. There is, however, an alternative way of understanding the logic behind the criminalization of skipping school. Stuart Hall and his colleagues theorized that in the 1960s and 70s the British state responded to a “crisis of hegemony” in which the public increasingly questioned the legitimacy of the prevailing system of racial capitalism, by creating a moral panic around crime and disorder. This moral panic, in turn, justified a police crackdown on those whose identities, behaviors, or politics threatened the social and economic order. They termed this phenomenon *Policing the Crisis*. More recently, Jordan Camp has extended this hypothesis to explain the rise of mass incarceration in the U.S., arguing that after Watts and similar moments of active rebellion against the U.S.’s racial caste system, the state has increasingly turned to criminalizing and incarcerating people of a color as a tool for repressing ideologies and populations that threaten the legitimacy of racial capitalism. He coined this *Incarcerating the Crisis*.

Following this logic, we can begin to see the criminalization of truancy as a response to another “crisis of hegemony.” We can think of the criminalization of truancy as “schooling the crisis.” Through this lens, compulsory attendance is a means of containing and controlling politically threatening populations and repressing alternative epistemologies. This perspective, that schools are used to contain or

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3 Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis*. 
neutralize a threat, is supported by the fact that, throughout U.S. history, school-aged people of color have often been at the forefront of the most radical social movements. In short, if truant youth did not pose a threat to dominant structures, skipping school would not be a crime.

In January 2018 Baltimore Mayor Catherine Pugh released a video in which she stops her car in front of a “squeegee kid,” one of the hundreds of young people who occupy Baltimore’s streets washing windshields for cash. Pugh rolls down her window and repeatedly asks the young man “why are you not in school?” but does not allow him to answer. If she had, he might have told her that he skipped because he felt harassed by school security officers or administrators simply for being young and Black, or that he felt that the sometimes $200 squeegee kids have reported taking home in a day felt like a more worthwhile investment in his future than working towards a high school degree. Pugh, however does not take the time to hear the young man’s grievances before ordering him to “get to school now!”

The fact that Pugh’s office released this interaction as promotional material, suggests that there is some political cost to the public presence of school-aged youth not in school, and some political gain in returning these young people to their rightful place behind school gates. This encounter reveals that part of the political threat of skipping school lies in what it renders visible: the crisis of legitimacy that schools are facing. The public presence of low-income youth of color—disengaged from school, participating in the illicit economy, and engaging in alternative forms of sociality—

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risks exposing a narrative of schooling that runs counter to the deeply held belief in schools as the great equalizer. In moving towards a framework of truancy that understands skipping school not as a symptom of poverty or pathology, but an act of resistance, we can begin to engage in a new analysis of the crisis—truancy is not the crisis, our schools are.

Angela Davis writes that the prison “functions ideologically as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited,” thus relieving us of the “responsibility of seriously engaging the problems of our society.”6 This too, in many ways, is the ideological work of schools. Schools are related to prisons not only by way of the so called “school-to-prison pipeline” through which youth of color are pushed out of schools and into prisons, or through the parallel structures of racialized containment within schools and prisons, but also ideologically. Both prisons and schools hide away populations whose public presence might force us to engage in a serious reckoning with the ongoing devastation wrought by colonialism, racism, and capitalism. A fifteen-year-old girl in Harlem made this argument quite explicitly when she told Kozol, “It’s like were being hidden […] It’s as if you have been put in a garage where, if they don’t have room for something but aren’t sure if they should throw it out, they put it there where they don’t need to think of it again.”7 Yet, if we recognize truancy, as this thesis has suggested, not as a symptom of deviance, pathology, or poverty but a form of resistance, then we are forced to confront what it is that young people are resisting—the fact that, not only has schooling not been the

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6 Davis, Are Prisons Obsolete?, 16.
7 Kozol, The Shame of the Nation, 28.
perfect solution to past injustices, but also that schools continue to be used to enforce these same forms of racial, gendered, and classed oppression they claim to overcome.

Dumas, in his reflection on schools as a site of suffering for African American youth notes that, “The study of suffering does not necessarily offer an answer to the question, ‘So what?’ It is (enough) to make empirical and theoretical space for attention to loss, to meditate on what it means to experience disregard and lack and betrayal.”8 Similarly, this thesis has sought to acknowledge and make space for both the historical and ongoing pain that being in school causes for many marginalized youth, and to recognize the ways in which students exercise agency in refusing and resisting the unjust system that they are subject to. Yet, I also think this work is not merely a reflection on suffering, but also points towards a “so what?,” or an alternative path forward. As Hartman puts it, there is a “promise of a future world that resides in waywardness and the refusal to be governed.”9

Drawing on Angela Davis and the ideological relationship between schools and prison in these final pages allows for a consideration of how an abolitionist framework can be applied to schools. Davis challenges us not to accept institutions that we know to be unjust simply because we cannot imagine alternatives. If we can acknowledge the fact that schooling is actively causing harm to young people, then the bare minimum we can do is to stop punishing them for refusing to subject themselves to this harm. A juvenile justice expert I spoke to described this as a Hippocratic oath for schools: first, do no harm.10 Taking this position requires a

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8 Dumas, “Schooling as a Site of Black Suffering,” 4-5.
10 Vincent Schiraldi, interview by Author, August 13, 2018.
fundamental rethinking, even an abolition, of compulsory education as we know it.

An abolitionist perspective on schooling does not mean getting rid of schools. Instead it would involve doing away with both the physical structures of containment in schools—compulsory education laws, truancy officers, court orders, police and security in schools—as well as what Sojoyner calls “ideological enclosures”—discipline practices, curriculums, and allocation of resources that function to limit the creative expression and liberatory imagination of marginalized students.

I do not believe that an abolitionist perspective means giving up on the powerful potential of school that Dewey, Du Bois, Freire, and countless generations of activists have theorized and fought for. Instead it requires us to ask: what would a school that students actually wanted to attend look like? I do not have the answer to this question; it is one that must be posed to students who, right now, are opting out of school. I know for me, it might have looked like smaller class sizes, more compassionate teachers, fewer police officers and security guards, no metal detectors, and challenging classroom material that helped me understand and confront the social issues of the world around me. I believe that if the perspectives of truant youth were placed at the center of a new discourse on schools the results would be truly transformative. Schools that young people attended not because they were legally compelled to, but because they made them feel valued, challenged, and better equipped to understand and confront the contradictions and injustices that surround them, might start to make real on the liberating promise of schools. Thus, truant youth are not only a sign of the crisis of our schools, but also symbols of hope, possibility, and alternative futures.
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