Rompiendo Alambres: Immigrant Youth Navigating School and Life in St. Louis

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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

The School of Arts and Sciences
Anthropology

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Rompiendo Alambres;
Immigrant Youth Navigating School and Life in St. Louis

by
Julia Katherine Macias

A dissertation presented to
The Graduate School
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2020
St. Louis, Missouri
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Julia K. Macias

Washington University in St. Louis

May 2020
Dedicated to:

The students at the IWC – and the youth who have not found a refuge.

The teachers who help dismantle walls of indifference and create spaces of belonging.
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Rompiendo Alambres;
Immigrant Youth Navigating School and Life in St. Louis

by

Julia Katherine Macias
Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology
Professor Bret Gustafson, Chair

This project focuses on educational and life trajectories of Central American youth in St. Louis, Missouri, who have immigrated unaccompanied from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. By tracking and telling their stories, I hope to amplify these young immigrants’ voices, and complicate others’ perceptions of their place and worth in this country. Current immigration policies and enforcement practices have made the entry process more punitive, restrictive and deadly. The immigrant experience, especially for young people, confronts many state institutions, chief among them the educational system. Institutions like schools become entry points for immigrants but can also be spaces for encounters with new forms of discipline and violence as well as potential sites for positive transformations. Based on eighteen months of research in the International Welcome Center, a public school in St Louis suburbs, this dissertation explores and chronicles the experiences of one group of predominantly Central American immigrants both in the school and in the region.

In chronicling the arrival and presence of unaccompanied Central American minors, I have identified a phenomenon understudied in this particular region. These students are invisible in St. Louis metropolitan region, a region that does not perceive itself as an immigrant
destination, despite its long history of refugee resettlement. Not only are conversations missing regionally, conversations on experiences of immigrants on a local or micro scale are missing in the scholarship as well. This population shift places demands on educational institutions and systems (Suarez-Orozco et. al. 2010), including English language acquisition and mental health counseling.

Immigrant students are often viewed as less worthy, less capable academically, even criminal. I was expecting to find the International Welcome Center to be source of challenges for the students. Instead, I discovered a place of refuge. It is an outlier in a local system unprepared and ambivalent about the rights of Latino immigrants to be in the schools. Using life history narratives, classroom exercises, and long-term hanging out and chatting with the students, I show how young people are impacted by violence and trauma, and continue to confront borders and obstacles in their struggle to get by. Border crossings are a daily occurrence for these students, putting themselves at risk when they leave their front door and travel to school, to work, or to the store. The school itself replicated some of these challenges, given its concerns with security. However, contrary to what other studies have found, the institution was able to act as a place where immigrant youth feel a sense of safety and belonging.

Through this work, I have found that within schools, individual actors seeing these students as whole, as worthy, combined with flexible school policies allowed the teachers to tailor the school environment to serve these students. Their radical flexibility makes space for the lived experiences of their students to dictate the flow of learning and engaging with the school. In understanding the challenges their students face, and seeing them as people to be understood, not bodies to be disciplined, educators are recognizing not only the students’ suffering and trauma, but their worth and contribution to the space (Benson, 2008). Perhaps
without realizing, the teachers are disrupting the oppressive institutional structures that hold these students back.
Chapter 1: Introduction

“It is injustice that makes them cross deserts and seas that become cemeteries. It is injustice that turns them away from places where they might have hope for a dignified life, but instead find themselves before walls of indifference.”

Pope Frances, December 25, 2019 “Urbi et Orbi”

This is a story of young people, 15 or 16 years of age, who have crossed deserts that are cemeteries and struggle to live a dignified and secure life, scaling walls of indifference daily. This is a story of crossing borders, vertical and horizontal, physical and societal borders, and finding a small oasis in this global desert of injustice. In telling their stories and amplifying their voices, this scholarly project intends to re-imagine immigrant youth in the United States, and in so doing, destabilize walls of indifference.

I have spent the past two decades working closely with Latino and immigrant students, primarily in the college setting. I have witnessed real life impacts of immigration policy and practice. I have been able to identify patterns in their lives including institutional obstacles and both positive and negative impacts of educators. As a research assistant for Professors Marcelo and Carol Suarez-Orozco on the Harvard Longitudinal Impact Study, working with Salvadorian and Mexican middle school students in San Francisco and Richmond California, I was able to see the impact of teachers on students’ progress through schools. I transitioned to working with college students around the nation, and finally in St. Louis, supporting primarily Latino students, students of color and immigrant students. National and state policies around education, immigration, and policing had lasting impacts on students’ lives. Even making it to elite colleges, these students cross social and political borders daily. Their collegiate lives are at the
mercy of human actors, staff and faculty who determined their value, overlooked them – or made them invisible, saw them as good, worthy of intervention, or transgressive, in need of punishment or discipline. These observations on the perception and treatment of black, brown, and immigrant students have driven my scholarly project

This project focuses on educational and life trajectories of Central American youth in St. Louis, Missouri, who have immigrated unaccompanied from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. By tracking and telling their stories, I hope to amplify these young immigrants’ voices, and complicate others’ perceptions of their place and worth in this country. In his book, “A Nation of Immigrants,” the late President John F. Kennedy posited, “everywhere immigrants have enriched and strengthened the fabric of American life.” (Kennedy, 1964). In 2005, the United States Customs and Immigration Services (USCIS) published its mission statement building on this belief, declaring its role to “secure America’s promise as a nation of immigrants.” However, in February 2018, USCIS removed that phrase and instead focused on “protecting Americans, securing the homeland and honoring our values,” changing the view of immigrants from benefits to threats (Jordan, 2018) (Giovagnoli, 2018). Current immigration policies and enforcement practices have made the entry process more punitive, restrictive and deadly. The immigrant experience, especially for young people, confronts many state institutions, chief among them the educational system. Institutions like schools become entry points for immigrants but can also be spaces for encounters with new forms of discipline and violence as well as potential sites for positive transformations. Based on eighteen months of research in the International Welcome Center, a public school in St Louis suburbs, this dissertation examines the experience of one group of primarily Latino immigrants and their educational experience.
Scholarship says the immigrant educational experience is more negative than positive in the United States (Murillo Jr., 2009) (Suarez-Orozco 2000). Immigrant students are often viewed as less worthy, less capable academically, even criminal. Furthermore, teachers and districts have little understanding of the immigrant experience. Other scholarship says immigrants can overcome hardships due to their sense of optimism, based on the assumption that life in the US is better for them. I was expecting to find the International Welcome Center to be one of challenges for the students. Instead, I discovered a place of refuge. It is an outlier in a local system unprepared and ambivalent about the rights of Latino immigrants to be in the schools. Using life history narratives, classroom exercises, and long-term hanging out and chatting with the students, I show how young people are impacted by violence and trauma, and continue to confront borders and obstacles in their struggle to get by. Border crossings are a daily occurrence for these students, putting themselves at risk when they leave their front door and travel to school, to work, or to the store. The school itself replicated some of these challenges, given its concerns with security. However, contrary to what other studies have found, the institution was able to act as a place where immigrant youth feel a sense of safety and belonging.

Through this work, I have found that within schools, individual actors seeing these students as whole, as worthy, combined with flexible school policies allowed the teachers to tailor the school environment to serve these students. They have made space for the lived experiences of their students to dictate the flow of learning and engaging with the school. In understanding the challenges their students face, and seeing them as people to be understood, not bodies to be disciplined, educators are recognizing not only the students’ suffering and trauma, but their worth and contribution to the space (Benson, 2008). Perhaps without realizing, the teachers are disrupting the oppressive institutional structures that hold these students back.
In chronicling the arrival and presence of unaccompanied Central American minors, I have identified a phenomenon understudied in this particular region. These students are invisible in the St. Louis metropolitan region, a region that does not perceive itself as an immigrant destination, despite its long history of refugee resettlement. Not only are conversations missing regionally, conversations on experiences of immigrants on a local or micro scale are missing in the scholarship as well. Latino Diasporas move out of traditional areas of migration in the south and southwest, and in larger industrial cities. With the increasing numbers of Central American and Mexican minors entering the United States since 2010, cities are transformed by the changing demographics and changing needs (UNHCR Report 2015). This population shift places demands on educational institutions and systems (Suarez-Orozco et. al. 2010), including English language acquisition and mental health counseling. So much written on immigration focuses on national borders, border towns and large metropolitan areas like Los Angeles, New York, and Miami. Addressing this phenomenon has ramifications both for the St. Louis region and for the literature as a whole. More attention must be paid to the regional phenomena and specificity in smaller inland regions such as St. Louis in order to improve local policies and practices, as well as create a deeper and more complex understanding of immigrant experiences and impacts in the United States.

Significance of the Research

Despite the perception of St. Louis as a Midwestern American city, St. Louis has the third fastest growing immigrant population amongst major metropolitan regions in the US. The foreign-born population has grown steadily since 2014 with growth of 5640 new foreign-born residents between 2017 and 2018 (Sandoval, 2019) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019) (Smith, 2019). Cities like St. Louis should address this question of integrating an immigrant and refugee
population at a time where both the economics and politics are hostile to these groups. With interior regions losing population to coastal areas, cities should have a vested interest in integrating populations that want to live there. Research like this is essential; we must consider the specificity of the questions of federal and state policy, education, and role of the carceral in US immigration throughout the entire nation; we must expand the imagination and geography of immigration in the United States.

The physical, practical and emotional geography of the US border has expanded unevenly on both sides of the border, as have the policies and practice of enforcement. From Trump’s Remain in Mexico policy, to the 1000s of children separated from their parents upon seeking asylum, to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) practice of checking documentation as much 100 miles from the physical border redefines the contours of US borderlands. Immigration, legal or otherwise, is treated as a punishable act. Research shows how carceral models and forms of punishment have spread to the heartland (Johnson and St. Vil 2018). We have an opportunity to intervene now in both daily lives and scholarly conversations to disrupt the structural violence caused by state policies.

The St. Louis region was built on incredible geographic and temporal diversity. It has been a crossroads for countless communities from indigenous city of Cahokia, from 700 -1400 AD, that attracted trade from indigenous groups throughout the American continent, to the control of the region first by the Spanish crown, and then the French crown. Later, as part of the United States, 20th century German and Italian immigrant neighborhoods shaped the identity of the current region. In addition, St. Louis has been a site for refugee resettlement for more than three decades with the largest Bosnian and Serbian population in the United States. However, the overarching discourse in St. Louis has been around contested black-white relations for more
than 150 years. Though a Union state, Missouri was granted permission to retain slaves during the Civil War. Since August of 2014, St. Louis is viewed as a flashpoint for the Black Lives Matter movement, with the killing of Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson, and the ensuing Ferguson protests. Through this critical lens, it is easier to see how white Anti-black racism manifests geographically, financially, economically, educationally, and in terms of policing and the carceral state. There is an important focus on police brutality, policing the poor and non-white, and the use of jails and prisons to control the populations.

Latino immigrant youth arriving in St. Louis are anxious to situate themselves within a new geographic region, a new language, and even new notions of family due to separation through the immigration process. These youth must navigate not only a new civic understanding, but also a new interpellation and interpretation of self. In unpacking concepts of identity, the students I worked with did not see themselves in direct conversation with black-white discourse of the area. They positioned themselves primarily in contrast to dominant white populations, and even more so, to authority figures such as bosses, teachers and police.

Importantly, they are addressing the same concerns through their own experiences. They are at risk of predatory policing-for-profit; they are denied opportunity due to segregated schools and neighborhoods and subject to the state’s use of policies and institutions to maintain entrenched [white] power structures. The state in many of its expressions is an active agent in their exclusion as full citizens. These students have to hide from the state, which includes the schools. There is an opportunity for coalition building, pushing back against the state maintained power structures and borders. We have arrived at an important juncture in the region; the state, its policies and institutions can be utilized as a punitive agent and instrument of control, or to
produce diverse, multiracial democracy that contributes to the population and economic growth of the region.

Anthropology has a rich history of exploring the movement of peoples, material goods and culture. At the turn of the 20th Century, anthropologists increased focus on immigration and immigrants in the United States. My work contributes to the body of knowledge around by providing a rich ethnographic encounter of not only the journeys of unaccompanied immigrant youth, but also the ways in which they build lives in the US. In particular, I provide an analysis of a situation in unaccompanied immigrant youth in the new Latino diaspora, in a region with little prior investigation, and the role of school and teachers on their lives, with particular attention to the radical flexibility of individual actors to support these youth. I build upon a call for the anthropology of the good, showing while educational institutions enact violence upon youth, there are also spaces of refuge and promise.

I work to expand conceptions and perceptions of immigrant youth in American schools, as neither victims, criminals, nor saints. I hope to complicate ideas of optimism as a tool for overcoming. I show that optimism plays a positive role but cannot break down the legal violence. Finally, I contribute to studies of trauma by showing the ongoing impact of trauma on these students’ lives and schools’ lack of preparedness and support. Trauma was a common thread in each student’s story. The need to talk about their experiences rose above all other subjects, elucidating the impact of government policy and enforcement as a means of violence enacted on these youth.

Voices and Stories
I build on the call for research on Latinos based on lived experiences and their own voices as well as utilizing the interactional elements of storytelling (Elenes and Delgado Bernal, 2009) (Irizarry and Nieto, 2009) (Lukose, 2009) (Villenas, 2012). Providing interlocutors a space to tell stories, rather than just respond to questions provides a means to express “multiple and contradictory selves (Villenas, 2012). Concha Delgado Gaitan (2018) talks about the need to “discuss oppression and needs in Latino communities without reducing people to their hardships.” Sofia Villenas (2012) sees Latino educational ethnography as a way to counter “deficit perspectives in documenting and theorizing transnational cultural, language, and literacy practices across home, school, and community.” Bejarano et al. (2019), in working with undocumented immigrants in New Jersey, sees ethnography in which interlocutors tell their stories as “a tool for marginalized people to theorize their lives.” Furthermore, the use of stories can show how the role of the parent or family can be protective in a child’s life (Villenas, 2012). Julio Cammarota (2004) also sees story telling as tool to combat oppression. “Educators and policy makers can support Latino/o resistances to oppression by facilitating their documentation of the life challenges and survival techniques of family members.” Cammarota also looks at family as a protective factor for Latino students: “Family narratives of resistance can serve as powerful motivational resources for helping young Latinas/os endure the pressures within and beyond schools that hinder their academic success (2004).” Tara Yosso, in theorizing models of cultural capital, looks to storytelling to transform theory, arguing that “cultural knowledge within marginalized communities has wealth, has capital (2005)” Building on the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, who calls on people of color to transform the process of theorizing, Yosso (2005) calls for a critical look at whose knowledge counts and whose knowledge is discounted. In this dissertation, I follow these scholars in my attempt to provide a space of expression, to amplify
student voices and ensure their knowledge counts, and to counter oppressive narratives with alternative voices from below. To the extent possible, I also sought to deepen and contextualize this understanding in juxtaposition with their extra-scholastic daily lives.

The New Latino Diaspora

A significant body of research has focused on the New Latino Diaspora- the movement of Latino peoples from established cities to new immigrant destinations. I focus on St. Louis as a microcosm for the new Latino Diaspora and for the crisis of US national identity as the United States grapples with the surge of immigrants and refugees. Between 2010 and 2018, the United States experienced an unprecedented increase of immigrant youth. Political and gang violence in the Northern Triangle Region Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, has grown, fueled by decades of civil war, US intervention, changing international trade agreements, as well as political and economic instability. Resulting local violence and extortion have become so intense that families are sending children alone to the United States by foot, bus, on top of trains (Martinez, 2014, 2017), (Zatz, 2017), (De Leon, 2015). Latino populations in the United States are spreading from traditional urban areas in the United States such as Chicago, Miami, New York, and Los Angeles into smaller Midwestern and southern cities. This demographic shift has been labeled the “New Latino Diaspora” (Hamann and Harklau 2010) (Worthham, 2003) (Villenas, 2012). What happens when immigrants enter into systems or institutions that are not prepared for their arrival, and into racialized frameworks in which they do not have a part? Schools become forms of border control and segregation, or launching points for new lives in new countries (Suarez-Orozco et. al 2011, Lukose, 2007). Villenas sees Latino education as a battleground for America’s culture wars (Villenas, 2012). As the first entry point for immigrant
youth into American society schools play a crucial role in immigrant trajectories (Suarez-Orozco 2008, 2011).

Latinos in the new Latino diaspora are often younger than the general Latino population in the US, and more likely to be Spanish language dominant (Hamman and Harklau. 2010). In areas with little previous contact with Latino immigrants or immigrants in general, improvised interethnic interactions ensue, on the part of Latinos as well as non-Latino whites and blacks (Villenas, 2012) (Bourgois, 1989). Pan Latino identity, claiming belonging or affiliation based on coming from Latino America, subsuming state, national, or indigenous identities, is often interrupted or confused in the Latino diaspora. Latinos create “a hybrid culture not bound by geography or generation” (Villenas, 2012) as immigrants mix with US-born Latinos. Non-Latinos often ascribe monolithic identities to Latinos and Latino immigrants, often categorizing Latinos as Mexican, regardless of country of birth, nor years residing in the United States. Complexities can be lost such as indigeneity, class, race, citizenship, language and sexuality (Villenas, 1997).

Cities located in the New Latino Diaspora such as St. Louis have little interaction with foreign-born populations. Areas of the New Latino Diaspora are predominantly rural or semi-rural areas with farming or manufacturing jobs in abundance (Murillo Jr., 2009). Mirroring work in Anthropology on the New Latino Diaspora is sociological work on new destinations. Several recent works look at Latino immigrant populations in the South. Helen Marrow and Vanessa Ribas, among others look at race, identity and work in southern states, including the role of documentation and the perception, and treatment, of immigrant workers (Marrow, 2012) (Ribas, 2018). Sandoval and Jennings posit that the growth of the Latino population in St. Louis is coupled with an emerging sense of Latinidad, or a sense of belonging based on ethnic identity as
Latino. They see this as socially significant in a traditionally white and African-American state (Jennings and Sandoval, 2012). My research adds to our understanding of immigrant experiences in these areas of “New Latino Diaspora” areas, with a focus on St. Louis which as neither a farming nor manufacturing destination, but a medium sized city in the Midwest.

Violence and Trauma

Another body of research has examined the violence that characterizes the immigrant experience. Immigrant bodies are often seen as illegal bodies, of less value than native bodies. US policy decisions have channeled immigrants into hostile desert terrains in hopes that the difficulty of passage will slow the flow of immigrants through either death or deterrence (De Leon 2008). US immigration officials forcibly separate children from theirs parents, and force asylum seekers to “Remain in México.” These policies put migrants at extreme physical and emotional risk, including lasting emotional trauma, assault and death (Kizuka, 2019) (Rivlin-Nadler, 2020). As the number of residents from the Northern Triangle Countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) seek asylum in the United States increases, the dangers along the way have increased. More than 20,000 migrants and refugees are kidnapped yearly traveling through Mexico. Over 68% of migrants experience violence along the journey including assault, battery, theft, and murder (Medecins Sans Frontieres, 2018) (Rodriguez, 2017) (Rosas, 2012) (Fleury, 2016). For women and children, there are added layers of violence; they are more vulnerable to assault and trafficking. Smugglers target women coercing them to exchange sex for safe passage. Police and government officials perpetrate more than ten percent of sexual violence against migrant women (Parish, 2017) (Fleury, 2016). Surviving the journey to and across the
US-México border is just the beginning of the immigrant journey, especially for the unaccompanied minors who must navigate a new life without the help of trusted adults.

Though I did not intentionally focus on these experiences of violence, I did talk to students about their journeys, and violence was inescapably part of it. Almost every student I interviewed brought up their experiences or their peers’ experiences with violence, loss and trauma. This led me to think about how trauma manifests as an ongoing experience for these students. They grapple daily with the affects of trauma, even in the refuge of the school. Jenny Edkins describes a traumatic event as something that involves force and betrayal of trust: “when the very powers we are convinced will protect us and give us security become our tormentors: when the community of which we considered ourselves members turns against us or when our family is no longer a site of refuge but of danger.” (Edkins, 2003)

For the students I worked with, their safe arrival in St Louis was not the end of their immigration journey. Trauma in the case of these students is more than a physical event or injury but an ongoing response to these events; “trauma happens within the flow of a person’s life (Lester, 2013).” Trauma and healing are parts of these students’ lives. Responses to trauma are culturally and socially informed, as are means of healing; forms of healing may not always be recognized by dominant society (Lester, 2013) (Rosaldo, 2014) (Cornille, 2007) (Suarez-Orozco & Robben, 2000) (Suarez-Orozco C., 2000). Trauma leads to victimization where humans are seen as objects, losing their individuality, and facing mortality (Giesen, 2004).

Another challenge for the students is that their trauma is not necessarily linear, it cannot be forced into a timeline nor does it have an endpoint (Caruth, 1996) (Lester, 2013). There can be lasting psychological impacts of immigration journeys starting with the factors that behind the
immigration decision including witnessing or experiencing violence, and lacking food and other resources for survival (Caruth, 1996) (Geltman PL, 2005) (Advincula, 2014) (Lester, 2013). Before and during their journeys, these young people have witnessed death of family members, fellow travelers, and some have came close to death themselves. Their lives are linked forever to these experiences (Caruth, 1996) (Cornille, 2007).

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, anxiety, even guilt for having survived or feeling responsible for a families’ immigration decisions are factors that surface in the lives of immigrant and refugee children (Richard D. Goldstein, 1997) (Geltman PL, 2005). Young people express nightmares, reliving difficult events, even fear of those events reoccurring; research across groups has shown similar impacts on Somali, Sudanese, Bosnian and Guatemalan unaccompanied minors (Geltman PL, 2005). There are often long term consequences of seeing a parent’s immigration arrest (Advincula, 2014). Psychologist Hank Greenspan shows similar effects of trauma on holocaust survivors. For Holocaust survivors, retelling their stories is a way of continuing the torture, grappling with guilt, as well as healing (Greenspan, 2014). These themes of trauma, guilt and gratitude are threads woven through the lives of the students at IWC. I argue there is a similar sense of guilt for many of the students at the IWC, particularly related to family separation, abandonment or other types of loss.

The Educational Experience

Some of the key areas of interest have focused on the politics of individual, ethnic, and national identity and belonging shaped by educational and residential interfaces (Goode, 1992, Coutin 2018) (Fergus 2004) (Garver & Noguera, 2014) (Ogbru 1998); access to education (Ong, Murillo, Delgado-Bernal, Villenas, Camarrotta, Torres and Baxter-Magolda); and regarding
educational attainment and language. Scholars critique the ‘cultural deficit’ paradigm, seeing Latino cultural attributes as a barrier to educational success and as an explanation for low academic achievement. Instead they look to broader societal influences, as well as structural and institutional influences as responsible for lower academic achievement among Latinos (Carter, Elenes and Delgado Bernal, Irizarry and Nieto, Lukose, Villenas). This paradigm also implicates Latino parents as unable to parent effectively and uninterested in their children’s education (Zarate and Conchas). Bilingual education as well as teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) are also topics of importance and debate (Valdez, Brantmeier, Escamilla).

Further, Suarez-Orozco sees immigrant students as a key fault line through which national identity is formed, especially within school settings. High Stakes Testing is a means of border control, reinforcing social segregation. Schools are also important sites for forming civic consciousness and educational aspirations for immigrants and their families. There are also sites where the politics of race and racialization But this same association subjects Latino immigrant youth to surveillance and assumption of illegality that white students avoided (Ramos-Zayas, 2007). Research on Latino youth has focused on the criminalization (Rosas, 2012) (Vigil, 2003) (Cammarota, 2004) (Peguero, 2011); interfaces with police and immigration authorities (Gonzalez, 2018) (Portes& Rumbault, 2014) (Diaz-Cotto 2006) as well as educational attainment, drop-outs; linguistic ability and bilingual education and identity production (Chavez, 2008) (Ogbu, 1998), (Suarez-Orozco, 2010) (Murillo, 2009) (Villenas, 2009).

My work intersects with these approaches because they are all reflected in the multidimensional and dynamic relationship between the students’ lives and the International Welcome Center as an educational institute, which is equally multidimensional. Much of this research tends to presume that the institution is a fixed and relatively stable space that enacts
some sort of pressure on students who move within and through it. However, institutions are also new and evolving as demographics changes, such as a new Latino diaspora like St Louis.

While traditional areas of Latino migration exhibit both institutional capacity and entrenched opposition, non-traditional receiving regions like Saint Louis become sites of new experiences of struggle and institutional uncertainty, as well as rising racialized anxieties associated with changing demographics (Jennings and Sandoval 2012; Wortham 2003). Schools in particular, often the first entry point for Latino youth into the apparatus of society and citizenship (Ong 2003, Suarez-Orozco 2008; Ramos-Zayas 2007), are flashpoints of both Latino struggles to gain access to public services and collective opportunity, as well as indices of state capacity (or hesitation) to change institutional forms and practices in response. Further complicated by the tensions surrounding black-white social and spatial segregation in the region (recall Ferguson), the slow and growing presence of Latino youth in the region’s educational system offers a context through which to understand whether and how Latino youth are able to access and navigate education and the ways in which institutions shaped in a particular history of racial formation and relations confront these new populations.

To focus on the relationship between students and the institutions as one that was dynamic and multidimensional, I documented student engagements with this context by following the (re)shaping of the state institution (the school system) in a context of historically segregated and under-resourced public school systems. Here the focus will be on the human actors and institutional processes through which Latino ‘presence’ is imagined as a raced, gendered, cultured, ethnic human subject, engaged as an object of knowledge production and acted upon through new institutional practices. My work therefore seeks to document transformation as it emerges in an under-researched setting, and to situate the Latino experience
with the educational system in the wider context of racial relations and tensions in a region historically dominated by ‘black-white’ discourse and segregation (Bourgois 1980; Wells and Crain 1999).

Findings Beyond the School: Documentation, Policing, and Separation

Part of what I discovered, reflecting my argument that students have never fully crossed the border, involves the problem of documentation. For immigrants without legal documentation, existence is “multidimensional,” they are socially and physically present but legally absent in the US. Noncitizens are controlled and validated by their legal documentation (Coutin, 2018). The “undocumented disadvantage” coined by sociologist Ariela Schacter found that (perceived) undocumented status was the largest barrier to symbolic belonging and mobility in communities in the US, above race and class (Flores & Schacter, 2018). Work done by Ariela Schacter and Rene D. Flores shows white Americans assume Mexicans are illegal 60% of times, while they only assume Italians or Indians are illegal 21% of the time (Flores & Schacter, 2018). Studies regarding stereotype threat document assumed connection between immigration status and criminality, alongside perceptions of drug and gang activity among Hispanics is common among the public and policy makers (Bender, 2003). The pairing of these beliefs with a rising Hispanic population can trigger policies, police actions, and community perceptions that “treat residents of pre-dominantly Hispanic communities as threats (Holmes et al., 2008; Martinez, 2007) (Johnson & St. Vil, 2018).

My work, anchored in the field of Anthropology, also draws from Sociology and Education research. Sociologists have a long history of looking at immigration, Latinos, and education. One tenant of this research is the role of assimilation and incorporation, if and how
immigrants fit into the white American mainstream, and the benefits and detriments of such actions. Particularly informative is the decades of work by Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbault on immigration assimilation through generations of immigration. Their volume “Immigrant America” (Portes & Rumbault, 2014), looks at immigrant settlement and spatial mobility, education, work, ethnicity and citizenship, language, ensuing generations and the impact of public policy on immigrant lives. Min Zhou’s work on assimilation in Asian American communities, also looks at educational, linguistic and neighborhood settings (Zhou, 1997, 2009). Recent works in sociology looks at concepts of legality and illegality (De Genova, 2005, Massey and Bartley, 2005, Donata and Armenta, 2011, Kanstroom, 2007) and legal violence enacted on immigrants (Menjivar and Abrego, 2012). Others look at the violence of family separation (Derby, 2018) (Abrego, 2018) (Terrio, 2015). Roberto Gonzalez’ work, Lives in Limbo, shows how society and the educational system creates barriers preventing immigrant youth from achieving success in higher education, pushing them to the same low paying factory jobs as their peers who drop out of school. Victor Rios and other sociologists look at the criminalization of black and brown bodies, particularly young Latino immigrant youth seen as criminals. This dovetails importantly with Ariela Schacter’s work on the documented disadvantage, Latinos perceived as illegal, regardless of their immigration status. Menjivar looks closely at the social hierarchy of documentation status and violence enacted through the criminalization of immigration law (Menjivar, 2012).

Cruel Optimism or a Space of Refuge?

My research also suggests that institutions can have a positive relationship with immigrant students, but I do not mean to deny that challenging and often harmful relationships that many Latino and immigrant students face daily in this country. We often think of
immigration in terms of individual actions. Specific people chose to leave their home country, chose to journey to the US and chose to succeed or fail while her. Research shows that social, political, and economic phenomena force individual actions at every step of the journey. Racialization of Mexican and other Latino bodies has occurred for at least two centuries, with early documentation appearing during the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, in 1848. Government documents show the region of Mexico chosen for the US territory was because it contained the largest amount of territory with the fewest amount of Mexican people, who were considered unfit for modern civilization. (Genova, 2002) The conflation of undocumented and illegality, the criminalization of immigration, arose in the late 1960s with the end of the Bracero Program. (Chomsky, 2014) An increasing global apartheid between Northern (rich) and Southern (poor) countries relied on immigration policy to exclude immigrants from society and exploit immigrant labor for the benefit of society.

In the Land of Open Graves, Jason De Leon (2015) explores the fatal impact of “Prevention Through Deterrence,” a the US policy enact in 1995 to push migrants to deadly desert regions to lesson cost of border patrol. Despite its ineffectiveness, Prevention through Deterence is still in place; immigration continues to rise, as do the number of deaths along that US border, making it one of the deadliest borders in the world. In 2008, the US government created Operation Streamline, a court process to charge immigrants with criminal offenses, reinforcing the conception of immigration and immigrants as criminal. (Chomsky, 2014). Parallel to criminalization and incarceration of black bodies (Alexander, 2010), US laws around immigration intentionally criminalize Latinos, a group no longer defined by race, to exclude Latinos and Latino immigrants from full benefits of society, while simultaneously exploiting their place in the US labor market (Chomsky, 2014) (Genova, 2002).
These forces pushing on individual actors creates a sense of “cruel optimism” for immigrants in general, but particularly for immigrant youth. (Bartlett, 2018, Vol. 49 Issue 4). Children feel pressure to do well in school to make up for family’s sacrifices. Yet scholastic institutions and society are not built to support their educational mobility. These students usually land in poor, segregated schools and are faced with high-stakes testing not in their primary language, as well as experiencing suspicion and discrimination. Students fail academically and blame themselves, or blamed by their families, instead of understanding the system in which they are trapped. Bartlett et all, call this the “cruel optimism of educational striving.” This inability to succeed places shame on the individual, a trauma they carry with them into adulthood.

Though seen as place of social mobility, school is often a place of social reproduction, a space where “a few can make it, a class will never follow.” Willis also looks at the role of masculinity and conformity, and the attribution of boys’ behavior to pathology or deficiency, rather than burgeoning maturity, seeking independence or other positive traits. Though not about immigrant students, these concepts parallel the experiences of immigrant youth. Immigrants, particularly young men often experience similar teacher interactions and labeling. Whereas a white student’s lack of engagement may be attributed to ADHD, a Latino student may be perceived as not caring or respecting school rules. In many cases, Willis’ theory holds true, there are rarified spaces where school can be a space for contestation as well as reproduction. Kathy Escamilla and others look at the perception of a Latino achievement gap as a myth. Pushing back against assumption that there is an achievement gap we need to become more critical of high-stakes testing, educational policies that see language differences “as problems to eradicate” instead of seeing instead of seeing multilingualism as a benefit. (Escamilla K. C., 2005)
Ogbu, Gibson, Tienda, the Suarez-Orozco’s and others have looked at the role of optimism in the success of immigrants. The dual frame of reference, optimism of voluntary immigrants willing to face any odds in the host country because conditions are worse in their home country, is seen as an important factor in educational and economic success. Optimism increases agency. (Kao and Tienda, 1995). This is a Deleusian sentiment, that desire can overcome the impossible. Immigrants desire to survive, to succeed, is a tool to overcoming structural and institutional barriers. In the current era in the United States, “optimism cannot overcome material circumstance.” (Bartlett, 2018). While it may work for some, most immigrants cannot overcome the incredible structural barriers and borders in their way. (Willis, 1977) Ethnographic work with refugees shows the cost of optimism, refugees focus on hope and optimism of being accepted into a new country, but arrive in new cities “where conditions provided by the liberal capitalist state are not only insufficient to help them flourish but also expose them to further trauma (Bonet, 2018). These students are striving to belong in their new home, and to succeed in school as a means of supporting their families and their familial expectations. Berlant’s concept of cruel optimism rings true, the cruelty of this immigrant optimism is that what they desire is an obstacle to their success. (Berlant, 2011) Belonging in a society that sees them as criminal and in a school system set up to fail them, no amount of hard work on behalf of the students will overcome this situation.

Within this tension between cruel optimism and space of refuge, I situate my effort to represent the immigrant experience within the broader research on immigrants and educational systems. Rather than presume that the institution has “effects” on students, I try to understand the changing, dynamic and multidimensional relationship between student life trajectories and the institutional relationships. My goal is primarily ethnographic, to document the voices and
stories of these students as a way of bearing witness. Key themes examined in the chapters that follow are family, work, the role of school, and the immigration journey.

Research Setting

Nationally, Immigration issues are top of mind and top of Twitter, with an incredible uptick in visibility, fear and anxiety since the inauguration of Donald Trump in 2017. Under his leadership, immigration policies of flexed, changed, immigration enforcement has become more visible and, more wide sweeping. Under the Obama administration, which did not have the best reputation for immigration (Obama was dubbed Deporter in Chief), enforcement policy focused on immigrants with criminal records; those who had broken the law, a danger to others. Under the Trump Administration, assertions of crisis at the border (not backed up by data), and the fight for a border wall are consistent talking points. His administration ended the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, though it is currently being evaluated by the Supreme Court. Enforcement focus has broadened to include families with children who have not reported to immigration court, immigrants who did not declare intent at major border checkpoints, or in country they entered prior to arriving at the US border (in many cases, this means Mexico). Immigration policy has changed rapidly, with family separation, banning entry for citizens from certain countries (predominantly Muslim, middle eastern countries, and Venezuela), to creating policy barriers such as the “Remain in Mexico” Program, to only considering immigration cases if they have gone through the right border check point, to not reviewing cases for asylum seekers who did not attempt asylum in the country they arrived in prior to the US (in many cases, this means Mexico). These policy changes come swiftly, are struck down by the courts, amended, and often reinstated.
In 2015, there were 324 million people in the United States, 14% of whom were Foreign-Born. According to the Pew Research Group, migration will be the driving force of population growth in the US over the next several decades. By 2065, it is estimated that of the 441 million people, 18% of the US population will be foreign born and an additional 18% will be second generation immigrants (children of immigrants). By 2065, it is predicted that one in three Americans will be foreign born or children of foreign born, compared with one in four in 2015 (Sandoval, 2019).

Missouri is perceived as a parochial or insular state with few immigrants, or foreign-born residents. The low percentage of passport holders and very lower percentage of Foreign Born in the state support that perception. Very few citizens holding passports, indicates that few Missourians travel out of the United States. Their interaction with immigrants and international tourists has been low. That is changing rapidly over the last 15 years. There are over 300 immigrant or emerging immigrant destinations in the state of Missouri. Despite this growth, the total foreign born is much lower than the national average of 14.4% foreign born (this includes citizens and non-citizens). In St. Louis, 95.4% of the population is native born, with less than 5% of the population foreign-born. To provide context, Miami recently rose to 40% foreign born, and cities like New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles at approximately 30% foreign-born population. Few cities have smaller foreign-born population than St. Louis, with the exception of cities like Birmingham, Alabama and Akron, Ohio. (U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration, n.d.) (Sandoval, October 24, 2019)

The St. Louis region faces social and political challenges including stigma, and racism amid the predominant narrative of black/white tension and anti-immigrant state political arena. St. Louis has a long history of black-white racial discourse, with little conversation around
groups outside this binary (Gordon, Bourgois, Sandoval). St. Louis City and County have experienced population and economic decline including both a decrease in white and black populations [Gordon] and loss of industrial jobs. Immigrants, including Latino immigrants seen as answer to residential, spiritual and economic revitalization by community organizations such as the St. Louis Mosaic Project and the Regional Chamber of Commerce, as well as the Archdiocese of St. Louis. Yet strong anti-immigrant sentiment is reflected in local and state legislation including limiting scholarships for public education. My research will build on the literature on Latinos in/and educational settings, but will contribute understandings of an under-researched setting while focusing in particular on the politics of race and institutional change in a context deeply shaped by racial segregation and tension).

The immigrant or foreign-born population in St. Louis is more diverse than other cities and towns in Missouri, including Kansas City. In Kansas City, the largest population is Hispanic with 43.5%. Mexicans are the largest group, with Hondurans, Guatemalans and Salvadorians as the 6th, 8th, and 10th largest groups. In St. Louis, Central Americans do not make the top ten largest immigrant groups. 38% of St. Louis foreign-born are Asian, 32.8% are non-Hispanic whites, including immigrants from Bosnia, and Serbia, 18% are Hispanic and 7.7% of St. Louis Foreign Born identify as Black. In St. Louis, immigrants from India outnumber immigrants from Mexico. (Sandoval, October 24, 2019) There are almost equal numbers of citizen versus non-citizen immigrants in the region. Interestingly the level of educational attainment does not differ widely in St. Louis between citizen and non-citizen immigrants with 21.6% of citizen immigrants holding a bachelor’s degree and 19.4% of non-citizens reaching the same milestone. There is a economic difference for citizens. Almost 20% of non-citizen immigrants live below the poverty line while only 11% of citizens live below the poverty line. What makes this study
more salient is that in October 2019, St. Louis became the third fastest growing immigrant
destination in the country. The region is underprepared for the population growth, particularly
related to services in languages other than English. Many school districts have seen a sharp
increase in English language learners. However, there is a shortage of teachers of English as a
second language, as well as teachers prepared to support immigrant students in their classrooms
more generally (Delaney, 2018). Understanding and meeting the needs of immigrant youth will
be important to more schools across the region.

Methods
My research was carried out in consultation with Washington University Institutional Review Board (IRB) office. I received an exemption from the Washington University IRB. After receiving my application, they determined I did not need clearance as I was focusing on oral histories and routine classroom observation. All names used in the dissertation are pseudonyms to protect individual identities. Photos and any images were altered to obscure identity as well. I did not attempt to disguise the identification of the Ritenour School District. As the only school of its kind in the county, it would be false to assume the International Welcome Center’s identity could be hidden. I worked with the Assistant School Superintendent and the teachers on this project and on this issue. They are aware I am writing about these experiences. Finally, it is important to note that I do not discuss immigration status of the students. This was done intentionally to respect their privacy and ensure the safety of my co-collaborators.

Safeguarding the identities of my co-collaborators and students was very important to me and to the project. These are young people who are dealing with very traumatic situations, have different types of documentation and visa status, and staying in the US is a matter of safety for most students. In addition to changing names, all student stories discussed in this dissertation have been altered to hide any unique or identifying factors. I only used photos with permission of the students, and altered these photos to avoid facial recognition.

My research is ethnographically anchored in at the International Welcome Center in the Ritenour School District that currently serves newcomers, (recent immigrants), and its surrounding communities. The Ritenour School District is a public school district located in northwest St. Louis County. Although there is less than 5% foreign-born in the St. Louis region, Hispanic or Latino students make up 15.7% of the student population in the Ritenour District.
This area has become an ethnic enclave with high percentages of residents from Mexico as well as Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Stores, restaurants, and churches catering to Spanish-speaking populations are growing in the area. Five of the nine cities in the Ritenour School District are among the ten cities with the highest percentage of Latino population in St. Louis County according to the 2010 Census. There are 6252 students in the district; 35.9% identify as white, 39.4% identify as Black, and 15.7% as Hispanic. 80% of students in the Ritenour District are eligible for free, or reduced price lunch.

I spent eighteen months at the International Welcome Center from January 2017 through June 2018. Sources for this project include classroom observation, participation as a teacher, teacher’s assistant, and classroom volunteer, informal conversations with students, and in-depth semi-structured interviews with students and teachers. My role in the classroom took on many forms. It was important to be nimble as needs in the IWC changed daily. I taught two sections of an Oral Communications class, designing and implementing curriculum to help IWC student practice and improve their spoken English skills. I assisted different teachers in their classrooms, helping students with projects and often serving as a translator. I assisted during special events such as celebratory or goodbye potlucks at the school, fire drills, walks to the book-mobile, and off-campus field trips. I organized two field trips to Washington University for students to visit a university campus. I also took photos at events, with students’ permission, often at students’ requests. All of these roles and activities provided informal spaces to connect with the students and create relationships. In informal settings, I spoke mostly in Spanish with the students unless they were non-Spanish speakers. At the request of the district, my classes were taught primarily in English. I conducted formal interviews with students in the Spring of 2018. The teachers provided classroom space for student interviews. All interviews were conducted in Spanish. I
conducted interviews with teachers off campus, and in English. Text conversations with teachers were common as well.

In taking on this project, I had the privilege of working in a community in my backyard. As a native of St. Louis, I wanted to be able to complicate the story for my beloved city that struggles not only with race relations, but how or if to welcome new people. St. Louis has been undergoing a transformation over the last 10 years as the immigrant, or foreign born, population is growing in a city that has been historically parochial. I wanted to understand what it was like to be a migrant youth in city like St. Louis that was not used to being an immigrant-receiving city. My hope was in elevating their voices and tell their stories, I could contribute to the conversation. I also wanted to contribute in some immediate way to the lives of my co-collaborators.

If the goal was to learn about these young people in a holistic manner, and to understand the complexity of their lives as students and newcomers to St. Louis, sitting in the back of the classroom would not achieve that. When I approached the school personnel about being a part of the IWC, I was hoping to create a mutually beneficial relationship with the school, teachers, and students. I knew I would gain from the experience and wanted to do more than take from this environment. Mrs. A explained their lack of resources and mentioned that the students did not have an opportunity to practice speaking English. She said they needed more opportunities to build their oral communication skills as well as confidence to help them navigate school, the work place and basic interactions in stores and in the community. Mrs. A asked if I would teach a course or two in the International Welcome Center. I would need to create a curriculum and teach a course on Oral Communications twice a day to students with varying levels of English proficiency.
Teaching a course by myself was never my intention when asking to help. I imagined myself translating for Spanish speakers, helping teachers out with small projects, sitting with a student when they tackled a tough school assignment. But I asked what was needed. If I wanted to truly help, sweeping in and out of the classroom doing insignificant tasks was not what was needed, and therefore not a significant contribution.

I discussed my teaching experience with the IWC teachers- I had taught graduate students in the School of Social Work and designed and overseen a seminar for undergraduate students for several years. I work closely with college students but had no experience teaching at a high school level. Mrs. A said that if I could commit to teaching two classes three times a week, that any experiences the students had practicing their spoken English skills would be beneficial. It would give them a chance to leave the one room of the IWC, learn and interact with a new teacher, even a chance to do something creative. She did emphasize the importance of consistency and respect in the classroom; even as an unpaid volunteer, my attendance would be essential. They often had trouble with volunteers not showing up; this was especially damaging for students who had gone through so many separations at a young age.

I agreed to serve as a teacher in the IWC. I taught two separate sections of Oral Communications on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Each section had 12-15 students per section; student placement was based on exposure to, and proficiency in English. Students in Group A possessed stronger reading and writing skills in English. These students could complete school assignments in English with minimal intervention. Additionally, many of these students were preparing to transition to the mainstream public high school in the district. The second section was Group B/ C. The students in this group had little to no exposure to the English language, formally or informally. They had been in the United States less than one year,
and in some cases, had just arrived. These students were just beginning to adjust to being in the United States, and often times had been out of school for several months due to the immigration process or dangers in their home countries. There were also some students in Group B/C who had growing English skills but were having trouble advancing academically.

I had about a month to create a curriculum. I drew on materials created by ESL educators and education researchers, particularly around language acquisition. Additionally, I took a graduate level Education class on Second Language Acquisition at Washington University, taught by Dr. Cindy Brantmeier. I also drew on my experiences working with college students, creating strong cohesive communities dedicated to working together. I utilized highly interactive activities and projects, designed to get students out of their desks and interacting with each other. This was especially important as the students did not have physical education, nor any arts education. The teachers saw this as an opportunity to get their students moving around, doing something creative and becoming more comfortable with their English skills.

In addition to teaching classes, I helped out in the main IWC classroom. Arriving early each day, I spent time with the teachers as they prepared their day, and filled me in on the successes and challenges of that week. Mrs. A seemed pleased to have a concerned but confidential and neutral party to talk through challenges. I acted as a confessional of sorts, not a teacher, not a school administrator, not local government. When I would arrive at the IWC, students were usually quietly doing work at their desks. This allowed me to check in with the teachers and get a pulse on the events, excitement and challenges for the day. Often one of the teachers would be on the phone with a parent or school administrator regarding a current issue.
I also served as a chaperone, whenever possible to accompany students and teachers on field trips, sometimes simply to the public park across the street, or to the book mobile or dental mobile that would park in the school parking lot a few times a year. Some field trips included going as far as the St. Louis FC Arena and Training facility, home to the professional soccer club in St Louis. I worked with the teachers to invite speakers for the students, mostly professionals who themselves had immigrated and were eager to share their own journeys, and arranged two field trips to Washington University for the students to see a college campus, and talk to students there.

Being the sole teacher in their classroom allowed me to build stronger and deeper relationships with the students than if I was just assisting in the background. On one level, it changed the power dynamic in the relationship. I was the authority figure and I was responsible for giving these students a grade. On the other hand, the class was organized to feel different from their core subjects. I tried to create a more informal, fun environment that allowed the students to be loud, even silly. I was able to work very closely with them, listen to their stories about family and their home countries, to learn about the music they liked, even who was dating whom or who was mad at whom. With the informal structure of the class, we spent a lot of time playing games and laughing which allowed me to build trusting relationships with most students in the classroom.

I did not conduct interviews while I was serving as a teacher. It was important to eliminate a dynamic in which students felt compelled to tell me anything because of the power I held as a teacher. I waited until the following year when I was no longer in an official teaching capacity, to ask students to participate in interviews. At this point, I had a year of working closely with these teenagers in many different capacities; I had been a part of most of their time
in St. Louis. I had been able to gain their trust. With the permission of the teachers, I conducted interviews during school hours. While students cajoled and asked for interviews during math or science class, I utilized flextime to engage with students and take away from other classes. We utilized empty classrooms adjacent to the IWC for the interviews. I conducted 22 semi-structured interviews. All interviews were voluntary and almost all students were given the opportunity to participate. There were a handful of students I did not ask, at the behest of the teachers. The teachers were concerned about that trauma students were experiencing at that time; they worried that these particular students would shut down if asked personal questions. These were primarily young women who had undergone difficult immigration situations or were experiencing challenging situations at home.

During my second year, I assisted as needed, primarily in the Reading classroom. Mrs. T who was a kind and compassionate teacher was the IWC reading specialist. She was not a Spanish speaker nor trained in second language acquisition or had prior experience teaching students for whom English was a second or third language. I spent a lot of time in her classroom helping individual students or small groups of students, translating for Mrs. T when needed, and helping with class activities throughout the school.

Structure of the Dissertation

Following this introduction, chapter 2 traces different immigration journeys experienced by the IWC students. These experiences show the incredible struggles students undertake to arrive at a new home, to gain an idea of how students come to the International Welcome Center, and why their experiences as students differ from other students in St. Louis. I argue that the
daily life of the migrant is still an unfinished journey; they are no longer at home but are never
allowed to fully arrive somewhere else. Chapter 3 explores the school setting, both its relation to
the greater St.Louis region, and what occurs daily within school walls. Based on my
observations, I argue that while the school campus creates a carceral setting, the IWC has
become a refuge for these students. In Chapter 4, we look at the impact of family separation and
reunification in students’ lives. I show that for some students, family can serve as a protective
factor, but family separation and abandonment can have lasting traumatic impacts in the lives of
these young people. Chapter 5 looks closely at my interactions with students in the classroom
and school events. This chapter provides a more holistic look; they are not just victims or
survivors, but complicated and vibrant teenagers. Chapter 6 chronicles experiences of
immigrants in St. Louis, outside of the school campus. I show these young people work very
hard to support themselves and their families, but live in fear of racism, apprehension by police,
and losing family or friends to Immigration and Customs Enforcement. I conclude by reflecting
on the wider implications, considering gaps in my own project, and offering ideas for future
research.
Chapter 2: The Journey

The Journey: Rompiendo Alambres,

In this chapter, we will look at journey stories—how these young people arrived in the United States. We will follow 4 students: Jorge, who walked by himself from rural Guatemala to the US border at age 15, Helbert, from the same aldea, or county in Guatemala who rode a bus to Ciudad Juarez, and Roberta and David who took a plane to Orlando, imagining a trip to Disney World. Themes that arise in each include danger, loss, family separation, guilt, and hope.

In writing about these students’ journeys, I provide a firsthand account of what young people experience as they attempt to make it to the United States. It is important to chronicle not only details of the strenuous journey covering long distances, but also the unexpected dangers and emotional trauma they endure along the way, from leaving family to facing drug cartels. These experiences impact their life in the United States and at school. I hope to complicate the idea of the journey of the migrant. It neither begins nor ends at the physical border, fence, wall, or line. And is that the last border—borders to entry into school, borders to walking freely down the street—when do they finally get beyond all the borders in their way? In fact, I argue that the daily life of the migrant is still an unfinished journey, because they are no longer at home but are never allowed to fully arrive somewhere else.

Before I get to their stories, some background on this chapter will be useful. I did not start out to write about the border, nor the journey. I wanted to explore what happens to the
young people who make it across. I wanted to understand what awaited them upon arriving in St. Louis, and if they felt connected to the country they worked so hard to reach. I wanted to know if they felt they belonged, could belong and if they wanted to stay. And I was curious how the institution such as schools helped them or hindered them in the process of becoming… American? Safe?

I developed relationships with the students in the International Welcome Center through teaching classes, accompanying students on field trips and school activities. As I spent more time with the students, I had more opportunities to talk one-on-one, particularly during school potlucks and times outside. Through these moments and individual interviews, I learned more about each student. When I was able to talk with a student in this manner, I was surprised by how often students chose to discuss their immigration experiences. They volunteered information and guided the conversation to their journeys. They often seemed more willing to talk about this journey then day to day life in St. Louis and at school. Students’ insistence on telling their stories caught me by surprise. I avoided asking directly because I did not want to force them to talk or revisit something traumatic. And yet that was often the bulk of their conversations. It became clear that this was important to the students. Being able to give voice to their journeys and experiences leaving home is salient to my collaborators. I will focus on the experiences of these young people as told to me during my two years working with them. So I offer them here.

The majority of students in the International Welcome Center come from the Central American countries of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. There is a very small group of Mexican students. In the two years I volunteered at the IWC, I also saw students come through from Ethiopia, Jordan, Pakistan, the Phillipines and Vietnam. As I keep attempting to log this
journey, the details become difficult. Where does the journey begin and end? What is linear? There are many temporal shifts and spatial shifts in these students’ journeys and daily lives. Another challenge of the immigration journey and immigrant experience is that their trauma is not necessarily linear, it cannot be forced into a timeline nor does it have an endpoint (Caruth, 1996) (Lester, 2013). There can be lasting psychological impacts of immigration journeys starting with the factors that behind the immigration decision including witnessing or experiencing violence, and lacking food and other resources for survival (Caruth, 1996) (Geltman PL, 2005) (Advincula, 2014) (Lester, 2013). Does it begin the day Jorge or Helbert say goodbye to their families? Does it begin earlier when they get threatened along with their school friends to join a gang or get hurt? Does it begin with they are one or two years old and their fathers leave for the United States to support their family financially when no safe employment can be found in their home countries? And could you argue it begins earlier with civil war and US military and corporate intervention in Central America? Through the telling of these journeys- so many other pieces of each individual’s story emerges. I will do my best to honor their experiences in the order they provide and imbue this writing with meaning that matters to them.

In order to reach St. Louis, these teenagers travel as much as 2500 miles to reach the United States southern border. Many travel primarily on foot. Visas needed to enter and travel through Mexico are often out of reach for most migrants. This makes traveling by bus or train impossible. Migrants are often dependent on smugglers to cross safely and avoid danger. Unfortunately, the smugglers can be a source of danger themselves. It begs the question, why would a 15 year old face these conditions? They are trying to survive, searching for lives of dignity, searching for livable lives. Varela Huerta (Huerta, 2018) theorized that that Central
American migration is actually forced migration. Migrants are escaping femicide, violence of the state, and market violence. Most students’ stories reflects violence as a prime factor for immigration. In particular, this refers to the Northern Triangle (Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador); this maps directly to the student presence at the International Welcome Center.

Many of these students’ stories traveling from Central America and across Mexico reflects what theorists call the “vertical border.” Mexico is considered by some as “the most violent and dangerous country for transit migrants” in the world (Huerta, 2018). The Vertical Border refers to the management of migration by the Mexican state that focuses on “national security” over the security and safety of the people. It includes “enforcement operations, specifically the detection, detention, and deportation of undocumented migrants along the Mexico-Guatemala border” (Huerta, 2018). In 2016, over 140,000 Central American refugees were deported from Mexico (Rodriguez, 2017). In addition, unofficial pacts between drug cartels and government officials and police allow for further exploitation and risk for migrants traveling through Mexico. Medecins Sans Frontieres has declared Mexico an unsafe country for refugees fleeing Central America, with 68% of refugees exposed to violence and kidnapping, and 30% of women experiences sexual abuse (Medecins Sans Frontieres, 2018).
As migrants try to avoid exploitation and bribes from police and military, their paths across Mexico take them into more remote areas. This in turn puts them at greater risk for run-ins with cartels and human trafficking. More than 20,000 kidnappings of Northern Triangle migrants are reported each year with up to 120,000 missing migrants (Fleury, 2016) (Huerta, 2018). This is a border each of these students has had to traverse in order to make it to St. Louis, Missouri.

The students came in a whole variety of methods. Some like Roberta and David took a plane with their parents from México City to Orlando, FL. Their parents said they were traveling to Disney World. When their visa request was denied, according to the kids, the parents decided to stay in the US. Helbert, from a village very close to Jorge, was able to take a 3-day bus ride
from Guatemala to the United States without concern because he had a US sponsor. Some are able to take buses or cars for parts of the journey. However, many people, including young unaccompanied minors have to walk and depend on “guías”, guides and smugglers to get them through dangerous places. Here are their stories.

**Jorge**

*Acá me ha cambiado la vida porque...porque acá hay trabajo. Pero siempre puedes trabajar, pero con el temor de irte. No sabes si te regresen de nuevo. Porque tú no eres de este país, haz cruzado fronteras, has rompido alambres y todo eso. ¿Y eso es un delito verdad? Yo comprendo esto.*

Here my life has changed because there is work. There is work but you always go to work with the fear that you will not return. You aren’t from this country; you have crossed borders, broken wires, crossing a line that can’t be uncrossed), and this is a crime, I understand that.

I have developed a close relationship with Jorge over the past 18 months at the IWC. I began teaching in January. He had only recently arrived in St. Louis in November after a very treacherous and traumatic journey from Guatemala. Jorge is one of the shorter boys in the class, about 5’6, dark skin, straight black hair, often styled in a cool faux-hawk. He wears Addidas Soccer pants and FC Barcelona shirts most days. Jorge traveled on foot for 31 days by himself at age 15 from his rural Guatemalan village to the US-Mexico border. He was detained for another 30 days before being released to his mother. “60 days!” He told me. Exactly 60 days to reach his new home in St. Louis, Missouri. While every story is unique, Jorge’ journey is illustrative of may unaccompanied minors who attempt to reach the United States.

*Una mama es diferente que una tia:* [A mother is different from an aunt]
Many unaccompanied minors leave a parent and siblings behind, to travel to the United States and connect with a distant relative or parent they have not seen in many years. However, Jorge lived in Guatemala for four years without parents. Both of Jorge’s parents left to live and work in the United States. His father left when Jorge was a very young child, less than two years of age. His mother left when Jorge was 11. For four years prior to leaving Guatemala, he and his younger siblings moved from relative to relative. Due to difficult financial and emotional situations, there was not anyone with the means to care for him or his four brothers. Their mother left them in the care of his maternal grandmother when she began her journey to the United States.

Desde cuando era muy pequeño, yo no conocí casi a mi padre. Se vino para acá. Mis padres se separaron y mi mamá me han hablado tantito de él. Y entonces por ese motivo no lo reconozco tanto sólo en fotos. No más vivía con mi mamá, pero después mi mamá se vino para acá. Nos cuidó mi abuela por parte de mi mamá. Entonces ella ya era muy anciana ¿verdad? Ya no podía con nosotros cuatro. No tiene la fuerza suficiente para dar apoyo ¿verdad? Entonces decidimos a que mi tía nos cuidará.

Since I was a little boy, I barely knew my father. He left for the United States and separated from my mom. She hardly talked about him. I only recognized him from photos. Then my mom came to the United States. My maternal grandmother took care of us. She was very old and did not have the strength to care for the four of us. Therefore, we decided to live with our aunt.

Entonces nos cuidó por un par de meses también ¿verdad? Como sabes que una mamá es muy diferente a una tía que lo crean Siempre había disgustos, problemas por diferentes cosas por razones porque ya no es nuestra mamá. Entonces ella se fue de nuevo. Pues vino otra tía, pero es parte de la familia de mi papá. La familia de mi papá sí nos quiere todo eso ¿verdad? Mi abuela sí siempre la vamos a visitar y todo. Entonces se fuimos con mi tía y así pudo con nosotros. Siempre nos da lo que necesitábamos. Los cocinaba y todo eso sin tener problemas; siempre feliz. Pero ella también tenía niños, tenía tres niños y será demasiado.

So she took care of us for a few months, right? But you know a mother is different from an aunt. There were always difficulties, problems because she was not our actual mom. So she left. Another aunt came, on my dad’s side. My dad’s side of the family truly cared for us. She always took care of us and cooked for us without any problems. We were all happy. However, she also had her own three children, so it was too much.
That was the tipping point for Jorge’s family. After shuttling between family members, it became difficult to see a clear way forward for Jorge and his siblings. What struck me is that Jorge talked about needing the love and care of their mother, even more than the material necessities. He set off on his journey for St. Louis to search for ways to reunite his entire family, to reconnect his younger siblings with their mother. “Mis hermanitos va a necesitar muchas cosas de parte de eso. Necesitaban el cariño de mi mamá, necesitaban todo eso qué es lo más importante.” Jorge was scared though. Jorge confided that he was scared to leave his siblings by themselves, and scared of the dangers he might face in trying to get to the United States. “Se necesita valor y necesita mucha fuerza.” You need bravery and a lot of strength.

Cuando yo…cuando yo salí de mi casa pues aparte de lo de estar triste dejar mi familia lo que siempre estado se siente muy, muy triste se siente como si te rompieron corazón dejar todo. a veces los extraño y todo, pero algún día iré de nuevo a visitarlos no sé sólo Dios sabrá.

When I … when I left my house, it was not just feeling sad to leave my family, you feel very sad, it breaks your heart to leave everything. Sometimes I miss them a lot but one day I will go again to visit them… Only God knows.

Even though Jorge felt this journey was crucial for the survival and well-being of his siblings, leaving them alone in Guatemala was very difficult. There was no guarantee that Jorge would make it to the border or make it through the immigration process. Even if he did, there was no way to determine if he would see his siblings again. Despite this, he often mentions feeling guilty for being here in St. Louis, at school, without his siblings. He carries this guilt with him two years after arriving.
Jorge’s mom, living in St. Louis, arranged for and paid “guías” or guides, often referred to as smugglers or coyotes, for Jorge' journey. Jorge traveled on foot with the guías and a large group of men. Jorge did not know any of the other travelers. In fact, he was one of only three men from Guatemala; there was another boy Jorge’ age and a grown man. Neither were from Jorge’ village or area. The other men were primarily from Honduras and El Salvador. For the next 31 days, Jorge would travel with this group of strangers, usually on foot, occasionally in a train or car.

 así veníamos en carro, o otras en bus, pero ... normal en carro venía no muy pesado. Mi viaje duró como 31 días, un mes tuve pasando muchas cosas, casi no sobrevivi.

So that’s how we do it. We come in cars, buses- but that is not very difficult. My journey lasted 31 days; an entire month enduring so many things. I almost died.

Jorge described risks and dangers not just from groups he would encounter, but also from within the group itself, and ultimately from the guides themselves. The guías were unrelenting; they told the group to move when and where. They did not wait or explain their movements. Jorge felt he had to keep up at all time; anyone sick or tired risked being left behind. In addition to the guías, Jorge talked about many other dangers.

Y ví muchas cosas, miraba personas como que se drogaban, y tenía marihuana y todo eso. Ellos les hicieron la persona que quieren o no quieren; le daban de personas a veces agarraron, y siempre nos decían quiere nosotros sí o no. Pero mi mamá me dijo “Cuando tomé ese camino, te van a ofrecer muchas cosas y te dan cosas. No los ves. No los recibes.” Bueno yo hice eso. No lo recibí pero sí vi todo eso. Pues entonces es un camino lleno de cosas que nunca he visto.

I saw many things. I saw people take drugs, marijuana, all that. ... People were always offering, and trying to get you to take it.. Before I left, my mother warned me, “When you take this path, people will tell you things and offer you a lot of things. Do not accept anything.” I listened to my mother’s words and did not accept or try anything. This road showed me things I had never seen in my life.
Some risks and dangers were easier to avoid. While Jorge was armed with the knowledge and conviction to turn down drugs offered, he had no control over other dangers. Jorge and his peers in the IWC often talked about feeling at the mercy of others. It mattered little if the risk experienced was intentional or unintentional, the fear and trauma experienced by Jorge and others was real.

Entonces fue cuando me vine, empezó a mi ruta. Viene cruzando fronteras; pues pasaba por lugares peligrosos resgando mi vida. Venía sufriendo. A veces venía, pero bien apretado y lugares donde no ocupan gente. Se sentía como ahogarse uno. Pero yo siempre echando fuerzas y con todo valor. Lo más dificil fue cuando veníamos como 25 personas en un carro. Fue algo muy que se diga muy arriesgo a todo entonces.

That is when I began my journey crossing borders. We passed through very dangerous places, risking our lives. I suffered a lot. Sometimes we went through very tight places, places where no person should be. You feel like you are going to drown or suffocate. But I kept moving forward, trying to be valiant. Nevertheless, it was difficult. The most difficult was when there were 25 people in a car (train car), it was something very very risky.

Like so many migrants in his situation, Luis feared engaging with police, criminals and members of drug cartels. He knew that kidnapping, extortion, and death were risks of the journey. They did not feel they had recourse or protection from police, as migrants often lack documentation or the police themselves are involved in the extortion.

y pues como en México hay demasiado policías y ladrones y como ahora existen los por decir los Zetas. Entonces nos tocamos unos de eso; fue algo aterrizante, algo muy tenebroso por decir. Entonces para que nada pasara, teníamos que dar dinero. Como mi mamá no tenía lo suficiente ya no sé cómo lo hizo, pero fue y dio dinero a los Zetas. Y entonces ahí fuimos.

In Mexico, there were too many police officers and thieves and what we call Los Zetas [a drug cartel/gang]. One time we ran into Los Zetas and it was very terrifying, it was very scary. They would not let us go unless we gave them money. Somehow, my mom was able to get money to los Zetas. I do not know what she did because she did not have enough money, but she did it. After we paid our money, they allowed us to leave.

Attempting to Cross
After almost 30 days of walking, Jorge and his group arrived at the Texas-Mexico border. The guías divided the approximately 25 men into smaller groups to cross the United States border. So close to the border, the group was dependent on the Guías not just to make it into the United States but more generally for survival. They were in an uninhabited section of the desert with only the resources they brought with them. They carried their own water and food. There was no way to replenish resources. According to Jorge, the guías decided if they liked the men, if they were good or bad, and were able to treat the group in any manner they chose. “We had to put up with everything. If they said to walk faster, we did even when we could not. nos podía mataron o algo así entonces. They could kill us if they wanted to.”

Jorge and six other people were grouped together. They made three attempts at crossing the border. Their first attempt to cross the border was thwarted by heavy presence of immigration officers and police. There was a death the previous day in that area, bringing military and police attention. Jorge’ group slept out in the dessert that night, near the crossing point in order to be ready to cross the following morning.

Jorge became very sick that night. So sick, he said, that he could barely stand. Despite his condition, the guías pushed them forward the following day, insisting they cross. Unfortunately, there was still a large police and ICE presence in the area. The risk of being seen was too high; they did not cross and returned to the desert to sleep.

Entonces por el tercer intento, nos llevaron en la mañana a otro lugar y teníamos que cruzar, pero había un obstáculo. Ese borde necesitaba algo para cruzar; tenemos que utilizar algo para subir ese borde, pero no había. Los guías nos dijeron que ahorita iban, nos dijeron que iba a ir a tener algo para subir el borde, pero no fue así. Nos dejaron ahí nos dejaron ahí perdido absolutamente sin agua, sin comida

On our third attempt, they took us to a different section of the border. When we got to this section, we could not cross. We needed a tool to climb over the barrier. Our guides
left us there; they told us they would return with the tools. They never did. They left us there completely lost, without food or water.

The guides left them in the desert to die or fend for themselves. They had neither water or nor food. Jorge said they were disposed, left like trash. After a full day, they were all very weak. The group searched for water but could not find any. Jorge recounts plants with spines, and many awful things. Overcome by biting insects, dehydration and other dangers; many of the men began to get fevers, including Jorge. On the third afternoon lost without food or water, Jorge said he could not take it anymore.

Imagine being fifteen years old, on your own and completely lost in the desert, you are sick with no water, no food, nor a way to move forward. That was Jorge on day 31; 31 days of walking, hiding, struggling to make it. The guides they paid to help them cross the border abandoned Jorge and his group.

Entonces nos quedamos sin agua buscando agua pero no teníamos agua ya un día completo ya todo ha debilitado ... sin fuerzas ya nos pasamos la tarde otro día siguiente ya no ya no aguantamos ya uno y dos estaba enfermando por los sancudos. Entonces en ese instante tenía demasiados granos por los animalitos todos los animales de sentido no aguanta la fiebre más que está enfermo no aguantaba. Entonces me llamó a mi mamá y le digo yo ya no aguanto yo yo me voy a entregar ver sin saber qué iba a pasar o sí me va a regresar para Guatemala. ... Ya no podía hacer nada.

We were stuck in the desert without water. We looked for water but there was not any to be found. We became weak, without any strength. Another day passed, we were getting sick from all the insect bites. I had so many bites and I could not handle the fever. I was so sick, I thought it was the end, that I would die there in the desert. I called my mother to tell her I tried my hardest but I could not take it any longer.

Overcome by dehydration and insect and animal bites, the seven boys and men became sick, plagued with bites and fever, and still no water. On the third day, in the afternoon, Jorge decided to call his mother. He could not see a way forward and did not know what would happen next. He felt his only options were dying in the desert or returning to Guatemala. He
just needed to tell his mother how far he had come, how hard he tried to make it to her, to the US and to St. Louis.

That same day, immigration officers found the group and transported them to a detention facility. ICE placed the men in what the migrants call “la Hielera” (the freezer). It is a temporary detention space maintained at a very cold temperature. Jorge remained in la Hielera for two days. “A veces no nos dejaban dormir; a veces nos castigaban” “Sometimes they prevented us from sleeping, sometimes they punished us.” Next, Jorge was transferred to a clinic of sorts. I asked Jorge if they helped him there. Only the bare minimum, he said.

Ayudar ayudar? No. Nos dan el mínimo de ayuda, verdad? Solo tenía el mínimo de apoyo. Entonces estuve ahí por eso me preguntaron si tenía una enfermedad. Ellos querían saber si tenía enfermedad por los granos.

Did they help me, really help me? No. They just gave me the bare minimum; they gave me the minimum support possible. They wanted to know if I had an illness due to all my bites and sores.

Two days later, ICE transported Jorge to a place where he was provided hot meals and given more attention. Jorge called it a Casa Hogar, or safe haven. Here he said they gave him real help. They treated him kindly, gave him plenty of food and water. He even had the opportunity to call home to Guatemala. But still Jorge felt alone. “Estuve este mes de mi camino fue demasiado largo si tenía como 15 años.” This month, this journey was too much for someone only 15 years old, Jorge told me.

Yo solo tenía 15 años y estuve bien triste, ¿verdad? Extrañando a mis familiares, a mis hermanos siempre pasaba por mi mente. Me dieron como dos llamadas a Guatemala; sólo escuché a mi hermanita y hermanito. Pues se me parte el alma de escucharlos, ¿verdad? Me decían que me extrañaba y lloraban todo. No pues, yo no podía llorarme porque tenía que hacer el fuerte. No pues, todo eso para que no se ponga así de triste.

I was 15 years old and sad, ok? I missed my family. They were always on my mind, especially my siblings. I was allowed two phone calls to Guatemala. I just listened to
my brother and sister. It broke my heart, my soul, to listen to them tell me they miss me, and cry. However, I could not cry because I had to be strong for them.

On November 29th, Jorge was released from the Casa Hogar and reunited with his mother. He took a bus from Texas to St. Louis. The following week, Jorge began school at the International Welcome Center in St. Ann, Missouri.

**Helbert**

Though Helbert and Jorge come from the same region in Guatemala, their immigration experiences are different. Helbert came with visa sponsorship that facilitated not only his journey to the US but also his daily life in the US. Having a visa instantly provided Helbert with a sense of security at work, at school and on the street. Helbert is fun loving, almost frivolous in his actions. Though he has a serious girlfriend, named India, he enjoys the attention of the girls in class. He gently teases the teachers and his peers, particularly the girls. Helbert picked up English language skills very quickly: within a few months, his command and comfort with English surpassed many peers who have arrived before him. Helbert tells me they taught English in his school in Guatemala- but they spent an entire year and only learned the verb ‘to be.’ He also speaks some K’iche but has always been embarrassed to use it. K’iche is an indigenous Mayan language spoken in that region of Guatemala. Jorge and Maynor also speak K’iche. “It is my grandparents’ language Helbert tells me, it was never very interesting to me.”

I connected with Helbert during his first week or two in St. Louis. During an informal soccer game at recess, Helbert was hit in the eye by a soccer ball. His eye socket was turning shades of purple and black, His left eyelids were swollen shut and fluid was leaking out of the sides. He clearly needed medical attention. I was assisting in Mrs. T’s Reading class. The IWC is in the northern most wing of Hoech Middle School. The school office and the Nurse’s office
were located at the southernmost wing of the school. Because the teaching staff is so sparse, Mrs. T could not leave her class to take Helbert to the Nurse. School rules precluded any student from walking in the hallways unaccompanied. Mrs. T. asked me to accompany Helbert to the Nurse.  

Unfortunately, it was Helbert’s second week in the school, and in the US; he did not know where the Nurse’s office was located. I had only spent time in the IWC wing and the cafeteria; I did not know where the nurse was located. Therefore, we explored the school together. To make things more complicated, I did not have a key card to the school. Each wing or area is locked so we could not travel through the buildings due to the many barriers. It felt like a minimum security prison or a border crossing: you can only travel so far without being blocked by locked doors, staff, or other barriers. Helbert and I found ourselves caught in lobby areas with no way to proceed. We finally exited the school and walked outside until we found the main entrance.  

There is a police car stationed daily in front of the school. As we passed the police officer, I was glad I accompanied Helbert. The police officer stopped us, questioned our presence and our route. He finally waved us on, directing us to the main office. Eventually we located the nurse. The nurse is a monolingual English speaker. And all of the posters and signs in the nurse’s office are in English. Further complicating the issue, the secretary at the school office was also a monolingual English speaker. For most IWC students, speaking and understanding English in their first weeks in the country, is extremely very difficult, both in terms of knowledge and confidence.  

While most everyone in the school was polite and willing to help, it would have been physically impossible for Helbert to go the nurse on his own. Physical barriers existed every 20
to 50 feet in addition to police presence. If he were able to navigate all of that, he could not have communicated with the school secretary or nurse. Furthermore, I am a volunteer, not a paid employee, so if his injury occurred on a different day, he may not have been able to leave the classroom right away. I never would have guessed how a simple request like going to the school nurse would be so difficult.

This unexpected experience helped me create a stronger relationship with Helbert. I would interact with him a few days a week when I helped out in Mrs. T’s English class. She is a dedicated and trained Reading specialist. Mrs. T was hired to help the students at the IWC with reading skills. Unfortunately, Mrs. T does not speak Spanish. For the more advanced English speakers, this was not insurmountable. However, for the newest English speakers, it often made class difficult. I would assist in her class, most often serving as an interpreter, helping students understand the directions, answering language questions so they could engage with class teachings. I often worked with Helbert, and his friend Persephone, who always sat with him. The other students assured me they were not dating because Helbert has a girlfriend. Helbert improved his English proficiency quite rapidly in class; he often needed more help staying on task than understanding the assignments.

When Helbert and I talked, he shared pieces of his life back in Guatemala and his journey to St. Louis. He is excited to be in the United States and has no wish to return to Guatemala. -

Aquí en Estados Unidos, todo es diferente porque hay muchas cosas que no había visto en mi vida. Vine a descubrir y es muy bonito. Estar aquí en la escuela, aprende mucho uno. Siempre me he aprendido muchas cosas, incluso hablar en inglés y siempre me ayuda. Cuando voy a las tiendas, necesito hablaren inglés para pedir algo.

Here is in the United States, everything is different. There are things that I have never seen before in my life. I am discovering many very beautiful things. I am learning so much being in school, included speaking English. It will always help me. English is necessary to speak, for work, to shop at stores.
To be in Guatemala, he tells, is difficult because there are so many criminals. He said he could not leave his house or walk around with his friends without being accosted or threatened. He said his mother was not bothered very often, but he and his friends were always under surveillance or threat. Though he had not been with his father since he was an infant, Helbert reached out to his dad, at the encouragement of his mother.

Well, to be in Guatemala is very difficult because there are so many criminals. It is not easy to live there. My father told me that living in the US is not the same as in Guatemala, I told him that was fine. I told him I wanted to go because I didn’t want to be in Guatemala anymore. So I came here and things are very different.

Once Helbert spoke with his father about needing to leave Guatemala, his father began making plans. One day, without warning, his father called him and told him it was time to leave. His father was able to arrange documentation, visa sponsorship, and a bus ticket for him. Helbert’s visa was sponsored by his stepmother who is a US citizen. Thus, Helbert set off on his journey with official documentation to enter the United States, a rarity amongst his peers.

Unlike Jorge who lived a town away and spent 31 days crossing vertical borders, Helbert packed a suitcase and got on an air-conditioned bus with comfortable cloth seats that reclined. It is still a daunting task, as a teenager to pack up your belongings, say goodbye to your mother and childhood friends, and leave, understanding you may never return to your home. It was a multi-day journey via bus, as it is more than 3000 kilometers (1864 miles) to Cuidad Juarez, Mexico across from El Paso, Texas. Thankfully, it was not dangerous for Helbert.

I asked Helbert what he wanted people in St. Louis to know about his experiences and the experiences of his classmates.

Coming here is difficult. Well for me, it was easy. I did not suffer. For those who went through the desert it was very difficult. You risk your life. You can die or be killed by other people. Animals could eat you. You can eat venomous plants. For me, well, I traveled across México with fake papers. It took three days. On the 4th day, I was in the United States.

I asked if it was difficult to get fake documents to travel across Mexico. Helbert said that with enough money, the process is easy. His dad provided the money. Helbert went to a man who took his photo and made the documents for him. Helbert interjected, most people come across the desert like his father did.

Conozco mucha gente que vinieron por el desierto como mi papá. Mi papá me dijo que es suerte que yo no crucé a pie, no pasé por el desierto. Aquí en la escuela y en San Luis, por cierto, muchos vienen por el desierto. Muchos sufrieron.

I know many people who came through the desert like my father. My father told me I was very luck to not cross on foot, lucky that I did not pass through the desert. Here in school, and in St. Louis, many people came through the desert. Many people suffered.

Helbert moved in with his father, new stepmother and younger half-sister. He said it was strange after living with his mother his whole life. She is all I knew, he said. His older brothers and sisters also remain in Guatemala with their own families. His sister just had a baby when Helbert left for the United States. I asked him how he felt living with a new family. I wondered if it was difficult to settle in.

A veces. Yo no le puedo decir que no o sí. No le vaya a faltar el gasto humano. En Guatemala, la vida está duro. Es mejor aquí porque aquí hay trabajo. Uno puede trabajar de lo que sea. Allá no; la vida es muy barato allá. Se mata uno solo para que le paguen un poquito.

Sometimes. I cannot say anything. It is not my place to say. I am not going to fault him for doing this; there is a human cost. Life is very hard in Guatemala. It is better here, one can work anywhere here. Not in Guatemala, there life is cheap back home. One can
Helbert states that life is cheap in Guatemala. He sees life as disposable because one can be killed for the smallest thing. Theorists talk about “basurizaction” or the disposable nature of migrant lives in the United States. Scholars argue that state and market laws, public policies and cultural representations frame migrants as illegal persons, stripping away dignity and rights under the law (Rosas, 2012) (Coutin, 2018) (Huerta, 2018) (Mbembe, 2019). Necropolitics, governing not through life, through the safety and security of human lives, but through death, shows the disposability of migrants at the US border. Over the last three years, there have been increased reports of border patrol spraying tear gas on migrant women and children who stand too close to the border, families keep in fenced cages under highway ramps in Texas, and small children dying of sepsis in detention centers, separated from their parents. How does it feel for these young people to escape a geography of disposability only to arrive in a new one?

Roberta and David

Roberta and David are brother and sister from Guadalajara, Mexico, one of the few Mexican students in the IWC. Roberta is 16 and a very dedicated student. She does her work diligently and usually without error. She moved from the beginning English group to the advanced English group within a few months. Most students take a full academic year to move up in groups. Many students, even when their English has advanced, ask to stay in the lower group as their confidence has not caught up with their abilities. Roberta is the opposite- she entered class with the intention of learning and moving as fast as she could. And she succeeded. Her younger brother, David, however is different. He is a good student but not very engaged. Though tall and athletic, appearing older than his 14 years, he seems lost at the IWC and in class.
Their immigration journey is very different from most of their peers. First, they traveled together with both of their parents. Roberta and David were one of the only students in the IWC that were not separated from their parents during the immigration process. Secondly, they flew on a plane without knowing they were leaving for good. Their parents told them they would fly to Orlando, from Guadalajara, Mexico.

Roberta and David did not prepare for leaving their old life and beginning a new life. They thought they were just going on vacation to Disney World. The Gonzalez Family did just that. They each packed a small suitcase and flew to Orlando, Florida. Roberta and David and their parents stayed with family friends residing in Orlando, and explored the theme parks. Roberta said “está bonito Orlando pero había mucho calor y no me gustaba.” “Orlando is pretty but too hot. I did not like it.”

According to Roberta, her parents had applied for visas to remain and work in the United States. She said they spent time in Orlando, unsure when they would go home. One day, their parents explained that they would stay in the United States. Their permits did not go through, but they would stay anyway. A few months later, they moved to St. Louis as a family. Their father’s nephew was moving to St. Louis, so they went with him. For Roberta, the hardest part of the immigration journey has been the separation from her extended family. She was used to living with her tios, primos and grandmother in one house. Here in St. Louis, there is very little family. Overall Roberta was happy in St. Louis, excited about learning English and doing well in school.

David on the other hand, seemed to really mourn his life back in Guadalajara. In a class presentation, David talked about what he missed most. While others talked about family
members and or valuable items, David talked about his Pokémon cards. He said if he could do his journey over again, he would have brought his Pokémon cards and figurines.

The journey for young migrants is difficult. It requires perseverance and determination to set out on your own, leaving a known home environment, embarking on a journey that is known to have high risk including death, to arrive in an unknown location with essentially unknown family situation, unknown language and customs. In addition, a successful journey from one’s home country to the US border does not guarantee successful or safe passage into the United States. I hope this chapter illustrates how each story, each journey is different, but also shares similar themes of risk, separation, and hope. Each student’s experience is nonlinear, they must grapple with the impacts of their journeys long after they have arrived in St. Louis. They must navigate relationships with families in their home countries. They must navigate new family and friendship structures. They must find ways to move forward daily, despite the violence and trauma they have experienced or witnessed and they know they must face new neighbors who think they are illegal or criminal (Caruth, 1996) (Flores & Schacter, 2018) (Lester, 2013).

It is important to note there are additional dangers for young women who travel alone, unspeakable risks (Parish, 2017). Although I grew close to many of the young women in the IWC, only Roberta shared her actual immigration journey and hers was an exception. She traveled with both parents and her brother; she traveled by airplane rather than crossing the desert. In the literature, I explore situations that many young women face when attempting to make it to the United States.

In future chapters, I will discuss how the impact of such journeys factor into young people’s experiences in school, work and settling into a new environment. While migrants embark on such journeys in hopes of a more secure life, they undergo trauma including leaving one’s home
community, fear of physical and emotional violence, family separation and reunification, uncertainty of one’s safety both in the journey and in crossing the border, and general uncertainty of what life will hold in their new community, assuming all other things go well. These are enormous stressors and the impacts on the students in the IWC will be discussed in later chapters. Learning about these experiences is important for teachers, neighbors, and policy makers to better grasp the complexities of the experiences of immigrant youth.

Finally, it is important to note that immigration journey continues; it neither starts nor stops at the border. Experiences like the trip to the nurse’s office, always full of hazards that make daily life an experience of constantly feeling vulnerable to being stopped, questioned, hurt, or sent back. Understanding trauma is important too, but the bigger point, is the potential role of the school experience in this struggle to arrive at a new home, which seemingly never ends for this generation. These stories provide context for the future chapters, to gain an idea of how students come to the International Welcome Center, and why their experiences as students differ from other students in St. Louis.
Chapter 3: The School

“The International Welcome Center serves Ritenour students from Hoech and Ritenour middle schools, as well as from Ritenour High School, who need intensive English Language Learner (ELL) support with accelerated English training. The program also provides an introduction to the U.S. culture and school system, and exposure to educational expectations and opportunities. The center gives students the support they need throughout their school day in a small, intimate environment that values their home cultures.”


In this chapter, I describe the physical infrastructure and location of the IWC. I also explore how the IWC students fit in to the wider space of the school and explore what the teachers and students must navigate in their daily work. My goal is to introduce both students and teachers as social actors engaged in an earnest effort to learn, despite numerous challenges and complications that stem from the wider politics of the state, society, and schooling. I argue that against my own intuitions, that in this particular case the school serves as a kind of “refuge” for the students, thanks largely to the efforts of advocacy and care made by two dedicated teachers. I introduce some of their stories here. I start by describing the school’s location in the wider social geography of the region.

Geography

There are roads that stretch for miles crossing through small cities and townships that make up St. Louis County. Warson Road is just such a road. It begins at the Old Warson Country Club and winds through impressive neighborhoods and multi-million dollar homes on
large acreages, sporting long winding driveways, and impressive decorative gates that separate the traffic on Warson Road from the houses on either side. This road passes in front of MICDS, an affluent, highly selective independent school that includes a 20 million dollar stem building and beautiful athletic fields. Before crossing Olive Road, it passes by Monsanto, now Bayer, North American headquarters, a global billion dollar agri-business, fertilizer and chemical business. Going downhill from Olive, Warson dips and as it climbs again, becomes more industrial. Small businesses flank both sides of the street including a family nursery, sign and t-shirt business and other small business parks. It passes by the St. Louis County police headquarters before hitting Page Avenue. Page looks very different from Warson Road. Warehouses, some shuttered and numerous fast food restaurants including Steak n Shake, Rally’s, Sonic, McDonalds, Wendy’s Taco Bell, and Burger King, as well as a Dollar Store and Speedy Emissions Testing. If you were to travel either east or west on Page, you would see similar commercial enterprises as well as warehouses and the federal Family Support Division-Child Support Office.

As Warson Road crosses Page Avenue and Midland Avenue, it becomes Ashby Road. Ashby curves through St. Ann, primarily residential with very small one-story homes, situated close together. Approaching the school, there is a Crown Mart, Us Food and Liquors, two gas stations and St. Ann’s Super Wash. There is a well-appointed nursing home and several churches. The speed limit drops quickly to 30 miles per hour and police cruisers are common. At the top of the hill, before Hoech Middle School, the home of the IWC, I know to slow my speed considerably. The small municipalities over utilize speed traps to generate revenue for the police department, a controversial practice brought to light after the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Ferguson is 7 miles from St. Ann. Attention and legal action is focused on
this practice in north St. Louis County, investigating the legality of speed traps combined with racial profiling and intentional efforts to jail those who cannot pay debts. We will discuss this further in a later chapter. There is usually a cruiser parked next to a trailer turned church, the Remnant Church of God, 7th Day Adventist. Passing this church, you have a large park on the west side and Hoech Middle School on the East side. St. Ann and eight other cities form the Ritenour School District.

Hoech Middle School opened its doors in 1955. The school is named after Alfred Hoech, Ritenour Superintendent from 1920 until 1956. It is an impressive campus with a sprawling set of brick buildings built in 1920s. The Ritenour School District purchased the building in 1953 for 100 dollars. There is a sloping lawn in front with tall trees shading the driveway. School administrative offices sit at the southern end of the building. A police cruiser parks daily on the southern end of the building as well. In the center is a large cafeteria on the ground level. On the northern end is a separate building connected by a walkway. This building is home to the International Welcome Center (IWC).

**Space**

The IWC consists of one classroom tucked at the north end of the large middle school. This classroom houses 22 to 30 students depending on the semester. Imagine an old-fashioned one-room schoolhouse- holding students of many different ages and levels. The IWC has students aged 14 to 19, with varying levels of English, time in the United States, as well as varying amounts of schooling in their home countries. The IWC students have arrived from different countries and continents with the majority of students come from the Central American countries of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. In my two years spent as the IWC, I also
met students from Nicaragua, Mexico, Ethiopia, Pakistan, Jordan, the Philippines, and Vietnam. The numbers fluctuate weekly as new students enter the school, and other students have to leave suddenly with their families. Some students have been out of school for months or years depending on their situations. There are two commonalities between students in the IWC; they have recently arrived in the US and settled in or around St. Ann, Missouri. Second, they have little to no English language experience before arriving in the classroom.

When I visited the school, as I did scores of times during this research, I arrived at the northernmost door of Hoech Middle School. I called the phone line for the IWC to let them know I was there. Ernesto, aged 15, came down to open the locked door for me. Ernesto usually volunteers for this. “Good Morning, Miss. How are you?” He laughs and then jumps down four stairs. We walk into the IWC, the classroom, and the students are finished up a guided reading exercise.

The first year I spent in the IWC, it was difficult to enter or traverse through the school. Most doors were locked; we had to knock on the first floor hallway door unless the teacher gave the student her badge. Entry into the school space was difficult for students as well. Students who arrived late had to use the same call system. The doors to the hallways were also locked-to prevent trouble in the hallways or the wrong students interacting. Students were not allow to leave their classrooms or walk in the hallway without permission and accompaniment. Even finding time to go the bathroom was a challenge: I was told by middle school teachers to keep my students out of the bathroom at certain times to protect them from other students.

Along with the entry process, the classroom, and the bathroom, the other main space of student and teacher life was the cafeteria. Staff were required to escort IWC students to lunch in
the cafeteria with the Hoech Middle School students. They went down a hallway, out a walkway into the main building. There is a big banner over the main doors of the cafeteria that states in English, Spanish and Arabic that everyone is welcome here. The cafeteria was usually busy and chaotic. The red linoleum tile on the floor looked almost like terracotta tiles. The room was full with rectangular tables with attached benches, the type that fold up like a single unit. Two police officers stood at attention in opposite sides of the room.

The school cafeteria was overwhelming for many of the IWC students, due in part to the number of students, the noise and the presence of security officers. Even ordering food can be difficult due to their language skills and the noise in the room. One student told me he always asks for pizza because he knows how to order it. Even when he wants a different item, he is too embarrassed to ask. Another student says he just follows closely behind someone else and says “same”, never sure what he ordered. For other students, they appreciate the ability to move through the school and leave their classroom. The IWC students went through the line together then moved to their specific section. Efforts were made to limit interaction between Hoech and IWC students in the cafeteria. My first assumption that school officials were worried about the immigrant students causing problems. I soon found out they wanted to protect the IWC from the “bad elements” in the Middle School. In the wing shared with the IWC, housed middle school students with disciplinary issues, the “worst students” a school administrator told me. In a reverse of life outside of school, the young immigrant youth, primarily Central American young men, were seen as worthy of protection, not the dangerous ones.

During my first year at the IWC, the students were confined spatially to two rooms in the large and sprawling middle school. There is one room for the 25 high school students, and one room for the 15-20 middle school students. Despite the large size of the Hoech Middle school,
there were no other rooms for the IWC. They did not have access to the gymnasium on a regular basis, nor a gym teacher. When the weather was good, the students were allowed to kick a soccer ball around in the grassy area between the school and the street; there were restrictions to when they could be in the hallway, even when they could use the bathroom. Across the hallway was a smaller classroom that had two attached offices. These offices served as the copy room, storage room, supply room, and teachers’ offices. If a student needed a quiet room or one-on-one with a teacher, they had to get creative and find a space. When it was my turn to teach, I would take a group of students upstairs to the second floor. We would borrow a middle school classroom that was used for evening English classes and math classes, judging from what was written on the white board. It was a bare classroom. The halls were linoleum with lockers lining the hallway in typical fashion. The bathrooms were also bare without real mirrors- just polished stainless steel like in detention centers or restrooms in state parks.

Occasionally we were unable to use classrooms because middle school teachers needed a disciplinary space to work with students. One morning, I walked up the second floor classroom with my students. Ernesto, opened the door for us. Everyone stopped causing a bottleneck at the door. Students stepped aside for me to look into the room. Inside our usual classroom, a teacher, a middle school student, his mother and a two police officers were seated at desks. The teacher politely escorted us out of the classroom. She apologized and said the student was in trouble and they needed the room. There were no other classroom options for us. I walked the students outside to the front of the school. While it is fun to kick the soccer ball around or chat with friends, it was more time out of the classroom, not learning.

Other obstacles related to space were locked doors and stairways. Even when classrooms were empty, their doors would often be locked. I often had to knock on teachers’ doors to ask
them to unlock our classroom. Other times, I had to send a student down to the IWC and borrow the lead teacher’s keys. Hallway and stairway doors were also blocked regularly, prohibited any traversing of the school; once in a hallway, there was no more movement. One class period, I let several students go to the bathroom at the beginning of the class. A middle school teacher came into my classroom and warned me to be careful with my students. She let me know this wing of Hoech housed the most troubled middle school students. They did not want the IWC and middle school students to come in contact in the hallway or bathrooms, worried these “bad” middle school students may hurt the IWC students. The carceral nature of the campus, with locked doors, police presence and hallway surveillance were ever present. While most of the young immigrant youth viewed the school as a safe place, a physical refuge from the dangers outside, the physical and political geography of the school was formidable, nearly impossible to navigate alone.

What made the IWC a place of refuge for the students went beyond physical structures? The teachers’ efforts and sensibilities created a special school within a school. They created an oasis within locked hallways and barriers. The IWC was a break from the carceral feel of Hoech Middle School.

The IWC consisted of one big room for 25-28 kids. The numbers varied as kids came and went. Though cramped with different configuration of desks and tables, the classroom felt warm and inviting. There were colorful pillows, mostly south Asian in design along the windows and standard metal heaters. Above the whiteboards were posters of different sites such as the Colosseum, the Eiffel Tower, Machu Picchu, and messages about traveling the world. On the south wall were posters about being American, school rules and grammar instructions.
Teacher Advocacy

The lead teacher, Mrs. A, had a desk in the corner, with photos of her husband and two young daughters. While not fluent in Spanish, Mrs. A was trained as an ESL teacher and was conscientious of the difficult situations impacting her students. She felt that as a child of immigrants, she had a closer understanding of the struggles of starting a life as a newcomer in the United States. She was quick to add that she did not have the same lived experience as her students; their challenges are very extreme and she does not want to conflate them with all immigrant experiences. The assistant teacher, Ms. B, was born in Mexico. She came to the United States with her family in middle school and attended Ritenour High School. She is a native Spanish speaker and closely identifies with the experiences of the students.

The two teachers worked well together. Mrs. A was empathetic, supportive and ran a well-organized program. She did not, however, relish confrontation between students or with parents. Ms. B ran interference. She was a fierce supporter of her students but also demanded respect and order from those same students. Mrs. A had a strong sense of direction for the IWC and advocated for her students.

The teachers had to balance many different age groups and learning levels in the IWC. They also must balance different language abilities. The students were broken into groups A, B, and C based on English language ability. Some classroom activities and coursework had to be run with all students; when physical and human resources existed, the teachers split up the classroom into groups, mainly by English proficiency. Similar to a one-room schoolhouse, Mrs. A and Ms. B are responsible for teaching all of the subjects: math, science, social studies, English, coding, etc. They alone taught these subjects to a large group of varying ages, levels,
and English proficiency. It is an incredibly difficult job and requires a high level of organization and creativity.

Despite the lack of teaching staff and classroom space, there are technology resources available. Each student had a district provided Chromebook which they could take home at night for homework. All IWC students use google email accounts and google documents to write papers, make presentations and communicate with the teachers. There were smart boards and projectors in the classrooms, textbooks for math, writing, science and social studies. A mobile library visited the school once a month. The IWC did not have any resources for Art, Music, or Physical Education (PE).

Mrs. A noted that many of the challenges they faced in the IWC were outside the traditional curriculum. The teachers were dependent on outside organizations and volunteers like myself to fill in needed resources. In addition to the lack of physical education and arts education, the teachers felt the students lacked time to focus on spoken English. With the limited time in school, the emphasis was on reading and writing comprehension. This focus, mandated by the district, helped the students tackle written assessments needed to move forward in school. The teachers recognized that written English assignments did not enhance the students’ English speaking skills, nor comfort using English language in real life settings. An additional shortfall at the IWC was the lack of a school counselor or social worker. This included counselors and social workers to help students in trauma. The vast majority of students are either survivors of trauma or still living through traumatic situations. Catholic Charities and a few other organizations, when receiving grants, sent social workers to the school. The teachers said this was high quality care but inconsistent; they could not count on anything all year round.
Mrs. A said this was particularly important because of the trauma and challenges the students experienced prior to arriving at the IWC and ongoing challenges living in St. Louis. These traumatic experiences include violence and persecution in their home countries, dangerous immigration journeys, uncertainty around immigration status and policy, and finally the extreme changes and adaptation required when moving to a new country with a new language and customs.

Mrs. A seems trauma informed and tries to keep the students in school successfully but also pay attention to their needs at home and elsewhere. Jenny Edkins describes a traumatic event as something that involves force and betrayal of trust. “What we call trauma takes place when the very powers we are convinced will protect us and give us security become our tormentors, when the community of which we considered ourselves members turns against us or when our family is no longer a site of refuge but of danger (Edkins, 2003).” The students arrive at the IWC, having experienced (or continue to experience) multiple forms of trauma despite their young age. These teenagers arrive at the IWC, escaping danger, unsure who can be trusted and perhaps looking for a refuge, a space to breath. Though hired to teach academic subjects while preparing them for the transition to mainstream high school, these teachers take on much bigger roles.

Perhaps like IWC teachers, I did not set out to explore trauma but rather the educational journey of these young people in St. Louis schools. What I found out quickly, is that the students’ traumas are very much present in their every action and their educational journey is inextricable with their life experiences. Traumatic experiences cannot be left at the classroom door, or tucked in a locker. These students carry the “realm of trauma and the realm of their current ordinary life” with them simultaneously. (Caruth, 1996) In disrupting our understanding
of community, trauma also diminishes our capacity for language, our ability to speak coherently about what has happened (Edkins, 2003). Mrs. A and Ms. B, perhaps as outliers, embrace their students’ realities, incorporating responses to these new challenges as a key part of the teaching pedagogy. I hope to illuminate this further.

Many students have been out of school for months or years, due to situations in their home countries and the length and difficulty of their immigration journey. Adjusting to a classroom setting is challenging; supporting this transition requires patience and awareness on behalf of the teachers. Most students have escaped violent situations in their home countries and often experienced violence or trauma on their journey. Students are living with relatives that they did not know before arriving, or have not seen since they were toddlers. Finally, every student in the IWC is navigating a new country, new language, and competing cultural practices, even new foods and expectations related to behavior.

Mrs. A feels strongly that teachers need training on trauma, as well as how to help students who suffer traumatic situations. She mentions with a laugh that training they have received amounted to having a quiet space with a rug and pillows. She laughs because the experiences of these students are so intense, physically and emotionally, that a rug and a few pillows seem like an insult, to both the teachers and the students. Mrs. A believes strongly that teachers can make a difference in these students’ lives, but they need more training and support to help and not harm these students. She does not believe this is limited to immigrant students; while it would greatly benefit teachers in her position, Mrs. A. thinks all teachers would benefit from training regarding trauma-informed teaching practices.
Through my time in the classroom, I observed how Mrs. A and Ms. B have taken on responsibility for much more than educational requirements. Mrs. A and Ms. B are strong advocates for their students both inside and outside of the classroom. This requires daily observation and engagement with their students, being in tune with their past and current experiences, and being the first to notice changes or warning signs that things are not going well for a particular student. They work to create a space in which they can feel safe and learn is evident in the classroom. They are observant and flexible, willing to adapt curriculum and even classroom rules to keep the students engaged.

I asked the teachers how they know how to do this. Both teachers shrugged. They say they do not have a playbook; they draw on their own lived experiences and the belief that you have to care for the whole student. Ms. B’s upbringing is similar to these students, arriving as a young teenager and a student in the Ritenour School District. Mrs. A again draws on her life as a child of immigrants, growing up in an immigrant community. Both teachers show a great deal of empathy towards their students and make adjustments daily, depending on a student’s situation inside and outside of school.

It is my observation that these teachers serve as an invaluable source of advocacy for these students. These teachers act as social workers, therapists, and parental figures; they believe that the whole student must be cared for in order for learning to take place. Students have had disparate educational experiences in their home countries; the students have experience violence in their home country or during their immigration journey. These students are fearful living in St. Louis due to current policies and sentiments regarding immigration. These are daily sources of stress for the students. What makes these teachers unusual is their willingness to consider
these factors in their daily teaching. Students who have spent time in other St. Louis schools, tell me Mrs. A and Ms. B are more understanding than other teachers.

Over the two years I spent at the IWC, I observed many examples of teacher advocacy that went beyond classroom expectations. The teachers held a unique position of power in these young people’s lives; their practice and their actions impacted much more than a student’s academic progress. In some ways, my presence as an outsider, not a member of the school administration or local government, I become a confessional of sorts. Mrs. A and Ms. B would provide details on the landscape in the IWC each day. They would alert me to who was having trouble with peers or with family; they would encourage me to be more flexible with certain students or not call on a student during moments of crises. For the duration of this chapter, I will illustrate specific examples in which the teachers showed flexibility and courage in order to support each student.

When I first arrived at the school, I met Ricky. He was silly and laughed a lot. He loved playing jokes in class, like sitting in the teacher’s chair. If he arrived early to my class, he would grab the dry-erase marker and pretend to lead the students in lessons, mimicking my way of speaking. Nevertheless, he missed school a lot and when present, he was often late. Occasionally, he was sullen and sat in the back of the class. I noticed his name was often on the board for tardiness or losing his cell phone privileges. The teachers permitted the students to have cell phones at school; students were required to keep phones in their pockets unless specifically allowed to listen to music or play on their phones in the classroom. Students who used their phones at prohibited times lost their phones until the end of the day. I learned from Mrs. A, that Ricky’s father had Ricky, age 15, drive him to work every morning (his father lacks a driver’s license), Ricky would then drive himself to school. Frequently Ricky’s father has been
insisting Ricky skip school for work. Mrs. A has spent quite a bit of time trying to convince the father to let Ricky stay in school. It worked to a certain extent; Ricky finished the school year but did not return the following fall.

In another case, Ms. B lets me know one morning that she is concerned about Elaine. Elaine is living with an older man who is not her father nor family member; the teachers suspect the relationship is not paternal. Elaine began missing school. The teachers reached out to Elaine and her mother to inquire about the situation. Neither Elaine nor her mother were open to speaking with the teachers about her situation but she began to attend school more frequently.

Another example of supporting the whole student is the case of Roxana. Roxana, a seventeen year old from Honduras, was an important member of the school community. She was one of the most mature students; she could easily corral her peers into participating in class activities. Roxana’s family left for Ohio to pursue other work opportunities. Roxana came to school crying, not wanting to leave the IWC, nor her teachers and friends. The teachers threw a goodbye party for her; students brought in dishes to share, from biryani rice to tamales to chips and soda. Roxana later wrote each of us letters thanking us embracing her and for teaching her so much. Less than a month later, she returned to St. Louis and the IWC. She left her parents and returned to St. Louis to live with her sister. She did not feel comfortable or welcome in Ohio; Mrs. A and Ms. B speculate that difficult family dynamics also played a role in her return. She currently works in the kitchen of a local hipster taco fusion restaurant; the burns on her arms are telltale signs of kitchen work.

Roxana has a high level of English proficiency. She is eloquent, poised and able to carry on polite conversations in English. She has a level of academic work, with strong grades and
consistent participation in class. As such, she was eligible to transfer to Ritenour High School. She transferred with a few other students. A few weeks later, she returned to the IWC. Roxana told the teachers that Ritenour High School was too much. She said the school was too big and there were too many people; she also said the work was too difficult. Both Mrs. A and Ms. B think Roxana experienced so many ruptures and transitions in her immigration and immigrant journey; she saw the IWC as her one consistent place of safety and refuge. While the teachers’ goal is to help each student to transfer to the mainstream high school, they felt Roxana earning a high school degree was most important. Mrs. A was able to secure district permission for Roxana to work towards graduation at the IWC. In May 2019, Roxana received her high school diploma from the International Welcome Center. Though she is no longer in the teacher’s care, they still worry about her.

Mrs. A and Ms. B have to navigate many of these situations on an individual basis. Wilson, a student from El Salvador, arrived at the IWC at age 14. He had not been to school in 4 years. A lot of work was required to help him adjust to such a structured environment. Though he was an adept student, he never acted entirely comfortable in the classroom. I could count on him to sit in the back of the room and observe. He was not disruptive but was always removed, except during the silliest activities when the other young men were laughing and participating as well. He had reached academic and English fluency levels that would allow him to transfer to Ritenour High School. Mrs. A feared that if he were asked to transfer, he would stop going to school altogether. He had told her as much. She knew that he was often balancing work and school, and entering a new school may be the breaking point. She was able to allow him to stay and receive his high school diploma through the IWC.
Nancy, from El Salvador, was placed in the lowest English group upon arrival but advanced rapidly. Nancy was always a head turner in class; she was pretty, always dressed stylishly with bright lipstick and precise makeup. She was confident, laughed a lot, and could get the boys to do anything she asked, from giving up their seat, to getting her a pencil, etc. If she felt like participating in a classroom activity, the loud and boisterous boys jumped in quickly. If she was bored by the activities, that same subset of boys acted disinterested. Nancy worked at a fast food restaurant in the kitchen after school every day. Her English skills improved rapidly and she did high level academic work. When Ms. B talked to Nancy about switching to the higher English group in the IWC, she begged the teachers to keep her in the B/C English group. She said she couldn’t do it and she was too scared. “Please Miss, don’t make me switch.” The teachers grappled with what would work for Nancy. They decided to let her stay until the end of the semester before attempting to move her up again. Mrs. A said that these changes only work if the students feel safe enough to work. “If we force them into truly uncomfortable situations, they often just leave.”

In addition to working closely with their students, the IWC teachers spent a good deal of time working with parents on immigration issues. It was common for me to arrive at school and learn about a new situation unfolding. For example, Lourdes arrived at school in the United States, fifteen years old and pregnant. She traveled by herself from Honduras to live with her father. I do not know if Lourdes was pregnant when she left Honduras, or if she became pregnant on her journey; research shows that as much 60 to 80 percent of girls and women experience rape and sexual violence immigrating from the Northern Triangle of Central America (Fleury, 2016). Lourdes enrolled in the IWC. After three weeks, the school district asked Lourdes to stop attending until she produced proper immunization records or received the
appropriate vaccinations. Most immigrant youth arrive in the US without immunization or other health records; receiving past records from their home countries is highly unlikely. Normally, the teachers or others in the district can direct new students to clinics to receive their necessary immunizations. Because Lourdes was pregnant, certain vaccinations could only be administered postpartum. The CDC and other health agencies recommend against certain immunizations during pregnancy for threat to the fetus. ((ACIP), 2016).

Mrs. A worried that if Lourdes did not start school until after she gave birth to her baby, she would not attend school at all. The teachers worked with the district to get an exception granted for Lourdes. She was able to stay in school until June when school ended for the summer. Lourdes had her baby over the summer and returned to school that fall, fully vaccinated. While we cannot determine what would have happened if Lourdes waited until the baby was born to attend school, the teacher’s foresight and willingness to intervene helped Lourdes progress in school. Lourdes has remained in school and will graduate in May.

Lourdes always wore black Adidas athletic pants with white stripes down the legs, a t-shirt and her black hair drawn back in a severe ponytail. I never saw her in make-up, or a dress. Her sartorial choices did not change after she had her baby. Lourdes lived with her father and was very quiet during her first semester at the IWC. She would smile or laugh when observing a joke or funny comment by her classmates, but she did not speak much unless addressed. However, the following fall, Lourdes and Yasmin became quick friends. Yasmin was a student whose style was very different from Lourdes. She wore bright red lipstick, carefully sculpted and painted eyebrows, large gold earrings, and dark eyeliner. Lourdes and Yasmin sat next to each other in every class. Yasmin did not smile often nor did she brook any unwanted
approaches. It took me more than month to gain her trust. I primarily interacted with her through math class, which was another challenging space for students.

In my second year at the IWC, a semi-retired teacher named Mr. Bull taught math. He was a white haired man with a hearing aid. He almost always wore a smile, a large belt buckle and a US Navy hat. He was a monolingual English speaker and had a hard time understanding student comments in English due to his hearing issues. He was completely lost with Spanish. The math course was online; students completed modules that had instructional videos, knowledge checks, and tests. Students were expected to progress at their own pace and Mr. Bull could ascertain online where each student was. His role was to keep order and answer any questions. However, it was difficult for the students with less English to ask their questions about complicated math. Mathematical terms such as algorithm, polynomials, and derivatives are not common vocabulary taught in English language classes. I spent a lot of time answering math questions or walking with the students to Mr. Bull’s desk to help ask the complicated questions when I could not figure out the math problem myself.

Yasmin and Lourdes did not have a lot of patience for Mr. Bull, so I became their go-to for math help. In the beginning, we just focused on math equations. Slowly Yasmin would talk about more about life, her family in St. Louis and things she liked. At the end of last year, she approached me for help before class began. She did not take out her Chromebook. Instead, she produced an envelope from the Hazelwood School District. She was worried about the contents of the letter and wanted me to verify what it said, as the communication was entirely in English. When she arrived in St. Louis from Honduras, she moved in with her aunt and her cousin. They lived in the Hazelwood School District. Yasmin and her cousin were the only two Hispanic students in most of their classes. She was lonely because it was hard to make friends but that
was not what troubled her. Yasmin said the teachers treated them very badly. The teachers would constantly yell at her and her cousin for not knowing English. They did not provide any resources in Spanish; nor would they provide help with school work. She said her cousin stopped speaking in school. It was too painful; teachers and students barraged him with insults.

That year, Hazelwood lost its accreditation from the state of Missouri. This offered the Yasmin a way out. All students were permitted to transfer to an accredited district. Whiter, affluent suburban districts in the western regions of St. Louis County and St. Charles County were holding angry meetings, asking for hoping to block the Hazelwood students from transferring to the suburban schools. Yasmin, however, transferred to the IWC. Her aunt had heard that teachers at the IWC treated students well and provided help with English. Unfortunately, Yasmin’s envelope contained a letter announcing the return of provisional accreditation to the district. All students were remanded back to the Hazelwood Schools for the following school year. Yasmin was very scared and nervous. She told me that if she had to go back to Hazelwood, she would leave school altogether. She wanted to learn but felt that she could not be successful at Hazelwood. This letter arrived in April, leaving the family just a few months to figure out a solution. Fortunately, her aunt was able to find an affordable apartment in the Ritenour District that July. Yasmin is now a permanent member of the Ritenour School District. Yasmin has been able to stay at the IWC and is on track to transfer to Ritenour High School. Yasmin’s story sheds light on the deeper instability in the region’s school systems, and on the ways that it affects all students, immigrants and otherwise.

In this chapter, I have described the physical space of the school and offered a description of the kinds of issues that teachers and students face in their daily lives. I had come into this experience expecting a broken system, a system that did not support students, emotionally or
academically. I knew that St. Louis lacked the infrastructure to support non-English speaking students nor students coming from outside of the United States (Delaney, 2018) (Dorner, 2019). I heard anecdotal stories about immigrant students punished for limited English skills, and labeled as special education due to their language differences. I expected the Ritenour district to be similar. What I found was very different. I found a place that the students considered a refuge, a safe place to belong, while they dealt with all the complexities of their own worlds and experiences. I found a place where students enjoyed coming, felt respected and were able to rest. I found an unexpected bright spot; a refuge built carefully by teachers who were educators and advocates. In the following chapter, I will explore the students’ experiences in more detail, shedding light on how the school as refuge is only able to do so much given the particularity of their struggles as immigrant students in a hostile society.
Chapter 4: Family Separation

Family Separation: abandonment, reunification, and new ways forward

Living in the Borderlands, you are the battleground where the enemies are kin to each other; you are at home, a stranger.

Gloria Anzaldua

A significant part of my research involved decoding the lived experiences of immigrant youth, particularly in relation to their families. These students have experienced multiple challenges and changes to get to St. Louis. Yet arriving geographically does not mean they have “arrived” in a new normalized life. They continue to cross borders, including language barriers, new schools and systems of education, and a vast reframing of family structures. In this chapter, I will focus on family structures. Embarking on their immigration journey, students are ripped from the fabric of their families. These are young people, 15, 16 years of age, when family support is crucially important. Arriving in St. Louis, they must sew together a new family quilt, an unconventional tapestry cobbled together with what is available to them, sometimes strangers or family members they have never met.

In St. Louis high schools, teachers and school personnel talk of teenagers struggling with family dynamics, developing prefrontal cortices, seeking burgeoning independence, and finding ways to differentiate from their parents as they prepare for adulthood (Barch) (Dalmore). High Schools often hold evening sessions for parents about teenagers seeking forms of independence include arriving late, not communicating with parents, focusing on activities that are forbidden or prohibited. It is a very different familial landscape for the students in the IWC. For many IWC students, they are not complaining about trying to get away from their parents, but rather
mourning the separation from their parents by borders, geography, and many miles. Their goal is to be able to live a safer life with an estranged parent- one they have may not have seen since they were an infant. The concept of family, missing family members, trying to adjust to living with a family that is more like strangers, is salient for these students. Even questions like "How is your family doing?" or: "What did you do with your family this weekend?" can be difficult for this group.

There are three major points of separation for these young people. The first separation happened with the students are only one or two years old, when their fathers left for the United States. Most students grew up in their birth country with one parent, most commonly their mother. While they usually have siblings and grandparents with them, their fathers have traveled to the United States for work to support the family financially. The second separation occurs when as teenagers, they embark on their immigration journey to the US. These students take on the extremely difficult task of leaving the family they know for a dangerous journey to reunite/meet a family they do not know, an estranged parent and potentially unknown family members such as stepmothers and half-siblings. The third separation is from their home country. In the United States, they must confront a new language(s), new social and cultural values, new sources of oppression, prejudice and violence. They must simultaneously move forward while processing the trauma of their journey, being physically separated from their childhood family and culture. It must also be noted there persists a great uncertainty around family. These young people do not know when or if they will be reunited with their family in their home countries. As we see in the stories below, there is no guarantee that their St. Louis families will be there for them.
I was interested in how issues of separation and reunification affect the daily lives of young immigrants. How does this experience influence their school life and daily life in the US? What happens when the family structure shifts again? How does the shifting landscape influence concepts of home? Given this difficult issue and lack of resources to address it, how does family separation influence school and future planning? I also wanted to understand if these students conceived of supportive adults in their lives. Who supports them through difficult times, who advocates for them in legal and educational matters and who empowers or encourages them to go forward and achieve more? What I found most of all was the family served as a consistent and important motivator for these students, even as most families were fragmented or separated. Some were motivated to support their families financially; some felt guilt, wanting to do more; and still others needed to push against or negative familial expectations, proving they can make it after all.

I will explore four student stories that bear witness and illustrate these experiences and meanings of family. I will show how physical separation from families can have a daily effect on the lived experiences of these students. While impossible to condense all family separation into one monolithic experience, these stories exemplify different ways in which family separation impacts the lived experiences of immigrant youth. We will learn about Maynor, separated from his mother when he set out for the United States. It exemplifies student struggles with missing a parent, longing for time with his mother, time that may not be possible. Second, we will explore Jorge’s story. Unlike his peers, Jorge was separated from both parents by age twelve. Coming to the United States allowed him to reunite with mother but separated him from his younger siblings. Jorge’ story deals with guilt: he feels guilty surviving the journey to the US, reuniting with his mother because it came at the cost of leaving his siblings back in Guatemala.
Third, Pierce was unique in looking forward to reuniting with his father after so many years. Due to a rough home environment in Guatemala, living with his father seemed like a new, safe opportunity. Unfortunately, Pierce’s father disappeared within a year of Pierce’s arrival. Pierce struggles to move forward alone, feeling abandoned at every juncture of his life. Finally, I share Roxana’s story. Roxana, from Honduras, graduated from the IWC in June 2019. However, her journey to graduation was hard fought. She left St. Louis with her family to move to another state. Due to an unhealthy family situation, Roxana left her parents and returned to St. Louis and the IWC where she felt safe and supported.

Maynor’s Story: “Le extraño mucho a mi mama.”

“I miss my mother very much.”

Maynor was 17 years old when I met him at the IWC. He is determined and self-sufficient, traveling by himself from rural Guatemala through Mexico to the United States. He works as a roofer after school each day and on the weekends, in addition to attending school. Maynor always stuck out to me for his closeness to his mother. Maynor would often bring up his mother in conversation, and would fight back tears in the process.

During May of my first year at IWC, we did a project to celebrate Mother’s Day. Each student could select a Mason jar, decorate it for their mother and fill it with candies, popcorn, and other snacks. We had bright neon paper, fabrics with different patterns, and colorful. There were stickers of random sorts as well as markers, pencils, and pens. It was a nice break from the normal school routine. Students were allowed to play music on their phones; Maluma, a very popular singer and influencer from Colombia, was the top choice. I sat with the students and decorated a jar as well. Students had finished writing poems for their mothers over the past week and I helped students mount these printed poems on card stock to make framed gifts for their
families. Maynor and I talked a lot during this activity. He calls his mother almost every day, and he told me about how strong she was and how much she did for the family. At the end of the project, I asked Maynor if he would send his jar to his mother in Guatemala.

Maynor: No, no lo voy a mandar el jarrito. No llegará a Guatemala.

Julia: ¿Entonces, porque lo hiciste? ¿Qué vas hacer con el jarrito?

Maynor: No sé- pero quería hacer algo para mi mama- para enseñarle que le amo y le extraño mucho.

M: No, I’m not going to send it. It will never make it to Guatemala.
J: So why did you make it? What will you do with the jar?
M: I do not know. I wanted to do something for my mom, to show her I love and I miss her.

Maynor started to tear up and we changed the subject. This exemplifies depth of his connection to his mother, and always stuck with me. Maynor missed his mother so much, felt such a strong need to honor his mother that he was willing to make her a gift she would never receive.

Although unsaid, we understood that he may never see his mother ever again. For most high school students who go home to their parents, an activity like this may not carry the same meaning. It may seem like a childish activity for a teenager, or an excuse to play around with friends during school hours. For Maynor and many of his peers, making this gift jar represented a symbolic attachment to family from whom they are separated.

Away from his classmates, Maynor talked more openly about his family situation. This connection to his mother was a common thread in his interview. When I asked Maynor what he found different here in St. Louis from his life in Guatemala, he answered

Como mi vida- 15 años con mi mama, y ahora con él y no se cuánto tiempo con él. Pero es difícil estar aparte, ¿verdad? [tearing up] Yo era la última que estaba en casa. Siempre me habla a mí, o yo a ella. Solo hablamos, nada más. Pregunté si ha cambiado en Guatemala. Me dice que no, nunca va a cambiar. No cambian- pero más aumentan los criminales.
I spent fifteen years of my life with my mom. Now I am with my dad for who knows how long. It is difficult being apart, you know? [Maynor tears up] I was the last child living at home. We talk a lot, she calls or I call. We just talk. I ask her if things are changing back home. No, she tells me. It will never change. It is just getting worse, the crime gets worse.

Maynor traveled alone from Guatemala to the United States in hopes of reuniting with his father. Like his peers in the IWC, Maynor has been separated from his father for most of his life, His father left for the United States when Maynor was a baby.

*Habia diecisésis años sin ver a mi papa. Tengo diecisiete. Solo tenía un año cuando se fue. Yo fui en bus, puro bus hasta Ciudad Juárez. Y de ahí, me entregaron a inmigración. Pues yo no lo conocía. Estaba parado, pero yo no sabía quién era. Y iba, y cuando me dice, yo vino y me dije ¿quién es él? Pero cuando me abrazo, y me dije es mi papa. Bueno, no sentí tanto amor con él porque nunca va ha estado conmigo. Lo miraba como un amigo. Y me confundí un tiempo y le decía “mama” y me dijo no soy tu mama. Pero ya poco a poco fui a acostumbrarme y el acostumbrarme a mí*

I came by bus from Guatemala to Ciudad Juárez. I had not seen my father since I was one year old. I met my father at immigration in Ciudad Juárez. He was standing up but I did not know who he was. Then he called me and I went to him. Then he hugged me and I said to myself, this is my dad. I did not feel the same for him because he was never with me. I see him more as a friend. At first, I would get confused and call him "mama" and he would tell me he is not my mother. Slowly we have become accustomed to each other.

For many, a family reunion draws images of balloons, hugs, even tears, running into the arms of someone you know, and who knows you, and you are both thrilled at this reunion. For Maynor, this virtual stranger was his father. He could not even recognize his face, so fleeting was their relationship. Going from a close relationship with his mother to a new relationship with father was an overwhelming experience. Maynor now lives with his father and stepmother and a stepsister, all three of whom are strangers. He says he is not angry at his father for starting a new family because life in Guatemala was so difficult.
Maynor works after school and on the weekends in the roofing business with his father. In some ways, getting to know his father by working at his side eased the pain of missing his mother. I asked him if it bothered him to work so much and if being on the roofs was scary. No, Maynor said, It is better here because there is work.

Siempre voy a trabajar con mi papa en roofing. Siempre en Guatemala me trabajan en mantener los palos grandes, buscando frutas. No me da miedo. Mi mama mantiene los cocos y los mangos. Yo siempre la ayude.

I always work with my dad in roofing. I am not scared of ladders or heights. Back in Guatemala, I maintained the big trees, climbing and cutting fruits. My mother had mangos and coconuts. I always helped my mother.

It seems that one constant between his old family and his new family is working alongside his parent, and contributing to the family. Even as Maynor finds means to incorporate himself into a new family, these relationships do not fill the place of his mother. Maynor continues to struggle with this, even two years later. Maynor is quick to ask me about my son, and his recent soccer games. He often asked when I would bring my children to the classroom, something I did when they did not have school. It was as if witnessing a mother-son relationship was comforting to Maynor, even made him feel close to his mother. This Christmas, he posted a photo of himself and his mother, with the caption “Otro Navidad y Ano Nuevo Sin Ustedes.”
Jorge’s story: *Una tía no es una mamá*

“An Aunt is not the same as a mother”

Unlike Maynor, Jorge lives in St. Louis with his mother. His father left the family in Guatemala when Jorge was a small boy. When Jorge was eleven years old, his mother also left Guatemala, seeking ways to support her children. When Jorge arrived in St. Louis, it marked a reunification with his mother but a separation from his younger brothers. Being here in St. Louis has its difficulties for Jorge, and many young people. He feels split, living a bifurcated existence, and always worrying about his siblings back in Guatemala.

*Estar con mi mamá pues es algo muy lindo que tiene su cariño su amor su atención. Pero como le digo yo lo yo la tengo a ella y mis hermanos no.*

To be with my mom again is something beautiful, to have her love, her attention, and affection. But, I tell you, I get to be with her but my siblings don't.
Every conversation with Jorge regarding his mother or positive things, he brings up his siblings. He expresses a sense of responsibility and concern for his siblings regularly. "They are younger than me and need my mom even more than I do." He is trying to be brave, even taking the place of his father. He has been forced to grow up quickly and assume a parental role.

Though Jorge's father is in United States, he does not see his father. He assumes he is still in St. Louis but has not talked to him in a while. He says it is a shame- "I need the attention and care of my father as well." It is impressive that teenager can express his loss so clearly. Though he has never had a father in his life, he mourns the loss. Though his relationship with his mother is very strong, he feels that his life would be better with his father involved as well.

Like so many of his peers, Jorge’s story is extraordinary. Jorge was separated from both mother and father for four years. As the eldest sibling, he took on the parenting role for his own brothers. They were shuttled from family to family until the situation was dire enough that Jorge felt compelled to leave in search of something better for him and his family. He lived under the pressure of crime and extortion in his hometown. Even seeking a job was risking death in the city. He was willing to take on these risks for support his three younger siblings.

Jorge, and many of his peers at the IWC, have life experiences that differ from the typical white US teenager. While we develop programs to support teenagers through every decision, Jorge risked his life for his family. His life is very adult like in the decisions and risks he has had to take, and one filled with trauma and violence. Their experiences force these students into adult roles much faster than most US teenagers. Again, we see how these students life experiences vary from white middle class. There are industries built around supporting or entertaining the American teenager, from vaping, to social media platforms, to college
counseling, to having a good time. On any given day, you may meet Jorge in the IWC and think he fits into this silly, carefree teenage mold. He can be silly and disruptive in class. The teachers temporarily prohibited Jorge from going to the school cafeteria for flirting with younger students. He can act like a young kid, laughing, calling out for attention and not seeming engaged in school. However, the school structure is a deep contrast from his life over the past several years and priorities of school clash with the importance of working and supporting his family. Is the structure of school beneficial for Jorge? Does it make him feel guilty that he has this refuge while his siblings do not?

After Jorge’ mother left for the United States, Jorge and his three younger siblings lived with their grandmother. She was loving and kind, but did not have the strength at her age to care for four boys. They moved to an Aunt’s house, but it was not a healthy relationship. She was unhappy to have them under her care and soon asked them to leave. The boys moved in with other aunt, who loved and opened her arms to them. But life in Guatemala is hard, Jorge reminds us. For Jorge, family separation is confusing and changing. Even with loving family members, Jorge felt a loss. “Una tia no es una mama” The phrase struck me because it was repeated by many students. Even in good situation, it is hard to replace or substitute for a parent.

After a certain point, she did not have enough resources to take care of Jorge and his brothers, in addition to her own three children. For this reason, Jorge left for the United States. He needed a permanent family for himself and his brothers. He was willing to risk his own life to try to reach his mother with the hopes of bringing his young siblings after him.

Quiero graduarme, tener un trabajo bien ayudar a mis hermanos ayudar a mi mamá e ir a visitarlas. Es mi sueño estar en mero salgo ir y regresar por él o tenerlos acá o no sé pero sí me gustaría mi familia unida.
I want to graduate from high school, get a good job, help my brothers and sisters, help my mom, and visit my family. I want to return and get them or have them here with me. Either way, I want my family united."

Jorge sees school as a means to learn English and preparing him for a job. Jorge works with his uncle, Maynor’s dad, and Maynor. Through working, Jorge feels he has a community of men who look out for him. But he is anxious about his asylum case because he wants permanent papers. He says working at night is very stressful for him and his friends. “I want a work permit so I can give to my mom.” Work provides a connection to family, both in terms of a community and a potential means to unite his family.

Jorge continues to grapple with family separation though he finally reunited with his mother after four years and an arduous journey to St. Louis. Despite almost dying in the dessert along the border, Jorge feels guilty for making it. Jorge struggles with the guilt of making it safely to the United States. He feels guilty for not being able to bring along his younger brothers. This guilt and worry for their safety motivates Jorge in many different ways. It motivates him to graduate from high school, to work long hours and pursue the dream of a work permit. Unlike most American teenagers, Jorge works the equivalent of a full time job alongside grown men, in addition to attending high school. Though a silly kid in school, he maintains the role of family provider, assisting his mother and saving money to reunite his family.

**Pierce’s Story: “Yo trato de vivir el presente.”**

“I am trying to live in the present.”

Pierce, a young man from Guatemala, is very proud of his cultural and linguistic heritage. However life in Guatemala was difficult. Pierce has a strained relationship with his family and feels a strong sense of abandonment. His father left Guatemala when Pierce was an infant.
Pierce was treated badly by mother and older siblings in Guatemala. Rather than dread leaving the home, leaving the known for the unknown, Pierce was looking forward to reconnecting with his father. He saw his father and new family as an opportunity to regain a loving family.

Although there were some happy moments in his childhood, Pierce said the majority of his memories growing up surrounded feeling alienated from his family. Pierce’s older siblings would strike him often with a cane. He was responsible for taking care of the animals early in the morning and late at night. He felt disrespected and unseen. His longing for a more stable family environment was a significant motivator for his immigration journey.

Entonces era parte de mi deseo que conocer a mi padre cuando me vine; a mi meta conocer a mi padre y estudiar acá. Quiero tener una mejor oportunidad para poder cumplir mis sueños en lo que soñaba. Es que mi familia me maltrataba, a mí me critica. No me gusta. A mí me gusta respetar a la gente entonces yo dije que iba a venir. Entonces yo me vine.

I desired to get to know my father and study here; it was my goal to create an opportunity for a better life. My family did not treat me well; they criticized me. I did not like that. I believe we should treat all people with respect. That is why I decided to I needed to come her. And so I did.

Pierce’s reunion with his father was happy. He was pleased to meet his father after 15 years and excited by the possibility of a new family. Pierce spent a very happy year before his father disappeared.

Cuando estuve junto con él, fue una historia bien bonita. Muchos muchos lugares donde íbamos a pasear y todo eso. Entonces eso fue una historia muy bonita.

When we were together, it was a beautiful time. We went to many different places together. It was a beautiful time.

Pierce explored St. Louis with his father. He was introduced to his new family and friends. His father remarried and had one young daughter. Pierce felt accepted by his stepmother and supported financially. He told me he finally felt welcome at home.
Pierce came into the IWC with a strong desire to go to college and to be a doctor. He stood out amongst his peers for two reasons. First, he was open about his interest in schoolwork and showing his knowledge to the class. Second, he was one of only a handful of boys who did not work. Most peers worked every day after school and on weekends. Pierce was teased by other boys for being soft. This was compounded by the perception of his peers that he did not go through the same travails during his immigration journey. Pierce was lucky enough to take a bus from Guatemala to Juarez, Mexico. As Pierce gained acceptance from his family, he struggled for acceptance in school. Pierce enjoyed being at the IWC and felt safe with the teachers, but he did not develop close relationships with his peers.

Pierce and I would often talk about college. He was curious about the classes he would take, what he would need to go to college. During the first year, I thought of Pierce as a model student. He was curious and engaged in every class. He put in quite a bit of effort; learning English and excelling in all subjects. Family plays a role in this decision as well. Pierce was named after a doctor who helped his mother. When Pierce was born and given that namesake, his mother told him he could be a doctor one day.

The next year, I noticed a big change in Pierce. He was no longer outwardly curious or excited. He seemed upset most days in school and was easily irritated by his classmates' jovial behavior. He did not speak in class unless called upon. He even stopped talking about college. After inquiring with his teachers and finally talking with Pierce, the reason for his change in behavior became clear. One week in August, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) had come to Pierce’s house and spoke with his stepmother. Pierce’s stepmother is a United States citizen, and sponsored Pierce’s entry into the United States. ICE was inquiring about Pierce’s father.
That morning following their interaction with ICE, his stepmother drove Pierce to school. When she returned, Pierce’s father was gone. Neither Pierce nor his stepmother know what happened. They suspect he either fled from immigration officials, or was detained by ICE. Unfortunately, there is no information and ICE is not obligated to provide information. For Pierce, it feels like abandonment. The possibility that his dad was detained or ran for his own survival does not lessen the blow for Pierce. Pierce feels that his family has abandoned him yet again.

Here is a young man who has waited his whole life for a loving family; he put himself at risk to obtain that family, and now it is gone. There are two major stressors here. One, Pierce has lost the ability to trust adults and family figures. Everyone has left him (and his stepmother and stepsister will leave him four months after his father disappeared). This may follow him throughout life and make it difficult to form trusting relationships in the future. Secondly, Pierce, and his IWC peers, live in fear of ICE, regardless of documentation. These kids are subjected to a police state and a new form of “disappearance” like many of their relatives suffered back in the violent days of Guatemala.

For Pierce, his father’s disappearance is almost too much to handle. The cognitive dissonance is hard to process. Pierce tells me his father must be running; he must be doing what he need to survive. He acknowledges that no one wants to be detained by ICE. “I do not want my father to be incarcerated through immigration,” he tells me. Yet despite acknowledging the reasons his father would run, it did not lessen the pain and the feeling of abandonment. Pierce’s experience illustrating the damage caused by structural violence of state immigration policies. Pierce has internalized the violence imposed by ICE as a failure of his family, rather than a
failure by institution that created the policy (Bartlett). You can see how the structural and
political situation literally and emotionally tears families apart.

In one moment, my father abandoned me. Now, I am not as I used to be. Things have
changed in my heart. I have to live alone and try not to think him. I do not know where
he is or why he left. He might have left due to immigration or he may have had a criminal
record. I do not know if he did or not. It was very scary to have immigration come to the
house; they say if you open the door, they will deport you. He did not want to spend
years incarcerated or detained. That must be the reason. Immigration came looking for
[my father] at the house. He locked himself in the house. I went to school and he stayed
in the house. In the afternoon, my stepmother picked me up from school. When we
returned, he was gone. I do not know how he did it but he left on his own.

Pierce’s story reveals a theme that runs through many experiences of the students at the
IWC. The sentiment that a tío (uncle) or tía (aunt) is not the same as a mother or father. These
young people express gratitude for the support and help of their aunts or uncles, new stepparents
or strangers who become family. They simultaneously express a sense of loss. They feel that
these surrogate family members do not provide the same support, or love.

Mi familia tengo ahora es mi madrastra y dos hermanitos. Sí está bien bonito, pero no es
el mismo y no sabes dónde está tu papá o sus amigos, pero nunca tiene información. O
sea que yo no sepa que Dios me dirían a mí. Entonces es muy difícil la vida estoy
viviendo. Mi tío me está apoyando. No es igual tener a un papá que un tío. Yo trato de
no de coraje de vivir en el presente Yo quiero un mejor futuro, entonces tengo que vivirlo
por eso. Trato de no sacar malas notas y es por eso que hago muchas preguntas. Estoy
preparándome para tener un mejor futuro para no sufrir
The family I have now is my stepmother and two younger siblings. Yes, it is nice but it is not the same when you do not know where your father is, or your friends, and you do not have any information. I do not know what God has in store for me. Therefore, it is difficult; the life I am living is very difficult. My uncle is supporting me but it is not the same. An uncle is different from a father. I try to have the courage to live in the present. I want a better future so I have to live for that reason. I am trying not to get bad grades and ask many questions. I am trying to prepare myself to have a better life. I do not want to suffer so much.

Pierce is trying to work hard so he does not suffer. He feels alone, like he does not have much to live for anymore since he lost both of his parents. He is working hard to provide himself a way forward. Jorge, Maynor, and Pierce all struggle with violence, the loss of a parent, and the constant worry about the future. Though separated by geography, Maynor has his mother to talk to. Jorge fights to keep his family together, yet he has his mother by his side. Pierce does not have a parent to support him; he has to go forward alone.

**Roxana: the family we chose**

Not all family interaction is positive, even when families are together in the United States. Roxana is a young woman from Honduras and seen as a leader in her class at the IWC. While she has not shared the details of her immigration journey with me, she came over from Honduras and lived with her parents and sister. Roxana was one of the most academically advanced students in the IWC. Her grasp of English is very strong, particularly in written form. She is poised, attentive and comfortable presenting in class.

Around April of my first year in the IWC, Roxana's parents announced they were moving the family to Ohio. Moving to other cities, without warning I learned, was a common experience for these families. Differing documentation and work authorization coupled with lack of stable jobs or living environments forced families to leave quickly.
This was a very sad moment for Roxana and her peers. Roxana had been in the IWC almost since the inception of the school. The students looked up to her; Roxana was the big sister, a caretaker in the group. The teachers and students organized a huge potluck lunch for Roxana. Students and teachers contributed food dishes including tamales, biriyani rice, Doritos, Takis, sodas, cake, pizza. The students make cards and everyone wished Roxana a safe journey. She wrote each of us hand-written notes on torn out loose-leaf paper, expressing gratitude and sorrow for leaving. In my letter, she talked about how much she enjoyed our class and how everyone made her feel safe and at home.

Three weeks later, Roxana returned to St. Louis and the IWC. She had a difficult time with her parents, coupled with the loss of friends and community. Living with her parents, without the safety of friends and community was unhealthy. Roxana decided to return on her own to the place she felt at home. She moved in with her older sister and resumed her job as a line cook. She chose to leave her parents because she felt more at home in St. Louis and at school.

Roxana continued to struggle with place and belonging. The following year, she transitioned to Ritenour High School. After a month or so, she returned to the IWC. The campus was too big, she said, it too hard to navigate and she got lost going to class. Though Roxana’s academic skills were very strong, she did not feel comfortable in the high school classrooms. She said the teachers did not understand her experiences and did not believe in her. She felt too nervous to answer questions in class. Mrs. A and Ms. B petitioned the school district to allow Roxana to graduate from the IWC. Things continue to be hard for Roxana-it is hard living with her sister and making ends meet. Roxana fought through so many moments of separation and abandonment; the IWC became the one place she belonged. It was the place she
turned to for safety and support. Both structural violence, and state violence in both countries removed any sense of safety or belonging for Roxana.

The IWC teachers observe the effects of family interaction on their students’ performance and behavior in the classroom. Mrs. A notes that the few students who remain close to their mothers have more stability; she is quick to mention that these are students who spent a good deal of their childhood with their mothers. Jorge, despite surviving such a challenging immigration journey, has a trusted parent in St. Louis. Mrs. A observes Jorge doing better than many of his peers and she attributes that in part to the support and partnership he has with his mother in St. Louis. For others, having lived apart from their parent(s) for most of their childhood, coming “home” to parental control can be challenging. The teachers see lots of stress on students who until recently, were forced to be independent to survive on their own. Now these students must navigate new set of rules and control by adults. This happens in the home and at school, and it is a difficult transition to make. Mrs. A notes that this particularly difficult for young women who have had to fend for themselves for so long. They were essentially independent women and now have to cede control; they must follow gendered rules that seem restrictive or unfair. Mrs. A told me in our interview that “These kids are trying to do the right thing, make things right but are not getting the understanding or flexibility they need.”

One example is Ivan and Manuela. They arrived from Honduras with their younger brother and moved in with an aunt and uncle. Manuela was quiet, smiley, and very cooperative at school; she did well on assignments and was learning quickly, despite being out of school for almost a year. Ivan, on the other hand, was struggling to adjust to school and life in St. Louis. He could not stay still in class; following rules was often a challenge. It was difficult for him to listen to, or trust the teachers. He got in trouble a lot for yelling at the teachers, or disrupting
class. I did not have him in my Communications Class but worked with him as a classroom volunteer in his math class. If the teacher said “don’t drag your chairs on the floor,” Ivan would drag his chair twice as far as needed. Mrs. A and Ms. B believe he is struggling with abandonment issues as well as the effects of serious violence and trauma he suffered before arriving in St. Louis. Ivan and Manuela quickly began having conflict with their aunt and uncle’s strict rules and attempts at control. Their uncle saw that Manuela’s phone app was active during a school day. Despite Manuela’s strong performance in school, the uncle assumed she was using the phone inappropriately in school so he took it away. She needed her phone for work, and to get rides home, but her uncle refused to return her phone. The aunt and uncle tried to enforce what the siblings saw as unreasonable rules about when to be home, how to dress, among other things. Other types of problems erupted and Ivan and Manuela moved out. They now share an apartment. Their little brother remains with the aunt and uncle but they are hoping to bring them to their apartment eventually. Manuela remains in high school but Christian dropped out and is working several jobs.

Other students, upon graduating high school are moving out, moving in with other friends because the tension in their new homes was too much. It is a lot to assimilate household rules from a parent they did not grow up with. Students struggle with having felt abandoned or disconnected from a parent for many years and are suddenly thrust into this parent’s new household. This new home can include new stepparents and siblings, new language, new cultural codes and expectations. Students also express worry and guilt for entering a new household when they have left their families back in their home countries.

There are many more stories of loss and separation that can be told at the IWC. DeLueze talks about desire over power. For these students, the desire for family and belonging was so
palpable but rarely push against the political, physical and social structures in place in St. Louis, the US, and in their daily lives. No matter how hard they worked, the loss of family could rarely be overcome. I would often see this yearning from students when they would ask about my own children. They were excited to see pictures and wanted to know what we did together. I became a bridge in some way, a person they could talk about family with, without divulging their own sense of loss. Finally I would be remiss in not mentioning the students who became parents themselves. Many of the young women either entered the IWC pregnant, or became pregnant during school. For some, this was a happy, though perhaps unexpected occurrence, where the partner was a steady boyfriend or girlfriend. Other times, the situation was not welcomed nor the experience consensual. Most of the young women left school after having their babies. I wonder how they conceive of parenthood in their fractured US families.

These stories, though unique, show key themes influencing the students’ daily lives. These further illustrate the challenges of the immigration journey that Maynor, Pierce, Roxana, Ivan and Manuela face, along with their IWC peers. Family Separation and fragmentation, coupled with violence of daily life in Guatemala and state violence in the US, as well as the role of labor are key themes in their lives. These are borders, wires, the students must cross daily and must juggle while also being a high school student. Their journeys are unfinished; there is no safe and secure destination. Each is searching for something salient in their lives; for Roxana, Manuela and Ivan, it is a safe place to belong, for Pierce it is family, and for Maynor, it is a place to send his Mother’s Day Jar.

This started as an exploration of schools, but the more time I spent with these students, the more they were interested in sharing their stories. Part of the immigrant experience is leaving home and leaving family. This affects the youth on a daily basis, even years after
leaving home. That is an important part of understanding, unpacking, and deconstructing the immigrant youth experience here in St. Louis, and everywhere. Being separated from family is different for these young people leaving home at 14 or 15, than for immigrants who leave as adults. For unaccompanied minors, parental and family support is desired but unstable and unpredictable. How does this change the game? Through this research, we can see how this lack of stable familial presence impacts their daily lived experience, including their motivation, their sense of security, and sense of self. For some students, it is strong source of motivation; they strive to do better, achieve more to help their families. For others, they fight to move forward without their families, even in spite of their families. And still others are weighed down; they feel lost, unmoored. Students may experiences all these sentiments and emotions, at different points in their journeys.

This loss of family ties is not a temporary loss that students work through in a few months and then carry on. It impacts them through their days and months, arising at different times, triggered by different situations, but never gone. It lurks under the surface. These students are often exchanging lives under threats of physical violence and hunger for lives of relative physical safety but riddled with social-emotional threats and violence. There is a real fear of the unknown, what might happen to them and worry for their families left back home. This is different from having family in different households that you can visit. These are family ties that may never be reconnected. There is also the fear and knowledge that they may not see their families again.

The students have begun to create fictive kinship structures, build new support structures through stepparents and stepsiblings, through friends, estranged aunts, and uncles. The need for stability in St Louis has redefined what families are for these students, involuntarily. We see all
of these young people struggling with the cultural concepts of family, grappling with biological versus fictive kinship. For some it is motivating, for some debilitating, for most it includes a yearning for reunification, it is a chance to change course in life, but for all, it is a daily challenge.
Chapter 5: At the threshold of belonging

In a previous chapter, I described the International Welcome Center, the dynamic between the IWC and Heoch Middle School and the work of the Teachers, Mrs. A, and Ms. B, and their impact on the students in the school. In this chapter, I continue to focus on the school, taking a deeper look at activities and interactive projects and how they impact the students. We will look at creating and sharing poems based on their childhood experiences. We look at the role of trauma on learning; where “easy” projects can be barriers to learning based on someone’s situation. We look at the role of language inside and outside of the classroom, and finally at different opportunities for the students to leave the confines of the IWC space. I argue that though these students have arrived geographically, they are on the threshold of belonging. The physical borders have been crossed but we see continued barriers threaded throughout the daily lived experience in school.

As their teacher for Oral Communications, my task was to create opportunities for the students to learn and practice spoken English. This included learning American phrases, working on pronunciation, and most importantly building confidence in utilizing the English they were learning. Though students were driven to improve their spoken English to help them with jobs and general life outside of school, they were often reluctant to use it with me at first. I began with small games and competitions to get the students excited and interested. I wanted the classroom to be a fun place where they could try out these new words and phrases safely.
Our classroom was on the second floor of Hoech Middle School, shared with special classrooms for Middle School students with disciplinary issues. The first day, I came equipped with games, structured activities and a detailed plan. My first period class was Group A; these were the more experienced students with at least a full semester at the IWC. They also felt comfortable in the school, and clearly knew they had belonged here more than I did. Ms. B started out the class instructing the students to be respectful and bear in mind that I and I alone would give them grades. When she left, I introduced the days’ activities. I asked for a volunteer to start our activity; nobody moved. The boys in particular, tipped their chairs back and looked uninterested. Daniel, a very tall self-assured young man from Honduras who was focused on transferring to the high school, said, “I can teach the class, Miss.” So I threw him the dry-erase marker and gave him instructions for the activity. Using a high-pitched voice to mimic my own, Daniel gave the first line of instruction: “everyone stand up and come to the front of the class.” Everyone laughed at his voice … and came to the front of the class. I had different animals, jobs, and items written in English on slips of paper. The students had to translate the object and act it out for their peers to guess in English. Soon, the students were acting out “elephant” and “bus driver” and laughing at their peers. Daniel, not one to yield the spotlight, wanted to act out the items. He passed me back the dry-erase marker, and I then became the teacher. Each class period, someone would run to the front to lead the class. Another student would race to sit at the Teacher’s desk. By letting go of a formal class structure, I was able to connect with the students and run the class.

In my second class, I had Groups B and C. These students had very little exposure to English and only a few weeks to a few months in the United States. New students joined the school and my classroom every few weeks, having just arrived in St. Louis. This group of
students did not come with the same confidence and self-assurance as Daniel and his peers in Group A. School protocol stated that instruction should be given in English. For many of these students, even simple instructions in English were undecipherable. For this section, I tried to use hand motions and drawings on the board. Eventually I spoke in Spanish. The Spanish speakers in the class immediately moved forward, and the non-Spanish speakers followed suit. Each section and each day was a new negotiation for us, but eventually we fell into a comfortable balance of English, Spanish, and other languages.

One of the first things I noticed was students falling asleep. Particularly on Mondays, students had difficulty functioning in my 9:00 AM and 10:00 AM classes. From my perspective, Mondays were a day to start fresh. I assumed students were coming in rested, excited to be in school with their friends, and open to interesting projects. What I quickly learned was that Mondays were their toughest days. I would start each Monday class going around the room asking the students to mention one thing that happened over the weekend. “Trabaje.” “Yo trabajé” “roofing con mi papa” “trabajo en roofing” “siding” “chic-fil-a” Only a few students said “dormí todo el sábado” o “mire YouTube.” Most of the boys in my classroom worked in roofing, siding, or construction. They would work all weekend - both Saturday and Sundays for long days outside regardless of the weather. I began to bring in snacks on Mondays and keep activities lighter. We used more interactive activities such as word games, Scattegories, competitions using basic vocabulary, animals, colors, cars, sports, etc. We even practiced ordering fast food menus. I adjusted my curriculum to introduce projects on Wednesdays. I discovered that projects that needed more attention such as written projects or multi-step projects were more effective when the students were well rested.

Poems
My semester plan included both interactive short-term assignments and more independent, more involved long term assignments. One assignment, the “I AM FROM” poem, was a three-part project. The first part was to think about a happy event or moment from their childhood, write a few details (when, where, what did you do, what made it a happy memory) and then a picture of the memory. The second part was to flush out details through a questionnaire: asking students to write down sights, smells, sounds, food, and people from their childhood. In the third and final part of the project, students took responses from this questionnaire and created a poem. The students presented their poems in English to their classes. Students could use their own experiences and memories use it to work on English presentation skills. For many students, this was a lot of fun. We had music playing and they laughed about silly memories from their childhood. They talked about foods they shared in common from their home countries, and what they cared about right now.

This assignment was revealing in expected and unexpected ways. I present a selection of poems and the experiences connected to this assignment to help the reader understand the students in a deeper way. I learned more about the students through some of the assignments that they did while working in my class. These stories were not always about instability and challenge. They provided an important reminder that these young people were not just immigrants but also teenagers, with happy, funny, and sad experiences. These poems highlight important events, sights, smells and activities of their childhood in their home countries. It is a way to preserve that part of their lives. For some students, it was interesting, even easy to complete. For others it was paralyzing.

I mistakenly thought everyone has a story from their childhood that they wanted to share. I was trying to find ways to connect their learning to the life before immigrating to the United
States. Some students were unable to write anything in either Spanish or English. Without prior knowledge or context of the student experiences, it may seem they were intentionally being defiant or are unable to learn. What I learned from these students was that a school assignment could force them to revisit traumatic experiences. For so many of the students in the IWC, their childhood was, (and continues to be) filled with violence, loss, and separation. Even family togetherness could be fraught with violence. In what follows, I will share poems and experiences from several students, some for whom this was a wonderful project, and others for whom this was extremely challenging.

Pierce

For Pierce, this was an exciting assignment. He drew a beautiful picture of a time he went with his family to Guatemala City and spent the day in a park. He described the tall buildings and traffic, and ability to visit. He spent a great deal of time on the drawing, details, colors, shading. These was a sense of pride and happiness in this memory. Despite his English name, Pierce grew up in a rural Guatemalan Mayan community. He speaks Spanish and K’iche’ fluently and began learning English since arriving in St. Louis two years ago. Pierce is tall and likes soccer, but was not perceived as athletic or tough as the other boys in the classroom. He was often teased for being soft. He is one of the few boys in the IWC who was not working on the weekends or after school in roofing, siding, or related industries. Pierce has been very enthusiastic and engaged in class, interested in school and learning. He unabashedly shared his work, his knowledge and his opinion on any subject. This contributed in part to his reputation as being softer than the other boys. Pierce has aspirations to be a doctor, he sees success and career as real possibilities.
Quiero prepararme en eso porque es parte de mi sueño de ser doctor. Fue un doctor que ayudo a mi mama, ayudo a dio luz. Ese doctor se llama Pierce. Es parte de eso dijo que yo iba a ser un doctor y que me iba a preparar en eso y bien he soñado ser un doctor y curar mucha gente, poder ayudar a mucha gente. Esos son parte de mis sueños que quiero cumplir. Yo también prometí a mi abuela tener un mejor futuro.

I want to prepare myself to be a doctor because it is part of my dreams since I was a child. There was a doctor who helped my mom give birth to me. His name is Pierce. She named me after him. She said that I should become a doctor like him. I have dreamed of becoming a doctor, treating many people, to have the power to help people is part of my dreams and I want to accomplish them. I also promised my grandmother that I would have a better future.

Pierce was very excited and made a point of telling me he was born in Mexico. His parents were living in a Mayan community that spread across the Guatemalan and Mexican border. Pierce was born on the Mexican Side. Pierce would joke that we must be related because of our Mexican heritage, and that he could claim Mexicanidad. During one class period, as we prepared for the poetry projects, I showed clips from Luis Valdez’ play Zoot Suit, and clips from the Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angles in the 1940s. Pierce was very interested in how immigrants and Latinos were treated by police and others back then; he was surprised to find similarities to his experiences today.

Pierce was in touch with, and proud of his Mayan culture. He proudly spoke K’iché. There are other students in the IWC who spoke Mayan languages including K’iche’ and Q’eqchi’. They expressed ambivalence about speaking it; for some, it was how they speak with grandparents and elders, but not how to they communicated with peers. Some saw it as a waste of time, an old language. For Pierce, it was pride and it was beauty. He asked to use his own poem for the final “I am from” project to talk about where he comes from.

MI GUATEMALA
Transformarme en ese son de tus danzas y rituales
esa herencia espiritual de abuelos milenarios
danzas de guardabarrancos pitorréales y canarios
tradiciones de esplendor de las ceibas y quetzales
¡Quisiera cantar como cantan los pájaros y convertirme en un son!
ese son que muchas veces nos deja en completa calma
porque nos recuerda muchos: tu pasado y tus raíces
ese son que nos susurra con sus cientos de matices las bellezas de mi patria

Transform me into that son (song) of your dances and rituals
the spiritual inheritance of ancestors
dances of Motmot birds, imperial woodpeckers and canaries
traditions of splendor of the ceibas and quetzales
I would like to sing as the birds sing and become a son (song).
This song leaves us in complete calm
because it reminds us. Your past and your roots
are whispered to us with their hundreds of nuances, the beauty of my country

Nancy

Nancy was a student who recently arrived from El Salvador; she was placed in the lower English group, Group B/C. She held sway over the classroom and what she thought was interesting, the others thought so as well. She was happy and easy going at school. Her poem is a list of flora and fauna and memories from living with her family in El Salvador. You also get a glimpse of her present self, with a love for iPhones, Coca-Cola and cars. Nancy identifies as an evangelical Christian; an identity shared by many of her peers at the IWC. Usulután, whose name come from the Nahuatl language, meaning city of the ocelots, is tropical and close to the ocean. There has been such wide spread immigration to the US, that Usulután is often referred to as Shulton City, an Americanized renaming or mispronunciation. You can find Salvadorian restaurants called Shulton City throughout the United States.

I am from El Salvador
I like to use my iPhone 6S plus.
From Coca Cola.
I’m from the colors red and orange.
I’m from the butterfly and the toucan.
I’m from the yellow margarita flower.
I’m from the Mother's Day food and playing games.
I’m from “Be happy and Do not fight.”
I’m from Evangélica.
I’m from El Salvador Usulután.
I like going to the park, I like cars and the color blue.

Oscar

Oscar’s experience with the project was similar to Nancy’s experience. He was a very polite, soft spoken student. Despite being over six feet tall, it was often hard for Oscar to speak up in class or stand up for himself. He was close to another student named Valeria, who had witty retorts and confidence to stand up for both of them. Oscar preferred this assignment to other class activities because he could take the time to think and write things down, rather than speaking extemporaneously in front of the class. His poem walks the reader through sights and sounds and foods from his home in El Salvador, as well as his current preference for the American comedy group, Tenacious D with Jack Black. He mentions pupusas a very common dish in El Salvador, and Boquitas de Diana, a Salvadorian chip company, similar to Frito-Lay. Flor de Izote is the national flower of El Salvador; it is actually the flower of the Yucca plant. You can also see the importance of religion in Oscar’s life. You get a glimpse of the teenager, as well as things that have been fundamental to his family, and his childhood.

I’m from Pupusas, from Boquitas Diana, and Tenacious D.
I am from the flor de izote, the mango tree; sweet and hot.
I’m from New Year’s Day, and Valentine’s Day.
I’m from Christian Church; God, Jesus, Holy spirit

Ahmed
Ahmed is from Jordan and one of the few students in the IWC not from Central America. Ahmed also has a slightly different immigration experience from most of his peers. While his family suffered a great deal of violence in their home country, Ahmed was able to immigrate and travel with his family from Jordan to Turkey to the United States. While most all of the students in the IWC are going through applications for refugee status, most kids are going through it alone and do not know what the outcome will be. Ahmed and his family were granted refugee status upon arrival as it had been coordinated in advance. Ahmed was hilarious, always laughing and making others laugh in class. He brought such positive energy to class but he was also the student who did not know when to stop talking. His first language is Arabic but his English is quite advanced and he picked up a great deal of Spanish. Often he would translate directly from Arabic to Spanish and loved interjecting into his peers’ conversations in Spanish. Ahmed enjoyed the poem activity, drawing on the puns between his love for Michael Jordan tennis shoes and his home country of Jordan. You can see the levity that exists in his poem. Writing in English was difficult for Ahmed, despite his strong command of spoken English; he transposed letters and words. When I mentioned this deficit to the teachers, they said they had noticed it as well. Mrs. A mentioned that it is hard to catch learning issues in English language learners because it is not clear at first what was due to second language acquisition and what was a learning deficit. These teachers, already stretched thin, did not have the time nor background to tackle this. They were working with Ahmed’s family to seek resources through the school district.

I am from Jordan and Jordan shoes.

I am from the couch; it is soft.
Me and my family pray 5 times a day.
I am from the tomato plant.
I remember one of my family members is tall.
I am healthy and an athlete.
I learn a lot and I am funny.

Kelsey

I only spent one semester with Kelsey. She was seventeen years old and from Honduras. Kelsey was fun and well liked and always wore red lipstick. She worked after school and on the weekends as a busser at a coffee shop in North St. Louis. Kelsey and I formed a quick bond. She said I reminded her of her mother because of my smile and the same markings I have on my hand (vitiligo). When I shared with the class that I was a mother of two children, she approached and talked about her own daughter who was two years old. She talked about how she worked for her daughter, and her happy space was being with her daughter. It was difficult for me to ascertain where her daughter resided, here or Honduras (She left the IWC before I had a chance to interview her). Kelsey was usually easy going; she was happy in class, and interested in the topics. She laughed a lot and easily ignored the teasing and attention from the boys. She laughed with them but also felt comfortable telling them to sit down, listen, and behave. She had the ability to silence them when needed.

Despite her easygoing nature and engagement in school, the “I am From” activity was extremely challenging for Kelsey. She would put her head down on the desk and remain that way throughout the class period. I would check on her and she would say “No, Miss, I can’t do it.” I thought it was a language issue at first. She was in the higher language level but perhaps
the English colloquialisms were throwing her off. I suggested to her, and the entire class that they write their memories in Spanish or their home language to get out the ideas and then we could translate together at the end of the process. She said “OK” but still made no effort to write anything down. The following day I approached her again, head down on the desk, looking clandestinely at her phone. She told me “No, Miss, No tengo nada feliz para escribir. No puedo escribir nada.” “I don’t have any happy memories. There was nothing happy to write about it.” I approached the lead teachers and they shared that there was a lot of trauma in her household and that trauma was a major impetus for her immigration journey. They could not share details but indicated abuse and violence were factors. I do not know if the pregnancy was related to that situation. I tried to switch tactics with Kelsey to not impose more trauma. I suggested the write about her daughter. That helped a little. I inquired if there was a food she liked today, a song, anything small. She wrote sentences describing her daughter and what she liked to do with her daughter. Kelsey ultimately finished her poem. Her poem is similar to that of other students; it masks the difficulties she faced.

I am from Adidas
From Pepsi and Chanel
I am from Dormilona, it is small spiny plant and Girasol it a yellow flower that only comes out the morning
Lovely
I am from futbol
I am from we cook chicken and pork tamales
I am from Lourdes Jessy Katy
I am from my tendency is that we all have a mole from my dad
We like to dance and dress and cook food
From I remember my mother gave me colitas [ponytails] and they told Me when I was a girl studying to be someone in life
I from Cristiano and I am from Honduras.
Valeria

Valeria had a similar reaction to the assignment. Valeria was an outspoken member of the Group A. Valeria possessed a biting wit and was unafraid to use it, on classmates, and teachers alike. She was seventeen years old when in my class and the only student born in the United States. She was born in Tennessee to Mexican and Salvadorian parents. She lived most of her life in El Salvador and returned to the United States at age 16. She was teaching herself Korean and loves anime and Korean pop music.

Valeria was usually engaged and happy to be in class. She did not embrace me immediately but was open to any interest I took in her. The teachers made a point of informing me about her challenges at home before I began teaching. Valeria worked until 3 am most nights cleaning office buildings with her mother. I was encouraged to be understanding when she fell asleep in class. They suggested I let her go to the bathroom or get a drink of water, instead of disciplining her for not paying attention in class. This was one of many examples in with the IWC teachers showed a depth of understanding of individual student experiences, and a willingness to adapt the classroom to meet the needs of their students.

This assignment produced a very strong reaction from Valeria. She aggressively refused to do the work. She threw her pencil; she talked back disrespectfully to me, and loudly refused to engage. This was the only time I had a difficult disciplinary issue while teaching at the IWC. Valeria’s friends, Diana and Wilbur also refused to do the work. Diana’s refusal to do the project was not a surprise. She had refused to engage in all classroom activities. She was not loudly defiant, but would not look at me in the eye, and did her best to avoid all work. Wilbur, unlike Diana, was engaged and active in class. Wilbur looked up to Valeria; his refusal was
aimed at supporting his friend rather than any reticence to complete the assignment. When he actually did do the work, his poem was expressive and he was one of the first to volunteer to present is his poem to the class.

Valeria told me she could not even talk about her childhood. She had nothing to say and said that the assignment was useless. Through various steps and conversations, I asked her to refocus on the present, a happy moment from the last six months. When centering herself on the present moment, she quickly and easily completed the assignment. It was a well-written and detailed poem. What did it cost her to do this assignment? I wonder what challenges students such as Valeria or Kelsey face every day in school, completing what others may see as “normal” or “easy” assignments.

Where I’m from
By: Valeria Gonzalez

I’m from Anime
And Kaichou wa maid-sama
It tasted like a lemon
From toto
I’m from Aliens,
I’m from Tennessee, tacos and pozole.
From the people who smile everyday.
I am Valeria and I am from Mexico.

Johnny

Johnny’s story is a reminder to me of the power of investment in human relationships; of why ethnography takes time, why relationships take time. Johnny arrived at the IWC shortly after I did. He transferred from a school in the St. Louis Public School District, where he had bad experiences with teachers and fellow students. Johnny is a very thin young man with curly
hair. His face is marked with acne and acne scars. Johnny consistently showed up to class in wrinkled khaki pants, t-shirt and a grey hoody. He would grab a table in the back of the classroom and slouch down. He would smile at me when addressed; he would giggle but made zero effort to do any work. He would use his phone until caught, and then he would put it away and sleep. Johnny did not appreciate getting called on during class. Despite his reticence to participate in class, he was never rude or aggressive towards me.

He often smelled; it appeared that his clothes were not washed frequently, particularly that grey hoody. Some days he was more lucid or present then others; his clothes seemed cleaner, and he was willing to participate in class activities. It was difficult to hold space for Johnny and hard to know when and why to push. My first reaction was that marijuana may be a part of Johnny’s social life, and that I was not sure what type of adult interaction, if any, he was receiving at home.

Johnny spoke English quite well. It was not always grammatically correct but he spoke with fluency surpassing most of his peers. He was picking up vocabulary and phrases in his daily activities and work. Perhaps he was more engaged in class than it appeared. Johnny surprised me with his high level of interaction and engagement with the poem project. He opened up regarding his past experiences through this project and it changed the trajectory of our relationship.

In the first part of the poem project, he drew a picture of himself escaping from a drug rehabilitation clinic in Honduras. Our relationship changed when he decided I was not trying to get him in trouble. He did not engage in long conversations but he would tell me a story or two, laugh and then walk away. He talked about using drugs with his friends. Johnny’s parents took
him to the hospital for addiction when he was 14. He did not want to give up the drugs then, and
did not like how they treated him there. He felt out of control in the clinic so he escaped. His
family took him back to the clinic; Johnny escaped again.

In the second part of the project, Johnny talked about losing his brothers and family
members getting killed. He also talked about liking Coca-Cola, soccer and Nikes. He presented
the violence in his life right alongside mundane and material interests. It was as if he considered
trauma a normal facet of his life.

Hello my name is Johnny Andres
I’m from TV
I’m from bicycles
I’m from my shoes
I see my family and my things like my game boy, my clothes
I see my cell phone, my games, my soccer ball
But I have relatives who died, some by bullets, others by accident
I remember when I was playing with my friends in the field playing ball
My family likes hamburgers and pizza and salads

Language

The students presented their poems orally to the class at the end of the activity. Some
students embellished their PowerPoint slides with photos and drawings that matched the words,
products, and experiences in their poems. Others smiled sheepishly as they tripped over words
yet succeed presenting in English. Others read straight from the slide and sat down as quickly as
possible. As an audience, the students loved the presentations. They exclaimed happily at the
familiar flowers and foods. They commented on outfits, and new haircuts. Multiple languages
could be heard in the classroom as they cheered and laughed with, or at, their peers. You could
hear exclamations in English, Spanish, Arabic, Vietnamese. It was a reminder that this was not
an English classroom, nor even a Spanish classroom. How many languages were spoken by my students was something I had no concept of before entering this space.

When I helped in the main classrooms, I often acted as an interpreter or translator for the students. Here I occupied a different role. I was not their helper; I was their teacher. I also knew that most of my recent immigrants from Central America had little English and I had Spanish to reach them. When a student stumbled over a word or wanted to learn more, they could ask me in Spanish and together we could decipher the problem, solve the puzzle.

However, the students did not all come from Spanish speaking countries. Students also came from Ethiopia, Jordan, Pakistan, Vietnam and the Philippines.

In the classroom, English and Spanish were the primary languages. It was fascinating listening to the flow of Spanish in the room. In this setting, Spanish became a tertiary default language. Ahmed, a student from Jordan, loved to joke in Spanish. He could keep up with many of the kids and relished shouting bad words and snarky comebacks in Spanish. Ahmed’s English skills were better than most in the classroom and Arabic was his native language, which he spoke with native proficiency. Speaking Spanish, especially to the shyer girls like Elaine, kept him energized in class. Nigel, a student from Ethiopia and native Amharic speaker, had a sufficient level of Spanish to understand when other students were making fun of him.

Nigel was tall and thin- and graduated from the IWC the first year I joined the school. He was determined to go to college and loved being in school. He was the student who reminded the teachers of homework and assignments. In my class, I had to work hard to win his attention because he working on assignments for other classes. While most kids tried to sneak in
time on their phones, Nigel was sneaking in math homework. Students often teased him for his attention to books and lack of ability in soccer and other sports.

One day, spontaneously, Nigel began greeting me in Amharic. He said English isn’t the only language. As he patiently repeated the phrase for me so I could learn. I asked him to write it on the board in order to better understand and remember the greeting. He wrote in Amharic script, then in English letters, and finally the English translation.

**Amharic**

Salaam Wal: Have a good day

En dem na dirk: Good morning

![Image](image1.png)

Figure 5.1

![Image](image2.png)

Figure 5.2

The other students got excited. They laughed and practiced saying the words.

Ahmed, never to be outshined, ran to the board and grabbed a marker. “*Kef eomec*” Ahmed told me that meant *que tal? [How are you?]* His first instinct was to translate into Spanish.

**Arabic**

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After much encouragement and cajoling from her peers, Ann stepped up to the board.

**Vietnamese**

Xin Chao: Hello

Like many immigrants from Central America, Spanish was not their first language. They wrote down words from their indigenous language and translated it into Spanish on the board.

**K’iche’**

Sagarik: Buenos Dias
Atjij: Maestra
The multitude of languages spoken in one small classroom complicates the view of immigrants and immigrant students as a monolithic group entering United States. It speaks to the invisibility of indigenous languages and the global flow of people entering the United States. Language is another border to cross, wall to climb for these students. It also complicates the job of teachers and educators in serving this student population. When speaking with the teachers about the linguistic diversity in the classroom, Mrs. A shook her head. She said it is very frustrating because community members assume all immigrant students are Spanish speakers.

Recently a local company offered to bring a South American artist to speak to the students at the IWC. The teachers explained that the event would have to be in English as not every student spoke or understood Spanish. This organization was upset and withdrew the offer.
Indigenous languages from Guatemala are a wider issue impacting immigration courts. According to the Justice department, asylum seekers speaking K’iche’ and other indigenous Mayan languages have been on the rise over the last five years. Some languages have not been spoken in the United States until recently. (Medina, 2019)

Field Trips

The students at IWC do not have access to many additional resources except school buses. It is up to the teachers to organize opportunities to expose their students to different parts of St. Louis and have opportunities to use their emerging English language skills. At the end of my first semester, the teachers asked if I could arrange a visit to the Washington University campus for the IWC. The teachers were able to get the school district to cover the cost of a school bus to transport the kids. We arranged permission slips for kids (although that is very hard because of students’ living situations). Eventually we are able to pull it together and bring 25 IWC high school and 15 IWC Middle school students to campus. I worked with student volunteers to provide campus tours for the students and have lunch together. We toured the classrooms, dorms and different buildings. Then we shared pizza with Washington University students and visited the campus tour before the students got back on a bus and returned to the IWC in St Ann.

What stood out to me about this field trip was what the students took away. They commented that the best part was that everyone was so kind. “People smiled at us and were nice.” They said they liked practicing their English with the college students and seeing the beautiful buildings, but mostly they liked being in a place where no one treated them badly. Most every student bought a Washington University teddy bears or t shirt at the campus store. This was in some ways an artificial experience. The IWC students were on campus at the very
end of the semester when most students were gone. I selected the student volunteers because of their desire to help others coupled with a strong interest in immigration issues. However, it also brings up the question about why kindness is the defining factor, more important than the impressive campus buildings.

One week in December, not far from the Christmas holiday, the teachers asked if I could assist on a walking field trip about one mile away. The idea was to provide real life experiences in which students could practice both their spoken English and reading skills. They felt the students could benefit from more practice interesting in the St. Louis community, outside of school. In addition, the students were feeling restless as the semester was ending and the excitement of impending break was bubbling over. It was sunny and 40 degrees on the morning of the field trip. Students came prepared with coats and sneakers, and spending money, and we walked from the middle school through the neighborhoods to the strip mall.

Setting out from the IWC, we passed through a mixed residential and business area. The houses tend to be small, one-story houses with grey or black roofs, some in need of fresh paint and new gutters. There are small lawns with green grass and an occasional tree. A few businesses are interspersed with the houses including several barbershops, liquor stores and auto repair shops. Storefront churches were plentiful on the walk. We walked past the St. Ann’s Police Station, MoneyGram, Guarded Heart Bible College, and a “dance and talent center” for kids. Finally, we crossed St. Charles Rock Road, a busy road flanked by strip malls, churches and gas stations. Our destination was a strip mall that included a Family Dollar, Big Lots, a Post Office as well as a discount smoke shop. The strip mall may have been very popular a decade ago, but now it was an uneven assortment of storefronts, some empty, and some full.
The Family Dollar and Big Lots stores were filled with artificial Christmas Trees, ornaments, toys and gift, as well as their normal assortment of household items. Teachers divided the students into groups of four to six students, and provided each group with a list of products to locate in the store. They needed to find prices of the items, compare to other brands, and decide which product they would purchase. They had forms to fill out that had photos as well as names of products to find. The students were supposed to ask the store clerks for help when they could not find items. Half the groups went to the Dollar Store and half went to Big Lots. The second objective was to go to the post office, purchase postage stamps, and address and mail a postcard.

I accompanied a group of five students in Big Lots. We looked for fabric softener, dish detergent, fuzzy slippers, and spaghetti sauce. Frank was in my group; Frank was always kind and respectful but in the 18 months I worked at the school he never once spoke out loud in class unless asked. Despite, or perhaps because of his stoicism, he was well liked by his peers. In sharp contrast to the other boys in class who wore Adidas warm-up pants and FC Barcelona jerseys, Frank was well dressed, taking his school style to a different level. Frank kept his hair styled and freshly cut, with clean lines. He would wear faux leather pants or closely styled jeans. He never showed up in a soccer jersey or hooded sweatshirt.

On this trip to Big Lots, there was a section with huge stuffed animals, stuffed bears and lions three or four feet tall. Frank found a bear almost as tall as he was (and he is particularly tall in this group). I was surprised to find Frank laughing and hugging that bear. The other students laughed and found bears they liked as well. The students ask me to take pictures of them with the big bears. I have 15 photos of students posing with giant stuffed animals. Below is a photo of Frank hugging a large dog that is at least 5 feet long. Frank has a huge smile. The other photo
below is of three girls in our group, Ana and two middle school girls, each hugging a bear bigger than themselves. Ana is wearing a Texas Rangers baseball hat and smiling broadly.

After finding the products on our list and getting the accurate prices, we walked over to the post office. It looks like it was built in the 1980s with artificial wood laminate, fake wood cabinetry and old fashioned glass windowed display boards. It caused quite a shock to people inside the post office at the time. Five older white men in flannel shirts and navy baseball hats with army or navy veteran insignia adorning the hats were gathered at the post office chatting. A woman with her baby in a stroller and a few people who seemed to be picking up or sending packages for an office. They all stopped and stared when our group entered. Perhaps it was just surprising to see a large number of young people in a post office. Perhaps they were surprised to by how different the students looked from the other clientele, speaking languages other than English. The woman at the counter was helpful and patient as a few brave students asked for stamps. Each student then wrote a message on his or her post card. Many had never been inside a post office, which is not that strange for teenagers anywhere.
The joy and fun they had at this excursion stuck with me, the letting down of the guard of Frank smiling ear to ear with a stuffed animal made an impression. It is a reminder that these are teenagers searching for the possibility of fun, whether in school activities or in field trips. They do not have a lot of outlets for fun; they work and go to school and are generally disconnected from their surroundings due to lack of time and fear for their own safety.

Through these vignettes of school activities, I hope to deepen our understanding of the experience of these young people, their curiosity, their joys and their traumas woven into daily activities. Despite all they are trying assimilate and learn in these new surroundings, they show an openness to linguistic difference and curiosity resulting from their own multi-lingual classroom. We see their impulses shaped by consumer goods and nostalgia for home, despite unhappy memories. These activities helps illustrate the multidimensionality of the experience. These stories also are a reminder of challenges, from the trauma of writing poems after childhoods of violence, to the challenge of being multilingual in a hostile English-only society,
and to the distance between places like IWC and sites of privilege like WUSTL. Despite how hard they work, these young people are not fully incorporated into the community. Despite being victims of violence physical and emotional trauma, they also want to have fun, be silly, hug stuffed animals, and post those photos on Instagram.
Chapter 6: Beyond School Grounds

This chapter will shed light on the worries and challenges students face beyond the boundaries of the International Welcome Center. We will look at areas of work and employment for these students, policing inside and outside of the school, and immigration policies in constant flux. We will illuminate safety and security issues students continue to grapple with after they have crossed the border in the United States. These young people left their home countries and their homes to secure a safer life in St. Louis. Often living without the support of trusted parents or guardians, they live in fear of Immigration and Custom Enforcement (ICE) raids and xenophobic neighbors. In highlighting their experiences, I show how national processes are lived locally, and how these relate to the meaning of education in this particular institution.

This chapter illuminates the pressures and constraints on these students’ lives that may differ from mainstream United States high school students. The students are laborers as well as teenagers, and the policing system has pre-criminalized them (as has white society in general). In addition to being economically precarious, their lives are further subjected to the violence of a carceral, racist, and capitalist state. I also hope to show the incredible level of perseverance demonstrated by these students inside and outside of the classroom. Finally, I hope to contrast the environment inside the International Welcome Center and the greater school, neighborhood and community. In earlier sections, I have shown how school has become an emotional refuge. Because of the uncertainty of living in an era of changing immigration policy and enforcement, perceptions of criminality and illegality by the police and community members, and the
difficulties of hard physical work make the classroom and school a physical place of safety, and refuge.

**Work**

Work is a centerpiece of these students’ lives. It is not obvious at first. Coming into the classroom, they look like teenagers- Nike shoes, Adidas soccer pants, cool haircuts and just the right slouch in their seat. They sneak looks at their cell phones below their desks, posting on social media and listening to music. However, work dominates their free time both after school and on weekends. When I began teaching in the IWC, I learned two things quickly: the students worked long days after school and on weekends, and second, the students were very tired in my Monday morning classes. Weekends were not days of leisure, but opportunities to work. Their intense activity impacts school work in both immediate and long-term ways. Most immediately, they do not have time for homework. They return home after a full school day and a close to full workday and are exhausted. Long term, the necessity of financial self-sufficiency and demands of work often prevent students from staying in school.

With few exceptions, the jobs of these students were divided by gender, and strongly consistent from student to student. The boys worked in the roofing industry, mostly working on roofs but occasionally doing siding as well. Landscaping is often associated with immigrant and Latino labor. No student in the IWC worked in landscaping or gardening. The girls worked as custodians or in the back of restaurant kitchens, cooking or cleaning. These jobs are physically taxing, and hidden from view. They are often physically dangerous, involving hot grease, open flames, power tools, and working at heights with or without safety equipment. It is important to note that not all students had work authorization; this influences their work experiences, particularly the types of jobs they can take, and their safety while on the job.
A missing piece of this puzzle is the role of work authorization for all of these students. I intentionally avoided discussing documentation and authorization with the students. Because of the shifting policies regarding immigration, visas, and refugee status, I did not want to put anyone at risk. I did not want to jeopardize any student’s safety by revealing or reporting their immigration status. Workers without authorization are greater risk for exploitation by employers (Spiggle, 2019) (Schenker, 2018). Threat of deportation, fear that employers will call ICE as retaliation, keeps workers silent even in bad working conditions. Undocumented workers work for less pay, longer hours and in worse safety and general conditions than others workers. This leads to worse health outcomes (Schenker, 2018).

Many of the roofing crews work as a cash business, meaning work authorization is not as critical. It also means those job sites are under scrutiny from ICE, as we will see later in the chapter. For many of the restaurant and cleaning businesses, the demand for work authorization is uneven. Valeria, for example, was born in Tennessee, though she spent her childhood in El Salvador. As a United States Citizen, Valeria does not need work authorization or documentation. For the others, it is unclear and a question I have not asked.

It is not clear how much government regulation is present in these local businesses, either regarding immigration or general OHSA requirements. Roofing in particular is difficult and dangerous work, as well as uncomfortable in the widely fluctuating St. Louis climate, where heat and humidity is high in the summer, and precipitation is common in the winter. Roofers spend their days up on the tops of houses or buildings, two, three stories high - St. Louis housing varies in age and condition with older houses exceeding three stories plus an attic (over 30 feet in height). In addition, older houses may have steeper roofs than houses built in the last 20 years. This means pitches that exceed 12:12 pitch, or roofs at 45-degree inclines. OHSA defines a
steep roof at 4:12 pitch, or approximately 18 degree inclines. (Macdonald, 2006) These boys
attend school until 1:15 PM then depart for their roofing jobs. They work five or six hour shifts
on high roofs, working with machinery like nail guns, spreading tar, laying and nailing shingles,
etc. On the weekends, these boys will work eight hour shifts or longer.

Another health risk is the use of safety equipment, like harnesses; the boys never mention
using safety equipment. The boys tell me they are not worried. Maynor told me he does not get
scared being up so high. He grew up cultivating mango and other fruit trees in Guatemala. He
had to climb or scurry up tall tree trunks to cut branches or dead leaves, cut down mangos or
other fruit when ready to harvest. He had to do this without harnesses and while yielding a
machete or other sharp instrument. The boys do say it is often uncomfortably hot or
uncomfortably cold up on a roof all day. Rain can also interfere with work hours. Rather than
being excited at not having to work, most boys tell me it worries them because they do not make
as much money.

Most boys entered the roofing industry based on family connections. Their father, uncle,
or stepfather usually worked on a roofing crew. When the boys arrive in St. Louis, they look to
older men in their community to introduce them to work crews or foremen and help these young
men acquire employment. They can be as young as 14 when they join a roofing crew. They
have to find a crew that lets them work outside of school hours and on weekends. Maynor and
Jorge, who hail from the same area in Guatemala, work on the same roofing crew. Their uncle
and father knew each other back home; many of that crew are from the same general area back in
Guatemala.

Kevin was often pulled from school when his father’s crew needed more help, especially
when a period or rain or high winds kept them out of work for several days. Kevin often
complained to me because he had to drive his father everywhere. Kevin was only 15 but responsible for driving his father to work. That meant he was often tardy for class because his dad would insist on Kevin driving him. Kevin enjoyed that freedom of having the family car, but not his inability to control his time, particularly at school. The teachers attempted to speak with his dad about this situation and ask him to allow Kevin to attend school regularly. Kevin’s dad was very matter of fact- “We have to work.” As a result, Kevin stopped trying as hard in school. He was unable to attend the fun field trips built into the school calendar, because his attendance was so spotty. He was particularly upset when he missed our trip to the STL FC stadium to tour and meet with some of the players. Kevin did not return to the IWC the following year. He began working full time, alongside his father.

Alberto was an exception to the rule of boys working on roofing. Albert joined the IWC during my second year. He came from Honduras and was jovial and friendly, and seemed genuinely excited to be in school. That year, I helped in Mrs. T’s literacy class. Mrs. T was the reading specialist and tasked with helping these students improve their English reading and writing ability. On the days I volunteered at the IWC, I always spent time in this classroom, helping translating back and forth between teacher and student. I often sat with a group of boys who struggled a lot with English. One of them was Alberto. He always called me over to his table, perhaps because it made things less boring, perhaps because he wanted to learn, or perhaps because we enjoyed talking about school and his life. In addition to being an earnest student, Alberto was motivated to learn English because of his job cutting hair.

Shortly after his arrival in St Louis, Alberto began cutting hair in his home, or going to other people’s houses or apartments. He was good with a razor and scissors, making lines and patterns on the sides, and keeping his friends looking sharp and stylish. Alberto was proud of his
skills. He said he used to cut hair back in Honduras and enjoyed keeping up with the latest hair trends on Instagram.

Driven by the need to support himself, Alberto began to cut hair at a barbershop. Working at the barbershop provided more clients and a steadier source of income. Unfortunately, it also challenged his autonomy and independence. He was no longer in control of when he cut hair, and where. Alberto’s work hours were dictated by the shop owner. By February, he began to miss class. When I asked Mrs. T about his absences, she said she believed he felt pressured to work more hours at the barbershop. When I would see Alberto, he was excited and friendly as always, but said he did not have much choice. He liked going to school; it was fun, and he was learning English quickly, but he needed to make more money. He could not make enough money cutting hair on his own. He felt he had to answer to the barbershop. Alberto did not make it to the end of the year at the IWC. By April, he was cutting hair full time. Some of the boys told me he liked it better than school. I am not convinced that is the whole story. Some boys teased him for cutting hair, but others said it sounded better than roofing outside.

Girls on the other hand worked primarily in two industries—custodial work and restaurant kitchen. Despite not being outside or 30 feet in the air, custodial and kitchen work came with its own hazards. Roxana worked as a line cook at a trendy faux-Mexican restaurant in central St. Louis. She would often return to school with burns on her arms. Roxana showed me her burns one day during Math class. She said it was too hot in the kitchen to wear long sleeves. When she worked in short sleeves, her arms were easily burned by oil splashing when items were placed in the fryer or on the grill. Roxana wanted to find a different job but was having trouble finding anything outside of a kitchen. Some girls worked at a coffee shop in North County,
bussing tables. Lara, who worked at the Coffee Shop, said she liked talking to customers and the work was not too hard. Diana worked at a fast food restaurant. Her role was to prepare orders that came through the drive-through or the counter. This job seemed a bit safer than Francesca’s kitchen work, but was significantly more regulated. I stopped at the fast food restaurant with my children one day to see her, at her invitation. She seemed happy but hurried. It was clear her supervisor did not appreciate my attempts to talk to his workers. Diana, though an engaged student with good grades, left school after a year and a half. She dated another former student, Wilson, who had dropped out after his first year. Diana and Wilson are expecting a baby and are working to be able to support their family.

Other girls worked as custodians and office cleaners. This was difficult work, both for the type of work including cleaning bathrooms, and also for the hours. Some work was in private homes, other work was for businesses. Cleaning office buildings required workers to start after the business day had finished. Valeria, worked in an office building in Chesterfield with her mother. They started work at 6:00 PM and worked until 2:00 AM. Chesterfield is at least 30 minutes by car from St. Ann. Valeria often did not get to bed until 3:00 AM on school nights. After a long night on the job, Valeria began school at 7:15 AM.

The connections or links for the jobs that girls took is not as clear as for the roofing jobs. Some found employment through family: Roxana worked in the restaurant with her sister, Valeria worked with her mother. Other girls found jobs through a variety of methods, mostly word of mouth in the community.

The bottom line is that these students’ lives were full. They attended school from 7:15 AM until 1:15 pm each day, and then took on a second shift as laborers. Time for homework and leisure activities were very limited. It also explained why Mondays were such hard days to
be in school. Most students had been working all weekend—full eight hour shifts or longer. School became a place to rest, rejuvenate, even be a kid for a few hours.

Police and Policing: Carceral Apparatus

The students often told me stories of concern, fear regarding police in their area. Regardless of the students’ immigration status, they overwhelmingly expressed concern with police interaction, in the street, at work, even eating at a restaurant. This comes from personal experiences where family members have been stopped, searched, and even detained by police. This fear, these anecdotal stories are mirrored in statistics and news reports regarding St. Ann police and surrounding areas.

Conversations about police and policing are not new in the St. Louis metropolitan area. St. Louis is seen as the launching place for the Black Lives Matter movement, based specifically on the incidents in Ferguson in August 2014. Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson shot and killed eighteen-year-old Michael Brown. Michael Brown was black and Darren, white. This sparked protests, civic engagement, police on the streets, and swelling of movement against police brutality against blacks, specifically killing of unarmed black man by white police officers, throughout the United States. The municipalities that make up the Ritenour School District are in the shadow of Ferguson. When the Ferguson Police Station jail was overcrowded during the protests, detained protestors were transferred to the St. Ann Jail. One of the now iconic images of protests in Ferguson is a St. Ann police officer pointing an assault weapon at unarmed protestors. (Bogan, 2012) That officer was later suspended for his actions.

St. Louis’ notoriety did not go away after August, 2014. In November of 2014, the grand jury handed down a not-guilty verdict for Darren Wilson. The city again erupted in outrage and
protest. The National Guard was called in to work alongside the police. Protest and outrage erupted again in St. Louis in September of 2017 when a jury handed down a non-guilty verdict for another white St Louis police officer, Jason Stockley, in the killing of Anthony Lamar Smith, a black man. Further compounding this incident, police were called to task for illegal and brutal policing methods against bystanders and protesters alike. Violent or fatal interactions with police have largely been cast as a black and white issue. Studies show that policing against Hispanics is also of serious concern. Policing of Hispanic is higher than policing of blacks in certain geographic regions particularly where people perceive the amount of undocumented immigrants to be very high. (Johnson & St. Vil, 2018) (Martinez, 2007)

Minority threats, the perception or association of minorities with crime (based on perceptions, not data), leads to targeted police engagement, increased level of coercive authority, and higher frequency of use of force. Men of Color are more likely to have fatal interactions with police than the population at large. Income inequality and racial segregation increase the chances of police homicide for Hispanic males. Interestingly, higher percentages of Hispanic police officers increased the risk of fatal homicides for Hispanic males. (Johnson & St. Vil, 2018). These national findings play out in St. Ann, Missouri, where Heoch Middle School, and the International Welcome Center, are located.

Heoch Middle School is in St. Ann, Missouri. St. Ann is a small town of 12,500 people. It lies in the shadow of Ferguson, Missouri, and is one of nine towns that comprise the Ritenour School District. St. Ann has gained notoriety over the last fifteen years for its extreme policing and de facto immigration enforcement. The former Police Chief, Robert Schrader, was proud of his extreme tactics to stop, search and detain people in his jurisdiction. In 2006, reports began to surface around scare tactics aimed at Latinos (citizens and non-citizens alike) in the area (Bogan,
St. Ann Police searched Hispanics 10 times more often than they searched whites. This policy continued despite results of searching white people was twice as likely to result in seizure as when searching Hispanics. St. Ann Police also routinely called Immigration and Customs Enforcement when stopping Hispanics. Lawyers and immigration advocates are very concerned that “St. Ann police tread dangerously close to immigration enforcement, a federal responsibility.” These extreme policing efforts in St. Ann have resulted in Latino business owners moving businesses to other municipalities. Retail storeowners and restaurant owners said that Latinos are afraid to drive through or shop in St. Ann for fear of interaction with police. Proprietors say they need to move or cater their businesses to non-Hispanics. This was not new in 2011. Chief Robert Shrader was in office in St. Ann for 24 years, beginning the late 1980s. In interviews, he was proud to be tough on Hispanics. “"I don't care if (ICE) takes them or not, but we are going to make the call [to ICE]."” (Bogan, 2012)

I imagined that this might be small town politics of the Midwest. Perhaps St. Ann policing statistics might be similar to neighboring towns like Overland, Maryland Heights and Ferguson. However, statistics show that the policies and actions of police in St. Ann are quite different from any other city in the St. Louis Metropolitan area. In 2006, police issued 371 traffic tickets to Hispanics; 66 percent of those cases included searches and arrests. Whites were only searched 16 percent of the time despite being more likely to have illegal contraband. Due to outside pressure, St. Ann made some changes. In 2011, Hispanics were searched 33 percent of the time, a decrease since 2006, but still twice the level of white searches. That same year, Maryland Heights executed searches of Hispanics 17% of times, and Breckenridge hills searched Hispanics only 5% of times. St. Ann police search and arrest Hispanics at a much higher rate than neighboring municipalities. (Bogan, 2012)
In 2012, Police Chief Robert Shrader retired from his elected position as police chief. He backed Officer Aaron Jimenez, who went on to win the position and currently is chief today. Jimenez identifies as the son of a Mexican father and German mother. Residents were hopeful that Jimenez would bring change for St. Ann and for Hispanics in the community. Interestingly, while his stance on calling ICE seems softer, his police department continues to receive media attention for strong police tactics.

In 2019 alone, several incidents have received national attention including beating black suspects until unconscious. According to Missouri police department records, St. Ann has the second highest number of police chases in the region. Despite having only 54 officers, they engaged in 166 police chases between 2016 and 2018. St. Louis Police department with more than 1200 officers engaged in 177 chases. Chief Jimenez stated “we chase them until their wheels fall off.” Another officer posted on Facebook another post from a resident stating “St. Ann will chase you—to Mexico, they do not care.” This appears to be a source of pride evident from statements both by the police chief and officers (Heffernan, 2019). This is the area in which the IWC students live, work, and walk through daily. As you can imagine, this puts students in a constant state of worry.

Even I have interacted with the St. Ann police. Driving to Hoech Middle School one morning, I was pulled over for a traffic stop. It was a white police officer with silver hair, appearing to be around 60 years of age. I was stopped for driving 35 miles per hour in a 25 mile per hour zone. The officer was friendly and spoke kindly to me. He asked that I pay better attention to speed limit signs and lowered my ticket from 10 miles over the limit to 5 miles over the limit, to reduce my ticket cost. He then told me to be very careful:
You have to watch out for the kids around here. They are up to no good; they do not care. Be very careful.

While I was relieved to have such a calm interaction with the police officer, his candidness and willingness to tell me how suspicious he was of the children at Heoch Middle School, speaks volumes to at least his own views of the local adolescents. Why was he willing to treat me gently and give me a break? Was it due to my light skin color, my gender, my St. Louis English diction and accent? Why was I worthy of his generosity, and not the students with whom I work?

**Fear**

Immigration issues are top of mind and top of Twitter, with an incredible uptick in visibility, fear and anxiety since the inauguration of Donald Trump in 2017. Under his leadership, immigration policies of flexed, changed, immigration enforcement has become more visible and, more wide sweeping. Students expressed fear about going to work, weighing the risk of earning money versus the potential detention by ICE. In July, Trump announced raids against families across the countries. It is important to show the St. Louis and Missouri context in which these particular students find themselves. I wanted to show the high level of fear and anxiety these students experience on a regular basis, just by leaving their house to go to school or work. To do so, it is important to show the context of immigration enforcement, support for immigrants, in this area. Though far from the US-Mexico border, these students worry they must cross borders daily, always risking deportation.

The students tell me stories of concern, of fear regarding police in their area. Regardless of the students’ immigration status, or process, they overwhelming express concern with police
interaction, in the street, at work, even eating at a restaurant. This comes from personal experiences where family members have been stopped, searched, and even detained by police. These anecdotal stories mirror the statistics and news reports regarding St. Ann police and surrounding areas.

For many white Americans, knowing someone’s identity as Hispanic, automatically assume they are illegal. Work done by Ariela Schacter and Rene D. Flores shows white Americans assume Mexicans are illegal 60% of the time, while they only assume Italians or Indians are illegal 21% of the time. Trump’s rhetoric around Hispanics both in speeches and on twitter has heightened white Americans perceptions of Hispanics as criminals. (Flores & Schacter, 2018). Studies about stereotype threat show assumed connection between immigration status and criminality, alongside perceptions of drug and gang activity among Hispanics is common among the public and policy makers (Bender, 2003). The pairing of these beliefs with a rising Hispanic population can trigger policies, police actions, and community perceptions that “treat residents of pre-dominantly Hispanic communities as threats (Holmes et al., 2008;Martinez, 2007) (Johnson & St. Vil, 2018).

Perceived by white people as being a threat or a criminal is an experience these students discuss frequently in school. I heard many variations of this story, in which St. Louisans treated the students or their families as a threat. Students have both positive and negative stories regarding interactions with local residents. Some are confronted by Americans and accused of being a danger to others; some have witnessed Americans standing up for them. One morning at the IWC, I was chatting with a group of boys while the math teacher went to copy a handout. Oscar told me the following story:
One day he went to eat with his Tio and an American, a “Guero” (a term used in Mexico and Central America to refer to an American, literally meaning light colored). This American, Oscar told me, treats his workers like his own children. Oscar’s uncle accompanied the Guero to a work site, a roofing job in place where they did not have any Hispanics. Other Americans present at the site became upset and argumentative, asking him why he brought a Hispanic to the work site, when they did not want Hispanics there. “El Guero” said “Stop! this man is like my son.” According to Oscar’s Tio, the other people backed down.

Jorge echoed this sentiment. He says there are Americans who see you and value you for your work for your personality. There are some who smile when they pass you on the street but many do not. The other boys in the class nodded in agreement. Jorge sees the look every day on the street- people look at him as if he shouldn’t be here, as if he will do bad things, or that he doesn’t belong there. He sees it when he goes shopping with his mother. I asked if he sees it in the school. He paused for a moment. “Sí- de vez en cuando, pero no como en la calle.” “Sure,” he says, “once in a while, but not at all like on the streets.”

Another student told me that sometimes it is hard at work because bosses and work crews treat you badly. He said if he can, he prefers to work with Hispanic crews. This is visibly upsetting for him. “I am going to tell you in plain words,” he says, “because if I use the words I feel it will be too much.”

*Es algo muy feo, ¿verdad? Que tuvieras un empleador, pero ese empleador lo pagas como quiera, pero el te habla como quiera y tú no puedes hacer nada. Porque si dices algo, pues le llama a la policía estatal. Y eso es lo que tú quieres evitar y todo eso. Nos tratan como animales. Parecemos animales.*

It’s really ugly, you know? Imagine you have an employer who can pay you whatever he wants, can talk to you however he wants, and you can’t do anything. If you say
something, he can call the state police. They treat us like animals; they make us feel like animals.

Another boy chimed in: “There is a lot of fear going to work. Sometimes we are afraid to go to work because the police will stop by and ask for papers. You risk not being paid. You have to choose: leave work if you hear police are coming, or stay through your shift (to get paid) and risk being picked up by the police. Its better when you work with other Hispanic folks like us. “Ellos comprenden todo eso y que todos están en esta situación juntos.” “They understand everything. We are all in the same situation.”

For many of our students, and for Hispanic residents in the area, there is a great sense of anxiety and risk-taking being out on the streets in St. Louis County, even shopping or going to eat. There is a fear of someone calling the police, or ICE. Lawyers and civic leaders report a doubling of calls and requests for legal help around immigration since 2017 (Hartman, 2017). Jim Hacking, an immigration attorney in St. Louis, states his business has doubled and many clients are scared to take their kids to schools, to call the police or even go to the hospital. With the uncertain laws and enforcement, they are worried about being picked up and detained by ICE or police. This fear is not limited to non-citizens. Hispanic immigrants with US citizenship report being diligent about carrying the driver’s license and passport every time they leave the house. There is a fear that they may be detained and not given the opportunity to show proper paperwork. (Hartman, 2017) For immigrants who live outside of St. Louis, there is a danger in driving to the metro area to seek help. (Davis, 2019)

An ongoing story in the St. Louis area revolves around a longtime resident whose story is very similar to the students at the International Welcome Center. Alex Garcia fled Honduras due to the crime and poverty. He has been in the United States since 2004, working for 13 years in
Missouri primarily in construction. He is now married to a US citizen, Carly Zuniga, and has five US born children. In 2015, Alex went with his sister to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Office in Kansas City. While the appointment was for his sister’s immigration case, they asked him questions as well and found an order of removal from 2000. Upon discovering this order, ICE detained Alex and put him into custody. He was released three weeks later due to the advocacy of his lawyer, Nicole Cortes, of the MICA Project- Migrant and Immigrant Community Action Project. Through her legal advocacy, ICE granted Alex a temporary stay, or injunction of his removal order.

This was issued in 2015, and renewed in 2016. In 2017, however, Alex received a noticed from ICE that he had to report for deportation in two weeks. There was no indication as to why temporary stay was revoked, or indication that he had violated a policy. It corresponded with the new administration and new leadership at ICE. Having built a life here in Missouri, with permission of the federal government, leaving would be a hardship both for him and his family. Seeking an alternative solution, Alex instead took refuge in the United Church of Christ in Maplewood, Missouri.

Alex has remained there for almost two full years. He works and volunteers within the church. He has the support of the pastor, Rebecca Turner, and the support of the parish and a great many St. Louis residents. There is a page on the church website detailing his situation and ways to help him. Some strategies include raising awareness, donating money to his legal fund, and writing letters to local and national congress people. You can sign up to be a “Vecino”-volunteering for a “watch” shift, someone who stays at the church and keeps a lookout for those who might harm Alex or try to remove him from the church. His family comes to visit him on the weekends. Congressman Lacy Clay has introduced a personal bill to allow him
authorization, submitted in July 2019. Cortes notes that private immigration bills have a very low likelihood of passing. This is a good step for Alex but not a guaranteed solution (Hidalgo, 2018) (Murphy, 2019) (Bogan, 2019). If you extrapolate this out to the young people at the IWC or anywhere in St. Louis- solutions are hard to come by, and most don’t get a private bill introduced by a congressman or have access to legal support.

For students at the IWC, they hear and exchange stories about police and immigration enforcement at school. Some of these stories are personal, happening to their fathers or uncles, some are almost urban legends or cautionary tales. They advise each other to be cautious and not trust others, particularly the police. “Do not answer the door, if you aren’t expecting anyone.” “Pay attention to who is in the neighborhood.” “This guy disappeared and you could too.” “Don’t talk to the police, they won’t help you.” This lack of trusts affects their daily lives, and limits their support systems. These students are caught in the immigration and deportation machine with little hope of escape. Even as some students are granted asylum, they are more likely to be seen as illegal based on white American’s perceptions of Latinos (Flores & Schacter, 2018).

When I asked students about their interaction with local residents, there is often a pause, and then “they are very nice, no problems….” When probing further, every student had at least one if not many stories about upsetting interactions with neighbors, bosses, and people they interacted with in St. Louis. Maynor said “I’m not from here, and I understand why people are worried, but I wish they understood what we did to get here and that all we want to do is work hard.” For Jorge, it is a daily struggle. He is trying to be honorable. He wants people to understand that he is not here to cause problems, just to live and work hard.
Viernes acá este país por algo, no por molestar. Sé qué vienes por necesidad. Pues nuestro país no tenemos nada. i te vas a la ciudad hay demasiados delincuentes de extorsión a cada día en nuestra ciudad en la mera ciudad pues más de 100 personas muertas diario peces algo tenebroso que no me gustaría ir allá Pues una de esas y personas podría ser yo verdad en tu pueblo.

You come to this country for something, for necessity, not to bother anyone. In our country, we do not have anything. In my city, more than 100 people die every day. One of these people could be me.

The students are the International Welcome Center in the Ritenour School District live full and robust lives outside of school. They are teenagers; enjoy spending time on their cell phones, texting or what’sapp-ing their friends and family, and watching videos. They also have lives full of anxiety and pressure. There is pressure to work and earn money for their own survival and that of their families; and anxiety of knowing every day comes with risk. Students work full work shifts after school and on weekends, giving them very little leisure time to play sports, an instrument, or even check social media. Importantly for school progress, this leaves little time to think about homework. In addition to their engagement with the second shift (school being the first shift and work being the second shift), these students expose themselves to high risk every time they leave their houses or apartments. They face risk of perceived stereotype threat from both residents and police. This perception that Latinos are inherently dangerous leads to greater risk of being stopped by the police, that immigration will be called, being accused of doing something wrong, or committing a crime. These students have to navigate public spaces for their physical and mental wellbeing. Students must navigate stereotype threat- public and police immediately assuming they are a threat based on their skin color, hair color and language. This should provide a broader understanding of the factors in these students lives; understand what may set them apart from other high school students in St. Louis.
Navigating community expectations is difficult for these children. Schooling institutions can further reproduce or disrupt (as a place of refuge) the violent and exploitative anti-immigrant system that we have in place. For many immigrant students, teachers buy into the belief that these students are criminal and not worthy of being in the classroom. The actions and attitudes of the IWC teachers have created a refuge because they knowingly, or unknowingly, disrupt these beliefs.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

“For when in the course of human history and events, it becomes necessary to cross borders of political, social, linguistic, cultural, economic, and technological construction...we will cross. For long before there were borders, there was us. (Enrique G. Murillo Jr., 2009)

Paul Willis, in talking about working class students improving their socio-economic futures, making it into a higher socio economic circle, said a few will make it but a class will never follow. As I trace the trajectory of these students from the IWC, these words ring true. There are highs and lows but success is not wide spread. These adolescents must navigate enormous changes without support or guidance from trusted family members. As doors close for these young people, particularly related to immigration status and education, these students are renegotiating their place in St. Louis and in the region. These students are claiming rights and claiming community, engaging in what Rosaldo would call cultural citizenship (Rosaldo, 1989, Benmayor, 1997), a space between documentation and the right to live and thrive in their space. Working alongside their teachers, these young people are creating lives and claiming space in the St. Louis region.

The good news is that several students were granted asylum since my project has begun; with this designation, they are able to obtain work authorization and legal documentation to remain in the United States. Some of these students have graduated with a high school diploma, from either the International Welcome Center, or the mainstream high school. And yet some have not. Many of the students have not had their court hearing, or their claims have been
denied, as is true for more than 70 percent of asylum seekers from the Northern Triangle countries (TRAC, 2017). Many of the IWC students I worked closely with have left school without a diploma in hand in order to work to support themselves financially. Many students have started families of their own, some under happy circumstances. Others are struggling with non-consensual relationships and parenting without partners.

It is important to not reduce these young people to their hardships and their traumas (Delgado Gaitan, 2018). Lourdes is the young woman who entered IWC pregnant and the teachers had to fight to keep her in school despite lack of record. She graduated from Ritenour High School, and was granted asylum. She is feeling more positive about her future and the future of her young daughter. Her asylum status provides security for her and her daughter; they can move freely about the United States without fear of detention by ICE. Her high school diploma and her work authorization create more opportunities for jobs. Lourdes’ friend, Yasmin who was worried about transferring back a less supportive district, was able to stay in the Ritenour District and graduated from high school with Lourdes.

Wilson, one of the young men who left IWC for work, was also granted asylum. His girlfriend is from Nepal and they enjoy watching Bollywood movies together. Their common language is English, though it is neither person’s native language. Roberta and David, the siblings from Mexico, both transferred to the high school and should graduate this year. Nancy, the young woman who begged to stay in the lower English group, graduated high school and lives with IWC classmate, Ricky. They have been dating for two years and are expecting a baby soon. She continues to work in a fast food restaurant and Ricky works in construction.
Jorge has his final asylum hearing coming up. He is nervous after all he has gone through; he must decide what will he do if asylum is not granted. Jorge and his mother were able to arrange for a guía to bring his young brother, Omar, to the United States. Like Jorge, Omar’s immigration journey was dangerous and scary. Nevertheless, he made it and now attends the IWC. The brothers lives together in St. Louis with their mother. If Jorge receives asylum, he will be in a better position to help his two younger siblings who remain in Guatemala. Jorge graduated from Ritenour High School and is now dating another girl from the IWC. He is feeling hopeful.

Roxana has finally found some stability. She has a steady boyfriend who is also an IWC graduate. She describes him as kind, reliable, and working hard. She continues to work in the same restaurant. The most positive change is she is able to handle pressure from her parents better now, she says. Roxana felt immense pressure to send any money to her parents regardless of her needs. Now she is more comfortable setting limits. Roxana sends money to her parents when she is able and on her schedule.

Other students are renegotiating their lives here due to unfortunate and unexpected circumstances. In a heartbreaking turn of events, Piece was abandoned yet again. Pierce was torn up when his father disappeared; he felt abandoned by his family and was trying to stay positive while living with his stepmother and half-siblings. Only a few month later, Pierce’s stepmother abandoned him as well, quite literally. She left with her child, Pierce’s half-sister, and moved to Florida. She refused to bring Pierce with her. Pierce is still in school and taking challenging classes. To support himself, he has two jobs, one in construction as well as a nighttime cleaning job at a Michaels Store in Illinois.
Helbert, the student I accompanied to the nurse’s office has recently dropped out of school. Helbert and his girlfriend, India, are expecting a baby. He stayed in school until November then dropped out to work full time. India plans to attend high school until the baby is born. The pregnancy and birth is straining the relationship between Helbert and his stepmother. His stepmother is a US citizen and sponsored Helbert’s visa. Although his stepmother and father separated since his arrival, she has control over his education as his sponsor and guardian. In an effort to support Helbert, the teachers held a meeting with Helbert and his stepmother so they could talk things through. She was frustrated because she had repeated conversations with him regarding using birth control. She said it has happened before but the girlfriend miscarried. They were unable to resolve their differences and Helbert moved out. He lives now with his girlfriend and her parents. He did start at the high school this year but left before the end of the term. One of the teachers said she thinks he was excited to create the family he never had growing up.

Elaine is the student who was living with an older man and not attending school regularly. The teachers tried to work with the Elaine’s mom but did not make much traction. This year Elaine got pregnant by this older man. He does not want anything to do with her now; he has kicked her out and she has returned to her mother’s house. The mother did approach the teachers for help because the man will not claim or support the baby. Unfortunately, there is not much the teachers can do in this situation.

Oscar, the tall quiet student who loves Tenacious D, dropped out due to financial issues. He needed to work full time. He began working in a sandwich factory. He was recently promoted to supervisor and is making a decent salary. Wilbur, Valeria’s friend, moved to New Jersey- but never enrolled in school there. He tried to enroll in school in New Jersey but he had
“aged out.” He was too old to start school, according to that district’s policies. He decided to move back to St. Louis and live with his sister. He has reached out to teachers to reenroll at Ritenour. He is in the process of filling out paperwork.

I asked the teachers how they felt about their students and their progress. Mrs. A said

Each one of these kids works hard. They want a decent life, just as we do. They are doing their best. I wish people could see that and not judge them.

She goes on to remark that teachers are not miracle workers. Sometimes teachers at the high school get upset and wonder what happens at the IWC; they criticize the students’ English skills. The IWC teachers view those reactions as a lack of training and understanding of these students’ life experiences. It is difficult to know when to transition the students. There are so many factors to consider, including ability, hours of instruction, age, and student need. They also lament the lack of support and understanding from the greater community. Sometimes it feels like organizations in St. Louis want to help but do not understand the community or the needs. People are interested in photo ops with these students, but are not flexible when the school or teachers suggestion solutions more in line with their needs.

This project focuses on educational and life trajectories of Central American youth in St. Louis, Missouri, who have immigrated unaccompanied from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. My research is an ethnographic and experiential proximation to a new Latino diaspora, with a focus on emerging institutions and immigrant experiences in a multidimensional perspective. This is not a study of educational outcomes but a study of life and its relationship to the institution. Incredible perseverance and strength on behalf of these young people coupled with Radical flexibility on behalf of individual actors within the educational institution have
created pathways for belonging and stability. These pathways are uneven and uncertain, but a way forward none the less.

Through the course of the research we have gained insight into the lives of immigrant youth in St. Louis, a mid-sized Midwestern city with little exposure or preparation for growing immigrant population. These young people have shown how full their lives are, with school, work, and the demands of navigating a new life with new cultural expectations and means of communication. They are simultaneously learning academic subjects while navigating a new language, their second, third or even fourth language. They are also adapting to a new family structure with new demands and new family members or parents they have not seen since their infancy. At the same time, they are butting up against the undocumented disadvantage and stereotype threat; they are perceived by others to be illegal, undocumented and potentially criminal, based on their appearance as Latin American, or other. Threaded throughout everything they do is the ongoing impacts of trauma, from traumatic events suffered before and during their immigration journeys, and for many new traumas from fragmented family situations and ongoing risks of live in the United States.

In looking at the research regarding immigration from the North triangle nations of Central America, attention is focused predominantly on men’s experiences. This makes sense in some ways, as more men immigrate from the Northern Triangle Nations, although the number of women and children is rising since 2014 (Hallock, 2018). As a result, the voices and experiences of women and young girls are not reflected enough in the literature. My work is no exception. The young men in my classroom were much more willing to share their stories. They volunteered for interviews and generally shared their stories with me. While I had good relationships with the young women, they were more interested in talking about present day
issues. Additionally, I did not interview a few young women, at the behest of the teachers. Mrs. A and Ms. B were concerned about these young women’s wellbeing, given current trauma and the girls’ reticence to engage with others around personal issues. About half of the young women became pregnant during the two years I was involved with the IWC. While the young women liked to discuss general themes of pregnancy, parenting, and babies with me, they rarely offered insight into their own situations. It is important to focus on both the immigration journey as well changing family structure and gendered expectations for young women who have immigrated on their own. Another limitation to my study is limited to one school district in the region. Additional research into the lived experiences of immigrant students at other regional high schools, not focused on newcomers would provide important comparisons and further conversation about supporting immigrant students.

I expected to find the International Welcome Center to be one of challenges for the students. Instead, I discovered a place of refuge. It is an outlier in a local system ambivalent about the rights of immigrants to be in the schools and unprepared to meet their needs. The school itself replicated some of these challenges, given its concerns with security. However, contrary to what other studies have found, the institution was able to act as a place where immigrant youth feel a sense of safety and belonging.

In order to for more schools to become places of refuge for all students to learn and thrive, there is a need to greater understanding of the populations in the region and the circumstances under which they live. Educators, administrators and policy-makers alike must share this awareness. There is a need to provide training and instruction for teachers around second language acquisition, cultural adaptation, as well as trauma-informed teaching.

Immigrant students are not the only ones facing trauma. Issues of violent crime, homelessness,
poverty and changing family landscapes are issues that affect students born in the St. Louis region. Helping schools and teachers learn about this situations and practice radical flexibility may make schools better for all students.

It is through a sense of radical flexibility on behalf of individual actors, particularly teachers and school administrators that have made a difference in the lives of these new St. Louis residents. A small gesture at the right time can have lasting positive effects. They have made space for the lived experiences of their students to dictate the flow of learning and engaging with the school. In understanding the challenges their students face, and seeing them as people to be understood, not bodies to be disciplined, educators are recognizing not only the students’ suffering and trauma, but their worth and contribution to the space. Perhaps without realizing, the teachers are disrupting the oppressive institutional structures that hold these students back.
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