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Con Café, Compañerismo, y Calidad: Latina Women Fashioning a Writing Group into a Space of Praxis and Belonging

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the spatial practices through which a group of Mexican immigrant women, participants in a school-based writing workshop I facilitated for four years, molded and gave meaning to our weekly writing routine to foster inclusivity as the basis for collective teaching and learning—creating what I refer to as a space of praxis and belonging. Integrating the insights of Latina feminist ethnography with dialectical and dialogical approaches to spatial production, I consider how workshop participants’ attention to the material, aesthetic, and affective dimensions of the workshop were central to the creation of a space for writing and discussing stories that respected writers’ differences, dignified their life experiences, and encouraged them to consider new ways of envisioning and enacting their lives.

The construction of belonging . . . is based on the everyday ritualized use of space.—Tovi Fenster

Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic.—Audre Lorde

For me the writing workshop is a comfortable place, a place of friendship. I look forward to our routine each week, writing and sharing our stories, sipping our coffee while we talk about our lives. I always learn something new from my compañeras. They help me to think about my life in a different way.—excerpt from a writing by Sandra Morales, Telpochcalli School “Parents as Writers” group

A space like, and unlike, home

It was Claudia’s first day with the “Parents as Writers” workshop at Telpochcalli, a small elementary school in a predominantly Mexican neighborhood. It was also my fourth year facilitating that workshop. For 15 years I have led personal narrative writing workshops in diverse Chicago neighborhoods, in my role as coordinator of Community Writing Project, a citywide program I run through the local university where I am based. Drawing on diverse pedagogies for liberation (Freire, 1970; Gramsci, 1971; Ranciere, 1991) the project aims to “provide adults in marginalized communities a forum for creative expression in which people can share their experiences, examine their lives, develop the craft of writing, and become recognized within their communities as writers and leaders” (Community Writing Project, 2014). That fourth year also marked the second time we were audiotaping our workshop sessions, as part of a participatory research project focusing on documenting and improving the school’s adult programs.

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1This and all writing excerpts and workshop participants’ comments are translated by me from the Spanish. I have left the Spanish word compañera in the text because it signifies at once companion, friend, and classmate.

2Telpochcalli, a Nahuatl word meaning “house of youth,” is the school’s actual name, which the writers and principal encouraged me to use. Writers’ names are pseudonyms, which they requested due to their civil status.

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Four workshop participants, two other parents, and I were collaborating as the project’s coresearchers. My role was to take ethnographic notes of our writing sessions, while the parent writers kept journals chronicling their experiences in the writing workshop and other parent programs in which they participated as learners or facilitators. An extension of an earlier action research project that had focused narrowly on the writing workshop, the purpose of our collaborative research was to learn about parents’ participation in and assessment of the workshops and classes offered, compare their experiences with facilitators’ intentions, and in this way determine how to make improvements to the diverse offerings. It was in the process of attending to those programmatic concerns that I was led to consider the writing workshop participants’ engagement from a critical ethnographic perspective—which is to say, to shift from framing participation as engagement, to a more agentive attention to the participants’ work of cultural production. Specifically, I began to pay attention to what mattered to the workshop participants: the spatial practices through which they molded and gave a distinctly dignifying meaning and purpose to their weekly writing workshop routine. With that thematic focus in mind, let me take us back to Claudia’s first day in the workshop.

Emerging from the depths of concentration, attentive to every word she inscribed on the paper in front of her, Claudia glanced up at the clock on the classroom wall. “Oh my God! I’m going to be late picking up my daughter from day care,” Claudia exclaimed. She put her papers into her folder, then turned to the group with a look of flustered disappointment. “I still haven’t finished my story. It’s just that for some reason I couldn’t stop the words from flowing out. I didn’t think I would have so much to write,” she added, looking both proud and embarrassed. “That always happens when you first start writing,” Rosalba chimed in. “At first you think you have nothing to write. And then suddenly you’re reminded of so many things, and one word just follows another.” “Yes! Like a flood of words,” Amelia concurred. “And then you want to put every detail about your life on that paper, so you don’t lose it. But you’ll see, Señora Claudia. When you read your story next week to the group you will have even more stories to write. What I like about talking about my writing with the compañeras is that it gives me a whole new vision about my life.”

Claudia took in the women’s reassurances as she made her way to the classroom door, then turned back to the group of women sitting around the table. “Thank you for including me in your class, señoritas. For these past two hours I have felt—renewed. I look forward to seeing you all next week.” Veronica, the mother who had invited Claudia to the group, accompanied her to the door, handing her two remaining sweet breads—“for your little ones.” Unbeknownst to Claudia, this gesture incorporated her into the group’s ritual of distributing leftover snacks, a practice the writers occasionally referenced as exemplifying the sharing, generosity, and thrift they associated positively with their “humble” upbringings, and contrasted to the wastefulness they encountered in the United States. It was, in other words, among the ritual practices through which the Telpochcalli writers constructed and signified the workshop as an educative and moral space. “You are always welcome here, Señora Claudia. Consider yourself among family.” Amelia concurred. “Here it is more like being in your home than being in a classroom.” “Oh, no! Better than in my home,” Claudia rejoined, her sad eyes contradicting her appreciative smile. And with that Claudia rushed off to collect her three-year-old daughter.

The remaining writers gathered up their papers, handing me their writing for the session, which I would type up and return the following week along with my affirming and inquiring comments—a key facet of the writing workshop pedagogy. As we cleaned out the coffeepot, wiped down the table and swept the floor to ward off any mice that might be taking refuge in the nooks and crannies of the drafty old school building, the women reflected on Claudia’s first day with the group. Veronica shared that Claudia was new to the neighborhood; she had arrived a few months earlier from Mexico with her two children, joining her husband who worked for a local construction company with his brother. Responding to Claudia’s departing quip about her home, the women expressed concern that things might be tough for Claudia, who had no immediate family in or near Chicago. They hoped she would return to the workshop where she would find support and encouragement. “We have all been through what she is going through,” Rosalba noted. Amelia added that she was still adapting to
the lifestyle in Chicago. “I don’t know if one ever really adapts; but for me, it helps to write about it. When I put it on paper—that’s how I get everything off my chest.”

Silvia agreed that writing about difficult times can help. “But it has to be at the right moment.” She recalled that when she first came to the workshop she liked that she could write about anything. “Back then, with two children getting used to school and one at my breast, I was too overwhelmed to write about what I was going through in that moment. I didn’t want to write about memories of my town in Mexico like some women did, because it made me nostalgic. I preferred to write about the positive things that were going on here—how well my children were doing in school, how they were learning English so quickly . . . even if I wasn’t,” she laughed. Alexa, who had been tidying up the children’s play area, compared Claudia’s situation to the multiple marginalizations she had faced when she and her husband initially moved into his cousin’s place up the street. “As much as people tell you this neighborhood is like a piece of Mexico, I didn’t feel at home in Chicago, and I didn’t feel at home in the decrepit apartment where we were living. What makes it worse is you don’t have anywhere to go where you feel like you’re among family. Like we feel here in this group.” “Maybe that is something we can write about next week,” Amelia proposed. “A theme like, ‘My first real home here in Chicago.’ Because it’s harder to get used to being here when you don’t have your own home.”

Veronica then said she would call Claudia to encourage her to come to the next workshop meeting, and Alexa suggested that Veronica let her know she could bring her daughter to the group. “Tell her she can be sure to receive quality child care.” Alexa’s emphasis on “quality” referenced a topic both the writing group and participatory research team had discussed: namely, the lack of neighborhood child care that was affordable and high-quality, and the group’s decision to make such care available on site. As we got ready to leave, Rosalba offered to bring tamales the next week, and reminded me to bring more coffee, sugar, and creamer. “Without our morning coffee the stories won’t flow,” she smiled. With arrangements made for the following week, we left the classroom, locking the door behind us.

This extended vignette describes the final 15 minutes of our weekly adult writing workshop at Telpochcalli, a neighborhood school serving one of Chicago’s predominantly Mexican immigrant communities. Writing in response to the prompt “aspirations for my community,” one participant characterized her neighborhood as “very poor, but very hard-working; rich in our Mexican culture and traditions, but poor in resources or opportunities for its people.” Her comment captured the contradictions experienced by the neighborhood’s immigrant residents, over one third of whom are undocumented, nearly half with less than a high school education. While the mean family income suggests a working-class neighborhood, it masks the tension between a proudly entrepreneurial community boasting a thriving business district seemingly replete with opportunities for upward mobility, and a community despairing over the expanding plague of gang violence, and intractable rates of under- and unemployment.

The preponderance of participants in the writing workshop were members of families that had settled into unstable work lives straddling formal and informal economies (Paral et al., 2014), haunted by the specter of I.C.E. raids and deportations, chronic layoffs, unpredictable wages, and work hours—all “in order to provide a better future for our families,” as one parent wrote in response to the prompt, “The Myth of the American Dream.” The comments of workshop participants in the opening vignette about their challenges settling into the neighborhood speak to their ambivalent relationship to a place that seemed to both offer and deny them a shot at that American Dream; a place where they found comfort in the familiarity of Mexican foods, arts, and cultural traditions, but that could not fully buffer them from the estrangement they often felt within their own households, let alone in coping with the English-dominant, assimilationist hegemony of the broader urban mainstream (Hurtig, 2005a). It was in relation to those daily contradictions and the challenges of encountering a space of belonging that the parent writers had appropriated the writing workshop over the years I worked with them to create an inclusive and trusting space approximating “family” or “home.”
I opened with that workshop scene in order to initiate an ethnographic exploration of the practices through which the “Parents as Writers” participants intertwined two dimensions of the writing group that Rosalba articulated in the opening quote: fostering a space of belonging and inclusivity such that the activity of writing and discussing stories served as the basis for collective teaching and learning, opening up new ways of envisioning and enacting their lives. This envisioning, I propose, instigated the writers’ engagement in the dialectical activity of praxis: the cycle of critical, creative reflection on past experiences as the basis for taking agentive action in and on the world, which in turn provokes newly critical reflection and insights upon which to act (Wallerstein & Auerbach, 2004; Freire, 1985).

As the opening vignette conveys, the practices through which the Telpochcalli writers turned the writing workshop into what I refer to as a space of praxis and belonging entailed collaborative work that sustained a delicate balance between the comfort of predictable routines and the freedom of spontaneous expression and critical examination of their lives within the context of those routines. The compassion and care with which the writers used this negotiation to incorporate a new member into the group is clearly evident. Claudia’s implicit wish that the workshop be a “better” place than her home prompted the writers to reflect upon and modify their articulation of the potential value of the writing group for Claudia, by suggesting that perhaps for Claudia the workshop could be like family, if not like home. At the same time, Veronica’s seemingly small gesture of sending Claudia off with sweet breads for her children enacted that proposition. Moreover, that Claudia was being invited into a space that would offer her a sense of dignity as well as family was conveyed by the reference to the workshop’s provision of quality child care. In this essay I consider how the writers’ material, aesthetic, and affective practices fostered “routines of belonging” (Fenster, 2005) that supported the dialogical activity of sharing and comparing stories across participants’ similarities and differences, which were in turn productive of critical praxis. My contention is that, because such dialogue took place in and fostered a space of trust and belonging, it facilitated the sparking of that dialectic identified by Audre Lorde (1984) as producing flames of creativity. It is precisely that creativity that fuels the critical agency upon which the dialectic of praxis depends (Freire, 1985; McNay, 2000).

For over a decade there has been a flourishing of feminist inquiry responding to the passionate call from Elenes et al. (2001) for scholarship that would attend to and learn from distinct forms of Latina, Chicana, and Mexicana women’s educative practices in diverse public and private spaces. This recent scholarship, much of it ethnographically informed, has documented and celebrated the pedagogical practices of Latina immigrant women. Several researchers have focused on how Latina women draw on and transform their daily efforts to establish their place in and across spaces of acceptance and opposition. In doing so, they create nurturing pedagogical spaces that integrate the affective work of caring with the intellectual work of critique, instantiating what some ethnographers have characterized as a distinctly mujerista—or “Latina womanist”—pedagogical praxis (Delgado Bernal et al., 2006; Delgado-Gaitan, 2005; Dyrness, 2011; Villenas, 2005; Villenas, Bernal, Godinez, & Elenes, 2006).

These bodies of work have been crucial in dissolving the gendered, Cartesian distinction between the affective and intellectual dimensions of teaching and learning, and in celebrating the wealth of knowledge and critical insight that women on the margins bring to their educative practice by virtue of—and not despite—their specific histories and life experiences. Emphasizing the historically and culturally situated qualities of Latina women’s “pedagogical spaces of teaching and learning” (Villenas, 2005), the critical studies that have emerged through and articulated a mujerista or Latina feminist perspective illuminate the discursive activities through which those spaces are

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3The pedagogical practices and sensibilities this Latina-centric work documents are similar to the qualities of poor Black and White women’s spaces of teaching toward personal and community renewal that Belenky et al. (1999) documented in *A Tradition That Has No Name* (1997). Drawing on the language of Black feminist activists, educators, and scholars, they referred to these spaces of learning and transformation as “public homeplaces.”
produced: conversation, reading, writing, advising, storytelling, singing. Indeed, my own ethnographic work on Latina women’s community writing spaces has focused primarily on pedagogical spaces produced through participants’ discursive and literate activities of writing, reading, sharing, and publishing stories about their lives across commonalities and differences (Hurtig, 2005a, 2005b).

However, as I engaged dialogically with the Telpochcalli writers from the position of practitioner-ethnographer (Hurtig, 2008; Page, 1997), they taught me by example and in our critical discussions as coresearchers, that there was more to their production of a distinct pedagogical space than just discourse. This awareness was afforded in part as a result of the distinct position of practitioner-ethnographer I took on during this fourth year of the writing workshop. That I could adopt that role—more akin to that of the teacher-as-action-researcher than the anthropologist-as-activist-researcher—was itself facilitated by the extent to which the writers took over the workshop process, sometimes over and against my conventional educator impulses to maintain control over that process. As a result, I was able to straddle the roles of facilitator and observer-listener. It certainly helped that such a (dis)position was consistent with the collaborative disposition of the popular educator as at once teacher and learner (Freire, 1970, 1998) espoused by the Community Writing Project. I suspect that these were among the reasons I did not experience the integration of the roles of practitioner and ethnographer as necessarily contradictory or conflictual in the ways that some activist anthropologists have experienced the endeavor of integrating activism or advocacy with ethnographic field research (cf. Ulichny, 1997; Craven & Davis, 2013).

Instead, my pulling back from the primary role of active facilitation, relinquishing aspects of my authority to the group, afforded the writers more agency in determining and reflecting on the qualities of the group’s process, while affording me the critical distance to experience the group’s practices as cultural production. Moreover, by regularly conferring with the writers about my impressions and interpretations, I was able to not only understand the writers’ perspectives, but to deepen my understanding of how the writing workshop process can best accomplish a participatory pedagogy.4

It was not long before I came to realize that I had been so immersed in the linguistic aspects of our work, I had neglected to afford comparable significance to those practices the women writers regularly identified as meaningful in forming the workshop into their own space of praxis and belonging. These were practices they wove in and around the explicit storytelling work of the group. They included preparing and sharing coffee and snacks; demonstrations of mutual respect, camaraderie, and solidarity; and attention to the quality of the workshop and its products—this latter a powerful assertion of the writers’ dignity and pride in their work. In other words, the women’s fashioning of the writing workshop as a humanizing and critical pedagogical space did not occur exclusively through discourse. Rather, it entailed the creation of an alternative space marked by a distinct set of practices and values. As Patti Lather put it in characterizing feminist pedagogical spaces, these practices provided “an ethical alternative to the dominant hegemony, a lived experience of how the world can be different” (1984; emphasis in original). The triad of “coffee, companionship, and quality” in the title of this essay references the multidimensionality of those practices—at once material, social, symbolic, moral, and aesthetic—through which the Telpochcalli writers created and gave meaning to their alternative space.

In proposing this multidimensional model to understand the Telpochcalli writers’ spatial production, I draw inspiration from Michel de Certeau’s theorization of space as a “practiced place” (1984); and Henri Lefebvre’s conceptualization of space in terms of three dialectically produced dimensions of social space, representational space, and representations of space (Lefebvre, 1991). Despite differences between de Certeau’s and Lefebvre’s theorizations of space in relation to hegemony and its resistances (Goodewardena et al., 2008), it is their attention to the simultaneously and necessarily material, social, and symbolic qualities of all spatial production that resonates with the pedagogical practices of the Telpochcalli writers. Such a framing is also theoretically productive, I would argue, because it affords the opportunity to transcend the limitations of both poststructural

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4See Dymess’ Mothers United (2011) on the critical insights she gained through engagement in ethnographically informed participatory action research with a group of Latina mothers.
formulations of hybrid and third spaces that would seem to eschew any historicity, and certain materialist formulations that reduce spatial production to a mechanistic and apparently teleological play of political-economic contradictions (Mitchell, 1997). By comparison, a multidimensional rendering of spatial production opens onto the kind of intertwining of dialogic and dialectical practices that I am proposing characterized the pedagogical space of the Telpochcalli “Parents as Writers” group (cf. Thompson 2012).

In the rest of this article, I draw on moments from that writing group that convey the writers’ three-dimensional production of a space of praxis and belonging. However, before turning to those stories, I want to situate the writing group in relation to Telpochcalli School, which played a significant role of supporting and affording meaning to the writing workshop as a valued pedagogical space.

**A parents’ space within a community school**

The Community Writing Project engages writers in a pedagogical process that is deliberately simple, focusing on life experiences participants render as narrative writing, and on the stories they share in response to those writings. Each week, workshop members engage in a routine of writing, reading, and discussion, finding commonalities and divergences in the experiences they recount and the significance they ascribe to those experiences. Compelling topics that emerge through the group’s discussion are proposed as prompts for that day’s writing. This generative approach to the development of workshop content—inspired in particular by the radical educator Paulo Freire’s emphasis on dialogue as the source of curriculum—fosters a pedagogical space that validates the insights and experiences of the group. It also disrupts the hegemony of instructional practices in which the teacher actively deposits knowledge into the mind of the passive learner—a pedagogy Freire characterized as “banking education” (1970). After several weeks, writers begin to revise the pieces they choose to include in an artfully crafted magazine of writers’ work we call *Real Conditions*. During this process the writers come to realize their stories will reach a broad audience, instilling the endeavor with added significance. Once the magazine is published, we celebrate its release with public readings, the culmination of participants’ accomplishments as writers, artists, and spokespeople for their community.

Most writing workshops meet for a few months during the school year, but the Telpochcalli “Parents as Writers” group endured for years. During that time, the writers took, initiated, and passed on distinct workshop practices, molding the weekly routines, determining the format and uses of their magazines. These transformations developed in response to the individual predilections of participants as they became writers, and the collective’s ever-evolving dynamic and sense of broader purpose within and beyond their immediate setting. Over time, the writing workshop become a lynchpin of the school’s partner community organization; and at the end of my fourth year as facilitator, we decided to turn that role over to two “veteran” writers, who then facilitated the group for another few years.

The longevity of the writing group had much to do with the support it received from the host school. A neighborhood school of around 250 students that was established in collaboration with UIC’s Small Schools Workshop in the 1990s (Ayers, Klonsky, & Lyons, 2000), Telpochcalli describes itself as a community arts school, and has as its primary commitment the integration of the community’s history, cultural and artistic heritage, and practices into a curriculum that prepares “fully bilingual/biliterate students in English and Spanish” (Telpochcalli School, 2016). Since its establishment, the school has consistently enacted its commitment to community education in the fullest and most dignifying sense of that concept. It approaches community as the sourcebook for curriculum and instruction. Telpochcalli’s founding principal characterizes it as “a school focused on giving students the opportunity and support to look at themselves, their roots, their community as a way of learning about their important place in it” (Lyon, 2000, p. 126). In my experience working with myriad Chicago schools serving immigrant neighborhoods, what most distinguishes
Telpochcalli are the myriad ways in which it invites parents to participate in the school, not only as adult learners or teachers’ aides or participants in school governance, but as coeducators and contributors to the school’s abundant arts programs. The school’s enactment of a humanizing educational philosophy that views adults in marginalized communities as subjects with the right and ability to define their own reality and to contribute to the broader public discourse (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; p. 53) clearly resonates with the pedagogy and politics of the Community Writing Project.

For over 16 years, Telpochcalli has occupied one wing of a massive building dominated by a “scholastic academy” that draws more than a thousand students from around the city. Telpochcalli’s relegation to an inadequate space in which students share a gymnasium, cafeteria, and cement courtyard with the larger school was one of the motivating factors behind a collaborative school and neighborhood campaign to create a community education and cultural center that would provide much-needed educational, cultural, and recreational programs and services to neighborhood children, youth, and adults. This campaign—which eventually formed the Telpochcalli Community Education Project (TCEP)—also brought the parent writing program to the school. During the years in which I led the workshop, over 40 parents and grandparents participated (all but two were women); some came for a few sessions, most for at least a year, and a few for four years. We published and distributed five magazines of participants’ writings and organized numerous public readings in and beyond the school and community. Workshop members came to be identified as “the writers” for the community organization, charged with crafting its mission statement and other public documents. All Telpochcalli teachers had magazines in their classroom libraries, and some incorporated stories into their curriculum or invited parent writers to read their stories to students. By the time of the workshop meeting I described at the outset of this essay, the writing group was well established and supported by its home institution. The visibility and legitimacy Telpochcalli school afforded the “Parents as Writers” group cannot be underestimated as an ever-present undercurrent of validation and inspiration for the parent writers.

**Coffee**

The Telpochcalli writers convened Wednesday mornings at 10 a.m. But we rarely settled into our routine of reading and discussing writings until about 10:15, after completing the ritual of setting up coffee to brew in the big old percolator, spreading out the sweet breads or tamales that one of the mothers brought for that week, pulling from the supply cupboard cups, plates, napkins, and a single spoon for stirring that they diligently washed and reused each week. At the same time they helped the young woman providing child care to arrange the corner play space. Sandra Morales’ reference to coffee, in the passage from her writing I opened with, captures the subtle yet fundamental role of the ritual preparation of coffee, as well as the warm, relaxing sensibility engendered by sipping freshly brewed coffee while working. Over the years I heard writers make diverse meanings of the preparation and presence of coffee through comparison to other “practiced places” (de Certeau, 1987): how it created a comfortable ambiance resembling home, or how it reminded them that this wasn’t a “normal kind of class.”

On one occasion, the writers’ casual reflections while preparing coffee led to a discussion about the distinction between the tone of diverse places where they had worked under pressure—on factory lines, in fast food restaurants, as hotel chambermaids—and the writing workshop. “As soon as I sit down with my cup of coffee and my writing, I feel like I’m on my break at work, that moment of slowing down, resting, enjoying the moment. To me, the writing workshop is a kind of work. Because we are writing and thinking and learning. But it is relaxing work.” Coffee, in other words, stood for the ritual production of the writing workshop as a practiced place like—and not like—home, school, or work.

The importance that the writers imparted to the ritual setting up of the workshop environment—the assertion of the classroom as their pedagogical space—was evidenced by the way the group
carried this practice with them when the workshop location changed. Three years into the group’s existence, we were displaced from our location in the original parent room—a bright, airy classroom on the second floor of Telpochcalli with windows that opened, two large chalkboards on opposite walls, one corner fixed up as the children’s play space, the coffee and snacks table in another—to the dreadful and dreaded Room 300. Room 300 was a dark, windowless, clammy, cluttered room located in the larger school, all at the other end of the building Telpochcalli shared. “Room 300” was the nickname the parents who attended programs at Telpochcalli gave to the dreary room to which their meetings and workshops had been relegated when the original parent room became a school arts space (a use none of the parents begrudged). The regular walk the parents and I now had to take each morning felt like a brave pilgrimage into an adversarial landscape. Coffeepot in arms, we would trapse down the halls of Telpochcalli, with its bold and welcoming wall murals including a vast portrait of Frieda Kahlo looking remarkably maternal, the heroes of Mexican history and local Mexican immigrant struggles looking inspiringly optimistic; splashes of children’s artwork adorning every wall space possible; the flow of parents in and out of the office and classrooms. Then we’d push through the double doors and up the stairs into the drab institutional space of the adjoining scholastic academy, its walls adorned with school district placards boasting motivational slogans in block letters like “We put our students first” and “The more you strive, the more you’ll succeed,” alongside signs announcing rules, regulations, and restrictions: “Parents may only use the main door”; “Children must have a hall pass to use the bathrooms.”

Now that we were holding our writing workshop in Room 300, the preworkshop ritual entailed more than simply preparing the coffee, snacks, and children’s space. Now we also took time to spread out a colorful tablecloth on the rickety work table to cover the nicks, scratches, and graffiti the women did not approve of; drag the few adult-size chairs out from the morass of student chairs scattered around the vast room; prop up the scarred and banged-up chalkboard against the barren wall by our work space; and arrange the children’s toys and books in one of the corners, which the women warmed with a soft, brightly colored rug in order to delineate the children’s play area. Within weeks of our displacement to this outpost, this series of preparatory activities had become a self-conscious, ritualized way for the writers to claim the room assigned to parents and convert it from a spatially marginalizing and aesthetically diminishing room, into a space the writers were never completely satisfied with, but which, as Rosalba put it, did the job. On one occasion, the writers’ transformation of the classroom space prompted extended discussion about all that one can do with few resources, a talent several writers attributed to having learned from parents and elders back in Mexico. This discussion, intertwined with a fierce critique of the materialism of “American culture,” led to that day’s writing prompt: “Making something out of nothing.”

Quality

As my portrayal of the writers’ work to beautify and soften Room 300 may have conveyed, the role of the coffee ritual in producing a humanizing pedagogical space is intimately entwined with practices through which they enacted their valorization of quality—calidad, as they put it. For workshop participants, the import of coffee lay not only in its availability, but in making sure the coffee tasted good, the accompanying snacks were fresh, and the room was clean and attractive. Even the funky chalkboard in Room 300 was subject to beautification, when one of the writers brought colored chalk to the class and adorned the chalkboard with a decorative border around the edges. The writers’ insistence on an aesthetic of quality extended to the objects and activities associated with the care of their children. At each meeting they made sure the toys were clean, the books were not tattered, and that the young woman who took care of the small group of children was loving and patient, but firm—although the ideal balance among those caretaking qualities was a subject of periodic debate among the parent writers, who frequently conferred and wrote about how they enacted their own parenting philosophies.
Over the years, the Telpochcalli writers’ insistence on quality seeped out beyond the physical space of the workshop into facets of the workshop process and its products. It has always been a principle of the Community Writing Project that the magazines we publish be professionally rendered publications, artful “cultural products” as we refer to them, about which writers should be proud. While initially the Telpochcalli writers were delighted by the mere existence of the bound, boldly designed, and professionally printed magazines that we produced and distributed twice a year, with time they came to expect that the magazine meet both their aesthetic and functional expectations. At one point, a group of writers protested that the typeface was too small for their intended audience: immigrant parents, many of whom had limited literacy skills, and those parents’ children. They wanted the magazine to be a blend of literary journal and storybook. This posed a challenge for me, as the Community Writing Project had been in the habit of printing magazines with a small font and what I considered to be an elegant, literary typeface. But for subsequent issues we accommodated the group’s preferences, making changes that a subsequent group of writers rejected in turn, deciding the larger print made the magazine look too much like “one of those readers they give us in our English classes.” Of course, it was easy enough for us to adapt the layout to accommodate each group’s preferences, as long as it supported the writers’ recognition that the magazine belonged to them.

During our second year, Ileana, a woman who had recently joined the writing group, arrived with a pile of decorative plastic folders, which she distributed to replace the flimsy cardboard folders I provided writers to store their writings each week. She had found them at a Dollar Store and told the group she was tired of looking at her tattered folder with papers sticking out everywhere. “It just doesn’t look professional,” she noted. This aesthetic of professionalism continued to be cultivated throughout the year, particularly after the release of the year’s first magazine. On one occasion I came to the workshop without my bag of supplies, which included lined paper for writing at the end of each session. So when it was time to write, we had to resort to recycled unlined paper from the office. The following week, as I was unpacking materials for class, Ileana approached and placed a large packet of lined paper, each sheet with a floral border, in front of me. “Here, maestra. No more scrambling for pieces of paper to write on. No more working with scraps,” she announced, the latter comment a clear allusion to a story she had written about how her grandmother had quilted magnificent blankets with scraps from worn clothing. Rosalba, picking up on the connection, teased Ileana. “So it’s okay for your grandmother to use scraps, but not us?” The comment gave Ileana pause, as her story had clearly been meant to honor and appreciate her grandmother’s ingenuity and craftsmanship. Eventually she responded that her grandmother was able to make beautiful blankets with scraps, but when I write my story on a piece of used paper, with my sloppy handwriting, it makes my story look ugly.” Ileana’s comment prompted a flurry of conversation about what constitutes beauty—how something looks on the outside or what it means on the inside.

This was not the first or only time that the writers’ assertion and negotiation of their expectations of quality spawned critical discussion that in turn inspired group writing. Such was also the case with the women’s expectations for their children’s care during the workshop. One of the reasons the writers had worked with the school’s community organization to provide child care on site was because they did not trust the quality of the day care that was available in their neighborhood. The centrality of day care in shaping the lives and possibilities of poor immigrant women is too vast a topic to enter into here. What I want to highlight is the way in which these parent writers’ practiced expectation of quality child care was informed by and contributed to their critique of what could be called the urban landscape of child care. In particular, Telpochcalli writers regularly reminded each other of the multiple injustices and ironies related to child care provision. One conversation in particular has stayed with me. After several mothers bemoaned the fact that they were “stuck in the middle” between the poorest of poor families who had access to subsidized child care, and the wealthiest families who could afford whatever child care they chose, Amelia reflected on her years of working as a nanny in a wealthy suburb. “Those people know that we Latina mothers will give their children the best care they can find. What it looks like to me is that we can’t get quality child care for our own children, and yet we are the quality child care for rich people’s children.” As the women
around the table nodded emphatically, we all knew what you the reader may also have surmised: that this topic, “we are the quality child care,” would become the writing prompt for that day.

The group’s deliberations around child care convey how the Telpochcalli writers’ attention to “quality” was more than a narrowly aesthetic expression of their individual and collective attention to, and pride in, the craft of their process and its products—although this in itself is not without significance. Their insistence on quality was also a material and symbolic expression of their refusal to be demeaned by the conditions of urban poverty in which they lived, a condition that relegated them to marginal public and institutional spaces characterized by mediocrity, deterioration, and neglect. Through their active insistence on “quality,” the Telpochcalli writers drew upon ethics and aesthetics from other times and places in their lives, from places they had lived and places they aspired to occupy, to transform the writing workshop into a validating space in which, as Jacques Ranciere has put it, they asserted their equality (Ranciere, 2007, pp. 49–50).

Companionship

The interpersonal support and sociability that the Telpochcalli writers referred to as companionship (compañerismo) was a quality they almost always highlighted when describing the group to new participants or visitors sitting in on a writing workshop session. Companionship, as they described it, was akin to the qualities of convivencia or “communalism” that Villenas, in her ethnographic work with Latina immigrant women, characterized as “pedagogical spaces of creative knowledge production and resilience in spirituality, wholeness, humor, and dignity” (2005, p. 275). The Telpochcalli writers regularly celebrated the workshop space as one of trust, respect, as well as conviviality, qualities which they considered distinguished it from other institutional and informal spaces they inhabited in their everyday lives. But the qualities distinguishing the Telpochcalli writers’ notion of companionship are those of collaboration, unity, and equality.

On one occasion, after Amelia had told a newcomer that “here there is a lot of compañerismo,” I asked her if she could explain what she meant. Amelia embraced the invitation. “Well,” she declared, taking center stage as writers would do when it was their turn to read, glancing around the table to make sure everyone was paying attention, arranging her papers neatly in front of her as she put her thoughts together. “Well, compañerismo means how we relate to each other with trust and respect and love. But it is more than that. Although those are fundamental. Because when we say we are compañeras, it means we are all friends and that in our friendship we are all equals. But the question is how do you show that? Here in our writing group we show it because we always treat each other’s stories and ideas with the same respect.” She then ended with the phrase that had practically become the group’s motto: “We all learn from each other.”

Manuela then took advantage of a pause in Amelia’s explanation to interject, “And then what do you do with that? Because for me compañerismo is not just a feeling we create here in this room when we are around this table. It is knowing we support each other, that we are all united in fighting together for something better for our children and for our community.” “And for ourselves,” Laura added, emphasizing “ourselves.” “Because as we have written about, as mothers, as wives we are always putting our family before ourselves. And we enjoy doing that. But sometimes we forget to take care of ourselves. I know that I have come to rely on my compañeras in this group to remind me that it is important for me to take time for myself as well.”

Over the years, I witnessed and experienced workshop participants producing this quality of compañerismo through apparently small but regular acts of support and solidarity that occurred throughout each workshop session. For instance, the Telpochcalli writers instigated and sustained a variety of workshop norms to reinforce the practice of equal respect for and attention to each writer as they read. This included the tacitly sanctioned hushing of anyone who talked over the reader and the reigning in of sidebar conversations, the enforcement of which was periodically legitimized by comments such as, “One conversation at a time, señoritas; everyone’s ideas are equally important.” When someone new joined the group, the writers collectively encouraged that person to bring young
children if she was inclined, assuring her that she could trust the quality of child care that would be provided. But they also made clear the expectation that if a mother did not want to leave her child with the caretaker, or if her child was too young to be left alone, the mother was responsible for keeping her children quiet as the stories were read.

That the enactment of companionship was intrinsic to the functioning of the group as a pedagogical place of belonging was instantiated in the ways the group modified the writing workshop method over the years. One example of the privileging of inclusivity and equality was the participants’ decision that, regardless of the size of the writing group, each person should have the chance to read her writing at every session, if she so chose. This led to one of the modifications the group made to my practice as workshop facilitator. When the group grew to over six people, or when writings got very long, I had initiated a routine of having a few of the writers read their stories at one session, and those who hadn’t read would do so the following week; or I would pull out passages from each writing to focus on at a particular session, so that we would read portions of each writer’s story. But the Telpochcalli writers eventually came to reject this approach. They insisted that since each woman put so much of herself into her writing, it was important that each person read her entire story at each session, unless she chose not to. The writers decided they would rather shorten the discussion around the writing than exclude anyone from reading. It was a decision the writers recognized required self-discipline and sacrifice, since they clearly relished the conversation that revolved around, or diverged from, each story. They recruited me to keep the weekly conversation moving, and held me to my role.

These ethnographic stories about coffee, companionship, and quality show how each week the Telpochcalli writers created their own pedagogical space of praxis and belonging through routines, rituals, and innovations that interwove the material, social, discursive, aesthetic, and moral dimensions of their collaborative work. In doing so, these immigrant women managed to sustain a delicate balance of respecting each participant’s felt needs, interests, and insights, celebrating individual creativity, while maintaining a respect for the integrity of the group and an appreciation for the wisdom that emerged through group discussions and debates. I propose that this creative tension was fostered through dialogue and fueled dialectically through appropriations and transformations of spatial practices the women experienced in other times and places. This integration of dialogue open to diversity and difference with critical and contestatory practices allowed the Telpochcalli writers to confront the indignities of the urban conditions in which they lived, supporting each other in asserting their legitimacy as women and mothers, as Mexicans and immigrants.

**Concluding with Consejos**

Over the years that I worked with the Telpochcalli writers, conversations and writings occasionally turned to reflections on the writing process itself, or the importance of publishing stories in a magazine that circulates into the community, or what they hoped to accomplish by publishing and sharing their stories in print. In a collectively written introduction for one of the Telpochcalli magazines published in the group’s third year, the women wrote:

> We write our stories so that our children—some of them born here—will know where they come from and what their roots are. We also write so that our children realize the effort and sacrifice we have to make as parents to make the decision to come to an unknown country, with a different language and lifestyle; and so that they understand everything we have to confront to survive and obtain a better quality of life than that which we had in our country. We hope that by putting these stories in writing, the traditions won’t be lost to memory, and that they can be read not only by our children, but also our grandchildren and even our great-grandchildren.

> In this passage the writers identified a dual purpose for producing a public document: to serve as testimony and to provide counsel. In an effort to extend these uses of storytelling and writing, I have tried in this essay to pass on some of what these immigrant women have taught me about how to create a space for rethinking the world and our place in it—a space that is nurturing and egalitarian,
that manages to simultaneously respect the solidarity of the group while treating each individual as única y especial, to borrow the title of one writer’s story about herself. These are lessons in the local and humble work of creating pedagogical spaces of praxis and belonging. They are lessons that may be difficult for those of us working as practitioners and researchers in immigrant communities to learn and implement, for they require us to contest and transform the spatial practices of inequality, meritocracy, and patriarchy in which we are regularly immersed. The Telpochcalli writers challenge us to participate in spatial practices in which everyone’s work is considered equally, in which taking the time to warm and sweeten the space with coffee and snacks is as important as the time to do written work, in which the quality of the pedagogical activities is attended to and respected, and in which the group is afforded the opportunity to contribute to the collective fashioning of the space that fosters a sense of ownership and belonging.

Through my discussion I have also tried to prompt reflection on certain tendencies in the literature on immigrants’ spaces of critical and humanizing pedagogies. The first is the tendency to prioritize linguistic or discursive dimensions of educational practice—what gets said, written, or read—at the expense of the physical, the literally material qualities of that pedagogical space, qualities that are integral to the production of all social space, and that operate dialectically in relation to a space’s social and symbolic production. The second is the tendency to overlook the aesthetic dimensions of spatial practices as enactments of an ethics of humanization or equality. Finally, I suggest we question the tendency in theorizing praxis, to separate the conceptual and spatial parameters of theory and practice, rigidly distinguishing critical or self-conscious discursive production as “theory” that occurs in one place, and the resulting engagement in political action beyond the space of theorization as “practice.” According to this perspective, the production of alternative spaces in which critique occurs does not somehow count as a kind of political action to which theorization has been applied. And yet, as I hope this ethnographic account has shown, the Telpochcalli writers’ making of their pedagogical space and its products regularly engaged them in responding to the indignities they faced daily.

I hope that the learning I have drawn from my work with this group of Latina immigrant writers contributes to questioning these tendencies by considering the myriad material, nonverbal practices that contribute to the creation of critical pedagogical spaces; and by showing how the Telpochcalli writers’ construction of a space of belonging and production of “a whole new vision for one’s life,” as Amelia put it, are inextricably intertwined.

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References


