

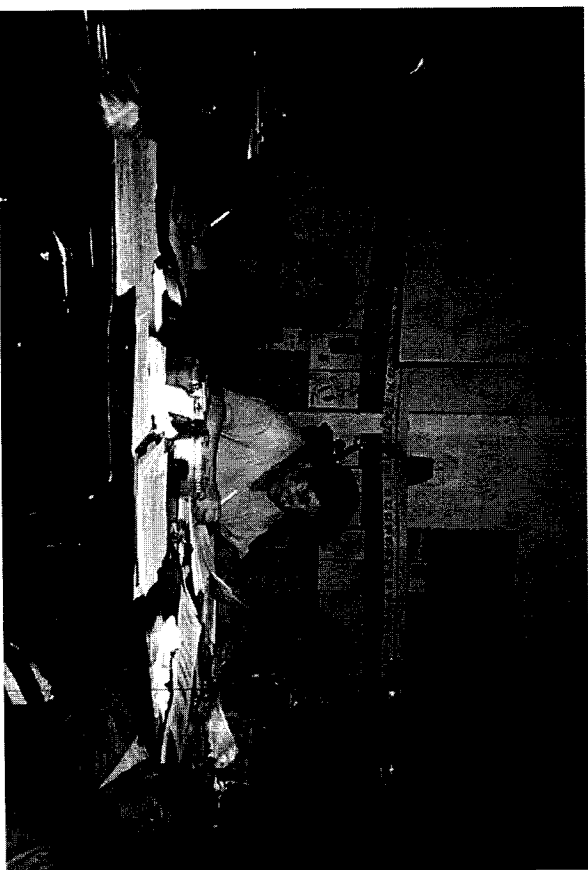
Resisting Assimilation: Mexican Immigrant Mothers Writing Together

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Personal interpretations of past time—the stories that people tell themselves in order to explain how they got to the place they currently inhabit—are often in deep and ambivalent conflict with the official interpretive devices of a culture.

(Carolyn Kay Steedman, 1986, p. 6)



Photograph by Janise Hurtig.

Myths of assimilation—from early 20th century myths of the melting pot (incorporation) to more recent myths of multiculturalism (pluralism)—are among the official interpretive devices of contemporary U.S. culture.² Like other comparable devices, these myths inscribe imaginary paths upon a dominant social landscape that promise the follower of those paths a visible and meaningful place within the landscape, while justifying the exclusion of those not willing (or able) to follow the prescribed paths. Myths of assimilation have immigrants as their objects, and the paths these myths inscribe are paved with the promises of opportunity, education, prosperity, security and a recognized ethnic identity for immigrants and their children.

In both its spatial and moral dimensions, the mythology of assimilation is thoroughly modern. Its unilinear, neofunctionalist plot converts the process of immigration into adaptation (Rouse, 1992, p. 25) or ethnic incorporation, and its meritocratic ethic offers “a universal promise of social

mobility based on individual motivation and effort in a society in which there [are] no class barriers" (Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992, p. 16). Moreover, it does so in culturally and geographically bipolar terms: immigrants are meant to "steadily shift their focus of attention and the locus of their principal social ties from one community to another" (Rouse, 1992, p. 26). The mythology of assimilation is also androcentric, inasmuch as it is constructed from the imagined perspective of a geographically mobile and socioeconomically upwardly mobile male worker and head of household. Myths of assimilation have men as their protagonists. Women are portrayed as passive recipients of money sent back home or of new opportunities, maternal comforts, and identities in the host society (Brettell, 2003; Mahler, 2003; Pessar, 1986, 2003).

In "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin (1969) proposed that "it is the nature of every real story to contain, openly or covertly, something useful" (p. 86). The storyteller, then, is a person "who has counsel for his readers" (p. 86). It is with counsel that ordinary people have responded to the myths of their times, and it is precisely this ability to give counsel that enables the storyteller to confront and resist the force of those myths. But the use of stories to resist myths and give counsel depends on the recognition, by the storyteller and her listener or reader, of the value of common experience, because it is from that experience that the storyteller draws her moral and proffers her advice.³ In this chapter I look at how a group of Mexican immigrant women have responded to, resisted, and counseled against the mythology of assimilation through the collective work of telling, writing, discussing, and publishing stories from their experiences.

For the past 2 years I have taught an adult writing workshop to Mexican immigrant women at Telpochcalli Elementary School, a small school located in a predominantly Mexican, working poor neighborhood on Chicago's southwest side. The program, called Parents Write their Worlds, offers parents and other neighborhood residents—people who do not usually think of themselves as writers—the opportunity to write and share stories based in their experiences, draw on their work to examine their lives, and develop the art of writing (Adams & Hurting, 2002). Since I began the program at Telpochcalli School, more than 30 women—all of them mothers or grandmothers between the ages of 25 and 55 years—have participated in the workshops, although at most meetings there usually are between five and eight women in attendance. The group meets weekly during the school year to read and discuss their work and help each other develop pieces that eventually appear in the magazine *Real Conditions*.

While all the participants write in Spanish (a few speak a little English; one speaks with fluency) their stories are published in both Spanish and English. Since I began the writing program at Telpochcalli we have published four magazines, representing the work of 22 different writers. Copies of each magazine have been distributed free to the writers, their families and friends, and to the school's students, teachers, and staff. The magazines also make their way into and well beyond the writers' neighborhood to other schools, communities, and countries.

The women who have attended the writing program come from different regions of Mexico, some from small villages or *ranchos*, others from small or large cities. Although the women grew up under differing socioeconomic conditions and have a range of educational backgrounds, they all came to this country in search of a better life for themselves and their families: "to obtain a better quality of life than that which we had in our country," they wrote collectively for the introduction to the third magazine.⁴ Like many of their neighbors, some of the women in the writing group endured tremendous danger and humiliation to come to the United States without legal documentation, squeezing into trucks, crossing rivers and deserts, confronting immigration officers. Others came easily and legitimately by plane, car, or bus. Some women came eagerly, joining their husbands or other family members after a long separation. Others came reluctantly, especially those who left family behind. Whereas most came accompanied by husbands or other family, or with the intention of joining their families already in Chicago, a few women came alone.

Several writers were already mothers when they came to Chicago. Some brought their Mexican-born children with them, and have told stories laced with regret about how they risked their own and their children's lives to make the dangerous trek across the border. Others have described the excruciatingly painful decision to leave their children in Mexico and then return for them later. Most of the women also have given birth to children since their arrival in this country. Regardless of the conditions of their arrival, their family networks now stretch across two countries, and their migration north has caused the painful attenuation of many formative ties. "We are all Mexican mothers looking for a better life for ourselves and for our children," wrote Rita,⁵ a mother whose children attend a nearby school. "However, at the same time we are sacrificing the support of our families in Mexico."

Each woman who has participated in the writing group has told unique stories of migration, relocation, and family formation. These stories have

resonated within the cavernous classroom where we work each week, sitting around a long table in the middle of the room, children's books and games in one corner, coffee and snacks in another, blackboards along two walls and long windows on the other. The uniqueness of each woman's experiences and insights, as well as the threads of commonality they encounter across their differences, have spawned hours of discussion. Those discussions have led the women to tell and write more stories and to rethink the old stories and their significance.

For the women in the writing program, the reduction of the transnational complexity of their lives to a bipolar, unidirectional model of immigration and settlement as ethnic incorporation is only one of the ways in which the mythology of assimilation denies the expression of their experiences. Although the mythology of assimilation may romanticize the "ethnic enclave" as a transitional haven for immigrants on their way into the melting pot, or as a site of identity production in a multicultural society, it also depicts the enclave, the ghetto, the barrio as a marginal, dangerous and socioeconomically limiting place from which immigrants should move up and out. In this way, the mythology of assimilation troubles the relationship between immigrants and their neighborhoods. Another, particularly contemporary, facet of this mythology is the conversion of an ethic of hard work into an ethic of consumption or, as the women in the writing group refer to it, "*materalismo*." The notion that providing for one's children is measured in terms of what one can purchase for them is a topic the workshop participants have confronted in writings and discussions that revolve around decisions about whether they should seek paid work outside the home or not.

Many of the gender ideologies implied by the mythology of assimilation are particularly troubling to the women with whom I work in the writing program. They question the assumption that upward mobility should buy women their "freedom" from housework and home life, as though the home, and by implication motherhood, were imprisoning. They debate the presumption that a lack of formal education or literacy skills is related to, or diagnostic of, inadequate parenting skills. And they challenge the idealization of the (middle-class) nuclear family, in which the value of extended family ties is diminished and the marital relationship is elevated as primary. Although the women in the writing program are critical of many facets of the contemporary "American dream," they draw inspiration from other facets of that same dream in expressing their critique of *machismo* and the limitations placed on them by husbands, by other family mem-

bers, or more indirectly by the gender ideologies they carry over from their homelands and that are among the cultural norms sustained by a "viable binational social structure" (Rodríguez 2003, p. 82).

The women who have participated in the writing project live in a Spanish-speaking community that forms part of a transnational migratory circuit and social space⁶ through which they sustain meaningful communicative, affective, and material ties to their families in Mexico. They contribute their volunteer labor to improving a neighborhood in which they are invested, or in which their children attend a school that celebrates the history, arts, and culture of Mexico. They are women whose primary social role and personal commitment is that of motherhood and whose deepest hopes are both to return to Mexico and to see their children prosper in Chicago. Thus, for these women, the interpretations they have of their past lives, the stories they tell about their past and present, and the relation between the two often are in deep and ambivalent conflict with the mythology of assimilation.

In *Landscape for a Good Woman*, Carolyn Steedman (1986) wrote of her British, working-class mother's struggles to use stories to make sense of her life when those stories were in conflict with the dominant myths of the society in which she lived. That mythology silenced Steedman's mother so that she kept her stories secret, imparting them to her daughter as stories meant to teach Steedman "the terrible unfairness of things" (p. 6). Because her mother kept her stories secret, she was unable to use them to resist the exclusionary myths of her times or transcend the longing they produced in her. Steedman, by contrast, was able to tell a story that responded to and resisted the culture of longing passed on by her mother. She did so, I propose, by writing, and more specifically, by writing critically, historicizing both her mother's stories and her own in relation to the political and cultural landscapes of the times. But Steedman did not only write her story, she also published it for a wider audience. Unlike her mother, who kept her stories secret, Steedman made hers public. It is (at least in part) for these reasons that Steedman was able to accomplish what she set out to do through her writing: to step into the landscape from which she was excluded and to see herself in it (p. 24).

In an essay entitled "Speaking in Tongues," Chicana poet Gloria Anzaldúa (1981) similarly asserted the power and value of writing as a way of telling one's story in one's own terms. "I write," said Anzaldúa, "to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you" (p. 169). Reflecting rhetorically on her compulsion to write, Anzaldúa also intimated the relation between writing

one's own stories and creating a coherent landscape for one's world: "By writing, I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it" (p. 169).

Anzaldúa's essay, which carried the subtitle "A Letter to 3rd World Women Writers," aimed not only to inspire her *compañeras* to write but also, implicitly, to publish: to put their stories in print. This was a significant act. Anne Ruggles Gere (1997) discussed the gendered power of the printed text in her study of U.S. women's reading and writing clubs at the turn of the 20th century, noting that "[t]he transformative power of literacy was particularly apparent when clubswomen chose to represent themselves and their activities in print" (p. 29). Similarly, for the women who participated in the writing project, producing stories that would be read, not only by people they knew, but also by an imagined audience that existed beyond the scope of their social world, had tremendous bearing on how they chose to represent their experiences in their writing, as well as how they came to understand and articulate the value and purpose of their writing.

Although Anzaldúa tended to depict her writing process as an intimately individual, personally tumultuous, and solitary endeavor, I question the romantic implication that creative and critical writing can be produced individually. As Gere (1997) noted, "The story of reading and writing does not begin or end with solitary performers" (p. 37). Certainly in the Parents Write their Worlds workshops, the women's social, oral activities of telling, discussing, praising, and challenging each other's stories are as critical as the literate activities of writing and reading one's stories (Brandt, 1990). Writing against the ideology of racist patriarchy that locates the creative act in the solitary individual, Audre Lorde (1984) spoke to the creative and critical power of interdependency and difference: "Interdependency between women," she noted, "is the way to a freedom which allows the *I to be*, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative" (p. 111). In other words, it is through interdependency that one comes to recognize oneself as a subject of history. Moreover, the source of this creativity is located in difference: "Difference must be ... seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic.... Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate" (Lorde, 1984, p. 111).

In discussions about the experience of writing, many workshop participants identified the collective work of the group as the source of mutual support, creative inspiration, and critical understanding. One of the mothers wrote about how "sharing our common struggles gives us the strength to accomplish some of the dreams that have been tucked away, perhaps

sleeping somewhere," whereas others have commented about the uniqueness of each writer's childhood experiences, or the variety of village traditions represented by the group. This dialectic of commonality and difference is what generates the creative spark to which Audre Lorde refers. Dolores Nava reflected on the relation between support and creativity in a piece she wrote and published about her experience in the writing workshop, entitled "The Experience of Writing":

Having written and read in a group, it leaves me with the sensation of having tightened even more our existing bonds of friendship, the respect with which I was listened to.... I respect them, I appreciate them, and I also thank them for having shared something about themselves with the group through their writings.... I really enjoy expressing myself in new ways through writing. Thank you, friends, for listening.

In the process of writing, reflecting, and telling new stories, the women in the workshop respond critically and collectively to the mythology of assimilation, begin to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about them, "put order in the world" in their own terms, and use their stories to offer counsel to others that challenges the mythology of assimilation. In this sense, the literate and, more generally, the cultural work of this group constitutes acts of resistance.

In the remainder of the chapter I consider several related facets of these women's resistance as they rewrote the landscapes of their past and present lives. In the first place, I look at how they contested the bipolar, bicultural dimensions of the mythology or ideology of assimilation by writing stories that begin to narrate meaningful, if conflicted and critical, relations between their past in Mexico and their present in Chicago. I also consider how the women mediated the spatial, temporal, and cultural relation of Mexico and Chicago in terms of their social roles and identities as mothers, implicitly contesting the androcentrism of the assimilation mythology. Finally, I look at how they used their stories and the magazine as cultural artifacts to "give counsel." By drawing critically on the moral and social norms from their past and present experiences, they lent meaning and purpose to their present lives and gave advice to their children, their peers, and their community.

Before turning to the writings, however, I want to locate the stories in relation to two contexts that are particularly relevant to understanding how the women come to use their writing as a form of resistance. These are the writing workshop and the elementary school in which the workshop takes place.

MOTHERS BECOMING WRITERS

Who am I, a poor Chicanita from the sticks, to think I could write.

(Gloria Anzaldúa, 1981).

"Many people, especially women, do not see themselves as legitimate subjects of *history*," commented the literacy educator and researcher Jane Mace (1995). "They do not believe that they are either 'relevant' or 'interesting,' let alone important to anyone else's understanding of the times in which they lived. In the same way, many people (again, especially women) do not see themselves as worthy to be *writers*; in the published sense" (p. 109; emphasis in original). These three perceptions—that one is an object, not a subject of history; that one's experiences and insights are not valued; and that one is not worthy of being a published writer—all are intimately related. (They are also, I hasten to add, pertinent to all social groups silenced by ideologies of linguistic legitimacy, not just to women.) They can be understood as the effects of a modern social and communicative landscape in which the experience of ordinary people is devalued (Benjamin, 1969), literate communication is valued over oral communication, and the voices of ordinary people are excluded from public conversations circulated and legitimized by print media. This ideological landscape reinforces the marginalization of certain groups of people, such as women, immigrants, and people who live in poverty. It is the work of literacy and community publishing, wrote Mace (1995), to challenge these ideas.

The Parents Write Their Worlds program similarly challenges these ideas, by providing a forum for creative expression in which participants write and share stories based in their experiences, draw on their writings to examine their lives, and develop the art of writing. The writing workshop method is inspired by the Freirian method for adult literacy education, in which dialogue based in participants' experience is the source of generative themes for writing, reading and reflection (Freire, 1971, pp. 85–118). In the writing workshops, we focus on personal narrative, or creative nonfiction writing, in which participants respond to prompts that encourage them to write concrete, detailed stories based in their experiences. The writing prompts for each session usually emerge from the group's discussion of the previous week's writings. In this way, the creative work of the participants is the primary content of the sessions, and their reflections guide the thematic direction the writing takes.

As is common among adults who begin to write about their lives for the first time, most of the women who have come to the writing workshop initially expressed reticence about writing. Some said they did not write well enough. They claimed they had not had enough formal education to prepare them for the creative task of writing, that the kind of education they had received had not emphasized writing, that their punctuation and spelling were terrible, or their handwriting illegible, or that too many years had passed since they had gone to school and they had simply forgotten how to write. (By this, they meant not that they had lost the technical skill of writing, but that they believed could no longer write a coherent narrative account.) Many women also claimed at the outset that they did not have anything meaningful to write about, or that their experiences were not interesting enough to write down or share with the group.

Most participants are initially astonished by the group's response to their writing, because many of the stories they write are drawn from events in their lives they had either forgotten or had "never bothered to tell anyone before." I remember the comment of one participant, a woman in her mid-thirties who had been raised by her mother and grandmother in conditions of extreme poverty and was therefore not permitted to attend school after the first grade. It was her second session, and we had read a short piece she had written the week before, entitled "A Special Place." In her story she described a garden in her village where she and her friends played house, too poor to have toys, making do with what they found in nature. Because she read haltingly, she asked to go last. As with each story that had come before, her story prompted a cascade of comments: about how one could find happiness as a child in Mexico without material things, about how nature was all around you in Mexico but nowhere to be found in Chicago, about the sense of freedom and safety one felt there, a feeling they wished their children could have in their Chicago neighborhood. The woman sat silently and attentively through the discussion. As we collected our papers and began to put on our coats, she turned to me and commented, "Who would have thought that such a simple story would produce so much talk (*palática*)?"

As participants read their stories to the group, as they receive praise and suggestions for their work, and as they listen to the extensive discussion prompted by their stories, they begin to identify the value of their experience and their capacity to write. María G., the grandmother of a Tepicochcalli student and a *ranchera* with little formal education, described this recognition in a piece she wrote about the experience of writing with the group:

For me, writing is a new experience. I have felt very comfortable with this group of *compañeras*. I like to share my experiences with them, since we have a lot in common.... I never would have imagined that I could write or that someone would be interested in what I write, but now I realize that this is not so. We all have stories to tell. We all have something interesting to write, and we can all become great writers.

Twice each year the writers have selected writings for publication, which appear in *Real Conditions* in Spanish and English. The value of their stories and thus their experiences grow as they circulate in the magazines and the women receive praise and appreciation from their families and friends. Not only have the magazines made their way into the community through local meetings, forums, or workshops; they also appear on the book shelves in most of the school's classrooms, and several teachers have incorporated the magazines into curriculum units. Teachers in the lower grades have used the stories primarily to teach reading and writing, and one teacher had the students write a response to the author of their favorite story. In one case, the upper grade students used the magazines, and even interviewed some of the writers, for a research report on the topic of "Chicago's immigrant communities." Often examples of class projects that use the magazines are displayed on the school's stairwell wall for all to see.

Periodically, the writers have had the opportunity to read selections of their writing in public forums. Some public readings have taken place as part of school-related events, such as an eighth-grade graduation fundraiser or end-of-year arts and culture festival. The writers also have given public readings at forums around the city at which their stories or the writing project itself has particular relevance. These have included a public hearing, parent involvement conferences, community forums, and a meeting of community and university partners. Often after the release of a magazine or a public reading, the group has shared stories about the enthusiasm with which particular people—daughters, husbands, friends—read or listened to the writers' stories. The women tell and listen to these stories with an enthusiasm bordering on astonishment, as though each demonstration of interest in or praise for their work is an antidote to the daily practices and social forces that diminish them. Recognizing the personal strength they gain from the group, some writers have described the workshop as therapeutic, while others have said it has helped them become "leaders" or "teachers." One mother told the group that writing and sharing her stories gave her the strength to carry on.

Both the collective nature of the women's storytelling and the publication and circulation of their stories in the magazine contribute to the women's critical and creative work of describing their experiences, expressing their views, and "represent[ing] themselves in their own terms to a wider audience" (Gere, 1997, p. 31). The writers' articulation of these terms has become more explicit over time, and this is particularly apparent in the introductions to the third and fourth magazines. After the writing program's first year and the publication of two magazines, the writers proposed writing the introduction to the third magazine collectively, a suggestion that established a precedent for subsequent magazines. The introductions are instructive. Not only do the writers describe the thematic content of the magazines (as I had done previously); they also identify themselves to their readers, explain their reasons for writing and the audience for whom they write, and articulate the value of inscribing their stories in print. The following is an excerpt from their introduction to the third magazine:

This magazine is made up of the stories and experiences of Mexican mothers from Telpochcalli school. It is a way of telling about our customs, our values, and our dreams. 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.

The Parents Write Their Worlds program is one of many programs and activities offered to parents at Telpochcalli Elementary School, a "small school" of fewer than 300 students, most of them from first- and second-generation Mexican immigrant families. Telpochcalli, a Nahuatl⁸ word meaning "house of youth," is a fully bilingual and biliterate elementary school. The school's name signifies its commitment "to integrating Mexican art and cultural heritage across its curriculum to create an engaging academic and social experience for its students and their families" (from the Telpochcalli School Mission Statement).

Telpochcalli is a community arts school composed of students, teachers, parents, and artists who aspire to nurture an understanding of self and an appreciation for family, community, heritage, and world. As Telpochcalli's

current principal, Tamara Witzl, explained, the school's experience-based pedagogy responds to the fact that there was nowhere in the conventional curriculum for Mexican immigrant students "to look at themselves—with themselves as the focus, the reason for investigation, the reason for celebration" (Lyon, 2000, p. 127). Telpochoalli's philosophy, Witzl explained, is: "Start here with who you are and that will give you the understanding, the template to look at everything else in the world."

Consistent with the school's dual commitment to supporting the traditions, culture, and family life of its students and to working integrally with the community, parents are encouraged to have a presence in the school's activities and to project the school's mission beyond the building walls. The writing project's approach to parent involvement—based on the belief that the knowledge and insights parents draw from their past and current experiences can make important and unique contributions to their children's education—is shared and actively supported by the school.

Telpochoalli's support of parent participation is further put into action by the school's sister organization, the Telpochoalli Community Education Project (TCEP). The initial coalition that is now TCEP was formed when a group of educators and parents at Telpochoalli School decided to address the lack of cultural and educational resources available to families at Telpochoalli School and throughout the Little Village community by advocating for the construction of a multipurpose community center that would be resident directed and staffed. TCEP shares Telpochoalli School's philosophy that education is most successful when it incorporates the culture and experiences of the community, and that meaningful community change occurs when parents and other residents take central roles in that process, guiding change according to their needs and dreams. Moreover, by incorporating parents into its efforts to improve the neighborhood, TCEP challenges the mythology of assimilation, including its vilification of the *barrio* as a place from which immigrants should strive to move out in order to move up the socioeconomic ladder.

Many of the writers participate in other TCEP and school-related activities. Several are on the local school council and the bilingual committee. Others attend the community leadership and family integration workshops. Still others work as school aides in the classrooms or library. The writing program was brought to Telpochoalli to support TCEP's efforts to organize parents, build unity among them, and encourage them to speak, write, and share their experiences, concerns, and insights with the wider community. Indeed, the writing workshop participants have become

known as "*las escritoras*" ("the writers") and have taken on the role of the organization's scribes. They were recruited to write TCEP's mission statement, they are often asked to write and read testimonials for public forums, and a subgroup of writers has formed TCEP's Research and Evaluation Committee.

Philosophically, structurally, and practically, Telpochoalli School and the TCEP create a rare institutional space that supports and sustains the transnational, bicultural reality of the students and families it serves, and that recognizes parents as thinkers, educators, and community leaders. For the women in the writing workshop, who talk often and write occasionally about Telpochoalli, the school is a haven in which they know that their language, culture, and values are respected. Rebecca Nieto, one of the workshop participants whose two oldest daughters attend the school, described it in this way:

Telpochoalli is a school that is completely bilingual in English and in Spanish. The students are very proud to study here because in this school one breathes a familial atmosphere. This is because the principal and the teachers are very friendly with the students and the parents, since they try to integrate an appreciation for our families, our community, our culture, and the world.

REWRITING THE HOMELAND, RECONFIGURING THE BARRIO

Migration is a statement of an individual's worldview, and is, therefore, an extremely cultural event.

(Tony Fielding, 1992).

Personal narrative, or creative nonfiction writing—the kind of writing we do in the Parents Write Their Worlds workshops—inevitably involves participants in the work of reminiscence on experiences from their past, reflection on their current lives, and expression of their desires and dreams for the future. In *Landscape for a Good Woman*, Steedman (1988) emphasized the storyteller's interpretive use of her past in order to explain her present life. Phillida Salmon (1992), by comparison, drew on reminiscence work she had done with elderly people to propose a different interpretive relationship between the present and past in storytelling. She suggested that "from the vantage point of their telling, earlier events are seen as leading up to later ones, and the current end of the story in some sense governs what is to be made of its earlier phases" (p. 219). For

Salmon, in other words, it is in the storyteller's interpretation of her present life that she gives meaning to her past. I suggest that Salmon and Steedman are each describing one facet of a dialectic: a process of mutual interpretation of past and present through which the storyteller imparts a sense of continuity to her life.

For people whose lives are not explained by official interpretive devices, telling stories that bring past and present together is one way they can give coherence and meaning to their own lives and, through this biographic coherence, to "put order in the world." For the Mexican immigrant women in the writing group, the distance between their past experiences and present lives is marked by ruptures of time, space and culture. The cultural work of mending these ruptures through storytelling is a gradual, collective, and critical process that has led the women to begin weaving together their past experiences in Mexico and their present lives in Chicago.

Since the writing program began, the participants have written alternately about experiences and people from their childhood and youth in Mexico, and their present lives in Chicago. The group's early writings maintain a consistent distinction between these two places that is at once spatial, temporal, and moral. The early stories about Mexico are nostalgic reminiscences of places and people located far away and in the writers' past, and the narrative is contained within Mexico. Stories about Chicago, while similarly restricted to that place, tend to address the challenges of settlement and the struggles of living in a poor inner city neighborhood. Rarely has a writer located stories about positive moments or pleasant places in Chicago, even when the writing prompt left the location open. In this section, I look at how the women have begun to bring these two places to bear on each other, and the ways in which that mutual interpretation has changed their representations of each place.

"*Recordar es volver a vivir*" ("To remember is to relive [the past]"). I have heard this refrain many times from women during workshop discussions as they read and reflected on stories about their childhood, youth, or young adult life in Mexico. Although they often have said this as an appreciative reflection upon their own or another writer's emotional response to the work of reminiscence, the stories the Telpochcalli mothers write and discuss in the workshop about their experiences as children, youth, and young adults in Mexico are not written versions of stories they tell about themselves on a regular basis. To the contrary, workshop participants frequently comment that these stories lead them to recall or "relive" moments from their past that they never talk or even think about. In other

words, these stories, drawn from childhood and youthful memories, are based on experiences to which the writers had not previously attributed any social value. This is one of the reasons the group work of reminiscence through storytelling is transformative.

Recently, a long-time workshop participant warned a newcomer: "Writing in this group makes you think about moments in your life you had completely forgotten about. And then another moment like that pops into your memory, and you realize how important that time was for you and you want to write that story too." This sense of the value of their childhood experiences comes not simply from writing them down, but from the sympathetic responses they receive as they read their stories to the group. Once these stories appear in print, they acquire additional value, in particular when the women read their pieces to their children. During workshop sessions, the writers frequently describe their children's enthusiastic responses to the stories and the curiosity about their past the stories provoke. "Ever since I began reading my children these stories about my childhood," commented one woman, "they are always asking me to tell them more stories about life in Mexico."

In their early writings about Mexico, participants might address the role an older family member has played in their life, describe a place that carried fond memories or made an impact on them in some way, or recount a village tradition or family custom that had value to them. Unlike Chicago, Mexico was never the locus of strife, or more precisely, strife was never the driving theme of the story. If anything, the women's early stories about Mexico provided a means of redeeming the poverty they suffered. For instance, several childhood stories describe the great sacrifices the writer's mother or grandmother made to buy her a modest gift, such as the paper doll María Pineda received from her mother for the Day of the Magi, or the cloth doll Rebeca Nieto's grandmother made for her. Other stories recount the hard work they and their siblings did as children to help out in the home, work that often kept them from play or from school. Yet the emphasis of these stories is never on their own suffering or deprivation, but rather on the way in which the family came together in mutual support, or the way in which the writer found solace or happiness in a special place or a humble toy. "Those gifts were so valuable," wrote María Pineda, "like the treasure of the Titanic."

The writers' early stories about Chicago, in contrast, usually are critical responses to daily struggles they, or other immigrants, faced in the city: a writer's struggle during her first months in Chicago to keep a factory job

in the face of linguistic barriers, verbal abuse, and the deadening routine; the struggle of an undocumented worker's daily effort to travel to his far-away job; the conflicting desire for and resistance to learning English; or the dilemma about whether they, as mothers raising their children in conditions of poverty, should work outside the home or stay home to raise their children. Unlike the stories based on childhood memories, in these stories the women address issues that are frequent topics of conversation at the school, at TCEP meetings, and in the community. That the women have written more assertively and critically about these issues since the workshop began may be attributable in part to the public currency and legitimacy the issues command, both in local conversation and in the local and national media.

Nonetheless, like the early stories the women wrote based on their childhood experiences in Mexico, in nearly all the early writings about settlement and life in the city, the authors contained their discussion to Chicago or the United States. This is the case whether they were writing about how they came to the decision to stay at home rather than work outside the house, about their dreams for their neighborhood, or about an arduous journey north and the pain, fear, and humiliation they experienced crossing the border. It is even the case that in these exceptional stories, the authors provide a positive depiction of their life in Chicago, as in Teresa Elen Dávila's story about the church she attends in her neighborhood, a place that "feels so much like another world I don't ever want to leave," or María Luisa Tellez' story "My Kitchen," in which she describes the warm, familial scene in her "simple but spacious" kitchen, the place where she spends most of her day and where the family unites at the end of the day: "We talk, we laugh, and we have a lot of fun. It is our favorite place." The spatial and temporal separation between Mexico and Chicago represented in these early stories and the moral and even aesthetic distinctions between the two places that reinforce that separation seem to express what Roger Rouse (1992) called a "cultural bifocality": "a capacity to see the world alternately through quite different kinds of lenses" (p. 41). In this sense the women's early stories also seem to acquiesce to the spatial, temporal, and cultural bipolarity of the mythology of assimilation.

The initial sharing of written work can be very threatening (Fitzpatrick, 1995), and it is possible that the women's early writings reflect a version of their world they were comfortable sharing with the group and, in the case of the published writings, with an imagined readership. In contrast to the writings, however, the group discussions that followed the reading of

these early stories rarely reiterated the radical spatial, temporal, or moral distinctions represented in the written stories. For instance, a story about a favorite place to play near the *ranchito* prompted comments about the lack of safe spaces available to their children in the inner city neighborhood; another woman's story about the family's regular outings to help her father sow or harvest their crops led to a conversation that moved from the bucolic landscape of their native towns to their present efforts to keep the family united, and to a discussion of how working together was as important as relaxing together. Similarly, the stories about covered dolls or annulets they had received as children spawned lengthy discussion about the easy availability of material goods in the United States, even for poor people like themselves, and about the challenges of teaching their children to appreciate the few things they had.

These discussions did more than prompt the participants to use memories of Mexico as the moral compass by which to judge life in Chicago. They also led the writers to share stories about more trying aspects of life in Mexico: experiences of poverty, family strife, or personal loss that they were reluctant to include in their written work. This process of writing stories about their past, and the subsequent discussion about the significance of their experiences has served not only to give value to the women's pasts, but also to provide the critical and creative spark through which the women have come to reflect and write differently about their lives—to "see beyond what one sees physically," as Rebeca Nieto put it in a piece entitled "To Write."

I want to signal two ways in which the women's writing has changed. First, their stories increasingly contain both Mexico and Chicago in their frame. Some stories have revolved around the comparison of some aspect of their childhood in Mexico with a comparable aspect of their children's lives in Chicago. Claudia Romo has compared the celebration of May festivals in her native town to the ways they are celebrated in Little Village. María Pineda has offered direct counsel to her children about how to deal with unfair assessments in the classroom by telling a story about her experience of an injustice during her years in secondary school. In more recent stories, the writers have punctuated descriptions of a memorable outing or family activity—in each case the story contained implicit counsel—with a comment about how they have tried to bring the lessons they learned from that person to bear on the ways they live their lives in Chicago or raise their own children. "Now that I am an adult and married I always remember [my mother's] advice and lessons," wrote Rebeca Nieto. Leticia Bravo

similarly ended a story about her trip to the market with her grandmother by noting: "Now I tell my children what I learned from my parents and my grandparents. I tell them how important it is that the whole family stay united, and above all to respect all people."

Second, this juxtaposing of Mexico and Chicago has led the women to write about their pasts from a more critical perspective. They write with more ambivalence and less nostalgia about the poverty they suffered, and they write more openly about family strife. Over time, the women have begun to draw on their childhood experiences in Mexico, not only to provide the moral basis from which to judge U.S. culture, but also to justify their migration north and to illuminate those qualities of life that they lacked or longed for as children in Mexico, but have been able to create for their children in Chicago. Maria Pineda has written about the sacrifices she and her husband made to buy a computer for their daughters, comparing their ability to do so with her mother's inability to provide her with the typewriter she needed for school. Guadalupe Lopez has written candidly about her troubled childhood experience, in which her two parents were so busy working that they became oblivious to the fact that her brothers were getting into serious trouble. In a conversation about the story as it went to print, Guadalupe noted that "people may think I am disrespectful by writing these things about my parents. It's not that they didn't love us. But I want parents here to know what the consequences might be if they put work first and forget to look after their children." Guadalupe's story is one of many showing how the women have resisted the proletarianization of their labor, especially when it has threatened their ability to be good mothers, according to their own values of motherhood. This is an important theme I return to later in the chapter.

Another example is Hermila Taboras' story "In the Kitchen." "When my children all arrive from school," the story begins, "they run right to the kitchen. They say to me, some speaking in Spanish and others in English, 'Mom, what is there to eat?' Hermila then describes a delightful scene in which each of her children recounts their day as they sit to eat. "This is something very important for me," Hermila continues, "because I would have liked to do the same with my parents. But unfortunately there was not this kind of communication between us because when they weren't working, they were doing other things." Hermila ends her story by noting that it is because of her own experience growing up that she tries to "help my children whenever and in whatever way I can." It bears noting that Hermila, a woman who came to the program in its second year, wrote this

story for her third workshop session. Because the value of the women's experiences and stories and their legitimacy as writers are sustained through the ongoing work of the group and made material by the magazine, the writers' collective confidence, creativity, and conviction continue to be passed on as new participants join the program and others move on.

The writers' work of mediating their past and present also has contributed to their critical rewriting of the neighborhood and their life in Chicago. Telpochealli School, the site of the writing workshop and the school that most of the participants' children attend, is located in Little Village. Little Village is a predominantly Mexican, working poor neighborhood that, along with the contiguous neighborhood of Pilsen, forms Chicago's largest, most concentrated, and most segregated "Mexicano" community (Guerra, 1998, p. 24).⁹ Nearly half the residents immediately surrounding Telpochealli are immigrants to the United States, and the majority speak Spanish as their primary language.

From the perspective of community organizers, social service providers, and urban researchers, Little Village looks like many inner city neighborhoods. Residents live in a historic port of entry plagued in recent decades by processes of urban restructuring in which factories and other blue collar businesses have closed or been displaced, while gentrification nibbles at the neighborhood's heels. Current residents of Little Village face high rates of poverty, gang and drug-related violence, and limited access to living wage jobs, social services, recreational facilities, higher education or legal status for their families, all of which "makes Little Village residents some of the least advantaged people in the country" (Telpochealli Community Education Project, 2003).

Meanwhile, from the perspective of social researchers interested in new patterns of global migration, Little Village is a vibrant community with a distinctly transnational commercial, cultural, religious, and recreational life. Researchers commonly refer to two qualities in particular that characterize the neighborhood as a transnational community. The first is the frequency, rapidity, and ease with which family members, material goods, and cultural products circulate between Mexico and the Pilsen/Little Village community, such that migration itself is formative of the cultural and social life of the community (Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992; Hurttg, 2000, p. 34). The second is the notion that Pilsen/Little Village is not merely the port of entry for migrants determined to settle in the host country, as assimilationist models of immigration would have it. Rather, it is incorporated culturally, socially, and economically into a larger spatially dispersed, transmigrant

culture (Hurtig, 2000, p. 32; Rouse, 1991). Nestor Rodríguez (2003) suggested that in immigrant settlement communities such as Little Village, which he characterizes as "binational," intragroup relations between new immigrants and long-term residents develop, such that for first-generation immigrants, "incorporation into the mainstream or into established ethnic groups of English-speaking Latinos becomes optional in the presence of a highly viable binational social structure" (p. 83).

Each of these depictions of the immigrant neighborhood—as inner city barrio and as transnational community—responds critically to certain aspects of the mythology of assimilation. For the women in the writing program, putting order in their world has involved writing stories about their neighborhood that draw upon and partially reconcile these two perspectives, but that do so in their own terms, particularly as mothers. In a story entitled "Nuestro barrio" ("Our Neighborhood"), María Pineda, a mother who moved out of Little Village because of its plights but continued to bring her children to Telpochochalli, gave a sense of how the residents of Little Village participate in and draw upon the construction of *Mexicanidad* to respond to the plights and contradictions of their neighborhood, including racial tensions with the Black community up the street, the vibrance of a lively commercial district that belies the neighborhood's chronic poverty, and an abundance of spirited children eager to play after school but whisked home and away from the omnipresent street threats of gangs, drugs, and violence:

People live in a state of anxiety, but we live like this, not because we like it, but out of necessity. The Little Village neighborhood is very active. We feel identified with each other. Although there are few murals, it seems picturesque. On 26th Street there is always activity. On weekends, it is full of cars and people. Some come from other places and states. They come to shop or simply cruise on the street, showing off their cars and pickups. Others, the young ones, watch the girls. 26th Street is identified by the arch, many stores, the September 16th Day¹⁰ parade, restaurants, and other events. That is our neighborhood, very Mexican. We are united with Cermak Street. Even if they are different streets, it is the same; we are all Mexican.

Certainly, the partial social autonomy of the neighborhood, as well as the viability and legitimacy of Mexican culture within the neighborhood produced by this transnational context, lends credibility to the women's goals as writers, and supports their narrative juxtaposing of Mexican and U.S. culture and social life. At the same time, the neighborhood's *Mexicanidad* op-

erates in tension with the assimilationist mythology of the dominant society, a mythology that continues to relegate neighborhoods such as Pilsen/Little Village to the margins of its social landscape. Rebeca Nieto, a writer who has participated in the writing workshop since its inception, responded to this marginalization in a story entitled "*El valor de los mexicanos!*" ("The Value of Mexicans!"). This story, which she published in the fourth magazine, has many of the characteristics I identify as indicative of the women's conscious resistance to assimilationist models through their writing.

Unlike Rebeca's earlier stories—remembrances of her childhood and family life in Mexico or positive reflections on experiences she and her children have had at Telpochochalli—she began this story by comparing locally recreated Mexican national festivals to "the way it is done in Mexico." She then related the performance of these festivals to the festivals of her native village, recounting an experience she had as girl when she played the drum in the parades. Having created a strong and positive link between her Mexican childhood and her adult life in Chicago in the story's first paragraph, Rebeca then made a dramatic shift: "But sometimes in this country we are discriminated against for being Mexican," she wrote. Drawing on her own experience, she continued: "On one occasion I heard the security guards that maintain order at the parade comment among themselves, saying, 'These Mexicans are so scandalous; why don't they go back to their own country?'"

Rebeca's response to the denigration of Mexicans and Mexican culture was proud and redemptive: "They [the guards] don't realize that we Mexicans are full of life, with a great desire to improve ourselves and with the dreams that we wish to convert into reality." She then defended her people in a way that integrated the values of her people that mark their difference and those that mark their conformity with the mainstream: "Not only do we dress in brilliant colors and play contagious music," she contended, "inside of us one finds the seeds of work and effort to improve ourselves and move ahead. Some work and others study in order to be able to reach our dreams and make a better life for ourselves and our children, always struggling so that our values will be recognized."

In the last sentence of her story, Rebeca identified several dimensions of her and the other writers' daily lives that operate in tension and even conflict with each other, and which they work to reconcile in their writing. These include work, education, their own self-improvement, their children's futures, and the values from their past that they struggle to maintain and live by. Whereas the women's daily efforts to address these issues are perennial themes for group writing and discussion, the one topic that

leads them to confront the mythology of assimilation most directly is whether to work outside the home or not.

This theme has prompted endless stories: some about friends, neighbors, or relatives in which both parents worked and the children grew up neglected, troubled, and in trouble; others about the pressures of materialism in this country and their efforts to resist those pressures and put the care of their children first. Often stories about their children's well-being, education, and safety have lead directly to discussions about the relative merits of working outside the house or staying home to raise and watch over the kids. For 2 years, the writing group's many participants have been unanimous in their position that the material comforts additional income might bring to their households were not worth the risk of their children "losing their paths" if not cared for and supervised by their mothers.

This is not to say that each woman in the group has come to this decision in the same way, or with the same long-term intentions for her life. Whereas some of the women are intrinsically uninterested in paid work and consider motherhood to be their "vocation," others have chosen not to look for paid work as long as they have children still living at home. Still other women have explored the option of combining informal service work with the care of their own children, or that of earning money by caring for a neighbor's children in the home.

What I have found most compelling about the women's stories on and discussions of this theme is the way that they resist the mythology of assimilation as they struggle to reconcile the value of family integrity they draw from their past and the personal pleasure and sense of fulfillment they derive from mothering, the hopes and dreams they have for themselves and their children, and the dangers and limitations they face as a result of their current socioeconomic condition. Given these women's critical understanding of their situation and their options, one would be hard pressed to draw the conclusion, as some researchers have suggested, that these immigrant women's decision not to work outside the home is a capitulation to traditional Mexican patriarchal family arrangements.¹¹ More likely, it is both a reasoned response to the real conditions of their lives and a form of resistance to the modern capitalist patriarchal arrangements and values they encounter in the United States.

MOTHERS AS WRITERS

As the many stories I have cited or described thus far may have made clear already, the primary social position and personal perspective from which

the Telpochcalli mothers write is that of motherhood. The writers identify themselves as mothers to their readers. They care about being writers in the eyes of their children, and they tell many (although not all) of their stories for their children. This is not to say that they write "children's stories," but rather, as they state in the introduction to the third magazine, that they write their stories so their children "will know where they come from and what their roots are" and so their traditions will be read, not only by their children but by their grandchildren as well.

There are two points about this social positioning I highlight here. The first is that, as the stories I described in the previous section illustrate, the women mediate their two worlds—their past and their present—as mothers. In nearly every writing in which Mexico and Chicago are juxtaposed, the tension, contrast, or continuity between the two places is mediated by the writer's role as mother. It is thus as mothers that they struggle to reconcile the values of their native land and the opportunities they associate with the place they currently call home.

In a story entitled "*El clima de Chicago*" ("Chicago Weather"), María Luisa Tellez conveyed the visceral impact of her move to Chicago through a contrast between the climates of Chicago and her native Mexico. "When I came to Chicago," she wrote, "I was struck to see such a sad, gray city, the trees without leaves and the wind so cold it chills you to the bones. The climate is very extreme, whether in winter or summer." In Mexico, by comparison, "the climate is pleasant all year round. The trees are always green and they don't lose their leaves. One rarely sees gray and sad days. Of course there are rainy days, but what I love is how it rains for a while and then a radiant sun comes out."

In some ways the sensibility of María Luisa's story sounds conventionally assimilationist. For her, as harsh, sad, lonely, or uncomfortable as the transition to a new place, new climate, and new way of life may be, one adapts. "[As] time passes, María wrote, "one gets used to it. Today I can say I like Chicago." What strikes me about her story, however, is the ending: "Now the rainy and sad days are brightened by my children, with their mischief and innocence." In the end, it is her children who compensate for the climatic and, one can imagine, cultural losses María Luisa has suffered by making the journey to this country.

For other women in the writing program, writing about settlement is cultural work laden with ambivalence. Rebeca Nieto conveyed this ambivalence in her story "*Una triste realidad*" ("A Sad Reality"). After rationalizing the difficulties of migration in terms of the desire to make a better life

for one's children, she described the difficulties of starting a new life in a country that "is like a time machine [where] people get sick from working so much." Rebeca concluded with the comment: "I think if there were more jobs and less poverty in our country, many of us would not be here."

The second point to make about the writers' social positioning as mothers is that it is the most common point of reference from which they use their stories to give counsel. It is as mothers that they assess the lessons learned as children and bring them to bear upon their current lives and daily decisions about how to raise their children. It is as mothers that they have found value in the activities of reading and writing, which they call upon their readers to "instill in our children." It is as mothers that they question the intrinsic value of paid work if it takes time away from raising and nurturing their children, and it is as mothers that they are committed to maintaining the language, traditions, and customs of their homeland.

Finally, it is as mothers that the writers articulate their dreams for a better community. We read this in Leticia Bravo's story "La fuente" ("The Fountain"), in which she demystified the picturesque image of a neighborhood fountain and park by signaling how rare such places are in the neighborhood, and by expressing the need for more places "where our children are safer, places where they can practice their sports and recreate." In "*Un sueño para mi barrio*" ("A Dream for My Neighborhood"), Guadalupe Lopez described a safe, clean, cooperative neighborhood in which mothers work together to raise and educate the neighborhood's children. Guadalupe's dream was not simply for her own children, but for the neighborhood as a community, and the role of mothering it envisioned was not confined to the nuclear family, but was collective and communal.

Motherhood is not, in other words, an intrinsically conservative social position from which to write. Rather, in responding to the androcentric, patriarchal mythology of assimilation, it is a position of critique, of resistance, a position that calls for the rewriting of that mythology. As a social role, identity, and experience, motherhood requires definition over and against the prevailing myths of both Mexican and U.S. societies. Thus, at the same time the women write as mothers, they inscribe themselves upon a landscape of immigrant life according to their own terms for motherhood.

Moreover, by drawing on their experiences of mothering, but also of being mothered, and by narrating their stories from their affective position as mothers, the women's writing becomes an intimate, interpersonal interpretive practice. Like the collective, literate work of clubswomen Anne Gere (1997) described in her book *Intimate Practices*, this intimacy infuses

the writers' "continual textual negotiations with special power" because it gives the writers "the capacity to imagine new possibilities for themselves, to change their desires" (p. 53). In this way we can understand the writers' literate creation of an alternative landscape of immigrant life and their self-positioning on that landscape as immigrant mothers as mutually constituting acts of resistance.

CONCLUSION

In *The Politics of Education*, Paulo Freire (1984) wrote that "only a literacy that associates the learning of reading and writing with a creative act will exercise the critical comprehension of that experience, and without any illusion of triggering liberation, it will nevertheless contribute to its process" (p. 17). Over the past 2 years, the Mexican immigrant women who have participated in the Parents Write Their Worlds program have begun to exercise a critical comprehension of their experiences as immigrant mothers, writing stories challenging dominant interpretations of the immigrant experience that fail to account for their experiences, and replacing these interpretations with their own. Although I agree with Freire that these women's social, creative, and critical activity will not necessarily trigger liberation, I have argued that their work of writing, reading, discussing, and publishing their stories constitutes a form of resistance and thus contributes to the process of liberation. In the early months of the writing workshop, the writers enacted their resistance indirectly through their written representation of alternative worlds and values, but over time their resistance has become more direct, explicit, extensive, and self-conscious. This is evidenced by their willingness to rewrite previous, nostalgic versions of life in Mexico in more critical terms, by their clear articulation of the magazine's purpose, and by their inclination to give counsel to their readers in increasingly direct ways, albeit always building the moral of their stories upon their own experiences.

Through the support of the group and through the individual and collective positions from which they write their stories, the women also "work hard to sustain compelling images of alternative possibilities" (Rouse, p. 41) for their present lives and their children's future. By drawing critically on the moral and social norms from both their past and present experiences to give counsel to their children and their peers, the writers effectively and creatively challenge the moral assumptions and implications of the mythology of assimilation and begin to create an alternative synthesis, and thus an alternative landscape for future action.

Carolyn Steedman (1986) began *Landscape for a Good Woman* by noting that her mother shaped her childhood "by the stories she carried from her own, and from an earlier family history" (p. 8). To what extent these women's acts of resistance will shape the stories their second-generation children tell and write in response to the myths of assimilation they had contended with on a daily basis is a question that calls for more stories and more writing.

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2. On the mythologies of assimilation, pluralism, and multiculturalism see Hollinger (1995), Orni and Winant (1994), several chapters in Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Santon (1992), and several chapters in Gutman et al. (2003).
3. This passage is my own synthesis and paraphrasing of several passages in Benjamin's (1969) inspiring essay. Benjamin describes how the fairy tale in particular, and not stories in general, responds to the need for counsel created by the myth (p. 102).
4. For the sake of readability, I have included only the English translations of the women's writings, as they appeared in the magazines.
5. At the request of the writers, I have used their actual names and not pseudonyms, despite the conventions of academic ethics, when quoting from their published work. In all other cases I have used pseudonyms.
6. On the concept of immigrant neighborhoods as points along a trans migratory circuit, see Massey, et al. (1987), and Rouse (1991, 1992). For descriptions of Chicago's Mexican community of Pilsen/Little Village as a transnational migratory space or transnational neighborhood see Guerra (2000), Hurtig (2000), and Farr (forthcoming).
7. I place the term "small school" in quotes to signal Telpochcalli's philosophical affinity with the small schools movement, and its concrete relationship to the Small Schools Workshop at the University of Illinois at Chicago (Ayers, Klonsky, & Lyon, 2000). The Small Schools Workshop had a central role in the school's initial planning and development phase in the mid-1990s, and continues to provide technical and structural support to the school.
8. Nahuatl, an indigenous language spoken in central Mexico, was the lingua franca of the Aztecs.
9. Guerra uses the term "Mexicano" to refer to people of Mexican origin born in Mexico or their U.S.-born children who self-identify as Mexicano/Mexicana, in distinction to the term "Chicano" which refers to people of Mexican origin born in the United States. In some contexts, these labels have a political valence. When the women in the writing group, all of whom were born in Mexico, refer

- to themselves as *madres mexicanas*, they do so descriptively and not for any political connotation the term may hold.
10. September 16th is Mexican Independence Day.
11. This perspective has a long history in research on women and immigration. For recent discussions of this perspective see Pessar (2003) and Mahler (2003). Here I am not arguing against these researchers' analysis per se, but rather suggesting that it does not apply to the women in the writing program.