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## Authoring Future Identities: Latina Girls Reading and Writing the University

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*In this article, we describe the campus visit we organized for Latina girls (grades 6–12) that participated in Somos Escritoras/We Are Writers. Somos Escritoras is a creative space that invites Latina girls to explore their lives and examine their worlds through art, writing, and theater. We focus on the writing marathon we designed for our visit and share the ways this activity invited girls to read and write the campus, while re-imagining their stories and authoring their futures. Drawing on figured words, we discuss how a campus visit can support Latina girls in constructing identities as future college students and graduates.*

*“I hope for a future of brightness filled with dreams, education, art works, and places to travel seeing wonders and mysteries left for me to unfold. I hope for a future where my voice is heard, where I figure out the one mystery that matters so much more than anything else, “Who am I?” ~Esperanza, Somos Escritoras writer”*

These words were written by Esperanza, a self-identified Latina, as we sat inside the Architecture Library on the University of Texas campus. Esperanza, a middle-school student, was one of 13 Latina girls that visited the university as part of their participation in Somos Escritoras/We Are Writers. Facilitated and organized by a Chicana faculty member and a team of Latina and Chicana graduate and undergraduate students in the college of education, Somos Escritoras was a creative space that invited Latina girls to use art, writing, and theater as a vehicle to examine their worlds and craft stories from their lived experiences.

For one week prior to our visit to UT, girls had been attending Somos Escritoras workshops to learn more about themselves and one another as Latinas/Chicanas. The offices where we hosted workshops were located in the surrounding Austin community. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) writes, “Nothing happens in the ‘real’ world unless it first happens in the images in our heads” (p. 87). A majority of our girls were first generation students and we believed that a campus visit to the “figured world” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) of the university to be a potential first step toward imagining their future selves, as college students and graduates.

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Some scholars have written about the transformational nature that a campus visit can have on students' perspectives of college. For example, Farmer-Hinton (2008) interviewed 55 high schools seniors from African American and Latino/a backgrounds to discuss the college supports available in their schools. She found the college tour positively impacted their aspirations to attend the university. Similarly, King (2012) found campus visits to be the most impactful on college-going rates, specifically for first generation students, as it "raised their confidence about the viability of college access" (p. 144) and career opportunities beyond.

Research related to Latina girls often highlights society's negative images and perceptions of them by focusing on teen pregnancy, suicide, and school failure (Denner & Guzman, 2006). *Somos Escritoras* is focused on building on the cultural and linguistic strengths present in the everyday practices of Latina girls as they explore and examine their worlds. Given the scarcity of opportunities for Latina girls to share their voices and literacies in schools and the need for representation throughout their educational journeys (Daisey & José-Kampfner, 2002; García & Gaddes, 2012), our work is an important step in providing girls with a space to envision their futures and explore their intersectional identities.

In this article, we share insights into *Somos Escritoras* in general and our visit to the university. We specifically focus on the writing marathon that we planned to provide Latina girls, majority first-generation students, the opportunity to read and write the university. First, we draw on the construct of "figured worlds" (Holland et al., 1998) to describe the ways that a visit to the university supported girls in beginning to construct their identities as future college students and graduates within the imagined and real world of the university. Next, we provide an overview of *Somos Escritoras* workshops, including the goals, and describe the girls and women that were part of the space. Then, we share a brief history of the writing marathon, discussing why we chose this activity as part of our visit. Finally, we share our learnings from our visit and argue for the necessity of opening spaces on our university campuses for Latina girls to re-imagine their stories and author their futures.

### Theoretical Framework

To consider the potential of a campus visit for our girls and to encourage and support them in envisioning themselves as future college students

and graduates, we draw upon Holland et al.'s (1998) concept of "figured worlds" (p. 52). According to Holland et al. (1998), figured worlds are "cultural realms peopled by characters from collective imaginings ... that rest upon people's abilities to form and be formed in collectively realized 'as if' realms" (pp. 51–52). Within the space of *Somos Escritoras*, in which Latina girls came together to create, write, and share of themselves with one another, workshops served as a "figured world" wherein girls and facilitators could collectively dream and author "new" selves – together.

On our campus visit, we crossed into the "figured world" of the university. The "figured world" of the university constructs certain identities, discourses, and ideologies of being, becoming, and belonging in which "particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 52). The privileging of "certain acts," or rather of particular ways of knowing and being, can serve to open space for few, while limiting access for many. In entering and navigating various figured worlds, we seek opportunities and experiences to "author" ourselves on our own terms to disrupt the ways that we are "authored" within these various worlds (Blackburn, 2002; Valdez & Omerbašić, 2015). The concepts of figured worlds and authoring are important in considering how, as Latina girls and women, we are positioned in society in general, and the university specifically, at the intersection of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and immigration status (Urietta, 2007), and how we see ourselves in relation to how society views us.

We hoped that our campus visit and participation in a writing marathon would open space for girls to read and write the campus in order to demystify the "figured world" of the university. Unlike a traditional campus visit, in which prospective students and their families are guided around the university and talked at, we built on the practices of *Somos Escritoras* by embedding reading, writing, and discussion into our day. We planned the writing marathon to open space within the larger figured world of the university for us to explore important landmarks while reflecting on their significance and what they symbolized for us and those that came before us. In our visit, we envisioned disrupting the discourses, stories, and narratives attached to the university by authoring a new narrative alongside girls, in which traditional notions of who is granted access and who belongs is dismantled and reconstructed.

## Somos Escritoras/We Are Writers Overview

Somos Escritoras stems from my (Tracey) dissertation study, in which I worked alongside Latina girls, in middle and high school, and their parents in a writing workshop. In workshops, girls and their parents were invited to explore and examine their lived experiences and their worlds through drawing and writing. After two iterations (Flores, 2018a, b) of these workshops, girls expressed their desire to have a space of their own to grow and learn together. This current iteration, which we report on in this article, is in response to the voices and needs of girls from across workshops.

Somos Escritoras is a creative space for Latina girls (grades 6–12) that invites them to share and perform stories from their lived experiences using art, theater, and writing as a tool for self-reflection and self-expression. This model draws on the work of scholars who have worked alongside girls of color in creative, arts-based literacy spaces. In these spaces, Black and Latina girls have learned ways to leverage their literacies and experiences through reading, writing, and performing of stories from their lived experiences (Brown, 2013; García & Gaddes, 2012; Muhammad, 2012; Winn, 2011; Wissman, 2011).

Somos Escritoras writing mentors collaborated to intentionally design and facilitate workshops. Our goal was to support Latina girls in continuing to develop their many literacies, while learning new tools to speak their truths, define themselves, and amplify their voices within a supportive community of girls and women. We hosted workshops in collaboration with Con Mi Madre, an organization that “empowers young Latinas and their mothers through education and support services that increase preparedness, participation, and success in post-secondary education,” (Con Mi Madre Mission, n.d., para. 2). They opened their offices to us to host Somos Escritoras and supported us in our recruitment efforts. Workshops convened for 2 weeks in June 2018 and consisted of 6 day-long workshops and culminated with a final celebration of writing that was open to the girls’ family and friends.

In designing Somos Escritoras, we created daily workshops that centered on the cultural and linguistic resources of girls while considering their gendered ways of knowing and being. Each session was facilitated in English and Spanish and we modeled and shared our writing in both languages to encourage girls to do the same. We recognized that each girl had a different relationship to their language(s)

and not all of them had access to bilingual course offerings; therefore, we were intentional in creating a space that allowed for them to draw upon their full linguistic repertoires.

Throughout each day, we read, watched, and discussed a variety of multimodal texts (Serafini, 2013), including artwork, poetry, spoken word poetry, and children’s books, created and performed by women and men of color, including Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, Pat Mora, Michele Serros, and others. These texts examined topics related to language, culture, and gender – topics relevant and important to young Latinas, but often absent from the school curriculum (Jocson, 2010). Finally, girls reflected on their lives, selecting stories and experiences rooted in their “funds of knowledge” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) and “pedagogies of the home” (Delgado Bernal, 2001) to share with one another.

At the end of the first week, we planned a campus visit to the university in which the program director and writing mentors were affiliated. We organized our visit to further our program goals by: (1) *supporting* girls in envisioning their futures as college graduates, (2) *demystifying* the “figured world” of the university, (3) *providing* the opportunity for girls to continue to engage in reading and writing of their worlds and the university through participation in a writing marathon.

## Somos Escritoras Girls

To recruit girls to participate in Somos Escritoras, we made flyers that detailed the program goals and registration information. We shared these flyers via e-mail with local middle- and high-school teachers, parent support specialists, and district curriculum departments and via social media (e.g., Twitter). In addition, Con Mi Madre, helped in our recruitment efforts by sharing information with their young Latinas as a summer program offering.

Thirteen Latina girls (grades 6–12) self-selected and registered to participate in Somos Escritoras. All girls were born in the United States and self-identified as Latina, Chicana, or Bicultural (Half White/Half Mexican). Twelve girls considered themselves bilingual and biliterate, being able to understand, speak, read, and write in English and Spanish, with different noted self-perceptions of their abilities. One girl considered herself “partially” bilingual and biliterate, feeling more comfortable speaking in English, and expressing that her peers ridiculed her when she spoke in Spanish.

Girls attended public and charter schools located throughout the city. Five girls were in high school (grades 9–12) and eight girls were in middle school (grades 6–8). Eleven girls were first-generation college bound students. Two girls had parents that were faculty at different universities in the Austin area. In addition, six girls participated with their mothers in Con Mi Madre.

### **Somos Escritoras Team**

Somos Escritoras was facilitated by a team of women self-identifying as Latina, Chicana, Puerto Rican, and Mexican American. As a faculty member in the college of education at UT, I (Tracey) serve as the Somos Escritoras program director and lead facilitator. As the director, I intentionally recruited a team of Latina undergraduate and graduate students to serve as writing mentors. I recruited women whose vision and values aligned with the goals of the program and that I knew could serve as positive mentors to young Latinas, sharing their experiences openly and honestly. Two doctoral candidates, Cori and Nathaly, served as graduate writing mentors and two pre-service teachers, Iris and Maya, served as undergraduate writing mentors. In addition, I invited my younger sister, Stephanie, to join the team as a writing and theater mentor.

We came together as a team because of our shared belief in the power of our stories and histories that reside in our cultural and familial upbringing and our view of art and writing as tools of self-expression and liberation. Each of us brought unique experiences teaching alongside youth in K–12 settings, developing language arts curriculum, and facilitating writing workshops for youths in arts-based community spaces. From these experiences, we knew firsthand the restorative potential of spaces like Somos Escritoras to build community and transform self-perceptions of all those involved. In addition, as Latina women, activist-students, and activist-educators, we leverage our privileges as faculty and students at a Research 1 institution in benefit of the communities that we serve.

### **The Writing Marathon: Reading and Writing the University**

The writing marathon is part of the traditions of the National Writing Project (NWP). Rooted in the words of author Natalie Goldberg and the practices of NWP teacher consultants (TCs), the writing marathon brings writers together to explore a

landmark or city through writing. Originally, the writing marathon was housed inside of the invitational summer institute (ISI), in which teachers spent an extended amount of time journaling. Later, the marathon would move from the ISI to the city. Over the years, the model has evolved; however, the foundation for a writing marathon is grounded in the principles of a group of writers, willing to commit to giving each other time and space to write, without apology, for an extended amount of time.

Drawing on these principles, we intentionally structured our marathon to align with the goals and themes of Somos Escritoras. First, we planned our marathon route and the landmarks we would visit based on what they symbolized for us. These landmarks included the Martin Luther King Jr. statue, the UT tower, the School of Architecture's library, and a wall located in the Perry Castañeda library with quotes from Gloria Anzaldúa's manuscript, *A Letter to Third World Women Writers* (1983). This bright blue wall features her writing from her own hand in white script. Anzaldúa's identity as a powerful Chicana writer who attended UT for part of her career made this landmark special in our journey.

We selected two mentor texts, *The Sun and Her Flowers* (kaur, 2017) and *Borderlands/La Frontera* (Anzaldúa, 1987), to read and discuss at each landmark. We chose kaur's collection of writing because her work examines themes related to culture, language, and feminism, which embodied the multiple topics we wanted to explore. Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* was selected with the goal of connecting previous workshop readings, writing crafted by girls, and the last site of the writing marathon. Additionally, we created a marathon writing journal with space for drawing, writing, and reflecting (See Table 1).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

For the purpose of this article, we focus on our Somos Escritoras visit to UT and the writing marathon that we planned for girls. We drew on three sources of data from our visit. This includes (a) ethnographic field notes, (b) writing and drawing artifacts from the writing marathon, and (c) girls' post-writing campus visit reflections. Through this data, we coded using simultaneous coding methods (Saldaña, 2015) and analyzed to consider the ways that our visit to UT might support girls in constructing identities as college students and graduates



**Table 1. Writing Marathon Overview**

Time	Site	Mentor text	Prompt
10:00–10:30	Martin Luther King Jr. Statue	Representation, rupi kaur	What was a time that you felt like a moth in a group of butterflies? We might look different in these spaces. How do we keep on going on and making our voices heard?
10:30–11:00	The Tower	Let's Leave This Place Roofless, rupi kaur	This space has traditionally been occupied by men and women that often do not look like us. Let's talk about the "ceilings" that we shatter by being here. This is a very metaphorical poem, how can we translate this into Spanish, Spanglish, or any other audience?
11:00–11:30	Architecture Library	First woman in my lineage, rupi kaur	Even though it might be challenging, we have many opportunities to strive and author the futures we envision for ourselves. How does yours look like? Write and illustrate the future you will create for yourself.
11:30–12:00	Main Library, Wall of Anzaldúa quotes	Ancestors, rupi kaur	The women before us (our mothers, grandmothers, teachers, and women like Gloria Anzaldúa) open up spaces for us to be able to tell our stories. Remember your own ancestors, what did they look like? Who are they? Draw them.
12:00–12:15	Main Library, Wall of Anzaldúa quotes	Two paragraphs from Anzaldúa, Ch. 6	Read Anzaldúa's work and close with discussion around us as writers and moving forward?

and how they authored themselves within the figured world of the university and beyond.

Across data, two themes emerged: Re-imagining Our Stories and Authoring Futures. In the next sections, we share vignettes that elaborate on these themes and highlight the necessity of opening spaces *with* and *for* Latina girls to author lives.

### Re-Imagining Our Stories

*"I was made to be someone in life, because not everyone in my family was successful."~Yazmin, Somos Escritoras writer.*

We culminated the writing marathon sitting on our floor of the campus library staring at the deep blue wall with Gloria Anzaldúa's (1983) words from *A Letter to Third World Women Writers*, written across it in white script. Anzaldúa's writing encourages us, as writers and women of color, to make visible our silenced narratives and amplify our voices through writing. In response to Anzaldúa's words before her on the wall, Yazmin reflected on her own experiences as a first generation student, and penned the words written above. Her words illustrate the connectedness of her story to the stories and histories of her entire family. In

her writing, we see the way that she is re-imagining her story, the stories of those that came before her and those that will follow her.

Like Yazmin, all girls connected their own story to the stories and histories of their family. Specifically they named the women in their lives – their mamas, abuelitas, and tias. They described these important women as "bold," "courageous," and "proud" and with deep admiration and respect. To the girls, these women had paved the way for them to accomplish their goals and to dream and re-imagine their own stories in relation to theirs (Urietta, 2007).

For example, Kimberly, reflected on and wrote about the "long line of women in her family" and her link to their histories and stories. She wrote:

*"I am part of a long line of women who are proud and bold. They're stubborn and stuck in their ways as well. I come from a strong and hardworking women [sic] who do their best to provide for their families."*

In her writing, Kimberly positions herself alongside the women in her family, accepting strengths and challenges, while honoring all that they do for her and their families.

Girls discussed and wrote about the challenges that the women in their family had endured and how, in these challenges, their mamas, abuelitas, and tias had learned valuable lessons that they had shared with them. Sky drew and wrote about her mother. She wrote:

*My Mom*

*A fighter*

*A lover*

*A woman whose strong ...*

*She doesn't care what other people think*

*She doesn't care what people say*

*She has grown stronger either way ...*

*She's a woman with color*

*A woman with thought*

*But not one can break her*

*Because she has a strong will.*

In Sky's writing, we see how her mother has modeled strength and courage for her. Sky's mother is crafting a new story for herself that she is sharing with her filled with lessons of strength, courage, and love (Delgado-Gaitan, 2005). This time and space (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001) provided by the writing marathon to reflect on her mother's story and her own, supported Sky and all the girls in authoring and re-imagining their collective stories within and across various worlds (Holland et al., 1998; Valdez & Omerbašić, 2015).

### Authoring Futures

*"I just want to live a happy life." Silva, Somos Escritoras writer*

Sitting in the architecture library, Silva wrote about her desire to have a "happy life." This spacious library contains walls full of colorful books, floor to ceiling windows, and large chandeliers. At this location, we read "First Woman in My Lineage" (kaur, 2017). This poem encouraged us to think about our futures and to be thankful for the firsts that we experience.

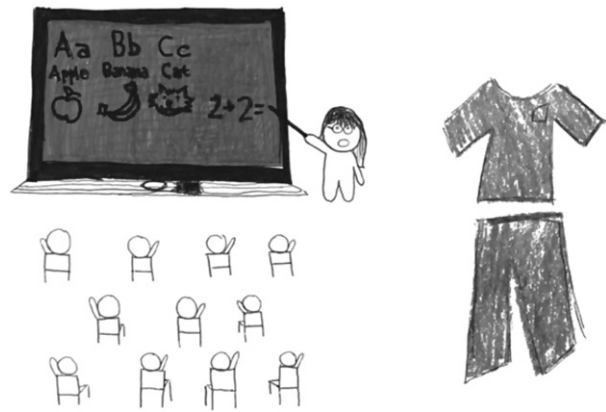


Figure 1. Symbols of careers.



Figure 2. Map of the future.

Inspired by the prompt "write and illustrate the future you will create for yourself," the girls shared their hopes for graduating high school and college and visualized themselves as professionals. Both Dayanara and Bernadette included drawings of cap and gowns symbolizing their future graduation from high school and college. Bernadette added an image of herself teaching in front of a classroom after receiving her college degree and Yvonne drew a picture of scrubs representing her goal to have a career in the medical field (Figure 1).

Aurora illustrated a beautiful map that included her past as an infant, placed a "you are here" marker next to her illustration as a young girl and outlined a clear path to college and a profession. She titled her work "Futureland." In this envisionment of her future, Aurora makes a strong



Figure 3. Looking toward college.

connection between college and her career goals. She sees the way that the two are related and can discern a clear path for herself. In this way, she is showing that she is confident about how she will proceed to reach her goals. It is important to note that Aurora is the daughter of university professors. She has a unique position of privilege that stems from having strong university role models and this could contribute to her sense of certainty about her future (Figure 2).

Finally, in her response, Carla names how she will be the “first generation to go to college and [how] its hard because you don’t have someone to guide you through the right path and show you how things are going to be done.” Carla wants to “go to Brown University to get a good education and a place where you can feel more at home.” Even though she imagines herself at Brown University in the near future, she echoes the literature when naming the challenges first generation students face (Aragon, 2018; Rivera & Gallimore, 2006). Her uncertainties are reflected in her drawing and the way that she is pictured at the gates of the university looking in. She is dressed in her cap and gown and seems poised to enter the university, but has yet to take the first steps (Figure 3). Looking toward college, Carla’s drawing highlights the need for additional opportunities to see herself as a legitimate member of university communities and imagine herself in this new world (Holland et al., 1998).

### Discussion/Implications

Like educators and scholars whose work is rooted in the communities in which they serve (Campano, Ngo, Low, & Jacobs, 2016; Delgado Bernal & Alemán, 2017), we believe in the importance of blurring the boundaries and borders, real and imagined, that exist between the university and

community, by acting as a bridge to connect girls to campus. As women of color, working and studying at a Research I university, we understand the significance of our own privilege and the importance of opening space for Latina girls to envision their future selves as college students and graduates. Our own journeys have not been linear. We would not be where we are in our educations and careers without the support of those that came before us and walk alongside us, serving as a bridge and a mirror, for us to imagine and dream.

The writing marathon was the focal part of our visit to UT, providing girls the opportunity to read and write the campus and themselves in the “figured world” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 52) of the university and the one we created together. For our writing marathon, we provided girls with a variety of texts and prompts to extend our work in previous workshops, while inviting them to relate their personal experiences to each landmark. Together, the physical space of the campus, the landmarks, texts, and our collective writing, and sharing served as cultural artifacts within the figured world of the university in which girls re-imagined their stories and authored themselves in new ways.

During our visit to UT, girls re-imagined and authored their stories by engaging with their histories, especially those of their *antepasadas*, in relation to the futures they were dreaming of and working toward. In their drawing and writing, girls named their mamas, abuelitas, and tias as prominent figures in their lives that embodied boldness, courage, and pride, which they instilled in them. Girls related their goals and achievements to the determination and support of their family, who they also realize overcame many challenges so that they may have the opportunities that they have today. The stories, experiences, and knowledge they carry with them from their families and communities support them in authoring identities as future college students and graduates of the university (Delgado Bernal, 2001; López, Ynostroza, Fránquiz, & Curiel, 2015; Urietta, 2007).

Within girls authoring themselves through their writing and drawing, we witness the tensions that exist, for some, as they position themselves anew within the figured world of the university. As a first generation student, Carla’s drawing and writing uncovers the contradictions and tensions that she navigates as she is authoring her path toward her college dreams and career goals. In Aurora’s writing, we see the potential impact of her family’s position within the figured world of the university as professors on her clear conception of her future



path and beyond. Both girls positioning and authoring of selves points to the importance of access and opportunities to spaces like Somos Escritoras in which girls can make sense of their stories and histories and work in community toward their futures.

In Somos Escritoras, we came together as Latina girls and women to create art and write and perform stories from our lived experiences. The voices and experiences of storytellers, authors, poets, and artists of color that we read and discussed foregrounded the examination of our own personal histories as we figured out the path that we are carving for ourselves with the support and encouragement of our close friends and families. The stories and experiences shared by girls at workshops and during our campus visit reveal the complexities of their identities while illuminating how they are positioning and authoring themselves in the many worlds they navigate to challenge stereotypes and open space for future generations.

For teachers and teacher educators, the work of Somos Escritoras illustrates how intentionally designed literacy spaces that build off the cultural and linguistic resources (Yosso, 2005) of Latina girls have the potential to empower them to speak their truth and amplify their voices while re-imagining their stories and authoring their future selves (García & Gaddes, 2012). The use of culturally relevant texts written by men and women of color, the modeling and sharing of our own stories, the use of art and theater, and the facilitation of workshops in English and Spanish offer teachers concrete examples of how to leverage the practices and resources of their students in their literacy instruction. Our campus visit and the organization of the writing marathon highlights how teachers can expand the literacy curriculum to support students to envision their futures beyond the classroom space.

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