

## Chapter One

### LANDSCAPES OF CHILDHOOD

Hot summer nights in New England, circa 1970. School's out, so I get to play outside after supper until dark. Most of my siblings and the rest of the neighborhood kids are there. We sort ourselves at times in pairs matched by age and gender; across these Irish- and German-Catholic families of five, six, eight and ten kids, we can always find some age-mates.

Other times we collapse into mixed groups with girls and boys of different ages, and play games like Kickball, Spud, and Kick the Can. Kick the Can's my favorite, because you get to run hard and disappear somewhere out of view. There are plenty of places to hide here, and my memories of childhood summers are those of being unconstrained by either time or space. There was freedom, too, from the surveillant eyes of adults: this was our territory, and we negotiated our own rules, solved our own problems, and forged our own memories, at least on those hot summer nights.

My thoughts shift from Waltham, Massachusetts to a 10 by 20 foot classroom in the inner city of Los Angeles some twenty years later, on another hot summer day. I'm a teacher now, and school is in session because this is a multi-track, year-round school in which instruction proceeds with two months on and one month off, leaving us in sweltering classrooms on days when other kids are at the beach. I'm leading my class in one of their favorite games, that of "Head's Up, Seven Up." Here, constraints are everywhere; this is a game that is played by kids in their seats, with heads down, moving no more than an arm or a thumb, and in silence. For some reason my students love this game, and it often gets played in the name of Physical Education on "Smog Alert" days when classes can't be held

outside. When we do go outside, it's to a fenced area no bigger than a football field that must accommodate some 1800 children's bodies in the course of a day. Fifth-grade students patrol this yard, wearing yellow traffic control vests and wielding hand-held STOP signs to remind kids that they can't run here, because it's too crowded, it's all asphalt, and there aren't enough band-aides in the nurse's office to cover all the scraped knees that could result, or even a nurse on duty every day. Yet this is the *one* place in this neighborhood where there are more than a few feet of unconstrained space - one of the only places where kids have a chance to play on their own.

Flash again to a farming town in central Mexico. The quiet is what is most palpable here: the slight hum of the summer air, broken by the occasional sound of crickets, a bird chirping over head, or a rooster braying from someone's backyard. This seems to me to be an idyllic world for children in so many ways - with almost limitless space to roam, few of the dangers imposed by modern technology (from traffic to smog to the junk food that's so readily available on most city corners), and many watchful-yet-unobtrusive eyes of adults. There's a daily menu of beans, rice, hand-picked fruits and vegetables, fresh eggs and cow's milk. Time exerts no pressures; here life seems to watch itself go by. But that's the problem. Idyllic childhoods make take form here, perhaps, but there are limited futures, and everyone knows this, so there are almost no young adults left in town.

### *Views of childhoods*

The children that play on the schoolyard in central Los Angeles - some of whom you will meet in this book - come from towns and villages like this one in Mexico and Central America. Their parents talk about life "back home" much the way I remember

my childhood “back then” in mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century New England – nostalgic musings about the freedom of movement that we associate with childhood or that we value for children and see missing in urban lives. Certainly, children living in global urban centers like Los Angeles experience very different rhythms of daily life than their parents did in Mexico and Central America, and these differences are important for understanding the “translations” of childhoods that happen when people migrate across geopolitical borders and sociocultural spaces. But as I will explore in this book, how we understand these differences – as products of history, social circumstances, or both – and what we have available as points of comparison - also matters for the translations that we construct.

Urban Los Angeles, as a context for childhoods, is a far cry from rural areas of Mexico and Central America, and immigrants who move to this global city experience many disjunctures with the way things were done back home. When immigrants move to other places – especially suburban and rural areas that are increasingly becoming homes for new immigrants<sup>1</sup> - some disjunctures may not be as great. In terms of a sense of safety for children, the city that I call Edmonville - one of the communities that I will present in this chapter - is much closer to the Waltham that I grew up in than is Los Angeles, and it may also feel much closer to parents’ experience of life in Mexico or Central America. But other differences may be more pronounced, and immigrants’ positions within each community may be seen and experienced in very different ways.

In this chapter I will develop a comparative analysis of two communities in which I lived and worked between 1983 and 2003. These are two kinds of contexts in which

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<sup>1</sup> **Richardson**. See also Hector Tobar’s (2005) collection of essays about Latino immigrants in new receiving communities all over the U.S.

youths' work as translators unfolded. The first, Edmonville, lies just outside of Chicago, Illinois. The second is the neighborhood around a school that I call "Madison," in central Los Angeles. In many ways these communities stand at extreme ends as types of receiving contexts for immigrants, and as very distinct sorts of playing grounds for the construction of childhoods. A contrastive analysis is thus useful for revealing dimensions of social contexts that matter for children's experiences of living, growing, and being raised up. These dimensions include the resources, opportunities, supports and barriers that they encounter for their work as translators, as well as for their more general experiences of daily life.

At the same time, in my self-reflective stance as "translator," I want to challenge a simplistic or dualistic comparison of these locales, and suggest instead how to see each community in its own regard, in complex, multi-faceted and nuanced ways. This includes the particular challenge of trying to see places through the eyes of the children who live there, because children may quite literally see things from different vantage points than do most adults, due to their social, cultural, and physical positioning in the world. These efforts demand looking *into* rather than just *at* each landscape, and in throughout the book we will do this by looking in a more close-up way at the experiences of children and families who live in these landscapes.

### *Edmonville*

From my mind's eye, I look toward the school that I call "Jefferson," which is in many ways the heart of the Mexican community in this town. The city's first bilingual education program was launched here in the 1970s, and the school houses most of the

city's bilingual personnel. The school is flanked by broad swatches of grass that border open play areas complete with sandbox, monkey bars, and a climbing structure over a protective floor of woodchips. Until recently, the playground was also adorned with a large wooden wagon and iron canon that was pointed directly at a wire climbing structure in the form of a teepee. I remember being shocked to see this blatant display of Western military force, an image evoking the genocide of millions of indigenous people; but it was even more unsettling to realize that few local residents seemed bothered by it, or even to notice it. (The structures were finally dismantled when the playground was remodeled.) Beyond the play area lies an open field, dotted with trees, a space that is filled each weekend with the brightly colored uniforms of youth soccer players, with multiple simultaneous games played in this broad expanse of field. The kindergarten classrooms look out onto the field through full-length, open panels of windows; these windows also allow outsiders a peek into a brightly-colored environment that is well stocked with books and toys. On the far side of the field are tree-lined streets with mixed housing stock, including 100-year-old Victorian "painted ladies," a smattering of Chicago brick bungalows, and "two flats."

Edmonville is an urban/suburban area just outside Chicago, with a population of about 74,000. The majority - 64% according to the 2000 census - identify as "white;" 22% as African American, 6% as Hispanic, 6% as Asian, and 3% as other. An additional three per cent of the population identifies as bi- or multi-racial. These demographics reflect a slight change over the previous decade, with the "Hispanic" population swelling by 91%, from 2,379 to 4,539. The proportion of Hispanic children in the public schools

is greater than that among adults; it reaches to 9%, while the white population drops to 45%, presumably due to private school enrollment.<sup>2</sup>

Edmonville's population varies on more than racial/ethnic diversity; it is also home to families from a wide range of incomes and social class backgrounds. In 1998, the per capita income was \$34,000; the median income was \$63,000. Still, almost 12% of households had incomes under the poverty line. Thirty per cent of the school-age population is considered low-income, and most Mexican immigrants are included in that

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<sup>2</sup> The changes in Edmonville somewhat mirror those in my own hometown, and in much of the nation. In 1970, Waltham's population of 62,000 was 80% "native-born." The Chamber of Commerce pronounced the "predominant nationalities" of the time to be "American, Canadian, Italian" (and indeed most of those who were not "native-born" were French-Canadian). By 1980 the ethnic make-up of Waltham had shifted considerably. The still white majority (87.9%) was followed by 5.6% of the population who identified as Hispanic. In the 2000 census the percentage of whites had dropped to 82%, while the Hispanic population reached 8%, followed closely by 7% Asian. In the school-age population these figures shift even more, to 20% Hispanic, 7% Asian, and only 63% white. Thirty-three percent of school age children speak English as a second language. In this way, Waltham and Edmonville are microcosms of much of the rest of the nation, where new immigration is rapidly changing the face of America. Nation-wide, one in six children has at least one immigrant parent; in California, 27% of the population is foreign-born, up from 15% in 1980.

figure. The four Edmonville census tracts that have a Latino population of over 10% are the four lowest-income census tracts in the city, and the wealthiest census tract is less than 1% Hispanic, and so there is diversity of income *within* the town, by neighborhood; but school intake areas are set up to ensure that no school has more than 40% of either “minority” or “white” students, which also secures some socioeconomic mixing. To establish this mix, school lines are continuously redrawn across neighborhoods, and many African American and Latino students are bussed to other schools.

The Mexican immigrant population in Edmonville goes back about 50 years.<sup>3</sup> Most families are from one of two small ranchos or old frontier settlements in the state of Guanajuato – small farming communities that are less than a mile from each other and a few miles from the nearest small town. The capital, Guanajuato, is a four hour bus ride away, and few families that I talked with had ever been there. These ranchos have a particular history within Mexico and a sub-culture of their own, one that is characterized by an ideology of rugged individualism coupled with a deep sense of loyalty to family.<sup>4</sup>

Adult migrants work for the most part in the service sector and in factories. Many men are hired as gardeners and landscapers, in some ways putting to use their experiences in farming communities in Mexico. Snow removal during the winter offers some supplement to this seasonal work; for those who have the means – and for those young men who left women and children behind - winter can also be a good time for return visits to Mexico. Women work in factories, cleaning office buildings, and in fast

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<sup>3</sup> See Farr (2005) for an historical sketch of the migration of Mexicans to the Chicago area. Farr notes that rancheros, in turn, are often snubbed by urban dwellers.

<sup>4</sup> See Farr (2005) also on this point.

food restaurants, or in part-time jobs such as in school cafeterias. Others are principally homemakers, sometimes providing childcare to fellow migrants for a small fee.

As the census tract data suggests, there is no single Latino barrio in this town, and the nearest Latino-run markets, selling Mexican food products, are across the line in Chicago. The families that I worked with were initially clustered on the south side of town, but after several years had spread out to the east and center, as three of the four purchased their own homes.<sup>5</sup> Some have relatives living in this city; others have extended family in neighboring towns. Where people lived seemed mostly a matter of the availability of apartments and of lower-priced homes.

The spiritual center of the Mexican community is St. Mark's Catholic Church, located just a few blocks from Jefferson school, where the first bilingual program in the city was launched. The declining numbers of U.S.-born churchgoers has been more than offset by the new immigrant community, and the church hosts masses in Spanish, "doctrina" classes for youth, and some parent-child education groups, as well as other services.

This church is only a few blocks from Jefferson Elementary School, and the two institutions together provide a center for the Spanish-speaking immigrant community, although not an uncontested one. Jefferson first began providing bilingual services to the children of Mexican migrants in the 1970s. Until recently, this was done through "pull-out" ESL classes, in which Spanish speakers left their home room classrooms for instruction in English for a good portion of the day. Not incidentally, this effectively

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<sup>5</sup> These families are part of a much larger national trend, with a 54% gain in the number of Latino homeowners in 2006. (Tomás Rivera Center report.)

reduced class size for English speakers who remained in the classroom. In the 1990s, as the population of English Learners grew, a second school began providing ESL services, and English Learners were divided across the two schools based on their home address, across a seemingly arbitrary line of demarcation. The second school was on the far end of town, in a wealthy neighborhood, and the decision to house the bilingual program there was largely part of the district's effort to maintain its commitment to a 40/60 racial balance, with no more than 60% of either white or non-white groups at each school. The bussed-in Latino youth helped to "balance" the school, and to "provide diversity" – a concept that is highly valued in this city's public rhetoric; the city's web page, for example, proclaims that "Edmonville prides itself on its diversity. Evident in the multi-cultural and socio-economic roles of Edmonville's many citizens and visitors alike, people of all walks of life, live, work and play in Edmonville."

Jefferson became the site of a contentious battle when attempts were made to transform it to a dual-language school. Spearheading these efforts were a group of English-speaking parents who wanted their children to have the opportunity to learn Spanish in school; they gained support from bilingual teachers who wanted to reform the problematic pull-out program, a program that is considered by bilingual education experts to be the least effective form of instruction. But they met with fierce opposition from neighborhood parents who wanted the school to remain a "neighborhood" school. These parents also invoked the rhetoric of diversity in their calls to maintain the "natural diversity" of the school, a diversity that they presumed would be upset by the formation of a dual language school, perhaps because few African Americans had enrolled in the program at that time. Some countered that the real concern beneath this argument was

that the racial balance within individual classrooms would be skewed, and that children who did not enroll in the dual language classrooms would be left in classrooms that were predominantly comprised of African American students and a few whites. This point becomes important for considering the place that Latino immigrants took up in this town; in some ways they served as buffers between African Americans and whites, with their positions evaluated by different forces and utilized for different purposes in relation to the historically-tense black-white color divide.

Eventually the decision was made to house a single track of a dual language program at Jefferson, giving English-speaking neighborhood parents the option of choosing this program or a regular English program for their children. But because the district established dual language instruction as *the* district's means of providing language supports to second language learners, the growth of the population of English Learners in the district forced an expansion of the program into three additional schools, which indeed were not even sufficient for the growing population.

The politics behind the policies I have so briefly sketched here are complicated.<sup>6</sup> My intent here is merely to reveal some of the complexities of life in Edmonville, a city that represents what Mary Pratt<sup>7</sup> calls a “contact zone” – a place where people from different backgrounds meet up, collide, and grapple with each other. These complexities sometimes play out in immigrant youths' translation encounters, a point I will explore

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<sup>6</sup> See Lisa Dorner's doctoral dissertation, *title* – for an account of these politics, including discussion of the various meanings that “community” took on in these discussions, and especially for Latino families' perspectives on and positions within these debates.

<sup>7</sup> Pratt (19??)

further in the chapter on “Transculturations,” because part of what children had to negotiate is who they and their families were seen to be within the particular mix of cultures and social classes within this town. Indeed, Edmonville represents a particular kind of contact zone – one that increasingly may represent the future of this country - and the nature of contact within this zone matters greatly for children’s experiences of childhood, as well as for their experiences as translators.

*Pico Union, Los Angeles*

I look from my same mind’s eye out at the corner of a busy intersection toward the entrance to the school that I call “Madison” – my everyday workplace for ten years. What I first recall are fences, gates and barricades. Tall iron bars block the entrance, flanked by signs warning against transporting weapons onto campus, and instructing all visitors to check in at the office and secure a badge. The gates are there to protect children from intruders, arguably, but I remember being locked *inside* that gated area when I and a fellow first year teacher stayed into the evening; we had to shimmy the fence in order to get out. On the other side of the school, a chained link fence encloses a **X x X** foot asphalt yard. Behind me, a yellow police barricade blocks traffic from turning in front of the school, in a way that is reminiscent of the concrete barricades that were erected a few streets away to control the flow of drug sale traffic in that neighborhood. My eye is drawn to the coils of barbed wire atop the fence of the car repair shop, beyond which loom the skyscrapers of downtown. A gas station, liquor store, 99-cent store, and brick apartment building with boarded up windows line the corners. Looking past the school in the other direction, there are rows of three- and four-story apartment buildings

interspersed with a few 1920s era houses that have now been subdivided into multiple living units. A few thin trees line the sidewalk – planted during a recent city-wide tree-planting campaign – but what I notice most is concrete, brick and asphalt.

While Edmonville is a community with clear, established boundaries, no such parameters exist for the neighborhood around Madison. Census blocks, political divisions, police precincts, and school intake areas all use different boundaries to carve up this community; from the perspective of children, the block or apartment building may be the most meaningful sense of “neighborhood,” and the school intake area may put the clearest bounds on the community that structures families’ daily lives. Madison is one of more than a dozen elementary schools in the central Los Angeles area.

Madison had a population of 2700 children in grades K to 5 at the time that I taught there.<sup>8</sup> According to school records, 94% of the student population were “Hispanic;” 4% were “Asian;” and the remaining 1.8% encompassed Filipinos, African Americans, Native Americans and whites. Eighty six per cent of the students were considered “limited” in their English proficiency, and virtually all qualified for free or reduced lunch. Census figures for the area around the school (an area that does not map precisely onto the intake area, however) indicate that 54% of residents under the age of 17 live below the poverty line. Only 23% of families, however, received public assistance.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This number was reduced to 2400 when a policy of “class size reduction” was implemented in 1997; under this policy primary grade classrooms could have a maximum of 20 students (while grades 3 to 5 remained with 30-35).

<sup>9</sup> Qvortrup makes the point that how states/nations calculate poverty rate varies greatly, in that some nations count ELABORATE

To accommodate this population, the school – like most of the other schools in the central Los Angeles area - operated on a multi-track year-round school schedule.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The term “year round” falsely suggests an intensified investment in education, and diverts attention from the driving force behind this program: the shortage of school space. It also blurs an important distinction between single- and multi-track schedules. Single-track schedules shift the timing of vacation periods, but all students continue to take their vacations together; this schedule is not designed to address overcrowding. Pedagogical arguments are often used to support this arrangement, such as claims that students retain information better if vacations are evenly distributed, and that teachers are less subject to burnout if they work for shorter stretches. A few schools in Los Angeles have established single-track year-round schools based on these rationales. Multi-track programs, however, are by far the most common type of year-round school in Los Angeles. In multi-track schools, the *buildings* are in operation year-round, but students and teachers are assigned to one of several “tracks,” which cycle through periods of vacation and school; and at least three classes share two classroom spaces.

There are several types of multi-track schedules. Some involve four tracks, in which one fourth of the student body is on vacation each quarter; others consist of three tracks, which accommodates even more students. Madison was on a three-track schedule that is called “Concept 6 Modified” at the time when I worked there; it has since converted to four tracks. To achieve a three-track system demands additional temporal reordering; children attend school for 40 additional minutes each day but thirteen fewer days in the year. This is justified through a quantitative view of time units as interchangeable (the total number of minutes is the same) without regard to the

Students were distributed to one of three color-coded tracks based on where they live in the surrounding neighborhood and programmatic constraints (e.g. specialized programs such as the “gifted” program and the Korean bilingual program were located on one of the three tracks).<sup>11</sup>

Madison was one of the first Los Angeles schools to adopt this kind of alternative schedule – an alternative to busing, the use of portable classrooms, or double sessions.

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qualitative experience, and through a distorted sense of “fairness;” it was made legally possible through a special bill of the California Assembly.

This approach also assumes a view of learning as a process that can be measured, quantified, and divided into equal discrete units to be administered at any time with equal effect. Teachers recognize that this is not the case, when they note how much harder it is to maintain children’s attention at the end of the day than at the start. See Orellana and Thorne (1998), *Year Round Schools and the Politics of Time*, for more discussion of the logic of this way of carving up educational time, the implications of this schedule for family and community life, and for how this tracking system played into and reinforced processes of racialization among youth

<sup>11</sup> The geographic logic of this distribution – which presumably respects the integrity of neighborhoods, striving to have children who live near each other on the same track – results in a skew within the school by ethnicity and income. (Although all students at the school were low income, with virtually all students qualifying for free or reduced lunch, one of the tracks drew from an area that was considerably more destitute than the others). The multi-track, year-round schedule profoundly shapes the rhythms of daily life, as students attend school for two months at a time followed by one month of vacation.

This was in 1980, at a time when immigrants from Central America were just beginning to join the mostly-Mexican migrants in this community. The numbers of Central Americans in the area increased dramatically in response to the civil wars of the 1980s, while Mexican migration to this area waned somewhat. The Korean population also increased briefly and then decreased as more Koreans began settling directly in suburban areas. Interestingly, in the last five years the total school population has decreased rather dramatically, from the high of 2700 in my teaching days, to a low of 1655 in 2005-2006, with steady drops by 100-200 students each year. The same is true in the larger central Los Angeles area, apparently because families are leaving the city due to the high cost of living, and some gentrification around the downtown corridor.<sup>12</sup>

The school does not record the national origin of residents, lumping all Latino immigrants under the rubric “Hispanic,” but figures for the larger area suggest that the greatest number are Mexican, followed by Salvadorean, Guatemalan, and Nicaraguan.<sup>13</sup> Some of the Guatemalan population may include members of indigenous (Mayan) communities, for whom Spanish is a second language – in the Los Angeles area there are some 10,000 Mayans - though this is obscured by the racial and linguistic classification systems in place in the school, as well as by parents’ reporting practices.<sup>14</sup> These several

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<sup>12</sup> Cite news article (LA Times?)

<sup>13</sup> Chinchilla and Hamilton (1992). The largest population of Mayan speakers – K’anjobal speakers, from an area in the highlands of Guatemala that was the site of massacres in the 1980s, are clustered in a different neighborhood a mile or so away, and attend a different school). In the 1990s indigenous migrants from southern Mexico began migrating to this area as well, like their Central American counterparts, this was a direct response to civil unrest at home.

<sup>14</sup> Loucky and Moors (2000); Lavadenz (2005).

thousand elementary school aged children, as well as thousands of older youth, live within ten square blocks around the school, in one- and two-bedroom apartments where families double and sometimes triple up to afford the rent. Most of the families that I visited in their homes had extended family living with them; Camilo lived with his mother, father, brother, aunt and two cousins in a two-bedroom apartment; Jacinto lived with his mother, four siblings, and an uncle in a one bedroom apartment; and Eva's family subdivided their one-bedroom apartment into three spaces, with artificial walls: the living room was divided in two with an artificial wall, with one side for Eva, her parents, and two brothers, and one for her uncle, while the single bedroom was rented out to an unrelated couple.

Where the church provides a center point for the Mexican community in Edmonville, no such center exists in the Madison area. Catholic devotees attend any of several area churches; and there is a growing number of small, evangelical Christian churches that hold services in the area, renting out spaces in denominational churches or office buildings, or sometimes taking the service to the streets. One day I witnessed a Sunday school class lined up in chairs on a crowded sidewalk outside Eva's apartment, led by a man with a bullhorn. These churches have their bases in Central America, where they arose as conservative forces as a backlash against the progressive turn of the Catholic Church, led by Jesuit Liberation theologians.<sup>15</sup> In Los Angeles, these churches

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<sup>15</sup> Guatemalan president Efraim Rios Mont, who led a military dictatorship that resulted in the death and "disappearance" of some 100,000 citizens in the early 1980s, was active in the Californian-based Church of the Word, an evangelical Christian sect, and during his rein evangelical churches sprang up all over Guatemala. I traveled with a Human Rights delegation to what was called a "model village" in the highlands. In the middle of the village stood a "Church of God" right near intersection of "La Calle del Ejercito" (*The*

forge a new “Latino” brotherhood that unite people through shared beliefs, largely effacing national differences<sup>16</sup> that are heightened in other arenas (e.g. soccer matches, which reinforce not only *national* allegiances, but home town ones, as leagues correspond with home towns in Central America.)

Work similarly disperses families, as people who live in Central Los Angeles may work anywhere from downtown, mostly in garment factories, south central Los Angeles (mostly in factories), northwest in “the valley,” or on the far west side, mostly as domestic workers – childcare providers, house cleaners, or gardeners. Others may hope for day labor jobs, hanging out with other migrants on specific street corners where construction managers and independent “contractors” know to look for workers that they can pay under the table, by the job – or sometimes no pay at all.<sup>17</sup> Many other Pico Union

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*Army’s Street*”) and “La Avenida del Presidente (*The President’s Avenue*). (The “model villages” were constructed by the army after nearby towns were burnt to the ground, with many of their residents massacred, as part of the counter-insurgency campaigns of the 1980s. The villagers were under close surveillance by the army. See Jean Marie Simon’s 1987 photo-journalistic expose: *Guatemala: Eternal Spring, Eternal Tyranny*.

<sup>16</sup> See Ek (2005) for an analysis of how the language and cultural practices of a pentacostal church erases national identities, albeit through a shift toward Mexican Spanish.

<sup>17</sup> My husband’s first job, as a 16-year-old immigrant from Guatemala, was in a car wash, where he was the last in the line of service providers, drying cars. He was not paid but was allowed to accept tips. He and his brother quit one day after drying eight cars in a row for customers who did not tip.

residents try to get by in the informal economy – making tamales, enchiladas, raspados, roasted corn, pork fries, and other home-made foods for sale. Youth often participate in this work, either by helping to prepare or to sell the food. Children also participate in other kinds of piecework at home, as part of families' struggles for survival under tenuous economic conditions.

The Pico Union community that I have described, briefly, lies less than a mile from downtown Los Angeles, and almost literally under the shadow of the Hollywood sign. It borders on the heart of the center of Korean international capital, and encroaches on the historically African American south central section of Los Angeles. In many ways, Pico Union is a “contact zone” – a place where people from all kinds of backgrounds meet up, collide,<sup>18</sup> and grapple with each other. But it is rather a different sort of contact zone than the one we see in Edmonville. It is possible for families in Pico Union to secure most of their basic needs and live out their lives without the need to communicate very much with English speakers, and so children's work as translators takes place mostly in excursions out of the immediate area, through printed media, including signs in the urban space, and in particular kinds of encounters, such as with monolingual teachers in the school, landlords, or their parents' employers. Moreover, there were more readily available bilingual resources here, in the form of older youth and bilingual adults. Children still serve as translators in this community, but not to the same degree or in the same way as did children in Edmonville.

### *Childhoods in Edmonville and Pico Union*

A stranger coming through Pico Union would not necessarily sense the presence of children in the Madison area, despite their numbers. There are few overtly child-friendly spaces in the public domain; the local parks are known by parents as places

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<sup>18</sup> Both literally and figuratively, as the popular movie *Crash* suggested.

where hyperdermic needles and condoms can be found, and most limit their children's contact with parks. When children play, it is usually within their apartments, or in their corridors and parking lots. Eva, for example, played in her dimly lit hallway, or in the few feet of open space between the beds in the room her family shares. Jacinto and his sisters used to ride the bike that they share around the parking lot that covers the first floor of their building. Adalia's building had an open courtyard where a swimming pool has been cemented over. (When I first visited Adalia, there was water in the unfenced pool.) Camilo and his cousins seemed to have the most freedom of movement, as they often traveled between their apartment and an afterschool program, located across the street from their building, or to the corner store and back.

In contrast, Edmonville has more than 80 parks, and virtually all homes have one within close walking distance. All of the children you'll meet lived in houses or apartments that had backyards. The parks are well-maintained and host a wide variety of play structures. This is a deliberately child-friendly place, filled with plenty of green spaces, and an abundance of summer programs and after-school enrichment activities for kids – both fee-based and subsidized. On sunny days, mothers can be seen pushing baby strollers; children ride bikes; and teenagers hang out in the fast food restaurants of downtown. On the other hand, during the long winters, families retreat indoors, whereas seasonal rhythms have far less impact on children's daily life in Los Angeles.

Edmonville also boasts of abundant resources for families and children, including the many parks, a well-stocked public library, plus two smaller branches; city-sponsored after-school tutoring services for low-income students; and city-sponsored parent education classes. A city-funded social agency offers after-school tutoring, field trips to local sites for teens, and parent education classes, among other services. Generally targeting low-income youth, this agency had historically served a mostly African-American clientele. But as new immigrants joined the city's population, the agency shifted gears and began offering such services as ESL classes as well.

Coordinating services for Latinos in this city was an official “Latino coordinator” who worked out of an office in city hall. Arcelia Carola was the daughter of immigrants in the first wave of migration in the early 1970s. She had grown up in this town, and she used her impressive bilingual and bicultural skills to lobby for the interests and rights of Latinos, as well as to link people up to local services. She was known by name by all of the families with whom I worked, and people often turned to her when they had a problem that they didn’t know how to resolve.

Los Angeles, as a city, certainly has resources that are dedicated to the Latino community, but that community is much larger and more dispersed. The sense of *personal* attention that Latino families have in Edmonville is impossible to achieve on the scale of Los Angeles, and the need for such services is so much greater. Considering the density of the population, public services in the Madison community are sparse. This is in large part due to a process that John Logan refers to as “stratification of place” – by which disadvantage is *overdetermined* in poor communities, because of limited resources on multiple fronts - e.g. a weak tax base, poor schools, limited recreation services.<sup>19</sup> In Pico Union, such overdetermination is structurally self-reinforcing.<sup>20</sup>

In terms of resources for children, there were two branch libraries within walking distance from Madison, but one was located in a public park, which was *not* considered a safe place for children, the main clients in this library were homeless men seeking shelter during the day. There was a small satellite arm of the YMCA that offered activities for

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<sup>19</sup> Logan (cite)

<sup>20</sup> The director of a small children’s program run through a park and recreation center explained to me how the city pays for certain basic personnel to be distributed to all parks, and a minimal level of funding for some classes, but everything above that has to be self-generated. Thus communities with clients who can pay for classes are able to sponsor many more classes than is possible in a community where few can pay.

youth during after-school and vacation hours. It was set up as a drop-in center, with an open basketball court where kids mostly played indoor soccer or handball, and a computer lab and game room. There was also a small Girl Scouts program that offered structured activities for youth who were on vacation, for a small yearly fee - but still a fee that many families would find prohibitive. A local church began sponsoring an off-track tutoring program during my last years in this area. But together the few programs that existed in the area could accommodate than less than ten per cent of the youth who were on vacation at any one time - some 900 a month from Madison alone. In a survey of 344 fourth and fifth graders on two of the three tracks at Madison in 1997, only 40 of 334 said they participated in a formal, off-track program. Twenty-six said they go to a babysitter's house; one third said they sometimes go to the public library, and thirty-four said they go to work with a relative. (Drawings made by youth, and my conversations with them, revealed a wider range of experiences, including transnational travel.)

The differences in resources across the two communities are particularly evident in school. Edmonville has an official student-teacher ratio of 15 to 1, while at Madison during the years I taught there I always had more than 30 students in my class.

Edmonville had a per-pupil expenditure of \$9,600 for students in the year 2000, while in Los Angeles Unified School District this figure was \$ . Other figures? e.g. teachers' level of experience/training?

A final ironic difference between the two sites lies in the nature of bilingual supports. While bilingual *resources* are far more abundant in Pico Union than in Edmonville (there is for example a fairly large cadre of bilingual teachers at the school, a product of 25 years of bilingual program capacity building), there is more institutional support for the development of bilingualism in Edmonville, given the dual language program that was established there around the same time in which bilingual education was dismantled in California, under Proposition 227. Both policies (the establishment of the dual language program, and the end of bilingual education) were arguably a direct

response to the presence of immigrants in these “contact zones” – but the former represents an *embracing* of diversity and a claim on the part of English speaking parents to some of the “bilingual goods” - while the latter, like national movements for “English Only,” represents the opposite kind of response.

### *Comparative lenses*

As these portraits may suggest, on both qualitative and quantitative dimensions, Edmonville comes out “looking good” as a landscape for immigrant childhoods: open, inviting, safe, with supports for families and resources for children, including linguistic ones, and at least some degree of welcoming to immigrants. Further, there are fewer demands on the system for these resources and opportunities. This is evident in the point by point comparisons I made as well as in statistics about money allocations, public services, housing stock, school environments, and cost of living. And it is reinforced by the sketch that I offered of each community, drawn from my mind’s eye.

But I want to be careful with the comparisons I have set up. For one, this set up may leave readers wondering why families would choose Pico Union over other places to migrate. Of course, families who move to Pico Union do not have the luxury of assessing their possibilities in this locale in direct comparison with those in places like Edmonville. Their points of comparison lie back home, and the tradeoffs that they face are much more double-edged. Parents in Pico Union certainly *know* that they have given up a great deal

in terms of everyday freedoms for their children, in comparison with life in rural areas in their home countries, and they are aware of the loss of quality in their own lives as well.<sup>21</sup>

Most of the parents I spoke with in *both* Pico Union and Edmonville, felt that they themselves might be happier if they had stayed back home, but they were clear on why they made the move – to get ahead (“salir adelante”), not for themselves, but for their children (“sacarles adelante”). Those in Pico Union were perhaps more keenly aware of

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<sup>21</sup> When the children of immigrants talked about visits to their parents’ hometowns they sometimes conjure images of freedom similar to those named by their parents. They talked about climbing trees, eating fresh fruit and dairy products, swimming in rivers, and being in the countryside. One girl said she like Nicaragua “porque uno puede salir, y (sin) miedo a nada.” (“*Because you can go out, without fear of anything.*”) Another boy said he liked El Salvador because *get quote*.

But at least as often children fixated on what may seem to be the oddest things. When I asked kids what’s different about “here” (the U.S.) and “there” (their parents’ home towns), one named the paper: “it’s all crinkly;” another the floors (“they have like no rugs”); others the landscape (“when you go walking, you just see brown” and “the oceans, the rivers, they like sprinkle you”). Of course, my own child’s memory takes me to similar images: the four-inch step between our living and dining room, a threshold I first negotiated as a toddler; the smell from the tin of broken, worn down, muddied crayons my mother kept under a bench in the kitchen; the slippery green of the olives that someone brought to a class picnic in kindergarten (I had never eaten olives before). One of the challenges that I face is to step into the mind’s eyes of different children, and make sense of the mosaics of images there.

the tradeoffs, however, and also they had found that it was not as easy to get ahead as they had thought. One mother commented:

Desde que llegue aquí, me siento inutil, porque aquí para agarrar un trabajo le piden papeles, permiso, uno tiene que dar cuenta de hasta lo que uno comió ayer, y no estoy acostumbrada a eso, y me hace muy difícil...Uno en su tierra tiene un cuarto, puede trabajar un poco más, con o sin estudios; aquí no puede ni salir, o le ponen un balazo las pandillas. Nosotros aquí vivimos encerrados. Llegan los niños de la escuela, y encerrados. Los niños no más un momento en que vienen a jugar aquí, y encerrados, y no se puede salir. Es muy difícil verdad. Pero le gusta aquí el sueño, verdad, de sacarnos adelante.

*Ever since I arrived here, I have felt useless, because here to get a job they ask for papers, permission; one has to account for even what one ate yesterday! And I'm not used to that, and it's very difficult. In one's own country one can have a room, and one can work a little more, with or without an education; here one can't even go out, or the gangs put a bullet in you. We live closed up here. The children go home from school, and they're closed in. The children have just a few minutes to play here, and then they're closed up, and they can't go out. It's very difficult, you know. But what people like is the dream, you know, of getting ahead.*

Another commented similar that she felt she had had the wool pulled over her eyes:

La mayoría de las personas, al principio, antes, cuando venimos a este país, por razones económicos, por razones personales, la idea era venir a mejorar la vida, económicamente, tanto por nosotros, y más, para nuestros hijos. Fue la idea con la que llegamos a este país, y nos han, como quién dice, nos han tomado el pelo, porque cuando llegamos a este país, vemos que no todo lo que nos dijeron es cierto... Porque allá hasta dicen que aquí, a la gente Latina hasta le tocan la puerta para que vayan a trabajar, porque saben que los latinos trabajan mucho, y piden poco. Lo cual no es cierto, porque ya cuando venimos para acá, vemos de que somos nosotros los que tenemos que tocar las puertas para trabajar, y tocar y tocar.

*Most people, at first, before, when we came to this country, for economic reasons, for personal reasons, the idea was to come to make a better life, economically, for ourselves and more, for our children. That was the idea that we came to this country with, and they have, as they say, pulled the wool over our eyes, because when we came here we see that everything they said is not true. Because over there they say that people come knocking on the doors for Latinos to work, because they know that Latinos work a lot, and ask for little. But it's not true (that they come knocking), because when we come here, we see that we are the ones who have to go knocking on doors to find work, and knock and knock.*

And a third, too, commented:

Cuando yo pensé en venir a este país pensé encontrar muchas cosas que no encontré al llegar. Mis amigos me contaban no exactamente que se recogía el dinero con pala, pero que era fácil ganarlo, que en dos meses uno podía tener carro, y en un año podía comprarse una casa. Además, hablaban de que lo buscaban a uno para trabajar – nunca dijeron que había que buscar el trabajo, y que además, era difícil encontrarlo. Con ese pensamiento salí para acá, con la diferencia que la realidad es otra muy distinta.

*When I thought about coming to this country I thought I would find many things that I did not find when I arrived. My friends had told me not exactly that you could scoop up money with a shovel, but that it was easy to earn it, that in two months you could have a car, and in one year you could buy yourself a house. They also said that they came looking for you to work; they never said that you have to go and look for work, and moreover, that it's hard to find. It was with those thoughts that I came here, with the difference being that the reality is quite different.*

One mother I spoke with reflected on differences in her two children's lives – her seven-year old son whom she left in Guatemala, in the care of her mother, and her six-year-old daughter who lived with her in Los Angeles:

He enjoys a little of what she can't have here. And she has a little more of what he can't have over there. The ones that are over there don't have material things, but they have freedom. My son has his grandparents, his

cousins, his uncles and aunts and all. And my daughter here is alone, closed up in an apartment filled with toys. Even if she has a closet overflowing with toys, she's stuck inside.

Parents in Edmonville were far less negative about the opportunities they had encountered through their move. And indeed, as we'll see in the portraits in the next chapter, most of these families were able to make a more direct path to the American Dream by buying homes in their new community. But even so they recognized the price they had paid. Sra. Gutiérrez spoke at length about the fact that in Mexico people are in much greater need of money than they are in the U.S., but that people there just don't worry about it as they do here. She notes that she and her husband were both very poor when they were growing up, and now they have more than they ever thought they would – but all their problems revolve around money. Add from p. 49 re: time?

Segue? Or footnote this?

Children in Pico Union also had their own ideas about what would make for an ideal community, and in their visions they imply some of what they see as missing. I led a group of students in a discussion of the book, *La Calle es Libre (The Streets Are Free)* about children in an overcrowded section of Venezuela who organize to petition for a playground. We then brainstormed a list of “what we want for our community,” and together the group dictated the following statement:

We want a community that is beautiful, clean, with swings, balls to play baseball, football, and tennis, in a big park with lots of space to play, and

chairs for sitting in when we're tired; trees; plants, and Dumb Heads video games, with animals like rabbits, dogs, a York (a kind of cow so we could drink fresh milk each day), and chickens so we could get fresh eggs (and then we cook it and eat it in a big party); balloons; butterflies and flowers (lots of them) so the butterflies will want to stay there; a theatre; water (a big, deep pool that is free for all children, but only if you get a card that you just ask for and they give you); an arcade; a room to watch t.v., video games and movies. No beer; no liquor stores (the ones that sell beer), and lots of food: pizza, sodas, hot dogs, tamales, hamburgers. Plus a room to paint and make art, like a library.

Certainly, many immigrants in Pico Union *do* get wind of other places that offer different possibilities for their children and their families. Pico Union is, for many, a “first stop” in the immigration trail, and as families learn about possibilities elsewhere they often move out, either to outlying areas in Los Angeles, or further afield. Three of the four families that I will introduce in the next chapter moved away from this community – two of them following leads for jobs and cheaper housing in Kansas and in Texas. Madison’s school records suggest the magnitude of movement in and out of the area even during the period in which I worked there in the mid-1990s (before the cost of houses in Los Angeles skyrocketed, which slowly triggered a rise in rent and the gentrification of the downtown area): in a three-year period, approximately 1,500 children left the school, while an equal number took their places. Families that left moved to twenty-nine different states and seven foreign countries.

*Problems of comparative framings*

But there is a different sort of problem with the comparative framework I have set up. Like all comparative frames, they become lenses on the world that dichotomize our thinking, and focus attention on certain things. This may keep us from seeing things in the ways that residents see them (using their own points of comparison); or simply from seeing other things within each landscape. For example, I compared the open space of Edmonville with the bars and fences that abound in Pico Union. But in fixating on the fences, what do I miss that lies beyond them? As I will detail in Chapter Four, when I gave 11-year-old Yandira a camera, she reached *through* the bars in a fence to photograph birds and flowers in a garden on the other side. Similarly, the building that I saw as a burnt out shell, with boarded windows, evoked personal histories or warm family relations for 15-year-old Luz, when she drove past a burned out building, a car repair shop, and an abandoned lot. To acknowledge such alternatives is not to deny the presence of fences, bars, abandoned lots and burnt out buildings. It is not to ignore the reasons they are there, the moods they evoke, the meanings they may have, what they indicate, and the ways these landscapes shape childhoods. But we can add more substance, texture, and shades of grey, and color, to an otherwise flat, starkly edged, black and white photograph. And we can consider *both* the possibilities *and* the limitations of different places and spaces. The limitations of Pico Union may seem more obvious than those of Edmonville, but there is more to life in this community than first meets the eye.

In the first scenarios I sketched of each community, my eyes were drawn to the landscape – the natural setting and buildings – and not, for the most part, to the people or activities that played out on these same streets. I saw the spaces, but not the places, and even less, the connections between people, or from people to these and other places – all the many things that lay outside my viewfinder, or under its surface. Moreover, my view of Pico Union essentially started from absences rather than presences, deficits rather than assets, and barriers rather than bridges. I noted that there are few children in public spaces, not *where* children *are* found. I noticed bars, boarded up windows, and fences, not windows, people, flowers, or trees. And I implied what is missing in the ways that I represented what was there.

Importantly, the “deficit” perspective that this represents is one that finds *structures* and *institutions* lacking (e.g. parks and schools – and by implication, the state, whose responsibility it presumably is to provide such services). Material resources matter tremendously for the opportunities that are available for youth to take up. A critical analysis must be distinguished from an a-critical deficit view. I can easily find echoes of such sentiments in the perspectives of Pico Union parents and children, so it is not, I think, the view of a strict outsider. And the sheer numbers of Pico Union residents who leave the area corroborate this, as people vote with their feet.

But a danger of this representation is that I may reinforce more insidious deficit notions that readers who do not know this community may bring to this text -- consciously or unconsciously -- rather than challenging us all to think in new ways. After all, we all have images of blighted urban areas filled with boarded up buildings and barbed wire. To name such images is to add little new to an outsider’s understanding of

urban areas. And as translator of other people's stories, I need to think not just about what I say, but how my words may fit with, reinforce, or challenge my audience's understanding. And so I need to think differently if my goal is to help readers -- and myself -- to see *both* the possibilities, *and* the limitations, *both* the inadequacies and injustices, *and* the rich potentialities, *both* the barren-ness, *and* the beauty, of *both* Pico Union and Edmonville. I need to present each community in hues of many colors and many shades of grey. But most importantly, I need to take us beyond just a view of the *landscapes*, to meet some of the people who live in each of these communities.