

Borders/Fronteras: Immigrant Students' Worlds in Art

Ni de Aquí/Ni de Allá: Not from Here/Not from There

ROBERT SHREEFTER

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In my work as an artist and a writer-in-residence in a number of public schools in Wake and Durham counties in North Carolina, I was struck by changing school demographics and culture. These schools — which had been made up almost exclusively of Black and White students — were experiencing a growing population of immigrant children, mostly children of migrant workers from Mexico, whose families were choosing to settle permanently in the area.

Much of my work in schools and communities at that time focused on making books. In part, the bookmaking process served as a way to cross racial and cultural divides among students, and between me (as a White teacher) and my students. Having had success with bookmaking as a community-building process, I created a similar project for migrant youth in which students would illustrate and write about their life stories.¹

Over a period of six weeks I worked with about twenty youth ages fourteen to nineteen. All were of Mexican origin, except one young woman from Cuba, and were members of the Randolph County Migrant Education AIM (Action, Inspiration, Motivation) Club in Randleman, North Carolina.² We started with the theme of border crossing (Mexico to the U.S.), and students

¹ I worked in collaboration with the Duke University Center for Documentary Studies, *Double Take* magazine, and Student Action with Farm Workers (SAF). SAF is a student organization that was formed in the mid-1970s to document conditions in migrant camps. It has expanded to include the training of young people to be farmworker advocates. The bookmaking was arranged through Project Levante, which encourages farmworker youth to finish high school.

² AIM is the county's dropout prevention program for both migrant and permanently settled students. It offers academic support through tutoring and ESL instruction, and activities to promote group identity and cultural awareness. Much of this support work for the AIM Club is facilitated by Roxanne Taylor and Denise Bean. The bookmaking project could never have been done without their work and support.

Performing Migrant-Impacted Schools” in *American Educational Research Journal* (with J. D. Scribner and K. Mahitivanichcha, in press), and author of “Re-visiting White Racism in Educational Research: Critical Race Theory and the Problem of Method” in *Educational Researcher* (2001).

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XUE LAN RONG is Associate Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His research focuses on cultures, race/ethnicity and education, and the effects of immigrant generation on young adolescents’ schooling. His published works include “Gender, Immigrant Generation, Ethnicity and the Schooling Progress of Youth” in *Journal of Research and Development in Education* (with L. Grant, 1999), and *Educating Immigrant Students: What We Need to Know to Meet the Challenge* (with J. Preissle, 1998).

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ROBERT SHREEFTER is Assistant Professor at the Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His professional interests include art and teacher education, and the connection between literacy/language arts and visual arts. His previous publications include “Club Kit: Creating a Class

expanded the notion of a single border to include the many borders/barriers they encountered in their daily lives. I asked students to visually represent their feelings and thoughts of the borders/barriers they faced at school, at home, in their communities and workplaces.

We began by doing schematic drawings of these many borders/barriers, and then students selected one they wished to explore more fully in collage form. Choosing the colors, textures, and symbols for these collages was not only an engrossing process of making art, but was also a catalyst for finding dimension, meaning, and complexity for the narratives that they would write to accompany their collages. Students had conversations about which colors adequately represented the beauty of the Mexican landscape, and what symbols could convey the feelings of crossing the border — either the fear of being turned back or melancholy over what they left behind.

Over several weeks, the students continued making collages, writing, editing, and binding books that included color copies of the original artwork and bilingual copies of their texts. Their collection of work, which includes the pieces that follow, was eventually named *Ni de Aquí/Ni de Allá: Not from Here/Not from There* and was exhibited in the gallery at the Center for Documentary Studies. In the students' words, taken from the introduction that was written by a group selected by students, the project was

to make a book about the barriers we have encountered in our lives because of differences in language and race as Latino and migrant students in North Carolina. . . . We learned to make art with paste paper [a decorative paper used for making collages] to give words to our art, to work with others and to value our work. Most importantly we had an opportunity to think about our lives . . . to give voice to the barriers we face. Above all we learned that we will always be Latino even though we live in this country.

In his artwork, Joel Mendoza represents the actual geographic border between countries as a brick wall topped with menacing barbed wire. Three other students — María Aguilar, María Mendoza, and Veronica Mendoza — used either the Rio Grande or Rio Bravo as the obstacle to cross. In his collage, Homero Aguilar created two walls to represent each side of the border. The United States is made of muddy-red-brown bricks with worms crawling through chinks; the Mexico side is made of sunny yellow and green bricks decorated with bright sunflowers.

Surprisingly, in every one of the collages, the border slices the page in half, intimating that half of the self is in one country and half in another. Mexico is never represented as some distant, small fraction of the pages. Jaime Mendoza, who includes in his collage the text "*Yo sueño de México*" ("I dream of Mexico"), writes:

. . . closing my eyes
I think about the nice things
I have done in Mexico

...

In the USA my life goes on right now
I feel like I am in two places at once
My memories are in Mexico
My family and I are here in North Carolina

One student, Luis Alaniz — whose work depicts a small house with a sombrero as a roof, which is surrounded by cactus and sun on one half of the collage and box-like factories on the other side — wrote:

In the United States, we come to work in furniture factories — framing, upholstering, sewing, packing, and delivering. People work real hard here, from the beginning of the day to the end of the day. Then they go home to work more.

I realized that students resisted telling stories that were painful and private. There was suspicion and surprise that anyone — especially anyone White in a school setting — thought that their stories were important enough to be heard, written, and illustrated. As an educator, I was reminded that schools often create more obstacles and barriers to expression and comfort. Schools had taught the students that their experiences were not part of the curriculum, were not to be discussed, confronted, and learned from.

These narratives and artwork speak to private longings for Mexico, the collective sting of racism, the painful distance that grows between parents and children as children speak more English and become “less Mexican,” as student Lizeth Toquinto writes. These particular stories suggest the work that schools and communities must do to welcome newcomers, and to teach long-time residents — Black and White families already living in North Carolina — about the complex lives of their new neighbors. Like millions of others who have come before them, these young people have the resilience and hope to make a new home, learn a new language, and cross the many barriers/borders created by bigotry. What lessons for all children in school!

I wish for the same things as Rocío Alaniz, who writes, “I want school to be even and equal, for students and teachers to respect us and our language and culture.”

Lizeth Toquinto, 14

My sister and I speak English. My mom doesn't understand English.
I have to speak both languages. It's hard.
I'm at school all day speaking English. Sometimes around white people,
if I'm speaking Spanish, they think I'm talking about them.
At home, if I speak English, my parents think I'm saying
something bad. They say, "speak Spanish so we can understand."

I feel distant from my parents. They think I should know
more Spanish than I do. My mom is afraid I'll forget my Spanish.
She thinks I'll be less Mexican. It's important to her.
If my children don't speak Spanish, she won't be able to speak to them.

When I go to Mexico to see my grandma and grandpa, it will be weird.
I'm not used to the Mexican ways. They'll think I'm used to
the American ways.

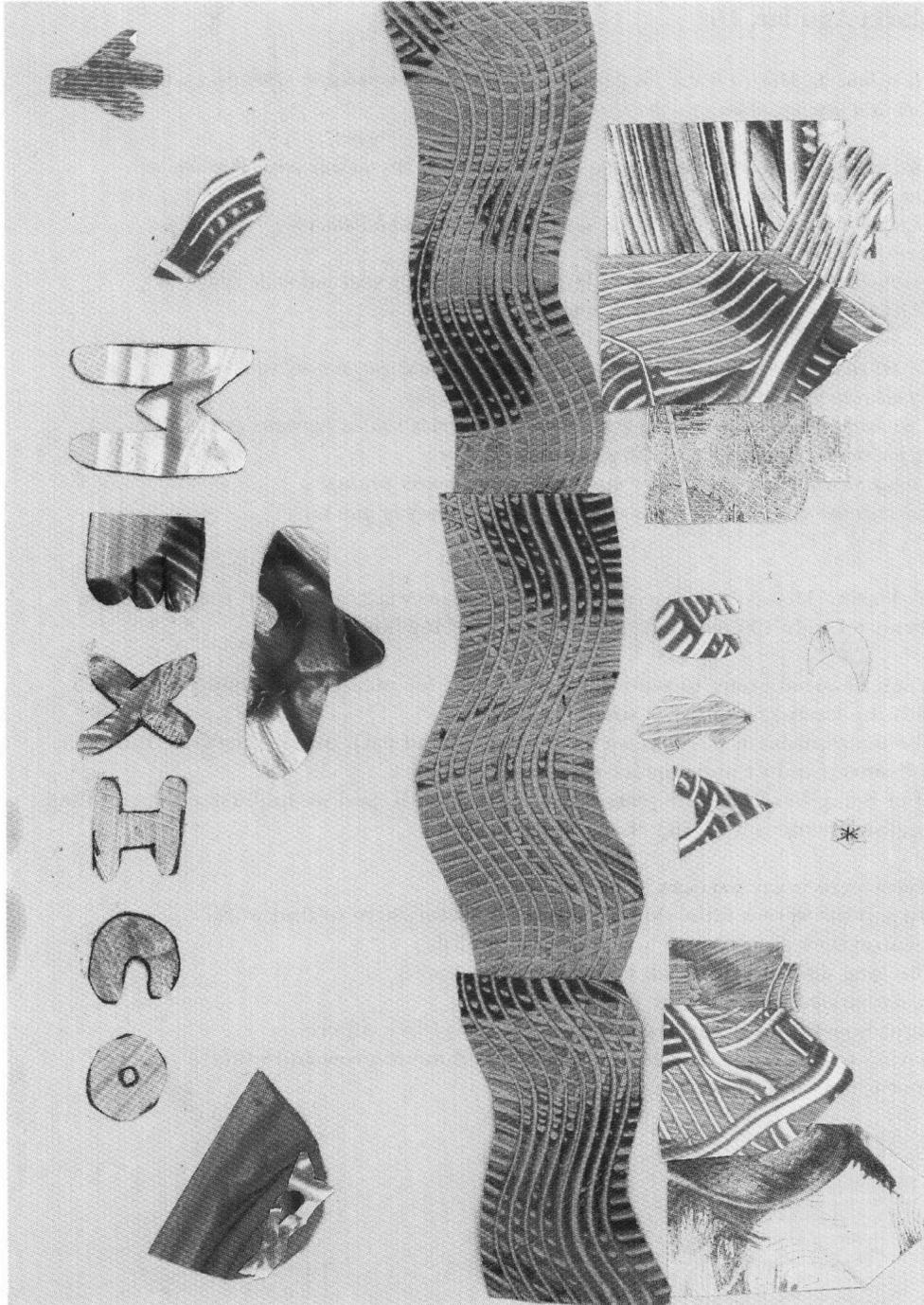
My six-year-old sister said she doesn't want to speak Spanish anymore.
My mom was upset.
She is afraid that in becoming American we will lose
our culture and our language.

*Mi hermana y yo hablamos inglés. Mi mamá no entiende inglés.
Yo tengo que hablar dos idiomas. Es difícil.
Me paso todo el día en la escuela hablando inglés. Hay veces, cuando
estoy con gente blanca y hablo en español, ellos piensan que estoy hablando de ellos.
En la casa, si hablo inglés, mis padres piensan que estoy diciendo algo malo.
Ellos dicen, "habla en español para que te podamos entender."*

*Me siento alejada de mis padres. Ellos piensan que debo saber más español.
Mi mamá teme que se me va a olvidar el español.
Ella piensa que voy a ser menos mexicana. Es importante para ella.
Si mis hijos no hablan español, ella no podrá hablar con ellos.*

*Cuando vaya a México a ver a mi abuelita y abuelito, va a ser extraño.
No estoy impuesta a las costumbres mexicanas.
Ellos van a pensar que estoy impuesta a
las costumbres del otro lado.*

*Mi hermanita de seis años dijo que no quiere hablar español jamás.
Mi mamá se enojó.
Teme que en hacernos americanas vamos a perder
nuestra cultura e idioma.*



Lizeth Toquinto, 14

María Aguilar, 16

Mi salida de México hacia los Estados Unidos fue una decisión repentina y trágica debido a que no sabía que iba a ser de mi vida.

Cuando empecé la escuela fue algo muy difícil para mí, ya que tenía problemas con el idioma y con algunos americanos.

El principal problema fue que no nos entendíamos, me hablaban y como yo no entendía me insultaban.

Después de haber pasado cuatro años, ya tengo amigos y me entiendo con ellos.

El inglés para mí es una barrera vencida.

En mi casa habían varias fronteras. Mis padres eran un poco mayores y les era difícil conseguir trabajo porque no sabían inglés.

A lo largo y a lo corto de todo esto es que no tenemos tantas barreras que vencer actualmente. Ahora ya no quiero regresar a México

porque ya me gusta aquí. Creo que el tener que vencer tantas

barreras me ayudó a crecer y a valorar lo que tengo y lo que soy.

My leaving Mexico to come to the United States was a quick and tragic decision because I didn't know what was to become of my life.

When I started going to school it was difficult for me because I had problems with the language and with some Americans.

The main problem was that we didn't understand each other; they talked to me, and since I didn't understand, they insulted me.

After being here for four years, I now have friends, and we understand each other.

English for me is a barrier that I have overcome.

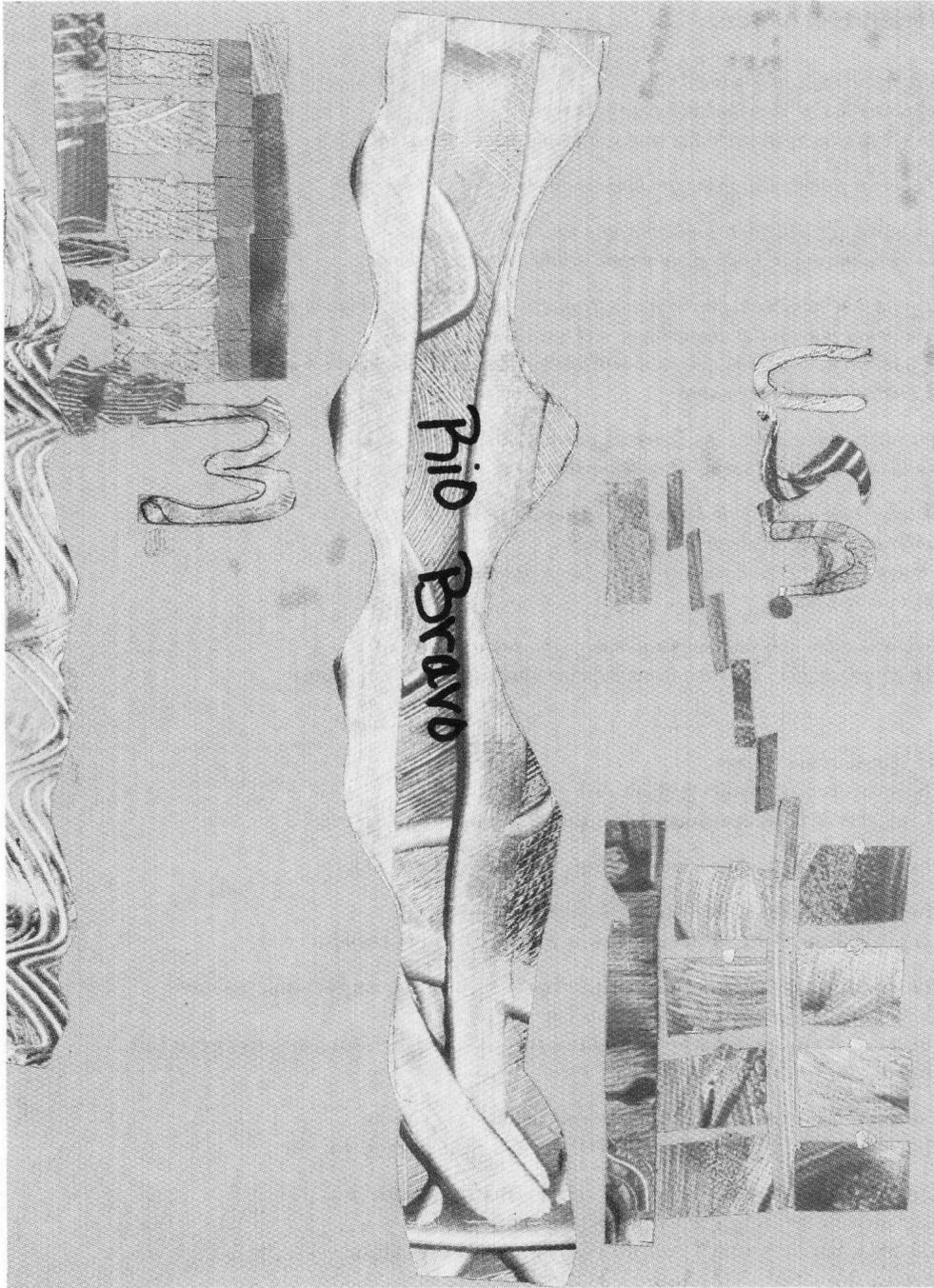
There were many barriers in my home.

My parents were a little older; it was difficult for them to find work because they didn't know how to speak English.

The long and short of it all is that we don't have many barriers to overcome presently.

Right now I don't want to go back to Mexico; I like it here.

Having to overcome so many barriers helped me to grow and value what I have and what I am.



María Aguilar, 16

Efraín Hernández, 16

*Mis fronteras son muchas
Algunas las he derrumbado pero otras no
En mi dibujo represento las que son importantes para mí*

Hay una pared, un gato, un hombre, hoyos, y el color negro

*La pared significa un problema que no puedo resolver
No encuentro que hacer y no tengo salida en mi problema*

*El gato y el hombre representan la frontera más importante para mí
El hombre para mí es un gringo, y el gato soy yo
El hombre es el gringo que está burlándose de mí en la escuela o en donde quiera que voy
Se burlan de los mexicanos*

*Los hoyos representan las barreras que ya he vencido
He derrumbado la pared de esas barreras que enfrentaba*

*El color negro detrás de la pared es cuando no tengo a
nadie que me ayude con mis problemas,
o tengo fronteras que no puedo resolver y me siento solo
aquí en el USA*

*Creo que estas son las fronteras más importantes para mí
Espero que algún día las pueda superar con esfuerzo y con ganas*

My barriers are many
I have overcome some, but not all
In my artwork, I represent those that are important to me

There is a wall, a cat, a man, holes, and the color black

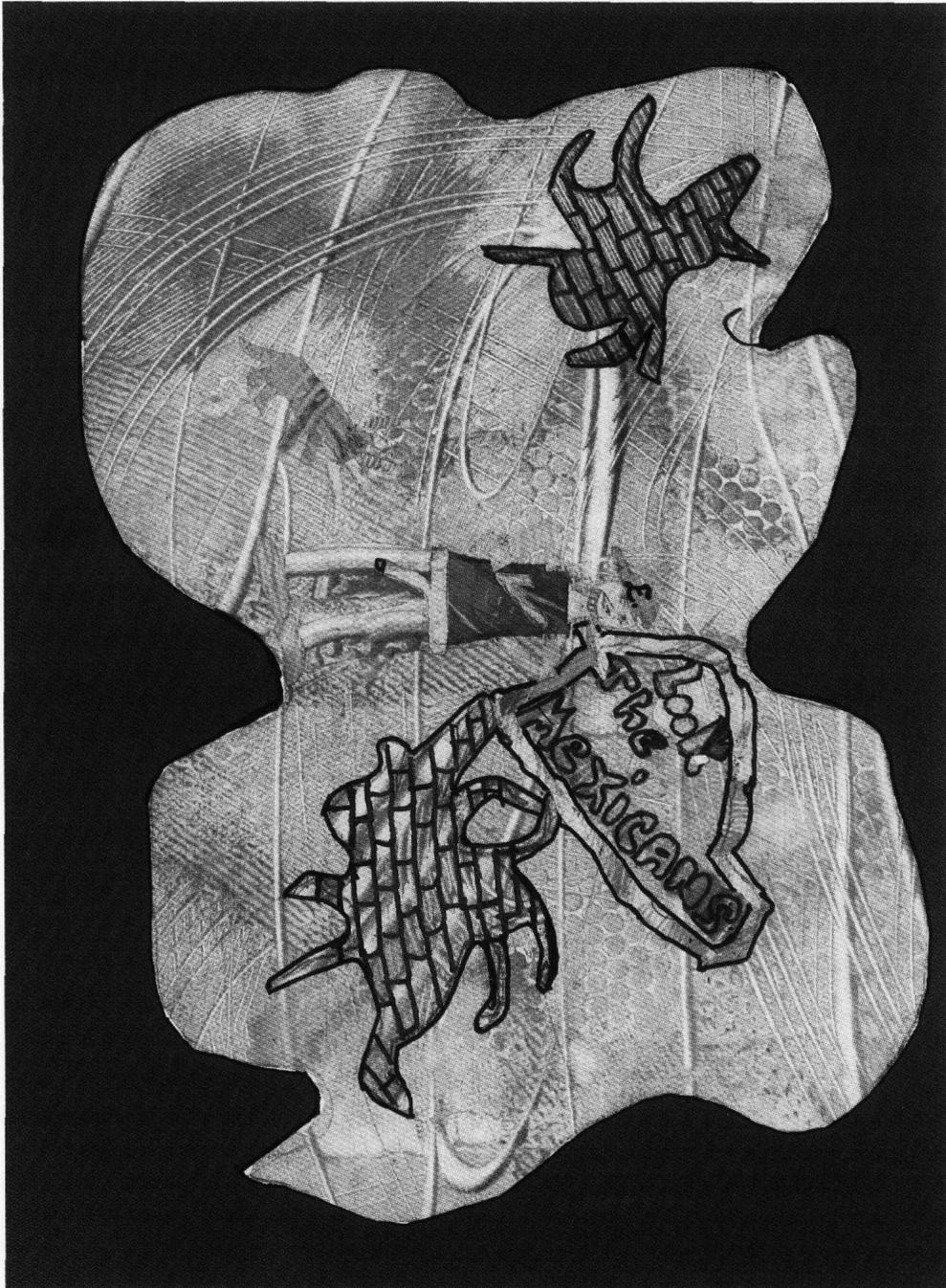
The wall represents a problem I cannot resolve
I cannot figure out what to do or a way out of my problem

The cat and the man represent the barriers of most importance to me
The man is a *gringo*, and I am the cat
The man is the *gringo* who is making fun of me at school and anywhere I go
They make fun of the Mexicans

The holes represent the barriers that I have overcome
I have crumbled the wall of those barriers that existed for me

The black color behind the wall represents times I do not
have anyone to help me with my problems,
or I have barriers that I cannot resolve, and I feel alone
here in the USA

I believe these are the most important barriers for me
Some day I will be able to overcome them with effort and willingness



Efraín Hernández, 16

Russell López, 14

Dark skin or light skin, does it really matter?
People pick on me because I am light-skinned Mexican.
What am I, Maya, Azteca, Mexican, mestizo, Chicano, American?
Who am I? Mexican or American?

I like being a little bit *güero* because the other Mexicans are not *güeros*.
The others think I am a *bolillo*, a *gringo*, and they pick on me
because of my skin color.

I feel Mexican when I go to a Mexican restaurant.
They speak to me in English. I answer in Spanish. They are shocked.
I feel a little bit bad because they think I am a *gringo* and when
I speak to them in Spanish they get scared.
At school I hang out with the *gringos* and the Mexicans.
The Mexicans pick on me when I talk in Spanish. The *bolillos* get mad when
I talk in Spanish because they think I am talking about them.

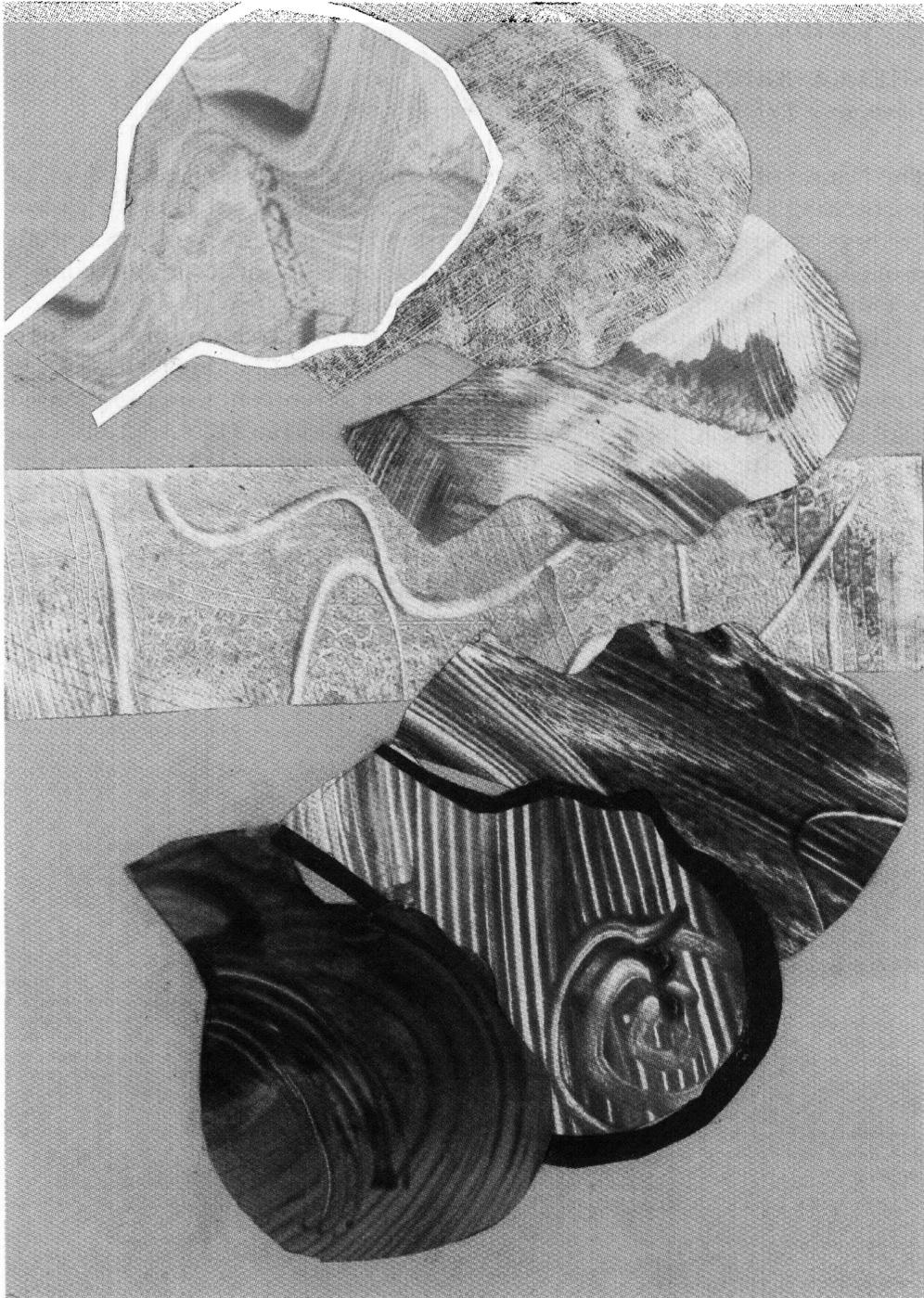
I am on the light-skin side but not on the *güeros*' one.
My friends are on the dark-skin side. They pick on me
because I am not as dark as they are.
I am Mexican but I am not dark-skinned.
To be Mexican to me is not just about my skin color.
To be Mexican is about my culture, my language, and my family.
I am always going to be Mexican and not a *gringo*.

*Piel oscura o piel blanca, ¿es realmente importante?
La gente me molesta porque soy un mexicano blanco.
¿Qué soy, maya, azteca, mexicano, mestizo, chicano, americano?
¿Quién soy yo? ¿mexicano o americano?*

*Me gusta un poquito ser güero porque los demás mexicanos no son güeros.
Los otros piensan que soy bolillo, un gringo, y me molestan por el color de mi piel.*

*Yo me siento como un mexicano cuando voy a un restaurante mexicano.
Me hablan en inglés. Yo les contesto en español. Se asombran.
Yo me siento un poquito mal porque piensan que soy gringo y cuando
hablo en español se asustan.
En la escuela me junto con los mexicanos y los gringos.
Los mexicanos se burlan de mí cuando hablo en español. Los bolillos se enojan
cuando hablo en español porque piensan que estoy hablando de ellos.*

*Yo estoy al lado de los light-skin pero no al lado de los güeros.
Mis amigos están al lado de los dark-skin. Me molestan
porque yo no soy oscuro como ellos.
Soy mexicano pero no soy oscuro.
Ser mexicano para mí no solamente se trata del color de mi piel.
Ser mexicano se trata de mi cultura, mi idioma, mi familia.
Siempre voy a ser mexicano y no gringo.*



Russell López, 14

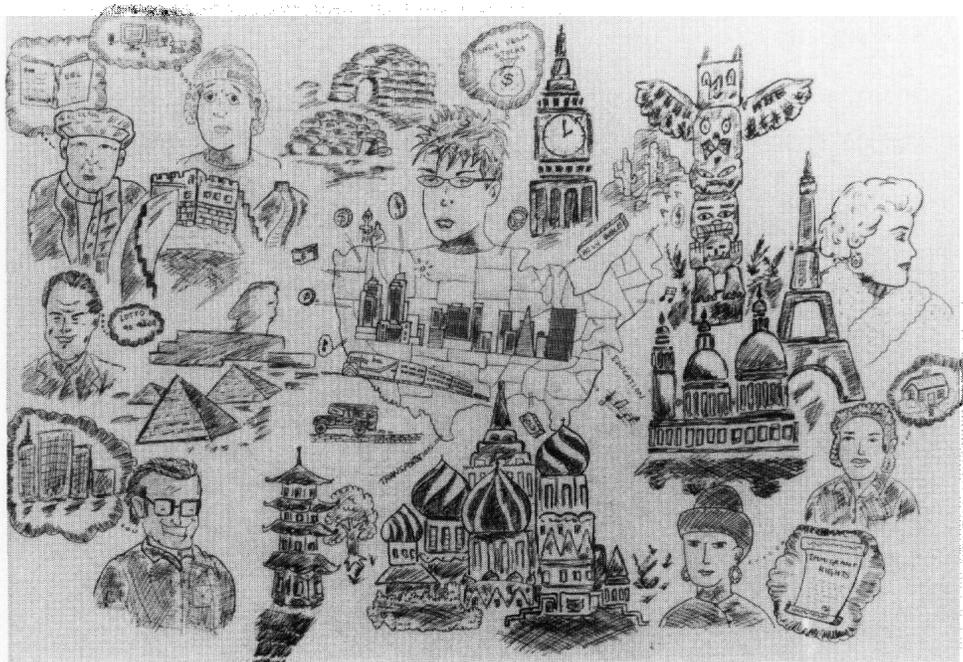
A Nation of Immigrants

SHELLA BRENNER

Immigrant Legal Resource Center, San Francisco

The Nation of Immigrants Art Contest was part of a year-long celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the Immigrant Legal Resource Center (see www.ilrc.org), an organization that offers a variety of legal resources to nonprofit professionals and attorneys in the United States and works with newcomers to empower them in their dreams of citizenship and civic participation.

The pieces presented here were among thirteen award-winning drawings, paintings, and sculptures selected from over forty outstanding works of art. Submissions came from youth ages thirteen to seventeen, who represented high schools and after-school art programs in California's Bay Area and Peninsula. The students' exposure to the largest immigrant population in the United States, plus their own family backgrounds, were surely major influences on their work. The artists were given only the phrase "A Nation of Immigrants" as a theme for their creative process. The ILRC was able to contact three of the youth artists featured in this issue and ask for their thoughts about their work.



Kim Fwan Wong, Grade 10

Notes on Contributors

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FRANK BROWN is Cary C. Boshamer Professor of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His research focuses on organizational theory, school law, and minority education. His recent published works include "Single-Sex Schools and the Law" in *School Business Affairs* (with C. J. Russo, 1999), and "Choice and Privatization of Education in the United States" in *Journal of Public Management and Social Policy* (with P. M. Wigfall, 1998).

GILBERTO Q. CONCHAS, Assistant Professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, is interested in race and ethnic variations in urban school engagement. He is coauthor of "The Race Is Not Even: Minority Education in a Post-Affirmative Action Era" in *Harvard Journal of Hispanic Policy* (with K. A. Goyette, 2001), and "How Context Mediates Policy: The Implementaton of Single Gender Public Schooling in California" in *Teachers College Record* (with A. Datnow and L. Hubbard, 2001).

ANTHONY DE JESUS is a visiting scholar at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College, City University of New York, and a doctoral candidate at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. His research interests include the social context of education, sociology of education, and multicultural education.

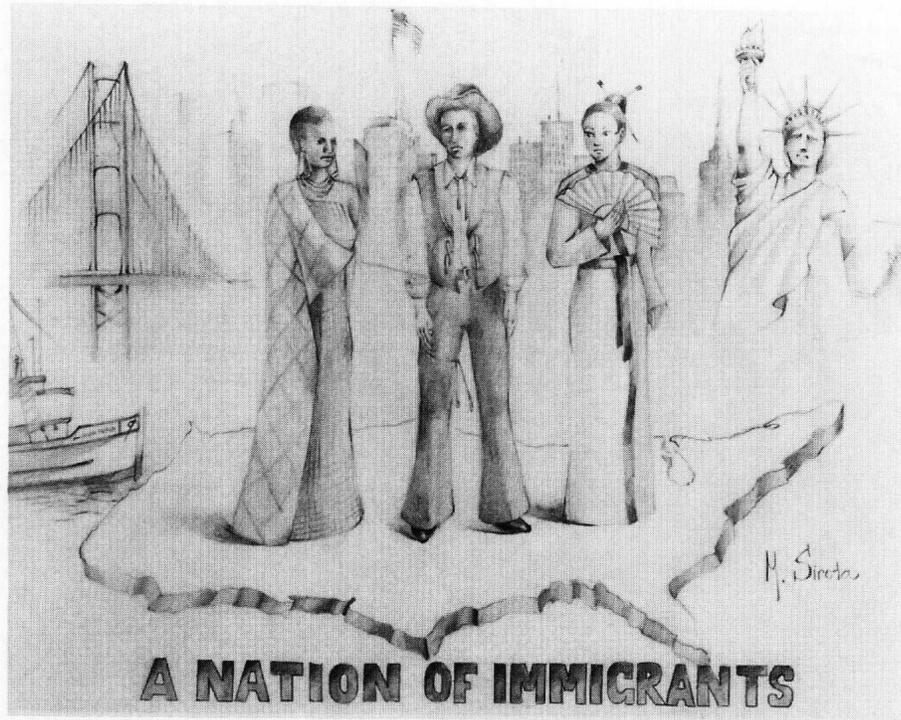
ANDREW J. FULIGNI is Associate Professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences at UCLA. His work centers around culture and adolescent development. He is coauthor of "The Impact of Family Obligations on the Daily Behavior and Psychological Well-Being of Chinese American Adolescents" in *Child Development* (with T. Yip and V. Tseng, in press), and "Parent-Adolescent Language Use and Relationships among Immigrant Families" in *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (with V. Tseng, 2000).

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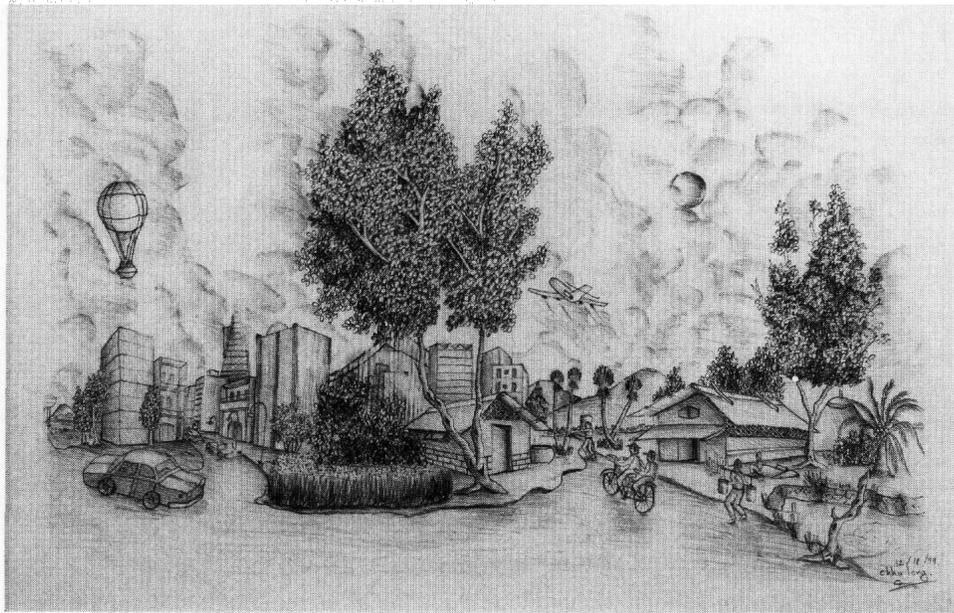
GERARDO R. LÓPEZ is Assistant Professor at the University of Missouri-Columbia. His areas of research are parent involvement, school-community relations, and migrant education. He is coauthor of "Redefining Parental Involvement: Lessons from High-



José Rodríguez, Grade 11



Marina Sirota, Grade 10



Chuu Long Ieng, Grade 10



Arthur Chan, Grade 9

Arthur Chan (above)

Arthur Chan, who received an honorable mention for his “Multi-Cultural Dancers,” was inspired by the theater for his work because “so many different cultures have their own forms of theater. Also it is an art form which combines all different types of people and their ideas. Different people can come together and share their cultures because everyone has something to offer.”

Marina Sirota (opposite, above)

Marina Sirota, who won second place for her “Indian Woman, Cowboy, Japanese Woman,” immigrated from Moscow in the mid 1990s. She would like viewers to know that she is “thankful for this country for accepting me and my family and for being so wonderful.” To her, the theme “Nation of Immigrants” means that “there is no specific definition of what being an American is. Everyone was at some point an immigrant like myself.”

Chuu Long Ieng (opposite, below)

Chuu Long Ieng’s drawing, “West-East/City-Village,” received a notable mention. Chuu is from Cambodia, where he began drawing. He says “Nation of Immigrants” means a different life for him. His drawing reflects his own experience in coming to America. As he adjusts to his new homeland, Chuu finds a means of expression and solace in his art and spends a great deal of time drawing.



Hilda Kwan, Grade 8