

## Eradicating Borders: An Exploration of ScholArtistry for Embracing Mexican Immigrant Children and Youth in Education

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### Abstract

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In this paper, I use Nielsen's (2005) scholARTistry (as cited in Siegesmund & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008), interweaving art and written text to interpret and challenge the widespread impact of Borders in school and society. With an artistic and scholarly eye, I argue that the Border needs to be removed, not only the physical wall, but also the many Borders that exist in society to bar Mexican and other Latino immigrants and the children of Mexican immigrant immigrants from gaining full access life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, including the right to meaningful education in American public schools. Using art (oil paintings) and written text, I intend to provoke readers to envision education from a hybrid lens of art and scholarship, to engage in exploring a world without Borders.

**Key words:** Borders, immigration, Mexican immigrants, scholARTistry

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In my lifetime (1950-present), crossing back and forth from México to the United States happened by walking or driving over a Bridge that connected two countries. Bridges were built to facilitate international migration that spanned centuries, beginning well before the arrival of the Spanish to Tenochtlán in 1519, which the Spanish empire, through its military conquest, eventually christened as México (Vélez-Ibañez, 1996). In the past twenty years, the Bridges between México and the United States have been slowly replaced by a 12-foot-high, iron Border wall that separates the two countries. In this brief paper, I use Nielsen's (2005) term "scholARTistry" (as cited in Siegesmund & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008), interweaving art and written text to look the Border Beast in the eye, to challenge and interpret the widespread impact of Borders in school and society. I argue that the Border needs to be removed—not only the physical wall, but also the many Borders that exist in society in order for Mexican and other Central American immigrants and the children of Mexican immigrant immigrants to gain access life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. This includes the right to funding for and admission to universities in the United States.

### **A Brief Historical Account of Mexico-US Connections**

México extended well into what is now the Southwestern United States until 1846, when the War broke out between the United States and México (referred to in México as *la primera intervención estadounidense en México*), and ended with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and the forced Mexican cession of California, New Mexico, and Texas, in 1848. Prior to the signing of the Treaty, while American military troops were fighting in the north, a battalion of 12,000 marines invaded southern México, in Veracruz, and eventually captured México City. With westward expansion finally reaching the West Coast of California, Mexicans living in the new American Southwest continued their migration patterns over Bridges and across pathways well-traveled by their ancestors, strengthening family linkages across space and time. Mexican migration to the Southwest spiked to one of its more recent apogees following the Mexican revolution in early 1900s (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1997).

During WWII and the ensuing years, *braceros*, Mexican immigrant families (including young children) working in the fields of Arizona and California, tended the fields that fed the nation, while living in deplorable conditions. In the 1960s, wealthy farm owners pitted Mexican *braceros* against Mexican American and Filipino farmworkers to block the efforts of Cesar Chávez, Larry Itliong, and Dolores Huerta to establish the United Farmworkers Union, in their struggle to secure decent wages, housing, and health care for all farmworkers. In the 1970s, Mexican workers cleared the land and built the homes that expanded metropolitan Phoenix, Arizona, burgeoning Southern California, and newly developed Las Vegas. By the late 1990s, Mexican immigration to the Southwest had reached a new peak. The hotel, agriculture, and housing industries would not have achieved their levels of growth without the labor Mexican immigrants provided.

In the post 9/11 years, and with collapse of the housing industries, came a new level of anti-immigration fervor, aimed mainly at Mexican immigrant workers and their families (Cruz & Carpenter, 2011).



**Oil painting: Working hands/las manos. C. J. Faltis, 2013**

### **The Border Replaces Bridges**

Presently, there is a 700-mile iron Border fence to replace the Bridges that had been in place for centuries. The new Border intends to separate Mexico and the U.S., to stop Brown people from entering the United States from México who have heretofore migrated for economic and family reasons. The Border is now guarded by White supremacist militia groups, up to 16,000 well-armed, Border Patrol (Miller, 2013), some U.S. military troops, camera sensors, and military drones. (See Hernández, 2010, for a history of the US. Mexican border.)



Oil painting: **Tear down that Border**, 2013. C.J. Faltis

The new Border, began in earnest under President Clinton, was expanded to and militarized under President George W. Bush, in accordance with the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Act of 2005 and the Secure Fence Act of 2006 (Chomsky, 2013). The new Border not only represents separation of peoples and nations, but also reflects and conveys a strong message that the United States does not want Mexicans, especially poor, brown-skinned people who speak Spanish or one of the many indigenous languages of México coming into U.S. schools, using U.S. health services, attending public universities, or vying for U.S. jobs. It is hard not to notice

that there is no Border between Canada and the United States; this is especially vexing since the U.S. security experts have warned repeatedly of terrorist incursions into the U.S. from Canada, *not* Mexico.



Oil Painting, *Border Patrol*, 2006, C. J. Faltis

White ultra-conservative and Tea Party politicians contend that Mexican immigrants are a undesirable drain on society, and consequently unworthy of health services, certain legal rights, adult education, in-state college tuition, taxpayer funded child care, and last, but not least, the right to use Spanish in schools and the workplace. Since 2004, conservative and Tea Party legislators in states such as Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Florida, Mississippi, and North Carolina have introduced and implemented the some of the harshest anti-immigrant bills in the U.S.



Oil Painting: *Border Crossing*, 2005, C.J. Faltis

This legal assault on the rights and services of Mexican immigrants, particularly children who came to the United States without documentation, sends a powerful message that Mexicans, regardless of their legal status, regardless of how much they contribute and have contributed to the construction of the United States, and regardless of the family connections that have been built for multiple generations, are unwelcomed in many states across the United States. Add to this the restrictive language policies also passed into law (Arias & Faltis, 2011; Gándara & Contreras, 2010; Johnson, 2011) in Alabama, Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Massachusetts, North Carolina, and Ohio, among others, and it is clear that many states also intend to eliminate the use of Spanish in schools so that children cannot learn to read in a language they understand and to replace Spanish with English, thus, erecting a new Border between languages and cultures, and resulting in subtractive schooling practices (Valenzuela, 1999).

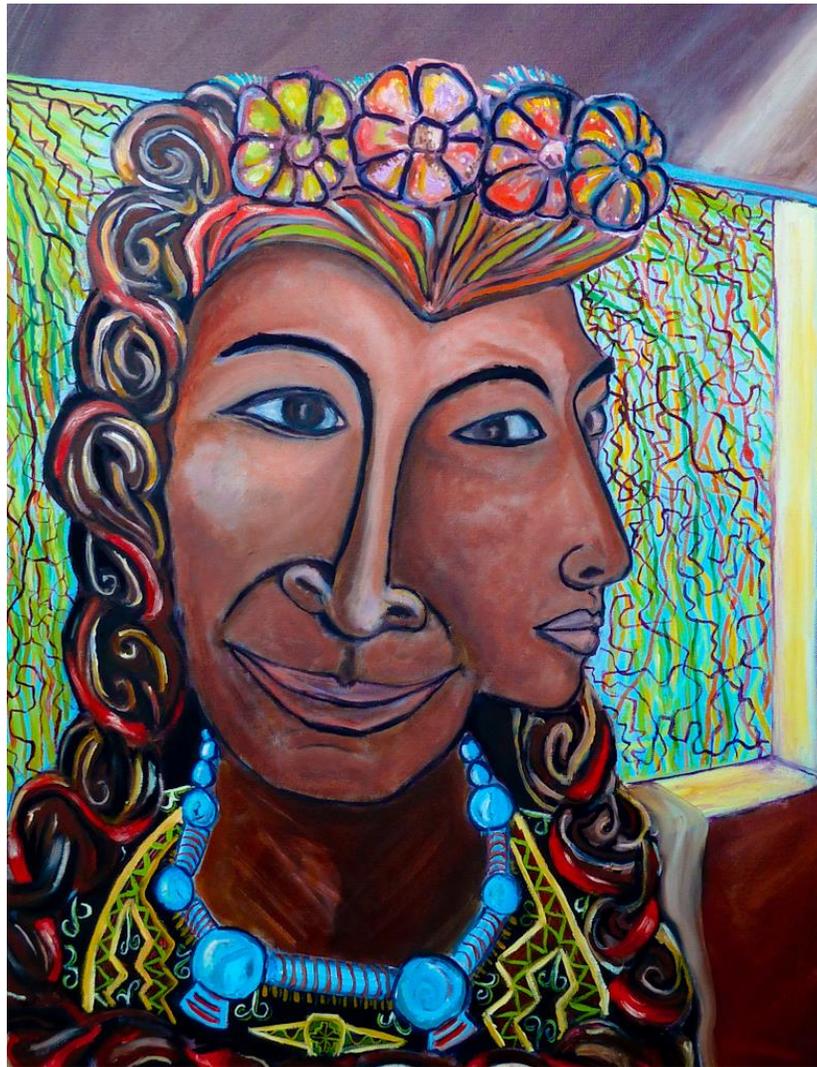


**Oil Painting: Literacy Borders, 2008, C. J. Faltis**

The Border has emboldened the special interest political groups, fearing a “Mexican takeover,” to criminalize immigration. The Obama administration, led by Homeland Security Director Janet Napolitano, has deported more Mexican adults and children than any other administration in U.S. history. A record number of undocumented immigrants were deported during 2011 (Department of Homeland Security, 2012). DHS deported 726,000 undocumented immigrants. Twenty-five percent of these were involved in some sort of criminal activity. The other three-quarters were deported for not having the appropriate documentation required for extended stay in the United States. The majority of those deported were of Mexican origin, and many of these had established families native to the United States. In 2012, the U.S. Border Patrol caught more than 24,000 undocumented and unaccompanied children under the age of 18, and placed 13,625 of them in shelters and group homes while their status was researched. The remaining 10,000 or so children, mostly teenagers from Mexico, were deported (Prah, 2013).

Roundups and mass deportation of Mexican immigrants—men, women, and children—have become favored tactics of state and county police organizations in recent years. In 2008, the Maricopa County (Arizona) Sheriff’s Department, for example, under the direction of Sheriff Joe Arpaio, conducted numerous raids throughout metropolitan Phoenix, under the guise of looking for “criminal, illegal aliens.” In 2009, Sheriff Arpaio was ordered by the Federal Government to stop rounding up Mexican immigrants (González, 2009). The practice has continued nonetheless. In Phoenix, it was reported that in mid-February 2010, 800 new deputies arrested Mexicans, or people appearing to be Mexican, en masse (Fernández, 2010). In the 2011, Alabama enacted HB56, which requires teachers to check their Mexican-looking students’ immigration status, and allows police to racially profile Latinos. While these round-ups are on the decrease nationwide, their effects on children and families remains indelibly etched in the consciousness of Mexican and Mexican-origin peoples in the U.S. (Suárez-Orozco & Pérez, 2009).

In many states, children of immigrants, or children who came with their parents at very young ages but have grown up entirely in the United States, are denied pathways to permanent resident status and eventual U.S. citizenship. Youth of immigrant families, called Dreamers, based on the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act of 2001, have argued vociferously for the right to gain conditional permanent residence status, leading to citizenship (Barron, 2011). This status would enable them to work, go to school, and be eligible for work-study and student loans, and in-state tuition. In Athens, Georgia, immigrant students and members of The University of Georgia’s faculty founded Freedom University in 2011 for undocumented immigrant youth who were barred from attending state universities in Georgia. Freedom University represented the building of a bridge and tearing down the walls of Borders that deny access to the public higher education. In 2011, Governor Jerry Brown signed into law the California Dream Act, which enables undocumented immigrant youth to apply for financial aid and to attend California state universities, paying in-state tuition. These children and youth have grown up for the most part in the United States, as Mexican Americans, attended schools since elementary level, and contribute to the rich diversity and history of this country.



Oil painting: DREAMing, 2013, C.J. Faltis

### Many Borders to Cross

There are still many Borders to tear down in society and education. There have been numerous attempts by conservative right-wing politicians to limit K-12 schooling to documented immigrant children and youth, despite the 1982 Supreme Court ruling in *Plyler v. Doe*, which held that all children, regardless of the status of their parents have the right to enroll in and attend public schools. *Plyler v. Doe* also ruled that schools could not in any way intimidate parents based on profiles of immigrant families (see López & López, 2010 for a legal analysis of *Plyler v. Doe*). The painting below serves as a compelling reminder of this important Supreme Court ruling:



Oil painting: *Plyler Rights for Immigrant Children*, 2010 C.J Faltis

As the nation moved into the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), it is likely that many more teachers than ever will be held responsible for teaching English learners, many of whom are children of immigrants. The CCSS and NGSS are permeated with ways of using language to explain interpretations, justify opinions and conclusions, analyze texts, and critique the reasoning of others that require teachers to have understanding of language that go well beyond what has occurred prior to CCSS and NGSS. Teachers need to be mindful of the potential of developing new Borders with the rollout of the new era standards. It is imperative that teachers and teacher educators learn much more about language practice and language demands of the new standards to be well prepared for ensuring the success of children of immigrants and English learners. Most importantly, educational scholARTists need to critique these standards, and how they are used to track students based on language proficiency levels.

ScholARTristy pokes and pulls at audiences, and often engages in what Barone (2000) calls *conspiratorial conversations* about possible and desirable worlds. Together the art and written text in this brief piece may engender new connections and touch new emotions, leading us to question the wisdom of Borders in an era where people need to learn to live and learn together.



Oil painting: No more borders vs. no more immigrants, 2008, C.J. Faltis

*Author's Note:* Oil paintings, Border patrol, Border crossing, Literacy borders, Plyler rights for immigrant children, and No more borders vs. no more immigrants were first published in: Faltis, C. (2012). Art and living inquiry into the anti-immigrant discourse. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 14(2). Reprinted with permission from IJME, <http://ijme-journal.org>.

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