We Didn’t Cross the Border, the Border Crossed Us—the title of a recent screen print by activist artist Melanie Cervantes (fig. 1)—has long been a rallying cry of the Mexican/Chicanx immigrant rights movements in the United States.1 The statement immediately historicizes the movements’ claims to territory, citizenship rights, and cultural legacy that predate the current boundary between Mexico and the United States. The central figure in Cervantes’s graphic is a young man dressed in Aztec dancer garb; the artist took the photograph at an Indigenous sunrise ceremony on Alcatraz Island, site of a famous nineteen-month occupation from 1969 to 1971 by American Indians demanding the island’s return to Native peoples.2 The image underscores these movements’ deep connection to the symbolism of Aztlán, the Aztec’s (or Mexico’s) legendary ancient homeland in what is now the southwestern United

1. Together with artist Jesús Barraza, Cervantes founded the San Francisco–Oakland Bay Area–based Dignidad Rebelde, whose work they describe as “grounded in Third World and indigenous movements that build people’s power to transform the conditions of fragmentation, displacement, and loss of culture that result from histories of colonialism, patriarchy, genocide, and exploitation.” Dignidad Rebelde website, https://dignidadrebelde.com/.

2. Cervantes explained the photograph in an email to the author, August 10, 2019.
States. The symbol is a reminder of a homeland in existence long before modern borders turned Mexicans into immigrants and the continent’s Indigenous communities into oppressed minorities in a colonized nation.

One historical anecdote illustrates the “border crossed us” assertion. When Mexico lost half of its territory to the United States at the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848, the Mexican village of Doña Ana suddenly found itself part of the United States, in what is now the state of New Mexico. Mexicans living in the expansionist United States’ newly occupied territories “were given one year to decide between accepting US citizenship or returning to Mexico.” It was a time of racist violence, including “lynching of thousands of men, women and children of Mexican descent” in the formerly Mexican nation from Texas, north to Colorado, and west to California. A popular ballad from the era, transcribed so as to “convey the flavor of the spoken Spanish of rural New Mexico,” expressed the anger and fears experienced by Mexicans at the time:

Voy [a] hablar del estranjero,
y lo que digu es cerdá;
quieren teneros d’ esclavos,
peru eso no les valdrá
Señores, pongan cuidado
á la ras’ Americana;
vienen a poser las tierras
las que les vendió Sant’ Anna.

It was in this context that some of the residents of Doña Ana, determined to remain part of Mexico, moved several miles south of the new border and founded the town of Mesilla. What is perhaps the first visual representation we have of Mesilla is a document produced as part of the United States’ expansionist project: a lithograph made in 1854 by Carl Schuchard, a mining engineer and expedition artist who accompanied a US reconnaissance party conducting a survey for a transcontinental railroad route (fig. 2). A short five years after the establishment of Mesilla, with the Gadsden Purchase the United States secured another thirty thousand square miles of territory from Mexico to build that railroad, thus moving the border yet further south. The residents of Mesilla found themselves once again within the boundaries of the United States. The border crossed them twice.

FIGURE 1. Melanie Cervantes/Dignidad Rebelde, We Didn’t Cross the Border, the Border Crossed Us, screen print, 18 × 12 inches (45.7 × 30.5 cm), 2016. Used with permission of artist.


5. Castañeda, Ybarra-Frausto, and Sommers, *Literatura chicana*, 116–17. Translation: “I’m going to talk about the foreigner/and what I say is true:/they want to keep us as slaves/but this will not serve them./Gentlemen, be careful/with the American race/they come to possess the lands/that [Mexican General] Santa Anna sold them.” Translation by the author.


IMAGES, HISTORY, MEANINGS, AND SOCIAL CHANGE

In the roughly 170 years since the US seizure of Mexico’s northern territories, generations of visual artists, writers, and musicians have returned to the themes of the border and the impact of its inconsistent and often arbitrary enforcement on the lives of people compelled by history to test its capriciousness. This article examines artists’ images of the border and immigration from three eras, the 1930s to the 1950s, the 1960s to the 1980s, and the first decades of the twenty-first century.

My interest in these images, apart from the aesthetic pleasure they produce, is based on two factors: their importance for understanding history and their power as representations that affect social change. Regarding the former, a recent book on photography and history by John Mraz draws the distinction between telling history with photographs (a form of social history) and writing histories of photography (cultural history). He argues for doing both simultaneously: linking the social and the cultural to produce more profound historical analyses.8 We can extend this framework beyond photography to include other artistic media such as graphic art, literature, and song, all of which produce representations central to a social and cultural understanding of history. This text represents a modest effort to tell a history with and of images.

My second interest here, inextricably linked to questions of history, is art’s potential to change the way we perceive the social world and thereby how we act within it. In Art and Social Movements, I explored the role of art and artists in various Mexican and Chicana social movements, using a framework that integrated Sonia Alvarez and colleagues’ concepts from scholarship on the cultural politics of Latin American social movements, Gloria Anzaldúa’s calls to “generate subversive knowledges” through creative acts that link “inner reflection and vision” with social action, and Stuart Hall’s analysis of the power of representations produced

FIGURE 2. Carl Schuchard, Valley and Town of Mesilla, hand-colored lithograph, 6 × 8 inches (15.2 × 20.3 cm), 1854. Used with permission of New Mexico State University Library, Archives and Special Collections.

by artists of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora to constitute new social subjects.9 I continue that line of inquiry here in relationship to art created about the US-Mexico border and immigration.

I think about the images of the border and of immigration made by socially engaged artists as constituting a critical discursive imaginary, one produced through creative interventions in the prevailing language of frontiers, migrants, and civil rights. By distinguishing between language as a structured signifying system that allows for meaningful communication and the act of speaking, linguist Ferdinand de Saussure signaled the important ability of the speaker to shift the meaning of language.10 Dominant sectors of society try to fix the meanings attached to concepts such as borders, migrants, and rights, while dissident sectors attempt to unfix those meanings through creative speech to produce counterhegemonic discourses within the culture. Critical artistic representations can be particularly potent. “It is the way art simultaneously engages our imaginations, emotions, bodies, and intellects,” argues Amy Mullin, “that makes it uniquely suited to affect us more deeply than other, more purely intellectual, ways of conveying these ideas.”11 Socially engaged artists sometimes “speak” with new representations and discourses that allow us to think, understand, feel, and act in new ways. Such representations have the potential, in Hall’s words, to “constitute us as new kinds of subjects.”12 And, continuing with his insights, because “we all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and culture which is specific,”13 we are returned to the challenge of writing history with and of images.

The images explored in this essay offer a rich set of data for contemplating the history of shifting representations of the border and immigrants over time and for exploring factors that shaped the context, content, and tone of such representations. Because most of the creative expressions highlighted in this text emerged in the context of social movement activism, they also allow us to explore shifts in movement politics, including new ways of thinking about race, class, nation, gender, and sexuality in relationship to activists’ discourses about immigration. Interrogating such issues also requires that we consider the relationship between the artist, modes of creative expression, social activism, and developments “on the ground,” such as government immigration policies and demographic changes.

This essay draws attention to images—visual, written, and performed—that represented bright points of enlightened consciousness in the darkness of the United States’ history of deeply rooted racism and xenophobia. As examples of artistic representations that aimed to counter prevailing attitudes about the border and immigrant communities, this essay offers work produced by artists working in the context of social movements from three distinct eras.

In the 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s, the communist movement was influential on both sides of the border, and leftist artists, writers, and musicians—typically not migrants themselves—produced a variety of work denouncing deportations of Mexicans and the exploitation of migrant workers. Through the images they produced, these artists helped reassert the humanity of Mexican migrants, who were often portrayed in dominant public discourse as lazy, uncivilized, and unworthy of humane treatment. The artistic images I found in this era tend to portray the migrants as noble but passive victims, despite historical evidence of extensive organizing and resistance by Mexican workers in the United States, and despite the artists’ ideological commitment to working-class struggle.

In the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s, the Chicano movement flourished in the United States and set a context in which Chicano artists and writers found their voice and created new spaces and innovative media for sharing their work.14 This was a time when communities of Mexican descent were largely excluded from meaningful exercise of their civil rights by social, political, economic, and cultural institutions

14. When referring to the historic Mexican American civil rights movement, I use the word Chicano, both because that was how the movement was more commonly labeled and because in Spanish nouns are gendered feminine or masculine, and in the phrase “Chicano movement,” the masculine adjective Chicano modifies the masculine word movimiento. When referring to individuals and communities representing a variety of genders, I use the more recent and more inclusive Chicana and Latina.
of White supremacy. Among large sectors of the White-identified population, people of Mexican heritage were either disregarded as uneducated and unambitious or feared and despised as low-life criminals and welfare cheats. Artists inspired by the Chicano movement produced counterimages emphasizing the pride, rich cultural heritage, hard work, and resistance of Mexican and Chicana/o communities. Many Chicana/o artists focused on issues of the border and immigrant rights. Their representations of their communities helped a generation to constitute themselves as new subjects imbued with proud identity and a sense of their own agency as social change makers. The work of movement-associated artists was not without contradictions, however, such as the discourses of cultural nationalism and indigenismo that produced their own restrictive cultural meanings.

The early twenty-first century has witnessed a new generation of activists profoundly influenced by intersectional analyses of race, gender, sexuality, and class, new social forces such as the UndocuQueer movement, and a renewed appreciation for the social power of art. Significant demographic shifts, particularly the increased number of immigrants from Central America and from Indigenous communities throughout the Mesoamerican region, have also changed the context in which today’s activist artists engage with the issues of the border and immigration. Additionally, the Donald Trump administration’s repressive policies toward immigrants, their manipulation of the border’s jingoistic symbolism, and their reactivation of the most extreme racist and xenophobic rhetoric have created new urgency among activist artists to produce representations affirming immigrants’ humanity and basic rights. Moreover, digital media and social media networks have dramatically extended the reach of the images created by the current generation of socially committed artists. We explore these examples in the following pages.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND THE BRACERO PROGRAM

As has been well documented, between the 1930s and the 1950s, Mexicans and Mexican Americans experienced the inhumane vicissitudes of US immigration policies aimed at alternately shrinking and enlarging the labor pool to meet the needs of an economy that contracted dramatically during the Great Depression and then accelerated during and following World War II. In the context of the economic upheaval, intensified class struggle, and anticommunist repression of the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, millions of Mexicans and Mexican Americans, many of them US citizens, were deported. “In California, in particular, the militancy of Mexican workers—many of whom were active trade unionists and members of the Communist Party—met fierce repression. More than 75,000 Mexicans were deported from Los Angeles alone in 1931.” Significant strikes by Mexican and Mexican American workers in the 1930s were carried out in California by cotton workers in the San Joaquin Valley and lettuce workers in the Imperial Valley, and by pecan workers in San Antonio, Texas. All met violent suppression. John Steinbeck, in a series of reports about the efforts of Mexican agricultural workers to organize in the 1930s, condemned the repression and opined that the Mexicans “have committed the one crime that will not be permitted by the large growers. They have attempted to organize for their own protection.”

Los Deportados (the deportees), a Mexican ballad from the era, recounts the misery of those deported:

Les cantaré un corrido
de todos los deportados,
que vienen hablando inglés
y vienen de desgraciados.
Los tiran en donde quiera
a puro mendigar
a última verlos
que no traen ni para almorc

...
Los corren, los maltratan
los gringos desgraciados,
no tienen vergüenza
siempre allá están pegados.19

In addition to popular ballads composed by musicians directly affected by the deportations, sympathetic allies also created artwork expressing humanitarian concerns about the plight of Mexicans affected by these policies. Socially conscious artists, who more often than not were allies rather than immigrants themselves, tended to express a sympathy for the Mexican migrant workers that was informed by communist movement discourses about worker exploitation and international worker solidarity rather than by direct experience.

Diego Rivera (1886–1957) and David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896–1974), two of Mexico’s most famous painters and Mexican Communist Party members, were working on commissions in the United States in the 1930s, and the deportations directly inspired some of their work. Rivera, for example, was reportedly moved by a wave of deportations at the start of the Great Depression to create a watercolor in 1931 depicting Mexicans recently repatriated to Torreón, Coahuila, about two hundred miles south of the Texas border (fig. 3). Local press reports describe thousands of deportees in miserable conditions arriving in Torreón by train from Ciudad Juárez.20 In contrast to his famous murals of socialist revolutionaries, labor union militants, and the greedy bourgeoisie, Rivera’s painting does not communicate outrage over capitalist exploitation or depict social struggle. Rather, it portrays the poor migrants as seemingly resigned to their fate, calmly crossing the street with suitcases in hand and duffle bags slung over their shoulders. Rivera helped raise money for deportees and encouraged more humane treatment of the migrants by welfare authorities. However, Rivera actually “exhorted his countrymen to return to Mexico and avail themselves of the opportunities offered by a benevolent government [of President Lázaro Cárdenas], rather than wasting their energy and talents enriching the United States.”21

During the period when Rivera made the Repatriados en Torreón watercolor, he was also painting a mural commissioned by the Sigmund Stern family for their home in the San Francisco Bay Area. Titled Sill Life and Blossoming Almond Trees, it depicts an idyllic, bucolic scene of an almond orchard with Mexican migrant workers as part of “a happy, productive, and integrated workforce” and brown-skinned children enjoying a bowl of fruit.22 Repatriados and Blossoming Almond Trees certainly evoke sympathy and a sense of humanity absent from the virulent anti-Mexican discourse and policies of the era. Yet they lack any of the denunciatory statements about capitalist exploitation or class struggle that figure prominently in some of Rivera’s works. The inconsistent, perhaps contradictory political views reflected in Rivera’s images and actions about Mexican migrants would unlikely have surprised MacKinley Helm, who knew Rivera and wrote one of the classic texts about Mexican painters, musing about Rivera’s approach to his work in the United States, Helm quipped, “his political convictions have never been truly profound.”23

Rivera’s Repatriados and Blossoming Almond Trees are in striking contrast to the “scathing critique of North America’s exploitation of Mexican labor” in América Tropical, the mural David Alfaro Siqueiros painted in Los Angeles in 1932.24 According to art historian Shifra Goldman, “of direct import to his choice of a theme for Tropical America were the mass deportations of Mexican nationals and the wretched conditions of Mexican migratory workers, whose efforts to organize for collective bargaining were repeatedly crushed by vigilantes and repressive laws.”25 Siqueiros’s mural depicted the ruins of pre-Colombian Mayan-like structures and a US bald eagle perched atop the cross of a crucified Indian. Barron, Bernstein, and Fort describe part of the mural’s narrative: “Two armed Indians eye the eagle

Translation: “I shall sing you a song/of all who were deported,/who came back speaking English/and in wretched shape./They are shoved around/...They are always beaten there.” Translation by Paul S. Taylor.

“We Didn’t Cross the Border, the Border Crossed Us” 11
surreptitiously, evidently making plans to shoot it. In contrast to Rivera’s seemingly passive repatriados, Siqueiros’s sharpshooters clearly signal resistance, an effort to inject a cautionary history lesson into the public discourse of the day. “The mural’s unmistakable condemnation of racism and exploitation,” notes Los Angeles–based scholar Max Benavides, “caused an immediate backlash.” The impertinence of the artist’s critique led to the whitewashing of the mural—partially in 1932 and completely in 1938. Goldman asserts that “there is little doubt” that the mural’s themes “contributed to Siqueiros’s own expulsion when his six-month visa expired.” The incident reveals the political challenges faced by artists who wanted to engage the public with narratives that countered government’s anti-immigrant policies. (Conservation of América Tropical was completed in 2012 after decades of organized community advocacy.)

Also inspired by news of the deportations, in 1948 US folk hero and communist activist Woody Guthrie (1912–1967) wrote the poem that, when later set to Martin Hoffman’s music, would become the classic protest song, Plane Wreck at Los Gatos (Deportee). The song laments the anonymity of the people who died in a plane crash in California while being deported to Mexico. The migrants’ remains were buried in an unmarked grave in California’s Central Valley.

The crops are all in and the peaches are rot’t’n,  
The oranges piled in their creosote dumps;  
They’re flying ’em back to the Mexican border  
To pay all their money to wade back again.  

Goodbye to my Juan, goodbye, Rosalita,  
Adios mis amigos, Jesús y María;  
You won’t have your names when you ride the big airplane,  
All they will call you will be “deportees.”  

We died in your hills, we died in your deserts,  
We died in your valleys and died in your plains,  
We died ‘neath your trees and we died in your bushes,  
Both sides of the river, we died just the same.  

The lines “Good-bye to my Juan” and “adios mis amigos” are key to establishing a human, personal connection between the songwriter, the audience, and the migrants. The migrant workers may be regarded by the media and much of the public as nameless deportees, but for Guthrie,

26. Barron, Bernstein, and Fort, Made in California, 146.  
29. Complete lyrics can be found on the Woody Guthrie website: https://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Plane_Wreck_At_Los_Gatos.htm.
they are “my friends.” The author and those who perform the song speak with sympathy, even familiarity; the lyrics try to give a name and life to the anonymous victims. Guthrie’s lyrics also express far more outrage about the migrant’s plight than did Rivera’s watercolor and mural. Yet the song suggests no sense of the migrants’ agency; despite the sweat and toil spent harvesting the gringos’ crops, the migrant workers are rendered helpless in the face of deportation and tragic death. There are no sharpshooters waiting for the moment to take the eagle down. Nonetheless, unlike Siqueiros’s mural, the song could not be erased, and its sympathetic narrative of Mexican migrant workers has endured through the decades.

About the history of what became one of the most popular protest songs in US history, Tim Z. Hernandez writes, “The way it was told to me, on hearing of the plane crash over the radio, Woody Guthrie sat down at his kitchen table and penned a poem titled ‘Plane Wreck at Los Gatos (Deportee).’ ... But nowhere is there evidence that Woody himself ever actually sang the poem ... It wasn’t until his closest friend, Pete Seeger, began playing the song in public concerts that the poem, and its message, finally gained traction.”

Over the decades, the song was performed by famous singers such as Seeger, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Dolly Parton, and Bruce Springsteen. However, until Tim Hernandez’s recent book, All They Will Call You, the deportees indeed remained anonymous. Hernandez has identified the names of those who died in the crash and provided us with their life stories based on extensive research. As a result of his work, a memorial to those who died in the crash was established recently in Fresno, California.

Deportations continued even as the United States ran a “guest worker” system known as the Bracero Program from 1942 to 1964, during which time more than four million Mexican workers were contracted to work the agricultural fields of the United States. As Ernesto Galarza wrote in his classic Merchants of Labor, “In 1942 the spontaneous and irregular migration that had prevailed gave way abruptly to one that was supervised and regulated by the government. ... It was during this period that the agricultural industry made its choice in favor of governmentally administrated migration of Mexicans.”

Progressive photographers Dorothea Lange (1895–1965) and Leonard Nadel (1916–1990) both created images of Mexican migrant workers that tap into peoples’ ability to recognize one another’s common humanity, despite dominant discourses that attempted to “other” immigrants, people of color, and the working class. Lange was “immersed in the politics of the left,” though she never joined the Communist Party. She created some indelible portraits of Mexican migrants, including a photo of a family trying to change the tire of their car—mattresses tied to the roof, belongings crammed into the rear—and a widely published shot of a young woman cotton picker. The woman, with an impossibly big bag of cotton slung over her left shoulder, looks directly into the camera, unsmiling but not unfriendly, as if to say, “Yes, this is me, this is my life, see me.”

Nadel was commissioned to document the Bracero Program by the progressive Fund for the Republic, a nonprofit anti-McCarthy organization dedicated to research and analysis of civil liberties and civil rights. Nadel, a freelance photographer and photojournalist, had previously been commissioned by the Los Angeles Housing Authority to photograph the city’s slums and post–World War II housing developments, but he left the agency in solidarity with a colleague who had been forced to resign after being blacklisted by the anticommunist House Committee on Un-American Activities.

In his work on the Bracero Program just north of the Texas-Mexico border, Nadel captured the inhumane treatment of Mexicans who were contracted to work for US agribusiness even as other Mexican laborers were being deported (fig. 4). Nadel described with words the horrors he also captured on camera: “Much in the same manner and feeling used in handling livestock, upon crossing over the

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“We Didn’t Cross the Border, the Border Crossed Us”
bridge from Mexico at Hidalgo, Texas, the men were herded into groups of 100 through a makeshift booth and sprayed with DDT. The photo and words constitute a powerful indictment of the conditions endured by the braceros, a bold effort to intervene in a public debate with denunciatory images that countered antilabor, anti-immigrant, and anti-Mexican sentiments of the day.

For me, however, there is a nagging absence in the otherwise evocative photos by Lange and Nadel. They are images created by leftist sympathizers whose distance from the subject and perhaps the repressive political environment of the era hindered their ability to recognize and represent the militant acts of rebellion—labor strikes, leftist political party affiliation, urban community activism, cross-border organizing—taken by many Mexican immigrant workers in the United States that constitute another important piece of this history.

This seems true even in Domingo Ulloa’s Braceros (fig. 5), one of the few works on the subject by a Mexican American artist made in the pre-Chicano movement era. Ulloa (1919–1997), an artist in the Los Angeles area who studied at Mexico’s prestigious San Carlos Academy, was moved to paint a row of Mexican migrant workers behind barbed wire after visiting a bracero camp in Holtville, California. The men’s faces and hats fill most of the canvas, bringing their presence directly into the viewer’s space. As described by Terezita Romo, “The men appear corralled in squalid living conditions, forced to live in wood shacks that seem unlikely to shield them from the extreme cold and heat of their environment.” Romo’s analysis of Ulloa’s painting echoes Nadel’s description of the scene of braceros being sprayed with DDT: “In this stark depiction of humanity treated like cattle, the viewer must confront not only the inequities of the Bracero Program but also confront the conditions of exploited labor universally. Yet the faces of the men seem passive, perhaps sad; they do not express the anger one might imagine them to feel under such conditions.

Activist singer and protest songwriter Phil Ochs (1940–1976), who was born in El Paso, Texas, and was sympathetic to leftist causes of the era, recorded a poignant ode to the braceros in the program’s final days:

Wade into the river, through the rippling shallow waters
Steal across the thirsty border, bracero
Come bring your hungry body to the golden fields of plenty
From a peso to a penny, bracero
Oh, welcome to California
Where the friendly farmers will take care of you
Come labor for your mother, for your father and your brother
For your sisters and your lover, bracero
Come pick the fruits of yellow, break the flowers from the berries
Purple grapes will fill your bellies, bracero . . . 40

In spite of the readily apparent sympathy for the migrant workers’ plight, it is striking that there is nothing in Ulloa’s image or in Ochs’s ironic lyrics to suggest the impressive capacity of the braceros to resist and organize. Indeed, in Mexico today there is a Movimiento Unificado de Ex Braceros (United Movement of Ex-Braceros) that claims to represent the interests of 3.2 million braceros and/or their survivors. In early 2019, the organization was in talks with the government of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, demanding payment of five billion pesos that were reportedly withheld from the migrants’ pay by the Mexican government during the Bracero Program. That money was supposed to have been deposited in savings accounts for the migrants but was never paid. Now, some seventy years later, the former migrants and their families are still fighting for justice. 41

North of the border in the mid-1960s, under pressure from organized labor—mostly the budding farmworkers’ movement of Mexican and Filipino immigrants—and progressive sectors of the Church, Congress voted to end the abuses of the government-run labor contracting system by terminating the Bracero Program in 1964. The action was a crucial step toward the building of a farmworkers’ union in the United States, a union of largely immigrant workers. 42

40. Complete lyrics can be found at https://genius.com/Phil-ochs-bracero-lyrics. A recording of the song by Ochs can be heard at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrmNDZNMxIk.


42. Baird and McCaughan, Beyond the Border, 148.
Yet the resistance that was taking place in one form or another among Mexican migrants and Mexican American communities throughout those decades was largely absent from the visual, literary, and musical images we’ve examined. I suggest several possible explanations for that absence. First, the fierce antilabor and anticommunist forces of the era created a dangerous political and cultural terrain for artists wanting to draw attention to the plight of migrant workers without risking censorship, blacklisting, or other forms of backlash. Many artists, writers, and performers had their careers ruined or at least temporary interrupted by the anticommunist hysteria of the times. Some of them, ironically, crossed the border south seeking refuge in Mexico.

Second, among Mexican immigrants or first generation Mexican Americans—those presumably closest to and hence most aware of immigrant resistance in the pre–civil rights era—relatively few enjoyed the opportunity to intervene in the public discourse with creative written or visual representations. Universities, publishers, media, and art institutions remained largely inaccessible to most people of Mexican descent until the 1960s, as a result of racial segregation and discrimination. Consequently, those artists with the opportunity to create public representations of immigration and the border were largely not from the Mexican communities engaged in resistance. There were exceptions, of course, like Domingo Ulloa, one of a small group of successful Mexican American artists in Los Angeles born between the 1910s and 1930s—a “hyphen generation,” according to Chon Noriega—who developed what Terezita Romo calls a “bicultural aesthetic synthesis.”

Of the six artists from this generation discussed by Romo, however, Ulloa appears to have been the only one to work consistently with sociopolitical themes and deployed anticommunist rhetoric as part of their support for immigration reform in the 1950s. Given the assimilationist political orientation of such Mexican American civic organizations at the time, those middle-class Mexican Americans with the educational and professional advantages that might have afforded opportunities for creative artistic intervention in public discourse on immigration would not likely have embraced representations of militant resistance.

That cultural and political landscape was about to change, beginning in the 1960s, as a new generation of Mexican Americans—many now calling themselves Chicanas and Chicanos—entered institutions of higher education and creative professions in record numbers. This generation largely turned away from assimilation and embraced an identity based on cultural nationalism. Many were simultaneously influenced by Marxist and anti-imperialist critiques of social class inequality, capitalism, and neocolonialism. In places like Los Angeles, there were certainly precursors to the new political and artistic awakening. Max Benavides cites “small pockets of radicalism and occasional episodes of cultural resistance in [early twentieth-century] Mexican Los Angeles,” and, as noted above, Romo documents the important “bicultural aesthetic synthesis” produced by an older generation of Mexican American artists. “But,” notes Benavides, “it was not until the 1960s that an entire generation was marshaled under the aegis of an oppositional identity.” Coming of age in an era of radical social movements and countercultural upheavals throughout the world, emergent Chicana artists began to intervene in the public discourse about immigration in ways that would center the agency of immigrants and their communities.

43. Romo, “Mexican Heritage, American Art.”
44. Of the six artists from this generation discussed by Romo, however, Ulloa appears to have been the only one to work consistently with sociopolitical themes and deployed anticommunist rhetoric as part of their support for immigration reform in the 1950s.
45. Rosales, Chicanos, 95.
47. Benavides, Gronk, 22; Romo, “Mexican Heritage, American Art,” 16.
48. Benavides, Gronk, 22.
THE CHICANO AND IMMIGRANT RIGHTS MOVEMENTS PRODUCE NEW ARTISTIC VOICES

By the 1970s, the Chicano movement was in full swing, and portrayals of immigrants and the border by a new generation of activist artists were changing. The movement that emerged primarily in the US Southwest in the mid-1960s was a constellation of civil rights struggles by Mexican American communities on many different fronts, including high schools and universities, agricultural fields, and urban neighborhoods. Among the many causes encompassed by the movement’s broad umbrella were racism, bilingual education, police brutality, the rights of prisoners, immigrants, and women, unionization of farmworkers, community health care and housing, community art, solidarity with Third World liberation struggles, and the war in Vietnam. This was also a time when New Left movements gave renewed currency to Marxist critiques of capitalism, class exploitation, and imperialism.

The era’s movements produced a heightened consciousness about the rights of workers, ethnic minorities, immigrants, and Indigenous communities, as well as newly militant assertions by Mexican Americans of their historic claims on territory, citizenship, and cultural legacies. Artists whose social consciousness was deepened and radicalized by the activism profoundly changed the artistic images of the border. Increasing numbers of Chicano artists now spoke for themselves, no longer so reliant on allied artists to produce well-meaning but inevitably distanced statements of solidarity that failed to recognize the power of the immigrants themselves. Moreover, in the 1960s and 1970s, thanks to successful struggles against racial segregation and for affirmative action, postwar investments in schools, and the G.I. Bill’s support for military veterans’ education, many more Chicano students were attending college, including a diverse range of art schools, further enhancing their ability to create and disseminate new artistic images of themselves and their communities.

One of the striking features of the movement era’s new artistic production is the emphasis on the agency of Mexican and Mexican American migrant workers. There were exceptions to be sure, such as the portrayal of would-be braceros in Macho, a 1973 novel by Edmundo Villasenor (b. 1949), one of the first of a new wave of published Mexican American fiction writers. In a scene set in a bracero recruitment station at Empalme, Sonora, about seven hundred miles south of the US border, Villasenor describes the response of men who were defrauded and abandoned by Bracero Program recruiters: “grown men with calloused hands and knives in their belts fell down and cried... And began by the thousands the long journey home.”

More typical of the representations created by movement artists in those years is “Brown-Eyed Children of the Sun,” by songwriters Daniel Valdez, Sylvia Galan, and Pedro Contreras. The song captured the ethnic pride and labor militancy of this new generation of Mexican Americans. Daniel Valdez (b. 1949) is probably best known for his role in his brother Luis Valdez’s play and film Zoot Suit, in which anti-immigrant violence was a central theme. “Brown-Eyed Children of the Sun” became a sort of anthem sung especially at rallies supporting the United Farm Workers (UFW). In the song, migrant workers are still portrayed as suffering injustice, but the focus is on their resistance and organizing, the legacy they will leave their children.

Up to California from Mexico you come
To the Sacramento Valley, to toil in the sun
Your wife and seven children, they’re working every one
And what will you be giving to your brown-eyed children of the sun?

Your face is lined and wrinkled and your age is forty-one
Your back is bent from picking, like your dying time has come
Your children’s eyes are smiling, their lives have just begun
And what will you be giving to your brown-eyed children of the sun?

You marched on Easter Sunday, to the Capitol you’ve come
To fight for union wages, and your fight has just begun
You’re a proud man, you’re a free man, and this heritage is won
And that you can be giving to your brown-eyed children of the sun.

53. A recording of “Brown-Eyed Children of the Sun” can be heard at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ezyHq1Qz9g0.

“We Didn’t Cross the Border, the Border Crossed Us”
Luis Valdez (b. 1940) founded El Teatro Campesino in 1965, originally as an artistic arm in support of the United Farm Workers union, and the troupe became one of the most famous of the theater ensembles associated with the Chicano Movement, gaining "almost mythical status." Randy Ontiveros argues that El Teatro Campesino helped shift the public discourse about immigrant workers by representing "them as protagonists in a dramatic confrontation between workers and corporations." According to Ontiveros’s analysis, the troupe “articulated an alternative model of citizenship based not on paperwork but on community-building labor” and viewed "the labor that went into the harvest as the same labor that went into poetry and dance and theater and music."

It is somewhat ironic, given El Teatro’s beginnings as an arm of the UFW, that the issue of “paperwork” — that is, documented versus undocumented immigration—caused a painful rift between the union’s leadership, namely César Chávez, and other movement constituencies. Believing the presence of undocumented workers made it more difficult to unionize, Chávez supported a “restrictive immigration policy to reduce immigration” and in 1970 even backed a proposed California law to impose criminal sanctions against employees who hired undocumented workers. His position was in stark contrast, for example, to that of the Los Angeles–based Centro de Acción Social Autónoma, Hermandad General de Trabajadores (CASA; Center for Autonomous Social Action, General Brotherhood of Workers), one of the movement’s many mass organizations. CASA produced the influential newspaper Sin Fronteras, which asserted a Marxist understanding of worker exploitation and a utopian vision of a Mexican people and movement without borders, with or without documents. A CASA poster from 1975 declared, "With or without documents, we are workers, we have rights, we create wealth." It is somewhat ironic, given El Teatro’s beginnings as an arm of the UFW, that the issue of “paperwork” — that is, documented versus undocumented immigration—caused a painful rift between the union’s leadership, namely César Chávez, and other movement constituencies. Believing the presence of undocumented workers made it more difficult to unionize, Chávez supported a “restrictive immigration policy to reduce immigration” and in 1970 even backed a proposed California law to impose criminal sanctions against employees who hired undocumented workers. His position was in stark contrast, for example, to that of the Los Angeles–based Centro de Acción Social Autónoma, Hermandad General de Trabajadores (CASA; Center for Autonomous Social Action, General Brotherhood of Workers), one of the movement’s many mass organizations. CASA produced the influential newspaper Sin Fronteras, which asserted a Marxist understanding of worker exploitation and a utopian vision of a Mexican people and movement without borders, with or without documents. A CASA poster from 1975 declared, "With or without documents, we are workers, we have rights, we create wealth." It is somewhat ironic, given El Teatro’s beginnings as an arm of the UFW, that the issue of “paperwork” — that is, documented versus undocumented immigration — caused a painful rift between the union’s leadership, namely César Chávez, and other movement constituencies. Believing the presence of undocumented workers made it more difficult to unionize, Chávez supported a “restrictive immigration policy to reduce immigration” and in 1970 even backed a proposed California law to impose criminal sanctions against employees who hired undocumented workers. His position was in stark contrast, for example, to that of the Los Angeles–based Centro de Acción Social Autónoma, Hermandad General de Trabajadores (CASA; Center for Autonomous Social Action, General Brotherhood of Workers), one of the movement’s many mass organizations. CASA produced the influential newspaper Sin Fronteras, which asserted a Marxist understanding of worker exploitation and a utopian vision of a Mexican people and movement without borders, with or without documents. A CASA poster from 1975 declared, “With or without documents, we are workers, we have rights, we create wealth.”

Defense of undocumented immigrants’ rights was a recurring theme in now iconic silkscreen prints created by two of the Chicano movement’s master printmakers, Rupert García (b. 1941) and Malaquías Montoya (b. 1918). The silk screen was a preferred medium for many movement artists. As Chon Noriega has observed, “In the 1970s the primary visual forms that emerged—murals, posters, and photography—were also those that could reach the largest number of people, creating the cornerstone of community through art.” Similar to El Teatro Campesino’s early ensemble, visual artists were engaged in what Ontiveros calls “community-building labor.” That García and Montoya were conscious of the community-building aspect of their work is revealed by the fact that their work, unlike most of the examples cited earlier of art created by white allies in the pre-movement era, often spoke directly to a Mexican American audience, sometimes in Spanish and using tropes familiar to their communities.

García and Montoya both used the image of barbed wire to symbolize the treacherous US-Mexico border. Barbed wire as a trope for the injustices of a border imposed by colonialism dates back to the late nineteenth century, when a popular saying asserted “cuando vino el alambre vino el hambre” (with the wire fence came hunger). In discussing how life was depicted in poems and songs by Mexicans living in the newly established border region of the late 1800s, Castañeda and her colleagues write, “The meaning implicit in ‘cuando vino el alambre vino el hambre’ is that the introduction of [border and private ranch] fencing signaled the beginning of dislocation, of migration, and hunger for Mexicans and their progeny.” In contemporary Chicano art, argues María Herrera-Sobek, that barbed-wire iconography “is designed to encode concepts of dehumanization, oppression, racism, pain, brutality, exclusivity, and suffering as they relate to Mexican transnational migratory movements.”

Rupert García’s screen print ¡Cesen Deportación!, produced in 1973, was a straightforward demand to stop deportations in the face of a new crackdown on undocumented Mexican immigrants by the US government (fig. 6). It is as eloquently simple in its design as in its message: “in García’s minimal composition,” writes Romo, “the human element
was stripped away in favor of the graphically strong, clean lines of the stark barbed wire against a deep red background and the strident message in yellow. The demand is in Spanish, indicating that the message is directed primarily to Spanish-speaking communities. Alicia Gaspar de Alba reads the red background as signifying “Chicano/a resistance to the bloody politics of racism at the core of deportation.”

García and many other movement activists were responding to President Jimmy Carter’s attempts to regain control over undocumented immigration from Mexico with a far-reaching “Immigration Plan” that intended to fine employers who hired undocumented immigrants, increase the budget and personnel of what was then called the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), offer a limited amnesty for some undocumented immigrants and temporary work permits for others, and extend a package of aid and loans to Mexico. However, in the face of strong opposition from both the right and the left, Carter’s immigration plan was abandoned by the administration in 1978. The community’s fight against the racism, injustice, and violence of US immigration policies continued.

Rupert García was in the vanguard of the Chicano silk-screen boom that created much of the Chicano movement’s visual discourse about the rights of immigrants and racial minorities. García was forged as an activist artist in the worldwide caldron of the 1968 era social protests. García was studying at San Francisco State University in 1968 during the famous student strike organized by the Third World Liberation Front and the Black Student Union, and he was well aware of the other student rebellions that same year in Paris and Mexico, in which graphic art was a prominent feature. For García the significance of 1968 is symbolized by the death that same year of the civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. and the surrealist artist Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp, in García’s words, “upset the perceived notions of what art is supposed to be, what it’s supposed to look like, and the procedure for making something called art.” The assassination of King and the passing of Duchamp, recalled García, “resonated for..."
me in terms of the challenge that King represented—the social-economic-racial dimension of protest, which, of course, Duchamp was also protesting—more of a cultural protest having with it moments of political ideology.67 Throughout his career García has combined social protest with innovative approaches to visual representation. Rights for Mexican immigrants was one among many social causes championed by García through his powerful graphics in the years since.

Malaquías Montoya was another of the pioneering graphic artists of the Chicano movement. In a recent review of the activist artist’s career, journalist Bill Berkowitz wrote, “Montoya’s work has existed at the intersection of art and politics for close to 50 years. Montoya sees his artistic identity as giving voice to a community that society had deemed silent and voiceless.” Montoya told Berkowitz, “Realizing later that it was not by choice that we remained mute but by a conscious effort on the part of those in power, I realized that my art could only be that of protest—a protest against what I felt to be a death sentence.”68

Over the years, Montoya created a series of silkscreen prints intended to rally support for immigrant rights. Several of them, including Abajo con la Migra (1977), Undocumented (1980), The Immigrant’s Dream, the American Response (1983), and The Oppressor (1989), incorporate the image of barbed wire.69 Like García’s print, Abajo la Migra included the demand in Spanish, “cesen las deportaciones”; it was produced as a poster announcing for the Bay Area Committee on Immigration.

Citing work by Gloria Anzaldúa and Pat Mora on the concept of nepantla, Gaspar de Alba suggests Montoya’s image of human beings trapped in the border’s barbed wire “portrays the nepantla state of undocumented immigrants.”70 Nepantla is a Nahua word once used to describe the in-between, uncertain, limbo state of the Indigenous population at the time of the violent cultural encounter of two distinct worlds during the Spanish conquest of Mexico. The images and political perspective in Montoya’s prints are as much informed by his personal life history as by intellectual concepts. He has said:

Being a child in a farmworking family . . . I often witnessed the horror, panic-stricken men being pursued by immigration officers. They were chased through fields and alleyways of the migrant towns, making a sport of this event. The image [in Undocumented] of the undocumented suspended on a barbed wire fence derives from these early experiences.71

Montoya’s The Oppressor (fig. 7) is a more nuanced and layered statement than Rupert García’s straightforward graphic, and it incorporates the artist’s personal, intellectual, and political influences. A maguey cactus pokes through a US flag and a face peers from behind barbed wire. Montoya explained the graphic’s symbolism: “These images deal with struggle. I use the maguey plant as a symbol of strength. The plant and its power are the manifestation of the poor represented by the person looking out of the rectangular box.” The Marxist-influenced text in English on the bottom of the graphic says, “The oppressor, who oppresses, exploits, and rapes by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both.” In Montoya’s graphic, the immigrant is now imbued with agency by the era’s social movements, a quality missing in images from the earlier generations of artists we’ve discussed.

Such images of strength and resistance, inspired by the power of social activism, also influenced the work of allied artists such as Rini Templeton (1935–1986), who studied printmaking with Malaquías Montoya and worked in solidarity with Mexican communities on both sides of the border.73 Montoya recalled that Templeton came to work with him at the Graphic Arts Workshop in Oakland, California, in 1977, to learn more about the technical aspects of the silkscreen process. Indicative of the seriousness with which Templeton approached art and politics, Montoya remarked that she “took so many notes on what I said!” Years later in 1986 the two collaborated on a poster


69. Romo, Malaquías Montoya, xi, 84, 89, 91.


71. Malaquías Montoya, quoted in Romo, Malaquías Montoya, 85.


for a Chicanx cultural event at the University of Texas, Austin. Templeton “identified with the Chicano struggle and created many graphic images . . . that were widely used in the Movement.” She was also deeply influenced by Mexico’s long tradition of graphic art, and she made Mexico her home from 1974 to her untimely death in 1986.

In one of her classic, deceptively simple graphics, a man defiantly confronts the border’s barbed-wire fence, seeming to force open a space for crossing al otro lado (to the other side) (fig. 8). In a testament to the enduring power of Templeton’s graphics and to the continued relevance of undocumented immigration as a social issue, this same image appeared silkscreened on the T-shirt of a North American protesting the Trump administration’s migrant detention centers in front of the US Consular Agency in Oaxaca on July 12, 2019. A Oaxacan artist printed the shirt with Templeton’s graphic and added the words, “Nadie es ilegal. La realidad y la miseria me oprimen, pero no hay muro capaz de contener mis sueños” (No one is illegal. Reality and misery oppress me, but no wall can contain my dreams).

“[T]he skin of the earth is seamless,” wrote the late Gloria Anzaldúa in her now classic Borderlands/La Frontera. “The sea cannot be fenced, el mar does not stop at borders.” Calling the US-Mexican border “una herida abierta”—an open wound—Anzaldúa reminded her readers, “This land was Mexican once, was Indian always and is. And will be.” A deepening consciousness about Chicanx communities’ Indigenous roots was another salient feature of the era’s new social movements and was evident in activist art. Two of the movement’s trailblazing feminist Chicana artists, Yolanda López (b. 1942) and

74. Montoya in Martínez, El arte de Rini Templeton, 142.
76. Witnessed by the author.

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Ester Hernández (b. 1944), for example, created iconic images asserting the historic presence of their communities’ Indigenous ancestors in what became the United States through colonization, territorial expansion, and cultural oppression.  

At the height of the contentious debates over immigrant rights and Carter’s attempted immigration reforms in the 1970s, López, who was born in San Diego, California, and grew up along the border, produced a poster showing an Indigenous warrior crumpling US immigration reform plans in his left fist while pointing at the viewer with his right index finger to ask the accusatory and still resonant question, “Who’s the illegal alien, pilgrim?” (fig. 9). The broader importance of López’s intervention in the public discourse about Mexican migration is discussed by Laura E. Pérez, who underscores the historical context:  

North America was traversed in both directions, north and south, by ancient trade and the inevitable migrations and cultural exchange that such contact created, as in our own time. Mexican migration today is a continuation of these ancient and humanly natural activities. Viewed through this lens, as some artists enable us to do, racist or cultural intolerance toward poor Mexican Americans and recent Mexican immigrants in particular, expressed in the xenophobic, “Go back where you came from,” is particularly ironic, as Yolanda López expressed in [her] 1978 poster.  

Davalos reads López’s poster as “a cultural intervention against assimilation,” in contrast to the approach taken by many of the previous generation’s leading voices, and as calling forth the community’s sense of agency. “Latinos identify with the angry indigenous man because he inspires resistance to imperialism and racism, not acquiescence.” Like Templeton’s graphic, López’s image continues to be reproduced in the context of ongoing struggles over US immigration policy. It remains compelling to activist Latinx publics “because it proclaims an oppositional consciousness that talks back to power by subverting conventional wisdom and challenging American historical amnesia.”  

Ester Hernández, anticipating the United States’ then forthcoming bicentennial celebrations, also reminded the public of North America’s ancient Indigenous presence dating back thousands of years before colonial powers imposed modern national border lines. In an etching from 1975, she imagined an artist resculpting the Statue of Liberty into Libertad, a totem celebrating Mexicans’ Indigenous heritage. The new Libertad stands on a base of Aztlán, Mexico’s mythical homeland in what is now the southwestern United States (fig. 10). Artist Amalia Mesa-Bains explains that “Aztlán as a site of origin was articulated through artistic expressions that addressed issues of political and social justice. . . . The concept of Aztlán underlies the persistent themes of land and spirit in Chicana/o art and continues to shape current understandings of social space and human geography.”

80. Davalos, Yolanda M. López, 56.
81. Davalos, Yolanda M. López, 55.
In creating Libertad, Hernández says, "My feeling was that this is still native lands," and that she chose to "celebrate the bicentennial with a statement that the United States with time will become brown again. The image is also a statement of claimed agency, as she imagined herself as the artist depicted in the etching, "carving my life and spirit." It is an agency both individual and collective, as the figure of the artist stands for women as change agents and for a larger brown-skinned community reclaiming its space and history. Hernández transformed the graphic’s Mayan stela, originally a representation of a male warrior, into a woman warrior with, in the artist’s words, “chichis [breasts] and all.”

The exploration and representation of indigenismo and Aztlan by Chicano activists and artists were not without contradictions. Efforts by feminists like Ester Hernández to inject consciousness of gender dynamics as well as Indigenous heritage into representations of Chicanismo were not typical of the movement’s dominant cultural politics. In her critical assessment of the politics of representation in the landmark 1990 CARA (Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation) exhibition, Gaspar de Alba wrote, “The problem with Aztlan is that it continues to be dominated by a patriarchal cultural nationalism that embraces the symbolic ideology of indigenismo and restricts its activism to race and class struggles. Gender and sexuality . . . are taboo in the kingdom of Aztlan.” The limited feminist consciousness in prominent artistic representations of Chicano and Mexican immigrant communities was not the only problematic aspect of the movement’s embrace of indigenismo. Like its historic counterpart in the Mexican School of Art that emerged from the Mexican Revolution in the early twentieth century, Chicano indigenismo tended to romanticize and glorify an ancient Indigenous past while revealing considerable ignorance about the realities of present-day Indigenous communities throughout the Americas. Such blind spots in movement consciousness of the era resulted in artistic representations of borders and immigrants that often failed to capture authentic Indigenous and feminist perspectives.

FIGURE 10. Ester Hernández, La Libertad, etching, 18 1/2 × 11 1/2 inches (47 × 29.2 cm), 1975. Used with permission of the artist.

SIGNS FROM THE NEW CENTURY

Nonetheless, the era’s social movements also produced new theorists such as the late Gloria Anzaldúa who brought a powerful intersectional analysis to the border. In Borderlands/La Frontera, Anzaldúa expanded the notion of borders to include those real and imagined seams or wounds between cultures, genders, and sexualities. In the first decades of the twenty-first century, a new generation of activist scholars and artists, some of them undocumented immigrants, has brought these ideas to their work on issues of borders and immigration. In a recent study, for example, Marla Andrea Ramírez employs an intersectional analysis “to examine how race, gender, and class status all served to disqualify Mexicans from US citizenship historically and today.” Ramírez, who as a child came to the United States as an undocumented immigrant with her family, concludes

85. Gaspar de Alba, Chicano Art, 43–45.
86. See McCaughan, Art and Social Movements, especially chapters 3 and 4, for further discussion of the contradictions of indigenismo in Mexican and Chicano art.
87. Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera.

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from her historical legal analysis that “Citizenship is a legal, political, and social construction. It is nothing more than a theory, an abstract, but one that has become powerful and exclusionary, giving way to Mexican illegality. Citizenship and illegality have justified different treatment for women, the working-class, and people of color. Illegality has erased the humanity of those excluded from citizenship. . . .”

In addition to new intellectual work that deepened our understanding, the context in which artists engaged issues of borders and immigration has been altered significantly by demographic changes and innovations in digital media. In terms of demographics, the increasing numbers of migrants from Central America and from Indigenous communities throughout the region made a Mexican American lens on the issues increasingly limited. With regard to the digital revolution and the internet’s social media networks, artists and activists now have the ability to circulate images and messages more broadly, rapidly, and inexpensively than ever before. Following are some examples of artistic representations of immigration that reflect these new theoretical and practical developments.

Young immigrant rights activists and politically engaged artists have been influenced by intersectional analyses of the migrant experience. One of the bravest and most innovative political forces to emerge in recent years is the UndocuQueer movement of undocumented LGBTQ immigrants. Los Angeles–based poet Yosimar Reyes (b. 1988) and Bay Area–based visual artist Julio Salgado (b. 1983) are among its most prominent voices. An intersectional perspective is evident in Reyes’s poem “For Colored Boys Who Speak Softly,” its title a clear nod to Ntozake Shange’s 1975 “for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf.” Reyes speaks to struggles and histories that he believes “transcend the borders,” because “brothers and sisters in Oaxaca, in Chiapas, in the Philippines, in Iraq are resisting this very same system.” Following is an excerpt:

For colored boys who speak softly
I’ll remind the world that centuries ago
we were shamans and healers

90 Like artists of the Chicano movement generation, Reyes draws upon an Indigenous past but does so in order to revere rather than deny his sexuality, which he describes as a “bendición de Omeyotl,”91 a blessing from an Aztec god representing dualities. Even with references to a specific Aztec history, his worldview is not contained by any narrow cultural nationalism, as his references to the Philippines, Iraq, African American poets, “colored boys,” and capitalism make clear. Reyes calls upon “colored boys who speak softly,” who “embody the word queer,” to recognize themselves as “messengers,” who “are a reminder of how colonization has destroyed nuestra cultura and “brainwashed our ancestors into believing that boys like us are a manifestation of the devil.” But he and his boys will not be paralyzed by a history of oppression: “we are people and with the people we stand breaking borders and stereotypes.”92

Reyes and Julio Salgado are close friends and collaborators. Both were born in Mexico, are gay and undocumented. Salgado is also a close friend of Marla Ramírez from their earlier school days in L.A. Theirs is a small, tight circle of fierce and creative activists, veterans of the Dreamers movement of young people without immigration status who were brought to the United States as children and are now fighting to secure legal status. On his website, Salgado explains that his “status as an undocumented, queer artist has fueled the contents of his visual art, which depict key individuals and moments of the DREAM Act and migrant rights movement.”93

Salgado produces digital art, created, according to scholar Juan Ochoa, at the “intersections between queerness, migration, nationalism, gender, and race” and “informed by Chicana feminisms, queer of color critique, and Chicana/o Studies.”94 In addition to his digital art, his website features a blog titled “Illegals in Times of Crisis” and a cartoon series called “Adventures of a Bitter Fag.”95 In 2013 Salgado installed a digital mural that proclaimed “I am UndocuQueer!” on Galería de la Raza’s billboard in

92. Reyes, “For Colored Boys.”
93. Julio Salgado’s website: https://juliosalgadoart.com/about.
95. Julio Salgado’s website: https://juliosalgadoart.com/about.
San Francisco’s heavily immigrant Mission District. The mural featured portraits of six undocumented LGBTQ activists, each of whom wears a T-shirt with a personal statement about the power of this movement. Above their head in both Spanish and English appears the phrase, “The intersection of the undocumented and LGBTQ community.”

Many of Salgado’s graphics combine expressions of righteous militancy and anger with ribald humor, such as the digital print from his *Fuck Your Borders* series in which “illegal faggots for the destruction of borders” are attacking a border wall in an image that might recall for some the tearing down of the Berlin Wall (fig. 11). His work is typically peopled with hip youth of color, of all shades, shapes, sizes, genders, and sexualities. His graphics radiate positive energy, and my experience sharing his work in the classroom suggests the works resonates powerfully with young Latinx and queer activists.

Another example from today’s activist artists is the *Migration Is Beautiful* campaign of Favianna Rodríguez (b. 1978) and CultureStrike, a national arts organization with which both Rodríguez and Salgado work. Rodríguez is the daughter of immigrants with Afro-Peruvian roots. CultureStrike describes its mission as “empower[ing] artists to dream big, disrupt the status quo, and envision a truly just world rooted in shared humanity” with “art and collaborative projects [that] address migration, global politics, economic injustice, patriarchy, and sexual freedom.” As explained on the organization’s website, the Migration Is Beautiful project:

began at [a] retreat in August 2012, where . . . Favianna Rodríguez led an interactive design session with artists and activists. The butterfly image and tagline quickly emerged as an approachable way to reimagine borders as permeable rather than militarized, reinvigorating a metaphor that many migrants have looked to for generations. CultureStrike quickly started commissioning artworks incorporating the butterfly and made them available for reuse and remixing.

Just one month later, the butterfly began appearing on costumes, buses, banners, and murals in border towns and cities all across the country. Since then, the *Migration is Beautiful* butterfly image has appeared at mass demonstrations across the country, from Los Angeles to Tucson, Charlotte, and Washington, DC.96

The campaign’s most frequently reproduced image was a monarch butterfly with wings outlined in bold black against a bright yellow, sun-like background. Inside each wing is one of Rodríguez’s distinctive profiles of a face with prominent nose characteristic of Incan or Mayan people. Beneath the butterfly are the words “migration is beautiful” (fig. 11). In another version, the butterfly is printed on a yellow rhombus shape, like a crosswalk street-sign; above the butterfly are the words “butterfly crossing” and underneath are the words “migration is natural.”

96. CultureStrike, “Migration Is Beautiful,” https://www.culturestrike.org/project/migration-is-beautiful. The website “Staff” page describes Favianna Rodriguez as “a transnational interdisciplinary artist and cultural organizer on a mission to create profound and lasting social change in the world. Her art and collaborative projects address migration, global politics, economic injustice, patriarchy, and sexual freedom. Favianna lectures globally on the power of art, cultural organizing and technology to inspire social change, and leads art workshops at schools around the country.” https://www.culturestrike.org/staff

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In a three-part video, *Voice of Art—Migration Is Beautiful*, filmmakers follow Rodríguez and activists on the frontlines of immigration battles in Arizona and on an “Undocubus” arriving in Charlotte, North Carolina, taking advantage of media coverage of the National Democratic Party Convention to make their case for immigrant rights. Throughout the videos, the Migration is Beautiful butterfly can be seen in all of the group’s actions. In the months after CultureStrike began to circulate the image of the monarch butterfly, whose annual transnational migrations have long fascinated the public, the image quickly seemed ever present. Protesters carried it in their demonstrations and others posed for selfies in front of a panel painted with giant monarch wings, thereby turning themselves into beautiful, migrating butterflies. Julio Salgado made a self-portrait with the butterfly wings, titled *A Volar Se Ha Dicho* (to fly it’s been said). The words “I Exist/Yo Existo” appear across his bare chest, and sections of the wings are labeled with words in English and Spanish referencing different elements of Salgado’s identity: migrant, queerness, love, family, unity, peace.

Significant changes in the composition of the people now seeking to migrate to the United States have precipitated related shifts in the ways immigrant rights activists and artists think, act, and create. Ana Cecilia Pérez is a prominent immigrant rights and antiracism activist whose family migrated from El Salvador to California more than forty years ago, in her words, “to escape certain death at the hands of the Salvadoran military that was being funded by the U.S. to wage a war against the poor in El Salvador.” Since that time, the numbers of Central Americans—now often entire families—trying to escape violence and poverty by fleeing to the United States has increased significantly. Pérez notes that today, “Most of the people arriving at the U.S. border as part of a bold exodus are historically excluded Central Americans.” Pérez emphasizes that many of them are from Indigenous communities, including Black Indigenous who “suffer from discrimination and exclusion” in the region. She argues that these recent migrants are “revolutionizing the way people migrate south to north”; instead of trying to sneak quietly across the border in small groups, many are organizing into caravans and “loudly demanding to be seen and to have their legal rights to seek political asylum . . . as a class of dispossessed people.” When Pérez writes about “my people,” she refers not simply to Latinxs, or Central Americans, or Salvadorans. “I want us all to remember who we really are . . . and say the names of our ancestral peoples. We are NAHUAT PIPIL, CHORITTS, POTOMAN, POTON, ULUA, CHOROTE, TEGA AND LENCA PEOPLE . . .”

The importance Ana Cecilia Pérez gives to recognizing the continued presence of Indigenous communities in the region today signals deepening consciousness about the importance of Indigenous cultures among today’s activists. The very concept of national “borders” has been challenged by the increasing visibility in migrant communities of people who identify deeply with their Indigenous traditions, perhaps more than they do with their nation of origin.


100. Pérez, “Refusing to Hide.”

On the activist front is the example of the Frente Indigena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB, Binational Front of Indigenous Organizations), composed largely of Oaxacan Indigenous migrants. In collaboration with local civic organizations in California and Oregon cities and towns, they re-create musical, dance, and culinary traditions from their Indigenous Oaxacan hometowns, such as the Guálagozta, an annual cultural celebration.

While Zapotec and Mixtec communities organize across national borders, graphic artist Jesús Barraza erases national borders altogether in his map of the North and South American continents labeled “Tierra Indígena.” Printed on handmade amate paper in the ancient tradition of Indigenous communities, the image is a simple, immediately decipherable statement about the Americas as Indian land, historically and in the present. Barraza’s statement is far more pan-Indian than the Chicano movement’s concept of Aztlan.

Cultural borders between various Indigenous communities appear increasingly permeable within activist circles. For example, people from many ethnic groups, including from several Latinx communities, supported the Standing Rock Sioux in their fight against the Dakota Access Pipeline. Dignidad Rebelde created a poster, “Solidarity With Standing Rock,” that was carried by many demonstrators, hung in windows of people’s homes, and turned into a popular button. Some queer Latinxs of Indigenous heritage now participate with American Indians in the annual powwow of BAAITS (Bay Area American Indian Two Spirit), embracing creative expressive forms of music, dance, and healing.

One core strand of the early Chicano movement was a reclaimation of Indigenous identity. Mesa-Bains has written about Chicano groups who “studied Aztec philosophy” and idealized “the Toltec, Aztec, and Maya cultures,” sometimes “based on limited anthropological knowledge.” Despite such shortcomings, Mesa-Bains argues that connecting with an Indigenous history “at the time served the spiritual and political needs” of that generation, including, for some, “a return to some of the spiritual and healing practices long hidden within Mexican communities in the United States.” Today, with the increased numbers and visibility of Indigenous people in Mexican and Central American immigrant communities in the United States, the connections to knowledgeable Indigenous elders is more immediate and intimate than books in university libraries.

There is evidence that this more intimate connection to Indigenous cultures is informing creative expressions of a living Mesoamerican migrant identity, including a renewed and perhaps deeper engagement with spiritual activism based on decolonizing Latinx communities’ healing and dietary practices. Groups such as Curanderas Sin Fronteras cross the border southbound to undertake serious study with veteran curanderas (Indigenous healers), such as Enriqueta Contreras in Oaxaca who gives workshops to people from Latinx migrant communities in the United States. Sandra Pacheco, cofounder of Curanderas Sin Fronteras, explained, “we have a commitment to tending to the health and well-being of our communities through traditional medicine.” She developed relationships over the past six years with Zapotec healers in Oaxaca to provide immersive experience with traditional medicine. Pacheco also organizes workshops in the United States to share Indigenous healing practices. Such practices often involve performative rituals incorporating poetic supplications, music, and dance—what we might regard as arts of healing for traumatized, colonized bodies.

A remarkable book by professors Luz Calvo and Carrión Rueda Esquivel bridges the divides between scholarly research, cultural activism, personal spiritual quest, and art. Elegantly designed and filled with beautiful photos and graphic illustrations, Decolonize Your Diet: Plant-Based Mexican-American Recipes for Health and Healing is a work of art. The recipes and texts are meticulously researched. The project was inspired by Calvo’s battle with cancer that led her to research the health benefits of the traditional Mesoamerican diet. They began “with the premise that we are living with the legacy of over 500 years of colonization of the Americas.” Their eloquently personal testimonies turn it into a sort of manifesto for much needed spiritual healing. “For us, spirituality is about connecting each of us...
to our common humanity, to our ancestors, to our elders, to our youth, to our earth, to a larger purpose.”

I would like to suggest that projects like Curanderas Sin Fronteras and Decolonize Your Diet can be understood as forms of creative discourse that allow their practitioners to constitute themselves as “new kinds of subjects,” to borrow Stuart Hall’s phrase. Many in the previous generation of Latinx activists expressed an existential dislocation captured in the phrase “ni de aquí, ni de allá”—neither from here or there—a sometimes painful sense of alienation from both the United States and one’s ancestral homeland. In an essay on Mexican and Chicana/o transnational performance, Laura G. Gutiérrez describes a shift she has noted in recent performance art from the “double unbelonging” of ni de aquí, ni de allá to a sense of “double belonging” signified by the phrase de aquí y de allá (from here and there), perhaps conveying a new level of comfort with a transnational identity located simultaneously in both the ancestral and adopted homelands.

Veteran Chicana activist Olga Talamante made a similar observation about the increasingly common ease of claiming to be de aquí y de allá during a panel discussion at an exhibition of photography from the Chicano movement, whose participants often experienced a sense of “double unbelonging.” This phenomenon perhaps represents a significant change in how individuals and communities are constituting themselves as subjects less constrained than previous generations by the practical and discursive presence of borders.

Two steps forward, one step back. With Trump’s unexpected rise to power, a new wave of racist, anti-immigrant policies and hateful discourse presents new challenges for Latinx migrants. Trump’s policies have been met with more traditional political protest as well as with artistic responses reflecting the cultural politics of the current generation of activists. Calls for a renewed spirituality and humanity have accompanied the widespread public outrage over the Trump administration’s inhumane treatment of Central American migrants seeking asylum, especially the separating of children from their families and the caging of tens of thousands of migrants in deplorable conditions in detention camps.

Yosimar Reyes wrote two poems in June 2019 following circulation in the media of a photo of a drowned migrant father and baby daughter. In one poem Reyes asked, “how spiritually bankrupt/must one be/to ignore/to sit there and say, ‘they should have done it the legal way’.” In a second poem clearly addressed to a white, nonimmigrant public, Reyes signals the limits of his willingness to engage that public, and his reference to his own border crossing “on my Grandfather’s back” makes the issue personal.

I have no interest
in reminding you of your humanity
no interest in showing images
of our suffering
for you to believe
We have already lost too much
Since the day I arrived in 1991
on my Grandfather’s back
you received us with hostility
saw prey in us
try to devour us

The question of spirituality is central to other creative responses to the horrors perpetrated on the migrants, as artists appealed to people’s ability to recognize our common humanity. In December of 2018, two Guatemalan children died while in the custody of the United States Customs and Border Protection. Seven-year-old Jakelin Caal and eight-year-old Felipe Gómez Alonzo were among the thousands of Central American migrants who made the treacherous journey north in an effort to escape the violence and poverty in their homelands. The children were apprehended at the border as part of the Trump administration’s highly publicized campaign to prevent asylum seekers from entering the United States to process their claims.

Within days of Jakelin’s and Felipe’s death, San Francisco–based photographer and collage artist Ruben Guadalupe Marquez created two portraits of the children that quickly spread via Instagram and Facebook among


111. Yosimar Reyes, poem posted on Facebook and Instagram, June 16, 2019, used with permission of the author.

immigrant rights activists and began to appear on signs carried in protests against the Trump administration’s inhumane policies. Rather than emphasize the violence and inhumanity of their death, Marquez crafted colorful, beatific images of Jakelin and Felipe. The artist’s portraits evoke for this author traditional images of the popular Santo Niño de Atocha, a child saint typically portrayed as kind and gentle, carrying a gourd of water to offer weary travelers. The Santo Niño is associated with health and healing, is believed by many to protect migrants, and is popular in the border region. In Marquez’s images, Jakelin and Felipe appear as child saints emanating halos or auras, surrounded by symbols of life-affirming flowers and leaves, an aesthetic seen throughout his work. On his website, Marquez describes his work as “heavily influenced by botanical elements and classic color palettes to find balance . . . melding the past and present through . . . use of color, shape and subject matter.” In the midst of our collective horror, sadness, and outrage, Marquez’s portraits seem to call for spiritual reflection about the inhumanity of United States’ treatment of migrants. (figs. 13 and 14.)

Wanting to send “the message to our immigrant children, youth, and families that we will not abandon them, that we love them and that we will stand guard for them,” a group of musical artists and activists came together in 2018 to organize the “Nuestros Niños Son Sagrados—Our Children Are Sacred” song project. The group plans to “produce a video using and documenting the collective power of singer/songwriters, children, videographers, visual artists and the movement.” Following is an excerpt from


114. https://www.rubenmarquez.net/info (accessed March 9, 2019). This site is no longer available, but Ruben Guadalupe Marquez can be found on Facebook and Instagram.

115. The project was described in an email to the author from María X. Martínez, July 4, 2019.

“We Didn’t Cross the Border, the Border Crossed Us” 29
the song written by Francisco Herrera in collaboration with Diana Gameros that inspired the project.

Cuanta dulzura y valor de una madre y su niño
que migró y camina hacia una vida mejor
If this is really the home of the brave
May our gates now be open
for you had the courage to walk
through the perilous fight
with a child in your arms
Our children are sacred/nuestros niños son sagrados
Our children are beautiful/bellos son
Our children are a gift/son el regalo más amado
Our children are sacred/sagrados son

At a time when the traditional terrains of rational politics and policy seem to many to be unreliable platforms for social change, artists like these turn to sacred and spiritual imaginaries for plotting routes back to our common humanity. They call forth visions of our children and our ancestors to connect past, present, and future in a search for solid ground on which to resist. “I stand firm/with the spirit of grandfather next to me,” wrote Yosimar Reyes. “I stand firm/because I have already lost too much.”

CONCLUSIONS
This journey through a history with and of images has allowed us to contemplate multiple dimensions of the cultural politics involved in shaping discourse about the US-Mexico border and immigration. We’ve identified various moods and attitudes conveyed by the artist’s gaze or voice: the melancholic sympathy for anonymous deportees in Woody Guthrie’s song, the discomfort in the exposé of cruelty in a photo by Leonard Nadel, the militancy of calls to action in graphics by Malakías Montoya, the ethnic pride of “Brown-Eyed Children of the Sun,” the cutting irony in Yolanda López’s Who’s the Illegal Alien, Pilgrim?, the ribald humor in Julio Salgado’s Fuck Your Borders, the self-recognition of beauty in Favianna Rodriguez’s migrating butterfly, the prayerful quality of the calls for spiritual healing in Ruben Guadalupe Marquez’s portraits.

We’ve seen how sociopolitical and personal contexts informed the representations produced: the caution engendered by anticommunism and assimilationism, the storm-the-barricades bravado generated by a social movement, the outrage provoked by cruel government policies, the childhood experiences that shaped the worldview of future printmakers and poets, the demographic changes that widened the lens through which issues are viewed, the intimate presence of Indigenous elders in a community.

Our travel through time has also highlighted the importance of technological change in the production and distribution of images: from a ballad perhaps only performed live to friends and family around a kitchen table or campfire, to photos and graphics seen in print media and recordings heard on the radio, to the digital image or text made instantaneously available to millions via the internet’s social media.

The representations that socially engaged artists create—whether in the form of visual art, music, poetry, or performative rituals—are important data for understanding the historical processes of social change. Some of the representations they produce also have the potential to constitute new social subjects who feel, think, and act in new ways: subjects who feel proud of their community or empathy for someone else, who make new analytical connections about global social forces, who join a protest, offer a hand in support, or learn new ways of self- and community-healing. The Chicano movement beginning in the 1960s and more recent immigrant rights activism informed by intersectional analyses of race, class, gender, and sexuality inspired activist artists to create work far removed from the sad and tragic images of Mexican migrants produced by early twentieth-century artists like Diego Rivera and Woody Guthrie. As Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and other Latinx immigrants developed social movements espousing new discourses of ethnic pride, civil and human rights, and militant demands for equality and justice, artists identified with those communities contributed to shifting public discourse and action about immigration and the border. Today we see twenty-first-century artists further deepening and broadening the vision of immigration and the frontera with defiantly celebratory, border-crossing butterflies; unapologetic UndocuQueer rebels; confident assertions of being simultaneously de aquí y de allá; more intimate interactions with Indigenous peoples; and spiritual calls for

116. Collaborators on this project include singer/songwriters Francisco Herrera, Diana Gameros, Liliana Herrera, producer Greg Landau, videographer Gustavo Vásquez, and Organizing Committee members Alberto Pérez-Rendón, Chelis López, Lariza V. Dugan-Cuadra, Linda Lucero, María X. Martínez, Olga Talamante, and Rose Arrieta.

117. Yosimar Reyes, poem posted on Facebook and Instagram, June 26, 2019, used with permission of the author.
reclaiming our humanity. Only history will reveal how effective today’s artists have been in creating representations powerful enough to turn back the United States’ latest tide of virulent racism and xenophobia.

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