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## Moving Out/Moving In

Mirta Tocci, Emerson College

"Moving Out/Moving In: A Multidisciplinary Exploration of the Immigrant Experience" is a service-learning course created and taught by Mirta Tocci in the Institute for Liberal Arts & Interdisciplinary Studies at Emerson College in Boston, MA. Tocci describes the five-year history of her collaboration with community partner, Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción, focusing on how Emerson students' study of the psychosocial effects of the immigrant experience inspires art projects created by Emerson students and Latino children aged 5-12 enrolled in IBA's Cacique after-school program.

*I am a visual artist and I know how to be an immigrant. In the late 1970s I fled the Dirty War of my native Buenos Aires, Argentina, and moved to Barcelona, Spain. In 1994, I left Barcelona to exhibit work and teach in the United States. From my own experience, I know what it is to move to a new country, how my body responds to living in a land that is not my own, to speak a language that is not my mother tongue, to experience a dominant culture that has no connection to my past. I know what it means to be invisible. And the force that it takes to become visible. This experience has been the subject of many artworks I have created and shown in museums and galleries in Argentina, Europe and the United States. For these reasons, I believe I am ready to explore this subject with Emerson students and with members of the Latino immigrant community here in Boston. (Tocci)*



This is the course rationale that I wrote in 2003 for IN405, “Moving Out/Moving In: A Multidisciplinary Exploration of the Immigrant Experience,” the service-learning course I have been teaching each year since Fall 2004 at Emerson College in Boston MA, where I am Artist in Residence in the Institute for Liberal Arts and Interdisciplinary Studies. When I left Argentina, the Dirty War, *la Guerra Sucia*, was raging, although I was not then aware of its scope and the extent of its barbarity. I had been out of art school for just a few years when I was advised by teachers and friends that the drawings I was making and exhibiting could be considered “dangerous,” and so I left my family, my friends and my beautiful city to be safe—and free. In the next several years Argentine police and death squads, engaging in what they called a “reorganization of society” would kidnap, torture and murder tens of thousands of suspected socialist dissidents, mostly young people like me, many of them students. Initially they threw the bodies of many of those killed in Rio de la Plata, but the currents of the river brought them “home.” Then the death squads dumped the bodies in the Atlantic Ocean so that they could never be found; the dead became known as “the disappeared ones,” *los desaparecidos*. For me, it would be eight years before I returned “home,” eight years before I saw my parents again and even then I returned as a citizen of Spain.

As I read my course rationale today, I remember those eight years with emotion, but now, after having explored the immigrant experience for five years with Latino children here in Boston, I am filled with the emotions of many journeys beyond my own. From my Emerson students I know, as well, something more about the experience of those whose homelands became my new homes. From the breadth and depth of our collective exploration, I now know the complexity of the questions we ask about ourselves and “the other” and how vital it is to meet face to face and to speak from the heart as a foundation for creating empathy, understanding, connection and change.



What is identity? What does it mean to be visible? What are the real and imaginary journeys that comprise our individual and collective maps of experience? What is “remembered” by first, second, third generations of immigrants as their history? Do we “remember” a world we never lived in? How do our memories extend beyond what is personally experienced to the memories of our ancestors passed down, and then integrated, even if not experienced, into our consciousness? What is it to live on the border between two countries, two cultures, two identities? In “Moving Out/Moving In” we explore questions provoked by “moving out” of one’s own country and “moving in” to another, moving out of and into one’s self, one’s culture, one’s community. We engage in an interdisciplinary study of these questions and express our discoveries through multidisciplinary art in a very real, artistic interaction with children of immigrants aged 5-12 enrolled in the Cacique Youth Learning Center, an after-school program offered by IBA (*Inquilinos Boriquas en Acción*) in Villa Victoria, a 20-acre, 435-unit housing community of 3,000 multicultural residents in Boston’s gentrified and affluent South End neighborhood. We move out of our comfort zones, away from what is familiar, and into connection with children whose backgrounds, culture, class and community are new to us.

Most of the residents of Villa Victoria are low-income and either first- or second-generation Puerto Rican. Most of my Emerson students are affluent, sixth-generation American citizens of mixed European ancestry. “The Villa” is just a few short blocks from where I live and a fifteen-minute walk from the Emerson campus. The social and cultural distances, however, are far greater. Ours is a story about shortening the distances between us, building bridges between communities and celebrating what we can learn and create together.

We come to know each other by making art together, not just because I am a visual artist, but also because we work with many very young children who do not or cannot express the complexities of their experience in words alone. Further, many of the older children we work



with are more capable of expressing complex thoughts in Spanish, a language that many of their Emerson student collaborators do not know. As Elliott Eisner, Lee Jacks Professor of Education at Stanford University, notes in his “Ten Lessons the Arts Teach,”

The arts teach children that despite the cultural bias that assigns to literal language and number a virtual monopoly on how understanding is advanced, the arts make vivid the fact that neither words in their literal form nor number exhaust what we can know. Put simply, the limits of our language do not define the limits of our cognition. As Michael Polyanyi says, ‘we know more than we can tell.’<sup>10</sup>

We explore through art also because, as Eisner notes,

Work in the arts teaches children to pay attention to qualitative relationships; that problems can have more than one solution and that questions can have more than one answer; the arts celebrate multiple perspectives; they teach children the art, not only of looking, but also of seeing, not only of listening, but also of hearing; they teach students to think through and within a material; the arts enable us to have experience we can have from no other source and through such experience to discover the range and variety of what we are capable of feeling. The arts are about recreation, the emphasis on ‘re-creation.’ What is being recreated? Oneself. One of the great aims of education is to make it possible for people to be engaged in the process of creating themselves.<sup>10-13</sup>

Further, the experience of making art together is social and collaborative. Our work is play; while we work we talk, sing, move and dance. Finally, I believe that our subject is inextricably linked to our process; in the words of the German visual artist Joseph Beuys, “To make people free is the aim of art, therefore art for me is the science of freedom.” (Beuys)



## Community Partners

Our community partner for “Moving Out/Moving In” is IBA, *Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción* (Puerto Rican Tenants in Action), “a dynamic community building agency dedicated to increasing the social and economical power of individuals through education, economic development, technology and arts programming that builds safe, vibrant and culturally diverse affordable housing communities.” (IBA website)

In addition to managing Villa Victoria, IBA’s full-time, professional staff provides services for youth, families, adults, and the elderly through community organizing, civic, health, peer leadership, cultural and educational programs, among them the Cacique Youth Learning Center, “a licensed after-school program that empowers young people through homework assistance, technology training and literacy development; health, safety & recreational activities, civic involvement; and the arts:

Emphasizing project-based experiential, interdisciplinary learning activities, the program helps youth develop their capacity to think critically, solve problems creatively, excel in school, and become civically engaged. Cacique empowers low-income youth, particularly Latinos, with the necessary opportunities, skills, and supports needed by youth to succeed in school and in their personal lives.” (IBA website)

For IBA, civic engagement is both a learning objective and an essential part of its history and identity.

In 1968, predominantly low-income Puerto Rican community activists successfully stared down the bulldozers of urban renewal and strategically organized to gain control over the development of their neighborhood. These actions, which led to the formation of the Villa Victoria community, are seminal moments in the history of affordable housing, civil rights, community organizing and Latinos in the City of Boston. Social historians recently have



stressed the importance of documenting the history of marginalized groups in mainstream histories that have often excluded them.

Boston's history as "the cradle of liberty" is incomplete without the full inclusion of the history of Latinos in the city and the formation of Villa Victoria is central to that history. (IBA website)

Civic engagement is also central to the mission of Emerson College,

to educate students to assume positions of leadership in communication and the arts and to advance scholarship and creative work that brings innovation, depth, and diversity to these disciplines. This mission is informed by core liberal arts values that seek to promote civic engagement, encourage ethical practices, foster respect for human diversity, and inspire students to create and communicate with clarity, integrity and conviction. (Emerson catalogue 2)

Since Fall 2007 our partnership has been further enhanced by our joint investment in a grant to IBA from the Linde Foundation to support the design and execution of programs and projects that develop increased knowledge of and skills in the visual arts and improved life-skills (namely language skill development, academic success, self-esteem, self-efficacy, leadership and belief in helping others; critical thinking, communication, ability to set and meet goals and develop self-discipline, perception and adaptability, teamwork, risk-taking, decision-making and perseverance). A final goal is the development of cultural competency, the capacity and/or knowledge to be aware of the various ways that culture shapes our individual, family, community and societal lives. The curriculum and pedagogy of "Moving Out/Moving In" are designed to fulfill these objectives.

### Course Description

Each year since Fall 2004 between 16 and 25 Emerson students from a broad range of majors and disciplines (Performing Arts,



Communications, Film, Writing, Journalism) have enrolled in IN405 to work with between 10 and 14 children, aged 5 to 12, from the Cacique Youth Learning Center.

Students enrolled in "Moving Out/Moving In" begin their exploration researching IBA/Villa Victoria, cultural identity, Latino identity, and the immigrant experience. The three principle texts for the course are *Children of Immigration* (Carola and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco: Harvard University Press, 2001), *Latinos: A Biography of the People* (Earl Shorris: W. W. Norton, 1992) and *Ethnicities: Children of Immigrants in America* (Rubén G. Rumbaut and Alejandro Portes, ed.: University of California Press, 2001). We explore the subject of immigration in interdisciplinary study, beginning first with our readings, research, class presentations and intense discussions and then in our creative work and play with the children, which consists of weekly meetings at the Cacique Youth Learning Center making artistic projects together organized around six themes we explore in our research: Identity; To Be Visible; The Real Journey; The Imaginary Journey; The Community of Memory; The Map of Experience. At the end of the course we host an exhibition or a performance that invites our communities to share in our experience. Our work together is organic—informed and inspired by research but expressed or embodied in physical form, either in a work of art and/or in performance; its best expression is experiential, social, physical and immediate. The exercises we do and the art we make change from semester to semester, but the themes, the questions and their progression have remained basically the same.

### Identity: Who Am I?

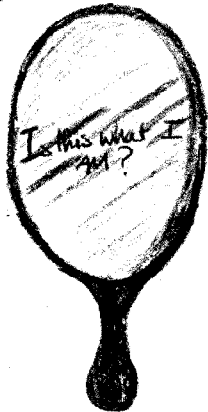
We begin our exploration together with exercises focused on the subject of identity. Children of immigrants "forge complex and multiply determined identities that resist easy generalizations." (Suárez-Orozcos1) They must shift among several identities, from that of their specific country of origin to what it means to be "American," moving from the



gender, racial and class identifications of one culture to another, from one language to another. (Zentella 321)

11/23/24

What do I look like?



Many aspects of the immigrant experience have a negative impact on identity formation in these children: ethnic stereotyping, bicultural stress, social marginalization (Suárez-Orozcos 66-123, Stavans 1-30, Shorris 146-171, Portes and Rumbaut 147-191) and what the Suárez-Orozcos term “social mirroring,” the (predominantly hostile and negative) reflections mirrored back to the children of immigrants by others in their social spheres:

W.E.B. DuBois beautifully articulated this challenge of what he termed ‘double-consciousness’ – a ‘sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in . . . contempt and pity . . . .’ Philosopher Charles Taylor notes [*Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (1994)]: ‘A person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.’ When the expectations are of sloth, irresponsibility, low intelligence, and even danger, the outcome can be discouragement. When these reflections are received in a number of mirrors including the media, the classroom, and the street, the outcome can be psychological devastation. (99)



We begin our initial session together mindful of these issues. We start with name games followed by five-minute “Me” performances presented for the children by the Emerson students. We pass

out boxes full of art supplies, each with a child’s name on it. We draw nametags and then create working groups, each with a mix of children and Emerson students; each group then chooses their own team name and identity.

We then proceed to photograph and interview each other. The simple act of taking photographs communicates a positive “mirror,” the sense that we see and wish



to be seen by each other, that we value what we see to the extent that we wish to record, preserve and display images of each other. Taped interviews from prepared questions about our respective families, food,



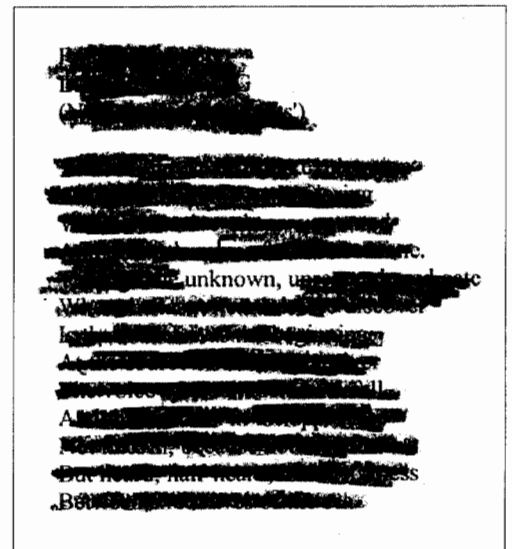
music, holidays, rituals and traditions further communicate the desire to listen, the need to be heard and the value of our respective “voices” and experiences.

In the next session we all fill out questionnaires, citing our favorite activities, song lyrics and clothing. We then use these questionnaires to “act out” each other; each of these performances ends with the question “Who am I?” The whole group guesses until they guess correctly the identity of the person who filled out the initial questionnaire. We then draw and paint “Who Am I?”

In the third session on identity we talk about and draw pictures that describe our social interactions in our neighborhoods, schools and on the street. These conversations inevitably lead to depictions of the cultural stresses and negative kinds of social mirroring the Suárez-Orozcos and others define, which, in turn, become the subjects of our art.

### To Be Visible: Do You See Me?

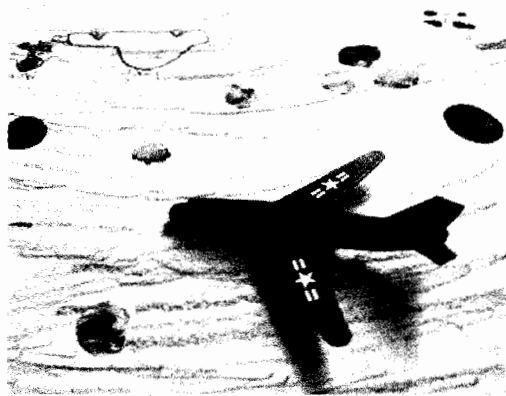
Many children of immigrants feel invisible. The fact that a vast multiplicity of nationalities and ethnicities, unknown and unseen by “the other,” is lumped together under the headings of “Latino” or “Hispanic,” terms that are themselves misunderstood and misused by most Americans, confirms this sense of not being seen or known. (Sanchez 45-57, Zentella 321-334, Portes





and Rumbaut 1-19) The relative paucity of working class Latinos in the media, on network television, in movies and advertisements underscores the sensation of somehow being here but not being here. Subtle behavior, such as a listener's moving away after hearing Spanish or the first sounds of accented speech or the inability of "the other" to pronounce one's name, further isolate the child and contribute to a feeling of loneliness and invisibility. As we work, our goal is to learn about and celebrate each other's individuality, ethnicity and culture. We invariably learn a little Spanish from the children who wish to teach us and we focus on seeing and listening intently to each child.

### **The Real Journey: Where Did I Come From? How Did I Get Here?**



There are as many stories of migration as there are immigrants. In her premier immigrant biography chronicling her family's migration from Russia to Boston in the 1890s, Mary Antin wrote, "I wish I knew some other way to render the mental life of the immigrant child of

reasoning age . . . . What the child thinks and feels is a reflection of the hopes, desires, and purposes of the parents who brought him overseas, no matter how precocious and independent the child may be." (198) We render this "mental life" in pictures. Many of the children we work with were born here and have no experience or memory of their families' journeys. We ask them to ask their parents how they got here and why, what mode of transportation they took, what routes they traveled and whom they met along the way. Then we "map" their trips.



### **The Imaginary Journey: I've Never Been to the Place I Come From. What Is It Like?**

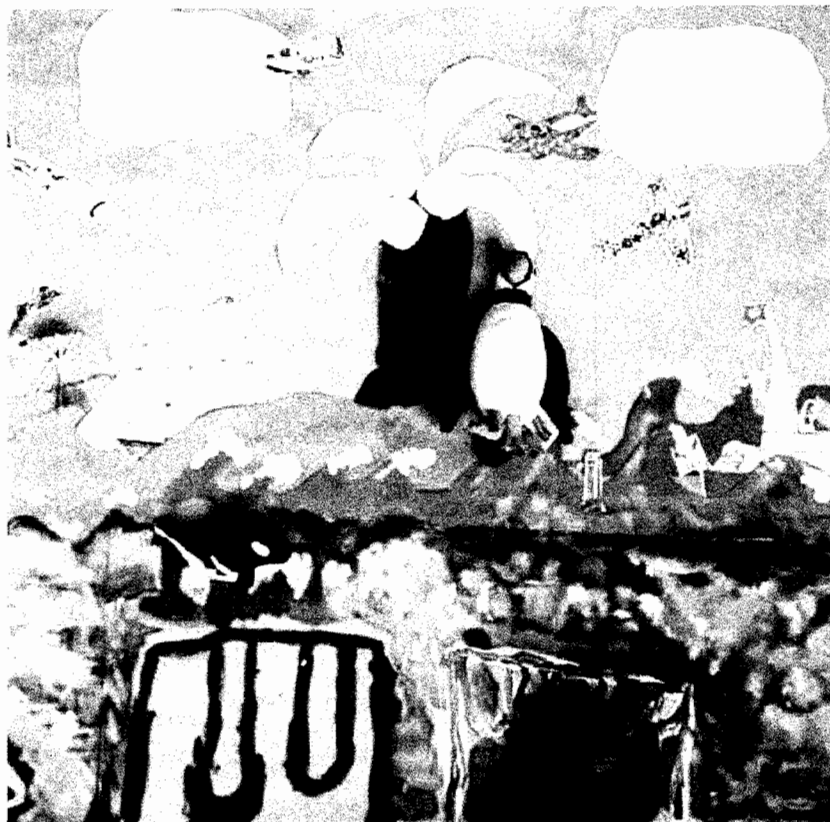
"Ethnic identity is, in part, a way of answering the question, 'Where do I come from?'" (Portes and Rumbaut 161) Mapping the "Real Journey" becomes our entrée into imagining a homeland that most of the children have never seen; if they have visited the country of their ancestors, they have done so as small children, and then only for the length of a school vacation or holiday. We travel to



their homelands in our imaginations, asking the following questions: What country are you from? What does this country look like? What is the landscape? What are the colors of this country? Are you in the mountains? Near the sea? A river? In the desert? In the city? What do you smell? What do you taste? What is the food like? What does it sound like? What language are the people speaking? What phrases do you hear? What animals are there? Birds? Is it hot there? Cold? Crowded? Isolated? We then paint a picture of this place. We travel to and from that place.

The act of imagining an unknown place is central to the immigrant experience. Earl Shorris writes, "Before a person can become an emigrant, he must first become expert in the study of his own condition, for emigration is made of despair and dreams, despair over life at home and dreams of life in another place. These dreams of emigrants are of





times and places so distant that they pass through abstraction to become real again, as do fairy tales or visions of gold.” (131) The children of immigrants also dream of “life in another place,” but that place is often their homeland, no less imbued with magic than their parents’ and grandparents’ dreams of the United States. The Cuban-American poet Gustavo Pérez-Firmat notes, “My children, who were born in this country of Cuban parents and in whom I have tried to inculcate some sort of *cubanía*, are American through and through. They can be ‘saved’ from their Americanness no more than my parents can be ‘saved’ from their Cubanness . . . Like other second-generation immigrants, they maintain a

connection to their parents’ homeland, but it is a bond forged by my experiences rather than their own. For my children Cuba is an enduring, perhaps an endearing, fiction. Cuba is for them as ethereal as the smoke and as persistent as the smell from their grandfather’s cigars.” (7)



### **The Community of Memory; What Do We All Remember? What Do We Carry With Us?**

In *Habits of the Heart* the sociologist Robert Bellah defines “community” as “a group of people who are socially interdependent and who share certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it. It always has a history and so is also a community of memory, defined in part by its past and its memory of its past.” (333) We work with our “community of memory” when we explore where we came from, why we emigrated and what happened to us on our journeys. In his memoir *Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation* the Mexican-American filmmaker and writer John Phillip Santos recalled, “I wanted to bind Texas and Mexico together like a raft strong enough to float out onto the ocean of time, with our past trailing in the wake behind us like a comet trail of memories.” (5)





The residents of Villa Victoria are themselves a community, defined in part by the commonality of their experiences as immigrants, by shared ethnic roots and cultural practices, by the unique history of the Villa itself and by the present-day programs and celebrations that bring their community together; with its five-year history, “Moving Out/Moving In” is now a part of the Villa’s community of memory.

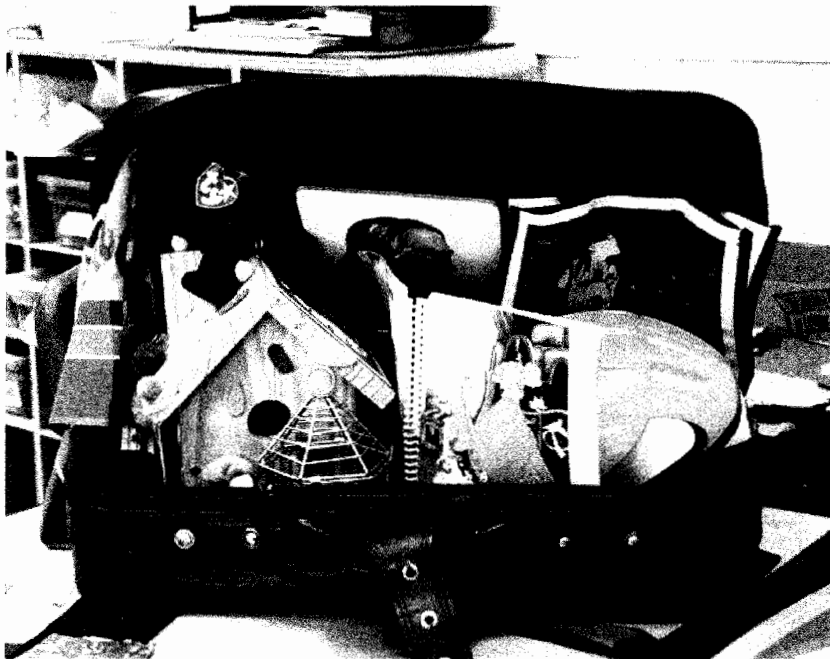
Building on our work with “real” and “imaginary” journeys, we explore our community of memory by making “containers of memories” from suitcases that serve as the repositories of our experiences, desires, hopes and dreams; they are also metaphors for what we carry with us when we “move,” what gives us the courage, strength and inspiration to change and grow, to create our authentic selves in a new world. We work with objects to stimulate our individual memories and then place these objects in our group’s suitcase, which takes on new meaning as an expression of the group’s “community of memory.”

#### Exercise: The Container of Memories

- Each group chooses a suitcase to hold their memories.
- Everyone in the group chooses an object (from a bag of objects provided by the Instructor) for which he/she has an affinity or a connection.
- With ONE Emerson student in the group acting as “Scribe,” ANOTHER asks each member of the group WHAT the object provokes them to remember and WHY the object evokes this memory. Is it the color, shape, form or significance of the object that causes you to recall something? Or some other quality of the object? When it is the next person’s turn to describe his/her object, A DIFFERENT Emerson student in the group takes on the role of “Scribe” and writes down what he/she says. We continue in this fashion, passing the responsibility of Scribe among all of the Emerson students in the group.



• After each member of the group has talked about his/her object(s) and memories, we work together to place the objects in the suitcase or fasten the objects to the suitcase in a way that the group agrees communicates their collective sense of the relationship among these objects. We then make individual drawings and paintings, choose and write down fragments of text from our interviews, cut images from magazines, etc., that communicate more of our individual memories or indicate

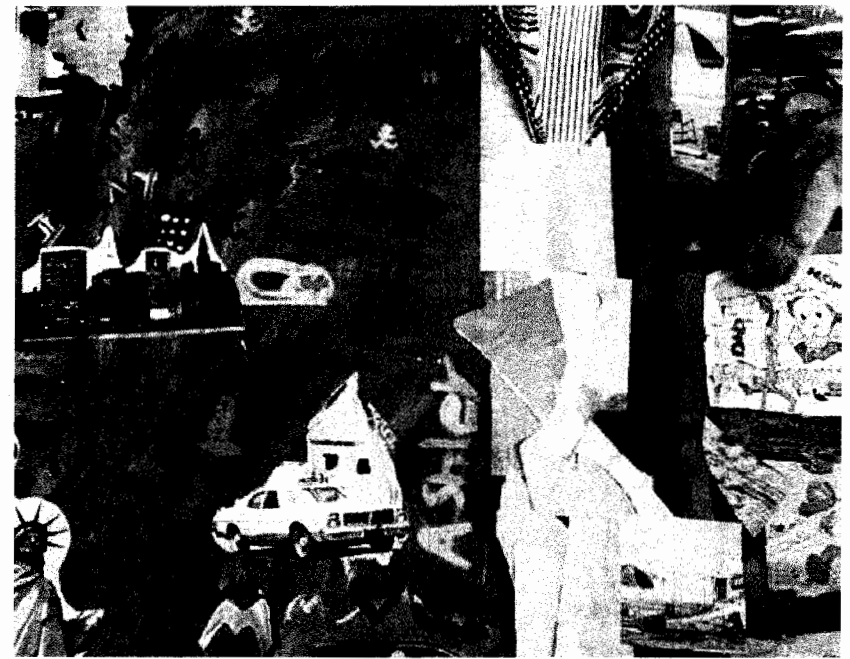


what we carry with us as we move. We then place or attach these elements in/to the suitcase, making the “container” an art object.

• We then leave our suitcase and “travel” to see each of our neighbor’s suitcases. We talk with each other about what we see. Each group then talks about what they’ve made.

### **The Map of Experience: What Do We Know From Where We’ve Been?**

In her astonishing memoir *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, the Polish-American writer Eva Hoffman offers a passionate argument against the notion of a universal reality: “There’s a world out there; there are worlds. There are shapes of sensibility incommensurate with each other, topographies of experience one cannot guess from within one’s own limited experience.” (204) Similarly, Carola and





Marcelo Suárez-Orozco ask, “What do we really know about what it is like to be a child in a new country?” (66)

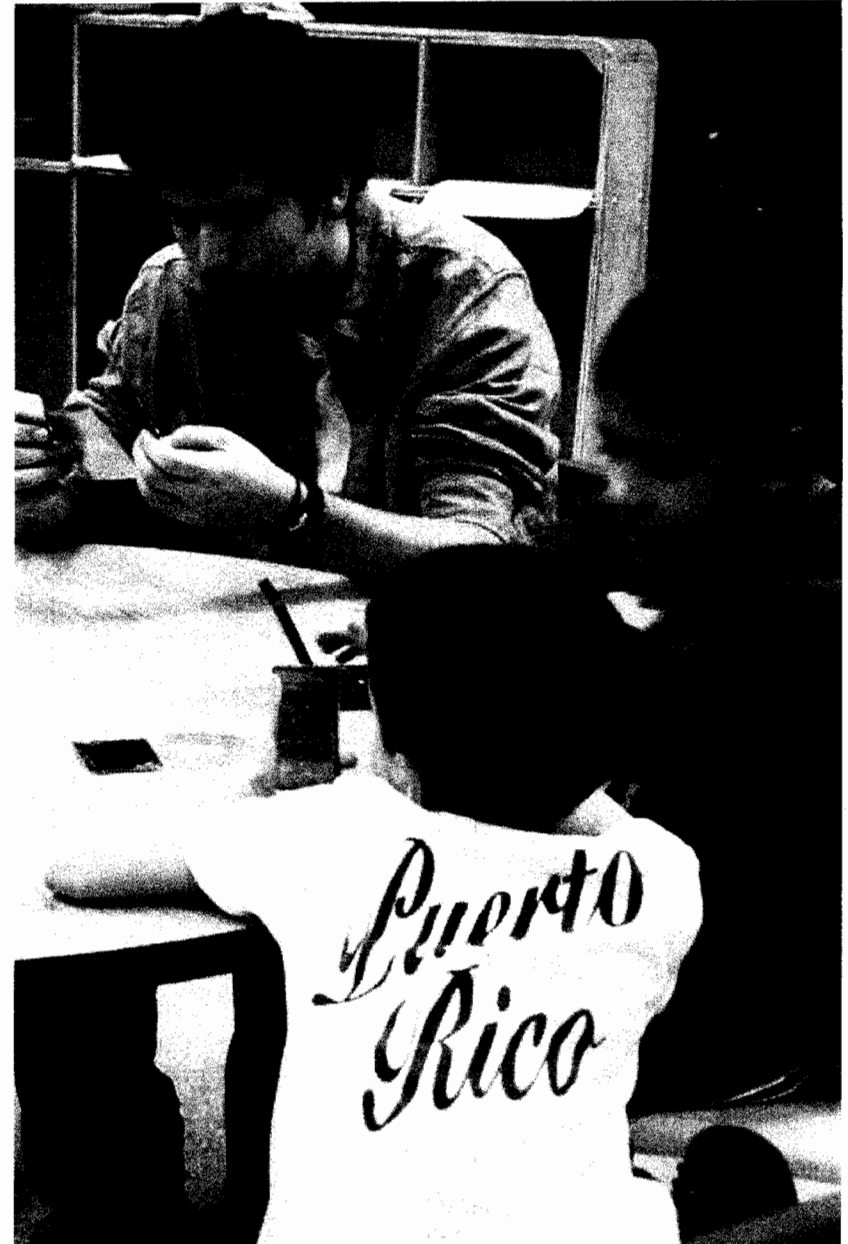
In a very real sense, our work together in “Moving Out/Moving In” provides us with the opportunity to map what we know about the immigrant experience using visual art as a kind of poetic cartography. At the end of the course we share our “maps,”—the projects we’ve made— with members of our collective communities in a public exhibition/performance. Over the years we have presented exhibitions in the Gallery at the Center for Latino Arts/ Casa de La Cultura at Villa Victoria and performed in the Semel Theatre/Tufte Center for the Performing Arts at Emerson College. Our experience together is further “mapped” on the “Moving Out/Moving In” website, where Emerson students share what they have come to understand about themselves and “the other” through their collaboration with the Cacique children:



Not only did I learn from the children and our interaction with them, but also from the experiences and insights of my peers. The semester proved incredibly invaluable, widening my scope of experience, opening my eyes to the viewpoints of others, and, primarily, forcing me to reconsider my own attitudes towards where I came from. (Modrall)

While I was writing this research paper I came upon a definition of the word 'Hispanic': 'Hispanic' is an English word meaning 'pertaining to ancient Spain'. This means that even I can be considered Latino because all of my ancestors were Spaniard colonizers that had *mestizo* children with native indios. You can even hear it in my name: Maria Paz Manansala Alegre. I am the third Maria Paz Manansala; it's a family name and the first Maria Paz Manansala was 3/4 Spanish. I never once thought of it like that before, and that changes everything. This is no longer a plight of peoples that I have read about, but a plight of my people and my heritage . . . . This course affected me so much. I can relate so much to the children because I too am a first generation immigrant. I was born in the Philippines but raised since in the United States. In watching the kids I recognize my own personal struggle with my identity as well . . . . It's a tough road these kids travel. I know, because I'm a traveler, too. It's funny. I never thought of myself as one, but because of my life and present, I see that I am a Latina, too. (Alegre)

This semester in class has stretched me in such an emotional way that I'm not even sure I can articulate what I feel about what I learned . . . . Getting to know people for who they are, and not for what they aren't is what I gathered from all of this. In leaving this class I am leaving behind my ethnocentrism. I've learned that part of being who I am, a part of my identity, is identifying characteristics in others that elevate my mind, that take me to places that I, under regular circumstances, wouldn't go . . . .





This is me moving out of some of my insecurities, and realizing that I am moving into a better me who is more equipped to recognize myself as I fit into my own niche in this changing society called 'America.' (Saunders)

We are the creatures who pause to look, who remember to look, who glance over the shoulder, who foresee, who gaze and peer and stare and wink and blink, and develop various views, who have an overall viewpoint, who behold this life in various ways—our visionary life as it begins with a child's wandering, wondering eyes, unfolds in a child's dreaming life, talking life, picture-making life, and persists until the eyes close for the last time. (Coles 57)

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