

Acknowledgements

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Word Power!

Writings, Poetry, and Artwork by
Johnston High School Students

Edited by Rene Valdez



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projects such as Sharon Bridgforth's "Finding Voice" series and the Austin Project's *Jam Sessions*. Erika also teaches theatre through the elementary after school program, Theatre Action Project, and co-facilitated poetry workshops at Johnston High School through the RSA Save Our Youth program. Erika has a B.A. in Elementary Education and a minor in Psychology from St. Edward's University through the College Assistance Migrant Program.

EMMET CAMPOS

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Cover photograph: *I Am/SOY*, Creek Nation (mural),
Tulsa, Oklahoma, circa 1990s
Body artwork by Mariama Konneh and Joseph Abel Posada
Body photographs by RSA Collective

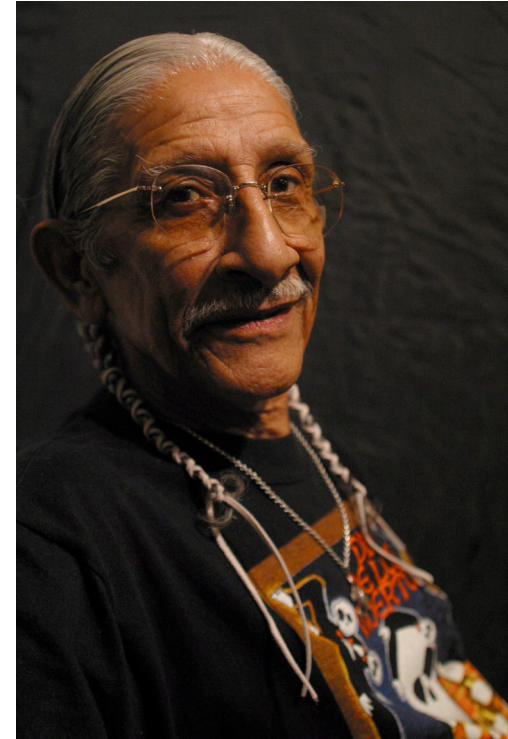
About the Editor and Facilitators

RENE VALDEZ

Hailing from East El Paso, Texas, Rene is a working-class Chicano cultural worker, community organizer, and media activist, who migrated to Austin in the late 1990s. He began as a volunteer for both Red Salmon Arts (RSA), a literary/cultural arts non-profit organization, and community-based Resistencia Bookstore. Since 2000, he has worked closely as a student, political comrade, and caring son of Xicanindio elder poet/human rights activist Raúl Salinas who founded RSA and Resistencia Bookstore. Presently, Rene is the Executive Director of Red Salmon Arts and one of the many caretakers of Resistencia Bookstore. For the past three years, he has co-facilitated the intensive writing workshops of the RSA project, Save Our Youth (SOY), at Johnston High School. Also, he has co-edited several SOY collections of poetry and writing which have featured the youth from Johnston.

ERIKA GONZALEZ

A native of Eagle Pass, Texas and the border of Piedras Negras, Coahuila Mexico, Erika González is Co-Director of PODER, (People Organized in Defense of Earth and her Resources), a grassroots social justice organization in East Austin. Erika coordinates PODER's Young Scholars for Justice program, PODER's Nahui Ollin Healthy Communities program and projects around juvenile justice. She is also a board member of the Highlander Research and Education Center and a core group member of the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice's Youth Leadership Development Campaign. She is also a poet and a flautist. One of her poems was published in the anthology, *Cantos al Sexto Sol*, edited by Roberto Rodríguez and Patrisia González. She also participated in



para Raúl Salinas, 1934-2008

RSA Mission Statement

Red Salmon Arts is dedicated to the development of emerging writers and the promotion of indigenous, Chicana/o, Latina/o literature, providing outlets and mechanisms for cultural exchange and sharing the retrieval of a people's history with a commitment to social justice.

What I see in the faces of others;
The fear that makes their souls die by the second.
The oblivious feeling like you're worthless,
But empty as you are, all it means is an uphill ride
To my destination of fate.
I pray to whomever that I don't fail.
I pray to him to keep me strong.
I wish for this to end.
But the end is simply a new beginning;
A clean slate to start over again.

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What Does 'Ho Mean?

Why do they call us that?
 What are you? Who are you? Are you better?
 I don't think so.

Stupidity—you have it. You show it. Why do you do it?
 You hurt and make us laugh.
 Why does it exist?
 Why do you do it?
 Answer me—does it annoy you?

I say stop, you keep on going
 I say go, you stop
 I cry, you laugh
 I laugh, you cry
 Hate it
 what it's
 Called.
 I'm smart.
 Not like you.
 But I'm equal.
 I see what you do.
 I don't like it
 and you
 do it.

Ana Karen Vargas

My color is Brown. That don't mean I'm your broom.
 My color is Black. That don't mean I'm a rapist.
 My color is White. That don't mean I'm right.

You're stupid because you're Mexican.
 You're scared because he's Black.
 You're mad because he's White.

What do you know?

I'm Mexican descended and I'm proud.
 I'm Black and I love it.
 I'm White and I'm the same as you.

Human, with a heart, brain, and soul.
 You're laughing because you're scared to show.
 You're intimidated. You're jealous. You don't know.

Ask and answer.

How long have you known me to know?

Introduction

I write this introduction the day after state of Texas ordered the closure of Johnston High School despite improved TAKS scores in the last couple of years. It is yet another devastating blow to our East Austin black and brown communities already under attack: displacement due to gentrification, lack of affordable housing and quality health care, police abuse and harassment, increased monitoring by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) investigative office within the Travis County Jail, and skyrocketing high property taxes. At the moment, the parents and students await the states decision on what will happen to the facility. Several options are on the table: from an outside organization/agency taking over as a high school to AISD re-opening it as a part college prep and part tech school. One thing, however, is certain—Johnston, is no longer, even as they cleverly try to retain part of its name for the so-called new school.

Johnston is the first school ordered closed by the state of Texas under George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act that mandates public schools pass standardized testing in order to receive federal funds. And while we see public education further deteriorate and bankrupted especially in communities of color and poor neighborhoods so that private interests take over the duties and monies of the state, funding for grants and scholarships for higher education also get cut. As more students fall through the cracks and on to the streets while the federal government increases its criminalization of undocumented workers and black and brown people, it is no surprise that the U.S. has incarcerated over 2.5 million people.

The federal government with the compliance by school districts has reduced public education to nothing but teaching to the TAKS test (especially in low-income and communities of color), instead of teaching to the creative and critical capabilities of the students. This type of

learning does not inspire them to go to college. As a result, more students drop out due to lack of interest or because they need to bring in extra money to help their families survive. To them, it seems easier and more practical to get a minimum wage job at a Wal-Mart or a fast food joint and have some semblance of autonomy, then to compete for grants and scholarships to get into colleges and universities. Johnston students have made progress with TAKS testing, but it is not enough for state officials. It is not the students that are failing, but it is the public education system failing our youth.

We also grieve from another tragedy: the passing/transitioning of our elder poeta revolucionario raúlrsalinas on February 13, 2008, the co-founder and main facilitator of Save Our Youth (SOY). raúl's life, extensive knowledge, writings and commitment to the liberation of our people was the lightening rod- for those of us who had the honor of struggling with him for a better and just society. Despite his personal struggle with his health these last couple of years, raúl forged on with his dedication to working with youth at St. Edward's University and Johnston High School. Like all of his readings and speaking gigs from years past, raúl gave it all—showering young, creative and sometimes resistant mind/spirits with good energy and sacred medicine. He challenged them/us to be truthful and brutally honest by facing our demons and telling our stories, our peoples' medicine stories. To reach into that genetic/body/spirit memory of pain and suffering and come face to face with it so that we can begin the healing from spiritual, cultural, and linguistic trauma caused by the effects of racism, war, and poverty. And despite all the hard knocks life inflicts upon us, raúl showed us how to survive and how to be human once again by using the pen as a weapon of resistance.

Thus, it is in that spirit of using art as a tool for social and individual transformation and in honor of the life of raúlrsalinas that Save Our Youth facilitated 6 weeks of intensive writing workshops with a small humble crew of

Friends

The way I go in life starts with friends.
 I have true friends that can help me in life.
 Since I was a little boy,
 There have been many friends in my life.
 I'm not gay or nothing.
 I just never do it alone!
 The way I stay is with a friend,
 'cause a real friend won't dis you with other friends!
 That's being a wimp,
 in your words a punk.
 Well, what I'm saying is you can never have one friend.
 And it takes heart to have a real friend.
 Respect that!

A Real Gang

I speak out with the problem between gangs
 And talk about racism.
 It unleashes anger inside of me
 Because there are too many gang members everywhere I go.
 They talk about you and it makes no sense to me.
 There are people throwing up the area code of their homes.
 What does that prove?
 You think you're better,
 'cause you think you're hard.
 They're just punks backing down from education
 and disrespecting adults.
 Just 'cause they go to jail doesn't mean they're cool.
 Be a real man; talking down ain't nothing.
 Everywhere I go I hear nigga this and nigga that
 Be a real man and be yourself!

Christian Morgan

My name is Sir Christian Morgan and I am 15 years old. I was born on May 10, 1993 and raised in Arlington, Texas. I like activities like work and reading about interesting things. I see myself graduating and making peace in the world. I see the world peaceful, calm, and safe. There are great things in my life that I love to do: wrestle, listen to music, work out, hang out with my friends, spend time with my family and dog, read on my own time, and write about myself. I always represent myself by writing my nickname and showing people who I really am. If they don't like it, then it's not my problem. That's the way I am—always hanging with my friends and my mom and family. I go to school to learn new things. My favorite classes are Math and English. I have been in school for so long trying to make it to college. I always represent Johnston High School, my school. I'm so close to making it...I just wonder what it's like to graduate!

Johnston High School student writer/artists. This spring, I invited two incredibly humble yet fierce teacher/activists to help facilitate this writing circle of strength and healing: Erika Gonzalez, co-director of PODER, and Emmet Campos, graduate student and mentor at UT Austin. And with solid and generous support/guidance from Johnston English teacher, Camille DePrang, we would gather in her classroom twice a week transforming it into a safe space/sacred circle for creative, critical, and spiritual rejuvenation. A space where student peers would grapple with the latest onslaught from the media's latest chisme/gossip on their school's closure to critical gender issues such as "Why must you guys use the word 'ho'?" They dared to go there with no fear. In a passionate yet respectful way, they talked through and broke down such a difficult yet needed conversation without finger pointing or blaming each other. They critically looked at their youth culture posing questions on language usage, hip hop music, and the types of messages conveyed to their peers and its effects on them.

Inspired by her intensive work with the Austin Project, Erika employed the jazz aesthetic for some of the writing exercises. She utilized body movements and group improvisation to challenge the students to get out of their comfort zones and take creative and critical chances with their writings. She brought in something fresh and exciting, yet so ancient and sacred to the writing circles. Erika guided the students in exercises that had them critically discuss issues that personally affected their families, neighborhoods, and school like drug abuse and violence. And through body movement, she asked them express solutions to those problems, then boom, write about it: what they felt, does it matter, what is it, why should we even care, would the solutions work?

Emmet Campos brought many years of teaching and mentoring experience to the facilitation process of engaging these young writers. Together we asked the students questions about the potential closure of Johnston; a topic

considered taboo during the regular school day. Through the guidance of the students, we traced the connections and contradictions between No Child Left Behind, federal funding of schools, teaching to the test, and the failure of our public education in addressing the needs of young people of color in low-income neighborhoods. They emphasized that one of the main problems was that school administrators didn't listen, respect, or take serious their recommendations, opinions, or expressions of why so many Johnston students were not scoring high enough on the TAKS exams. Yet again we can see this played out with the re-naming of Johnston between students, their parents and school administrators. There was a citywide call out for recommendations, but the administrators had the last word and made the top-down decision for East Memorial High School at Johnston Campus (keeping the name Johnston to appease the students and their parents).

One other simple yet vital element to the SOY writing process is to share the love of learning, reading, and writing. We create an atmosphere that is safe, engaging, exciting, and fun yet ancient, healing, and empowering. The facilitators are soldiers on the front lines of social justice who brought that passion, that fire, that inspiration to make change through art, expression, body movement, and writing. And without a doubt, we were humbled by the power of the students' words, the intensity of their convictions, and their ability to have fun during this process. They were committed to express their truths through poetry. They taught us so much about their resiliency and spirit to survive and forge on despite what the media and the greater Austin communities say or think about Johnston High School.

We also hope you are moved and inspired by their word power.

We want to express our most sincere gratitude to all of those beautiful people who have supported and given their love to our efforts in working with these talented and intelligent young people: raúlsalinas, sharon bridgforth,

Words that Are Being Said

The words being said
 are spilling over
 so please listen
 do not clean them up
 and pay attention.
 Pay attention
 to the things being said.
 And when you can
 stand up and say something,
 It doesn't matter what
 just say something.
 Open up to people around you
 like others do to you.
 Don't let them just talk
 even though you are told to be silent.
 Sometimes words are better just said out loud
 instead of inside your head.
 You have a voice and we want to hear it.

Irma Flores, Raúl Valdez, Camille DePrang, Emmet Campos, Erika González, Carole Mettelus, Red Salmon Arts Board of Directors, and PODER,

We also want to give a shout out to Lilia Rosas for her commitment and unwavering support by editing this humble yet fierce literary offering to all those who struggle for peace, respect, and dignity in their schools, communities, and homes.

With love and respect,
Rene Valdez,
Osten, Tejas
2008

Beatrice Hernandez



SOY Poetas y Maestros at Johnston High School

Terence Baber



Carpe Diem

Seize the day for the magnificent gift it has given you.

Seize your life for it is precious.

Seize your friends and family because they're yours.

Give life, *carpe diem*,

Do—please—go ahead and seize the life.

So go satisfy your day!

Lies They Started Before

The lies they started before
my birth.

Now that I get it
they sho do hurt.

Something was taken,
and it was mine.

Then the thieves started lyin'.

I lived with those lies for 15 years.

And just recently I shed tears.

Things will be taken and
you'll be sad.

But over time you'll
change to mad.

Live Life to The Fullest

Moms.

They brought you into this
world and they can easily take you out.
Which without them would result
in no life.

Who cares for you?

When you're down, mad, and sad,
they allow you to live life to the fullest.

Mariama Konneh

I'm from a country that means liberty.
 I'm from a family that had been broken.
 I'm the girl that is said to be unique.
 I'm the girl some might judge before meeting.
 I'm the senior that everyone thinks is a freshman.
 My passions (arts and sports) are written all over my face.
 The five languages
 (Creo, Liberian English, Malinka, Madingo, English)
 I speak make me unique.
 I'm the girl that just leans back and
 watches the haters pass by without moving.
 I'm the seventeen year old you'll find different.
 I'm the girl that will do things you least expect her to do.
 I go to a school that is being torn apart
 by the presence of inconsiderate slob.
 I'm from a hood that is healing from danger.
 I'm girl that believes in second chances
 instead of one.
 I'm Mariama Konneh.

Speaking out

Speaking out can empower.
 Some speaking out can anger?
 Some speaking out can liberate.
 You speaking out can imprison.
 You speaking out can move, unmask?
 You speaking out can trouble you?
 Speaking out is good,
 Or is it bad?
 So I guess I will speak out.

Gentrification

What am I supposed to do?
 How can I stop something that's already begun?
 Maybe shouldn't.
 Maybe I should just let it pass by.
 Maybe it won't affect me.
 Maybe I'm just a kid who thinks a lot.
 A kid who has nothing better to do after school,
 except think.
 Maybe those thoughts can help me beat the
 system.

Unappreciated Moms

It's hard to find out that I ain't the perfect daughter.
 I made mistakes over and over,
 But you still give me your love and care.
 Thank you for giving me a hand when I fall.
 Thank you for drying my tears when I cry.
 Thank you for loving me in a way no one can.
 Thank you for overlooking my weaknesses.
 Thank you for drawing out the good in me,
 in a way that makes me believe.
 Thank you for listening to me when I need you.
 With you my life is safe.
 I know we fight a lot,
 But I still love you.
 Even though I don't prove it enough,
 I still appreciate the love you give to me.

Emanuel Alejo-Mendez

I'll Be Waiting

You taught me what I know and can do.
 You stand strong through tough times;
 You stand strong like Mount Everest.
 But now you're dying faster than roses in a desert.
 Where's the spirit that once lived here?
 Where's the self-esteem that existed here before?
 Where's the power that lifts you higher,
 when you're falling?
 I'll be waiting until the raining weather,
 changes over Johnston to a shining sun again.
 So I can see it shine
 like a reflection of a mirror under the sun.



I Am Spartacus

I'm so high up, when I look down all I see are little dots.
 It's hard up here, mistakes don't happen, perfection just is.
 One wrong move and it's all over,
 there is no do-over according to excellence.
 I sit on the stool while Mr. Perfect
 placed the thorn-crown labeled dunce on my head.
 While Mrs. Perfect teaches me how to be a lady,
 Sitting, just doing whatever I'm told,
 Not living, just there.
 Wanting so badly not to care, but I can't help it, I do.
 And, in one instant, I've been knocked down.
 Because I realize I am not perfect; that no one is.
 My epiphany.
 A slap on the wrist and soft blows to my soul
 when I realize my beliefs.
 They're not ready, I'm too radical, I'm too rebellious,
 I'm not keeping up with the Jones'.
 With my short hair, my boyish look, and my riotgrrl music.
 It is unacceptable and I'm told I must change and conform
 for the sake of society.
 To be the one who saves them all.
 For to save society,
 I must become an ignorant, arrogant, idiotic, bigot.
 Just like, you, perfect people.
 Because I am your savior.
 But I'm not.
 I am Spartacus for all the flawed.

Trying so hard to fit in and failing miserably.
 We get high off of so much stuff that it kills us.
 We drink ourselves to sleep
 And cut through all the pain.
 Now happy meals make us cry
 because we all think we're fat.
 And yet we still eat them,
 because maybe, just maybe, they'll take us back
 and help us remember the time when we were kids.

My Ghost

I see you and yet you only speak a few words to me.
 Our relationship is half-full.
 No, it's half-empty.
 It seems like you don't care,
 but deep down I know that you do.
 If only you weren't so afraid to show me who you are.
 How strong.
 How intelligent.
 How powerful.
 But most of all how loving.
 Don't be afraid.
 I'm still here.
 But not for long.

Someone To Hear Me Out

I try to stand high but I am not tall enough.
 I try to speak out but there were no ears to listen.
 All I have to do is wait till my words are heard.
 But how long will it last before someone hears my cry?
 How long will it last before it turns into fire?
 I got to get it out before it's too late.
 Hear me out so the young soul of this child is set free,
 Someone hear me out!

I Ain't Perfect

She came in singing, laughing, and talking loudly
 About how her daughter is perfect.
 "Bedyanamo," she would say while sitting
 and saying more to keep me alert.
 But I still forget my backpack when I go to school.
 I still dream of change in my life,
 Like the decision I made at age 15,
 Like being a little bird that tries to fly a million feet high,
 Like being the kid that was at the mouth of a gun at age 16.
 I still stand in the field and wonder why I am here
 Like when you stare into the open air
 for more than 30 minutes and an hour later.
 You start wondering what you are talking about.
 I still cry in the dark like a baby,
 Like when you think
 the only solution to a problem is shedding tears
 because crying makes your pain go away for a while
 Sometimes I wonder if she knows me
 With all the trouble I caused around her.
 She still thinks I'm perfect.
 I try to be all I can be but I ain't perfect.

From Past to Present

Joseph Abel Posada

“Dying is easy, Comedy is hard.”

My age is none of your business
I’d like to think I’m Native American (I was born in America).

My dislikes are sheep-ple who question me
My likes are people who question me.

My long-term plan is to take over the world
My short-term plan is to get a job.

If you asked one of my friends to describe me with one word,
You would hear (an expletive of your choice)!

I’m a fanboy for Stephen King.
I’m a fangirl for Shadowleggy.

I have a really short attention span
I have a really short attention span.

I frequently talk to myself
Don’t tell them that, you retard!

I will say what’s on my mind
Whether you listen or not.

I love foaming!!!!!!

In truth, I don’t really know who I am exactly,
but one day I want to know.
And hopefully writing will help with this goal.

I remember back when we were kids,
Getting high meant
swinging until we thought we could flip.
School meant nap and snack time,
art and music were requirements.
Everyone was a friend, no one hated each other.
We thought babies came from birds,
and sex was still a bad word.
It was ok to mix-match our clothes, and dress funny.
No one cared about the newest shoes or the hottest clothes.
We could play pretend for hours on end.
I was a power ranger and you were a cowboy.
We thought the world was a perfect place
Where tears could be stopped with happy meals.
And the only monster we knew
was the imaginary one under our beds.
When boys could hug each other
without being called faggots.
And girls could hold hands without being called dykes.
A place we called childhood.
A utopia.
We should have known it was too good to be true.
Oh how the have times changed.
Reality has backhanded us so hard,
we’re stuck on the ground.
There is no more time to pretend.
We’ve been put in our place in this world called
“Adulthood.”
Friends are now enemies, or better yet frenemies.
Babies happen everyday from that little thing called S-E-X,
because we just couldn’t wait.
We face monsters everyday for hugging boys
and holding hands with girls.
And all anyone cares about nowadays
is wearing the newest clothes and the “right” shoes.

Lauren Montoya

People always say show me who your friends are and I'll show you who you are. Well, I guess the best way to know who I am is through the eyes of my friends. This is me, according to them: the pinstriped, punk revolutionary who is intelligent, modern, critical, funny, driven, intimidating, strong, feminist, presentable, loving, athletic, cynical, willing, hard-working, stubborn, sarcastic, wild, outspoken, busy, kool, loquacious, provocative, resilient, flaming, punctual (sort of), a jerk (every now and then), perfectionist, short, weird, grammar nazi, and, of course, genuine.

Now, this is my interpretation: I am not the person you perceive me to be, so don't judge me until you know me. I am the girl who doesn't back down without a fight, who will stand up for what she believes in, and is a riotgrrrl at heart. The girl that goes against the grain, that wears the color black like there is no tomorrow. I always have a camera to document moments in time and I am different and love the title. The girl who can't figure out what she wants to do in life so she just might do everything: a comedian, a teacher, that one chick on the Real World, a video blogger, and maybe even a pirate. I'm nowhere near perfect; even though, I try to be, but I can assure you that I'm the greatest person you will ever meet.

The Nothingness I like

There is nothing...
No race, no gender, no religion.
You can't stifle my lyrics with your propaganda.
I can yell all I want and there is no one to stop me!

I rule myself with pencil in hand.
My throne, my canvas are one.
Visions that see all corners...

Our worlds are separated, only connected by words.
You write what's on your mind and I on mine.
And in the middle,
there is language, comprehension and conflict.

A lot of nothing ...
The nothingness I like.

At the Mirror

We grow up told to be a good boy and girl.
Never lie, cheat, steal or kill.

But, then, when you're older and there's no black or white.
It's okay to have sex without protection,
It's only stealing if you caught.

Everyone does it, why shouldn't I?
My hood and family needs to be celebrated,
with bullet and beer, right.

Now you're even older.
You look back and ask, "did I do that, was it my fault."
The T.V. said it was alright.
My friend thought it was cool.

