

## *Acknowledgements*

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# On the Meeting Grounds

Writings, Poetry, and Artwork by  
Johnston High School Students

Edited by Rene Valdez and Lilia Raquel Rosas



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## Red Salmon Arts Mission

*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.*

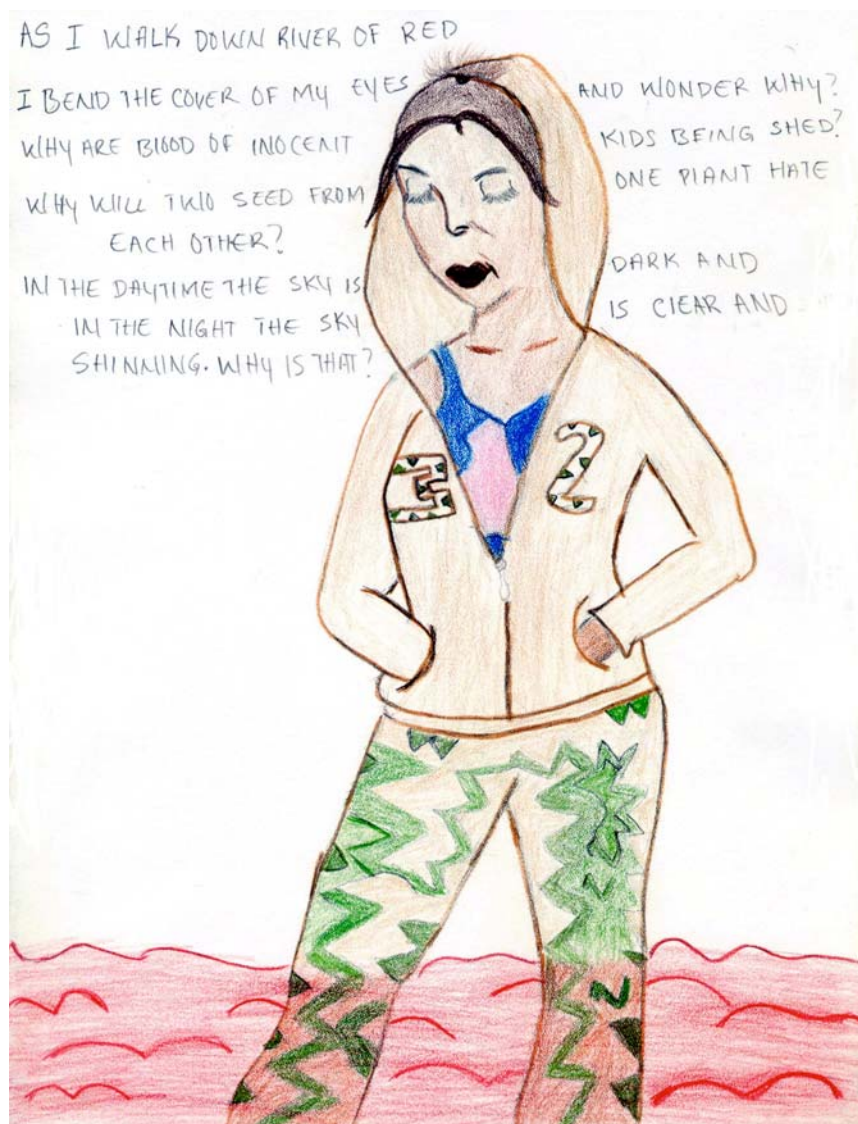
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## raúrsalinas

Xicanindio elder poet and human rights activist raúrsalinas is the Executive Director of Red Salmon Arts and Founder of Resistencia Bookstore, a literary venue and center for aspiring writers in Austin, Texas. raúl also conducts intensive creative writing clinics locally and throughout the country with disenfranchised youth. These clinics are held in conjunction with a variety of arts organizations, correctional facilities, and social service agencies. raúrsalinas' work with various political movements has earned him an international reputation as an eloquent spokesperson for justice and advocate for the challenges and struggles of youth. Through SOY, raúl has reached countless marginalized young people and trained other members of RSA collective to continue this invaluable work nationally. He has worked extensively with the American Indian Movement and the International Indian Treaty Council. raúl is the author of four books of poetry: *Viaje/Trip*, *East of the Freeway*, *Un Trip Through the Mind Jail*, and *Indio Trails* as well as three spoken word CDs: *Los Many Mundos of raúrsalinas*, *Beyond the BEATen Path*, and *Red Arc*. Most recently, the University of Texas Press published *raúrsalinas and the Jail Machine: My Weapon Is My Pen*, a collection of his essays, newspaper articles, and letters. Since 2001, he is an adjunct professor at St. Edwards University, teaching classes and seminars in incarceration and media studies. raúrsalinas is also the recipient of numerous awards: the Louis Reyes Rivera Lifetime Achievement Award presented by La Causa and The Dark Souls Collective at Amherst College, Massachusetts in 2003; the Martin Luther King Jr., César Chávez, Rosa Parks Visiting Professorship Award given by the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in 2003; the Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture in 2004; Con Tinta, a coalition of Chicana/o, Latina/o cultural activists and writers, honored raúl with the Veterano Writer Award in 2006, and, finally, Alfredo Cisneros Del Moral Foundation Award in 2007.



## Preface

While the policing of youth in our society is not a new phenomenon, the heightened surveillance and punishment of both inappropriate personal conduct and learning in public schools is a new occurrence. Undoubtedly, we can attribute the overemphasis, almost obsessive emphasis, Texas school districts such as Austin Independent School District (AISD) place on examinations such as the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) as a legacy of Governor George W. Bush and a precursor to the “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) Act. With the passing of the NCLB Act, we have witnessed an increased attention to the “adequate yearly progress” of primary and secondary school students across the country without regard to the socioeconomic, cultural, and political factors—teen pregnancy, single-parent households, English not spoken at home, and families separated by borders—that shape and prevent so-called proficiency in reading and math. Children and young adults are now accountable for their educational achievement in an institution that is riddled with the same race, class, gender, and sexual inequalities that plague society at large.

Similarly, the enactment of “zero tolerance” policies by school districts like AISD in response to Chapter 37 of the Education Code has led to misuse and abuse by educators. Chapter 37, which requires the removal of students for crimes like sexual assault or drug possession, also allows for the judgment of teachers and administrators in determining instances of misconduct that warrant removal. Unfortunately, it is students of color and other underrepresented students who officials have disproportionately targeted and placed in disciplinary alternative education programs for infractions as minor as chewing gum, speaking too loudly, or carrying Advil. The majority of educators in urban schools, who are white, have

found an easy way to rid themselves of “disruptive” youth of color. It is imperative, then, for us to wonder about the kind of climate of learning created by zero tolerance policies and excessive testing. At a fundamental level, the very institution that exists to address the needs of youth is failing them. How can we expect this generation of youth to learn to be better citizens, human beings, if schools no longer stress a love and interest in humanism and the knowledge that reflect these traditions? What type of education are they getting if their main goal is to pass a test and maintain a draconian status quo? Simply put, our schools are erasing the civil liberties of youth and putting the blame on them.

This crisis in education is neither a distant nor some other city’s problem, but is happening in AISD schools. Several schools have operated under the threat of closure for a number of years, including Johnston High School, because they have not met federal and/or state standards of acceptable academic performance. The TAKS scores of Johnston students, according to the Texas Education Agency, continue to be unacceptable. Additionally, AISD youth report that zero tolerance policies further create an inhospitable environment, where their education takes a backseat to eradicating perceived “criminal” behavior. Still, no local, state, or federal governmental agency or body has suggested a holistic solution that addresses the obstacles and struggles that “low-performing” and “at-risk” students encounter daily in inner-city schools with stretched resources, teachers, and large student bodies. Only grassroots and community-based organizations have truly heeded the challenge to take back the schools and dismantle the micro-police states that are destroying our educational systems.

In this second year at Johnston High School, Save Our Youth (SOY) continues to cement and nurture the relationship began in 2005 upon the impetus of English teacher Camille DePrang. SOY, a Red Salmon Arts (RSA) program dedicated to the empowerment and creativity of

### 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) and Resistencia Bookstore and is now the Administrator of RSA. Along with ensuring the cutting-edge programming and seamless daily operations of RSA for the past five years, Rene has co-edited several SOY chapbooks. He is also a poet/writer, who has participated in literary events such as El Festival de las Plantas and benefits for El Corazón de Tejas—Central Texas Chapter of REFORMA. He received his Bachelor of Arts in philosophy from the University of Texas at El Paso and was a founding member of the *Austin Javelina*, a community newspaper, and Free Radio Austin, an unlicensed neighborhood radio station.

### Lilia Raquel Rosas

A queer Chicana feminist, Lilia Raquel Rosas is originally from Albany, California in the San Francisco Bay Area but has lived in Austin, Texas since 1995. She is a volunteer at RSA and Resistencia Bookstore. She is a Ford Foundation Dissertation Fellow and is currently a doctoral candidate in history at the UT Austin, specializing in comparative ethnic and queer studies through narratives of sexuality. In addition to assisting with SOY programming, Lilia is experienced in other areas of public education. She has taught U.S. history, civics, and English-language classes to immigrant adults in Riverside, California; worked as a teaching assistant for the Department of History, Center for African and African American Studies, and Center for Asian American Studies; tutored for Intercollegiate Athletics for Men and Women; and worked as a supplemental instructor for UT Learning Center, all at UT Austin.

## *About the Editors and Facilitators*

youth, works with “hard-to-reach” students in writing clinics. The intensive writing workshops serve as vehicles where youth can self-express, self-reflect, grow and heal through poetry. They are safe spaces where the RSA facilitators encourage participants to fully delve into their lived experiences. Here we do not censor subject matters nor dismiss a piece of writing if it does not fit some future test. Indeed, the strength of the workshops lay in the uncovering and recovery of what RSA Executive Director and internationally renowned poet Raúl Salinas calls our “medicine stories,” which we sometimes quiet as a result of shame, trauma or retaliation. Yet, we must write in order to begin to recover our histories, our cultures, and ourselves.

In *On the Meeting Grounds*, we read poetry that defies the “unacceptable academic rating” that has haunted Johnston for the last four years. The SOY authors have written texts that illustrate strength, resistance, beauty, wittiness, and a command of language that call into question the usefulness of labels and rankings. Moreover, through their poems, they dare us to confront the entirety of their life stories. We bear witness to the dislocation and alienation between family and friends, the fragmentation caused by low-intensity and high-intensity warfare, questions about the role and purpose of organized religion, and the shortsightedness and superficiality of educators and policy-makers who dismiss them and their school. These poets also invite us to share in their desires, goals, and futures, which convey their compassion, humor, and willfulness. Ultimately, we are asked to listen and see beyond the negative attention that has surrounded their school. As Charlie Ramirez states in his poem “Meeting Grounds,” which inspired the title to the collection, “The laughter never dies in our world/and we battle for respect.”



Numerous people were instrumental in making this publication and we thank them con todo corazón. First, we are grateful to Camille for her deep commitment to SOY

and the work we do. Her invitation to conduct workshops with the students of Johnston High School created a much-needed bridge to the voices of these youth. Second, thank you to gifted poet Erika González for assisting in the facilitation of the workshops. Third, we appreciate Mariama Konneh's generosity in sharing her lovely artwork that we feature in the chapbook. Fourth, we thank the poetas of Johnston High School, whose vision and hopefulness allows SOY to grow. Finally, we are indebted to Raúl for his ongoing support and guidance, which makes SOY and RSA possible.

—Lilia Raquel Rosas,  
Osten, Tejas,  
Septiembre 2007





## The War Field

In the middle of a field  
I stand in the sun  
and I wonder why  
this place is so quiet.  
And I think  
what lies under settled water  
is darker than what lies  
under running water.



## *Charlie Ramirez*

My name is Charlie Ramirez. I'm 18 years old, straight-edged, and I love all my friends like family. I am a brother, son, friend, and a singer. I was born in April, which makes me an Aries. I have too many favorite bands. I am an atheist and artist. Honesty and loyalty are my best traits. Writing is my life; life is writing.

## My Window View

I wake up in the morning  
and open my window.  
I hear the wind blow so low  
the birds sing  
as the fresh scent of  
nature spreads around.  
The wind blows through my hair  
and makes my heart full of joy.  
The scent of roses is everywhere  
and I realize the beauty  
of earth is priceless.

## My School Future

Every day and night I wonder  
What will be the future of my school.  
Without the dropouts,  
we will not raise our graduate level.  
Without the skippers,  
we will not raise the attendance level.  
And without them our school is gone.  
We try and try every day.  
It gets better but my mind also tells me:  
will this continue?  
All we can do is keep trying to meet our goals.

## Vacant Apportion

Failure seems like the only option.  
 The seats of students seem vacant,  
 and the voices of our leaders now are silent.  
 The doors are pried open,  
 and the education is bled on the dry.  
 You can't see the beauty in the rough  
 but the writings on the walls are now memories.  
 The doors are pried open.  
 The eyes of my comrades are vacant.  
 I look in the mirror and see another  
 statistic in the media.

## Novelty Crosses

This is where the fire descends  
 into winds of drones that wait.

Prayers are useless clichés.  
 Your idea of faith is man-made.  
 and so are your crushed beliefs;  
 putrid ideas for a decapitated empire.

This is where the flames make amends,  
 and the wounds are never ending in  
 this repetitive cycle.

Your idea of salvation lies in a cross when catastrophe  
 strikes again, where is your God now?

You are on your own  
 with your bravado torn into shreds,  
 place the shroud upon your head.  
 Wait for your demise.



## I Haven't Learned a Thing

My idea of life sits on the stand.  
 Nothing left but sour notes with these words  
 that dance like embers in the night.  
 My silence is now a virtue; your voice is a nuisance.  
 Can my eyes tell you my future?  
 Only lost and caught in between  
 denial and doubt.  
 The flames are an asset;  
 a scene for our enemies.  
 The stars are my guides.  
 My idea of life lies facedown.  
 Nothing left but desolation,  
 shed these words off the blade.  
 My love is a menace;  
 it lets me embrace these flaws.  
 Can your smile bring back my innocence?  
 Now found and yet caught in between  
 ignorance and lunacy.  
 (What's the difference?)

## Oh, My What a Great Follower

Repeat in your head: you haven't moved on.  
 My smile is your frown.  
 Every word in your head has become unrecognizable.  
 My pride helps your mouth heave useless ideas.  
 You can't feel what I feel,  
 so invincible and my insults are golden.  
 Friends decay into Judas,  
 foes now reanimate themselves into  
 every scenario.  
 You would think we'd praise your hubris,  
 But the lives you've destroyed just can't put  
 in your trust.

## Johnston High's Problem

What they say about Johnston  
 is worse than what goes on at my school.  
 The excellence is covered.  
 The good kids are inside,  
 and the bad ones are spread out.  
 As each day goes by it gets better;  
 we try and try to keep it that way.  
 But it seems like they only look for  
 the bad instead of the good.

## My Fear Of The Test

It is five days before the test  
 and I sit in my room at night.  
 I am awakened by the fear of failing;  
 everyday I try to overcome it.  
 But it just doesn't seem to be easy.  
 I wonder why am I afraid of failing  
 and why I shouldn't be.  
 I wake up in the dark,  
 tossing around in my bed.  
 But on the day of the test  
 instead of getting worse  
 my fear is gone.



Follow the crowd, there lays the answers.  
Live in the crowd, devour their false praises.  
Die in the crowd, in the end your all just the same.

### Lion Hearted

I feel so secure with your courage around my neck,  
I see calluses on your hands  
and the nights seem so eternal.

My thoughts of you will never change.  
You are my hero when the definition of life is strained.  
You were the only one standing by my side,  
as the stars seemed to revolt with disobedience reigning  
high.

I knew your strength would be there to lift us,  
when laughter changed into sobs.

And I know my words are just complements  
but I'm thankful.  
Inspiration and wisdom are concealed  
in your eyes.

## I, Iscariot

I speak in tongues of daggers and neglect  
where my soul dances with you in the dreams I see.

I write down my prayers  
to see whether I hold a plea for purging,  
Or am I already redeemed?

To give life to words that wait patiently.  
I want to believe that my breath brings you back this time.  
Where the doors don't seem so dissembled  
and the building sets up a façade.  
Are we worth it?

Pick up every poet, artist or true believer.  
Every direction another face turns  
and I still stand strong for you;

Repeating works that will soon bring discomfort,  
but there is no choice but to become an infidel  
outside looking in.

## One More

This is a home fit for thieves, failures,  
and those who lack self-respect.  
And yet the solution seems so far away.  
No one gives the time to admire our pride.  
In these words, the TV shows us decomposing.  
Can I compose a remedy?  
To redeem my fellow comrades  
or will your eyes still see past the marvel.  
Time is not on our side,  
he must hold us together as one.

## Iron Mama

Sometimes I sit  
in my room quiet  
for half an hour  
thinking about  
who I would be  
without my mom.

She wakes me up at  
7 am while  
she's leaving for work.  
But every time I  
ask her a question  
about how she can  
afford all the stuff  
she gives me:

She tells me to  
ask the one I pray to and  
that I should never lose hope  
in what I believe in,  
because what she believes  
helps her give me what I have.

## The Meeting Grounds

### *Mariama Konneh*

My name is Mariama Konneh. I was born in Monrovia, Liberia on September 22, 1990. I came to the United States when I was 13 years old. The first place I lived was Phoenix, Arizona and the first high school I attended was Cortez High School. I am very quiet and shy around people I've just met. I like to draw and write poetry. I moved to Austin on October 10, 2005. I speak four different languages, plus English.

This is where we meet  
in hand to hand combat.  
Where the hits feel so valuable  
and the look on your face—priceless.

I can see you are my backbone.  
The laughter never dies in our world  
and we battle for respect.

I know my time is near  
when you have to walk alone.  
But until then, we'll walk forever on this path  
and never stray.

Just seeing you here makes me feel alive.  
This is where we meet  
in a field full of promises.  
Where you'll walk  
and I'll give you time to reconstruct  
yourself, brother.

## *Oscar Valenzuela*

Oscar, that one guy, do you truly know him? Is he really that happy little chavalo you see everyday? Or is there something drowning? He creates a mist in his mind that leaves a wake of confusion. Reminiscence is the essence that solely clashes his emotions into his opinions ultimately breaking his balance. He's from Michoacán, the only Mexican who despises jalapeños. He grew up in Austin, Texas, and has carved some strong friendships that he hopes to hold onto till death. He loves his family, with that being said he considers friends an extended family. And, in his head, that's all that matters. But, what do you know? To you, he's still just "that one guy."

## My Dad Tells Me To Pray

My dad tells me to pray  
for strength but I won't;  
I'm already strong.  
Should my strength falter?  
I will grit my teeth,  
strain my muscles  
and hope to bring out  
some hidden strength.

He says I should pray  
for wisdom but I won't;  
I know enough.  
Should my knowledge  
not be enough  
I will wrack my brain  
and hope my charm and wit  
are enough to get me by.

He says I should pray  
for patience but I won't;  
I think I have far too much patience.  
But if it should ever  
run out of hope  
my self-control will be enough.  
My mom never tells me to pray;  
it's always "tu Papá dice."

One day, I hope she will.  
Just so I can hear *her* talk.



## Love in Brief Words

Month after month, without a voice,  
you carry two jobs with no other choice.

Weeks go by, I sit here bored,  
rarely seeing each other, speaking barely a word.

Day by day, we have nothing to show,  
on my own, it eats at me slowly.

Each passing hour, we grow farther apart,  
loving each other, with barely a heart.

Minutes can't grasp on one another,  
just like us, we don't know each other.

## The Life that Ended Before It Began

Before you began  
I held you so close,  
I had a simple taste  
but I was forced  
to push you aside.

I wish I could have  
lived in your domain,  
and experienced  
happiness in its truest form.

I lost mostly everything  
that you had to offer,  
joy, wisdom,  
and mostly another brother.



### *Phylicia Fabian*

My name is Phylcia Fabian and I am 17 years old. I am a senior at Johnston High School. It has been a hard and wonderful year. A lot of things have happened, and I am trying hard to keep up with my classes. Even though some days, I just want to quit, I know I won't get anywhere in life if I don't succeed. I also know that if I give up now, then I will be giving up all my life. I have dreams and goals that I am not ready to let go just yet. And I don't want to spend the rest of my life thinking about what I could have had.

### I See Her Lips Move

I see her lips move  
as she spins and twirls, arms stretching high  
towards the lights.

And I wonder if it's music that comes out  
but I can't seem to focus on anything except for leg so long  
parted lips and bucking hips.

-click-

I see grown men with their pants falling off  
flailing their arms and gesturing wildly.

And I wonder if there is a message  
hiding

behind cussing and innuendos.

But I'm too busy trying to stifle a laugh.

-click-

I see them on the stage

Tossing their Strats

screaming into mics

spinning 'round and 'round.

He squeezes his eyes shut, wincing

as if every word hurt.

And I wonder if he's telling my story

but I'm too busy trying to figure out how he squeezed into  
those too-tight pants.

-click-

I sigh, flex my fingers and step outside  
maybe

I'll find what I'm looking for out there.

## *Saray Rosales*

Miss Kitty Fantástica.

Soy chapina  
soy guanaca  
soy americana.

I'm still allergic to soap  
and I still can't do a chilena.  
I've hurt myself  
more times playing soccer  
than in my 17 years of living.

I fall in and out of love  
several times a week.

I hate going to church  
but I do so anyway  
because I look good in my Sunday best.

I love my dad to death  
but one day  
I'll break his heart.

I'm such an attention whore.  
But not literally  
'cause that's illegal.  
And I'm far too picky.

I like to read the scribbles on the bathroom walls  
then pull out a red pen and get to work.

I'm always chillin'  
hangin' carefree.  
Never stressing,  
because that's no good  
for someone who wants  
to live forever.

## The Plan of My Future

The plan of my future,

The future of my dreams.  
It used to be so bright,  
but now it seems to be fading  
with each passing day.

It's there but yet it seems  
so far out of my reach.  
So many obstacles in the way  
that I have to overcome.

I had it all planned out:  
high school, college,  
and then a business of my own.  
This is my plan of the future.

But even though this plan,  
seems so hard to achieve.  
I won't let go.  
No, not yet.

