

Preface

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of
human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

—Langston Hughes, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” 1921

The collection, *Beyond Blood Ties*, marks the eighth publication resulting from the most recent Save Our Youth (SOY) writing clinics, which critically-acclaimed poet and international human rights activist Raúl Salinas has led since the mid-1990s. In itself, this is a significant landmark. But coupled with two twenty-third anniversaries—the founding of Red Salmon Arts (RSA) and the federal district court decision determining the “successful” desegregation of Austin schools—we find ourselves at cultural and sociopolitical crossroads. These crossroads allow us to reflect on the effectiveness of integration and the importance of local literary arts programs in refashioning the struggles of underrepresented people into new movements for social justice. The 1956 *Brown v. Board of Education II* decision urged for expedient desegregation. However, we still find the same lack of leadership, funding, and community-accountability at Johnston High School and other East Austin schools. Yet we cannot underestimate the role of projects such as SOY. They provide a response to the seemingly unchanging circumstances found in our public educational system.

Save Our Youth channels the energies of youth who are often viewed “at risk” and/or are from minority/indigenous communities to become leaders, thinkers, and writers. By working in middle schools, high schools, juvenile justice facili-

ties, and summer programs across the United States, the writing/healing workshops provide sacred, collaborative, and righteous moments. Youth not only learn the craft of writing, but also embrace the life stories where we write at our truest and best.

The writing clinics conducted with the students of English teacher Camille DePrang at Johnston High School represent another germination of this rigorous and holistic process, which encourages up-and-coming writers to confront even the most difficult parts of themselves and their communities. In the fall of 2005, Raúl, Rene Valdez, and invited guests looked to poetic expression to transform experiences of pain, violence, and alienation as well as those of joy, triumph, and intimacy into words that empower, liberate, and heal.

In *Beyond Blood Ties*, we find poems that address universal themes—war, family/friendship, and culture, in addition to individual topics that yield unexpected results. The young authors ask us to consider issues such as the futility of war, the rituals of culture, and the injustices committed by our government through their verses, images, and revelations. The writings further push us to contemplate our collective responsibility in building a more just and equitable society. In many ways, these works also adopt the same youthful wisdom and reverence conveyed in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” Langston Hughes wrote it when he was only seventeen years old and he dedicated it to W.E.B. Du Bois, his senior by thirty-five years. These students, similarly, were able to celebrate their own community elders like Sharon Bridgforth, Irma Flores, and Raúl Salinas in the culminating event, *Honoring Our Own: Youth & Elders Poetry Reading*. Their poems are a multivocal letter to their elders, who have heard them loud and clear.

We would like to extend our deepest and most heartfelt gratitude to a number of individuals: To Camille for the generous invitation to work with her students and the nurturing environment she sustained throughout the writing clinics. Many thanks to renowned poet/performance artist/teacher Sharon Bridgforth and indigenous poet/librarian Irma Flores for their continuous and unconditional support of Red Salmon Arts. Last, but never least, un millón de gracias a los poetas de Johnston High School for their inspiring, remarkable palabras/words and their faith in the completion of the chapbook.

¡Luchamos con nuestra poesía!

—Lilia Raquel Rosas,
Osten, Tejas,
Septiembre 2006