

Preface

Of Borders and Bridges



I began this book before the 2016 presidential election laid bare the deep and long-standing divisions in our country. From racial segregation, gender discrimination, and religious prejudice to the wage, opportunity, and wealth gaps, we live in a world of divisive borders—divisions that are largely built around our very identities. Our identities—the ways we name, experience, and understand our bodies and beliefs—can be sources of great pride and shared honor. However, these same identities can also be used to pit us against each other, to create the illusion that one type of person is better than another. The walls and gaps that result from these socially constructed divisions feed inequality and injustice.

These identity-based divisions are marked by borders—the real and imagined lines that separate one person from another. Poet and scholar Gloria Anzaldúa writes, “Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge.”¹ In the United States, these edges appear to be growing ever steeper. Our schools and neighborhoods are increasingly segregated by race and wealth. Our social media platforms turn ever more partisan. Even our friendships tend to be with like-minded people from similar social backgrounds. The barriers between us can seem insurmountable.

For those of us in education, these borders that separate people—borders named after parts of our identities—can feel particularly significant. We might bump against them as we try to understand our students who may be racially, culturally, economically, or simply generationally different from us. We might crash into these barriers when we try to speak with a

colleague about our political or religious beliefs. We might feel blocked by walls that seem to prevent us from really connecting with the communities in which we work and live. In a field where the goal is to expand understanding, these manmade borders obstruct our work. To be effective teachers, we must cultivate our capacity to examine, cross, and reimagine the social borders that separate us.

This book is about why and how we can use art to better understand our different identities—be they tied to our race, culture, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, ability, or nationality. It is about using art to investigate the personal and structural ways in which power and privilege intersect with our identities to affect how we relate to one another. And, at its hopeful core, this book is about how the arts can provide educators and their students with tools to connect with people across the borders that too often divide us. As many educators know, the ability to understand our students, their families, and their communities is imperative if we aim to facilitate empowering learning experiences. Educator Paulo Freire writes, “Educators need to know what happens in the world of the children with whom they will work. They need to know the universe of their dreams, the language with which they skillfully defend themselves from the aggressiveness of their world, what they know independently of the school, and how they know it.”² The question is, how do we do this? What does it take to find our way across these borders to really understand the universes within each of us?

Writing of bridges, Anzaldúa describes how the act of crossing a boundary unlocks critical opportunities for transformation:

Bridges are thresholds to other realities, archetypal, primal symbols of shifting consciousness. They are passageways, conduits, and connectors that connote transitioning, crossing borders, and changing perspectives. Bridges span liminal (threshold) spaces between worlds, spaces I call *nepantla*, a Nahuatl word meaning *tierra entre medio*. Transformations occur in this in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries.”³

Bridges—as overused as the metaphor might be—still offer us the clearest visual for the kind of opening that can happen when we connect across a border. Suddenly, the steep edges can appear less daunting and the distance apart less impassable. While I am not so naive to believe that simply nurturing metaphorical bridges across the social divisions in our country

will radically alter the inequality that pervades, I do believe that those of us in education must find ways to teach and learn across the barriers that society has built between us. Without a concerted effort to connect with people whose identities we have been taught to see as distant, the borders and divisions between us will certainly widen.