Eric Garcia's artworks examine parts of American history that have been overlooked, challenging viewers to re-evaluate historical narratives.

ERIC GARCIA: Warrior With a Pen

"Every warrior has a weapon and mine is my art"

—Garcia, 2009, para. 1.

JUDITH BRIGGS

Recommended for grades 9-12

Eric Garcia's large-scale oil paintings, drawings, installations, prints, and political cartoons examine versions of American history that have been overlooked and whitewashed. Aware that dominant history reflects a strategy of power, Garcia embraces the confluence of history, culture, and politics to challenge historical mythologies and identities and to prompt viewer reaction to create necessary dialogue. Garcia calls his style "comic baroque," as it contains his childhood influence of comic books as well the Colonial Baroque style of early Mexico. Both were meant to inspire and inform their viewers using a single scene (Nuffer, 2012).

Garcia's artistic goal is to educate and to challenge. While creating paintings for gallery consumption, Garcia also believes that creating political prints in the tradition of Mexican activist printmaker Jose Posada and creating cartoon commentary uses art as a vehicle to reach the greatest numbers. Garcia employs his political cartoons as weapons to strike at injustice and to expose issues that are often overlooked, whether they are local or global. According to Garcia, visual imagery is a powerful vehicle for telling stories (Nuffer, 2012). Garcia's work reflects on the past, but also poses questions for the present that incorporate politics, critique, and identity.

Objectives

The activities provided in this Instructional Resource will enable students to:

- Distinguish the characteristics of political cartoons.
- Examine and practice the process of creating a political cartoon.
- Use Eric Garcia's work to analyze contemporary issues and events.
- Research a concern and take a stance on the issue by creating a political cartoon.

About the Artist

Eric Garcia was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 1977. As a child, his first exposure to artwork was through comic books, as they were cheap and readily available. As a high school student he became involved with Working Classroom, a nonprofit youth organization for the Arts located in Albuquerque, where he apprenticed with muralist Joe Stevenson. It was at this time that he traveled to Mexico City with his brother and witnessed the powerful murals of Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, and David Siqueiros. The experience was life-changing as Garcia realized the ability of art to instruct, to uplift, and to inspire (E. Garcia, personal communication, March 2, 2009).

When it was time to attend university, Garcia found that his high school courses had not properly prepared him to take college entrance exams or to attempt college material. Located in a working-class section of Albuquerque, the school, like many urban high schools, was underfunded and ill equipped to prepare its students to compete academically. Instead, Garcia entered the United States Air Force. While stationed in Greece and Italy he visited major European art museums and architecture to prepare himself as an artist. After leaving the Air Force, he received his Bachelor of Fine Arts in painting with a minor in Chicano studies, graduating Summa Cum Laude from the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque in 2006. His work became politicized as he blended editorial cartooning with large-scale paintings, drawings, and prints that challenged textbook history, popular culture portrayals of it, and U.S. attitudes toward Mexican immigration. Garcia's older brother, a committed immigration-rights lawyer and human rights activist, left an indelible mark on Garcia (E. Garcia, personal communication, March 2, 2009).

During this time Garcia also produced cutting political cartoons for the university's daily newspaper as well as for the *Weekly Alibi*, Albuquerque's entertainment magazine. His editorial cartooning won several national awards for student journalism. The cartoons' subject matter, drawn in stark black and white, frankly critiqued U.S. immigration policies, the War in Iraq, and the disarming effects of globalization by U.S. companies. Garcia's artist's statement began with the line, "Every warrior has a weapon and mine is my art" (Garcia, 2009, para. 1).

In 2009 Garcia received a Master of Fine Arts from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), where he continued his activist stance, incorporating Aztec symbolism into his work to highlight U.S. Colonial expansion in the Americas. While at SAIC, Garcia received a prestigious Jacob Javits Fellowship (United States Department of Education, 2008). Garcia currently lives in Chicago, and is involved in community outreach. Garcia sees himself as a critical postmodern artist whose attention to craft enables him to effectively and ethically communicate a social consciousness (Nuffer, 2012). He continues to produce cutting political cartoons for publication and to work with area youth.

Instructional Activities

The following instructional activities are designed for the student to learn—through research, practice, class discussion, and debate—about the importance of editorial cartooning in instigating political critique. Students will create their own political cartoon. Students should consider three major aspects of the cartoon:

- ***Subject matter:*** What is the artist trying to say? Sometimes a cartoon can say something with images that is hard to put into words.
- ***Background information:*** What events have led to the artist's political stance? The more information and relevant facts that the artist can find to support his statement, the more powerful it will be.
- ***Building an argument:*** How can you convince someone with an opposing point of view to accept your argument? How can you use political cartoon techniques to present your case?

Political cartoons use the following persuasive techniques (Library of Congress, n.d. a):

- **Symbolism** to stand for big ideas
- **Exaggeration** of people or objects
- **Labeling** for clarity
- **Analogy** to compare a complex idea with a simpler one so that readers can understand it in a new way
- **Irony** to suggest how things really should be compared to how they really are

Political cartoons are the result of academic research, visual research (producing a series of preliminary sketches), and a honed message in which less said can have the greatest impact. Political cartooning is a unique blend of visual and written text that can have a powerful impact on the viewer.

About the Work

In Figure 1, *Tamale Man #2*, Tamale man, the ultimate Chicano superhero, fills a void in popular media as he battles the ghost of George Washington and the Border Patrol. Likening the new U.S. border fence to the Great Wall of China, Garcia highlights its futility and its source of constant tension between Mexicans,

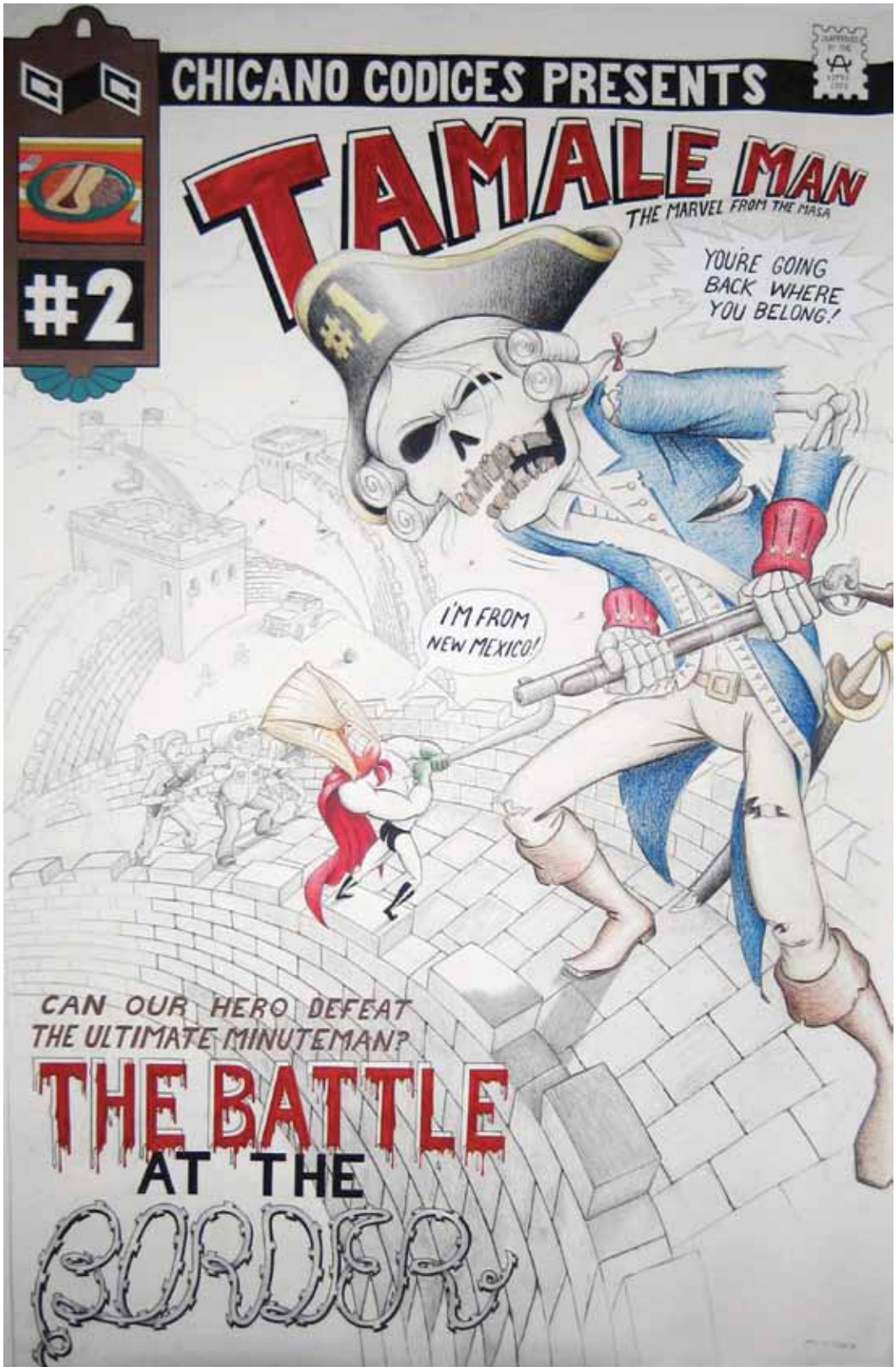

Figure 1. *Tamale Man #2,* 60" x 40", mixed media on paper, 2007. Photo credit: Eric Garcia.

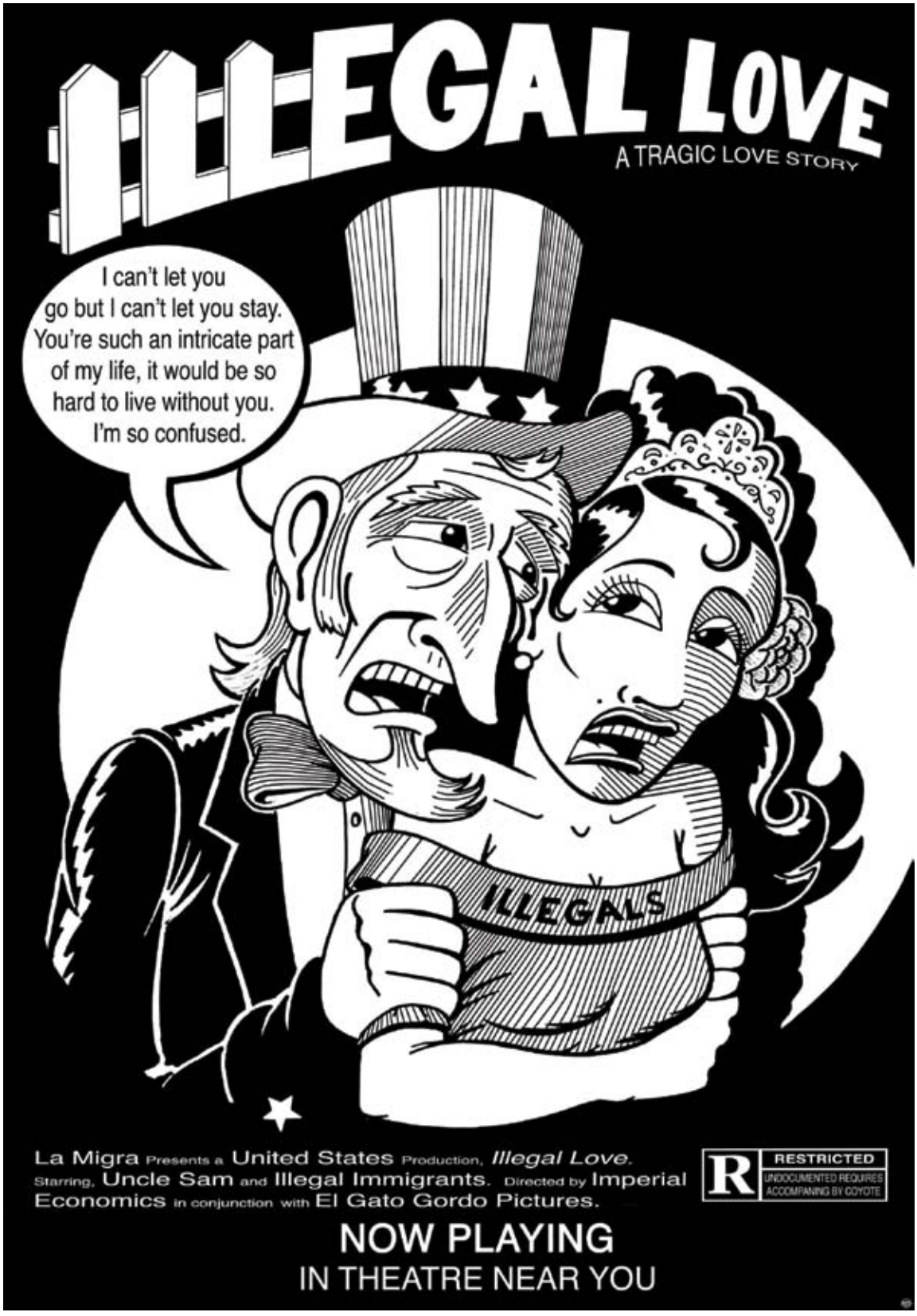

Figure 2. *Illegal Love,* 11" x 17", offset press, 2008. Photo credit: Eric Garcia.

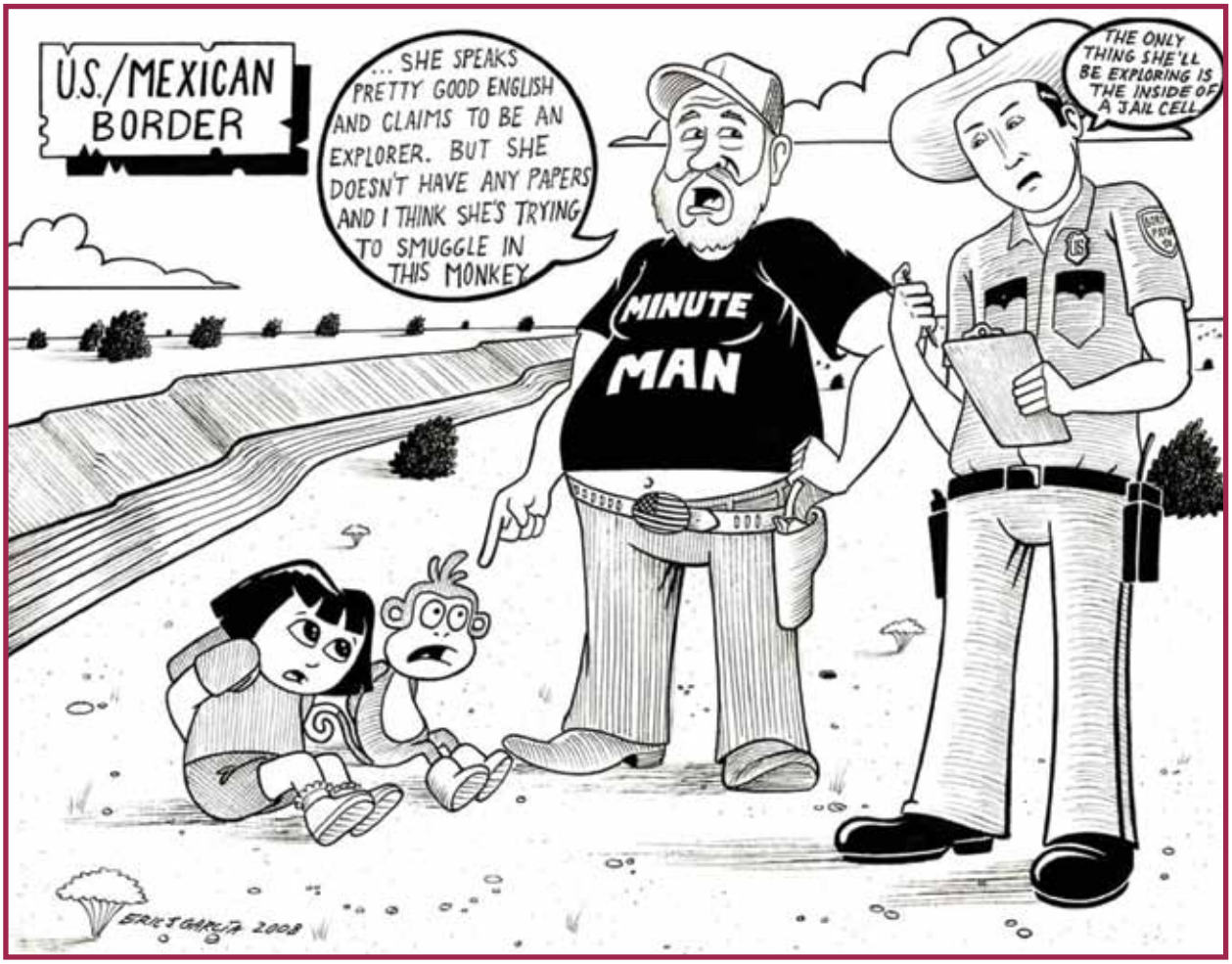

Figure 3. *Explorer on the Border,* 8.5" x 11", pen and ink on paper, political cartoon, 2008. Photo credit: Eric Garcia.

Mexican Americans, and Anglo Americans who choose to police it. Tamale man's humorous persona highlights the average Anglo American unfamiliarity with Mexican American culture and its equation with cultural stereotypes conveyed by fast food restaurants and media personifications. Tamale man vainly declares, "I'm from New Mexico" in the face of an exaggerated caricature of a wooden-toothed George Washington who reminds us of European dominance within U.S. history and identity. Garcia asserts that history can be misrepresented and mythologized, as George Washington was never a Minuteman, and his teeth were not wooden, but ivory and gold (Etter, 2013). The image is a blend of past and present, and the comic book references an Aztec codex, a powerful pictorial pre-Columbian text.

Within Figure 2, *Illegal Love,* a desperate and confused Uncle Sam clutches a Mexican beauty, professing that he can't live with her, but can't live without her. Through the use of analogy, Garcia likens the US's relationship with illegal workers to a difficult love affair. The first three letters of "illegal" form a picket fence, suggesting both an idyllic U.S. image of home, something easily breached, yet a boundary. The beauty is shown sympathetically, if not a bit frightened of Uncle Sam's leer and fervent grasp. We are reminded of the pervasive underground U.S. economy and of the numbers of raids on U.S. establishments, many with substandard working conditions for both adults and minors (Gutierrez & Baca, 2008; Preston, 2011).

In Figure 3, a character looking like Dora the Explorer, the Nickelodeon television channel's popular Latina character, and her best friend Boots the monkey are charged as illegal aliens by a self-proclaimed Minuteman at the U.S. Mexican border. Dora, an altruistic character, is known for exploring new places and helping people in need. She speaks Spanish and teaches words and Mexican American traditions, customs, and values to elementary-aged Nickelodeon viewers. Garcia's cartoon is an ironic example of racial profiling. It mirrors Garcia's personal experiences. When hosted as a visiting artist at a nearby university, Garcia was asked when his family came to this country. He replied, "Five hundred years ago, the border crossed us" (E. Garcia, personal communication, March 3, 2009).

Manifest Destiny (Figure 4), designed as a comic book cover, summarizes an entire story within one image. It questions the US's 19th-entury belief in the God-given right to expand across the North American continent. It portrays August 18, 1846,

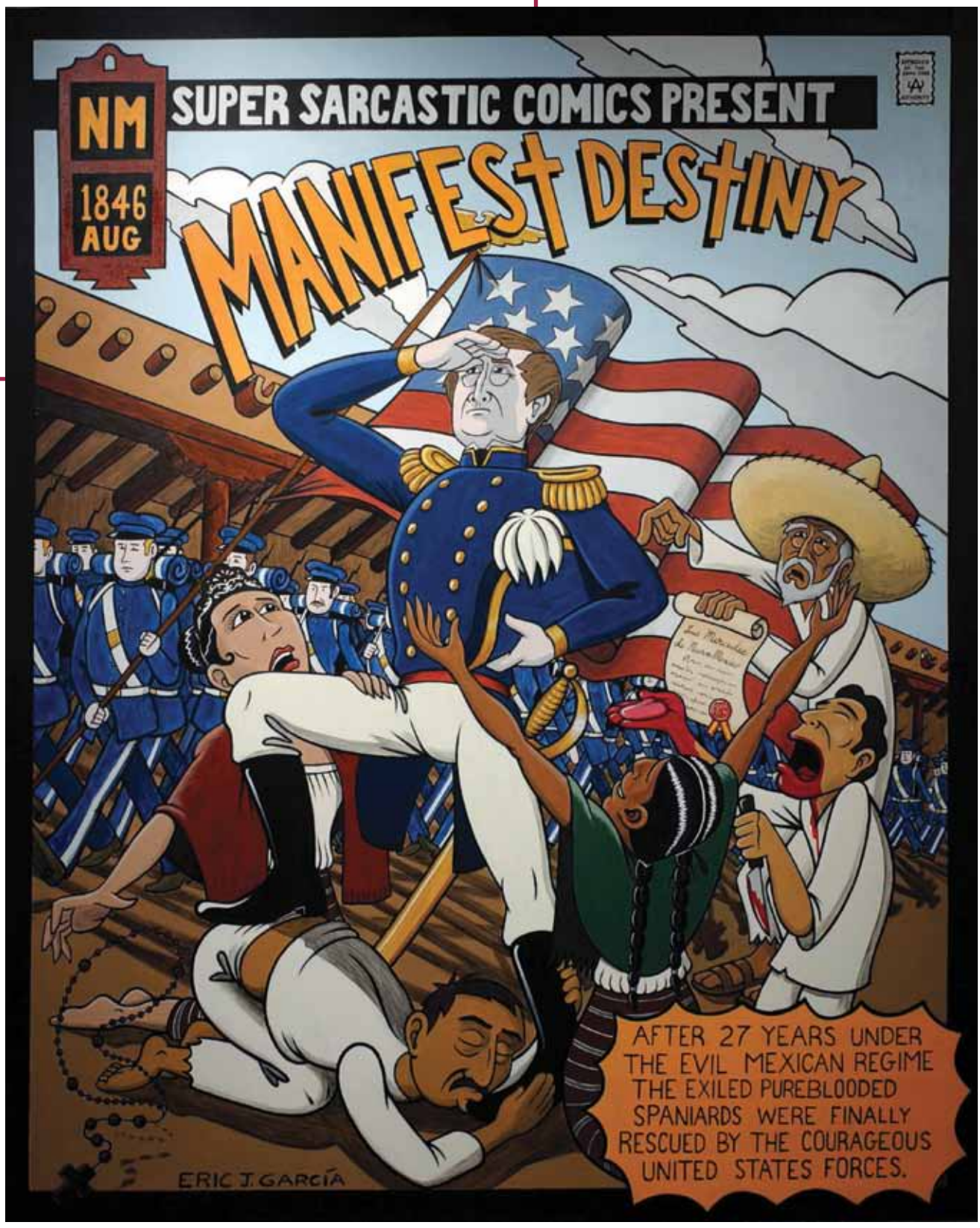

Figure 4. *Manifest Destiny,* 60" x 72", acrylic on canvas, 2006. Photo credit: Eric Garcia.

during the Mexican American War/Invasion of Mexico (1846-1848), when U.S. General Stephen Kearney marched into the Mexican city of Santa Fe, the largest settlement west of the Mississippi River, claiming the Province of New Mexico for the US (Gonzalez, 2006). The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that ended the conflict ceded almost half of Mexico's territories, including the future states of California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and parts of Wyoming and Colorado, to the US, paving the way for the domination of settlers of European origin over the Native and Mexican mestizo population that had occupied the area for centuries. In the process, former Mexican citizens lost their land, their mother tongue, and the dominance of their religious beliefs, creating economic and racial disparity that still exists (Gonzalez, 2006). Garcia's own ancestors were members of this disenfranchised population (E. Garcia, personal communication, March 2, 2009).

Garcia ironically portrays General Kearney as a Stephen Colbert-like superhero, striding forward looking toward California with a puffed chest as he stands on the back of a former Mexican citizen who appears to be kissing his boot, while another cuts out his tongue in offering, and a third asks about a land deed. A Native woman raises her hands in exaggerated supplication, and a Spanish woman drops her rosary. The tan color of her skin contrasts with the pureblooded European lineage of the invading forces as designated by Garcia's text label. U.S. forces march under the veranda of the Palace of Governors, suggesting the invasion of an established city.

Discussion I: A Sense of Vulnerability

Begin by displaying *Tamale Man #2* (Figure 1), *Illegal Love* (Figure 2), and *Explorer on the Border* (Figure 4). Ask the students the following:

- Describe what you see in the pictures.
- What does the labeling tell us about the picture?
- Spot the symbols that represent political beliefs.
- What emotions do the exaggerated facial expressions and body language convey?
- Which characters seem to be vulnerable within the cartoons and why?
- Who do the characters represent?
- How have the characters been shown within other historical representations?
- What is Garcia's message?

Review the history of Mexican immigration to the US (Library of Congress, n.d. b). Research and discuss the debate around Mexican immigration. Discuss racial profiling and stereotypes.

- Ask students if they have ever been in vulnerable positions.
- Ask them if they have been classified or misidentified because of their appearance or beliefs.
- Discuss ways in which identities can be fluid and can be different within varying contexts.
- Ask them what ways that the popular media have portrayed someone like them.

> Teach the students how to think critically and not be afraid to teach them about their heritage.
>
> —Eric Garcia, 2012

Activity I: Reflective Journal, Use of Analogy

Have students write a reflective essay outlining a situation in which they felt vulnerable. Have them compare it to an event in history or to a contemporary issue in which people were vulnerable. Create an accompanying journal sketch that uses formal elements to convey this emotion. Ask for student volunteers to share their work with the class.

Discussion II: *Manifest Destiny*, Revisiting History

Eric Garcia chose to depict historical and contemporary events that have an impact on his daily life. By using the political cartoon genre, he revisited a version of U.S. history that he learned in school. Divide the class into groups. Have students research the Mexican American War and its aftermath from several different viewpoints: that of the U.S. Government, of Native Americans, of Mexican inhabitants, of the popular press at the time, of dissenters of the time, and of present-day historians. Ask the students to participate in a debate, with panel members from all groups presenting their opinions. Have students view the painting *Manifest Destiny.* Ask them the following questions, which deal with symbolism, exaggeration, labeling, analogy, and irony:

- What is happening in the picture? How do they know this?
- What symbols has Garcia used to get his point across?
- How has he used stereotypes to exaggerate the characters' meaning?
- How does the labeling help us to form a point of view?
- Name an historical event that was similar to this occasion.
- Compare how characters look to how they really are.
- How do you think Garcia's life has been impacted by this event?

Ask students to consider their own relationship to the piece.

- How has this event in history made an impact on your life? What if the Mexican-American War had never happened?
- What are some ways in which national or global events have impacted your community or your life?

Activity II: Creating a Political Cartoon

Ask students to name a concern that they have identified through discussion. Have students research the background of the concern. Using a worksheet, students will answer the following questions: How did the concern start? What are opposing points of view? Who is affected? What is the student's personal involvement with the issue? To what can the situation be compared? What are some phrases connected to the issues that lend themselves to visual images? Have the students turn their ideas into several different working sketches that employ the elements of political cartoons: symbolism, exaggeration, labeling, analogy, and irony. Have students meet in small groups to give peer feedback on the sketches. What are the preeminent features of the characters involved? Remember that less is more regarding text. Encourage the students to develop their own cartoon style. If they have difficulty with figure drawing, suggest tracing figure images. When students have chosen an idea have them map it out on 20" x 15" illustration board with pencil, completing the process using paint, markers, and ink. Using their written and visual research, have students create a written narrative that describes their subject matter, its background information, and how they used elements of editorial cartooning to construct their visual argument.

Assessment

The teacher should examine journal entries and written work for content, clarity, and effort in conveying the topic. Have students decode and share their cartoons within a group critique. Compare this assessment with the students' written narrative for accuracy. Have students complete a short essay stating which cartoons have provided them with a new way of thinking about an issue and why. Using a rubric, judge artworks on how well the students used background research, materials and techniques, and formal and cartoon elements to convincingly build an argument for their issue.

Conclusion

Eric Garcia's work is significant because it challenges us to review our own preconceptions about historical and contemporary narrative, what is included, how it is stated, and—more importantly—what is left out. When asked what he would advise art educators to do when they teach, Garcia responded, "Teach the students how to think critically and not be afraid to teach them about their heritage" (E. Garcia, personal communication, June 21, 2012). It is to be noted that this heritage should not be left unchallenged.

Judith Briggs is an Associate Professor of Art Education at Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois. E-mail: jabrigg@ilstu.edu

Artist's website: www.ericjgarcia.com

REFERENCES

Etter, W. (2013). Wooden teeth myth. *George Washington's Mount Vernon.* Retrieved from www.mountvernon.org/educational-resources/encyclopedia/personal/wooden-teeth-myth

Garcia, E. (2009). *Artist's statement.* Retrieved from www.southvalleyart.com/eric/ArtistStatement-Eric%20Garcia.html

Gonzalez, D. (2006). *The travail of war: Women and children in the years after the U.S.-Mexican War.* Retrieved from www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/war/travail_of_war.html

Gutierrez, L., and Baca, J. (2008, August 7). Immigrant raids must stop. *AlterNet*. Retrieved from www.alternet.org/immigration/94272/immigrant_raids_must_stop

Nuffer, C. (March 19, 2012). Artist profile: Eric Garcia. *Gozamos.* Retrieved from http://gozamos.com/2012/03/artist-profile-eric-j-garcia

Preston, J. (2011, May 29). A crackdown on employing illegal workers. *The New York Times.* Retrieved from www.nytimes.com/2011/05/30/us/politics/30raid.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all

The Library of Congress (n.d. a). Cartoon analysis guide. In *It's no laughing matter: Analyzing political cartoons.* Retrieved from www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/activities/political-cartoon/model.html

The Library of Congress (n.d. b). *Immigration… Mexican*. Retrieved from www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/immigration/mexican.html

United States Department of Education. (2008). *Jacob K. Javits Fellowships Program.* Retrieved from www.ed.gov/programs/jacobjavits/index.html