

Carlos Cortéz, *We are of the earth. We are not illegal*, 1984, linocut

Black ink, a block of linoleum, and a small linoleum cutter: these are the only tools artist Carlos Cortéz needs to re-write history, fill viewers with compassion, and strike back against a term many people believe takes away immigrants' dignity and individuality. The label in question is the term "illegal" or "illegal aliens." In the 1970s and 80s, groups that did not want undocumented immigrants from Mexico who had worked and lived in the United States for many years to receive the legal right to reside here started using this term. The word "illegal" to describe undocumented immigrants continues today, though many people are working to abolish it from use in newspapers, government documents, and the public sphere in general.

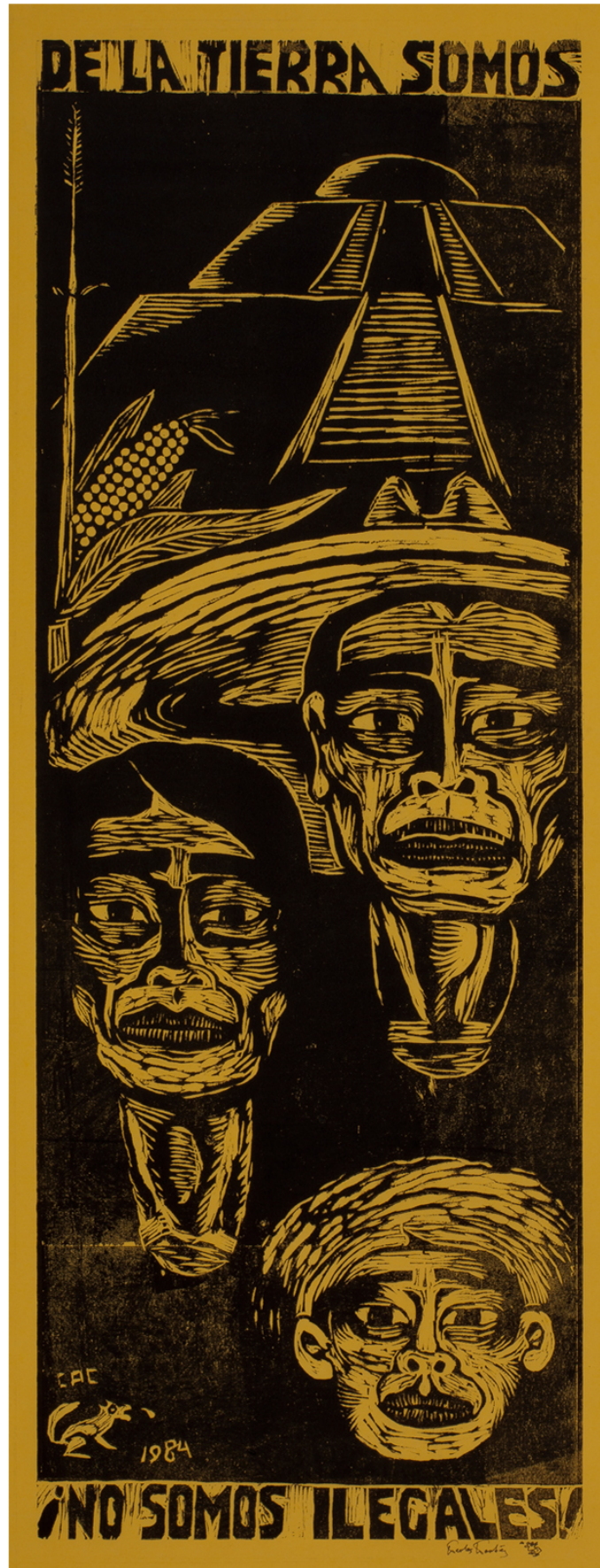
In this linoleum print by Carlos Cortéz, bold, block letters at the top and bottom of the image proclaim: "DE LA TIERRA SOMOS—¡NO SOMOS ILEGALES!" ("WE ARE FROM THE EARTH—WE ARE NOT ILLEGAL!"). These words frame the faces of a child, a woman, and a man, as well as a corn stalk and a pyramid-like structure.

The faces of these three individuals are formed by carefully chosen horizontal, vertical, and diagonal lines—some thick, some thin. Cortéz's strong lines create a frontal view of each face and intense dark eyes that look straight out at us. Even if you or I do not look exactly like them, we may still be able to relate to them as children, parents, or members of a family.

The wide-brimmed hat the man wears gives us a clue to his possible identity as a person of Mexican origin, linking him and his family back to the controversial "illegal" issue mentioned in the text that frames the image. The issue of unauthorized immigrants to the U.S. from Mexico was a hot topic in the 70s and 80s and remains so today. Carlos Cortéz aims to show, through imagery, that not only are these so-called "illegals" legitimate family members and individuals; they are "from the earth." He does this through symbolism that shows their close relationship to the land and also informs us that they have lived here since long before the United States of America existed. The cornstalk in the print refers to the nutritious, life-sustaining grain domesticated by indigenous Mesoamerican groups over 7,500 years ago—revealing their close connection to the land and their self-sufficiency since well before Europeans arrived. Likewise, a structure resembling the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan (an ancient city in Mexico) reminds viewers that, before Europeans arrived, civilizations in Mexico completed sophisticated engineering projects and had highly developed societies.

Cortéz, who was the son of two immigrants to the U.S., felt a strong bond with the people experiencing discrimination like the man, woman, and child depicted here. He worked to promote social change using both his art and poetry. For many of the political and civil rights groups he belonged to, Cortéz created prints like this one. He favored prints because they could be copied many times, pasted up around town, and printed in magazines or journals, making them easy to see and furthering the causes he cared so much about. What are some of the causes that are important to you? How do you spread ideas or messages about the things you care about most? What would you include in a poster design for something that matters to you?

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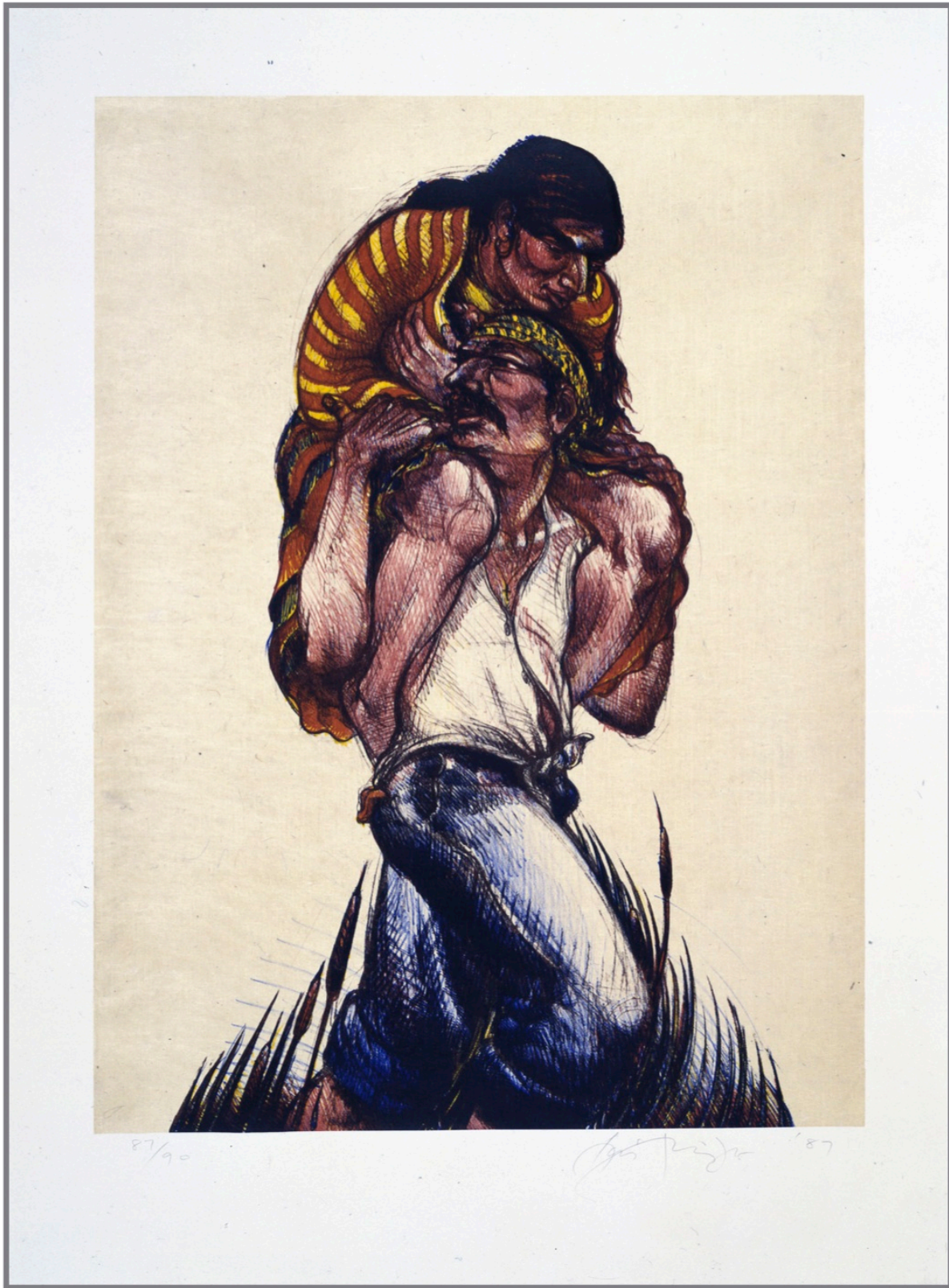
Carlos Cortéz, *De la tierra somos. ¡No somos ilegales!* / *We are of the earth. We are not illegal.*, 1984, linocut, N.N., 36 3/8" x 16 3/8" (paper size), National Museum of Mexican Art Permanent Collection, 1990.29, Gift of the artist, photo credit: Michael Tropea

Luis Jiménez, *Crossing the Rio Bravo*, 1987, color lithograph with chine-collé

Holding on for dear life, a woman clamps both legs over the shoulders of a powerful, sturdy man, flexing every muscle of her calves and thighs. She hunches forward with fierce determination and fixes her eyes ahead. The man, his thick pants rolled up in order to trudge through tall grasses, jerks his head to the right, straining his neck. Does he glance back in the direction he came from, or does he spot a threat to himself and the precious load on his back?

What could be so urgent—or so dangerous—to make these two take such a drastic, uncomfortable stance? Once clue to this mystery lies safely tucked under the woman's shawl: a baby, small enough to enfold in her clothing. Another clue is this print's title: *Crossing the Rio Bravo*. The Río Bravo, or the Rio Grande, as it is called in English, is a river that forms part of the modern-day border between the United States and Mexico. From this we can gather that not only is the couple holding onto each other for safety in an extremely dangerous—sometimes deadly—river crossing attempted by thousands every year; they are moving forward to a new life in the United States at the other side of the river. With this information, we can ask ourselves about the new life they will soon be starting. Are they excited for new opportunities for themselves and the young child they bring with them? Are they worried about the challenges of life in a different country? What other emotions might they be feeling in this moment?

Imagine you are watching this brave act through the grasses of the riverbank. Luis Jiménez, the artist who created this work, makes it easy for us to see these two in our minds' eye; he outlines every segment of their arms, legs, and facial features—almost like an anatomy lesson—and makes strong shadows using dense areas of dark lines (the back of the man's leg, for example) and bright, almost white areas showing reflected light (the front of his thigh). Jiménez's ability to help us imagine these individuals in 3-D is not surprising, since he was a famous sculptor in addition to a printmaker. In fact, Jiménez made a life-size sculpture of this very image the same year he printed this. Perhaps his experience sculpting taught him that twisting the man at the waist and neck, leaning the woman forward, and showing the man's right leg mid-stride would propel these 2-D characters off the paper and into our imaginations as fellow human beings undertaking something full of danger and hope at the same time.



Luis Jiménez, *Crossing the Rio Bravo / Cruzando el Río Bravo*, 1987, color lithograph with chine-collé, 87/90, 38 3/4" x 28 3/4" (paper size), National Museum of Mexican Art Permanent Collection, 1993.10, Museum Purchase Fund, photo credit: Kathleen Culbert-Aguilar

Letter from a Migrant Graphic Organizer

Before writing your letter take time to think deeply about who you are in this role and what you want to include to make your writing credible. What perspective will you have on life in the United States? Fill in all the columns that apply to your character.

Who am I?	
Who am I writing this letter to? Why?	
Why am I living in the United States?	
What are my living conditions like?	
What are my working conditions like?	
What do I miss about Mexico?	
What do I like about living in the United States?	
What do I dislike about living in the United States?	
Do I have plans to return to Mexico?	

An Immigrant's Perspective

Lesson 4—Choosing Your Words

Extension Activity: Media Literacy Activity

Directions: Choose a current immigration issue you would like to explore. In the Computer Lab, find two articles, each with a different viewpoint on your chosen issue. Fill in the chart below with information about your current events articles.

The Bias Rule

This rule says that every source is biased in some way. Follow these guidelines when you use a source for information:

- Every piece of evidence and every source must be read or viewed skeptically and critically.
- No source should be taken at face value. The creator's point of view must be considered.
- Each piece of evidence and source must be cross-checked and compared with related sources and pieces of evidence.

	Article 1	Article 2
Title		
Source		
Author + information about him/her		
Immigration Topic Addressed		
Main Arguments (explicit or implicit)		
Informative Language (Provides reader with information, such as facts)		
Expressive Language (language that shares a feeling or attitude)		
Directive Language (language that directs or commands)		

Words with Positive Emotive Meaning (words with a positive emotional impact or positive connotation)		
Words with Negative Emotive Meaning (words with a negative emotional impact or negative connotation)		