



# Finding Value(s) for a Currency of Caring: Exploring Children's Picture Books, A Dollar Bill, and Fine Art Sources

BY MIRA REISBERG

**I**nterrelated visual sources can provide powerful insights into the cultural messages, aesthetic power, and contemporary relevance of visual images (Darts, 2004; Duncum, 2000; Freedman, 2000; Smith-Shank, 2004). Thus, this article connects fine art, children's picture book illustrations, and the design of a dollar bill to promote social and environmental caring in art education while engaging in discussions about power.

## Money and Power in Picture Books

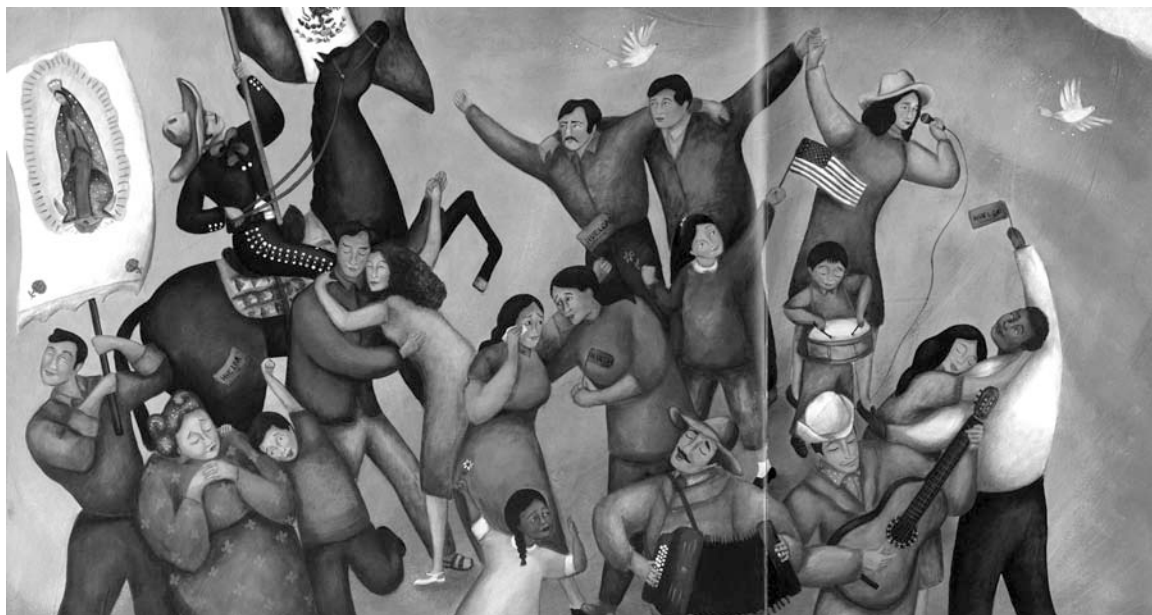
As evidenced by the many children's books about money (Berg & Berg Bochner, 2002; Berger, 2001; Kummer, 2005), learning about the history and numerical value of currency is an important part of some children's educative experience. Children's picture books also provide a primary site for children's initial learning about the world (Galda & Cullinan, 2006; Higgins, 2002; Mitchell, 2003).

The following picture books, *So You Want to be President* (St. George, 2004); *Money, Money, Money: The Meaning of the Art and Symbols on United States Paper Currency* (Winslow Parker, 1995); *Harvesting Hope, The Story of Cesar Chavez* (Krull, 2003); and *Americans Who Tell The Truth* (Shetterly, 2005), provide resources to critically investigate the history of paper currency and/or issues of power. These books, along with artists who work with currency as an art form, provide a conceptual framework for creating a currency of caring.

*So You Want to be President* (St. George, 2004) looks at power in conventional terms, i.e., who gets to be president of the United States of America. It notes that no woman has ever been president, nor has any person of color. It remains to be seen in the year 2008 if this will change. The book perpetuates the belief that anyone can be president, stating, "If you care enough, anything is possible" (p. 43). While this may have been true in the past, this is certainly no longer the case where it requires millions of dollars for someone even to consider running for president. David Small's Caldecott Medal illustrations are elegant caricatures with oversized heads and tiny bodies, perhaps commenting on the supposed brainpower of presidents, or, perhaps just trying to be funny.

Above: Figure 1. Author example. Photoshop. Quote from "Song of Myself" (Whitman, 1921, p. 24).

Figure 2. Illustration from *Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez* by Kathleen Krull, illustrations © 2003 by Yuyi Morales. Reproduced by permission of Harcourt, Inc.<sup>4</sup>



**In examining picture books, paying attention to what is omitted is equally as important as examining what is included.**

For example, how have different presidents treated Native Americans, or what is the influence of presidential advisors such as Karl Rove? *So You Want to Be President* (St. George, 2004) describes a range of motivations for striving to be president, including serving one's country, making the world a better place, or having power, wealth, and prestige. While celebrating past presidents, the book provides opportunities to discuss what the presidency and leadership could and should be.

Another children's picture book that deals with presidential power and money, *Money, Money, Money: The Meaning of the Art and Symbols on United States Paper Currency* (Winslow Parker, 1995), historically contextualizes U.S. paper currency. The book highlights the meanings and practicalities behind paper currency as a powerful artifact of American visual culture by decoding currency's many symbols and providing information about the presidential portraits. The book also provides information about less positive historical events, such as Jackson's persecution of the Cherokee Nation and the extreme corruption of Grant's administration. This information can facilitate deeper discussions about the complexity of power.

*Harvesting Hope, The Story of Cesar Chavez* (Krull, 2003) looks at a different kind of power—the power of popular social activism.

Illustrated by Yuyi Morales,<sup>1</sup> this multi-award winning biography of Cesar Chavez, co-founder of the National Farm Workers Association (UFW),<sup>2</sup> provides many opportunities for critical discussions and art activities related to poverty, racism, environmentalism, workers' rights, immigration, and bilingualism. Although this is a wonderful, inspiring story, it fails to mention the support of Chavez's activist wife, Helen Fabela, or Dolores Huerta, who co-founded the National Farmworkers' Association, or others who also participated in the historic 340-mile march for workers' rights. The author also fails to mention that poor working conditions continue to affect a great many migrant workers. These include inadequate housing, abusive working conditions, lack of health care or clean water, and cancer-producing exposure to neurotoxic pesticides (United Farm Workers, 2007).

Although the author idealizes Chavez as an individual hero, the truth is far more complex. Morales visited the fields where Chavez lived and worked, met with people who knew him, and traveled the route of the 1966 march. This research informed her images where she shows many of the people neglected in the text.<sup>3</sup>

Other images tell different stories, such as depicting different relationships to the land than the often-alienated U.S. response documented in recent books (Kriesberg, 1999; Louv, 2005). For example, in the opening pages, Morales shows Chavez's extended family happily picnicking at night under the stars, playing music, cooking corn, and eating watermelon while a

grandmotherly figure entertains the children by telling stories about Pancho Villa (Morales, 2007, personal conversation).

The colors in Morales' different landscapes change to show the power of nature. They portray the heat of the drought in Arizona where Chavez's family lost their farm, the beauty of the verdant California land, and the depressing cabin where they lived while laboring in the fields. These images provide opportunities for art educators to compare and contrast this landscape with their students' environments to engage in art activities that address environmental issues both locally and globally, such as water rights, global warming, farming, agribusiness, conservation, and sustainability.

Like *Harvesting Hope* (Krull, 2003), *Americans Who Tell the Truth* (Shetterly, 2005) looks at the power of social/environmental activism in a series of portraits of 50 activists. Shetterly notes,

one of the responsibilities of living in a democracy is the obligation of every person to work toward that goal, and that honest dissent is necessary so that the people can give their honest consent. (p. 1)

Most of the activists stare straight into us as if seeking our hearts and souls. Each portrait contains the activist's name and a quote, such as this excerpt from Terry Tempest Williams, "The eyes of the future are looking back at us and they are praying for us to see beyond our own time" (p. 25), or Cesar Chavez,

It's amazing how people can get so excited about a rocket to the moon and not give a damn about smog, oil leaks, the devastation of the environment with pesticides, hunger, disease. When the poor share some of the power that the affluent now monopolize, we will give a damn. (p. 15)

The book ends with biographies of each of the activists and Shetterly's dedication;

[T]o all those who have fought with such persistence and courage to close the gap between what the United States says about equality, justice, and democracy and what it does. Justice is not guaranteed in our Constitution; it is guaranteed by the love we have for it in our hearts, the truths we are willing to tell, and the degree to which we are willing to struggle for it. (p. 46)

### Making Money

While there are other resources for art educators interested in exploring the visual culture of currency such as Marc Shell's (1995) *Art and Money*, due to space limitations I will discuss only *The Art of Money: The History and Design of Paper Currency From Around the World* (Standish, 2000). Standish's book provides historical contexts of the art and design of global currency. Standish writes, "Since money is such a handy tool for propaganda, national leaders, current and historic, are ... tangible reminders of who's in charge" (p. 29).

Standish also notes that despite the United States' dedication to portraits of powerful Anglo-American males on its paper currency, other countries draw from a wider range of historical and cultural contributors. These include "[a]rtists, writers, scientists, explorers, inventors, musicians, [and] architects" (p. 34), as well as other representations of culture including environment and industry as national metonyms.

### Contemporary Fine Artists Working with Currency

After looking at a range of children's picture books that address power in terms of currency, presidents, and social/environmental activism, I now highlight some artists who work with currency as a conceptual and literal medium. As a visual culturalist utilizing the many lenses of design, fine art, children's books, etc., I hope to de-canonize the privileging of one form over another and show their interconnections. While there are many artists working with currency (see [www.alternatingcurrency.com](http://www.alternatingcurrency.com) for examples), two of them, Marshall Weber<sup>6</sup> and Fiona Hall, stand out.



From top:  
Figure 3. From *The Art of Money* © 2000 by David Standish (text) and Terry Armour (photography). Reprinted with permission from Chronicle Books, San Francisco. Aboriginal-designed currency for the 1988 Australian Bicentennial.<sup>5</sup>

Figure 4. Marshall Weber. "United States of her Four Saints in Three Acts." Used with permission of the artist.

Figure 5. Marshall Weber. "Mickey Dollar." Used with permission of the artist.



Figure 6. Fiona Hall. *Tender*, 2003–2005 (detail). U.S. dollars. Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, Australia.

Weber's work at [www.alternatingcurrency.com](http://www.alternatingcurrency.com) presents a powerful (and playful) way of looking at the effects of American money to critique late capitalism and cultural imperialism. In his dollar bill silhouette map of the United States, Weber invites viewers to question, "What values has the U.S.A. come to represent?"

**Weber also comments on the devastating impact of consumerism and greed on our environment and humankind** in "To Change," where George Washington's image is replaced with the statement: "We must change our desire." As Macarov (2003) writes: "Corruption, ecological disaster, fraudulent practices, poverty, human degradation and a score of other ills stem from the oft-expressed (although usually cynical) ideology that in the long run, the market-driven society improves the lot of everyone" (p. 104).

Weber's "Mickey Dollar" explores cultural imperialism by playfully collaging an image of Mickey Mouse extending a welcoming hand from the cartouche surrounding him.

Mickey is the smiley face (or some might say mask) of The Walt Disney Corporation's many media holdings, including film companies, broadcast television, cable television, radio channels, music, book publishing, magazines, and national and international parks and resorts (*Columbia Journalism Review*, 2006). Disney's impact on identity construction and the perpetuation of racist and sexist stereotypes are well documented by authors such as Giroux (1997, 1999) and Tavin and Anderson (2003), who note Disney's depictions of shifty dark-skinned Arab villains, buffoonish African-Americans, and monstrous middle-aged and older women. These images go largely unchallenged by viewers who are seduced by the surface delight of Mickey's invitation to pleasure and escape. Perhaps Weber's Mickey is inviting us to take a closer look behind the attractive faces of all corporations whose primary function is to maximize profits and minimize costs while abdicating responsibility for the social and environmental consequences of their businesses.

Fiona Hall's work also looks at the social and environmental impact of global capitalism using currency as her conceptual and literal medium. Smith (2006) describes Hall's work as "seek[ing] connections between: colonial history, global trade, consumerism and the environment" (p. 76). In the series *Tender*, the Australian artist meticulously replicates dozens of architecturally correct birds' nests using shredded U.S. bills. Ewington writes,

Here in its ubiquity and availability, the dollar bill is made to assume the form of each exquisitely differentiated avian habitat, at exactly the moment when modernization, the advance of capitalism and the spread of deforestation is depriving many birds, animals, and indeed people, of their own environments. (Ewington, cited in Smith, 2006, p. 78)

Another series, *When my boat comes in*, comments on global trade and the accompanying desire for prosperity and wealth. Hall paints botanically correct indigenous leaves on the country's lowest value currency. The common thread on each banknote is the

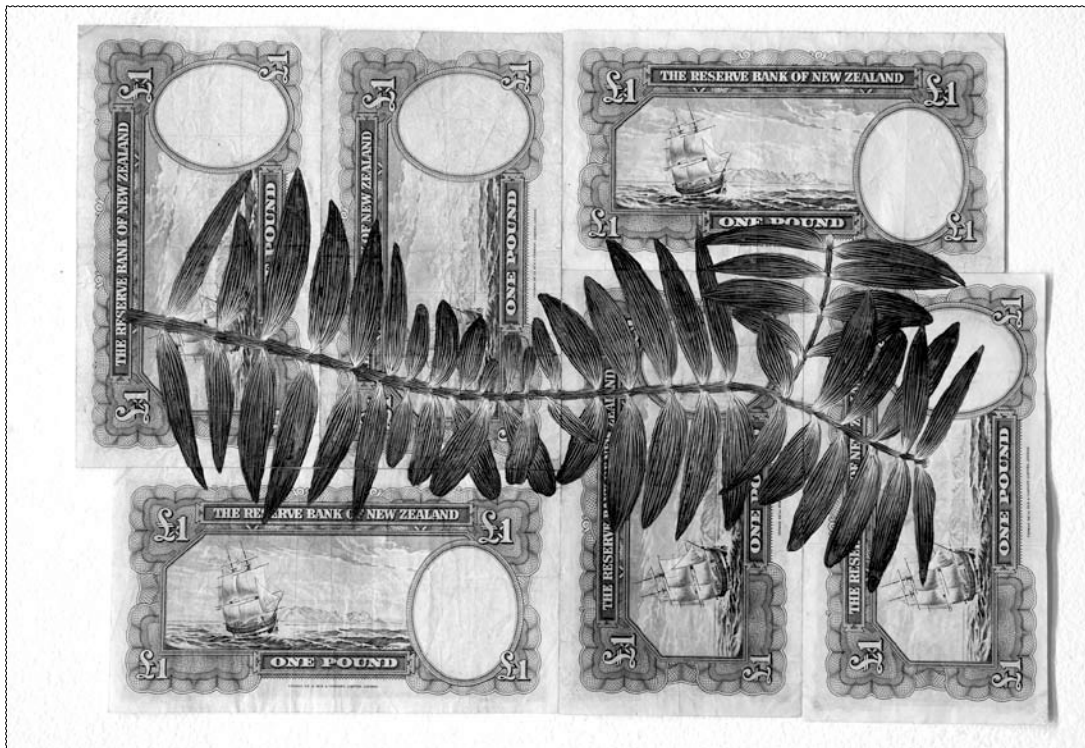


Figure 7. Fiona Hall. *When my boat comes in* (detail), 2002–ongoing. *Agathis australis* / New Zealand kauri pine. Gouache on banknotes. Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, Australia.

image of a boat as a cultural symbol of movement, progress, and enterprise. Smith (2006) suggests this work invokes a subtle word-play “in economic parlance ... with ... allusions to the floating of currencies and to the financial solvency of nations as in ebb and flow” (p. 78). The “oddly poetic taxonomy” (p. 78) includes images of the tea plant (a factor in the Opium Wars) on a Chinese five-yuan note, coca (a prime ingredient in cocaine) on a South-American banknote, and neem (a plant with medicinal and pesticidal properties, recently the subject of a genetic patenting rights battle) on a Burmese banknote featuring barques floating on the water (Smith, 2006).

Hall (n.d.) comments on this work: Money doesn’t grow on trees—or does it? Plants have long played a crucial role in the history of trade and in the development of world economies. A number of species (including some whose origins are in the “New,” or “Third” or “developing” worlds) have been largely responsible for the rapid growth of European power and wealth of the past five hundred years. Plants, and along with them people (colonists,

slaves, indentured labourers) have been shifted across the oceans, battles have been waged over them, forests raised. But everything comes at a price, and now we are paying heavily for over-taxing the environment and for cultivating an ever-widening gap between rich and poor nations. (Hall, cited in Smith, 2006, p. 78).

Studying these artists’ work can lead to fruitful conversations about what the artists are trying to convey through their art. For instance, the teacher could ask, “Why do you think Marshall Weber cut a dollar bill into the shape of the US?” “How do you imagine people around the world feel about the US and Mickey Mouse?” “How do you feel about Mickey Mouse representing American values?” With Fiona Hall’s boat series, the teacher might ask, “Why do you think she painted leaves on these bills, and what might their connection be to boats or ships?” or “Why are plants important, and who ‘owns’ plants?” These artists inspire us to look beneath the surface images of currency and ask what do the images really represent, and what does money actually do?

### The Value(s) of Currency: Creating A Currency of Caring

While students cannot afford to make art statements using real paper money (like Weber and Hall), they can create art currency to make statements about *their* values.

Stout (1999) advocates for a form of “critical intelligence” (p. 23) that nurtures human beings’ capacity to care for self and community, animals, and the physical environment. She writes, “[C]aring to know and to make sense of the world should be primary goals for schooling” (p. 23). The books and artists described above provide a conceptual framework for the following art lesson (3rd grade and up) that promotes this kind of caring by exploring issues of power and activism.

Following discussions about what currency represents and different concepts of power and activism, each student selects an activist role model from global, local, or personal sources. This model is one who cares for and helps others and/or the environment. Students can then focus on the formal qualities of making their own



Figure 8. Jana Griffin. Pen and pencil. Used with permission of the student artist.



Figure 9. Nicole Burns. Pen and watercolor. Used with permission of the student artist.

currency. The currency can be created with any medium such as pen and ink and watercolor, colored pencils on blank 4" x 6" index cards, scratchboard, scratch-away inked oil pastels, or computers. Currency signifiers can include scrolls, ornamentation, patterns, embellishments, and symbols representing the values of their portrayed activists and the monetary value. To infuse mathematics, after students have completed their currency, the teacher makes multiple Xerox copies for students to trade, who then calculate profit and loss in monetary terms. Discussions then ensue as to the unquantifiable value of their currency representing people such as Martin Luther King, Bob Dylan, Rosa Parks, someone's doctor, or Oprah Winfrey. In the recent past, my students exhibited their currency at the local bank to show the community the value of art education as well as local students' values.

Additional art projects for this age group might involve students designing a poster for their own presidential campaign, including pictures about why they want to be president and what they would contribute to their community, country, and world. In a manner similar to the portraits in *Americans Who Tell the Truth* (Shetterly, 2005), students could focus on who in their community or lives makes it a better place, create portraits of this person, and write about their community activism. Additional portrait artists might include Leonardo da Vinci, Rembrandt van Rijn, Rupert Garcia, Vincent van Gogh, Faith Ringgold, or Kehinde Wiley among others. Students could also create local superheroes, as some of my preservice art teachers did in their elementary school practicum, painting portraits of local heroes with appropriate superhero outfits. All of these art pieces could then be exhibited in the local community.

General education teachers wishing to incorporate art into their lessons sometimes approach art teachers, but this project involves the opposite approach. Here art teachers can ask their colleagues to support this lesson by teaching children about different civil rights leaders and environmental activists, such as those featured in *Americans Who Tell the Truth* (Shetterly, 2005) or *Harvesting Hope* (Krull, 2003).

**By combining interrelated sources of visual culture related to a theme (in this case a range of children's picture books, a dollar bill, and fine art sources), art educators can help to deepen their students' awareness of the interconnections between social and environmental caring while exploring, in a truly integrated manner, the multiple ways that these constructs are depicted in historical and contemporary cultural sources.**

Mira Reisberg is Assistant Professor of Art Education, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb. E-mail: [mreisberg@niu.edu](mailto:mreisberg@niu.edu)  
[www.mirareisberg.com](http://www.mirareisberg.com)

## REFERENCES

- Berg, A. G., & Berg Bochner, A. (2002). *The totally awesome money book for kids*. New York: Newmarket Press.
- Berger, M. (2001). *Round and round the money goes: What money is and how we use it*. Nashville, TN: Ideals Publications.
- Columbia Journalism Review. (2006). Who owns what. Retrieved March 12, 2008, from <http://www.cjr.org/resources/>
- Darts, D. (2004). Visual culture jam: Art, pedagogy, and creative resistance. *Studies in Art Education*, 45(4), 313-327.
- Duncum, P. (2000). Defining visual culture for art education. *Journal of Multicultural and Cross-Cultural Research in Art Education*, 18, 31-35.
- Freedman, K. (2000). Context as part of visual culture. *Journal of Multicultural and Cross-Cultural Research in Art Education*, 18, 41-44.
- Galda, L., & Cullinan, B. E. (2006). *Literature and the child* (6th ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Giroux, H. A. (1997). Are Disney movies good for your kids? In J. L. Kincheloe & S. R. Steinberg (Eds.), *The corporate construction of childhood*, (pp. 53-67). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Giroux, H. A. (1999). *Disney, the mouse that roared: Disney and the end of innocence*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
- Higgins, J. J. (2002). Multicultural children's literature: Creating and applying an evaluation tool in response to the needs of urban educators. Retrieved May 18, 2007, from <http://www.newhorizons.org/strategies/multicultural/higgins.htm>
- Kriesberg, D., A. (1999). *A sense of place: Teaching children about the environment with picture books*. Portsmouth, NH: Teacher Ideas Press.
- Krull, K. (2003). *Harvesting hope: The story of Cesar Chavez*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Kummer, P. K. (2005). *Currency (inventions that shaped the world)*. London: Franklin Watts.
- Louv, R. (2005). *Last child in the woods: Saving our children from nature deficit disorder*. New York: Algonquin.
- Macarov, D. (2003). *What the market does to people: Privatization, globalization, and poverty*. Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press.
- Mitchell, D. (2003). *Children's literature: An invitation to the world*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Morales, Y. (2007). <http://www.yuyimorales.com>
- Morales, Y. (2003a). *Harvesting Hope* teaching resources. Retrieved June 5th, 2007, from <http://www.yuyimorales.com/hh1.html>
- Morales, Y. (2003b). *Just a minute: A trickster tale and counting book*. Illustrated by Yuyi Morales. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
- Shell, M. (1995). *Art and money*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shetterly, R. (2005). *Americans who tell the truth*. Illustrated by Robert Shetterly. New York: Dutton Children's Books.
- Smith, J. (2006). Fiona Hall. In *2006 contemporary/ commonwealth* (pp. 76-79). Melbourne, Australia: National Gallery of Victoria.
- Smith-Shank, D. L. (2004). Semiotics and visual culture: Sights, signs, and significance. In D. L. Smith-Shank (Ed.), *Semiotics and visual culture: Sights, signs, and significance* (pp. vii-xi). Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- Standish, D. (2000). *The art of money: The history and design of paper currency from around the world*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
- St. George, J. (2004). *The revised and updated version: So you want to be president*. New York, NY: Philomel Books.
- Stout, C. J. (1999). The art of empathy: Teaching students to care. *Studies in Art Education*, 52(2), 21-24, 33-34.
- Tavin, K., & Anderson, D. (2003). Teaching (popular) visual culture: Deconstructing Disney in the elementary art classroom. *Art Education*, 56(3), 21-23 & 32-35.
- United Farm Workers. (2007). Dozens of farm workers exposed to toxic pesticide chlorpyrifos. Retrieved June 20th, 2007, from <http://www.ufw.org/>
- Weber, M., Wagner, M., & Wilde, C. K. (2007). Alternating currency. Retrieved July 18th, 2007, from <http://alternatingcurrency.com/>
- Whitman, W. (1921). *Leaves of grass*. New York: Modern Publishers.
- Winslow Parker, N. (1995). *Money, money, money: The meaning of the art and symbols on United States paper currency*. New York: HarperCollins.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> In the interests of disclosure, I need to note that Yuyi Morales is a friend and a former student from when I taught children's picture book illustration at San Francisco City College.

<sup>2</sup> The first migrant farm-workers' union in the United States.

<sup>3</sup> On her website, Morales also provides social justice-oriented handouts, worksheets, and links to the UFW website to broaden understanding of the social contexts of his work (Morales, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> In this image, Morales has painted Dolores Huerta, Cesar Chavez, and Luis Valdez standing in affectionate solidarity as Huerta speaks into the microphone. She has painted the marchers waving banners of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the *huelga* (strike) flag, the Mexican flag, and the American flag to show the interrelationships of these cultural signifiers (personal communication).

<sup>5</sup> Standish's (2000) text describes how this "reverse side of a 1988 Australian Bicentennial bill represented a small redress of wrongs, celebrating the aboriginal people who had occupied the island continent for 75,000 years before the first Europeans came along in 1788 and began systematically wiping them out and/or driving them from their traditional lands" (p. 49). Designed by aboriginal artists, the note shows many significant elements of indigenous Australian culture while floating in the hologram "like a (bad) dream balloon is James Cook, the intrepid explorer who started all the trouble for the aborigines" (p. 49).

<sup>6</sup> I am also a friend and admirer of Marshall Weber, whom I knew in San Francisco when he began this series of work.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

With thanks to my former general education students, whose art is featured here, as well as Jessie D'Unger, Danielle Pike, Stacy Winterfeld, Rachel Robinson, Nina Cork, and Zach Weisser for their inspiration in writing this article.