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The Roots That Heal: Chicago's Latinx Odyssey and Art of Liberation

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Introduction: Raised in a Climate of Fear

During the 2024 presidential election, there was an undeniable buzz in our community. In the classroom, I was continuously overhearing students expressing deep concerns and fears about what the outcome might mean for them and their families. Given these anxieties, it felt as though teaching our standard lessons should temporarily be put on the back burner so we could address their needs. However, I tried my best to continue following the agenda, especially for our primary grade levels. For my little ones, I wanted to avoid addressing political discussions in order to protect their developing minds from adult apprehensions, to preserve their sense of innocence, and prevent them from absorbing complex concepts they are not yet ready to process. I wanted to maintain a safe space where students could ignore, if just for a while, what is going on outside of school—a moment to find peace and joy, explore new artistic mediums, and exchange creative art processes with their classmates while simply being kids. However, that hope was misguided; the realities outside our classroom walls cannot be hidden or ignored.

The news announced that Trump was elected president for a second term on November 5, 2024. My heart sank in disbelief. I was consumed with fear and worried about my family, friends, and students. Yet, I had to continue my routine as usual while trying to remain optimistic. I went into school, and I could already see that several of our students were absent. Our school was not as lively as it once was. That same week, I was scheduled to be observed; thus, I tried to put on a happy face. My kindergarten class, which is predominantly Spanish-speaking, arrived to art class, and that day, I planned to teach them two new elements of art: texture and space. I could see the students were trying their best to participate, but as I walked around during their studio time, I heard talk about Trump. At one point, a little boy asked me if I knew what was going on. In Spanish, he asks, “It is true that Trump wants to kick out Mexicans?” I hesitated in responding. I was flabbergasted that someone so young, 5 years old, would ask such a question. I wanted to be cautious as to what I was going to say because I knew that small children are very literal. In my experience, broad statements or complex arguments can leave them confused about how the world works, which may lead them to inaccurate conclusions. Immediately, another student sitting right next to him said “Yes!” She continued adding that her older sister (another student of mine, 7th grade) told her “He wants to send all the Mexicans back to Mexico.” The boy exploded in to tears, and cried “I don’t want to go to Mexico!” I rushed to console him and hugged him as I tried to reassure him that it wouldn’t happen. I wouldn’t allow it. At that point, several other students started crying and voicing intense concerns about being separated from their parents. I

was as honest with the kindergarteners as possible, and let them know that while I am unsure of what the future holds, they have a strong support group here at school with several people who care about them. The classroom observer came to my aid, stopped taking notes, and joined me in reassuring the students. That was my point of realization. Even though we were trying to protect our young students from these issues, they were more aware than we realized. It was clear that the political climate was heavily impacting their emotional well-being.

Classroom Context: Teaching in Back of the Yards

The Back of the Yards—named for its location directly behind the expansive Union Stock Yards (a massive meatpacking hub that operated from 1865 to 1971)—is a historically significant, working-class neighborhood on Chicago's Southwest Side, and it is where I proudly began my teaching career.[1] Throughout my 10 years of teaching in this community, I consistently try and stay informed about our school and neighborhood. Understanding the factors that influence our community are essential for me to effectively plan my units and lessons. I have become familiar with the activities in our community and recognize their impact on our students. Unfortunately, our neighborhood faces high crime rates and gang activity, which has historically contributed to declining student numbers. In recent years, increased immigration enforcement has become an even greater contributing factor. To illustrate the impact, our enrollment has drastically dropped from over 680 students in 2016 to just 390 today. Our demographics, however, have remained the same. We serve a predominantly Hispanic student population, and 97% of our students come from low-income families. In the past couple years, we have also seen an increase in newcomers from numerous locations in Latin America. Though, I have noticed that several of these students do not complete a full school year before moving to another location. It appears that our school often aids as a temporary stop before they continue their journey elsewhere. I have made an effort to get to know these students and they have shared stories about their difficult travels and inconsistent living situations. It's heartbreaking to witness young students going through such turmoil. Additionally, because of the current harsh immigration policies and heightened deportation enforcement, families that have been in the neighborhood for many years are facing displacement or living in fear. Thus, these circumstances have harmed many of our students through induced fear of family separation and school trauma. These challenges have resulted in chronic absenteeism, classroom disengagement, and decreased academic performances. Currently, according to state test scores, only 14% of students are at least proficient in math and 23% in reading. Additionally, many of our students perform below grade level, and struggle academically. Undeniably, there are many additional factors that affects this outcome, but I am committed to develop units that supports students academically as well as personally. By incorporating subjects that they feel strongly about, stimulate their curiosity, and revitalize their drive, I aim to help our students become lifelong learners through critical and creative thinking, as well as find a voice of their own.

Content Objective: ¿Si ellos pudieron porque yo no?

Childhood is a time for children to learn fundamental values such as kindness, sharing, and fairness. They should not have to navigate through polarized adult ideologies; addressing political issues with primary grades might be a premature or farfetched notion. Instead, we can help students maintain a sense of cultural pride while embracing diversity. We can achieve this by designing lessons that empower their ancestral roots and foster positive connections with their classmates.

On the other hand, addressing serious matters such as this with upper grade students can be highly beneficial for developing critical thinking and civic engagement. Therefore, teaching students about history, culture, and multiple viewpoints—without revealing personal political leanings—helps them form their own thoughts and ideas in addition to having a better understanding of themselves and their heritage. This approach can also enable students to become aware of bias, misinformation, and sensationalism in the news. More importantly, engaging in dialogue and listening to peers helps students develop empathy by understanding diverse life experiences and viewpoints.

Through a historical standpoint, I would like students to gain a deeper understanding of where their lineages originated, and what critical events occurred that compelled them to make challenging ventures. Understanding the origin journey can anchor personal identity, build their resilience by honoring their ancestors' sacrifices, and challenge historical misconceptions. In other words, by students knowing their roots, it connects them to a valuable, diverse heritage and empowers them to celebrate the profound impact Latinos have made throughout history. It also recognizes the importance of Latino contributions in US. Therefore, this unit will focus on how historical U.S. interventions and territorial shifts displaced populations, subsequently fueling Latino migration and community reclaiming in Chicago neighborhoods such as our Back of the Yards, Little Village, and Pilsen. In turn, students will study public art and murals to examine how local artists visually restore these hidden histories and empower their own identities.

My artistic objective for this unit is to enhance upper-grade students' critical thinking skills through observation, dialogue, and creativity. By introducing them to public art such as murals and artists, I want to help students gain a sense of visual cultural empowerment and identity formation while reclaiming erased or altered histories. Art can serve as an alternative archive that preserves origin stories, migration experiences, and cultural struggles. My goal is to teach students how to decode these elements. This approach aims to support young Latinx students in connecting with their roots and bridging the gap between their ancestral heritage and the diverse realities of the diaspora. Ultimately, I hope to foster self-reflection and pride, motivating students to become creators themselves. When students realize that art can be a powerful tool for justice and survival, it can transform a standard assignment, into an individual superpower. In this unit, I will share inspirational artists and their work—particularly in Chicago—who utilize their work to narrate their stories and embrace their culture, thus helping students uncover how they, too, can find this superpower within themselves.

Rationale

This 10-week unit (an academic quarter) is developed for 6th grade students. As these students transition from elementary to middle school, there is a profound turning point in their academic and social growth. Curriculum shifts from basic facts and understandings to critical analytical thinking. More specifically, our school is IB (International Baccalaureate) certified, and we implement the Middle Years Programme (MYP) across all disciplines. Our curriculums must foster holistic growth by connecting classroom lessons to the real world in order to develop critical thinkers, and create compassionate as well as internationally-minded individuals. Therefore, I believe this unit will be an ideal introduction for 6th grade artists to learn about real-life contexts, and explore globally significant ideas and issues while at the same time, cultivating their personal, emotional, and social growth. Furthermore, it will be culturally relevant. Immigration and ethnic pride will be the core theme at hand for this unit.

The majority of these 6th grade students are first- or second-generation immigrants who have either experienced migration personally or have heard firsthand accounts from their families. Through building relationships with many of them, I have come to understand that their families migrated predominantly from Mexico, El Salvador, Venezuela, Colombia, or Puerto Rico to the United States in pursuit of a better future. Unfortunately, some families within our community have experienced deportation or know someone personally who has been detained or deported. This has undeniably increased fear and anxiety in the neighborhood and school. Students worry that they or someone close to them might be deported, which has led to increased psychological distress. In addition, it is the aggressive enforcement and the implementation of I.C.E. programs that have certainly amplified economic vulnerability and shifted residential mobility, leading to an increase in Latino segregation and isolation in our community as well as others like it. I've also noticed how mixed public opinions on immigration has negatively impacting our students' mental health and social well-being. At this time, academic performance has become the least of their worries as they navigate these challenges. Thus, I hope to help my students find purpose and passion within themselves. This unit is designed to guide students on a journey of self-discovery, moving from historical inquiry to artistic empowerment.

Furthermore, the MYP (Middle Years Programme) key concept I will focus on is *Identity*. This is because art challenges and enriches personal identity. This study of individuality will explore self-discovery, cultural roots, social commentary, as well as external perspectives. I would like students use their artwork to represent feelings, beliefs, values, and cultural perceptions. The related concepts—promoting a deeper learning of the key concept—will be *Visual Culture and Interpretation*. The global context in which the students learn from is *Personal and Cultural Expression* with the exploration to develop being *Beliefs and Systems*. We will focus on how humans make sense of the world, structure reality, and express their inner values. It goes beyond just studying facts to look at how these frameworks shape human identity, behavior, and creative output. Moreover, the approach to learning that I will teach these students is both *Critical and Creative Thinking Skills*. The students will be introduced to artists in Chicago who have embraced the Latinx culture and history through their work. These artists can help play a crucial role in healing and essentially empowering younger students by acting as mentors, cultural historians, and even creative guides. This curriculum aims to shed light on complex socio-political realities, decode heritage, and transform lived experiences into a powerful form of self-expression. By doing so, I hope the students feel culturally emboldened and encouraged to establish a unique voice in their own artwork. The expectation is to make connections between migration journeys throughout history while recognizing the positive influences made by their ancestors, and utilizing

artistry as a form of visual communication to an audience (community) to reframe perspectives of Latino culture. I also hope to extend appreciation in the aesthetic of public art that embodies culture as well as the creators behind

La Cultura Cura and the Arts

Emerging from Chicanx mental health activism in the 1970s and strongly promoted by practitioner Dr. Concha Saucedo, the notion of *la cultura cura* (the culture cures) suggests that cultural heritage and traditional practices are fundamental tools for healing, community empowerment, and overall psychological well-being.[2] This approach that was exemplified by *El Instituto Familiar de la Raza's* youth program founded in 2000, and frames cultural involvement not merely as an expression of identity, but as an essential wellness practice that fosters critical consciousness, emotional awareness, and deep historical connections.[3] Recognizing these cultural roots as source of strength is crucial for Latinx youth, who may often experience anxiety and depression due to systemic issues like hardship, unstable living conditions, and discrimination. It is providing them with a secure foundation to counter negative societal messages and lower the risk of adverse outcomes such as academic burnout, substance abuse, or other risk-taking behaviors.[4]

This philosophy serves as the root of this unit because its teaching students that their identity is not a barrier to success, but the very foundation of it. Students should recognize that an individual's or community's ancestral values, traditions, and collective experiences hold the fundamental tools for their overall well-being, positive development, and prevail over any instilled trauma or fears. By understanding Latinx history, exploring their ancestors/families' migrations to a city, and discovering their influences within it, they can gain a positive narrative about their culture and transform history into a source of personal and collective strength. Ultimately, students will realize that they do not need to “hide” or leave their culture behind to thrive. Instead, they will learn to lean on and utilize their history as a form of motivational liberation, viewing their family's struggles and triumphs as a blueprint for their own resilience and success.

Community Leaders and educators should implement this ideology of *la cultura cura* by establishing an environment in which Latinx students can engage in actionable, healing-center practices that also promotes social-emotional learning. This can be effectively achieved through various art forms including music, painting, sculpting, literature, architecture, dance, performing arts, and even cinema. By exposing students to cultural rituals that have strongly influenced society through these art forms, they can gain the confidence to do the same in their own unique manner. As Patricia Foxen, the UnidosUS's deputy director of research, states

“These types of activities serve the purpose of both remembering and affirming cultural identity, which bolsters both individual self-esteem and collective well-being. They also reaffirm the importance of an intergenerational bridging of culture which is important to ensuring continuity in our communities.”[5]

My key focus will be on visual arts. The City of Chicago is filled with incredible art that embodies the diversity of Latinx culture, and it is my mission to teach students how to go beyond just seeing this art to truly appreciating it. Much of the public art in our neighborhood tells a story through resilient postures, vibrant, warm lighting, and uplifting community portraiture that can often be overlooked if not fully understood.

Therefore, I would like to provide students with the tools to understand the visual elements that artists use to narrate stories inspired by their Latino culture. As a result, I hope that students feel motivated to continue exploring the ways in which Latinx communities actively shape the cultural landscape of our city, and that they remain proud of these positive influences. Additionally, I want to embrace solidarity and cultural connections among students of diverse Latin backgrounds, and ultimately, encourage them to advocate for one another, no matter where their journeys take them next. In order to do so, we will begin by exploring the origins of the Latinx's journey and their remarkable perseverance.

Latinos in America: We Are Here Because You Were There

As Marie Arana, a Peruvian-American author and journalist, explains in her book titled *LatinoLand: A Portrait of American's Largest and Least understood Minority*, "We were Americans long before the founders dreamed of a United States of America. Our ancestors have lived here for more than a half millennium, longer than any immigrant to this hemisphere, and still we come." [6] It was not until the European explorers arrived to America did an overpowering encounter between cultures ensue. This era of first contact and colonization spans from 1492 through the 1500s, and it was England and Spain that had the greatest impact. [7] Both imposed their cultures over vast native territories, and established colonial empires. Arana reframes the arrival of Europeans as a brutal colonization that brought immense force and "genocide of historic proportions" over Amerindian civilizations such as the Aztecs, Mayans, and Incas. [8] This process involved populations that were already a blend of European, African, and Arab influences, creating a unique demographic shift. However, as Juan Gonzalez explains in *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*, "racial mixing did not mean racial equality." [9] *Mestizaje* (racial mixing) served as a form of control and assimilation. The Spanish developed a strict, legally enforced caste system based solely on the percentage of Spaniard lineage a person possessed, and deterred away from a harmonious, colorblind society. Inherently, this "whitening" notion became almost the social objective; the closer an individual could get to Spanish ancestry, the more legal right and social status they could potentially secure. In other words, it was designed to sustain racialism, not dismantle it. Subsequently, this led to a historical domino effect that has shaped modern American history.

In the early 19th century, Latin American nations fought for independence from Spain and won. Though, they essentially inherited the disassembled social structures left behind by the colonizers. Unlike the United States that grew into a single, wealthy, expanding nation, the Spanish viceroalties split into dozens of separate, smaller countries. Furthermore, these new nations were at a disadvantage due to internal civil wars, lack of economic progress, huge foreign debt, as well as racial and class divisions born from the previous colonial caste system.

Additionally, as Gonzalez notes, between 1810 and 1898, the US aggressively expanded southward and westward. [10] Through wars and obliged treaties, they took control of Florida, annexed Texas, and seized half of Mexico's territory. Rapidly, Mexicans found themselves under US sovereignty, and although some might have been granted citizenship, they would find themselves being treated as foreigners in their own land. This was also said to be true for Puerto Ricans despite their US citizenship. Gonzalez explains, "The contradiction of being at once citizens and foreigners, when joined with the reality that ours was racially mixed population, has made the Puerto Rican migrants experience in America profoundly schizophrenic." [11] They, too, faced a control of land, lower-caste social status, and undeniable racism. Progressing their involvement into the 20th

century, the United States transitioned toward economic dominance. U.S. military interventions in nations like Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Panama were often driven by strategic and economic interests. Some historians would argue that these long-standing political and economic connections have indirectly influenced the broader historical context behind today's demographic shifts in the United States.

A Journey to the Windy City and its Ordeal

The first stream of Latino migration coincided with Chicago's rise as a massive center for industrial capitalism that included growing railroad, steel, and meatpacking industries in the mid-to-late 1900s.[12] American's employers actively sought out Latino laborers, who at that time were primarily Mexicans. They promised young men permanent employment, but their ulterior motives were to seek cheaper, more exploitable labor to fuel its demanding urban industry.[13] They worked at steel mills in the South side of Chicago, in meatpacking companies located in the Back of the Yards, and railroads in the North West side. Many were replacing European immigrant workers, whose entrances into the US was then restricted as a result of WWI and the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act. In his book titled *Making Mexican Chicago: From Postwar Settlement to the Age of Gentrification*, Mike Amezcua explains "Mexicans immigrants became the ideal expendable labor force. They were presumed to be docile, transient, perpetually deportable, and permanently controllable." [14] In adding insult to injury, Mexican settlement was unwanted, undesirable, and contentious in the eyes of the white majority in the city. Although both Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans attempted to build new communities, they were facing white resistance and exclusionary regimes of citizenship that casted them as perpetual aliens. This evidently created sites of struggle in the city's working-class neighborhoods. Furthermore, Puerto Ricans started migrating to Chicago in the late 1940s, and the increasing presence of Latinos in the Windy City, disturbed the city's racial order, provoking locals to redraw boundaries.[15] Since Latino immigrants were seen as racially inferior and unassimilable outsiders, unfit for the benefits of modern urbanity, many tried to avoid documentation, often leading to inadequate records, and even fraudulent documentation. Therefore, "patterns of migration and settlement defy the kinds of data urban historians treat as indispensable: property deeds, maps, demographics reports, zoning and municipal codes, fair-housing laws, and community-organization records." [16] Amezcua articulates that "the act of migrating, securing shelter, and simply *being* in the United States while Mexican have often constituted, through structures of immigration control and enforcement, acts of crime or conspiracy." [17] Simply put, the U.S. immigration laws have historically criminalized the existence of Latin immigrants. In order to survive and build lives, they had to often rely on clandestine networks, fake documentation, and hidden living arrangements. As time progressed, Latin Americans and immigrants sought to remake *Barrios* (neighborhoods) through homeownership and commercial power. They were determined to make a name for themselves. This initiated the formation of young activists and community members who later mobilized direct-action campaigns, boycotts, marches, and protests against the unjust political establishments. Inspired by calls for self-determination, Latino activists proclaimed that "*la raza* (the people) deserved both political rights and a redistribution of economic resources at all levels of government." [18]

Putting Down Roots and Revitalizing *Los Barrios*

In her book titled *Brown in the Windy City: Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Postwar Chicago*, Lilia Fernandez expresses that, by the 1950s, Mexican and Puerto Rican areas—especially the Near West side—faced increasing physical decay, dramatic population changes, massive federal highway construction, and a rapid increase of public housing.[19] The communities also witnessed dramatic racial changes—an influx of more Latino immigrants as well as African Americans. White residents who had the desire and resources to escape these neglected districts did so in growing numbers, and thus exacerbating the racial change. Moreover, urban planners and downtown executives considered the city’s central region “destroyed” or close to it. They saw its growing population of Latin and African Americans as a threat to the vitality of the metropolis, and particularly its downtown department stores, banks, insurance companies, and railroads. Thereafter, in the interest of downtown businesses, they elected mayor Richard J. Daley.[20] Daley urgently developed an agenda that included modernizing the city, improving services to (some) neighborhoods, and refining powerful allies among the downtown elite. His goal was to clear the overcrowded, run-down slums of the Near West side and other nearby areas in order to attract commercial and residential real estate investment, and thus stabilizing the downtown economy. This urban renewal, however, was guided by racial concerns. Fernandez describes how Daley preserved the city’s white neighborhoods and business districts by building racial separation in the very concrete of the city, and Latino communities experienced a pattern of “successive displacements that relocated them from one neighborhood to another just ahead of urban renewal bulldozer.”[21] Most of them were at the center of such physical restructuring—not able to change it, but left with the burden of its consequences. Still, Latinos managed to establish a thriving community life in their humble, less-than-ideal locations. By the end of the 1970s, Latinos had concentrated in four community areas—Pilsen, Lower West Side/Little Village, South Lawndale, West Town, and Humboldt Park.[22] These became the quintessential *barrios* and the center of Latinx life in the city of Chicago. The population continued to grow thereafter. Several Latino groups continued to arrive in large numbers both as legal immigrants and those without authorization as a result of more restrictive immigration policies. Nonetheless, they managed to persevere as a community.

“Among Latinos migrants’ most common and important practices has been remitting—sending money, information, and other important resources back to their places of origin,” states A.K Sandoval-Strausz in a book titled *Barrio America: How Latino Immigrants Saved the American City*. [23] Sandoval-Strausz continues to explain how in recent decades, they’ve been by far the most active remitters sending \$100 to \$200 per month to help their families back home. The majority of these remittances had been utilized for essential purchases such as food and basic goods, serving as an indispensable part of their community’s economic survival in rural areas of Latin America. The second-largest category of expenditure had been in construction. Sandoval-Strausz elucidates that families were rebuilding old, wrecked dwellings, while others had elected to expand their homes or build new structures entirely. Nevertheless, new conditions in the 1980s led immigrants to change patterns of remittance. Because they were now living in a place with much developed infrastructure, migrants gained a new perspective on their home communities. They came to the realization that many of the comforts of modernity such as running water and electricity that they had the fortunate of enjoying on a daily basis were lacking in many of their Latin communities. Thus, to gather collective remittances and undertake community projects, migrants formed hometown associations. They went from enriching individual families, to creating pooled funds for concrete civic upgrades in their place of origin, including paving streets, repairing schools, and building electrical grids. Overtime, various Latin American governments recognized the success of these community-driven funds and formalized the effort by

developing them into state and county level matching program.[24] As Sandoval-Strausz defends, it is their community-minded, financial discipline, and organization mindset that rescued and restored neighborhoods like Chicago's Little Village and Pilsen. Additionally, migrants were importing cultural landscapes from their home countries and adapting them to their new homes in the US.

Latinos, in a less programmatic but evidently a more efficacious way, created a new kind of urbanism of their own. Sandoval-Strauz articulated,

"You can see it in the sheer number of people in public: the throngs of excited children frolicking in once empty playgrounds, the women and men sharing family news and stories, playing dominoes or cards, arguing about homeland politics, or listening to sports announcers so distinctive that English speakers far outside the *barrio* learned to recognize and eventually adapt the term *GOOOOOL!*"[25]

The Latinization of Chicago neighborhoods involved much more than simply arrivals of millions of individuals in metropolitan areas. It was the urban culture of newcomers—the way they gathered, walked, lived, shopped, and socialized. It was a combination of these quantitative and qualitative factors. For instance, a fundamental way in which Latinos began transforming the urban scene was by using their feet. They have a tendency to walk from place to place more than most people in the US, especially the native-born. Latin American immigrants were importing a different understanding of urban landscapes, one that came from the simple fact that they had not grown up in a "US-style" car culture. In a sense, the Latino walking culture reordered the cityscape in barrios business districts making a variety of goods and services easily accessible. They could attend to practically all their needs within the community, and did not have to travel outside the *barrio*. In essence, Latinos reinvented the kinds of locally owned and locally serving neighborhoods economies that has been disappearing before they arrived. Moreover, the residential landscape had served as a vital link to Latino survival. Specifically, Latino urbanism, which has significantly influenced the way U.S. cities function today, emerged directly out of the tragedy caused by the 1995 heat wave where several people died of heatstroke. Sandoval-Strauz noted that "In context of the Chicago heat wave, local formed a crucial point of articulation between identity and survival, providing a site where spatial practices were protective." [27] The architectural features, inspired by Mexican structure designs, served a purpose. It was not only intended as a form of customized front-yard sociability, where they could expect to find friend and family, but also a solution to prevent distress from extreme heat. This was quite the opposite for white Chicagoans that were hesitant to venture outside in fear of being caught up in street violence. Latinos embrace public spaces similar to their homeland where gathering in *plazas* were common. Local shopkeeper also supported social efforts by offering a safe, air-conditioned place, welcoming those that needed relief from the heat. In *Barrio America*, a passage reads

"As it turns out, the extraordinary rate of Latino survival in the heat wave was by no means idiosyncratic—it was just one example of a much larger social phenomenon that sociologists and public specialists have dubbed "Latino health paradox." Numerous studies conducted over more than a decade have found that Latinos enjoy longer life expectancies and better health outcomes that similarly situated non-Hispanics." [28]

Astonishingly, this "Latino paradox" also held an even more profound potential when considering crime

prevention. Sandoval-Strauz adds that the presence of immigrants corresponded to significantly lower rates of many crimes, specifically in Little Village. There were constant protective efforts. A survey revealed that between 1999 and 2001, the presence of immigrants corresponded to significantly lower crime rates.[29] While some counter explanations focus on individual characteristics, it should be noted that people who choose to come to the US are often intrepid, hardworking, and highly motivated. Consequently, they tend to avoid the types of trouble that could lead to problems with immigration authorities. Latino immigrants have managed to create a strong sense of community and a vibrant life that demonstrate their hard work and ability to leverage small but significant advantages in the face of tremendous adversity. Their urbanism promotes a safer, healthier public sphere for both Latinos and even their non-Hispanic neighbors. They have revived some of the key structures of a public realm that were at the mist of disappearing decades ago.

Community, Cultural, and Activist Spaces in Chicago

Latinx community-based mindset is the foundation that continues to sustain our neighborhoods. As Mike Amezcua notably mentions, groups and spaces were set in place to support the self-determined working-class people that “overwhelmingly remain the custodians of the central city, a resource even more valuable to global neoliberal capitalism.”[30] One of which is the Committee of United Latinos (COUL). This activist committee became active during the Chicano Movement that fought for localized resources and civil rights.[31] It was formed by the Near West Side residents to challenge city planners and politicians, with community members studying urban planning to fight against neighborhood displacement. Similarly, Pilsen Neighbors Community Council (PNCC)—founded in 1954—was a group instrumental in the development of the neighborhood.[32] They sought to address the need for bilingual programs, school funding, immigration help, and housing advocacy. They are currently active to this day. Gage Park Latinx Council (GPLXC)—founded in 2018—is another nonprofit grassroots organization that Amezcua highlights.[33] They represent a continuation of resistance against displacement and racial bigotry in Chicago.

Two groups that utilized an artistic approach in this combat against Latinx injustice were Movimiento Artístico Chicano (MARCH) and Casa Aztlán.[34] MARCH was a vital midwestern arts organization founded in 1972 that promoted Latino artists, community murals, and cultural publications. Although it is no longer active, they claimed physical space and expressed community identity in Pilsen. Moreover, Casa Aztlán was founded by Chicano activists in the 1970s, and became the literal cultural, artistic, and political headquarters for anti-police brutality campaigns, immigrant rights, and coalition building in the Pilsen neighborhood. It served the community for four decades before closing in 2013 due to financial difficulties.[35] Still its famous, brightly colored murals on the building’s facade once stood as the most recognizable symbol of Mexican heritage and anti-gentrification struggle in the neighborhood. After a private developer purchased the property in 2017 and tried to convert it into luxury apartments, a massive community outrage generated. The painting-over plan sparked intense protests, boycotts, and neighborhood town halls. Following this strong backlash, the developer hired original muralist Ray Patlan and other local artists to return and paint a new commemorative mural across the building's facade.[36] The historic revolutionary figures—such as Che Guevara and Frida Kahlo—were replaced with portraits honoring contemporary local Pilsen activists and community leaders. Currently, it continues to serve as an active monument to the neighborhood's Chicano movement. This is an attribute I intend to emphasize within the lesson. There is power in public art, and it serves not only as a historical narrative, but also an instrument of protest and accountability. Visual culture holds immense

leverage.

Relevantly, Pilsen is also home to the National Museum of Mexican Art. Founded in 1982, the museum represents the Mexican community from their own perspective and voice.[37] One of their most significant galleries titled *Nuestra Historias* is permanent collection that shares stories of Mexican Identity. This exhibition showcases the dynamic and diverse experiences that have shaped Hispanic identity in the US and Mexico. It demonstrates culture as stories made up of many histories rather than one linear narrative. Within this gallery, there is another space labeled *Galería Sin Fronteras* (Gallery without Frontiers). This portion specifically showcases a promotion of Chicano Artists and depicts a first-voice approach that consciously connects to the social and political realities of their community. Some of these recognizable artists include Hector Durate and Ester Hernandez. Nevertheless, it also features Chicago local artists such as Salvador Vega, and Maria Tomasula. Incorporated in their art are socialist concepts where they systemically reestablish cultural imagery and aim to change society, politics, and the Latino community. This collection is not an elitist art space, but rather one that serves the community. Visiting this institution—gallery artwork also accessible virtually—with Latinx students is well worth the trip, as it genuinely illustrates Latin history.

Painted Histories: The Canvases in our Barrios

Art is undeniably the heartbeat of Chicago's *barrios*. They thrive on deep rooted cultural preservation, historical architecture, and street-level artistic expression. Throughout these neighborhoods, vibrant, socially conscious murals honor Latino heritage. Exploring a few of these recognized public artworks in Back of the Yards and Pilsen provides a better understanding of the community's history, resilience, and Latinx pride.

Located at 1645 W. 47th Street in Back of the Yards stands a large vivid mural created by Jason Schumer, a Chicago-born artist, alongside community members and youth from the local area.[38] It was funded through neighborhood initiatives and provided the local youth a public canvas of their own to explore their identity and pride, countering negative external media portrayals by focusing instead on unity and community support. Their intention was to celebrate the community's rich cultural blend, deep immigrant roots, and shared history. Within the composition, it highlights traditional Hispanic attire, celebratory community music and dance, the portrayal of the working class, and local landmarks which include the Union Stockyard Gates as well as the historic architecture of St. Joseph Catholic Church. It also serves as a colorful gateway to greet residents and visitor with the message that reads "Welcome to Back of the Yards." This mural would be an ideal segue for our Latinx students in this unit. It integrates familiar imagery, their Latinx culture, and local historic landmarks, which can help build a deep sense of historical awareness and personal pride in their heritage.

Similarly, Jeff Zimmerman, another Chicago native, painted a three-panel mural across a classic Chicago brick three-flat apartment building located near St. Pius Church in Pilsen.[39] Zimmerman's mural features deep cultural, spiritual, and community themes. On the right, there a monumental, towering depiction the Virgin Mary. Underneath her reads a caption "*Increíbles las cosas que se ven*" (Incredible are the things that are seen). Layered over is a poignant portrait of an immigrant family that appears to be making a journey through a body of water. The center panel is compiled of local working-class community faces. It is meant to highlight the neighborhood's demographic and industrial history by particularly including immigrant laborers, field workers, and construction personnel wearing hard hats and caps. On the left panel, the theme shifts to future

growth and neighborhood achievement by showing youth wearing graduation caps and gowns. Next to them reads the slogan “*Sí se puede*” (Yes, we can). Above them are portraits of Hispanic historical figures, and below are portrayals of career advancements, such as an educator and a doctor. Zimmerman certainly depicts the struggles of immigration while demonstrating the inspirational faces of both the past and current residents. This public artwork continues to serve as a way to motivate community members. Latinx students can analyze and uncover so much of their ancestral history from this imagery.

Lotería Art for Revolution

Rick Garza

Garza—owner of International Real Estate on 18th Street located in Pilsen—was the concept creator for the “Lotería Doors” murals all around the neighborhood.[40] Lotería is a traditional Mexican—although it originated in Italy, moved to Spain, then arrived to Mexico in the late 1700s—game of chance similar to Bingo. However, it uses a deck of 54 colorful cards and player boards (*tablas*) featuring iconic illustrations like *El Gallo* (the rooster), *El Sol* (the sun), and *La Muerte* (death). Inspired by the game, Garza funded the project in hopes to stop public vandalism while honoring Mexican-American heritage. Having his business be affected first hand, he hoped to combat gang graffiti on his own doors; however, he later expanded the idea through the entire neighborhood. He approached various artists in the area whose work he has seen on murals all over Pilsen. Garza asked if they would be interested in painting doors in some of the buildings and this became a contribution and exposition of the Mexican American community within Pilsen. Artists went further than painting the traditional cards, they created new card designs inspired by Latin icons. Although there are only original 9 doors are spread across 18th Street, 17th Street, and Laflin Street, Garza intentionally left the project open-source and encouraged neighbors to imitate it. Thus, local business owners and independent artists have painted several additional uncounted doors throughout Pilsen.

Grae Idalio Rosa

Rosa—also known as Missy Rosa—is a Mexican-Puerto Rican artist who uses pronouns they/them, and was born on the Northside of Chicago. They currently reside in Pilsen, and have previously partnered with an organization called IPAINMYMIND.[41] Through this partnership, they share a paid homage to the city of Chicago with a collection titled *Chicagotería*. This series highlight distinct Chi-town elements through the lens of the game Lotería. Some notable designs include Humboldt Park’s beloved Puerto Rican flag, and Little Village’s Arch. In a 2016 BuzzFeed article titled *This Artist Made Chicago-Themed Lotería Card and They’re Awesome*, Rosa explains what inspired them to complete these prints,

“I saw first-hand the effects of gentrification and how it’s currently washing away the culture of so many Chicago neighborhoods. I wanted a way to preserve the memories and share them with others.” They continue by adding, “The memory of playing *Lotería* with my family was fresh in my mind and wanted to combine my memories and experience into new illustrations.”[42]

Rosa was looking to update this classic game that has been played for many years. Their goal was to share this work with others, and provide players with an opportunity to experience Chicago’s rich Latino culture

while playing. In essence, it brings attention to Latinx revitalization and contribution to Chicago's *barrios*.

Fernando Caldera

Caldera—also known as Fedz—is an Artist from Jerez, Zacatecas that currently resides in the Southside of Chicago. He has been commissioned to do numerous murals around the city and many of them are a tribute to his race and portrayal of Mexican pride. Nevertheless, in connection to *Lotería*, Calderas had created a unique card design of his own titled *El Tunero*. In his description, he reminisces his days in Mexico as a kid. His grandfather and uncle would bring them prickly pears from the ranch after their long days in the fields. He explains how his family would gather in the patio and talk about their days as they peeled the tunas and pass them around. Calderas, expresses how he misses those moments.

“[I’m] proud to be Latino...having a culture full of love and hardworking people. Our resilience is unlike no other and our willingness to help those in need speaks volumes. This piece is for the handworkers, the field laborers, the ones who make sure we have a roof over our heads and a plate to eat every day. *Gracias por todo su esfuerzo* (Thank you for all your efforts).[43]

Introducing these artists and showing how they have transformed *Lotería* in their own unique styles can be an ideal way for young Latinx individuals to experience a sense of nostalgia while reflecting on the aspects of their Latin roots they truly appreciate.

Teaching Strategy

Visual Thinking (Individual Artworks & Public Mural): The visual thinking strategy is a teacher-facilitated method where I introduce visual images and encourage discussions within the classroom about what we are seeing. Art can have so many meanings based on life experiences and when a teacher welcomes discussions about personal thoughts on art, it establishes grounds for engagement by contributing observations and ideas based on the student's personal experiences. Furthermore, to enhance the thinking process, I will utilize the 4W'S as they are attempting to read the artwork:

What do you see? (What is your observation?)

What does it remind you of? (Another image? A personal experience?)

What's the artist's purpose? (To Provoke? Persuade? Express? Document?)

So what? (Why does this matter? What is the significance?)

Learning Logs: Learning logs are used to help students keep track of learning during the class sessions in both individual and collaborative work. Therefore, I will have students jot down what they have discovered from our historical presentations and discussions in their sketchbooks. This will help students reflect on and refer to when they are seeking clarification and inspiration during art assignments. Sketching-noting—a creative note-taking method that combines words, simple drawings, shapes, and arrows—will also be highly encouraged.

Collaborative Learning: Collaborative learning is an important strategy that I will utilize for most of this unit because it helps students to establish a strong sense of community while gaining new perspectives.

Think-Pair-Share: Oftentimes, some students may be too shy or insecure to share their thoughts and ideas with the entire class. Therefore, I utilize this collaborative learning technique. A student will first examine & think about the artworks independently. Subsequently, they will have the opportunity to share their insight with another classmate.

Classroom Activities

Prior to beginning each art activity, we will devote the start of class to specific aspects of Latinx history and visual imagery related to the lesson. For the first activity, I will address the historical timeline of U.S. interventions and territorial shifts that displaced Latino populations, leading to their journey to Chicago. We will also explore similarities in migration experiences and life in the U.S. as well as how this reflects within artwork. Leading into the second activity, I will illustrate how the Latinx community revitalized and reclaimed barrios in Chicago. This will also provide an opportunity for students to investigate how their own cultures have contributed to the city. Before the final activity, I will highlight Latinx activist groups and other spaces in Chicago that continue to support Latinos. Students will analyze the mural examples mentioned above, as well as comparable murals in surrounding neighborhoods, to gain a better understanding of how artists use their talents as a powerful tool to share their culture's history and traditions while embracing their identity. Throughout this process, students will be required to sketch-note their thoughts and ideas in their sketchbooks for future reference.

Lesson 1: Neighborhood Art Hunt (A community/local research)

"I can select and research local public art to explain how it reflects the history and culture of my community."

Summary- In this lesson, students will have the opportunity to explore a piece of artwork independently. I will provide direct links to access specific Chicago's Latinx public artwork and galleries, such as the Mexican Art Museum's *Nuestras Historias*. Students will select a piece that captures their attention, and speaks to them about Latinx culture. Prior to beginning their investigation, I will ensure that students have chosen different artworks to avoid any repeats. Their task will be to observe the overall composition and explain visual details such as its elements. Taking a deeper dive, I will encourage them to research the context and story behind the work as well as make a personal connection. After compiling their findings, students will share with their classmates.

Objective-

- Make connections between prior knowledge/experiences and new information using their process of analysis
- Note relevant historical information using visual literacy
- Demonstrate an awareness of purpose, audience, voice, and artistic style
- Synthesize information in order to share observation and interpretation
- Gain insight from peers about similar artwork

Instructions-

Part 1

Choose one of the platforms provided and select an artwork that provokes feelings and thoughts (I encourage to look at a few art pieces before making a final choice).

Document artwork information: Title, Artist's name, Year, & Medium.

Part 2

Zoom in and Discover: What are some of the art details observe? Are there any hidden objects or words you do notice at first sight?

List Elements of Art: What are some artistic choices and why? (Example: The color choices the artist uses to express strong emotion)

Context & Story: Look at the Artist's biography. What is some information you can uncover about the artist and their artwork? Where are they from? How does it relate to their culture?

Personal Connection: Why did you choose this piece? What does it make you think of when it comes to your culture? How does it connect to your ancestral history?

Part 3

Shared Artistic Investigation: Once you've completed parts 1 and 2, share the image and responses digitally on our classroom Google slides.

Open Discussion: We will review all submissions together, exchange thoughts, and communicate similarities we see.

Students will also write a reflection of this activity in their sketchbooks. Some guiding questions will be: What story or message do you think the artist wants to tell the world? How does the artist use specific colors or symbols to show their identity? What does this artwork tell us about the time or place it was made?

Lesson 2: Illustrating Our Cultural Tributes through Lotería

"I can create a custom Lotería card that uses personal and/or cultural imagery to honor my heritage and reflects a traditional printmaking style."

Summary- In this lesson, students will be recognizing their culture's attributes. I would like them to consider the positive qualities that their lineage has brought to the City of Chicago, whether illustrated through a person, object, place, or symbol. In other words, they will visualize parts of their heritage as a superpower, and utilize this awareness to reinvent a new Lotería card. Students will brainstorm ideas in groups and finalize their own individual designs. I will also introduce a relief printmaking technique—a method used by many Latinx artists to produce mass democratized art—so that students can create multiple copies of their cards. These designs will ultimately come together for an installation at our school.

Objective-

- Identify distinct positive attributes, traditions, and contributions of their personal cultural lineage.
- Analyze how their heritage has historically or culturally enriched the City of Chicago.

- Synthesize a cultural asset (person, object, place, or symbol) into a conceptual "superpower" visual.
- Translate a brainstormed cultural concept like Lotería into an original, single-image icon design.
- Demonstrate and properly execute relief printmaking techniques.

Instructions-

Part 1

Brainstorming Stage: In groups of 3-4, take turns exchanging ideas and providing recommendations. Create 3 small thumbnail sketches, share and give feedback among your group.

Part 2

Finalizing Card Design: Centered by your brainstorm stage, create your final preferred design in a larger scale (8x10). Follow the visual and textual components:

-Image Centered (the focal point)

-Spanish name (Example: El/La [noun])

-A digit from 1 to 54 placed in the corner (consider selecting a meaningful number)

-A Border (a plain frame that surrounds the central artwork)

Part 3

The Relief Printmaking Process:

1. Transfer your image to the linoleum block: Rub the back of your drawing with soft pencil graphite, place the drawing face-up on top of your linoleum block, and trace over the lines with a pen to press the graphite onto the lino surface. Remove the original drawing and go over the transferred lines with a permanent marker so they do not rub off while you work.
2. Carve the Linoleum: (safety: Always cut away from your body and keep your non-cutting hand safely behind the blade. Turn the block instead of your hand to make curved lines easier.) Use a small V-gouge tool for fine details and outlines, and a larger U-gouge tool to scoop out big blank areas you want to stay white. Remember, whatever you carve away will not hold ink.
3. Ink and Print: On a flat surface, in this case cardboard, squeeze block printing ink. Roll your brayer back and forth until the ink sounds tacky and looks thin and even. Roll the inked brayer smoothly over your carved linoleum block in multiple directions until the raised parts are entirely covered. Carefully place a piece of paper directly onto the inked block. Rub the back of the paper firmly and evenly using your hand, the back of a spoon. Carefully peel the paper away from one corner to reveal your finished print. I would advise you make 2-3 editions of your design.

Following this activity, students will complete an Artist statement about their card. In a brief paragraph, they will explain why their design is a cultural tribute. I will collect one edition from each student, and use it to build a new diverse classroom Lotería deck for an art installation in our school.

Lesson 3: Our Roots, Our Neighborhood

“Collaboratively, we can create a culturally empowering mural for Back of the Yards.”

Summary- In this lesson, students will work in groups (3-4 students) in a communal effort to design a new mural for our neighborhood. Driven by what they have learned thus far in the unit and influenced by cultures' history and contributions, they will form a composition that embraces their diversity and welcomes other to their neighborhood. Additionally, students will be asked to play an activist role in changing societal views of Latinos and actively rewriting their narrative in a public space. Although it will not be a large-scale model, students will create a smaller 18x24 prototype with their group, and present it to the community during our annual art show.

Objective-

- Recognize that their experiences and perceptions have value
- Work collaboratively on a group mural, strategizing a cultural theme.
- Explore the elements of art (texture, color, line and form) as they choose compositional layout for their mural.
- Gain experience with sequential imagery to convey a common message.
- Develop a deeper appreciation of cultural diversity by introducing them to murals from a Latinx standpoint.

Part 1

Planning and Brainstorming:

- Pick a theme: Select a unifying concept together that acknowledges and empowers every group member's heritage.
- Gather input: Have every student draw individual idea, symbol, or imagery on small pieces of paper.
- Group discussion: Talk about colors, shapes, and favorite motifs that represent everyone's voice.

Part 2

Designing the Prototype Layout:

- Scale the dimensions: Considering you're the "wall" space (18x24), draw a miniature version (8x10 standard paper).
- Arrange elements: Move the small classmate drawings around on a shared board to test foreground, middle ground, and background.
- Create the master sketch: Combine the chosen pieces into a single unified blueprint that matches the wall's proportions.

Part 3

Transfer and Create your Mural Prototype:

- Map out a grid: Lightly sketch a grid to map the small prototype onto the "wall".
- Test colors: Try out small paint samples or markers on a test sheet to check how colors look together. Make sure everyone agrees on the color selections.
- Communal efforts: Work together to paint your mural. Everyone should be contributing equally. Include a title and purpose.

During their mural-making process, I will provide students with the opportunity to complete a peer critique. Using a Praise, Question, and Suggest protocol, I will have groups exchange their work-in-progress with another group, so they may share comments in what is working out well and point out specific strong elements of their composition, ask open or focusing questions to understand their artists' intention, and offer a gentle, helpful idea to make the mural better prior its completion.

Appendix on Implementing District Standards

National Core Arts Standards Addressed

Anchor Standard 1: Generate and Conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

VA:Cr1.2.6. Formulate an artistic investigation of personally relevant content for creating art.

VA:Cr1.1.6. Combine concepts collaboratively to generate innovative ideas for creating art.

Enduring Understanding: Culture is carried within us, not just in places. Artists individually and collaboratively investigate personal history to show how traditions adapt, survive, and unite communities across physical journeys.

Part 1- (VA:Cr1.2.6.) Investigate culture through self.

Students will explore a personal journeys, ritual, belief, or family heritage. They will investigate how this personal experience mirrors or challenges the cultural values of their community.

Part 2- (VA:Cr1.1.6.) Bridge ideas collaboratively.

Students will share their individual cultural investigations, and blend distinct cultural symbols, personal narratives, or differing viewpoints into a collaborative artform or installation.

Anchor Standard 8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

VA:Re7.1.6. Identify and interpret works of art or design that reveal how people live around the world and what they value.

VA:Re8.1.6 a. Collaboratively interpret art and generate meanings through describing and analyzing feelings, subject matter, formal characteristics, artmaking approaches, and contextual information.

Enduring Understanding: By analyzing and interpreting artworks in our city (Chicago), we discover how migration shapes human history and how our communities use art to protect, share, and adapt their core cultural values across any journey.

Part 1- (VA:Re7.1.6) Investigate Perspectives.

Students will observe contemporary or historical art about Latino migration and resilience, and decipher specific visual clues that reveal what traditions and values the displaced people held onto most dearly.

Part 2- (VA:Re8.1.6a) Decode Meaning Together.

Collectively, students will break down an artwork's context. They look beyond just the surfaced imagery to analyze the artist's envisioned meaning, and the historical context expressed about one's culture.

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Historical Aspect: These sources can be used to understand the history and statistics of Latinos in America.

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This book, Arana provides an exploration of Latino Americans with a combination of historical research, numerous personal interviews, and her own bicultural experience as a Peruvian-American writer. Arana illustrates an extensive account of Hispanic life in America and examines the vast diversity, resilience, and evolving political as well as social impact on America's largest minority group.

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