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Carolyn Yates
CUNY City College

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The Chicano Community Murals of Chicago: 1968-2010

Carolyn Yates

Advisor: Dr. Anna Indych-López

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Introduction

One Sunday after Mass in 2001, members of St. Pius Church in the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago gathered to watch Father Charles Dahm bless a newly finished mural, *Increíble las cosas que se ven*, *(Incredible the things that are seen)* to welcome it as a new member of the neighborhood (Figure 1). This commissioned mural, by graphic artist Jeff Zimmerman stood four stories tall, a Photorealist portrait of various members of the community of Pilsen, the second largest Mexican and Mexican American community in the United States. It had been more than thirty years since the first impromptu mural had been completed by Mario Castillo and a young group of local students only a few blocks away. This first mural, entitled *Metaphysics (Peace)* (1968) featured sprawling arms and cells of brightly colored, abstract designs, completely devoid of illusionist properties. Ostensibly, the two murals shared few similar traits, stylistic or thematic. However, their history and creation are intrinsically linked to the notion of “community” and public art. This thesis will analyze the evolution of muralism in the Pilsen area from the somewhat clumsy murals created by community youth with generalized messages of Latino empowerment to the compositionally complex works by professional artists exalting the unique local culture of Pilsen.

While the murals of Pilsen and Little Village have become increasingly popular among local residents and tourists alike, they have never received a thorough scholastic analysis. For the most part, these murals have been addressed in general Chicago mural anthologies. In addition, The Institute for Latino Studies at Notre
Dame published a history of Latin American and Latino art in the Midwest in 2008.¹ There have also been a select number of career retrospectives published within the last few years concerning the more established artists in the community, such as studies of the work of Marcos Raya (b. 1948) and José Gamaliel González (b. 1933).² The other portion of the literature consists of material from the mainstream media, such as *The Chicago Tribune*. These sources are useful for elementary information and historical context, but generally do not provide much additional discussion or insight.

This thesis approaches the Chicano murals movement in Chicago from a previously nonexistent critical and scholarly perspective. The first chapter investigates the beginning of the Mural Movement in Pilsen and how the process of mural production, directed toward youths in the neighborhood, vitalized and bolstered the relevance of public art while spreading the message of cultural empowerment. The remaining portion of the thesis builds upon the iconography and themes investigated in Chapter 1 while examining how they evolved throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Chapter 2 discusses how artists in Pilsen reconfigured and re-imagined the Chicago urban landscape to create a visual and political repossession of space, addressing issues pertinent to the community such as gentrification and immigration. Chapter 3 investigates the portraiture of Pilsen’s murals and the integration of local leaders and “average” members of the community into the national pantheon of Chicano heroes. This thesis also contextualizes such topics as the national Chicano Movement, muralism in California and Mexico, and the ethnopolitical and
sociological history of Chicago to form the first comprehensive and nuanced analysis of these works.

Chapter 1: Community Formation and Chicano Activism

The origins of muralism in Pilsen can be traced to the collaboration between local artists and community youths between 1968 and 1975. During that time, the content of these murals shifted drastically, from abstract, vaguely Pre-Columbian designs to enormous portraits of Mexican Revolutionary leaders. However, the unifying purpose for their production coincided with the burgeoning neighborhood activism intended to better the lives of community members in response to increased racism and disenfranchisement. This early muralism in Pilsen was propelled primarily by the notion that public art works empowered community members, especially those who participated in their creation. Directing artists encouraged their students to engage with cultural production and discipline in an area where agency and ownership had previously not existed. The result was the creation of a public art movement with a distinct slant toward community involvement.

While Mexicans have been living in Chicago since the turn of the 20th century, clustered community settlement began to develop during the World War I era, when laborers immigrated to the city to work at the steel mills and railroads. For more than three decades, they lived primarily in the “Taylor Street” area on the Near West Side of Chicago (Figure 2), a neighborhood that had historically been a port of entry for many different immigrant groups throughout the city’s history. In the late
1960s, however, it was becoming increasingly evident that residents were going to have to vacate the area. The building of federal expressways which cut through the neighborhood, urban renewal, and the construction of the new University of Illinois, Chicago Circle Campus, displaced much of the population, forcing them to move slightly west across the railroad tracks into Pilsen, a neighborhood which, until that point, was home primarily to Eastern European immigrants.

This ethnographic shift in demography was not conflict free. In a Chicago Tribune article published in 1973, a “Bohemian” (Czech) woman was quoted as saying, “It used to be such a nice neighborhood, Polish and Bohemian, and Dutch. But now the gangs come over from 14th street.” Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants who moved to Pilsen faced this kind of discrimination on a regular basis; they were insulted with ethnic slurs or turned away at stores. Furthermore, the area was plagued with dilapidated housing facilities, various infrastructural setbacks, and dismal educational opportunities. Another Tribune article describes trash strewn on the streets without anyone dispatched from the city to remove it. These circumstances were met with frustration, but more importantly, locally-based activism. The combined factors of displacement, increased discrimination, and educational and political disenfranchisement would serve as a driving force behind the emergence of locally based, community organizing.

It is no accident that this upsurge in community activism coincided with the burgeoning Chicano Movement, or El Movimiento, on the West Coast. The term “Chicano” has loosely developed into a broad-based category, and has even been defined simply as a person of Mexican heritage born in the United States. However, it
is widely agreed that the *Chicanismo* that gained popularity in the late 1960s through the 1970s manifested in a politically motivated surge of activity and ethnic populism that espoused the empowerment of Mexican culture in the United States. Leaders and activists urged those of Mexican descent to question institutionalized policies of discrimination while encouraging and organizing cultural and historical education. César Chávez and Dolores Huerta, founders of the United Farm Workers (UFW), gained national recognition for their strikes and boycotts that supported workers’ civil rights. In his book on Chicano politics, Juan Gómez-Quiñones deems this wave of activism as an era of political liberalism and occasional radicalism. “Chicano politics emerged as a challenge to the assumptions, politics, and principles of the established political leaders, organizations, and activity within and outside the community.”

In Chicago, members of the Mexican American and immigrant community in Pilsen felt inspired by *El Movimiento*, but were geographically and culturally isolated from the center of Chicano activism. This led members of the Pilsen community to stage meetings and events at a local level in order to address the issues that were most pertinent to them. As Lilía Fernández notes, “the social, political, and economic dynamics at the local level [in Pilsen] provided [a] direct inspiration and motivation to act.”

This period of time saw the establishment of such neighborhood centers such as Casa Aztlán (1970) and Centro de la Causa (1971). They provided such services such as health care, language classes, and recreational facilities for youths while espousing the importance of “cultural preservation.” Aztlán was a particularly significant name choice, derived from the Chicano appropriation of the Mexican myth that the American Southwest was the homeland of the Aztec people. The founders of
Casa Aztlán deliberately chose to create a symbolic bridge between their center and the Chicano movement on the West Coast (such as the UFW in California and the Crusade For Justice led by Corky González in Denver). It was also the meeting place for such groups such as the Chicago chapter of the Brown Berets, a national group of young Chicano (often politically radical) activists. The presence of these organizations and groups provided Pilsen with the initial push for neighborhood mobilization and community organization from within.

A large percentage of these programs and independent community effort was directed toward improving the lives of neighborhood youth. According to a document released by Centro de la Causa, the organization aimed “to provide an atmosphere which encourages adults to use their civil rights and responsibilities and which enables youth to realize their full potential.”\(^{10}\) And in an article published in the *Chicago Tribune*, then director of Casa Aztlán Humberto Salinas wrote, “The emphasis in the Casa Aztlán program is on youth. If a heritage is to be carried to succeeding generations, it will be done by young people who have been given a sense of their own identities.”\(^{11}\) Even independent groups of residents rallied to improve educational opportunities for neighborhood youths. In 1973, a group of Pilsen mothers worked together to successfully build the first dual language academy in the neighborhood, Benito Juárez High School, named for the famed president of Revolutionary Mexico. The overwhelming sentiment was that the youths of Pilsen deserved the opportunity to be challenged academically and creatively to become productive and non-violent members of society and help shape the future of the community.
Chicano Murals, Community, and Education

The very beginning of the mural movement in Pilsen, however, was not overtly linked to radical *Chicanismo*, but rather grew partially out of neighborhood “beautification” and youth service programs enacted by the city to aid local community centers. This form of institutionalized city giving provided funding that was often unavailable to these organizations. In the summer 1968, artist Mario Castillo (b. 1950), was able to take advantage of these loosely defined initiatives by proposing that muralism could fall under the umbrella of community betterment. When the Halstead Urban Progress Center received money from the Neighborhood Improvement and Beautification Program (NIB) for landscaping equipment, Castillo was able to secure the funds he needed to organize the first mural in the neighborhood—*Metaphysics (Peace)* (Figure 3). The organization provided daily stipends for the youths who would be working on the mural and the necessary paint. For his second mural, *Brotherhood*, the five recruited teenagers, ages 15-17, were paid $7.50 an hour by the city’s summer youth program to complete the mural, as a means of early employment opportunity creation. Without the monetary assistance of the NIB, it is unlikely that the mural movement in Pilsen would have commenced at this moment in time.

Using the funding directed toward youth employment and neighborhood betterment, Castillo established an important practice of inclusion and collaboration in the creative process among Pilsen neighborhood residents. Initially, those young people who were hired to paint the side of the Halsted Center also helped install
benches and aided with outdoor landscaping. Castillo, too, participated in these “improvements”; one photograph published in the Chicago Tribune showed the artist bent over a rake during the park renovation. However, for Brotherhood (1969) (Figure 4), Castillo further redefined this process of neighborhood improvement by focusing exclusively on the creation of public art. To that end, he created the design and general composition of the second mural, but portions of the painting were left open and the youth were allowed to paint their own creations in these areas. Castillo implemented this experiment in an effort to encourage youths in the community to actively engage with the concept of “brotherhood” and camaraderie, while simultaneously introducing them to a collaborative artistic process and giving them the power to make artistic decisions. With the completion of Brotherhood and Metaphysics (Peace) Pilsen now had two murals within two blocks of each other, thereby drastically changing the physical makeup of the neighborhood, and sparking an interest in community-based public art.

In addition to their close physical proximity, these first two murals were closely related in composition, form, and color. Both displayed a design at the center, from which bands of color and abstract patterns emanated. In the negative space created between these bands, Castillo and the students inserted organic, abstract cells of color. Both murals also featured a wide array of intensely bright, highly saturated colors. For Metaphysics (Peace) the artists chose a bright yellow background, with additional dominant shades of pink and aquamarine. Shades of violet dominated most of the Brotherhood mural with large sections of tangerine. Brotherhood did feature some more readily recognizable, less abstract symbols. These included a zoomorphic
design in the lower left hand corner, small yellow hearts, paisley prints, and a peace symbol with human arms at the center. In the upper right hand corner, the word “Brotherhood” was barely discernible- yellow letters set on a slant against a background of tightly woven shades of pink and purple.

Because of the emphasis on neighborhood betterment, the local media were mostly dismissive of the mural and did not acknowledge its artistic value. As Marcos Sanchez-Tranquilino points out, most mainstream media diminishes the importance of *barrio* muralism as a “colorful attempt to reclaim the decaying American urbenscape.”14 However, while they city’s financial support was essential for the execution of the works, Castillo’s murals were not a mere quest for “harmony with the park” (as one anonymous newspaper writer deemed), but the visual development of different artistic influences.15 Castillo, born in Mexico, was aware of the work of the Mexican muralists, and also attended Lane Technical High School, home to various Works Progress Administration murals.16 However, for *Metaphysics (Peace)* and *Brotherhood* the most apparent visual influences were symbols based on Pre-Columbian art and a contemporary color palette. The artist has cited the non-illusionistic flatness and design aesthetic of these murals to both Pre-Columbian murals in Mexico and the Native American carvings of the Northwest Coast (though there were no actual direct allusions to Indigenous designs).17 The hues of both murals reflect both the palette of 1960s Pop Art and the facades of houses in Mexico. There were thus multiple artistic sources that shaped the creation of the mural, resulting in a vague synthesis of styles and abstract forms.

While the projects led by Castillo initiated the mural movement in Pilsen,
their abstract forms and mélange of artistic influences was not integrated into the iconography of the Chicano muralism. From a national perspective, the production of *Metaphysics (Peace)* and Antonio Bernal’s untitled mural (Figure 5) on the exterior walls of the headquarters of Teatro Campesino in Del Rey, California were nearly simultaneous, both produced in 1968. However, Bernal’s has been widely accepted in academic literature as the first Chicano mural in the United States, shaping the tone of the movement to come. The mural illustrated a cast of important leaders and revolutionaries from different eras in history, including a Mexican *soldadera* (woman soldier of the Revolution), Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, Joaquin Murieta, the nineteenth-century outlaw hero, César Chávez, Reies López Tijerina of the New Mexico land-grant struggles, a Black Panther, and Martin Luther King, Jr. As Shifra Goldman notes, the figures in the mural are represented in appropriate garb and carrying objects related to their respective roles in the social process.¹⁸ For example, Chávez holds the red UFW flag and shears used by workers in the crops. Furthermore, rather than enhance the Mexican and Chicano figures’ Spanish heritage, Bernal chose to emphasize the darkness of the figures’ skin as an affirmation of racial, Indigenous pride. Bernal’s work helped launch a movement based on a canon of identifiable cultural symbols and the representation of brown-skinned individuals. Castillo’s murals of universal, abstract symbols were an early exception to trends that grew increasingly prevalent throughout the 1970s. However, they never gained the popularity of the racially conscious, politically overt works such as Bernal’s due to the heavily politicized nature of the Chicano Movement.
In fact, by the early 1970s, young Chicano artists living in Pilsen became increasingly aware of these national trends and began adopting the ethnopolitical, Indigenist stream of cultural empowerment of the era. In 1972, a group of young artists convened to form the Movimiento Artístico Chicano (MARCh), a collective that aimed to “promote Latin art and artistic creativeness in the Midwest,” according to a MARCh promotional document. They mounted exhibitions, protested the lack of Latino artists represented at the Art Institute of Chicago, and published a journal entitled *ABRAZO* (Embrace). In a press release, members made clear the importance of art creation within the Mexican American community: “To be the inheritors of the glorious past, it is necessary to carry on the spirit and creativity that made this past so glorious. If this is not done, it is only a matter of time before the community loses an identity and becomes another part of the faceless mass.” Chicano art was thus an agent for the active negation of cultural assimilation and the canonically accepted notion of “Art for art’s sake.” As scholar Guisela Latorre points out, Chicano art’s motto was instead “Art for life’s sake.”

The consequence of this new wave of politically-charged artistic thought was the acceptance and use overt visual exaltation of brown-skinned individuals and Mexican Indian culture, as opposed to the more generalized message of brotherly solidarity and visual abstraction implemented by Castillo. This was due primarily to the activity of muralist Raymond Patlán (b. 1946), the artist most dedicated to the concept of establishing a Midwestern branch of the Chicano mural movement in the Pilsen community. Educated at the Art Institute of Chicago and Academia de San Carlos in Mexico City, Patlán was responsible for the majority of murals executed
during the early 1970s. Patlán was quoted in an editorial of Chicago Today saying, “When God decided to make Man, he took clay from the earth and baked it. At first, the oven wasn’t hot enough and it came out pale white. Then it was too hot and it got burned black. But by the third time, He had mastered it, and out it came, a beautiful caramel brown. He had made the Chicano.” Patlán’s comprehension of Chicano identity was thus formed around a limited construct of race—those of Indigenous descent. Thus, when he insisted that “Nothing is more important in this community than the people and their history” it was a history influenced by a specific ethnic consciousness and empowerment. Consequently, this affected the content of the murals that he would produce, consistently depicting figures with brown skin and motifs from Mexican Indigenous sources.

Painted on the entire exterior façade of Casa Aztlán, Hay Cultura en Nuestra Comunidad (There is Culture in Our Community) was the first visual representation and expression of this Indigenous racial pride. The title was chosen to affirm the notion that art and culture existed inside the barrio and outside the institutionalized, predominantly Anglo art world. In order to illustrate this point accurately, Patlán and his students covered the walls with selections from Jorge Enciso’s book, Design Motifs of Ancient Mexico, an image catalogue of Pre-Columbian carvings and drawings (Figure 6A). The book’s wide variety of designs and thick line drawings facilitated an easy reproduction of numerous geometric patterns, animals, and humans, while allowing the muralists to experiment with scale and color. On the right side of the wall, they emblazoned a large head of Quetzalcoatl, an Aztec feathered serpent deity later appropriated by Casa Aztlán as their logo (Figure 6B).
of the building near the entrance, well-known quotes from Emiliano Zapata and Benito Juárez swirled along the sides of the exterior in both Spanish and English in bold black font (Figure 6C). On either side of the doors, brown-skinned figures, one female and one male, were depicted with outstretched arms and stern expressions, welcoming visitors into the center. The visual representation of these individuals was an important turning point in the visual canon of Chicano murals in Chicago, as their presence demonstrated to the residents of Pilsen a clear correlation between their own features and those being exalted on their public walls.

The significance of these new images was not merely their presence and visibility in the community, but also their creation process: the founding methodology of youth engagement continued as the driving principal force behind mural production. However, as opposed to merely bringing teenagers together for general neighborhood improvement, Hay Cultura en Nuestra Comunidad inaugurated a period of providing Pilsen youths with an ethnically conscious education. This included two weeks of studying Mexican history and culture before beginning the execution the mural. Once the painting process began, Patlán was quoted as saying, “There is no design. It’s your wall to paint.” Youths were thus encouraged to overcome their initial frustration by engaging with the wall and deciding how to organize it, rather than simply following a pattern, or filling in space with color. They chose which figures to paint and where to locate them within the composition. This particular brand of agency was noteworthy because this artistic expression of Pre-Columbian motifs and brown-skinned individuals was perceived as a method of negating a dominant society of assimilation by actively reclaiming their Indigenous
past. The process was described by muralist Eva Cockcroft as a form of cultural rejuvenation, “as if five hundred years of colonialism had not existed.”

For *Reforma y Libertad* (Figure 7), executed during the summer of 1971 on Blue Island Avenue, Patlán maintained the trend of guiding teenagers using archetypal images of the Chicano mural canon. For twenty six hours a week, Patlán directed a group of teenagers from the National Youth Corps in the production, encouraging his students to work together to complete the mural in its entirety, as a form of cultural immersion. A photograph published in *Toward a People’s Art* shows four student hands around a large paper canvas, working together to choose and craft the iconography that would occupy the wall: Aztec icons and designs, a Pre-Columbian pyramid, and Miguel Hildago, a key figure in the fight for land reform in Revolutionary Mexico (Figure 8). The final mural also included Benito Juárez, the first Indigenous president of Mexico flanked by women painted in profile and stacked, in the style of the Mayan murals of Bonampak. At the center, two brown hands literally break the chains of Spanish rule revealing the new Mexican flag. Also include were corn (first cultivated by the Indigenous peoples of Mexico), and a Native American figure donning an elaborate headdress. While these figures might appear anachronistic next to one another, the mural was not intended as a linear history of Mexico. Rather, these boldly outlined, flat figures occupying nearly the entire height of the wall, were easily readable symbols. In this way, they provided a cultural education to those creating the mural while also extending these benefits to the non-participatory members of the community by using generally recognizable figures and iconography.
The use of varying and broad Mexican themes served as a means of integrating as many members of the community into an educational atmosphere as possible, especially recent immigrants. Due to language barriers, anti-immigrant sentiments, and fears of deportation, immigrants often felt isolated within the city. Public programs were instated at such organizations such as Casa Aztlán to ease the transitional process, offering such services as language classes and immigrant rights seminar. The public act of mural creation served an additional tool for combating cultural isolation. As it is recounted by Eva Cockcroft in *Toward a People’s Art*, “Some days, impromptu seminars were held on the sidewalk; one neighbor held the group spellbound for an entire day recounting lessons from Mexican history.” These kinds of unplanned meetings were what Chicano scholar Tomás Ybarra-Frausto described as the formation of a “non-art world centered network of support and information…a communal celebration.” Those who painted the wall were further instructed on their mutual cultural past, while the older, immigrant generation was included and integrated into the burgeoning community.

The inclusion of isolated community members in neighborhood activities and public art however, was not restricted to recent immigrants, but even including those who actively disrupted the stability of the neighborhood. Starting in the late 1960s, violence between warring gangs Pilsen became a threat to the safety of the community. In 1969, Chicano members of the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council formed The Alliance of Latin Americans for Social Advancement to address the gang violence from within the community and “press for Latin American power” according to a *Tribune* article by John Davies. They worked to meet with gang
members and provide recreational facilities to keep youths “occupied” in the hopes that they would “follow a constructive path.” In the same vein of engaging at risk youth in productive activities, Patlán decided to create a mural with warring gangs entitled *Mural de la Raza* (1971) (Figure 9) on 16th Street and Blue Island Avenue. According to Patlán, community members expressed their desire for a mural because “they felt it was necessary to make some kind of statement about the struggles going on in the community at that time between gangs.” Rather than being shunned, gang members were thus encouraged to become non-violent members of the community, at least while they were painting the mural.

Because gang members joined together based on their Mexican or Puerto Rican heritage, Patlán proposed a visual message of peace and brotherhood among these groups. On the left side of the composition, Patlán and gang members painted the faces of Ramón Emeterio Betances, Eugenio María de Hostos, and Pedro Albizu Campos, all noted figures of the Puerto Rican independence movement, while the right side featured Emiliano Zapata, Benito Juárez, and Pancho Villa, the most celebrated leaders of the Mexican Revolution. Underneath their portraits, the last name of each leader was painted in white capital letters. Their solemn faces were imposed upon a flat background of the national flags and the geographical silhouettes of both countries, explicitly reinforcing the cultural background of the leaders. However, while both countries’ separate outlines were represented, their tips met at the center of the composition, linking them together. Furthermore, Hostos and Zapata, closest to the middle of the mural were oriented with their faces shown in profile so that they appeared to be looking at one another. Next to their faces at the very center,
two brown-skinned hands met in an empowered hand shake, similar to the raised “Chicano Power” fist popularized by El Movimiento.

The significance of the implementation of these historical figures was the intent to inform a contemporary struggle in the neighborhood. As Latorre explains, “community murals emphasized the narrative and discursive continuity between Mexican and Chicano history…while expressing the specificity unique to Chicano artistic production.”

For example, it is clear that Patlán was influenced by the work of the Mexican Muralists. Specifically, the enormity of the figures’ faces recalled José Clemente Orozco’s (b. 1883-d. 1949) portrait of Benito Juárez at Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City (Figure 10A). In fact, the orientation and features of Juárez’s face in Mural de la Raza (Figure 10B) are nearly identical to Orozco’s version. However, the work was not a blind copy of Orozco’s mural. Desmond Rochfort’s description of Juárez’s monumental as “a symbol of stability and integrity in a time of uncertainty” is particularly pertinent. However, Patlán and gang members were not referring to the unrest of the Mexican Revolution, but that of Pilsen’s. By involving local gangs in the production of the mural, Patlán challenged them to consider their cultural ties to Juárez and the other leaders. This experience provided them with the chance to consider the similarities of their two peoples, particularly their struggles for social change, and its relation to them.

The final mural Patlán directed, Viva La Causa (1973) (Figure 11) used the same iconography and content as previous projects, but with an additional emphasis on the negative impact of mainstream U.S. society on Chicano identity. The mural, painted on the side of a private residence, featured a guerrillero (Mexican soldier) on
a horse, arms extended and fists clenched with a red banner reading “La Causa.” *La Causa* was the most popular all encompassing expression of solidarity for “the cause” of *El Movimiento*. Upon the red background, the portraits of Emiliano Zapata, Benito Juárez, Pancho Villa, and Cesar Chávez hovered above a mass of men with brown faces. To their right, a male figure bore the “tripartite” face, a Chicano motif popularized by the artist Emanuel Martínez in Colorado that depicted a *mestizo* face flanked by its Spanish and Indian predecessors. Latorre argues that the face acted as “a public call for Chicana/os to embrace the complexity of their identity.” However, the figure was portrayed with his body and wrists bound, his muscles buckling under the strain as he drifted dangerously close to a skeleton beneath him. The figure also was depicted wearing blue jeans, alluding to his modernity. To his right, the U.S. flag descended with vertical stripes upon the skeleton and vaguely Pre-Columbian designs, A small square in the middle of the stars was painted to create the illusion of the exposure of the stripes behind, resembling a prison window, symbolizing the Chicano struggle to maintain cultural autonomy in an oppressive and discriminatory environment.

The creation of *Viva La Causa* was documented in a short film of the same name produced by Kartemquin Films, focusing on the collaborative process between Patlán and his students. Narrated by Patlán and an unidentified female voice (understood as an assistant of Patlán’s), the film begins with brief history of his work in the community, and how the months he spent studying muralism in Mexico shaped his desire to create public art in Chicago’s Mexican American community. He explains in the film, “I decided that people from Mexico were so close to that work it
would relate just as well here in the United States.” This quote validates the public art in the community by connecting it to the great Mexican masters. For the remainder of the 12-minute film, Patlán chooses to emphasize the importance of community involvement regarding all aspects of mural production. He notes that the resident whose house the mural was to be painted upon was “involved in community activities” and bought lunch for the students and that Casa Aztlán donated the acrylics. The young muralists paint together (Figure 12A) while neighborhood residents look on and smile (Figure 12B). Patlán is shown wearing a t-shirt that reads *Viva Mi Raza* (Figure 12C), a popular Chicano chant of ethnic empowerment.

Furthermore, the film provides not only rare visual documentation of the now destroyed mural, but also an audio track that enhances the concept of a mural being a direct product of the community at large and its culture. This is best illustrated towards the end of the film, when unidentified voices begin singing “Bella Ciao” together. Originally an Italian anti-Fascist partisan song, “Bella Ciao” was adopted by *El Movimiento* during the National Chicano Youth Conference in March of 1969. The Conference, which took place in Denver, was a cultural gathering organized by famed activist Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzáles, where youths could discuss and experience Chicano culture and performances. In the book *Viva la Raza!: The Struggle of the Mexican-American People*, conference participants Elizabeth Sutherland Martínez and Enriqueta Longeuaux y Vásquez, describe the event with great enthusiasm. When explaining the significance of the song for young Chicanos, they write, “The theme song of the conference became “Bella Ciao”…Our once secret whisper of ‘We are
proud to be brown, we are beautiful,” grew into a grito- a roar -that would one day rock the nation."^{41}

While Chicago was far from the center of national Chicano activity, in Viva La Causa, “Bella Ciao” carries a similar weight and significance for the Chicano community of Chicago: it is the cry of el pueblo unido, a song of solidarity. While the song plays in the background, flashing images alternate between members of the community and the mural, in rhythm with the guitar (Figure 13A-C). Between verses of the chorus, the voices sing “Hay unos vatos (chingones!) en la dieciocho/ Yo soy Chicano, toda la vida/ Seguir luchando por la justicia.” (There are some men on 18th Street/I am Chicano for all my life/ Keep fighting for justice.) “La dieciocho” was the adopted name for 18th Street in Pilsen, the main avenue that cuts through the neighborhood, culturally appropriated in the Spanish language. The song ends with a rousing, unified cheer alternating between “Chicano!” and “Chicago!”, utilizing word play to connect the city with Chicanismo, thereby reclaiming the city for the Chicano population. And, while the song was derived from the more dominant Chicano Movement, the act of inserting aspects that related exclusively to Chicano life in Chicago exhibited a local appropriation of national culture. The film finishes with a panning shot of the mural and a final word from Patlán explaining the significance of the mural: “La causa- the cause of the movement to re-conquer our education, our history, our culture.” The communal act of creating the work was a means to preserve la causa and combat the negative forces depicted in the mural.
Conclusion

Ultimately, this early period of Chicano muralism only lasted from 1968 through 1974 in Chicago. Most of the works from this particular era have been demolished- *Peace (Metaphysics)* was destroyed as part of an “urban renewal” effort in 1988. Some have simply fallen victim to Chicago’s inclement weather. Finally, Castillo left Chicago in 1969 to work in Los Angeles and Patlán moved to San Francisco in 1981 where he continued successfully to lead other community based projects, most notably the Balmy Alley murals in San Francisco’s Mission District in 1984. However, the tradition of engaging youths with public art in Pilsen was not abandoned. In 1997, the National Museum of Mexican Art founded Yollocalli Arts Reach, a youth initiative and open forum for experimentation in art-making based on issues in art, history, and youth culture. While Yollocalli’s art activities vary, those murals sponsored by the organization operate under the same principle that began in the 1960s- community youths working under the tutelage of a professional artist to promote cultural awareness and education. However these murals, along with those created solely by professional artists, reflect the maturation of the mural movement in Pilsen. Beginning in the 1990s, muralists living in Pilsen began to address community issues such as gentrification, immigration, and the work of local heroes within the artworks themselves.
Chapter 2: The Politics of Space- Assertion and Reclamation

From the beginning of the mural movement in Chicago in 1968, the depiction of Mexican and Mexican American themes on city walls was a significant gesture of neighborhood reclamation. By expressing their artistic vision in a public setting these muralists asserted their ownership of the neighborhood walls and the cultural makeup of the community. However, beginning in the early 1990s (after a lull in production in the 1980s due in part to Patlán and Castillo’s departure to California) the content of the murals shifted from iconography solely derived from the California and Mexican murals to include other symbols that explicitly demonstrated the repossession of local space. The symbols established by muralists in the 1970s were not abandoned, but integrated into a new iconography that included such visual tropes as the Chicago skyline, directly challenging the cultural and political isolation of Chicago’s Mexican and Mexican American community. These murals demonstrate the desire of Chicano artists to portray this community firmly embedded within the city’s diverse landscape, while addressing pertinent issues that relate to their local space such as gentrification and immigration.

Space reclamation is particularly important in urban communities that have been systematically and continuously disenfranchised by dominant forces. Those spaces and neighborhoods inhabited by working-class Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the United States are historically forced ghettoized areas developed by urban planners and official city developers. According to urban studies scholar David R. Diaz, these barrios are “zone[s] of segregation and repression...characterized by
inflated rent, low wage labor, and the worst abuses of urban renewal in the arena of urban policy." This assessment is especially true in Chicago, dating back to the era when Mexican immigrants first arrived in the city at the turn of the century. The practice of racial segregation has led to what John J. Betancur described as “clustering” in Latino communities in Chicago, due partly to choice as a result of a desire to co-inhabit space with those who share a common background, but primarily because of “disinvestment, overcrowding, and the instability associated with low ownership and immigrant status.” Thus, the community spaces of Pilsen were not formed solely based on a shared heritage, but also institutionalized segregation bred by a culture of racism and isolation.

The highly visible nature of public art makes it one of the most powerful and permanent refutations of these discriminative practices of urban development by acting as a symbol of neighborhood space reclamation. As Guisela Latorre points out, muralism functions on multiple and distinct levels of repossession: the actual physical space that the mural occupies and the metaphorical space expressed through the content of the work. The creation and completion of a mural in the barrio, visible to the entire neighborhood and city, demonstrates a confirmation of physical ownership. This act also sends a message of agency from within the community. The full power of reclamation is only achieved through the images and iconography chosen for the wall--the expression of metaphorical space that illustrates the cultural makeup and content of the neighborhood. Latorre argues that, for the Chicano muralists of California, Indiginest imagery served as the primary “symbolic counterpart to the more concrete claims for public space.” By exercising their unique cultural
difference in a public medium, Chicano muralists acted as spokespeople for the residents of the neighborhood, creating a fortified visual expression of autonomy.

While Indigenist imagery remained a vital aspect of the iconographical mural canon in Pilsen, artists also wanted to exploit their own geographical specificity to express a unique form of space reclamation. They recognized that Chicago is home to many easily recognizable and celebrated architectural landmarks. The city has one of the most iconic skylines in the United States, including three of the five tallest buildings in the country. The Sears Tower, with its stepped silhouette, is probably the most famous as the tallest skyscraper in the country. Most of these buildings are located in affluent, predominantly Anglo residential neighborhoods and areas that revolve around commerce. The visual re-construction of the skyline is thus not only a rethinking of the physical geography of the city, but a way to alter the cultural identity and history of the urban landscape. In their book which considers the historical revision of Chicago’s architectural history, Charles Waldheim and Katerina Rüedi write, “These [new histories] celebrate and legitimize spatial representations and agencies hitherto excluded from the master history.” While the authors were not specifically referring to painting or muralism, this is an apt description for what artists in Pilsen strove to accomplish by integrating the most recognizable Chicago buildings into their compositions.

**The City and La Familia**

From the beginning of *El Movimiento*, “la familia” has served as a powerful
metaphor for the Chicano community at large. Referring to the rhetoric of the Movement’s early years, historian of Mexican American culture Ignacio García writes, “Chicanos had to preserve the *familia* as a social entity and not succumb to the decay of urban life. The barrio needed to return to its role as a communal refuge from the sterility of the Anglo-American world.”48 *La familia* came to act as a metaphor not only for the genetic family, but also an interconnected network of support within and without the *barrio*. Consequently, the image of *la familia* became a popular trope in Chicano art. In their Los Angeles mural, *Chicano Time Trip* (Figure 14), Wayne Alaniz Healy and David Rivas Botello used an image of the family— a mother, father, and two children standing against a backdrop of Chicano history to depict the strength and stability of the community and to construct the Chicano nation through the social unit of the family.49 It should be noted that this representation was formed around a heteronormative and sexist construct that glorified the father figure and relegated the mother to her reproductive duties. Those who did not conform to these ideals of womanhood were considered a threat to the patriarchal bonds of *la familia*, and therefore anti-Chicano.50 Thus, the accepted version of *la familia* was both limited and highly problematic.

In Chicago, the image of the nuclear Chicano family was used within the visual context of the urban landscape to represent the cultural fusion of the ever growing Pilsen and Little Village communities (see Figure 2). By the 1970s, Pilsen’s boundaries could no longer sustain the Mexican population on the Lower West Side, compelling new residents and immigrants to move to the neighboring area of Little Village or “La Villita” as it is commonly known today. By the mid 1990s, Mexicans
had been the dominant ethnic group of the area for more than a decade, with a steady rise in local commerce and cultural institutions. In murals, *la familia* came to encapsulate a romanticized representation of this growing stability and cultural establishment of the Mexican American community in Chicago, despite the ongoing challenges faced by neighborhood residents. Muralists juxtaposed the Indigenist symbols of the 1960s and 1970s and recognizable architectural landmarks with a modern, brown skinned family. In this way, *la familia* came to represent the unique situation of Chicanos in Chicago, as the inheritors of Mexican civilization but also firmly implanted within the geographical and cultural history of the Lower West Side and indeed the entire city.

Oscar Romero’s untitled mural on the corner of 26th Street and Hamlin in Little Village illustrates this mélange of cultural signifiers with an emphasis on Pre-Columbian iconography (Figure 15). In the left portion of the mural, a brown skinned man in the immediate foreground wears an artist invented Indian ceremonial costume, including golden armlets, a necklace with a turquoise pendant, large decorative earrings, and a flowing headdress with feathers the colors of the Mexican flag. He raises his arm and gestures with an open palm to the large eagle behind him that is perched on a cactus with a snake in its talons, which is a representation of the Aztec legend of the founding of Tenochtitlan, modern day Mexico City. Continuing to the right, two serpents emerge and jut toward the extreme foreground, their heads closely echoing the stone carvings of the Chichen Itza Mayan ruins (Figure 16A and B). A family of four sits on a chair in a close embrace; the young boy holds a book in his hand and they all calmly gaze out toward the viewer. The eagle’s wing extends out
behind their chair, as if protecting them, while the serpent’s heads extend beyond them, like arms on a royal throne. In the very upper right hand corner, a blue and yellow Aztec Calendar floats above the scene, the lines of its outermost sections quiver and dissolve into the sky.

While these diverse and diffuse Pre-Columbian symbols are used to construct the family’s (and Pilsen residents’) ancient Indigenous heritage, Romero also chose to depict a Little Village landmark to refer to the community’s modern relationship with Mexico and its metaphorical location within the city. This landmark, the 26th Street gateway, marks the entrance into Little Village, greeting visitors with the words “Bienvenidos a Little Village” (Welcome to Little Village) below its upper arch (Figure 17). The gateway and clock were a gift to the community from Mexico, and erected in 1991 through the efforts of numerous community leaders. The curved domes that top the posts of the arch and its terracotta tiles are reminiscent of the Spanish colonial architecture of Mexico, altering the appearance of the city streetscape while also signifying the cultural makeup of the neighborhood’s dominant ethnic group. Every year, the Mexican Independence Day parade passes through its gates every September. The representation of this arch in Romero’s mural validates its significance as a cultural landmark. Furthermore, the artist chose to paint the arch in front of the Sears Tower located in the downtown area, a physical impossibility. However, the Sears Tower has historically been a more widely known building that defines Chicago’s skyline. Therefore, this close juxtaposition re-constructs the city’s famous landscape and reminds the viewer that Chicago’s geography is comprised of different influences, both stylistic and ethnic.
Francisco Mendoza’s (b.1958) untitled mosaic mural mounted on the exterior façade of the dual language Orozco Academy in 2000 (Figure 18) illustrates a visual synthesis of Mexican art and Chicago culture. The top of the mural pays homage to the Mexican craft of papel picado, colorful paper banners that are hung at celebratory events. One panel reads “Viva Chicago” while another represents the United Farmworks flag. On the left hand side, the artist shows the structural exterior and large, concrete entrance gateway of El Centro Museo de Bellas Artes Mexicanas, the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum located in Pilsen. In a separate scene to the right, a well-dressed, brown-skinned family sits in a close embrace. A full bookshelf stands behind them. To their right is a figural grouping sampled from the history of Mexican art: a recreation of a small section of Diego Rivera’s (b. 1886- d. 1957) 1948 mural, Sueño de una tarde dominical en la Alameda Central (Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park) (Figure 19), located in Mexico City. In the original, the artist depicted himself as a young boy with the arm of his wife, the artist Frida Kahlo, around his shoulder, while simultaneously holding the hand of La Catrina, a female skeleton made popular in Mexico by printmaker José Guadalupe Posada. In the Chicago mural, however, Rivera is depicted wearing a White Sox uniform, the South Side baseball team. And, instead of being located in Alameda Park in Mexico City, the figures are shown standing on the 18th Street “El” train platform that connects Pilsen with the rest of the city, thereby literally implanting Mexican culture into the U.S. city.

The reproduction of the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum (MFACM), only a few blocks away, is particularly noteworthy for acknowledging the successful
creation of a cultural institution that belongs to Pilsen and all of Chicago. In 1982, educators Carlos Tortolero and Helen Valdez founded the center, without much publicity. However, by 1987, they had gained the financial support of thirty firms and numerous federal grants, establishing the museum in a permanent Park District facility on 19th Street. The center was officially inaugurated by the Mayor, Harold Washington. Today, it remains the only institution in the city to dedicate itself to the promotion of Mexican and Mexican American art and the only Latino museum in the country that is accredited by the American Association of Museums. By the time the mosaic at the Orozco School was produced, the museum had been a component of the city’s physical and cultural presence for over a decade, drawing diverse audiences from many different neighborhoods. Its presence in the mural acts as a further testament to its permanence and demonstrates that Mexican culture forms an integral part of the entire city’s fabric. Thus, while Mendoza did not represent any of the most famous buildings of the city’s skyline, the choice to depict the MFACM is a testament to the stability and importance of the institution as part of the urban landscape and cultural growth of the entire city of Chicago.

While the architectural aspects are essential components of these murals, the families act as the indispensible anchor between the different cultures. Both artists composed their murals so that the families were linked to the different aspects of the cityscape and cultural markers that surrounds them. In the Orozco School mural, the outer edges of both parents’ arms are illustrated in such a way that thick black outlines of their clothes are still visible while the backgrounds of the adjacent scenes are visible through transparent areas. Thus, the outdoor scene of Pilsen’s urban
landscape literally forms part of their makeup, connecting the family to the neighborhood’s various landmarks. In Romero’s mural, the family’s location is slightly more ambiguous, lying somewhere between the desert of Mexico behind them and the city landmarks that they face. However, it is clear that they are separated from the solitary Indian figure, both by space and culture—they wear modern clothes and hairstyles, without any ornamental jewelry. In the Orozco school mural, the family also wears modern clothing, but pays homage to their Indian heritage with a small reproduction of an Olmec head on the top shelf of their bookcase in their Chicago home. All of these visual markers indicate that the Pilsen and Little Village communities are composed of complex identities and histories, from the United States and Mexico alike.

It should be noted that while these representations of modern Chicano families were meant to illustrate the Lower West Side communities, both of these artists relied on a nuclear, idealized depiction of the Chicano familia that disregarded the housing problems faced by many residents of Pilsen and Little Village. These communities are two of the most overcrowded neighborhoods in the city of Chicago: nearly one fourth of the area’s occupied housing units were overcrowded in 1980, compared with less than one tenth of housing citywide. These figures remained the same according to the 2000 census as well, due in part to the near constant flow of recent immigrants from Mexico who live with friends and family before they gain employment. The two-parent, two-child family unit is a romanticized portrayal of la familia to illustrate the community’s status of stability and comfort, rather than an
accurate depiction of the living conditions of the Pilsen and Little Village’s community members.

**The fight against gentrification**

The concept of space reclamation became particularly powerful in the late 1990s when many residents in Pilsen felt threatened by what they perceived to be increased property values due to institutionalized gentrification. In particular, the Tax Increment Funding (TIF) measures, enacted by the city, provoked considerable resentment from the Mexican American community, who distrusted the motivations of government officials and feared that they were to be displaced as a community yet again. Muralists of Pilsen, as members of the community, were acutely aware of the social climate and unrest. While in the 1970s, artists like Ray Patlán used historical figures to address issues of local interest, in the 1990s Héctor Duarte and José Guerrero (b. 1948) used recognizable landmarks and images of organized protest to assert community ownership over space. Furthermore, by juxtaposing aspects of Mexican and Mexican American culture with existing architecture and structures these artists symbolically solidified the presence of the Pilsen community in Chicago, visually opposing the possibility of mass community dislocation.

Opposition to gentrification in the Pilsen area has existed since the early 1970s, with the conception of the Chicago 21 Plan, a development scheme created by wealthy businessmen intended to revitalize Pilsen and other nearby areas. However, perhaps no organized measure has received as much attention and resistance as the
Tax Increment Financing (TIF) program, enacted by the office of Mayor Richard Daley. According to government reports, this program acts as an effective investment tool for the City to create jobs and promote economic development, as well as make neighborhood infrastructure improvements to benefit people and businesses throughout different neighborhoods in Chicago.⁵⁶ About $329.5 million in property taxes is diverted into the 131 TIFs annually. Ben Joravsky of The Chicago Reader has dedicated multiple articles to the investigation of these citywide measures.⁵⁷ As he explains it, the redirected property taxes are only intended to go toward improving specific aspects of neighborhood improvement. In the case of Pilsen, those funds are supposed to help industrials sites by building new ones and keep others from closing. However, as he explains, many in the city affected by these “improvement” measures perceive the TIF as a “giant piggy bank controlled by the mayor and the local alderman (in this case, Pilsen’s representative, Daniel Solis), whose unmonitored spending may or may not have anything to do with its original purpose.”⁵⁸

The community organizing and mobilization that began in the 1960s was reinvigorated during the late 1990s while the TIF program was in the process of being instated. Many residents felt that the TIFs revoked area ownership from the community and placed it firmly within the hands of government officials and private urban developers who received money from the city. They also feared that city involvement would raise property value substantially, thereby displacing longtime community members who could no longer afford to pay the rent. Residents and businesses began placing signs in their window with such slogans in English and Spanish as “Pilsen is not for sale!” Despite the program’s authorization in early 1998,
the community organized numerous public hearings, pushing back against the city. At one of the meetings in December of 1998, a Circuit Court Judge ruled that the city had violated state law during a previous public hearing in April because residents were limited to 30 seconds for comments and denied Spanish-language interpretation. While these actions were ultimately unsuccessful in halting the TIFs, Pilsen residents refused to be silenced. Responding to an op-ed article criticizing the protests of those opposed to the TIFS, Carmen Velasquez, longtime co-owner of Décima Musa Restaurant wrote in the *Chicago Tribune*, “This is still America; we, the ordinary people of Pilsen still have the right to question why our taxes are increasing, what will happen to our families if we can no longer afford to live in Pilsen and who Pilsen will belong to if it is gentrified.”

One of the most involved community organizations in the fight against the institution of the TIF was the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council (PNCC). Founded in 1954 by Eastern European immigrants, it has since transformed into a Mexican organization with the changing ethnographic makeup of the neighborhood. According to their mission statement, PNCC “works to establish policies and practices in the Pilsen and Southwest Areas that bring about justice and equity.” During the proceedings and pending approval of the TIFs, the president of PNCC Teresa Fraga, along with State Senator Jesus G. Garcia acted as the most prominent voices of opposition to the city’s measures. Fraga, a native of Mexico and a Pilsen resident for 32 years led protests at City Hall equating the TIFs with “ethnic cleansing;” she was present at all the meetings that took place during this time. Even today, more than ten years later, the PNCC remains vigilant about monitoring the TIF
spending. In 2000, the PNCC commissioned a mural by the artist José Guerrero, a long time resident of Pilsen, as a permanent and highly visible demonstration of this opposition.

Painted on the side of the PNCC headquarters at Blue Island Avenue and West 21st Street in 2000, the mural relies on pre-Columbian symbols to reinforce the strength and presence of Mexican culture within city’s landscape (Figure 20). In the lower right hand portion of the composition, a group of people gather around a sign that reads “We have to organize.” This scene only occupies a small portion of the composition: to the left, the grey, steel skyline of Chicago unfurls throughout the remainder of the bottom portion of the mural, with the Sears Tower at the center. However, the skyline is eclipsed by two dark brown-skinned figures at the center of composition. Their bare feet dangle above the skyline, larger than any of the buildings. A cob of corn opens up in front of the cityscape while two brown arms, wrapped in green husks, jut out alongside it. Their hands hold books, symbols of education, in their strong grasp. Three cornstalks grow forth from the steel buildings--the stalk on the right opens its husk to produce the Virgin of Guadalupe. In the upper right corner, the translucent portrait of Aztec ruler Cuauhtémoc hovers above the scene, He appears to be watching over the entire composition. Finally, along the very bottom edge of the mural are the words “Aqui estamos y aqui nos quedamos” (“Here we are and here we stay.”) in large capital letters. Thus, while there is no explicit mention of the TIF, the message is clear: Pilsen residents would not be displaced by any governmental measure.
While Guerrero’s mural was sponsored by a Pilsen community group, other artists, such as muralist Héctor Duarte (b. 1952), chose to express their resistance to the TIF measures without this form of support. The artist’s commitment to issues of social and political justice has led Duarte to become an outspoken defender of the Pilsen community and a well known voice of opposition against the TIF. As a gesture of solidarity, Duarte attended many of the TIF related community meetings in 1998. At the time he was quoted in a Chicago Tribune article by Teresa Fraga as saying “People who are living here now will be kicked out to who knows where.”

During this period, he created a sprawling, complex mural on the side of a building on 18th Street and Bishop with his own funds and the aid of several other artists. The mural, entitled Alto al Desplazamiento urbano de Pilsen (Stop Gentrification in Pilsen) (Figure 21) is centered around a giant eagle whose body is replaced by an image of a family reading together. Behind them, encased in a bubble, are rows of corn and an Aztec pyramid. On either sides of the bubble are dramatic scenes that evoke the current political scene in Pilsen. The scene on the right shows groups of protestors in frontal poses in the foreground, middle ground, and background holding different signs- the most prominent displays the mural’s title in Spanish and English, while others read “TIF = ethnic cleansing” and “Alto a la basura moral” (Stop moral trash). The houses of Pilsen form a blockade around the crowd, while the Chicago skyline looms in the far distance. The left side of the mural portrays a group of Pilsen residents falling off balance as one man attempts to fight off a menacing Klansman who reaches toward them.
It is likely that for the left portion of the mural, Duarte drew directly upon the visual and social precedent established in Pilsen by Marcos Raya, José Guerrero, and other artists with *Alto a la Tercera Guerra Mundial (Stop World War III)* (Figure 22). The mural, completed in 1980, was a collaborative antiwar effort on an 18th Street concrete railroad embankment, provoked by the impending election of Ronald Reagan. The mural’s continued existence was precarious, as it was not authorized by the Burlington Northern Railroad. However, after almost two decades (despite areas of significant fading) the work, according to art journalist Jeff Huebner, is a “Pilsen landmark” and “a true street survivor.”63 One of the central sections depicts a group of protestors holding signs with the mural’s title in both English and Spanish. The tight, stacked figural grouping and strong, horizontal arm gestures are echoed in the right hand portion of the 1998 mural *Alto al desplacimiento urbano de Pilsen (Stop Gentrification in Pilsen)*. In addition there are certain shared iconographical markers—the threatening hooded Klansman, white moneybags, and a skeleton that indicate that the 1980 work was a source of inspiration for depicting the battle between *el pueblo unido* and the government. By referencing the mural, Duarte pays homage to a Pilsen landmark created by community artists that grew to represent a successful, guerrilla style reclamation of local space and a visual protest of governmental abuses of power.

Duarte also added an important symbol to this section that pertains directly to the preservation of local culture and business. In the scene, the Klansman reaches forward with his thorny hand toward a *paletas* (ice cream) cart, wheeled by a man in simple clothes and sandals. The man is a *paletero*, someone who sells popsicles and ice cream, accompanied by a pushcart. They are often immigrants without proper
documentation, working many hours a day on their feet for little pay. In addition, many wards in Chicago have outlawed street peddlers, citing grievances from local businesses. But for many in Pilsen and Mexican American communities throughout the country, the palatero is a symbol of local culture, someone who works in opposition to chain businesses and strip malls. In that sense, palateros, though mobile, form part of the Pilsen’s commercial landscape. By weaving the palatero into the mural, his arm literally raised against racism and corporate power, Duarte not only elevates a profession that is not usually considered noteworthy, but also solidifies the figure’s presence within the community.

Crossing boundaries- butterflies and the representation of immigration

Increased enforcement at the United States/Mexico border, worksite raids, and heightened xenophobia toward Latinos have recently led Pilsen artists to consider how the representation and re-construction of local space could also address issues of international immigration. The result has been the incorporation of butterflies into Pilsen’s mural iconography due to their powerful symbolic association with human immigration. In particular, monarch butterflies are well known for their unique annual migration patterns. Beginning in August, the butterflies fly from Canada through parts of the United States (including Chicago) and land in sanctuaries in Mexico by the end of October. Despite their miniscule size and delicate wings, they can travel for more than two hundred miles a day until they reach their final destination. The incredible lengths that these butterflies travel and their ability to cross borders without
the need of any documentation have inspired artists such as Duarte and Salvador Jiménez (b. 1982) to use them as symbols of freedom and hope.

In 2004, Duarte created his most elaborate mural to date, *Ice Cream Dream* (Figure 23), with monetary support provided by established cultural city programs. The Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) chose Duarte to create a new mural to be mounted outside the newly renovated Pink Line station at Western Avenue and 21st Street in Pilsen. The project was funded by the Art in Transit Program in conjunction with the Public Art Program, an organization that focuses not only on providing opportunities for the creation of new public art in the city but also commissioning local community artists. According to the CTA, these artworks “typically add aesthetic value to [their] site, and often has added meaning, perhaps conveying something about the local community.” With the funds provided by the city, Duarte was able to construct a complex mosaic mural of glass pieces and ceramic insets, working originally from a mixed media painted composition. After completing the mixed media portion of the project, Duarte enlisted the assistance of several other local artists from the neighborhood to aid in assembling the thousands of glass fragments in his studio before the work’s final installation on the exterior wall of the transit plaza.

The mural depicts Chicago’s lakefront. The choppiness of the water is expressed through individually articulated small, sharp waves of aquamarine and white throughout the middle foreground. In the background, waves of dark blue and violet rise vertically towards a fiery sky of vibrant yellow, orange, and red. At the very center of the mural a red heart floats above the lake. Growing out of the heart are
different buildings that make up Chicago’s architectural landscape: the Sears Tower, the John Hancock Building, church steeples, and the 19th century brick buildings typical of Pilsen. They bend and twist in different directions, echoing the movement of the lake’s waves behind them. Planted in the lower right of the heart is an Aztec Pyramid. While most of the mural is comprised of small ceramic pieces, the artist chose to use large, grey and brown tiles in the direct foreground to imitate the concrete revetments near the shore of Lake Michigan. On the far right hand side, a \textit{paletas} cart sits alone on the pavement. From its slots, a large pink ribbon emerges, swirling along the entire width of the composition, transforming briefly into the steel scaffolding that runs below the “L” tracks. Finally, butterflies of different colors fly throughout the entire composition, their wings spread at different angles. A number of butterflies are raised above the lowest relief.

While the topic of immigration is certainly pertinent to the community of Pilsen, Duarte used symbols that were vague enough to be more universal in nature. Creating an effective balance of universal and local signifiers was a concept with which Duarte struggled. In a photo provided by the CTA, it is evident that the piece was originally conceived to include only Monarch butterflies (Figure 24), particular to migratory patterns between the United States and Mexico. In the final mosaic, however, Duarte chose to include butterflies in a wide array of colors thereby shifting the focus from solely the Mexican immigration experience. Furthermore, Duarte chose to represent the \textit{paletas} truck without its owner, as he did in \textit{Alto al Desplazamiento Urbano}. Without the human face attached to it, the \textit{paletas} truck becomes a more universal symbol of immigration, the butterflies emanating in every
direction from its slots. While *paleteros* are certainly emblematic of Mexican culture, the absence of a brown-skinned individual accompanying the cart eliminates any openly Indigenist significance that was so widely applied earlier. While it is possible that Duarte consciously removed these aspects due to the source of funding, it is also likely that the artist was experimenting with different modes of representation and broadening the message.

Duarte’s powerful visual association of butterflies with human immigration influenced other artists in the area to utilize the symbol to its full potential. In 2009, the National Museum of Mexican Art (formerly the MFACM) displayed an exhibition entitled *Declaration of Immigration*, a display of artworks that depicted “many of the experiences and viewpoints within the U.S. immigrant community.” In conjunction with the exhibition Yollocalli Arts Reach, the educational arm of the museum, sponsored a new mural at their headquarters led by teaching artist Salvador Jiménez and participating students. However, Yollocalli already had an existing mural at their center by local artist Roberto Valadez and students that had been completed a decade earlier. After serious consideration and discussion with Valadez, Yollocalli staff reached a decision to have the existing mural removed due to the importance of the topic of immigration. In June of 2009, the mural was whitewashed (Figure 25A) and a large note was put up in its place (Figure 25B), an “open letter to the Pilsen Community” explaining the importance of creating a new mural that addressed immigration rights. “We feel that this is a serious issue that directly affects the Pilsen, Chicago, and Global communities.”
The entire background of the four-story mural is painted a bright blue, representing the sky, completely altering the surrounding space (Figure 26). In horizontal bands, a tromp l’oeil barbed wire fence crawls across the composition, splintering and breaking apart at the center. The words “We are a nation of immigrants/NO inhumane treatment, deportation, family separation, detention/NO wall/No human being is illegal/National security is used to foster ethnic tension” occupy the negative space between the wire in bold red and black capital letters. The scrap remnants of flags from different countries are caught in the wire, abandoned by their human counterparts. This, therefore, is not simply a representation of the physical border area between Mexico and the United States, but rather a metaphorical crossing point that all immigrants pass when leaving their country of birth. In the upper right hand corner, two brown hands break through the wall through a trompe l’œil hole, reaching toward the Chicago flag twisted around a pole. The created space branches off, extending beyond the actual mural onto the poles that hold up the power cables. A bright shade of yellow, the painted barbed wire curves up around post while the words “Legalización ahora!” are imprinted upon it. Carved, multi-colored steel butterflies perch upon the pole, further transforming the surrounding space.

The most notable aspects of the piece, however, are the various incarnations of the painted butterflies-each relaying a different side or story of immigration. In the upper right hand corner, a butterfly is formed by five human eyes, while a mosquito-helicopter hybrid drips blood onto the wire below. These figures represent the border control, watching over the others below. One butterfly represents the permutated flag of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, its body morphed into the central star,
further represented with fists clenched, wearing members’ characteristic hat and face mask with the word “hope” across its lower half. One butterfly shows a golden sunset over the city of Chicago, while another shows a human curled in the corner, the skyline looming in a threatening manner. Yet another’s wings show the profile of the Statue of Liberty, while another’s body is formed by the world and a dangling key, its wings composed of the American flag and the words “Wake Up: Dream Act,” the now defunct bill that would have allowed certain immigrants who arrived in the United States as minors to gain full citizenship. These butterflies, along with the other components of the mural, render a complex symbolic story of the space immigrants encounter—surveyed, crossed, inhabited, and left behind. The architectural landmarks and landscapes are incorporated into the makeup of the butterflies; the immigrants, therefore reclaim space for those who are too often dispossessed of any claim to land.

Conclusion

The repossession and creation of space is often a highly contested and controversial matter, especially in mural form. During the creation of the Declaration of Immigration mural, an unknown individual vandalized the work, spray painting out the text and writing, “Mexicans are racist,” in an attempt to reclaim the space for their own purposes, rather than attempting to understand the significance of the work. Others have expressed their doubt that muralism is an adequate or effective form of protest against concerns that relate to space. YoChicago, a popular real estate website, posted an image of Duarte’s Alto al Desplazamiento mural with the accompanying
caption, “I think if you're serious about stopping gentrification, the first thing you do is put a stop to all the murals. You're just adding ammunition to the notion that this is some kind of quaint artists' community.”

This is a particularly damning statement considering the intended social legacy of these murals. Essentially, the author argues that rather than combating gentrification or demonstrating any possession of political power, muralism is a mere byproduct of neighborhood beautification. However, despite these acts of disapproval, it is clear that these public art works have acted as powerful reminders of community space ownership, and will continue to remain significant. As Duarte responded to the posted criticism in Spanish, “The moment we stop painting murals is the day we are defeated and we should leave this place.”
Chapter 3: Re-imagining portraiture

The development of Chicano muralism in Chicago has depended largely on the use of portraiture to depict and codify members of the local community. Portraiture is an important aspect of Mexican and Chicano muralism, a means of exalting (or condemning) recognizable faces. At the beginning of the mural movement in Chicago, portraits were limited to the heroes of the Mexican Revolution and César Chávez, strictly following the Mexican and Californian examples. By the 1990s however, images of notable members from the Chicago Chicano community such as Rudy Lozano and Carlos Cortez (b. 1923- d. 2005) were integrated into this pantheon as well. This visual juxtaposition between national icons and Pilsen’s heroes has metaphorically elevated these figures beyond their local standing while enriching the Chicano iconographic vocabulary. More recently, artists like Jeff Zimmermann (b. 1970) and Robert Valadez (b. 1958) have expanded upon this tradition by depicting non-distinguished members of the neighborhood in their photorealist murals, as a means of empowering local figures and the community as a whole.

A New Pantheon

Portraiture in Chicano muralism is derived in large part from the Mexican precedent, used as a link between El Movimiento and the Revolutionary past of Mexico. Portraiture has existed and evolved in Mexico (and throughout Latin America) since the Pre-Columbian era. In the 20th century, the modern muralists of
Mexico relied heavily on portraiture to construct the visual history of the nation after the Revolution, depicting its heroes—specifically populist leaders such as Emiliano Zapata and Benito Juárez—in order to shape a uniquely Mexican narrative. These murals expressed a communality of national experience, and the portraits served to clearly classify the nation’s heroes and villains, not allowing room for open interpretation. Chicano muralists identified with the struggle of the Revolution and recognized the power of these instantly identifiable faces. They appropriated these figures and their portraits, often directly, to suit their own cause. As Guisela Latorre explains, “The images of these heroes became timeless ideals that transcended the Revolution itself and made themselves current to the contemporary activism of Chicanas/os on U.S. soil.”

Of course, the Chicano pantheon of heroes extends beyond the Mexican model. Of those figures that are uniquely Chicano, no one person has been more widely represented than César Chávez. While other members of the Farmworkers Movement, such as Dolores Huerta, have also evolved into important symbols in the Chicano mural iconography, none have achieved the mythic level and status of Chávez. Since Antonio Bernal included the UFW leader’s likeness in his 1968 mural in Del Ray California (see Chapter 1), Chávez’s benevolent face has grown into one of the most popular subjects of Chicano mural portraiture not only in California but also throughout the Southwest and the Midwest, including Chicago. Even when the content of the mural does not relate directly to the UFW, land reform, or worker’s rights, Chávez will often appear as a central character within the narrative of the mural, a key cornerstone in the history of the Movement and La Causa. As journalist
and Chávez biographer Susan Ferriss has indicated, “Chávez served as a reminder that Chicano creative expression had a moral basis and was founded on the political struggle to overcome oppression. Chávez’s image was and continues to be an archetype, a bigger than life symbol of Chicano art’s distinct origins.”

As described in Chapter 1, César Chávez and figures from the Mexican Revolution have appeared throughout the Chicano murals of Pilsen since the beginning of the Movement in Chicago. This marked the first time that members of the community were able to create a viable link between their own ethnic makeup and that of exalted heroes painted on Pilsen’s public walls. However, before the 1990s, there was no direct visual reference to any particular member of the Pilsen community because no one figure had emerged as a powerful or unifying Chicano political voice, despite the development of community organizing in the area. In 1971, the Chicago Tribune published an article addressing the lack of political agency within the “Latin” neighborhoods in the city. While the article’s tone is decidedly patronizing, a telling quote from community organizer Saul Alinsky encapsulates the ideal characteristics of an as of yet unidentifiable Chicago leader of Mexican descent. Alinsky postured that, “He must be one of their own people but he must be politically sophisticated, dedicated to winning at all costs. He must be able to know in advance the actions and reactions of both his own people and those of his foes.”

For many residents of Pilsen, the person who would come to embody all of these traits was Rodolfo “Rudy” Lozano. Born in Harlingen, Texas in 1951, Lozano grew up in Pilsen where he became interested in community activism and organizing during adolescence. Throughout the 1970s, he became a prominent community figure and solidified his political credibility through his efforts to organize and unionize
both migrant and undocumented workers in Chicago.\textsuperscript{74} These endeavors included acting as an organizer for the International Ladies’ Garment Worker’s Union (ILGWU) and working to unionize the undocumented employees at Tortillería Del Re. As member and spokesman of the Chicago branch of the Centro de Acción Social Autónoma (Autonomous Center for Social Action, commonly known as CASA), he spoke out against U.S. Attorney General William Saxbe’s proposed $50 billion dollar increase in federal funding to deport undocumented immigrants.\textsuperscript{75} From a broader perspective, Lozano also understood the need to gain political support outside the community to achieve any goal of social justice for Pilsen. He lost a close race for Alderman of the 22\textsuperscript{nd} Ward to incumbent Frank Stemberk but acted a central figure in rallying the Puerto Rican and Mexican communities of Chicago to vote for Harold Washington, who became the first African American mayor of the city. After his election in 1983, Washington made Lozano his acting liaison to the Latino community. Shortly thereafter, he was killed by an unknown assailant.

While Lozano was popular during his lifetime, his assassination propelled the beloved activist’s status to veritable martyrdom throughout Pilsen. His memorial service at St. Pius Church on June 12\textsuperscript{th} lasted seven hours with 15 priests concelebrating, beginning with an original \textit{corrido} (a type of Mexican popular ballad) performance by friend and scholar Jesus Negrete that included the lyrics, “Your death is not in vain, for we have your ideas in our hand. It is better to die on your feet than to live on your knees.”\textsuperscript{76} The second sentence refers to a famous quote by Emiliano Zapata, likening the slain community leader to one of the most influential figures of the Mexican Revolution. The service culminated in a procession through the streets of the Lower West Side, where thousands of members of the community mourned publicly. Nearly every store window contained a black-bordered sign with Lozano’s photograph and the words “Un Hijo del Pueblo- A Son of the People.”\textsuperscript{77} This
enormous outpouring of posthumous support, according to Casa Aztlán director and Lozano’s friend Carlos Arango, was a critical display of solidarity with the movement to dismantle Chicago’s political “machine” and fight for those whose rights were being threatened or challenged.78

While artists had created small-scale portraits of Lozano, Marcos Raya was the first artist to incorporate his face into a public mural. Since 1979 when he painted over Ray Patlán’s first impromptu community mural *Hay Cultura en Nuestra Comunidad* (Figure 6), Raya has made a variety of changes to the Casa Aztlán exterior façade to create a more organized and portrait based composition. He replaced the randomly placed Indigenist symbols with a horizontal line of repetitive designs and six circular porticoes, three on each side of the main doors. While the artist has redone these windows on numerous occasions, they have always included the portraits of renowned historical figures such as Emiliano Zapata, Benito Juárez, and Ernesto “Che” Guevara, greeting visitors upon their entrance (Figure 27A). About a decade after Lozano’s death, Raya removed the large Pre-Columbian face over the doors and replaced it with two red banners (Figure 27B). Superimposed on these banners are the faces of César Chávez on the left and Rudy Lozano on the right, a halo of orange and white surrounding their portraits. In a 1996 interview, Raya explained why he included the portrait on the façade, "He [Lozano] was really committed to his cause, and we have to keep his image alive. He was one of the martyrs...His name rang all over."79 Furthermore, between the two banners, Raya painted a Chicano *familia* (similar to those discussed in Chapter 2) against a flat, bright purple and blue background. Rather than embed them in the Chicago landscape
however, the artist depicts the two children, on either side of their parents, valiantly holding up the red banners on the opposite sides of the façade. Thus, the depiction of Lozano’s face—on equal footing with Chávez—not only provides a permanent visual reminder of his contribution to *la causa* in Chicago but also metaphorically connects the community at large to The Movement as well.

Lozano’s face was also featured prominently in an untitled Little Village mural, completed in 2000, that relies primarily on portraiture to characterize the victories of both Mexican and Chicano history. A large, centrally located Aztec calendar acts as a bridge between two portrait-based histories. The left side of the mural (Figure 28A) represents the many faces of Indigenous Mexico and the Revolution- on the far left, an Aztec warrior with a gold and feathered headdress raises his head proudly, while below him an Indian mother gazes at her swaddled child. The other figures were appropriated from famous painterly and photographic portraits, including Emiliano Zapata, Benito Juárez, and José María Morelos. Of note is the portrait of Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla- his animated expression, extended arm, and fiery torch in hand are features derived directly from a celebrated mural by José Clemente Orozco at the Governor’s Palace in Guadalajara. On the right hand side of the work (Figure 28B), the bust of Rudy Lozano in a grey suit is crowned by the Little Village gate and the city skyline in the background. To the right, César Chávez is shown mid speech, his hand raised to his chest. Below them are members of the ILGWU, holdings signs with their union’s name and one that reads “Abajo con la explotación a nuestra clase obrera” (Down with the exploitation of our working class). Thus, not only is this a portrait history of notable figures of Mexican and
Chicano history but also a depiction of those who actively fought for the rights of disenfranchised peasants and workers.

However, the young muralists also opted to include two figures that ostensibly do not seem to fit into the overarching theme of social justice. The men that appear on the very right hand side of the work were Mexican American members of the military, Roy P. Benavidez and Manuel Perez, Jr., both recipients of the Medal of Honor for their service in Vietnam and World War II, respectively (Figure 28C). Their inclusion alludes to a particular “standoff” that occurred in 1987, regarding the honorary naming of 26th Street in Little Village, where the mural is located. A group of veterans wanted to name it after Perez (who was born in Oklahoma but raised in Chicago), while others fought to have it named after Lozano. Many viewed the battle as a symbolic reflection of the divide between the older generation of “patriotic” Mexican Americans and the younger, politically active group who identified as Chicanos. Often, murals will not acknowledge any inner discord, opting to gloss over any disagreements in favor of portraying the community as a unified body. While the Little Village mural does not openly address the identity clash, the close positioning of the two figures demonstrates the differing faces and beliefs of the Mexican American neighborhood while also suggesting that the two can indeed occupy the same wall (and community) without conflict. As Alderman Jesus Garcia (a Lozano supporter) said, those who wanted the street named after Perez just had “a different idea of showing pride.”

Apart from Lozano, the one other community member who gained the most widespread respect and visual representation in Pilsen was the artist, poet, and
worker’s rights activist, Carlos Cortez. Cortez was born in 1923 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin to a German mother and a Mexican father who was an active member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) union, which Carlos also joined as an adult. During World War II, he served a two-year jail sentence for conscientiously refusing to serve in the military. Beginning in 1948, Cortez began drawing cartoons and creating prints for the Industrial Worker, the printed publication of the IWW. Twenty years later, he moved to Chicago, where he became one of the founding members of Movimiento Artístico Chicano (MARCh). While he participated in the production of some collaborative murals, the politically motivated prints he created seeking to capture the struggle to promote social transformation gained him the most recognition as an artist and activist.  

As an artist, Cortez’s socially conscious body of work made him a portrait-worthy subject for various younger artists (many of whom he mentored). Paying homage to famous artists through portraiture is a prevalent tradition among many Chicano/as. For example, Frida Kahlo’s unmistakable visage expressed in her powerful self-portraits, coupled with her political activism and questioning of her identity and subjectivity, has made her image and style popular visual symbols for Chicana/o artists to reproduce and re-imagine in their own rite and voice. While Cortez is not nearly as well known as Kahlo, his expressive and distinctive prints, coupled with his dedication to social issues and his near constant presence at cultural establishments in Pilsen made his portraits ubiquitous throughout the neighborhood. Muralists in Chicago re-visualized Cortez’s primary creative mode of printmaking, acknowledging the medium while simultaneously transforming it to suit the mural-
based platform, In doing so, they constructed a complex artistic fusion that reflects the diverse forms and expressions that characterize Pilsen’s artistic community.

In a now completely eroded mural on May and 18th Street, Pilsen students paid homage to Cortez by re-imagining one of the artist’s tributes to his own hero. In a 1981 linocut (Figure 29A), Cortez created a portrait of his creative idol, the printmaker José Guadalupe Posada, based on one of the few photographs of the artist (Figure 29B) with hair slicked back, eyes squinted, and a prominent moustache. However, instead of replicating the three piece suit that posada wears in the photo, Cortez chose to portray the artist as a craftsman—wearing a smock, his hands arranging skeletal icons on a piece of paper that bears his name. Beside Posada is La Catrina, his female skeletal creation reincarnated as a muse, who lovingly rests her bony hand on his shoulder. In the mural (Figure 30), the students replicated La Catrina’s affectionate embrace, but replaced Posada’s likeness with Cortez’s. As a nod to Cortez’s preferred black and white printmaking, the muralists chose to paint the skeleton’s feathers shades of grey and white, while also taking advantage of their own medium by painting the underside of her hat a shade of lilac. Cortez is depicted with the items and features that would come to be his attributes— an oversized white cowboy hat and large dark rimmed glasses, with a bushy white moustache that extends beyond his face. On the right side of the work is a red coyote accompanied by its Náhuatl name, “Koyokuikatl,” a moniker and image adopted by Cortez as an adult. By linking Cortez to Posada, the muralists turned the Chicago artist into an icon of socially-engaged printmaking worthy of international acclaim, while maintaining Cortez’s own distinct traits that earned him renown in Pilsen.
Cortez’s likeness also appears on the façade of the José Clemente Orozco Community Academy. While the Orozco School is home to a variety of murals based on narrative scenes (such as the one described in Chapter 2), the most prominent and numerous works are the vertically aligned ceramic mosaic portrait panels that cover the façade of the school. Francisco Mendoza began producing these works with his students during the summer of 1991 and continuing through 2001. These murals feature a wide spectrum of Mexican and Chicano heroes—these include the overwhelmingly popular faces of Cuauhtémoc, Benito Juárez, and Mexican artists such as Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. However, Mendoza and students also chose to include figures from popular culture such as slain Tejana music star Selena and Mexican movie star Pedro Infante. Moreover, the many panels have come to include various notable members of the Pilsen community such as Guadalupe Reyes, who founded El Valor (Courage) the first bilingual, bicultural rehabilitation center in Illinois for adults and children with special needs and mental disabilities. Over the years, these hundreds of panels have come to represent a broad and varied array of faces and contributions that make up the Mexican and Chicano experience.

For the portrait of Cortez (Figure 31), Mendoza and students chose to highlight the artist’s dedication to Chicano political activism and worker’s rights. To that end, they decided to take full advantage of recognizable iconography and the surrounding panels to create potent visual juxtapositions. Next to Cortez is a portrait of César Chávez; he is shown wearing his characteristic checkered blue and green flannel shirt holding a stack of papers. The background behind him consists exclusively of the red UFW flag, the black wings of the eagle mascot poke out from
behind his head. Cortez’s portrait demonstrates the artist’s support of Chávez and his ideals— in addition to his own individual attributes— the hat, glasses, bushy moustache, and large skull that he often wore around his neck— he also sports two buttons: one of the UFW logo that mirrors the background of Chávez’s neighboring panel and one that reads “UVAS NO.” (NO GRAPES). This was a popular slogan coined by the UFW to protest the use of toxic pesticides on grapes harvested by farmworkers.

Moreover, Mendoza also linked the two figures by incorporating one of Cortez’s prints ¡Viva La Huelga! (Long Live the Strike, a popular UFW slogan) (Figure 32A) into the background of the mosaic portrait. The linocut, created by Cortez in 1993, depicts Chávez shown smiling widely, surrounded by the faces of various braceros (land laborers) that fade into the background. Not only was the print a portrait of Chávez, but it also served as a significant object that connected the artist and the UFW founder. In a photograph from a 1993 event at the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum (Figure 32B), Chávez is shown kneeling, signing a large poster version of ¡Viva La Huelga! while Cortez stands behind him, smiling. This was one of Chávez’s last engagements— a week later he passed away in Arizona. By appropriating the print as the background of Cortez’s portrait, completed after Chávez’s death, Mendoza used his own artistic agency to rearrange Cortez’s work, replacing where Chávez was located on ¡Viva La Huelga! with Cortez’s face. In this way, Cortez continues to embody Chávez’s cause, carrying on the message of the national icon in his own unique fashion through his art and social consciousness.
Photorealism and the many faces of Pilsen

While many of these mural portraits have been derived from well-known photographs of their subjects, the majority of those works often retain a stylized, loosely drawn appearance. Beginning in the 21st century, Jeff Zimmermann and Robert Valadez began exploring a different stylistic technique that mimics the heightened realism of photography. This style has enabled these artists to venture beyond the accepted canon of Mexican and Chicano heroes and capture the precise likeness of non distinguished, “every day” residents of Pilsen. While Chicago muralists had previously represented community members in murals, their presence had always been mostly symbolic: vaguely drawn faces in a crowd rallying for a cause, holding up didactic signs. On the one hand, these subjects’ lack of historic context and political significance has freed muralism of some of the pervasive symbolic iconography that has accompanied the mural based portraiture of Pilsen. On the other hand, some contemporary realist portraits of community members also fall prey to racial and ethnic stereotyping. Nonetheless, these artists’ careful attention to detail and desire to expand the hero’s pantheon, deeming new faces as acceptable mural content, has by and large empowered not only those people represented but also the entire community at large.

As the Artist-in-residence at Casa Aztlán in 2005, Robert Valadez, like Marcos Raya before him, was given the opportunity to re-conceive the community center’s façade. While Raya continues to repaint the area surrounding the main entrance, Valadez has reworked only a very small portion of the south exterior wall, a
section underneath the symbol of the quetzal symbol students painted with Ray Patlán in the 1970s. Much of Valadez’s oeuvre revolves around photorealist portraits of both famous figures and normal people of Mexican descent. As Artist-in-residence, Valadez decided to paint one of his friends as a way to modernize the heavily Pre-Columbian and Indigenous inspired designs (Figure 33). She is portrayed with photographic precision, gazing tranquilly at the viewer. She wears a tight fitting black tank top and pants, her brown arms exposed. A spot on her shoulder and the sheen of her hair seem to shine in the sun. Her black hair is tightly braided in two pleats and she wears lavender eye shadow under her plucked eyebrows. In her arms she holds a young boy with dark hair and skin who looks off into the distance while he plays with her ear. With the relaxed embrace and candid posture, the two figures appear to be a true extension of the community who gather in the Casa Aztlán courtyard, rather than an Aztec ancestor.

While Valadez’s work does evoke a modern, real face of Pilsen, his portrait does fall victim to some of the problematic gender roles assigned to women by a large sector of the Chicano Movement. As discussed briefly in Chapter 2, Chicanismo functioned on a patriarchal system, relegating women to restricted positions based on maternity and loyalty to men. Since the beginning of the movement in Chicago, the representations of women by Chicano artists have been, for the most part, both limited and conventional. In a 1978 review of the MARCh exhibition, “La Mujer: A Visual Dialogue”, art critic for New Art Examiner Jane Allen wrote, “These [works] address themselves to the theme in a very traditional way, depicting views of woman as seductress, woman as omnipotent mother, woman as picturesque peasant.”86 It
should be noted that Valadez does not include his figures within a nuclear *familia* structure; in so doing he avoids the exaggerated unequal gender roles and idealized lifestyle commonly depicted in representations of the Chicano family. However, the male artist’s representation of a brown skinned woman as a (presumed) mother, along with an unthreatening gaze and her close positioning on the wall next to the a pre-existing painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe solidifies the long established trope of the Chicana characterized as both maternal and virginal.

Perhaps the most well-known of the photorealist murals painted on the walls of Pilsen are the six works completed by Jeff Zimmermann, commissioned by the local Catholic church, St. Pius Parish. The largest and most visible of these murals is *Increible las cosas que se ven*, on the corner of 19th Street and Ashland (Figure 34). The three story high, three paneled mural, situated above a laundromat, depicts different aspects of the Pilsen neighborhood. The content of the right hand panel of the mural resonates the most with the patron’s role both as a church and haven for recent immigrants. St. Pius Parish has become known for its strong community involvement. It was the first of the eight churches in Pilsen to offer Catholic Mass in Spanish in 1963; it has also grown to offer teachings and programs that help to incorporate new immigrants into a competitive, often hostile environment. The mural depicts a dark skinned family in the foreground, wading through a body of water while the Virgin of Guadalupe watches over them. The positioning of the family with water to their chests connotes various passages- the baptism, a rite of admission into the Church, and the dangerous challenges immigrants face to arrive in Chicago. A hand and obscured face are pressed against barbed wire that blends in
with the blue sky in the background echoing the theme of immigration. The faces of these figures are less individualized and realistic than those on the other two panels, reflecting a more universal narrative of immigration and Christian benevolence.

The central panel is a veritable ode to the many different professions and faces that make up the mostly working class Pilsen community. As such, the figures are depicted with working attire and tools: their own attributes. Two women in the upper left hand corner (presumably restaurant employees) don crepe hats and green smocks, a shade echoed in the baseball caps and t-shirts worn by two house painters below. On the left, an older woman slumps wearily over the paletas cart she pushes. In the lower left hand corner, Zimmermann pays homage to local artist Marcos Raya, paintbrushes in hand, but no more distinguished than any of the other non recognizable faces. While these community members occupy nearly the entire composition, Zimmermann makes no attempt to convey any sense of ongoing narrative or relationships between them. Rather, the mural is clearly a photo-like composite- each overlapping figure imparts its own different, individual story. While they do not interact with one another other, however, the figures all appear to be bathed in bright sunlight, squinting their eyes as they look in the same direction. In this sense, they are united as residents and workers of a shared place, forming the human fabric of the community.

The collection of portraits on the left panel presents the most easily interpretable story- the hopes and realizable potential of the neighborhood. In a band across the top of the mural, the familiar faces of international heroes- Emiliano Zapata, Zapatista Subcomandate Marcos, slain Salvadoran bishop Óscar Romero,
César Chávez, and Guatemalan Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú, blend in to the blue background, overlooking the scene below. However, they are not the central focus of the work. A man and a woman, in cap and gown, smile in front of a flat explosion of pastel colors behind them. These colors seem to emanate in a halo like fashion from the head of a female doctor below them. She wears scrubs and a stethoscope around her neck, her hair cut short, smiles and extends her arms outward into the neighborhood. Further below, a young, well groomed male teacher looks downward, chalk in hand where he has just finished writing the phrase “Sí, se puede” (Yes, we can), a slogan coined by Dolores Huerta in 1972. While implemented by the UFW, the phrase has come to represent a rallying declaration of empowerment to Latinos across the country. As the teacher’s students are not represented, this message can be interpreted as a reminder to the community at large to value education and remain empowered. While the theme of the mural could appear romanticized, the fact that these are real faces from the community makes the values and goals represented seem attainable, rather than abstract.

These portrait-based works have been described by artist and curator Karen Ann Myers as “sensitively rendered” because the artist avoids overt political didacticism, instead focusing on the simple physical traits of his subjects, turning unsung local people into heroes. In the central panel, the working class people are represented with the tools and uniforms of their designated trade; the same can be said for the left hand mural. In addition, the figures on the right panel, the immigrants, are portrayed with significantly darker skin than those represented in the other two segments. The compositional separation of these groups compartmentalizes
them into classifications based on their social, economic, and racial backgrounds. These deliberate divisions and emphasis on class-based markers harkens back to the practice of “type” photography in Latin America—a common means of codifying the race and class of the sitter based on dress and accessories. As anthropologist Deborah Poole argues, this was a way for photographers to “fix” their subject’s identity based on these markers, rather than create a fluid representation of an individual. 90 Thus, the artist’s use of realist portraiture at times echoes certain ethnographic visual traditions. Depictions of marginalized ethnicities and women in art are rarely problem free, and both these artists rely on standard representational tropes and traditions.

Although realist portraiture in the Americas is a historically charged practice, Zimmermann and Valadez’s images are a source of pride throughout the neighborhood, expressed in communal public celebrations. After the completion of Valadez’s work, attendants at a party, including the subject of the mural, posed for photographs in front of the work (Figure 35A and B). Similarly, as mentioned in the introduction, Zimmermann’s mural was welcomed into the community with a blessing from the priest and members of St. Pius. In a video of the event, large numbers of church members can be seen smiling as they watched the inauguration of the work (Figure 1). The popular reception of these murals indicates the overwhelming acceptance of the photorealist strategy as one that empowers local subjects.
Conclusion

In the introduction to the catalogue *Retratos: 2000 Years of Latin American Portraiture*, Marion Oettinger Jr. writes, “Faces are the mirror of our humanity, and their depiction in art is uniquely compelling.” ⁹¹ In the case of recent muralism in Pilsen, portraiture, in its many forms, acts as a mirror of a multi-faceted and diverse community. These faces have come to represent the creative expression, political awareness, and social change achieved by well-known leaders but also the quiet dignity and everyday lives of the continually growing population. While some of these faces are more recognizable than others, as a whole they bring together and celebrate the varied contributions and stories of Chicago’s Mexican American community. Perhaps one of the most well expressed thoughts on the power of these portraits comes from a young Pilsen resident. When asked to articulate the significance of the Zimmermann mural, 16 year old Aimee Alvarez said, “These murals represent who we are as a culture…we do our best to grow as a society and progress as a people.”⁹²

The future and legacy of Pilsen’s murals

Muralism in Pilsen faces some challenges for its continued production and survival. From a purely practical standpoint, Chicago’s inclement weather coupled with a general lack of funds for repainting and maintenance greatly shortens the life span of a mural. On a more intellectual and artistic level, muralism has also been
accused of being old fashioned, or too traditional, especially in its painterly form. Muralists in Pilsen have expressed concern that the younger generation of artists will be drawn to more marketable and digital art forms. In a short article published by Northwestern University in 2010, Marcos Raya stated decidedly that “Now it’s technology, and there’s no way going back as an artist.” However, just a few months after making that statement, Raya returned to repaint and reinvigorate his historic mural, *Prevent World War III* (discussed in Chapter 2). Furthermore, both established and young artists alike continue to create new murals that engage the public’s interest and remain relevant to the community’s interests.  

From a critical perspective, the muralism of Pilsen has too long been dismissed merely as a “colorful” or “dramatic” expression of ethnic difference, dispossessing these works of their social and historical significance. While Chicano muralism as a whole often does not receive the scholarly attention it deserves, the murals of Pilsen, even within the academic community, have previously not been acknowledged as artistically compelling. Perhaps this can be traced back to the community-centered nature of these works. Pilsen and Chicago as whole have been perceived as the center of the “people’s art” rather than a source of forward thinking, conceptually innovative projects. However, addressing the concerns and issues as they pertain to the community does not preclude artistic originality. From a clear and careful analysis of these works, it is evident that artists have engaged specific strategies such as appropriating imagery from Chicano murals in California, incorporating local landscapes and faces, and experimenting with techniques such as photorealism and mosaics. They deliberately engaged with historical traditions in
Mexico while tackling complex issues of identity, politics, ethnicity, and culture unique to *Chicanismo*. These themes continue to challenge Pilsen and the rest of Chicago to consider the evolving role of public art in an urban landscape in a manner that could never have been predicted when Mario Castillo first gathered a group of youths to beautify Pilsen’s bare walls.
Notes

5 Lilia Fernández, “For the West Side to 18th Street: Mexican Community Formation and Activism in Mid-Twentieth Century Chicago,” Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society 98 (August 2005), 164.
8 Fernández, 178.
12 Mario Castillo was born in Mexico and moved to Chicago as a child. He began painting in high school and studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He now teaches art at Columbia College in Chicago. For more information see Gonzalez and Zimmerman, 2010; Gray 2001; and Goldman 1985.
16 Lane Tech Academy is home to many early twentieth century murals, including works by WPA artists like Mitchell Siporin and Edgar Britton.
17 Unpublished document provided by Mario Castillo to the author.
19 Movimiento Artístico Chicano (MARCh), Calendar, 1977.
20 Ibid.
25 These quotes include “El respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz” (Respect for the rights of others is peace) by Benito Juárez and “Mejor morir de pie que vivir de rodillas” by Emiliano Zapata.
27 Ibid., 148.
28 Ibid., 149.
30 For a brief history of gang violence in Pilsen including groups such as the Latin Counts and the Latin Kings see Tom Diez and Chris Swecker, *No boundaries: Transnational Latino Gangs and American Law Enforcement* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).
32 Ibid.
33 *Viva la Causa*, Kartemquin Films. (Chicago, 1974).
34 Latorre, 12.
35 Patlán was certainly familiar with this mural, including it in the montage of works by the Mexican muralists in *Viva La Causa*.
38 Latorre, 75.
40 *Viva la Causa*, Kartemquin Films. (Chicago, 1974).
41 Enriqueta Longeaux y Vásquez and Elizabeth Sutherland Martínez, *Viva la Raza!: The Struggle of the Mexican-American People* (Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday: 1974), 251.
42 Latorre, 165.
46 Ibid., 141.
49 Latorre, 85.
51 Oddly, the symbols that are used in this murals demonstrate no attempt at representing any cultural continuity, using both Aztec and Mayan symbols at will to homogenize distinct Pre-Columbian civilizations.
63 Jeff Huebner, “Raya, Reloaded: Veteran Pilsen Artist Restores Classic Guerilla Anti-War Mural,” *Chicago Art Magazine*


65 http://www.nationalmuseumofmexicanart.org/exhibitions/adoi.html


68 Ibid.


78 Rudy Lozano: *his life, his people* (Chicago: Taller the Estudios Comunitarios, 1991), 32.


81 Ibid.


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