Space, Place, and Belonging: Interdisciplinary Artist Nicole Marroquín

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> Gentrification is a kind of veiled extension of Manifest Destiny thinking. Anything that is new and comes with more money and is White is better. We're going to civilize the uncivilized. What was here before, the incredible amount of community building, people tried to make this a better place. And now it's time for them to go. (Marroquín).

On October 25, 2013, about 45 people —led a by a small collective of Latina artists— methodically worked to cover up an estimated 50 murals in Pilsen, a neighborhood in Chicago's Lower West Side (Fig. 1, Calles y Sueños). Named one of the "twelve coolest neighborhoods around the world" by Forbes magazine (Abel 2018), Pilsen has been the artistic, social, and activist heart of Mexican Chicago and the Mexican Midwest since the 1960s and is celebrated for its Chicano and Mexican murals and public art (Seif, 2018). Yet Mexican families are being pushed out at an alarming rate, more White, single, and affluent individuals are moving in, and the community's hard-won and culturally engaged schools, small businesses, and other institutions are endangered. This massive artistic intervention would draw attention to gentrification. Artist and educator Nicole Marroquín "had this crazy idea that I really wanted to do an art strike. The idea that you can harvest all the culture on the walls but remove the people. Let's take the murals with us if we have to go!" (July 24, 2018). As the women and their friends unrolled fabric and carefully covered the works of art, they engaged with passersby (Fig. 2, DWAP, El Popocatepetl). "By drawing attention to the enormous contributions of Pilsen cultural workers, youth and visual artists, we aim to create a scene around the absence of this work, and to ask, what it would look like to not have the art and public life we enjoy in Pilsen?" (Marroquín 2012).

Marroquín is a member of Multiuso, the feminist art collective that was awarded a Propeller Grant for A Day Without Public Art in Pilsen, a "mash-up" of Day Without Art, an annual day of action and mourning in response to the international AIDS crisis, and the film A Day Without a Mexican (2004), a satirical look at what would happen if all the Mexicans in California suddenly disappeared (Marroquín, 2012) (Fig. 3, Sisterhood). Creativity, originality, collective effort, public impact, the centrality of Latinas and other people of color, and a deep engagement with local community that also has global resonance: these are themes that run through A Day Without Public Art and Marroquín's broader artistic vision. Marroquín, associate professor in the Department of Art Education at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, is an artist, researcher, and teacher educator. She has been artist in residence at the Chicago Cultural Center, Mana Contemporary, Watershed Center for Ceramic Arts, and the Ragdale Foundation. In 2011, she received the Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz Woman of Achievement Award for her outstanding contributions to Chicago's Mexican community. Born in San Antonio, Texas, Marroquín moved to the Midwest when her father, from a Spanish-speaking Mexican immigrant family, was offered a fellowship designated for Mexican Americans to study at the University of Michigan. Most of her childhood was spent between the Midwest and frequent visits to her family in Texas. "I was always very confused about my identity in Michigan. People would ask me what I was. Pretty quickly I found I wasn't Mexican, I'm not from Mexico…I'm from this other place. So, the overarching theme in my work comes from my interest in spaces and place which is connected to this idea of belonging." (Nicole Marroquín, July 24, 2018). Marroquín also came to question what it means to belong to the United States because of its deep history of racism, colonization, and conquest. "I'm really interested in the ways the state acts on bodies, the ways we're monitored and patrolled. I'm fascinated and disgusted. [The] colonial framing of identity [is] deeply embedded in my work" (Nicole Marroquín, July 24. 2018).

An interdisciplinary artist, Marroquín is also known for her ceramic portraits which reflect her formal training in figure drawing and sculpture (Fig. 4 Nicole Making Art). Although Marroquín did not train

as a ceramicist while studying at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Eastern Michigan University, and the University of Michigan, she took ceramics classes as a child and then worked with clay while teaching art to third graders. "I watched the joy in their eyes and got caught up in it!" (Nicole Marroquín, July 26, 2018). From there, she studied ceramics during residencies at Ox-Bow and the Penland School of Arts and Crafts. In her compellingly evocative ceramic sculptures "Endurance" (Fig. 5 Endure Angela Scalisi) and "Nostalgia Takes a Smoke Break," we see Marroquín's commitment to depicting and humanizing women and other marginalized groups through visual art. "To me, representing less represented people, bodies, and faces is really important. To populate art spaces with them is really important." "Endurance," a portrait of Angela Scalisi, was part of the 2010 exhibition *Cabeza de Barro* featuring the work of Marroquín and Piloto Nieves at the National Museum of Mexican Art (NMMA) curated by Gabriel Villa. Marroquín's work is in the permanent collection of the NMMA (Chicago) and has been exhibited widely in venues that also include the Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares (Mexico City), the Urban Institute of Contemporary Art (Michigan) and the Cothenius Gallery (Berlin). "Nostalgia Takes a Smoke Break" (Fig. 6) also demonstrates the wry sense of humor that helps the artist stay immersed in and communicate the tough themes that preoccupy her. In this piece, Marroquín makes visible the complexities of Mexican American experience and the indigenous roots of herself and other mestizas that are largely denied in the U.S. Yet she also challenges a tendency to exoticize and dehumanize when their Mexican and indigenous ancestry is acknowledged. "The pressure of these identities is so terrible. Someone kept asking me, why don't you teach me *papel picado*. People wish I can tell them about the artisans and the crafts of Mexico. I'm not from Mexico. Or they think I'm from the [housing] projects. There's so much pushed onto me, and I'm very sensitive to that stuff. Give me a minute to just chill out! It's exhausting" (Nicole Marroquín, July 26. 2018).

Her ceramic sculpture "Missy Elliot, Upon Returning from Teotihuacán" (Fig. 7, 2016) exemplifies the ways that Marroquín's work challenges divisions between Mexican and African Americans. "There's a lot

of evidence that in pre-Hispanic Mexico, the population was traveling all over and people were visiting. There was a very multicultural population in Teotihuacán. They had personal ceramics there representing different geographies and cultures. I have waking dreams where I see solutions to problems. I had been playing [rapper, singer, and dancer Missy Elliot's music] a lot, she was in my dreams. I found a picture from a mural from that archeological site and it kind of looked like Missy Elliot. So, I started thinking about [her] being part of this advanced group of time travelling immortals who had led the great city of Teotihuacán. She was the Minister of Dance and Natural Resources. And she's here coming to the future, trying to express to us that we are destroying the planet and each other. And she has been trying to transmit the solutions in her dances, but we weren't paying attention" (Nicole Marroquín, July 26, 2018).

This coalitional perspective is rooted in the artist's political commitments and personal history, an experience that is not uncommon for Latinxs in Midwestern cities with large Black populations. "I didn't grow up in a Mexican neighborhood. I was raised in affordable housing in Michigan, and most of my friends were Black. I wasn't afraid of Black people and I was never given White privilege" (Nicole Marroquín, July 26, 2018). Marroquín sees mutual understanding and alliances between Latinxs and African Americans as crucial for positive change.

In "Historical F(r)ictions," a 2017 residency and exhibition at the Chicago Cultural Center, Marroquín and artist Andres L. Hernandez reinterpreted two largely Black and Latinx citizen struggles in Chicago from 1968-81. In the exhibition, Marroquín joined art, historical research, and work with youth to uncover and disseminate important yet neglected Chicago histories, with a focus on Latinas' contributions. "I've always thought about representation. People who aren't present in art history books, exhibitions, galleries, museums have always spoken louder to me than the people who are represented. I have been preoccupied by this. If we all dropped everything we were doing and only dedicated ourselves to recovering women who did important things, we wouldn't get to one tenth of it. It's frustrating and mind boggling. My anger propels me. Every day I wake up I'm mad, and it helps me get a lot done" (Nicole Marroquín, July 26, 2018). A recent, consuming passion for Marro-

quín has been reconstructing the history of student uprisings on Chicago's West Side during the late 1960s and 1970s. Through her art practice she aims to help others, including West Side students, think about the implications of these activist histories for education and urban life today.

When Marroquín first heard from an older teacher about the uprisings at Harrison High School, and especially its 9th grade Froebel Branch, "it was hard for me to believe it since I had not heard of it and could find no books about it" (Marroquín, 2018). Black and Latino students had walked out of classes, organized marches, and led uprisings "in response to the deplorable school conditions" and discrimination and a top-down decision to close Froebel (Marroquín). "Students who [were] Spanish speakers were assigned to rooms for the 'educable mentally impaired.' Students demanded change. There were no Spanish-speaking teachers, no Black teachers to teach Black Studies, and there was no soccer team because it was considered to be Communist. By 1973, there are Afro, Chicano/a and Puerto Rican groups and clubs in the yearbook" (Nicole Marroquín, July 24, 2018).

"I make art to think through ideas" (Nicole Marroquín, July 26, 2018). Marroquín worked with Multiuso Collective member and art department chair Paulina Camacho on an art action research project with Camacho's students at Pilsen's Benito Juárez Community Academy High School and created a poster series highlighting these events. In two of these silk-screened posters, Marroquín interweaves colorful designs inspired by period psychedelia with old press photos (Fig. 8, Riot Cops, 1973). In one photo that the artist found for sale online [photo by Howard D. Simmons for the Chicago Sun-Times], Froebel student Rosemary Navarro, daughter of activist Lola Navarro, is poised at the center of riot police who swarmed the Froebel school building on June 5, 1973. "I wanted to start interacting with the photos, to focus on those images to see what they meant and what they mean to me" (Nicole Marroquín, July 26, 2018). The colorful patterns evoke the chaotic energy and youthful rebellion of the era and the moment. A second informational poster features Lola Navarro, who was central to the fight for an empowering high school for Pilsen's students of Mexican ancestry, an effort that led to the founding of Benito Juárez High School in 1977 (Fig. 9, Lola

Navarro Poster). Marroquín's poster includes a description of Navarro's accomplishments. She "was deeply involved in the United Farm Workers protests, boycott, and organizing. She was this powerhouse. Chuy García, [a West Side resident and Mexican immigrant from Durango who was the first Latino to run a credible campaign for Chicago mayor in 2015] … credits her for initiating him into organizing…" (Nicole Marroquín, July 26, 2018). Marroquín's posters use a gig poster format (posters that bands use to advertise concerts) so they will circulate and be seen. "Everybody asks me to tell the story. So, I'm trying to come up with a short biography and a short blurb for each of these key moments. I think about all these people who were working behind the scenes, who were often doing the heavy lifting, usually unpaid labor. And they set the stage for this community to be able to support families." The photo of Lola Navarro was taken at the end of the Froebel standoff, when the mother and activist walked out of the school waving a Mexican flag and declared "We'll be back!" (Nicole Marroquín, July 26. 2018).

Like the Day Without Public Art, the passion that Marroquín and the students at Benito Juárez Community Academy have for documenting, spreading, and considering the implications of these histories is also fueled by neighborhood transformation. Between 2000 and 2010, Pilsen lost over 25% of its Latinx population and 31% of its immigrants, with a 41% decline in families with children under age 18 (Betancur 2016:23). "As prices rise and people are forced to move away, the histories of the struggles for civil rights in [Chicago's] Mexican immigrant community leaves with them. This blow to community cohesion … has the potential [to] roll back some of the gains that have been won…." (Marroquín 2018). In 2016, Marroquín and Camacho "asked students to envision the future" (Marroquín 2018). They produced art at school and at the Chicago Cultural Center, traveling from Pilsen to make themselves and their community history visible in the Loop, the central business district of downtown Chicago (Fig. 10, Juárez students). The students made collages with images they gathered, "including their homes and five places they frequent on foot" (Marroquín 2018) (Fig. 11, Future Community). These art works were featured in the Historical F(r)ictions exhibition. With Marroquín's guidance, Pilsen's Mexican American high school stu-

dents presented to the city "a radical vision [of the future]: their community with themselves still living there" (Marroquín 2018).

Artist and cultural organizer Nicole Marroquín gathers women artists and local communities to make visible the contributions and destruction of Midwest Mexican and Chicanx urban culture through political artistic actions such as A Day Without Public Art in Pilsen. She depicts and amplifies the brilliance of Latinas and other strong women largely omitted as actors from the artistic canon. She engages youth at the center of her efforts to recover lost histories of community empowerment and consider how these efforts might shape today's struggles. The teacher exuberantly learns with her students, like rediscovering the feel of clay in her fingers through the joy of 3rd graders. This socially engaged and women-centered art helps urban communities of color, and especially their young generation, create their vision for the future. This is an essential step toward molding Chicago to nourish and embrace them.

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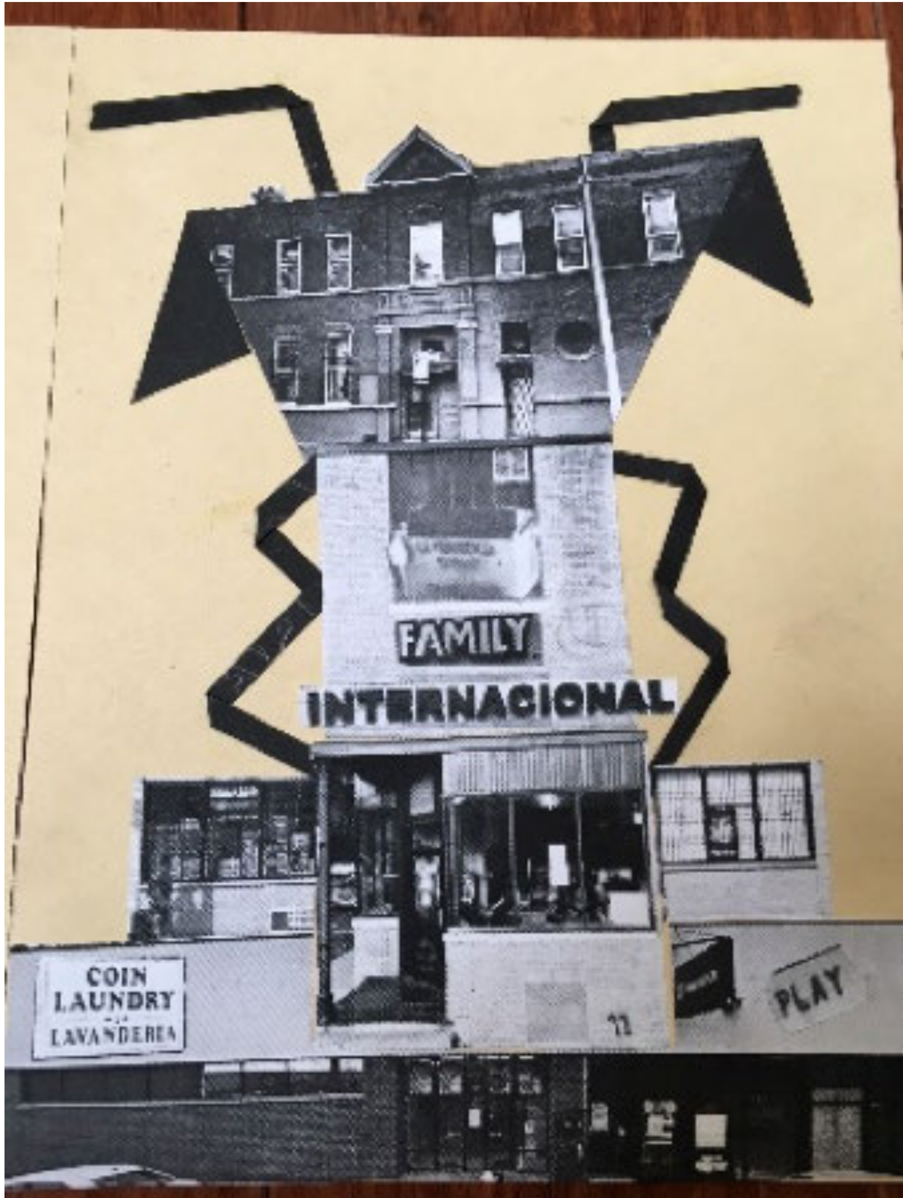

Future Community: collage by students at Benito Juárez Community Academy, 2016. Photo by Nicole Marroquín