Destroying “The Path to Knowledge and the False University”: Democratic Participation and Identity Assertion in the Chicano Education and Mural Movements

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Destroying “The Path to Knowledge and the False University”: Democratic Participation and Identity Assertion in the Chicano Education and Mural Movements

In 1974, in the midst of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, artist and professor of Chicano Studies at East Los Angeles College (ELAC), Roberto Chavez, painted a mural on an outer wall at the institution. Despite a process “that included approval of the work by a campus committee, and the administration of the college and of the Los Angeles Community College District,” the new president of ELAC, Arthur D. Avila, ordered that the mural be whitewashed in 1979. Soon after, in the summer of 1981, Chavez stepped down from his position and relocated to Northern California.

The work, “The Path to Knowledge and the False University,” was communally produced by Chavez and his students. Although the mural did not explicitly criticize educational institutions (with the exception of its name), it does in its symbols implicitly represent some criticisms commonly present in both the Chicano education and mural movements. Featuring small images of Chicano culture in juxtaposition to loud symbols of Anglo-American war, industry, and death, the mural suggests Anglo-American oppression of Chicano culture. And, due to its location on an institute of higher education, as well as its title, it can be assumed that its iconography is related specifically to education, in this case, the exclusion and oppression of Chicano students and culture within American schools. Despite cultural implications, its destruction remained fairly quiet, with the exception of an article run by the Los Angeles Times in which Chavez

2 Roberto Chavez, The Path to Knowledge and the False University, 1975.
identified the main theme of the mural as a combination of “the meaningful search for knowledge with meaningless educational activities,” with its main purpose being “to stimulate thought and discussion about education.” This statement showcases the mural’s attempt to embody criticisms of Anglo-American oppression, as well as attempts by education reform advocates and muralists of the Chicano Movement to educate the public and to encourage participation and identity assertion for Chicanos. Yet, the president attributed its destruction to bad conditions, rather than any political or cultural objections. Chavez, as a prominent figure in the Chicano Movement and one of the first artists showcased at the liberal, activist Goez Gallery, went on record questioning the administration’s motives in having his mural removed, especially since the president was viewed as believing “the ELAC [was] becoming too Chicano,” a term often considered outside the community to indicate an overly aggressive militancy that, in this case, might challenge structures within ELAC on the basis that they were racist.

Whether or not the mural’s destruction was actually an attempt to quiet Chicano concerns, the controversy was not an isolated incident. The mural itself does represent a very real connection between the Chicano education and mural movements of the 1960 and 70s, as it was a public work of art created by Chicanos at an educational institution. Its outcries against Anglo-American oppression, its representation of Chicano culture, its student production, and its attempts to get the public talking about its shadows of broader issues are reflective of both movements. These movements can been seen as identifying similar problems and proposing similar responses, as well as working in conjunction. Yet historians have often failed to highlight the analogous relationship of these movements,

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3 Birkinshaw, SE1.
instead isolating the artistic from the educational, or touching only briefly on the broadly “educational” aspect of murals in general. In this paper, I hope for the first time to explicitly link the movements and place their goals and methods in conversation. I will attempt to show that the education movement’s goals of cultural identity collectivity, democratic participation, and power assertion in the face of assimilation and oppression were in many ways echoed by the mural movement by representing them visually, as well as enacting them through the artists’ production and viewing processes. I will also argue that these movements were not only similar and worked in conjunction, but that because murals were completely public works, and not limited to the somewhat separate educational sphere, artists were able to move further, empowering the Chicano in the barrio and confronting the Anglo oppressor.

I will build this argument by first providing historical context for the Chicano Civil Rights Movement and then explaining the Chicano Education Movement specifically through statistics of school failure and scholarship of Chicano culture oppression in education. I will move on to explain responses to these shortcomings through the words of a specific student organization and their plan of reform to voice a collective identity and achieve democratic participation and power assertion. Next, I will introduce the Chicano Mural Movement, citing scholarship and my own analysis to explain its visual language, as well as the ways in which it reclaimed a common cultural identity, asserted this identity, and was participatory and educational. Finally, I will use the words of specific Chicano muralists to show the ways in which they, in many ways like education reform activists, experienced exclusion, attempted self-liberation of Chicanos through their visual language, represented a pre-existing collective cultural
identity, worked to enact democratic participation, and broke down stereotypes and asserted empowered Chicanismo in the face of oppression. I will also use the artists’ own words, as well as their actual (and varying) methods, to show the ways in which they went one step further than education reform activists to actually confront and educate the oppressor.

**A Brief History of “Chicanismo”**

While the word pervades society today, “Chicano” was a term not popularized until the 1960s and 70s. From the 1920s through the 1950s, people living in the United States of Mexican heritage were commonly referred to as “Mexican-American.” However, this was more than just a label—it was an ideology. According to Chicano historian, Ignacio García, beginning in the 1920s, “‘Americanization’ was [thought to be] important in order for Mexican Americans to gain full rights.... If Mexican Americans were going to make changes in their status, they had to do it within the established process.”\(^5\) In order to uplift themselves, “Mexican-Americans” believed they needed to conform to mainstream American culture. While this process of Americanization was considered a means to an end, a way to empower themselves by creating a connection with the society in which they hoped to gain equal rights as citizens, leftist reform groups that officially adopted and instated this assimilation policy were ultimately disappointing to those people they were supposedly trying to uplift. “Mexican-American” assimilation

reformers were in actuality “too immature to make significant changes” in social structures and unable to challenge Anglo-American dominance.⁶

Due to the inadequacy of assimilation policy, by 1960 poverty amongst Mexican-Americans continued at high rates; schools, despite official “desegregation,” were still unofficially segregated; drop-out rates amongst Mexican-American youth were high, and these students continued to be commonly labeled as low-achievers, condemned to vocational training. In short, Mexican-American students continued to be “seen as an educational burden, potential troublemakers, and students who needed little attention since they were likely to drop out.”⁷ As a result of continued inadequate education, Mexican-Americans continued to find themselves stuck in low-skilled jobs, unable to uplift themselves and create permanent change in relation to their rights as citizens. “Mexican-Americans” were, as a whole, beginning to find themselves disenchanted with the liberal politics that had promoted assimilation policy. Although assimilation policy had promised to “provide economic development, protect civil rights, and guarantee cultural pluralism,”⁸ it ultimately had failed to fulfill promises to uplift Mexican-Americans. This failure marked a need for an alternative to assimilation politics.

Thus, the “Chicano” Civil Rights Movement was born. Despite the existence of an array of grievances and agendas ranging from education to labor to art, a “loose ideological vision of activism for social change in the barrios (neighborhoods) of the community did emerge (originally) as Chicanismo.”⁹ The term “Chicano now referred to

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⁷ Ibid, 27.
⁸ Ibid, 28.
a ‘new’ Mexican American, one who understood his or her roots and shunned assimilation or integration.” No longer would the “Mexican-American” assimilate. The 1960s marked a movement toward cultural nationalism and self-determination—the “Chicano” would now take control of his own rights through identity assertion as a community. How would the Chicano community undo the oppression so long institutionalized by dominant Anglo-American power structures?

**Shortcomings in Chicano Education**

Many Chicanos believed the answer lay in education. In teaching the people itself, Chicanos would ultimately be able to produce successful citizens well-equipped with the historical and theoretical framework and tools to create real, lasting change and to reclaim the Chicano culture. However, education was also viewed by Chicanos as an institution dominated by Anglo-American values. Through organization and activism, Chicanos challenged exclusion within the education system and demanded control of their rights. However, before discussing the specifics of democratic participation and self-determination in relation to education, I must first outline the precursor to the movement—the failures of the American education system for Chicano students that led to the official stance for Chicanos to take control and seek change in the system.

As perceived by most historians, despite the technical desegregation of schools in the early 20th century, general problems with Chicano students within American education still persisted. In 1965, Thomas P. Carter, professor of education and sociology at the University of Texas at El Paso, conducted a survey of local Southwest schools from

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10 García, 35.
a broad range of states, including California. Utilizing his statistical data, he identified trends among Chicano students in California of low enrollment rates (with them drastically dropping over time), high drop out rates (starting early on), and “low achievement” as subjectively measured by the educational institutions.\(^\text{11}\) According to his 1966-67 surveys of seven California schools, college attendance rates were extremely low, dropping steadily between freshman and senior year, with graduate school enrollment rates less than five percent.\(^\text{12}\) More current scholarship echoes and builds upon Carter’s findings of shortcomings from the time of the movement. Richard R. Valencia, professor of educational psychology at the University of Texas-Austin, outlines similar issues, including continued unofficial segregation, teacher racism that led to low-expectation, low financing per student due to increased student-to-teacher ratios following desegregation, and curriculum tracking to “low-achieving” classes.\(^\text{13}\) These findings are reflected in education reformists’ claims that Chicano students were statistically achieving less, and thus unable to uplift themselves.

Carter identified several problems of cultural suppression that could perhaps explain these patterns of low-achievement within schools. He found that cultural authoritarianism, including “no Spanish” rules banning the use of Spanish by Chicano students, as well as ethnic isolation and alienation, were commonly present in studied schools.\(^\text{14}\) Carter believed that schools were informally and unofficially participating in what Chicano education reform activists would come to call “cultural genocide” of the

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\(^{12}\) Ibid, 31.


\(^{14}\) Carter, 96.
Chicano people. Modern historian, Guadalupe San Miguel Jr. summarizes this point: “schools were oppressive institutions aimed at forcefully stamping out Mexican students’ cultural identity and channeling them into low-skilled or dead-end vocational jobs.”

Schools asserted the dominance of Anglo-American language and culture over that of the Chicano. These practices can be seen as a direct reflection of earlier assimilation policy, which set forth the concept of the need for Chicanos to assimilate to Anglo-American culture, rather than assert their own, in order to achieve success. However, in this case, assimilation policy was being implemented specifically in schools. Carter pointed to the idea that school curricula was in fact based in middle-class, Anglo-American ideas, thus excluding Chicano identity, an idea supported by the fact that, statistically, Chicano students consistently “achieved,” according to official standards, at a lower level than white students. Chicano students soon began to take note of these inequalities, citing and acting upon them, and taking matters into their own hands to reclaim their education and assert their Chicano identity.

The Birth of the Education Movement and MECHA

On March 3, 1968, approximately 10,000 Chicano students walked out of Los Angeles classrooms in protest of unequal conditions in their schools. Despite the adoption of the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 in response to demands to solve inequality, implementation and use of funds was still unsatisfactory according to the

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16 Carter, 106.
17 Valencia, 5.
student protestors.\textsuperscript{18} However, because little resulted from this overt act, Chicano students began to readapt their means of protest. In April of 1969, students came together at the University of California, Santa Barbara to respond to the perceived problems in the American education system in relation to Chicano students. Participating student authors had come from a variety of different groups, including MASC (Mexican-American Student Confederation), MAYA (Mexican American Youth Association), UMAS (United Mexican American Students), la Vida Nueva, and MECHA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán). However, “despite difference in name and organizational experience, a basic unity evolved”\textsuperscript{19} and the students banded together to promote a common ideology in one core group. They wrote the Plan de Santa Barbara, a document that “demanded access to higher education, promoted cultural nationalism, self-determination, and designated El Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán, MECHA, as the official student organization of the movement.”\textsuperscript{20}

This movement from overt acts of protest to a more long-term, planned movement can be explained on a broader scale. During this time, the college student was believed to be becoming “increasingly representative of the society and reflective of its values.” Therefore, MECHA’s claim to being a first attempt to “tying the student groups throughout the Southwest into a vibrant and responsive network of activists that will respond as a unit to oppression and racism and that will work in harmony when initiating and carrying out campaigns of liberation for our people”\textsuperscript{21} can be seen as a declaration

\textsuperscript{18} Urrieta, 6.
\textsuperscript{20} Urrieta, 3.
\textsuperscript{21} Chicano Coordinating Council on Higher Education, 54.
consistent with this new form of activism. MECHA was a new form of activism, drastically different from the walkouts of 1968, aimed at seeking real, permanent change by serving themselves through continued reform, rather than isolated acts of protest. This concept is supported by their declaration that “the self-determination of our community is now the only acceptable mandate for social and political action.”22 This statement evidences the self-serving nature of this new form of protest. The group can be seen as taking charge of their own perceived issues within the American education system, as outlined by the problems and solutions they set forth in both their constitution and formally outlined plan of reform.

In their 159 document, El Plan de Santa Barbara, Chicano students of MECHA and other organizations were able to set forth their perceived problems within the American education system, and its failings in relation to the Chicano student experience. First and foremost, however, they gave their reasoning for general structural inequality and ongoing oppression of Chicanos within American society. In consistency with the broader Chicano Civil Rights Movement, writers placed much of the blame for school failings on the previously instituted liberal ideology of assimilation, claiming schools were indoctrinating “agencies of control,” and claimed that continued “Chicano participation provide[d] an ersatz legitimization for the continuance of the pattern of dominant-subordinate relations that characterizes Chicano colonial status within the larger society.”23 In brief, the document puts forth a claim that American schools were reproducers of Anglo-American colonial structures, and thus further participation in and acceptance of this system by Chicanos would only legitimize power structures,

22 Ibid, 9.
23 Ibid, 13.
inequalities, and oppression and control. The authors dispute the common misconception of universities and higher education in general as often being progressive defenders of public and student interests, claiming instead that they were often racist. According to the authors, this was especially apparent in inequities in funding for Chicano students and programs, as well as racist admissions and employment practices, and general underrepresentation of Chicanos and their values in higher education. This claim shows the acceptance of statistics documenting the lack of presence of Chicanos in higher education, the disproportionately low-achieving status of Chicano students, and the suppression of their culture previously discussed.

Participating Chicano students thus set forth to combat these perceived problems on two levels—through broad concepts of democratic participation and identity and power assertion, and then through specific demands for reforms that would seek to systematically and structurally solve issues of Chicano oppression. The students delineated that their main aim was the creation of a uniquely and strictly Chicano plan for higher education, one that would fulfill their goals of “diversification, democratization, and enrichment of our cultural heritage and human community.”24 Here, they explain their intentions to take control of their education by formulating a Chicano plan for higher education, in which they would assert their own power, combating traditional Anglocentric structures. The university would be the origin of change for them, a decision highlighting their belief that education was the key to uplifting their people. At the university, they would make “strategic use of education, an education that places

24 Ibid, 10.
value on what [they] value[d].”\textsuperscript{25} Specifically, they planned to institutionalize Chicano programs to help realize Chicano power starting at universities, based in their own values and beliefs, claiming their key to power was found in the “application of the principles of self-determination and self-liberation.”\textsuperscript{26} For students, in this idea of asserting their own power and their own values, was the key to liberation and ending Chicano students’ subordinate participation in a system of Anglo American dominance. The document proclaimed that students should hold the power in the university, since universities were meant for “public service [in this case] to the Chicano community.”\textsuperscript{27} In their case, they believed the university should serve the Chicano student and greater Chicano community, as it was the key to their liberation and success as both individuals and a people.

Beyond this vision of power and identity assertion as a means to achieve self-liberation, the document listed specific demands through which this aim would be achieved. Divided into six specific categories, these demands included admission and recruitment of Chicano students and faculty, a curriculum (major) relevant to the Chicano culture and experience, Chicano support programs for students, research programs, Chicano publication programs, and finally community cultural centers.\textsuperscript{28} In relation to admission and recruitment, they called for a level of affirmative action, asking for “proportional representation for Chicanos.”\textsuperscript{29} The percent of Chicano students at any given university needed to be proportional to the number of Chicano students of high school age in the area. They hoped to achieve this through recruitment of Chicano

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, 10.  
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid, 13.  
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid, 14.  
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid, 10.  
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid, 24.
students in community and student organizations and high schools. They similarly called for the abolition of “culturally biased” admissions criteria including the SAT and GPA, and instead demanded “culturally relevant tests and indicators,”30 as well as weighted interviews, in order to better gage what they had the potential to achieve within the context of their own culture. In relation to hiring, the document went on to claim “more bilingual Chicano teachers, counselors, and administrators must be hired and... those schools with a majority of Chicano students must have a Chicano principal” because “only people that relate to and understand the background of the Chicano student can satisfactorily make such a subjective interpretation; hence Chicanos must make the final decision on student admissions.”31 In short, they called for the acknowledgement of the subjective, Anglocentric admissions process that was consistent with racist and oppressive education structures. Instead, they called for a process that would take into consideration the cultural experience of the students, in order to at first allow more participation in a previously structurally exclusive system, and then later to empower them.

However, these demands did not stop at affirmative action. The document outlines the idea that, in order to ensure the complete success of these students and to enact real, permanent change, rather than to just have Chicanos more highly represented in universities, support for these students after admission would have to be instituted in a curriculum that would be both culturally relevant and would serve the Chicano people as a whole. The authors claims “rather than accommodate Chicanos to these institutions, support programs should facilitate the development of educational processes to meet the

31 Ibid, 25.
unique interests of Chicanos, hence develop alternative goals to those prescribed by society." A transitional orientation was recommended in order to combat Chicanos’ inferior secondary education by strengthening their cultural identity, improving their basic skills, undoing their negative self-image, teaching them college-specific English, and giving them the financial support (through medical insurance, financial aid, work study, stipends, and transportation and housing support services) to thrive in the institution. In short, MECHA planners sought to counteract the ongoing inequality, oppression, and racism Chicano students experienced on every level—mentally, academically, culturally, and financially. Understanding and preservation of Chicano culture in general was especially taken into account through the formation of a culturally relevant curriculum. Students would have an interdisciplinary, bilingual Chicano studies major that was “socially relevant, humanistic, and pragmatic which prepares Chicanos for service to the Chicano community and enriches the total society.” This final goal highlights the plan’s authors’ aim to both represent Chicanos within higher education and ensure their success as students, and utilize these educated students to empower the Chicano community and assert their identity and power within the United States in general.

Historian Guadalupe San Miguel Jr. claims that in the Chicano Education Movement, “one aspect was aimed at eliminating discrimination in the support and administration of public education; the other was aimed at nurturing educational aspirations within the Mexican-American community.” I have already discussed both

32 Ibid, 30.
33 Ibid, 32.
34 San Miguel Jr., 472.
aspects within education itself, but these aims were also present within the partner movement, the Chicano Mural Movement. In many ways, this movement can be seen as both a visual representation of education reform aspirations, as well as an attempt to echo and enact them in their production and viewing process.

**Representing Chicanismo Visually**

Beginning in the 1960s, Chicano mural painting began to appear in the urban landscape throughout the United States. California quickly became its most common playground because “it possessed a mural tradition spanning most of the twentieth century.”

Beyond the murals themselves, California contained a rich variety of Chicano public art institutions; Los Angeles alone had the Goez Gallery, Mechicano Art Center, and the Cultural Art Section of the Department of Recreation and Parks, due to its large Mexican heritage population. As demonstrated by both the murals themselves and these cultural institutions, artists were not only creating Chicano murals, but they were also banding together to make it a recognized cultural practice. By the 1970s, “mural painting was an accepted community activity that often involved local school youths under the supervision of an artist.” These massive group projects were often produced on “shoestring budgets independent of governmental funds, thus underscoring their

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revolutionary intent.”  

Thus, these murals can be seen as echoing, and in some ways furthering, the education reform demands. Like education reform advocates, “early Chicano artists claimed Aztlán (the birthplace of the Mexica Indians and their fierce mercenary warriors) as a symbol of their indigenous or historical roots,” in order to create a common base of “shared cultural values, self-identification, and self-determination.”

Therefore, at a most basic level, these murals shared the revolutionary nature of the education movement, but they also underscored many deeper cultural values and attempts of the movement, as outlined by both scholarship on the subject, and personal statements made by the movement’s artists themselves.

Before addressing these similarities explicitly, I must first discuss the iconography used to achieve these aims; in other words, it is necessary to discuss briefly the ways in which these murals were employing certain techniques through their visual language, as they are works of art first and foremost. In order to achieve their broad goals through muralism of creating a collective identity, asserting this identity against oppression, and providing a means to democratic participation as the education movement had aimed to do, as well as educating the public (and all of which I will discuss in my next sections), artists had to employ a certain Chicano visual language. At a most basic level, “Chicano artists therefore attacked stereotypes... and stressed the celebration of cultural symbols that identified their ethnicity.” In order to stress the aspects of their culture that differentiated them from Anglo-America, they embraced pre-

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38 George Vargas, Contemporary Chican@ Art: Color & Culture for a New America (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 21.
Colombian imagery. Most commonly, they used the “image of the Virgin of Guadalupe to solidify their conquest” of their own culture, as well as their own power within oppressive structures. Similarly they used images of legendary indigenous figures such as Quetzalcoatl and Mexican revolutionary leaders such as Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa to claim their cultural and revolutionary roots, in addition to representing Chicano leaders themselves, such as Cesar Chavez. Most importantly, they symbolized the strife of Chicanos in relation to labor, farming, gender, immigration, and countless other areas. Education was taken up in a work entitled the Mecha Mural, done in part by 20 MECHA students. The visual language used to represent their culture was artists’ means to express their grievances, as well as to achieve their aims. It was an effort analogous to the formation of a formal plan to enact change in the Plan de Santa Barbara.

Various elements of this visual language are present in murals I will discuss later in my paper; however, this visual language and its connections with the education movement are very apparent in the aforementioned Mecha Mural, organized by O’Jay T. Vanegas (see Figs. 1, 2, and 3). As seen in Figure 1, set to the backdrop of what appears to be a sky burning with strife (an assumption supported by the presence of a burning building), various Chicanos fight for their civil rights and to assert their identity. In the

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background a grim factory and gravestones are pictured, suggesting the death of Chicano culture to Anglo-American capitalism and oppression. Chicanos march forth, carrying signs wearing phrases such as “Mexica” and “30 Años EOP” (30 Years Equal Opportunity Program, an education program run out of the California State University system). One can see that these Chicanos are reclaiming their identity as natives in Aztlan, their homeland as Mexica Indians, in relation to issues such as education. Marchers are pictured carrying guitars, suggesting that this is in fact a collective cultural reclamation of identity. In the center and spotlight of the mural is Quetzalcoatl, pictured in the form of an indigenous man with his arms spread open to embrace and empower his indigenous brothers and sisters. Rising from him is Cesar Chavez, leader of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, making up the middle of the Mexican flag, once again showing indigenous roots. Chavez, in his stern, powerful face, is reclaiming and asserting Chicano identity and power. In Figure 2, Chicana women are represented demanding topical issues such abortion rights. Others are marching for different Chicano causes, raising MECHA signs featuring Zapata’s face. MECHA’s flag is shown flying proudly above a capitol building, thus asserting Chicano education rights and power above institutions of Anglo-American oppression. This reversing of power structures is apparent in the American flag, which is painted upside down. Finally, in Figure 3, militant Chicano soldiers can be seen literally rising up to save an oppressed farm worker, who is reminiscent of la Virgen, as she is female and virginal in being fully clothed, yet maternal in her full figure. In each of these symbols, motifs of Chicano identity, exclusion, participation, and power assertion are apparent.
Utilizing this visual language and its symbols, historians have interpreted these murals as the reclamation of a common cultural identity amongst Chicanos. These murals are thought to have “shared certain common philosophies, and established a network that promoted hitherto nonexistent cohesion.”

Murals thus played a vital role in promoting the same sense of cultural cohesion that education reform attempts had hoped to realize and promote. This cultural cohesion was an expression of “solidarity and affirmation between and among ethnic, class, gender, and religious groups.”

Basically, artists promoted a collective cultural identity that united all Chicanos based on a common ethnic background, in spite of other differences. This cultural cohesion is also not thought to

43 Goldman, 167.
have been invited by these artists, but instead the “Mexican mural renaissance [is thought of] as part of a larger effort to recover their cultural patrimony and identity through art practices.” These muralists are thought to have been expressing a pre-existing collective identity. But in expressing it, they created an institutionalized sense of cohesion within the mural movement and, by extension, the Chicano Movement.

By voicing a collective identity, these artists were then able to call upon it to assert Chicano identity in the face of Anglo-American oppression. Historians typically view Chicano muralists at this time as having “ultimately questioned and contested the status quo of postcolonial systems in which the lives of oppressed and formerly colonized peoples are conditioned and compromised by the presence of a hegemonic and overpowering nation-state.” In other words, muralists are thought to have questioned their place within oppressive institutions. As an alternative, they asserted their collective cultural identity in opposition to post-colonial power structures, asserting their agency through murals. Muralists contested their supposed racial inferiority by “countering oppression and determining their own destiny” by challenging the “entire political, social and cultural structure of modern society.”

Not only did artists challenge oppressive structures through the murals themselves and a collective identity, but they also did so through a democratically participatory art production and viewing process. Because scholars have noted that traditionally, and especially in the case of Chicanos, “racial and ethnic minorities and others on the

45 Carlos Francisco Jackson, Chicana and Chicano Art (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2009), 75.
46 Latorre, 20.
47 Goldman, 167.
economic and political margins of society have had minimal involvement with such dominant cultural institutions as museums and galleries,” most muralists “introduced new collaborative and community organizing elements.... Based predominantly in urban areas, they began painting collaboratively with groups of adolescent assistants, primarily from ethnic minority communities.” 49 Artists utilized muralism due to its democratic nature. Scholars have noted that by both including ordinary Chicanos in the production process and creating the murals in publicly viewed spaces, artists were making identity assertion participatory, rather than merely elitist and confrontational in private spaces such as galleries. Chicanos themselves would be able to help assert their identity through murals. And because park and community centers were so valued within the barrio landscape, 50 the masses would be able to democratically participate in the identity assertion process through their viewing, discussing, and reading of the murals.

In relation to the participatory, confrontational, discursive nature of these murals, scholars also believe that there was an educational element to them. In general, community murals have been viewed a “part of a larger effort carried out by Chicana/o activists to reform the US educational system on all levels.” 51 By using a style that was easily read by the masses, “the community mural movement serves an important educational role by helping to clarify, expand, and strengthen community values.” 52 Thus, murals reinforced the identity and processes set forth for Chicanos in the education movement. However, murals are also viewed as asking “profound questions at the same time; they are expressive as well as didactic. They stimulate community pride and

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49 Von Blum, 464.
50 Arreola, 413.
51 Latorre, 23.
52 Conrad, 98.
commitment to justice while teaching outsiders about the struggles of traditionally oppressed people.”

Murals work on many levels—both in educating Chicanos themselves, but also in informing and engaging the oppressors themselves in conversation about Chicano strife. Murals were also especially educational because they “could carry much of the knowledge and history not taught in schools and universities.”

In a sense, muralism not only contributed to the education movement, but it also went a step further by fulfilling an educational role to those Chicanos who were still excluded from schools and universities.

The Chicano Muralists

Beginning in the 1970s, amidst the Chicano Movement itself, through the 1990s and 2000s, the Smithsonian Institute did a series of interviews with various Chicano artists. In these oral histories, California muralists spoke to their personal experiences with the movement, confirming and building upon these concepts put forth by scholars. While the ideas of which they spoke were by no means completely homogenous, in many ways, there existed many commonalities in the way they spoke of intersections in the education and mural movements, namely in their views of stereotypes and broader issues in relation to Chicanos, as well as their responses of democratic participation, identity assertion, and empowerment. In the following section I will analyze interviews with LA artists Gilbert Sanchez Luján, Willie Herrón, Frank Romero, Judy Baca, and Carlos Almaraz in light of each of these topics.

53 Ibid, 98.
54 Latorre, 24.
I must give some historical background of the artistic contribution of each of these artists. I feel shedding light on the personal biographies and accomplishments of the artists in relation to muralism is appropriate, as I am giving them voices to explain the movement and its aims in this paper. Each of these artists was highly influential within the movement. Luján, Almaraz, and Romero were three of the four artists within “Los Four,” a group devoted to asserting La Raza against Anglocentric institutions. The group exhibited all over the West coast as the first artists to participate in a Chicano art exhibit. One of the best-known (and most relevant to this paper) pieces collaboratively credited to the group (which also included female artist Judithe Hernandez in this case) is the mural, La Adelita (see Fig. 4), a mural painted on the side of an LA housing project in 1976.55 The most prominent figure in the piece is a militant matriarch, reminiscent of la Virgen. While female figures have often been critiqued as over-sexualized and simplistic in murals, La Adelita is both empowering to the community and women. She is seen with a benevolent, maternal facial expression, but holding a gun, leading a Mexican army, as she is labeled the “madre de la tierra y de la libertad” (mother of the land and liberty). She is a militant in the army’s cause of reclaiming Chicano culture, as the mural states she continues giving them the power to persevere (“sigue dando la fuerza para perseguir”). In this statement, the viewer can see the reclamation of Chicano culture, as embodied and led by the matriarchal, Virgen-like figure. Behind her, the mural has a surreal, dreamlike, natural night sky background, thus incorporating mythical, natural elements adopted by Chicano artists. Finally, the fact that the muralists did not whitewash

55 In this section, I have combined historical background as provided by Luján, Romero, and Almaraz through each of their oral history interviews. Each of these interviews are individually referenced fully in the following paragraphs, and full citations can also be found in the bibliography at the end of the paper.
the graffiti already existing on the wall mirrors the concept of marrying this indigenous, folkloric figure with a “Chicano” art form—graffiti—in order to assert their own, unique identity in a new way.

**Fig. 4**

Similarly, Baca and Herrón, while not members of Los Four, were also distinctly influential in the Chicano mural movement. Baca, an artist in many ways independent of the others, was one of the first, and most well known, artists to devote her career to community-based muralism. Baca’s best-known work that is also most intimately linked to the subject of this paper is entitled, *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* [see Fig. 5 for *Zoot Suit Riots* (a portion of the mural)]. Located on the eastern side of the Valley College campus in the San Fernando Valley, the mural measures 2,754 feet as one of the longest in the world. The mural is also notable for its employment of and creative collaboration
with numerous Chicano youth and criminals.\textsuperscript{56} The mural, through the collective design vision of its collaboration team, attempts to tell LA history from the perspective of minorities, including but not limited to that of Chicanos. It depicts such quieted historical events as the Zoot Suit Riots, in order to reclaim minority and Chicano identity. It includes typically explicit “Chicano” symbols, such as the common Virgen, thus asserting ties to indigenous Chicano identity, in addition to showcasing lifelike depictions of real minority oppression. Through this retelling of history in mural form, the project attempts to both confront and re-educate the viewer in light of minority strife, as well as educate and assert the power and identity of the participants through its collaborative production process.

\textbf{Fig. 5}

Finally, like Baca and the others, Herrón was devoted to the Chicano cause and muralism. He, along with several other artists, was a part of Asco, a group also devoted to asserting Chicano identity and power through murals, but that went one step further to utilize performance art. Two of his most famous mural pieces include \textit{Quetzalcoatl} (see Fig. 6) and \textit{The Wall That Cracked Open} (see Fig. 7).\textsuperscript{57} The former once again marries

\textsuperscript{56} Latorre, 52.
\textsuperscript{57} Latorre, 123.
indigenous elements claimed to be Chicano in nature with pre-existing Chicano graffiti, thus asserting a strictly Chicano identity. It features Quetzalcoatl, a mythical creature with disputed significance. In this case, he embodies both histories—both of the second coming of the terrible Hernán Cortés who stole indigenous land and originally oppressed their identity, as well as their Chicano entitlement to power, as it is an indigenous figure and a symbol of their own culture. By embodying both sides of the history, the viewer looks on in fear and awe, learning about the original oppression of the Chicano people, while at the same time witnessing and participating in their newfound identity reclamation. In this way, the mural once again reeducates the viewer as well. His other most famous mural, The Wall That Cracked Open was a memorial piece to his brother, who was allegedly stabbed by a rival gang member, featuring several faces similarly in both fear and awe of an indigenous figure. This symbol, the life and death mask of Tlatilco, an ancient, pre-Aztec site near Mexico City, once again attempts to connect Chicanos with their Mesoamerican ancestors while marrying it with culturally relevant graffiti. In this union, Herrón hoped to attempt to continue cultural life cycles within the barrio, while also educating both the viewer about issues within the barrio and asserting a uniquely Chicano identity.

Fig. 6
Fig. 7
Before describing the ways in which they attempted to echo education reforms, these artists describe direct experience with the education, oppression, exclusion, and stereotype issues. When describing his high school experience, Romero explains, “a high school counselor expected me to go into shop rather than an academic major just because I had a name like Romero.”58 Here Romero gives a specific case of Chicano low-achievement, vocational tracking. Baca describes a similar stereotyping, as well as cultural suppression that negatively impacted her, stating, “I was in this environment in which it was really against the rules to speak Spanish, and I was really freaked-out.”59 In addition to the cultural oppression of Chicanos described by Baca, Luján describes, first hand, the Anglo-American oppression and cultural dominance experienced by Chicano students at the time:

a Mexican had a role to play in this society, and I fell into place like every other Mexican. And when gringos came around I had to keep quiet, back up, and be conservative while they took over and controlled and were in charge and had the greatest social stature or status, just by being white.60

Luján goes on to describe their personal goal of attending college due to this low tracking and white oppression. He claims, “that was very important for me to go to school. I knew my people weren’t going to be able to send me through school, and I knew I wanted to go to college, but I had no idea what it meant. None.”61 However, despite describing achieving highly enough to break from low-achieving, vocational tracking, Luján remained confined to only possessing a desire for higher education to combat negative

59 Oral history interviews with Judith Baca, 1986 Aug. 5-6, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
60 Oral history interview with Gilbert Sanchez Luján, 1997 Nov. 7-17, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
61 Ibid.
stereotypes. Despite rising above an oppressive education system, he still never attained some culturally relevant, self-liberating want for higher education.

Aims of the Mural Movement

In their interviews, the artists themselves pointed to their personal experiences as embodying a larger pattern of problems for Chicanos within the American education system. In relation to high school, Romero explains that in the California Chicano community, “there isn't a history of encouraging kids to go on to university. It's just, "pay your own way. It's hard for people [because] the prejudice is always ‘out of high school to get a job.’” Here, Romero sheds light on the broad issue of higher education exclusion for Chicanos. The other artists continue to highlight the Anglocentric system’s oppression and subsequent victimization of Chicanos. Almaraz claims he achieved success in life due to his family’s financial success, thus citing that he had made his life choices independently, but “when you're working with poverty people, things are quite different. There's a lot of things wrong and they have no idea how they got to that point.” Luján builds off this explanation of structural inequality, saying “we make a mistake giving [cholos] over to an institution that’s going to make them into these incredible, inhuman creatures.... [W]hat they do to these young men is very criminal. That’s the real crime of what these kids are translated into, into adulthood.” Luján utilizes systematic inequality to explain criminality and lack of upward mobility within the Chicano community, but goes a step further than Almaraz to place some blame on the

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62 Interview with Romero.
64 Interview with Luján.
community itself. He acknowledges Anglo-American oppression, but sets up a need within the Chicano community to assist and transform these victims, rather than merely placing their faith in American institutions.

These and other artists attempted to respond to these issues by becoming determined to achieve self-liberation for Chicanos. Their first step to achieving this was to create a new artistic language that would embody the spirit of Chicanismo itself. Luján discusses his reasoning for the need to create a new visual language explicitly in relation to Chicano education in general. He claims, “with education being such a focus in our Movimiento, I said I had to do something so that when educators get these ideas they can transfer them through their students and have something of an idea.... I mean, a metaphor that they could say, ‘This is Chicano art.'”65 Luján believed the muralists needed to develop a common, specifically Chicano iconography and style in order to be able to efficiently communicate ideas and educate students about their intentions, as well as to be able to help a wider, non-Chicano audience be able to quickly and easily identify Chicano art. Baca claims, as a group, the muralists were “developing a new visual language that didn't use Western-European precedents in image-making.”66 Herrón speaks to a similar idea, saying they were “representing something that was different, approaching art differently, not using those but trying to come up with new symbols.”67 Luján explains their visual language embodied the movement by “not only looking to indigenous experience or those roots, but to utilize the tools that graffiti guys were using, employing

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65 Ibid.
66 Interview with Baca.
low-rider techniques and attitudes and translating them into art forms.\textsuperscript{68} The idea they attempted to embody was Chicanismo itself, transforming pre-existing, uniquely Chicano forms of expression into a recognizably Chicano artistic language that they, according to Almaraz, found “to be genuine. It was real.”\textsuperscript{69} To the muralists themselves, their new Chicano visual language was a genuine way to express and teach others about Chicanos and their issues and oppression, an organic language of self-liberation.

These artists expressed an attempt, through this specifically Chicano artwork, to create and speak to a collective cultural identity, through which Chicanos would be able relate and mutually learn, as well as build their communities. Luján explains that the creation of Chicano was, according to his perception, the representation and visualization of an already existing collective identity: “I understood Chicano to be an internalized word that we used [entre nosotros], you know?”\textsuperscript{70} Almaraz echoes this notion, saying they were adding to “a sense of collectivity” because “what [they] shared was [their] culture.”\textsuperscript{71} Luján explains that he was asking the collective question, “who were we? Mexican Americans? Hispanics? Latinos? We had all these names that we still have confusion over.” His answer to this question was “we were Chicanos. We were bilingual for the most part, not everybody. And we shared a culture. Whether you were cholo, gay, nerd, middle class.”\textsuperscript{72} Each artist speaks to the concept of officially voicing a pre-existing collective identity, but Luján goes a step further to explain their self-perceived notion that this collective identity was one that defied class, gender, and the like, instead being based

\textsuperscript{68} Interview with Luján.
\textsuperscript{69} Interview with Almaraz.
\textsuperscript{70} Interview with Luján.
\textsuperscript{71} Interview with Almaraz.
\textsuperscript{72} Interview with Luján.
strictly in a Chicano culture. And, according to Herrón, these artists saw themselves as utilizing this collective identity in their art as “a way of salvaging communities.” These artists saw themselves as not only voicing the common identity of these communities, but also as utilizing it to officially bring communities together through this collectivity.

Muralists claimed to aim to achieve democratic participation of the Chicano masses by not only community building and involvement, but also by making an art form that was accessible and participatory. Luján claims, “we all had a concern for being involved with the community. We all wanted to help the community.” To make the community fully participatory as Luján claims they were so concerned with, Almaraz says they had to bring “poetry down to the level of working-class people.” However, it is Baca who best explains the democratic, participatory goals of the murals. Baca, like the other artists, believed that they must be empowered in the making of the art. She speaks of full Chicano community involvement in the production process itself, having “massive community organizing into the creation of some kind of image.” Baca hired over 250 Chicanos youths to aid her in the production of a cohesive, culturally relevant image that would then be approved by the community itself, thus uniting them under the guise of a shared culture. She believed she was educating Chicanos through their actual participation in creating and representing their own culture, in essence reclaiming it while empowering themselves and their community. She believed that she should “engage more people, in fact, create bigger and bigger ripples,” and did this by putting all different

73 Interview with Herrón.
74 Interview with Luján.
75 Interview with Almaraz.
Chicanos “in the different parks, together in one place.” Baca expresses a personal aim to unite the community through full participation in the artwork; through this process of self-awareness and mutual education, she would also help the community achieve self-liberation.

Another step in liberating Chicanos through the mural education process was to break down stereotypes, transform negatives into positives, and then assert this empowered Chicanismo in relation to racism and Anglo-American oppression. Herrón claims that with his murals, he “wanted to create works that would help to break down the stereotype, to break down the barriers.” It was important for them to not only combat stereotypes, but to fully transform Chicanos in a positive light, in order to assert their identity in the face of racism and oppression. Almaraz claims an aim of the movement was to confront “the conquest, the struggle between mestizo and the European culture.” In order to fully confront this struggle between Chicano and Anglo-American culture that was so prevalent, the muralists thought it necessary to represent artistically, through their uniquely Chicano style, iconography, and production process, the history and culture of a “people whose history has never been represented,” due to “racism, and... the American idealism.” Baca believed that by representing on multiple levels this oppressed culture, as well as confronting Anglo-American oppression and racism, they could combat “the loss of self-esteem” of Chicanos,” while also asserting their power by “revers[ing] perspective in Los Angeles.” Muralists in this way sought to combat loss of

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76 Interview with Baca.  
77 Interview with Herrón.  
78 Interview with Almaraz.  
79 Interview with Baca.  
80 Ibid.
Chicano power, and thus reverse oppression and assert identity through representation and participation.

**Intersections with and Pushing the Education Movements’ Aims**

Through the words of these muralists, the parallel nature of the education and mural movements is evident. Both movements worked to voice a collective cultural identity, as well as achieve democratic participation, power assertion, and self-liberation for Chicanos in the face of Anglo-American exclusion and oppression. However, in many ways, empowerment of Chicanos in education was limited due to the still somewhat private, separate nature of educational institutions and its academic audience. Murals were able to move beyond these aims because they often existed in the public sphere, and were thus able to not only empower and educate Chicanos, but also confront the oppressor itself.

MECHA has failed to outline the muralists’ final step in achieving the liberation of the Chicano people—confrontation and education of the Anglo oppressor itself. To create real, permanent change Chicanos would need to reverse stereotypes in the minds of Anglo-Americans, and educate them about all things Chicano, including their community’s issues, culture, and hope for change. Herrón claims that, beyond empowering Chicanos themselves through artistic education, he also aimed to educate “the people that are on the street, walking by, just looking at the mural..... They're going to have their interpretation.” Thus, the artists would need to represent their ideas clearly and concisely, in order to properly educate onlookers about Chicano oppression. For the

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81 Interview with Herrón.
majority of these artists, one of the most important factors in creating a large-scale, publicly displayed art form was to confront and educate the masses about Chicano strife. Baca expresses this sentiment, claiming she would “force them in intense interaction with each other.” For Baca, her artwork was a public way to force the masses to talk about the issues at hand, when they normally would not be confronted with Chicano oppression.

Yet, in relation to the concept of educating the public, there was some divergence in beliefs and practice. Romero agrees with the idea that the murals needed to educate both Chicanos and the public in order to achieve full liberation, but he believed that Baca and others’ murals, located in predominantly Chicano neighborhoods, were not sufficient to complete the process. While their location was culturally relevant and allowed Chicanos to fully participate in their creation, thus in some ways assert their identity, in other ways, they did not fully confront the public. Romero believed that Baca and others put their murals “somewhere where the establishment doesn't have to confront [them] every day. So they sort of [said] some very blunt political stuff... but it's sort of done in a run-off basin where it doesn't disturb people too much.” Because of this, Romero and others took their murals to the galleries, but were often criticized for leaving the barrios. However, Romero claimed his idea “was to take the barrio to the West Side, because the West Side was certainly not going to come to [them].” Almaraz, a believer in the same philosophy, articulated their intentions to fully confront and educate the oppressor in its own environment:

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82 Interview with Baca.
83 Interview with Romero.
the other purpose was to demystify that whole process, because murals, like most art, it's not meant for just one locale. We had agreed to do them for the museum, with the understanding that they would be on tour, which they were. They were done on movable canvas so they could be taken off the walls.  

Thus, for them, the education process was two-fold. In some ways, the muralists would need to combat oppressive power structures by asserting their Chicano identity and ideas within established Anglocentric artistic structures. To fully confront the oppressor, they would need to reach him in his own environment. Yet, despite this difference in ideas of where these confrontational, informative pieces should be presented to educate the public, there was a basic agreement that in order to achieve self-liberation through democratic participation and cultural education, as outlined by both muralists and education reform advocates, artists also needed to educate non-Chicanos, rather than leaving all responsibility to change the system in the hands of Chicanos themselves. To truly reverse power structures and assert Chicano identity, the oppressors themselves would have to confront and change their own stereotypes, a step MECHA and the education movement never fully forced society to take.

This full commitment to education made by Chicano muralists is apparent in their explicit ties to the education cause. Willie Heron eventually went on to create Chicano art restoration programs for high-risk youth, as well as visiting different schools to talk about Chicano art, as well as engage students in discourse relating the Chicano Movement to their current issues. Luján became a prominent professor for one of the first Chicano Studies programs, challenging students to think about construction of La Raza from

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84 Interview with Almaraz.
85 Interview with Herrón.
political, historical, artistic, anthropological perspectives. And Judy Baca created a mural training program through the California Department of Education, using her piece, *The Great Wall*, as a model for alternative education. The mural also put in place support services for Chicanos, including counseling services, shelters for battered women and children, incest support services, runaway services, and suicide prevention programs. Each of these narratives showcases the intersections of the Chicano education and mural movements, highlighting intersecting reactions to problems within the Chicano community that include the creation of a collective identity, democratic participation, identity assertion, and ultimately empowerment of the Chicano people. Each also marks some mutual successes of the movements.

**Conclusions**

Despite some levels of success in achieving demands and educating the public about the Chicano strife, many of the same problems of Chicano stereotype, oppression, and exclusion persist today. This persistence can be seen as having roots in the fact that, in some ways, these demands were limited mostly to Chicano communities. As I have already shown with the whitewashing of Chavez’s mural, oppression of Chicano outcries continued during the movements themselves. Only one article run at the time, “The Murals of Los Angeles” really praises murals for having “criticized the social order and helped unify the nation in a desire for change,” and making art “the property of all levels

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86 Interview with Luján.
87 Interview with Baca.
of society, not just ‘aristocratically oriented intellectuals.’” These claims were in some way true, as Chicano Studies programs were implemented after student groups and muralists educated and engaged the public in discourse about Chicano oppression; however, overall, articles run at the time continued to oppress and stereotype Chicanos in many ways. Many articles focus on the movement’s success in cleaning up the barrios, or fixing gang members in some way. While murals did on some level do this, the overall public discourse focus on negative, stereotypical Chicano symbols such as barrios and gangs only further oppressed them in many ways. Almost all articles failed to mention the existence of any movements or specific artists at all, and when artists were mentioned, they were painted as barrio thugs turned American artists. They were only playing into the ideas of assimilation and elitism that they were trying to combat.

Perhaps only by understanding that in many ways, the public was never fully forced to confront the issues and demands of the Chicano movements (as seen in the destruction of Chavez’s mural), can we begin to see why many of the same education issues still persist. In this paper, I have discussed the ways in which Chicano Education and Mural Movements worked together to combat these issues. I have outlined the ways in which murals and muralists in many ways worked to represent the democratic student participation and Chicano identity reclamation and assertion for which education reformers had so actively pushed to counteract oppression, as well as the way in which

89 Here I have drawn my analysis and themes from a number of articles run in the Los Angeles Times during the movements. To delve personally into their subject matter, see “The Murals of East Los Angeles” by George Beronius, “Chicano Gang Turns to Art” and “Murals Changing Face of East LA” by Frank del Olmo, “Latino Draws on Life” by Herman Wong, and “Art Replacing Writing on Walls” by Keith Takahashi.
muralists moved one step further to challenge the oppressor itself. I have attempted to explain this relationship and their attempts by outlining and comparing both the words of the students themselves in their reform demands, and those of the artists in relation to their own goals through muralism. However, despite the attempts that I have outlined, in relation to white students, Chicano students today still consistently score lower on tests, drop out of high school at higher rates, have low attendance rates, are commonly stereotyped, and are set on low-achieving, vocational tracks. Despite the existence of didactic Chicano mural and education movements, many of the same structural inequalities still persist. With Latino populations rising constantly due to immigration, and student oppression and exclusion continuing to spiral out of control due to high stakes test legislation such as No Child Left Behind, it is in many ways a common belief that American education is in a state of crisis. However, in reforms to fix these issues, where will Latino, or Chicano, students fit? Perhaps our “melting pot” nation must once again, or perhaps for the first time, as Baca said, fully examine “the interrelationship between the different cultures.” In this way, I hope for this paper, a marriage of the aims of two cultural movements previously studied rather separately, will shed light on historical, alternative responses to cultural reclamation and solutions in response to structural oppression today.

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