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Public Art Narrative

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Mural Image: The Declaration of Immigration Mural



Mural Context:

The Declaration of Immigration mural, located in Yollocalli Arts Reach 1401 W. 18th St. Chicago IL. 60608, was created by Professor Salvador Jiménez-Flores alongside a group of young community artists. The mural made its public debut in the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago on August 11, 2009. Although the neighborhood of Pilsen is home to several murals, the Declaration of Immigration stands out amongst the rest as it mainly features words and typography. Captivating the audience with its usage of words, the mural displays a sense of urgency towards immigrants- especially those who have traveled thousands of miles away from their motherland in order to seek better opportunities. The US, though being a proudly diverse country, fails to embrace its diversity; marginalizing its minority groups as businesses continue to gentrify its neighborhoods. Standing 2 stories tall and 30 feet wide on the Southwest exterior of the Yollocalli Arts Ranch & Radio Arte shared building, the mural is enormous in its significance. The neighborhood of Pilsen has always been diverse. Abandoned during the white flight, the neighborhood then considered a slum was repurposed and turned into a barrio, housing many new incoming immigrants from all over Latin America- especially Mexico. According to the artist, Jiménez-Flores, the mural is “a reminder that the United States of America was founded on emigration and settlement.”

Breaking down the image one can observe barbed wire, butterflies, pieces of cloth with latin american flag imprints, as well as an ICE helicopter on the top left corner, among many other small details. Butterflies tend to symbolize transformation and freedom- freedom to lightly fly away wherever one wishes. On a deeper level, the butterfly may also symbolize one’s soul, as the journey up North is not easy. Thousands of people risk their lives every year, seeing new opportunities and a better future. Poor migrants take extreme measures in order to not get caught by ICE. Recently, 50+ migrants were found dead inside a sweltering truck in San Antonio, Texas this June. Additionally, politicians, such as ex President Donald Trump, have made inter ethnic tensions rise, as slogans like “Build The Wall” and “Make America Great Again” are glamourized. Despite tensions in America’s borders, Americans must show solidarity to our brothers and sisters who seek for a chance. A chance to have an education, freedom, a job, a fair opportunity at life. At the end of the day, one must remember that the US is a land built off of migrants and settlers. Also, the land occupied by US citizens is one that used to belong to the Native Americans before the colonization period.

While researching articles about The Declaration of Immigration mural, I was flabbergasted to see that there were several groups of people on Reddit who detest the wall's message. Many stated that immigrants are welcome in the United States so long as their process is “legal.” Yet another user was quick to say that the immigration process in the US is flawed as certain groups of people are granted entry at a faster rate than others. Moreover, occupying land that once belonged to the native tribes, some Americans forget that their ancestors too were once immigrants who chose to settle in the US. The hypocrisy displayed showcases how despite being a diverse country, the US fails to celebrate their people and tends to favor one group over another. The wall's messages remain prevalent, families are being separated with children living

in detention centers, groups of people are forced to move out of their neighborhoods due to gentrification, children don't have access to a fair education, minorities are most likely to be arrested and get a harsher punishment than white people. Though the US may be considered a first-world country, their policies are not as progressive as one may think.

When I first saw the mural, I was mesmerized by its message and how huge it was compared to other murals. The lettering provided a sense of exigence, whereas, other murals only provide visual images. The Declaration of Immigration provides a sense of momentousness- we must act now and accordingly. Though 13 years have passed since the mural made its debut to the public, a lot has happened since then. Immigrants in this country continue to be called "illegal", "aliens", "poor", "criminals", and among other diminishing characteristics. There are still several groups of people in our country fighting for their rights in a country that claims to be proudly diverse yet fails to provide the same treatment and opportunities to those of different races. I feel ashamed at the fact that I've never visited neighborhoods such as Pilsen and Little Village as certain parts of Chicago have garnished a bad reputation. Moreover, after watching Tonika Johnson's Folded map project, I was able to understand that one must break the stereotypes and stigmas surrounding their neighborhoods. After seeing Sebastian Hidalgo's photography, I was able to experience that the people living in these "dangerous", "poor", and "run-down" neighborhoods are regular people.

Furthermore, the most memorable part of the STRC program was when the class visited La Villita Park that was right next to the Cook County jail. Maria Gaspar's work stood out to me the most, as she has not only read some of my favorite literary work, but she also stated that the inmates in the jail look like her relatives, people in her neighborhood. She then asked the audience " Was I supposed to be afraid of my own family? My neighborhood? My friends?" Coming from the suburbs, I've always had the luxury of hiding. Hiding from racism, gentrification, marginalization, and being blind to the issues that other minorities have to face. I felt embarrassed when I couldn't relate to my peers' struggles. Now that I am aware of issues such as gentrification, marginalization, and poor funding, I will do my best to be an advocate for those who need to be heard. Though I was previously a Chicago tourist, I now mae part of the community and I find it necessary to be a voice for minorities in Chicago's neighborhoods.

Flash Fiction

“The Bravest People I Know” by Gerardo Avila

I will never forget the summer of 2018. It completely changed my life for the better. You see, sometimes we see the news and believe everything we see and hear, but have you ever given yourself the time of day to actually visit such “dangerous” places?

In my Spanish class, we learned about murals and their significance to their communities. Some were really pretty, had lots of meaning, and some were kind of stupid. For example, the ‘Declaration of Immigration’ one.

Everybody in my class got so pressed because I said, “immigrants should stay in their countries and stop complaining when their lives are too hard.”

Everybody in the class looked at me. It was silent.

“I don’t understand why everyone’s so upset”, I said. “Illegal aliens should stop coming to our country, they take our jobs, invade our space, and are always whining about something.”

Vanessa was shocked, “You’re so disgusting!”

Jessica went off on me, “You wouldn’t know what it’s like to be an immigrant. Jason, you’re a white male in the United States.”

Ms. Sol quickly interrupted, “Guys, stop! I will not tolerate this uncouthful behavior. Jason, you’re one of the best students in the class. It upsets me that you expressed yourself that way. I am extremely disappointed in you.”

Ouch, no one has ever told me they were disappointed in me. I mean, yes maybe I was a little conceited but I never meant to hurt anyone’s feelings.

I had to get my mind off of things, so I decided to hang out with my girlfriend Ashleigh. When I arrived at her house, Ashleigh looked at me. It was the same look Ms. Sol gave me in class.

“Jessica and Vanessa told me about your little scene.”

“Oh whatever. That class is full of snowflakes anyways. My comment was not bad at all.”

“Not bad? It was horrible. Look, instead of going off on you. We are going to Pilsen right now.

“Are you joking? That neighborhood is extremely dangerous. I will much rather stay here in the safe suburb of Naperville.”

“Have you ever visited anywhere outside the tourist zones in Chicago? Your comment is so stupid. Now I have to take you. There’s also something that I need to tell you.”

I finally agreed. I was scared. What did Ashleigh want to tell me? I really hope it’s nothing that could impact our relationship. Despite us being together for two months, I didn’t really know much about her family. In fact, I was confused about her because she would always hangout with all the Mexican girls, despite the majority of white girls avoiding any type of contact with anyone who wasn’t of their “status.”

When we arrived at Pilsen, a muscular man with tattoo sleeves ran up to Ashleigh.

“Watch out!” I shouted.

To my surprise, Ashleigh ran towards the man and gave him a big hug.

The man laughed at me and said, "Calm down boy, I don't bite."

Ashleigh said, "Jason this is my uncle Jaime."

Ashleigh's uncle then took us on a walk around the neighborhood.

He shared his story with us, "Look, Ashleigh has told me a lot about you. She expressed how you were a nice guy but from the looks of it, I can tell that you're just uneducated. You see, my journey to the US was a rough one. On my way here I encountered various obstacles. My group abandoned me in the desert. I was lost, afraid, and for a moment I thought maybe this is it. Maybe this is how I die. To my luck, I was able to find another group of people. They took good care of me. One night when we were all asleep, a group of white men tried to scare us off. As we were running we had to get over a barbed wire fence. I noticed a mother struggling to open the fence, therefore, I helped her. Unfortunately the barbed wire fence was set up wrong and it sliced multiple marks across my skin. The tattoos on my arms represent my journey.

We then came to halt, the 'Declaration of Immigration' was in front of us. It was so beautiful. I saw the busy streets of Pilsen. Divided by monochromatic gray and colorful murals. The busy streets are full of life and hardworking people. I realized how fortunate I was to have Ashleigh. She really did love me and I did too. I didn't see anyone trying to harm one another. In fact, it was beautiful. I then got the chance to meet Ashleigh's family, they were all amazing people. The mural now has a different meaning to me. Gosh, these are some of the bravest people I know.

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