

Turning Points in Latino/a/x History: Public History as National History Day® Model

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Public historians work in places such as museums, libraries, and archives. They also create films, radio programs, and other ways that the public can engage with history. National History Day® (NHD) alumnae Crystal Johnson and Elena Gonzales are public historians associated with the Chicago History Museum (CHM), which will open a new exhibition in the fall of 2025, *Aquí en Chicago*, about Latino/a/x resistance to white supremacy and colonialism in Chicago during the last century. In the following interview, Johnson and Gonzales discuss the ways professional historians find and construct meaning from the past and share that history with the public.

Latino/a/x

Identity terms change over time. The Latino/a/x communities, for example, have a history of identity words ranging from Brown to Hispanic to Latin, Latino, and now, the gender-neutral Latinx and Latine. However, there can be a generational divide around these terms. This is why we at CHM choose to use Latino/a/x. It retains the more traditional “Latino” form while welcoming those of all genders. Any NHD student who is researching a subject where racial or cultural terms may have changed over time may benefit from referring to EDSITEMent’s Race and Ethnicity Keyword Thesaurus for Chronicling America (neh.gov/blog/race-and-ethnicity-keyword-thesaurus-chronicling-america-new-tool-edsitement). It helps researchers identify research keywords that may work better for different time periods.

Crystal Johnson: The idea for *Aquí* came from high school students. Can you explain the student activism that led to this exhibition?

Elena Gonzales: A group of mostly Latino/a/x high school students from Instituto Justice and Leadership Academy (IJLA) visited CHM on a field trip in 2019. The students toured *Chicago: Crossroads of America* and were shocked to find the Latino/a/x one-third of Chicago absent from this 14,000-square-foot exhibition. They demanded change, wrote letters, protested at the museum, and amplified their cause on social and news media. They are the reason we are building connections between Latino/a/x communities and the museum today. Their work illustrates how much change motivated students can make.

The IJLA students’ civic activism is a wonderful example of a turning point—in this case, in the history of the museum itself. The museum was moving toward more inclusivity, but the events of 2019 represented a tipping point beyond which the museum could no longer fall back on old habits.



IJLA students hold protest signs following the visit to the Chicago History Museum that sparked their activism, 2019. Photograph by Anton Miglietta. IJLA students/alumni and the Chicago History Museum.

Students from Instituto Justice and Leadership Academy (IJLA) collaborated with the Chicago History Museum (CHM) on the *Aquí en Chicago*. In their words, this exhibition was important because:

“Personally, not seeing anything about our history made me believe we don’t exist, that we weren’t part of the history.”

– *Fernanda Gonzalez*

“Not knowing Latinx history does not just affect us Latinx people, but it affects white Americans and other cultures also. They might just see us in an inferior way since there is little to no history of us documented in a museum such as this.”

– *David Cervantes*

CJ: One of the challenging parts of being a curator—or an NHD student—is making difficult decisions early in the process about how to approach history. Chicago’s Latino/a/x history dates back more than a century. How did you decide which histories to include and what arguments to make in the exhibition?

EG: The first step in creating a manageable story is deciding on a focal point. The center of this exhibition is the IJLA students and their protest. I knew I could never create a satisfactory overview of the complete Latino/a/x history in Chicago. The students are able to do their work because leaders in their communities have been doing similar work for generations. I decided that illuminating that landscape would be the job of the exhibition.

NHD Connection

Current events can be catalysts for studying the past. Questions that students have about the world today can lead to great NHD topics. The key is to look at the history of a modern-day challenge, issue, or debate.

Just like public historians, students must also select a focal point for their project. Dr. Gonzales knew she could not cover all aspects of Latino/a/x history in Chicago, so she used the students’ activism to pinpoint her focus. NHD students must resist the urge to cover too much ground in their projects. They must narrow their topic, create a historical argument, and let the thesis become the roadmap for their project, presenting clear boundaries for what will and will not be covered.

CJ: Even with that focal point, it must have been challenging to make sense of all that you wanted to cover. How did you approach organizing this information for the public?

EG: I had to decide whether the exhibition would be thematic (arranged according to particular themes) or chronological (arranged in the order the events occurred). Thematic storytelling allows me to group histories in a way that draws attention to resistance strategies. Early on, I learned that the use of the term “Latino” to bring groups together politically comes from Chicago. This brings me to the first turning point I want to mention: 1972.

In 1972, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago collaborated to protest the dominant telephone company at the time, Illinois Bell. They demanded that the company comply with the 1964 Civil Rights Act and hire more Latinos. Illinois Bell was not practicing affirmative action in keeping with federal law in employment. The Spanish Coalition for Jobs took on this fight and was eventually successful. 1972 became a turning point of ideas: groups leveraging “Latino” identity for empowerment and economic gain. Nevertheless, Latinos are not one community: witness the 20 different countries of heritage, diverse races, economic experiences, religious practices, legal status, and wildly divergent treatment by U.S. law and law enforcement. When Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago began to use the term “Latino” in 1972, it shifted the conversation about identity and how identity can be used for political and economic purposes—starting an intellectual current that leads to the use of the term “Hispanic” in the 1980 census and then “Latino” in the 2000 census.

NHD Connection

Both thematic and chronological organization can work for History Day projects. Students must decide what framework makes the most sense for their topic. All students must connect their argument to NHD’s annual theme—this year, *Turning Points in History*—and demonstrate their topic’s significance in history.

CJ: What do you do when you hit dead ends in your research path?

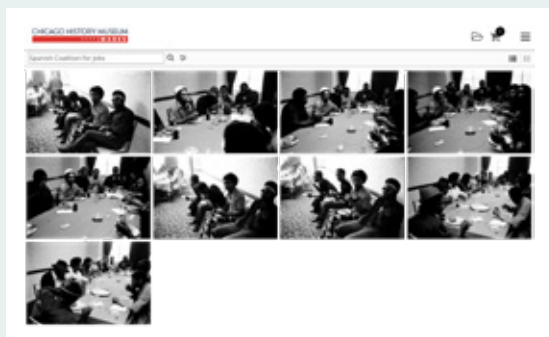
EG: As important as the story of 1972 is, it is challenging to determine how to share this story in an engaging way. I decided to try a strategy I often use in special collections, especially when that research concerns marginalized populations. I try to search at a slant, to come into searching through words and phrases that have to do with other topics but can still guide me to my goal. So, for example, if the search terms “Hispanic,” “Mexican,” “Puerto Rican,” and “Latino” have been exhausted, what if I search for “Illinois Bell” itself?

It turns out that CHM actually has archives for Illinois Bell. I was able to find traces of the story I was researching. This is an important concept because sometimes, especially when researching communities that have been historically sidelined, it takes reading between the lines, close reading, and triangulating different sources to find the

right information. So, for example, I noticed evidence of historical change: after these events, Illinois Bell featured Latina employees in its annual report more prominently and frequently.

My next step was to search the museum's image database for "Spanish Coalition for Jobs." In that search, I discovered photographs from 1972 of the Spanish Coalition for Jobs with another group: the Coalition for United Community Action (CUCA). The CUCA was formed with the goals of desegregating the construction industry and placing African Americans in trade jobs.¹ The two organizations disrupted meetings of the Chicago chapter of the National Urban League. The Chicago Urban League was both devoted to economic uplift and self-determination for African Americans and mired in class struggles. The photographs appear to show African American and Latino/a/x activists collaborating on these actions. This evidence of allyship shows the importance of finding missing narratives and integrating multiple perspectives.

The Image Collection at the Chicago History Museum (images.chicagohistory.org) is helpful for many different NHD topics. The collection includes the archives of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, often called "Chicago's picture newspaper." The *Sun-Times* collection is one of the largest held by any museum—more than five million images spanning 75 years.



This screenshot shows a search from the CHM image database for "Spanish Coalition for jobs," showing community organizers from the Spanish Coalition for Jobs and the Coalition for United Community Action meeting at the Conrad Hilton Hotel in 1972. Chicago History Museum.

CJ: The 1972 Bell Strike did not just happen. What are some of the turning points that you think help us understand the path toward this complex Latino/a/x identity?

EG: 1898 is another important year that contains several turning points, all of which helped shape our contemporary experience. The United States entered the Spanish American War and took the Philippines, Cuba (ultimately unsuccessfully), and Puerto Rico. The United States has continued this pattern of military intervention for economic gain across Latin America up to the present. The diverse Latino/a/x communities in the United States are the result of people having to flee every country where the United States has intervened. 1898 started a flow of Latin American refugees to the United States and further complicated Latino/a/x identity by connecting it to Asia (the Philippines) and the Caribbean (Puerto Rico, Cuba). Remember, Latino identity, as opposed to Latin American, is particular to the United States. People in Mexico or Argentina are not Latinos.

Aquí will map these populations as they grew and moved across the city. Visitors will be able to see that new and different groups arrived in each decade as the United States intervened in different countries, tipping off civil wars (Guatemala), installing dictators (Dominican Republic, Paraguay, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, Argentina), supporting coups (El Salvador, Nicaragua), and creating economic disasters (Colombia and many of its neighbors). Each of these histories is a turning point in its own right.

NHD Connection

To understand why historical events happened, NHD students need to examine historical context and change over time. Dr. Gonzales explains that turning points in 1898 established the conditions that help us understand events in 1972 and today. What social, political, economic, cultural, or other factors help NHD students explain why their topic happened when, where, and how it did?

CJ: How do you make decisions about the text you write for exhibition labels? How do you decide which objects you will use?

EG: Text and objects are the bread and butter of curatorial work, but they are two different areas. People are more important than objects. But objects do help us tell the stories of people. Curators choose artifacts based on the stories they help us to tell. We might be looking for a particular instance of some type of object—the red cooler belonging to a particular *tamalero* (vendor of tamales) in Chicago, for instance—or we might look for an object that is representative of something prevalent in a certain time and place, such as a switchboard of the type Illinois Bell employees might have used in 1972. All of the different

1 Erik S. Gellman, "The Stone Wall Behind: The Chicago Coalition for United Community Action and Labor's Overseers, 1968–1973," in David Goldberg and Trevor Griffey, eds., *Black Power at Work: Community Control, Affirmative Action, and the Construction Industry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010): 112–113.

elements of the object are relevant in these considerations: How and when was it made? How was it used (if at all), and by whom? What other stories can it connect us to?

Text can be challenging for curators. Different museums have different standards for how much text can go on a wall, but it is never as much as we want to share. An exhibition label might be restricted to 25, 50, 75, or occasionally as many as 250 words, much like a social media post. No one thinks it's much fun when an exhibition contains so much text that it feels like a book on the wall, but at the same time, words are important for sharing stories. The text we see in exhibitions is often the product of a lot of revisions by many different people.

NHD Connection

Certain types of evidence lend themselves to particular NHD categories. Students should consider this when making decisions about which category will best communicate their argument. The exhibit category requires captivating visuals and a limited number of words, similar to Dr. Gonzales's challenge in preparing a museum exhibition. Websites and documentaries also depend on engaging visuals. Papers rely on text to tell the story, and performances offer students a medium to integrate their subjects' own words with period-appropriate clothing, settings, and props.

CJ: What other historically significant stories will we see in *Aquí*?

EG: The school walkouts of the 1960s and 1970s are another set of stories in *Aquí* of great significance today. Latino/a/x students demanded changes in their schools—more Latino/a/x teachers and administrators, new curriculum, bilingual education, and decent facilities. Students and families caused the city to create new schools and trained a new generation of activists (creating more new schools). High school students are learning at these institutions today. In addition, the effort to create an equitable educational landscape resulted in new cultural institutions, such as the National Museum of Mexican Art. In 1982, several teachers were sick of their Mexican students finding nothing of relevance in their curriculum. They quit their jobs and founded the museum. I hope future generations will find that CHM has also shifted to become a trusted and inclusive storyteller.

Environmental justice is another thread in *Aquí*. Latino/a/x people have been working for decades to protect their communities from being used as sacrifice zones—places where the safety and health of residents are sacrificed for the benefit of industry. Community-based advocacy and organizing are ongoing efforts, linking the work of past generations with those in the present. We can see this historical significance in a recent example. From 2018

to 2021, community members on the Southeast Side of Chicago stood up to General Iron, a large company that was trying to place a metal shredding facility in the heart of this residential neighborhood. When separate groups of community members went on a hunger strike and filed a lawsuit, they eventually got the attention of the mayor, who stopped the permit. I hope this story will inspire visitors to see how significant their own activism can be.

NHD Connection

NHD students should consider historical significance when choosing their topics and framing their historical arguments. So what? Why should the viewer care? Why is the topic historically significant? How did the events being studied influence or change later events?

CJ: What lessons do you think NHD students can take from public history?

EG: As students uncover stories about the past, they can share their knowledge to encourage others to become better informed and more civically engaged community members. Whatever category they choose—paper, website, documentary, exhibit, or performance—they have the opportunity to connect with their audience. What would students like others to know, feel, think, and do? If students consider the things that feel urgent in their world—in their community—they may find a surprising road back in time that can inform their thinking about the future.

NHD Connection

Not all histories are represented equally in research collections, especially historically marginalized groups and more recent history. Many archives are working to improve their collections. If a topic is not well-represented already, an NHD student may be in a position to help preserve important stories for future researchers. For example, students' interest in someone's personal history may inspire that individual to donate their personal records to an archive or to consider offering a copy of an NHD interview for archival access.

