

Featuring the Art of the Chicana activist Adelita Michelle Medina for the Ethnic Studies Classroom

Adelita Michelle Medina, Chicana Artist from New Mexico
Marisol O. Ruiz, New Mexico Highlands University



Adelita Michelle Medina is a Northern New Mexican Chicana artist, social justice and peace activist, and a free-lance writer. From 1971 until its closing in 1973, she worked with the Chicano movement newspaper *El Grito del Norte*, where she wrote numerous articles, took photographs, and worked on the layout. Adelita Michelle holds an M.S. degree in Journalism from Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism and a B.A. in Art and English from New Mexico Highlands University.

Adelita Medina and I (Marisol O. Ruiz) sat down in August of 2024 for an interview about her artwork which would be displayed in the *Ethnic Studies Pedagogies Journal*.

Adelita recounts how, one day in 1971, when she was in her apartment located on the plaza in Old Town, she heard people yelling and chanting out in the park. She looked out the window of her living room, which faced the plaza, and saw scores of Chicano students marching. She wondered what was going on. She saw that her older brother, Benjie, and his close friend, Fred Trujillo, were among the marchers. She went out to ask them what they were marching about. They told her that they were protesting the lack of Chicano representation at New Mexico Highlands, the local university, and its failure to respond to student needs. The Board of Regents had not selected Dr. John Aragon to fill the presidency at the university and instead had hired someone from Wisconsin who knew nothing about the history of the area and its people (Chicanos and Native Americans). In addition, Highlands lacked culturally and linguistically responsive faculty and curriculum. While

the Chicano student population made up the overwhelming majority, there were only a handful of Chicano faculty and no administrators. Adelita agreed with their demands and joined, not only the march that day, but the Chicano student association on campus and became active in the Chicano Movement at Highlands. Students who joined the Chicano Movement received a political education and made important changes that benefited Chicano students at Highlands University.

Shortly afterward, Adelita Medina also began working with *El Grito del Norte*, a newspaper that covered the Chicano Movement and other Civil Rights Movements throughout the country and beyond. It was through *El Grito del Norte* that she gained a socio-political and economic justice consciousness.

Adelita further developed her global political consciousness when she joined *El Grito del Norte* and was mentored by Betita Martinez, the co-founder and editor of the paper. Betita was an internationalist who had been to Cuba and Vietnam and written about their struggles. She played a major role in helping to mentor and educate many young Chicanos throughout New Mexico and promoted the importance of connecting the struggle in New Mexico to those in Latin America and around the world.

Adelita explains that her awareness about the struggles in Latin America developed when Betita decided to do a special issue on Latin America and Adelita was assigned to cover Puerto Rico. Before this time, she had lived her whole life in a small town and knew nothing about Puerto Rico. She asked herself, *Where is Puerto Rico? What is happening there and how do the Puerto Rican peoples' struggles relate to ours?* While working on the article for that special issue, she found out about the island's colonial conquest by Spain and later the U.S. and learned about its long struggle for independence. She noticed some similarities to the Chicano struggle for self-determination. Little did she know that in 1975 she would move to New York and work in solidarity with the Puerto Rican Independence Movement.

Once in New York, Adelita first volunteered for the newspaper *Claridad* and the Committee in Solidarity with Vieques. Later she became active in and was the editor of the newsletter of the Puerto Rican Committee Against Repression, which supported various *independentistas* who had been jailed for their militancy. She also worked for Boricua College and the Puerto Rican Legal Defense & Education Fund, which in 2008 became known as LatinoJustice.

In 2004, after having spent almost 25 years in New York, Adelita returned to her hometown of New Mexico, Ranchitos de San Juan de los Caballeros, a small village located in the Española Valley, just outside of the Tewa Pueblo of Ohkay Owingeh, also known as San Juan Pueblo.

In 2016 when Trump was elected president, Adelita felt she needed to express her feelings and concerns about what his presidency would mean for the economy, environment, and racial justice progress we had made over the decades. Therefore, she turned to her art as a means of expression and began to produce protest art to help raise political consciousness.

Paintings we are featuring in this issue are:

- *Campesinas*
- *Niña de la montaña*
- *Lolita Lebron*

- *Zapata EZLN - Tierra y libertad*
- *Free, Free Palestine 2014*
- *Curandero*

Art for Raising the Ethnic Studies Social Justice Consciousness in Youth Ninth–Twelfth Grade Purpose of Lessons

Students will be able to:

- Explain the profound meaning of each of Adelita Medina’s paintings.
- Research the historical significance of each painting.
- Present the social justice relevance of each painting to today’s struggles.

Note to Teachers

Lesson plans are not set in stone. Teachers know their students and have the creative rights to change, add or reword all questions, and implement lessons in ways they feel will be more accessible to their students.

Sketch of a one-week Lesson Plan

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
<p>Introducing & Previewing Adelita Medina’s artwork Group work: Six small groups of 4 people or fewer will go around the room previewing Adelita’s painting.</p>	<p>Researching Group work: (Six small groups) Each group will discuss and research one of Adelita’s paintings.</p>	<p>Preparing Presentation All six small groups will continue researching and preparing a presentation for their classmates.</p>	<p>Presenting All six groups present their research on the painting.</p>	<p>Individual Work Reflective Writing Whole group Discussion</p>

Day 1 Previewing and Discussing Adelita’s Paintings

- 1) Divide students in groups of four (teacher will need a timer).
- 2) Each table will have one of Adelita’s paintings and butcher paper for students to write.
- 3) Tell the class that they will have 60 seconds to observe the picture in silence (teacher use timer and then say okay time to discuss).
- 4) Give students 4 minutes to discuss each painting.
 - What do you see/notice?
 - What do you think the colors/ color schema represent?
 - Why do you think she painted this?
 - What message is she trying to convey with this painting?
 - What questions do you have about the painting?

- 5) 2 minutes: Write down on the butcher paper. What you think the painting means and questions you have about the painting.
- 6) After 7 minutes, students move to the next table with another one of Adelita's paintings. Students will do this for all 6 paintings.
- 7) In the end the teacher can discuss as a whole group the following questions
 - Which painting did you like the best and why?
 - Which painting spoke to you? Why?
 - Which painting did you like the least? Why?
 - Which painting made you feel (happy, sad, excited, irritated, etc.)
 - Which painting taught you something new you did not know before?Or you can have students write a 2-5 minute reflection using the question above.

Day 2 Discussion and Research

Divide groups in 4 again - different or same depending on your classroom dynamics. Students will need chrome books to do research:

- 1) This time each group will have a specific painting
- 2) Have students take 3 minutes to review what their classmates wrote about what they believe the meaning of the painting is and the questions they had about the painting. After they read their comments, students will discuss their thoughts about the painting and if they agree or disagree with their classmate's comments. Ask them to add to the comments if they felt something was missing.
- 3) Have students take 5 minutes to discuss specific questions about their paintings. Specific questions of each painting are below.
- 4) Then give them 25 to 30 minutes to research the second set of questions. Tell students they will write in a note pad the information they uncover so they can share it with their group.
- 5) Have students share their research with one another—Tell students they will use this information to create a presentation for their classmates on the depth of the meaning the artist wanted to convey.
- 6) End class by having students write: 3 new things I learned and 1 question I still have?

Specific Questions for Each Painting

Campesinas

- 1) Why are there only women in the painting?
- 2) Why are there no men?
- 3) Why do they cover their faces and wear gloves?
- 4) Why do you think she painted this?
- 5) What is the message she is trying to convey by only painting women?
- 6) Do you think this has to do with the MeToo Movement? Why or why not?



Campesinas Research Questions

- 1) Did you know that farmworkers and domestic workers are excluded from labor protection? Why? Are farmworkers and domestic workers protected now? Why or why not?
- 2) Research pesticides used in farms.
- 3) What is the MeToo Movement? When did it begin? Why? Who is involved?
- 4) What is the Alianza Nacional de Campesinas, Inc.? When did it begin and why?
<https://www.alianzanacionaldecampesinas.org/>
- 5) Human Rights Watch wrote a report on Campesinas called Cultivating Fear. What were their findings?
- 6) Watch PBS documentary: Rape in the Fields
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/rape-in-the-fields/>
After the research then have students report information back to each other .

Nina de las Montañas

- 1) Why is the girl laughing and happy?
- 2) What are things that make you happy?
- 3) What makes you laugh?
- 4) Why do you think she painted this girl during the Trump administration (2017–2021)?
- 5) What do children and Trump have to do with one another?
- 6) What were you doing during the Trump Administration?



Nina de las Montañas Research Questions

- 1) What was the Family separation program during the Trump administration? When did it begin? How did the immigration Zero Tolerance exacerbate family separation?
- 2) How did the family separation program affect children/ youth? / parents? Think about it After the 4 years of the Trump administration—how has family separation affected children / youth? and parents?
- 3) Have children/youth reunited with families why or why not?
- 4) Explain the immigration youth detention centers?
- 5) How were children/youth affected from being detained?
- 6) What happens when a child arrives at the border?
- 7) Why were so many children arriving at the border alone? Unaccompanied minors is the term used for children arriving at the border alone.
- 8) What is the “Keep Families Together” policy and why was it passed?

Note to Teachers: Adelita Michelle Medina had wanted to do a series of Latin American children being free in their home country, but once in the U.S. as they were fleeing violence in their hometown, they were forcibly detained and put in cages. She was only able to complete two paintings centering children.

Lolita Lebron

- 1) Who do you think is being arrested?
- 2) What do you think the quote means on the painting? Why?
- 3) What year do you think this happened?
- 4) Is this a real person in US history? How do you know this?
- 5) What does the statue of liberty with a flag on her forehead symbolize? Whose flag is that?
- 6) What do the different symbols on the painting mean? Why?

(Note: Taino petroglyphs are symbols of their indigenous culture and the vejigantes are symbols of their Afro Latino culture)



Lolita Lebron Research Questions

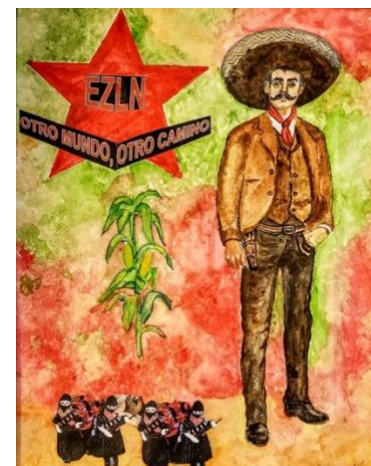
- 1) Who is Lolita Lebron? Why did she decide to take action? When was she released from prison? How long was she in prison for?
- 2) What is the nationalist movement in Puerto Rican? Who is Pedro Arbizu Campos?
- 3) Who hung the Puerto Rican flag on the statue of liberty? Why did they do it?
- 4) Explain the Puerto Rican Independence Movement?
- 5) Explain the movement to free the Puerto Rican political prisoners
- 6) Explain the Young Lord Party and their platform.

Zapata EZLN

1. Who is the man standing in the painting? Why do you think that he is that person?
2. What do you think EZLN stands for? How do you know this?
3. What do you think "otro mundo, otro camino" means? Why?
4. Who are the people in the bottom? What are they holding? Why are they holding this? Why are their faces covered?
5. Why is there a corn stalk in the middle of painting? What do you think it represents? Why?

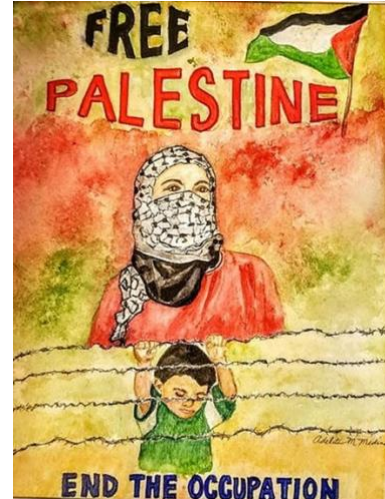
Zapata EZLN Research Questions

- 1) Explain who Emiliano Zapata is? Explain what he was fighting for and when?
- 2) Explain the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional? What are they fighting for and why? Where are they located in Mexico?
- 3) Explain who are the Zapatistas and how they have maintained their autonomy
- 4) How are ideals of Emiliano Zapata still relevant today?
- 5) How are the ideals of the Zapatistas relevant to people in the United States? What are the Zaptistas teaching us?



Free Palestine 2014

- 1) Why do you think it says Free Palestine? Why do we need to help Free Palestine?
- 2) Why does it say end the occupation? Who has to end the occupation? How can they end the occupation?
- 3) Why is the little boy holding on to barbed wire? What do you think that symbolizes?
- 4) Why is she wearing a Palestinian head scarf (keffiyeh)? What do you think it symbolizes?
- 5) What do you think the color scheme represents? Why?

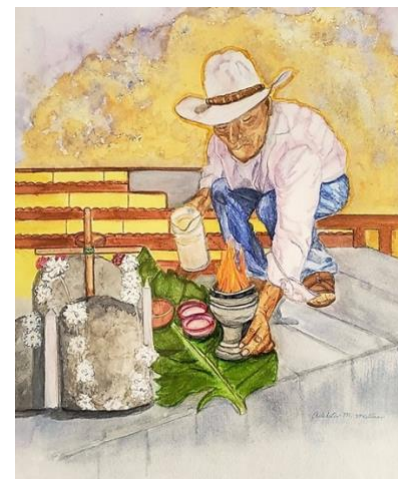


Free Palestine 2014 Research Questions

- 1) Where is Palestine? Research the history of Palestine
- 2) Research the war on Palestine in 2000-2014
- 3) How is it different or similar to what we are seeing in 2024 in Palestine?
- 4) How are people trying to free Palestine today?
- 5) How many Palestinians have left their home country and why? What countries do they reside in?
- 6) Why do you think more people around the world want an end to the violence against Palestine? Why is there more awareness today than ever before?

Curandero Who Was Murdered by a Youth Gang in Mexico

- 1) What is the man doing in the painting? Why do you think this?
- 2) Who is the man? How do you know?
- 3) What do the cross, candles, and stones symbolize there? Why?
- 4) What do you think he has in the jar?
- 5) What does fire symbolize?
- 6) What do the white flowers symbolize on the stone? Why?



Curandero Research Questions

- 1) What is a curandero? What do they do?
- 2) Research Mexico in 2000 to today?
- 3) Research how in 2006 the drug war began in Mexico and the drug cartel began to escalate the violence against communities?
- 4) How is the US involved in the violence in Mexico? Why?
- 5) How has the violence affected people in Mexico?
- 6) Why do you think drug cartels might fear curanderos? Why do you think they target them?
- 7) Do you think there will be an end to the violence? Why or why not?

Day 3 Preparing Presentation for Classmates

In their same groups of 4, students will prepare a presentation.

- 1) For 5 minutes Ask students to look at the painting again with all of the research information they have gathered and discuss the following questions.
 - a. What do we see? What do you notice now that maybe you did not notice before.
 - b. What do we learn from this painting?
 - c. How does this painting bring awareness to the public about social/ political/historical issues? social justice issues?
 - d. What is the message the artist is trying to convey to all of us? Why?
- 2) Then give students 40 minutes to Prepare a 5-minute PowerPoint presentation of the painting
 - Give students time to finish researching information and discussing how they will put together a presentation. Who will speak? How long will they speak for? Who will do what slide?
 - Have students rehearse presentations before they present in front of the class.
 - End session with a whole group's reflection or a 2 minute written reflection on what they learned.

Day 4 Students present

Give students 5 minutes to prepare to present. Have students begin their presentation. While presenting the audience will write the following information:

- 1) Three things I have learned from the presentation.
- 2) Questions I might still have about the painting?
- 3) How has my perspective changed or not when looking at that particular painting being presented by my classmates?

Day 5 Writing

Have students write a 2-page reflection on Adelita Medina's art. Address the following questions:

- 1) How has Adelita Michelle Medina's painting shifted your perspective about viewing art and social justice?
- 2) How do these paintings bring awareness to the public about social/ political/historical/ justice issues?
- 3) How do these paintings connect with one another? How do her paintings connect to your life? How do her paintings connect to your community? How do her paintings connect to today's political historical moment?