

# Identity in Works by Yoshida Lawrence and Aranda

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Identity in visual art concerns the ways individuals and communities represent themselves and are represented by others. It can be expressed through the body, costume, gesture, language, color, symbols, architecture, historical memory, religion, and the social setting in which an artwork appears. The original essay examines three different works: Chester Yoshida's *Oshogatsu JAM* poster, Jacob Lawrence's *Vaudeville*, and Guillermo "Yermo" Aranda's mural *La Dualidad*. Its central argument is that each image communicates cultural identity to a public audience. That argument should remain, but the works require separate attention because a community-event poster, a modern painting, and a monumental Chicano mural operate through different purposes and visual traditions.

The three works also demonstrate that identity is not a fixed label. Japanese American identity in the poster is created through celebration and gathering; Black identity in Lawrence's painting is shaped by performance, stereotype, interior emotion, and the history of entertainment; Chicano and Indigenous identity in Aranda's mural is expressed through cosmology, resistance, duality, and collective history. Viewers bring their own assumptions to each image, so interpretation is produced through an encounter between artwork, context, and audience.

## Yoshida's *Oshogatsu JAM* Poster

The *Oshogatsu JAM* poster is connected with the Japanese New Year. *Oshogatsu* is one of the most important annual celebrations in Japan and in many Japanese diaspora communities. The first days of January are especially significant and can include family gatherings, visits, special food, decorations, prayers, performances, and community events. The original essay says the holiday lasts for an entire month. Some New Year customs and events extend through January, but the principal holiday period is not uniformly a month-long celebration.

As a poster, the work has a practical function: it announces, invites, and organizes participation. Unlike a museum painting, it must communicate quickly to people moving through public space. Text, recognizable cultural references, location, date, and visual energy help create a response. The poster does not merely describe Japanese identity; it helps perform it by bringing people together for a shared event.

## Community Gathering

The invitation to gather at a church or local community venue shows how diaspora identity is

sustained through institutions. A religious building can function as more than a place of worship. It may provide meeting space, language support, food, music, intergenerational contact, and cultural education. The event therefore connects family tradition with public community life.

Identity becomes active through attendance. People prepare food, perform, volunteer, greet relatives, teach children, and adapt customs to a local setting. The poster is part of that process because it turns cultural memory into a scheduled collective action.

## Tradition and Contemporary Design

The use of the word “JAM” suggests an informal, energetic, or musical event rather than a strictly ceremonial observance. This combination can represent a living culture rather than one frozen in the past. Traditional New Year symbolism may coexist with contemporary typography, youth culture, performance, or American community organization.

Such hybridity is important for Japanese American identity. Diaspora communities do not simply copy practices from Japan unchanged. They select, translate, combine, and reinterpret traditions according to local history and generational experience.

## The Audience's Role

The original essay describes posters as causing a passive audience reaction and calls them “manner posters.” That term is not established clearly enough to use without a source. Posters can influence behavior, but their audience is not simply passive. A viewer may recognize the symbols, ignore the invitation, question the representation, or attend and help reshape the event.

The poster's success therefore depends on cultural knowledge. A person familiar with Oshogatsu may read small details as meaningful, while another viewer may see only a festive design. Identity is communicated unevenly because audiences possess different memories and literacy.

## Jacob Lawrence's *Vaudeville*

Jacob Lawrence created *Vaudeville* in 1951. Lawrence was a major African American modernist whose work frequently represented Black history, migration, labor, family, performance, and urban life. His distinctive style uses simplified forms, strong color, compressed space, and rhythmic composition. *Vaudeville* depicts two Black entertainers in clown-like costume whose somber expressions contrast with the expectation that performers should amuse the audience. (Wheat, 1986)

The original essay correctly notices this emotional contradiction. The performers' bodies belong to public entertainment, but their faces resist the assumption that the performer's inner life is identical with the role. The painting asks viewers to recognize human complexity behind theatrical costume.

## Vaudeville and Racial Performance

Vaudeville was a popular form of American variety entertainment that included comedy, music, dance, novelty acts, and dramatic performance. Black performers entered an industry shaped by segregation and racist traditions, including minstrelsy. Some gained fame and creative opportunity, yet they often faced restricted roles, unequal pay, stereotypes, and white audience expectations.

Lawrence's figures reportedly draw on performers Dewey "Pigmeat" Markham and Tim Moore. Their clownish clothing may appear humorous, but the painting refuses simple comedy. The serious faces suggest fatigue, dignity, thought, or awareness of the social role imposed on them.

## The Mask as Metaphor

The original essay describes a mask as a metaphor. Even when no literal mask covers the face, performance can function as masking. Entertainers present a public identity designed for an audience while protecting or suppressing private emotion. Black performers historically had to navigate the demand to be entertaining without challenging racial comfort too directly.

The painting does not say that performance is false in every sense. Artistic roles can be chosen, skilled, and meaningful. The problem is the unequal context in which an audience expects one group to perform joy while ignoring its social conditions.

## Color and Composition

Lawrence's flattened shapes and strong contrasts prevent the scene from appearing naturalistic. The figures are constructed through angular forms, and the surrounding colors create tension rather than a realistic stage. This visual style directs attention toward structure and emotion.

The background does not provide a deep space into which the performers can retreat. They remain close to the picture surface and therefore close to the viewer. The audience cannot watch from a comfortable distance without confronting their expressions.

## Identity and Humanization

The original essay concludes that the work shows African Americans as ignored by other groups. The painting supports a more specific interpretation: it humanizes entertainers whose public roles could reduce them to racial type and comic function. Lawrence does not portray Black life only through suffering. He portrays the dignity, skill, contradiction, and psychological depth of people working within an unequal cultural industry.

## Guillermo Aranda's *La Dualidad*

Guillermo “Yermo” Aranda created *La Dualidad* in 1970 inside the Centro Cultural de la Raza in San Diego. The mural is approximately sixteen feet high and forty feet wide and uses Indigenous American, Chicano, cosmic, animal, and historical imagery. Sources describe it as an expansive account of the universe, humanity, and Indigenous peoples of the Americas. Its location inside a community cultural center is central to its meaning.

The original essay sees fire, animals, pyramids, a bound or crucified male figure, and a serpent or dragon-like form as images of suffering. These elements do convey conflict, but the mural is not only a representation of hopelessness. Its title, *La Dualidad*, points toward opposing and complementary forces: life and death, earth and sky, Indigenous and European histories, destruction and creation, oppression and resistance.

### Chicano Muralism

The mural emerged during the Chicano movement, when Mexican American artists, students, workers, and activists challenged discrimination and asserted cultural and political identity. Murals transformed public and community spaces into sites of education, memory, protest, and pride. They rejected the idea that significant art belonged only in elite museums.

Because *La Dualidad* is located at the Centro Cultural de la Raza, it addresses a community that participates in its history. The mural is not merely an external image of Mexican Americans made for distant observation. It is part of a cultural institution created to support Chicano, Indigenous, Mexican, and Latino art. (“Centro Cultural de la”, 2025)

### Indigenous Cosmology

The feathered serpent evokes Quetzalcoatl and related Mesoamerican traditions associated with creation, knowledge, wind, agriculture, and the joining of opposites. A feathered serpent combines bird and reptile, sky and earth. It therefore embodies duality through its form.

Animals, celestial bodies, pyramidal forms, and earth imagery place contemporary Chicano identity within a much longer Indigenous history. This rejects narratives that treat Mexican American culture as foreign or recent in the Southwest. The mural asserts continuity with civilizations existing before modern borders.

### The Crucified Chicano Figure

Archival descriptions identify a crucified Chicano figure among the mural’s elements. The image can

connect Christian suffering with racial and political oppression. It may suggest sacrifice, conquest, labor, or a community suspended between historical forces.

The figure should not be interpreted only as helpless. Crucifixion imagery also carries meanings of witness, martyrdom, and transformation. The surrounding cosmic and Indigenous symbols situate suffering within a broader cycle rather than making it the final identity of the community.

## Duality Rather Than Isolation

The original essay says the composition makes it appear that the entire world is on one side while Mexican Americans suffer on the other. The title suggests a more complicated relation. Duality can involve opposition, but it can also describe interdependence. Day has meaning in relation to night; earth in relation to sky; the colonized present in relation to ancestral memory.

Chicano identity itself can be experienced through dual or multiple belonging: Mexican and American, Indigenous and European, Spanish-speaking and English-speaking, local and transnational. The mural does not resolve these identities into one simple category. It presents their tension as a source of cultural meaning.

## Comparing the Three Works

The three works share an interest in cultural identity, but their strategies differ. The Oshogatsu poster builds identity through invitation and celebration. Lawrence's painting examines the emotional and racial contradictions of public performance. Aranda's mural constructs a monumental history linking contemporary Chicano life with Indigenous cosmology and political struggle.

Their scales also matter. A poster is portable and temporary, intended to circulate information. A painting is a discrete object that may enter a museum collection. A mural is inseparable from architecture and community space. These material differences affect who sees the work and how long the encounter lasts.

## Public and Private Identity

All three works negotiate public identity. The poster announces a community to itself and others. The vaudeville performers present public comedy while their faces reveal private seriousness. The mural makes a collective identity public on a monumental wall.

The distinction between public and private is never complete. A festival contains family memories, a performer's private feeling enters the public image, and a mural turns historical pain into shared cultural knowledge.

## Tradition and Modernity

Each artist combines inherited cultural material with a modern form. Yoshida uses contemporary poster design for a traditional holiday. Lawrence uses modernist abstraction to examine a popular entertainment tradition. Aranda uses modern muralism to reactivate Indigenous and Chicano symbols.

This combination challenges the idea that cultural authenticity requires unchanged tradition. Identity survives through reinterpretation. The question is whether adaptation remains connected with community meaning or reduces culture to decoration.

## Stereotype and Self-Representation

Lawrence's work most directly confronts stereotype by showing Black performers whose interior dignity exceeds the comic role. Aranda's mural challenges the marginalization of Chicano and Indigenous histories by placing them at cosmic scale. The Oshogatsu poster may counter invisibility by making Japanese American celebration visible in local public life.

Self-representation matters because communities have often been depicted by outsiders through narrow types. Artists can reclaim symbols and create more complex narratives, although no one artwork speaks for every member of a group.

## The Viewer's Responsibility

Viewers should avoid assuming that one symbol has a universal meaning. A serpent may appear threatening to one audience and sacred to another. A clown costume may appear amusing until historical context reveals racial pressure. A holiday poster may seem decorative until a diaspora viewer recognizes family memory.

Responsible interpretation therefore combines close observation with research. It asks what is visible, where the work was made, who created it, which audience it addressed, and which historical conditions shaped it. Interpretation should remain open to correction.

## Limits of Identity Analysis

Identity analysis can become reductive when every artistic decision is explained only through ethnicity. Lawrence is a Black artist, but his work also concerns form, labor, psychology, and modernism. Aranda's mural is Chicano, but it also addresses cosmology and universal conflict. Yoshida's poster participates in Japanese culture while functioning as graphic design and event communication. ("Google Arts Culture", 2026)

Artworks do not merely illustrate sociological categories. Their visual form creates meanings that cannot be replaced by a summary. Color, scale, rhythm, material, and placement deserve attention alongside historical identity.

## Conclusion

Chester Yoshida's *Oshogatsu JAM* poster, Jacob Lawrence's *Vaudeville*, and Guillermo Aranda's *La Dualidad* communicate identity through three different visual forms. The poster sustains Japanese and Japanese American community through celebration and invitation. Lawrence's painting humanizes Black vaudeville performers whose serious expressions challenge the roles expected by an audience. Aranda's mural connects Chicano identity with Indigenous cosmology, historical suffering, resistance, and the creative tension of duality. (Lawrence, 1951)

The original essay is correct that art shapes how audiences perceive cultural groups. The process is not one-directional or passive. Viewers interpret according to their own knowledge, while communities respond to, preserve, and sometimes contest the image.

Together, the works show that identity is created through memory, performance, gathering, conflict, and representation. They do not offer fixed definitions of Japanese, Black, or Chicano identity. They demonstrate how artists use public images to make cultural experience visible while preserving its complexity.

## References

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