

MURALS AS RESISTANCE: MAPPING COMMUNITY MURALS IN THE SAN
FRANCISCO BAY AREA

A Project Report

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By

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The Undersigned Graduate Committee Approves the Project Report Titled

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FRANCISCO BAY AREA

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ABSTRACT

In this project report, I discuss my role as an ethnographer and content creator for the Mosaic Atlas Project in collaboration with San José State University's Department of Anthropology and the nonprofit organization Mosaic America located in San José. The research project goal is to develop a digital ArcGIS Interactive Atlas that highlights cultural artist hubs present in the Bay Area. My research focuses on mural artists in San José and how murals are a catalyst for fostering place-based belonging, sites of cultural memory, and spaces of social action. I explore the connections between visual storytelling and self-expression, place-based belonging, and mural arts as a method for engaging in social action. I interviewed San José mural artists, mural producers, and mural advocates to develop two distinct ArcGIS StoryMaps discussing murals as social justice.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCING THE COLLABORATIVE PROJECT

In the Spring of 2021, I joined a collaborative team of graduate student researchers for the Mosaic Atlas Project, developed in partnership between San José State University and the nonprofit organization Mosaic America. The team designed the Mosaic Atlas Project to spotlight hidden cultural communities and their distinct artistic practices throughout the Bay Area using an ArcGIS Digital Interactive Atlas. As the Mosaic Atlas team, we collaborated on building this public atlas, which features one hundred and twenty culturally distinct Bay Area hubs and the cultural resources they offer to local communities. The Digital Interactive Atlas features place-based narrative StoryMaps that provide visual, auditory and written space for the ethnographic narratives, coinciding with geographic points on the map. As a team researcher, I contributed to the Digital Interactive Atlas by conducting ethnographic research to understand mural arts in San José and the San José Mayfair neighborhood. Following my fieldwork and data analysis, I wrote two StoryMaps that explore how mural artists in San José use visual narratives as a tool for expressing narratives of resistance and for activating placemaking.

The Mosaic Atlas Project, which is found on the Mosaic America website, aligned with Mosaic America's mission to develop social models of multicultural inclusion and self-expression for communities across all five Bay Area counties (Mosaic America n.d.). Mosaic America operates to provide inclusive cultural spaces in order to combat isolation and loss of cultural space for immigrating ethnic communities. Given this

directive, our team designed the Digital Interactive Atlas as both an educational resource for the public and a tool to unite cultural artists and cultural hubs present and active throughout the Bay Area. Mosaic America tasked the Mosaic Atlas team to design a geographic map that would accurately encapsulate the mobility and fluidity of cultural populations in the Bay Area. In order to accomplish this, StoryMaps were used to produce a nuanced storytelling aspect of the Mosaic Atlas, bridging the gap between static data points and boundless communities. The team created Mosaic Atlas StoryMaps to explore the connection between place-based belonging and cultural production. Ethnographers on the team collected photographs, video content, and edited audio clips to drive StoryMap narratives. Interview audio clips enriched StoryMap narratives, creating an immersive and central focus on the voices of communities we highlighted.

As my contribution to the project, I examined how mural arts foster social and place-based belonging for communities in San José. Within the context of the Mosaic Atlas Project, I examined mural visual narratives and explored how storytelling through mural arts fosters community ownership and belonging for San José residents. Murals are commonly sites of community development, which I found to be a point of conflicting interest for the San José artists that I interviewed throughout the project (Grodach 2009, 474-490). I learned through ethnographic interviews that the San José creative economy landscape is a complex network of both art economy politics and frequent distrust of community development direction. Public receptivity of contemporary mural

installations, according to my findings, rests acutely at the relatability and familiarity of the narratives displayed.

The Mosaic Atlas and Mosaic America

As a site of exuberant opportunity and growth, the Silicon Valley becomes home to new immigrating families every year. Global media identifies the Silicon Valley as a central hub for technological innovation and industrial development which has historically created place- based friction for existing and migrating communities in the region (Stehlin 2016, 474-490). Diverse communities in the Bay Area often face the pressure to assimilate into the mainstream culture. They translate their sense of isolation, misrepresentation, resource paucity into various forms of creative self-expression (Mosaic America n.d.). These cultural communities experience isolation, intolerance, and discrimination and eventually fragment (Mosaic America n.d.). To combat the fragmentation of cultural communities in the Bay Area, organizations like Mosaic America foster spaces for cultural communities to engage and invest in collective placemaking, cultural awareness, and multicultural support.

As an intervention for public education, the Mosaic Atlas team has designed the Mosaic Atlas to contribute to public knowledge of hidden cultural groups existing in the San Francisco Bay Area. As a public resource, the Mosaic Atlas combines community oral narratives with political and legislative considerations that are aligned with distinct community interests. The desired outcome of these efforts is to increase opportunities for hidden communities in the Bay Area to receive financial and social investment, safety net resources, and multicultural support to produce a more culturally inclusive and

educated Silicon Valley. Finally, our Mosaic Atlas team has partnered with the SJSU Martin Luther King Jr. Library to archive all written ethnographic interview transcripts with artist and advocates into the ScholarWorks public library database for future research (San José State University ScholarWorks n.d.).

Project Deliverables and Research Question

As an ethnography team member, I produced two StoryMaps, Mural Arts in San José and Murals of Mayfair, San José, to highlight the interests of local mural artists and art advocates who have ties to San José's Mayfair neighborhood and the broader City of San José (Stokes 2023a; 2023b). To understand how murals foster place-based belonging, I engaged in ethnographic research opportunities for site visitation, participant observation at local events, conducting oral history interviews, and capturing visual and narrative content for StoryMaps. I developed this project through two main objectives: (1) conduct oral history interviews with mural co-creators in the Bay Area that would be archived with the Martin Luther King Jr. Library ScholarWorks public database and (2) develop StoryMaps to share publicly within the Mosaic Digital Interactive Atlas.

Throughout the project, I used several theoretical frameworks to inform my approach. As discussed by anthropologist Robin Balliger (2021), community art can either unify or isolate surrounding communities from social and place-based belonging. From this concept, I consider murals as a tool for both social isolation and unification. Equally, I applied a framework that asserts that economic realities that surround visual narratives that display power, resistance, and intertwine with artist challenges in San José. Arlene Davila (2020) posited this idea after researching the global Latinx artist

market. I will elaborate more on this idea in the second chapter. In my analysis, I also consider anthropological notions of cultural memory as discussed by Marita Sturken (1997). I interpret publicly embraced murals as potential sites for cultural memory and social action, often inspiring community collectivity and resistance (Rodriguez, Xiomara, and Tuschling 2021, 294-313). I further discuss these notions in the next section.

Murals as Sites of Cultural Memory

In my background research on the site I explored, I came across oral histories associated with both historic and contemporary murals found in San José neighborhoods. The historic murals, standing in historic neighborhoods like Mayfair, contribute toward an ongoing visual culture that has remained continuous and unchanging. It is from these historical visual narratives that I came to understand how San José's resistance history deeply influences the visual narratives of the past and present for San José communities. According to Haitian anthropologist Michel Rolph Trouillot (2015, 75-92), history is the formation of narrative control as determined by structures of power, resulting in revised histories as the mainstream narrative. Through this project, I approach both historic and contemporary protest murals as mechanisms for culture preservation and placemaking, in addition to their potential power in furthering community development.

According to media scholar Marita Sturken (1997), cultural memory sites offer a platform for the production and debate of present memory, forgotten histories, and methods of storytelling. These protest murals, in this sense, are sites of cultural memory and nostalgia. They also act as a material ethnographic archive, which reveal geographies of race, class, power and cultural identity within their social contexts (Magana 2024, 710-715). Throughout my interviews, participants expressed passion for the ongoing preservation and maintenance of these significant cultural sites. By approaching murals as sites of remembrance, cultural expression and visual activism, I argue that mural artists in San José are activating spaces of belonging, ownership and inclusion for their audience communities.

Community Art as Resistance

Mural arts have an elaborate global history in political activism and community mobilization. Street murals are used for communicating collective interests across many countries in the world (Rodriguez, Xiomara, and Tuschling 2021, 294-313). Protest and conflict murals have played a monumental role in global resistance movements, as artists frequently have used them to evoke political advocacy, social engagement and patriotic unity amid political unrest (Leahy 2023). Street murals allow for artists to dictate an unavoidable visual narrative to the public, creating a rare opportunity for social organizers and activists to spread their social movement demands and interests to a wider audience (Rodriguez and Tuschling 2021, 294-313). Regarding mural production in San José, these sentiments can be found in contemporary political murals from past organizing efforts. Murals from the organized labor movement in San José appear, particularly in the Mayfair neighborhood,

dating as far back as the early 1970s. Neighbors and art advocates still consider them relevant. Contemporary muralists in the city acknowledge these nostalgic remnants of San José's organizing history. San José artists continue to use these collective histories to produce visual stories of social struggle in their art today.

According to anthropologist of art Robin Balliger (2021, 81-107), murals in Oakland once represented the political and social interests of the populus, but eventually transitioned into a threat of incoming gentrification for residing communities. Contemporary murals signal incoming gentrification and do not represent the interests of Oakland residents. Residents vilify rather than embrace them (Balliger 2021, 81-107). Murals in the Bay Area are not all welcomed by the neighborhoods in which they exist. These tensions have made contemporary mural making a complex political and economic landscape for residents (Balliger 2021, 81-107). Audience concerns are then: who controls the narratives, and to whom do the murals belong? As a result of this ongoing community distrust and instability, mural artists throughout the Bay Area feel conflict when accepting new mural commission projects throughout the city. San José muralists who take part in organizing often will consciously partner with production companies who are interested in elevating community stories and perspectives to acknowledge their displacement concerns. Artists with the desire to uplift collective narratives might also conduct interviews, focus groups, or surveys from within the local community to invite their voices into the visual design process. While mural production in San José is largely centralized, many San José artists resist hyper-commercialization through intentional community inclusion on projects and exclusively agreeing to partnerships interested in uplifting community voices through mural creation.

Creating StoryMaps

The Mosaic Atlas ethnography team collaborated with San José communities to produce StoryMaps. As a content creator, I recorded oral histories and included audio clips to capture elements of the broader regional narrative unfolding per highlighted neighborhood. Visual components, such as photographs of murals and the visual narratives being discussed, allowed for the StoryMaps to provide an immersive experience for future users of the Mosaic Atlas. While creating StoryMaps, my primary aim was to elevate the social justice interests that were discussed passionately by my interview participants, and to highlight the social narratives that they wanted to share. I wrote StoryMaps that related to San José contemporary and historic murals as expressions of resistance, and one that featured historic murals found in the Mayfair neighborhood today.

Methodology, Significance, and Report Structure

Conducting Fieldwork

To begin our fieldwork as an ethnography team, we organized neighborhood walkthroughs with partner organizations in each neighborhood. The purpose of these walkthroughs was to engage with the neighborhood, its public art, and its cultural geography prior to attempting any mapping or conceptualizing of the space. Experiencing neighborhood spaces firsthand allowed for the affective elements to help refine our overall sensibilities when engaging with neighborhood narratives and interests. My own walkthrough of the neighborhood allowed me to engage with the urban structure of the space. I noticed material weathering and signs of aging on older murals in the Mayfair neighborhood. I saw how murals were used, and were not used, by those walking by. The walkthrough allowed me to

contextualize the placement of murals, the narratives they displayed, and notice how they have been maintained overtime. Several of the murals I encountered in Mayfair had no written record or noted affiliation, and neighbors and residents could not easily trace them. As a result, walkthroughs provided an essential context to these mysterious displays that otherwise would have been impossible to incorporate into my StoryMap narratives.

In my ethnographic fieldwork, I conducted seven oral history interviews with mural artists, mural producers, and mural advocates. I wanted to understand the experiences and challenges muralists and mural advocates face in the contrasting Silicon Valley. I also included interview questions regarding community involvement and their reception of contemporary mural productions. When speaking with artists, I asked about their experiences creating new murals in San José and to describe their technical and conceptual mural-making process. Depending on the piece, I asked about the level of community involvement and engagement with the produced mural and ask for their insights into the landscape of the neighborhood based on their production experiences. I also spoke with advocates and mural commissioners who provided additional information and insight into the production side of mural making throughout the city. These interviews uniquely informed me about the complex artist economy in San José and showed how advocates and artists are interrupting systemic practice through community advocacy and involvement.

Collaborating with Muralists in San José

Throughout my fieldwork, I collaborated closely with Lou Jimenez, an art historian and artist in San José, working as an undergraduate student intern for the Mosaic Atlas geography team. We met regularly to exchange ideas and discuss concepts in relation to the project, our own artistic interests, and our general observations about the landscape of the art scene in San José. Lou demonstrated a vital and relevant pulse on the issues of the San José arts community and became a key informant throughout the duration of my project fieldwork in crafting interview questions, learning mural production processes, and in my overall analysis. I discuss more about this collaborative process in chapter two.

Once I had a clear idea of my research topic and question, I began conducting informational research using social media to develop my contact list and understand the network of the artist community in San José. As mural artists often rely on free marketing tools for their work, social media was a beneficial tool for reaching out to artists and researching mural projects and collaborations not published elsewhere. I leveraged social media to build an informal network of artists and cultural artist hubs, which helped build my sample pool quickly. Within two weeks' time, I had constructed an informal and generic contact list of over 200 local mural artists who had affiliations with San José mural productions. It was from this list that I narrowed down my outreach based on mural projects that aligned with theoretically relevant interest: murals as a tool for social justice. I focused on artists who had experience with mural making or interest in community issues as a theme for their visual work. I included community organizers, nonprofit

representatives and mural producers in these conversations to further develop neighborhood narratives for my StoryMaps.

Data Management and Storage

As the ethnography team, we collectively generated interviews, materials, and content for StoryMaps and engaged in collective analysis through weekly meetings and discussions of patterns and observations. This approach allowed for a more diverse data pool to ensure more accuracy overall. The Principal Investigator, Dr. Jan English-Lueck, divided the ethnography team into focal area, allowing for strategic and collaborative generation of StoryMap content. Patrick Padiernos, graduate student, and ethnographic photographer was the primary point of contact for capturing visual imagery associated with StoryMap themes. Here, I relied on Patrick and Mitchell Tran, the ethnographic photography interns, as they helped in capturing high-quality mural images for my StoryMaps. We have stored all interviews throughout the project in the same ethnography team database, providing equal access to the use of that data for StoryMaps and analysis purposes.

By the end of the first iteration of the pilot project contract term, the Mosaic Atlas team had conducted over 57 ethnographic interviews to include in the Mosaic Atlas and archived in the ScholarWorks archive at the Martin Luther King Jr. Library. The shared data collection, management, and storage extended a rare opportunity for each of us to elevate our own analysis and ensure further saturation and accuracy of our overall story of people and place.

Applied Significance

The Mosaic Atlas Project is an excellent example of applied anthropology in action. The Mosaic Atlas Project offered hands-on experience in working on community-centered projects and managing the interests of multiple stakeholders. Through this project, I could contribute toward a multi-team research project with a multi-layered deliverable. The project permitted me to gain further insight into grant processes, project management, research sampling, cross-team communication, budget planning, and mediation between partner expectations. As an ethnography team member, I learned how to approach and communicate through an anthropological lens within the team and in multidisciplinary settings. I was able to present my anthropological findings as an expert on my project and engage in analytical discussions within the ethnography team, while also being able to present these findings to stakeholders through project funding efforts and broader outreach practices.

Project Roadmap

I divided this project report into three chapters. This first chapter offers an in-depth introduction to the Mosaic Atlas Project and centers on the anthropological scholarship that has helped produce the design and implementation of the Mosaic Atlas and my special focus on mural artists in the San Francisco Bay Area. Chapter two is an article for *Practicing Anthropology*, which I wrote as an overview summary regarding my contribution to the Mosaic Atlas Project as a member of the ethnography research team. Last, chapter three includes an in-depth reflection on our project outcomes, project limitations, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

MURALS AS RESISTANCE

Abstract

In this article, I discuss my role as an ethnographer and content creator for the Mosaic Atlas Project in collaboration with San José State University's Department of Anthropology and the nonprofit organization Mosaic America located in San José. The research goal of this project is to develop a digital ArcGIS Interactive Atlas that highlights cultural arts in the Bay Area. My research focuses on mural artists in San José. I explore the connections between visual storytelling and cultural self-expression, place-based belonging, and the production of social change. I interviewed San José mural artists, producers, and advocates to develop two distinct ArcGIS StoryMaps discussing murals as social justice.

Keywords: Place, Identity, Belonging

Introduction to the Mosaic Atlas Project

In this article, I discuss my role as an ethnographer and content creator for the Mosaic Atlas Project, where I co-produced a digital ArcGIS Interactive Atlas that highlights culturally diverse artist communities in the Bay Area. In the Spring semester of 2021, I became one of several graduate student researchers for the multidisciplinary Mosaic Atlas Project. Mosaic America, a nonprofit organization located in San José, created the Mosaic Atlas Project with San José State University students and faculty from the fields of anthropology and geography. Mosaic America's mission in San José is to foster collective spaces for cultural inclusion and place-based belonging for hidden cultural

communities in the ever-expanding Silicon Valley. The Mosaic Atlas team created the Mosaic Atlas as a tool to invite multicultural engagement, awareness, and advocate for hidden populations to receive more social and financial opportunities and investment from the collective Bay Area.

As members of the ethnography team, each graduate student chose specific communities to highlight, then streamlined our personal data collection, analyses, and narrative StoryMaps accordingly. My research on mural artists resulted in the production of the two StoryMaps *Mural Arts in San José* and *Murals in Mayfair, San José* to magnify local muralist narratives while considering them within their socio-political and economic contexts that contribute to the visual stories of resistance being told (Stokes 2023a; 2023b).

I divide this article into five sections. The first section introduces the Mosaic Atlas Project, where I produced two StoryMaps that examine the economic and socio-political influences that produce and maintain both contemporary and historical murals in San José. I then present the history of the City of San José and the Mayfair neighborhood, both of which have deep roots in resistance movements visually represented and nodded to in contemporary and historic murals throughout the city. Section three describes the partnership between me and San José artists and advocates in the production of both StoryMaps, interview direction and overall project analysis. Section four dives into detailed examples of murals as a tool for social justice organizing and advocating. Finally, in section five I depict how murals are understood as significant sites of both memory and action for cultural communities in San José. I conclude with a brief

discussion section summarizing my findings, considered through an economic and socio-political anthropological framework.

In my StoryMaps, I highlight mural artists in San José while examining how murals contribute to visual culture, cultural expression, and social change within the city. To capture specific place-based narratives, I produced two separate StoryMaps about the theme of social justice in visual culture, as depicted in two distinctive geographical regions of the city. My first StoryMap, for example, highlights murals in the Mayfair neighborhood of San José, while contextualizing place-based economic, historical, and socio-political realities that contribute to Mayfair's visual narratives and shared experiences. My second StoryMap highlights murals throughout San José, expanding the range of ethnographic data to capture patterns of the city's overall visual culture. In this StoryMap, I consider the external contextual factors that produce San José muralist experiences and visual narratives. While both StoryMaps convey the theme of mural arts as social justice, these geographic divisions allowed me space to capture in-depth localized narratives that provide a greater sense of place-based belonging as described by their respective hidden populations.

In my research analysis, I consider the insights from anthropologist Robin Balliger (2021), who discusses community art in Oakland as a highly controversial space that can foster place-based belonging or produce isolation. When visual narratives do not belong to the community, these development projects can create further distrust of future development projects for community members (Balliger 2021, 81-107). This insight informed my approach when engaging with participants in San José, who expressed

similar tensions and distrust of community development efforts. With special interest in murals that foster place-based belonging for San José communities, I also consider anthropological notions of cultural memory in my examination of visual narratives that dictate themes of resistance (Sturken 1997). Throughout my analysis, I focus on how artists and advocates use protest murals as a space of political organizing and inspiring social action. Finally, I consider Arlene Davila's (2020) anthropological research on art markets and the artist economy for Latinx artists in the United States and throughout Central and South America. Davila (2020, 60-85) finds that Latinx artists are most negatively impacted by the contemporary creative economy that assigns value to certain voices over others, often reflecting stereotypic expectations from the consumers. These economic frameworks and limitations for Latinx artists, as described by Davila (2020), greatly impact the visual narratives being told and those who are choosing to tell them. Artists can choose to promote community issues in their work, but doing so might harm their business viability. Muralists must navigate this tension. I explore each of these themes further in the following sections.

As the Mosaic Atlas ethnography team, we shared the responsibility of collecting ethnographic oral histories and interviewed participants ranging across interests, cultural art forms, and cultural identities. While my StoryMaps were primarily reliant upon my own interviews, our shared collection expanded my analysis and interpretation of oral narratives, themes, and overall place-based experiences across cultural and geographic boundaries. While my participants primarily identify as Mexican-American, Latinx, or Chicax, I had access to interviews conducted with participants from other cultural

backgrounds, creative disciplines, and artistic roles, furthering my understanding and ability to identify patterns for analysis. In addition to interviewing mural artists, I conducted ethnographic interviews with cultural art advocates and community organizers who had geographic ties to Mayfair or the City of San José. These interviews provided an essential thread of contextualization, which produced direct quotations conveying barriers that mural artists and their communities endure. As a result, I rooted my actionable insights in the interests conveyed by the artists and advocates in their own voices and on their own terms.

Resistance History and Visual Culture in San José

San José's rich history of social justice and resistance movements has significantly permeated the visual culture of the city for the last several decades. Murals dating as early as 1970s can be found in San José, depicting heroic resistance leaders, movements, and nods to the agricultural history of the city. Similarly, modern murals in San José can be found honoring the continued resistance of immigrant families who remain present in San José despite risks of erasure, displacement, and continued struggles toward equity today. The inseparable nature of San José murals and local resistance histories is evident when engaging with local muralists and encountering a vast majority of their work on San José walls. These histories present the context in which these visual stories have been produced, and continue to be upheld as local legacies for hidden populations struggling to thrive in this ever-changing city.

As the birthplace of several multicultural labor movements, such as the formation of the United Farm Workers Union of 1962, where predominantly Chicano and Filipino farm workers united to protest the unfair labor practices of migrant farmworkers, these movements represent a collective history of the region centered on unity across cultural and geographic divisions (Cruz 2016, 365-370). The labor movements in San José represent just a small portion of the legacy of grassroots organizing toward establishing collective presence, representation, and liberation in San José. These efforts laid the foundation for modern muralists to reimagine cultural identity collectively through the production of murals depicting and saluting these stories.

Sal Si Puedes: Resistance and Visual Stories in the Mayfair Neighborhood

As a featured StoryMap on the ArcGIS Interactive Atlas, I focused specifically on mapping, researching, and understanding murals found in the Mayfair neighborhood. As one of the oldest neighborhoods in San José, Mayfair has always been home to working-class immigrant families and has a rich history of grassroots leadership, making a notable impact on the visual culture of the neighborhood. Advocates and historians acknowledge Mayfair as the birthplace of multiple Chicano organizing movements and the rise of Chicano leadership between the 1960s and 1970s, when many of the remaining activist murals in the neighborhood were first installed.

Throughout the 20th century, locals referred to the Eastside San José barrio as “*Sal Si Puedes*” (“escape if you can”). The saying referred to Eastside San José’s lack of supportive infrastructure and the challenges of poverty for young people who desired to expand beyond Eastside barriers. *Sal Si Puedes*’s unpaved roads, lack of economic

opportunities, and paltry social safety nets made life difficult for residents at the time (Matthiessen 2000, 30-38). "Sal Si Puedes" equally represents locals' desire to seek opportunities outside their neighborhood and the circumstances that produced fierce organizing efforts in the region. Despite notable infrastructural improvements in Mayfair's urban development since the 1960s, the neighborhood has continued being a challenging place for residents to stay and thrive (Matthiessen 2000, 30-38). Consequently, these realities have also impacted the ability to upkeep and maintain many of the historic murals in the neighborhood, which time capsule these local histories.

Beyond existing material and economic challenges, the Mayfair neighborhood has made enormous efforts to foster collective cultural and social belonging across its diverse population. Mayfair's leading organizations combined in these efforts and formed the Si Se Puede Collective, whose mission is uplifting community initiatives, empowering youth, bridging safety net resource gaps for residents, and offering spaces of self-agency and self-expression through distinct cultural programs. Five local organizations comprise the collective: SOMOS Mayfair, Amigos De Guadalupe, Grail Family Services, School of Arts and Culture at the Mexican Heritage Plaza, and Veggelution. This collective has been a paramount influence on the preservation and continued production of visual culture, including murals, present in the Mayfair neighborhood today. It is also within these cultural and economic contexts that mural artists and advocates have crafted their visual narratives. These cultural and geographic histories intertwine with present formations of identity, presence, and place-making in

San José, making them powerful contextual components to help understand the production of the present and future imaginaries of San José artists and activists today.

Collaborating with San José Mural Artists and Co-Creators

Throughout my ethnographic research, I relied heavily on the connections that I fostered with my informants and interview participants. As this project centered the narratives of local artists specifically, it was essential that both my analysis and fieldwork represented local muralists and advocates who, I learned, were deeply devoted to the cause of producing social change through their art. I grew to understand muralists as archivists and ethnographers of a different capacity. As documenters of personal and collective experience, I valued understanding their stories on both scales. My connections with San José artists and community advocates became both meaningful and productive. I worked closely with Lou Jimenez, an experienced San José mural artist and a student intern on the Mosaic Atlas geography team. In our collaboration, she taught me about the elements of mural construction, production, and introduced me to the barriers that many cultural artists are experiencing in the city. Lou assisted me in navigating the invisible social spaces that exist around and in-between the physical murals themselves. Lou's work as an art historian and mural tour guide for the city also gave her a unique perspective to contribute regarding narrative patterns she saw and information about new installations. She was a key interview participant and resource throughout my project.

When I connected with artists for interviews, I worked from my knowledge of their artistic accomplishments and positions in the San José mural scene. I was interested in

hearing their retellings of mural projects they had worked on or how they connected to the place and its community. I also wanted to understand their use of semiotics and how their own interpretations might relate to cultural identity and place-based belonging. Throughout our conversations, artists and advocates shared personal reflections and struggles that influenced their projects, visual stories, and creative symbolic choices. It became clear through these interviews that grassroots artists and advocates in San José have important personal attachments to the visual stories they create. From these interactions, I felt an immediate connection and profound respect for the varied experiences that artists and advocates shared about their ongoing pursuits and from where their visual stories draw inspiration.

Featured Murals in StoryMaps

Besides the interactive GIS map of murals, my StoryMaps feature in-depth narratives about specific murals, which are highlighted along with long-form content. The murals I featured in the StoryMaps incorporate themes of social justice and were referred to as notable by community members during my ethnographic interviews. Figure 1.1 is an example of a featured mural, which highlights the *Leyendas de San José* mural created by the Timeless Art Collective, located on Santa Clara Street and Fifteenth Street in Downtown San José.

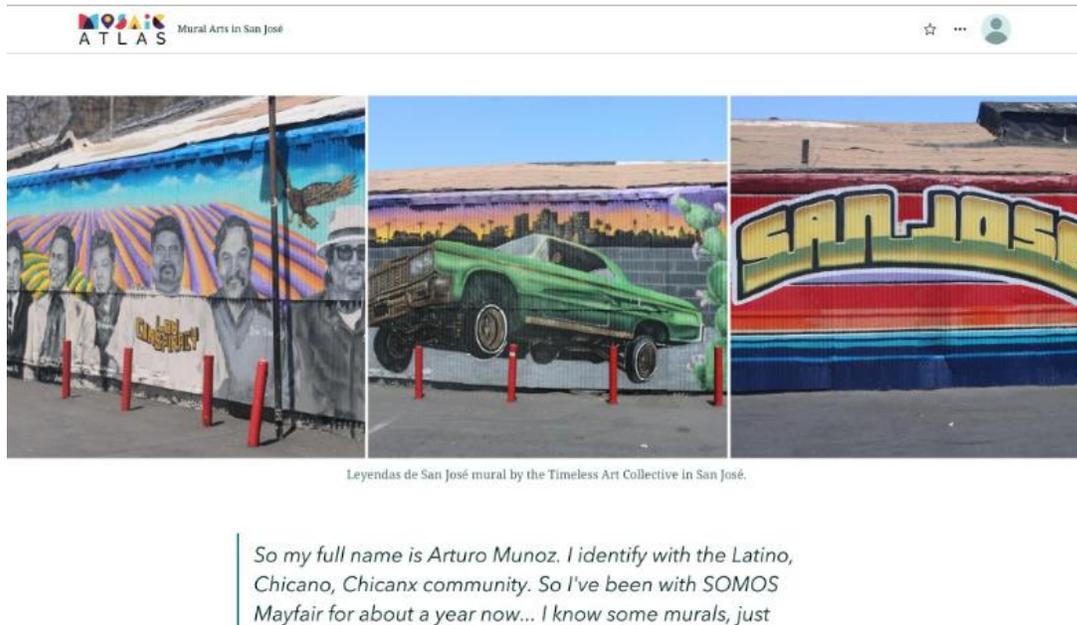


Figure 1: Screenshot of Mural Feature in San José Mural StoryMap: *Leyendas de San José*.

The *Leyendas de San José* mural was produced in 2020 by the Timeless Art Collective as an effort to highlight legends of San José's Mexican American history. The mural features realistic portraits of seven historic figures, including Jesus Valenzuela, Ricardo Santa Fe, Daniel Valdez, Art Rodriguez, Jose Martinez, Luis Valdez, and Sonny Madrid. These local legends left marks on San José from as early as 1940 through the late 20th century through Chicano artistry, publications, and radio platforms (Stokes 2023a). The mural is a frequently visited site by locals and tourists, making it a site of significance for many in the city.

Leyendas de San José extends across a series of metal sheet panels and includes a San José dedication in colorful lettering, a lowrider and a cactus plant with the San José skyline in the background, and the *leyendas* portraits in black and white in front of a field, nodding to San José agricultural roots. Mural artists Eduardo Herrera, Steven

Martinez, and Arianna Hansen from the Timeless Art Collective created the mural and invite unity and celebration over Mexican American presence in San José throughout history.

...the Leyendas Mural down on Santa Clara, has significant figures to the Eastside or to the San José community...It continues to create curiosity and...pathways for folks to explore that part of their identity. And even for folks that are not from here, that are coming to visit, they see that this community is really tied to who they are and to their culture and to their roots as well. - Arturo Munoz.

The Leyendas de San José mural is one example of how murals can foster place-based belonging through visual storytelling. It also serves as an example of murals as an experiment of ethnography, which both captures a local history and activates a social response. As Arturo Munoz describes, the mural can invite curiosity and education through representation, while also extending Mexican families the ability to access their own representation and histories in San José in a public space. This mural invites historical figures into the public narrative, initiating interest and conversation regarding these archived visual histories and how they might impact residents in the city today. Since installation, the mural has remained a frequently visited site for families of all cultural backgrounds, lowrider clubs, and young people interested in cultural arts.

Murals as Sites for Identity and Cultural Memory

As a historic cultural practice, murals materialize in often saturated urban spaces. Murals can be sites of cultural identity production and memorialized histories (Sturken 1997). Mural artists who capture these histories or present systemic realities engage in an ethnographic and archival practice by portraying and engaging the social geographies tied to place, while also creating a site for remembrance and understanding (Magana

2022, 705-710). Artists engage in archival work by sharing visual narratives of familiarity, historical insight, socio-political and cultural commentary, stories of oppression and violence, cultural and ethnic representation, and variations of expressing collective experiences for neighboring communities. For archivists and resistance artists, murals offer an opportunity to express collective issues to a broader audience without linguistic limitations (Naef 2024, 70-80). These murals are distinctive, as they are painted to produce social outcomes such as place-based belonging, equity and reducing community isolation (Lowe 2000, 360- 372).

In contrast to protest murals, murals that do not employ community interests or foster community engagement throughout production are often assumedly signaling the onset of gentrification for low-income communities and communities of color (Davila 2020, 39-56). Community development projects frequently use murals as a neighborhood beautifying project but are often devalued or resented by locals who experience economic and safety net vulnerability (Balliger 2021, 90-97). Murals present in San José's older neighborhoods, such as Mayfair, date as early back as 1960 and remain standing today. Many of these murals depict Cesar Chavez, who resided in the Mayfair neighborhood during the start of his organizing career. These murals have remained present in the neighborhood and were referred to frequently throughout ethnographic interviews as sites of notability for locals. Mayfair residents' interest in preserving these archived stories suggests that these narratives are still ones of significance to uphold.

While murals are often sites of memory and belonging, contemporary public art is frequently associated with ongoing efforts to develop low-income neighborhoods, often signaling an influx of gentrification to the area (Davila 2020, 39-56). Contemporary public art in the Bay Area is an ongoing source of tension for low-income neighborhoods and communities of color, who are the most at-risk to impacts of gentrifying efforts (Balliger 2021, 90-101). These tensions produce a challenging relationship between communities and public art committees and mural producers, creating distrust between the art production space and local community (Balliger 2021, 90-101). The gentrification of neighborhoods through public art installations is the underlying threat and concern of the San José artists and advocates that I spoke with for this project, and it is the primary tension that I discovered while exploring the mural socio-political landscape in San José. Speaking with artists whose concerns regard the art economy in San José, informed my interpretations regarding visual narratives and their interwoven nature with the systemic realities that produce them.

As seen in the previous *Leyendas de San José* mural example, murals have the potential to be sites of cultural memory and collective identity for some audiences, while not for others. Some San José audiences value certain murals as sites of cultural memory by demonstrating shared cultural values, cultural representation, or the ongoing presence of surrounding ethnic groups. How collective communities choose to remember cultural histories or define cultural identity differs with time, presenting the fluidity of this discussion. Lou Jimenez, a muralist in San José, speaks about this as an artist and art historian in the following quote.

I get inspired when I see artists being so dynamic with culture, but also bringing something new with flavor that is what's pushing it forward rather than copying and pasting...reusing it. We see the iconography and the semiotics and we identify those are Aztecs or Mayans symbology but what we do with it? It constantly takes us back as if back in the day was nice, back in the day we were free. This is who we were back then, but who are we now?

As Lou describes, muralists and mural audiences alike are continuously re-evaluating meaning in visual storytelling. For many young emerging artists in San José, such as Lou, by the use of traditional symbology does not statically define cultural identity and placemaking. Rather, many cultural artists are approaching cultural symbols as visual tools with the freedom to be reinvented, redefined, and reclaimed in new ways.

Just as some murals positively affect a sense of belonging for communities, they can also carry negative associations for their audiences. Certain murals can represent the city's efforts in beautifying the neighborhood, often signaling the impending economic consequences of gentrification for surrounding low-income communities (Balliger 2021, 90-101). These tensions have created a complicated relationship between murals, mural artists, commissioners, and their respective audiences. The symbolic nature of murals, in this sense, is sharply framed by the socio-economic context in which they are produced and observed (Davila 2020, 39-56). In the quotation below, Arturo Munoz, a community organizer with SOMOS Mayfair, describes which murals that he has assigned with placemaking power and why.

...the more grassroots ones, the ones that are within our neighborhoods. Not the ones that are on the main streets. I feel the grassroots ones share more of a realistic view of what's going on. I feel like main street ones are sometimes polished for more mainstream purposes. Rather than the ones that are within our community, within their community... they're not all the prettiest,

they're not the most eye-catching ones but, they tell more in an articulate manner, what change they want to see.

As Arturo describes, murals that show knowledge of localized shared experiences and challenges can help surrounding communities feel less alone. The community identifies with visual stories that are both from and for the surrounding community. Meanwhile, polished murals found on main streets, as Arturo describes, can feel as if artists created them for audiences that exist outside of the immediate community residents. In this sense, murals have the power to promote either inclusion or isolation based on how artists place them (Ballinger 2021, 90-101).



Figure 2 features El Sueño De La Mariposa (“The Dream of the Butterfly”) by Morgan Bricca. The mural is located at Havana Drive and Midfield Avenue in San José.

Figure 2 is as an example of a community-led mural project producing place-based belonging to a low-income immigrant neighborhood in San José. The mural, titled El Sueño De La Mariposa (“The Dream of the Butterfly”), was created by muralist Morgan Bricca in 2021 as a response to an ongoing neighborhood request to the city for the beautification of their otherwise neglected walls. From the beginning, the artist designed the mural to be a direct reflection of the surrounding community, after a series of visual development workshops held between the artist and surrounding neighbors. Morgan Bricca collaborated with residents to understand their vision for the mural and to co-create a visual story that would inspire and uplift the community according to their needs, interests, and what they collectively defined as a meaningful story. Mural projects such as El Sueño De La Mariposa serve as an important example of placemaking power and the production of place-based belonging for cultural communities residing in San José. The muralist Morgan Bricca illustrated an important act of disruption to the increasingly typical process of mural creation, which often excludes community involvement. While increasingly rare, this project approach offers a glimpse at the possibilities for mural arts to foster a profound sense of engagement and unity amongst their intended audiences.

Murals as Resistance

As exemplified globally throughout history, protest murals are used in efforts of organizing and expression of social justice issues. Intentional actions taken by muralists and mural production companies alike can determine the impact that a mural will make in terms of socio-political and economic changes and community engagement. Artists, for example, can approach murals as an opportunity to invest in local community interests and needs. Juan Carlos Araujo, founder of Empire Seven Studios, demonstrates an example of how strategic mural placement can play a role in the urban development of otherwise neglected and forgotten neighborhoods.

I like to go and see the sites, see how they're doing, and I see that there's been a significant change in how that community is now taken care of. There have been sidewalks fixed because we've painted walls. I've seen people in wheelchairs struggle to walk on a sidewalk because no one fixes the infrastructure of the city until we put art there, because now people are visiting these places. Having people activate a space in that way is activism. Literally, you're activating a space.

Activism and forms of resistance, in this context, can arise from a variety of approaches to the material production of a mural and how that mural interacts with the surrounding world. Another form of resistance through mural-making is through the direct stories being portrayed through visual symbols. These stories may feature untold or otherwise rejected cultural histories from mainstream educational spaces, making them uniquely radical sites for cultural exposure and increased understanding of the public (Ulmer 2017, 496-501). Cultural representation, histories, and perspectives in public spaces invite audiences to recognize hidden communities and require their engagement through direct and indirect measures.

Given the public and material nature of murals, they are often unavoidable and have a reputation for capturing the attention of locals and tourists alike. This reality serves well to the interests of activist artists and muralists interested in creating change through their visual stories, as they can tailor their narratives to include promptings toward desirable action. Beyond visual stories, mural production behind the scenes is also a rich space for the interruption of inequitable practices that face muralists throughout the Bay Area today (Davila 2020, 39-56). Organizations such as Local Color in San José mediate between mural artists and production companies commissioning art to advocate for artists as they sign onto new projects. The women-owned nonprofit focuses specifically on ensuring that their artists receive equitable pay, and fair treatment, and are signing onto projects that align with their creative mission and organizational values. The organization interrupts project assignments that do not consider the alignment with community interests and functions as a bridge between many other conflicting interests within the San José art scene today. A conflict for San José artists is the growing competition, as large production companies increasingly commission mural projects with non-local artists. In resistance, organizations like San José's Local Color, dedicated to fostering equity of pay and treatment for artists and communities on all commissioned projects, interrupt projects designed to exclude community interests. As such, artist advocates play just as important of a role in fostering belonging through mural production.

Concluding Discussion

Artists associated with local cultural hubs in San José provide a closer perspective on the happenings within a community and what individual people are experiencing within their own neighborhoods. The Mosaic Atlas highlights hidden cultural communities to contribute toward public knowledge of active cultural communities present in the region and avenue for support, elevation, and furthering collective investment in their place-based belonging. The Atlas offers a public educational tool for community members, organizers, community leaders, and policymakers to find transformative public art and the communities that support such work. Academic knowledge can impact change when practitioners apply it in the right places and offer it so that esoteric knowledge can be accessible, understood, and used.

CHAPTER THREE

REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH PROJECTS

Working with a Research Team

As an ethnography team member, I was responsible for both my personal academic efforts and my contributions toward the team's broader research goals. As the Mosaic Atlas team, we collaborated to share findings, engage in analytical discussions, cross reference one another's fieldwork, and support one another in our processes developing StoryMaps. The experience allowed me to navigate the complexities of a multi-disciplinary research project and practice effective communication and thoughtful group analysis. Working on Mosaic Atlas team, I felt challenged to contribute toward team discussions on topics that did not always directly relate to my research in the moment, but ultimately enriched my analysis. The ability to work with other researchers allowed for further refining of my ethnographic questions and overall thinking.

Throughout my participation on the project, I learned the value of effective team communication while conducting ethnographic research. The incredible benefit of working on a multi-person ethnography team was having access to over 50 ethnographic interview transcripts, which helped further saturate data findings and inform my analysis. I also learned how to navigate tensions regarding confusion or changes in direction, as we shifted from a five-county project focus to a single county project focus. When this shift occurred, I learned how to ask effective questions and gain clarity in order to redirect my focus where it needed to be in order to accomplish our deliverables effectively. I also was afforded the ability to streamline my focus on

mural artists only within the City of San José, permitting more depth in my findings and data collection.

Interdisciplinary Collaboration

The interdisciplinary nature of the Mosaic Atlas Project presented opportunities to examine urban space through both an anthropological and geographic lens. My collaboration with Lou, an art historian and student of geography, produced engaging conversations and helped build our mutual understandings in how we could approach the shared topic of mural arts and place-based belonging in a neighborhood. The collaboration across disciplines invented space for conversation outside of our own disciplines and ultimately allowed for me to consider alternative perspectives and interpretations rather than automatically trusting and relying on my own without question.

Earning Trust with Informants

In efforts to organize outreach for the project, SJSU students came across challenges fostering a trusting relationship with the community at large. Despite our desires to connect with local artists downtown San José, artists conveyed their hesitations to work with SJSU students because of previous projects, though unaffiliated with the Department of Anthropology, that had created tensions and distrust between the artist community and the University. In my own experience, I found that these tensions were somewhat effortlessly resolved when mentioning partnership with the community organization Mosaic America. The reputation Mosaic America had built within communities throughout the Bay Area proved to be a strength for our team and opened

doors that would have otherwise been closed. As a result of Mosaic America's positive reputation, artists shared openly and freely with me about their life experiences, passions, artistic influence, and lessons they have learned overtime. My experience conducting interviews was both academically and personally enlightening. The artist stories profoundly influenced my sense of responsibility and protection over interview content and my desire to ensure that it was applied to the project with integrity.

Conducting Research During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Working on the Mosaic Atlas Project during the changing tides of COVID-19 presented some challenges. Meetings and engagements occurring over Zoom as the project adapted to the pandemic. COVID-19 related limitations resulted in less access to artists who no longer had the availability or ability to meet with us for interviews. The financial realities that the pandemic constructed for artists also presented complications, making scheduling and face-to-face interviewing more difficult to ensure. This interruption certainly impacted our ethnography team's ability to capture the full artist experience in the Santa Clara County, as artists who we could not reach may have otherwise diversified our findings.

Project Limitations

Conceptualizing an ArcGIS Digital Interactive Atlas centered on cultural identity and place-based belonging while considering the fluidity of cultural communities was a challenge. Ultimately, the project required that regional boundaries be set in place, which helped guide the research into usable findings. However, these boundaries produced limits for understanding hidden populations, such as artists who may be local

to San José but do not have murals represented in San José neighborhoods specifically. As the team could not ethically map artist addresses, I focused on murals as the geographic points to be highlighted and mapped, regardless of whether or not they were painted by San José local artists or outside artists. Additionally, my research would have further reach with more interviews representing muralists outside of Latinx, Mexican-American or Chicanx identities. With more time, I would have sought more interview representation from artists outside of those identities and pursued more art commissioners and producers for their perspectives on mural making, the art economy, and the tensions as presented by local communities.

Future Recommendations for Research

San José Mural Artists and Co-Creators

I recommend further research examining the ties between mural production and the artist economy in San José, including funding for projects and the selling or demand of local art. San José artists expressed concerns regarding the economic barriers that are increasingly posing a threat to the thriving presence of artists of various mediums throughout the Bay Area. Mural artists in San José are also seeing challenges regarding receiving commissioned or paid projects local to the City of San José. I recommend further research on community art as a tool of resistance in San José specifically, as well as further research on the specific narratives that foster place-based belonging for residents and the narratives that do not. Finally, I recommend further academic exploration of mural artists of non-Latinx cultural identities in San José and what their experiences are in the artist landscape in San José.

The Mosaic Atlas Project

With the continued development and growth of the Mosaic Atlas Project, I recommend future researchers develop more oral history narrative StoryMaps, highlighting mural arts beyond Santa Clara County and into the other counties of the San Francisco Bay Area. Artists and their murals inseparably intertwine across counties. I recommend that the Mosaic Atlas Project continue developing their research within Santa Clara County, while also expanding their research scope to reach other counties within the Bay Area. Finally, I recommend further research regarding the interests of mural artists, advocates, and co-creators outside of Mexican American, Chicanx, or Latinx heritage.

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