

IF THESE WALLS COULD TALK:
GRAFFITI, PLACE, & CULTURE
IN IZTAPALAPA, DISTRITO FEDERAL, MÉXICO

By

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ABSTRACT

IF THESE WALLS COULD TALK: GRAFFITI, PLACE, & CULTURE IN IZTAPALAPA, DISTRITO FEDERAL, MÉXICO

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The practice of painting on walls and communicating through art on walls is a rich tradition in Distrito Federal, México. This research investigates contemporary wall inscriptions throughout the regional landscape of Mexico City, seeking social, place-based context to specifically understand the use and function of contemporary muralism and graffiti in Delegation Iztapalapa. The researched questions posed in this study are: what is graffiti and how is it different from other types of wall inscriptions, how do graffiti makers identify/describe themselves, in what manner does graffiti produce ideas of culture, what stories of place are transmitted by graffiti makers and where are these stories transmitted, how is globalization made evident through graffiti practice and imagery, and how does the contemporary graffiti movement of Iztapalapa mimic, depart from, and compare to the Mexican mural movement of the Post-Revolutionary Period? To answer these questions, this study examines social hierarchies, accepted practices, state sponsorship, and visual content of graffiti and murals throughout the Central and Eastern portions of Mexico City spanning: Cuauhtémoc, Iztacalco, Coyoacán, Xochimilco, Tlalpan and the case study area of Iztapalapa. Methods include: semi-structured interviews, participant observation, visual ethnography, and collection of

demographic data. The paper ultimately uncovers narrative and form that describe graffiti as an important method of storytelling about place, identity, and culture in Iztapalapa and as an evolutionary iteration of the historical Mexican Mural Movement.



Figure 1. Luchador with a spraycan.

Keywords: art, graffiti, murals, Iztapalapa, Mexico City, regions, place, public space, culture, cultural production, the Mexican Mural Movement, identity, community

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“We can only be said to be alive in those moments when
our hearts are conscious of our treasures.”

–Thornton Wilder

~

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1 INTRODUCTION

The day was hot, sweaty, and sticky, with the dull overcast light that precedes afternoon rain on any typical summer day in Mexico City. My stomach fluttered with nervous excitement, for we were heading out to see my first live graffiti painting-- we had been invited to come and watch one of the well-known local crews paint somewhere to the North East of the Constitución Metro, in a barrio called Rio Frio. The three of us, me and two friends who were helping me conduct my research, took one of the green and white peseros (small buses) to a metro-bus station. We fumbled with money and tickets to try and catch the fast approaching rapid-bus and double-checked to assure we were heading in the correct direction.

Upon arriving at our stop we had to call for clarified directions, and finally stumbled around the corner to find ourselves treading a narrow path through green grass and shrubs in a small, shady park. The park was bordered on two sides by three-story apartment buildings and to the back side by a shorter building. Three graffiti makers could be found setting up two tall metal painter's ladders. They were leaning the ladders against the wall so as to continue working on a large, elaborate painting. The massive work included images of blue and white ice-berg landscapes and two-story tall golden robots, who seemed to be waving their hands or making motions of offering to the viewer.



Figure 2. Graffiteros work on graffiti mural in Rio Frio, near border of Iztapalapa and Iztacalco.

The painting was in the process of being immaculately curated, planned, and executed and sat opposite another large graffiti masterpiece. This second painting consisted of a serene feminine face (at least one-story in height) and included images of hands holding the strings to manipulate a puppet. Where the viewer expected to find a dangling puppet, eight different graffiti autographs were inlaid, giving credit to the crew who made the massive artwork and showing off the exquisite talent and control that they commanded of their spray paint materials.



Figure 3. Graffiti mural with puppet master and pieces, at Rio Frio.

We wandered through the park, so taken in awe by our colorful surroundings that few words were exchanged with the painters at first. After greeting the three men who had invited us there, I settled back to see what this was all about. One of the artists climbed up and began sketching the outline of a face with his spray can, while the other two stood back with us and politely answered my curious questions. I was told that the guys first came here after receiving permission to paint the wall opposite the one they were working on that day, the one with the face and puppet-master imagery, because the building belonged to a friend's uncle. The neighbor across the park had admired their work so much that he offered up his wall for their next project. They said they came there every Sunday to work on this project, devoting the hours from about 9 or 10 in the morning to the time when the sun went down and there was not enough light to continue painting. As we settled in, it became clear that the day would move slowly, without

glamour or drama, as the artists worked precisely and stepped back to consult each other often.



Figure 4. Graffiti mural at Rio Frio. Researcher observes graffiti making in Iztapalapa/Iztacalco.

One older gentleman, with his young granddaughter, did post up alongside us after an hour or so while passing through the park. He called out to one of the young men, complimenting him on the meticulous beauty of the large painting they were doing, saying it was interesting and so much better than the "feo" (ugly) tagged paintings that had been placed on a shorter back wall. I was taken with surprise at the artist's polite response to the gentleman, as he gently explained to the man that he and his crew had done the "ugly" paintings on the back wall as well, but that these had been done more hastily, without permission and without an elaborate plan like the one they were working

on that day. The older gentleman took the response in stride, even though he was visibly surprised. He praised the artists again, and excused himself and his granddaughter. As the pair ducked around the corner, I wondered what the older man had expected the artist to say, and if the exchange had changed his understanding of graffiti or graffiti makers in any kind of meaningful way.

The story above begins to point out the complexity of graffiti as it is talked about, understood, and made real in the world. In the vignette, graffiti was conceived by members of the community as both a deliberate and masterful method of decorating space and as an annoying and hasty practice of disrespect. These extreme perspectives juxtaposed starkly to my impressions of the graffiti makers, who were quiet, humble, and unassuming, describing the fact that they had devoted hours each week for months to the skilled masterpieces in front of me as if it was almost an afterthought; a normal, everyday activity that was no more remarkable than the way they had scribbled their names illegally on the back walls in the dead of night.

From this experience, nuanced questions arose for me regarding place, people, and graffiti's role in their connection. What had each party taken away from the interaction in the park that day? Did the experience humanize an otherwise emotionless urban space? How? If asked years later, would these community members remember this day? Did the interaction narrate any particular notions of place or culture? What were they?

This thesis will discuss the practice of painting on walls in Mexico City as a cultural tradition and introduces the idea that graffiti takes on a unique form of storytelling throughout the region. I argue that although the practice of painting on walls has certainly evolved, changed form, and is uniquely different in character from the famous mural movement of the Post-Revolutionary period in Mexico, mural making is indeed alive, thriving, and can be found in exemplary fashion throughout the streets of the municipal delegation of Iztapalapa---Distrito Federal's largest and most concentrated populace with the worst reputation and most diverse mix of country-wide immigrants. Ultimately this thesis uncovers seeds of inspiration buried within the graffiti movement of one of the most complex urban landscapes worldwide.

I encourage my readers to explore and answer for themselves the following question as they read the pages of this thesis: if these walls could talk, what would they say?

2 A REVIEW OF GRAFFITI LITERATURE

“The graffito represents part of ‘a twilight zone of communication,’ an outlet for often deeply felt but rarely articulated sentiments and attitudes.”

David Ley and Roman Cybriwsky, 1974: 492

“...there is much evidence to support the fact that the common citizen vented his or her feelings through clandestine writing on out of the way structures.”

Roland Jefferson, 1976: 12

“The Palestinian community thought ‘out loud’ in graffiti. Issues of gender, religion, and politics were charted and debated.”

Julie Peteet, 1996: 141

“It [graffiti] represents a type of discontinuous communicative strategy through which people may engage in visual dialogue... This often reflects psychological and social conditions and the community concerns of a particular time.”

Klingman et al. 2000: 299

2.1 Defining Graffiti

Graffiti is, by some accounts, undefinable. Nevertheless, many scholars attempt to explain what graffiti is to their readers. Most authors agree that to make graffiti is to make a wall inscription (D'Angelo 1974, Jefferson 1976, Stein 1989, Santino 1999, Klingman et al. 2000, Whitehead 2004, and Yaponidjian 2005). Further, a handful of authors explicitly state that graffiti is a wall inscription done with particular implements or tools, such as spray paint or ink marker (Ley & Cybriwsky 1974; Peteet 1996; Bowen 1999; Whitehead 2004; Valle & Weiss 2010). It is however, understanding the specific type of wall inscription, the meaning it has for people, and story behind it that makes it more difficult to outline exactly what graffiti is and why it was made. Is graffiti political? Is it vandalism? Is it art? Do graffiti artists make wall inscriptions for the public, for themselves, or to warn of territorial boundaries? Is graffiti wordplay? Is it style? These are some of the broad overarching questions that have been asked by scholars throughout the second half of the 20th century and into the 21st century. The answers found in these studies demonstrate that there is no general consensus. The depth and diversity of the variety of definitions have also been listed in Table 3, found in APPENDIX A: GRAFFITI DEFINITIONS on page 183.

As evidenced by the diversity of ways that graffiti is discussed and written about, one cannot simply 'define' graffiti. However, one prominent thread within scholarly debate is that graffiti is a loaded, powerful, social tool. Scholars referencing this theme have argued that graffiti has been used as a demonstration of public dialogue, an act of

performance, a mechanism of political resistance, a mode of deriving friends, or a method of becoming known or getting noticed (Ley & Cibriwsky 1974; D'Angelo 1974; Jefferson 1976; Lachmann 1988; Stein 1989; Peteet 1996; Santino 1999; Bowen 1999; Klingman et al. 2000; Whitehead 2004; D'Amico & Block 2004; Halsey & Young 2006; Snyder 2006; Jefferson 1976; Stein 1989; Peteet 1996; Santino 1999; D'Amico & Block 2004; Benavides-Vanegas 2005). Based on these arguments, graffiti should be understood as a visual mechanism for understanding how people engage with, captivate attention, socialize, and entertain one another.

However, another scholarly theme found in graffiti literature poses a tension within definitions of graffiti. The converse perspective states that graffiti is a criminal practice of territorial control, aggression, and vandalism and therefore, graffiti has historically merited erasure and elimination by media, community stakeholders, and law enforcement (Ley & Cybriwsky 1974; Lachmann 1988; Stein 1989; Bowen 1999; Klingman et al. 2000; D'Amico & Block 2004; Halsey & Young 2006). Authors engaging with this theme have often positioned their research under the assumption that graffiti deserves to be mitigated, diminished, or controlled in many circumstances worldwide. This thinking has subsequently created a discourse that has guided much of the legal and criminal action against graffiti markers since the 1970s, particularly in the United States/Canada, Europe, and Australia.

Perplexingly, some authors argue that graffiti may be a positive social act for graffiti makers but is concurrently popularly believed by community members to be an illegal act of aggression. Therefore, the two seemingly dichotomous scholarly positions,

that graffiti positively affects graffiti making community members or that graffiti harms non-graffiti making community members, should not be thought of as mutually exclusive. Graffiti can indeed be thought of as a “both/and” situation, wherein it is written about as both positive for graffiti makers and negative for community recipients. For example, Halsey and Young discuss at great length the unlawful and violent acts of graffiti makers that merit government control while also arguing that graffiti is a rational and positive tool of social engagement used by graffiti makers in the same case study (2006: 292- 297). Whether graffiti is illegal or legal, political or playful, art or defacement, it becomes clear that graffiti has important social context and that it is made real in the world based on systems of lived experience, struggle, and power.

Only one article could be found written in English about the graffiti of Mexico City and in it, authors Valle and Weiss (2009) pose a stark definition of graffiti as a process of illegal lettering, which they posit is definitively separate from legal mural painting (2009: 128). Due to the diverse notions and interweaving definitions found in so many of the articles reviewed above, this blunt definition appears to require further investigation. Therefore, as a first research question, this thesis seeks a baseline for defining graffiti and for understanding how it may be different from other nuanced types of wall inscriptions within a case study.

There is also a wide vocabulary and several slang terms that are typically used within both the graffiti community and the articles written on graffiti to describe unique typologies. These terms have been presented in graffiti literature with some congruity and consistency of definition, showing that graffiti practice may carry common

understandings from place to place or from person to person. The chart below summarizes the meanings of a variety of graffiti terms:

Table 1. Graffiti Terms, Vocabulary, & Slang.

Term	Definition	Author/Source
Tag	Stylized letters that represent identity of the writer; written by novices to saturate an area; written quickly; are unique pseudonyms; often categorized as vandalism or public nuisance	Castleman 1982; Lachmann 1988; Bowen 1999; Docuycanan 2000; Whitehead 2004; D'Amico & Block 2004; Snyder 2006
Tagger	Novice graffiti maker who uses quantity over quality to saturate a territory	Lachmann 1988; Docuycanan 2000
Writer	Tagger or graffiti maker; a person who's reputation is based on fame and recognition of graffiti style	Lachmann 1988; Yaponjian 2005; Snyder 2006
Throw-up	When two colors comprise a tag name, with one outlining the letters and the other used as fill; is an evolution of tags; made hastily	Docuycanan 2000; Whitehead 2003; Documentary <i>Piece by Piece</i> 2005
Piece	Word short for 'masterpiece'; demonstrates great skill and mastery over materials; requires intricate planning; can be realistic, or can be lettering, shapes, or styles; more complex than tags, bombs or throw-ups	Whitehead 2004; Valle & Weiss 2010;
Mural	"Any graffiti that encompass more than the writer's basic tag." Or "often authorized and funded by a governmental	Lachmann 1988; Loeffler 2012

Term	Definition	Author/Source
	agency or community organization”	
Toy	"Muralists' pejorative term for taggers who fail to develop a style."	Lachmann 1988
Crew	"The term, crew, refers to teamwork and cooperation aimed at a common goal... a community of learning."	Valle & Weiss 2010
Burner	A very well-executed piece	Docuyanan 2000
Style	Flow, precision, readability, simplicity or complexity, funk, influence, color	Documentary <i>Piece by Piece</i> 2005
Wildstyle	Graffiti style where letters are interlocking but have flow of movement; sometimes unreadable; interweaving lines; signifies complexity first made famous in New York	Whitehead 2004, Valle & Weiss 2010
3D or Three-Dimensional	Piece with three dimensional style; signifies complexity and high status of the graffiti maker	Whitehead 2004

This vocabulary reflects that despite being situated throughout a range of contexts worldwide, the practice of making graffiti does entail some common understanding beyond place-based cultural context.¹ This means that there appears to be a well-developed set of rules, along with deep knowledge and skills that graffiti makers embrace

¹ The vocabulary in Table 1 is posed in the literature overwhelmingly in English. Results from fieldwork demonstrate that in the case study of Iztapalapa/Mexico City, some of these terms were repeated in English by Spanish speakers, (such as “Wildstyle” and “tags”) while others were not used by Spanish speakers whatsoever (such as “burner”, “toy”, and “throw-up). A few terms were commonly used as a translation from English to Spanish, (such as 3-d to “tres-de” or the word tag in Spanish as “placa”, which translates directly to the word “nameplate”).

during their participation in graffiti making as a sub-cultural event world-wide. The slang chart also points out that specific types of graffiti have been deployed for a variety of different socio-cultural purposes. For example, use of ‘Wildstyle’ could demonstrate well developed skill by a graffiti maker who seeks respect for their work and has a particular proclivity for the stylistic traditions developed by New York graffiti makers of the 1980s. On the other hand, use of ‘tags’ might imply that a graffiti maker is novice in their practice and that they seek fame/recognition through saturation, over precision of skill or talent. This study seeks to understand graffiti as a complex set of socio-cultural rules, practices, and knowledge that requires a lens for understanding how and why graffiti definitions and meanings might diverge and converge across the globe.

2.2 Graffiti as a social & cultural process

In addition to having been well established as a social act, graffiti has also been widely accepted as an act demonstrating elements of culture. In particular, one of the prevalent arguments explored in graffiti literature is that writing and painting on walls is an important constituent of the visual human culturescape. Santino proposes that the marked culturescape is comprised of “markings left on the environment... the painted walls and curbstones, the graffiti, and the murals” (1999: 517). Graffiti is also recognized as a common contributor to visual experiences in both cities and rural areas because painted and written images on trains, freeway overpasses, walls of buildings, industrial

areas, and transportation districts are highly visible to community members throughout common experiences of daily life (Whitehead 2004: 26).

Further, graffiti can be viewed as a vital part of visual culturescapes because content placed on the wall surfaces of cities reveals patterns about customs, social processes, traditions, attitudes and stories of human experience (Stocker et al. 1972: 173; Ley and Cybriwsky 1974: 491; Peteet 1996: 141; Klingman et al. 2000: 299; Docuayan 2000: 103). Also, the large range of topics demonstrated in graffiti images may include many aspects of lived, everyday moments (Stocker et al. 1972: 357; Peteet 1996: 139; Docuayan 2000: 103). Examples of graffiti topics that exemplify and comment on culture include current events, politics, social problems, race, war, advertisements, famous people, drugs, sex, religion, ecology, and economy (D'Angelo 1974: 173). Graffiti therefore, may comment on specific nuances of culture, cultural practices and beliefs, and visually depicts these nuances through words, realistic images, or symbols.

It has also often been argued that graffiti may display particular patterns that reflect different economic, educational, gender, and religious viewpoints, rather than universal perspectives shared by graffiti-makers worldwide (Stocker et al. 1972: 357; Ley and Cybriwsky 1974: 491; D'Angelo 1974: 173; Roland 1976: 12; Peteet 1996: 140; Klingman et al. 2000: 299; Gauthier 2001: 273; Benavides-Vanegas 2005: 53). This suggests that graffiti can provide insight about "local attitudes and social process" (Ley and Cybriwsky 1974: 491).

Finally, it is Peteet who overtly introduces the idea of graffiti as a cultural artifact and form of cultural production, which requires that it be understood as an embedded, lived

experience situated within social, institutional, and material contexts (1996: 139-140).² In her dissertation on hip hop and adolescent youth, Yaponjijian quotes Matsumoto (1994) and writes that culture is summed up as “values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, communicated from one generation to the next” (2005: 6). Therefore, if we are to accept graffiti as a social and cultural practice, then we must understand how cultural views are shared, grouped, and where they diverge. That is, the meanings associated with graffiti, how it functions and is received in a community, and the reasons for deployment will likely vary from cultural group to cultural group.

While many authors cited above clearly reference the importance of local culture and cultural symbols during interpretation of graffiti images, many fail to properly address the nuances of culture as a lived, subjective, and contextual experience in their own work. Two themes ultimately arise as the bases of understanding lived and experienced culture. These themes are: who makes graffiti and the place where graffiti is made. It seems obvious that both may change from case study to case study and that these variations may help explain some of the divergence within graffiti definitions, meanings, and explanations. The second of four research questions subsequently emerges: in what manner does graffiti produce ideas of culture in a specific case study?

² Peteet refers to Bourdieu’s theories of art and culture: “Thus the encounter with a work of art is not ‘love at first sight’ as is generally supposed, and the act of empathy, *Einfühlung*, which is the art-lover’s pleasure, presupposes an act of cognition, a decoding operation, which implies the implementation of a cognitive acquirement, a cultural code” (Bourdieu, 1984: 3).

2.2.1 Who makes graffiti?

Pierre Bourdieu theorizes that producers of culture have personal context that contributes to how their work is created and how it is in turn, acknowledged and understood by viewers and receivers (Bourdieu, 1984: 3). Bourdieu also argues that art is encoded in cultural assumptions and symbols, thus making artists purveyors of culture (Bourdieu, 1984: 4). Peteet builds on this argument, claiming that graffiti may be one mode through which cultural artifacts are transmitted (1996: 139). Both Bourdieu and Peteet therefore contend that understanding the personal context of a cultural producer and the institutions and actors they interact with is integral to understanding the cultural work itself. Unfortunately, a general trend in graffiti literature is that several scholars problematically speak for graffiti makers and attempt to explain their cultural background or context without ever interviewing them.

2.2.1.1 Generalizations about graffiti makers.

It appears that due to exclusion of self-described identity traits of graffiti makers, many scholars fall into the trap of generalizing graffiti maker identities on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, economic class, or political affiliation. A few authors have claimed that graffiti makers in their study were exclusively inner-city poor youth of color, primarily black (or of African descent), Hispanic, or Mexican-American males, but these same scholars fail to include data showing how they arrived at this conclusion (Ley & Cybriwsky, 1974: 493-494; Jefferson, 1976: 14, Yaponjian, 2005: 10; MacGillivray and Saucedo Curwen, 2007: 354; Pardue, 2004: 414). Lachmann (1988), who claims that

graffiti makers in his case study of Brooklyn, New York were poor blacks and Hispanics, explains that he did in fact interview graffiti makers in his study, but says that his racial and ethnic identity claims were based on interviews with district attorneys about graffiti arrest records, rather than on data offered by graffiti makers themselves. The gap in data collection creates the possibility for inaccurately stereotyping or generalizing identities and perspectives of graffiti makers. Further, the lack of interview or demographic data from graffiti makers themselves creates a glaring void in the methodological research design of these scholars and points out a potential area for improvement in future graffiti research.

This methodological trend establishes *the* inherent problem within graffiti literature: that without knowing why graffiti is made from the perspective of the maker, we cannot know how graffiti functions as a cultural tool in the case study. That is, if graffiti is a means for providing visual information about important elements of culture, we must know who is telling the story illustrated on the walls--- who is behind the curtain, what views are held by this person or group of persons, and to which cultural group(s) do they ascribe. It is neither accurate nor fair to make overarching 'guesses' about graffiti maker identities without asking them specifically to describe who they are, why they make graffiti, and what their intentions are.

Therefore, while the scholars listed in these paragraphs have attempted to grapple with the argument that graffiti is a practice socially embedded in particular kinds of people and social groups, they have often not offered substantive evidence to suggest that

they definitively know who created the graffiti in their study and from where notions of culture stem in the graffiti imagery of their study.

In addition to making assumptions about the race, ethnicity, economic standing, or political affiliation of graffiti makers, scholars have also sometimes incorrectly claimed that graffiti makers are dangerous social deviants. Specifically, several authors have emphasized a commonly held perspective that graffiti makers lack morals, education, and pose threat of violence (D'Angelo, 1974: 173; Glazer quoted by Lachmann 1988 and Castleman 1982: 231; Ley and Cybriwsky quote statements from the New York Times, 1974: 491). A few authors write that state governments have legally or otherwise promoted the idea that graffiti is an act of criminal disorder and chaos in places like New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and throughout Britain (Halsey and Young, 2006: 275-276; Snyder, 2006: 95). And Docuayan includes an especially poignant quotation from the Los Angeles Times in the 1990s that summarizes graffiti as an indicator of crime, predation, and desolation (Docuayan, 2000 quotes Stolberg, 1992: 105). The pivotal assumption underpinning exclusion, elimination, and criminalization of visual stories depicted by graffiti makers is that graffiti and graffiti makers harm neighborhoods and community members in them.

Grffiti makers have also long been linked to gang violence. Authors linking graffiti makers to gang affiliation or acts of group-enacted violence include Ley and Cybriwsky (1974), Jefferson (1976: 17), Lachmann (1988: 233), Santino (1999), and MacGillivray and Saucedo Curwen (2007: 354). Lachmann writes that he spoke with leaders of only two Brooklyn gangs who paid graffiti makers to “advertise the gangs’ power and claims

to turf” (1988: 233). This claim does a better job of elucidating gang leader perspectives than graffiti maker trends in any kind of representative sample. Faye Docuyan (2000) quotes a graffiti maker, writing: “They don’t even label you as taggers no more or graf artists. They label you as gangsters now. If they catch you writing, oh you’re a gangster” (2000: 111). Graffiti makers are often lumped into negative social categories and linked to aggressive character traits without their permission. Their voices, perspectives, and the stories told through their work are often lost to the argument that graffiti is dangerous, criminal, and violent and therefore, deserves to be silenced.

It is sometimes difficult to distinguish whether scholars have generalized or excluded graffiti maker perspectives due to their choice of methods or their prescription to a particular conceptual framework. Several authors merely gloss over the fact that they did not interview graffiti-makers in their study of graffiti, never mentioning this significance or citing a reason for this omission, such as with Stocker et al. (1972), D’Angelo (1974), and Jefferson (1976).

Other scholars are clear, writing exactly why they chose to exclude graffiti maker perspectives in their study. Stein, for example, explains her omission of graffiti-maker perspectives by the fact that she had a hard time locating graffiti makers to interview (1989: 100). Klingman et al. claim that perspectives and identities of graffiti-makers are unnecessary because graffiti is a mode of “quiet dialogue, where a face-to-face interaction was not required” (Klingman et al. 2000: 306). Peteet writes of graffiti makers in her study of Palestinian graffiti of Jerusalem: “their signature by political groups rather than individual writers, suggested the sense of community and assertiveness of a

readership bound by common political experience and language” (1996:146). Claims made about graffiti maker intentions and identities remain mere guesses in each of the aforementioned articles, because they are unsubstantiated by graffiti makers themselves. The justification for excluding identity data and perspectives of graffiti makers does not outweigh the value of including it, especially if we are to understand graffiti as a mode of cultural production, as described by Bourdieu.

A few authors openly challenge the labeling of graffiti makers as “deviant” or as belonging to any particular social group, which further enforces the idea that omitting graffiti maker direct quotations and vantages is problematic. For example, Jefferson paradoxically writes in 1976 that “Today we know for a fact that graffiti is engaged in by all classes, all ethnic groups, all religious groups, children and adults,” although his study purports to represent motivations of one social group: black youth (1976: 12). Bowen shows that graffiti makers cannot always be lumped into one or two broad ethnic social categories by providing empirical data from her study that demonstrate graffiti makers were of white, Latin, and black descent (1999: 27). Bowen also crucially identifies the fact that graffiti maker voices are often excluded from the narrative about graffiti (1999: 22). And Lachmann writes that “the deviant label serves to highlight the illegality of graffiti writing and (falsely) link it with violent crime” (1988: 232).

Yapondjian’s study explicitly counters the negative associations made between graffiti makers and gangs, pointing out that graffiti evolved as a mechanism for gang leaders to “improve neighborhoods” in the South Bronx, rather than disseminate messages of territorial control or violence (2005: 10). Yapondjian further claims that the

purpose of graffiti in the 1970s in these South Bronx neighborhoods was that of entertainment and non-violent competition, explaining graffiti as a way to rework experiences of despair in the neighborhood into a collective means for self-improvement and healing (2005: 10-11). Lachmann suggests that it is worth asking why all youths of similar backgrounds do not have “the same ideological affinity and structural links to a graffiti subculture” (1988: 232). Lachmann’s quotation begins to articulate a hypothesis that differences in culture, and hence between social groups and places, might stimulate different motives for painting on walls between graffiti makers.

Thankfully, a handful of authors do include extensive direct quotations from interviews with artists who make graffiti, which gives voice, feeling, and accuracy to their claims of how and why these wall markings were made. These scholars include: Ley and Cybriwsky 1974, Lachmann 1988, Santino 1999, Bowen 1999, Docuyan 2000, Pardue 2004, Halsey and Young 2006, MacGillivray and Saucedo Curwen 2007, and Iddings et al. 2011. Halsey and Young use the voices of graffiti artists taken from interviews to demonstrate that in their case study of Melbourne, Australia, graffiti is “overwhelmingly, about pleasure and desire in the act of writing” rather than about intent to do harm, cause damage, or assert aggression (2006: 276). One additional gem in the published writing on graffiti does exist, and appears to be published for the graffiti maker audience, rather than for the audience of the academy. This is Cesaretti (1975).

However, while several authors (including those above) do include interviews with graffiti makers, rarely do these same scholars describe the demographics of the graffiti makers they interviewed, or list self-described identity traits of the graffiti makers they

interviewed, such as age, gender, or cultural background. Halsey and Young write that “becoming a writer is, in any case, a heterogeneous event—subtly yet importantly nuanced for each and every writer” (2006: 276). This thesis attempts to fill the gap pointed out by Halsey and Young by seeking answers to questions from graffiti makers themselves and offering a depth of different responses. In other words, the third research question for this thesis is developed: how do graffiti makers identify and describe themselves and their wall inscriptions?

2.2.2 Graffiti & place

In addition to excluding graffiti maker perspectives and identity demographics, scholars sometimes discount the value of examining elements of the place where graffiti is made. This is ironic because in a variety of case studies, authors discuss graffiti as political because visual content directly references localized political factions, recognized political symbols, instances of government repression, public protest, and resistance phrases (Jefferson 1976: 13; Peteet 1996: 139; Santino 1999: 522; Benavides-Vanegas 2005: 53). The specificities of localized politics suggest that place would provide important contextualization of graffiti images. For example, Benavides-Vanegas summarizes the work of Jeff Ferrell (1993), describing graffiti as an effective mechanism for resisting colonial domination through use of symbolic icons that can be understood as ‘revolutionary’ such as with use of the image of Che Guevarra (2005: 53). Also, Benavides-Vanegas writes that graffiti at the Universidad Nacional de Columbia functioned as a mode of subaltern expression because “To be written means to be

included; oral communication and wall painting were activities of the excluded” (2005: 57). Benavides-Vanegas successfully articulates that graffiti takes on different form and function depending on the place it is made.

A handful of authors do examine the nuances of political struggle that link to place in their study of graffiti content and form. Some of these include: Stein’s (1989) analysis of joke content written on the Berlin Wall mirrored the deep political divisions of Germany in the 1980s, Petee’s (1996) narrative of public dialogue via graffiti of the West Bank during the Intifada in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Santino’s (1999) discussion of public protest graffiti between Republicans and Loyalists in Northern Ireland, and Klingman et al.’s (2000) description of graffiti as means of healing following the political assassination of Israel’s Prime Minister in 1995. In addition, Yaponjian’s (2005) previously described dissertation does an excellent job explaining how the historical details of place link to the development of graffiti in her case study, whereby black and Hispanic gang members attempted to “improve life in their neighborhoods” through the creation of social clubs that offered a variety of means for creative expression such as “graffiti, break-dancing, mc’ing and dj’ing” in the Bronx in the 1960s-70s (2005: 10). The examples demonstrate that graffiti in each place operated as a unique form of entertainment, resistance, or therapy as a response to specific place-based political conditions.

A void in the collective scholastic voice however, is that place might be the defining factor influencing graffiti image, content, and form. While many of the authors above do include specific details of place in a case study, they rarely explicitly state that place is a

relevant lens for graffiti analysis. In addition, the concept of place in a case study is often merely mentioned as a locational reference point, rather than as a complex and unique set of stories evident throughout visual imagery of graffiti.

2.2.2.1 Theories of Place & Place-Making

Faye Docuyan contributes quite simply: “Graffiti writers actively engage in place-making activities” (2000: 105), but she unfortunately fails to explain this point. Ella Chmielewska elaborates on how place and graffiti are linked, writing that subtle differences between graffiti of Warsaw and Montreal narrate unique stories of place, namely of wartime trauma or notions of sovereignty, respectively (2007: 146-147). Further, Chmielewska eloquently writes: “A close reading of the local context, however, reveals layers of nuance that are place specific, and like signatures themselves, are unique and unrepeatable” (2007: 154). The idea that distinct stories of place are present in graffiti imagery becomes a useful jumping off point for this study, and consequently, a robust theory of place is needed to unpack how notions of place are made legible in the work of graffiti makers.

Thomas Gieryn writes simply that the three central components of place are: geographic location, material form, and the meanings and values assigned by people as they experience place (2000: 464-465). Gieryn’s three-pronged explanation means that while location is one part of place, the specific objects, structures, tools, resources, histories, mythology, folklore, culture, people, and identities are also integral parts comprising place (2000: 465.) Massey further explains that places may have multiple,

conflicting identities because they are comprised of bundled social stories, relationships, and networks (1994: 155). Embedded in both Gieryn and Massey's arguments is the underlying assumption that place is also social and cultural.

2.2.2.2 Theories of Public Space & the Concept of the 'Street'

Furthermore, stories of place may be commonly shared, distributed, and consumed in public spaces. Goheen asserts that public space is an area where different kinds of people come together and express themselves in ways that were previously restricted (1998: 481). Goheen defines public space areas where groups can "achieve public visibility, seek recognition, and make demands" (1998: 480). In other words, public spaces are areas where narrative, memory, expression, and acknowledgment are shared and conveyed. Using the idea that public space is an area where community members create open dialogue and transmit information, I investigate the notion that public space could be a stage on which stories of place become visible, shared, explicit, and remembered.

Delving further into areas of public space, Goheen also writes that the advent of the "boulevard", or street, was a new type of public space that came about in 19th Century cities where citizens of different social classes could exchange ideas (1998: 481). For this thesis, the 'street' fulfills as an effective example of public space wherein stories of place are delivered and received.

2.2.2.3 Sense of Place & Globalization

In this thesis, place should not be thought of as a static concept, but instead as a constantly changing set of social interactions that tie together through space and location (Gieryn, 2000: 466; Massey, 1994: 155). Therefore, it is also important to think about how space and place have become reorganized in recent decades. For example, there are many areas worldwide that exemplify what Massey calls a “time-space compression” that have changed in stages (Massey, 1994: 162). The time-space compression can be understood as an evolving and fairly recent process of increasing global interconnectedness between people, things, and places, wherein boundaries are dissolved and new flows, networks, and connections between places are constantly occurring (1994: 161). Massey writes that under this new, globalized reorganization of space and place, it seems as though one can “sense the presence of everywhere” while standing in only one place (Massey, 1994: 162). From Massey’s theory, it becomes relevant to examine how one might engage with many places at once, especially in regard to graffiti images. Chmielewska references the spread of graffiti style and image worldwide, saying that websites, magazines, and advertisements “effectively promote similar styles for quite different places” (2007: 154).

A fourth research question is molded from Gieryn and Massey’s theories of place and from Goheen’s theories of the street and public space: what stories of place are transmitted by graffiti makers, both when asked explicitly and as told through visual wall paintings in public spaces of a case study? And, where are these stories transmitted? And, pulling from Massey’s theory of time-space compression: how is globalization (i.e. the

expanded connectivity between places) made evident through graffiti practice and imagery?

2.3 Summary of Gaps in the Literature & Identified Research Questions

In summary, it is clear that scholars have explained and researched the topic of graffiti in many different ways. This thesis inquires to graffiti makers about who they are and why they do what they do, and pairs this narrative with inquiry about place as a geographical, social, and material experience to explain what graffiti is and how it functions throughout a case study.

The identified research questions that emerged from gaps in graffiti literature are:

- 1) What is the baseline for defining graffiti and for understanding how it may be different from other nuanced types of wall inscriptions within a case study?
- 2) In what manner does graffiti produce ideas of culture in a specific case study?
- 3) How do graffiti makers identify and describe themselves and their wall inscriptions?
- 4) What stories of place are transmitted by graffiti makers, both when asked explicitly and as told through visual wall paintings in public spaces of a case study? Where are these stories transmitted?
- 5) How is globalization (i.e. the expanded connectivity between places) made evident through graffiti practice and imagery?

3 DATA COLLECTION

3.1 Researcher Background & Personal Biases

I was raised in an agricultural part of California called the Napa Valley. Consequently, I came of age in a community of first generation Mexican immigrants and second generation Chicano children, with whom I attended school, community events and developed my earliest fundamental relationships. I therefore attribute much of my cultural upbringing to Latino, Chicano, and specifically Mexican traditions.

While attempting to narrow my research topic for this Master's program, I was advised to conduct an international research project. Because I came to this project with a geographical bias toward Mexico, it seemed like a natural choice to conduct research somewhere within Mexican national purview. However, it was partly my personal curiosity about Mexico City's role in the events of national identity formation and as a hub of art activity that led me to hone in on one part of the Valley of Mexico for this thesis.

Contributing to my biases are elements of my professional background, which also heavily influenced selection of a research topic for this work. Before becoming a graduate student, I had previously worked as a high school tutor in an underserved part of the San Francisco Bay area called Richmond and as a creative director and project coordinator within the arts. I had also explored cartography, graphic design, marketing, drawing, and painting as side projects and hobbies, which explains my inter-personal

connection with graffiti makers. It is clear that each of my professional experiences contributed to the decision that my inquiry would somehow focus on art, place, and community action in an underserved community.

After settling on a topic that would fuse art and social action, I was then faced with the prospect of narrowing in on a case study area. I began asking anybody and everybody I knew about art and social movements in the Federal District region of Mexico. As a newcomer to the topic, I was excited to stumble on literature describing the government sponsored Mural Movement of Mexico from the Post-Revolutionary period of the 1920s, which provided a vast context on which to situate contemporary wall inscriptions. Finally, during several informal conversations with friends and acquaintances, I heard rumor of a massive graffiti movement unfolding in the streets of Iztapalapa today, one municipal delegation within Mexico City.

While the inquiry and results developed in this thesis diverge drastically from my early ideas, I wish to make clear that my biases are abundant and permeate all aspects of my work. I have done my best to highlight several influencing factors for my predispositions here, although there are inevitably more. In addition, these culminating factors influenced my research design and choice of methods.

3.2 Geographic orientation of field work

Data gathered in the field was collected over a nine week period during the summer of 2013 while I lived in a neighborhood situated on the East Side of Mexico

City, in the municipal delegation of Iztapalapa. Most of the graffiti makers interviewed and all of the community members interviewed had some relationship to Iztapalapa, in that they lived there, painted there, taught or attended classes there, worked there, or belonged to a crew based in Iztapalapa.



Figure 5. Map of Delegations in Distrito Federal, Mexico. Iztapalapa is found on the East side (light blue), bordered by the delegations Iztacalco, Coyoacán, Xochimilco, and Tláhuac.

During the time this research was conducted, I lived in an apartment that sat just five blocks from the metro station called Constitución de 1917, located at the eastern end

of the green line metro, and was located just off of a prominent storefront avenue called Avenida Del Rosal.

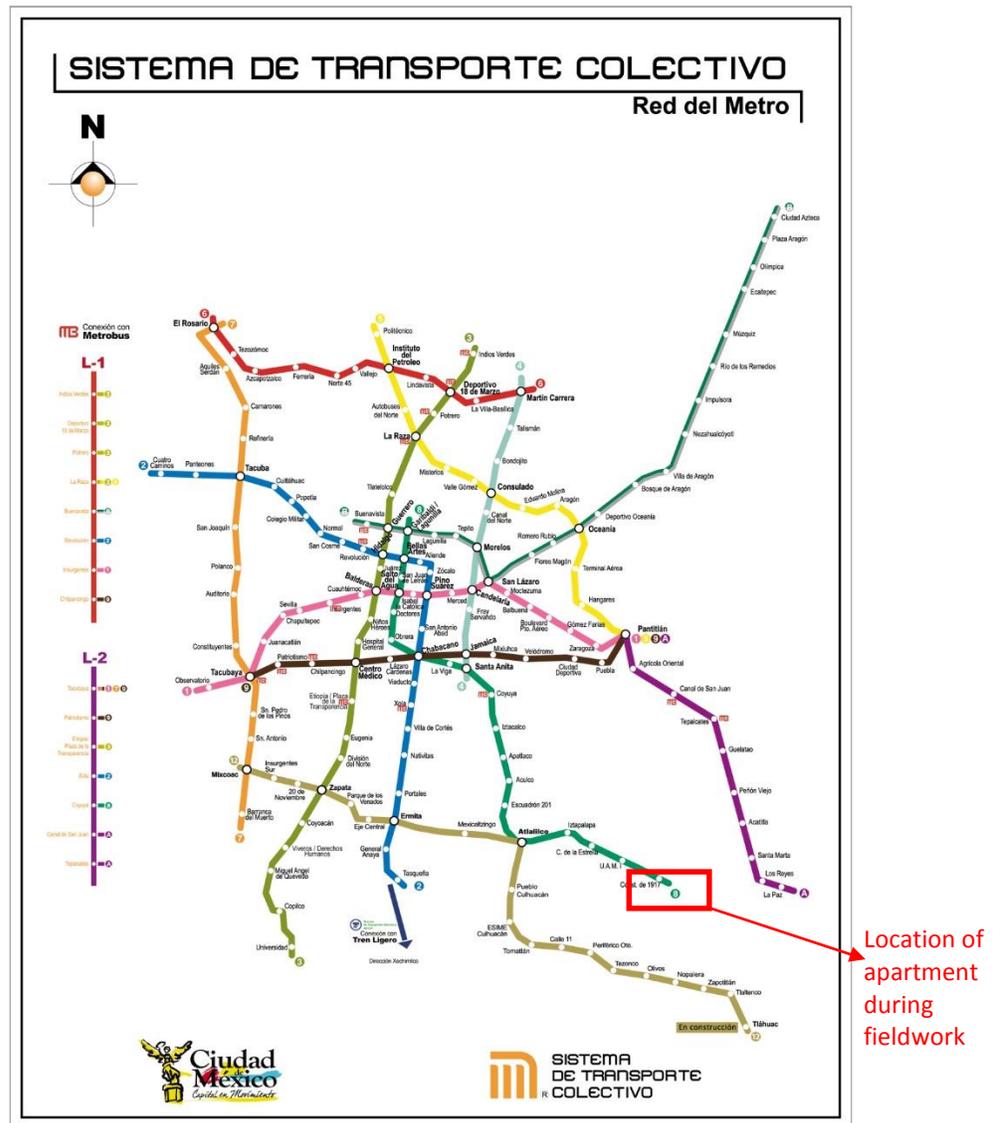


Figure 6. Mexico City/Ciudad Mexico Metro map.

The apartment and home base from which this research was conducted was also only 2.85 miles (4.6 kilometers) from the important cultural site in Iztapalapa of Cerro de la Estrella. Cerro de la Estrella is today the site of an annual Passion of Christ

reenactment during the week before Easter called *Semana Santa*.³ The Christ reenactment ceremony is said to draw thousands of viewers and participants during *Semana Santa* (it was described that likely upward of 10,000 people pack the streets of Iztapalapa to view the event). The Passion of Christ ceremony is also popularly conceived as one of the most well-known and defining elements of place in contemporary Iztapalapa.



Figure 7. Photos of the Passion of Christ reenactment during Semana Santa in Iztapalapa. Photo taken at Cultural Museum in the Centro de Iztapalapa.

³ *Semana Santa* is a Mexican religious and cultural tradition that precedes Easter Sunday and marks the end of the Catholic tradition of lent.



Figure 8. Passion of the Christ reenactment at Cerro de la Estrella in Iztapalapa. Participants haul massive wooden crosses on their shoulders through the streets and finally, up to the cultural focal point of Iztapalapa-- Cerro de La Estrella.

The apartment I stayed in to conduct this research also was conveniently located approximately 12 blocks from the crossing of two major highways in Iztapalapa, named “Eje 8 Sur, Calzada Ermita Iztapalapa” and “Anillo Periférico”, both of which are main thoroughfares and were lined with walls covered in graffiti paint, color, and form. In essence, the home base for this research project was a geographic focal point for graffiti, for the community, and from which I could easily access a number of city-wide destinations via the metro, small buses called Peseros, by taxi, or on foot.

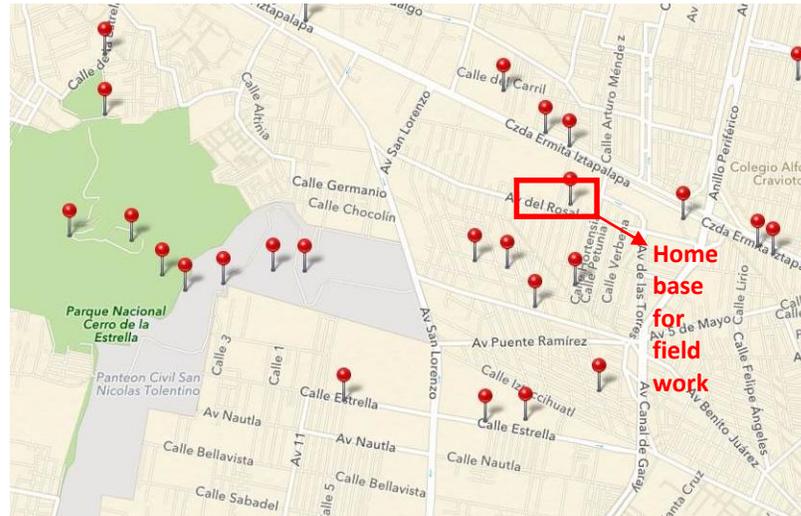


Figure 9. Map shows the main area of Iztapalapa where researcher lived and gathered data, in relation to nearby geographic features. Red place markers indicate some of the places where photographs for this research were taken.

3.3 Engagement with Fear of Mexico, Graffiti, & Iztapalapa

With this research, I have attempted to produce counter-hegemonic and anti-racist work.⁴ The reason for approaching my research in this way is largely due to a pronounced overarching fear of Mexico that is seemingly widely prevalent in the United States. I encountered this fear of Mexico over and over again as friends, family, and acquaintances expressed their disapproval and incredulity that I would voluntarily

⁴ Beverly Daniel Tatum describes anti-racism in the following terms: “Active racist behavior is equivalent to walking fast on the conveyor belt. The person engaged in active racist behavior has identified with the ideology of White supremacy and is moving with it. Passive racist behavior is equivalent to standing still on the walkway. No overt effort is being made, but the conveyor belt moves the bystanders along to the same destination as those who are actively walking. Some of the bystanders may feel the motion of the conveyor belt, see the active racists ahead of them, and choose to turn around, unwilling to go to the same destination as White Supremacists. But unless they are walking actively in the opposite direction at a speed faster than the conveyor belt—unless they are actively antiracist—they will find themselves carried along with the others”. (Chapter entitled “Defining Racism: ‘Can We Talk?’” in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, 9th Edition).

explore a thesis topic in the streets of Mexico City as a single, white, American woman traveling alone with the intent of interviewing graffiti makers. Many people expressed that I would certainly wind up dead, the victim of crime or assault, or that I would encounter a degraded landscape with my work. In other words, because of the place and the people that I was researching, it was assumed that negative outcomes would pervade my research experience.

With this research paper, I have therefore engaged with fear and the negative perceptions of graffiti/graffiti makers, of Mexico at large, and of Iztapalapa as an inner-city portion of the Mexico City landscape. In particular, I have offered concrete and empirical evidence that contradicts some of the negative stereotypes of Mexico City/Iztapalapa and graffiti makers. My hope is that this text and the data within it counter the common concepts of Mexico and in particular, of Iztapalapa, as merely scary, impoverished, and hopeless landscapes.

3.4 Epistemology: A Justice-based Approach to Knowledge Creation

Epistemology is the philosophical process of knowledge creation, by which a researcher establishes particular truths as real and legitimate (Ritchie et al., 2015: 6). This thesis does not seek “absolute truth” paradigms, drawing from the work of George Lakoff who argues that attempting to establish one ‘absolute’ truth, rather than a range of divergent perspectives, is socially and politically dangerous (1980: 159). Hesse-Biber et al. also assert from the feminist epistemological perspective that the search for absolute

truth can create a hierarchical knower versus subject relationship (Hesse-Biber et al, 2004: 12). In my research, I tried to avoid the idea of hierarchy and absolute truth by accepting many different types of responses, however different from the others, as valid, accurate, and true in their own way. I have attempted to understand the context of how and why knowledge differed between interviewees.

In addition, I did not assume that I came to the field as a “knower” or “expert” on the topics of graffiti or murals and instead assumed that people I interviewed were the experts on my subject matter. I assumed that it was my job as the researcher to find patterns, overlaps, and outliers in themes, content and stories. For example, rather than assuming that I knew what art was or what graffiti was, I asked people to explain and define these concepts to me.

This epistemological approach is called social constructivism, as described by John Creswell (2003). Creswell writes that social constructivism can be understood as a process by which a researcher studies the subjective meanings/explanations that people form about the world they live in and then seeks a “complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas” (Creswell, 2003: 8). In addition, I drew from John Gaventa’s assertion that those experiencing conditions may be the best ones to research said phenomena (1991: 126). I emphasize that graffiti makers and the community members who interact with graffiti on a daily basis in the neighborhoods of Iztapalapa should be considered the experts on its content, function, and meaning.

3.5 Methodologies

Halsey and Young demand in their 2006 graffiti study that questions be asked of non-graffiti making persons because a person can never be considered “just ‘a writer’, or ‘an observer’, or ‘a young person’, or ‘an outraged citizen’,” and because each community member may be invested in several social roles and networks at once (2006: 278). In this case study, I interviewed not only wall painters, but also others in the community who saw, noticed, or interacted with wall paintings. Fischer calls the information yielded by community members “popular knowledge” and Fals-Borda calls this knowledge “folklore and popular wisdom” (Fischer, 2005: 127). Fischer argues that popular knowledge creates a “deeper contextual understanding of the situation” (Fischer, 2005: 179). I have incorporated a variety of narratives (folklore or not) as rich and legitimate forms of data.

3.5.1 Grounded Theory

In this thesis I have used a grounded theoretical approach. Kathy Charmaz writes that the utility of grounded theory is that it permits change and development over time (2005: 527). One example of how I applied this was through modifying problem definition, choice of methods, data analysis, and use of findings based on the perspectives of stakeholders involved in my study. I suggest that these steps kept research design inclusionary and team-guided and gave agency and the capacity for intervention to interview respondents.

Yancey Martin and Turner (1986) describe grounded theory in another way. They write that grounded theory is a good approach when no useful theory already exists within a certain topic or discipline (1986: 142). In my case, I found that developing a new and unique theoretical approach was extremely valuable because many existing theories surrounding graffiti pivoted on notions of territoriality or political upheaval, which were not prominent features in my data. As an alternative, I was able to patch together theories of culture, place and public space from the fields of geography and urban planning. Grounded theory allowed me to make these “real life” changes, and to adjust and distill an appropriate theoretical framework based on the evidence I found in the field. After returning from the field, for example, I additionally abandoned theories of masculinity and machismo, in lieu of focusing on themes of place, cultural exchange, and public space.

3.5.2 Cultural Broker

In planning data collection for this project, I found it extremely helpful to connect with a “cultural broker” as described by Puri (2011). Puri defines the cultural broker as someone who enables researcher participation in the community of study and who introduces the researcher to others in a way that opens doors and integrates elements of trust and friendship in a community (2011: 92).

I was lucky to have met a person in the community who served as a cultural broker during my fieldwork. This person was a graffiti maker, was well connected and trusted by other graffiti makers, and lived in the heart of the case study area of Iztapalapa.

I will use the pseudonym Jesus for my cultural broker. Jesus assisted me in cultivating both informal and formal experiences and conversations with graffiti makers. He also led me all over Delegation Iztapalapa to photograph graffiti and to ask questions of other community members. I did not pay Jesus for his help but he offered it enthusiastically.

In addition, Jesus introduced me to a young woman who would become my research assistant, and several other well-respected leaders in the graffiti community of Iztapalapa who acted as key informants. I will use the pseudonym Catalina for the person I hired as my research assistant. I paid a small stipend to Catalina each week to assist me with a variety of research related tasks. Catalina knew the neighborhood well, having spent all her life living there, and was familiar with all local transit systems. She was unafraid of exploring and venturing to graffiti maker businesses, studios, and homes, which was integral to the success of my fieldwork. Catalina also had a long-standing romantic relationship with a graffiti maker, and thus, she was very familiar with graffiti as a sub-culture and daily experience. Catalina acted not only as a tour guide, but also as a friend, mentor, and analytical contributor.

Jesus and Catalina introduced me to community members as their friend, which was undoubtedly part of the reason I was successful in attaining so many rich interviews (which numbered 43 in total). The fact that Jesus and Catalina introduced me a friend and compatriot created a foundation of trustworthiness with many graffiti makers that I interviewed.

My work was importantly guided and implemented by both Jesus and Catalina. This also meant that some of the ideas that I brought to the field (such as that I should

photograph a large number of historical murals of the past in museums and government buildings) were abandoned in place of the priorities Catalina and Jesus set for my project (namely, that photographing contemporary works in the streets of the various delegations of the East Side took priority).

3.6 Methods

The methods used to collect data were mixed. Methods included semi-structured interviews, participant observation/ethnography, visual ethnography, photo elicitation and some archival research. The data yielded from these methods include: geographic information, folkloric stories, interview narrative, observation of daily experiences, and photographs.

3.6.1 Semi-structured interviews

Development of the interview questions was done mainly by me, the primary researcher, but were revised a few different times during “question setting” sessions with community members and graffiti makers. Interviews were conducted at a multitude of locations and length ranged from ten minutes to four hours. Interview questions were tailored to each individual interviewee, based on whether the interviewee self-identified as an artist and/or graffiti or mural maker, teacher, government administrator or none of the above.

3.6.2 Ethnography & participant observation

Ethnography and participation in my community of study played special importance as a counter-hegemonic research tool because these approaches enabled me to limit the process of “othering” between myself and research participants, an approach suggested by Hesse-Biber et al. (2004:12). Furthermore, Schweizer writes that the researcher’s job is to “try and grasp the actor’s point of view by acting as though he or she were in that situation” which averts or minimalizes the process of “othering” (1998: 58). One example of how I implemented this strategy was by participating in one wall major painting event as an honorary graffiti crew member.

3.6.3 Photos & visual sociology

Photographs of graffiti and murals were taken in a mix of locations, spanning: residential neighborhoods, commercial areas, along highways/roads, in and near parks, in cemeteries, on billboards, at transportation centers, and at government buildings/community centers. The method used to collect photographs was a process of visual ethnography, which is defined as “an effort to understand culture by making it visible and the frame of reference is usually much smaller than a whole culture” (Harper, 2012: 11). I also showed people photographs I had taken and asked them whether these photos aligned with their definitions and explanations, which is a process of photo elicitation (Harper, 2012: 157). Harper writes that this method can build a bridge of understanding “between people who may not even understand the extent to which they see the world differently” (Harper, 2012: 157).

3.7 Obstacles & Advantages during Data Collection

I encountered several obstacles and advantages while in the field. For example, as an American researcher visiting Mexico City, I was very clearly an outsider to my community of study. This was at times helpful, because the position seemed to lend an air of formality to my work and people were eager to explain things to me. It seemed that graffiti makers and other community members were proud to show off elements of their city and neighborhood to an outsider.

Also assisting me as an outsider was the fact that Mexican culture traditionally demands hospitality be given to guests, and in particular, as a single, visiting female, I was received as an outsider/guest in particular need of assistance and support. I believe that my positionality as a young, non-threatening female with a genuine interest in visual storytelling also made graffiti makers comfortable and eager to demonstrate to me their unique skill, style, and approach to doing graffiti and expressing themselves.

However, complicating my role as an outsider was a language barrier because Spanish is my second language. Although I spoke conversationally fluent Spanish prior to entering the field and conducted nearly all of my interviews in Spanish, I had not previously spent extensive time listening to and translating the fast pace of “Chilango” Spanish.⁵ I admittedly missed some opportunities for follow up questions during initial interviews. However, because I audio recorded most interviews, I was able to glean

⁵ Chilango is a non-derogatory term for Mexico City dweller, similar to the colloquial term “New Yorker”

expanded meaning from interviews while reviewing audio data during my process of data analysis back in California.

3.8 Approach to Data Analysis

Data was collected and stored as handwritten notes, digital photographs, and digital audio files. The first step in data analysis was to review handwritten notes to identify data containing poignant quotations or summarizing themes. Interviews thought to contain this type of information were then transcribed word-for-word. Then questions and responses were added to an Excel spreadsheet, filling cells either as directly transcribed narrative or as summarized keywords from handwritten notes. Answers were then compared between respondents in one subject area, and then additionally examined across a row to piece together the story of each individual graffiti maker. Trends were then noted and followed by explanation of these trends during write-up of results. Photos and direct quotations were added to support claims. Respondent demographics were summarized using the pivot table function in Excel.

4 SETTINGS

Mexico City is a complicated and contested area that has been written about in many different ways—as a site of cultural vitality throughout the ages (Canclini and Liffman, 2000), as a complete environmental catastrophe in the 21st century (Carruthers, 1996; Simon, 1997), and as a site of important economic exchange in a globalized world (Aguilar and Ward, 2003). Rarely have these concepts been linked so as to understand stories of place. Here, I focus on the notion of place as a region, because this better describes Mexico City as a networked bundle, with overlapping flows in, out and through space that have grown and changed over time.

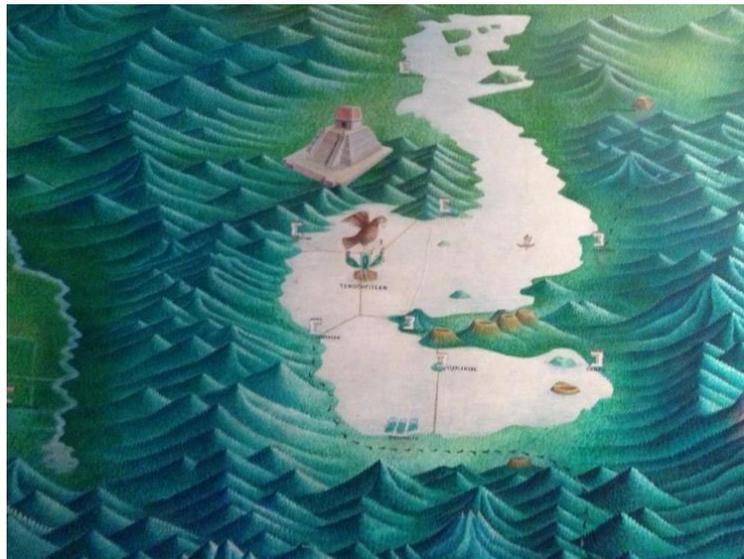


Figure 10. Historical painting renders the Valley of Mexico as comprised of lakes and surrounding mountains during Aztec settlement.

The important human processes contributing to historical notions of place are: (i) Aztec landscape and social organization as it existed prior to colonization, (ii)

development of Post-Revolutionary national identity during a time of decreasing agricultural opportunity, and (iii) increased social segregation with the advent of neoliberal economic policies.

4.1 Mexico City as a Region

In this chapter, Mexico City is analyzed as a region, as opposed to analysis of the Federal District as a ‘city’ like some might expect. Pablo Torres-Lima and Luis Rodriguez-Sanchez argue that patterns of sprawl and overlap between outlying rural actions and inner metropolitan processes make it necessary to use a conceptual framework that incorporates “regions” (2008: 194). Regionality is also necessary as an analytical framework because contemporary flows between inner and outer parts of Mexico City mean that the area is comprised of overlaps and networks, rather than of a city-unit that begins or ends. Finally, Aguilar and Ward write that urban areas should be studied as “region-based” urbanized sites as opposed to cities, because the “area of influence is expanded to a wider region facilitated by advances in technology” (Aguilar and Ward, 2002: 4). This conceptualizes the notion of place (i.e. the Mexico City region) in terms of the people, goods, and ideas that flow through it.

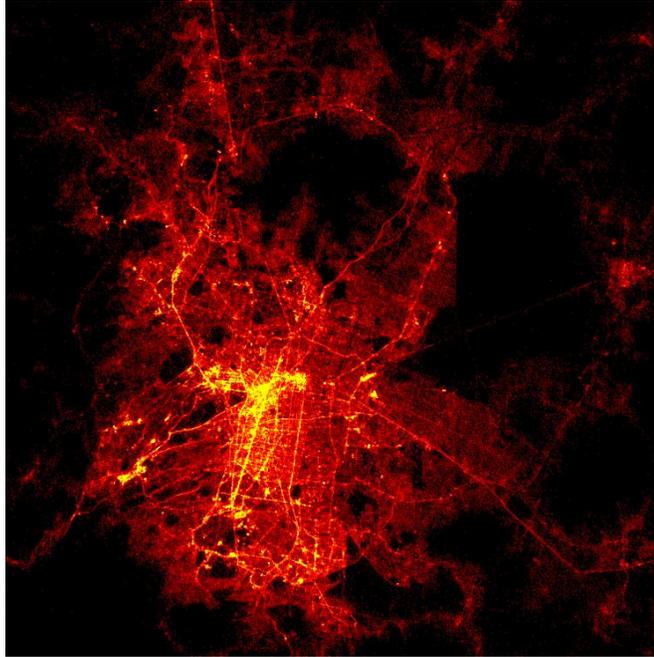


Figure 11. Visualization of tweets (i.e. posts on Twitter) in Mexico City 2013 exemplifies the spread of technological networks in the Mexico City region that expand beyond the borders of the city. Taken from <https://www.mapbox.com/blog/glowing-tweets/>. Image developed by Eric Fischer.

4.2 Physical Geography & Visual Landscapes

As a broad geographic overview, the Mexico City region is set within a specific set of topographic conditions that yield a very particular ecological environment. The region is located in the heart of the Valley of Mexico, in what is termed “the centre of the Mexican highlands” (Torres Lima et al, 2000: 363). The region also sits at an approximate altitude of between 2,200- 2,450 meters or 7,200- 8,040 feet (Losada et al, 1998: 38). The valley is surrounded by volcanic mountains, and is characterized by temperate climate, with temperatures that generally fall between 18-24 degrees Celsius or 64-75 degrees Fahrenheit (Torres Lima et al, 2000: 363). The Federal District region has heavy rainfall in the summer months, with averages between 1,000 and 1,400 mm or 39-

55 inches per year (Torres Lima et al, 2000: 363). An LA Times article articulates that the “lion’s share of its annual rainfall” occurs from June to October, and as a point of comparison, this amount represents approximately 14% more rain than “famously soggy London” receives in a year (Ellingwood, 2010: LA Times Article). Water, rain, and hydrology are prominent features of the regional landscape.

4.3 Aztec Social Organization

The lake area became settled famously between the years of 1200-1521 by the Aztecs (otherwise known as the Mexica), who came upon the Mexico City region sometime between the years of 1200 and 1300 BC. As legend holds, the Mexica had wandered the deserts as descendants of the Aztlan people who spoke the Nahuátl language of Northern Mexico (Smith, 1984: 153). These peoples searched for a place to settle and call their own, a place that would allow them to grow food, prosper, and reign with substantial power. There was a prophecy that when this wandering group came upon an eagle eating a snake atop a nopal cactus, this would be sign that they should settle. This sight was beholden to the early Aztec nomads in the marshes of Lake Texcoco, where they proceeded to develop a highly organized society on a lake island in a slightly west-of-center area of the water body (Calnek, 1972: 105). The folkloric image of the eagle eating the snake is depicted on the Mexican flag today and is revered as perhaps the most recognized symbol of Mexican nationalism.



Figure 12. The Mexican Flag, depicting the legend of the fortuitous eagle eating a snake on top of a nopal cactus.

During the time of their control of the region, Aztec society was estimated to have had a population ranging from 60,000 to 300,000 citizens, who established themselves in a “city-like” formation of high population densities per area land (Calnek, 1972: 104). Historical references estimate that the ‘urban’ Aztec area was “not smaller than 12 square kilometers” or 7.45 square miles (Calnek, 1972: 105). Diego Rivera is known for having depicted images of Aztec society that invoked great pride during his participation in the Mexican Mural Movement of the 1920s-1930s, as in Figure 13.



Figure 13. Painting of the Aztec city by Diego Rivera. Located at the Palacio Nacional, in Mexico City.

Records indicating the role of Iztapalapa within the Aztec civilization are vague at best. Nonetheless, several maps depicting important features in the region include a place or island labeled “Iztapalapa”. See Figure 14 and Figure 15 below.



Figure 14. Map of Mexico City Region "as seen by Cortez". Image taken from <http://bcr-8history.blogspot.com/2010/06/aztecs-and-tenochtitlan.html> (originally published by George F Cram in 1869). Iztapalapa is conceptualized here as a place called "Iztapalapan", which appears to be an extension of the mainland, accessible from Tenochtitlan by one of the main thoroughfares constructed by the Aztecs.

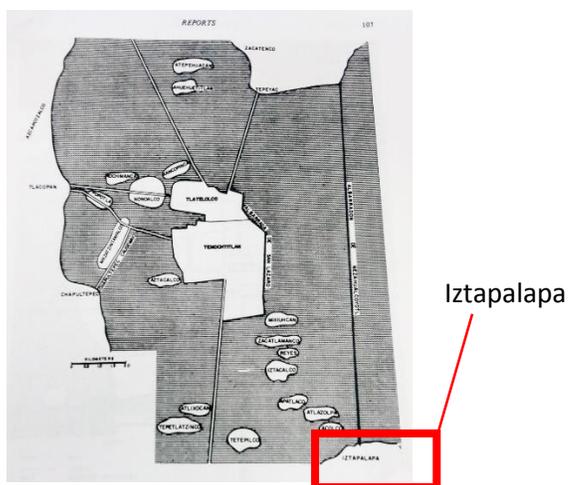


Figure 15. Map of Mexico City region taken directly from Calnek, 1972. The caption for the image portrays Iztapalapa as an 'island colony' within proximity of the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan.

The only consistent information about Iztapalapa at the time of the Aztec City relates to legend about a ceremony called “Fuego Nuevo.” It was explained to me by an older gentleman while hiking at Cerro del La Estrella (a small hill in Iztapalapa) that the Fuego Nuevo ceremony was based on an Aztec belief that every 52 years, the sun was in danger of failing to rise again. Therefore, the Pre-Hispanic people held an important ceremony at Cerro de la Estrella in Iztapalapa to welcome and encourage the Sun to rise again and initiate another 52-year cycle. Partly due to this historic cultural tradition and legend, Cerro de la Estrella perseveres as a site of spiritual heritage and transmission of stories of place in Iztapalapa today.

4.3.1 Colonization & a changing region

The thriving Aztec city, known as Tenochtitlan, would become further urbanized with the integration of Euro-colonial control (which began with the conquest of Hernan Cortes in 1521). Images of resistance to Cortes by a brave Aztec warrior called Cuauhtémoc pervade historical narrative of place throughout Mexico City. This is in part due to contributing images from Mexican Murals of the Post-Revolutionary Period that dictated pride for Cuauhtémoc’s bravery and villainized the ruthless actions of the Spaniard colonizers.



Figure 16. The resurrection of Cuauhtémoc, by David Alfaro Siqueiros.



Figure 17. Torment and Apotheosis of Cuauhtémoc by David Alfaro Siqueiros.

Mexico was perceived to have formally gained its “independence” in the 1820s when legal autonomy was reassigned from Spain to the Mexican state after the War for

Independence (Erfani, 1995: 1). Up to this point and into the early 20th Century, the draining of Lake Texcoco had remained a gradual process. However, in the first half of the 1900s, pollution of the water body, expansion of urbanized zones, and diversion of water for city-dwellers explain an increase to the drying process (Hicks, 1996: 254). In particular, water began being significantly diverted for the provision of potable water to urban city dwellers in 1913-1914 (Hicks, 1996: 254).

4.4 Revolutionary National Identity Formation

Major diversion of water for city-dwellers corresponds with the time in national history when the Mexican people began to reclaim governance over land, people and economy from wealthy aristocrats who had controlled these elements for nearly a century following Mexican Independence. One of the goals of the Mexican Revolution, which spanned 1910-1921 (Trillo, 1996: 75), was to create a strong government that would hold legal power to intervene in economic processes on behalf of the social well-being of all Mexicans (Erfani, 1995: 172). Following the Revolution, the strategy for a new Protectionist government was deployed by Alvaro Obregon as President and Jose Vasconcelos as the minister of public education from 1920-1924 (Coffey, 2012: 1). Vasconcelos and Obregon attempted to revitalize education, form a new, proud, national identity, and reform agrarian land tenure (Simon, 1997: 5).

In her dissertation, Ramirez-Garcia (1989) succinctly explains the mechanism by which Obregon and Vasconcelos were able to craft successful reception of the new post-

Revolutionary government through visual representation in art in the 1920s. She writes that the mural movement was a way for the State to visualize and demonstrate a new set of nationalist symbols, that were particularly reminiscent of “the Pueblo: i.e. the peasant, indian, and working class population” and that invoked pride for this heritage and history (Ramirez-Garcia, 1989: 3). In addition, the murals deployed by the Post-Revolutionary government were a successful linguistic medium by which to transmit stories because at that time, the Mexican population was mainly illiterate (Ramirez-Garcia, 1989: 3).

The Mexican Mural Movement eventually became famous by the work of three painters known as “los Tres Grandes” or in English, “The Big Three” (Indych-Lopez, 2007: 287). Los Tres Grandes include Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros (Patterson, 1964: 275). While many texts seek to cull specific intent and effect from the work of the Mexican Muralists, there is general consensus that “the tres grandes argued bitterly among themselves and fought publicly to assert their individual and distinct visions of Mexico,” (Indych-Lopez, 2007: 287). The most important component of the work of Los Tres Grandes for this thesis is mainly the fact that each federally commissioned mural told a story of a shared Mexican past, of non-Anglo heritage, of agriculture, and of protection for human justices. Together these themes came to embody the spirit of nationalism in Mexico.

This thesis explores the idea that Mexican Muralism might be a thing of the past. Campbell introduces the idea that Mexican murals have disappeared as an “official” government medium, suggesting that “unofficial” or non-sanctioned visual stories of

Mexican nationalism do indeed still exist but have perhaps been quieted in scope and visibility by the Mexican state (2004: 17). Thus, one more research question emerges, regarding the role of murals in the process of national storytelling in Mexico City: what is the role of the Mexican state in contemporary graffiti making today, and how does the contemporary graffiti movement of Iztapalapa mimic, depart from, and compare to the Mexican mural movement of the Post-Revolutionary Period?

4.4.1 Rapid urbanization and decreasing agricultural opportunities

Following the explosion of national symbols and ideology of the Mural Movement, the 1940s and 1950s were a time during which urban growth, draining of Lake Texcoco, and population influx sped up at a remarkable rate. This part of the 20th century represented a period when huge numbers of diverse peoples began to move into Mexican cities from farming villages (pueblos). For example, the percentage of Mexicans living in cities increased from 10% to 70% from 1900 to 1970 (Canclini and Liffman, 2000: 208). The landscape changed further from 1940 to 1980, when the “urban zone” increased from 11,753 hectares to 100,000 hectares or approximately 30,000 acres to 250,000 acres (Losada et al, 1998: 40).

Import substitution industrialization policies caused a short period of industrial growth from the 1940s to the 1970s, when the average growth rate per year of the manufacturing sector was 7.8% (Aguilar, 1997: 373). This pushed young people toward the core areas of the Mexico City region in search of industrial jobs, and contributed to a decline of nearby rural and agricultural sectors (Aguilar and Ward, 2003: 5-6).

Furthermore, Iztapalapa exemplifies one area of the Mexico City region where national migrants commonly settled, which meant that Iztapalapa morphed rapidly from a place of agriculture to a place of industry. A short explanation from a museum engaging with the history of Iztapalapa is translated in English to: “Iztapalapa suffered an abrupt change in the relations of production, which resulted in a transformation in the significance, appropriation, and use of land and territory, changing in a very short period from being an area predominantly rural and agricultural to an industrial area and services.” See Figure 18 below.

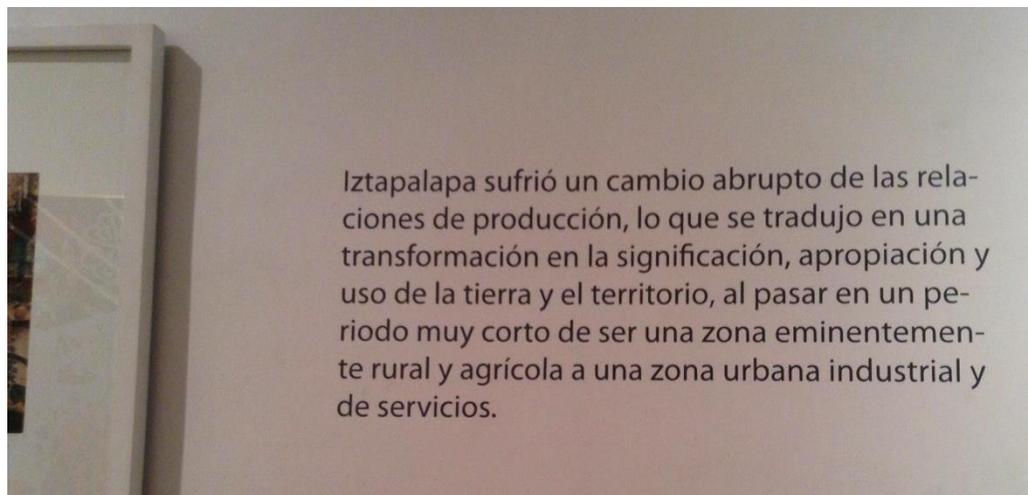


Figure 18. Photo taken at a museum in the Centro de Iztapalapa.

Urban expansion led to the loss of 42% of agricultural land to urban use in the Mexico City region from 1964 to 1994 (Torres-Lima et al, 1994: 40). Put another way, from 1940 to 1970, agricultural as a percentage of GDP dropped from 23.2% to 11% (Aguilar, 1997: 373). Ground water level and access to usable water for farmers was also significantly depleted in the region. The water table dropped from 1.45 meters, or 4.75

feet, below the surface in 1940 to 1.75 meters, or 5.75 feet, below the surface in 1980 (Torres-Lima et al, 1994: 40). Image, sentiment, and livelihood relating to Lake Texcoco as an integral dynamic of place became less prominent in the following decades.

4.5 Neoliberalism

By the late 1970s, Mexican economic growth had stagnated. A few factors played into dramatic trade deficits of this time which include: increased flight of capital, devaluation of the peso, 100% inflation, trade deficits of \$2.7 billion, and external debt to the United States in the amount of \$85 billion (Aguilar, 1997: 373). ISI officially failed in 1982, when the Mexican government announced that it would not be able to “service its US\$85 billion external debt” (Carruthers, 1996: 1008). These conditions ushered in neoliberal policies of the late 1980s, in which Mexico negotiated for increased structural adjustment loans with the International Monetary Fund in exchange for orienting the economy toward cheap exports. With this negotiation came the agreement to formally overhaul the economy in order to liberalize trade and lower all state protections in trade and market exchanges (Aguilar, 1997: 373). The signing of NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) in Mexico on January 1, 1994, was conceived as the official and formal advancement of the neoliberal agenda (NACLA Report on the Americas, 2005: 15).

4.5.1 Effects of neoliberalism

The effects of neoliberalism on the Mexico City region are complicated and spatially uneven. In Mexico in general, the opening of markets and lowering of trade barriers was packaged as a way to increase employment opportunities in “number, quality and remuneration,” (NACLA Report on the Americas, 2005: 15). Neoliberalism had also been packaged as a way to lower inflation, privatize state-owned industries, and bring in new foreign direct investment (Aguilar, 1997: 373). However, the realities of how these policies affected social, political, environmental, and economic systems differ from the proposed benefits. In addition, NAFTA has contributed to a vastly changed characterization of place throughout Mexico City and Iztapalapa.

In particular, the implications of NAFTA and introduction of neoliberal discourse in Mexico have been critiqued as having pit the interventionist state against the private sector, drastically devolving from the Protectionist political sentiment evident and popular in the murals of Los Tres Grandes from the Post-Revolutionary period (Erfani, 1997: 172). It therefore serves as probable that citizens experiencing the uneven effects of NAFTA might seek methods for preserving the tradition of Protectionist national identity and safeguards against social disenfranchisement, in unsanctioned and informal ways.

4.5.2 Changes to spatial organization with NAFTA

Many authors have explored ideas that the neoliberal agenda in Mexico has created increasingly commodified experiences and spaces (Aguilar, 1997: 374), expanded consumer society (Bayon and Saravi, 2012: 36), and amplified inequalities through

foreign direct investment and “the exportation of profits abroad” (Wise and Breña: 2006: 35). The advent of neoliberal policies has also affected the physical and visual landscapes comprising place in the Mexico City region. For example, while Mexico City was growing at a demographic rate of 5% prior to the 1970s, growth slowed to 2.6% from 1970-1990 (Aguilar, 2008: 135). Then, from 1990-2000 demographic growth rates slowed further to 1.69% and then to .89% from 2000-2005 (Aguilar, 2008: 135). As population growth in the core center of the region decreased, three distinct patterns appeared: (1) the middle class left the city for other areas of the country, (2) inner city populations decreased, and (3) migrants settled more often in urban peripheries and even more so in the peri-urban areas (Aguilar and Ward, 2003: 6). In addition, Aguilar and Ward point out that spatial arrangement of the city changed to mimic poly-centric settlement patterns, in which urban centers, sub-centers pop up along major highways and railroads and create mixed land uses of agriculture side by side with housing projects, new factories, and suburban developments (Aguilar and Ward, 2003: 7). This meant that urban space and people began to cluster around commercial flows with the advent of neoliberalism.

Furthermore, in Mexico, neoliberalism did not bring with it the improvements to livelihood opportunities that were heralded by neoliberal champions. Bayon and Saravi argue that “the absence of redistributive policies in the context of neoliberal reforms have left poverty and inequality levels practically unchanged in the last two decades” and that

delegations on the East side of the city consist of “the poorest sectors of the population” (Bayon and Saravi, 2012: 38).

Neoliberalism also appears to have contributed to increased segregation between social groups. For example, there was increase in gated and exclusive communities throughout the city since neoliberalism, whereby affluent pockets have been spatially scattered throughout the city and have created micro segregation between classes because different classes no longer interact in spaces of difference (Bayon and Saravi, 2012: 40). Spatial changes can also be explained in the context of foreign direct investment (FDI), when areas of concentrated FDI have yielded increased pockets of: shopping centers, upscale residential development, postmodern architecture, transnational hotel chains, satellite telecommunications, digital television services and multiplex cinemas, replacing what Canclini and Liffman describe as “precarious immigrant neighborhoods surrounded by garbage dumps” in the previous decade (2000: 210).

4.6 Characteristics of Iztapalapa



Figure 19. Photo taken at the Cultural Museum in the Centro de Iztapalapa and depicts general place-based sentiment toward graffiti. It says "Todo lo gris de Iztapalapa te dan ganas de pintarlo" which translates to: "Everything grey in Iztapalapa has the need for one to paint over it."

Iztapalapa illustrates a culmination of the conditions of place described above, created by processes of urbanization and neoliberalism. Today the landscape appears to be addled concurrently in poverty and increased commercialization. The delegation is comprised of roughly 117 square kilometers or approximately 72 square miles (Losada et al., 2000: 421) with extremely high population densities, which in the year 2000, were approximately 21,000 people per square kilometer (Losada, 2000: 421). Iztapalapa is widely known for its classification of being “extremely poor” with the most prominent livelihood strategies being in manufacturing, commerce, and service industries (Losada et

al., 2000: 421). Iztapalapa also falls in the second lowest income bracket, in the 41%-55% range of income-based poverty by municipality (Bayon and Saravi, 2012: 39). Quoted by one blogger as “a part of Mexico City where tourists have no reason to go” (Dunlap, 2005: www.bootsnall.com), Iztapalapa is often characterized as depressed, dangerous to outsiders, and void of cultural wealth. This thesis challenges the assumption that Iztapalapa is to be avoided, and instead poses Iztapalapa as vibrant, exciting, and culturally significant for the telling of national and cultural stories of place, due largely to the graffiti movement unfolding in its midst.

5 RESULTS & ANALYSIS

The identified research questions that emerged from gaps in graffiti literature are:

- 1) What is the baseline for defining graffiti and for understanding how it may be different from other nuanced types of wall inscriptions within a case study?
- 2) In what manner does graffiti produce ideas of culture in a specific case study?
- 3) How do graffiti makers identify and describe themselves and their wall inscriptions?
- 4) What stories of place are transmitted by graffiti makers, both when asked explicitly and as told through visual wall paintings in public spaces of a case study? Where are these stories transmitted?
- 5) How is globalization (i.e. the expanded connectivity between places) made evident through graffiti practice and imagery?

One question generated from the settings literature posed in Chapter 3:

- 1) What is the role of the Mexican state in contemporary graffiti making, and how does the contemporary graffiti movement of Iztapalapa mimic, depart from, and compare to the Mexican mural movement of the Post-Revolutionary Period?

Analysis has been woven into presentation of data so that answers to research questions and the derived meaning of these answers are presented side-by-side in each

sub-heading. Finally a brief discussion of the results and analysis is outlined in the section entitled Discussion, which begins on page 152.

5.1 Demographic Summary of all Interview Respondents

Nearly every person interviewed was asked to self-describe their economic situation (which was an attempt understand the person's class), race (which was often clarified to be "nationality" by the research assistant), gender (which was often scoffed at or laughed at), ethnicity (which was often met with confusion or a blank stare), religion, level of education, and the year they were born.

Demographic data from sample population is summarized here. 34 males were interviewed and 9 females were interviewed. The spread of age of participants at the time interviews were conducted was from 65 years old (oldest) to 20 years old (youngest). The youngest age bracket, spanning 20 to 23 years old represented only six interviewees; 26 interviewees were in the age bracket of 27 to 43 years old; and only seven interviewees were in the oldest age bracket of 48 to 65 years old. A total of 43 interviews were collected; 31 interviews were conducted with self-identified artists and 12 interviews were with community members who did not identify themselves as artists. Of these 31 self-identified artists, 24 identified as having made graffiti. In summary, the bulk of people interviewed in this study were self-identified male artists ranging in age from 27 to 43 years old.

5.2 Graffiti Maker Identities, Demographics, & Subjectivity

5.2.1 Economic situation

Graffiti makers were asked to describe their 'Economic Situation'. Only one graffiti maker said their economic situation was "Buena", meaning "good". It was observed that this person was from a wealthier family and was working as a professional scholar, researching 20th century history, presumably getting paid to do research. A more common response was that graffiti makers considered their economic status to be "estable" (stable), "regular" (regular), or "media" (middle class), with eleven graffiti makers in this study answering in this way. One person elaborated that his reference to "middle class" meant that he worked a full time schedule, Monday through Friday. Furthermore, it was observed that graffiti makers considering themselves middle class seemed to have enough money to house themselves, feed themselves, pay bills and in many cases, provide a bit of economic support to family members (contribute to the household). These respondents seemed fairly content with their income and were observed spending money on taxis, public transit, food, alcohol, and graffiti supplies and materials. Some had large homes, while others occupied shared quarters with family members.

One graffiti maker said that he considered himself to "media baja" or "middle-to-low income". Only four graffiti maker respondents said that they considered their economic level to be "mala" or "baja" meaning, "bad" or "low". One of these respondents explained "Muchas personas, pocos empleos", which translates to "Many

people, few jobs.” And it was observed that one of the respondents claiming to be of low economic status was one of the more highly sought professional muralists, who received paid gigs to paint large works on walls of businesses and at public expositions. While he clearly thought he could be making more money for his work, my perception was that he seemed to be doing fairly well for himself and was successfully obtaining income doing something he loved. Two graffiti makers offered outlier responses. When asked to describe his economic situation/level, one of them explained in English: “I’m not really sure because I live for my artwork. So it’s just, like, random I guess. Sometimes good, sometimes bad.” The other outlier respondent described his economic situation as “Proletarian”, indicating class consciousness and awareness for Marx’s description of working-class laborers. While it is clear that rarely did a graffiti maker describe their economic and financial situation as “great”, they also rarely described themselves as ‘poor’ or having a ‘bad’ financial situation. And while Iztapalapa, the primary part of the city where graffiti makers were interviewed, is generally classified as a poor or under-resourced part of the city, the graffiti makers interviewed generally did not describe themselves as poor. This counters arguments made by scholars in the literature review that graffiti makers are often poverty-stricken or that graffiti might indicate low economic status of the person making it. See raw data responses in Appendix B, on page 185.

5.2.2 Age

Graffiti makers were also asked the year they were born in order to analyze whether graffiti makers were generally youth, as was indicated in literature. The average

age of graffiti makers at the time they were interviewed was about 30 years old and they described themselves as currently practicing, self-identified graffiteros. Most graffiti makers interviewed were born between the years 1979 and 1987, making the bulk of them between 26 and 34 years old at the time of interviews. The total number of responses to my inquiry about age summed 21 graffiti makers, with the oldest aged 39 years old at the time of the interview and the youngest aged 20 years old. This counters the narrative that graffiti makers are generally “youth” or adolescent. However, many graffiti makers explained that they began making graffiti at the time of their adolescence (teenage years), and we can therefore assume that most graffiti makers in the study began doing graffiti approximately in the mid-to-late 1990s. This means that many of the respondents have been practicing and developing their graffiti methods and styles for more than a decade.

This also indicates a nuanced explanation of age of graffiti makers, in that while they generally started as youngsters, graffiti makers in this study have continued making graffiti into the adult period of their lives, into their late 20s and 30s. This means that graffiti in Iztapalapa and Mexico City does not seem to be a careless activity of youngsters who practice while they are young and then burn out or lose interest with maturity. Instead, graffiti makers interviewed in this case study were generally mature adults, with professional careers and well developed ideas about their graffiti and the process of making wall inscriptions. Further, it appeared that their ideas of graffiti had evolved with age, so that by the time I interviewed them, they felt deeply and passionately that the craft of making graffiti was one of the most important elements of

their lives and identities. Surprisingly to me, many spoke fairly negatively of new youth becoming interested in graffiti, calling them “New School” and saying that these young people have no respect for the rules, hierarchies, or skill that they themselves had developed and learned during their tenure as graffiti makers from the “Old School”. See Table 5 on page 186 for raw data.

5.2.3 Race or nationality

Many respondents stared blankly with no response to the question about what race they considered themselves to be, and therefore, Catalina (my research assistant) clarified that they should describe their nationality. That the cultural or social group most prominently ascribed by graffiti makers in Iztapalapa was that of nationality, rather than race, generates a compelling argument that graffiti as a place-based social practice in Mexico is one of nationalism, rather than of racial status or pride. Nearly all of the graffiti makers who commented on their race or nationality described themselves as Mexican, with only one person describing himself as a French ex-patriot. One person said that they were “Mexican y tambien ‘Mestizo’”, meaning “Mexican but also mixed [race]” and another said, “Mexicano pero tengo influencia Norte Americano,” which infers Mexican and American heritage. This indicates that national identity was the most prominent descriptor of graffiti makers in the study but that a few referenced the complicated and vast racial mixing that was a prominent theme in the art works of Los Tres Grandes during the Mexican Mural Renaissance.

While the literature has often claimed that graffiti makers can be generally grouped into one or two racial categories, this study points out that race was not a prominent identity descriptor for graffiti makers and they could not relate to the term race or how it applied to them. It does indicate that scholars claiming graffiti makers may often be of Hispanic or Latino ancestry could be accurate and poses graffiti and the making of visual wall inscriptions as a tradition of national culture in Mexico City and Iztapalapa. See Table 7 on page 187 for raw data.

5.2.4 Ethnicity

As with the question about race, many graffiti makers did not know how to describe their ethnicity and therefore responded that they had none or asked that their response be left blank. Specifically, when asked to describe their ethnicity, 16 graffiti makers said that they had “ninguna” or “none” and two respondents purposefully gave no response to the question. This is relevant when considering literature posing graffiti makers as ethnic minorities and suggests that in the case study of Mexico City, ethnicity is not positioned as a relevant identifying trait. Few to no respondents spoke deeply about ethnicity, with the most elaborate response being “Tengo orígenes prehispanicos del Nahuátl,” which means, “I have pre-hispanic origins of the Nahuátl [people].” One person described their ethnic background as from Michoacán, another Mexican state to the west of the State of Mexico and one other as from “Chilapa/Guerrero” which indicates ethnic ancestry from an area called Chilapa found in the state of Guerrero to the southwest of the State of Mexico. This also suggests that while ethnic identity was an

important element of national pride during the Mexican Mural Movement in the Post-Revolutionary Period, this theme was not prominent in conversations with graffiti makers of contemporary Iztapalapa. Further, while racial and ethnic identity were prominent themes in the literature on graffiti from the United States, it appears to be less so or excluded completely in the case study of Mexico.

5.2.5 Gender

All interviewed graffiti makers and muralists were observed to outwardly exhibit socially expected and accepted male gender roles. 100% of graffiti makers surveyed responded “masculine” or “male” when asked to describe their gender.

Throughout the interview process, I asked male graffiti makers whether they could connect me to female painters and graffiti makers to interview and was either told: “I do not know any female graffiti makers” or “Sure, I know some female graffiti makers and I will try to connect you to them.” None of these suggested connections yielded interviews with female graffiti makers; that is, no male graffiti maker successfully introduced me or connected me to a female graffiti maker that I was able to interview. Although I cannot comment on why this occurred, I offer this gap in demographic respondents as an area for future research.

5.2.6 Religion

Descriptions of religion were somewhat surprising, with 14 out of 24 respondents saying they did not ascribe to any religion and only five graffiti makers saying they were practicing Catholics. Due to the high number and relatively large volume of graffiti

images portraying Catholic symbols, events, and figures, I had expected more graffiti makers to describe themselves as Catholic. What this best demonstrates is perhaps the idea that graffiti makers don't always paint images that they personally ascribe to, but that instead, they sometimes depict images of place and culture that they believe or know their fellow community members will relate to. This was confirmed in the comment by one graffiti maker who said that he did not ascribe to any creed but that his family was Catholic, "as is the practice in Mexico." The comment shows that Catholicism is popularly understood to represent the religious affiliation of the majority of Mexicans.

One person said they practiced the Yoruba religion, which is a West-African faith that was unknown at the time to both myself and Catalina, my research assistant. This response was surprising and we weren't sure what to make of it, other than the fact that this person was an outlier in terms of their religious background. This further underscores claims from some of the literature that graffiti makers are from a variety of heterogeneous backgrounds.

5.2.7 Level of Education

Most graffiti makers in this case study can be described as generally well educated. Approximately half of all graffiti maker respondents indicated they had obtained some level of college education, with one person having studied at the graduate level, nine completed undergraduate degrees, and two with technical certifications. The other half of respondents completed high school.

The most compelling trend here was that the disciplines of study chosen by graffiti makers who attended University were within fields that could all be arguably related to their interest in graffiti and creative visualization. These fields include visual and fine art, graphic design, cultural heritage, architecture, and communications. Further, several of the graffiti makers interviewed in this study had obtained jobs and careers arguably related to skills and values of their practice in graffiti making. We can see that graffiti appears to have positively influenced professional opportunities because the following jobs were noted to be held by respondents: lawyer, graphic designer, architect, tattoo artist, airbrush detailer in automotive sector, commissioned muralist, researcher, media professional, clothing silk screener and designer, retail shop owner, and teacher. This indicates that graffiti makers in this study have proven to be highly successful professionals, putting their creative skills to work in specialized settings. See raw data in Table 9, found on page 188 below.

5.2.8 Review of graffiti maker demographics

The demographics above demonstrate that graffiti makers of this study were generally not adolescent youth who considered themselves poor or poverty stricken, nor did they consider racial or ethnic descriptions to accurately depict who they are and what their identity is comprised of. The largest unifying characteristics of graffiti makers were nationality and gender: nearly every graffiti maker interviewed described themselves as Mexican male, except for one who described himself as a French immigrant. The indication in the literature that graffiti makers tend to be male was thus confirmed here.

Self-identified graffiti makers were largely in their late 20's and early 30's, indicating that they were not the adolescent rabble rousers as has been offered by some scholars in graffiti literature, although perhaps they had started out that way years before. And claims in the literature that graffiti makers are uneducated, or that they exhibit traits of social deviance such as violence and aggression through gang membership were found to be largely inaccurate. Most of the data here counters all of the negative assumptions posed by scholars who did not interview graffiti makers and rather poses graffiti makers of Iztapalapa and Mexico City as mature, skilled, well-educated members of their community from generally middle class backgrounds.

5.3 Defining Graffiti: Spray Cans, the Street, Lettering, & a Sense of Belonging

When asked, many graffiti maker respondents said that graffiti is a type of wall inscription made with spray paint. This aligns with definitions in the graffiti literature. One respondent defined graffiti as: “Pues, son cosas hechas con aerosoles en las paredes,” which means “Well, [graffiti] is made with aerosol [spray cans] on walls.” See examples below (Figure 20, Figure 21, and Figure 22) of spray cans sold for the purpose of making graffiti at three of the most popular and well known graffiti retail locations in D.F.



Figure 20. Spray cans stacked horizontally in a retail shop called Mr. Fame near the Centro Histórico.



Figure 21. Spray paint and graffiti marking tools sold in a retail shop called 360. The paint sold here is produced exclusively in Mexico and offers a more affordable price point for buyers.

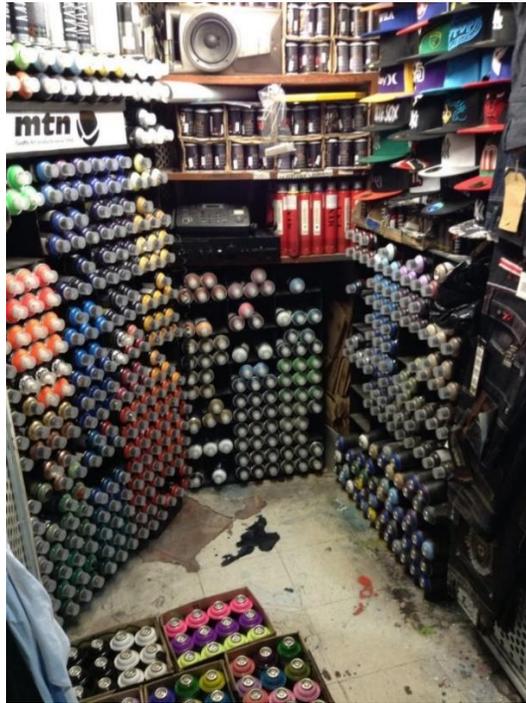


Figure 22. Spray cans sold in a retail shop called 4 Elementos, which refers to Hip Hop culture, under which graffiti is one of the four elements. The remaining three are: the MC (person who raps on a microphone), the B-Boy (break dancer), and the DJ (disc jockey who plays records for other team members during exhibitions). Shop located near the Centro Histórico, around the corner from 360.



Figure 23. Spray cans in the home of a graffiti maker.

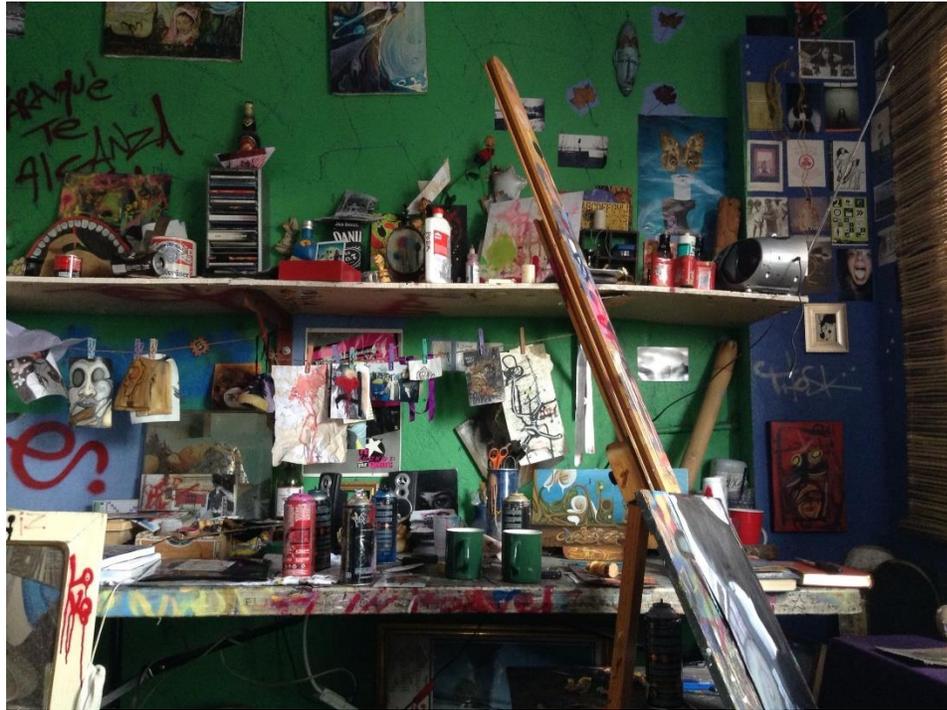


Figure 24. Graffiti spray cans on desk of a graffiti maker studio/office in Iztapalapa, littered with other art making materials and drawings, paintings, photos, and magazine clippings for inspiration.



Figure 25. Spray cans scattered on the sidewalk while graffiti makers work on large commissioned painting. Photo taken in at the intersection of Delegations Miguel Hidalgo and Cuauhtémoc, at Calle Tamaulipas and Diagonal Patriotismo.



Figure 26. Variety of spray can caps, in varying line styles and sizes. Some caps are made to create thin, detailed lines (such as for lettering) while others are made to fill spaces or cover large areas. Evolution of variety of caps available to graffiti makers has evidently caused development and complexity of graffiti images over time.



Figure 27. Markers made for drawing, writing, and tagging on walls and other surfaces as depicted in graffiti magazine.

The materials developed, used, and purchased for the purpose of making graffiti in the Mexico City region are complex. They demonstrate that a vast technological response has been generated in the manufacturing sector, to meet the demand of graffiti making consumers. A whole economy of product differentiation has become popular, contesting the dominant conventional narrative that graffiti is simply “cowardly vandalism” by “defacing morons” (as quoted from the New York Times by Ley and Cybriwsky, 1974: 491)—or that graffiti as a general practice is undeveloped, juvenile, or in any way amateur throughout Iztapalapa.

In addition, I participated in making graffiti during one major occasion with a local crew and during the process of the ensuing graffiti making session, I realized what a significant amount of time, energy, and money went into procurement of appropriate materials for executing graffiti.

For the one graffiti making event that I participated in as a painter/graffiti maker, I traveled with the crew to three different retail tiendas (shops) on a Sunday. In the process, we took several buses and trains, pushed our way through bustling sidewalks, over the course of about two hours. The spray cans were then hauled back to the walls we were going to paint, in a public park, which took another hour or two. We added our new supplies to an existing collection of several spray cans (another 5-8 cans) and a paint tray, paintbrushes, and a roller that we used to paint the background wall one solid color before beginning. I then worked from a sketch I had drawn in a notebook previously to apply spraypaint to the wall over a period of 3-4 hours. My graffiti making compatriots worked in tandem on a large lettering piece of their crew name, called “Radicals”.

Several children interacted with us during the time that we were painting, asking questions and commenting on our work. The entire experience took around eight hours, at the end of which, I was exhausted. It seemed that the whole day was a rushed, hurried, and exciting enterprise. But at the end, I felt fulfilled, and like I had invested and created something that was public—for others, that was given away. I did not depart from the park that we painted in that day with the fruit of my labor in my pocket; instead it was there on a wall, left behind for others to view, think about, or paint over if they chose.

Overall, making graffiti that day was a cathartic process that really demonstrated the time, money, and energy that is expended by graffiti makers during each and every graffiti making event. Also, making graffiti was a difficult endeavor for a variety of reasons. I had trouble reaching the top of my piece, I miscalculated dimensions and had to step back, revise my work often, and I had difficulty producing line widths in a way I was pleased with. In essence, although it was extremely time consuming to find and purchase spray cans, this was the least of my worries as a graffiti maker! I was left with a massive amount of respect for graffiti makers after attempting to do it myself for the first time. In spite of the challenges, I found the experience rewarding. It left me feeling extremely connected to myself, to those around me, and to the place. Leaving my own unique mark on the city was gratifying.



Figure 28. La Catrina in Iztapalapa. Me with my graffiti.

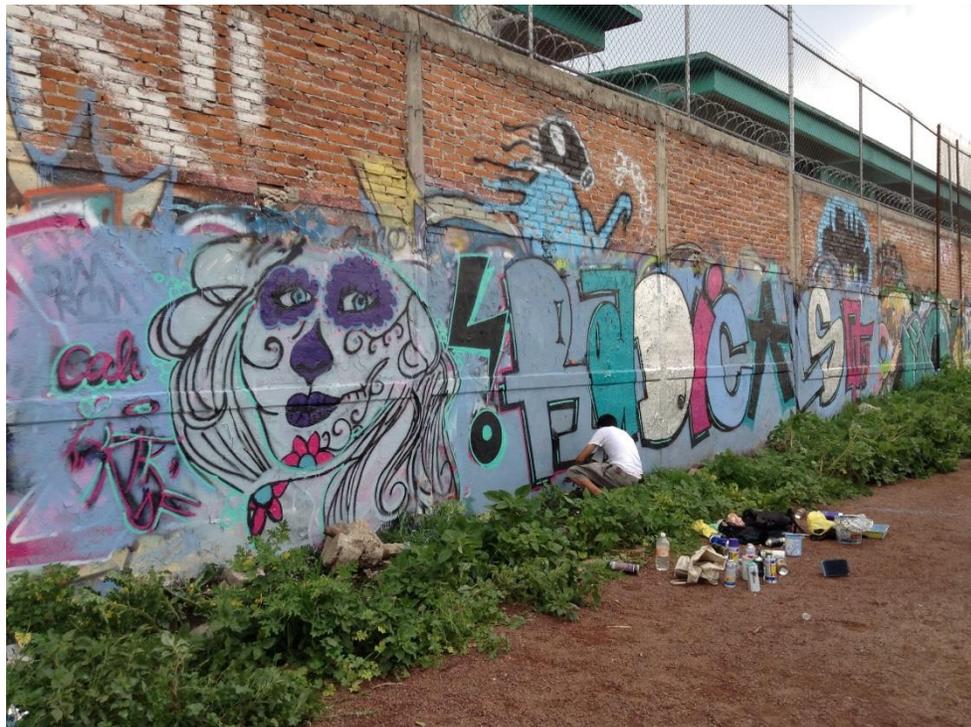


Figure 29. La Catrina and Los Radicals in Iztapalapa.

In addition to being made exclusively with aerosol spray paint and other tools and implements, graffiti was also generally described by several respondents as a practice of technique, in which letters and stylistic choices may be applied to walls either illegally or legally and that need not be considered art. One graffiti maker said, “El graffiti ahora no es arte, es experimento en forma, colores, ritmos, tonos, y contrastes,” which means, “Graffiti today/currently is not art, it is an experiment in form, color, rhythm, tone, and contrast”. While this sounded like art to me, what the respondent seemed to articulate was that graffiti need not be fully formed, planned or finished. It could be experiments of linework written on a wall. Another graffiti maker described graffiti as simply, “la descomposición de las letras, logicamente viene del griego ‘rayar’, ‘arañar’, letras de caligrafía; es corriente tags y bombas” which translates to: “[Graffiti] is the decomposition of letters, logically comes from Greek ‘to scratch’ or ‘to scrape’; calligraphy letters, it’s currently tags and bombs.” The skill, practice, or experience with which spray painted inscriptions were applied to walls did not seem to affect whether they were called as graffiti or not. Legal or illegal, hasty or calculated, abstract or witty, political or comical, most spray painted or drawn letters and images are considered graffiti in Iztapalapa. This offers a point of originality in graffiti literature, posing graffiti practice as a mode of experimentation, that need only be completed with spray paint, (regardless of legality) which was a theme not explicitly identified by scholars previously.

5.3.1 Vandalism & Illegal Graffiti

A small number of graffiti makers and community members did acknowledge illegality as a definitional component of graffiti, saying that to them, graffiti is vandalism or illegal writing of letters on walls. And a very small number of graffiti makers did reference this dynamic fondly, citing this as part of the reason they do it—for excitement, for the thrill of breaking rules. One graffiti maker said that he began doing graffiti as a young man “por rebeldía, inconformidad,” which means “for rebellion, to not conform.”

More graffiti makers referenced the fact that they started doing graffiti not to rebel against conformity or to break rules but because they wanted to be like someone else or fit into a group. Many said they witnessed an older person doing graffiti and became inspired to participate themselves and this was the main reason for becoming initiated in the participation of graffiti making. One respondent said,

Inicié yo por buscar como una identidad, alguien que... no sé. Como sentirme significado con alguien. Con algo. Porque cuando me inicié en el graffiti era como no tenía nada... En cuestion de ideología, en cuestion de movilidad, no tenía nada. Entonces, inicié a graffiti por eso. Mas que nada, por integrarme a un grupo, a un grupo de la escuela, que fué en bachillerato de inicié.

English translation: I started because I was looking for an identity, to be someone that... I don't know. I was looking to feel meaningful things with someone. With something. Because when I started in graffiti, it was like I did not have anything. Relating to the questions of ideology, mobility, I did not have anything. So, I started in on graffiti for these reasons. More than anything, I started doing graffiti to integrate into a group, a group from school; from when I started my undergraduate degree.

This quotation eloquently points out that graffiti was this person's way of connecting with others, with peers, of sharing something with them and finding himself amongst

them. Another graffiti maker said simply, “Empezé a los 14 años y comencé porque ví la expo Chavos Banda,” which means, “At 14 years old, I started [painting] because I saw the exposition at Chavos Banda”. It only took one event, one in which hundreds of graffiti makers come out to share in the graffiti experience at once, and the adolescent was hooked on the practice.⁶ These ideas correspond to the literature written on graffiti in which graffiti is mechanism to connect with others, or that graffiti is about performance and visual communication for others (Ley & Cibriwsky 1974; Lachmann 1988; Bowen 1999; Klingman et al. 2000; Whitehead 2004; D’Amico & Block 2004; Snyder 2006; Halsey & Young 2006).

Furthermore, several graffiti makers explained that while vandalism and illegal tagging were practices that they participated in when they started doing graffiti as youngsters, through the progression of their experience and continued repetition of using aerosol spray cans, they had evolved ‘past’ the immature form of graffiti that they considered to be illegal tagging. Still others said while they admired many types of lettering styles, including some tags, they did not spend time invested in tagging. Most of the passionate and dedicated graffiti makers seemed to mention tagging as an afterthought, relevant and real, but minimally important to their current practice of painting walls. Or they mentioned their tag name only as the signature they inscribed on graffiti pieces or murals as a way of signing their name on their work.

⁶ See full description and analysis of Chavos Bando on page 162.

Dislike for hastily scribbled tags was a sentiment sometimes shared by graffiti makers and community members alike. These people neither liked nor appreciated letters or ‘tags’ scribbled on walls, but the notion of ‘placa’ (or signature) was accepted as any signature or moniker that could be included on a piece or mural. One graffiti maker spoke of tags, saying “Es algo que molesto, ensucia mi pais” which means “It’s annoying, it dirties my country.” Another sentiment toward illegal graffiti is exemplified in Figure 30.



Figure 30. Stenciled, spray painted message translates in English to: "Graffiti maker friend: I respect your art, you respect my school." Message implies that the walls of this school have been tagged and illegally painted in the past and the school respectfully requests that the graffiti makers not continue the practice.



Figure 31. Federal stenciled message reads "Federal Property, Announcements and Painting Prohibited." Graffiti makers display their opinion of the message by painting on top of, near, and all down the wall surrounding the statement.

Respondents informally spoke to me and relayed their experiences of encountering the illegality of graffiti during participant observation and ethnographic events. A few people shared that while painting on walls without permission is considered technically illegal in Mexico City, there are little to no repercussions of tagging even when caught by law enforcement and so this rule is rarely lived, felt, or made real in the daily life of graffiti makers. One respondent described his only run-in with police while painting illegally on a wall bordering the freeway around 3 a.m. He said the outcome was simply that the young man paid the police officer 80 pesos, after which time the officer merrily went on his way. The graffiti maker indicated that he happily paid this amount, as it was affordable. The run-in with the police did not ultimately affect his plan to paint walls in the future. Another graffiti maker also explained that because police officers in Mexico City tend to drive rapidly with lights flashing and sirens blaring at all time, it is easy to avoid getting caught doing illegal

tagging because you can hear/see law enforcement and stop what you are doing before being in direct sight. Further, as referenced above, most graffiti makers who regularly invested themselves in developing 'pieces' obtained permission prior to painting on a wall or they commonly executed pieces in areas designated for graffiti, muralism, and other types of wall inscriptions.

The only instance of hard-lined illegal painting was graffiti done in subway train stations, on trains themselves, or along the tunnel walls of the metro. Although I never witnessed anyone doing graffiti in or around the metro, I was told with great enthusiasm by several graffiti makers that accomplishing a skilled graffiti piece in or at the metro station was the highest level of achievement for three reasons: 1) it was highly dangerous because the most desired placement for pieces was literally in the subway tunnel or on a train, and that trains could rush by furiously without warning at any moment injuring or killing you; 2) because so many people ride the metro, pieces viewable from passing train cars get a huge level of exposure, and 3) it is highly illegal and therefore the only heavily regulated area of the city where doing graffiti carries a heavy legal repercussions. See examples in Figure 32 and Figure 35 below:



Figure 32. Highly illegal political graffiti throw-up reads "#Peña no es mi presidente" indicating social media reference with the use of hashtag and severe dislike for President Peña Nieto. In English message states: "Peña Nieto is not my President". Graffiti assumed to have been made during or following student protest movement "Yo Soy 132", under which students protested against Peña Nieto for his representation of PRI political party ideology Photo taken from Facebook page of interviewed graffiti maker.



Figure 33. Further distaste for Peña Nieto (right) is displayed as he is depicted kissing the last President of the PRI political party prior to himself, Vicente Fox (left). Image is reminiscent of another piece showing Brezhnev and Hanechev kissing on the Berlin Wall in Germany.



Figure 34. Political graffiti made from a wheat pasted sticker in the Centro Histórico depicts one of Diego Rivera's famous paintings of a woman toting a basket of calla lily flowers. In this instance, the flowers have been replaced with automatic rifles, presumably indicating distaste for gun violence throughout Mexico.⁷

⁷ It should be noted that Figure 32, Figure 33, and Figure 34 depict explicit political disapproval for the Mexican government. While powerful, unique, and compelling, this type of clear political imagery was not largely present in the graffiti of Iztapalapa.



Figure 35. Illegal bombs in the Metro Tunnel near Metro Constitución, Iztapalapa.

In general however, it appeared that aside from on, near, or within train areas, the illegality of graffiti in Mexico City was largely ‘down-played’. In other words, graffiti as a general practice was not discussed as a highly illegal or criminal act; when applied or viewed in the street setting, at public parks, or in skate parks, graffiti in Iztapalapa seemed to be generally regarded as a normal and expected part of the landscape. Tagging was understood to be a minor infraction of the law, rarely enforced and observed as more annoying than threatening. Instead, graffiti as a concept was more often described as a social mode of visual expression or experimentation that was likely appreciated, accepted, and linked to the term mural if deployed in specific ways. This departs sharply from the literature posing graffiti as an illegal act of vandalism that is resented by

community members (Ley & Cybriwsky 1974; Lachmann 1988; D'Amico & Block 2004; Stein 1989; Bowen 1999; Klingman et al. 2000; Halsey & Young 2006).

While most wall inscriptions made with spray paint, paint pens, markers, or wall crayons were considered graffiti, not all were created equal. This means that varying levels of attention and respect were given to graffiti images based on complexity, content, and form. A clear hierarchy is present in graffiti culture that expands on the graffiti slang table (see Table 1 on page 11). In this hierarchy, tags are established as the most elementary, illegal and least respected type of graffiti (see Figure 38, Figure 39, Figure 40), bombs as a slightly more skilled type but still illegal form of hasty graffiti (see Figure 43, Figure 44, Figure 45, Figure 46, Figure 47), and pieces, also known as “graffiti legal” (or graffiti made by legal means) in D.F. and Iztapalapa, as the most skilled, complex, often legal and respected form of graffiti (see Figure 48, Figure 49, Figure 50, Figure 47, Figure 52, and Figure 53). See examples below.



Figure 36. Tags on bottom left, in white. Bomb on bottom right, in black and yellow. Pieces/murals above, in green and pink. Photo exemplifies techniques of experimentation and varying levels of mastery. Photo taken on Avenida Del Rosal, Iztapalapa, around the corner from researcher apartment.

5.3.1.1 Tags

While shadowing graffiti makers during casual activities around the city, I did witness the delight with which some of them drew their tag name quickly on sign posts, telephone boxes, and public transportation with ink markers or crayons made for tagging all surfaces. The process seemed to align with the definition of tagging referenced in the literature (given by Castleman 1982; Lachmann 1988; Bowen 1999; Docuyana 2000; Whitehead 2004; D'Amico & Block 2004; Snyder 2006) which defines tagging as: stylized letters that represent identity of the writer, written on walls and other surfaces by novices to saturate an area with their chosen name, written quickly in a practiced movement, are unique pseudonyms for writers and graffiti makers, and often categorized as vandalism or public nuisance (see Table 1 on page 11).

However, the descriptions of tagging offered by respondents reinforced a deep need for self-expression and validation held by taggers, indicating that recognition and being noticed as different and unique, even if in an illegal or disruptive way, was the greatest stimulator for taggers. The notion of writing on a wall to get noticed, to be unique, for the thrill of creating something exclusively 'yours' differs strongly in character from the idea that taggers would intentionally be spurred by the desire to destroy property, to commit criminal acts, or to scare others. It becomes clear that by all accounts, graffiti in Iztapalapa functioned as a method of processing identity and crafting self-worth rather than as a mode of harming others.

Tagging was also considered the most novice and undeveloped mode of doing graffiti, in which a writer uses simple linework to inscribe their chosen name on a wall with either a spray can, paint pen, ink pen, or wall crayon. Writers may write their tag name over and over at home in a notebook, changing nuanced flourishes of lettering style with each unique inscription and noting the differences in appearance of each new and different tag.



Figure 37. A graffiti maker points out a place that he tagged from a photo he pasted into his notebook. Note the variety of practiced tag lettering styles depicted throughout pages of his graffiti notebook.

My experiences of witnessing the process of tagging were rather unremarkable, rarely discussed, and overall, indistinctive. The most exciting part of watching someone do a hasty tag of their chosen autograph was recognition of tags after the fact. Further, viewing a recognizable tag later when not in the presence of a tagger was thrilling and

moving. It connected me to the graffiti maker and made me feel as though I had a friend, a secret, that I was connected to others in such a large and at times, overwhelmingly isolating city. In other words, recognition of tags solidified my sense of place at any given moment by connecting me to the web of stories and people that I associated with each tag and its location. All of sudden, places I had never been became familiar because I knew so-and-so had left his mark there, or lived near there or had passed through there. The city became mapped in my mind as a process of collecting associations and stories through recognition of graffiti, graffiti makers, and tags. This process exemplifies Massey's web of social relationships becoming spread over and throughout space, carving out notions of place from space. Further, the process of illegal tagging demonstrates an alternative, underground, non-state-sanctioned method of crafting place from space.



Figure 38. Gate full of 'tags'. Photo taken near Chavos Banda in Iztapalapa.



Figure 39. Tags in Iztapalapa. Photo taken alongside of Avenida Ermita.



Figure 40. Tags near Ermita and Periférico.



Figure 41. Tags in Coyoacán. Photo taken near the crossing of Avenida Papalotl and Avenida Pedro Enriquez Ureña.

5.3.1.2 Bombs

In the greater D.F. region, it appears that the term “bomb”, or “bomba” in Spanish, has replaced the term ‘throw-up’. A bomb and a throw-up are understood to be the same thing and I did not hear the word throw-up used in D.F. A bomb is understood as any hastily drawn inscription of the graffiti maker’s tag name, done in any style where outline is used to highlight the edges and shape of a second fill color, which corresponds to definitions of throw-ups given by Docuycanan 2000; Whitehead 2003; and in the documentary *Piece by Piece* 2005. Creating bombs in Iztapalapa is the second step in developing skill as a graffiti maker because it requires that the writer: learn to use their materials rapidly and with precision, gain recognition and fame from community

members by saturating an area with their tagged moniker over and over in a repetitive fashion, outsmart police and other community members by slyly avoiding arrest, and develop a unique lettering style that gets attention. Bombing can be illegal or legal and is generally thought of as the second step in the development of graffiti maker skill, after tags. Iztapalapa was saturated with thousands of bombs, found everywhere from residential neighborhoods to highway settings. It was rare to see a single bomb, and instead several bombs were often placed next to each other, or had been layered over time. This was explained by the competitive hierarchy in the “Old School” rules of graffiti in Iztapalapa, under which it was appropriate to bomb over someone else’s work only if you thought you could do a better job.



Figure 42. Public deportivo (park) demonstrating many layers of experiment with spray paint and graffiti. Inscriptions mostly constitute bombs with some pieces. Located in Iztapalapa, a short walk from Avenida Del Rosal. Graffiti here is done legally because the park is public and graffiti is understood to be permissible/non-punishable.



Figure 43. Bombs in Iztapalapa. Photo taken at the crossing of major highways Anillo Periférico and Avenida Luis Mendez.

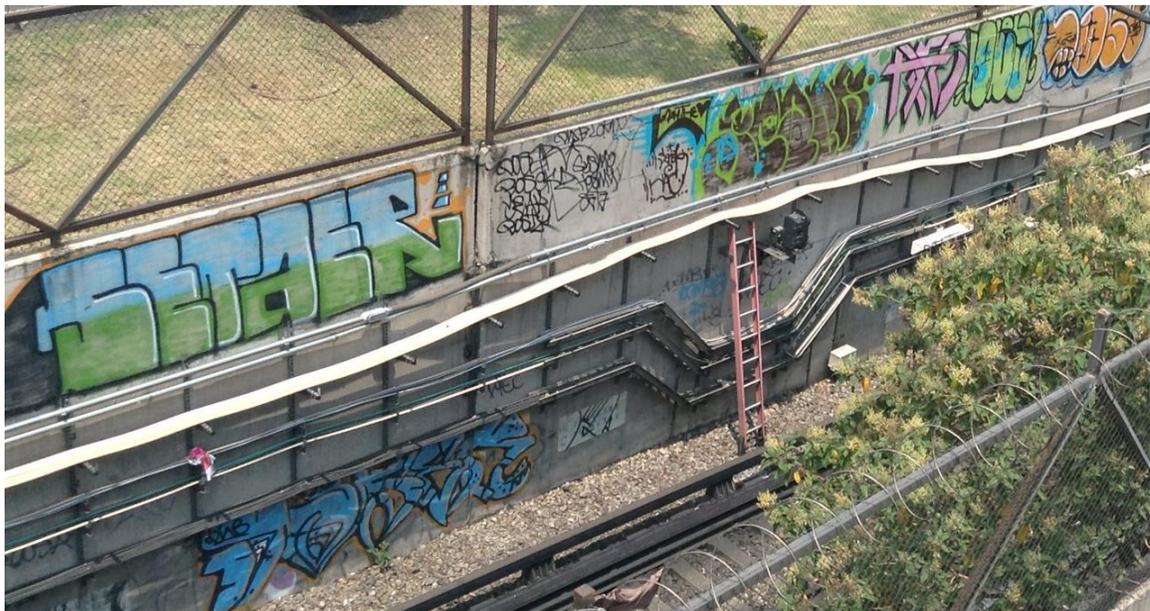


Figure 44. Illegal Bombs in Iztapalapa. Photo taken near Metro Constitución in Iztapalapa.



Figure 45. Bombs in Coyoacán. Photo taken near the crossing of Avenida Papalotl and Avenida Pedro Enriquez Ureña.



Figure 46. Bombs in Iztapalapa. Photo taken off of Calle Estrella and near Avendida San Lorenzo.



Figure 47. Illegal bombs on an abandoned building near Condesa.

5.3.2 Pieces & ‘Graffiti Legal’

When asked what type of wall inscriptions graffiti makers liked seeing on walls the most, the overwhelming answer was “cuando artista tiene tiempo para planear”, which means, “when the artist has time to plan”. This is understood to represent the often legal form of complex graffiti, in which the graffiti maker creates a large image from aerosol spray paint on a wall with permission or in a space designated for graffiti use. These planned and highly developed wall inscriptions, (usually done with permission) tended to be an admired form of wall painting that was indeed considered graffiti, and may also constitute a hybrid form of graffiti and muralism. Called ‘pieces’ (short for masterpieces) in the literature by Whitehead 2004, Valle & Weiss 2010, and described in the documentary *Piece by Piece* 2005, this type of graffiti was often simply called

“graffiti legal” in the case study of Iztapalapa. The ability to perform or execute this type of graffiti elevated the social status of the graffiti maker, both by peers and community member viewers. Graffiti Legal could be comprised of developed lettering style or could be any well-developed image applied to a wall with spray paint. Wildstyle and Tres-de were styles often applied in pieces or graffiti legal. See examples below (Figure 48, Figure 57).



Figure 48. Graffiti piece in Iztapalapa by Geet. Photo taken near Avenida Del Rosal.



Figure 49. Graffiti piece in Iztapalapa. Photo taken at public park (deportivo) near Avenida Del Rosal. "Silty".



Figure 50. Graffiti piece in Iztapalapa. Photo taken at public park (deportivo) near Avenida Del Rosal. "Korux."



Figure 51. Graffiti piece, "Mosk". Photo taken near Centro de Iztapalapa.



Figure 52. Graffiti pieces near Iztapalapa. Photo taken at Ave Canal de Rio Churubusco and Calle Ferrocarril de Rio Frio by EKR Crew (Expresión Kontra Represión).



Figure 53. Graffiti piece, photo taken at Deportivo in Iztapalapa. "Houser".



Figure 54. Piece in Iztapalapa. "Lis".



Figure 55. Piece in Iztapalapa. "Infez"



Figure 56. Pieces in Iztapalapa, near San Juan Xalpa by Telma, Korux, and Resto.



Figure 57. Piece demonstrating "tres-de" style, (3-dimensional). Photo taken in Iztapalapa, off of Ermita.

5.3.3 Graffiti in public space: streets, deportivos & the skate park

One characteristic of graffiti making it different from the traditional, 'official' school of Mexican Muralism is the informality with which it is experienced, produced, and shared. Specifically, one graffiti maker, 34 years old, explained graffiti as a practice of the street and that this comprises the defining characteristic of graffiti. He said that graffiti: "Es pintura en la calle. El graf es de la calle 100%" which translates to: "It's painting in the street. Graffiti is of the streets 100%." Another graffitero said "Las expos de murals tienen diferentes tipos de personas; el graf es más de la calle," which seems to infer that graffiti demonstrates many different types of personalities and these can be found in the neighborhood culture of the street. Graffiti in the street arises as an informal practice that one experiences with compatriots of the street, or neighbors and others with

whom one would commonly share their street and find their own unique place within the community.

Further exemplifying the notion of graffiti as a “street” activity were several respondents who indicated that they first became familiar with graffiti in the informal street setting of skate parks, because they were skate boarders and skate parks were common areas that graffiti was made and was acceptable. ‘Deportivos’, or parks used primarily for physical recreation activities such as running, playing soccer or basketball, were also commonly used for displaying graffiti. Both skate parks and deportivos were public areas that remained open for public use at all times and often bordered streets and street activities. Graffiti was a common visual staple of these areas. This helps answer the research question where is graffiti made by posing public spaces such as the street and parks as specific graffiti areas.

One graffiti maker who actually began his practice as a fine artist trained at the University and then transitioned to making what he called “spray painted murals” explained the important differentiating factors between painting at an indoor studio and painting in the street. He said,

I think you’re just kind of secluded in the studio and [you have] no contact with the world around you. And, when you’re painting outside, you interact with, you know, everything. You get, like, all this background noise, and a lot of people come up to you and ask you questions and are talking to you and they’ll give you their version of what they’re seeing, what you’re doing. Which is cool. And yeah, so it’s more of a social thing.

Michelle Garcia discusses the public, social aspect of graffiti as it is made in streets, within the public purview of everyday life and relates it to the difference between

traditional muralism and the contemporary culture of graffiti in her journalistic piece about the murals at Mercado Jamaica (2014). She compares the artist Jonathan Ulsis Mendez, 33, to the historical muralists, writing that Mendez's work is unique because it "rises from the sidewalk" and that the street is his "studio" (Garcia, 2014: <http://projects.aljazeera.com/2014/mural/>). We see here that contemporary graffiti, and murals made by graffiti makers, function as visual components of everyday life, central to the hustle and bustle of activity found in streets, on sidewalks, and from public vantage-points.

Stories of the importance of streets in the making of graffiti were transmitted through other graffiti maker narrative as well. Two others spoke specifically about learning rules, meanings, and culture of graffiti in streets. One said, "More than anything, I learned in the street. When I was taught to paint, it was much better to watch people who were doing it. And well, this young guy who was good, used to paint "Tune". He would tell me "Do it like this and like this", and various things about graffiti". Another said "Everything I learned with respect to graffiti, I learned in the street." This brings into view the scholars who defined graffiti as a an act of performance for an audience, made for the purpose of achieving fame, notoriety, getting known, and done on public property or in public spaces where members of public may see it. Graffiti emerges as an importantly 'public' event in D.F.

It also points out that for several graffiti makers, the street functioned as an area that invited curiosity from and for peers; as an area of exploration, where ideas of expression were modeled and then practiced. The street consequently functions as a

public space in the urban landscape where less powerful groups may share experiences and engage in positive social activities in an unregulated manner, which mirrors the theoretical and functional description of streets listed by Goheen (1998) in the literature review. Further the street becomes an area where graffiti makers create their own social networks and craft notions of place from the experiences, relationships, and memories that they visually share with members of the public. And while the social and public dynamics of graffiti are well recognized in the literature (Ley & Cibriwsky 1974; D'Angelo 1974; Lachmann 1988; Santino 1999; Bowen 1999; D'Amico & Block 2004; Halsey & Young 2006), the importance of streets as a public space integral for the sharing and making of graffiti is startlingly absent.

5.3.4 Graffiti: A Mode of Connection & Expression

Perhaps the most important way that graffiti becomes a method of mapping social relationships in space (and consequently making ideas of place public, explicit, and real in Iztapalapa) is through the transformative power it holds to position graffiti makers socially in their community. One graffiti maker says that graffiti: “es tan libre, tan amplia, que no tiene un limite. Puede transformar,” which translates to: “graffiti is so free, more open, it doesn't have a limit. It can transform.” This quotation suggests that in addition to simply being a wall painting technique requiring use of spray paint, there is an important expressive, emotional quality of graffiti, in which a graffiti maker might externally process who they are and experiment with this notion in a non-restricted way.

Another graffiti maker seems to build on this argument, going into great depth in an attempt to communicate his visceral, abstract understanding and relationship with graffiti. He says,

Para mi, en personal, el graffiti es una forma de vivir, pero creo que... es que como explicarles. Pero no es tan solo una forma de vida, para mi, me llena mucho hacer graffiti... es como... ya forma a parte de mi como si yo nací con eso. Es una necesidad. Es mas. Considero que no es arte, el graffiti. Para nada es arte. Yo creo que tan solo es como un sentimiento. Que al momento que empiezas a pintar, o empiezas, o te sales, no ah? Vivirlo, a vivir adrenalina, nó?

In English, this translates to:

For me, personally, graffiti is a way of life, but I believe that... how can I explain this... But it's not just a way of life. For me, it fills me up to make graffiti. It's like it's already a part of me, like I was born with it. It's a necessity. It's more. I don't consider graffiti to be art. It's not art at all. I believe it is only like a feeling. Like the moment that you start to paint, or you start, or you leave, right? Live it, live with adrenalin, right?

The sentiment behind the words above demonstrates that the respondent considers graffiti to be a strongly emotive experience. While he struggled to explain exactly what his emotional reaction to making graffiti might be, he referenced the feeling of 'living', of having adrenaline course through the veins, of graffiti as a part of himself. His words implore a sensation of excitement, of being made real and important in the world. Further, his words imply a search for social location and for his own personal narration of life and experience. This suggests that each graffiti maker may participate in a search for sense of self, discovering different and unique cues for who they are during the process of visually expression.

And this response was echoed by several other graffiti making respondents, of which one said: “[Graffiti] es una forma de expresarse, tiene que ver con la imaginación,

union entre personas”. This translates to “Graffiti is a mode of expression, it has to do with imagination, it unites people”. Another graffiti maker said that graffiti is “para decir existo. Aunque la gente no entiende a los escritores de graff, puedes escribir tu nombre con lo que sea” which means, graffiti is “to say/claim that you exist. Although folks don’t understand the graffiti writers, you can write your name however you want.” And finally, another says that he does graffiti for the purpose of “dejar mi marca en la ciudad. Para que la gente lo vea,” which means that he creates graffiti in order “to leave my mark on the city. So that the people see it.” Each quotation describes graffiti as an important mode of discovering sense of self and giving it away in a manner that will eventually lead to acknowledgment or recognition by peers or other viewers. What becomes prominent here is the congruity of responses narrating the need for non-restricted self-expression, which is a theme dichotomously opposite the assumption that graffiti makers might intentionally make graffiti to disrespect others and commit criminal acts of aggression and violence. Further, graffiti becomes a uniquely freeing form of non-state sanctioned expression. However, it is the role of the state in some cases that indicates a contemporary mural movement can also be found within the community centers and government buildings of Iztapalapa.

5.4 Murals: Painting the Political, the Cultural, & the Revolutionary

Several respondents agreed that muralism is a political form of inscribing walls and that murals must contain political messages/content. One graffiti maker respondent,

32 years old, said, “Los murales tienen un mensaje social, tienen una ideología política muy clara. El mural debe ser políticamente duro, si deja de tener ese mensaje ya no es mural, es un objeto decorativo,” which translates in English to: “Murals have a social message, they have a political ideology that is very clear. A mural should be politically strong, and if it ceases to have a message then it is no longer a mural but a decorative object.” Similarly, another graffiti maker, 28 years old, explained, “Los murales utilizan elementos del dibujo en la pintura, mas enfocados a dar un mensaje político o social, para decorar un lugar que se vea mejor”, which translates to “Murals utilize elements of drawing, are more focused on displaying a political or social message, in order to decorate a place or make it look better.” This shows consistency to some degree that the term mural and the practice of mural making should be understood as loaded with political intention to convey concerns, opinions, or thoughts about social issues.

Under this assumption, abstract artworks or experiments in color or form lacking political ideology would not necessarily be considered murals but any ‘graffiti’ with embedded and clear political messaging could be. Furthermore, the quotations above offer some discrepancy about whether murals can be decorative paintings that simply enhance the visual appearance of a public space or rather, whether murals *must* function as culturally loaded devices of political persuasion. See Figure 58, Figure 59 and Figure 60).



Figure 58. Aztec images rendered in the format of a decorative mural. Represents contemporary version of muralism. Political ideology is unclear, non-explicit. Photo taken at construction wall barrier in the Centro.



Figure 59. Clear political ideology is depicted in lesser known historical mural. Displays workers revolting alongside a starving mother and rich banker. Historical mural created circa 1935 in fresco style. Photo taken at Mercado Presidente Abelardo L. Rodriguez.

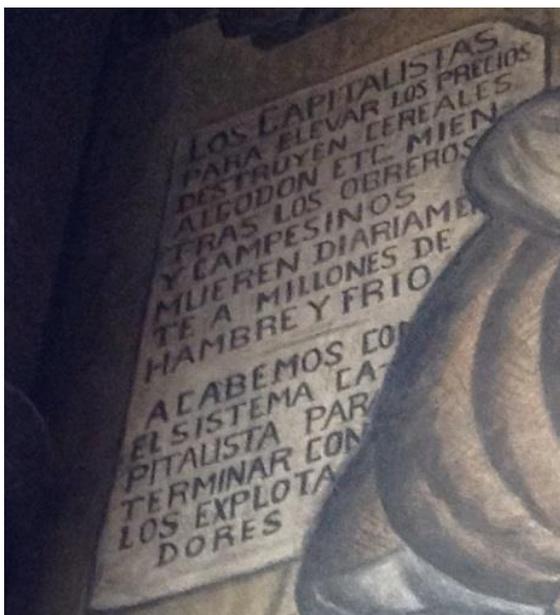


Figure 60. Clear, political statement embedded in Figure 59. Statement found in middle, left-side of mural, above.

Statement reads: “Los capitalistas, para elevar los precios, destruyen cereales, algodón etc. mientras los obreros y campesinos mueren diariamente a millones de hambre y frío. Acabemos con el sistema capitalista con los explotadores” which translates to: “The capitalists, in order to elevate the prices, destroy cereals/grains, cotton, etc, while the workers and peasants die by the million every day, from hunger and cold. Abolish the capitalist system to end the exploitation.”



Figure 61. Historical mural depicts industrialization of agricultural products and exploitation of the Mexican labor force. Represents hybrid mixture of decorative and political imagery. Political meaning is implied, but no explicit political dialogue exists. Created circa 1935 in fresco style. Photo taken at Mercado Presidente Abelardo L. Rodriguez.

Still another variation on the definition of the murals references culture and cultural symbols specifically. One non-graffiti making community member posed the connection between murals and cultural messages, saying, “Mural es con pincel, con brocha, ¿es mas cultural, no? Graffiti tambien puede ser,” which translates to “A mural is with a paintbrush, it’s more cultural, no? Graffiti can be [cultural as well]”. At the time of the interview, it was unclear what the respondent meant about murals being ‘cultural’. Nevertheless, the term ‘cultural’ appeared over and over as the key descriptive word for murals during interviews. Another graffiti maker, 32 years old, echoed the words above, almost exactly, in an interview that occurred at completely different place and time. He described murals as “Diferente a un graffiti, es algo mas cultural,” which in English, means murals are “different from graffiti, it’s something more cultural.”

It eventually became understood that what was meant in the quotations above was that murals should represent specific place-based, cultural symbols, regardless of political nature of the symbols. This demonstrates a much more detailed and nuanced definition than posed in existing graffiti literature. Examples of murals containing cultural, place-based symbols include: the valiant clash of Cuauhtémoc against Hernan Cortez in the early 1500s (Figure 62), images of regional boat travel and mercantilism on Lake Texcoco (Figure 63), and an Aztec diety called Tlaloc, the God of Rain (Figure 64). Furthermore, the reference to murals as wall inscriptions specially made with paintbrushes alludes to the fact that the historical Mexican Murals were made with paintbrushes in the style of European ‘frescos’. As the method of fresco-style painting was co-opted by Los Tres Grandes in Mexico, this practice has become known as a

‘culturally’ Mexican practice. See contemporary examples of murals containing cultural images that were each produced with paintbrushes in Figure 62, Figure 63, Figure 64, and note that Figure 58, Figure 59, and Figure 61 represent murals also made with paint brush:



Figure 62. One part of a contemporary mural found at the Centro de Iztapalapa. Famously named "Iztapalapa: Past, Present, and Future" it was executed by Francisco Cardenas and represents the clash of native and Spanish histories with Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortez (left) fighting Aztec warrior Cuauhtémoc (right).



Figure 63. Mural depicting boat travel during the time of Lake Texcoco, applied with paintbrush. Mural also references the massive contemporary flower bazaar established at Mercado Jamaica circa 1950. Photo taken at Mercado Jamaica, approximately one block from Viaducto Rio de la Piedad and Metro Station Jamaica.

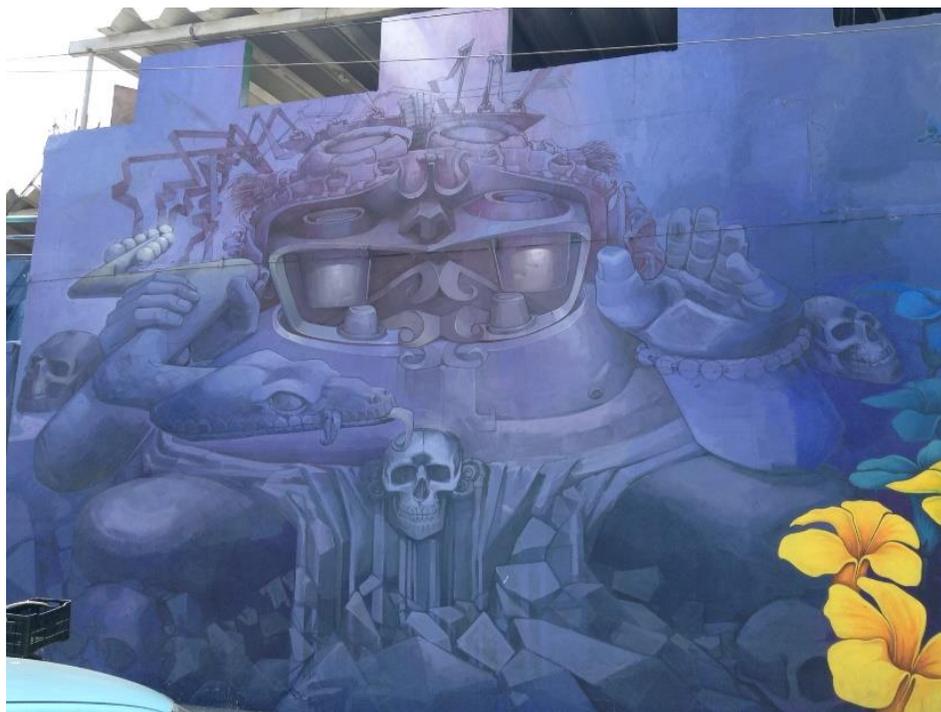


Figure 64. Mural depicting the Aztec figure of Tlaloc, God of the rains at Mercado Jamaica.

While the narrative of the respondents above initially references ‘culture’ in a manner that seemed superficial or even cryptic because it was non-specific, the examples reflect the endurance of the historical mural movement in Mexico while concurrently departing from it. It must be understood that some of the components of historical murals, (ie. use of cultural symbols, political context and ideology, and practice of using paintbrushes to visually depict historical content), have endured in Mexico City. Furthermore, these definitional elements have directly developed from place-based understandings of muralism as it has functioned throughout the Mexico City landscape over approximately the last century.

However, the concept of contemporary muralism departs in many cases from historical muralism when one considers the strictly ‘official’ nature of the Mexican

Murals of the 1920s. A trend appears in the responses given from respondents older than 60 years of age. For example, one community member, 64 years old, pointed out that he considers the official murals of the past to exemplify his understanding of muralism as a whole. He said "... un mural es, por ejemplo, de mencion los del palacio de bellas artes o los de los revolucionarios de esta epoca. Eso es murales," which approximately translates to "...a mural, for example, is like those mentioned at the Palace of Fine Arts or those made by the revolutionaries from this period. That is a mural." In addition, when the respondent's wife, also 64 years old, was asked what type of art she liked to see in public spaces in her community, she said, "Tradicional de México, murales de Diego Rivera, que pintaban bonito," or, translated to English, means "The traditional Mexican ones, the murals of Diego Rivera, that were well painted." This implies that she considers the most prominent example of muralism to be those of the past. Another gentleman, also 64 years old, concurred that murals must be 'revolutionary' like the ones found at the Palacio de Bellas Artes. Each respondent mentions the 'official' culture of these historical murals, referencing art works that exist behind the walls of government buildings, that were created by famous, recognized muralists, and that express specific revolutionary ideology. Also, these respondents were born 20-30 years after the initiation of the Mexican Mural movement, and therefore likely experienced these murals in the golden afterglow of their worldwide popularity/notoriety. Based on the characteristics given by these respondents, large format decorative paintings or paintings made publically available and viewable from streets in contemporary times would not be considered 'Mexican murals'. In other words, the paintings referenced in this paragraph are specific;

they are set of nationally recognized artifacts, irreplaceable and unmatched by any contemporary version of large format visual artwork. Examples that these respondents spoke of are given in Figure 65, Figure 66, and Figure 67.



Figure 65. Large painting entitled "Catharsis" by Jose Clemente Orozco. Large format painting is actually done on canvas, not directly applied directly to wall. Located in Palacio de Bellas Artes in the Centro Histórico, next to Parque Alameda.



Figure 66. Large mural entitled "The New Democracy" by David Alfaro Siqueiros. Located at Palacio de Bellas Artes, also applied to enormous canvas rather than the wall.

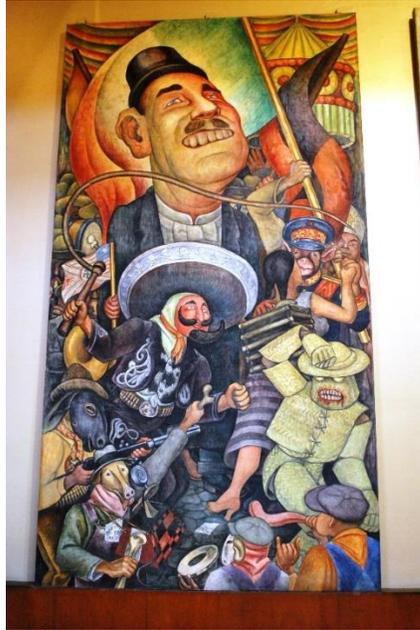


Figure 67. Mural entitled "Carnival of the Mexican Life" by Diego Rivera. Located at the Palace of Bellas Artes, on canvas.

A few graffiti makers from the younger generation referenced the Mexican Art Renaissance as the foundational process of national story-telling but diverged from the understanding that muralism must refer to traditional, historical murals of the past. One graffiti maker, 30 years old, explained: “En México, nos referimos a un proceso nacional y puede llevar técnicas mas complicadas. Pero hoy, se hacen murales con aerosol,” which means “In Mexico, we refer to a national process [when describing murals]. Muralism can be associated with techniques that are complicated. However, today, murals are made with spray paint.” Another graffitero, 33 years old, said that murals “Plasmar la historia de México,” meaning that murals “Capture/translate the history of Mexico.” What both respondents express is that muralism is a remarkably place-based practice in Mexico, and that the concept takes on the specific form telling stories of place, of history, and of

nationalism. These quotations also suggest that graffiti may function as a contemporary version of muralism, if content transmits narrative of Mexico and Mexican nationalism. This is demonstrated in Figure 69, Figure 70, Figure 71, Figure 72, and Figure 73, below.



Figure 68. Fresco-style revolutionary image, surrounded by spray painted tags. Photo taken near the Centro de Iztapalapa.



Figure 69. Contemporary spray painted mural, depicts José María Morelos, a figure from the Mexican war for Independence. Photo taken at the crossing of major highways Czada de Talpan and Autopista Urbana S (also called Boulevard Adolfo Ruiz Cortines).



Figure 70. Spray painted contemporary mural depicting Miguel Hidalgo during the Mexican war for Independencia. Photo taken in Tlalpan at the crossing of major highways Czada de Talpan and Autopista Urbana S (also called Boulevard Adolfo Ruiz Cortines).



Figure 71. Contemporary spray painted mural, depicts Pancho Villa, Revolutionary leader (left, large) and revolutionary imagery. Photo taken in Tlalpan at the crossing of major highways Czda de Tlalpan and Autopista Urbana S (also called Boulevard Adolfo Ruiz Cortines).



Figure 72. Contemporary spray painted mural depicts Mexican Revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata (right, large) and revolutionary imagery. Photo taken in Tlalpan at the crossing of major highways Czda de Tlalpan and Autopista Urbana S (also called Boulevard Adolfo Ruiz Cortines).



Figure 73. Spray painted contemporary mural depicts Dia de Muertos ceremonial imagery. Photo taken in Tlalpan at the crossing of major highways Czda de Tlalpan and Autopista Urbana S (also called Boulevard Adolfo Ruiz Cortines). Written description reads “Como una pintura nos iremos borrando. Como una flor, nos iremos secando aqui sobre la tierra. Como vestidura de ave zacuan de la preciosa ave de hule nos iremos acabando. Meditadlo señores aquilas y tigres, aunque fuerais de jade o de oro tambien alla ireis, al lugar de los de los descarnados tendremos que desaparecer, nadie habra de quedar.”

In English, approximately translates to: “Like a painting, we become erased. Like a flower, we dry up upon the earth. Like the plumage of the eagle, made of the most precious rubber, we will be decimated. Meditate on it, you men of eagles and tigers, even if you were of jade or of gold, you will also go there, to the place of the emaciated. We will all disappear, no one will be left.”

The images above visually depict events, characters, and symbols that have become descriptors of Mexican nationalism. Furthermore, the combination of all perspectives listed above suggest that Mexico’s loaded history of muralism (as the political and cultural deployment of wall painting for the purpose of national storytelling) has been highly influential to future generations. It also appears that the current version of this practice has been made less formal and more accessible than the murals of the past whereby everyday, non-famous people may contribute to contemporary muralism. Also, murals today may be placed, viewed, and shared in the setting of the urban street, avenue, or boulevard, rather than strictly within the confines of government

buildings. See examples in Figure 74, Figure 75, Figure 76, Figure 77, Figure 78, Figure 79, Figure 80, Figure 81, and Figure 82 below.



Figure 74. Contemporary cultural mural depicts Tlaloc, Aztec Diety of Rain. Photo taken in Centro de Iztapalapa, believed to be made with paintbrush. Decorative and cultural in nature; lacking direct political or social messaging.



Figure 75. "Sin maiz, no hay pais". In English, this means "Without corn/maiz, there is no country." Contemporary spray painted political mural, photo taken near the Centro Histórico.



Figure 76. Spray painted contemporary cultural mural resembles Aztec calendar symbology.
 Photo taken near Centro de Iztapalapa, close to the Metro station called Iztapalapa.



Figure 77. Cultural spray painted contemporary mural depicts Aztec Warriors. Photo taken at Cerro de La Estrella hiking path.



Figure 78. Cultural spray painted contemporary mural depicts Nahuatl deity Quetzalcoatl (feathered serpent) and Aztec person near the pyramids of Teotihuacan. Photo taken on hiking path at Cerro de la Estrella in Iztapalapa.



Figure 79. Spray painted contemporary cultural mural depicting Aztec warrior. Photo taken at hiking path on Cerro de La Estrella in Iztapalapa.



Figure 80. “Tierra y Libertad”, translates to “Earth and Liberty”. Contemporary political mural refers to Mexican revolutionary soldier. Applied with spray paint. Photo taken near Cerro de la Estrella, Iztapalapa.



Figure 81. Spraypainted political/social mural. Photo taken near Avenida Periférico

Words written above imagery read: “Queda prohibido toda discriminación o conducta que atente contra la dignidad humana y que tenga por objeto anular o menoscabar los derechos y libertades de las personas.”

Translates in English to: “All discrimination or conduct that violates human dignity and that has the effect of nullifying or undermining the rights and freedoms of individuals is prohibited.”



Figure 82. "Ciudad". Cultural contemporary mural capturing pride for Mexico City. Applied with Spray paint. Photo taken near Avenida Periférico.

However, the description of murals as political, cultural, or historical large-format images was not decisively stated by all people interviewed. There were some outliers in the responses of graffiti makers, specifically, that the term mural may have a broader and more vague meaning than the previous descriptions. One graffiti maker said simply, "Es un formato grande, pintura en la pared pero de gran formato," which translates in English to, "It's large format, a painting on a wall but in large format". This definition denotes that any inscription made on a wall, including graffiti, may be considered a mural if it is large in size, taking up a good deal of visual space. Another graffiti maker, 31 years old, said, a mural is "Una pintura o instalación en gran formato, y puede tener contexto político y social," which means in English that a mural is "a painting or installation that is

large, and can have political or social context.” Still another graffiti maker respondent, 32 years old, said, “...Necesitas estudiar sobre eso. Es cuando hablan y saben y conocen lo que hacen, preparacion dan un espacio y acomadan sus elementos,” which translates in English to, “...You need to study [the practice of muralism to do it]. It’s when [muralists] can talk about and know and are acquainted with what they are doing, and preparation is given to a space and accommodates the elements.” Another graffiti maker concurred, saying that murals, “Son proyectos más avanzados de técnicas más difíciles de gente con más experiencia.” This translates to “[Murals] are projects that are more advanced in technique, more difficult, made by people with more experience.” These responses indicate the belief that murals must only be large works created by people who are practiced in their application techniques, and while they may or may not convey political ideology, murals must be planned in detail so that placement, size, and content are considered prior to execution.

Arguably, some graffiti may therefore overlap with descriptions of murals. Wall inscriptions falling into this category were the most frequently appreciated and respected graffiti that I saw, and were regular staples of the urban visual landscape in Iztapalapa. I have come to understand that any work demonstrating skill, extensive planning, and immense attention to detail that is also large format and has been applied to a vertical surface with spray paint to be a hybrid version of graffiti and muralism. This hybrid of graffiti and muralism is often referred to as a ‘piece’, short for ‘masterpiece’ or “Graffiti Legal” as described above.



Figure 83. Graffiti mural of animals done on a wall in Iztapalapa.



Figure 84. Spraypainted mural advertises for a handy-man business in Iztapalapa.



Figure 85. Spray painted mural mixes images of animals with human faces in Iztapalapa.



Figure 86. Spraypainted mural advertises airbrush services in Iztapalapa.

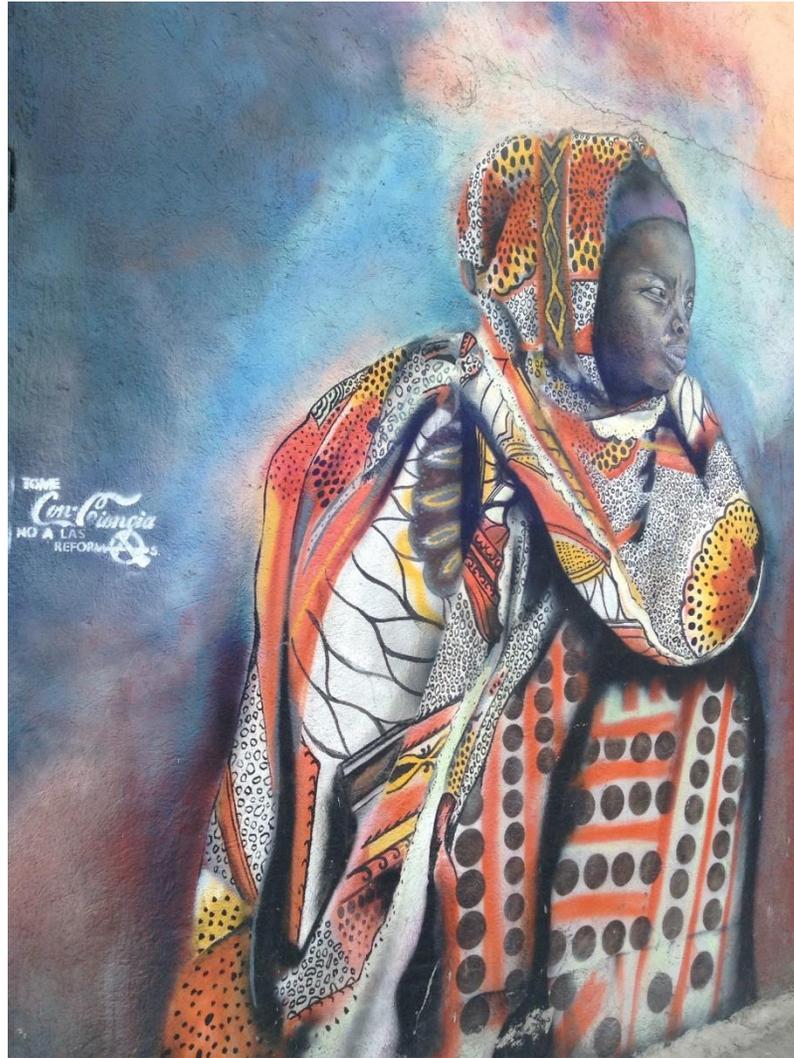


Figure 87. Spraypainted mural in Iztapalapa. Words say "Tome conciencia, no a las reformas" which translates in English to "Have consciousness, not for the reforms".

In summary it is useful to think of several categories of wall inscriptions when conceptualizing graffiti in Iztapalapa and D.F. See Table 2: Graffiti Categories & Hierarchies.

Table 2: Graffiti Categories & Hierarchies

Type of Wall Inscription	Description	Expected Level of Skill as Perceived by Graffiti Makers	Legality	Reception by community members
Tag	Hasty lines written on walls	Novice	Generally illegal	Annoying, ill-developed
Bomb	Two-dimensional painting of tag name, with outline and fill	Intermediate	Often illegal but sometimes legal such as in skate parks and deportivos	Irritating, generally unremarkable
Piece	Any spraypainted work indicating extensive time, skill, and planning	Expert	Legal	Interesting, well-liked
Combination Graffiti Mural	Cultural, political or well developed image spray painted on wall	Expert	Legal	Loved, treasured, respected,

5.5 Art: Expression of Feelings & Emotion

As one might imagine, art was the term most difficult for people to define, and was often described as a mix of emotions, feelings, environments, reactions, and materials. One graffiti maker said simply that art is “una forma de expresar tus sentimientos” which means art is “a form of expressing your feelings.” Another graffiti maker who also considered himself a muralist described art as “Todo aquello que

sensibiliza tus emociones, como árbol, naturaleza, todo” or “Everything that sensitizes the emotions, like a tree, nature, everything”. Still another graffitero described art as moments that have a creative process, saying “Son momentos que tienen el proceso de crear”. And one especially well known, respected, and prominent graffiti maker in Iztapalapa described art as “Puede ser algo que causa una motivación o emoción. Algo que pase del blanco a una emoción” which translates to “It can be something that causes motivation or emotion. Something that passes from white (blankness) to (colorful) emotion.” Prominent here is the congruous narrative that art is anything that gives one an emotional reaction, or that intentionally captures, visualizes, or presents a viewer with a specific emotion or feeling.

Moreover, bringing the comparison between art and graffiti back to the concepts of shared, public space and reception by an audience, the famous graffitero last quoted above says, “El arte no debe quedarse encerrado en un museo; el graff debe compartirse y dar color a la ciudad,” which translates to “Art should not remain locked up in a museum; graffiti should be shared and give color to a city.” Several graffiti makers communicated that they shared this sentiment, another saying that he wished to make the whole of the city a public art gallery comprised of graffiti in the streets. The common theme was that visual, externalization and experimentation with representing one’s feelings and identity was the primary factor comprising notions of art. Further, although the idea that graffiti is an art form is one of great contradiction and debate, I argue that most of the graffiti photographed for this thesis represents expression of feeling, if nothing else, which therefore should be attributed to the perspectives of art given in this section.

The last element of art that should be linked to graffiti is the term ‘street art’. Street art was explained as a process of making an intentional artistic contribution for the public in streets. Street art could be made with any type of material, or as an installation, and generally was thought of as successfully executed if it was cleverly placed, wittily inscribed, or referenced topics needing contextual understanding. Street art may consist of: spray paint, stencils, stickers, wheat pasted posters, performance, or dioramas.

5.6 State Support for a Contemporary Graffiti Movement

The appropriateness and acceptability of graffiti in Iztapalapa is further exhibited through the support and permission to make graffiti that the state government and law enforcement have extended to adolescents, established graffiti makers, and community members. It appears that the governments of D.F. have formally encouraged the teaching of graffiti and spray paint techniques in state-sponsored art classes at community centers and through the sponsorship of enormous graffiti exhibition events. This means that not only has the state continued the practice of investing in visual storytelling first initiated by the Alvaro Obregon and Jose Vasconcelos, but the state appears to have formally indicated that spray painted murals are a recognized art form and are worthy of investment.

Evidence is presented here from community centers, graffiti classes and public graffiti expositions in which the Mexican state has sponsored and sanctioned acts of graffiti. The community centers examined are both found in Iztapalapa and are called:

Faro Oriente and Chavos Banda. The graffiti exhibition events examined here are called: Febrero Graffitero (held annually for the month of February at Faro Oriente), and Expo Chavos Banda (held for one day annually in November at Chavos Banda).

5.6.1 Faro Oriente

Faro Oriente is a large community center located on the north-east side of Iztapalapa, where Iztapalapa shares a border with Ciudad Nezahualcoyotl (also known as “Neza”). The center can be found just off major highway Czada Ignacio Zaragoza in between side streets Calle Cedros and Calle Pinos. Faro seemed aptly placed, in an underserved neighborhood severely lacking resources and marked by what appeared to be massive government housing projects. One teacher at Faro however, pointed out that the center is not heavily used by people from the neighborhood, and that “La gente cercana no conoce el Faro” which means “The folks nearby are not familiar with Faro.” The same teacher also described this part of the city as “una zona conflictiva y peligrosa, para que la comunidad atraves del Faro cambiara,” which means that it is “a dangerous conflict zone, but through the community at Faro, is changing”. It was in this part of the city that my friend and research assistant, with whom I had explored so many other areas of the city, warned me of danger and became visibly fearful that we may not be in a safe environment for the first and only time during my fieldwork. That said, we were able to explore Faro, interview several teachers and administrative staffers with no problems.



Figure 88. View of the main facility at Faro Oriente, from front entrance.

As a community resource, Faro Oriente functions as a hub of social engagement and as a creative center for the arts. It is available to community members at no cost, and even has a small garden area and child care onsite. The facilities were covered in wall inscriptions of every sort, ranging from scribbled tags to hasty bombs to complex graffiti pieces to massive cultural murals. It appeared that at Faro, students and community members were clearly permitted to use vertical spaces for all types of visual expression. Observed program offerings included: painting, drawing, guitar, sculpture, airbrush, print making, silk screening, dancing, welding, metal work, graphic design, cultural events and performances, and likely, more. The site also had a large music stage, for open air concerts that are reportedly well attended and exciting events for community members. I was also told that Faro is run by “el gobierno del D.F. y gestion de promotores”, which translates to “the government of D.F. and the management of promoters”. Faro appeared

to be well known, respected, a highly organized community resource for many attendees.

See photos taken at Faro Oriente below.



Figure 89. Cement tunnel, decorated with spray painted murals at Faro Oriente.



Figure 90. Dia De Muertos sculptures called "alebrijes", in process, at Faro Oriente.



Figure 91. Interior workspace for drawing, painting, printing, and other art classes at Faro Oriente.



Figure 92. Installed sculptures found in second story of Faro Oriente facilities.



Figure 93. Exterior tags and bombs at Faro Oriente.



Figure 94. Exterior spray painted mural outside of metal shop at Faro Oriente.



Figure 95. Decorative, surreal spray painted murals at backside of Faro Oriente.



Figure 96. Decorative, cultural mural, reminiscent of Pre-Hispanic styles at Faro Oriente.

Interestingly, the intended goal and mission statement at Faro veered away from the intent to create fine artists. Rather, one drawing teacher explained “El Faro no intenta hacer artistas. Utilizan el arte para tener una perspectiva distinta de su vida; el arte funciona para hacer mas sensible a las personas” which translates to: “Faro does not intend to make artists. We utilize art to gain a new and distinct perspective on life; art functions as a way to make people more sensitive [to those around them].” This quotation captured exactly my perception of graffiti in Iztapalapa: that rather than functioning as a practice of fine art, graffiti was often simply a way for people to externalize feelings of daily life in order to become more emotionally stable and sensitive members of their community. This was further exemplified in a conversation I had with another art teacher who had been teaching in Iztapalapa for decades. He said one of the most important activities he did with youth attending his classes was to assign them to paint or draw specific emotions, like anger or sadness. He said this was an essential exercise especially for students in Iztapalapa, who often don’t have other modes of support for positive, safe, and healthy emotional expression. My overall impression was that this was the goal of the center as well, to create a safe and positive atmosphere, brimming with inspiration for community members who would otherwise not have had access to such opportunities in their lives.

In some ways, Faro Oriente inevitably captured the Revolutionary spirit of the Mexican Mural Renaissance imagined by Obregon and Vasconcelos. For example, we can see that Faro Oriente, via government sponsorship, provides resources for the creation of vast visual stories, depicted on walls. Also, most of the work produced at Faro

is found behind the site walls—one cannot access the visual works there when the center is closed during after-hours times. This characteristic effectively mimics the government works of los Tres Grandes of the past. Finally, many of the wall inscriptions are made with acrylic paint applied in fresco style, and some of the interior murals depict political, social, or cultural images. These traits closely imitate style of the Mural Movement of the past. See Figure 97 below for example.



Figure 97. Fresco style mural done with paint brush depicts elements of Mexican national history and symbology.

However, Faro also departs from the historical mural movement. The center encourages the use of all kinds of expressive materials, including: spray paint, ceramics,

metal, silk screening/print making materials, and digital design software. In addition, while most of the center is contained with fences and walls thereby sheltering most of the artworks from complete public access, some spray painted murals can be found along the out-facing streets making some of the work at Faro un-restrictedly public. The center also promotes the idea that anyone and everyone may take advantage of the expressive benefits of art making. This is markedly different from Mexican Muralism of the past that was distinguished and renowned as “fine art” made by famous painters. As the final point of departure from the Mexican Murals of the past, many of the images found on walls at Faro were merely decorative, abstract, or surreal. These murals are starkly different from those of the past that were used to tell specific, place-based histories of nationalism.

There is one major cultivating event at Faro Oriente, held for graffiti makers and for the purpose of shared public expression. It is called Febrero Graffitero, which translates to “February of the Graffiti Makers”. One of the administrative organizers described the purpose of the event, explaining that an early goal, from its initiation in approximately the year 2005, was “por brindar un espacio de expresión porque no habia lugares donde ellos pudieran pintar”, which means “to provide a space of expression because there were not places where they [graffiteros] could paint”. Further, he explained that the formal objective of Febrero Graffitero is now to offer a community space for aerosol painting, to serve as a place where music and dance can also be shared, and to present families with opportunities for visit, learning, and participation. Spray paint cans are donated, presumably from the rapidly growing Mexican company called 360, (which was started in part by a famous graffiti maker in Iztapalapa) and between 1500 and 2000

people attend. The event is held for a full month, filled with graffiti expositions, break dancing, mc/rap, and dj events. It was also mentioned that talks, graffiti films, and other workshops were offered during the month of graffiti celebration. Informally, I was told by acquaintances that while well known, this event was not nearly as popular, exciting, and attractive as the other rather large graffiti event at Chavos Banda. I can only guess that the reason for this perspective was that Faro seemed to be received as a bit more formal, organized and harder to get to than other events in Iztapalapa, such as the Expo at Chavos Banda. However, my opinion is completely speculative and the month of festivities for Febrero Graffitero sounded fascinating to me.



Figure 98. Decorative and abstract mural son the out-facing walls of Faro Oriente.



Figure 99. Spray painted mural along the exterior of Fario Oriente. Depict the Mexican cultural image of the skeleton, reminiscent of pride for Dia de Muertos cultural tradition.



Figure 100. Spray painted mural found on a wall of the metal shop at Fario Oriente. Depict the Mexican cultural image of the skeleton, reminiscent of pride for Dia de Muertos cultural tradition.



Figure 101. Part of spray painted mural on the front side of Faro Oriente, made by the legendary graffiti maker Peque. Peque is rumored to have been one of the first graffiteros to gain massive respect with his skill for painting murals with spray paint in Iztapalapa/Neza.

5.6.2 Chavos Banda

The other community resource center that helps demonstrate government support for large wall inscriptions is called Chavos Banda. Chavos Banda was smaller than Faro Oriente, a bit less formal, and talked about more frequently by graffiti makers (as opposed to by community members like with Faro). While Faro Oriente appeared to have the ability to host upward of ten to fifteen classes at a time, Chavos appeared to house maybe two or three classes at one time, maximum. Chavos also seemed to function more as a ‘deportivo’ (a park used primarily for physical recreation) with limited community art resources, whereas Faro seemed to function primarily as a creative resource, with limited functionality for physical recreation activities.

Further, Chavos offered additional community resources for households. For example, one site administrator explained that Chavos offers instructive courses for community members coping with domestic violence and abuse, sexualized violence, or

conflict resolution. My research assistant thought that this aspect of Chavos made it an extremely more important community space and praised the center for offering these resources. She explained that issues of violence and domestic abuse were large problems in Iztapalapa, and that it was rare to find resources dealing with these issues.

Perhaps the most remarkable part of Chavos Banda was the one-day graffiti exposition event occurring every year at the end of November. The executive director claimed that approximately 600 murals are created on this day every year, with anywhere from 1,000-1,800 participants painting on walls of the site. He said that up to 8,000 people total attend the event, viewing and participating in artworks, and that the expo is covered by many local media outlets, such as tv stations, radio, blog and online coverage, and print journalism. Graffiti makers must arrive early in the morning to stake their claim for turf, as wall areas are designated on a first come-first serve basis. The event then continues throughout the day with integration of all four elements of hip hop being showcased: graffiti, mc'ing, bboy/breakdancing, and dj'ing. Although it was not explained by event coordinators, I also deduced based on mural content that the event apparently dictates a theme, and images must adhere to the theme in some kind of stylistic fashion.

The one negative aspect of Chavos Banda was that many graffiti makers expressed frustration and distaste for the financial management of Chavos. More than one alluded to the fact that donations made to the organization did not necessarily make it to the students or community members attending and using the facilities. And while Faro

boasts an organized and professional website and staff, Chavos was found online only via a cryptic facebook account rendering nearly no relevant information. Administration seemed more informal and was comprised of volunteers, as opposed to the paid staff comprising Faro Oriente. I also found it odd that after identifying myself as a researcher, I was told I could not take with me a copy of a brochure explaining class offerings.

I did personally view art classes, (specifically an open-ended craft session for youngsters and an adolescent-age airbrush course) while I visited the site and heard several accounts of the thriving Exposition event in November. I was encouraged by the friends I had made during my fieldwork to return to witness the Expo at Chavos Banda for myself, but was unable to do so for this research project.

In any case, Chavos appeared to depart more strongly from the historical mural movement, emerging individually as a central component of the contemporary graffiti movement. There were fewer fresco-style murals at Chavos, with the focus being primarily on spray paint and airbrush techniques. Further, the yard at which the Chavos Expo takes place felt more public, less closed off than the walled site at Faro. However, the Expo at Chavos did dictate social themes, bringing it back into purview of the

Mexican Mural movement under which government administrators dictated mural themes and ideology. See examples below.



Figure 102. Main classroom facility at Chavos Banda.



Figure 103. Spray paint mural depicting Salvador Dali marks the entrance to Chavos Banda by Koka.



Figure 104. Spray paint image in the office at Chavos Banda.



Figure 105. Spray paint words above list offered “Taller de arte urbano: graffiti, caldo en madera, dibujo, pintura, papelmache, bisuteria, actividades deportivas,” which translates in English to “Courses in Urban Art: graffiti, stock wood, drawing, painting, paper-maché, jewelry, and sports activities”.



Figure 106. Graffiti in the yard of Chavos Banda.



Figure 107. Spraypainted murals and graffiti covering the walls surrounding the track at Chavos Banda.



Figure 108. Spray painted mural of youth reading a book at Chavos Banda.



Figure 109. Spray painted mural of young boy reading with man at Chavos Banda.

Both Faro Oriente and Chavos Banda operate as modern-day environments that illuminate unique versions of state-sponsored muralism. While they differ strongly from the historical murals of the past, I have argued here that both community centers serve as sites of a new and exciting contemporary Mexican Mural Movement in Iztapalapa. Furthermore, while the literature has posed graffiti as an often non-sanctioned, illegal form of inscribing walls with hasty tags, we see here that in Iztapalapa at both Faro and Chavos, this is simply not the case.

5.7 Cultural Imagery & Place in the Graffiti of Iztapalapa & D.F.

Some additional evidence provided expanded context about culture, cultural images, history, and nationalism. Specifically, particular images and symbols were repeated over and over, and found to give visual explanation about the culture and meaning of place in Iztapalapa and in some cases, the Mexico City region.

Specifically, there were several sets of cultural symbols and recurring themes in the collection of photographs taken for this study. These included: Catholic imagery, Dia de Muertos skeletons, Aztec or Pre-hispanic symbols, Luchadores, and famous internationally recognized cartoons and characters. The implied meaning of these symbols is that of place pride, indicating that in the places where these photos were taken, people obtain very specific pride over their cultural symbols, heritage, and recognized meaning.

5.7.1 Catholic imagery

As mentioned in the demographics section, Catholicism is a common religious faith throughout Mexico and in Mexico City. One theory explained to me was that the faith and reverence for Jesus Christ was accepted so strongly throughout the Mexican landscape was because it was offered as a direct corollary to Aztec sacrificial faith. That is, common folklore about the Aztecs regards them as a violent and warring people, who believed that the sacrificial blood of tribes they had conquered and peasants in their highly organized society would bring their soils agricultural prosperity. When the Spaniard conquistadors overran the Aztecs, their reverence for a man who had sacrificed himself for his people was an extremely refreshing alternative to slaves, conquered peoples, and those who had lost family in forced sacrificial ceremonies. Hence, the common and intense Mexican veneration and admiration for the teachings of Jesus is said to have taken hold. Exemplifying this is the huge Semana Santa (also known as Passion of the Christ) re-enactment ceremony held at Cerro de la Estrella. The wealth and prevalence of images depicting Catholic Jesus speaks to this widely attended and appreciated place-based event.

Further, Mexico has taken the symbol of the Virgin Mother Mary from the Catholic religion to be the patron saint of the nation. There are deep legends of the Virgin's appearance at Tepeyec Hill in the early 1500s when she appeared to visit, protect, and answer the prayers of a native person known as Juan Diego. The Virgin's image apparently appeared to Juan Diego in the folds of a piece of cloth at which point

she had the darker skin of a native person and spoke to him in the native Nahuátl language. She became known as the Virgin Guadalupe and seems to have been an integral symbolic character linking Spanish and indigenous cultures, giving rise to early national pride for Mestizo identity and reverence for the household role of the “mother”. Today, one of the largest celebrations in Mexico City (which I was told is second only to the Day of the Dead celebration at the end of October) is the December 12th Virgen de Guadalupe holiday, in which people flock to the famous Basilica of Guadalupe. The Virgin symbol, along with Catholic images of Jesus, were prominent visual staples common in spray painted imagery of D.F.



Figure 110. Spray painted mural commissioned by the Catholic church. Photo taken near Avenida Del Rosal in Iztapalapa.



Figure 111. Spray painted mural depicts Jesus Christ. Photo taken in Coyoacán.



Figure 112. Spray painted Catholic mural, depicts hands in prayer (left) and Jesus with his crucifixion 'crown of thorns'. Photo taken near Ave Ano de Juarez and Calles 6 & 8 in north Iztapalapa.



Figure 113. Spray painted Catholic mural. Depicts Jesus Christ and 12 Apostles at the Last Supper. Photo taken near Avenida Año de Juarez and Calles 6 & 8 in north Iztapalapa.



Figure 114. Virgin Guadalupe and Jesus mural, painted at Chavos Banda in Iztapalapa.



Figure 115. Virgin Guadalupe spraypainted mural in Iztapalapa.

5.7.2 Dia de Muertos & Mexican culture surrounding death

Mexico is also well known for the cultural celebration of Day of the Dead. The holiday takes place on October 31st and November 1st, with the 31st being a day to celebrate and remember adults that have passed away and the 1st being a day for celebrating the lives of children. The festivities include preparing food and drinks that were favorites of people who have passed away and putting them out on a table or decorated shrine constructed in their memory as offering, should the departed souls of loved ones return for the celebration. Stories are told, games are played, and the general tone is of merriment and gratitude for having been able to share some time on Earth with the souls of the departed. The Dia de Muertos celebration is thoroughly depicted with the

co-option of skeleton imagery and pervades graffiti imagery of Iztapalapa. It is important to understand that the image/symbol of the skeleton is often playful and evokes a tone and feeling undeniably Mexican. This is different from the American use of the skeleton for purposes of fear, darkness, death, and destruction—alternately, the cultural implications surrounding the notion of death in Iztapalapa are generally understood as normal, accepted, and spirited aspects of Mexico City. The image of the skeleton connotes these place-based understandings of death.



Figure 116. Skeleton embedded in graffiti bomb in red. Taken in Iztapalapa.



Figure 117. Skeleton imagery created with spray paint in the Centro Histórico.



Figure 118. Spray painted skeleton imagery near the border of Iztacalco and Iztapalapa. Photo taken near Rio Frio.



Figure 119. Skeleton image made with spraypaint, embedded amongst other graffiti pieces. Photo taken at a skate park in San Juan Xalpa in Iztapalapa.



Figure 120. Spray painted mural depicts skeleton mariachi players. Photo taken at "El Chopo", located in the northern part of the Centro Histórico near the crossing of Avenida Mosqueta and Avenida Insurgentes Norte.



Figure 121. Spray painted mural. Dia de Muertos skeleton woman, smoking a cigarette amongst graffiti pieces. Photo taken at "El Chopo", located in the northern part of the Centro Histórico near the crossing of Avenida Mosqueta and Avenida Insurgentes Norte.

5.7.3 Aztec & Pre-Hispanic symbols

As discussed in the settings chapter during the recounting of Aztec social organization, Pre-Hispanic peoples played a prominent role in the landscape now considered Mexico City. Further, images of Aztec and Pre-Hispanic culture have been used to depict nationalism for decades throughout the region of Lake Texcoco. Most prominent themes depicted in graffiti imagery include: Aztec calendar, Aztec warriors, pyramids, and the feathered serpent of Queztalcoatl.



Figure 122. Spray painted mural of corn and Aztec calendar symbology. Photo taken at el Chopo.



Figure 123. Spray painted mural depicts Aztec pyramids, warrior, and calendar. Photo taken near Avenida Año de Juarez and Calles 6 & 8 in north Iztapalapa.



Figure 124. Spray painted Aztec warrior and temple. Photo taken at Estadio Azteca.



Figure 125. Spray painted mural depicts the Nahuátl feathered serpent called Quetzalcoatl. Photo take at Estadio Azteca.

5.7.4 Luchadores

Another decisively Mexican tradition is the revered character of the Mexican wrestler called the Luchador, which is best known for colorful masks worn by competitors and theatrical performance during wrestling matches. Friends told me that attending a Luchador match was fun, riotous, and classically “Mexican”. Again we see the repeated theme of nationalism reflected in discussion of the cultural symbols of graffiti imagery. I was amused to see more than one image of a luchador carefully inscribed on the walls of Mexico City by graffiti makers, giving me, as an outsider, yet again, clues of cultural importance.



Figure 126. Spray painted mural depicts Mexican wrestlers called "luchadores." Photo taken near Avenida Año de Juárez and Calles 6 & 8 in north Iztapalapa.



Figure 127. Spray painted mural depicts Luchador with a spray can. Photo taken at El Chopo.

5.7.5 Famous international figures, cartoons & characters

Massey's time-space compression, or the notion of "sensing the presence of everywhere" all at once is exemplified in graffiti depicting international characters, cartoons, and figures. It was very common to see international cartoon characters, film characters, and internationally recognized faces in graffiti imagery. These examples demonstrate the spread of global images, stories, and symbols world-wide, particularly with the advent of the world wide web. Further, several graffiti makers told me that they get a good deal of their inspiration by viewing graffiti from other countries. Also, one graffiti maker lamented the fact that most graffiti makers from other countries know nothing of the graffiti of Mexico. He has therefore attempted to remedy this problem with the creation of his own blog called "Velvet Mexican Streets" (www.velvetmexicanstreets.com), in which he showcases the masterful skill that

Mexican graffiti makers display in the streets of his city. See Figure 128Figure 135 for examples of international graffiti imagery.



Figure 128. Postres Mary, depicts global image of Betty Boop.



Figure 129. Stenciled spray paint image found on the inside of an internet cafe, depicting Marilyn Monroe.



Figure 130. Luigi, a character from Mario Brothers Nintendo, depicted in graffiti in Iztapalapa.



Figure 131. Large spray painted mural in Iztapalapa depicting American film box office and cartoon characters of the Transformers.



Figure 132. Spray painted mural depicting American cartoon character Spongebob squarepants in Iztapalapa.



Figure 133. Graffiti referencing the Sistine Chapel in Iztapalapa.



Figure 134. Spiderman. Spraypainted mural by famous graffiti maker who tags the name "Komex".



Figure 135. Marvel characters Hulk and Captain America, depicted in spray painted murals in Iztapalapa.

6 DISCUSSION

What can be taken away as meaningful from the results and analysis describing the wide assortment of wall inscriptions in Mexico City? In response to the question about who graffiti makers are, we see that graffiti makers interviewed largely in Iztapalapa often gave deeply insightful and heartfelt responses to explain what they do and why they do it. The responses offered pose graffiti makers as kind, intelligent, sentient members of their community, who often implored the use of graffiti to share themselves with others, engage in communities of participation, and experiment with modes of expression that would help solidify their social location. It is also clear from the many photographs inserted here that graffiti makers are talented, remarkable, and skilled purveyors of visual stories and images. In many cases, graffiti makers thought intensely and sincerely about the work they placed on walls and practiced their techniques for days, weeks, and often for years. And while community members in Iztapalapa and throughout D.F. are sometimes slighted or irritated by thoughtless lines tagged on walls, there seemed to be a void of hatred, fear, or distress caused by graffiti makers. This provides evidence proposing graffiti as a non-violent, non-aggressive form of wall painting done with spray paint, often completed without criminal intent.

Further, in this case study, graffiti makers were not commonly feared as criminals, vandals, gang members, nor did they exhibit violent, aggressive or hostile character traits. The demographic data gathered supports observations posing them as smart, imaginative and sensitive individuals, needing visual, creative outlets. In other

cases, we have seen that many graffiti makers embarked on the quest to do graffiti simply because they were attempting to imitate others they saw painting on walls in their neighborhood and craved a sense of belonging and fulfillment that they saw modeled in graffiti crews and practice.

Furthermore, in response to the question about how to define graffiti, we see that both graffiti and muralism in D.F. have been popularly conceived as a cultural practice of visual storytelling under which elements of national history are sometimes transmitted. Muralism, and graffiti categorized as murals, are well-developed in precision and skill, and as such, evidently merit deep respect, inspiration, and praise from community members. Graffiti makers, through their practice and experience using spray paint, have in some cases conveyed cultural, historical, or political images, and consequently have emerged as contemporary Mexican Muralists.

In other cases, even when historical stories were not transmitted via graffiti content, paintings done in large format lettering style with spray paint have been considered murals done in graffiti style. Therefore, while we have seen that graffiti images often differed strongly in character, notoriety, and location from the historical Mexican Murals of the past, many community members have accepted the contemporary work of graffiti makers as representative of 'muralism'. And because many wall inscriptions appear to evoke deep national and place-based cultural pride, graffiti appears to have become a highly sought skill. In Mexico City, painting on walls and the development of skill to expertly do so has become a respected, rather than feared practice.

Finally, emerging as a poignant declaration about a graffiti maker's right to the city in Iztapalapa, it appeared that the intense visceral need to communicate ones feelings or to experimentally express sense of self in a visual manner has been generally acknowledged as a healthy, sensitive, and acceptable practice by the state government and by community members. It seems that graffiti makers in Distrito Federal, Mexico have successfully claimed a right to their own city, which is remarkably different from graffiti in many other world-wide case studies in which graffiti is illegal, erased, or in some way, commonly expunged.

In response to the question about what stories of place are transmitted by graffiti makers, several cultural stories of national pride for Pre-Hispanic and Revolutionary heritage emerged in the content of graffiti imagery. In addition, stories of reverence for figures in the Catholic religion, specifically of Jesus and the adapted figure of the Virgin Guadalupe, were prominent. And more playful, place-based figures such as skeletons, luchadores, and cartoons narrated stories of lighthearted and spirited wit, comedy, and fun. Some political stories engaging with distaste for political leaders in the PRI party were presented, but appeared as a much less prominent dynamic of place than the other aforementioned narratives and symbols.

The evidence of place posed in this thesis also paralleled graffiti's interaction with cultural imagery. In regard to the research question "in what manner does graffiti produce ideas of culture in a specific case study", I argue that the graffiti of Iztapalapa directly narrates elements of cultural pride, as if to broadcast to an outsider which dynamics are integral for understanding national identity. Therefore, it seemed that graffiti served

partly as a tool for making cultural symbols visual, explicit, shared, and remembered. And as a final point relating to how graffiti produces ideas of culture, it appeared in the case study of Iztapalapa, graffiti harkens back to some of the ideals of state protection imagined during the Post-Revolutionary period. That is, nostalgia for a Protectionist government seems to be felt by graffiti makers (evident in written social justice messages of graffiti), community members (who posed social justice murals as their favorites), and the state alike (through sponsorship for graffiti classes, techniques, and materials).

As noted, it is clear that in some parts of Mexico City, including Iztapalapa, expression via large, vertical paintings is not only acceptable, it is often encouraged. Due to the cultural history and respect for wall painting in D.F., it appears that adolescent male youth have discovered what may be the one acceptable mode of expressing feelings in a public way in Mexico, which I believe, is something to be applauded. Mural and graffiti making appear as established methods of expressing anger, beauty, love, frustration, sadness, pride, sense of self/individuality, sense of belonging, culture, history, political sentiment, silliness, humor, and globalization.

The only element of graffiti found to be annoying to community members was tagging and in some cases, bombing. These steps seemed to be accepted as simultaneously irritating but tolerable. The practice of illegal and hasty lettering was understood as a step that graffiti makers must experience before arriving at the more experienced and higher cultural status of mural maker. Further, it was agreed that if public expression of feelings and identity through graffiti would replace other, more destructive patterns and social practices, such as substance abuse or violence, it was an

appropriate and worthwhile behavior, especially for youth and adolescents. Nearly all graffiti makers who had become revered as talented in adulthood, began their practice with tagging, as a mode of simply practicing use of materials, if not as a method for developing identity, confidence, sense of self, and professional skills they would later use in their careers.

Finally, although it was not explicitly cited by community members as a shared perspective, my personal experience of becoming familiar with particular graffiti maker styles, personalities, pieces, tags, and bombs allowed me to recognize the presence of individual graffiti makers throughout the urban landscape. I could literally find their unique mark on the city by viewing their graffiti. This process of encountering and recognizing graffiti of people I knew amongst the sea of graffiti made by people I did not, made me feel connected. This process mapped a notion of place in my mind that was built on social relationships with graffiti makers, taggers, and recognized imagery. Graffiti, in essence, allowed me to craft my own personal story of place due to the social web I had constructed during my fieldwork. All in all, the process of engaging with graffiti and graffiti makers in Iztapalapa was an incredibly enjoyable and rewarding experience.

7 CONCLUSION

By the end of my time in the field and upon my return to the United States, I had become noticeably uninterested in walls that did not tell some kind of story. Walls painted one color, lacking tags, bombs, pieces, or murals, and especially those painted solely white, seemed to call to me. They invited a visual story, the rendering of a graffiti masterpiece, or at the very least, the hasty inscription of a witty phrase or recognized symbol that would make passersby think during their daily travel. A blank wall had literally taken the form of a blank canvas in my mind's eye. I was thinking like a graffiti writer.

As a researcher and community advocate, I had also become upset upon returning to the North Coast of California to notice (for the first time in over a year) that much of the graffiti in my small town was consistently and noticeably painted over with white or grey paint, erasing any marking that had been inscribed beneath it. Encountering graffiti erasure in Northern California contrasted starkly with the colorful pervasion of graffiti with which I had become so enmeshed in Mexico City. This foreign re-exposure to graffiti removal left me wondering: what had been painted here previously? What did the graffiti maker intend to communicate? And most importantly, who felt it was important to dismiss this graffiti; why were the voices of graffiti makers in my town being edited out of the visual landscape? I also of course began forming the discursive thread in my mind, wondering about the assumptions made under which it was appropriate and necessary to dismiss the voices of graffiti makers in my community. If investigated

further, how accurate would these assumptions prove to be? Did decision makers know about the positive effects of externally sharing thoughts, ideas, and feelings? Did the community agree that graffiti should be erased? These are topics that could be explored by a future community project on the North Coast of California.

The graffiti that I viewed and experienced in Mexico City had so integrally changed my experience and perspective of social engagement, visual storytelling, and experimentation with self-expression that I was shocked and horrified that anyone might consider stifling the insightful and creative voices of graffiti makers. This was especially stunning to me because I had come to understand the opportunity that graffiti poses to powerfully enhance the quality of life for community members, for both those who make graffiti and those who do not. I could no longer relate to the common American fear of graffiti as vandalism, aggression, territoriality, chaos, and violence. I realized I had suddenly become envious of the communities I encountered in Mexico, because the everyday culture of the neighborhoods I spent time in had seemed to be so receptive to the application of visual, colorful, creativity in public spaces. And the support, respect, and freedom rendered to graffiti makers in my case study by members of community, the state, and the media had yielded such powerful, beautiful, and creative images, I could not relate to the idea of stifling these forces, in my town or anywhere.

Therefore, based on my experience and the data I have offered with this research, I would professionally encourage city governments, planners and leaders to partner with community resource centers, after-school programs, and educational institutions to promote public painting projects, graffiti, and muralism. I advocate that public works

projects, for example, improvement of parks, public buildings, schools, skate parks, highways, bridges, and public transportation, should specifically incorporate designated areas in which public painting, artwork, sculptural installation, visualization, design, graffiti, and street art should be encouraged. In addition to that, I advocate for the creation of exclusive 'graffiti' spaces; that is, the creation of areas where it is ok to experiment with spray cans, and for people to make lines, images, write their name, or do whatever they like with painting and drawing on a wall. Classes, groups, and youth efforts should also implement a focus on design, execution, and planning of public art works.

I furthermore I advocate for a halt to all criminalization of graffiti makers and would encourage lawmakers and citizens instead to divert graffiti makers to art classes, design, music, and place-based research projects under which they could join community projects to remake public visualization of place. I remain curious about the stories of place, culture, nationalism, political ideology, and history that would be transmitted in places all over the world if this were not only permitted to happen, but if this were a funded, supported, and maintained activity. Finally, I argue that methods of stylistic competition and social engagement, (as we see within graffiti practice and form in the streets of Mexico and through formal, government graffiti expositions in D.F.) would introduce the potential for the transformation of vertical spaces into visually stunning creative landscapes. I personally believe that the case study of graffiti in Iztapalapa offers a tangible mode of positive community engagement that should be admired, shared, and most importantly, replicated.

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APPENDIX A: GRAFFITI DEFINITIONS

Table 3. Graffiti Definitions.

Definition	Keywords, nuances, defining characteristics	Author
Graffiti is simply a type of wall inscription	Wall inscription	D'Angelo 1974; Jefferson 1976; Stein 1989; Santino 1999; Klingman et al 2000; Whitehead 2004; Yaponjian 2005
Graffiti is a type of painting or drawing specifically applied to wall surfaces with aerosol spray paint or ink marker	Spray Paint; aerosol on walls; drawing with ink on walls	Ley & Cybriwsky 1974; Peteet 1996; Bowen 1999; Whitehead 2004; Valle & Weiss 2010
Graffiti is a criminal act by definition; graffiti is the illegal act of inscribing a wall	Illegality; lack of permission	Lachmann 1988; D'Amico & Block 2004; Halsey & Young 2006
Graffiti is an act of vandalism and defacement; done with the intent to damage property	Vandalism; defacement; Intent to damage property	Ley & Cybriwsky 1974; Lachmann 1988; Stein 1989; Bowen 1999; Klingman et al. 2000;
Graffiti is painting done on public property or in public spaces where members of public may see it; examples may include on/near subways and public transit	Public property, viewability by members of the public	Ley & Cibriwsky 1974; D'Angelo 1974; Lachmann 1988; Santino 1999; Bowen 1999; D'Amico & Block 2004
Graffiti is an act of performance for an audience; inscriptions made for the purpose of achieving fame, notoriety, getting known	Audience, fame, becoming known	Ley & Cibriwsky 1974; Lachmann 1988; D'Amico & Block 2004; Halsey & Young 2006

Definition	Keywords, nuances, defining characteristics	Author
Graffiti is a form of expression, visual dialogue, communication	Expression, visual dialogue, communication strategy	Bowen 1999; Klingman et al. 2000; Whitehead 2004; Snyder 2006
Graffiti images describe culture, graffiti is a type of culture such as street, youth, underground, or hip hop	Type of culture, embedded cultural symbols and storytelling	Santino 1999; Peteet 1996; Whitehead 2004; Valle & Weiss 2010; D'Amico & Block 2004; Yaponjian 2005
Graffiti is art; a study in form, style, aesthetic; a particular mode or method of doing art work	Art/Style	Ley & Cibriwsky 1974; Lachmann 1988; Valle & Weiss 2010; Bowen 1999; Klingman et al. 2000; Whitehead 2004; D'Amico & Block 2004, Yaponjian 2005; Snyder 2006; Halsey & Young 2006
Graffiti is a way of making political statements; is a resistance mechanism within politics	Political Statement, form of political resistance	Jefferson 1976; Stein 1989; Peteet 1996; Santino 1999; D'Amico & Block 2004; Benavides-Vanegas 2005
Graffiti is a way of advertising by making visual, public proclamations	Advertisement	Santino 1999; Whitehead 2004; Snyder 2006; Halsey & Young 2006
Graffiti is a way of leaving public autographs	Autograph, signature	Ley & Cibriwsky 1974
Graffiti is a device to mark territory	Territorial, marking territory	D'Amico & Block 2004
Graffiti is a mechanism to derive friends and social connections with others: a way to develop a sense of belonging within a group of peers	Friends, social connections	Halsey & Young 2006

APPENDIX B: RAW DATA FROM GRAFFITI MAKERS

Table 4. Economic Status of graffiti makers.

Data Collected on Economic Situation		
<i>Interviewer asked: Please describe your economic situation or economic class.</i>		
Response	# of Respondents who Answered this way	Notes (Relevant direct quotations used to enhance response summary)
Buena (<i>English translation: Good</i>)	1	
Estable (<i>English translation: Stable</i>)	2	"Estable con trabajo y un salario quincenal, ejerciendo". (<i>English translation: Stable with work and a salary for 14 days of working</i>)
		"Estable; clase media." (<i>English translation: Stable; Middle Class</i>)
Regular	1	
Media (<i>English translation: Middle Class</i>)	8	"Trabajo lunes a viernes." (<i>English translation: I work Monday through Friday</i>)
Media baja (<i>English translation: Middle low</i>)	2	
Mala (<i>English translation: Bad</i>)	2	"Mala/baja." (<i>English translation: Bad/low</i>)
		"Mala/nivel medio." (<i>English translation: bad/middle level</i>)
Baja (<i>English translation: Low</i>).	2	"Muchas personas, poco empleos." (<i>English translation: Many people, few jobs</i>)
Sometimes good, sometimes bad	1	"I'm not sure because I live for my artwork so it's just, like, random I guess. Sometimes good, sometimes bad."
Proletariado (<i>English translation: Proletarian</i>)	1	"Empleado Proletariado, trabajo mucho." (<i>English translation: Proletarian Employee, I work a lot</i>)

Table 5. Age of Graffiti Maker respondents.

Year Born	# of Respondents who answered this way	Age When Interviewed
1974	1	39
1976	1	37
1979	4	34
1980	1	33
1981	3	32
1982	2	31
1983	1	30
1985	2	28
1986	2	27
1987	2	26
1991	1	22
1993	1	20
(blank)	3	unknown
TOTAL	24	

Table 6. Summary of Age statistics within Graffiti Maker respondents.

Year Born of Youngest Respondent	Year Born of Oldest Respondent	Average Year born	Average Age at time of Interview
1993 (Age 20)	1974 (Age 39)	1982.666667	30.33 years old

Table 7. Graffiti Maker responses to race/nationality.

Description	# of Respondents who answered this way	Notes (Relevant direct quotations used to enhance response summary)
Mexicano (<i>English translation: Mexican</i>)	20	"Tengo influencia Norte Americano" (<i>English translation: I have North American influence</i>)
		"Mexicano y tambien 'Mestizo'." (<i>English translation: Mexican but also mixed</i>)
Blank (no response)	4	

Table 8. Graffiti maker religious affiliations.

Religion	# of Respondents who answered this way	Notes (Relevant direct quotations used to enhance response summary)
Catolica	5	"Soy creyente." (<i>English translation: I'm a believer</i>)
		"Catolico... Cristiano." (<i>English translation: Catholic... Christian</i>)
Ninguna	14	"No creo en Jesus ni dios. Sin religion." (<i>English translation: I don't believe in Jesus or gods. No religion.</i>)
		"Ninguna, pero mi familia es Catolico, como la tradicion en Mexico." (<i>English translation: None, but my familia is Catholic as is the tradition in Mexico.</i>)
		"No tengo religion, solo hip hop... y karma. Pero mi familia es Catolico... Tienes que estar en armonia." (<i>English translation: I don't have a religion, only hip hop... and karma. But my family is Catholic... You have to be in harmony.</i>)
		"I'm supposed to be Catholic but I don't really follow. I was born Catholic."
Yoruba	1	
blank (no response)	4	

Table 9. Graffiti maker self-described level of education.

Level of Education	# of Respondents who answered this way	Notes (Relevant direct quotations used to enhance response summary)
Maestría (<i>English translation: Master's degree/ Graduate level</i>)	1	
Licenciatura (<i>English translation: Equivalent to Undergraduate degree</i>)	9	Incluyendo disciplinas de: leyes, diseño grafico, artes visuales, arte y patrimonia cultural, comunicacion, arquitectura (2 respondents), y historia con especialidad en siglo 20 (<i>English translation: Including the disciplines- law, graphic design, visual art, cultural heritage, communication, architecture, and history with emphasis in 20th Century</i>)
Carrera Tecnica/ Tecnico Comercial (<i>English translation: Technical career, Commerical Technician</i>)	2	En diseño grafico (<i>English translation: in graphic design</i>)
Preparatoria (<i>English translation: High School</i>)	9	"Pero no me gusta la escuela. Primaria- buen promedio, secundaria- no muy buena." (<i>English translation: But I don't like school. Primary school- good average/grades, High school- not very good</i>)
blank/no answer	3	
Total	24	