

**THE PAINT MARKS THE PLACE: THE MURAL ART
OF RESISTANCE IN OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA**

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ABSTRACT

The Paint Marks the Place: The Mural Art of Resistance in Oakland, California

In the context of both historical and current urban redevelopment schemes in Oakland, California that displace black, brown, and indigenous peoples, businesses, and communities, I examine the work of mural artists and activists to resist erasure and mark belonging. Specifically, this research explores the relationship between the practice of intentional community mural-making, projecting narratives of culture and resistance, and geographic concepts of place-making, and sense of belonging. The research was conducted through a critical feminist anti-colonial methodological process of artography. Through semi-structured in-depth interviews with artists, residents, and community activists, photography, archival media analysis and a case study of the *Madre Maize* (2012) mural by the Community Rejuvenation Project crew, I uncover how the process of mural-making is a means of place-making by allowing some of the most societally marginalized to author the landscapes in which they dwell, work, and live. This thesis argues that intentional community mural art is a means of counter monument, community justice, and an act of decolonization through embedding a decolonial aesthetic in the fabric of urban landscapes, uncovering hidden black, brown, and indigenous geographies and contributing to larger movements of social justice making.

Key words: *Oakland, artography, public art, mural art, place-making, resistance, decolonial aesthetic*

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Chapter 1: The Paint Marks the Place: The Mural Art of Resistance in Oakland, California

Mural art has long been an influential tool for representing and raising awareness about urban social struggles. Through the use of color, symbolism, design, and outdoor wall space, murals relay stories, and provide a means of public documentation. Historically, mural art has served to bridge the realities of the subjugated, disadvantaged, poor, ‘other’, with the lives of the dominant, privileged, and wealthy. This research explores the relationship between the practice of outdoor public community mural-making in Oakland, CA and the geographic concepts of place-making, and sense of place and belonging for represented groups.

My exploration of the relationship between outdoor public mural-making and its relation to geographic notions of place-making, and sense of belonging is contextualized by a desire to explore community responses to cultural, social, and physical displacement. My research investigates the ability for art-making (both in the process and in the final product) to serve as a means of peaceful aesthetic resistance to locational development projects and processes (including gentrification) that intentionally or unintentionally work to make existing groups histories, bodies, and ways of being unseen, displaced, or invisible. The purpose of my research is twofold. First, to explore how intentional community mural consulting and organizing processes contribute to the politics of place-making. Second, to examine how specific aesthetics and design techniques (e.g., mediums, symbols, and styles that are used to represent community histories, politics, and sentiments of resistance in the urban landscape) contribute to a sense of place and belonging for represented groups.

The primary question that guides my research is: how does mural art in the context of Oakland represent community histories, politics, and sentiments of resistance in the urban landscape? To answer this question, I pose three sub-questions: (1) How are specific symbols used as tools of representation? (2) How does the geographic location of the mural within the landscape impact, or emphasise its meaning and reading? (3) How do community mural consulting and organizing processes contribute to politics of place-making? I answer these questions through an analysis of primary qualitative data that includes 17 semi-structured participant interviews, participant observation, photographs, and grey-documents. I conclude by expanding on the emergent role of mural art as a means to decolonize or un-whiten urban landscapes by placing symbolic representations of systemically marginalized, and both socially and physically displaced black, brown, and indigenous histories, bodies, and ways of being into the urban landscape.

The thesis is structured as follows. In this introductory chapter I establish a theoretical framework that grounds this study in geographical concepts: understandings of place-making, sense of place as

aesthetic experience, intentional community creative process, dynamics of race and power in the structuring of urban landscapes, and the decolonial aesthetic of mural-art in Oakland. Chapter 2 outlines the methodological process that was carried forward in the field work/data collection component of this study including the procedure of data analysis. Chapter 3 provides a brief historical contextualization of Oakland's radical social movements and mural genealogy. Chapter 4 focuses on the power of the creative process of mural-making as a means of place-making based on a case study of the *Madre Maize* (2012) mural. Chapter 5 examines the influence of intentional black, brown, and indigenous symbolism in the urban landscape within the *Madre Maize* (2012) mural as contributing to a sense of place and belonging as aesthetic experience for represented groups. Chapter 6 concludes with a commentary on the way in which the practice of intentional community mural-making can be a productive force to challenge normative urban landscapes.

My research project is influenced by my own social location and positioning as a housing and human rights advocate, a community artist, and a geographer. Over the last eight years, I have observed how systems of power have played a role in the structuring of urban landscapes and the systemic social and spatial marginalization of 'othered' racialized bodies. Parallel to this, as a community artist I have also witnessed the ways in which systemically marginalized communities have used mural art as a tool for social activism to respond to and resist marginalization and displacement by writing community histories, politics, and narratives of resistance and thriving existence into places. The intent of this study is to use my positioning as a geographer and artist-activist (artivist) to act as a bridge between the academy and the community. Through this thesis, I seek to develop a written account of the valuable work of community artists and activists to make it available to future generations. This study contributes to the discipline of critical cultural geography in its understandings of the power of community-led creative process and mural-making as an active force in the making and challenging (both shaping and reshaping) of social and physical landscapes.

My research study pays attention to the forces of power and privilege that traditionally characterize academia and what is understood to be legitimate ways of knowing and producing knowledge in the discipline of Geography. My research seeks to elevate the work of often underrepresented or misrepresented groups, and to emphasize the value and importance of visual forms of knowledge production. In this way, I seek to challenge traditional ways of creating and knowing, and through this bring attention to the powerful work of intentional public artists as alchemists for justice and change; actors who respond to inequality and symptomatic blight in urban space. In what follows, I review existing critical geographic scholarship on (1) public art (particularly mural art) as symbolic resistance and a process of meaning making, (2) place-making and sense of place as 'aesthetic

experience,' (3) understandings of power and race in the structuring of urban landscapes, and (4) cultural revitalization as a means of decolonization.

Public Art (Mural Art) as Symbolic Resistance and Meaning Making

Both 'mural art' and 'public art' are terms to which a number of meanings have been ascribed, not all of which are of relevance to this research. It is at the point of intersection between the vast respective worlds of 'mural art' and 'public art' where the theme of mural art as a means of resistance and counter hegemonic narrative can be found. Mural art is broadly understood to be large-scale visual art productions on 'permanent' wall space, which can be indoor or outdoor, and which account for the architectural features of the space on which it is painted.

Public art has no straightforward definition. Broadly speaking, public art is "site specific art in the public domain," (McCarthy 2006: 244). Malcolm Miles has written extensively on the subject, concluding that public art has many effects and takes many forms; and the effect is dependent on the way in which the art is constructed, and by/for whom it was produced. Miles (1997) suggests that while public art can be used to promote social cohesion, resistance, local and civic identity, memorialize history, and to inspire social change, it can also be used to re-write histories, to exclude, and to rebrand/revitalize a space for economic and political interest.

For the purpose of this research, I investigate site-specific mural art in the 'public' domain. I focus on the making of community-based, managed, and produced mural projects, which largely fall under the category of 'new genre public art.' I share Doreen Massey and Gillian Rose's (2003: 19) concern that "for an artwork to be public, negotiation between social differences has to be part of what the artwork does." This type of mural-making is also characterized with the spirit of intention and consciousness, and a process that includes meaningful engagement with the social and political aspects of landscape production and inhabitation.

Public art can include: graffiti art, corporate commissions, community symbols of resistance (Boros 2012), historical monumentalization (Dwyer 2004), government sponsored community regeneration projects (Sharp & Polluck 2005), and act as a source of political propaganda to name a few of its uses. As suggested by Miles (1997) McCarthy (2006) and Hall and Robertson (2001), this study acknowledges that not all 'public art' is for the intention of art as a social good, and that it is important to look critically at who is creating the artwork, where it is being created, who is and who is not represented in the piece, and how the location of the work effects the social and physical landscape (McCarthy 2006).

Within urban and cultural geographic scholarship on public mural art, attention is directed to two types of public art: “institutional public art” which re-instills hegemonic symbols and “new genre public art” which represents community-based counter narratives (Hall 2003). “New genre public art is an art of change and intervention and is concerned with the promotion of social and ecological healing”; it “seeks to disrupt prevailing conceptions of the city, highlighting contradictions, processes of uneven development, and the marginalisation and exclusion of certain groups within the city” (Hall 2003: 222). It is new genre public art that is of particular interest to me in this study.

To counter the effects of deindustrialization and urban blight, city officials, planners, and community members often turn to public art installations, often in the form of murals, as a means of aesthetically responding to physical and social issues in the landscape. Again, as with the very sculpting of landscapes, it is important to acknowledge mechanisms of power at play in the planning, symbols, location, and creation of public art. The work of Rosalyn Deutsche (1997) provides a critique on public art that focuses on works themselves as site(s) of meaning and that examines the social context of public art. According to Deutsche, public art is in part responsible for the production of space, and as public art has both social and physical characteristics, the production of place.

Public art as a means of “symbolic reparations” is a concept that has been described by Zayd Minty (2006: 424) in the context of post-apartheid South Africa and is defined by the Truth and Reconciliation Committee as “measures that facilitate the communal process of remembering and commemorating the pain and victories of the past”. Public art as a form of symbolic reparations also draws on the work of Miles to suggest that artists can act as social catalysts to provoke and inspire creativity and political imagination in people. The notion of public art as a form of symbolic reparations gives theoretical grounding to the issues around re-appropriation of space through public mural art that I seek to explore in the context of Oakland. Deeming murals as a means of symbolic reparations lends insight into how public mural art and representations in space can be part of larger compensation (reparations) for residents and communities who have experienced systemic social marginalization and requires further investigation.

Most of the literature on mural art as a means of resistance and political voice that counters dominant discourse has come out of studies from Northern Ireland (Jarman 1998; Jarman & McCormick 2005; Flannery 2006; White 2010). Northern Ireland has been the site of a great deal of mural-based territorial claims to space and has a rich history of mural-making. In Northern Ireland, mural art developed after 1908 out of an annual parade which celebrated the defeat of Catholic King James II by his son-in-law the Protestant William of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne, through aesthetic symbols, flags,

banners, and garlands (Jarman 1998). Rather than limiting this sentiment to annual displays of identity, murals were erected as more “permanent” markers of identity politics (Hartnett 2003). Based on his work on murals in Northern Ireland examining the political tensions and conflicts between Catholics and Protestants, Neil Jarman insists that the location of the mural is one of the most important factors for researchers to consider. To regard a mural only for its symbolism is to not fully value its 'power.' The location of the mural in combination with the symbolism used affect the way in which the mural and its multiple messages are 'read' and interpreted. For Jarman (1998), murals embed politics in place and are a form of resistance to the state.

Site-specific interpretation of murals involves multi-scaler observation that moves outward from the site to a neighbourhood, district, city, and city-region. Location must also be considered in terms of the ‘points of view’ from which the mural can be ‘seen.’ This leads one to question who (beyond the local community) is able to view the piece and whether the placing is intentional. If a mural is ‘directed’ at the view of specific groups outside the local community, who are these groups and why is their attention warranted?

Jarman (1998) treats murals as spatial “artefacts” that are a product of and powered by their symbolic and site-specific features. Mural images, Jarman (1998: 81) contends, have always “had functionality: as propaganda, as rhetoric, as ideological and as symbolic markers, but as artefacts their use is potentially more varied”. To see murals as spatial artefacts "demands some wider recognition of ‘placing’, of the area beyond the immediate frame or edge of the wall, which all too often is the limit or boundary of photographic reproduction and, in the past, of verbal analysis" (Jarman 1998: 81). As images, murals can be interpreted in different ways; “but as artefacts in public space they are also open to multiple forms of use, re-use and abuse" (Jarman 1998: 81). By way of strategic location, murals have a way of breaking boundaries and barriers and are able to speak to a wider audience.

It is worth acknowledging that there is literature on public art and gentrification that suggests that public art, if not created in a way that is participatory and inclusive, can have the opposite effect on a space and act as a tool for displacement and writing certain groups “out of place” (Sharp *et al.* 2005). There is indication from McCarthy (2006), Miles (1997), Sharp *et al.* (2005), and Zebracki *et al.* (2009) that, if the art produced has not been created through meaningful collaboration between artists and the community, there may be issues of visual misrepresentation which can, in turn, result in negative consequences for local residents and the preservation of the art. Misrepresentation can also occur. Murals may inadequately represent people who live, work, and inhabit a space, further invisibilizing already socially marginalized groups (Polluck & Sharp 2012). If art work is unwelcomed by residents of the space, it is likely to be vandalized (Minty 2006). The scholarly literature demonstrates that art that lacks

consultation, meaningful participation, or representation often generates a negative community response. How, then, can a more positive sense of attachment and belonging to place be generated through art?

Sense of Place and Identity as Aesthetic Experience

Sense of place and attachment are particularly concerning in the context of those whose *place* in this world has been made ‘vulnerable’ based on structures of power that systemically discriminate against them based on characteristics including (but not limited to) race, gender, class, and ethnicity. Geographers have long described the relationship between the memories inspired by the aesthetic landscape as contributing to a “sense of place” for an individual (Tuan 1989). As McCarthy (2006: 245) describes, “identity is a socio-spatial concept in that people themselves endow places with meaning, leading to identification with shared characteristics between groups within a locality”. The concept of place, then, “implies a strong emotional tie between a person and a particular location” (Windsor & Mcvey 2005: 147). Numerous geographers have contributed to the development of geographic knowledge about place and sense of place: Tim Cresswell, David Harvey, Doreen Massey, Edward Relph, Gillian Rose, and Yi Fu Tuan. All of these scholars reinforce that sense of place is central to how people generate meaning and value in their lives. I am particularly interested in how sense of place exists in relation to aesthetic experience.

Tim Cresswell (1996: 10) argues that social expectations about ‘appropriate’ “behavior in place are important components in the construction, maintenance, and evolution of ideological values” that preserve the socio-spatial status quo. Mural-making, then, can be an opportunity to challenge the dominant ideology of a landscape and thus can be interpreted as socially and physically transgressive. For Cresswell (1996: 10), “the moment of transgression marks the shift from the unspoken, unquestioned power of place over taken for granted behavior, to an official orthodoxy concerning what is proper as opposed to what is not proper; that which is in place to that which is out of place”. Acts of aesthetic or behavioural transgression can highlight taken for granted normative ideologies embedded in the landscape.

Public art and aesthetic symbolism have a very distinct relationship with a sense of identity for a resident through what Tuan (1989) describes as “aesthetic experience”. There exists a relationship, which can be positive or negative between one’s visual memory of space, and the way the imagery may make one feel. When a resident observes representation of self, the community to which they belong, or symbols of common history in the environment around them, there is an increased positive sense of belonging to the space (Burk 2007). Tuan asserts that the aesthetic experience is largely a combination of the pleasure of the senses informing the mind. Tuan (1989: 234) contends that “the aesthetic response

depends on, and can perhaps be endlessly extended by association, memory, and knowledge”. For Tuan, our appreciation of place largely depends on memory. Embedding memory making into built form is also how public art has been described by geographers Burk (2006) and Dwyer (2004).

By employing public art production processes that are largely participatory I hypothesize that in both the act of promoting community participation in the creation of a piece and in the use of historical symbols that evoke memory they together contribute to a sense of place as a product of aesthetic experience that can challenge dominant assumptions of what or who is in or out of place.

A Critical Geographic Look at the Politics of Place-Making

“Place-making refers to the set of social, political, and material processes by which people iteratively create and recreate the experienced geographies in which they live” (Pierce *et al.* 2011: 54). Place-making, then, is a “doing of place” through which people’s actions create and cultivate the spatial environments (Benson & Jackson 2012). In the context of a neighborhood, place-making can be the “activities through which residents work to produce the neighborhood they want, such as participating in community organization or initiatives, interacting with their neighbors, and supporting or opposing particular changes in the neighborhood” (Elwood *et al.* 2015: 125). Place-making at the scale of the neighbourhood involves people individually and collectively cultivating spatial imaginaries that can be actualized through their behaviors, interactions with and expectations of others which may also have an aesthetic dimension to them (Elwood *et al.* 2015: 125). It is important to emphasize that while place-making can cultivate a sense of belonging, it can also be a practice that is violent and exclusionary against some bodies and ways of being declared by those with economic, political, and therefore spatial power as ‘out of place’. Groups with economic and, therefore, political power can develop municipal legislation, build fences, sign posts and iron sculpture to maintain place, while others with less economic power often rely upon do-it-yourself (DIY) means of marking (an act of territorialization) and maintaining place (Benson & Jackson 2012).

A significant amount of geographic research on place-making, and peoples attachment to their place of residence is on middle class residents and their moral claim to place through their (relative) symbolic and purchasing power. Through a process of selective belonging middle class peoples are able to move into certain geographies and selectively appropriate the meaning of place and invest in it, while choosing to distance themselves from what is undesired or stigmatized aspects of the area (Benson & Jackson 2012). According to scholar Sarah Elwood, some place-making practices of the middle-class which aim to preserve whiteness in place is in part what facilitates the gentrification of urban (once racialized black and brown) geographies. Place-making can thus be a “spatial and discursive practice

through which middle-class residents consolidate their class identities in mixed-income neighborhoods, normalizing middle-class values, tastes, and aesthetics” (Elwood *et al.* 2015:125). Institutional systems – such as policing and education – can also be deployed to reinforce a middle-class, often white, status quo. The most obvious example is excessive policing (and police calls) for suspected criminal behavior. In the context of the death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, the concept of ‘place maintenance’ in Sanford, Florida included the monitoring and then forced removal of a black body from a white, middle-class residential environment. But power can also be reasserted and place re-claimed, particularly by racialized and lower-income people, through DIY intentional community mural-making projects.

Power and Race in the Urban Landscape

Power is often defined “in terms of one set of people exerting power over another set of people, or over space, or nature, or the landscape in order to control them and their meanings in various ways” (Ogborn 2003: 9). Within this definition, power is defined in terms of its negative ‘use.’ The other, positive connotation of power affirms human agency and capacity to make change.

Landscapes are power-laden sites that are a mixture of both textuality and materiality (social and physical elements). We can understand mural art as a social and physical component of the landscape not immune to dynamics of power, and as having both an impact on the social and physical culture of the landscape. Don Mitchell (2000) suggests that landscapes comprise a system of signs that are unstable, ever-changing, and open to revision. While landscapes and murals may both be designed to represent one perspective, they may be read in a host of alternative ways beyond the control of the author(s).

Landscapes are built and organized to sustain unequal social relations and these relations in turn unequally shape spaces (Razack 2002). As Don Mitchell (2000: 122) contends, “race is constructed in and through space, just as space is often constructed through race” and the spatiality of race often needs ordering and policing. When applying a critical race analysis to the production of landscapes, two key questions must be asked. First, how much does the spatial comfort and success of the dominant population depend on keeping racial ‘others’ in their place? Second, what does it ‘look like’ when othered, (systemically marginalized bodies) interrupt and restructure landscapes with aesthetics and messaging that counters dominant historical representations, discourse, and politics?

Don Mitchell (2000: 123) contends that landscapes are impositions of power: “power made concrete in the bricks, mortar, stones, tar, and lumber of a city, town, village, or rural setting-or on canvas or photo stock”. Power can also remake landscapes. In order to understand these forces of power in the context of murals, it is necessary that in combination with reading the symbols embedded within murals

that the location of the piece, the actors who are involved (as well as those who are not), and how the piece has been interpreted and reproduced are recognized.

The fabric of landscapes must be analyzed through an intersectional lens to understand how subversions to normative power structures contribute to the shaping of landscapes. In reflecting on the ‘power’ of mural art, I seek to question whose histories and narratives are depicted, and whose are not? Where is the mural located in reference to the wider cityscape, and what are the underlying systems of power that impact that particular geographic location? And, how does the depiction of one group’s ‘voice’ silence or amplify the voice(s) of others? As one of the tools of *the oppressor* (italicized to emphasize the changing nature of this role) has also been to distort the identity, culture, and representations of marginalized groups of ‘others’ we might also ask, for those who are depicted in murals, how have these representations been captured and how does the style of representation match or measure with how the represented see themselves?

Decolonization and Art-Making

I now turn to scholarship on the relationship between decolonization and art, also referred to as the decolonial aesthetic. Decolonial aesthetics attempt to disrupt and re-narrate heteropatriarchal narratives by centering black and brown existence and ways of being (Zepeda 2014). The relationship between decolonization (a process of mental, physical, economic, and political de-tanglement of a colonized people from the colonizer) and art in its multiple manifestations and possibilities occurs in both the physical form, performance, and experience of the art piece, and in the process of its making. The effect of art as a means of decolonization, and the decolonial aesthetic is shared by both the artist and the audience.

Decolonization is not a metaphor (Tuck and Yang 2012). To make claims regarding decolonization is to be intentional and to demonstrate commitment to not further displacing or de-centering the voices of indigenous, black and brown lives. Decolonization is defined as a land based freedom from colonial rule which includes delinking socially, and politically from colonial systems, and having autonomy and self governance over the lands from which a peoples were disenfranchised or displaced. The historical nation-state process of decolonization, which took place largely during the Cold War, in part initiated by the Bandung Conference of 1955 refers to the process by which colonized nations developed independence from colonial rule by developing and actualizing independent political and economic systems (Mignolo in Gaztambide 2014).

Concurrent with the nation-state process of decolonization (of which First Nations peoples of Canada and American Indian peoples of the United States still have been largely denied), decolonial and

post-colonial theorists, activists, and philosophers name the importance of mental and cultural decolonization referred to as the ‘decolonization of the mind’ and as part of this, the development/emergence of a ‘decolonial aesthetic.’ Decolonization is a means of empowerment, of reclaiming space, narrative, and aesthetics. Decolonization is a means of dignity making for peoples who have in the past and continue to suffer deeply from regimes of inequality systematically engrained as part of colonialism. Decolonization of the mind is important in order to undue the discriminatory social norms that exist today as a direct result of the oppression, enslavement, and genocide of indigenous, black, and brown peoples as part colonial domination projects. “Attitudes of racial, cultural, religious and civilization superiority of the colonizers over the colonized that developed, often as a justification for political domination during the colonial era, continue to impact the lives of many people in the world today, informing how people in the rich North view those in the poorer South as well as minorities within the South of migrant origin” (newworldencyclopedia.org). Inter-generational harm and ill-treatment has been internalized for many communities. De-tanglement and delinking from oppressive systems and ways of thinking is imperative to liberation and with it, restoration and reclamation of individual dignity. In the following paragraphs I turn to the work of scholars in this realm that contend decolonial art and the decolonial aesthetic exists as a political art of agitation (Kidane 2014), an art of remembering (Zepeda 2014), and a process of de-linking from colonial chains to re-emerge to heal the colonial wound (Mignolo in Gaztambide 2014).

The decolonial aesthetic explores both future visions and past disruptions. By weaving together images, narratives, and sentiments of freedom and resistance, it exists as a political art of agitation (Kidane 2014). Through creation in the form of movement, music, and visual art, decolonial art has the capacity to heal through naming the harm of the past, while simultaneously developing the imaginaries for present and future positive possibilities; for alternative re-emergence. Kidane (2014) reminds us of the urgency around this type of political art-making, grounded in self determination. “Art informed by decolonial aesthetics abandons the local imaginary for narratives that reach across those disrupted borders and connects to other locations from which testaments are being made” (Kidane 2014:190). In doing so, decolonial art can jump scales, move across colonial borders, and breaks boundaries which seek to keep out unwanted bodies, cultures, and ways of being. Kidane clarifies the far reaching capacity of decolonial art to expand the collective imagination and restore power and dignity to fuel the fire of social movements to further the political, academic, economic, and land based work of decolonization.

In the process of decolonization, along with the act of re-creating, and re-emerging is undoing the harm of the past through intentional remembering. Zepeda (2014) names the importance of art as a means of remembering and re-centering indigenous peoples through countering the forced forgetting which is

integral to the colonial project. Through unravelling the various stages of memory, pre-colonial ways of being reveal themselves. Through this remembering (while it can be painful and disarming) in some instances people are able to heal through re-claiming traditions, wisdoms, spiritual belief systems, and medicines. Art has the capacity to facilitate the act of remembering through story telling and creating spaces of curiosity and questioning to peel back layers of trauma and barriers against the parts of the self that were tortured for being, and re-call re-imagine ways of being before and between. Intentional community mural-making processes commonly include a process of community engagement. Within the process of community engagement group gatherings are held within which experiences, and stories are shared. At times elders even share old photographs and artifacts as testament. “The very experience of remembering creates meaning through a particular context (time and space), while bringing life to a specific topic, genealogy, or legacy” (Zepeda 2014:121). The space of sharing and remembering that is cultivated, and the following process of large scale outdoor site specific painted projection of these histories and ways of being is in part an act of decolonization through remembering. Through the process of remembering, individuals are able to embark on a journey of de-tanglement and de-linking away from colonial systems, which overall can help in the attempt to heal the colonial wound.

Mignolo (Mignolo in Gaztambide 2014: 206) argues for constant intentional awareness during the process of decolonial art-making, decentering away from privilege; “delinking is precisely to think and become by embodying categories of thoughts and grounded in non-Western experiences”. Delinking from the colonial matrix of power, and coloniality as defined above to combat oppression and heal the wound of the past through re-emergence. “Healing is the process of delinking, or regaining your pride, your dignity, assuming your entire humanity in front of an un-human being that makes you believe you were abnormal, lesser, that you lack something” (Mignolo in Gaztambide 2014: 207). In part, site-specific art that claims space through its being and process of making for dignified representations of black, brown, and indigenous peoples does contribute to a sense of pride and belonging for individuals. In this way, art-making translates into a process of dignity making.

For artists working within a decolonial framework or with decolonization in their intent delinking also means not seeking validation for the artwork from the colonial gaze or from colonial measures of success including individual independent success, and financial gain. To de-link as artists is to create outside the bounds of the colonial gaze, rules, expectations, ideals. Mignolo (Mignolo in Gaztambide 2014) frames a decolonial artist’s success as their very ability to de-link. Decolonial art moves beyond a capitalist model of ownership, existing within and beyond the formal art world. “In the discrete units of capitalist frameworks, where art is a possession as opposed to an immersive experience decolonial aesthetics disrupts the notion of art for the sake of consumption” (Kidane 2014: 190). Beyond the

consumptive aspect, decolonial art, in the form of community mural-making, painted by black and brown communities, is a populist art, one that is created by, and meant to serve the people, and be transformative, resistant, and freedom paving in nature. The streets, alleyways, and outdoor wall space are by some named as the gallery of black and brown peoples often whose own art-makings, and rightful non-exoticized representations rarely make it into major museum and fine art gallery collections.

I believe artists who place site specific images of black, brown and indigenous politics and ways of being on the street (outside of the formal art world or permit processes) fall within the framework of decolonial art. In most cities it is challenging to hold true to decolonial politics as the very nature of the decolonial narrative can spark controversy with City officials, funders, and wall owners. For this reason and more it is particularly interesting how artists are able to create these works in the context of Oakland, California.

Taken together, this scholarship on public mural art, sense of place as ‘aesthetic experience,’ place-making, the dynamics of power and race that shape urban landscapes and the decolonial aesthetic all serve to set the stage for the chapters to follow. With the support of this literature, over the course of my thesis I seek to describe the way in which artist and activist groups in Oakland, California use mural-making to interrupt normative aesthetics through highlighting ‘othered’ experiences and histories, exposing alternate hidden black and indigenous geographies in place. As will be further explored, intentional community mural-making acts as a means of place-making in the process of its community engaged authorship, and symbolically through its existence in the landscape as an aesthetic contributor to a sense of belonging for counter-hegemonic identities. Aesthetically resisting the displacement and both social and spatial marginalization. The following chapter will describe the methods that were employed during the process of data collection, and data analysis of the field work study completed in Oakland, California in 2013.

Chapter 2: Methods Blurring the Lines Between Research and Life

In this chapter, I detail my research methods and provide an anecdotal account of the field work experience. My goal is to describe the context within which the study was pursued, as well as to document the intimate motivations of the project. The primary data collected for the study is based on murals in Oakland, California; however as a result of the physical and cultural geography of the San Francisco Bay area, my overall analysis has also been informed and influenced by the mural art works and art making processes of artists in the neighboring cities of Richmond and San Francisco, California. Overall, as I will reveal in this chapter, my research unfolded in an organic way that reinforced my beliefs in the power of mural-making as an art form that can both physically heal landscapes and emotionally heal peoples.

For this study I employed a mixed-method, arts-based qualitative research design that combined in-depth semi-structured interviews with participant observation, photography, and archival newsprint document analysis to answer my primary research question: how does mural art in Oakland, CA represents community histories, politics, and sentiments of resistance in the urban landscape? This chapter begins with an anecdotal account of the field work experience to contextualize the research process within the contemporary political climate of Oakland. I then provide a racial and gendered reflection of my fieldwork experience followed by a detailed overview of the methods of data collection and analysis.

Painted Places, Sites of Study

The murals I selected for the study were based on three main criteria: (1) mural projects painted by Oakland-based artist/activist groups (2) murals in which symbols and messaging were based on themes of race, power, and community justice and (3) murals for which the artist-crews who painted the murals and the mural itself were accessible and open to participating in the study. While my research is informed by the multiple intentional public art murals painted on the buildings, schools, churches, streets, and back alleyways of Oakland, Richmond, and San Francisco, within the study, three mural sites were given particular attention. These three sites include: (1) the *Memorial Mural for Trayvon Martin* (2013) painted on Youth Radio by the Trust Your Struggle (TYS) Artist Collective at 17th and Broadway (2) the *Who Stole the Sun* (2013) mural painted by the Community Rejuvenation Project (CRP) at 19th and Broadway, and (3) *Madre Maize* (2012) mural painted by CRP on the Peoples Grocery headquarters at 7th and Market Street. The *Memorial Mural for Trayvon Martin* (2013) by TYS and the *Who Stole the Sun* (2013) mural by CRP were being painted during my fieldwork and became significant sites of research.

Artivists and the Making of a Research Project

I crafted the research design of this study with the motivation to avoid hierarchical power relations. Through my research, I aimed to uncover feelings, meanings, and lived experiences of mural artists and community members working in mural-making. ‘Artivist’ is a term referenced to describe the artist identity characteristic of many of the artists that were part of this study. The exact origin of the word is unknown, but it is commonly used by many who embody the reality of being both artist and activist. An artivist is an individual who seeks to use the medium of art making to further social and political agendas; bridging of the world of political activism and art making embodied in the work and being of the artivist.

My methodological process is founded upon research methods of critical anti-colonial feminist geographers who have advocated for the employment of methodological approaches that are collaborative, non-exploitative, and that challenge the unequal power relations between researcher and respondent (Dwyer & Limb 2001). I have developed an arts-based qualitative research methodology guided by feminist research methods that is both inspired and given legitimacy by Stephanie Springgay and Rita Irwin’s (2005) process of “a/r/tography”; a form of arts based research that seeks to empower and transform the manner in which research is conducted, created, and understood. A/r/tography is based on a process of living enquiry and places flexibility, reflexivity, and constant analysis at the forefront to account for the potential altering of methods as a result of the research experience in practice (Springgay & Irwin 2005). There is added emphasis on the active participation of doing and meaning making, accounting for the subjectivity that is enhanced by one’s intimate relationship to the subject matter inevitably influencing the research. This process is “imbued with the understanding that to live the life of an artist who is also a researcher and teacher is to live a contiguous life, a life that dialectically moves between connecting and not connecting the three roles” (Springgay & Irwin 2005: 900). The employment of this research design supported my concerns of knowing before entering ‘the field’ of my inability to be just one or the other; researcher or mural artist or advocate or educator, and takes into consideration the notion that one can be all, at once, and acknowledges the inter-subjectivity that will arise in practice, and inevitably influence data collection.

My intention was for the research process to be fluid, and flexible, and through emphasizing visual methods of knowing, and the role of artists as producers and disseminators of knowledge, veer away from traditional modes of knowledge production. Visual storytelling and sharing through mural-making has the ability to overcome barriers of language, and class, and this contributes to the power of this medium; barriers that the academy often does not consider. Mural-making is a way of knowing, producing, and disseminating knowledge. The increasing acceptance and use of visual forms of

knowledge moves beyond written text, interrupts dominant discourse around what constitutes as knowledge, and importantly ‘who’ has the power to create knowledge. Analyzing intentionally designed, painted, and placed murals I believe permits hidden geographies of race, class, and resistance to be directly engaged with.

Mural Crews in Focus

I refer to the mural crews that I studied and worked with in Oakland as being comprised of *intentional community mural artists* because of the way their spiritual, social, and political motives frame each project they paint, and their individual character going into each project. This is evident in their choice of themes, and project partners (including both those they choose to work with and those they refuse to work with) the locations on which they chose to paint, and the exhaustive amount of personal resources (material and kinetic) they invest into each project. In what follows, I describe the two main mural crews whose pedagogy and murals are the focus of my thesis.

The Community Rejuvenation Project

The main mural artist organization in Oakland who I was privileged to learn from was the Community Rejuvenation Project (CRP). In the words of the organization, the Community Rejuvenation Project is “a policy to pavement organization that cultivates healthy communities through public art, beautification, education, and celebration” (www.crpbayarea.org). CRP is comprised of a crew of multi-talented mural artists, educators, photographers, and social and environmental justice activists. CRP’s mural artist team includes Desi Mundo, Peskador, Grace Chen, Lavie Raven, Elijah PFontenhauer, Beats 737, Release, Miss Amo, Daz, and Dave Young Kim. The group was founded by educator, activist, and aerosol art master Desi Mundo, a Chicago native who arrived in Oakland in 2002. Between 2010 and 2013 the organization has painted over 100 murals in Oakland, Richmond, and San Francisco Bay area. Through massive, multi-colour palette, spiritually moving mural productions, CRP inspires community pride and wellness. The themes of the murals include: local heroes, legendary musicians, revolutionary, spiritual, and philosophical leaders, healthy living, and indigenous traditions. These themes are often woven together with a combination of large characters, symbols, and traditional graffiti letter pieces.



Figure 2.1 Community Rejuvenation Project members and Narmeen. Photo by local passerby.

Within CRP's mural painting process there is always opportunity for collective participation and mentorship of younger artists. Brushes and spray cans are frequently passed from artist to artist, fostering a process of co-creation in the making of large symbols, words, and figures. This inclusive production style also accommodates the skills and ideas of volunteers and community members who drop-in to contribute one day of painting over a month-long project. Even if someone is not involved in the actual painting of the mural, the crew leaders find ways to ensure that anyone who is interested in participating is included by allowing people to offer suggestions, keeping conversations going with the public as the artists are painting, or encouraging people to volunteer to make food and supply trips.

The style of each community mural project painted by CRP is dependent on the group of artists, community partner, and volunteers that are brought together. Complimentary to community mural projects, CRP also plays a role in making public art policy recommendations at the local municipal and state level. CRP believes that community mural-making is an integral part of an effective blight reduction strategy of a city, and that public art (created by and for the public) should be produced in a way that becomes a source of pride for people, to give residents who live in urban blighted neighborhoods a greater sense of attachment and belonging to their spaces, and hope that through this they might feel encouraged to maintain and defend with pride their neighborhood space. According to the CRP's blight reduction strategy; "given the proper support, murals can transform a community without pushing out its long-term residents while raising property values as much as 15-20% without the displacement akin to gentrification. CRP believes in a holistic strategy to abatement which includes surveys, murals, community clean-up, youth development, education, and block parties" (www.crpbayarea.org). CRP trusts in the power of community mural art as a way to respond to urban blight, and also as a way to make

art and inspiration accessible to all people with no restrictions on viewership, common to artworks hung in museums and galleries. According to CRP, murals have “obvious benefits in that public art creates a sense of identity and community involvement, as well as inspiration, for residents from all types of social and economic backgrounds” (www.crpbayarea.org). CRP asserts that through community engaged public mural art projects groups can inspire local pride and engagement with the landscape in a way that allows residents to participate in the authoring of their own landscapes, while also combating urban blight by creating art works that hold the stories, inspiration, and knowledge of local residents at the centre. For CRP founder, Desi, the mural-making process resists forces of displacement at play in gentrification by reinserting the voices, cultures, and large scale imagery of long-time local residents.

Trust Your Struggle Crew

The Trust Your Struggle (TYS) crew, formed in 2003 is largely bi-coastal, based in both the San Francisco Bay Area and New York City. TYS is a collective of visual artists, educators, and cultural workers dedicated to social justice and community activism through the medium of art (tys.mvmt.com). Members include Tres Rock, Erin Yoshioka, Scott La Rockwell, Borish, DJ Pele, Cece, Shaun Turner and Miguel Bounce Perez. Each crew member contributes a unique artistic style and skill set, and collaborates to support the people, and to continue the legacy of *visual language*. TYS is a crew of contemporary storytellers influenced by graffiti art, comic books, political posters, religious spiritual icons, and their own personal indigenous traditions (www.tys.mvmt.com). The crew has not only produced countless murals, but also gallery installations, live painting performances, and arts education programs with youth and communities. Some of their legendary mural tours include stops in El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Atlanta, and Louisiana. TYS has used mural art as a means to mark local often undermined politics in place, and through doing so hold place for black and brown geographies at risk of erasure and displacement. The very name of the crew demonstrates their commitment to hold up the voices and experiences of the oppressed in a way that is empowering and uplifting. My fieldwork in Oakland coincided with the TYS crew painting the *Memorial Mural for Trayvon* (2013) as will be explored below.

A Glimpse into the Field: Trial Verdict, Heated Landscapes, and Memorialization

I arrived in Oakland just days after the George Zimmerman vs. Trayvon Martin verdict was released. Demonstrations, marches, poster pasting, and other community artful responses were in motion as critical mass formed to collectively express disapproval of the verdict, put forth demands for justice for Martin and all black and brown bodies victim of racial violence, and to show compassion, and support for the family and friends of Martin. Through social media I learned about the TYS mural project to honor Trayvon Martin who was killed on February 26, 2012 by a neighbourhood watch volunteer, George

Zimmerman, after purchasing snacks from a 7-Eleven convenience store in Sanford, Florida while walking to his father's fiancée's home.

The verdict reaffirmed to African American parents and communities of colour at large, that their children are not safe, forcing the community rise up with the support of allies to express dissent against the verdict and demand for justice in order to protect their children. The solidarity led to a global resistance movement reminiscent of the civil rights movement; including a global campaign that invited allies to wear black hoodies to show solidarity and condemn the court's decision. Social justice movements have historically worked to demand societal and systemic change when the powers that be or systems in place affirm inequality. Historically, it has been social movement protest (in its varying forms including public demonstrations, rallies, sit-ins, boycotts, letter writing campaigns etc.) that has led to major societal change that would not have occurred otherwise had individuals chosen to remain complacent to the status quo.



Figure 2.2 Poster seen in most business windows and streets in Oakland after the Trayvon Martin verdict highlighting patterns of historical violence inflicted on black lives. Photograph by Narmeen Hashim.

Oakland has historically been a site of an unprecedented community spirit and leftist political mobilization. There exists a sincere intolerance for injustice and inequality in Oakland which presents itself in the form of a socially active landscape. Based on my conversations with community members, the verdict also reached particularly close to home for Oaklander's as there have historically been countless incidents of white police murder and brutality of black men and youth. The political atmosphere in Oakland during the time of the verdict was articulated in an interview I did with a Blackfoot Nation

elder, Running Wolf (Interview 27/07/2013), who simply stated, “there is no such thing as being neutral in Oakland, if you want to be neutral, you can go to the South”. Meaning, in Oakland, in whichever social location you find yourself, you take a stand, and you defend that stance. Through my research I learned that in Oakland there is a strong common collective sentiment that no one should be left behind; personal calamities often become collective demands for justice.

To honor Trayvon Martin, TYS painted a mural on the boarded up ground floor windows of Youth Radio at 17th and Broadway which had been vandalized during the riots that broke out as part of the demonstrations. The mural was organized by member Erin Yoshi in response to a request from Youth Radio to help bandage over the blight of the plywood boards. It was an unpaid project completed through volunteer labour. In dialogue between Youth Radio volunteers and TYS, the design concept was developed. The mural was to have a large image of Trayvon in the middle of the wall surrounded by representations of youth staff and volunteers of Youth Radio wearing hooded sweatshirts in solidarity. One of the artists was inspired to create a mandala-halo around Trayvon as a way to honour, and hold light and spirit around the young life taken.

While I was at the mural site, numerous people honked the horns of their cars and shouted out messages of support for the work as they passed by. The site of the mural became a place of altar, dialogue, and heartfelt discussion around the pain so many felt regarding the verdict. I was sincerely grateful to have been handed a brush and allowed the opportunity to contribute to the completion of the mural. There is a great deal of physical and emotional labour required to complete a hand-painted mural, and the power of collective support in this process, and sometimes visiting hands are welcome.



Figure 2.3 & 2.4 Trust Your Struggle crew, community volunteers, and youth painting the memorial mural for Trayvon Martin on the boarded up windows of Youth Radio. Photograph by Narmeen Hashim.

Around the mural site, there were many side conversations about the verdict and what this verdict means for Oaklander's. These conversations also included discussion around the irony that plays out when public resistance demonstrations turn violent and the resulting vandalism causes damage to the same communities whom the protest was organized to support and show solidarity for. During my field work experience, unofficial conversations contributed to my larger understanding of community activism and social justice making in Oakland. While I would not count these conversations as official interviews, I would often take notes in my personal field work diaries of these conversations as they contributed to my overall understanding of the social and political climate of Oakland, and the way community activists would fuse art making (creativity) with pursuits of justice making (activism). A field diary was a very natural tool of research for me as this is something I carry with myself through life and all of my travels, documenting events, sources of inspiration, emotions, and inspiring conversation. In one of these informal conversations with artists and activists in the community after the verdict had been released, folks referred to an *awakening* taking place. One prominent community activist, organizer, and mother said to me, while describing upcoming community actions planned, "there is a massive shift taking place at a spiritual level, a shift that is an awakening a new generation of warriors to respond and take on the battles for racial equality" (Anonymous Oaklander 2013). This awakening was described by this woman

and others as; “a call to action to all youth of color, their mothers, and allies to take a public stand for the most basic of human rights; the right to life.” The right to live wholesome fearless youthful lives, to move through space without apprehension, regardless of skin color, regardless of clothing style, with freedom from persecution, harassment, and most importantly, murder. Trayvon Martin’s murder and the trial verdict struck a deep chord for Oaklanders, reinforcing the institutionalization of racial violence and discrimination. Within this thesis I explore the way in which artists use their tools and position to politically respond to and resist oppression as in the case of this trial verdict, and the role of artists as aids in documenting truth, and both visioning and creating other possibilities.

Positioning: Safety Planning, Privilege, and Fear

This research project is intimately connected to my personal life outside of academia. As in the practice of critical feminist geography, I too seek here to reflect upon my own positioning, and through this, reflect upon the relationship between the body of the researcher, and the field site. My relationship to the San Francisco Bay area developed as a result of my older sister having moved there in 2006. Through my annual visits, I developed strong connections to both the people and the landscape.

Planning and preparation are necessary parts of field work. Finding accommodation, establishing a network, deciding local modes of transportation, and ways to meet other personal needs including spiritual, health, and diet are details unique to the researcher. As a single, South Asian, Muslim female, planning for my fieldwork was a challenging process of negotiations with my family my capability to carry out my research independently without being harmed. An element of safety planning was necessary prior to my departure, as it would be for any trip. I had to find accommodation close to public transportation so as not to walk for long distances alone on the street.

Safety planning for my research was further required as Oakland, for better or for worse has a reputation. It is often characterized by its resilience, vibrant culture, creativity, openness, and radical fierceness, but there are also challenges with poverty, blight, and gun violence, and based on my initial safety planning I was informed that those who live in Oakland have developed the street knowledge to cope and navigate. The murder of Trayvon Martin, and the accompanying verdict and media coverage I was exposed to at the time of preparing for my departure re-emphasized the importance I felt in being mindful when ‘safety planning’ and allowing my intuition rather than my fear to guide me during my study. In an excerpt from my field diary, I summarize my response to the criticism I was receiving around my research:

‘time to write about something that has been troubling me since before I arrived, the issue about safety. Since I said I was going to work in Oakland everyone has had their backs up about it.

Things like: ‘...why have you chosen the most dangerous place to do your work?’ or ‘careful you don't get shot.’ Obviously I am not completely oblivious. There are real things one must factor in when going out into any unknown place; good to know where your people are at, know what routes are good to take and which to avoid etc. However, in actual fact, I think there are two major issues here, firstly, ignorance or lack of knowledge/experience infused with negative stereotypes blasted daily via mainstream media, and secondly, racism. I think many of the people who have said these things to me are both racist and ignorant (I suppose, if you are one you are also often the other) to the realities of real life out here. Is it more likely that a light skinned middle class girl get shot or a young black man? Whose safety matters most? and who are we all trying to keep safe from and what does it mean to feel safe anyway? If I feel unsafe because of my ignorance or allowing fear to cloud my judgment about someone, then that very well could cost another body their life. Often is the case, if a light skinned middle class girl feels she is unsafe because a black man is walking near her and calls the cops, and that cop is having a rough night already, the outcomes can be severe and tragic. But people don't think that far. Sensitivity and accommodation and real intentional attempts to unlearn all the racism we have been brought up to know is extremely important. This means attentively listening to your intuition. Listen with your spirit, feel, SEE, do not assume. In Islam, we refer to the sixth sense of knowing in this way as ones Firsasa. There is typically a visceral inner feeling you know when you are in the wrong place or with the wrong company. There are signs. But also, importantly, calculate your moves. Do the best you can, but never allow ignorant fear to cloud your ability to live and learn” (Hashim Journal 12/02/2013).

With direct reflection on how the murders of Trayvon Martin, Oscar Grant, and Renisha McBride and many other young men and women of colour are committed out of conscious and socialized subconscious fear, I think it is deeply important to question how as women and researchers (many of whom have been subject to sexual harassment and violence) we are cautious and keep ourselves safe without perpetuating the same social systems of fear responsible for the murder of so many. Rather than be limited by fear, I instead found myself to be being alert and aware.

Methods of Data Collection

The fieldwork component of the research was conducted in the summer of 2013 over the course of six weeks. During this time, I was based in Berkeley, California. Berkeley is adjacent to downtown/East Oakland and is easily commutable by local Bay Area Rapid Transit: BART. My main points of contact to building community and meeting research participants were established by emailing

artists directly, Facebook, and through my friend Saqib Keval who, at the time, was the Growing Justice Institute Coordinator at the Peoples Grocery.

Sampling Procedures and Interviews

In order to engage in an in-depth understanding of the mural-making process, and the impact of mural-making on the social and physical landscape in Oakland, I undertook 17 semi-structured in-depth interviews. These interviews revealed the process and impact of the art form through the knowledge and expertise of mural artists, activists, residents, and local community groups engaged in some way in the process of mural-making. The sample population of interviewees was comprised of (1) mural artists who participated in the design and painting of the murals in focus; (2) community residents and activists who were involved in the mural-making process; and (3) staff from organizations who have engaged in a process of community mural-making as part of their organizational role. Many of the interviewees fit within all three of these categories.

The interviews unfolded organically as gently guided conversations. I was particularly conscious of power dynamics and sought to establish comfort and trust through body language and directness. I am very aware of the harm that has been caused, and can be caused when academics parachute into activist communities of colour and extract intimate knowledge and then share that information without taking consideration of the consequences this might have on the community. Prior to starting the interview, I often had a brief conversation about avoiding what are known to be traditional methods of extracting knowledge, the limits of the academy, and my commitment to only use information shared that was relevant to the study. The interviews ranged in length from 40 minutes to 3.5 hours. The interviews were recorded with a handheld digital voice recorder. The location of the interviews ranged from the mural site(s), community gardens, kitchen tables, organization offices, local restaurants, walking along local streets, to living room couches.

Time, safety, comfort, and space availability were all factored in to the choice of interview location. Each of the interviews was guided by a similar series of questions (see Appendix B *Sample Interview Guide* p.135). Some interviews were conducted with more than one participant at the same time. The interviews included both open- and closed-ended questions. The themes of the questions concerned what interviewees felt with regards to; the power or impact of mural art, messaging and interpretation of symbols, influence of location on the art piece, the process of mural-making, and lastly how murals influence one's sense of belonging or attachment to place. After each interview, I fully transcribed and coded it using the qualitative coding software, Dedoose. I produced a coding tree (see Appendix C *data analysis coding tree* p.140) that includes 39 parent codes, and 70 child codes which became the basis of my analysis.

Visual Methods, Ethnography, and Document Analysis

Detailed photographic documentation of murals in Oakland was an important aspect of my research. I took the photographs to act as a visual aid during interviews, and for the purpose of later being able to analyze images as text. What proved to be more effective than having hardcopy images of the murals was to have the images available on my cell phone, and to aid in interview-conversation. I have used the photographs in my analysis as a visual aid to help uncover the meaning of the symbols in the murals, and to document an ephemeral art form that is subject to vandalism so as to be able to share its history with the next generation of mural artists.

During my fieldwork, I was always researching. Informal walks and drives were often in some way related to mural-making, activism, and conversations about place and local histories. I kept a journal with me at all times to record important insights, information, and reflections. This field journal was complimented by daily entries I would make on the computer of reflections and experiences of the day. People often said to me that I was taking them on a tour of their own neighborhood. It is true that we often become so accustomed to our surroundings that sometimes we lose the ability to really see the world around us. I feel that this is the benefit of being an ‘outsider’ researcher – conducting fieldwork in a place that is not where one lives. To become better acquainted with this place I also collected archival newspaper articles on mural-making in Oakland dating back to 1958 from the Oakland History Room, a section of the main branch of the Oakland Public Library.

This chapter has outlined the research methods I employed during my field work process along with an anecdotal account of the field work experience. I sought to provide a temporal-spatial context for the research, as well as an understanding of my motivations and intentions as a researcher. Throughout my career as a housing rights advocate and as a community mural artist, I have seen a relationship between mural-making, and place making in various parts of the world, but it was my frequent visits to the San Francisco Bay area that lead me to understand that this process of mural-making as a means of marking history and making place was uniquely happening, with powerful process and politics in Oakland, California. My further investigation lead me to name Oakland as a ‘landscape of possibility’ for the modeling of this revolutionary place based art form as Oakland represents a geographic space in which social justice activism and mural-making intersect to use mural-making as a tool of the movement. In the following Chapter, I describe what makes Oakland, California a landscape of research possibility.

Chapter 3: Radical Mural-Making in Oakland, A Landscape of Possibility for A Peoples Public Documentation of History

Why Study Radical Mural-Making in West Oakland?

This chapter provides historical background as to why the mural art of resistance flourishes in West Oakland. I describe Oakland as a landscape of possibility for radical mural art based on the city's rich history of mural-making by both Chicano and graffiti-art traditions in tandem with Oakland's rich history of radical political activism dating back to the late 1800's. Through an abbreviated exploration of the radical political and mural-making history I extrapolate on the importance of this community-led public art form in the present day context of gentrification and revitalization processes in Oakland.

Oakland California, North America's Last Radical Strong Hold

West Oakland is often described by its residents as a community in crisis, the making of which is the result of decades of racism, discriminatory planning, and economic divestment. My intent in this section is to briefly highlight historical moments that have contributed to the making of Oakland's radical reputation, and present day state of being. These historical moments highlight patterns of demographic settlement, community resilience, hardship, and displacement that have resulted in the structuring and restructuring of Oakland's landscapes, and with it the marginalization of some; namely low-income racialized groups. Such contextualization provides a foundation for understanding the gravity of why the artful public documentation of these histories is of value in the face of contemporary processes of gentrification. Murals, I argue, document *place* for both the awareness of new residents, and the empowerment of long-time residents.

Radical, in the context of this research, is a term held by those politically left of center, whom advocate for political, economic, and social reforms by direct and often, uncompromising methods. Radical activists advocate for change by means of complete transformation to current systems of power. Similar to how the black liberation movements of the 1960's in Oakland inspired international movements of liberation of oppressed groups, today the radical, confident, direct, and often artful political activism taking place in Oakland around issues of anti-capitalism, environmentalism, and racial and gender equality continue to inspire and support the vision of activists around the world.

It is important to note, that the very happenings and historical documentation of many radical groups have been destroyed, co-opted and rewritten in ways that distorts the factual accuracy of these events. Many radical leftist histories have also not been publically documented and disclosed for fear of persecution. With this disclaimer I proceed to present a brief summary, in order to support my claim as to

why Oakland is the ‘landscape of possibility’ for the mural art of resistance, and why Oakland has a reputation as North America’s last radical strong hold.

Oakland’s Radical Happenings 1800-2000

The following section is a selective timeline of the major historical moments that have led to the present day thriving of radical resistance in Oakland. Some scholars suggest that the radicalization of Oakland was brought about by the Vietnam War; however, prior to the 1900’s, Oakland had a history of labour unions and union strikes. Some of the specialized craft unions of the time included: the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers; the Brotherhood of Switchmen; and the Brotherhood of the Sleeping Car Porters.

Two major events that occurred early in Oakland’s history of significance in regard to labour movements included the American Railway Union (ARU) strike of 1894 and formation of the Brotherhood of the Sleeping Car Porters in 1925. In 1894, the ARU sought to organize all railway workers without regard to individual job or craft. The ARU called for a nationwide strike on June 28th 1894 to support striking Pullman car builders in Chicago. While Oakland members had no specific local grievances beyond the distrust and resentment of corporate management, they participated in the strike as an act of solidarity with the Chicago contingent (Douglas 1994:38). The 1894 strike in Oakland quickly became a local movement of resistance of not just the male union members, but also hundreds of supporting women and children who joined the men lying across the tracks in protest. The 1894 ARU strike was viewed nationally as a symbolic test of power, and as a significant act of protest for basic rights; one of the many instances that fueled the civil rights movement.

The Making of Black Geographies

Railroad employment influenced the demographic landscape of Oakland, most significant to this was the settlement of the Pullman Porters in West Oakland, who by company policy, were to be male and black. Given that people commonly settle near to employment, many chose West Oakland, attracted by the nearness to the railroad, the pleasant climate, and California’s relative social freedom (Bagwell 1982). In 1925, after a series of localized steps to track employee grievances and collective opinion on wages, the first major labour union open to blacks, the all-black Brotherhood of the Sleeping Car Porters formed in West Oakland, led by socialist, activist, and World War I pacifist A. Philip Randolph (Douglas 1994). Randolph and other union members later became active members of the civil rights movement.

From 1930 to 1950, Oakland experienced a period of industrial growth centred on wartime industries of ship-building and manufacturing. After a decade of depression, job-seekers were attracted from across the nation, producing a population surge that brought ethnic groups (white, black, Chicano,

and Chinese) into close living and working quarters. As a result of the demand for labour, for the first time in the East Bay there was a mixed racial and gender composition in the workforce. While there was relative cohesion among groups, there were a host of recorded tensions and mistreatments of men towards women, whites towards blacks, and most groups towards Asiatic peoples (Bagwell 1982). The post-war population increase to five million strained city services and produced tensions along ethnic and class lines about access to services.

It was during this period that the 'Great Migrations' took place, which largely involved the migration African American families from the Southern states to California. African American families, characterized by a distinct labour culture, primarily settled in the areas of West Oakland, North Oakland, and South Berkeley. African American families were drawn to Oakland in particular as a result of wartime employment, desirable climate, freedom from the aggressive racism of the South, and importantly the already established strong black community complete with black institutions including churches, retail businesses, and black-owned newspapers.

The war was beneficial for business in Oakland and it was during this era that the Seventh Street corridor of West Oakland gained its reputation as a thriving hub of black culture and commerce, as well as a retail outlet for other immigrant businesses. However, this period of cultural flourish ended a decade after the war when West Oakland experienced a period of divestment of which the effects still linger into the present day. The Red Train; a local passenger train, which once ran along Seventh Street was shut down, and without it, the Seventh Street commercial and business corridor began to decline (Douglas 1994: 41). During this time, many businesses were forced to close and urban blight encroached upon the once thriving strip.

Poor 'progressive' planning resulted in urban development projects (including housing and highway construction) which disproportionately impacted the stability of black communities in West Oakland. Population increases and housing shortages caused planners to decide that the small cottages and single family houses that had defined West Oakland's neighborhoods were not fit living spaces for modern laborers and their families, and replaced much of the old built environment with bleak row housing projects (Douglas 1994: 31). Victorian single-family homes, in West Oakland were replaced with row housing projects, enforcing a class-based residential transformation of the streetscape, which I argue could be considered one of the first phases of ghettoizing the landscape.

Dieselization of trains, the decline in war industry jobs, and industrialization were all factors that contributed to the divestment of West Oakland, and high unemployment rates in African American communities. In the 1950s, dieselization of trains resulted in few needs to stop at West Oakland rail

facilities and declines in passenger train travel. “In the early 1950’s, as many as forty passenger trains would leave West Oakland in a day, by 1965 only three had remained,” (Vanderbeck 2013: 2). As a result, West Oakland’s once booming rail industry became quiet and thousands of jobs were lost, many of which were held by African Americans.

As the United States of America slowly transitioned to a service based economy, cities such as Oakland, which mainly prospered as a result of a manufacturing labor economy, experienced individual economic depressions, where the effects were felt from the household to the municipal level. The effects of de-industrialization had a disproportionate impact on African Americans, Chinese labourers, and women as they experienced greater discrimination in the labour market. The transition to a service economy was particularly difficult on African American groups who were as a result of systemic and social racism largely unable to find work in the service industry during the 1960’s (Vanderbeck 2013). The consequences of this period of divestment, discrimination, and unemployment can be seen in the geographic wealth disparities evident today in Oakland.

Geographic racial divisions were furthered in Oakland in the 1950’s during a period of white flight of residents from North and East Oakland to the suburbs of Walnut Creek, Pleasanton, and Livermore. During this time, it is estimated that over 150,000 white residents moved out of Oakland as they were given incentive and access to home ownership and affordable land-privileges not afforded to black people at this time. African American populations, even those with enough income to purchase property, were largely denied access to real estate during the 1950s and 1960s, supported by the discriminatory legislation Proposition 13 (Vanderbeck 2013). Proposition 13 gave landlords and property owners the right to deny rent or sale to anyone, at their own discretion, based on ethnicity, creed, sex, race, family status, and disability as they desired, in accordance with the concept of freedom of association. Proposition 13 is described by housing rights experts as a tool for discrimination as it reinforced lines of segregation, and was not repealed until 1974. African American communities and communities of colour in Oakland up until this point had endured unemployment as a result of deindustrialization, institutionalized racism, segregation, and community displacement by way of urban development projects. The projects included the construction of three freeways (980, 580, and 24) and the BART railway which displaced over 10,000 residents from West Oakland and majorly disrupted the physical landscape by dividing the community. The now named Cypress Freeway (880) originally displaced hundreds of people during its controversial construction in the 1950s. While it served the benefit of connecting San Jose and Oakland by freeway to the Bay Bridge, it was built above West Oakland’s streets, further marginalizing the community while setting the scene for the earthquake tragedy over two decades later (Douglas 1994).

From 1950-1960, Oakland was consumed by the traumas of postwar urban restructuring, divestment, and displacement. During this time, the corridor between West Oakland, North Oakland, and South Berkeley, the physical centre of African American life in the East Bay, was impacted by various urban redevelopment schemes (highway, BART, and bridge construction) in tandem with increasingly aggressive policing of African American communities. In an effort to ‘manage blackness’ Oakland hired Southern white police officers; a clear action to violently police and remove blackness from place. This resulted in a historical period of gentrification, displacement of African American groups, racial profiling, harassment, and violence in an effort to police and oppress resistance efforts (many of which were organized acts of community survival) by African American groups (May *Oakland Tribune* 2009).

The countless forceful assaults and murder of young black men at the hands of white police officers, coupled with neighborhood divestment, and lack of adequate basic social services presented the need for radical political organizing and community response, and inspired the development of one of the most internationally legendary social rights organizations, the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP). The BPP was organized in Oakland in the fall of 1966 by Huey P Newton and Bobby G Seal (Ransby 2014 in Foner 1970). They worked to end police violence, harassment, and brutality faced by African American communities across the United States including Oakland.

The BPP was engaged in a multi-pronged approach to survival beyond resistance which prioritized the delivery of basic social services. A few of the social service initiatives (also referred to as survival programs) included: (1) the Oakland Community School; an innovative model founded by the BPP as a means of free community based education, which lasted until 1983; (2) the Free Breakfast for Children Program, held in community centers, schools, and church basements around the country. (3) the Peoples Free Medical Clinics, which provided free medical checkups, and a travelling clinic to visit elderly and disabled peoples (Ransby 2014 in Foner 1970).

The reputation of the BPP was actively distorted by the CIA and the special unit of the CIA COINTELPRO (counterintelligence program) created to take down the perceived threat of both the party and black liberation struggles at large. While the essence of and the teachings of the BPP still live strong in Oakland, and Chairman Bobby Seale and Angela Davis continue to give University and community lectures, most of the official Chapters have been closed. Overall, the 1970’s were a period of radicalization for many communities of colour in the Bay area. It was also a time when many young people of colour were the first in their families to attend college where they were exposed to critical thought and community organizing, including the anti-Vietnam war movement further contributing to this period of informed radicalization (Beckles 2012).

The 1980's are largely dubbed the neoliberal era for Oakland, where State funding for infrastructure steadily decreased, and corporate development largely became the sole way to fund the cities needs from roads to schools. During this time period, black people were the largest demographic group in Oakland. The 1980's were considered a time of black leadership in Oakland including the election of two consecutive black Mayors (Lionel Wilson (1977-1991) and Elihu Harris (1991-1999)) along with the establishment of two major black-owned newspapers, the *Oakland Post* and the *Oakland Tribune* (Mailman 2012 in Bagwell 1982). However, this demographic composition was challenged in the following decades with the impact of the foreclosure crisis.

Gentrification as a Product of Neoliberal Urbanism

During the 1990's the technology boom of San Francisco and the resulting increase in high-end residential condominiums put increasing pressure on adjacent cities such as Oakland for affordable market rate housing. The foreclosure crisis of the 2000's combined with gentrification marked uneven rates of racial change in the demographics of Oakland. East Oakland, North Oakland, and West Oakland (communities that were 60-80% African American) were hit highest with rates of foreclosures. "Oakland lost almost half of its African American population from 1990 to 2011, and fewer African Americans own homes" (Jones SF Gate 2014). As a result, many communities of colour migrated to the outer edges of the Bay Area, including Pittsburgh, Bay Point, Antioch, Stockto, Modesto, Tracy, Lathrop, and Manteca. Overall, the African American population in Oakland declined from 35% of the city's population to 28% (Vanderbeck 2013: 4). While the foreclosure crisis in the Bay Area is strongly correlated with the ex-urbanization of communities of colour, during this period of on-going demographic shift, there was also reported an increase in the middle-class Latin American population moving to Oakland, purchasing homes and businesses. This finding contributes to the complex irregularity of processes of gentrification, not formulaic in any one region.

Gentrification is a dynamic that emerges in poor urban areas when renovation, restoration, and demographic shifts displace long-time residents out of a neighborhood (Phat Beets Produce 2016). Gentrification highlights class-based struggles taking place in urban environments and influences both the material landscape and the demographic composition of neighborhoods. Uneven development contributes to the formation of cities which harbor sites of investment and divestment in close geographic proximity; one block may appear seemingly bleak and the other newly renovated with condominiums. The process of gentrification is not seamless or uniform, and occurs at variable paces and scales in different neighborhoods. In Oakland the process has differed based on the influx of capital to select neighborhoods. The gentrification of West Oakland has been slower than other areas of Oakland, including North and East Oakland where the process has accelerated. One of the most detrimental aspects of neighborhood

revitalization projects enveloped in processes of gentrification is that they displace the old residents both as a result of the neighborhood no longer being affordable to them, and also by active efforts to move-out the ‘unwanted’ from the up and coming area. Displacement of the priced out/unwanted includes low-income residents, artists, the homeless, and older racialized residents whom inhabited the area for generations; as is the case with the African American population of Oakland, but can no longer afford their place.

Cities across the world have been impacted by processes of urban restructuring based on neoliberal policies that have lead to the marginalization of lower-income residents. Neoliberalism manifests in urban restructuring by using capital as the dominant driving force behind neighborhood development. Under urban neoliberal policies, a decentering of power away from the state and into the hands of private developers translates to a lessening of procedures of accountability whereby groups can ensure the best interests and needs of all civil society are factored in urban development schemes.

Wealth is produced by the state by hosting corporate industries which Smith (2002) argues, and I concur, is correlated to the displacement of black and brown low-income bodies from urban space in part of the gentrifying process. As neighborhood locales begin to increase in middle-class allure with hipster cafes and DIY bike shops (as has been the case with Oakland), corporate industries become increasingly attracted to hosting offices in once blighted but now redeveloped urban real estate. Corporate investment increases the overall property values of the neighborhood, commonly forcing long-time residents into foreclosure as they can no longer afford to pay the property tax on their home. With the change in demographics the price of rent and goods including grocery increases to meet middle class standards which further prices residents out. New (often white middle class residents) further marginalize old residents using police calls (which often results in police force) to coerce ‘perceived threats’ (black and brown bodies) out the place. From gang injunctions to disrupt the congregation of male black and brown bodies in outdoor space, to reports of a suspicious pedestrian, resulting in excessive police force and in some cases even murder. This process enacts a sort of biopolitics at the local level where the perceived visual safety of some is at the expense of the lives and livelihoods of others.

While development and investment into blighted community locales is needed, particularly in the context of deteriorating landscapes, it is important that it be done in a way that factors in the continuities of existing residents. As is explored with DIY community murals in this thesis, physical improvements to the landscape can be made in ways which do not further marginalize existing residents. Dannette Lambert a local community organizer in Oakland, published an influential article in February 2014 in *The Guardian* entitled “Oakland: 20 ways not to be a Gentrifier”. In this article she documents ways new

residents and businesses can be mindful of their privilege and the ways they impact the landscape. A few of her suggestions include: the importance of new businesses keeping a price margin accessible to the majority of the local population; and the hiring of local residents, people of color, and different socio-ethnic backgrounds with trainings for those with low to no experience in order to help the local community benefit from new job opportunities in the neighborhood. She added the importance of new residents researching and recognizing the local history, and through doing so, making an effort to not contribute to the erasure of history. Neighborhood development in Oakland will continue to be a complex contentious topic moving forward, however it is important for new and old residents and businesses to work together in order to keep people in their homes and communities, and to resist corporate greed efforts to displace the poor without consequence or concern. In more recent history, Oakland continues to exemplify its radical politics with the movements such as Occupy Oakland in October 2011 and the Black Lives Matter movement, which continues on today.

This historical overview has demonstrated how Oakland's built fabric has endured cycles of investment and divestment, and urban renewal projects that have disproportionately negatively impacted some groups over others. A reflection on cycles of unemployment, segregation, and displacement provides context of the need for community organizing and political activism as a means to ensure survival and the delivery of basic social services. These snapshots of radical history provide background as to why Oakland is today the landscape of possibility for artist-activists groups, using the medium of mural art to pioneer a movement of radical mural-making to publically document the people's history.

A Brief History of Mural-Making in Oakland

The California Bay Area, a collection of cities in close proximity to one another, is attractive to mural artists because it has a relatively warm, dry physical climate and a supportive social climate. Over the last 10 years, as a result of the, 'freedom to paint', the frequency of blighted spaces in need of brightening, and the (relative) affordability of housing for artists, there has been an increase in the number of murals and mural artists working in Oakland. The once mural-covered streets of Los Angeles are now facing a mural ban and the mural-covered Mission District of San Francisco has dealt with twenty years of gentrification and the accompanying displacement of its long-term Latino, Chicano, and lower-income artist residents. As a consequence, artists and artist crews have migrated to Oakland where, for the time being at least, the municipal policies around public murals are less stringent, and there are spaces in need of creative relief.

With advances in technology, techniques of mural-making have evolved from fresco and acrylic to spray paint, traditional grid-style mural mapping with scaffolding to digital projection with a motorized

lift, tile installation, and most recently, digital print transfer of image. Advances in paint technology have also broadened the spectrum of colours beyond pastel shades. While many artists (depending on experience and access to materials) still use traditional styles of mural-making, progress in paint technology has made the art form more accessible to a greater range of artist skill levels.

The following overview of Oakland's mural history has been gathered from a review of historical newsprint clippings from the Oakland History Room. This is not intended to be a detailed historical review, for that would require extensive research beyond the scope of this thesis. My review highlights historical moments of significance which I believe have led to the making of today's 'climate of possibility' for radically spirited community co-created professional mural-making in Oakland. The print media sources used for this analysis include: *The Oakland Local*, the *Montclairion*, *SF Chronicle*, *SF Examiner*, *SF Gate*, *Metro*, *Guardian*, the *Daily Californian*, and the *Oakland Tribune*. The intent of selecting these print media sources is that they report from a very local East Bay perspective; incorporating the views of how the local community has interacted with the art pieces. By limiting the scope of this review to the range of articles from these sources collected in the Oakland mural history room, I seek to capture a sense of the local community history and interpretation of urban mural-making in Oakland.

The 1950s and 1960s: Guardians of the Mural

Prior to the 1970s, most print media coverage of murals was an account of residents' concerns over the disappearance or 'moving' of public murals from public spaces or a commentary of praise for a locally created, and locally themed piece of art as a source of pride for the city. These murals were largely indoor moveable productions staged in different public spaces including the Mayor's office, town hall, and libraries. The imagery primarily captured outdoor Oakland landscapes. Print media coverage captured a collective sentiment during this time that murals did not belong to one site, one institution, or one person, but were created for all of Oakland and therefore the city was responsible for their fate. The question of local protection and guardianship of the murals was centre stage in public debate.

The 1970s Politics and Paint

Outdoor mural-making gained popularity in Oakland in the late 1970s, when municipal approval was given to paint murals on public property. Prior to this all outdoor murals had been painted on private property. In the mid-1970s, Oakland commissioned its largest mural (also the largest on the West Coast of the United States) – the *Oakland Acorn Mural* (1976). This mural was designed by artist George Mead, and painted by a team of unnamed professional mural artists using eighteen colours. The design was the winning submission from of a contest held by the Golden Gate Paint and Coating Association as a

Bicentennial project to design the 35ft wide and 90ft high north wall of the Cathedral building at 1601 Broadway Avenue in downtown Oakland. The completed mural was a depiction of a germinating acorn sprouting symbols of Oakland's cultural, industrial, civic, and athletic assets (Erker *Oakland Tribune* 1977). This was acknowledged as a significant marker in mural-making history in Oakland as it was the point at which the City of Oakland began to think seriously about the potential of urban landscape beautification through outdoor mural-making. This project in some ways initiated what would later become a popular form of urban beautification in the city.

Another key moment in the history of mural-making in Oakland was the approval by the City of Oakland, in 1978, of the first mural on *public* property. The mural project was initiated by Laney College instructor Gary Graham who felt the blighted freeway abutment walls were void of meaning and eyesores for onlookers who spend hours in traffic (Malaspina *Tribune* 1977). This may have been the initiating point for what now today is a popular location (freeway underpasses and abutment walls) for public community murals.

The increasing popularity of outdoor murals in Oakland forced the City of Oakland to develop a mural approval process and take serious consideration of who (e.g., artists, wall owner, or the City) would be made responsible for maintenance of the mural in the event of vandalism, or decay of paint due to weathering. The mural approval process at this time for murals on public freeway walls included both maintaining approval from both the City of Oakland, and the Department of Transportation. During the late 1970's, several news sources reported on the increasing support from the City of Oakland for local mural projects as both municipal officials (including several City councillors) began to understand the potential of mural art as a cost efficient and effective means to combat urban blight. This sentiment of support through a cost benefit analysis would later combine with other learned social benefits of this art form to make for a mural filled next decade.

The 1980s The East Bay Mural Boom

The 1980s saw the production of a series of powerful murals in Oakland and the migration of artists from Eastern and Southern states to the Bay to learn and practice their craft, many of them studying at the California College of Arts and Crafts. During this decade, highway underpasses became particularly popular spaces for murals because they are heavily trafficked and relatively protected from the elements. CALTRANS (the State Department of Transportation of California) gave permission to mural artists to paint their underpasses as a means of combating highway blight caused by vandalism (Edwards *Montclarion* 1982). To publicize their support for murals and to solicit interested artists, CALTRANS aired a television commercial call for artists to paint murals on freeways as a method of graffiti abatement

(Drummond 2013). While freeway underpasses are still a popular location for mural-making, the artworks are subject to damage from poor storm drainage and pigeon droppings.

In this decade, Oakland came to host what was described as a ‘new breed’ of muralists; a younger group of independently minded professional artists who were *inspired-by* traditional mural artists and traditional ways of making, but not *held-to* any particular tradition (as mural artists in the neighboring Mission District of San Francisco were known to) and instead confidently created works in their own creative style. This class of young professionally trained artists had funding and approval from city governments to “change the face of the urban scene” in Oakland (Woo 1984). The artists of this new breed included Daniel Galvez, Keith Sklar, and Dan Fontes. The ‘new breed’ artists were reported to have believed in their right to artistic autonomy and creative freedom, and focused more on aesthetics and brightening environments than using murals as political tools.

Sklar, Galvez, and Fontes were responsible for some of the largest and popular murals of this decade, including: the *Oakland Portrait* (1981) by lead artist Daniel Galvez assisted by Juan Karlos and Keith Sklar, *Street Tattoo* (1982) by lead artist Daniel Galvez with team of artists, *Grand Performance* (1983) by Daniel Galvez and Keith Sklar and *Giraffics* (1984) by Dan Fontes. Mural artist Daniel Galvez was one of the pioneering community mural artists at this time, incorporating a community engagement process into his mural productions, first notably with the *Oakland Portrait* mural (1981) and then with the *Street Tattoo* mural (1982). *The Oakland Portrait* (1981) was painted on the Liberty House wall on 15th street between San Pablo and Telegraph Avenue, and was revered for its transformation of a blighted dreary alley way with a hopeful reflection of Oakland locals, representing the image of everyday working-class Oakland heroes. The mural *Street Tattoo* (1982) was designed through a community-engaged process. It animated an otherwise gloomy, blighted urban space with a cheerful, brightly coloured scene of dancers, musicians, and smiling children, reflecting the positive spirit of Oakland locals. The mural *Grand Performance* (1983) was also created by artists Daniel Galvez and Keith Sklar as a tribute to legendary Bay Area artists and performers and is both a play on mural-making itself as a street performance and also a commemoration of the invaluable service of the regions cultural workers. Still visible today, the mural series *Giraffics* was created in 1984 by a young muralist Dan Fontes. Inspired by the surrealist art movement, Fontes painted eight giraffes on the concrete pillars supporting the I-580 freeway at Harrison Street. With this artistic intervention, Fontes transformed a utilitarian and neglected space below the highway into a playful and imaginative one.

When artists Daniel Galvez, Keith Sklar, and Dan Fontes were in their artistic prime, they all created large scale outdoor public murals, yet they were also criticized for breaking away from more

traditional styles of both painting and designing. Criticism revolved around these artists signing their section of the mural and accepting funding from municipal governments. As legendary community mural artist and one of the founders of Precita Eyes Ray Patlan said; “This (municipal funding) takes away the essence of mural painting as art for the people and puts those concepts back into gallery art, art that is bought and sold,” (*Bay Guardian* 1984). Patlan emphasized that government funding and approval requirements for murals serves to limit community involvement, and leaves control over the art with the funder. While older and younger muralists, and muralists of different mural-making styles continued to work together, older muralists such as Ray Patlan worried that younger artists privileged aesthetics over politics.

In the late 1980s, mural-making in Oakland flourished. As a journalist for *The Bay Guardian* (1984) wrote, “murals are proliferating here (in Oakland), not like wildfire, as they have in SF’s Mission District, but more like wildflowers, everywhere in unexpected places.” Many of the murals were created by local youth under the guide of teachers from local high schools, instructors from California College of Arts and Crafts, and local independent community mural artists. In order to reach, engage, and employ local youth into the mural projects, artist instructors partnered with local public schools and community centers. Within these projects, there were consistent thematic trends of community, culture, and critical historical narrative. Artists whose mural projects fell within this category were: Malaquis Montoya (instructor at California College of Arts and Crafts), Nzinga Kianga (Oakland WallSpeak), Xozchtil NevelGuerrero, Dewey Crumpler, and Seyed Alavi. These artists approached mural-making as an organizing and teaching tool, allowing groups they worked with to explore their artistic capacity, histories, and ethnic identities in the process of designing the mural.

One of the very profound instructors of this style of mural-making in Oakland during this time was Malaquis Montoya, a mural artist and mural course instructor at the California College of Arts and Crafts. In Montoya’s course each year he created a mural with his students that explored a different political issue. Montoya emphasized mural painting as a cooperative process, where artists who are accustomed to exerting their individuality must learn to function within a group (*Woo Tribune* 1985). Montoya was a firm believer and advocate of art that spoke to the concerns of the community. Through his teaching Montoya emphasized the importance of nurturing a sense of collective responsibility in emerging artists. In the murals painted by Montoya’s class, topics of war in Central America and Vietnam, feminism, and critical race and class issues were addressed.

During the late 1980s, an influential program called Oakland WallSpeak was created where teenage youth were employed and supervised by artist Nzinga Kianga to create murals on the outside

walls of the rental housing projects in which they lived (Ashbrook *The Daily Californian* 1988). Participants in the program were given one month of artist training, and paid an honorarium for participating in the program. This program is an excellent example of the capacity of individuals who do not own their property, to show ownership of place through authoring the imagery in their landscape. Themes addressed in this project included taking a stand against apartheid and all forms of racism. The program Oakland WallSpeak was considered innovative and inspirational for its time, as it was not just professional artists painting murals but young teenagers (who were local occupants of the landscape) taking authority, authorship, and charge of beautifying their own residential spaces.

In 1989, local community mural artists Xochitl Guerrero, Dewey Crumpler, and Nzinga Kianga collaborated with local youth from Fruitvale and Elhurst areas of Oakland to create three murals. The youth were recruited through the Spanish Speaking Unity Council (EPA), the Youth Development Centre (EOYDC) and the Summer Youth Employment Training Centre (SYTEP) to create three murals; (1) Sanborn Park (2) Castlemont High School courtyard and (3) 82nd Avenue wall of Jims Liquor Store. This project was funded and supported under the Office of Community Developments Graffiti Abatement Program to change and transform the local landscape through reflecting the ethnic and cultural diversity of the local neighborhoods (MacArthur Metro 1989).

In the 1980s, there were many documented accounts of mural artist groups working in a similar way my research has found Oakland based muralists do presently. The consistency in creation and process included developing bold works that respond to urban blight, created without adequate remuneration, reflective of community through a community engaged design process, painting collectively with a team, on public property including commonly highway underpasses, and concluding with a community celebration/mural unveiling.

The 1990s Public Funding for Public Art

The early- to mid-1990s were characterized by strong funding for publicly-funded mural projects in Oakland. The Mayor of Oakland at the time, Elihu Harris, was supportive of community mural projects as a community unification and beautification tool. During the mid-1990s under his leadership, the Oakland Office of Parks and Recreation, and the Oakland Mayor's office after school program were responsible for supporting several mural projects which employed and engaged youth.

In 1992, a series of 'word murals' went up on highway underpasses in Oakland. This project was supervised by Oakland mural artist Seyed Alavi, and gave youth an opportunity to design and paint works that responded to the blighted concrete, while learning artistic and critical thinking skills. The instructor Alavi lead the youth through a series of workshops where they talked about the power of creating art in

the public landscape and the power of spreading messages through this art form. The youth came up with four word plays for the murals including: (1) INVISIBLE COLOR (2) INFORM (N) ATION (3) eRACISM (4) DFFERENCE (Flynn 1992). The word plays were intended to provoke thought in the viewer, similar to that of a riddle. For example, there is no I in difference, if we remove the I (the self, the ego) we begin to realize we are all more similar than we are different.

In 1993, graffiti artist and community organizer Ringo 93 in collaboration with 11 local youth created a powerful animated mural centering on themes of race, respect, and community. The participating youth were not required to have any previous artistic experience and were employed by the Summer Youth Employment Program. The mural they produced depicted a truck heading towards destination 'Respect' through an appreciation of local history. In the tradition of many muralists from Diego Rivera onwards, the youth painted themselves into the mural (McConnell 1993).

The print media continued to document the restorative and healing capacity of murals for marginalized communities. In 1994, a mural was painted on the AIDS Services center with HIV-positive clients supervised by artist and teacher Sharon Siskin. It was described by a journalist as a way of both providing an opportunity for healing through the arts for those participating in the painting and for the streetscape on which the centre was located (Tribune 1994). The concept of healing was also applied to murals themselves, with the first public record of mural restoration being documented in 1999 in Oakland. The restoration of a 1977 mural by Raymond Nevel involved the incorporation of new imagery of Mayan and Aztec symbols of healing in order to bridge African-American, Latino, and Chicano ethno-cultural heritage.

The 2000s The Now of Mural-Making

At the turn of the twenty-first century, while there was still public reporting (more in online than print media sources) on a number of community mural projects, there was less reporting on mural projects supported by state- or municipally-funded streams or programs. A key moment for mural-making occurred in 2004 when mural artist T. Scott Sayre won a lawsuit against a local restaurant whose owner had made changes to one of his original murals depicting the life of Jack London. The value of this case is that the artist's rights over creative property were legally upheld. Five years later, in 2009, the mural artist crew the Community Rejuvenation Project was cited in the *Oaktown Teen Times* for having created a powerful mural project with a team of over 30 youth from local Oakland high schools. The youth crew called themselves by the crew name Street Warriors Enacting Artistic Revolution (S.W.E.A.R). Over a six-week period, the youth learned how to prepare walls and to design and paint murals. In interview, one of the youth who took part in the project said "rejuvenating our communities requires all of our efforts.

Since our government leaders are failing, we are doing our jobs as citizens to shine the light on what needs to be done. As our walls show, we are not only artists and workers, but activists protesting for equality and peace in our neighborhoods” (Oaktown Teen Times 2009). This statement summarizes the sentiment of revolutionary mural-making that was the essence of my fieldwork findings – that a large contingent of community mural makers in Oakland are not only beautifying urban space with their artistry, but also using the messaging content as a space for protest, and the design process as a space for political organizing and education.

Intentional Community Mural-Making and Municipal Process

While I describe Oakland, CA as the landscape of possibility for mural-making, this is largely the result of the culture and politics of Oaklander’s as supportive of radical messaging in the murals they commission on privately owned wall space; in short, radical mural art is possible in landscapes where radical politics are present, black and brown mural art is possible where black and brown people are present. With regard to Oakland’s municipally administered Public Art program, the notion of what is ‘possible’ differs as will be discussed below, largely as a result of the bureaucracy that is tied to many municipal government processes.

Since the late 1980s, municipal governments across North America have been using mural art as a way to respond to neighborhood blight, and as a means of youth employment. As a result, many municipalities have developed a mural arts approval process which typically incorporates a funding stream, permit, and mural design approval process. Based on my knowledge as a mural artist and researcher I have found that each municipality’s public art policy is unique, varying in size, economic capacity, and in frequency of activity.

Not all site-specific outdoor art-making in Oakland is required to go through a municipal approval process. To date, the only murals in Oakland which require the approval of the Public Art Advisory Committee are those that are painted with public funds, or those that are painted on public or Cal Trans (California Department of Transportation) property. The City of Oakland’s public art program was founded in 1989 when Public Art Ordinance NO. 11086 C.M.S. was adopted. The Public Art Program commissions art projects which are funded through a 1.5% allocation from all eligible City of Oakland capital improvement projects (www.oaklandnet.com). For projects painted on City of Oakland, Cal Trans property, or with funds allocated from the City, the review process is both lengthy and bureaucratic. The mural project proposal must include an artist resume, samples of past work, a visual proposal of the mural, photos of the site, budget, a mural maintenance plan, permissions, and insurance documentation. Further to the lengthiness of the process to attain funding, financial challenges arise for

artists wishing to create projects on municipally-owned or -managed property including that the City of Oakland charges artists and site owners a project review fee (for projects requiring review by the Public Art Program) of \$109.00/hour, or a minimum of \$327.00 per project review (www.oaklandnet.com).

Based on my interviews with mural artists, despite what appears on the City of Oakland's website, Oakland's current public art policy is complex and remains in many ways challenging for artists working from a community engaged socially motivated lens to access. In the 1980s and 1990s, the municipal government appears to have funded more mural projects than they do currently. Artists I interviewed described the challenges of delayed contracts and funding from council members as well as rigid design-approval processes that constrain the ability to respond to changing community needs. Thus a key advantage to creating murals on private property without municipal funding is the creative freedom this affords – all that is needed is the approval of the property owner. While painting on private property has its advantages, one significant challenge remains for private outdoor mural-making; protection. This is in part a result of the fact that mixed in with community made murals in Oakland is a significant amount of tagging (considered a sign of blight by City officials) which businesses are ordered to remove or else face municipal fines. And so, the private graffiti-buffing companies at times perform blanket sweeps of certain neighborhoods taking with them community created murals.

None of the murals which are the focus of this research study were painted on public buildings or with public funds, and so for this reason, I have not focused on a deep policy-based investigation of how Oakland's public art policy differs from that of neighboring municipalities, rendering Oakland as the landscape of possibility of this form of radical-intentional community mural-making. Instead, in my research I have found that the permissibility is based largely on the frequency of radical politics in Oakland in tandem with extent of blighted wall space.

From my review of the public archival newsprint record of mural-making in Oakland, there are a few major themes regarding the content and the local community response to the murals. Overall, there was a strong sentiment of pride-of-place in Oakland. This included depictions of Oakland's community history, Oakland's natural landscapes, and various tributes and dedications to Oakland's political and cultural heroes. There were also several mural projects which highlighted the ethnic history of local groups including depictions of native homelands, including spiritual and cultural symbols, and a narrative between life back home, and life in the new home. Lastly, there was a prominent theme of social justice and activism in many of the mural productions, some more obvious and others more clandestine, these murals addressed both local and international justice pursuits including anti-racism, anti-poverty, anti-war, and environmentalism.

Conclusion

Through Oakland's history, murals have served multiple functions in the urban landscape as tools of beautification, historical memorialization, and public political expression. The act of mural-making has been shown to be of particular significance to marginalized social groups and social movements as a way to give voice to alternative perspectives, experiences, and histories.

Through my analysis I have found that murals through their documentation and public telling of history, inspire collective commemoration of moments of triumph in the people's history that can affirm intergenerational community solidarity (Sieber et al., 2012). In this way one can appreciate how the large scale public visual narration and marking of Oakland's radical political history through intentional community mural-making keeps that politics alive and in place today in Oakland as the city faces yet again another era of change, revitalization, and most recently gentrification of its historical neighborhoods. The public documentation of these powerful histories, both painful and celebratory, are of paramount significance to local residents as is revealed in the following chapters. It is important for youth growing up in these very landscapes, navigating the residual effects of racially intolerant systems of power and systemic discrimination, to know the truth of their own suppressed hidden black and brown histories, not commonly taught in the classrooms or centered in mainstream media, in order to give context and on how to navigate the present. Through my analysis of both the radical political histories, and mural-making histories of Oakland, I confirm that Oakland is the landscape of possibility for this intentional community mural-making that centers black, brown, and indigenous peoples and history as the very politicized lives of these demographic groups has been integral of the making/history of Oakland. A radical politics can be found painted on the walls, because a radical politics lives and has lived in the streets.

Chapter 4 The Process of Mural-Making as Place-Making Transforming the Social & Material Landscape:

This chapter provides a contextual analysis of the transformative capacity of mural art within the fabric of urban cultural landscapes and the way in which the process of mural-making can serve as a political and social act of place-making. My exploration of the relationship between outdoor public mural-making and place-making stems from a desire to explore local community resistance to cultural, social, and physical displacement through art making in the context of West Oakland, California. In this chapter, I describe the mural art of resistance practiced today by Oakland mural art crews, and the process of mural-making employed by these groups with a particular focus on community engagement as a means of contributing to a sense of place for participants. In order to consider the place-making capacity of mural art, I offer an examination of the *Madre Maize* (2012) mural, painted by the Community Rejuvenation Project in West Oakland, CA. I conclude by describing the transformative impact of this mural on the cityscape through a discussion of the Free Your Way community garden.

Mural-Making to Resist Gentrification

In Oakland, mural-making crews, in particular, the Community Rejuvenation Project (CRP) and Trust Your Struggle (TYS) are actively using the art of mural-making as a tool to combat gentrification, and the cultural and historical displacements that are a bi-product of it. As the following quotation from the founder of CRP illustrates, mural-making serves as an aesthetic, spatially subversive act which aims to disrupt the hegemonic discourse that follows neoliberal planning schemes and neighborhood renewal projects:

Actually, I think that [the mural] is a tool against gentrification. You know, sometimes change is used as a tool for it, but when you do it with the community, in a way that holds the community into it, you become rooted to it as well. So, if you do stuff that people connect to, they want to stick around it. Other people may want to move to it, but they are not going to have space because you are already there. Just like when you are planting in your garden, if the roots are there. We are trying to support those roots, support the rooted plants, that are blooming, blossoming, and give them more water, give them more light, and that will help them to survive (Desi, 27/07/2013).

Desi asserts that when residents see themselves and their ways of being in place it increases their sense of belonging to the landscape and therefore their motivation to fight for their right to continue to exist in that space. In the analogy that Desi draws between mural-making and gardening, he asserts that activists, through their creative efforts, aim to support the local community through reviving and beautifying a blighted landscape, contributing to the overall health and survival of the community.

Through a process which prioritizes the voices of the displaced or those at risk of displacement, and the use of cultural symbols and historical narratives, mural artist crews help to defend the right to physical places for marginalized social groups by marking their presences and histories back into the urban landscape. In this way, there exists a symbiotic relationship between mural-making as a means of responding to urban blight, and mural-making as a means of resisting displacement as a bi-product of gentrification. The extent of urban blight in an area is often used as a measure by which developers and municipal planners defend the need for neighborhood revitalization plans. Community mural projects, professionally organized and painted, give blighted spaces a DIY, low-cost and (in the best scenarios), locally-driven and controlled facelift. They can relieve a site of blight with symbolism that reflects the history of the local community as narrated by local members of the community. In doing so, community mural projects respond to the need for aesthetic healing of the blighted physical landscape.

Aesthetic healing refers to the way in which visual art is used to better the health of the landscape. Aesthetic healing in this context relates to the way in which murals heal urban landscapes of grime, pollution, and the associated negative energy of divestment by cleaning the walls, applying community dictated images of positivity, and in the process of painting, transfer positive energy into the landscape. These acts of aesthetic healing contribute to the overall improvement of the landscapes physical and energetic health which impacts the residents of the space.

Eric Arnold, communications director of CRP, spoke of the way in which intentional spirit supporting murals have a way of responding to gentrification while still upholding community. Rather than vandalizing new businesses and property with slogans such as ‘f*&k gentrification’ (which is a legitimate act of resistance to gentrification), community mural artists use graffiti-art to respond in a way that visually represents the culture of the community to increase the visibility of those made vulnerable by redevelopment with storytelling imagery. Through doing so, artists I interviewed claimed they aim to send a message to the ‘new’ and transient public of the local histories and cultures that are being displaced and replaced in the process of redevelopment, while also reaffirming local community and their right to place through painting their faces, stories, and histories in the landscape. In this way, artists

(many of whom have roots in graffiti culture) use the mural art of resistance to aesthetically ‘fight back’ against forces of displacement with colour and culture.



Figure 4.1 “Culture Is A Weapon” mural, East Oakland. Visible by BART and 880 Freeway. Author and date of the mural is unknown. Photograph by Narmeen Hashim.

Types of Radical Mural-Making in Oakland

I define radical spirited mural-making as mural-making which aesthetically depicts images and narrative that is politically left of center which boldly advocate for political, economic, and social reform. Radically spirited mural-making occurs in varying ways in Oakland, but according to my analysis, takes three main forms which I have categorized as *permanent*, *semi-permanent* and *ephemeral*. Each of these categories of mural have a unique impact, and are employed depending on the artist, the wall, and the context.

The first type are ‘permanent murals’ which are murals created with the intention of being a permanent fixture on the allotted wall space. These projects largely involve a longer and more detailed planning process including partnerships, permission, contracts, and community involvement. It is mural works within this first category that are largely the focus of this study. Large-scale permitted and planned

projects have the power of longevity in their holding of place, along with the powerful impact of their making process.



Figure 4.2 Permanent mural example: Garden side wall of the Madre Maize mural painted by the Community Rejuvenation Project, West Oakland. Photograph by Narmeen Hashim.

The second type is ‘semi-permanent murals’ which are murals created on rotating and at times, movable wall spaces. As immediate responses to current political and social events, these projects involve a much more condensed and quicker planning process. Despite the more temporary placing of a piece on a rotating wall, it is the rapid nature of the response that is powerful and allows the message to quickly get out as a retort to a recently occurring event, tragedy, or verdict.



Figure 4.3 Semi-permanent mural example: Memorial for Trayvon Martin mural (2012) painted by Trust Your Struggle, Downtown Oakland. Photograph by Narmeen Hashim.

Lastly, ‘ephemeral murals’ are mural art works created without any formal planning or spatial permission. They may be acts of free creative expression and could fall within the category of graffiti street art. Graffiti street art murals are powerful in their ability to claim space, again rapidly spreading message and emotion but without having to navigate bureaucracy, public opinion, or permission for the space. While not all of them last, some of them have longevity because of the level of artistic skill and/or because of the effectiveness with which they may animate and revive a blighted space makes the building owner and local community want to preserve the piece.



Figure 4.4 Ephemeral mural example: DECOLONIZE mural (2012) painted by the Community Rejuvenation Project, East Oakland. Visible by BART and 880 Freeway. Photograph by Narmeen Hashim.

Culture as Commodity: Mural-Makings Multiple Potentials

While artist crews, such as the ones I focus on, do the work of community mural-making with holistic intention, some mural art does have the capacity to incite rather than resist gentrification. Urban art-making, public art, and neighborhood regeneration are all complex often controversial spatial processes. Mural-making has in countless times been folded into culturally lead urban renewal strategies that promote the making of a ‘creative city’ (Miles 2015). Art and aesthetics have long been mobilized for the economic regeneration of neighborhoods and I acknowledge that not all developers or artists create murals with the same intention of empowering the local population. At times for the developer the agenda may be economic, and for some artists, egotistic.

The state and the private sector have commonly used art and culture to carry out economic and social change. While gentrification was once described as a phenomenon where the culture work of artists and affordable real estate enticed rich individuals to relocate to poor urban centers raising the value of property, gentrification is now engineered, and artists are often used as pawns in the process. Notably businesses commission murals as a means of promoting their brand/services on the walls of their facility and often BIAs (Business Improvement Associations) commission community murals as an attempt to show they are ‘investing in the community’ and ‘involving local voices’. While these murals are typically aesthetically appealing they are often void of any depth in meaning, cultural significance, or any political dissent in narrative. Typically, in the processes of making of these pseudo community murals any

controversial histories/stories that surface during the community engagement sessions do not make it to the wall.

Intentional community murals and radically messaged street art, including ones which depict the local authentic critical history of a neighbourhood, can still raise property values. Murals that narrate the histories of those being actively displaced can be and have also been used to “assuage the guilt” related to the displacement of groups (Bockman 2013). Some murals have been criticized for depicting a sanitized look at history, implying that the culprits of oppression and inequality are characters of the past, rather than the continuing present. My intent in exploring the negative potential of mural-making is to present an honest reflection of the capacity of the art form. I believe it is important that mural-artists going forward be mindful of the multiple potentials of this artform in order to mitigate harm.

The best case scenario is when artists are mindful of the influence of their creations, in the process of creating, and over the life cycle of the mural. At times, artists are able to monitor the impact of their creations, and take actions when necessary in order to protect the needs of the community. While the community mural-making process is rarely seamless, and artists cannot always know the potential impact of their work, I believe that the mural art crews Trust Your Struggle and the Community Rejuvenation Project, by keeping a political and social agenda rather than an economic one at the heart of their art-making process lead example of how to mitigate some of the negative potential of this form of art-making.

Oakland Radical Mural Art Crews

Radical mural-making in Oakland is unique because of the fusion of mural-making techniques, the community centered intentional process, and the political meaning(s) embedded in the work. I have defined ‘intentional community mural-making’ in the context of this study as site-specific mural art in the public domain, that is created out of a community engaged process, and thematically offers a political, cultural, and/or spiritual narrative in the work. Based on my research in Oakland, the two crews who most directly engage with and consistently use intentional community mural-making are the Community Rejuvenation Project, and Trust Your Struggle. While I do not wish to take away from the individuality of both of these crews-as they are different in structure, and each employ unique artistic and organizing styles, they do share some similarities. Both CRP and TYS engage in a style of intentional political mural-making that embraces diversity in culture and spirituality, and create murals with a fusion of graffiti aerosol-art and traditional Mexican mural-making techniques. Both crews also create work that honors the stories of the communities they paint about and within, in a dignified way, and both paint murals projects that are both funded and not funded based on their belief and commitment to a cause. In

this way, the intentional community mural-making taking place in Oakland at this time is not only radical in its powerful, life affirming symbols and messaging, but also in the processes, techniques, and pedagogy behind the practice.

Local Authorship of Place

Materially, community murals create a physical marking of place-identity in the landscape, and socially, through the community engaged process of their making. Place, in the context of neighborhood locales, is in a constant state of making. Through social processes, policies, and divine intervention, the social and material landscape is in a constant state of production. While defining ‘place’ can be complex, we can most commonly understand place as the meaning-filled relationship based on an emotive or experiential connection an individual or group of people have with a geographic location.

In my analysis, I found that the aspect of this form of mural-making which makes it different from other forms of art making in public space, is the emphasis placed on *intentional authorship*; the meaningful inclusion and involvement of all interested members of the neighborhood or geographic community in the *process* of art making, and not just that of professional artists. This engagement in the process of making allows community members, residents, and occupiers of the landscape to assume authorship of the landscapes they inhabit creating an experiential connection to the making of that landscape; to the making of place.

Community mural-making may be considered a micro-spatial urban practice that reshapes urban space. Based on the scholarly work of geographers in everyday urbanisms, radical community mural-making fits well within the definition of DIY urbanisms which hold at their core “a belief that change is possible despite economic or political obstacles” (Iveson 2013: 943). For those groups who are long-time renters, and have been restricted in the modifications they can make to their dwellings, and largely excluded from municipal planning processes, the opportunity to author a piece of the landscape can inspire confidence, and a sense of power. In my research findings I found that community mural art projects activate spaces by encouraging local residents to assume civic power and take it upon themselves to respond to, rejuvenate, and create a local landscape reflective of their own identities and a product of their own actions. While a resident might start with being given the opportunity to take more initiative in the landscape with a mural, realizing their ability to have power in even small spatial transformations within their local environment can inspire other DIY urbanisms. DIY urbanisms that aim to heal and relieve the social and physical landscape of a community can include community gardens, urban reforestation projects, community clean ups, and neighborhood repair initiatives such as street light and basketball net replacement. The DIY act of painting a mural in the landscape can empower community

residents and can have a ripple effect of drawing attention to the wider urban landscape as was the case with the *Madre Maize* (2012) mural and the consequent creation of the Free Your Way garden. While the inspiration of local community to take up DIY acts of spatial revival has positive impact, research by Schmelzkopf (2002) reminds us of the limitations and potential frustrations of this work in that at times, communities are inspired to put hours of personal time, energy, and resources into for example a community garden, only for it to be later regarded as expendable space at the dispense of developers and land owners including by City government.

Based on the radical messaging of the mural, murals of resistance can be considered subversive acts of spatial transformation in the urban landscape. According to the critical urban scholar Kurt Iveson (2013), while the city is a product of complex power geometries, power does not follow one strict hierarchal order; and no operation of power is beyond subversion and or appropriation. In the context of radical community mural-making (which by nature of imagery and narrative asserts visibility of marginalized groups) value is placed on the ability of local citizens to appropriate space, visibility, and subvert power hierarchies through this form of grassroots urbanism.

Through their efforts, community mural-making groups activate and inspire action in the landscape rather than passively accept the erasure and displacement of vulnerable groups from the environment. As visual narrative, the voices, images, and histories of community (of local culture) compete with corporate advertising and other forms of media visually dominating North American cities through billboards and purchase of building wall space for advertisement. In this way, community mural-making de-commodifies space by using it for cultural projection rather than corporate production (Crawford 2011 as cited in Iveson 2013).

Process of Mural-Making as Place-Making

It is important to note that while the process of mural-making is unique to each community project, there remains some standard components. The process of community mural organizing typically begins with an initial spark, desire, or idea, in response to a blighted space, or, to relay a particular theme, politics, or story. A project team is then brought together, typically including a mural artist or mural artist crew, a community organization, and interested members of the community. A collective application for funding may then be drafted and submitted.

An average of 60% of the projects which I spoke to artists about were either only funded to cover the cost of materials, or not funded at all. This relates to the act of mural-making as more than a 'job' in the capitalist sense of the word, and something which many community artists do based on their passion and commitment to the politics integral to this act of making and their passion for painting. Scholarly

research on artistic labour demonstrates that many professional artists earn the majority of their income from secondary employment that provides a steady income (Bain 2005). In the context of intentional community mural artists in Oakland, many artists keep a second ‘real’ or ‘mainstream’ job in order to ensure that their art-making can remain intentional, political, and truly community supporting, rather than being forced to be dependent on corporate arts funding for their livelihood. Corporate funding schemes often have regulations on design and messaging that can restrict artistic expression and inadequately serve community needs.

Bain and McLean (2013: 94) focus on “the collectivist approaches to artistic practice employed by non-profit arts organizations trying to sustain a community cultural economy of generosity, exchange and co-creation”. Much like the artists groups at the centre of my research in Oakland, according to Bain and McLean’s (2013) study, artists groups with collectivist ideals that prioritise critical community engagement practices in Toronto have struggled against the corporatization of culture in order to do so. Through reflection, I infer that in both Toronto and Oakland, artists who prioritize community engagement practices, creating artworks reflective of community (at times politically charged) over public art works that are corporately supported, struggle to do so, as community projects are less funded (if at all). It is only through practices of generosity, exchange, and collective creation, that community mural artists in Oakland, like artists in Toronto, are able to make such valuable art projects possible.

Once the project is ready to move forward by the project planners, a community engagement session is organized. The details of the community engagement session will be described below. A project may be deemed ready to move forward based on the decision of the organizers, and the securing of the mural location and funding. Out of community discussion, a finalized sketch of the proposed mural is created and, if required, sent for approval to community members, property owners, municipal public art councils, and/or funding agencies. The need for approval is contingent on where the mural is being painted, and who is funding it. In the case of a privately owned building, with a private source of funding, the approval process is much simpler and informal between the artists, the community, and the building owner. In the case of a publically owned building, a heritage site, and/or public funding, the approval process can be lengthy and bureaucratic; first seeking approval from community members, then municipal councils and public art approval boards elected by local government. Waiting for approvals and funds to be released can be frustrating for out-door mural artist groups working to complete projects during climatic dry seasons, and while balancing scheduling of other projects. When all of the layers of approval are given, the painting commences. Upon the completion of the mural, a mural unveiling is held as a way to acknowledge and celebrate the new marker, thank the artists and community members for their efforts, and reveal the new counter-monument in the community.

Counter-monuments are intentionally designed pieces of public art made to unsettle social relations rather than provide universalized closure. Counter monuments “dismiss heroic imagery, interject disturbing rather than placating texts, and are designed to be interactive and accessible rather than awesome...and tell truths about both literal and ideological absences in social memory” (Burk 2006: 953). Through their existence, counter-monuments challenge sanitized narrations of history and elevate the silenced truths of the oppressed. The added value of community created DIY counter-monuments is that they are physically situated in the locales in which those who might most benefit from seeing them live, work, and dwell.

The public artistic function of the counter-monument is to address erasures, displacements, and silences by offering interruption to the landscape (Burk 2006). Community-made murals are a form of counter-monument. They are made from “textured and fragile materials, disturbing the perfection of forms, displaying inscriptions which refer to multiple and fragmentary experiences, and eschewing the heroic imagery and proportions for more intimate and accessible, even invitational forms” (Burk 2006: 952). The very imperfectness of the wall mural makes it accessible, and allows space for narratives and experiences that are un-sanitized, and ultimately imperfect.

Community Authorship Through Ongoing Community Engagement

One of the most valued and unique aspects of the community mural-making process is the community engagement session. The engagement session sets community mural-making apart from other forms of mural-making, and contributes to this art form as a means of place-making. It is in this session that community members are able to come together, and often through acts of storytelling, skill sharing, and creative exercise, learn about the experiences, memories, and ideas of one another, and through doing so, in the best of scenarios, participate in a process of community building and healing. From the ideas, stories, themes, and images collected in the community engagement sessions, artists, in consultation with community members create a design. Once the design is finalized, the surface wall is prepared and the process of painting begins. The surface wall is prepared dependent on the needs of the wall. Most commonly, the wall is thoroughly cleaned to wash off any grime, salt, chipping paint, or pollution residue. Depending on the previous condition of the wall, sanding or pressure washing may be required. Following this parts of the wall may be repaired. Finally, once the wall is completely dry it is primed with an appropriate primer (matched to the type of paint used for the mural) to ensure the wall will accept the paint.

In my analysis I have found that in best practice models of community mural-making concurrent to the initial organized engagement session there is an ongoing process of community outreach that

extends through to the final mural unveiling. Pending the nature of the mural, the points of engagement vary. These may include participation in: the initial community engagement design and planning sessions; the prepping of the wall and landscape; the process of painting through either painting, or offering supportive assistance, sitting as audience to the artists while painting; and attending the final mural unveiling celebration. Within the community engagement process, artists and community organizers often must variously play the roles of: artist, researcher, negotiator, counselor, and mediator. Community mural-artists, by nature of the outdoor space in which they create, are exposed to social engagement and conversation while painting. While at times the use of headphones and the height at which they are painting distances them from passerby's, many of the artists I witnessed and interviewed were intentionally and respectfully available to engaging with community.

The very process of community engagement can be transformative for the community through building bridges and connections between different people and groups, uncovering hidden histories, bringing collective attention to spaces of blight and neglect, and inspiring local community action. The engagement process contributes in one way or another to the making of place as individuals whom participate in the process establish new meaning within the landscape based on their lived memory of making their mark in the landscape. The ability to participate in place-making processes is of particular significance to those often excluded from such processes. By creating a community-led process that gives local residents agency within their local geography, artists often help to foster a sense of pride and dignity for local residents.

Of the seven artists interviewed, four mentioned the importance of thinking about safety for the community when organizing these sessions. In the case of landscapes that experience perpetual violence and painting projects that reflect a coerced political perspective, organizers and artists must carefully plan engagement sessions to ensure that those people already subject to disproportionate insecurity are not made further vulnerable as a result of this project. For the duration of the painting process, artists constantly interact with passerby members of the community in which they are painting. In this way the painting of a public mural is also a public performance.

Making space for all community members to feel engaged in some way in the process during the painting of the mural (even as audience or witness to the painting process) was described by community members to be part of what made them feel 'a part of the mural'. This process of community engagement through mural-making creates experiences that build individual and collective memories that may last a lifetime. In this way, the individual or collective group experience of making, authoring, marking, transforming, becomes a form of material memory embedded in the landscape, with a large scale

reminder (for the lifetime of the mural) of their place within the landscape, and their experience of being part of the transformation.

Madre Maize (2012) and the ‘Free Your Way’ Garden: Marking and Rooting Politics into Place

“The *Madre Maize* (2012) mural is a great example where you have this once blighted forgotten lot; a dumping ground, that is now one of the biggest murals in Oakland” (Saqib, 22/07/13). In what follows, I discuss the making of the *Madre Maize* (2012) mural. First, I focus on the ways in which the landscape was activated through the creation of the mural. Second, I explore how the mural inspired the formation of the Free Your Way community garden, further transforming the landscape and rooting politics into place.

The *Madre Maize* mural stands as a vibrant landmark of history and culture in the heart of West Oakland. It was the vision of CRP, based on the potential they saw for the blighted space that led to the creation of this powerful place marker at the historic intersection of Seventh and Market street, and the accompanying Free Your Way community garden. The *Madre Maize* mural was created in April 2012. After almost a month of dedicated teamwork, CRP and the Peoples Grocery staff together with local resident support created a 3500 square foot mural that wraps three large sides of the Peoples Grocery office headquarters.

Through the representation of a narrative that marks the cultural and political past and present of the community, placed at a historically significant intersection, this piece of public art was designed to serve as an uplifting and educational monument, visible for local residents, and from different points of view including those travelling by foot, by BART, and by car on the 580 freeway. While the Peoples Grocery has had an influential history in the West Oakland community, the *Madre Maize* mural has been a supportive addition to the work, as it has visually marked the politics and history of the organization and the community in the landscape, increasing the organizations visibility. “People come into our office now all the time. They come in because they are interested in the story of the mural, you can see it from everywhere. The Bart train passes by it, the freeway passes by it, 60 000 truckers pass by it every day, people know who we are because of our public relations and our history in the community but, people know *where* we are because of the mural” (Saqib, 22/07/13).

The Peoples Grocery is a food justice organization that works from a justice oriented lens to push for more justice-oriented self-determined solutions to food insecurity in West Oakland. The organization was formed in 2002 out of the hard work and dedication of three West Oaklander’s who were compelled to take action against the lack of available fresh and healthy food in the community. Educating the local community about healthy food production through praxis is a powerful way in which the organization is moving beyond a charity model, and equipping the local community to produce and harvest for

themselves, taking the matters of their nutrition, and access to good food into their own hands. The Peoples Grocery's mission is to improve "the health and local economy of West Oakland through investing in the local food system" (www.peoplesgrocery.org). The Peoples Grocery fulfills its mission by increasing economic opportunity, building a healthier environment, and strengthening social capital in the local community. The Peoples Grocery is innovative and expansive in their approach to dealing with food insecurity, making connections between access to healthy food and community health. Other organizations across the United States have used the Peoples Grocery allyship program as a resource to become more competent in the areas of race, class, power and privilege (www.peoplesgrocery.org). Part of the aim of the Peoples Grocery is to ensure those made most vulnerable to food insecurity are guiding solutions within their own community. They embody through practice the belief that part of the way a community fights back against gentrification is to improve their own health through creating sustainable business models that improve the economic and physical health of the community.

'It Was All A dream...' The Origin of the Mural Project

According to Desi of CRP, the project originated out of a proposal for a mural project that Nikki Henderson (the former Executive Director of PG) and Desi had developed in response to the Mitchell Kapor Foundation (now the Kapor Center for Social Impact) call for mural proposals. The call originally requested a mural design for the 13 boarded-up windows of the organization's new facility in Oakland. Desi and Nikki brought together a team of food justice organizations to develop a community-guided design for the project. The group began with the number 13 and discussed its significance in multiple cultures and indigenous communities, as well as the relationship of the number 13 to lunar cycles. Based on their conversations around the number 13, the group decided to frame the project around 13 moons and the relationship between lunar cycles to other aspects of life including traditional night farming practices, and women's menstrual cycle. This proposal was not initially selected for funding but the artists persevered over eight months and ultimately leveraged financial support from the Oakland Cultural Funding program.

Peoples Grocery staff had long-talked about the need for a mural and a community garden on the surrounding property, and willingly approached the landlord for permission. The argument made to the landlord was that the costs associated with buffing graffiti vandalism could be mitigated, if money was invested in a mural instead. Evidence has shown that buildings with murals on them are much less likely to be tagged with graffiti. The landlord was supportive of the project and once the approval from the landlord was received, the artist group in collaboration with the People's Grocery began planning. This was the beginning of an important process of relationship building that brought a variety of community

stakeholders into the project, including community residents, Peoples Grocery staff, the CRP team, and the neighbouring construction company.

In my interviews with Peoples Grocery staff, and the artists from CRP, the word used most commonly to describe the relationship that formed between the two groups around the project was ‘organic’. In this context, organic described the more or less effortless, and natural collaborative working relationship of developing, planning, and creating the mural project. Prior to the mural, the outside of the People’s Grocery facility was uninviting, vandalized, and overgrown. It was a large grey cement cinderblock, with barred windows, surrounded by a chain link fence with barbed wire running along the top, and graffiti tags along the back facing wall of the building. The removal of the physical barriers (the barbed wire fence and the overgrowth), and the placement of vibrant aesthetics historically reflexive of the community, made both the organization and the land more accessible to community residents. “No one knew where we were, no one could ever find us, and we were unknown on the block. Next door to us was an empty lot, a dumping site, so our goal was to reclaim that land, and start growing food on it, and creating something beautiful here” (Saqib, 22/07/13). The addition of the mural and the garden allowed the Peoples Grocery to augment its historic and physical with an aesthetic presence, and root their politics in the landscape.

The project was completed over the course of one month. The artists worked at times seven days a week, sun up to sun down, as natural light when painting an outdoor mural is commonly used as the clock to measure the work day. Significant physical and emotional energy was required and invested to complete a project of this magnitude. While the artists were paid nominally from the project, the *Madre Maize* (2012) mural, like many of CRP’s community mural projects, was largely a product of passionate commitment to social justice politics unbound by monetary gain.

Community Engagement: Planning the Narrative of the Piece Through Research and Flexibility

The aim of the *Madre Maize* (2012) mural project was to create an outdoor mural that was inspiring towards and reflective of the local community. Working in West Oakland, a community in crisis, meant CRP artists and Peoples Grocery staff had to be flexible in their approaches to engaging a community, who while thriving, is also facing issues of health, poverty, crime, and violence. In order to engage local residents, youth, and community leaders, and meet the community where they were at, CRP and the Peoples Grocery incorporated a strategic community engagement process which included town hall meetings, a community survey, and ongoing dialogue and outreach.

The town hall meetings were organized to invite residents and representatives from local organizations to learn about the project, meet with the artist team, and share their ideas for the mural. According to Peoples Grocery staff, several meetings were held both during the day and in the evening to

attract a diverse range of people. Considerations made by Peoples Grocery staff included: meetings held during the day and evening; childcare; and food. To advertise about the meeting and encourage participation, posters were put up in the neighborhood, a Facebook post was made, and Peoples Grocery staff visited residents in the buildings around the office inviting them to attend. At the town hall meetings, participants were asked what the Peoples Grocery means to them, what they wanted to see represented on the walls, and how they wanted the mural to feel. Peoples Grocery staff spoke to me about the challenges they were aware of-and-faced in attendance numbers at the town hall meetings. Often as a result of a combination of shift-work, household and care duties, and working through frequent community and individual crisis it is less likely for residents of West Oakland to have 'free time' to volunteer at a three-hour meeting. With this in mind, Peoples Grocery staff made an extra effort to be flexible with their engagement and go out and speak with community members about their ideas for the mural. For example, Jumoke spoke of how staff engaged a group of teenage youth in the making of the mural; Peoples Grocery staff would see the youth walk by the office each day at about 4:00pm and decided to go out and invite them in. Staff explained the mural project to the youth, and solicited their ideas about what they would like to see in the mural, a landmark they would pass each day on their way home from school. Peoples Grocery staff member Saqib Keval commented that he believed it was important to not proceed on the project until they felt they had received sufficient participation from the local community. In the case of the *Madre Maize* (2012) mural, sufficient meant enough ideas to work with for the artists, and participation from a wide range of local community folks.

Second, the organizers administered a small paper survey to solicit ideas for what local residents in the apartments surrounding the Peoples Grocery who were not able to attend the meeting would like to see in the mural. The survey was handed out by staff at the apartment buildings across from the Peoples Grocery, and left on the tables of community events including the large common table at the Peoples Grocery and the California Hotel (the sister site of the organization, a historic site of black culture which today serves a low-income population of colour). Lastly, as will be elaborated upon, the process of community engagement was fluid and ongoing throughout the painting process. As West Oakland locals (passerby's and residents) were inspired with new ideas during the making of the mural, where it was possible the artist team incorporated the ideas into the mural.

The entire artist team was not in town at the time of the town hall meetings and so Desi represented the artist group. At the largest town hall meeting, the attendees included a combination of Peoples Grocery Staff, local residents, community elders, and some local youth. There were approximately 25-30 attendees at the meeting. Based on the various meetings and surveys, CRP and Peoples Grocery staff together came up with a set of themes and potential images that could be incorporated into the wall. The themes included: resiliency of local food movements, and food rebellions

in West Oakland; the history of food justice movements in West Oakland; the legacy of radical organizing in West Oakland; and the history of the indigenous people of the land. Community participants expressed a desire to see a reflection of the spirit of West Oakland over the ages on the walls, along with a sacred representation of local plants and animals, and respected community members and figure heads of the neighbourhood.

After the meeting, based on the ideas collected from the community, Desi, hosted separate meetings with the artist team to develop creative ways to weave together the broader themes in order to adequately represent them on the wall. Organizers of the mural described the complex process of weaving multiple narratives together in a way that honoured and dignified each of them. Value was asserted in accurately and adequately representing black and brown histories, in a way that is factual, and counters any distortions or misrepresentations common to representations in mainstream media.

The Painting Process

Similar to the way in which artists prime a canvas, the first stage of the mural painting is to prepare the surface walls. The artists began by priming the walls with a large paint spray gun in order to coat the cement cylinder block. This form of preparing the wall coats the cement so that it will hold the aerosol paint, preventing it from seeping into the porous surface, and also cleans the wall of any weather damage or grime. CRP did not originally intend on painting all three sides of the building. The original intent was to only paint the front, and garden side of the building, however, according to Desi, once they began the priming of the wall, and turned the corner, they decided to do the entire back wall – doubling the size of the mural.

The CRP artists that worked on the mural included Desi, Mike 360, Peskador, Raven, Miss Amo, Release, Abikus, Phil the Villain, and PHASE 2 through long distance collaboration. There were numerous other volunteers, and assistants who helped in parts of the mural. One empowering part of the CRP process, which aligns with graffiti-art etiquette, is that they create a ‘shout out’ list on the wall, where they include the names of everyone that contributed to the mural project; regardless of how small their contribution. This is a way of honoring all contributors, from the lead artists to the burrito runner.

A Commitment to Incorporating Local Voices, the On-Going Process of Community Engagement

Unlike what is common to other mural projects, in the case of the *Madre Maize* mural, there was no complete design created for the mural, and instead the painting stage of the process included a careful orchestration of image placement with room for movement and suggestion. This approach allowed the artists to be more flexible to incorporate the ideas of local residents during the painting process. Not having a predetermined sketch also allowed the artists to be guided by their own intuition and lived

experience in the landscape, and to be conscious of the needs of the wall and the community as they learned them.

In my interview with Desi, he described how a stack of images based on the community meetings was brought to the site, and how he, as the lead artist, in consultation with the artist team decided on the placement of each image. When painting with spray paint, it is easier to paint directly referencing an image, and less necessary to follow a hand drawn design. I believe that in the case of the *Madre Maize* (2012) mural, the lack of a concrete design, and the ability of the artists to paint based on a source image using aerosol paint, allowed the artist team to be more reflexive of the needs, ideas, and concerns of local residents and passerby's while painting as they were able to adapt and expand on the design as requested. This allowed the community engagement session to extend beyond the town hall meeting or survey.

During the interviews, the artists of CRP, and the staff and volunteers of the Peoples Grocery expressed how they felt they lived the process of making the mural, and their experiences of being in the landscape during the month-long painting. Many of the artists lived in Oakland, and those from out of town stayed with Desi for the duration of the project. The time spent outside in the natural environment painting influenced the images in the mural. The many dragonflies, butterflies, bees, and ladybugs made their presence felt during the mural painting process and so, were represented on the wall.

Transforming the Landscape, Nourishing the Community: The Free Your Way Garden

The *Madre Maize* mural initiated a process of landscape transformation, inspiring the construction of the Free Your Way community garden at its base. The garden's name references the freeway which runs parallel to the garden plot and the intention of freeing residents from the barriers West Oakland poses between themselves and affordable healthy food. Through the garden's design, community education and skill sharing, and an overall awareness of privilege, I believe that the Peoples Grocery staff were successful in creating a community garden space that is inclusive to both old and new residents.

The Free Your Way garden is sited at a freeway on and off ramp and it was frequently used for illegal dumping. Juxtaposed against a large fleet of trucks, highway ramps, abandoned Shell gas station and a McDonalds restaurant, the *Madre Maize* mural is truly a site of relief.

The plot of land is technically owned by the City of Oakland, CAL TRANS, and the landlord of the facility, however, the responsibility of maintenance for the property has been left ambiguous. None of these owners has protected the area from dumping, cleared garbage, or landscaped the property. Like many divested North American cities, the plot of land at the corner of Market and Seventh street was

symptomatic of issues facing the city; deprived of resources, and a shifting of responsibility in the end leaving it ignored and deteriorating, considered as ‘someone else’s problem to care for’.



Figure Figure 4.5, 4.6, 4.7 (from top to bottom) The above images display the geography surrounding the Madre Maize mural. A large truck rest stop under the 880 freeway and BART transit lines, the shell gas station across the way and the McDonalds restaurant on the opposite corner.

The Peoples Grocery staff when asked about the garden, described that they felt through cleaning the land, remediating the soil, and planting the garden, that they reclaimed the land from blight and toxicity, and through doing so, reclaimed themselves as a community. Taking active steps towards the improvement of their health both physically and spiritually, healing themselves through healing the land. “Urban agriculture, farming, and gardening can be so much about reclaiming yourself, your community and transforming that which has been potentially traumatized, pushed on, or made not well” (Jumoke, 29/07/2013). This quotation describes the way in which remediating the land was synonymous with healing and strengthening the West Oakland community. Community health improvement by way of the garden includes the labour of gardening as a means of physical activity; improving air quality by way of

more greenery in the neighborhood to offset pollution levels; the growth of healthy foods which nurture individuals and families, to finally the overall sense of positivity and wellness felt by Peoples Grocery staff and residents walking by or viewing from their building the site of a thriving garden instead of a dumping site.

The land that became the garden was first cleared and de-fenced by the artists in the process of creating the *Madre Maize* mural. By making the walls accessible for painting they also opened the land up to the possibility of cultivation. The very images of community farming, water systems, plants and insect life painted in the mural manifest themselves materially in the garden – an example of the collective transformation of the landscape. Once the landlord saw the community initiative to remediate the soil and ready the land for the food production, he offered to loan machinery, one of his staff members, and himself to remove larger bushes to open up more space for planting.

One week into my field work, there was a community harvest day organized by the Peoples Grocery for the Free Your Way Garden. The harvest day is an opportunity for all members of the community to come out and learn about gardening and participate in the harvesting of vegetables to take home and enjoy. The harvest day was an opportunity for me to help with gardening, meet with members of the community, and observe the logistics of community gardening. It was also an opportunity to learn more about the history of the mural, and the relationship that residents and staff of the organization had with the mural and the garden. Residents of varying social locations joined in the harvest and took home bags of zucchini, squash, tomatoes, kale, and collards. Staff took the time to teach residents how to recognize which vegetables were ready for harvest, how to use gardening tools, and how to remove dead plants. Others who could not or did not want to take part in the physical labour were invited to be part of the harvest by washing the harvest and preparing a lunch for everyone. In this way, residents were invited to participate however they were most comfortable.



Figure 4.8 & 4.9 Community harvest day at the Free Your Way garden. Visible in figure 4.8 is the juxtaposition of the McDonalds restaurant across from the garden.

Large sage plants, flowers, chamomile, and other herbs were planted on the outside rim of the garden to act as a natural barrier, and to inspire pollinators to visit the garden. Staff researched what plants would be most suitable for growth on the land, taking consideration of climate, and the dietary preferences of the local community. In the following quotation, Lissa expresses her concern for local dietary needs in the planning of the garden:

A lot of it was thinking about what people would enjoy, and what is really good and really special to have fresh. We always do a lot of collard greens

as we have a lot of black folks in the neighborhood who are always asking for fresh collard and mustard greens. We also try and grow things that are good for the environment. We are in a little urban jungle, so growing a lot of flowers is important to attract pollinators. We have a big population of Yemeni neighbors in this housing area so we are trying to get to know them better and get to know what their foods are, and what they want us to grow (Lissa, 30/07/13).

The Free Your Way garden exemplifies how to overcome common issues with community gardens which can make long-time residents feel out of place. This includes the design of the garden, the incorporation of culturally sensitive foods, and the lack of fence. The garden is intentionally unfenced so as to remain inviting and to reduce barriers to access, such that anyone can harvest food despite not having contributed labour to the construction and maintenance of the garden.

In the context of creating a community garden in a working-class community of colour, a historical black geography, mindful organizing meant staff were sensitive to the fact that many residents of colour hold complex farming histories in their families. Native American, Black, Mexican and other groups have been forced off of their land, or have been forcefully denied access to land on which to live and autonomously cultivate on. Others are also rightfully sensitive to anything resembling free labour as they are mindful of not so distant histories of slavery and forced agricultural labour exploitation. In Ramirez's work (2014), she identifies the pain associated for some African Americans with farming as a result of histories of slavery, sharecropping, and the exploitation their people through farming. The Peoples Grocery recognizes this complexity and through their urban gardening work seeks to help communities heal wounds of the past and to build community knowledge that can be a tool of resistance moving forward.

Community gardens have long been a means of responding to issues of urban poverty. For example, New York cities infamous Lower East side gardens were planted as guerilla gardens during the financial crisis of the 1970s (Langegger 2013). However, community gardens are transformations that, like murals, if not done with the right intention and with the lives and continuities of existing members of the community in mind, can instigate and support gentrification of the neighborhood through making some feel out of place. "The act of building gardens in low-income communities may inadvertently undermine the well-being of people of colour by attracting development that pushes them out of the neighborhood" (Ramirez 2014:15). Scholars including Zukin (2010), Ramirez (2014), Langegger (2013) contend that while community gardens have long been used as temporary solutions to urban poverty and food justice, they also easily fall into rhythms of gentrification. Zukin (2010: 27) theorizes that "community gardens follow a specific evolution from grassroots social movements to spatial expressions

of cultural identity in line with gentrifier values and finally to a form of local food production consistent with the tastes of the middle class locavores.” As community gardens can be folded into processes of gentrification, they can instigate increase in property value which can transpire into developers approaching to repurpose and develop the land for alternative use. While this has at times been the case, according to Langegger (2013) they also can evoke a sense of compassion in developers and planners when they view the garden as a symbol of neighborhood investment, dedication, and pride, preventing the gardens destruction for land profits.

Along with a consideration of the gardens gentrifying capacities, a critical race lens reminds us of the way in which, if not done through a lens of reflexive allyship, white activists can go on to create gardens on what is assumed to be 'abandoned space' re-inscribing it as white space, adding value to the community by nature of its whiteness and contributing to processes of gentrification (Ramirez 2014). In order to make sure this is not the case, similar to the case with mural-making, the process of creating the garden, what is planted in the garden, and maintenance of the garden must be intentional and reflective of those whom the garden is intended to serve. While this reflexivity and class-race based considerations seem to be made by the Peoples Grocery staff in the making and maintenance of the Free Your Way garden, in order to be truly effective, this commitment will have to be ongoing, and span the lifetime of the garden despite changes in staff at the organization.

According to Ramirez (2014: 6) "race, power and privilege emerge through community food spaces; they either reify existing inequalities or challenge them, depending on how the food space is being produced". In the construction of the Free Your Way garden significant attention was paid to challenging inequalities. The literature and staff meeting notes that are hung on the walls of the organization and the organizational programs (e.g., the Growing Justice Institute) illustrate that staff members are mindful of their privilege and their role as allies working in community. By creating the garden, the Peoples Grocery staff and community resident volunteers assumed the role of stewards of the land, taking responsibility for the care, and maintenance of the garden. Through the creation of the garden, the organizations politics of making accessible affordable healthy food to those in need were rooted into place. Through these acts of DIY community rejuvenation, the Community Rejuvenation Project and the Peoples Grocery challenged the assumptions of the space as a blighted freeway on-off ramp dumping site, and instead a place of community, culture, and wellness. By creating participatory processes for both mural and garden making, the artists and activists used their power, passion, politics and skills to create opportunities for West Oakland residents to manipulate, mark, and be part of making place.

The day of the *Madre Maize* mural unveiling celebration was also the official community planting day for the garden. The collective planting day was a way to ensure that community members, for whom the garden is intended, could have an opportunity to participate in planting and helping create

the garden and through doing so, be part of the change in the landscape that was intended for their collective benefit. The mural unveiling celebration is a significant event common to most community mural-making projects. The unveiling is the moment at which the mural is presented to the community from the organizers, the artists are thanked, and the monument is revealed and celebrated. The *Madre Maize* mural unveiling-community planting day was a community party with over 200 residents in attendance, eating, drinking, and dancing. The acts of intentional community mural-making and gardening were acts of taking ownership of space, and through doing so, marking place.

The very name of the organization the Peoples Grocery (which staff were critical of in that they felt the name rightfully confused people) has many passerby's stopping in looking for food, and in the context of a community in crisis staff felt it was important to be able to meet that need. "Part of it is for all the people who walk into our office and ask if we are a grocery store. It is us being able to say sorry we are not a grocery store but can we please bring you out to our garden and harvest this with you, for free to take home. Our garden is around our belief that food is a human right, and being able to provide that for anybody who comes through" (Lissa, 30/07/13). The organization being able to offer free food is also important to staff as they acknowledge that for a community in crisis, dealing with multiple problems including unemployment, violence, and poverty and the related health issues that are parcel with, providing free healthy food is a way for the Peoples Grocery to directly support the community and respond.

The Free Your Way garden symbolizes a collective attempt to offer solution to a broken food system. The garden in tandem with the mural did the aesthetic work of reviving a neighborhood eyesore through cleaning the land of garbage, remediating the soil, and cultivating plant life. By its existence the garden created a space for community gathering, individual reflection, food production, and emotional recuperation (Langegger 2013).

Conclusion: Place-Making as Resisting Displacement

"The mural, the idea of the art, the idea of the farming, gardening, is also a part of us around existing, resisting, and pushing back" (Jumoke, 29/07/2013). As this quotation emphasizes, through their collective efforts, the Peoples Grocery in partnership with CRP have been able to reclaim the land and push back against forces of redevelopment that were having the impact of making residents less visible. A grey cylinder block which was once an infamous dumping site has now been reclaimed as a site of beauty, a place that grows free food, and marks community sovereignty and history through its physical aesthetic.

According to scholar Kelly Main (2015), local shaping of place by marginalized groups is both a form of resistance and agency. Through the development of participatory DIY urbanism processes community mural-making artists and activists create mechanisms for community agency and community

authorship of the landscape. As place is in a constant state of making, these mechanisms for agency and making place are of paramount importance to allow groups to constantly reassert their presence in place; to re-establish collective connection to the landscape; to re-assume power in the frequently changing landscape.

Based on my research, mural artist crews, through the act of a community mural-making process, are able to inspire physical aesthetic transgressions in the landscape. Through painting displaced histories, bodies, and ways of being into the landscape, the artists highlight the physical being of those histories, bodies and ways of being as visibly part of the landscape, and through doing so, bring attention to their displacement. By painting elderly African American people, and African American history into the presently gentrifying and redeveloping landscape of West Oakland, CRP challenges the displacement of African American elders and their histories. Similarly, by painting indigenous symbols, stories, and peoples of Oakland back into the landscape, CRP challenges their expulsion from the land as an act of creative aesthetic decolonization. Acts of place-making including mural-making, enable communities to assert spaces of identity, and to spatially combat marginalization and racism (Main 2015). Through their efforts, community artists challenge local power dynamics by making physically visible, and therefore more dominant, marginalized groups. While affluent (often young and white) newcomers to Oakland may own property, poor racialized groups can assert their ownership of place through visual markings (murals). Through these acts, communities are able to create spaces of belonging. Through acts of place-making, including mural-making, we can infer that societally made marginal groups embed identity into place and through doing so, experience further attachment to place (Main 2015).

As described earlier, public art projects, if not carried out with social justice intention and/or inclusion processes can be used to make vulnerable groups invisible, and accelerate processes of gentrification. One of the biggest challenges to 'public' or 'community' art is the assumption that a piece of art can be created that reflects all of the life experiences, values, customs, and norms of those who frequent/reside in the space. While that may be considered a futile effort, there is significant value in groups whom have been generationally oppressed, forcefully excluded, or dispossessed as a result of urban redevelopment schemes making artworks in urban space that allow them to be visible and, through visibility, to take place. These artworks do not aim to be representative of all groups-histories-and experiences-but do seek to factor in voices of those who demand to be heard and have been silenced.

According to Deutsche (1992) public art is not just public by nature of its location in the public sphere; but rather by nature of its themes and meaning engaging in some type of political debate. Deutsche (1992:37) contends that public artists as part of social movements are more closely engaging

with the true version of public art. I believe as artists-activists we must be remain conscious and critical of our desires to beautify spaces. There is a way in which murals highlight the unwanted; blighted spaces and beings, which often further displaces and makes vulnerable those people including the chronically homeless, who take refuge in the blighted cracks of the city. Homelessness, grime, blight, and garbage are symptoms of greater structural inequality, neglect, and divestment that exist in the city. While uneven social relations may not be able to be cured with paint, community mural-making continues to be a low-cost, accessible DIY means of creating momentum and visibility around issues of inequality. Through a community engaged process, the most vulnerable can steer the direction of a paint brush or paint can in the making of the messaging around their liberation. In the next chapter, I will expand further on the power of this art form by reflecting on the use of symbols in the *Madre Maize* (2012) mural as it relates to how different communities experience a sense of belonging and attachment to West Oakland.

Chapter 5 Symbolism and Sense of Place

The intent of the following chapter is to describe how symbolism in the landscape by way of community murals which reflect political, cultural, and spiritual identity and history contributes to place-making for residents. Intentionally embedded symbolism in the landscape can be a means of claiming ownership of place. While low-income systemically marginalized communities may not be able to own property, through my research I argue they may still claim ownership of place through symbolic marking. Whereas in the previous chapter I described the process of mural-making and its relationship to the production of place, in this chapter I describe the end result of this process, and how once a mural is established as an artifact of history and culture in a particular landscape, it can contribute to a sense of belonging for residents.

A sense of belonging to place is important for all people as it is entangled with a sense of personal identity and well-being. For groups who fall out of dominant structures or whose identities are discriminated against, and often made to be invisible, this is of critical importance. For such groups claims to place can be considered an act of resistance. Sense of place “refers to the emotive bonds and attachment people develop or experience in particular environments, from the national, regional, or urban levels all the way to the personal scale of the neighborhood and home” (Foote and Azaryahu 2009: 96). Sense of place highlights the uniqueness of human experience in place. Our understanding of how symbols function in the landscape and acquire meaning derives from the science of signs, known as semiotics or semiology (Denil 2009). Symbols are one element which defines membership to a cultural group through demonstration of a members’ values. The headscarf, bindi, cross, medicine wheel, national flag, or the ankh can all be interpreted as symbols of culture and group membership.

Symbols surround us daily, from advertising, to street signs, the labels on the clothing we wear, to the computer keyboard. They express meaning, increase awareness, and foster connections. They tell us where to go, they make us feel, and through their consumption we inherit information. Collectively, symbols can come together to tell us a story, and one’s visual literacy and subjective knowledge contribute to the way in which individuals interpret this story. Symbols have the power to engage the mind. They ignite our own background knowledge and we use this knowledge and information to interpret and put meaning to the symbols we consume.

Image-based storytelling is in many ways, more accessible to the masses than written text. Images overcome barriers of language, and time as visual symbols and narratives are more quickly consumed than literary text. Images are also reproduced and applied faster than text. In many cultures around the world, oral and visual exchange has for centuries been a popular means of disseminating

knowledge. In many working class immigrant communities in North America, the visual tradition is often stronger than the written tradition. This occurs for a multitude of reasons including low English literacy rates, intergenerational language barriers, and often a general preference of oral and visual storytelling. Visual imagery is powerfully motivating, and while listing its positive capacities it is important to note that as with many tools, image production can be also used in negative ways. For example, visual imagery has been used to propagate both small- and large-scale conflicts, encourage the consumption of harmful substances, and entice the mind to partake in many potentially harmful activities.

I begin the following chapter with a theoretical review of geographic literature in the field of symbolism in the landscape, and the relationship symbols hold to a sense of place and belonging for residents. In order to contextualize this work, I offer a thematic analysis of the symbols embedded in the *Madre Maize* 2012 mural, followed by an analysis of the relationship between symbolism and sense of belonging based on my fieldwork analysis.

Theorizing Symbolism in Geography

Visual symbols embedded in the landscape which represent local culture enhance a sense of place for individuals. According to geographers, an investigation of local symbols and the meaning they hold to the local population can provide an understanding of local identity. In order to theoretically ground my findings on the relationship between symbolism in the urban landscape for residents and their relationship to place and sense of belonging in Oakland, California, I employ Kevin Lynch's (1960) concept of imageability and Duncan and Duncan's (1984) research on residential landscapes as repositories of class and ethnic symbols.

Kevin Lynch's concept of imageability refers to the mental image of a city as held by its residents, and the legibility of the city scape. For Lynch, (1960: 9):

Imageability is that quality in a physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer. It is that shape, color, or arrangement which facilitates the making of vividly identified, powerfully structured, highly useful mental images of the environment. It might also be called legibility, or perhaps visibility in a heightened sense, where objects are not only able to be seen, but are presented sharply and intensely to the senses

The more vivid and vibrant the setting of a city is, the stronger its expressive meaning may be for residents. I believe that murals serve as cultural landmarks that vibrantly mark meaning in place through their legible symbols.

According to Lynch (1960: 4), “[t]he need to recognize and pattern our surroundings is so crucial, and has such long roots in the past, that this image has wide practical and emotional importance to the individual”. I would extrapolate that the emotional importance associated with a legible urban space relates in part to the ability of the individual to create attachment to the place based on its vibrancy and vividness. “A good environmental image gives its possessor an important sense of emotional security” (Lynch 1960: 4). Murals, I assert, have the capacity to build such emotional security amongst residents, particularly those living in blighted neighborhood spaces. With this notion of murals as landmarks that contribute to the vividness of landscapes, and with that the nurturing of an emotive relationship to the landscape aiding ones capacity of navigate, I turn to the work of Duncan and Duncan (2009) who unpack the potential value of the symbolism embedded within these street-side landmarks.

Duncan and Duncan’s (2009, 1984) work on landscape interpretation and residential landscapes as repositories of class and ethnic symbolism and identity formation supports my findings on the relationship between the symbolism embedded in community murals and the relationship to a sense of place for residents. Urban landscapes are produced and preserved through political and economic processes and are subject to the will and the influence of stake holders with varying degrees of power. Landscapes are complex systems which incorporate multiple practices and ideas, and hold both class and ethnic variables, which contribute both to their vibrancy and complexity. For many, the residential landscape is an important marker of social identity based on the way in which the symbols surrounding the individual influence their sense of identity and relationship to place (Duncan and Duncan 1984).

In their study of Anglo elite neighborhoods, Duncan and Duncan (1984) contend that in North American individualist capitalist societies, status is largely achieved and purchased rather than ascribed by membership in a caste or kin group, and social identity is communicated through the private consumption of objects. The dwelling space itself, together with the status level of its locality, is one of the principal symbols of status. While this may be the case in elite neighborhoods, the context of low-income rental row-housing unit neighborhoods differs twofold. First, private consumption/purchase of status symbols does not occur at the same rate. Second, the dwelling is not a single detached unit with surrounding expansive outdoor property, rather it is often an attached or semi-attached space in a multi-unit facility either in the form of high-rise building or row-housing units. In this case, belonging is demonstrated not solely by a sense of belonging to ‘one house’ but rather to ‘one-block’, one building, or

one ‘neighborhood’. In this context a sense of identity may be rather formed in relation to the neighborhood locale more so than the individual housing residence in which one lives.

While elite suburban identity formation can be contingent on purchased status symbols including the material form, size, and design style of the housing residence, and the extent of outdoor landscaping, in low-income high density residential landscapes, social identity may instead be defined by markers of cultural, spiritual, and ethnic identity including national flags on balcony railings, spiritual imagery such as the cross or the Virgin of Guadalupe, and community murals which hold a host of symbols that define community culture and identity as will be further explored in this chapter. As tenants do not own their homes (and physically have less space) they are subject to a reduced capacity to influence and author their residential landscape. Through ascribing their own cultural, spiritual, and political identities on to place with the use of symbolic murals, some residents of low-income neighborhoods push back against and resist societal-spatial margins (largely a product of systemic poverty and historical oppression and discrimination). Based on geographic scholarship I infer that there exists an emotive relationship between peoples and the landscapes in which they dwell through both the imageability (vibrant legibility) of the landscape, and through their attachment to the symbolism embedded in the landscape. In the following section I seek to further expand on this relationship through a symbolic reading of the *Madre Maize* (2012) mural, and an analysis of interview responses to my research inquiry on the relationship between a sense of belonging and mural symbolism.

Madre Maize: Mural in Focus

The *Madre Maize* (2012) is an extensive three-sided mural which holds a multitude of symbols and interwoven narratives centering on the theme of food justice and local community resilience. The front wall is largely comprised of markers of the Peoples Grocery organization, the next adjacent wall which I refer to as the garden wall consists mainly of images of California native plants, animals and black, brown, and indigenous farming knowledge. The back wall extensive in its size and content, carries over the above listed themes and features vignettes of black, brown, and indigenous culture, leadership, and history as it relates to West Oakland and the politics of the Peoples Grocery. Please see *Madre Maize* (2012) *wall by wall* photos in Appendix E p.142. As a result of the murals size, and the multitude of community voices the artists and organizers strived to include, and the word count limitations of this thesis the mural cannot be described in detail. In person, the wall and placement of the symbols guides the viewer to interpret the interwoven narratives. The captioned names invite further exploration and curiosity to learn more of the figures and stories connected to the wall and the community.

The work of the Peoples Grocery which is reflected in the *Madre Maize* mural is to strive towards community food security and food equity through a lens of food justice which recognizes the role race and class play in local food movements. A true model of food justice translates into “A socially just food system in which power and material resources are shared equitably so that people and communities can meet their needs, and live with security and dignity, now and into the future” (Activist Researcher Consortium, 2004 as cited in Allen 2010: 297). One of the consequences of the elitism of the organic good food movement is that it often shames poor people and makes them feel as though their present ailing health and unhealthy food options is their own doing, and their own fault. This is something the Peoples Grocery, and other food justice activist groups seek to deconstruct to reveal the systemic makings that cause certain peoples, and landscapes to be deprived of nutritious food. A substantive interpretation of food justice recognizes that present day issues of poverty and failing food systems are the result of centuries of colonialism, imperialism, and neoliberalization (Allen 2010).

The *Madre Maize* (2012) mural is a powerful historical artifact of a significant black geography. Artists, activists, and community residents have depicted a differential knowledge for onlookers, including new residents, to observe, know, and recognize. In the field of Black Geographies, scholars including Ramirez (2014) Woods (1998) and McKittrick (2011; 2013) acknowledge the vital knowledge’s that black peoples hold, as well as the long-standing spatial politics from segregation, slavery, the plantation, to incarceration to emancipatory strategies that inform black lives. The work of the Peoples Grocery is in itself a black geography, founded by black activists cultivating justice and sovereignty over the food supply in West Oakland. An understanding of black geographies is of paramount significance for consideration by artists and activists working to rejuvenate neighborhood blight with site-specific artworks, as these works deeply impact space. Site-specific mural art embeds into the very material fabric of landscapes which hold the physical and emotional memories of black and brown experiences of dispossession, pain, and tactics of liberation, and therefore must be intentional in their placement and imagery. As has been described earlier, intentional community mural-making in black geographies, and other racialized low-income neighborhoods in crisis is deeply political and must be carried out in consultation with community residents so as to not cause further harm, suffering, or displacement.

Overall, the *Madre Maize* mural hosts a narrative around black, brown, and indigenous food sovereignty. The use of the term food sovereignty versus food justice connects North American struggles to indigenous struggles for autonomy across the globe, signaling our interconnection in the colonial present (Ramirez 2014). The *Madre Maize* mural carries the themes of black power, an empowering narrative of the cultural history and spirit of resilience and resistance of West Oakland, and an overall cultivation of health, wellness, and intergenerational healing for local residents. The *Madre Maize* mural

serves as a vibrant visual manifestation of community health and wellness through representing current practices of farming, and medicinal plant based knowledge to aid in the healing and wellness of the community.

Symbolism of the Mural

Overall, unlike words or traditional text, murals do not always tell a story in a linear fashion. In some instances, the architecture of a building site is used to guide the viewer in their interpretation of the narrative of the mural. In other instances, artists have used the placement of images in the background and foreground to guide the viewer to interpret the story in a specific order. Before critically interpreting the mural's images, I must emphasize that images as symbols are inter-textual; thus, symbolic meaning is influenced by the placement and relationship of symbols to one another within a mural.

In the following section, I describe the symbols of the mural based on my interviews with residents, Peoples Grocery staff, and artists from the Community Rejuvenation Project so as to reveal the meaning given to the mural by its designers and local residents. There was specific intention in the choice of these symbols, and their placement. In my analysis of the 45 major symbols depicted in the 3-sided mural, I have categorized eight major themes. These include; (1) Graffiti Art, (2) Revolutionary Figures, (3) California Native Plants and Animals, (4) The Free Your Way Garden, (5) Black and Brown Farming, (6) Oakland Radical History, (7) Indigenous Culture and Knowledge, (8) West Oakland Spirit. Many of these themes are interrelated and difficult to disaggregate.

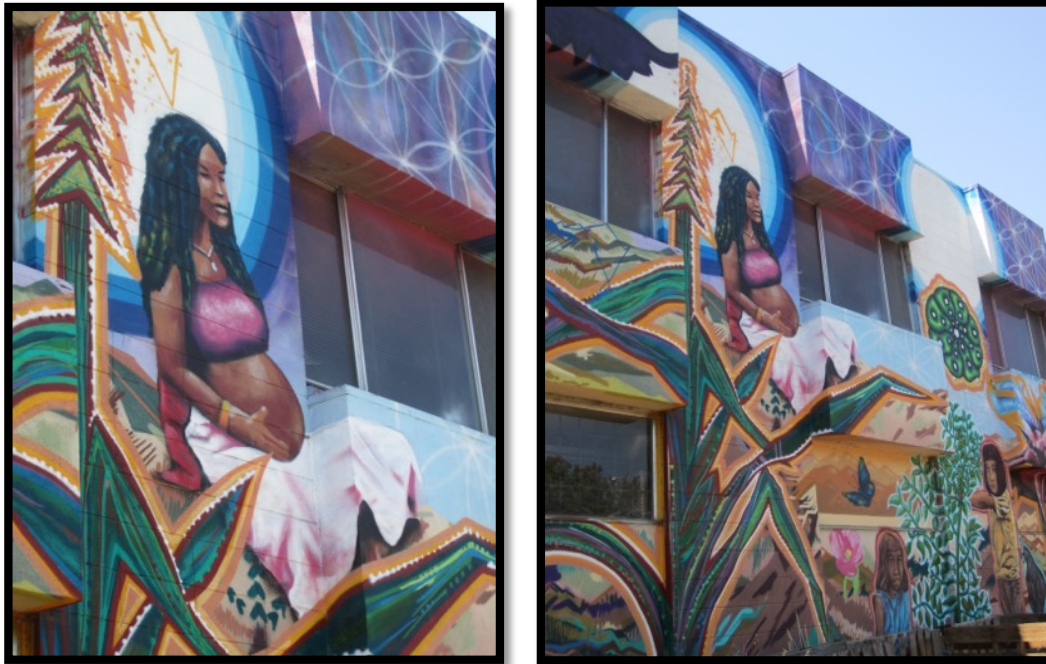


Figure 5.2 & 5.3 *The Madre Maize* as part of the larger *Madre Maize* (2012) mural by the *Community Rejuvenation Project*. Photograph by Narmeen Hashim.

To begin, the symbol which in many ways holds the narrative of the mural together, and was named by many interviewee participants as the *Madre Maize*. Rising high to the top of the left side of the garden wall of the mural is the sacred ‘maize’ corn plant. Maize crops are native to the landscape, and considered a very sacred plant in indigenous Central American communities. Maize is referred to by many indigenous groups as the ‘mother grain’. Maize has been considered the connector plant for many Mexican peoples tracing their indigenous roots/lineage across the Americas. Through tracing the migration of maize (corn) peoples have been able to trace their lineage to the indigenous Mayan and Aztec peoples (Rodriguez 2014). Corn has also played a ceremonial, and story telling role in many indigenous cultures. The Corn Spirit or Corn Mother is a sacred spirit in many Native American traditions. While corn plays a deeply spiritual and nutritional significance to many indigenous peoples, it has also been one of the most widely genetically modified and commodified crops. Activists from Canada and the United States down into Mexico have long organized around and protested the paralleled declining health and sovereignty of indigenous communities with the genetic modification of the sacred maize plant. During my interviews and conversations with residents and staff, this particular image came up repeatedly as the symbol in which people commented they most saw themselves or someone close to them in the community. One resident who had recently given birth saw herself in that image and it gave

her a sense of power in her motherhood. Staff of the Peoples Grocery felt that the Madre Maize reminded them of their Executive Director, who at the time was pregnant.

Graffiti Art

Graffiti-art has been a part of the visual landscape of the California Bay Area since the 1970's. The style, aesthetic, and process of creating these visual-art master pieces has evolved since as both access to media, and paint mediums have developed. Graffiti-art and the spray can has historically revolutionary roots as a mode of street based aesthetic protest. Along with the CRP and the local communities desire to include a graffiti-art aesthetic, graffiti style fits with the overall theme of the mural which encapsulates the radical spirit of West Oakland.

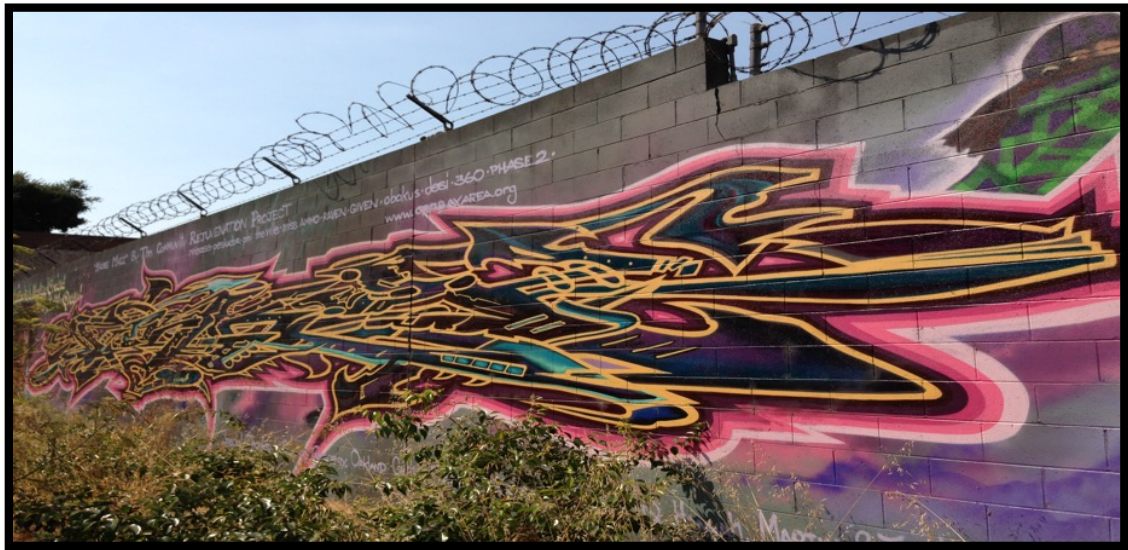




Figure 5.4, 5.5, 5.6 Pink and green large graffiti burners designed by PHASE 2 and painted by CRP on the large back facing wall of the Madre Maize mural. Photograph by Narmeen Hashim.

Legendary graffiti artist from New York City, PHASE2, who is both a mentor and friend of CRP's, designed all of the graffiti letter pieces for the mural. The letter designs were projected and traced onto the wall, filled, and outlined in by the local CRP artist team. In a landscape where there is a heavy influence of graffiti culture, in some instances the mural may be less likely to be vandalized, and more respected by the local community of street and graffiti artists if the mural incorporates graffiti-art, particularly from highly respected graffiti artists. Prior to the painting of the *Madre Maize* mural, the back wall of the Peoples Grocery facility had been heavily tagged and bombed by graffiti vandals. The large back wall of the building was largely considered 'fair game' to the graffiti community due to the characteristics of the wall; it is a wall with high visibility from varying points of view including by highway and Bart commuter traffic. It was also a wall that was blighted and overgrown, and had little pedestrian traffic in the evenings. This type of seemingly vacant or abandoned urban space often provides refuge for the homeless, inadequately housed, graffiti vandals, and peoples who practice behaviors and lifestyles deemed largely 'out-of-place' by normative standards of the city.

Within the graffiti world subculture there are known and largely respected rules. First, a 'throw-up' (quickly painted outline bubble letters of a name) or a 'bomb' (quickly painted filled in bubble letters of a name) can be painted over a 'tag' (quickly written name) and a 'burner' (planned, coloured in, often 3D complex letter name piece) can be painted over a 'throw-up'. Another, better painted burner is all that can respectfully be painted over a burner. You cannot respectfully paint over anything that you cannot 'burn' (paint better). Second, younger artists still developing their aesthetic and skill are not to paint over the work of more established practitioners of the art form. A juvenile artist painting a sloppy tag overtop of a burner by a highly respected elder would immediately destroy their career as a graffiti artist as their

tag from that point on would be crossed out as a punishment and public shaming for their disrespect. I believe the aesthetic design decision to include large graffiti pieces on this back wall is both a way of honoring the artist team's roots and keeping graffiti art alive and part of professionally commissioned mural projects, but also a way of acknowledging that this wall space is part of the local graffiti community, and the inclusion of graffiti art helps to ensure respect for the mural by local graffiti artists. In some ways these design decisions can be understood as culturally respectful deterrents. In this graffiti-art tradition, CRP artists decided to give 'shout-outs' which is the act of taking a small space on the wall to name various graffiti artists-in this case, artists whom had previously tagged the wall, as a way to acknowledge their previous occupation of the space.

On the front side of the building, the rooftop wall holds a straight-letter graffiti piece that reads 'Power to the People.' It was decided that this wall should incorporate a powerful message as it is a wall visible from varying view points for some distance from the actual facility, including to those outside of the local community. In mural planning conversations, one suggestion was to use this wall to send an aggressive message of resistance to the McDonald's restaurant with the statement 'fuck you, McDonald's'. In the end, this statement was not used for fear of the harm it could potentially do the community who would inevitably spend more time seeing it than anyone at McDonald's head office. They also discussed how this messaging could potentially make local residents feel, some of whom by no choice of their own, may be dependent on McDonalds for employment or food. This measure taken speaks to the Peoples Grocery awareness about the relationship of class to the notion of food justice; an awareness of the potential elitism, and an avoidance, despite their disapproval of the food and labour practices of McDonalds in its Fordist manufacturing of fast food. In multiple instances, environmentally sustainable healthy eating options are offered as high priced gourmet foods, and the social justice concerns of advocates do not always extend to the needs of customers whom as a result of systemic poverty and constricted spatial mobility do not have the means to pay more for or access to healthy organic food (Alkon 2007). While the Peoples Grocery as an institution is making multiple efforts in this respect to put healthy fresh food into the hands of the local community, including through the free harvest available from their community garden, to display a politics which is mindful of the exclusionary elitism common to many food movements makes for a more inclusive, and truly just movement.

Revolutionary Figures

Revolutionary figures were described by the artists, and Peoples Grocery staff as important to the community to include in the mural as their achievements and life stories inspire individuals to rise up above trying circumstances. The revolutionary activist leaders depicted in the mural include Vandana Shiva, Angela Davis, Fania E. Davis, and Wangari Maathai. All four are women of colour, two of whom

have a direct relationship to the local Oakland community, and two of whom are from the global south. In juxtaposition to other revolutionary murals in Oakland and the Bay Area at large I believe it is significant that the four revolutionary leaders were all women, rather than the more commonly painted, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. All four leaders have made grassroots-local and international contributions to justice, equality rights, and poverty reduction through ground up empowerment projects that have each in their own respects been systemically transformative.



Figure 5.7 Vandana Shiva as part of the Madre Maize (2012) mural painted by CRP as part of the Madre Maize (2012) mural back wall. Photography By Narmeen Hashim.

Furthest to the right, the back wall of the mural begins with a larger than life depiction of Vandana Shiva clad in a traditional sari and holding in her cupped hands a sprouting seed. Vandana Shiva is an activist, author, and scientific advisor, considered the pioneer of the global seed saving movement aimed at preserving the native seed. In 1991, she founded Navdanya, “a national movement to protect the diversity and integrity of living resources – especially native seed – and to promote organic farming and fair trade” (www.vandanashiva.com). Once one of India’s leading biochemists, Vandana Shiva is an internationally acclaimed figure in the global food sovereignty movement and an opponent to genetically modified food production. She advocates for a return to traditional farming practices. The Peoples Grocery shares in Vandana Shiva’s vision to empower local communities to repair a failing industrial corporate food system.



Figure 5.8 Angela Davis quoted 'Radical Simply Means Grasping Things at the Root.' Painted by CRP part of the Madre Maize (2012) mural back wall. Photograph by Narmeen Hashim.

Next is a colourful depiction of scholar, activist, educator, politician and member of the Black Panther Party Angela Davis. Included is one of her more famous quotes, “Radical just means grasping things at the root.” Davis grew up in Birmingham, Alabama and joined the civil rights movement in 1963 after four girls were killed in the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in her hometown (blackpast.org). Later in the 1960’s Angela Davis joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and from there the Black Panther Party. In 1968, she joined the American Communist Party and in 1970 her involvement in a high profile legal case lead her to be named to the FBI’s most wanted list. While she was acquitted of all charges in 1972, she still had to deal with significant discrimination and backlash by various institutions and powerful individuals including California Governor Ronald Reagan’s attempt to prevent her from teaching in the California State University. Davis participated in multiple levels of community and international activism, she also ran for Vice President of the United States in 1980 and 1984 on the Communist Party ticket. In the mural, Davis’s afro, an iconic aesthetic of the movement in the mural has been made to fade into a beehive, and the lower part of her arm the roots of a tree. This intentional depiction not only references the movement work of the Black Panther Party around food sovereignty, but also, can be interpreted as metaphor to reflect how in the same way that honeycombs are built one upon the other in divine geometric patterning,

so to have many social movements built upon the foundations laid by other powerful social movements of the past, in this case, the profound legacy of the Black Panther Party.



Figure 5.9 Fawnia Davis with her quote Justice is a Healing Ground Not a Battle Ground. Painted by CRP as part of the Madre Maize mural. Photograph by Narmeen Hashim.

Above the image of Fania E. Davis is a famous quotation by her that reads “Justice is a healing ground, not a battle ground.” Fania E. Davis is a prominent civil rights attorney in the United States. She was on her sister Angela Davis’s defense team, but took a hiatus from the United States after being disappointed at the extent of injustice prevalent within the justice system. During this time, she travelled to South Africa to study the Truth and Reconciliation process of restorative justice models. In 2005, joined by Oakland City Council member Nancy Nadel, Fawnia E. Davis and other prominent community activists founded Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (RJOY) program, which allows for youth to both address their wrongs and heal the victims of their crimes and themselves in the process. RJOY has been acclaimed for their success in the development of a systematized structure for a solid restorative justice program within the Oakland school district to keep youth out of the school to prison pipeline. RJOY believes in a push from a justice as harming to a justice as healing; from a retributive justice to a restorative justice. Rooted in indigenous knowledge, “restorative justice is reparative, inclusive, and balanced. It emphasizes; (1) Repairing harm (2) Inviting all affected to dialogue together to figure out how to do so (3) Giving equal attention to community safety, victim’s needs, and offender accountability and growth” (rjoyoakland.org).

In the context of schools, the RJOY model allows for a school wide response to the harm that is caused on campus, inviting people to come together and address when harm is caused instead of being harshly punitive about issues, which has the effect of displacing youth out of the community, further harming the community. RJOY has been so successful in its efforts that “in 2010, the OUSD (Oakland Unified School District) Board of Directors passed a resolution adopting restorative justice as a system-wide alternative to zero tolerance discipline and as an approach to creating healthier schools” (rjoyoakland.org). Desi commented that by painting Fania E. Davis and learning more about the work of RJOY, a beautiful relationship formed between CRP and RJOY that has blossomed into a restorative justice model for mural-making, which is one of many powerful outcomes of the *Madre Maize* mural-making process.

Beside Fania E. Davis in the mural, is Wangari Maathai, depicted with her iconic quotation “We are called to assist the earth to heal her wounds and in the process, heal our own.” Wangari Maathai (1940-2011) was a highly renowned environmentalist and political activist from Kenya who founded the Green Belt Movement (GBM) in 1977. In 2004, she was also the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize and the first East African woman to earn a doctorate degree. The GBM empowers communities, particularly women, to be the solution to their inadequate food systems (greenbeltmovement.org). The influential work of the GBM is the empowerment of local communities to manage their own food systems using tree-planting as the entry point. Through the GBM, 1 million trees were planted in East Africa between Kenya and Tanzania and a community movement was formed to heal the effects of colonization and globalization on local food systems and communities. For the People’s Grocery, and community residents working on issues of food sovereignty the work of Wangari Maathai is particularly powerful as she has demonstrated the capacity to work from the ground up empowering those in the most vulnerable circumstances to be in charge of their own food supply.



Figure 5.10 Wangari Maathai with her quote “We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds and in the process heal our own.” By CRP part of the back facing wall of the Madre Maize mural. Photograph by Narmeen Hashim.

California Native Plants and Animals

Native organisms including plants, mammals, birds, amphibians, and insects create an intricate web of life that connects human and animal food systems. The mural offers a visual reminder of local plant and animal species native to the landscape prior to colonization and industrialization. The mural designers advocate a return to indigenous knowledge to look for solutions to current ecological disasters; a return to native plant species is thought to revive the natural ecology of urban spaces suffering from drought and extinction of animal species.



Figure 5.11 The garden side wall of the peoples grocery depicting from left to right; the eagle, sacred corn stalks, chia, cotton, and kale, the mission blue butterfly, and the California quail bird. Painted by CRP. Photograph by Narmeen Hashim.

In order to fulfill this component of the mural, artists and staff of the Peoples Grocery conducted research on native plant and animal species, this research in turn impacted the decisions around the Free Your Way garden and which plants were selected. The California Native Plants and Animals depicted on the garden wall of the mural include the family of white tailed deer, the California quail bird, the Mission blue butterfly, the eagle, and the chia, kale, and cotton plants. These plants are all indigenous to California and hold significance as examples of indigenous knowledge of plant based health and wellness. Chia seeds, recently described in popular food culture as a ‘super food’ are an example of a plant species that has been for centuries considered a sacred food for Aztec, Mayan, and Native American people of Central America. In Mayan, the word ‘chia’ means strength. In part, the importance of this narrative is to remind viewers that so often indigenous medicinal wisdom is disregarded, and then only when later ‘discovered’ by white scientists, suddenly given great reverence and attention.

The inclusion of Native plants and animals within the Madre Maize mural is also a means of decolonizing place through bringing visibility to and making place for species which have otherwise been displaced out of the landscape as a result of urbanization and land clearing in part of colonization. The California Quail bird, is native to the landscape and the State bird of California. The California Quail is

known for its hardiness, and adaptability (birds.cornell.edu). In the context of neighborhood and landscape change, the symbol of this adaptable native species is also a lesson from which to take note of an animal species who has been displaced out of their land, and found ways to adapt and be resilient against displacement and obstructions to their food and shelter supply.

Above the children flies the Mission blue butterfly, a species that is native to the San Francisco Bay area but registered as endangered by the US Federal Government (parksconservancy.org). Again, this is a reminder of the way in which indigenous species, like indigenous peoples, have been displaced from their original lands. Butterflies are a reminder of metamorphosis and migration, but they also play a vital role in garden ecosystems. For the mural artists, butterflies were a constant presence during the painting process.

The final symbol on this wall is the eagle, soaring high on the top left corner of the wall. In many indigenous communities across North America the eagle is understood to be an intermediary between man and the Creator. The eagle flies higher than any other bird, with great strength and endurance. The presence of an eagle during prayer is a sign that a prayer has been answered. In some prayer ceremonies, eagle feathers are held up to the sky. As the side of the mural which holds the eagle is one which projects health, vibrancy, and sustainability for the future of the community it is of prime placement that the image of the eagle was placed above this wall. In this way we can understand both the significance of the symbol, but also to the placement of the symbol at one of the highest points in the mural, to carry the message of community health as prayer.

Indigenous Knowledge and Culture

In many conversations about the mural, artists and Peoples Grocery staff referenced indigenous knowledge and culture as important markers of place – a means to honour the Ohlone people’s connection and coexistence to the land. The very essence of the *Madre Maize* mural to center indigenous knowledge and ways of being through the use of numerous symbols including native plants and animals, and the ones discussed below is itself a means of decolonizing place.

The Ohlone also known as the Costanoans, are the indigenous people of the San Francisco Bay area, south of the main channel, including the geography of what is now referred to as West Oakland. The Ohlone people once occupied the entire central and northern California coast, but like many indigenous peoples, were violently displaced during Spanish colonization. One of the spiritual practices of the Ohlone people, is to use dance as a form of prayer for healing. The mural organizers painted the Ohlone Sun and Moon dancer as reminders of the power of indigenous prayer in times of community crisis. The sun and moon dancers are considered the spirit warriors from the community. As narrated by Peoples

Grocery staff: “We needed the sun dancer and the moon dancer on there (the mural) to commemorate the Ohlone land that we are on and the black and brown unity that has been really powerful throughout the years” (Lissa Interview 2013). Across North America and in Oakland specifically there have been multiple examples of solidarity between indigenous and black communities, both fighting together in the struggle against discrimination and for justice and a practice of decolonization after decades of slavery, dispossession, and torture by the State government. The images of the sun and moon dancer have also been placed strategically on two ends of the back wall in a protective way so as to hold up the wall.

The top of the mural is framed by the lunar cycle, the phases of the moon which are carried over from the mini rooftop ‘Power to the People’ section of the mural. These moons and the sacred geometry delicately painted between them together create a spiritual cosmic framing of the mural. In American Indian tradition, names are given to each full moon. The name is also associated with the entire month until the next full moon. In the following quotation, Saqib of the Peoples Grocery describes the layers of this narrative; “The moons are part of the idea that they originally had to do the 13 moons, and there are a couple of layers to this narrative. So each moon has a different vignette around it for each narrative including the lunar planting cycle, the phases of rebellion, and the menstrual cycle, and they are all layered together” (Saqib 22/07/13).



Figure 5.12 The Ohlone Moon and Sun dancer holding up the left and right most sides of the back wall of the Madre Maize mural. Painted by CRP. Photograph by Narmeen Hashim.

Running parallel to the corn stalk down the left of the wall is a depiction of sacred water systems and the movement of the water. This portion of the mural was described as an important reminder of the cycles of water, and the way in which indigenous communities are coerced by controlling their access to water. Water is life sustaining. The human interruption of sacred water systems, through for example the creation of dams, obstructs a communities' ability to access clean water and therefore impacts the overall health of the community.

Staff at the Peoples Grocery spoke about the way in which in California and Arizona, indigenous food systems were and continue to be destroyed by limiting their access to water. In Southern California, Arizona, and New Mexico, when Native communities have lost their access to water, they have been unable to grow their own food, or to fish and hunt, which directly results in the degradation of the health of the community. For the West Oakland community dealing with both social and environmental crisis, a return to indigenous science in food systems, and spiritual practice has significance.



Figure 5.13 Sacred water systems painted by CRP on the left most side of the mural. Photograph by Narmeen Hashim.

The Free Your Way Garden

The process of creating the garden unfolded into the mural, and vice versa. As a result, imagery of the garden began to appear in the mural including flowers and insect species. In many religious and cultural traditions symbols are used as means of protection. The Peoples Grocery staff claimed the bee and the ladybug were painted as a way to call upon these vital insect forces to help protect and pollinate the garden and help stimulate growth and regeneration of the land. “The massive ladybug is looking over and guarding the garden. They are warriors and they protect the garden by killing off and literally hunting pests and insects. They are also viciously savage in the way that they do it, so they are great. We plant flowers to attract lady bugs so that they will protect all the plants” (Saqib 22/07/13). With this intent, the aggressively perched ladybug was painted on the top of the wall as a protector of the garden, and to call the ladybug species into the garden as a pesticide free means of crop management.



Figure 5.14 Dragon Fly and Bee painted by CRP. Photograph by Narmeen Hashim.

Artists spoke of how in part the flora and fauna painted in the mural was inspired by their time within the landscape. In multiple conversations, both Peoples Grocery staff and CRP artists spoke of the way they were moved by the amount of insects that surrounded them as they were painting and landscaping. “There was a lot of insect life that came, the dragonflies were really prolific and came and hung out with us a lot, and also butterflies, and hummingbirds. There was a butterfly that came and passed away with us” (Desi 27/07/2013). Dragonflies are a common cross-cultural symbol of change. In the view of the artists and Peoples Grocery staff they saw the dragonflies as blessing the mural and the revival of the land and that their presence symbolized nature's approval of their work.

Black and Brown Farming Knowledge

Within the symbolism embedded in the *Madre Maize* mural there are many distinct references to black and brown farming knowledge. This theme directly ties to the work of the Peoples Grocery in fighting against food injustice through empowering the West Oakland community with education. The symbolic imagery of black farming is a political act as for so many African-American communities across the United States, the agricultural narrative is dominated through a history of slavery. In the present day, many African-American's in the United States are not only systemically denied the ability to produce food, with African American farmers facing the highest rates of discrimination across the nation, but also as a result of poverty and spatial limitations cannot purchase the foods their families once grew (Alkon 2007). Through community dialogue, research and education, activists and artists within the West Oakland community excavate the forgotten and sometimes intentional distorted complex history black and brown people have with land. From ancient ancestral knowledge of farming and food cultivation practices, to eviction, genocide, and forced displacement, to slavery and forced labor to present day widespread community health issues tied to failing local food systems. Excavating historical knowledge about black and brown farming for the local West Oakland community contributes to a wider process of decolonization and empowerment.





Figure 5.15, 5.16, & 5.17 Top to bottom black and brown farming; the Peoples Grocery logo, children farming and the emaciated black farmer painted by CRP. Photograph by Narmeen Hashim.

The major symbols within the *Madre Maize* mural which explore themes of black and brown farming knowledge directly include the Peoples Grocery logo, the black farmer, and children farming, but also as stated earlier, being that the symbolic imagery in the mural is deeply interrelated, the kale, chia, and cotton plants can be considered equally part of this theme.

Left of the entrance doors, there is an enlarged rendition of the Peoples Grocery logo. The name ‘Peoples Grocery’ is sprouting out of an open palm holding seeds. The hand is brown, a significant detail as often the depiction of body parts (hands in logos and advertisement especially) are made in a white skin tone. The hand holding seeds depicted on this wall begins the story of the mural in the same way that the process of gardening, food production, and community sovereignty all begin with the seed. The seed biologically represents the starting point for growth of a plant species, and in the metaphorical sense as the initial point or spark of an idea, of radical hope or change, eventually growing into larger social movements. The logo of the organization on this wall was originally designed 10 years ago and it included a white man standing in the background. When the logo was redrawn for this logo, the white man was omitted in critical recognition of the pervasive whiteness of food movements. “Whiteness may prevent alternative food movements, despite their growing popularity, from contributing to a just sustainability that can transform existing social, material and ecological relations” (Alkon 2010: 938). The very grouping of white bodies in space, their cultural practices and ways of being, can racialize space, rendering it as ‘white space’ (Saldanha 2006 as cited in Alkon 2010). Whiteness is not necessarily a bad thing, however in the context of working to empower communities of colour who have been

disenfranchised at the hands of white supremacy and privilege, activists must be conscious to not perpetuate a dynamic of privilege and exclusion, which requires intentional decentering, and a mindfulness of privilege and position by white and other ally's who hold any form of physical or class based privilege. Within the Peoples Grocery and the Community Rejuvenation project, white allies have demonstrated solidarity and anti-racism in practice through decentering themselves and being mindful of their privilege and positioning in space.

The Peoples Grocery logo offers an empowering depiction of black and brown people working together to have sovereignty over their own food supply. On the right, there is a young black woman proudly holding her fresh corn harvest high in the air with her right hand, and in her left hand a shovel with its nose in the dirt. Next to her is a shorter, and possibly older brown woman wearing a head wrap and overalls, with a small garden shovel in her right hand, and her left fist in the air. The iconic symbol of the fist has been used over generations as a symbol of solidarity, resistance, unity, and strength. To the left of these two characters, is a satisfied looking brown man with his arms filled with fresh garden harvest. The logo of the organization alone is a symbol of power, and unity, and demonstrates the goals of the Peoples Grocery in promoting food sovereignty in the West Oakland community.

Beyond the backdrop of the foothills is a depiction of a black farmer using a preindustrial method to water crops; a method still used in many parts of the world today. The importance of this method of watering crops, according to the Peoples Grocery staff was included as a reference to the politics of water, and the ways in which water is used and how it flows, and how communities are built and destroyed based on their access to water. A narrative built upon with the depiction of water systems at the furthest left corner of the wall as described earlier. A closer look at the farmer reveals an exposed rib cage, and little fat or clothing on his laboring body. Artists explained that the farmer was intentionally made to look emaciated, as an important reminder that farmers are some of the world's poorest people, and while they are responsible for food production, they themselves have very limited access to good food and equipment. The image of the black farmer, and other images that represent black and brown farming knowledge also contribute to dispelling the white imaginary of farming that largely renders invisible the low-paid, predominantly Latino workers who do the bulk of the cultivation and hard physical labour associated with farming (Alkon 2010).

Lastly, the mural depicts two young children with the tall leafy plant symbolic of the value of passing on knowledge and skills about cultivation and agriculture to the next generation. This symbol is also a reminder of the importance of reflecting on the varying roles young people play in food systems

around the world. In many parts of the world, young people are farmers, and are directly involved in the production of food.

The mural in many ways serves to dispel dominant white farming imaginaries through depicting the co-opted and hidden history of healthy food and farming practices for communities of color. Overall, the symbols and imagery of black and brown farming knowledge was considered of great importance in that the artists, community residents, and Peoples Grocery staff all believe that in order to truly help the West Oakland community overcome food injustice and the associated health and social issues that come with it, they must have sovereignty over their own healthy food supply which includes taking part in processes food production, through historic cultural knowledge about food production. The mural also in many ways serves to deconstruct imaginaries and stereotypes that label black and brown communities as unhealthy or lazy through depicting empowering imagery of ancient black and brown healthy food based wisdom.

Historical Moments Oakland Radical History

The *Madre Maize* mural depicts the radical spirit of West Oakland, and the community felt it was important to include significant moments of local political history into the mural to commemorate and honor this tradition, and to memorialize the work of community hero's. In this regard, the Black Panther Party Free Breakfast Program was an extremely important vignette to incorporate into the mural, and honors the geographic history of St. Augustines Church in West Oakland as the founding site for the breakfast program nearly 50 years ago. "At the Breakfast Program's peak in late 1969 and early 1970, the BPP and other volunteers fed thousands of children daily before they went to school across the country" (Heynen 2009: 406). The Panthers recognized that the African American community was not being provided for by the State in the same way that other communities were, and so they built up their own structures for community resilience, survival and care. The image of the BPP modeling an early form of food justice activism was important for the Peoples Grocery staff to include both to honor the pioneering ways of West Oakland in forming the roots of the movement, and also because the Free Breakfast Program in the way of the Black Panther Party is something Oaklander's continue to carry forward today with the Peoples Kitchen Free Breakfast days in DeFremery Park.



Figure 5.18 The Black Panther Party free breakfast program. Painted by CRP as part of the back wall of the Madre Maize mural. Photograph by Narmeen Hashim.

In the small top portion of the wall, there is a depiction of the Save Our Schools sit-in of 2012 where teachers, parents, and activists of Oakland rallied together to help protect Lakeview Elementary, one of five neighborhood elementary schools slated for closure and charterization. All five schools were located in poor working class communities of color in Oakland. The sit-in was considered particularly powerful as parents took time off work to create a ring of protection around the perimeter of the school to allow teaching and learning in to continue in the facility. The sit-in and supporting activism was successful in keeping Lakeview from being shut down. While there are multiple other examples of Oaklanders taking charge and responding to injustice, it was important for the mural team to incorporate a few of these vignettes in their telling of the radically resilient spirit of Oakland.



Figure 5.19 Lakeview Save Our Schools sit-in protest. Painted by CRP on upper portion of the back wall. Photograph by Narmeen Hashim.

West Oakland Spirit

Each place holds a unique spirit, one that is exemplified in the people, cultural customs, food, dress, and even in the aesthetic architecture of the landscape. Oakland has a particularly unique culture of place built off the mixing of a diverse number of immigrant groups who upon settling in Oakland found way to both keep alive and reinvent traditional ways of being. From drama, to dance, music, to visual arts, the spirit of creative resilience stays iconic to Oakland. This spirit was incorporated into the *Madre Maize* mural with the addition of the Oakland Cowboys, local community members, Sly Family Stone, and the Turf Feinz.

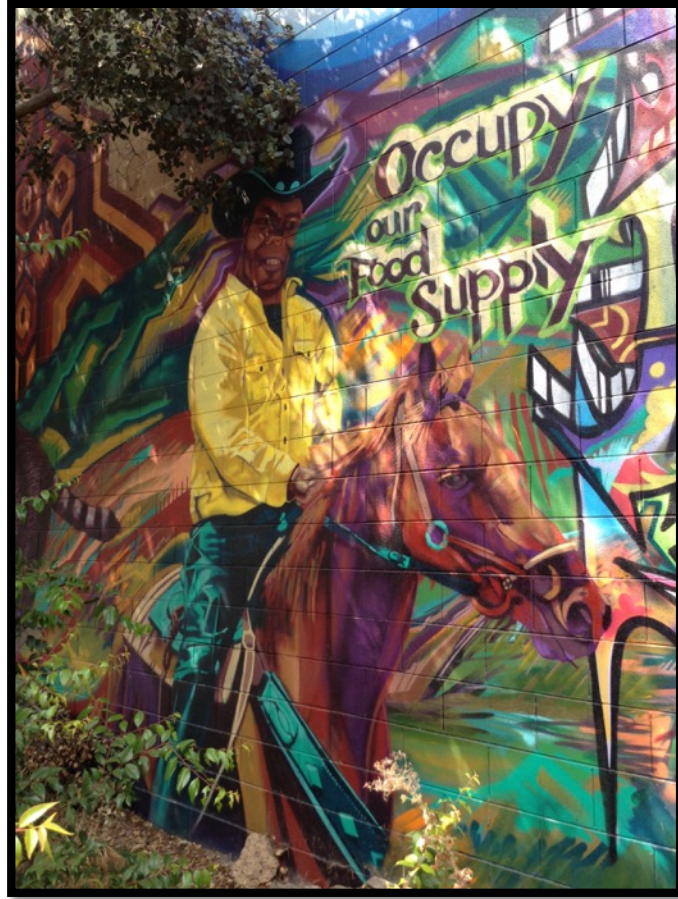


Figure 5.20 Oakland Black Cowboy with banner Occupy our Food Supply. Painted by CRP as part of the back wall of the Madre Maize mural. Photography by Narmeen Hashim

To the left is a depiction of a black cowboy riding a horse representative of the Oakland Black Cowboys. During the Great Migration, a large group of black farmers migrated to Oakland from the South, and brought with them knowledge of farming and agriculture. According to Peoples Grocery staff, black cowboys were known as resilient defiant fighters, and helped aid in the protection and settlement of black communities in the West. Today, there exists the Oakland Black Cowboy Association (OBCA), founded in 1975 with the aim to educate children and adults on the contributions of people of color in the settling of the Old West. The Black Cowboys were important to include in the mural as a historical group from Oakland, and as a reminder of the strength, resilience, and historical agricultural expertise that exists in the black community of Oakland.

Some aspects of the mural were decided on during the process of making the mural, based on the process of lived inquiry and learning about the landscape. One of these elements was the depiction of an elderly man. I was told he is a local elder from the community who visited the site often during the mural

creation process. On the turn/angle of the wall, ‘Stay 149 voice of the ghetto’ is painted. He was a prominent elder in the graffiti community and a mentor to some of the artists who wanted to honor his legacy and influence.



Figure 5.21 & 5.22 Stay 149 & Elderly West Oakland local with Black Panther. Painted by CRP. Photograph by Narmeen Hashim.

Sly Sylvester Stone of Sly and the Family Stone is a local Bay area musical legend. This actual image was sourced from a performance that Sly did at the California Hotel which is an iconic piece of architecture in Oakland, a historic site of black geography which is now the home of the People’s Grocery Urban farm and garden. The California Hotel is a significant place in West coast history and the local history of Oakland California because it was for many years the only place that black performers and artists could both perform *and* stay. It was considered one of the pioneering sites of desegregation of hotels. Allegedly a black labour union from Oakland ran a campaign protesting their labour services to the construction of places they could not eat, stay, and be customers of (Beckles 2012). The California Hotel was the first place where the labour union was successful and this opened the doors of the California Hotel to many prospering years of thriving black music and culture. “You had these amazing artists that would come on tour to California, and play at all the big jazz clubs, and big concert venues, but they were not actually allowed to stay at any of these venues, they weren’t actually allowed to stay at any of the hotels nearby so they would all stay at the Cal Hotel. So it was this heart of black arts and culture” (Saqib 22/07/13). Sly was an important figure to include in the mural not only because he was a

Bay area sensation, but because Sly and the Family Stone are regarded as pioneers of soul and funk music. This history is important to include as a reminder of the cultural ingenuity that is part of the Bay area's black history.



Figure 5.23 Sly Sylvester Stone. Painted by CRP on the back wall of the Madre Maize mural. Photograph by Narmeen Hashim.

A powerful Oakland cultural reference included in the mural are the Turf Feinz, a fly Bay Area dance crew. The Turf Feinz originally started the art of turf dancing and quickly popularized it. The crew gained international stage when a YouTube video of the crew dancing at the intersection of 90th and McArthur in East Oakland, the site of where one of the half brother of turf dancer Dreal Armstead died the night before in a tragic car accident (Swan East Bay Express 2016). Turf Feinz have gone on since to use dance as a way to commemorate the lost lives of their friends and community members, and to help themselves and others through the grieving process. Saqib (Interview 22/07/13) from the Peoples Grocery describes:

There is something really beautiful about turf dancing. They come out because their friends are being shot and killed on a regular basis and they are like you know we cannot keep harming ourselves in response to people being harmed. We cannot keep destroying

things or shooting things or people or harming our bodies to deal with this trauma, and so they would create art out of it, so they dance, and dance for the people who are being or have been killed. Turf dancing, the dance itself is so raw and poetic for that reason.



Figure 5.24 The Turf Feinz painted by CRP as part of the back wall of the Madre Maize mural. Photograph by Narmeen Hashim.

The choice to paint this legendary Oakland group within the landscape is a powerful example of honoring young living legends, and a reminder to youth of their ability to innovate, transform the present, and heal. The imagery offers a visual narrative of the vibrant spirit of West Oakland. Peoples Grocery staff spoke of the importance of having a mix of both older historical culture hero's, while also showcasing local young leaders in movements of justice and healing work, including the Turf Feinz who are an example of one of the ways in which the Oakland community is pioneering solution and healing response to community struggle from within.

While below I have provided an in-depth interpretation of the symbols, as described earlier symbols are given meaning based on the knowledge, world view and experiences of the observer. In order to further the work of community murals impact it is possible that a mural key be placed on one corner of the wall which would give the viewer a detailed account of the intended messaging behind each symbol. The

challenge with the placement of a mural key are namely the cost, as most projects are underfunded, and secondly, the forced interpretation and singular meaning it applies to each symbol. In this regard to help uncover the context and meaning behind some of their murals, CRP offers guided mural tours and descriptions on their website of each work.

Murals transform public spaces to better reflect the very people who use them (Baca as cited in Cockcroft and Barnett-Sanchez 1993). The *Madre Maize* mural in many ways, excavates the hidden histories of the landscape including those of the Ohlone indigenous peoples, the work of the Black Panther Party, and the legacy of the Peoples Grocery, and marks them for both old and new occupiers of the landscape to know, and hopefully, to honor. In this way it serves as an aesthetically profound piece of public education. The attention to detail including the inscription of names of each character allows onlookers to use the mural as a starting point for further inquiry. Through their careful curation of symbols, the artists and mural organizers were able to show critical examples of the way in which art and healing exists within the work they participate in, decentring from a focus squarely on food, and being mindful of the interconnectedness between food systems and other struggles for justice, and how food sovereignty can be used as a tool for connecting social movements. Overall re-surfacing culturally specific historical knowledge about food cultivation is both a tool against systemic poverty and discrimination and then projecting this knowledge into the community to help overcome the current struggle against failing food systems facing the West Oakland community.

Intentional Representations: A Sense of Place for West Oakland Residents

In the case of the *Madre Maize* mural specifically, respondents described how the mural is a powerful visual reminder of the valuable work being done by residents, activists, community folk, Peoples Grocery staff, and allies in the West Oakland community, that sometimes goes unseen. Peoples Grocery staff specifically stated that the mural was for them a constant reminder of the importance of the work they are doing within a very contested landscape: “I think for us as staff we see the mural as a constant reminder of what we do and why we do it. In that regard, everyone feels like it is inspiring because it reflects who we are so we are all like, we love our job just based on having the mural there. So it has been very powerful” (Jumoke 29/07/2013). Here Jumoke describes the way in which the mural makes the Peoples Grocery staff feel stronger about the work place, taking the momentum from inside the building, inside meetings, and research being developed by the organization and placing large scale manifestations of that work for the community and staff as reminders.

When interviewing artists about the choice of symbols and images used in community mural projects, of great importance to the artists was making sure that for whatever image it was they were

painting was done so in a respectful and dignified manner, particularly so as to respect the community for whom they were creating the mural for, and the peoples depicted in the mural itself. In this regard, the artists spoke of the importance of being cautious and conscious in their messaging, choice of colours, and the source images.

With respect to sourcing images, particularly of revolutionary peoples and groups, Saqib from the Peoples Grocery described the seriousness intention of this matter in not choosing imagery that further distorts mainstream media misrepresentations. For example, in their selection of imagery for the Black Panther Party, while there are numerous empowering vignettes available, they chose to use a depiction of the Free Breakfast Program to represent the often undermined (while extremely valuable to the West Oakland community) nurturing social work the Black Panther Party carried out as part of the parties Ten Point Platform.

Symbols of Belonging

One of the goals of my research was to explore the sense of belonging to place experienced by individuals as a function of community murals and the meaning extracted from their semiology. As described above, symbols and images hold subjective meaning dependent on the interpreter, and the context within which the symbol appears. According to geographic scholarship, “a sense of belonging is based in the lived experience of inclusion and affinity, and undermined by experiences of exclusion, marginalization, and rejection” (Foote and Azaryahu 2009: 299) It was my goal to investigate what generates a sense of belonging for people with the knowing that certain people’s ability to maintain place is challenged by social and economic practices that seek to displace and disadvantage, and this has both a physical and emotional impact. Through a geographic lens, my research on the politics of belonging included asking questions such as who belongs where; who decides who belongs where; and on what basis is this belonging determined. Who is considered to be in place or out of place, and further to this, who is authorized to represent place and community?

To the last point, I found DIY community mural-making is particularly revolutionary in that through its process, it lends permission and authority to some of the most disadvantaged, and economically powerless to author representations of their place. In order to understand the relationship between individuals and their sense of belonging to place in relation to mural art I asked two questions; (1) “do you think our ability to see ourselves, and I don’t just mean an image of someone who looks like you but also our politics and representations of ourselves ‘in place’ contributes to our sense of belonging to a place? “(2) Was there any part of the *Madre Maize* 2012 mural or any other mural in which you saw symbolism which generated a sentiment of attachment and sense of belonging?

Overall, interviewees replied that in more ways than one it felt good for them to see images that reflected who they were in the landscape, particularly for those who belong to counter-hegemonic identities. Counter-hegemonic identities are those that do not fall into, and challenge the normalcy of dominant identities, for example Black-Queer Women, Brown-Immigrant-Non Anglo Speaking-Trans person (Foote and Azaryahu 2009). Specifically, a black pregnant female respondent spoke of how seeing a beautiful depiction of a healthy, happy, black mother set in a natural landscape on the wall gave her a sense of pride, happiness, and positive hope for the future. It is important to note that these visual representations in place may not be of the same relevance to all groups however are of paramount importance for some. Particularly those whose identities, histories, and ways of being are constantly made invisible, labeled as bad or wrong, and inaccurately represented in mainstream media. This type of representation may be of less important to those of the dominant narrative; white-middle class-hetero-male archetype whose identity is validated in the mass media, mainstream narratives of history, and in the very built form of the city his ancestral histories of colonization are anchored in iron sculpture. With this in mind, I turn to a thematic analysis of my interview responses. Four main themes surfaced with regard to visual representations in murals that generate a sense of belonging for individuals which I will expand on below. These include; physical identity characteristics, affirmations of political and social struggle, role models, and images of safety.

Many interviewees responded that what inspired them most was seeing any visual representation of themselves or someone they knew in a mural. They commented that visual reflections of themselves allowed them to connect with the mural in a deeper way. Images reflecting personal identity characteristics were particularly important to non-white respondents as it was considered rare. “Seeing any kind of reflection of myself. I remember the first time I saw the mural that is on the Women’s Building in San Francisco. It was so huge and so comprehensive. They show women from all over. An Indian woman in a sari with her baby at the river. An African woman harvesting food, and there are so many different images. So I think when I see myself reflected” (Jasmine 24/07/13). This very response signifies the potential power of this art form in that what draws people into murals at times is seeing something in that mural that reflects their own story or experience, forcing them to pause and reflect on the piece at large, and increasing their sense of attachment and belonging to place.

Interviewee’s expressed that seeing symbolic representations that relate to their own personal politics and struggle made their experiences both as a person, and also as an activist less lonely. At times, fighting against the dominant white supremacist capitalist patriarchal system can be exhausting, emotionally challenging, and isolating. “I think it (the mural) is also an affirmation that there is somebody

else who actually cares about the things that I care about so that my experience becomes less lonely. Images give you this sense of fellowship in a sort of virtual, non material way” (Daniella 26/07/2013).

Symbolic markings of resistance for various justice movements including economic, social, political, and environmental also contribute to the strengthening and publicity of the movement as other activists and community members are made aware of others in the present, and the past in support of the same cause. For some, the ‘sense’ of attachment and belonging through seeing their political beliefs represented evoked within them overwhelming emotion that they expressed were hard to put to words. I believe this sentiment is true to much of the geographic study on sense of place and belonging in that the very word ‘sense’ implies that it is in fact a feeling. In the following quotation, Lissa expresses her feelings in this regard;

I think of the time I took the Bart from Fruitvale station for the first time and saw the *DECOLONIZE* mural. It is huge and just that one word. And just this feeling of YES so strongly not really knowing how to put words came over me. I think I just felt really affirmed, and that I need to see that mural every single day. To remind me of why I am doing the work I am doing, and I can only imagine that is the same for every other person who sees their ancestors, their story, their creation, and hopes for the future up on a wall. Where we want to go as well as where we have been, just feeling that huge sense of affirmation that can sometimes get stuck inside of buildings or inside of our bodies, but really getting to share or provoke that thought for others, is just huge (Lissa, 30/07/13).

Murals have the capacity to render a sense of belonging for activists, and for social movements. For the people who are part of those movements, including indigenous and racialized people who have faced displacement, discrimination, and social and physical violence.

In relation to the above theme (affirmations of political and social struggle), respondents said that in some ways, murals were like role models for them, giving guidance and breaking feelings of isolation. An interview commented that she felt that all individuals required a form of role model, or leader they could take lesson, direction, and inspiration from. Community members commented that in a largely heteronormative world, to see images of individuals who shared cultural, ethnic, racial, or religious traits in positions of authority whom are accomplished can be very inspiring for young people of colour to research who these people are, and realize they too can achieve without limitation.

Of course! Everyone needs role models and to know they have some power, and that someone is there who understands your background and your interests. Whether it is through politics or media, to help you make decisions about the things that you want and the things that are important to you.

(Grace 26/08/2013).

Seeing leaders that had a common background or interest, and that shared some personal characteristics with the person including their race, gender, ethnicity, politics, or religion, within the landscape, made them feel empowered and less alone, and increased their sense of belonging.

Visibility plays a complex role in relation to safety for many groups. While for some, blending in can be prove to be advantageous, for others; black men, Muslim headscarf adorning women, this is not always an option. Different spaces, dependent on time of day, and who else occupies that space can contribute to making one feel in or out of place, to the point of which it impacts their personal safety. Interviewee's commented that seeing symbols and signs on the street which promote acceptability of their identity, or protest/demand their right to be in place, had the impact of sometimes making them feel safer in space. For example, visual images including posters of young black men who have lost their lives to police brutality pasted on the street is a means of attempting to bring awareness to this issue and through generating public mass, and public gaze to the issue, attempting to increase safety and accountability for the lives of black men and boys.

In one interview, a participant described how she would often walk home late at night down a street where she felt unsafe when returning from work. As she had no other choice but to walk on this street she decided to make herself feel safer she would paste up images and names of her grandmother, mother, and sisters. For peoples who are persecuted, such as for example queer and trans folks to see images on the street that publicize their right to access space safely and free from oppression is significantly important. Many street artists who belong to multiple intersectional identities have also used street markings through tagging with marker and sticker to mark their place and increase their visibility, as minorities in the landscape.

Conclusion

According to geographic literature on the study of the politics of belonging, claims and counterclaims over place transpire through both material and symbolic struggles and negotiations. These struggles over the ownership, stewardship, occupation, and management of real places are often connected to struggles over the expression, status, recognition, and authenticity of group identities (Foote and Azaryahu 2009). Community mural-art by way of its publicness, and its content often confronts

issues of identity, and is a means of expressing group authenticity. As an outdoor site-specific art form, it is a physical attempt to make claims to place, to occupy the block/building/underpass with group identity expression. In the context of Oakland, where urban redevelopment schemes coupled with the gentrification of historical black, brown, and indigenous geographies occurring at varying scales, community mural-making is a symbolic material response of community members attempt to maintain evidence of the people and history at risk of erasure and displacement. Even though developers may continue to win the battle of corporate, condominium development in place of community arts space and/or affordable housing, at the least, artists help ensure that what is being displaced, or at risk of erasure is seen, and made vibrantly visible.

As both place and meaning are in a constant state of making, it is possible that the *Madre Maize* (2012) mural will go on to have a variety of more meanings to those who pass by it, and who take over the building and the garden over the lifetime of the mural. Placing symbolic representations of histories at risk of erasure and displacement into the present urban landscape helps to ensure geographic space for the future of these groups, as stated by one interviewee; “I think seeing images that reflect culture and history helps people feel closer to the places they live even though gentrification is taking place and people are faced with all sorts of displacement” (Lissa 30/07/13).

While through my analysis of the *Madre Maize* mural, and the conversations had with the artists, Peoples Grocery staff, community activists, and residents about the mural, I can confirm that the presence of this mural generates a strong relationship between one’s sense of place and belonging to the social/urban landscape because of the presence of cultural, social, and politically relatable imagery in the landscape, I do not believe the mural is the only thing that gives West Oakland residents a sense of attachment or belonging to the landscapes in which they dwell. An important consideration raised by one artist during my interviews was that while murals are important markers of meaning and identity, she felt that it was important to reflect on the fact that in some cases, regardless of the mural being there or not, the people themselves are tied to that geography and feel a sense of belonging and attachment to it. The mural highlights and marks that attachment, and perhaps does so for outsiders to recognize and know who occupies the space, however the emotional connection may exist regardless for the individual resident.

Community murals are a powerful means of documenting history and culture in place and through their imagery have the capacity to contest place based power relations. In this chapter I have offered a thematic reading of the *Madre Maize* mural to provide an informed interpretation of the symbols used in the mural, and to expand on the ways in which the placement of symbolic imagery (as used in the mural) can help to hold and mark hidden geographies, particularly ones at risk of displacement in place. The

process of participatory place making by racialized and indigenous groups can be considered a means of decolonizing or disrupting normative landscapes by returning symbolic representations of systemically marginalized and displaced black, brown, and indigenous knowledge's, bodies, and ways of being back into the urban landscape. As critical cultural geographers we must do our part to acknowledge and name injustice in the landscape, and through our research, elevate the work and voices of those actively and practically working to create creative alternatives. In the concluding chapter, I will expand on this sentiment.

Chapter 6: Decolonizing Landscapes through the Power of Community Mural-Making

I conclude this thesis by expanding on the emergent role of mural art as a means to decolonize or un-whiten urban landscapes by bringing socially and physically displaced black, brown, and indigenous histories, bodies, and ways of being back into the urban landscape. I return to the primary question that guided my research study; *how does mural art in the context of Oakland represent community histories, politics, and sentiments of resistance in the urban landscape?* To answer this question, I posed three sub-questions: (1) How are specific aesthetics and design techniques (including mediums, symbols, and styles) used as tools of representation? (2) How does the geographic location of the mural within the landscape impact, or emphasise its meaning and reading? (3) How do community mural consulting and organizing processes contribute to politics of place-making? To conclude, in the following paragraphs I summarize my answers to these three questions.

Murals and Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging to place may be extended for individuals as a function of community murals based on the meaning extracted from their semiology. I have shown that intentional community mural-making that symbolizes black, brown, and indigenous culture, history and ways of being, marks place for these identities whom have historically faced both structural and systemic discrimination, and continue to be most vulnerable to displacement under current processes of urban redevelopment. In the case study of West Oakland, through marking the very faces, and political history of the West Oakland community, artists and activists aesthetically resist site-specific erasure, while empowering community residents with positive/uplifting imagery that contributes to an overall sense of belonging for individuals.

A sense of belonging is important for all people as it is entangled with a sense of personal identity and well-being; this is particularly so for groups whose identities are disproportionately vulnerable to discrimination and invisibilization. For such groups claims to place can be considered an act of resistance. In chapter 5, I explored the case study of the *Madre Maize* (2012) mural which hosts a narrative of black, brown, and indigenous food sovereignty and an empowering representation of both the history and ongoing spirit of resilience and resistance thriving in West Oakland. My analysis of this mural revealed it to be a DIY artful act of political resistance to displacement and disadvantage. I showed that intentional community mural-making is revolutionary because its very process lends permission and authority to some of the most disadvantaged, and economically powerless to author representations of their place.

Murals and Location

The geographic location of a mural, and the characteristics of the landscape impact not only the meaning and reading of the mural, but also its very ability to 'be'. Intentional community mural-making is not possible in all cities. The mural art of resistance is possible in Oakland because of a deeply rooted radical history of black activism, demographic concentration of people of colour, and the support of

private landowners who donated wall space to the political project of visibly documenting black histories and geographies. When black, brown, and indigenous communities and ally's co-exist in a space they are more likely to support the painting of their history on the walls of the landscape as a tool of community empowerment. While the demographic and physical landscape impacted the imagery of the mural, so too did the mural as a spatial artifact embed itself in the social and cultural fabric of the landscape shaping who may be considered 'in place' and what can be collectively accomplished. The imagery from the *Madre Maize* (2012) mural inspired the transformation of an abandoned landscape into the *Free Your Way* community garden.

Mural-Making as Place-Making

Overall I found that the most significant way through which community mural consulting and organizing processes contribute to the politics of place-making is through a flexible community engagement process. This process as described in Chapter 4 extends over the entire mural-making process from design to painting. Through community engagement, power is transferred to the local community to author the landscapes in which they work and live. Through facilitating this process of community authored place-making, local groups, particularly in the context of low-income communities of colour, are able to visibly occupy space and through doing so, show resistance to aesthetic displacement.

The community engagement session sets intentional community mural-making apart from other forms of mural-making. It is in this session that community members are able to come together, and often through acts of storytelling, skill sharing, and creative exercise, learn about the experiences, memories, and ideas of one another, and through doing so, in the best of scenarios, participate in a process of community building and healing. From the ideas, stories, themes, and images collected in the community engagement sessions, artists, in consultation with community members create a design. The engagement process contributes to the making of place as individuals whom participate in the process establish new meaning within the landscape based on their lived memory of making their mark in the landscape. By creating a community-led process that gives local residents agency within their local geography, artists often help to foster a sense of pride and dignity for local residents.

In Oakland, intentional-mural-making, is an attempt by artists, activists, affected communities and allies to raise awareness about indigenous, black, and brown ways of being in order to counter the violent systems of oppression in the present which treat some lives as less valuable, to the point of enslavement (forced unpaid labor coupled with harassment and mistreatment), state supported genocide, and death. In this way, large scale visual acts of remembering are a means of justice making by way of helping to ensure that the atrocities and terrors of the past are not forgotten. This is cultivated with the hope that this remembering will promote collective awareness so as to prevent them from being

reproduced by existing systems of power, and to remind those who face mistreatment today of the ways in which peoples have historically resisted to exist.

Mural-making is one of many needed processes of communal and individual healing which allows space for groups to empower one another to restore dignity, reclaim culture, and rewrite history. For an oppressed people to research and reclaim spiritual and cultural ways of being, be they medicinal, mathematical, artistic, scientific, or geographic knowledge, and through them to support life affirming practices from these ancestral knowings is itself an act of decolonization. Through their doing, community mural artists, local activists, and residents strengthen themselves to face the ongoing daily trials of intense discrimination, racialized violence, legislated inequality, and systemic injustice.

Intentional Community Mural-Making as Counter-Monument

Murals not only offer an assertive aesthetic counter-narrative to injustices currently taking place, but also, very much, offer a counter-experience to the normative urban experience. Some interviewee's spoke of murals as a 'gift' in a 'place' (the city) where mostly things (your time, money, energy) are taken from you. Further to this, as urban spaces have become sites of capital production, and people themselves feel they are constantly being capitalized upon, the mural is a gift. Giving information, giving a story to inspire a journey in your mind, a journey to another place; a journey (at times) of hope, of empowerment, and through this a reminder of your own and others ability to resist and survive despite what might be the reality of one's day, or the reality of oppressive structures and symbols in the rest of the landscape.

I believe as critical geographers we must demand the visibility of those historic geographies that were silenced, displaced, and marginalized in processes of nation building. With a reflection on the limited exposure in public art or public monument the heroic Asiatic and Black slaves, First Nations, or American Indians tortured during the formation of the nation state, one can infer the potential of the DIY act of counter-monument making as a means to make public counter-claims to both land and place. Counter-monuments are intentionally designed pieces of public art made to unsettle social relations rather than provide universalized closure. Counter monuments "dismiss heroic imagery, interject disturbing rather than placating texts, and are designed to be interactive and accessible rather than awesome...and tell truths about both literal and ideological absences in social memory" (Burk 2006: 953). Through their existence, counter-monuments challenge sanitized narrations of history and elevate the silenced truths of the oppressed.

Intentional Community Mural-Making as Community Justice-Making

Intentional community murals offer a physical site of memorial, and upholding of truth to create a place of altar, gathering, and remembrance. In Oakland, there are a number of murals holding the images of black and brown heroes, whom have either been murdered by the hands of law enforcement officers, assassinated by national security intelligence forces, the hands of racially intolerant vigilantes, or by the systemic conditions of their own communities. These community murals are painted in an effort to ensure these faces are not forgotten, and as a reminder to those oppressive forces that these patterns of ‘modern lynching’ will not go unnoticed. The act of mural-making in this way serves as a form of public documentation in an effort to bring accountability and attention to these issues, and to maintain public awareness, and solidarity over the very real struggle of racial inequality and both physical and systemic violence.

Community murals are significant because they allow people to memorialize their own heroes. This is of particular importance as described in Chapter 2 of this thesis, in the context of a justice system which is constantly failing to bring justice for black and brown lives. Through the act of projecting fallen comrades, activists seek to keep different truths alive, to remember, and to move forward with their spirit. To let the mothers of those who have lost their sons know that they will not endure pain and suffering in isolation, and that even if the current system for prosecution fails them, that the community will come together, and through artistic public acts of marking, will keep the real truth alive. In this way, mural-making is a means of community justice making. As we have seen with the death of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner (to only name a few) the American justice system has failed to value the lives of these boys and men let alone persecute their murderers, and so in its place activists must publically, on the walls, honor life and condemn murder, racism, and injustice.

Decolonizing Landscapes through Intentional Community Mural-Making

The decolonial aesthetic of intentional community murals I have explored in Oakland in tandem with the land-occupying site specific nature of the art-form translates into mural-art as a contributing force to the decolonization of urban landscapes. Decolonization is defined as a land based freedom from colonial rule which includes delinking socially, and politically from colonial systems, and having autonomy and self governance over the lands from which a peoples were disenfranchised or displaced. During my research I uncovered examples of murals which have been successful in helping to attain memorialization and protection through heritage status of black, brown, and indigenous historical geographies and therefore land and space. By way of creation in the form of movement, music, and visual art the decolonial aesthetic is an attempt to undo the harm of the past, and in re-emergence creates space for alternative positive possibilities.

The politics of place impact spatial relations on a variety of scales. As described in the context of my research, negotiations around who is ‘in’ or ‘out’ of place has been for many a matter of life and death. I believe in part, the transformative potential of mural-making is that through visually marking ways of being in place, it is a tool by which to resist the external forces including but not limited to: violent policing, discriminatory housing policies, gang injunctions, and the internalized negativity about self that are at play to physically and emotively make racialized and indigenous bodies feel out of place. As artists, activists, theorists, and academics, we attempt to decolonize through knowing these complex histories.

As explored in Chapter 5, the empowering, positive light in which black, brown, and indigenous lives and ways of being are projected in massive, bold, colorful configurations on outdoor wall space, curated and witnessed by local residents is of great significance as a tool of resistance against current forces of gentrification, discrimination, and violence facing these groups; which are all bi-products of colonial rule. Intentional community murals explored as part of this research in Oakland represent a decolonial aesthetic through their collective and anti-capitalist making, their capture of symbolic imagery of black, brown, and indigenous history, and through their site specific nature making visible hidden black and indigenous geographies. The intentional community mural art of Oakland holds both images of both freedom and resistance (Kidane 2014), imagery that calls for justice and visibility, and contribute to the overall-ongoing process of healing the colonial wound through remembering, and bringing representation into the landscape.

The Future Possibilities of the Mural Art of Resistance in Oakland, CA

Overall, intentional community mural-making is an extension of the vibrant social justice movements alive and thriving in Oakland, CA. From the Civil Rights and Black Power movement, to the Occupy Movement, to the Black Lives Matter movement, mural-making as a tool for political, and social justice promotion and a means of peaceful aesthetic resistance. A decolonial aesthetic counters the dominant narrative and challenges the politics of place in making spaces more visually accessible and accepting of certain groups, and for some even make spaces feel safer by way of having visual markings of their personal (often displaced, mis-written, and undermined histories) in the outdoor urban landscape. Through visual site specific remembering, I hope it is possible that those who may be in a position of privilege, whose ancestral lineage, current social positioning including wealth and access to power might enable them to intentionally or not contribute to violent systems of oppression to be made aware. While at the same time for those against whom bare the scars of histories injustice and humanities failing, pain to be acknowledged and to see government accountability through the artful act of public memorialization, acknowledgement, and apology.

To the best that they are able to, I believe artists must continue to do the valuable work of intentional community mural-making. It is of great value to the communities represented and to onlookers, and has impact at multiple levels as has been explored in my research. My research has shown that murals impact upon the people who are both residents of these landscapes as well as those who see the images from varying distances. For those travelling through the city and at a variety of scales from which the murals are visible (e.g., highway, elevated building or bridge), and through a variety of mobilities including internationally through rapid digital media transfer of photos of the murals. It will always be important for mural artists, who hold aesthetic and spatial power to do their best to ensure that their artworks do not further displace existing residents. This requires artists to be mindful in the process of making, to constantly decenter from their own (if any) privilege, to be conscious of their position, and artist ego as their art-making deeply impacts the communities and landscapes within which they work.

Murals are Powerful

My interviews, observation, informal conversations, and research all reinforced that intentional community murals are powerful; they are an art-form made for and by the people, and are site-specific public art pieces of consequence. Murals are powerful because they remind us of history; of indigenous, mis-written and un-represented histories. Murals are powerful because they make space for a politics of plurality, for diversity, of bringing physical life and representation to varying geographic imaginaries. Murals allow art to become a political tool, and based on the politics they largely represent, a revolutionary tool. Murals allow those who occupy the landscape to be the authors of the landscape, even if they are not the proprietor of the land. Murals are able to communicate beyond the written word, beyond borders of culture, language, and literacy. Intentional community murals are powerful because they are the voice of the people, rather than that of corporate capitalist monopoly.

Through marking the stories of the people, and being witness to the marking of that history, long term community residents attest to their relationship with the landscape, and in respect mark a contract with the landscape. Community intentional murals hold space as uncensored billboards that activate spaces. Murals are consequential because as a form of DIY urbanism they allow communities to respond to urban blight themselves without the intervention or financial dependency of developers. Murals have the capacity to make local sites and hidden geographies landmarks. Memorialization and city instituted landmarks are costly laborious processes that often require significant time and financial support. Mural-making is a way in which local groups can memorialize space, mark, highlight, and hold the collective memory of a site. Through doing so, they mark and hold place of the murdered, made dead, displaced, disappeared, for whom state systems of justice making have failed.

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Appendix A: Sample Interview Consent Form

Date:

Study Name: The Paint Keeps The Place: The Mural Art of Resistance in Oakland California

Researcher: MA Narmeen Hashim, S407 Ross, York University, 4700 Keele St., Toronto ON M3J 1P3

Purpose of the Research: The purpose of this research is to understand how, in the context of Oakland California, mural art has been used as a form of social activism to represent community histories, politics, and sentiments of resistance in the urban landscape. This qualitative study employs multiple research methods, including individual interviews with community artists, leaders, and activists, photography, and document analysis. The themes this research seeks to explore include; the power, location, process, and symbolism of/in mural art, and the relationship between mural art and a sense of place and belonging. The end result of this research will be a written report.

What You Will Be Asked to do in the Research: You have been invited to participate in this study because of your familiarity mural art and community social justice work in Oakland California. I am interested in understanding more about the power of mural art from your perspective and wish to conduct a semi-structured interview with you. The interview will be recorded using a digital voice recorder, and is expected to last between 60 and 90 minutes. Interview questions are intended to be exploratory, the topics of conversation will include: artistic practice, the power, politics, location, and process of/behind mural art, and how mural art relates to ones sense of place or belonging.

Risks and Discomforts: I do not foresee any risks or discomfort from your participation in the research. Should you feel any discomfort or concern, you may refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time.

Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You: A summary of the findings of the project will be shared with you upon completion of the research study in Spring 2014. The study should shed light on the impact of mural art, and seeks to empower and build transnational solidarity amongst communities using mural art as a tool for advocacy. Should it be of benefit to yourself or your organization, a summary of our conversation can be presented to you upon your request.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time.

Withdrawal from the Study: You can stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason, if you so decide. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions will not affect your relationship with the researchers, York University, or any other group associated with this project. In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible.

Confidentiality: All information you supply during the research will be held in confidence and unless you specifically indicate your consent, your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. The digital record of your interview will be transcribed, and only I will have access to the data. All data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and/or on a password-protected computer for fifteen years after which time it will be destroyed in all forms. You may request a copy of your own recording at any time. If your data is referred to during any subsequent writing about this project, you will be assigned a pseudonym to protect your anonymity, and no other identifiable data will be used. If requested, any notes taken from the interview will be destroyed. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

Questions About the Research? If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact myself Narmeen Hashim by e-mail. This research has been reviewed and approved by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University’s Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact my supervisor Dr. Alison Bain or the Sr. Manager & Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5th Floor, York Research Tower, York University (telephone 416-736-5914 or e-mail).

Legal Rights and Signatures:

I _____ consent to participate in *The Paint Keeps The Place: The Mural Art of Resistance in Oakland, CA* conducted by Narmeen Hashim. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Signature _____

Date _____

Participant

Signature _____

Date _____

Principal Investigator

Appendix B: Sample Interview Guide

Mural Artists

Name: _____

Date: _____

Location: _____

Artistic Practice:

- 1) What kind(s) of art do you practice?
- 2) How would you describe yourself as an artist?
 - What are some of your motivations and influences?
- 3) How did you become involved in this mural project?
 - What other mural projects have you participated in-in the past?
- 4) How did you and your group decide on the design for this mural?
- 5) What has drawn you to painting murals?
 - What kinds of murals do you paint?
 - Do you ascribe to a particular style of painting?
 - Did you receive any training?
- 6) (Referring to photos) Can you tell me anything about the choice of symbolism in this piece?
 - Why were these symbols used to represent your message?
 - How did this mural come to be?
- 7) How do your political and social priorities impact your art?
 - Do they influence or are they related to your choice of medium and style?
- 8) Is your participation in or organization of murals projects influenced by your political and social priorities?

Location:

- 9) How was the location of the piece decided on?

- 10) How has your design been influenced by the physical and social location of the mural?
- 11) Do you think the location of the piece affects the way in which the mural is interpreted by those who view it?

Process:

- 12) Can you tell me about the design/consultation process your group/crew does for each mural or this piece specifically?
- 13) Who is typically involved in this consultation process?
- 14) What strategies do you use to balance the ideas of the various actors involved in the consultation process?
- 15) What feedback have you received on this piece?

Place:

- 16) How do you understand ones belonging or attachment to place?
- 17) In what ways do you think murals contribute to this?
- 18) How do you think the works you create speak to the lives, stories, and experiences of people living in the area?
- 19) Do you think our ability to ‘see ourselves’ in place, on walls, in the imagery of murals contributes to our feelings of belonging?

Community Leaders and Activists

Name: _____

Date: _____

Location: _____

Power of Mural Art

- 1) What types of social justice work are you involved in?
- 2) What kind of ‘power’ do you think mural art has?
- 3) What political potential do you think mural art has?
- 4) What murals, if any, have captured your attention and why?
 - What is it about them that captures your attention?

- 5) (Referring to photos or actual mural) Had you seen or noticed these murals prior to me showing you these photographs of them?

Symbolism:

- 6) (Referring to photos) What do you read as the overall messages of this/these pieces?
- 7) (Referring to photos) How do you feel about the choice of symbolism in this piece?
- Repeat question for each of the three murals.

Location:

- 8) What role, if any, do you think location plays in how the mural is interpreted?

Process:

- 9) If any, what have your experiences been in a design/consultation process for a community mural?

Place:

- 10) Do you see yourself (your identity, culture, or politics) in the visual imagery of the murals in Oakland's landscape? Where?
- 11) What do these images/symbols/representations look like? Why, if at all, is it important to you and how do they make you feel?
- 12) What role, if any, do murals play in your sense of belonging and attachment to Oakland?
- 13) Do you think our ability to 'see ourselves' in place, on walls, or in the imagery in the landscape contributes to our feelings of belonging?
- 14) How do you read murals?
- How do your political and social priorities influence your reading/interpretation of murals?

Community Organization

Name: _____

Date: _____

Location: _____

Power of Mural Art

- 1) What type(s) of work is your organization involved in ?

- 2) What kind of 'power' do you think mural art has?
- 3) What political potential do you think mural art has?
- 4) What murals, if any, have captured your attention and why?
 - What is it about them that captures your attention?
- 5) (Referring to photos or actual mural) Had you seen or noticed these murals prior to me showing you these photographs of them?

Symbolism:

- 6) (Referring to photos) What do you read as the overall messages of this/these pieces?
- 7) (Referring to photos) How do you feel about the choice of symbolism in this piece?
 - Repeat question for each of the three murals.

Location:

- 8) What role, if any, do you think location plays in how the mural is interpreted?

Process:

- 9) If any, what have your organizations experiences been in a design/consultation process for a community mural?

Place:

- 10) Do you see yourself or the aims of your organization (identity, culture, or politics) in the visual imagery of the murals in Oakland's landscape? Where?
- 11) What do these images/symbols/representations look like? Why, if at all, is it important to you and how do they make you feel?
- 12) What role, if any, do murals play in your sense of belonging and attachment to Oakland?
- 13) Do you think our ability to 'see ourselves' in place, on walls, or in the imagery in the landscape contributes to our feelings of belonging?
- 14) How do you read murals?
 - How do your political and social priorities influence your reading/interpretation of murals?

Appendix C: Data Analysis Coding Tree

1. **Activism 1A.** Activist Identity
2. **Aerosol Art Movement 2A.** Graffiti **2B.** Graffiti Artists **2C.** Marginalized
3. **Artist 3A.** Allyship **3B.** Artist Identity **3C.** Artist Style **3D.** Autonomy **3E.** Mentors **3F.** Educators
4. **Audience**
5. **Beautification 5A.** Healing **5B.** Hope **5C.** Rejuvenation
6. **City 6A.** Censorship
7. **Community 7A.** Empowerment **7B.** Relationships
8. **Counter Narrative 8A.** Counter Violence
9. **Cultural Production**
10. **Decolonization**
11. **Gentrification**
12. **Great Quotes**
13. **History of Oakland 13A.** History of West Oakland
14. **Intention 14A.** Consciousness **14B.** Dignified **14C.** Fulfilling **14D.** Honor **14E.** Spirit
15. **Location 15A.** Bart **15B.** Freeway
16. **Madre Maize 16A.** Black Farming **16B.** Peoples Grocery
17. **Make Visible**
18. **Media Technology Mural Transfer**
19. **Mural Crews 19A.** CRP **19B.** Estria Foundation **19C.** Trust Your Struggle
20. **Murals 20A.** Culture is a Weapon **20B.** Decolonize **20C.** Murals Are Powerful **20D.** Restoration **20E.** Trayvon Mural **20F.** Who Stole the Sun Mural
21. **Oakland 21A.** West Oakland
22. **Oscar Grant**
23. **Photo Sharing**
24. **Place 24A.** Attachment and Belonging **24B.** Awareness and Engagement **24C.** Holding **24D.** Marking **24E.** Transformation
25. **Political**
26. **Positionality 26A.** Fold **26B.** Safety
27. **Process 27A.** Community Engagement Workshop **27B.** Design **27C.** Funding **27D.** Legal **27E.** Organic **27F.** Painting **27G.** Relationship Building **27H.** Research **27I.** Unveiling
28. **Public Art**
29. **Race 29A.** Black **29B.** Brown **29C.** Indigenous
30. **Radical**
31. **Representation 31A.** Symbols
32. **Resistance 32A.** Solidarity **32B.** Struggle
33. **Social Movements 33A.** Black Panther Black Liberation **33B.** Civil Rights Movement **33C.** Food Justice **33D.** Idle No More **33E.** Migration is Beautiful **33F.** Occupy Movement **33G.** Peace **33H.** Restorative Justice
34. **Timing**
35. **Traditional Mural Making 35A.** Precita Eyes **35B.** The Mission
36. **Transformation of Landscape**
37. **Trayvon Zimmerman Case**
38. **Urban Blight**
39. **Youth**

Appendix D: Madre Maize Wall by Wall Photos

The following images provide a wall by wall review of the Madre Maize mural in order to build context of the flow with which the symbols are placed and the expansive side of the mural.



Figure E.1 & E.2 Front wall of the Madre Maize mural facing Seventh street. Photograph by Narmeen Hashim.



Figure E.3 & E.4 the garden side wall of the Madre Maize mural facing Market Street. Photograph by Narmeen Hashim.



Figure E.5, E.6, E.7, E.8, E.9, E.10 Right to Left the Back wall of the Madre Maize mural facing the 880 Freeway and Bart.
 Photograph by Narmeen Hashim

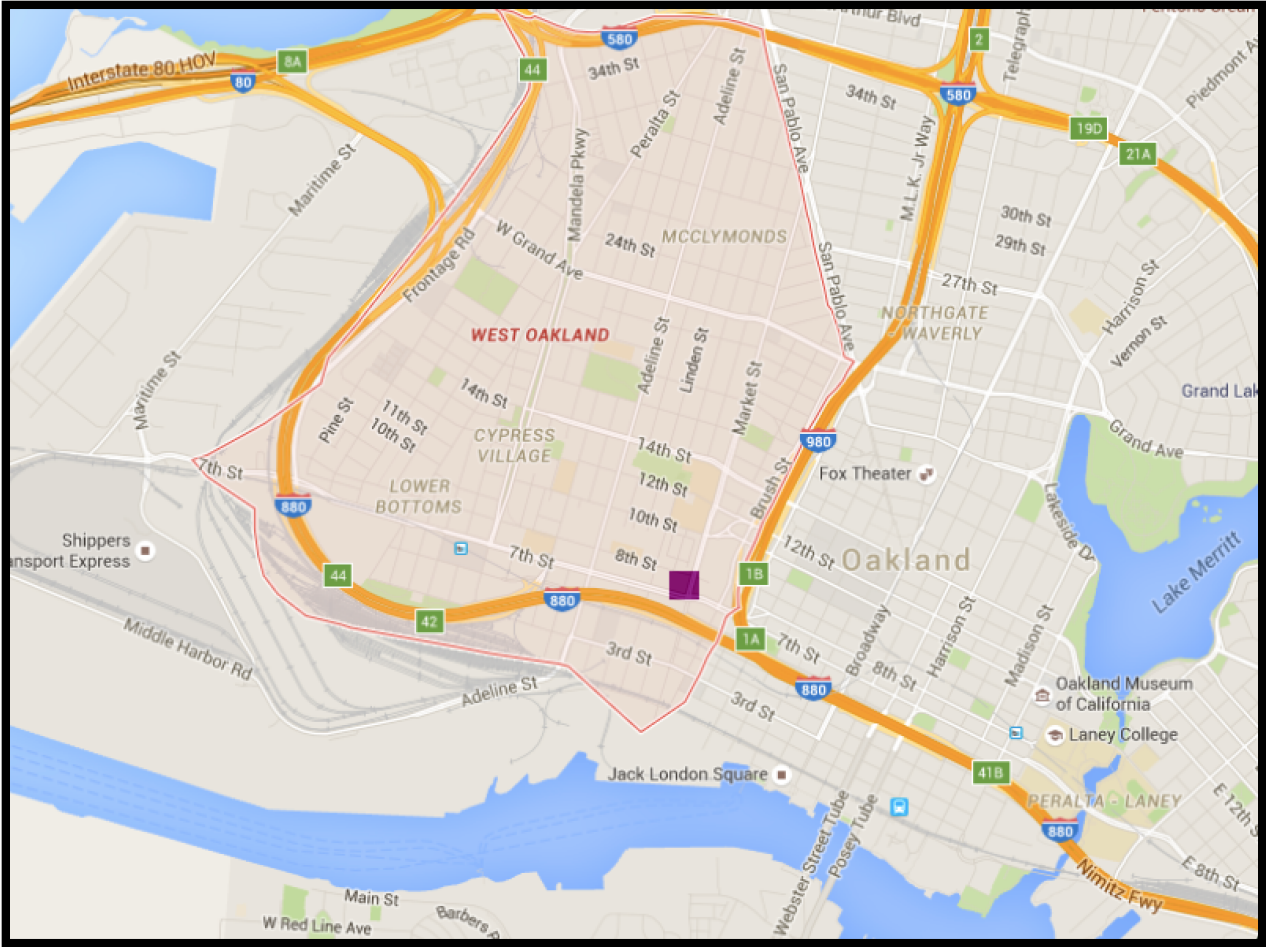


Figure E.12, E.13, E.14, E.15 (top to bottom) continued sequence of the back wall of the Madre Maize mural facing the 880 Freeway and Bart. Photograph by Narmeen Hashim



Figure E.16, E.17, E.18, E.19 continued final sequence of the back wall of the Madre Maize mural facing the 880 Freeway and Bart. Photograph by Narmeen Hashim

Appendix E: Map of Oakland



Map of Oakland: in the above depiction West Oakland can be viewed in juxtaposition to downtown Oakland 12th and Broadway St. The purple square at the corner of Seventh and Market St represents the Peoples Grocery.