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A Tale of Two Murals: The Divide Between Community Muralism and Street Art in the “Creative City”

By: Allyson Burbeck

Abstract: This piece examines the history and legacy of Chicana/o muralism in the historically Chicana/o neighborhood of La Alma-Lincoln Park in Denver, Colorado. Members of the Chicana/o community who participate in, observe, or support mural-making contribute to physical transformations of the urban landscape while also creating memories that result in affective attachments to these spaces, contributing to the process of placemaking and a communal sense of belonging for this marginalized group. In recent years, street art has gained popularity in Denver, increasing competition for public spaces. Many people claim that street art culture provides Denver a positive form of public art that beautifies the city and breaks up the monotony of the urban landscape. By comparing two murals in La Alma-Lincoln Park, one Chicana/o mural and one street art mural, this piece demonstrates how city officials, urban planners, and corporate developers have effectively co-opted street art practices to commodify the urban landscape in the name of the “creative city.” Street art becomes a type of marketing scheme through which to communicate a neighborhood’s “authenticity” and attractiveness to visitors and members of the upper classes to accumulate profit through tourism and development plans. The appearance of street art murals in La Alma-Lincoln Park transforms its distinctly Chicana/o public spaces, negatively affecting longtime residents’ sense of belonging and signaling the gentrification of public space. The author situates transformations to public spaces as not an effect of gentrification, but rather a cause. This thesis challenges public sphere theory by emphasizing the importance of public space to counterpublic spheres. The Chicana/o counterpublic has repeatedly faced geographic displacement at the hands of the US government

and the Anglo-American public, rendering access and control of public spaces especially meaningful.

Keywords: *Chicana/o Muralism, La Alma-Lincoln Park, street art, muralism, urban landscape*



Figure 1. Carlos Fresquez and Metropolitan State University of Denver students. Su Teatro murals (east wall). 2012. Santa Fe Drive and 7th Avenue, Denver, CO. Photo by author.

Every month, Denver's Art District on Santa Fe hosts the First Friday Art Walk, inviting the public to tour the district's many art galleries and wander the street admiring its public art. The art district inhabits the neighborhood of La Alma-Lincoln Park, home to a sizeable Chicana/o community and several Chicana/o murals created during the Mexican American activist-led Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, or *el movimiento*. As visitors meander down Santa Fe Drive, they encounter two colorful murals directly across from each other on 7th Avenue. A massive Chicana/o mural adorns Su Teatro Cultural and Performing Arts Center, which promotes and preserves Chicana/o arts, heritage, and traditions (figure 1). Created by

students from Metropolitan State University of Denver in 2012, the mural features contemporary Chicanas/os playing and dancing to music and colorful figures representing Aztec deities, such as an undulating feathered serpent, that explode across the walls.



Figure 2. Pat Milbery, Pat McKinney, and Jason T. Graves. *Love this City*. Mural. 2016. Santa Fe Drive and 7th Avenue, Denver, CO. Photo by author.

Opposite this artwork stands an equally vibrant mural on El Noa Noa Tex-Mex Restaurant (figure 2). The mural proclaims “Love this City” in cursive letters over a geometric pink heart and features a mishmash of geometric shapes, symbols, and elements of Colorado culture, including a bicycle wheel, native animals such as buffalo, and a jagged silhouette of the

Rocky Mountains. Street artist and Colorado-transplant Pat Milbery painted this mural during Denver Arts Week in 2016, effectively launching a series of *Love this City* murals that would punctuate Denver. Backed by the city's tourism and marketing agency Visit Denver, Milbery's street art campaign offers various neighborhoods a slightly different version of the original design meant to reflect each area's character and history. While the mural seems to promote a vibrant downtown full of public art, it loses its charm as the critical viewer wonders how exactly the artist sought to depict this specific neighborhood with vague symbols of bicycles and skyscrapers found anywhere in Denver.

Does this mural truly represent La Alma-Lincoln Park? Notably, the artist fails to include the neighborhood's rich Chicana/o history and community. La Alma-Lincoln Park became a haven for the Chicanas/os in the 1960s after the city evicted them from the nearby Auraria neighborhood targeted for redevelopment. In their new neighborhood, the community gathered for celebrations, painted community murals, and mobilized against a local and federal government that sought to assimilate them into white American society. The neighborhood's Chicana/o murals allowed Chicanas/os to take ownership of their surroundings, empowering the community to embrace its ancient and contemporary history, cultural identity and values, and future aspirations. The street art style in *Love this City* encapsulates an affront to this history, smoothing over the city's continued displacement and marginalization of the Chicana/o community and replacing it with a mural that fails to account for cultural difference and conflicting histories.

This paper challenges the narrative that the *Love this City* murals reflect and serve the immediate community by exploring the relationship between urban renewal, street art, and displacement. Scholars interested in gentrification have asserted the idea of the "creative city" as

a way to describe international cities that use creativity and cultural attractions to market themselves as worthwhile tourist destinations. In the creative city, street art often becomes a marketing tactic that communicates a neighborhood's "authenticity" regarding how "street" it appears. Such street art murals attempt to harken back to the days of illegal graffiti writing, a subculture now thoroughly wrapped into hip-hop and popular culture, as a way to signal the trendiness and desirability of a neighborhood to visitors and the upper classes.

How can we consider such manufactured street art truly "authentic" when those in power control it? Such murals are no longer spaces used to fight the power, but to attract visitors and members of the upper classes, thus accumulating profit for city officials and corporate developers through tourism and urban renewal plans. Murals similar to *Love this City* have emerged within La Alma-Lincoln Park in recent years, transforming the distinctly Chicana/o character of the neighborhood and its public space into a haven for white, affluent people. This street art campaign legitimizes a homogenous form of public art that presents a unified public sphere, thus erasing and displacing La Alma-Lincoln Park's Chicana/o community, whose culture does not fit into gentrified ideals.¹ I seek to criticize street art as a tool of gentrification, thus confronting urban citizens and artists with their role in this process. If we can recognize and become critical of our role within gentrification, hopefully, we can change how we contribute to such a process and fight against it.

The Creative City and Appropriation of the Street

Both urban theorists and art historians have extensively debated the relationship between art and gentrification. The "blighted," lower-class spaces of a city often attract artists with their central locations, low rents, and sense of authentic culture.² Artists serve a colonizing function as

the frontline who first occupies a neighborhood considered “dangerous,” securing it for the rest of the bourgeois.³ The artistic community attracts property investment and development, easing the flow of capital into the gentrifying neighborhood. Often, the gentrification process displaces the initial community of artists who become priced out as the upper classes infiltrate the neighborhood.⁴

Art historians Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Ryan firmly indict the art world with complicity in the gentrification of New York City’s Lower East Side, a historically working-class neighborhood overtaken by artists in the 1980s.⁵ Aided by city officials, corporate developers created the “appropriate” conditions to house the white middle class and, thus, evict working-class residents.⁶ Soon after their arrival, art galleries and a rising street art culture appeared across the neighborhood.⁷ However, art critics rarely discussed the concurrent phenomena of gentrification and the rise of the East Village art scene, concealing longtime residents’ suffering. Deutsche and Ryan assert that considering artists as the victims of gentrification mocks the real victims: the neighborhood’s working-class inhabitants who face economic hardships that limit their choice to pick up and move elsewhere.⁸ The authors argue that it is necessary to understand the role the art world plays in gentrification to avoid aligning the arts with such destructive forces.⁹

The art world’s role in processes of displacement has evolved, becoming more complicated as 21st-century city officials, urban planners, and corporate developers have identified the connection between the arts and processes of gentrification. As global cities compete to fashion themselves as creative cultural centers, the “creative city” co-opts creativity and cultural production by commissioning public art and building arts infrastructure, thus attracting the upper classes and increasing property value, while also displacing established

residents and shifting funding and attention away from low-income and marginalized communities.¹⁰

Additionally, the creative city functions to occlude differences, exclusions, and conflict to create a singular, homogenized image of an urban community.¹¹ It allows city officials to normalize a particular type of cultural production by defining the limits of acceptable creativity, condoning commissioned street art but whitewashing community-driven Chicana/o murals.¹² Using the façade of trendy street culture, many cities across the globe, including Denver, have effectively institutionalized street art to co-opt an image of a neighborhood brimming with art and culture. In the context of the creative city, street art must function at the service of city officials and urban planners, who value property development over cultural value; street art in the name of the creative city must support, not critique, its surroundings. In the process, the creative city bastardizes an artistic practice created in opposition to capitalism, consumerism, and other forces of subordination.

Graffiti Writing and Street Art's Dissident Origins

Street art evolved from the practice of graffiti writing, which originated in Philadelphia and New York City in the late 1960s and 1970s. I define graffiti as the practice of “getting up,” in which a graffiti writer places their signature tag and more advanced pieces in as many places as possible to achieve respect and recognition within the subculture.¹³ Graffiti writers seek to address an audience of fellow writers who understand the language, forms, and value of graffiti writing. The practice threatens systems of capitalism and fine art by operating outside the art world's realm of evaluation and capitalism's need for consumption.¹⁴ Graffiti writers challenge norms of public space and law by contesting authority's aesthetic of order and characterizations

of the writers themselves as “criminal.” Their work also defies notions of property and ownership while creating sites of communication and interaction in public spaces by prompting passers-by to think critically about such themes.¹⁵

In turn, street art refers to a wider variety of art practices situated in public spaces, including stickers, paste-ups, murals, sculptures, and other ephemeral, seemingly unauthorized works of art. Street artists target the general public by reclaiming public spaces often regulated by government and overwhelmed by advertising. While the practices certainly overlap, some scholars have identified differing socioeconomic associations between graffiti writing and street art.¹⁶ Graffiti in the U.S. originated in working-class Black and Chicana/o neighborhoods neglected by city officials and urban planners, leading to impoverished, deteriorating conditions. The state and the media have constructed an image of graffiti that connotes danger, disorder, and blight, although graffiti writers come from all socioeconomic backgrounds.

Street art appears as graffiti’s “cultured, grown-up cousin from the suburbs” as street artists often receive a formal art education from recognized art institutions.¹⁷ In his article “The Vandalism Vandal,” author Sam Anderson follows the Splasher, a graffiti artist who vandalizes popular and highly valued street art in New York City, exposing the hypocritical commodification of the art form. For Anderson, the evolution of street art from graffiti writing appears as an “example of racial plagiarism,” arguing that:

The privileged classes co-opt an art form developed by the urban black poor, “improve” it by bleaching out the danger and incivility, then import it into white culture, where it suddenly becomes lucrative. It’s rich kids’ getting a contact high from poverty. In the cynic’s view, street art has reduced graffiti—the once-forbidden language of the repressed—to a minor-league system for galleries and museums. Subversive street art is an oxymoron: Modern graffiti is just an infinitely clever guerrilla-marketing campaign for artists’ brands, one that’s even more insidiously effective than a corporate campaign, because it hijacks the cultural credibility of the street (rebellion, authenticity, freedom) without paying any of the economic price (poverty, prison, repression) —and it expertly hides the fact that it does so.¹⁸

The creative city further appropriates this liberatory art practice by using it against its original practitioners, thus transforming working-class neighborhoods where graffiti writing would abound into middle-class enclaves that wear the false façade of “streetness.”

Chicana/o Muralism in Denver

Conversely, the residents of La Alma-Lincoln Park have established a culture of public art that supports and reflects its Chicana/o population. Chicana/o art lacks the institutional support afforded to other types of public art given its marginalization by white American society. Furthermore, white American art historical practices often ignore the histories, practices, and contributions of art-making traditions it marks as “other.” Chicana/o art represents the community’s refusal to assimilate into the white American culture by rejecting Eurocentric epistemologies and traditions. Instead, they rely on vernacular, community-based art practices and experiences.

In his essay “*Arte Chicano: Images of a Community*,” cultural historian Tomás Ybarra-Frausto discusses the various ways Chicanas/os use art to form a communal cultural identity. He finds that Chicana/o artists challenge the status quo and imposed hierarchies of the Anglo-American art world by making art more democratic and participatory through their community practices.¹⁹ For example, muralist, sculptor, and painter Emanuel Martinez initiated the production of collaborative murals in La Alma-Lincoln Park in the 1970s. Together with local youth, the Denver-native began painting various buildings and homes throughout the neighborhood. In 1977 at La Alma Recreation Center, Martinez and various volunteers created *La Alma*, a mural that stands as the community's physical and spiritual soul (figure 3). It features a contemporary Chicano and his Indigenous ancestor in identical poses, illustrating the

community's foundational connection to Aztlán, the ancestral homeland of Chicanas/os. The towering figures appear as strong warriors who will fight for the survival of their cultures. His work reflects the spirit of his contemporaries, including fellow Denverites Carlota Espinoza and Tony Ortega, and inspires younger generations of muralists, such as Arlette Lucero and JOLT.



Figure 3. Emanuel Martinez assisted by community members. *La Alma*. Mural. 1978. La Alma Recreation Center, Denver, CO. Photo by author.

These artists oppose the commodification of art as an escape for the privileged upper classes, instead characterizing it as aesthetically pleasing, educational, and reflective of cultural values. According to Ybarra-Frausto, Chicana/o artists have created alternative outlets for art circulation beyond “the official cultural apparatus” of galleries and museums, exhibiting their artwork in community centers and at social events and, thus, reintegrating art with everyday life.²⁰ He claims that Chicana/o art constitutes an art of resistance that challenges entrenched power systems in the U.S. This is undoubtedly the case for Denver’s Chicana/o artists, who have relied upon public muralism as a key method to showcase their artwork and make it accessible to the community.

Chicana/o artists often utilize their work to circulate *Chicanismo*, the Chicana/o worldview and strategies used to construct and legitimize the community's origins, histories, and identities, and facilitate political self-fulfillment.²¹ The white American art world has created a hierarchy that ranks Western fine art traditions above all others, excluding artists who do not confine to these standards. Chicana/o artists referencing their own ethnicity and, thus, overtly flaunting their "failure" to assimilate are certainly excluded. Art historian Marcos Sánchez-Tranquilino argues that, within mainstream media and the art historical canon, Chicana/o murals have been characterized as a reclamation of the urban landscape rather than a legitimate form of art, devaluing the art historical and cultural value of such artworks.²²

The whitewashing of muralist and painter David Ocelotl García's mural *Huitzilopochtli* serves as an example of such exclusion and erasure. The artist painted the mural in 2009 on an 8th Avenue building owned by Sisters of Color United for Education, a local organization that uses holistic health education to heal intergenerational cycles of health disparities. The artist draws upon imagery found in Mexica (commonly known as Aztec) codices and his ancestral spiritual beliefs.²³ García's mural proudly and colorfully proclaimed the roots of Chicana/o ancestry by illustrating the Mexica patron deity Huitzilopochtli, who often represents triumph and strength, and using neon greens, blues, yellows, and oranges to bring the composition to life. In the center stands the figure of Coatlicue, holding her son Huitzilopochtli. Life blossoms from her in the form of water, which flows onto green plants that sprout from the earth. García's mural reveals the cyclical nature of healing as the mother's abundance passes onto her child.

Huitzilopochtli was one of the first murals created in this industrial area west of downtown Denver and La Alma-Lincoln Park. García's accessible and culturally valuable creation turns this

desert of creativity into a colorful assertion of Chicana/o artistry and culture, giving residents a shining example of their place within the urban landscape.²⁴

Unfortunately, when a marijuana dispensary leased the building in 2020, the new tenants revealed a total disregard for this mural's significance and Chicana/o murals in general by whitewashing the wall. The Chicana/o community was devastated, prompting a letter-writing campaign to the dispensary and calls by community leaders for García to repaint the mural. The artist has stated that while "he does not make overt political statements in his art, he inevitably partakes in a politicized landscape since he affirms lifeways that have continuously been denied and erased in American society."²⁵

Chicana/o murals function as both a legitimate form of art and a reclamation of urban space. The growing scholarly discourse around Chicana/o art indicates the legitimacy of Chicana/o muralism. Scholars such as Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Tey Marianna Nunn, Guisela Latorre, and Karen Mary Davalos have deconstructed the arbitrary boundaries placed upon Chicana/o art and have established its nuances, shunning the evaluative terms and dominance of the Anglo-American art world and, thus, working to decolonize the canon.²⁶ Additionally, Chicana/o murals play an important role in placemaking by allowing the community to establish a sense of belonging in a white American urban landscape that often seeks to diminish, devalue, and displace its members.

A Tale of Two Murals

Su Teatro's bright and colorful murals, created by students from Metropolitan State University of Denver, reflect La Alma-Lincoln Park's distinctly Chicana/o community and history. Thus, the project readily aligns with the category of community-based murals defined by

muralists Eva Cockcroft, John Weber, and Jim Cockcroft in their book *Toward a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement*.²⁷ These murals reflect the immediate community's histories, values, and aspirations by engaging it in mural design, sketching and painting, inaugural events, and preservation.²⁸ Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft argue that community-based murals are often created by nonwhite artists who have a connection to and appreciation for the neighborhood, contributing to that community's sense of civic belonging.²⁹

Artist and professor Carlos Fresquez offers a course during which MSU Denver students collaborate with local organizations to research, design, and paint a mural that reflects the surrounding community. The mural project for Su Teatro spanned over multiple semesters as students worked to wrap the Denver Civic Theater's exterior with more than 400 feet of murals. As a teenager growing up in La Alma-Lincoln Park, Fresquez witnessed *el movimiento*, which significantly impacted his later artistic career. He attended demonstrations led by the Chicana/o activist group Crusade for Justice and local activist Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzalez and participated in the city-wide school walkouts on September 16, 1969.³⁰ Fresquez remembers, "We stood up and told our teachers that we were marching for better education for the Chicano community. I had never seen anything like that before: a river of Chicanos flooding the Capitol. That day was pivotal."³¹ He marks this day as fundamental to his own political and cultural awareness, recalling that it was the day that he first declared himself to be Chicano.³²

The Chicano Movement inspired the artist-teacher to seek out his own culture, history, and art-making traditions and, ultimately, to use art and muralism as an educational tool to lead others down a similar path of personal and cultural discovery.³³ He designs his course to model the administrative processes used by Denver's public art program, giving students valuable experience in creating a proposal and painting a mural.³⁴ For the Su Teatro project, students met

with the director and various staff members who wanted to see a mural that incorporated ancient and contemporary Chicana/o imagery, reflecting the neighborhood's Chicana/o history and culture. The groups then presented their proposals to the organization, and the winning proposal came to fruition on the theater walls. Fresquez plays a supporting role as an advisor, ensuring that the students may claim full ownership of the final product and move away from the hierarchical relationship of professor/student in Western institutions.³⁵

At Su Teatro, Fresquez's students portray a broad array of Chicana/o visual culture, demonstrating the complexity of Chicana/o ancestry, history, art, and music. The front of the building features the Mesoamerican deity Quetzalcoatl, a feathered serpent. The cult of the feathered serpent dates back to the Olmec civilization, the region's dominant culture during the Formative Period (1800 BCE to 150 CE). The artists painted the deity with bright shades of orange, red, yellow, and blue green, evoking the namesake quetzal bird's iridescent blue-green feathers. Quetzalcoatl undulates along the wall, leading the viewer toward the theater entrance, where his body meets his head in profile. Quetzalcoatl wears a plumed headdress and opens his fanged mouth as his supernatural eyes look out toward the viewer.



Figure 4. Carlos Fresquez and Metropolitan State University of Denver students. Su Teatro murals (south wall). 2012. Santa Fe Drive and 7th Avenue, Denver, CO. Photo by author.

The southern side of Su Teatro further illustrates the cosmology of Pre-Columbian Chicana/o ancestors, namely the Mexica pantheon of deities (figure 4). The artists use forms and symbols that recall Aztec codices as well as a wide variety of colors that pop off the otherwise beige walls. Siblings Coyolxauhqui and Huitzilopochtli encircle a motif that references both an Aztec calendar stone and an Indigenous medicine wheel.³⁶ The mural evokes the mythic battle between the siblings, after which one claimed their place as the patron deity.³⁷ As the god of warfare, Huitzilopochtli dresses as a warrior and carries a shield and arrows. In contrast, his sister Coyolxauhqui is depicted in a shade of stone gray, decapitated and dismembered, referencing the excavation of a similar sculpture at Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan (the Aztec capitol, now Mexico City) (figure 5).³⁸ In Mexica mytho-history, when Coatlicue became

pregnant with Huitzilopochtli, Coyolxauhqui led her siblings in a plot to murder their mother and her unborn child. However, Huitzilopochtli sprung from her womb, fully equipped to defend Coatlicue, decapitating Coyolxauhqui with a snake. Huitzilopochtli soon after took his place as the triumphant patron deity of the Aztecs.



Figure 5. Carlos Fresquez and Metropolitan State University of Denver students. Su Teatro murals (south wall). 2012. Santa Fe Drive and 7th Avenue, Denver, CO. Photo by author.

The viewer may interpret this battle scene in several ways. Given my discussion of street art in the name of the creative city, the scene may stand as an allegory for the battle over public art in Denver, with Huitzilopochtli serving as a representation of Chicana/o muralism. While intertwined with graffiti and street art, muralism boasts a much longer history as a medium used

by cultures worldwide.³⁹ I characterize these three forms of expression as siblings who often fight for power and attention, similar to Huitzilopochtli and Coyolxauhqui. The viewer may interpret the triumph of Huitzilopochtli in the end as the triumph of Chicana/o muralism over graffiti and street art. Nonetheless, the battle scene's inclusion may also symbolically evoke Aztlán, the ancestral home of the Aztecs, by bringing Mexica mytho-history into the contemporary urban landscape. After all, during the Mexica's migration south from Aztlán, they stopped at Coatepec ("serpent hill"), where Coatlicue became impregnated with and gave birth to Huitzilopochtli.⁴⁰ Although oblique, the reference to the mythic battle scene at Su Teatro evokes the migration. It illustrates the Mexica's ability to make a new home for themselves outside Aztlán, empowering the Chicana/o community in La Alma-Lincoln Park to do the same.



Figure 6. Carlos Fresquez and Metropolitan State University of Denver students. Su Teatro murals (north wall). 2012. Santa Fe Drive and 7th Avenue, Denver, CO. Photo by author.



Figure 7. Carlos Fresquez and Metropolitan State University of Denver students. Su Teatro murals (north wall). 2012. Santa Fe Drive and 7th Avenue, Denver, CO. Photo by author.

Conversely, the northern wall features contemporary aspects of Chicana/o culture, emphasizing the its present-day rituals rooted in history. A woman dressed in a colorful *China Poblana* blouse and skirt dances the *jarabe tapatío*, Mexico's national dance, as a nearby group of men dressed in *charro*-style suits play Chicana/o music (figures 6 and 7). The mural also includes a woman with her face painted for *Día de los Muertos* and a sugar skull that peers out from the wall. The sugar skull wears a sombrero with the United Farm Workers eagle, referencing the organization led by César Chávez and Dolores Huerta that helped spark the Chicano Movement. By reinforcing its roots in ancient civilizations similar to the ancient Greeks and Romans, the murals challenge the viewer's preconceived notions that Chicana/o culture is illegitimate because it is new or unknown to a white public. The artists do not shy away from

imagery full of conflict, presenting a counter-discourse of *Chicanismo* that disrupts the homogenous public sphere and challenges people to explore Chicana/o culture further.

Directly across the street from Su Teatro's distinctly Chicana/o murals stands *Love this City*. Pat Milbery takes design credit for the street art mural, which he painted during Denver Arts Week with fellow street artists Pat McKinney and Jason T. Graves. The mural spans the height of the two-story building that houses El Noa Noa Tex-Mex Restaurant. Milbery's colorful, bright design features elements of Denver culture. Iconic buildings of the Denver skyline, including the state capitol, emerge behind a cluster of pine trees and the foothills and peaks of the Rocky Mountains. Milbery also displays a bicycle tire, referencing the city's bike-friendly nature, and native animals such as a soaring eagle and a buffalo facing the street. Almost unrecognizable at first glance, the buffalo takes an abstracted form, its steadfast nature symbolizing the community's strength.⁴¹ Finally, a pink and grey geometric heart with a white banner reading "Love this City" sits atop the composition. Milbery states that the many geometric pieces of the heart represent the "many different layers of love," from joy to pain.⁴²

Approaching the mural, the viewer immediately notices its bright shades of blue, orange, and purple, evoking the art district's colorful spirit. When designing the mural, Milbery sought feedback from the property owners, one of whom pushed for the bright colors featured in the mural as they were "reflective of her soul."⁴³ He recalls that the owners were excited about this opportunity for public art, and he felt honored to give them this gift in celebration of their business.⁴⁴ Milbery further states that limited time and resources prevented him from consulting the larger community and many La Alma-Lincoln Park residents. He prioritized gathering feedback and approval for the mural from the property owners, the Art District on the Santa Fe board, Visit Denver officials, and Mayor Michael Hancock.⁴⁵ Although the property owners are

members of the Chicana/o community, Milbery's reluctance to consult La Alma-Lincoln Park residents reveals his disinterest in making an artwork that genuinely involves and reflects the community as a whole, prioritizing city officials' and business owners' needs over residents.

Love this City fits well within what Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft classify as decorative murals stemming from an "urban-environmental" philosophy.⁴⁶ This type of muralism seeks to make art available to the public and improve the city's appearance while supporting artists economically. Such commissions are usually given to white artists with little connection to the surrounding area, often resulting in projects disconnected from the community.⁴⁷ *Love this City* style murals feature abstract or decorative patterns that avoid any political or ideological content. At first glance, the project appears devoid of any substantial message.

However, Milbery's political inspiration for the project attaches some substance to the mural and its messaging. The artist developed the idea in 2016, an election year fraught with particularly divisive and hateful discourse as the country grappled with an intensely debated presidential election.⁴⁸ The artist has not publicly vocalized his more political inspirations for the project, instead emphasizing his elusive vision for "a mural that would express his love for the city."⁴⁹ His alliance with Denver Arts Week, Visit Denver, and other city officials most likely influenced this decision to avoid possibly divisive content. Visit Denver even helped the artist secure funding and negotiate with property owners and the Art District on Santa Fe to ensure that the project went smoothly, evidencing the agency's vested interest in a pretty yet shallow street art marketing campaign.



Figure 8. Pat Milbery. *Love this City*. Mural. 2016. 12th Avenue and Acoma Street, Denver, CO. Photo by author.

Milbery's mural on Santa Fe Drive is only the first mural in a city-wide campaign sponsored by Visit Denver. Since 2016, the artist has painted eight *Love this City* murals throughout Denver to depict each area's distinct qualities and histories; however, the street art campaign appears homogenous, making it difficult for the viewer to grasp each neighborhood's unique identity. For instance, the artist painted *Love this City* murals in the Golden Triangle and the River North Art District (RiNo) within two weeks of creating the Santa Fe Drive mural. Both murals include the signature geometric heart and other geometric elements with different combinations of bright colors. Milbery references the Rocky Mountains with pine trees, mountain peaks, and soaring birds in the Golden Triangle mural, leaving the viewer wondering how it relates to its immediate surroundings, including the state capitol, city hall, and the Denver

Art Museum (figure 8). The RiNo mural features more soaring birds and a rhinoceros, a single reference to this neighborhood's identity as a burgeoning art district, which occludes its displaced, predominantly Black and Chicana/o residents (figure 9).



Figure 9. Pat Milbery, Pat McKinney, Jason T. Graves, and Remington Robinson. *Love this City*. Mural. 2016. Broadway Avenue and Arapahoe Street, Denver, CO. Photo by author.

Milbery and Visit Denver have even taken this project beyond Denver city limits, creating an iteration during a 2019 food and music festival in Chicago. This mural features Colorado red rocks, portions of the Denver skyline, and the Denver International Airport, attempting to attract Chicago residents to the city and further emphasizing this street art campaign's role in Visit Denver's marketing schemes. The ever-growing scale of the *Love this City* mural project squanders each preceding mural's uniqueness. As *Love this City* continues to materialize on seemingly every corner, the more the murals appear as street art-Starbucks — corporate entities lacking unique character, culture, and history.

Conclusion

There is a stark divide between community-based Chicana/o muralism and street art in the name of the creative city, which has begun to transform the visual culture of La Alma-Lincoln Park from one that reflects the neighborhood's rich Chicana/o culture and history to one of homogeneity and gentrification. *Love this City* disregards the immediate community to create a vapid mural that allows Denver to market itself as a street art mecca. Ultimately, street art in the name of the creative city attracts corporate developers and real estate investors, drives up property values, and pushes out long-term residents.

At Su Teatro, Fresquez and his students strive to reflect the surrounding community and its histories, values, and traditions in their mural project. They provide imagery that celebrates the Chicana/o community to circulate the counter-discourse of *Chicanismo*, disrupting the homogeneity of the Anglo-American dominated public sphere. These murals legitimize Chicana/o culture by linking it to an ancient past, ultimately evoking Aztlán. Such imagery makes Chicana/o residents feel at home, contributing to the process of placemaking. The intrusion of murals like *Love this City* disrupts this sense of belonging and security by threatening the community's control over La Alma-Lincoln Park's public spaces.

These two murals evidence how the residents of La Alma-Lincoln Park lack total control over the creation of art in their neighborhood. In both murals' cases, the artists worked with property owners to bring their designs to life, resulting in two distinctly different products. Su Teatro's murals fit well within the neighborhood's Chicana/o visual culture and history of Chicana/o muralism. Although some downplay access to public space when considering the public sphere, we cannot discount the importance of public space to groups that lack cultural and political capital. Chicana/o murals assert *Chicanismo*, legitimizing Chicana/o history, culture,

and origins by reclaiming a piece of the urban landscape despite cycles of displacement. By symbolically evoking Aztlán, Chicana/o murals create a feeling of home.

Endnotes

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- ¹ Sig Langegger, *Rights to Public Space: Law, Culture, and Gentrification in the American West* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), viii.
- ² Vanessa Mathews, “Aestheticizing Space: Art, Gentrification, and the City,” *Geography Compass* 4, no. 6 (2010): 663.
- ³ Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Ryan, “The Fine Art of Gentrification,” *October* 31 (Winter 1984): 103.
- ⁴ See Mathews, “Aestheticizing Space,” 665-667 for an extensive discussion of artist’s agency within the gentrification process.
- ⁵ Deutsche and Ryan 1984, 91-111.
- ⁶ Deutsche and Ryan 1984, 93.
- ⁷ For a discussion of the 1980s street art scene in the Lower East Side, see Allyson Burbeck, “This Will Not Be Available on Canvas Later: Graffiti Invades the Art World” (Undergraduate honors thesis, Texas Christian University, 2016) and Margo Thompson, *American Graffiti* (New York: Parkstone International, 2009).
- ⁸ Deutsche and Ryan 1984, 104.
- ⁹ Deutsche and Ryan 1984, 94.
- ¹⁰ Sabina Andron, “Selling streetness as experience: The role of street art tours in branding the creative city,” *The Sociological Review* 66, no. 5 (2018): 1048-1050.
- ¹¹ Mathews 2010, 669.
- ¹² Andron 2018, 1051.
- ¹³ The term “graffiti writer” specifies someone active in the illegal graffiti subculture with a focus on stylized letter writing and a concern for their growing reputation amongst other writers. A “graffiti artist” refers to an artist who takes inspiration from graffiti writing but does not necessarily participate in the subculture itself.
- ¹⁴ Susan Stewart, “*Ceci tuera cela: Graffiti as crime and art*,” in *Life After Postmodernism: Essays on Value and Culture*, ed. John Fekete (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987), 161-180.
- ¹⁵ See Jeff Ferrell, *Crimes of Style: Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996); Gregory Snyder, *Graffiti Lives: Beyond the Tag in New York’s Urban Underground* (New York: NYU Press, 2009); Alison Young, *Street Art, Public City: Law, Crime and the Urban Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2014); and Caitlin Bruce, *Painting Publics: Transnational Legal Graffiti Scenes as Spaces for Encounter* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019).
- ¹⁶ See Edward Fuentes, “The abstraction of content and intent between murals and street art,” *Visual Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (March 2018): 9-17; Javier Abarca, “Graffiti, street art, and gentrification,” in *Grafficity: Visual Practices and Contestations in Urban Space*, ed. Eva Youkhana and Larissa Förster (Paderborn, Germany: Wilhelm Fink, 2015), 221-233; and Sam Anderson, “The Vandalism Vandal,” *New York Magazine*, May 25, 2007, <http://nymag.com/news/features/32388/>.
- ¹⁷ Abarca 2015, 224.
- ¹⁸ Anderson 2007.
- ¹⁹ Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, “*Arte Chicano: Images of a Community*,” in *Signs From The Heart: California Chicano Murals*, ed. Eva Cockcroft and Holly Barnet-Sánchez (Venice, CA: Social and Public Art Resource Center, 1990), 56.
- ²⁰ Ybarra-Frausto 1990, 56.
- ²¹ Marcos Sánchez-Tranquilino, “*Murales del Movimiento: Chicano Murals and the Discourses of Art and Americanization*,” in *Signs From The Heart: California Chicano Murals*, ed. Eva Cockcroft and Holly Barnet-Sánchez (Venice, CA: Social and Public Art Resource Center, 1990), 90.
- ²² Sánchez-Tranquilino 1990, 92.
- ²³ David Ocelotl García, “Molding a Creative Life with David Ocelotl García,” interview by Latino Cultural Arts Center, Latino Cultural Arts Center, June 17, 2019, <https://www.lcac-denver.org/single-post/2019/06/04/molding-a-creative-sustainable-life-with-david-ocelotl-garcia>.
- ²⁴ García 2019.
- ²⁵ Nancy Ríos, “‘Is America Possible?’: The Space Between David Ocelotl Garcia’s and Norman Rockwell’s Freedom of Worship,” *History Colorado*, December 6, 2020, <https://www.historycolorado.org/story/2020/12/06/america-possible>.
- ²⁶ See Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art Inside/Outside the Master's House: Cultural Politics and the CARA Exhibition* (Austin: UT Press, 1998); Tey Mariana Nunn, *Sin Nombre: Hispana and Hispano Artists of the New*

Deal Era (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2001); Guisela Latorre, *Walls of Empowerment: Chicana/o Indigenist Murals of California* (Austin: UT Press, 2008); and Karen Mary Davalos, *Chicano/a Remix: Art and Errata Since the Sixties* (New York: NYU Press, 2017).

²⁷ Eva Cockcroft, John Weber, and Jim Cockcroft, *Toward a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement* (New York: Dutton, 1977).

²⁸ Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft 1977, 30.

²⁹ Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft 1977, 30.

³⁰ Estevan Ruiz and Carlos Fresquez, "Carlos Fresquez," *Metrosphere*, July 2019, 113.

³¹ "Carlos Fresquez," Our Past, Metropolitan State University of Denver, accessed February 7, 2020, <https://www.msudenver.edu/our-past/ourpeople/carlos-fresquez.shtml>.

³² Carlos Fresquez, "Carlos Fresquez Artist Interview," interview by Chicano Murals of Colorado Project (Lucha Aztzin Martínez and Jillian Mollenhauer), March 21, 2018, video, 39:03.

³³ Ruiz and Fresquez 2019, 116.

³⁴ Fresquez, interview.

³⁵ Fresquez, interview.

³⁶ Lucha Aztzin Martínez, "Heritage and Place: Chicano Murals of Colorado," in *Murals of the Americas: Mayer Center Symposium XVII, Readings in Latin American Studies*, ed. Victoria I. Lyall (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019), 159.

³⁷ The story of their battle is taken from David Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition, Revised Edition* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2001), 166.

³⁸ Martínez 2019, 159.

³⁹ Most importantly, the ancient Mesoamerican cultures depicted in the Su Teatro murals and the Mexican Muralists of the early twentieth century utilized muralism as a primary medium, proving inspiration to contemporary Chicana/o artists.

⁴⁰ Constance Cortez, "The New Aztlán: Nepantla (and Other Sites of Transmogrification)," in *The Road to Aztlán: Art from a Mythic Homeland*, ed. Virginia Fields and Victor Zumudio-Taylor (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2001), 360.

⁴¹ Pat Milbery, phone conversation with the author, February 11, 2020.

⁴² Milbery, phone conversation with the author.

⁴³ Milbery, phone conversation with the author.

⁴⁴ Milbery, phone conversation with the author.

⁴⁵ Milbery, phone conversation with the author.

⁴⁶ Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft 1977, 29.

⁴⁷ Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft 1977, 29.

⁴⁸ Milbery, phone conversation with the author.

⁴⁹ Nate Ferguson, "Meet the Artist Behind Denver's 'Love this City' Mural Campaign," Visit Denver, last modified December 21, 2016, <https://www.denver.org/blog/post/artist-behind-denvers-love-this-city-mural-campaign/>.

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