

MISSION MURALISMO:
EXAMINING IDENTITY IN SAN FRANCISCO'S MISSION DISTRICT VIA AN
EXPLORATION OF PUBLIC MURAL ART

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Stanford University, 2012

Abstract:

Scholars have suggested a bilateral relationship between environment and inhabitants, placing the core of human identity in inextricable relation to the social, cultural, and environmental landscape in which it resides. If this correct, then the existential question of self—Who am I? Who is community X?—can be answered with an observational analysis of the surrounding environment. With the highest concentration of public mural art in the world, San Francisco's Mission District and its community-based Mission Muralismo movement provide a uniquely variegated and colorful platform from which to begin this analysis. In what follows, I have worked to understand the Mission community by examining the public mural art concentrated within the historically significant Balmy Alley. I will provide photos and a brief description/analysis of each Balmy mural piece, in hopes of creating a reaching a conclusion that can be represented into a diagram of Mission District identity.

Approved for publication:

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For the Center for Latin American Studies

Acknowledgments

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Last but certainly not least, a huge thank you to my beautiful partner Leilani who, since our first encounter in high school cooking class some 11 years ago, has embraced all of my quirks and eccentricities, has supported my every desire with the utmost passion and faith, and has inspired my life in more ways than this page could ever hold. Thank you.

This project is a continual work in progress. Please feel free to send comments or suggestions to:

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urals are the HEART, eyes, hands, voices, and spirit of the Mission

--Carlos Santana, 2009

Nestled in the residential corridor of an assuming back alley lies the unified collective identity of an ever-changing hodgepodge of a community—San Francisco’s Mission District. Balmy Alley houses 37 public art pieces by over three dozen community muralists, and serves as an important cultural hub for the Mission neighborhood. If the stretch of 24th Street from Mission to Potrero is the “corazón” of the Mission community (Hunt 2005: 1), then Balmy is both physically and metaphorically at its nucleus.

What lies at the heart of the Mission’s heart? Is there a cohesive collective of goals, ideals, and values? How can we know the answers to these questions? In short, I believe the answers are, respectively: community, yes, murals. The purpose of this paper is to elucidate and elaborate on these inquiries and responses by employing an analysis of Balmy Alley murals to unearth, if any, the components of the Mission’s collective identity.

Biography of a Barrio

The Mission today is extolled as, “the new bohemia” (Perry 2000: 1), one of the “hippest neighborhoods in America,” (Jacoby 2009:29). The neighborhood is truly a *mélange* of cultural expression, individual and shared histories and linguistic dialogues, and boasts enough distinctive character to be considered San Francisco’s own “City within a City” (SF Planning 2007: 1). The streets are lined with the highest concentration of mural art in the world—over 500 public art pieces in a 30 block radius (Jacoby 2009: 29)—which bring an unparalleled “energy, consciousness, and cadence” (Santana 2009: 23) to the conurbation’s public abode. The neighborhood is well-loved by San Franciscans as a vibrant community gathering place that celebrates a number of seminal, monthly, and yearly festivals, including one of the largest Día de los muertos gatherings

outside of Mexico, a distinguished annual Carnaval, First Fridays, Sunday Streets, Rock me Street Fair, Hunky Jesus Contest, Transgender and Dyke marches, Literature Crawl, and the San Francisco Food Fair—all of which place the community at the center of importance, and many which pass through the “visual feast” (Lopez 2009) of the Balmy Alley corridor.

Social mobilization has been a defining characteristic of the neighborhood since the mid-20th Century, as the Mission District played a pivotal role in the urban renewal initiatives of the 1960’s, Human Rights and Chicano movements of the 1970’s, criticism of US-intervention in Central America in the 1980’s, and gentrification via the dot-com boom in the 1990’s and currently (Nyborg 2008: 27). The Mission once again made international political headlines in 2007, when Mayor Gavin Newsom publically declared the neighborhood an “immigrant sanctuary”, vowing to do, “everything he can” to discourage federal raids and repercussions for the “immigrant” citizens (Fimrite 2007: 1).

Newsom’s declaration is testament to a city built, very literally, on immigration. Spanish Friars were some of the very first foreigners to reach San Francisco, who appropriated what was once known as “Mission Lands” (Richards 1999:32) from the Native Ohlone in 1776. The Spanish erected Mission Dolores—the City’s oldest standing building—and devastated the native population with disease, harsh work requirements, and cultural shock, after requiring they convert to Catholicism. Once Mexico gained control of the territory, the Franciscan’s fled, and the land was occupied by a majority of Mexican-born farmers known as “Californios” (Richards 1999: 35). The 1906 earthquake later diversified the region with an influx of Irish, German, Italian, and Scandinavian immigrants from the devastated SOMA and North Beach neighborhoods. Finally, war time production of the 1920’s and again in the 1940’s continued to support immigration from around the world, and the Mission gained a 45% Latino population by 1970, housing one of the largest numbers of Central American immigrants outside of Central America (Nyborg 2008: 25-27).

Balmy Alley

In the 1970’s, Balmy Alley was just another dilapidated alleyway in the quickly urbanizing and politically significant San Francisco Mission neighborhood. In 1972, Patricia Rodriguez and Graciela Carillo, who would eventually form the iconic Mujeres

Muralistas, began painting a series of murals in the corridor. Balmy gained international recognition in 1984 when Mission artist Ray Patlan—one of the most “well-known and prolific muralists in the country” (Drescher 1998: 26)—organized a group of over three dozen mural artists known as PLACA to paint the entirety of the alleyway. Original PLACA paintings were created with the dual themes of celebrating Mesoamerican Indigenous culture and opposition to US involvement in Central American wars

Balmy certainly did leave its mark—in Spanish, its “placa”—on the community. The alley’s art has served to inspire community-based mural movements throughout the San Francisco Bay Area (e.g. San Francisco’s Clarion Alley Mural Project of the 1990’s), the state of California (e.g. the Great Wall Mural Project of Los Angeles), and the nation (e.g. “La Lucha Continua,” in New York City’s Lower East Side), (Drescher 1994:36). The key to Balmy’s impact, Drescher argues, lies in the fact that the murals are painted in a single location, creating a dominating presence and demanding the attention of all passersby (Drescher 1998: 235-236).

Identity

The concept of identity dominates a multiplicity of academic domains, including political science, women’s studies, psychology, anthropology, biology, philosophy, history, and literature, amongst others. Throughout these disciplines are various significations and usages of the lexicon, and although no one definition of the concept is universally accepted, a brief introduction to the different types of identity is crucial to the understanding of murals as a reflection and creation of collective identity in San Francisco’s Mission District.

There are at least three conceptually distinct, but overlapping, understandings of identity: personal, social, and collective. Personal identity is often viewed as a fixed conglomeration of properties, characteristics, and mental processes; it is generally self-designated (Snow 2001: 3). In contrast, social identities are attributes designated to an individual by their society in an attempt to place them in a social space. Social identities include significations such as “student”, “sister”, or “activist” and are viewed as fluid throughout the lifetime.

Finally, the concept of collective identity which I use in the present investigation can be culled from the Durkheim’s “collective conscience”, as well as Hegelian and

Marxist politically-based “class consciousness” (Snow 2001: 3). Snow states that collective identity refers to a sense of individuals’ belonging to a group which engenders a collective “we-ness” or “one-ness” despite individual differences. Furthermore, Individuals with a strong sense of collective identity will tendentially neglect their own personal values, needs, and desires to meet those of the group (Snow 2001: 3).

Collective identity is anchored in real or imagined *shared* attributes and experiences, and becomes “unsettled with culturally pluralistic societies” (Castells 1997; Giddens 1991, as cited in Snow 2001: 5). On the surface, then, it may seem unlikely that San Francisco’s immensely ethnically diverse Mission community does not, or cannot, have a unified collective identity. However, a closer examination of the community via its distinguished mural art suggests that Mission residents in fact display a powerful sense of the collective and a shared sense of community-based values despite the immense diversity in population.

Why use murals to understand Mission identity?

Geographical landscapes serve a powerful function in the construction of a collective identity. Social Anthropologist Tim Ingold argues that: “through living in it, the landscape becomes part of us, just as we are part of it” (Ingold 1993: 154). Murals are a public art medium through which communities personally color their own landscapes, a form of working-class diffusion wherein community members can be active creators, rather than passive recipients, of their environments. As master muralist Susan Cervantes says, murals are: “an art that’s for the people, by the people” (Cervantes 2007).

Why study murals? Murals are an “expression of collective ideals” (Cockroft and Barnet-Sanchez 1993: 10), providing society with a “symbolic representation of...a collective self,” (Cockroft and Barnet-Sanchez 1993: 5) which ultimately helps “achieve a collective identity” (Cockroft and Barnet-Sanchez 1993: 9). Mission murals are a political platform, a didactic tool, a community voice (Cockroft and Barnet-Sanchez 1993: 30); they are a powerful publically available medium through which to understand a community from the perspective of the community members themselves.

Balmy Alley: A Journey to the Heart of the Mission

What lies at the heart of the City’s heart? Please, join me in a journey to uncover this enigmatic and historically significant San Francisco neighborhood.



The Five Sacred Colors of Corn (Susan Cervantes and Mia Gonzalez, 1990)

This beautiful three-dimensional sculpture-mural *The Five Sacred Colors of Corn*, painted in collaboration with San Francisco native master muralist Susan Kelk Cervantes and sculpturist Mia Gonzales in 1991, greets visitors as the very first mural from the 24th street entrance of Balmy Alley. The piece was designed after a collection of Huichol yarn paintings from the Natives in the Sierra Madre region of northwestern Mexico. The Huichol's sacred colors are experientially perceived by shamans as visual, tactile, and auditory sensations; Cervantes and Gonzalez recreate this multi-sensory experience with a three-dimensional vanguard sculptural style whose five panels create a temporal experience for the passerby.

According to ethnographic research, five sacred colors guide Huichol shamans in communication with the deities associated with the five cardinal directions (north, south, east, west, and through the center reaching upwards from Earth to sky), represented in Balmy with a five-directional compass on the 2nd panel of the mural (MacLean 2001: 312).

Cervantes and Gonzalez use their *Five Sacred Colors* to communicate a message as well, including the following painted in the third panel cloud:

“El nacimiento de un silencio está escrito en la agonía de un suspiro/ The birth of silence is written in the agony of a cry”

The Five Sacred Colors of Corn ends its final panel with a tribute to women as a regenerative force; a mother gives birth into the spiritually protective hands of the life-bearing sea.



Naya Bihana/New Dawn (Martin Travers 2002)

In a public statement¹, Martin Travers said that *Naya Bihana*, depicting a community resisting injustice, learning self-sufficiency, and regaining localized power, can serve as a model for the Mission and other neighborhoods (Travers 2007). The piece portrays three generations of Nepalese women, standing in solidarity with fists in the air (bottom left), and “demands we acknowledge the struggle of people everywhere” (Murguia 2009: 98). The younger women (bottom right) is breaking the chain (of oppression?), standing strong though internally distraught, while the elder strategically holds her palm upwards to hold the sun (strength? Wisdom?) in the sky. Two women continue working in the fields, while the Himalayan mountainscape dominates the background.



¹ A <http://www.flickr.com/photos/oneaimgraphics/5712353571/in/set-72157626579036037/>



Dragons of Paradise (Precita Eyes Muralists 1998)

The Mission District has a rich and influential history in women's rights activism and equality throughout the world. In 1973, Mission native Patricia Rodriguez formed a group of female artists known as "Las Mujeres Muralistas". The first female artist group of its kind, Mujeres Muralistas acted as a vanguard for women in public art and made a significant impact in the way, "people looked at murals, the way artists looked at each other, and the way men began to look at [and presumably treat] women" (Cortez 2009: 68).

Today, nearly half of Balmy's murals either exclusively address women's issues or include feminine imagery and symbolism. *Dragons of Paradise*, for example, depicts three women surrounded by a tropical array of flora. The mural is painted on the staircase entryway of a home, rather than a garage door, metaphorically speaking to the generative upwards movement of women's rights that Mission Muralismo attempts to spark.



Untitled (Caitlin Sullivan & Miguel Jimenez, date unknown)

This untitled mural is one of several Balmy pieces which portray man in inextricable relation to his surrounding environment. An exotic landscape fills the background, though a human face appearing in the center of a tree and (significantly) a woman suspended in mid air, supported by the branches, dominate the foreground. This interconnectedness represented in the mural suggests who we are or perhaps imparts who we should strive to be: natural creatures in a natural world. The branches have significantly few leaves, suggesting that prosperity is found in nature rather than material wealth. Finally, a butterfly—again, one of several throughout the alley—appears in the background, representing hopes for a new beginning, an awakening to the value of nature, and a transformation for the neighborhood.



La Cultura contiene la semilla de la Resistencia que retorña en la flor de la liberación/ Culture Contains the Seed of Resistance which Blossoms into the Flower of Liberation (Thield O'Brien & Miranda Bergman, 1984)

Borrowing its title from a quote by Guinea-Bassaun nationalist Amílcar Cabral, O'Brien and Bergman's historical piece spans the length of two sliding garage doors, and is the last remaining of the original 1984 PLACA murals. The piece is dedicated to the civil wars of Central America in the 1980's and 90's, though the message remains poignant even today: stay true to cultural roots to resist the negative influences of warfare. On the right side of the mural (Detail A), the viewer sees a jubilant cultural community, playing music and gathering plentiful crops. The image is juxtaposed with that of warfare (Detail B), citizens with a melancholic stare holding guns and photos of (presumably lost) loved ones while a young girl in the center sits with an empty plate. A boy in the background clearly writes the mural's primary message on the wall: Resistance.



Detail A



Detail B



Lu the Wanderer (Carlita Wo 2011)

“The wanderer has no fixed abode, the road is his home” (I Ching, hexagram 56)

Perhaps it is her welcoming smile or (mischievous?) eyes; I am immediately lured to Lu’s madness—creativity which she exchanges with an adobe red Quetzalcoatl. These two distinct centers dominate the landscape, and while each character is accompanied by an alley doorway, I invariably enter the journey as the wanderer. Wo’s wanderer meanders throughout the mural’s other center: a road, a journey, a middle-ground reminiscent of Jung’s unconscious liminal space.

A red and yellow sun-ray motif pays tribute to the highly controversial SB-1070 bill, passed in Arizona during the painting of the piece. Wo’s mural asks critical questions: “Who is the visitor?” “What is our role as social beings?” and “How is or is not our present affected by our biological and environmental past, our roots?” It memorializes and maintains the spirit of the Mission’s multigenerational, community-based Muralismo movement. However, if I may borrow a line from Mission native Guillermo Gómez-Peña, the beauty of Balmy’s wanderer lies in the details which pay “homage to the hood that hosts and nurtures madness” (Gómez-Peña 2009: 45).

A city scene carved into the mountainside are painted after the thumbnail photos which were used to paint *Golden Dreams of the New World* (Daniel Galvez), the Mission’s oldest standing mural on 24th street. Maize growing from Lu’s head is painted in five colors, an ingenious tribute to Cervantes and Gonzales’ *Five Sacred Colors of Corn*. The agricultural landscape is intentionally reminiscent of Cervantes’ other Balmy work, *Indigenous Eyes*. Finally, the central figure (a Mission native whose uncle is included in Galvez’ *Golden Dreams*) strolls unaccompanied through his home—the road.



Indigenous Eyes: War or Peace (Susan Cervantes 1990)

Cervantes' iconic *Indigenous Eyes* (1990) mural is both a political and spiritual masterpiece, imparting peace and freedom above violence and connecting past and present with native landscapes. When the garage door of the 1984 PLACA original *Indigenous Beauty* (Nicole Emmanuel), was destroyed, Susan Cervantes paid tribute by painting a captivating, foreground image inspired by the photo of a native woman into the original background of Emmanuel's mural to pay homage to the "war-ravaged Honduras" (Gressel 2009: 109). Cervantes flawlessly blends the agricultural background into the hair of the indigenous woman, as a pair of larger-than-life eyes dominates the foreground of the mural: A skeletal soldier (war = death?) juxtaposed by the image of a white dove (peace = freedom?) in the other. The soldier is an image preserved from the original mural and appears in Morgan's *Tribute to Romero* and Bergner's *Un Passado* as well.

Indigenous Eyes is easily one of the most "striking images in the alley today" (Crain 2007: 1). A maize crop is painted significantly large in the foreground of the piece, honoring Meso-American creation myths. A tropical bird in the top left corner exudes a positive and colorful energy to the preservation of indigenous cultures, despite the shadow of a soldier menacingly pointing his weapon at the hard-working campesino and frightened woman in the bottom left of piece



Victorion: Defensor de la Mission/Victorion: Defender of the Mission (Sirron Norris 2001)

According to the Norris, Victorion “speaks to the subject of gentrification in the mission district of San Francisco, supporting the persistence of Latino business owners and residents. The mural also speaks to the importance of the preservation of original San Francisco Victorian homes through a ten-foot robot, suitably named, “Victorion.” the “Defender of the Mission,” takes form as a giant Victorian house crushing the so-called “hipsters”, cafes, and businesses that are raising the cost of living and lowering the quality of life for native Mission District residents, whose houses are portrayed with “For Sale” and “For Lease” signs throughout the piece.”²

Thousands of mostly minority residents have been displaced from the Mission to the surrounding Bernal Heights, Outer Mission, and South Bay neighborhoods since the early 1990’s due to rising housing costs brought on, in part, by the so-called “dot-com boom.” Mural art such as Norris’ *Victorion* has taken to “defend” the Mission which, as Precita Eyes muralist Fred said in a personal interview, “can have a paradoxical effect. The art itself raises housing costs, thus leading to further gentrification” (personal interview 2012).

² <https://outgoing.me/profiles/sirron-n>



Un Passado que Aun Vive/A Past that Continues (Joel Bergner 2004)

Joel Bergner³, whose work currently spans throughout San Francisco, Baltimore, Washington DC, El Salvador, Cuba, Brazil, Poland, and Cape Verde West Africa paints with a distinctive, “almost kitschy language” (Greensberg 2009), using community-based street art to, “uplift communities, celebrate culture, and explore a variety of local and international social issues” (actionashe.com).

Un Passado que aun Vive is painted with dominating hues of red and yellow, emanating a powerful heated energy with exquisite detail which gives alley visitors an intricate puzzle to decode.

Just as Lévi-Strauss comments on his trip to the Brazilian Amazon, “We will always walk with our past,” (Lévi-Strauss 1974: 44) Bergner’s symbolic depiction of a woman whose family has been torn apart from the civil war in El Salvador, places human identity in inextricable relation to his roots. Within the shadows of a contemporary landscape—the mountainsides, river, streets, and walls of the pupuserias—are the “collective memories” of the Salvadoran Civil War, which “disrupted order and killed the innocent” (Gressel 2009:111) from 1980-1992. American involvement in the war was immensely controversial, and Bergner’s piece pays tribute to the original PLACA project with this topic.

³Follow Bergner and his Action Asché Global Mural Project: <http://actionashe.blogspot.com/>



Things Fall Apart (Janet Braun-Reinetz with Jane Weissman, Artmakers Inc. NY, Tim Drescher, and Laura Reinitz, 2004; repaired 2012)

San Francisco was the epicenter for one of the first and most devastating HIV/AIDS epidemic. Borrowing from Yeats' poem *Second Coming*: "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world," Reinetz expresses the chaos that arises when a system collapses. The symbolic red bow is the closest thing to a center in this mural, connecting crying youth on the right, and a mother and child on the left, all the while encircling the figures fallen to the virus. A healthy infant grabs hold of one of the virus' victims, suggesting a positive outcome—as Yeat's poem suggests, a second coming.



Those we Love, we Remember (Edythe Boone and H.O.P.E Project, 1997)

The above mural was a community-based collaboration sponsored by Precita Eyes, and allowed children affected by the HIV/AIDS virus (either infected themselves or with HIV + parents) to be politically active and share their experiences of being ravaged by the epidemic. RIP names and graves are painted in memorial throughout the piece. Tears run down the central figures face, and an HIV ribbon encircles a clock, so as to say: "The time to deal with this is, Now!"



Una ley inmoral, nadie tiene que cumplirla/No One Should Comply with an Immoral Law
(Juana Alicia, 1996)

Monseñor Oscar Romero, the fourth archbishop of San Salvador, became internationally recognized for his humanitarian efforts and service for the poor at a time when the majority of El Salvador's wealth was concentrated within the infamous "thirteen families". Romero was assassinated while delivering mass on March 24, 1980, one day after calling on Salvadorean soliders, as Christians, to denounce governmental abuses against human rights..

Juana Alicia, herself an icon in the Mission Muralismo movement, paints Romero and his message with distinct clarity. His eyes "wise and unflinching," (Gressel 2009: 104) serve both to guard the alley's visitors and as an educational, spiritual, and political tool.



A Tribute to Monseñor Oscar Romero (Jamie Morgan, 2001)

The second of two Romero tributes in Balmy Alley, this mural sprawls the span of two large garage doors and welcomes all community members with open hands. Reminiscent of Cervantes' Indigenous Eyes, a large skeletal soldier dominates the right hand of the painting (bottom right), accompanied by fire and neutralized by two adjoining cans of red and blue paint, offering art as a solution both for global warfare and local gang violence. The imagery is juxtaposed by the blazing sun and thriving agriculture on the right, including symbols of a glowing heart and a photographed image of Archbishop Oscar Romero.

Included in the political message is, once again, a representation of the environment, which Morgan himself describes as intentional attention to landscape: "I see their images as the "natural" elements amidst the relative formality of a background design" (Jamie Morgan⁴)



⁴http://www.creativeworkfund.org/modern/bios/james_morgan.html



Enrique's Journey (Josue Rojas, 2010)⁵

According to 2010 Census data, 38.7% of reported Mission residents were born in a country outside the United States (Sprague 2012:19). Of these, 63.6% are from Mexico, Central, or South America. This journey of immigration—a shared history amongst a significant portion of today's Mission neighborhood—is captured and memorialized in Rojas' piece *Enrique's Journey*. The mural was inspired by a book by Sonia Nazario of the same title, which follows Enrique, a young boy, on his journey from rural Central America (portrayed in the right of the mural), to the United States. The boy travels via train, and meets various people along the way, and his grandmother (portrayed in a welcoming purple hue), awaits his arrival on the other side. Uncle Sam and the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) skeletons reach out to grab the young boy (Above left). Enrique is safe, however, as he is guided on his journey by an angel (Above right), yet another protector of Balmy Alley and the Mission community.

⁵ For an interview with the artist on this mural, please visit:
http://www.youthoutlook.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=8170b9e2f023d5ff0be992f26ae1168a



Desaparecidos pero no olvidados/Dissappeared but not Forgotten (Carlos Madriz 1998)

In an almost metaphorical manifestation of its title, Madriz' patterned painting nearly disappears into the fence it is painted on. However, this easily-overlooked mural, which reveals stenciled outlines of the faces of revolution, has apparently inspired the "unique rockability-infused Las Vegas punk band" Cobra Skulls' debut album *Agitations*¹, and is also used as an example in a text book titled *Public Speaking: Concepts and Skills for a Diverse Society* (Jaffe 2007: 154-155, 308-309).¹





After the Storm (Tina Wolfe, 2008)

Wolfe's community project, featured in 7X7 Magazine's "Best of the Bay" issue (2012) pays tribute to the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina. Mission residents were asked to contribute to the mural by adding photographs throughout the painting, adding further community awareness to the issues surrounding the region, years after the disaster. As with many murals in the alleyway, *After the Storm* is continually changing; in May 2012, the artist added fractured lines throughout the painting (below), suggesting the fractured and parceled memories of hurricane Katrina that continue to affect the New Orleans area.





Unknown Title (unknown artist, 2012)

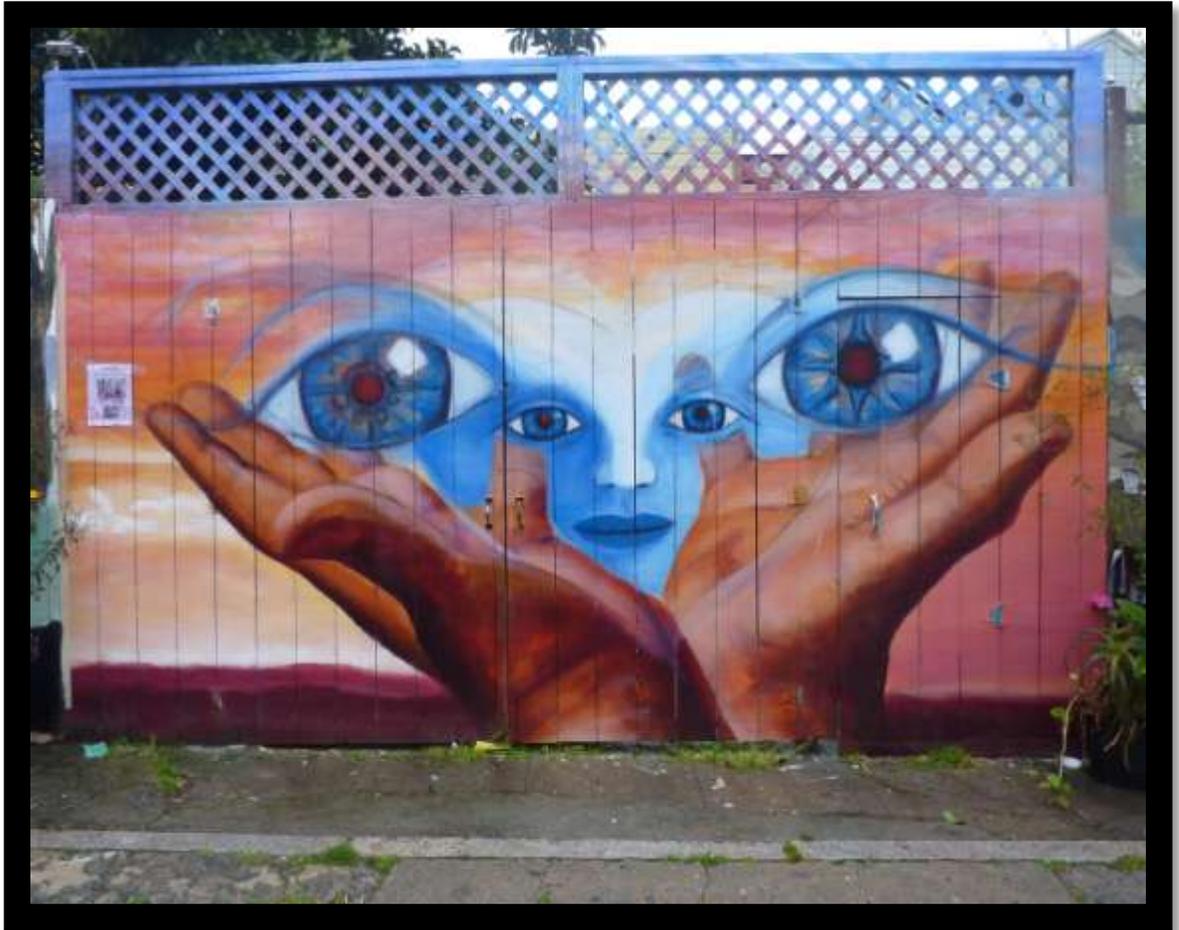
No other Balmy mural embodies Ingold's theory that, "environment becomes a part of us just as we are part of it," (Ingold CITE!!) better than this untitled piece. A cityscape juxtaposes the agricultural landscape; a painted tree to the right of the horse resembles its live counterpart in the bottom left of the photo; a bay of water surrounded by mountains is akin to the San Francisco Bay Area, all the while a series of patterned paint swabs—camouflage, stripes, polka-dots—skew the viewers perception of place, making the foreground image of the horse even more prominent.

In Angel de Saavedras' iconic 19th Century Spanish play, *Don Alvaro and the Force of Fate*, the author employs the use of horses to represent the ethnicity and social class of his protagonists. I venture to say that the colors of the primary character of the above mural, a spotted brown and white horse, were not lackadaisically chosen but rather painted to represent the bi-cultural identity of the Mission's Latino population.



Untitled (Artist, date unknown)

If you reach out your hand and touch the above mural, you will immediately recognize the distinction between the smooth laminated texture of its panels compared the rough and weathered paintings surrounding it. This piece was created by digital computer imagery, printed, and stuck to the garage door in a type of larger-than-life adhesive sticker. Imagery includes Aztec deities, mountainsides, and Japanese-style ocean waves. Our Lady of Guadalupe transforms into a skeleton in her lower half. 2012 is depicted in the writings above the golden castle in the upper right corner, and two butterflies represent a new beginning for the future of our world. The piercing eyes of an elder dominates the foreground of the mural.



Unknown Title (Artist, Date unknown)

Mission Muralismo is a “political/community aesthetic that changes the way everything looks and everyone sees” (Jacoby 2009: 29).

Balmy Alley is, above all, a sensorial experience, an ever-changing “parade of murals, stimulating memories of sage-blessed processions, street protests, the landscape of the tropics, volcanoes rumbling, and monkey and parrots screeching overhead” (Murguia 2009: 98).

As the viewer strolls from one end of the alley to the other, however, they are met in the middle by this as an opportunity for awakening—an opportunity to look inside oneself and ask, “Who am I?” and, “What is my position on these issues?” “What is my role in this social world?” and, “What can I do to make this temporary home a better place?”



Father Richard Purcell (Laura Campos, 2012)

In this memorial mural, Campos paints a predominant cultural figure for San Francisco's HIV/AIDS and homeless population. Father Purcell moved to SF from AZ in 1980, and created a homeless shelter for HIV and AIDS patients, in memory of his brother who had been a victim of the disease.

The mural expresses the artists (and, presumably, the late Pastor's) philosophy of life—love and compassion—and represents life as a regenerative, recycling force in the natural world. On the top of the mural are the words, “In loving memory. Love and compassion/amor y compasión.” Atop the central image—the regenerative tree of life—is a chest opening in the shape of a heart, which the artist herself describes as “representative of the love and passion Richard had towards others” In the bottom of the tree, there is the skeleton of a person, for “Even in death, he [Father Purcell] is still giving life” (Campos, interview below).

The mural is the second in Balmy which symbolically paints man into a tree, equating man with nature and placing human life in inextricable connection with his surrounding environment.

Interview with Laura Campos:

<http://www.indiegogo.com/Father-Richard-Purcell-Mural?c=gallery>



The Lost Page of the Wild Things (Guarina Lopez, 2003)

The above mural is based on Maurice Sendak's award winning children's picture book *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), and pictures a playful and poetic political message: Preserve our limited resources.

A Van-Gogh-like sky meets with the poorly-preserved painted ocean waves to support a ship called Max, whose flag reads, "Don't waste water and keep it clean because across the water is where we find the wild things." Like the vibrant political message which fades with time, the mural is eroded from extreme weathering. Artists will often use a top-layer coating which binds the acrylic paint to the original surface to protect from graffiti and weathering, but funding and time create limits on the mural's ability to last.



Icons of Mexican Art (Hector Escarraman, 2005)

Contemporary Mission Muralismo was immensely influenced by the works of such Mexican artists as Diego Rivera, Jose Clement Orozco, and David Siqueiros, each of whom are memorialized in Escarraman's *Icons* (above). Also included are Frida Kahlo (far right), actress Maria Felix and composer Augustin Lara, muralist David Siqueiros and others. A second Balmy tribute to Kahlo (below) lies hidden behind the bushes as an old, unused garage door (the owner's new garage door is now replaced with Jesus meditating at Mt. Shasta) at the opposite end of the alley. In the far right of the piece, the artist includes a self-portrait of himself as a child, suggesting these Mexican artists are not only icons but fathers of the contemporary Mission Muralismo movement.



Las Milagrosas (Mary Nash, 2001)



100 Years of Mexican Cinema (Carolyn Castano, Rigo, Ray Patlan, Hope Algarin, Jamie Morgan, Mary Nash 2006)

One more example of the collaborative and community-based emphases of the Mission , *100 Years of Mexican Cinema* is a collaboration between seasoned Mission muralists (recall Patlan organized the original PLACA project in 1984), and newer artists such as Castano who at the time of painting was a student at the San Francisco Art Institute. The tribute piece adds a vibrant and colorful portrayal of Mexican artistic icons throughout a 35 mm film roll, which acts as a glue to connect the generations of cinema. The 1950 Victor Junco film *Dona Diabla* is commemorated as a large image in the front left, as well as the comedian Cantinflas and actress Dolores del Rio in the top right and top left respectively.



A Tribute to Michael Jackson (Unknown Artist, 2009)

In San Francisco, mural art is distinguished from other types of wall-painting and graffiti in that they are legal public pieces that are commissioned by the building owners themselves. Mural artists often protect their work from weathering and graffiti with a protective overcoat, which can make the paint last upwards of three decades. Unlike other alleyways throughout San Francisco, Balmy receives relatively little unwanted graffiti, presumably due to a certain level of respect the community members have for the muralists, the messages, and their surrounding artistic environment. Still, when it does appear, unwanted graffiti in Balmy is generally removed immediately.

However, when this Michael Jackson tribute appeared near the 25th Street entrance of the Alley shortly after the artist's untimely 2009 death, the building owner apparently appreciated the reference to popular art not to have the image removed. Michael is painted in his Billy Jean attire, memorializing his iconic 1983 Motown performance, a moment where many believe the boundaries of race and art were crumbled with Michael's



Latino Pride (Shariff Dahlan and Francisco Carrasco 1997)

Mission residents have an immense amount of pride for their heritage, language, and history. Leaves are added to the bottom of the mural with no ostensibly additional purpose than an effort towards urban gardening. Hidden behind the overgrowth of live shrubbery are weathered images of an Aztec God. The Old English text is partnered with a “cholo” (Murguia 2009: 98) guardian of the alleyway. The protector is encapsulated by the United Farm Workers Flag, a testament to Latino Civil Rights, and the inspirational work of Cesar Chavez whose slogan, “Si se puede” became an iconic protest chant for the Mission during throughout the later 20th Century. Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and the United States are included in the interconnected flags above the garage door, but are painted with reference only to their colors rather than details—perhaps suggesting that despite the smaller details we are, as one alley resident proclaimed in a personal interview: “Many colors, one people.”



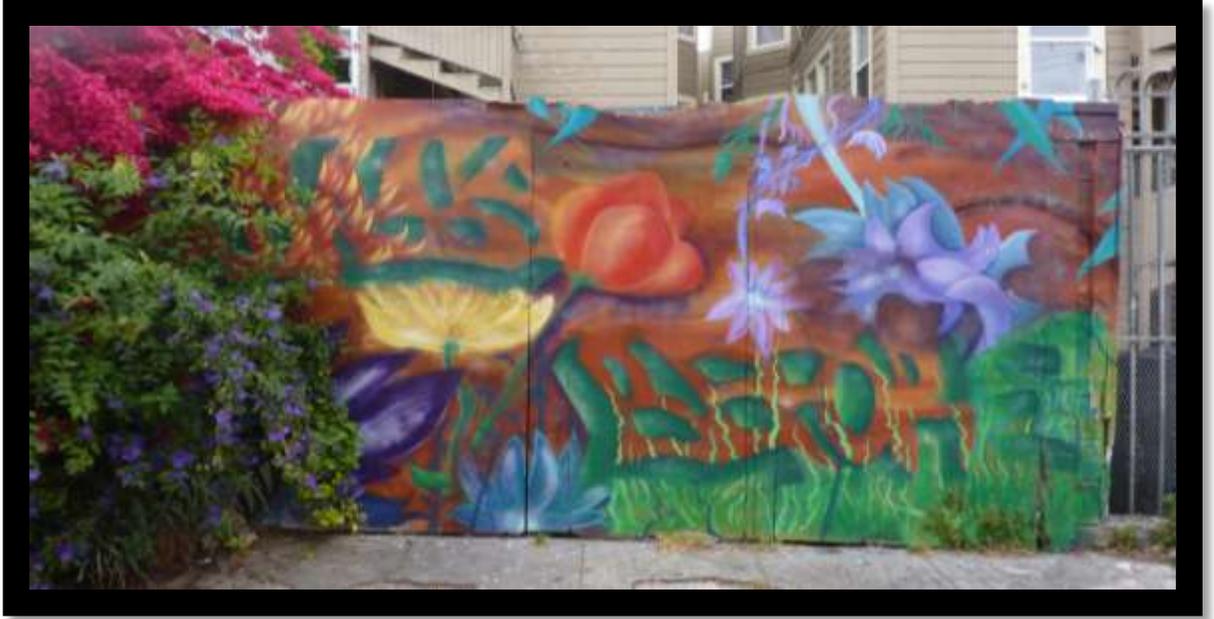
Tribute to Mujeres Muralistas and Future Generations (Precita Eyes Mural Workshop, 2005)

When Annice Jacoby said, “The best way to view the murals of the Mission is through the cracked windshield of the bus,” (2009: 29) she was probably talking about MUNI’s line 14, which carries over 36,000 passengers⁶ daily runs through the Mission District. Native children and tropical landscapes juxtapose the contemporary Muni 14 Line—a flawless comingling of the past and contemporary.

As is written in the bottom left rainbow, this mural was a community effort created as part of a Precita Eyes workshop⁷, designed and painted by Elba Rivera, Barbara Devaney, Laura Smith, Keith Lewis, David Isaacson, and Oscar H. Directed by Susan Cervantes and 2 kids Georgina and Jr.

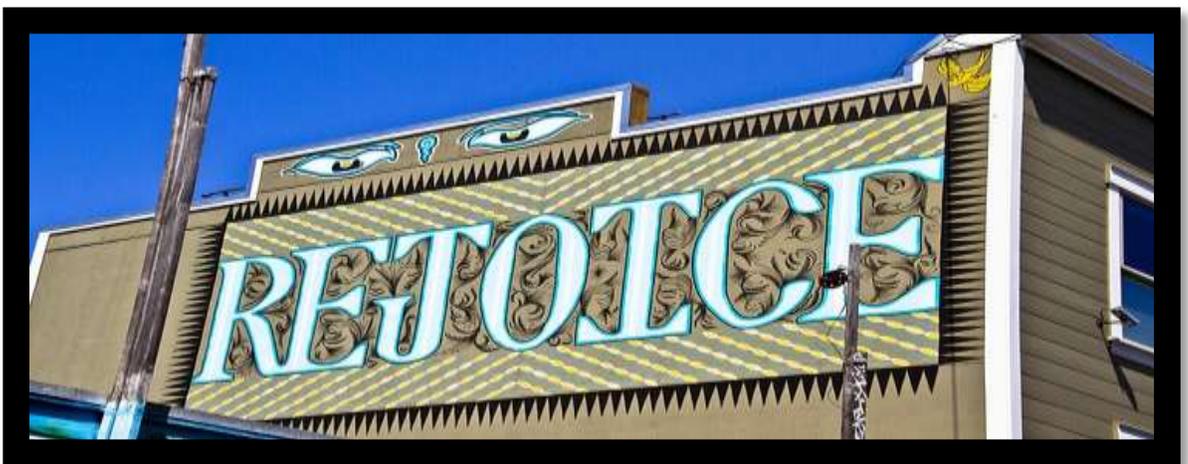
⁶ For one journalist’s experience of “24 Hours on the MUNI 14”, Please visit: <http://missionlocal.org/2009/07/riding-munis-14-mission-%E2%80%94-for-24-hours/>

⁷ For More information, please visit: www.precitaeyes.org/



Days Before (Artist, Date unknown)

While at first the above mural appears a simple solution to the alley's urban pathway, an addition of plans and shrubbery in an effort towards urban gardening, a second (or third) glance reveals an additional layer of meaning. Replicating the reverence for the Mission's history and the spiritual connection with nature that is present throughout the alley's painting, this piece is an ode to the "Days Before" the urban growth that recreated an agricultural wasteland to a contemporary and booming urban economy. When entering the alley from 24th Street, shortly after passing the current mural-in-progress, prior to arriving at Indigenous Eyes, situated in best view from Days Before—take a moment, look up, and rejoice.





Memorias Primas (Marta Ayala 2001)

Ayala's 2001 painting pays homage to the Native lifestyle, the "first memories" before the Spanish conquest. A beautiful coastline is represented with pastel paint strokes, a mountainside is the backdrop for a single thatch-roof hut. A significantly large butterfly is painted into the window of the garage door, a foreground image representing life and renewal despite the disappearance of the once-virgin bay.

Interestingly, around mid-2011, a slab of ply-wood (Purposefully? Metaphorically?) was added to the mural to cover the butterfly. Is the artist, or home owner, suggesting that renewal at this point is not attainable? That our beauty of first memories is lost? Or perhaps the plywood plays a more practical and less metaphoric role; in any case, Balmy viewers too are curious, written in pen on the plywood is a simple, "WHY?"



500 Years of Native Survival (Irene Perez, 1991)

Celebrating 500 years of Indigenous resistance throughout the Americas, the mural portrays modern Native life—a boy and a girl, sitting back-to-back in contemporary clothing—juxtaposed with traditional aztec imagery on the left. Lining the bottom of this mural is the phrase, “Coyolxauhqui has something to say.” In Aztec mythology, Coyolxauhqui is the goddess of the galaxy, suggesting that survival both in North and South America was the destiny of the Native.

Below, one home with two split garage doors houses homage to native Mesoamerica.



Title Unknown (Frances Valesco, 2008)



Untitled (Garth Tompkins-Viera 2000)

The above mural comically utilizes a repetitive and monotonous imagery to address issues such as pollution and police repression and brutality, while promoting healthy living, an appreciation for the arts, and politically proactive living. A sun in the top right corner is coughing over the city, partially an effect of the exaggerated smog bubbles excreted from the cars.

Significantly, the two animals in this mural—a cat and a bird in the upper right corner—are represented as larger than most of the human subjects, a message perhaps to recognize the impact of our environmental decisions.

Over a dozen police officers, standing offensively with his baton, are stenciled and spray painted as identical images, while protestors, bike riders, and musicians are drawn as unique characters in the play. Significantly, of the three largest individuals in the mural, two are artists, and one is reading a book, suggesting that leisure and joy prevail despite the (inevitable?) political and environmental turmoil in the background.



La Virgencita (Patricia Rose, 2000)

A slew of religious symbolism, syncretized to include “Missionismo” Welcomes visitors to the alley’s 25th St. entrance. Rose’s feminine and warm *Virgencita* is the first of these guardians. While the traditional image portrays the virgin with her hands clasped together and her eyes closed in prayer, Rose’s rendition of the religious symbol paints Guadalupe with her eyes and arms open, “looking out over the neighborhood, extending welcome and blessing to the community” (Rose 2009: 268). Like the neighborhood, *La Virgencita* continues to evolve, a 9th rose was added to the parking sign post after this photo was taken.



Manjushri (Marta Ayala, 2001)

Manjushri which can be translated as “Gentle Glory,” is a prominent Mahayana Buddhist figure who represents eternal wisdom and ultimate transcendence. The figure in the painting reaches his hand out “in a *mudra* gesture, meaning ‘to assist.’ His other hand holds a lotus flower, a symbol of purification and his sword ‘cuts through ignorance.’ Ayala painted Manjushri as a Bodhisattva on his way to becoming an enlightened Buddha but remaining on earth to help others attain enlightenment” (Gressel 2009: 269).

The mural is dedicated by the artist to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Balmy Alley community, amongst others.



Untitled (Laura Campos 2011)

Merced, Goddess of the Universe, Lourdes Mother Earth, Jesus meditating at Mt. Shasta. Weaving her textured palate into the painted landscape, Campos creates motion and sound, a fluid experience, a syncretic tribute to a neighborhood with as much quirky style and soul as the artist herself. The 90 degree angle of the garage door creates a space between the paintings and the pedestrian passage, wherein the viewer can enter the mural from the outside world.

The goddess dons a jeweled crown; Mother Earth fluidly floats down the river; Jesus' meditative stare greets visitors to Balmy's 25th St. entrance, holding a tripod of diamond cuts, robed in purple with a branded heart logo on his left breast. Merced is surrounded by angels, and cradles a young child in her arms. Her cape holds the universe, but is she holding a wand, or inviting us in?



Mission Makeover (Lucia and community 2012—unfinished)

As the neighborhood continues to transform and the Mission welcomes a new generation under its watchful eyes, so to do the walls evolve to reflect the changes in concerns and ideals of the Mission community. Balmy has always been a “continuous event, because it is always changing” (Cervantes 2007: 1). At the time of this writing, a new history was being written as this as-of-yet unfinished masterpiece was being painted in the center of the alleyway.

Mission Makeover addresses issues such as national fiscal greed, police brutality, gentrification, and homelessness. Painting community members and alley residents into the mural, the piece pays homage to the Mission community. As one artist commented in an informal interview: “Painting these kids into the mural creates a sense of ownership, and when people own their environments they are less likely to abuse them” (personal interview 2012). Bold and beautiful, the painting represents the new generation of Mission muralists, commemorating the “Mission of the past and present” (artist statement 2012).

¿Y Qué?

So...what?

This paper has worked thus far to situate the uniquely diverse Mission District within its own historical and political context. It has motivated the methodology by examining the importance of murals both to the history of the Mission District, and the larger global sphere. I have provided the reader with a clarification of my aim—that is, discovering and graphing collective Mission District identity via an analysis of Balmy Alley murals—by briefly examining the different types of identity, and defining my own use of the term “collective identity.” Finally, I have provided the reader with photos and a brief analysis of each and every Balmy Alley mural, highlighting the thematic and symbolic elements of each, as well as leaving the reader freedom for their own interpretations of the works.

Certainly, even the first time voyager is able to recognize a number of replicating themes throughout their first Balmy Alley journey: political activism and solidarity; respect and reverence for the past; a love for the arts; and a spiritual connection with the natural world.

Painted Walls and Politics. The Mission District has been a political “nerve center” (Jacoby 2009: 28) since its post-colonial beginnings. Today’s Balmy Alley bears the scars of its political past and models hopeful ideals for its future. The Mission’s concerns and objections to US warfare are as relevant today as they were in the 1980’s. Skeletal soldiers equate war with death in Morgan’s *Tribute to Monsenor Oscar Romero*, in the mountainsides of Bergner’s *Un Passado que aun vive/A Past that Continues to Live*, and in the spiritual juxtaposition in the eyes of Cervantes’ rendition of *Indigenous Beauty*.

But the Mission does more than merely, “paint life onto drab walls” (Jacoby 2009: 28), it also imparts a sense of responsibility towards political activism. Raised fists in *Naya Bihana*, and protests in Thompkins-Viera’s repetitive stencils, express the significance of grassroots social mobilization efforts, for which the Mission became internationally recognized throughout the 20th century. Activism includes the freedom to embracing cultural roots while respecting your new home, as Balmy depicts in its original

Culture Contains the Seed of Resistance, and various references to Native rights and culture throughout. Activism also includes, as Juana Alicia's Romero suggests, standing up for your rights even if they are written in immoral laws. The Mission's contemporary political concerns include gentrification and a rise in living costs (eg: *Victorion*) conservation of limited environmental resources (as depicted in Lopez' *The Lost Page of the Wild Things*), environmental pollution (Thompkins-Viera), and immigration (eg: *Enrique's Journey*, *The Wanderer*).

Past, Present, Future: Respect, Reverence, Pride. A trip down Balmy alley is a journey through time, an homage to generations past, an experiential insight to the struggles and successes of a community. The tradition of painting murals in the Mission is done "with respect and reverence for the past" (Santana 2009: 6). *Memorias primas*, *Un pasado que aun vive*, *Enrique's Journey*, tribute murals to artists and activists, celebrations of native imagery—each of these pay tribute and reverence to a collective past of agriculture, tropical landscapes, immigration, and memories of war and destruction. Pride for "the hood" (Gómez-Peña 2009: 45) is imbued into the symbolism of each and every mural, and a series of butterflies suggest a hopeful future. Mission Muralists paint with an immense respect for their predecessors, exemplified in subtle tributes of older Balmy murals in the new generation of paintings and multiple generations of residents included in the murals' landscapes. In Balmy, according to Murguia, "Every mural is a challenge: a gauntlet against forgetting, an attempt to recover [our] memory and history" (2009: 98).

Finally, in works such as *Desaparecidos pero no olvidados*, *Un Pasado que aun vive*, and the weathered original *Culture Contains the Seed of Resistance*, Balmy challenges the concept of memory and asks the critical questions: "What is the past?" "Can we ever escape our history, or are we inevitably a product of it?" *Days Before* reminds us of the landscape which San Francisco's urban Mission jungle supplanted with concrete.

Love for the Arts. The fact that the Mission neighborhood is passionate, appreciative, and dedicated to art is apparent not only in the nature of Balmy Alley as a monument of public expression, but in the art which is displayed in the murals themselves. Literature, cinema, painting, guitar-playing, native music, singing, native

yarn painting, digital art, and sculpture are a sample of art forms that are revered throughout Balmy Alley. Mission muralists are innovative in their approach to their art, employing an “unmatchable range of styles” (Cervantes 2009: 26) to tackle new topics with inventive symbolism, adding Mission flare to the global medium.

Spirituality and Nature. I began to recognize, even within my first few visits to the alleyway, that Balmy and the larger Mission community has an immense amount of respect for nature. Almost every painting has some addition of flora or fauna, even if its presence is irrelevant to the mural’s primary message. Leaves are added to a *Latino Pride* script; bountiful fruits and vegetables are represented in several pieces including *Icons of Mexican Art*, and *Culture Contains the Seed of Resistance*; a horse appears against a variegated environmental landscape; *Memorias Primas* bring us back to our original connection with nature prior to urban expansion and colonial rule. I understand this phenomenon as a form of urban gardening, a reverential honorarium for homeland, and also a message to the greater Mission community: remember that we are connected with nature, we are one.

In two distinct Balmy murals, man is represented with his roots as a tree; extra roses are continually added to Rose’s *Virgencita*; maize is memorialized on close to a dozen pieces. *Jesus Meditating on Mount Shasta* exposes to the viewer the spiritual yet syncretic “nature” of the Mission District, mixing traditional images with contemporary “Missionismo”.

Community. “In no other city” states Carlos Santana, “has the [mural] movement remained so focused on the participation of everyone. The[se] murals are the heart, eyes, hands, voices, and spirit of...the Mission District” (2009: 23). Internationally recognized Mission muralist Susan Cervantes expresses the role of the artist within the community, clarifying that, “[The artists’] bonding commitment is to respect and paint what is important to the community” (2009: 26).

Each of these aforementioned themes, then, works cooperatively to form the foundation of the distinct collective Mission District Identity, but they are not the core themselves. Rather, each of these shared values, ideals, etc. work in relation to one another and bilaterally with the true nucleus of the collective Mission identity—of which

I believe to be, very simply, community. That is, each of the values delineated in the list above are a consequence of the community's value in itself.

That community lies at the heart of the Mission's heart is apparent only in the symbolism and content of Balmy Alley murals, but in the alley itself. All individuals or groups are allowed to paint in the public alley with the permission of the building owners. By involving community members in the creation and display of public art, the Mission District is empowering the neighborhood to play an active role in the display of each of their shared values and proceed as active participants in the creation of their contemporary culture (Cockroft & Barnet-Sanchez 1993: 5-7). Artists make an effort to include community members, taking requests while in process of a mural, painting local community members into the background of the mural, allowing passersby to get involved in the painting and creation of murals—community is very much at the center of San Francisco's mural movement, and of the Mission neighborhood.

I use community here as “a social not merely a geographical definition, refer[ing] to any group of like-minded people (Drescher 1998: 12). Community art, in distinction from other forms of public art, are created by or with a group of people who will interact with the finished piece. Inherently temporary and inextricably linked to the social, political, and economic milieu of the times, and the community where the mural is displayed is a paramount player in the public forum's social meaning. Drescher even goes so far as to argue that murals lack a meaning without the interpretation and interaction with the community—a concept similarly conceived by Roland Barthes' “Death of the author” (1967) . He argues, “The relationship of community artworks to their communities is dynamic, intimate, and reciprocal. In a real sense, the meaning of San Francisco murals [are] as much defined by the community as the community is defined by them” (Drescher 1994: 12-13).

The Mission District



Final Thoughts

Public mural art is a powerful tool through which careful collection and analyses can reveal significant details about a community's history, concerns, and ideals that may otherwise be unreachable through census and other data collection methods. In our present investigation, I have worked to understand the collective Mission identity via an analysis of murals located in San Francisco's historically significant Balmy Alley. I have found that the desire for a happy, healthy, politically active, spiritually aware, artistically explorative, and historically sensitive community is embodied individually and collectively throughout Balmy Alley, and is present in every Mission tradition. Balmy Alley—San Francisco's "Street of Dreams"(Garcia 1996: 1)—is an educational experience, which argues that collaborative mindsets create optimal results.

Similar to Ingold's influential landscapes and the different types of identity, each of the Mission values—political awareness, respect for the past, love for the arts, and spiritual connection with nature—exist independently, though cooperatively, with the other surrounding values, and overlap with the central collective value of community. For example, political awareness overlaps with reverence for the past in that it represents a desire for the community to learn from past mistakes and create a better society. Political awareness works bilaterally with the shared values of an appreciation for the arts, as the presentation of global issues are done with an artistic public medium, which once again is relayed via the core collective identity—community.

The above graph, of course, does not account for individual differences within the Mission neighborhood, but rather serves as a lens through which to understand the collective identity of the Mission community as a whole, overall, on average. This research, albeit a brief academic analysis of a complex social code, may serve to provide visitors with a list of cultural norms, provide future research for a guide in the power of contemporary mural art, or simply provide snapshot examination of a unique migrant community within a particular slice of time and space. Documenting murals and cataloging them in an even more public database—the internet—will allow for future comparative research projects on the growing global movement of contemporary murals.

Communities are best examined with awareness to all five senses; mural art is the same. Murals are best experienced rather than studied, as the surrounding community is

an active creator of a mural's meaning. Ineluctably, the historic Mission neighborhood will change. Murals which now color the walls and spirits of the City's barrio will fade, and the core collective value of community may one day be pushed to the way-side. For now, we have a slice of history articulated on the walls of our public space—let us enjoy them not merely as visual masterpieces, but as a corroborating presence with the smells, sounds, and tastes of the vibrant and colorful Mission community.

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