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Authorship and Memory in Judy Baca's Murals

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Thank you, Daniel, for believing in me and reminding me I could.

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my great-grandmothers and to the futures of my nephews and niece.

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## **Introduction**

Judith F. Baca was born on September 20, 1946 and spent her early childhood in Watts, Los Angeles.<sup>1</sup> She was raised in an all-female household made up of her single mother, several aunts and her grandmother. In many ways, Baca's female home informed her sense of self and her creative ideologies.<sup>2</sup> Her beloved grandmother, Francesca was a spiritual healer and a great role model to her. The two of them shared a special bond that may have inspired many of Baca's murals.<sup>3</sup> In 1969, Baca earned a Bachelor's degree in Studio Art from California State University, Northridge (CSUN). Although she was a creative child, it wasn't until her graduation from university that she was challenged to make artwork that was meaningful to her.<sup>4</sup> As she began to question who and what her artwork was for, The Chicano Movement was well underway in California and in Los Angeles. Baca was one of the earliest L.A. muralists, making murals as early as 1971, and she was also one of the only women to do. Her methods and themes were unique, thoughtful, innovative, and grand, which helped to distinguish her as one of the most prominent figures in the Mural Movement and in The Chicano Movement.

There are many questions asked within this thesis, but some of the most critical issues at hand are around the production of discourse. I also aim to ask what the interests of the art world are today. Art writer Jan Avgikos also questions how is culture made, and

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<sup>1</sup> Birth of a Movement p.107

<sup>2</sup> Exposures: Women and Their Art, Betty Ann Brown and Arlene Raven  
NewSage Press 1989, p 16

<sup>3</sup> Judith F. Baca, [http://latino.si.edu/virtualgallery/ojos/bios/bios\\_Baca.htm](http://latino.si.edu/virtualgallery/ojos/bios/bios_Baca.htm)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.judybaca.com/now/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=153&Itemid=49](http://www.judybaca.com/now/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=153&Itemid=49)  
accessed January 15, 2014

who is it for?<sup>5</sup> What are the conditions in which activist art enters the artistic or art historical cannon? These questions are relevant to this thesis because Baca is often referred to as a feminist and activist artist, a public artist, a social artist, a Chicana artist<sup>6</sup>, but rarely is she framed as *an artist*<sup>7</sup>. Perhaps her professorship within the Chicana/o Studies Department at UCLA and the political qualities of her murals inform the ways that we frame her discursively. I find it both interesting and curious that in current scholarship her work is not treated or received as contemporary art often is<sup>8</sup>. Scholars and others often organize her work within Chicano histories and texts, yet even a young Judy Baca questioned the legitimacy of her own artistry stating, “I didn’t think that I had the right to call myself an artist, because the image of who an artist was didn’t fit.”<sup>9</sup> This quote expresses the homogenized concept that Baca held of who could be an artist.

Within this thesis, I suggest that Baca’s murals are important works of art for their themes, methods and origins, yet at the same time, they are distinguished from other art objects. Baca’s murals occupy social and political positions around liberty and social justice, which transform them into methods of activism and knowledge building. As Allan Kaprow states, “Once art departs from traditional models and beings to merge into the everyday manifestations of society itself...[artists] cannot claim that what takes place

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<sup>5</sup> Jan Avgikos, “Group Material Timeline: Activism as a Work of Art.” in *But is it Art* 1995, ed. Nina Felshin (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 116.

<sup>6</sup> Guisela Latorre, *Walls of Empowerment*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 233.

<sup>7</sup> Judy Baca (artist) in discussion with Baca, November 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Baca’s work is often commemorated in texts that are historically, politically, culturally or otherwise socially inspired. My research shows that Baca is underrepresented in texts that deal with contemporary U.S art histories.

<sup>9</sup> Amalia Mesa-Baines, “Quest For Identity,” in *Signs from the Heart: California Chicano Murals* 1993, ed. Eva Sperling Crockcroft and Holly Barnet-Sanchez (Venice: New Mexico Press, 1993), 78.

is valuable just because it is art.”<sup>10</sup> Baca’s work follows this logic. The murals she makes are made with social consciousness and often narrate “alternative” histories or histories that privilege marginalized peoples and their perspectives<sup>11</sup>. In doing so, Baca’s murals, exist outside of otherwise traditional methods for art making so her murals and practices are analogous to activism and political expression.<sup>12</sup> Jeff Kelley says it another way, “The infusion of [science or politics] into and their representation through the arts makes art relevant to something other than itself.”<sup>13</sup> Kelley’s thoughts provide a critical social context for considering Baca’s murals, which is to ask how relevant they are beyond their own existence. I believe this question is worth asking because it negates the subjectivity of aesthetics and suggests that art can have a social responsibility. Kelley’s perspective hasn’t always been favorable within the art world<sup>14</sup>, yet I ask—when does social and activist art become a critical part of art historical discourse? An analysis of Baca’s contemporaries and also a separate analysis of the Chicano Movement might offer us a better understanding for situating Baca in her practice, but also for understanding how art histories are made and commemorated.

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<sup>10</sup> Allan Kaprow “Success and Failure When Art Changes,” in *Mapping the Terrain*, 1995, ed. Suzanne Lacy (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 158.

<sup>11</sup> Stefano Bloch, “The Changing Face of Wall Space: Graffiti-murals in the context of neighborhood change in Los Angeles” (Ph.D disss., University of Minnesota, 2012) 33.

<sup>12</sup> James Clark, *Mapping the Terrain p. 1*

<sup>13</sup> Jeff Kelley, “The Body Politics of Suzanne Lacy,” in *But is it Art* 1995, ed by Nina Felshin. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 224.

<sup>14</sup> Patricia C. Phillips, “Public Constructions,” in *Matting the Terrain* 1995 ed. By Suzanne Lacy (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 60.

## **Chapter 1: Chicana/o Histories: From Mexico to the United States**

In one of his most famous articles, Ruben Salazar wrote, “[A Chicano] resents being told Columbus ‘discovered’ America when the Chicano’s ancestors, the Mayans and the Aztecs, founded highly sophisticated civilizations *centuries* before Spain financed the Italian explorer’s trip to the ‘New World’”<sup>15</sup> Within his words, Salazar discusses how Columbus’s so-called ‘discovery’ trivializes Chicana/o experiences and how it also contributes to a larger narrative that disenfranchises Chicanas/as as the “other”. As a result of deducing the histories of the Mayans and Aztecs to stories of heroes and villains, historical framing reflects the Anglo bias in United States narratives. While Salazar’s words were written in 1970, 44 years ago, the sentiment behind it is still poignant and relevant to many Chicanas/os today. With this in mind, I propose that the telling and remembering of Chicana/o histories is very important within and beyond the arts. Chicana/o histories present stories and events in heterogeneous perspectives that help us understand the conditions of the past and the present. Additionally, Chicana/o discourse has become an important part of higher education and popular culture. Therefore, as this chapter develops, and as a way to preface the murals by Judith F. Baca, I offer some historical references to The Chicana/o Movement, otherwise known as, *el movimiento*.

The Chicano Movement has its roots in the political and social movements of the first half of the twentieth century. Such movements were focused on decolonization,

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<sup>15</sup> Salazar, Ruben. “Who is a Chicano, What is it that the Chicano Wants?” *Los Angeles Times*. February 6, 1970.

social and civil equality, gender equality, and other forms of liberation.<sup>16</sup> In her book, *Social Protest in an Urban Barrio*, Marguerite V. Marin points to the mutual impact movements had on another during this time. One powerful demonstration of this is Rosa Parks' bus ride, where she refused to give up her seat, which thereafter sparked the Montgomery bus boycott in 1960.<sup>17</sup> Such grassroots efforts went on to inspire other marginalized groups in the United States, including Chicanos. By the 1950's and 1960's, Chicanos were organizing.<sup>18</sup> After decades of mounting resentment and anger within Chicano communities, efforts such as the Chicano Movement, otherwise known as *el moviemento*, and the Chicano Moratorium came into being.

In 1947, after a series of large-scale deportations of Mexicans, the U.S. and Mexico collaborated to institute the Bracero Program.<sup>19</sup> While Mexican immigration was increasingly contested and opposed at this time, the *Bracero* program allowed the U.S. to capitalize on migrant laborers, while offering temporary stay to Mexican workers. Although this arrangement was framed as mutually beneficial, it often left the workers susceptible to exploitation and abuse. Lori A. Flores reminds us of the inhumane conditions that such laborers faced. She writes, “[*Braceros* were] subjected to backbreaking labor, low-quality food, a lack of water and rest, and segregated, substandard housing, braceros frequently suffered from respiratory illness, permanent

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<sup>16</sup> Marin, Marguerite V. *Social Protest in an Urban Barrio: a study if the Chicano Movement, 1966-1974*. University Press of America 1991 (New York) p.39

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Chicano* is a politicized term that refers to Mexican-Americans, that is, a person of Mexican ancestry or heritage and U.S. nationalism. The famous journalist Ruben Salazar wrote for the *Los Angeles Times*, “A Chicano is a Mexican-American with a non-Anglo image of himself.”

<sup>19</sup> Gutierrez, Jose Angel. “The Chicano Movement: Paths to Power” *Political Science, University of Texas-Arlington* (2011) 102, 26

spinal injuries, malnourishment, and the mental effects of isolation.”<sup>20</sup> These extreme conditions devastated many families and communities. Additionally, a number of Mexican workers died untimely deaths due to various instances of car crashes and other preventable accidents. Flores makes the case that, “California farmers had crowded braceros into poorly constructed vehicles manned by untrained drivers to transport them from field to field.”<sup>21</sup> While these migrant workers were nationally Mexican and not *Chicano*, they were the parents and grandparents of those Chicanos, who would, in the most pointed ways, distinguish themselves as activists and leaders. These young Mexican-Americans of the 1950’s, 1960’s and 1970’s, would, “reject assimilation into Anglo culture and forge a new ethnic identity neither Mexican nor Mexican American but as Chicano.”<sup>22</sup> The histories of Mexicans in the U.S. are significant for understanding some of the concerns addressed within *el movimiento*. Furthermore, because familial ties transcend borders and languages, the younger Chicanos of the 50s, 60s and 70s focused on labor and education within *el movimiento* as a way to ensure a better future for themselves and posterity. Additionally, focusing on labor issues became a means to dignify and remember their families’ unfavorable treatment within the U.S. In other words, the bad working conditions and inhumane treatment of Mexican parents and grandparents would become a focal point for those involved with the Chicano Movement.

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<sup>20</sup> Flores, Lori, A. “A Town full of Dead Mexicans: The Salinas Valley Braceros Tragedy of 1963, the End of the Braceros Program, and the Evolution of California’s Chicano Movement. *The Western Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 44, No. 2 (Summer 2013) pp. 137

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Gutierrez, Jose Angel. “The Chicano Movement: Paths to Power” *Political Science, University of Texas-Arlington* (2011) 102, 25-32

While the 1950, 1960's and 1970's were times of cultural, political and social change in the U.S., the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were times of great systemic change for Latin America and Mexico in particular. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Simon Bolivar lead Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, all colonies of the Spanish Empire, to liberation.<sup>23</sup> Three separate times, between 1836-1853, the U.S/Mexico boarder was altered and each time, Mexico grew smaller.<sup>24</sup> When geographical lines reorganized the nation, the people living along the border became, "foreigners in their own land."<sup>25</sup> Uprooted in the most artificial way, the nation moved away from the inhabitants; and while some became, "the powerless minority", others moved back "to their ancient homelands in the United States for safety."<sup>26</sup> In 1910, after two wars with the United States and several decades under the rule of a dictator, President Porfirio Diaz, in 1910, the Mexican Revolution broke out.<sup>27</sup> Diaz, a mestizo, emphasized Mexico's inclusion in modernity, moving away from indigenist practices and favoring European traditions.<sup>28</sup> This idea of so-called *upward mobility* was central to Diaz's philosophies. Additionally, Diaz rejected indigenous peoples in Mexico, claiming their inferiority, affirming the superiority of the criollo or European.<sup>29</sup> Although Diaz was born of an

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<sup>23</sup> Bushnell, David. *Simón Bolívar: liberation and disappointment*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2004 p.

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<sup>24</sup> Gutierrez, Jose Angel. "The Chicano Movement: Paths to Power" *Political Science, University of Texas-Arlington* (2011) 102, 25-32

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Donahue-Wallace, Kelly. *Art and Architecture of Viceregal Latin America, 1521-1821*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

indigenous mother, his political rhetoric and ideology was centered in the legacy of colonialism in Mexico.

Under Diaz and his hegemonic principles, the arts in Mexico, particularly public art, became an especially powerful political platform. In his manifesto, *Art and Revolution*, David Alfaro Siqueiros speaks to the conditions under Diaz, saying, “In the last years of the Porfirio Diaz dictatorship, Mexico mentality, economy and politics were typically colonial.”<sup>30</sup> Siqueiros was not alone in discussing the prominence of coloniality in Mexico at this time. In fact, Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco made historical murals and frescos that discussed pre-conquest peoples, colonization and the violence it yielded, exemplified by Cortes and La Malinche. While *Los Tres Grandes*, Siqueiros, Rivera and Orozco, did not agree on all aspects of these histories, the three were undoubtedly concerned with the conquest and the effects of colonialism in Mexico. Although the conquest was several hundred years before *Los Tres Grandes*, its destruction and logics were not disconnected from the conditions of Mexico in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Frantz Fanon, a notable post-colonial theorist discusses the impact and aftermath of colonialism in his famed text, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon recounts the physiological and physical affects of such destruction. Withstanding cultural, biological and physiological genocide, “colonialism forces the colonized to ask the question: ‘Who am I in reality?’”<sup>31</sup> This question underscores the colonial paradigm such that the colonized no longer recognizes or knows self. In other words, this question and larger framework speaks to the traumas that colonized peoples face and endure.

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<sup>30</sup> Siqueiros, David Alfaro. *Art and Revolution* (1975) Lawrence and Wishhart, London

<sup>31</sup> Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) Grove Press, New York p. 182

Moreover, this question is particularly striking when considering the themes of *Los Tres Grandes* because these artists were working towards a national narrative that spoke to their respective subjectivity.

### **Judy Baca: what is a mural?**

The Mexican Revolution and the mural movement in Mexico had and continue to have significant influence on art practices and politics for many Chicanos within and beyond the *el movimiento*. In fact, Stefano Bloch, an emerging geography scholar, writes in his doctoral dissertation, “In 1968 the Chicano mural movements began as members of *el movimiento*—the Chicano-led civil rights movement--were turning to wall art to represent the political and social causes that were important to the Hispanic population...”<sup>32</sup> Judith F. Baca is one such artist who was influenced by the Mexican muralists, Siqueiros in particular, as she was also involved in the Chicano Movement in Los Angeles.<sup>33</sup> Shifra Goldman notes that, “Muralism was the most important, widespread cohesive and publicized aspect of the Chicano art movement during the 1970s.”<sup>34</sup> In this way, muralism was one aspect of the liberation movement that many people could participate in. While Baca does not always discuss issues of gender or sexuality, her background in these discourses do inform her ideology and some of her works. Baca is now a professor at UCLA where she is a joint faculty member in the Department of Chicana/o Studies and the Department of World Arts and Cultures. Her

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<sup>32</sup> Bloch, Stefano. *The Changing Face of Wall Space: Graffiti-murals in the context of neighborhood change in Los Angeles*

<sup>33</sup> Baca, Judith. *Birth of a Movement* p.109

<sup>34</sup> Baret-Sanchez, Holly, and Sperling Crockcoft, Eva. *Signs from the Heart: California Chicano murals*. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque (1993)

artistic career and practice are innovative, interactive and internationally known. While this thesis focuses on Baca, she was not the only Chicana making in this period, Barbara Corrasco, Patricia Rodríguez, Irene Pérez and Garciela Carillo, not to mention *Las Mujeres Muralistas* and others are her contemporaries.

As an undergraduate at California State University, Northridge, Baca majored in studio art and was trained as a minimalist painter.<sup>35</sup> Upon graduation, she quickly relinquished her education in minimalism as her artistic practice transformed into what she now calls, cultural community development.<sup>36</sup> In a 2006 interview, Baca discusses the disconnection that occurred at the time of her graduation from university, saying, “There was an incredible disjunction at that point between content and the notion of making art.”<sup>37</sup> She recalls Sister Corita Kent’s artist practice, as Kent drew attention to the blight of war using line and “field color studies...I could never understand why she didn’t integrate her ideas into the ways she painted.” Kent, who often made art about liberation and peace, also painted in a simple and restricted style, which may have undermined her messages. In this way, her style of painting and her message were not always in agreement. Baca’s curiosity and frustrations are clear—she was interested in mark making and formal prosperities of art making that embodied ideology to go along with politically charged artworks. It was at this time that Baca deviated from her training and moved into an artistic practice that focused on the liberation issues at hand.

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<sup>35</sup> Suzanne Lacy and Judith F. Baca, interview by Lynn Hershman, Stanford University, Digital Collections, July 27, 2006

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

This pedagogical or epistemic change in genre is not unique in the history of academic art. In the case of Diego Rivera, for example, his training in Paris lead him to develop an interest in cubism, a style that requires an educated viewer with a refined knowledge of style and art history.<sup>38</sup> However, when he returned to Mexico at the end of the war, Rivera departed from cubism and developed a style of painting and mural making that reflected the cultural conditions of Mexico, as well as his Mexican subjectivity.<sup>39</sup> Rivera transitioned from a Western style to a vernacular Mexican form in order to converse with and address the public--his audience of choice. In these examples, both Rivera and Baca experienced a metamorphosis from a Western epistemology and training to a more provincial genre or style that subverts the hegemonic construction of hierocracy within artworks, artistic practices and (art) histories. Within *el movimieto*, Baca goes on to say, “we consciously avoided Western European aesthetics, instead privileging Chicano popular culture...whatever could better and more accurately portray our direct life experience.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, Baca and others desire to make art that is relevant to their respective communities and to their time. Baca speaks of such a desire to address a local theme or idea, naming it *relatedness*, in her address to the Association for Moral Education.<sup>41</sup> In her address, Baca reflects on muralism saying,

A mural is not an easel painting made large.  
A mural is a work of art created in relatedness.  
Relatedness to the architecture in which it is placed,

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<sup>38</sup> Rochfort, Desmond. *Mexican Muralists: Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros*. San Francisco, Chronicle Books 1993 p.48-65

<sup>39</sup> Baca, Judith F. “The human story at the intersection of ethics, aesthetics, and social justice” *Journal of Moral Education* (June 2005) pp153-169

<sup>40</sup> Baca, Judith F. *Birth of a Movement* pp.111

<sup>41</sup> Baca, Judith F. “The human story at the intersection of ethics, aesthetics, and social justice” *Journal of Moral Education* (June 2005) pp153-169

To the people for whom it was painted.  
 Related to those who loft their brushes to help paint it.  
 It is a choreographed dance between team members, community residents and the street life.  
 Murals build common ground.  
 At their best, muralists pass brushes between many hands in precise poetic marks without individual distinction. Where one hand ends another begins.  
 A mural's scale transforms place, immerses the viewer in color and amplifies community voice.  
 A mural's compositional lines draw the body of the unsuspecting passer by into the painting by the solar plexus, yanking on his heart...  
 Murals sing gospel from out streets and preach to us about who we can be, What we fear, and to what we can aspire.  
 In the highest moments, murals can reveal to use what is hidden,  
 Challenge the prevailing dialogues,  
 Transform people's lives.  
 Murals exercise our most important rights of free speech  
 And can indeed be the catalysts for change in difficult times.  
 Times such as these...<sup>42</sup>

The prose works poetically to articulate the magic of the mural, the opportunity in its production and birth, as well as the power of its presence viewers. While some artists (and others) may work within a mythological framework, Baca expresses the idealized purpose of muralism in the lines above. Furthermore the form of the mural, which relies on architecture, becomes a non-object artwork that cannot be moved from the place it exists.<sup>43</sup> Because the mural cannot be bought or sold, it exists for those who made it and view it, subverting any art market, and capitalist or economic systems.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, the locality and often urbanness of the work tends to mirror those who live and work near the mural. Baca says, "...public murals in places where people live and work have become

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<sup>42</sup> Baca, Judith F. "The human story at the intersection of ethics, aesthetics, and social justice" *Journal of Moral Education* (June 2005) pp153-169

<sup>43</sup> There is the possibility that a mural can be whitewashed or buffed, and essentially erased. We may consider this a form of removal, although it is not lost, only hidden. Additionally, some frescos from Italy have been cut from the walls on which they were created and moved to an alternative location.

<sup>44</sup> Baca, Judith F. *Birth of a Movement*

tangible public monuments to the shared experience of communities of color.” It becomes clear with this quote that Baca values her audience and their experiences above the art object. In this way, the mural as medium has a multitude of functions and possible meanings—it subverts capitalism, and western supremacy within (and beyond) the arts, advocates for the local concerns, emphasizes the public and the city, encourages team work within its creation, and offers public monuments to the shared experiences of the subject, emphasizing their subjectivity and often, their marginal status.

### **Aesthetics in political art**

Many Chicana/o and Mexican murals alike employ a style of painting called, *social realism* or *socialist realism*. Noted Latin American and Chicana/o art historian Shifra Goldman remarks on the contestation of defining these terms writing, “I cannot do much more than establish a working definition of social realism, since the issue is still hotly debated on an international scale.”<sup>45</sup> As we endure the debates about the respective terms, we can generally understand social realism as, “[A] term used to refer to the work of painters, printmakers, photographers and film makers who draw attention to the everyday conditions of the working classes and the poor, and who are critical of the social structures that maintain these conditions.”<sup>46</sup> In other words, social realism most often renders figures and every day life in order to clearly demonstrate the narratives at hand. James G. Todd Jr. asserts that social realism, “almost always utilizes a form of

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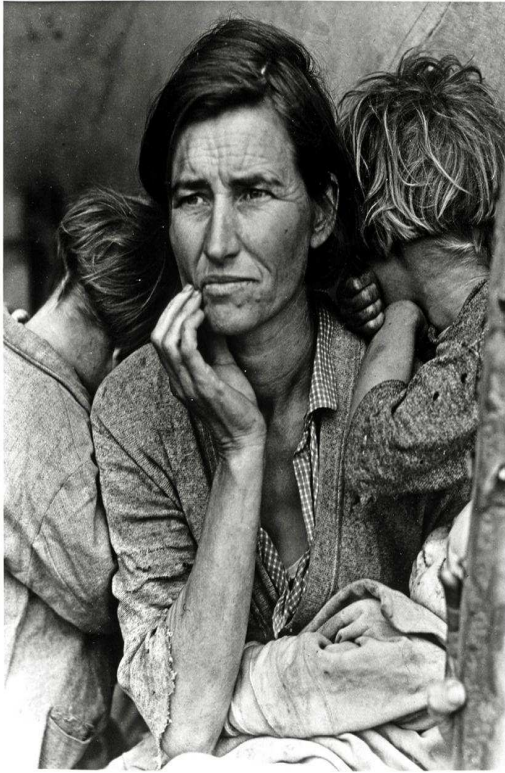
<sup>45</sup> Goldman, Shifra. *Contemporary Mexican Painting in a Time of Change*. University of Texas Press: Austin and London (1977). P9

<sup>46</sup> “Art Terms: Social Realism”, Museum of Modern Art, accessed June 11, 14, [http://www.moma.org/collection/theme.php?theme\\_id=10195](http://www.moma.org/collection/theme.php?theme_id=10195)

descriptive or critical realism”<sup>47</sup> In this way, we can understand that social realism is not a passive means of expression; rather, it actively takes up issue with political and social circumstances or conventions. While there are no limitations to the aesthetics of social realism, the murals of *Los Tres Grandes* and Baca often depict figures without photo-realistic treatments. Instead, their figures often appear to be flattened or simplified while still identifiable, sculpted and proportionate. I find this style appealing because it compels the viewer to reconsider the importance of the picturesque within an art work, while drawing our attention to the social issue at stake. While Dorothea Lange’s famed photograph, *Migrant Mother*, is a beautiful tragedy, as viewers, we are prompted to enjoy the symmetry of the composition, the stern beauty of the mother figure, while we also sympathize with her situation. In contrast, Baca’s murals do not usually emphasize the beauty of the sitter or the pleasure of tragedy or irony; rather, her treatment of figures is consistent with the social issues at hand.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 1.1** Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*



**Figure 1.2** Judith F. Baca, Detail from *Great Wall of Los Angeles*

These images in juxtaposition present a stark contrast to each other. While we might consider either image to exist as social realistic artworks, the medium, form, color, composition and subject matter differ significantly. Lange's image is a still moment where we witness a mother's immediate concern for her family. The mother's pose harkens back to classical or neoclassical sculpture, such as Rodin's *The Thinker* (c. 1880). In the midst of the mother's introspection, her children surround her, clinging to her for rest and safety. Formally, the photograph is clear, emphasizing the composition and media of the work as a way to discuss the subject at hand. The image created by

Baca, however, is a fragment of *The Great Wall*. It is a painting of several of the founders of Los Angeles, as noted underneath the wall painting. This segment of the mural is labeled, *Mulatto & Mestizo Descent*, describing the cultural and ethnic mixing of those who helped to found Los Angeles and the multicultural history that has sometimes been forgotten. The figures in this fragmented mural look at us with serious gazes and stern postures in confrontation. This contrasts Lang's mother figure who looks outward and beyond while we look at her. Another difference we note is between the two works is the form. Baca's mural is not perfectly rendered; we note the imperfections in perspective and a lack of sculpted figures. While these two images might be considered social realist artworks, their aesthetics and medium differ in important ways. This contrast of social realism, therefore, demonstrates the range we can understand in the term.

### **Looking at Baca's career**

In her early career, Baca worked for the city of Los Angeles as an art teacher at a handful of public parks in East L.A.<sup>48</sup> It was here that she began to understand the necessity and power of public artworks. While engaging with young people, mostly young men from a number of local gangs, Baca was able to work with them in groundbreaking ways. The youths' initial interest in art and design was manifested in more vernacular forms of visual culture: tagging and tattoos<sup>49</sup>. After building a rapport with these young people, Baca organized them into a *crew* of their own called, *Las Vistas*

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<sup>48</sup> Judith F. Baca (muralist) in an interview with Kaelyn Rodriguez, February 2014

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

*Nuevas*.<sup>50</sup> They would work collectively to protect each other from the imminent threat of violence while they painted an imagined portrait of Baca's grandmother, *Mi Abulita* (1970). Although I will discuss this mural in great detail in chapter two, I maintain that Baca and these young people transcended cultural and social boundaries with their project, which would, thereafter, inform their future direction and career paths. For her involvement with this work, as well as other projects, Baca would receive media attention and recognition as a professional artist. However, at this time, Baca was often framed as a political figure for her ability to incite peace where violence was the norm. The persistence of gang violence was a reality at the time; however, it is worth noting that art journals and publications on art theory and practice began writing about this project, some 15 or 20 years later, when Baca was an established professional artist.

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<sup>50</sup> Suzanne Lacy and Judith F. Baca, interview by Lynn Hershman, Stanford University, Digital Collections, July 27, 2006



**Figure 1.3** Judith F. Baca, *Mi Abulita*

Because *Chicano* murals and Baca's murals in particular operate in the vernacular and exist in barrios rather than museums or galleries, some might have been seen as low or even "ghetto art".<sup>51</sup> This discussion of so-called, "*high art*" and "*low art*" is not a new one. Art historian Guisela Latorre addresses this:

The reputation of the barrio as a dangerous and undesirable place to live is challenged by the creation of these mural environments. Chicana/o artists created these environments with the express purpose of transforming increasingly deteriorating barrio spaces (usually due to city initiatives), and others were erected to change the predominantly negative attitudes about the spaces inhabited by Mexican and Chicana/o communities. In both cases, however, mural

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<sup>51</sup> Bloch, Stefano. *The Changing Face of Wall Space: Graffiti-murals in the context of neighborhood change in Los Angeles*

environments function as emblems and physical markers of a space exclusively allocated or altered for the needs of the Chicana/o community.<sup>52</sup>

Latorre highlights the murals' responsibility to relieve barrio spaces of their negative and deteriorating qualities by asserting agency on behalf of the community in question. Furthermore, in mural making, there is an urgent and distinguished act of identity building taking place. In other words, this action of recreating or recontextualizing space leads the community to the central theme of the *el movimiento*: liberation. Within community building, the local is centralized and not marginalized. In cases where Baca received public attention for her murals and community building, she suggests in an interview with Bloch that she was primarily concerned with the community members and the gang members she worked with. Baca says, "I wanted to make sure the actual people in these neighborhoods accepted what I was trying to do. I needed the residents' respect, including the gang members', and I got it by showing them that they had mine. I wasn't trying to control this space or be elitist, I was trying to express a collective feeling about prevailing social issues facing the community."<sup>53</sup> With her words as well as her actions, Baca animates her deep interest in cultural community development. As such, a sense of shared pride and identity were largely motivating factors within *el movimiento* and within this work of mural making in Los Angeles in the 1970s.

After Baca and the young artists finished making *Mi Abulita*, she was asked by the Army Corp of Engineers to paint a mural in the cemented channel where the Los

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<sup>52</sup> Latorre, Guisela *Walls of Empowerment* University of Texas Press (2008) p.144

<sup>53</sup> Bloch, Stefano. *The Changing Face of Wall Space* p. 219

Angeles River once ran wildly<sup>54</sup>. This would turn into a 5-year project that involved some 400 youth assistants.<sup>55</sup> This new mural, *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*, would become the largest mural in the world and the mural that transformed Baca's career.<sup>56</sup>



**Figure 1.4** Judith F. Baca, detail from *Great Wall of Los Angeles*

At around the same time she began working on *The Great Wall*, Donna Deitch, Christina Schlesinger and Baca founded the Social and Public Art Resource Center (1976), or

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<sup>54</sup> Suzanne Lacy and Judith F. Baca, interview by Lynn Hershman, Stanford University, Digital Collections, July 27, 2006

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

SPARC, in Venice, Los Angeles. SPARC is now a major art center that houses the UCLA Digital Mural Lab, an art gallery, space for artists in residency, offices, an archive and more. Baca and her colleagues created SPARC because they needed a space of their own to work.<sup>57</sup> Her involvement with the city of Los Angeles was becoming bureaucratic and distanced from her interests in murals and community. Therefore, SPARC allowed them to create their own narratives and rules for public art practice, establishing them as experts and deeply invested members of a local community.

### **Suzanne Lacy and New Genre Public Art**

As we consider Baca's career and practice, it becomes important to contextualize her by way of comparing her to some of her contemporaries. Suzanne Lacy, a contemporary new genre public artist, presents excellent points of comparison to Baca. Lacy and Baca are colleagues and collaborators; they have worked together on several projects from Lacy's anthology, *Mapping the Terrain*, to interviews; the two are pioneers in the discourse of public art practice. Both artists are concerned with pressing topics that influence and inform audiences and public alike. In her book, Lacy describes new genre public art as, "visual art that uses both traditional and non-traditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly related to their lives..."<sup>58</sup> She goes on to discuss how new genre public art "deal[s] with the compelling issues of our time."<sup>59</sup> However, one main point of difference between

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<sup>57</sup> Suzanne Lacy and Judith F. Baca, interview by Lynn Hershman, Stanford University, Digital Collections, July 27, 2006

<sup>58</sup> Lacy, Suzanne *Mapping the Terrain: new genre public art*. Bay Press. Seattle (1995) 19

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* 33

Baca and Lacy is that Lacy's projects are ephemeral, whereas Baca's are permanent.<sup>60</sup> For example, *The Crystal Quilt*, *The Roof is on Fire*, *In Mourning and in Rage*, as well as many other works by Lacy are performative installations that deal with space, interaction, and time. While these "happenings" primarily focus on local issues, they rely on the participation of the people in the communities. In Lacy's text, *Mapping the Terrain*, she wonders, "The nature of audience—in traditional art taken to be just about everyone—is new being rigorously investigated in practice and theory. Is 'public' a qualifying description of place, ownership or access? Does it explain the intentions of the artist or the interest of the audience?"<sup>61</sup> This series of questions probes us art historians to consider the politics at stake within the assumptions that are made around a word like "public". Lacy urges us to reconsider biopolitics, access, and histories of inclusion and exclusion with her words. Even in the most obvious historical examples, we can consider this question of access and audience (or patron). One such example might be the practice of racial segregation within (or beyond) the United States. When "separate but equal" meant anything but equality and dignified treatment, we must consider what public spaces, amenities and public art projects are framing within their existence.

With this in mind, let us consider Baca and her focus on Chicana/o peoples with her murals and artistic praxis. Could we consider Baca to be a separatist who reinforces the differencing of communities and peoples? What are the advantages and disadvantages of operating within or beyond the dominant culture? Undoubtedly, Baca works with the

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<sup>60</sup> Suzanne Lacy and Judith F. Baca, interview by Lynn Hershman, Stanford University, Digital Collections, July 27, 2006

<sup>61</sup> Lacy, Suzanne *Mapping the Terrain: new genre public art*. Bay Press. Seattle (1995) p. 20

intention of privileging or emphasizing a Chicana/o perspective, however, I might ask what the alternative could be? Some might expect that at this point in history, we can apply a sort of post-racial, post-gendered approach that ignores ethnicity and gender, stating that they are no longer relevant because our problems around race and gender are defeated. In fact, such a topic is still highly relevant and discussed among popular media outlets and academics alike. While race and gender are informed by social constructions, it would be naive, unkind, and reckless to diminish or discount one's cultural, ethnic or gendered experiences in the world.<sup>62</sup> In fact, we all experience life from our own respective subjectivity. And while some artists or writers seem to believe that life could be universal or that all experiences could become homogenized, those of us who take a critical racial perspective know that is simply not accurate.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, to believe that all or most experiences or perspectives can be identical or unvaried from each other is to privilege the often-unmarked Anglo perspective<sup>64</sup>. In other words, Anglo cultures or perspectives in the U.S. are often positioned as *status quo* or normal, when the history of this geographical space that we now know as the United States of America reminds us that Europeans came to these shores on ships long after the American Indians had developed sovereign nations, complex languages, cultures and ways of life.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, the implicit invisibility of white culture in the U.S. is also a cultural construction that reinforces social and ethnic hierarchy.<sup>66</sup> Given this explanation, Baca's murals function

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<sup>62</sup> Corita Mitchell, interviewed by Warren Olney, *To The Point*, 89.3 FM, NPR, Spring 2014

<sup>63</sup> hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: from margins to center*

<sup>64</sup> Corita Mitchell, interviewed by Warren Olney, *To The Point*, 89.3 FM, NPR, Spring 2014

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

within a self-aware and self identified artistic practice that does not rely on a rhetoric of being *normal*, rather, she addresses her subjectivity and the subjectivity of those who share her cultural background and/or her experiences. A similar argument is laid out in the introduction of bell hooks' text, *Feminist Theory: from margins to center*, where hooks articulates the problems with Betty Friedan's famed text, *The Feminine Mystique*.<sup>67</sup> hooks discusses the assumptions of feminism that Friedan mistakenly made by excluding concerns of so many women. hooks writes, "Friedan's famous phrase, 'the problem that has no name' ... actually referred to the plight of a select group of college-educated, middle and upper-class, married white women—housewives bored with leisure..." With her words, hooks describes the way that certain women's concerns are expressed and advocated for, while the women in the margins are forgotten or excluded from the liberation movement that Friedan advocated for.

While Suzanne Lacy's work often deals with race and class, gender and access, her medium of choice is also worth examining. Because her works are most often ephemeral, their results may be harder to document. In this way, Lacy makes the audience member or the participant responsible for the exchange. While her projects are recorded, the record of the project is not the artwork; it is simply the way the idea of the project is preserved in time.<sup>68</sup> In this regard, the works of Baca and Lacy are non-object artworks that exist for the audience members. However, it is worth noting that these site-

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<sup>67</sup> hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From margins to center*. Cambridge: South End Press, 2000 p. 7-29 Within this introduction, hooks speaks about the unmarked presence of whiteness in the U.S. and address the middle class attitude and audience that was Friedan addresses. In this, hooks asked what was at stake when middle class white women went to work and poor women of color watched their children and cleaned their homes.

<sup>68</sup> <sup>68</sup> Suzanne Lacy and Judith F. Baca, interview by Lynn Hershman, Stanford University, Digital Collections, July 27, 2006

based instillations have a multitude of effects. For example, in her project, *The Crystal Quilt*, Lacy asked 430 older women to participate in a discussion that was not privy to the audience.<sup>69</sup> In this way, her public artwork was made private. This particular aspect of this project is very interesting to me because although the audience is allowed to *watch* the conversations, only those who participated will access the discussions. This is unique to Lacy's practice, as some of her earlier works such as, *Ablutions* (1972) are performative and chronicle certain events for the sake of the audience. In this earlier work, Lacy's performers sit in "body-sized galvanized metal tubs" that are filled with various substances.<sup>70</sup> The nude performers go on to smother their bodies with the materials while in an audio recording, rape victims recount their traumatic experiences.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> "Suzanne Lacy: The Crystal Quilt" accessed December 11, 2013

<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern-tanks/display/suzanne-lacy-crystal-quilt>

<sup>70</sup> Suzanne Lacy, Judy Chicago, Sandra Orgel and Aviva Rahmani <http://www.suzannelacy.com/early-works/#/ablutions/>

<sup>71</sup> Suzanne Lacy, Judy Chicago, Sandra Orgel and Aviva Rahmani <http://www.suzannelacy.com/early-works/#/ablutions/>



**Figure 1.5** Suzanne Lacy, *Ablutions*

While Baca's murals speak to a *Chicana/o* ideology, that is to say, they have specific points of reference in *Chicana/o* history, they do not literally restrict the audience members as in Lacy's *The Crystal Quilt*. However, as noted, this is not typical in Lacy's works. While Lacy has been a major contributor in new genre public art, Baca has been a major contributor to the revival of murals in Los Angeles, especially *Chicana/o* murals. This thesis focuses on two Los Angeles murals of Baca, however is it worth noting that she has made murals all over the U.S. and the world. Her influences from Siqueiros and *Los Tres Grandes* to more contemporary artists like Suzanne Lacy and Judy Chicago inform her ideology, subject matter, methods and her subjectivity.

## Chapter 2: A Question of Authorship

But the fact that art is rooted in collective experiences is not simply an established fact, a secondary characteristic which one might assume ‘in addition’ to artistic creation. It is an essential part of the very life of a work of art, and only through ignorance or dishonesty can these two factors be separated.<sup>72</sup>

-Jean Duvignaud

Baca’s grandmother, Francisca Baca, inspired the figure in Judith F Baca’s mural, *Mi Abulita*. In a lecture that Judith Baca delivered at the Association for Moral Education in 2004, the artist notes that until her the 1990’s when she painted in Colorado, her work told the stories of others, excluding any personal narratives.<sup>73</sup> Baca says, “Over the years through my work as a muralist I had told many stories of communities across the United States, but never my own.”<sup>74</sup> Up to that point, Baca’s murals were certainly self-reflexive, but were they also biographical? Does a self-referential work lend to a biography of sorts? Can we objectively say that Baca had not included her own story until this mural in the 1990’s? Within this chapter, I aim to examine storytelling in Baca’s murals, her processes for making murals and telling stories, as well as the significance of such stories and methods of production. With these questions in mind, I hope to develop sophisticated ways to understand Baca’s works as collaborative historical documents. Additionally, within this chapter, I aim to confront these questions as a way to understand Baca’s authorship and biographical position. Furthermore, Baca discusses the importance of telling, “alternative histories” within her work, but particularly within *The Great Wall*

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<sup>72</sup> Jean Duvignaud, *The Sociology of Art* (Harper & Row, 1970), 64

<sup>73</sup> The human story at the intersection of ethics, aesthetics and social justice, Judy Baca. 2004, p164

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

of L.A.<sup>75</sup>. While I find the term, *alternative histories* to be loaded and possibly problematic, I will consider the application of such a term and the stakes of such histories and their constituents. Another question I wish to explore within this chapter is that of the collaborative method for making murals. While Baca is known for her collaborative projects, she is often the primary artist credited for the work of art. In a production where collaboration is central, how can we understand this sort of crediting and why do we accept it? Non-conformist collective, Asco complicates this topic and others as we consider a paradigm of authorship in *Chicana/o* artistic practices. Additionally, a brief inquiry of *auteur theory* will also be presented in order to contextualize these questions and their relevance.

Baca's 1970 mural, *Mi Abuelita*, was made in a collaborative setting where the participants of the murals became central to its local meaning and its larger societal significance.<sup>76</sup> This mural's unconventional, sometimes unpredictable, methods of creation surprised those who worked in *el movimiento*, as well as those who did not. Additionally, making such a mural would become highly politicized and its political possibilities would become sought after by city official and bureaucrats alike.<sup>77</sup> In fact, the collaboration and organization of this mural became sensationalized when city officials and Los Angeles press learned that Baca was peacefully working with rival gang members to make this wall painting.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Shifra Goldman, *Signs from the Heart: California Chicano murals* (Venice: SPARC, 1993), 22-30

<sup>77</sup> Birth of a Movement

<sup>78</sup> Birth of a Movement p. 113

Upon graduating from university, Judy Baca began her career with the Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks where she taught painting classes for young children and the elderly in Hollenbeck Park, a public park in East Los Angeles.<sup>79</sup> At the time, this primarily Mexican and Chicana/o neighborhood ranked amongst the worst in the nation for gangs and gang activities.<sup>80</sup> According to Baca, Hollenbeck Park, among others, belonged to the gangs that occupied it, and was considered to be potentially dangerous.<sup>81</sup> In his essay, “Fortress L.A.”, Mike Davis, a noted Southern California social critic, prompts us to consider the locations of violence and gang activity with respect to the privatization of spaces in Los Angeles.<sup>82</sup> Davis reminds us of the disparities between “inner-city conditions” and conditions of the “truly rich” in Los Angeles.<sup>83</sup> Within his analysis, Davis does more than simply offer an account of Los Angeles, he illustrates the details of a city, demonstrating “how the built environment contributes to segregation...”<sup>84</sup>

Baca recounts how gang members were unable to journey “even a mile to a neighboring park for fear of reprisal by rivaling...gangs.”<sup>85</sup> Despite this environment of violence and segregation, Baca began her work in Boyle Heights, becoming familiar and friendly with the young gang members who frequented Hollenbeck Park. The young men

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<sup>79</sup> William Stephens, “New Street Gang Trades Weapons for Paint Brushes” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Aug. 30, 1970

<sup>80</sup> Birth of a Movement

<sup>81</sup> archives of American art, Smithsonian Institute, oral history 1985

<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interviews-judith-baca-5436#transcript>

<sup>82</sup> Mike Davis, “Fortress L.A.” *The City Reader* 1996. P198

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> birth of a movement p112

who would call to her, “Hey art lady!” displaying their interested in her art.<sup>86</sup> Eventually the young men and Baca would exchanged artworks—she shared her paintings with them if they would share their tattoos with her.<sup>87</sup> This rapport developed into the collaborative group known as, *Las Vistas Nuevas*, a remarkable kind of collaboration. It was not a gang, but a collection of gang members who respected and protected each other so they could make art together.<sup>88</sup> This collective process marked a significant method of repurposing gang members’ creativity, expression and competition in a public place.<sup>89</sup> *Las Vistas Nuevas* became the blueprint for reorganizing gangs in East L.A. to work collectively and peacefully on a single project. With the mural *Mi Abuelita*, this new *crew* imagined local and cultural family values with the mural *Mi Abuelita*; they honored the matriarch, a figure they respected and admired.<sup>90</sup>

In the United States, 1970 was a year of great social change. In the specific context of Baca’s work, *el movimiento* manifested in high school, college and university walkouts made waves in Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Colorado, and New Mexico.<sup>91</sup> At the same time, politics, social changes and art were conflated into one for some Chicanas/os.<sup>92</sup> Muralists like Joe and John Gonzalez, David Botello, Wayne Alaniz Healy and others made murals that directly tied to the themes of liberation within *el movimiento*. In some cases, these early murals incorporated pre-conquest iconography that would become

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Baca, Judith F. birth of a movement p112

<sup>89</sup> Birth of a Movement p. 112

<sup>90</sup> Personal interview with Baca 3/6/2014

<sup>91</sup> Abelardo B. Delgado, *The Chicano Movement: Some not too objective observations* (Denver: Totinem Publications, 1971) 22-24

<sup>92</sup> Shifra Goldman, *Signs from the Heart: California Chicano murals* (Venice: SPARC, 1993), 26-29

widespread in later murals.<sup>93</sup> In 1970, only a handful of Chicana/o murals were made in Los Angeles. Shifra Goldman dates the birth of the Chicano murals movement to 1968-1970, making *Mi Abuelita* not only one of the earliest Chicano murals, but the first to be organized by a woman.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, its subject matter, that of an elderly woman, is distinguished from other early Chicano murals that portrayed warriors, or the origins of the *mestizaje*.<sup>95</sup> While David Rivas Botello and Wayne Healy, also known as *Los Dos Streetscapers* or *East Los Streetscapers*, were making murals that had to do with indigenous spirituality, architecture and Chicano life, they also made contemporary images that spoke to the conditions of urban Chicana/o families and communities. Botello and Healy, the Gonzalez brothers, José Montoya, Esteban Villa and others made murals that spoke directly and publicly to Chicana/o peoples, their histories and origins.<sup>96</sup> In this way, the subject matter of the murals was crucial. Aesthetics and styles varied among Chicana/o artists at that time, yet the themes of their work were often related. Goldman lists several popular concepts for this time, such as pre-conquest religious motifs, especially Olmec, Toltec, Aztec and Maya deities, as well as historical events, indigenous symbols, political and social topics and other themes related to land and liberty, a theme from the Mexican Revolution.<sup>97</sup>

*Mi Abuelita*'s subject matter differed from these popular themes, yet maintained a local significance and vernacular subject to its community. It was painted on a band shell

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<sup>93</sup> Shifra Goldman, *Signs from the Heart: California Chicano murals* (Venice: SPARC, 1993), 26-29

<sup>94</sup> Shifra Goldman, *Signs from the Heart: California Chicano murals* (Venice: SPARC, 1993), 26-29

<sup>95</sup> Shifra Goldman, *Signs from the Heart: California Chicano murals* (Venice: SPARC, 1993), 26-29

<sup>96</sup> Shifra Goldman, *Signs from the Heart: California Chicano murals* (Venice: SPARC, 1993), 26-29

<sup>97</sup> Shifra Goldman, *Signs from the Heart: California Chicano murals* (Venice: SPARC, 1993), 29-30

in Hollenbeck Park, which covered a stage where the annual *Feria de los Niños* or Children's Fair was hosted.<sup>98</sup> The three-sided band shell was similar to that of an amphitheater, but distinguished in its flat walls in lieu of round ones. During the Children's Fair, children presented their dances and performances on stage and the collective *Las Vistas Nuevas* had the fair in mind when deciding the subject matter of the mural.<sup>99</sup> When Baca was asked about the subject matter of the mural, she stated that she posed this question to her crew: "Who is the most loving figure in your family? And they said, 'our abulitas.'"<sup>100</sup>



**Figure 2.1** Judith F. Baca, *Mi Abuelita*

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<sup>98</sup> birth of a movement p .112

<sup>99</sup> personal interview with Baca

<sup>100</sup> interview with Baca March 6, 2014

When deciding on the theme for the mural, *Las Vistas Nuevas* considered of the building they were painting, as well as its function. Baca recalls them saying, “It looks like we can paint all the way around and it would be like embracing the children.”<sup>101</sup> In this way, Baca and her crew decided that a grandmother figure with embracing arms would be the subject of the mural. For Baca, this mural had personal significance, since it was around this time that her grandmother passed away, although the image was not a portrait of her late grandmother. Baca went on to say that, “It didn’t really look like her, we weren’t looking for likeness. We were doing a projection; it was very simple.”<sup>102</sup> In fact, Baca was beginning her feminist studies at this time although she noted, “the feminist movement hadn’t hit East L.A.” yet.<sup>103</sup> While the mural was not a likeness of Baca’s grandmother, the image seems to possess some self-reflexive qualities for Baca. By this, I mean to say that Baca shared a deep bond with her grandmother because she helped to raise her and in her first mural, she paid homage to the grandmother figure. Additionally, in 1970, Baca was beginning to understand the dynamics of feminist discourse, therefore this mural might be an early Chicana feminist or a pre-feminist mural. For these reasons and others, it is significant that Baca and her crew pictured an elderly brown woman, especially in comparison to most of her male counterparts who were picturing warriors, ancient motifs and other popular Chicano iconography. In my interview with Baca, she said that she and the crew discussed the matriarch system, indicating an awareness of feminist issues in the part of the participants in this project.

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> interview with Baca March 6, 2014

<sup>103</sup> interview with Baca March 6, 2014

### **How the mural was made:**

Since Hollenbeck Park was not a neutral place for gang members in 1970, it was a potentially dangerous location for the young men and women who made *Mi Abuelita*. Gang members from such gangs as White Fence, Second Street, Evergreen and others assembled to become *Las Vistas Nuevas*.<sup>104</sup> This action of mixing gangs was dangerous, so Baca worked to create treaties for the young men so they could paint peacefully together.<sup>105</sup> Moreover, police were also aware that gang members frequented this park, and tried to segregate the gang members from other patrons of the park. On more than once occasion, Baca was warned that if she continued to assemble the gang members together for the mural, they would be arrested.<sup>106</sup> Assembling to create this mural created a significant risk for the members of *Las Vistas Nuevas* and Baca in the form of threats from other gangs as well as the authorities.<sup>107</sup> With such serious and immediate dangers at hand, the groups' persistence is exceptional, but they were organized to protect themselves. *Las Vistas Nuevas* created a look out system in which they would whistle if they saw or suspected a police officer, an undercover police officer or an opposing gang member approaching. They would then hide inside of the band shell until another "all-clear" whistle was sounded.<sup>108</sup> With this system, it was possible for *Las Vistas Nuevas* and Baca to work both day and night, allowing them to finish the mural in only two

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<sup>104</sup> interview with Baca 3/6/2014 26 minutes

<sup>105</sup> interview with Baca 3/6/2014 26 minutes

<sup>106</sup> birth of a movement

<sup>107</sup> interview, Judy Baca and Suzanne Lacy interview, Stanford 2004

<sup>108</sup> birth of a movement

weeks. To speed the work, they used a projector to capture the likeness of the figure onto the walls.<sup>109</sup>

Along with the projector, very basic materials were used to make this mural. The young men climbed on scaffolding to reach the high walls and ceiling of the band shell. Their other materials were gathered by donations and sometimes, they were attained in less than ethical ways. It wasn't until later that Baca realized some of the youths stole the paint and other materials they needed.<sup>110</sup> Yet this project involved the community in more than one way: Baca wrote letters to local butchers and business owners, asking them to donate lunchmeat and other foods so she could provide lunch for the crew. The image below captures a moment in the process of painting the mural. We can see that it was made in sections, the background was painted first, and the figure in the mural was painted later.



**Figure 2.2** Judith F. Baca, *Mi Abuelita* in progress

<sup>109</sup> interview, Judy Baca and Suzanne Lacy interview, Stanford 2004

<sup>110</sup> interview, Judy Baca and Suzanne Lacy interview, Stanford 2004

In this mural, the matriarch demonstrated a specific dynamic within a Mexican or Mexican-American family, such that the woman—the mother, the Nina, or the grandmother—is the nurturer. This mural demonstrates how the pictured image and the story of its making present a dichotomy within women’s roles, the dichotomy of the loving old woman in the mural juxtaposed to the fearless young art teacher who led gang members to make art, Baca pioneered new terrain with this project setting her own rules. In *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa discusses the duality of roles within the Mexican/ Chicano home noting the strength *and* humility of the woman, her persistence to protect and her instinct to nurture. Anzaldúa asks, “Which was it to be—strong or submissive, rebellious or conforming?”<sup>111</sup> In a reflection of Anzaldúa’s question, we see Baca as a leader among young men, where she displays both care and rebelliousness in this project.

Upon closely examining the complex roles of women within Mexican/ Chicana culture, I observe three elements that are tied to the making of *Mi Abuelita* and its meaning. First, members from several rival gangs worked peacefully on a single project outside gang discourse. *Mi Abuelita* was a mural that could bring young gang members to neutralize their brawls. In the context of the neighborhood and the prominent gang culture at that time, this is unique.<sup>112</sup> Second, a young woman only a few years older than her crew was able to organize this collaboration. Her leadership and rapport with the young men was exceptional. In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa recalls the messages her mother

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<sup>111</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: the new Mestiza* (San Francisco, Aunt Lute Books, 1987) 18.

<sup>112</sup> Birth of a Movement

gave her, saying, “*La mujer tiene que hacer lo que le diga el hombre.*” or “*The woman must do what the man says.*”<sup>113</sup> With *Las Vistas Nuevas*, Baca turned this rule turned on its head. The sentiment behind Anzualdua’s words juxtaposed to Baca’s attitude about making murals with gang members emphasizes Baca’s unique experience within and beyond her cultural expectations, and as an unaccompanied woman in a dangerous neighborhood. Lastly, the particular narrative within which the collective worked within is surprisingly rare. The commemoration of the matriarch within a Chicano space is unique, especially in consideration of the other early Chicana/o murals that were made from 1968-1970.<sup>114</sup>

### **Rasquachismo Aesthetics**

While the collective approach and history to *Mi Abuelita*’s creation is central to its significance, aesthetic properties also inform its meaning and offer insight to the circumstances of its creation. In this vein, I analyze the aesthetic and formal properties of this mural. Many Chicano murals from 1968-1970 and later were created in haste or created by artists who had no training.<sup>115</sup> Goldman reminds us, “As a result the works were often ragged and needed better drawing, composing or painting skills. However, they exhibited what one writer on Chicano theatre has defined as *rasquachismo*, the virtue of opposing the refined finished product of bourgeois art with ‘unpolished vitality’.”<sup>116</sup> I see in *rasquachismo* an individualized and unique decision to refuse formal Western techniques, aesthetics and expectations of visual culture. Goldman goes on to

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<sup>113</sup> Translated by Kaelyn Rodriguez

<sup>114</sup> Shifra Goldman, *Signs from the Heart: California Chicano murals* (Venice: SPARC, 1993), 26-29

<sup>115</sup> Shifra Goldman, *Signs from the Heart: California Chicano murals* (Venice: SPARC, 1993), 25

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

explain “murals insisted on ‘messages’, on narrative...in a period which derided these attributes in art.”<sup>117</sup> These murals were more than “formalist experimentation for its own sake, but only as it contributed to the community.”<sup>118</sup> According to this logic, we must analyze this work within the framework of its context.

The mural was 20 feet by 35 feet and filled the band shell entirely. It was painted with acrylic paint.<sup>119</sup> The bright reds, oranges and yellows behind *Abuelita*'s head create a feeling of warmth and celebration. They act like ripples behind her, echoing her message in color rather than sound. Although the colors do not blend into each other, they transition from the most saturated to the least. *Abuelita*'s head is small in comparison to her grand torso and her massive arms and hands that wrap around the amphitheater. Additionally, her head is flat against the ceiling wall, creating an effect that she is looking down on the viewer. *Abuelita*'s gaze is serious, and her eyes are wide open. Her mouth is open in a stiff sort of smile. The cast shadows on her cheeks coupled with her high cheekbones seem to indicate *Abuelita*'s indigenous heritage. Her black hair is in thick braids that wrap into buns on either side of her head, a traditional hairstyle among Mexican girls and women. While her hair is almost all black, there are two or three instances of graying near her temples and down the center part. *Abuelita*'s attire is simple; she wears a pink blouse with a black knitted poncho adorning it. Finally, her massive arms and hands are carefully rendered. Close attention was paid to the details of her wrists, palms, and fingers. Although the anatomical details are rendered with great

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. 24-25

<sup>119</sup> “Mi Abuelita” Judy Baca, accessed July 1, 2014, [http://www.judybaca.com/now/index.php?option=com\\_igallery&view=gallery&id=5](http://www.judybaca.com/now/index.php?option=com_igallery&view=gallery&id=5)

care, the technique that was applied to the arms and hands make her limbs appear stiff and immobile, almost alien to the rest of her body. Her larger than life arms reach out to the viewers as if she will enfold them with a mighty hug. While *Abuelita* does not look like a young woman, her age is most apparent in her wrists, which display weathering and strain. In fact, they seem strained even in her embracing gesture. Additionally, her neck gives sign of her years, as it sags a little under her chin. However, this mural also emphasizes her vitality and presence within the brightly colored scene around her and the warm halo that envelops her head. She greets us as she stands in front of a brightly painted community of adobe style homes. And while there are no others with her in the image, we know that she is not alone, she is loved by her community and by the audience in turn.

Although this mural no longer exists, it had a tremendous impact on its community and individual community members. Some of the men that were involved with this mural continued to paint with Baca for several more years, working on *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*, and eventually establishing careers in the arts. Bernardo Munoz, for example, started making murals with Baca in East Los Angeles in 1970.<sup>120</sup> Munoz was an “inner-city school kid with loads of artistic inclination but little opportunity”, yet his experience working on the murals would inform his future. Munoz stated how working on the mural helped him and others “make a positive transition into adulthood...To go from graffiti to doing something that the community respects and

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<sup>120</sup> <http://sparcinla.org/meet-bernardo-munoz-from-great-wall-of-la-kid-to-board-member-of-sparc/>

appreciates, that's incredible"<sup>121</sup> As an adult, Munoz opened a graphic design firm and is a board member at SPARC.<sup>122</sup> His career in the arts and continued partnership with SPARC and communities in Los Angeles is significant to the legacy of the murals. While the narratives of Baca's murals most often deal with historical moments and social issues, the collaboration that they require creates a second narrative in its own right. The act of collaborating to make the murals becomes a significant element of the work integral to the final work of art.

### **Questions of Authorship**

With this analysis, I pose a question about the construction of authorship with respect to *Mi Abuelita*. While it is clear that Baca organized and managed the efforts to make the mural, it is also true that this mural would not have cultivated the same meaning if she had painted it alone. If *Las Vistas Nuevas* had not made this mural, it probably would not have been painted in the first place since the work is a result of impromptu social interactions between Baca and her collaborators. The mural creation is dependent upon both Baca and the crew, yet the young men are not credited for the work.<sup>123</sup> I would note that this mural is not well documented and is written about by only a few scholars, including Baca herself.<sup>124</sup> Only a handful of images of it have been published and although SPARC archives about two-dozen 35-millimeter slides of the work, the sides

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<sup>121</sup> <http://sparcinla.org/meet-bernardo-munoz-from-great-wall-of-la-kid-to-board-member-of-sparc/>

<sup>122</sup> <http://sparcinla.org/meet-bernardo-munoz-from-great-wall-of-la-kid-to-board-member-of-sparc/>

<sup>123</sup> birth of a movement

<sup>124</sup> those who have written about this mural in any detail include Shifra Goldman, Judy Baca and Stefano Bloch.

are difficult to access, reproduce or circulate. Nevertheless, the question of authorship is significant for considering the processes of re-telling “alternative histories” and for appreciating elements of biography in Baca’s career. I would ask, “Who is presenting a loving *abuelita*?” or even, “whose *abuelita* is she?” These questions address the larger context of the message that is presented within the wall painting.

In this vein, the mural functions in a similar to a film made by a director, actors and other contributors. As such, we can consider theories of authorship and the *auteur* for understanding the mural. In the book, *Theories of Authorship*, Edward Buscombe writes, “Truffaut defines a true *auteur* as one who brings something genuinely personal to his subject instead of merely producing a tasteful, accurate but lifeless rendering of the original material.”<sup>125</sup> While this definition may be sufficient in conceptual terms, it lacks a method that identifies an individual or even a group as an author. I submit that this definition leaves room for the possibility that a collaboration of people can in fact be a collective *auteur*, in the case of *Mi Abuelita*. With respect to public art, there are possibilities of authorship that could be irrelevant to single-authored private artworks. On this subject, Patricia C. Phillips writes:

Rather than serving as predictable urban décor or diversion, public art can be a form of radical education that challenges the structures and conditions of cultural and political institutions. Public art, like radical education, by necessity occupies a marginal position. Critics and theorists need to see this location as an opportunity rather than a disadvantage: public art can frame and foster discussion of community and culture specifically because of its border conditions.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Edward Buscombe “Ideas of authorship” in *Theories of Authorship* ed. John Caughie (London: Routledge, 1996), 22

<sup>126</sup> Patricia C. Phillips, “Public Constructions,” in *Mapping the Terrain 1995*, ed. Suzanne Lacy (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 61

Phillips' argument around public art, her same argument can be applied to the culture and politics of collectively produced artworks and to community and social classes. She develops a framework for recontextualizing education and radical knowledge sharing, which is to say she discusses the politics of communities and their methods of (visual) communication. In this way, the question of the author and the collective authors is central to fostering discussion around culture, education and its methodologies.

Developing a stronger discourse around authorship for this mural and others is significant. I submit that *Mi Abuelita*, although no longer in existence, functions as a historical document. It was a primary record of the conditions, aesthetics, culture and interests of the time of its creation and of its authors. Its subjectivity is significant for understanding it as an original Chicano mural, but also as a Chicano document about life in East Los Angeles in 1970<sup>127</sup>. I propose that *Las Vistas Nuevas* and Judy Baca authored the mural, an important distinction from other literature on this mural since the work is typically credited to Baca alone.<sup>128</sup> However, there are some understandable challenges to crediting *Las Vistas Nuevas* as authors of this mural. First, some members have since passed away or moved on to their own individual endeavors.<sup>129</sup> Additionally, Baca's notoriety to her alone. Yet, the collective nature of the project and the collaborative process in which it was unfolded is, in my perspective, sufficient to be called collective authorship.

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<sup>127</sup> Here, the term, "original", is meant in context to the creation of image at hand and its impetus. This is not an argument of authenticity or any related notion of an essential Chicano voice.

<sup>128</sup> According to Baca's

<sup>129</sup> birth of a movement

### **What does narrative matter: connecting voice to consciousness**

The work and practice of Asco, a distinguished artist collective poses important questions around authorship and collectivity. Asco's four members—Patssi Valdez, William Gamboa, Gronk and Harry Gamboa Jr.—grew up in East L.A. in the 1970's. They actively made art together from 1972-1987, at the height of *el movimiento*. Their work often addressed the social and political situations of Chicanos in East L.A.<sup>130</sup> Asco worked very differently from Baca and her collaborators. For the most part, Asco was a fixed collective, working together without other collaborators. They were not interested in ancient Mexica motifs or deities, nor were they concerned with the or the beloved Virgen de Guadalupe. Their art did not care to discuss Mexican histories or family structures; rather, they were interested in the contemporary urban Chicano and his experiences.<sup>131</sup> Asco, for the most part, refused to make typical wall paintings, instead, they staged murals with their bodies and literally took their installations to the streets.<sup>132</sup> Their works, *Walking Mural* and *Instant Mural* are groundbreaking. Asco questioned not only the qualities of a mural, they questioned the use of indigenous motifs, and the political, aesthetic, and social conventions of *el movimiento*.<sup>133</sup> For example, after their performance, *First Supper (After a Major Riot)*, Asco and Humberto Sandoval made

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<sup>130</sup> Guisela Latorre, *Walls of Empowerment* p. 212-220

<sup>131</sup> C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez, *Asco and the Politics of Revulsion* in *Asco: Elite of the Obscure* ed. by C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez (Los Angeles: LACMA, 2011) 37-45

<sup>132</sup> C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez, *Asco and the Politics of Revulsion* in *Asco: Elite of the Obscure* ed. by C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez (Los Angeles: LACMA, 2011) 37-45

<sup>133</sup> Guisela Latorre, *Walls of Empowerment* p. 212-220

*Instant Mural* (1974)<sup>134</sup>. With masking tape, Gronk taped Valdez and Sandoval to the wall of a nearby liquor store. Gronk later reflected on this saying:

*Instant Mural* challenged the fragility of social controls. Several anonymous individual, concerned about their welfare, offered to help Valdez and Sandoval escape the confines of the low-tack masking tape. After an hour of entrapment, Valdez and Sandoval simply walked away from the visually intimidating, yet physically weak lengths of tape.<sup>135</sup>

With this account, it is clear that Asco was making a statement about biopower, especially for Chicanos living in urban areas. This performance of a mural transforms some of the conditions of “social control” into a visual and physical enactment of daily life. Although this mural was performative and ephemeral, it made a significant impression on its community and other muralists.

Asco’s earlier work, *Spray Paint LACMA*, also called, *Project Pie in De/Face* (1972), offers some important points when considering the stakes of authorship and narrative in Chicana/o art. While this piece is not necessarily a mural, it is often described as a work of graffiti or tagging.<sup>136</sup> According to Chon Noriega, the piece was made after “a LACMA curator’s dismissive statement that Chicanos made graffiti not art, hence their absence from the gallery walls.”<sup>137</sup> As such, Gamboa, Gronk and Herrón drove to LACMA and signed their names on the entrance of the building with spray paint.<sup>138</sup> With their signatures Asco conflated graffiti and conceptual art by turning the entire museum

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<sup>134</sup> Guisela Latorre, *Walls of Empowerment* p. 217-219

<sup>135</sup> Guisela Latorre, *Walls of Empowerment* p. 217

<sup>136</sup> Chon Noriega “Conceptual Graffiti and the Public Art Museum: Spray Paint LACMA” in *Asco: Elite of the Obscure* ed. by C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez (Los Angeles: LACMA, 2011) 256

<sup>137</sup> Chon Noriega “Conceptual Graffiti and the Public Art Museum: Spray Paint LACMA” in *Asco: Elite of the Obscure* ed. by C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez (Los Angeles: LACMA, 2011) 256

<sup>138</sup> Chon Noriega “Conceptual Graffiti and the Public Art Museum: Spray Paint LACMA” in *Asco: Elite of the Obscure* ed. by C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez (Los Angeles: LACMA, 2011) 256

into an art object that was signed by several Chicano artists.<sup>139</sup> As with many of Asco's artworks, this one was short lived, yet when the signatures were buffed or whitewashed, LACMA was simultaneously erasing the world's largest work of Chicano art.<sup>140</sup>



**Figure 3.** Willie Herrón, *Project Pie in De/Face*

The following day Willie Herrón photographed Patssi Valdez with the signatures. This image, as seen above, has become an icon for Asco and this project. In *Project Pie in De/Face*, the question of authorship becomes highly relevant to the artwork but it also challenges the definition of who can make art. It also significant to consider the account that Valdez gave about her exclusion from this project. Mario Ontiveros writes, “Asco

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<sup>139</sup> Chon Noriega “Conceptual Graffiti and the Public Art Museum: Spray Paint LACMA” in *Asco: Elite of the Obscure* ed. by C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez (Los Angeles: LACMA, 2011) 256

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

might have enacted the very gender politics that they criticized in the movement” with respect to Valdez. In an interview with Valdez said, “I was not allowed to go. They said, ‘You cannot run fast enough. What if we get arrested and go to jail?’ They were sort of protecting me, but at the same time I was pissed off.”<sup>141</sup> While her counterparts made their marks on LACMA and commented on discriminatory definitions of art and its makers, Valdez was simultaneously excluded.

Finally, while authorship is central to this chapter because of the construction and conventions that surround it I would like to compare Baca’s public art to that of Richard Serra, a contemporary spatial artist who designs sculptural artworks. In a PBS Art 21 interview, Serra says that his sculptures are not about art or landscape or buildings, nor does he work from metaphor or image<sup>142</sup>. He elaborates that his interest is in a relationship between certain elements that he finds interesting at a given moment.<sup>143</sup> While many artists might also admit that their work does satisfy some kind of individual interest, Serra functions within the artist-genius paradigm, but some of his work has produced controversy and opposition. In a famous court case, *Tilted Arc*, Serra’s infamous 1981 spatial work was removed from its site because of vehement public opposition.

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<sup>141</sup> Chon Noriega, “Your Art Disgusts Me: Early Asco, 1971-75” in *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* Issue 19 (Autum/Winter 2008) 109-121

<sup>142</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/richard-serra>

<sup>143</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/richard-serra>



**Figure 2.4** Richard Serra, *Tilted Arc*

In regard to *Tilted Arc*, Tomkins remarked, "I think it is perfectly legitimate to question whether public spaces and public funds are the right context for work that appeals to so few people – no matter how far it advances the concept of sculpture."<sup>144</sup> Tomkins reminds us that public art has a responsibility to its constituents because of the politics of public life. When Serra was asked about his *Tilted Arc*, however, he replied, "When I conceive a structure for a public space, a space that people walk through, I consider the traffic flow, but I do not necessarily worry about the indigenous community. I am not going to concern myself with what 'they' consider to be adequate..."<sup>145</sup> Serra articulates an apathy toward the community around his artwork. His desire to make objects that exist

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<sup>144</sup> *Visual Shock: A History of Art Controversies in American Culture*, Michael Kammen p. 241

<sup>145</sup> *Visual Shock: A History of Art Controversies in American Culture*, Michael Kammen p. 239

in space but do not necessarily interact with the “indigenous community” presents a neo-bourgeoisie project that exists beyond cultural relevance or concern for the public.

Serra has become famous for transforming planar objects into spaces. While the meaning or purpose of these space sculptures is ambiguous, aloof and arguably elitist, he makes his works in public spaces for the benefit of the site, rather than the people.<sup>146</sup> The importance of the location is highly significant to the work of both Serra *and* Baca, but Baca’s work takes into account the interest of the people for whom the mural is made. Baca notes that, “The beginnings of muralism in Los Angeles are rooted in the need for public space and public expression.”<sup>147</sup> By contrast, Serra and his supporters, “openly ridiculed the idea of a public art rooted in democratic processes.”<sup>148</sup> In this respect, Richard Serra’s oeuvre differs drastically from Judith Baca’s. The cultural and ethnic background of these artists reinforces the meaning of their works, while the location of the public artworks is also crucial to their meaning for their intended audience. Such stories extend beyond their most immediate narrative and become stories in themselves of experiences of access, liberation, history, public life culture and expression.

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<sup>146</sup> *Visual Shock: A History of Art Controversies in American Culture*, Michael Kammen p. 239-241

<sup>147</sup> *Birth of a Movement*

<sup>148</sup> *Visual Shock: A History of Art Controversies in American Culture*, Michael Kammen p. 239-241

### Chapter 3: A study of memory in The Los Angeles River and *The Great Wall*

*The Great Wall* is a major monument that has gained international notoriety. Its large scale, unconventional production, and subversive telling of histories make it a particularly famous mural. I submit that its location *within* the Los Angeles River is one of the most important aspects of its status as a cultural text. The Los Angeles River, also known as El Rio (y Valle) de Nuestra Senora la Reina de Los Angeles de la Porciuncula, was once a thriving body of water that brought life to what is now Southern California.<sup>149</sup> Before it became captive to an urban metropolis around the 1920's, it was a living organism that yielded for no one<sup>150</sup>. Figure 13 captures a calm moment in the history of the Los Angeles River, but more importantly, it recalls the significant loss of a natural resource.

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<sup>149</sup> Birth of a Movement

<sup>150</sup> Patt Morrison, *Rio L.A.: Tales from the Los Angeles River* (Santa Monica: Angel City Press, 2001) 16-82



**Figure 3.1** . Los Angeles River 1900's- image from the human story article accessed January 2014

The river's unpredictable ebb and flow lead to its containment. Patt Morrison and Mark Lamonica discuss how the river's currents distinguish it from others, "The Los Angeles River never was a river as the Seine or the Thames is a river. It was unlike any river the Europeans had ever seen. It swelled and shrank by seasons, spawning small streams that lasted only as long as the water did."<sup>151</sup> The indigenous Tongva peoples accepted and appreciated the changing river— they would relocate as the river rose. Their lifestyle allowed for nature's will. By contrast to the Tongva perspective however, later settlers decided the river should be contained.<sup>152</sup> Today within in Los Angeles culture, the river is not considered to be a thriving, living thin and many Angelinos have never seen The Los Angeles River. In contemporary thought, the L.A. River is a cite for dumping

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<sup>151</sup> Patt Morrison, *Rio L.A.: Tales from the Los Angeles River* (Santa Monica: Angel City Press, 2001) 33  
<sup>152</sup> article

garbage, a hub for graffiti and tagging, a common place for the homeless, but not a river that supports animal and plant life.<sup>153</sup> The natural history of the river has since been forgotten in contemporary Los Angeles memory<sup>154</sup>. Morrison and Lamonica write, “As the modern city depends on the freeway, the ancient one depended on the river.”<sup>155</sup> This comparison demonstrates the power and potential destruction of cultural amnesia.



**Figure 3.2** *Containing of the Los Angeles River c.1930*

Figure 14 depicts the cementing of the Los Angeles River by the US Army Corps of Engineers process of erasing a natural river. Judy Baca uses this phenomenon as a

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid. 38

metaphor for *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*: the erasure of a living, thriving river to the cultural exclusion of marginalized peoples. She compares the physical containment of a river to the intellectual, social and cultural containment or exclusion of certain groups of people. In “Birth of a Movement”, Baca explains her metaphor, writing that the cemented L.A. River functions as a scar in Los Angeles “a tattoo on the scar where the river once ran.”<sup>156</sup> She imagines that the mural is a tattoo, which covers the wounded flesh, and reinterprets the scar’s history. This metaphor identifies the *Great Wall of Los Angeles* as a knowledge producing cultural text and artwork. The facets of this mural tells and *retells* stories, creates and reframes meaning, and attempts to heal a wounded river.

Baca also discusses the importance of telling, “alternative histories”<sup>157</sup> in *The Great Wall of L.A.* In a lecture that she presented at the 30<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the Association for Moral Education, she discussed her process for the collaborative method used for making and planning *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*. Baca discusses a four parts, a process called, “Imaging of Content”<sup>158</sup>. The first step in the process is research. Baca and her team researched events in Los Angeles and worldwide and translated those histories in *The Great Wall*. Additionally, they interviewed experts and non-experts to gain individual perspectives on the events. The interviews helped to ground the mural in local epistemologies that allowed for a myriad of stories and histories. This research included popular culture, music, art, film and other elements of life that support the

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<sup>156</sup> Judith F. Baca, *Birth of a Movement* (Los Angeles: SPARC) 117

<sup>157</sup> Judith F. Baca, *Birth of a Movement* (Los Angeles: SPARC) 159

<sup>158</sup> Judith F. Baca, *Birth of a Movement* (Los Angeles: SPARC) 159

arts.<sup>159</sup> In the second step, they analyzed the information they had gathered to establish a credible and historically accurate depiction of Los Angeles histories, and to validate the histories that were otherwise excluded from conventional U.S. narratives. Pilar Castillo, the SPARC archivist, notes that this particular step was not only productive for making murals, but empowering for the participants, as they were encouraged to wonder about and investigate the history of marginalized peoples and to “recognize social disparities.”<sup>160</sup> The third step of this process is to “create alternative ways of viewing the social issues inherent in the content of the mural.”<sup>161</sup> In this step, Baca and her team were able to reframe histories in order to present an *alternative* to certain narratives. By doing this, the team of youth was able to recontextualize specific histories, and able to understand them in ways that proved to be more relevant for their lives. This practice allowed the team members the opportunity to participate with history, to have a sophisticated understanding of it, and to understand how it is constructed. A painting on a wall, therefore, became a tool for young people to relate to the past and to understand their current existence. Furthermore, it encouraged youths to be involved to pass on these histories and narratives to posterity, a valuable and important element of culture and historiography. Making sketches is the fourth and final step in this process depicted in the image below. This image helps to humanize the experience of interpreting historical events. I suggest that interpreting information and photographs with sketches

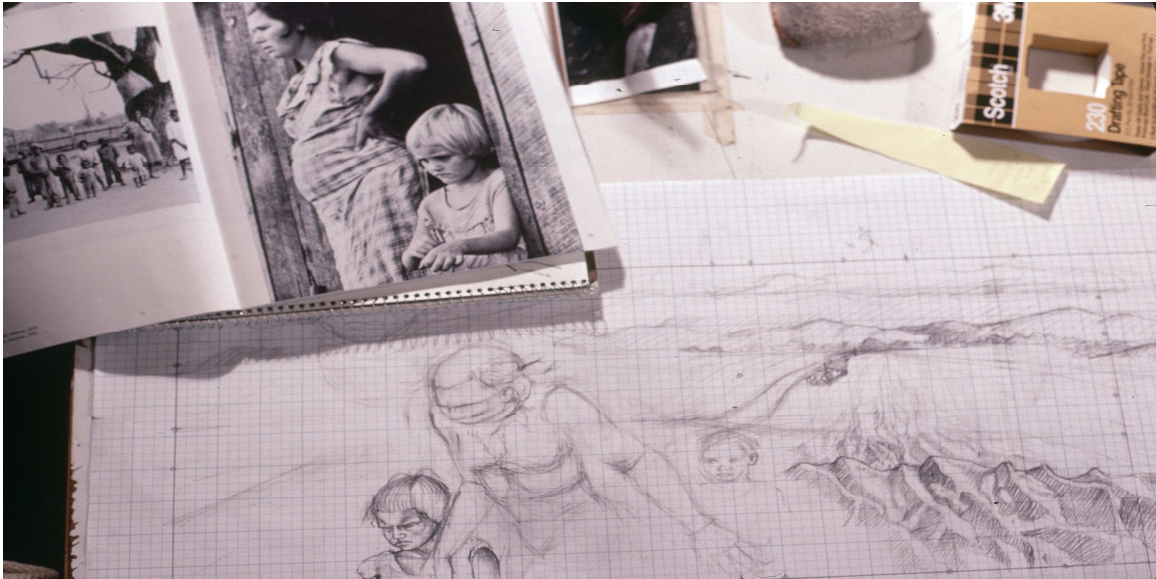
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<sup>159</sup> Judith F. Baca, *Birth of a Movement* (Los Angeles: SPARC)

<sup>160</sup> Personal interview with Pilar Castillo 1/28/14 SPARC

<sup>161</sup> Judith F. Baca, *Birth of a Movement* (Los Angeles: SPARC)

helps the artist and the viewer to process historical events in a new light.



**Figure 3.3.** *Untitled photograph, study for the Great Wall*

The collected histories were analyzed were therefore translated into rough sketches that were the model for the larger images of the mural. Within this four step process, one of the steps deals with collecting histories and conducting interviews, two of the steps revolve around critical thought and analysis and the last step deals with image making. The process for making murals is not only historical; it is steeped in academic rigor. In other words, the process for making the mural is entirely vital to the mural in a material way, as also in its collaboration of social and public art. Baca maintains that, “Through this process a new generation will learn about their place in history and not internalize the degradation their parents suffered.”<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Judith F. Baca, *Birth of a Movement* (Los Angeles: SPARC) 161

### **Close looking at *The Great Wall***

The first panels of *The Great Wall* show images of the Chumash Indians who lived in what is now Los Angeles since about 1000 A.D. The images depict Chumash families, their every day life and the conceptualization of the great migration from Asia into North America. The images also picture thriving plants, animals and other motifs. Within this image clever planning allowed the artists to manipulate the formal perspectives to show the continental landmasses and historical concepts to incorporate aspects of the past into the geography and daily life of the Chumash. As the landmass of North America ascends into the sky, it also moves back in space, creating a dual meaning representing times passed and far away lands. This innovative practice was inspired by the histories of the land and the peoples who inhabited it. The brightness of the sunrise spreads across this landscape, creating a feeling of magic within nature. The whale is rendered like a glyphic in black and white lines, yet it's position suggests that it might be jumping out of the ocean.



**Figure 3.4** Judith Baca, detail of Chumash peoples

The half-mile mural transitions from pre-historic panels to more modern ones. It tells the stories of Portola's arrival in North America, the stories of the missions in California, women's suffrage, World War I, the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. It also features the debated history around the birth and origins of Thomas Alva Edison. According to SPARC, their research on Edison's origins are ambiguous and allows for the possibility that he was in fact born in Mexico and adopted by U.S. parents.<sup>163</sup> The image of Edison portrays him with a light bulb in one hand and a movie reel in the other, representing his contribution to modernity. Upon closer observation, it is clear that Chichimeca, the Mexican corn goddess whispers into his ear the secrets of ancient

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<sup>163</sup> "The Great Wall of Los Angeles" Sparcinla.org, last modified in 2014, <http://sparcinla.org/programs/the-great-wall-mural-los-angeles/>

inventors. The questions around memory in this panel are abundant. Most of Edison's biographers write that he could speak, read and write in Spanish with native proficiency even though his training in Spanish was brief. Additionally, Edison's birth certificate was never located. While this information may be speculative and circumstantial, the possibility of misremembering Edison's birthplace is interesting.<sup>164</sup>



**Figure 3.5** Judith Baca, Detail of Thomas Alva Edison

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<sup>164</sup> "About the Great Wall of Los Angeles" *SPARC Murals*. Accessed August 9, 2014. [http://www.sparcmurals.org/sparcone/index2.php?option=com\\_content&do\\_pdf=1&id=21](http://www.sparcmurals.org/sparcone/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=21)



**Figure 3.6** Judith Baca, *Division of the Barrios & Chavez Ravine*

One of the most famous panels in this mural is “Division of the Barrios & Chavez Ravine”. This segment retells the story of Chavez Ravine, the village of Mexican-American families who lived on the hill above downtown Los Angeles. Although the full history is not pictured in the mural, it is remembered by many Angelenos and immortalized in Don Normark’s photographs. As early as 1946, plans were discussed for redeveloping Chavez Ravine, but it wasn’t until 1950 that residents of the Ravine received a letter notifying them of that they would need to move out of their homes

because a new public housing developments was to be erected in their place.<sup>165</sup> Architects Robert Alexander and Richard Neutra designed the new development, which they believed would “improve the lives of low-income residents.”<sup>166</sup> In 1951, however, the city council canceled the redevelopment contract because of fears that public housing would bring “creeping Socialism”.<sup>167</sup> In 1952 the California Supreme Court ruled that the city council could not cancel the redevelopment contract, but by this time, many of the residents of Chavez Ravine had already left. After years of lawsuits and debate, Chavez Ravine was sold to the Dodgers; no public housing was ever built. In May of 1959, the city asserted its authority of eminent domain and sent police officers and bulldozers to evict the few who remained in Chavez Ravine.<sup>168</sup>

The people living in Chavez Ravine were almost all Mexican or Mexican-American. While it is described as having, “poor street patterns” and being “blighted” Neutra and others called it “charming”, noting that, “the residents seemed happy and ...[felt] pride in an identity with their communities.”<sup>169</sup> In *The Great Wall*, Baca and her team portray a woman being forcefully removed by a police officer during the evictions of 1959. The image that Baca and her team painted is closely derived from Normark’s photographs, which captured the force and violence of the evictions.

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<sup>165</sup> Don Normark, *Chavez Ravine, 1949: a Los Angeles story* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999) 18

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Don Normark, *Chavez Ravine, 1949: a Los Angeles story* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999) 18

<sup>168</sup> Don Normark, *Chavez Ravine, 1949: a Los Angeles story* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999) 21

<sup>169</sup> Don Normark, *Chavez Ravine, 1949: a Los Angeles story* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999) 18



**Figure 3.7** Mrs. Aurora Vargas evicted from her home in Chavez Ravine

In this way, the mural remembers those who were removed from their homes having been promised housing, but instead getting a a multi-million dollar sports team and stadium. While the Dodgers are a famous team and an important contributor to the Los Angeles economy, their stadium is seldom remembered for displacing a community.<sup>170</sup> The social implications of this segment of the mural are clear. Although the institutionalized removal of communities is not necessarily a new practice in the U.S., this modern example of social inequality is significant for Los Angeles.<sup>171</sup> This panel remembers those who are often forgotten in lieu of professional baseball, sports entertainment, popular culture and consumption culture. With it, Baca and her team not only paid homage to those who were removed, they reminded Los Angeles about it's own history.

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<sup>170</sup> Don Normark, *Chavez Ravine, 1949: a Los Angeles story* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999) 23

<sup>171</sup> Historical events such as the Japanese confinement camps, Indian boarding schools, and even the age old "melting pot" paradigm demonstrate how differences in peoples are homogenized or removed from popular culture

In her career, Baca has utilized the mural's potential for reaching audiences and demographics that might not otherwise frequent art galleries or museums.<sup>172</sup> The public and urban qualities of her work contribute to underserved communities with legible and local renderings of histories.

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<sup>172</sup> Eva Sperling Crockoft and Holly Barnet-Sanchez, *Signs From the Heart* (Venice: Sparc Publications, 1990) 12

***Conclusion: What is it for?***

The intention of this thesis has been to bring together a handful of themes that exist within two of Judith Baca's murals. From here, I have developed my research and fieldwork into a body of text that realizes patterns of methodology, display and historical framing within and beyond the work of Baca. This thesis also examines the importance of space and site, methods of showcasing, problems within authorship and narrative, and the invisible but significant component of memory and cultural amnesia.

The first chapter of the manuscript begins with the subtitle: *Defining Chicana/o*. In it, I introduce a text that Baca authored. In her chapter-length article, "Whose Monument Where?: Public Art in a Many Cultured Society", she wonders about art, access, historical narratives, and assumptions they sometimes make. This article, an early portion of the first chapter, is used to preface the rest of the chapter. My goal in arranging the text as such is to explain the Chicano Movement of the 1970's in order to recontextualize Baca within it throughout the chapters of the manuscript. As the first chapter proceeds, I examine the cultural climate of the 1970's and consider a period of time when many social and civil movements are taking place in grassroots and also mainstream culture. This historical background is important for gaining a better understanding of Baca's motivation and situation in the world. I also define important terms and concepts that allow us to understand the social contexts at hand. Later, I move into a comparison between Baca and Suzanne Lacy, a feminist artist and scholar. Juxtaposing Lacy and Baca is particularly telling because they both, in some instances,

make art that discusses women's issues, age and gender. Furthermore, the two artists are friends and share a similar network, yet their work and writings are often organized in varying genres.

Within the second chapter, we look more in depth at Baca's murals to examine her methods of production, the complexities of crediting a sole author and the importance of teamwork. With this, I wanted to compare Baca to Asco to demonstrate a range of mural practices. Asco presents us with a lovely contrast because where Baca relies on her large teams to assist with the murals, Asco depends only on the collective. Furthermore, where Baca make special efforts to look to the past and include Mexican or Chicana/o imagery, Asco often appropriates such imagery or motifs to make a more critical statement about cultural identity. From here forward, I make a brief comparison between Baca and Richard Serra. The purpose of measuring the Serra against Baca to, again, make a contemporary comment on the way that public art is dealt with and some of the problems it has faced. This is an important contrast because it demonstrates a range of attitudes within public art, art practices and art institutions. Moreover, this juxtaposition identifies the cultural components to each respective artist. Within the comparison, we get a sense of their cultural contribution and sense of identity.

Memory is the major theme within the third and final chapter. In this portion of the manuscript, I open with a close analysis of the Los Angeles River and *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*. We look, again, at her methods to consider the significance of collaborative mural making and community building. I also present an analysis of *The Great Wall* in order to appreciate the meaning of the location of the murals, but also the

metaphor it presents. The state of the Los Angeles River serves as an example of cultural dominance, yet Baca uses the space to bring life back to her young team of helpers and the community.

The arrangement of this thesis, its topics of focus and theoretical backgrounds are meant to contribute to certain cultural conversations that expose, question and analyze issues of inclusion, access, democracy, and value within popular culture, art historical discourse, (public art) and academia. The purpose of this thesis is to consider two of Baca's murals, *Mi Abulita* and *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*, and to analyze their historical framework to underscore some of the conventions and constructions around art historical discourse. This point is reinforced in the impetus for this project and the project is therefore reinforced by the availability of materials, methods, and murals that speak to the same themes.

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