UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Afro-Latinx Futurism:

A History of Black and Brown Arts from 1781–2018

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements of the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Chicana & Chicano Studies

by

Kaelyn Danielle Rodríguez

2020

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Afro-Latinx Futurism: A History of Black and Brown Arts from 1781–2018

by

Kaelyn Danielle Rodríguez

Doctor of Philosophy in Chicana, Chicano, and Central American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2020

Professor Charlene Villaseñor Black, Chair

Professor Judith F. Baca, Co-Chair

This dissertation project identifies the anti-colonial and anti-racist traditions that Black and Brown Angelenos have created, specifically the artworks expressing cultural pride and solidarity with each other. While other scholars have looked at Black and Latina/o/x Los Angeles together, few have looked at the trends and traditions within visual culture and art history. This particular intervention is historical, but also builds from the contemporary moment we live in, where underpaid school teachers have been striking *en masse*, where women are proclaiming #TimesUp, where Black Lives Matter is ushering perhaps the largest social movement in U.S. history, and still, the movement continues to grow all over the world. Furthermore, this dissertation has been informed by the COVID-19 crisis, which deeply and disproportionately impacts housing, employment, health outcomes and many other factors for people of color, especially Native Peoples, African Americans and Latinx folks in the U.S. As a way to reframe

this political moment of pandemics, social injustice, and consciousness raising, I freedom dream through Afro-Latinx Futurism, a concept I offer that empowers Black, Latinx and Afro-Latinx people to center pleasure, rest, and joy as a visual practice in the arts and an important expression of liberation. Together, this project will forge a new history of the past by offering analysis of artworks, but also, moments when people lived, fought and created together. In some cases, I will highlight works of art that were not exactly made together, or directly in conversation with the other, but still work within a constellation of struggle against US imperialism and white supremacy.[1] I have conducted participatory observation fieldwork, interviews, investigated archives, made maps via Emoji Mapping and Social Explorer; I offer visual and historical analysis to demonstrate the social realities that Black and Brown creative communities have forged for the past 237 years in what is now Los Angeles.

Keywords: art history, African American and Latinx solidarity, Los Angeles, freedom dreaming, Afro-Latinx futurism

[1] I borrow the term "constellation of struggle" from Gaye Theresa Johnson, who coined it in her groundbreaking book, *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 20), 6.

The dissertation of Kaelyn Danielle Rodríguez is approved.

George Lipsitz

Gaye Theresa Johnson

Judith F. Baca, Co-Chair

Charlene Villaseñor Black, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2020

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the reader. Without you, this project is just words on a page. This effort is for Black and Latinx people of all ages engaged in the struggle for liberation. More importantly still, this work is here for the pleasure seekers, the healers, the artists and creatives, the brave among us who believe that despite everything else, true freedom is uncontaminatable and lives within.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Acknowledgements

This dissertation project has existed in one form or another since 2015 when I started working at SPARC. I remember when the dream of this project was born, I had an incredible sense of purpose and joy when confronted with public arts for and by Black and Brown artists in Los Angeles. Because of this, I thank you Judy Baca and the whole team at SPARC, for bringing me in and teaching me so many things about making art and being in community.

I would like to thank the Art History Department at UCLA for their generous support and award of the Dickson Fellowship that allowed me to finish this project at this time.

A hearty thank you goes out to my home department at UCLA, the César E. Chávez Department of Chicana/o and Central American Studies. Not only did I receive funding and teaching experience, I was trained and disciplined here. I gained friends and femtors who have impacted my life for the better. I also thank my department for providing access to amazing health care that has sustained me in more ways than one. Shout out to my incredible therapist Tanya Brown for being with me along this journey.

Thank you to my colleagues and friends Araceli Centanino and Larry McDaniel Jr. While we did not take classes together, we shared much learning. I appreciate all the times we were human with each other—it made the goals we set that much more possible.

Thank you to my cohort members for being loving, passionate people. Sometimes graduate school can be very challenging, isolating and competitive, but that was not my experience with you all. What a blessing to be in community with such beautiful colleagues! A special thank you to Isabel Duron, Maxwell Greenberg and Nadia Zepeda for years of friendship and support—from qualifying exams to dissertation writing together, I love and appreciate you! I will always cherish the memories of crossing the border with y'all. I'll never forget the time we

spent in Mexico City for UHI and all the power we conjured in sharing our knowledge with others. Thank you, Rose Simons for years of collaboration and sisterhood. Between grant writing for *bozalta* and fellowship & career applications for ourselves, we have put in dozens of hours and earned hundreds of thousands of dollars between us! I appreciate how abundant and creative we are!

Thank you to my friends and family who believed in me and prayed for me this whole time. Your faith in me is so deeply appreciated. My cousins and sisters who have held space for me—Jillian Smith Martin, Celia Burke, Janel and Danielle Claybon, Ixel Madrigal, Ziza Delgado, Raquel Perez, Rose Simons, Silvia Rodriguez Vega, thank you! If I had to write this dissertation without you, it would have much less soul.

This work would not have been possible without my parents. Thank you, Anthony and Paula Rodriguez for raising me and teaching me that I can be an artist. This simple act opened up so many areas of my life; I am the recipient of your generosity and I love you both very much! Thanks to my brothers, Anthony Joseph, Jonathan and Jared Rodriguez for your patience as I talked about this work probably more than you cared to hear.

Thank you, Lawrence Lan for your miracle work, you have given me peace to sleep at night! Thank you, Walter Meyer for your vision of the future! I see now that you believed in me all along, including this very dissertation.

My committee members, Charlene Villaseñor Black, Judy Baca, Gaye Theresa Johnson and George Lipsitz, are each legends in their own right. I don't know how I could have assembled such an amazing team of creatives, scholars and activists to support me and my work, but I did, and I deeply appreciate each of you. Your labor as thinkers and dreamers has profoundly impacted my ideas about what it means to be engaged with knowledge production

and our communities. Additionally, you have modeled perhaps the *best* examples of heartfelt, insightful, accessible writing that centers the reader and the reader's potential for growth. I could easily spend the rest of my life learning from each of you, and I very much hope I do. With all of this, I thank you for your service of my academic endeavors and especially, your generosity, your guidance, your feedback and belief in this project. Here it is now, done.

This has been perhaps the best and hardest year of my life thus far. With so many distinct milestones and also, so many obstacles and moments of uncertainty, I am *most* grateful to my true love, my husband, Daniel J. Chavez Jr. for his unconditional love. It has transformed the ways that I see the world around me and inspired me to believe deeper and more fully in my own unconditionality and my own sacredness. These things, combined with my training, have also informed my views of the immense potential of Art History and Afro-Latinx Futurism and freedom dreaming. Our goals of being free are not separate from love; love is at the center of that work too. With a full heart, I thank you, Daniel, for talking about my research with me, for sharing an office with me, for believing in me beyond my own limitations. Learning from you has given me an education I did not know I needed. I hope you see yourself and your influence represented in this project; I love you.

Vita

Kaelyn D. Rodríguez earned a Bachelor's degree in Art with an emphasis in Art History from California State University, Fresno. She went on to earn a terminal Master's degree in the History of Art from University of California Riverside, and later, a second Master's degree in Chicana/o Studies from the University of California Los Angeles. This dissertation represents the completion of her doctoral degree in Chicana/o Studies from UCLA.

In 2013, Rodríguez published an essay about four photographs from an exhibition she co-curated the at California Museum of Photography; the essay is called, "Women Are Beautiful in the Streets." In 2018, she published an essay based on her research called "Making Space and Marking Race: Emoji Mapping and Liberatory Cartographies in South Los Angeles" in *Diálogo Journal.*

Rodríguez was a Max. H. Gluck fellow, a Dean's Distinguished Graduate Student fellow at UCR, a Department of Chicana/o Studies fellow, Graduate Research Summer Mentorship fellow, a fellow with The National Trust for Historic Preservation, a fellow with The Smithsonian, and a 2020 Edward A. Dickson History of Art fellow at UCLA.

Introduction

This project advances the fields of Art History, Chicanx Studies, Black Studies, and Spatial Studies while retracing histories of Black and Latinx art in Los Angeles from 1781 to 2018. This ambitious and interdisciplinary project does more than discuss art objects or unsettle white art histories—it demonstrates, through historiography, spatial and visual analysis, the ways that Black and Latinx Angelenos have created anti-colonial and anti-racist traditions of making art, creating culturally specific (art) spaces, and lifting each other up for hundreds of years. While exchanges between Black and Brown Angelenos were rarely simple, singular or always affirming, the scholars and artists I build on demonstrate many stories that have since been ignored or fragmented from the truly rich and joyful history of Black and Brown Los Angeles.

Many histories of art, as told and retold within the discipline of art history, have generally been written by and for elite white institutions and have had the effect of maintaining and consolidating power for those same institutions. This dissertation departs from this tradition and focuses specifically on Black, Latinx and Afro-Latinx peoples in Los Angeles from the settling of the city under Spanish rule until the twenty-first century. The main contributions this dissertation offers are several chapters that demonstrate solidarity across racial/ethnic difference, liberation and freedom dreaming through visual works of art, community engagement in Watts and a theoretical concept I advance called Afro-Latinx Futurism. This framework empowers Black and Brown artists and communities in freedom dreaming, by centering and celebrating our desires for pleasure, ease, play, rest, beauty and joy by reading them in visual works of art with intention and self-awareness, as a practice for seeing them in the world around us. This framework is especially powerful in the visual arts because any visual creative expression is both real and imagined (at the same time); Afro-Latinx Futurism moves us to look and see towards

what we *want*, rather than singularly creating works of art around struggle, unease and suffering as we fight for freedom.

The impetus for this dissertation project comes out of the research and public art that was a part of my master's thesis project in Watts. After our team at the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) was commissioned by the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs to create a mural that would commemorate the 1965-Watts Rebellion, I began researching the history of Watts. I read The McCone Report, Gerald Horne's *Fire This Time*, Robin Kelley's many articles on Watts; I spent time in the community, joined the group I Heart Watts and held workshops at Markham Middle School. I interviewed prominent residents, elders in the community and law enforcement officers to get a sense of how the community understands its past. What I learned was that historical memories for many residents reached back 30 years, but others did not know the histories of the 1965 rebellion, nor did they learn about them in school. They remembered the unrest around the murder of Latasha Harlins and the case in which three of the four police officers were acquitted after brutalizing Rodney King; they remembered the racial tension between Koreans, Black residents and Latinxs, but they did not know the Frye family or their violent interaction with the police. This historical disconnect was significant to me for many reasons, as our job was to visually represent a storied past, a multiracial present and a future that residents saw for themselves. My research also inspired me to continue to push further back in history. What was Watts before 1965, I wondered? How did it come to be annexed? Why was a 2-square mile swamp in Los Angeles a safe haven for people of color when it was surrounded by some of the most discriminating white communities LA has ever known?[2] I

[2] Josh Sides, in "From the South to Compton," video interview by Zach Behrens, in Zach Behrens, "Before the 1950s, the Whiteness of Compton was Defended Vehemently," *KCET*, January 11, 2011, https://www.kcet.org/socal-focus/before-the-1950s-the-whiteness-of-compton-was-defended-vehemently.

moved between historical moments and looked at 1992 with 1965. I was amazed, but not surprised, to see and learn about many instances of interracial collaboration and solidarity in the arts and in mutual claims to space. In this way, the more murals and visual culture I saw, the more I wanted to know about Black and Latina/o/x art and communities in LA.

After pairing texts like *Demonic Grounds, Black Los Angeles, Black Arts West* with *The Los Angeles Plaza, This Bridge Called My Back*, and *A People's Guide to LA*, I was empowered to engage my questions more fully. These texts also pushed me to broaden the scale of this project from the tiny area of Watts to the sprawling and robust city of Los Angeles. Furthermore, I was compelled to center space and race as they specifically relate to Black and Latinx people, as a way of celebrating the beautiful and rich traditions our communities hold. Additionally, I center people of color in LA as a means of opposing the prominence and overrepresentation of whiteness in the arts and in the history of Los Angeles.[3] Finally, going back to my training in Art History, I looked at art historical texts like John P. Bowles' "Blinded by the White"; Jeanette Kohl's "Work Hard, Dream Big"; Kency Cornejo's "'Does That Come with a Hyphen? A Space?'"; Kellie Jones' *South of Pico*; Kobena Mercer's "Black Art and the Burden of Representation"; and Karen Mary Davalos' *Chicana/o Remix*.[4] These texts help me to examine the many ways that art historians have engaged and are still engaging questions of race and space within visual culture and art history.

---

[3] John P. Bowles, "Blinded by the White: Art and History at the Limits of Whiteness," *Art Journal* 60, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 39.

[4] Bowles, "Blinded by the White"; Jeanette Kohl, "'Work Hard, Dream Big': Whose Renaissance?" *Kunsttexte*, no. 4 (2012): 1–7; Kency Cornejo, "'Does That Come with a Hyphen? A Space?': The Question of Central American-Americans in Latino Art and Pedagogy," *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 40, no.1 (Spring 2015): 189–210; Kellie Jones, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and* 1970s (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Kobena Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation," in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994); and Karen Mary Davalos, *Chicana/o Remix: Art and Errata Since the Sixties* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

With these principal texts in mind, this project advances the conversation of Black and Brown LA by conducting art historical and spatial historiography in Los Angeles from 1781, the year LA was settled under the Spanish flag, to the contemporary moment. This temporal period spans 237 years and is expansive, however it is critical for demonstrating the deep historical roots and continuity to this work. Furthermore, is even more important because the stakes of this project are not only historic, they are a part of the contemporary world we live in and also have the potential to inform the future we create together. By expressing spatial, racial and creative histories of Black and Brown LA together over such a vast period of time, I provide evidence to answer my research questions; furthermore, and more importantly, this evidence lifts up Angelenos of color and celebrates visual art as a radical form of spatial power. Instead of taking a comprehensive approach to Black and Latinx spatial and creative expression and solidarity, this project focuses on specific artists and artworks, mostly murals, and collectives that demonstrate Black and Latinx practices for making art, sharing space and being in solidarity with each other. Of course, this work is greatly significant considering the social and political moment we live in. With the rise of white nationalism, white supremacists and the KKK in recent years, we have seen the many ways that people of color, especially Black Americans, Latinxs, immigrants, refugees, women, queer and trans people, poor people, and differently abled folks have suffered on countless fronts. Furthermore, federal divestment from the National Humanities Alliance (NHA) and other humanities institutions, art histories of marginalized communities deserve even greater protection and investment. Additionally, this work is important in the art world in LA, as many Angelenos are still reflecting on the contributions from exhibitions, panels, talks and performances via Pacific Standard Time's LA/LA and feeling empowered by the rich representation of Latinx and Latin American arts. Finally, by conducting this project that

especially looks at Black, Latinx and Afro-Latinx art throughout LA's history, this project contributes to and advances several fields. By engaging interdisciplinary research that builds on qualitative and quantitative methodologies, archival research, interviews, primary and secondary source analysis, tracing housing practices in LA and engaged social mapping, this project forges a spatial and racial art historical historiography for the purpose of advancing Black and Brown freedom dreaming.

Conceptual Framework

As a research project that is specific to Los Angeles and closely inspired by space and spatial theories, this study is foregrounded in geography, space and the development and destruction of cities in LA. This dissertation begins with the colonial settling of Los Angeles under Spanish rule and expands to introduce the white spatial imaginary as both a spatial concept and a philosophy that "seeks to hide problems rather than solve them."[5] I also unpack the Black spatial imaginary as a tool of imagination and transformation in Black communities, empowering and complicating histories that were fragmented and dispossessed. While this dissertation seeks to offer an art history of Black, Latinx and Afro-Latinx art practices in Los Angeles, it *must* also analyze the social and spatial conditions that these groups lived in. In this way, I draw from Shifra Goldman's radical approach to art history writing[6] and nod to pioneering art historians like Kency Cornejo and Kellie Jones who center space, place, race and history with artworks and art histories.[7] This distinction is especially significant within the field of Art History because it

[5] George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 2011), 29.

[6] Shifra Goldman, *Tradition and Transformation: Chicana/o Art from the 1970s through the 1990s*, ed. Charlene Villaseñor Black (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2015), xviii.

[7] See Kency Cornejo, "'Does That Come with a Hyphen? A Space?'"; Kellie Jones, *South of Pico*; and Kellie Jones, *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960–1980* (Los Angeles, CA: Hammer Museum, 2011).

advances methodologies and theories that speak to and inform life experiences and outcomes for Black and Brown communities, but more importantly, it empowers me to center my scholarship on African American and Latinx groups, their relationship to space and their art practices, which, I submit, is a form of social and academic activism. Furthermore, the discussion of space is critical, as it demonstrates in the most powerful terms, the ways and the reasons why Black, Latinx and Afro-Latinx peoples have historically lived and worked in the same or similar places. It offers opportunities to explore creativity in geographies through a racial lens. Katherine McKittrick says it this way: "expressive acts, particularly the naming of place—regardless of expressive method and technique—is also a process of self-assertion and humanization, a naming of Black geographic presence."[8] By locating Black people in a foundational history of Los Angeles, we locate Black people and Black geographies. I submit that this gives Black people, Latina/o/x folks and other marginalized people a greater sense of self and future self.

I take these approaches as an Afro-Latina, because I know in the most intimate ways, that these communities are not always mutually exclusive. While there are distinct and diverse cultures and practices between Black and Latinx communities, I also dare to complicate the sometimes rigid cultural borders by centering my own positionality and engaging in a layered ontological experience where African roots are visible and celebrated in history and the contemporary moment. Moreover, by engaging Black and Latinx experiences together, I take up Natalia Molina's call to do relational racial work. That is, Molina implores us to engage scholarship that does not *compare* experiences of people of color, but rather relates and

[8] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xxii.

understands proximity and mutual influence between distinct communities.[9] While more scholars utilize this approach, it is important to note that this paper and its conceptual framework are a part of an important shift in Chicanx art history to work across disciplines and to expand the field by putting Black and Latinx communities in closer dialogue.[10] Molina reminds us of the violence of centering whiteness in the study of history and asks us to consider that we might be replicating a model that has worked against us and created limitations, even if though omission, that should not be replicated.

With these factors considered, I assert my conceptual framework and methodologies for doing this art historical dissertation project. In this way, I am introducing a new methodological approach to art history. It is important to note that these methods are not *new*; other scholars like Josh Kun, Laura Pulido, Paul Ortiz, Kelley Lytle Hernandez, Gerald Horne, and many others use these same frameworks in their research. My contribution, however, employs interdisciplinary frameworks and methods in an old and oftentimes conventional discipline. Now more than ever, artists and art historians are moving beyond the limitation and false standard of whiteness. For example, in John P. Bowles essay, "Blinded by the White," Bowles critiques the prominence and hegemony of whiteness in the study of art and art history such that whiteness has been at the center of that discourse. He offers a call to action stating, "If whiteness is to be denaturalized, and its hegemony undermined, artists and art historians must take responsibility for the racial desires concealed within the history of art as it has traditionally been written."[11] While many others have offered similar critiques, it is still incredibly important that room for people of color

[9] Natalia Molina, "Examining Chicana/o History through a Relational Lens," *Pacific Historical Review* 82, no. 4, (2013): 522.

[10] Charlene Villaseñor Black, "New Fronteras," *Aztlán* 41, no. 2 (2016): 9.

[11] Bowles, "Blinded by the White," 39.

is made within the art world. In fact, I believe that at this precise moment when masses are awakening to the realities of structural racism and inequality in the U.S., we must continue to apply pressure to the institutions, both discursive and physical, that marginalize and omit us. That being said, this dissertation is specifically not about whiteness. It is for, by and about Black and Latinx people and our amazing traditions as visual artists. In fact, centering these communities underscores the power of telling, showing, seeing and celebrating Black, Brown and Afro-Latinx art histories, especially in Los Angeles.

Finally, in considering who this is for, what is the good of this project, I offer my most important contribution: Afro-Latinx Futurism. Afro-Latinx Futurism requires an alternative understanding of freedom, one that puts the power on the side of the dreamer. Because this theoretical concept does not deal with structural oppression but rather, individual moments, thoughts and work of art that lend to beauty, playfulness and ease for aggrieved communities, it pushes us to believe "that a world filled with softness and beauty and care is not only possible, but inevitable."[12] To this end, when we believe and practice this form of freedom dreaming, we align with what we want more and more. Indeed, we must know how to resist, but also, we must have space in our minds and bodies to imagine and believe in the world we want to create—otherwise, we are simply fighting without hope of a better vision for the world. If we fight, we must believe. Therefore, freedom dreaming is not simply a relaxing exercise, it is a radical and extremely powerful form of manifesting, claiming our future and bringing freedom into the present.

[12] Tourmaline, "Filmmaker and Activist Tourmaline on How to Freedom Dream," *Vogue*, July 2, 2020, https://www.vogue.com/article/filmmaker-and-activist-tourmaline-on-how-to-freedom-dream.

Research Questions

Through my conceptual framework, I have demonstrated the ways I use interdisciplinary histories, theories and epistemologies to investigate and retell Los Angeles art histories of Black and Latina/o/x people. In the background section, I offered a broader historical context as to the impetus of me perusing this project as well as the gap that I am addressing in the fields of Art History, Chicana/o Studies and Spatial Studies. It is important, then, that I introduce the principal questions that are informing this research. While there are many questions I will ask as I pursue this work, I am specifically seeing to answer these broader questions: What are the anti-colonial and anti-racist traditions that Black and Brown Angelenos have created to not just make artworks and hold exhibitions, but express cultural pride and solidarity with each other? How have Black and Brown Angelenos resisted spatial, social and creative segregation in LA? What are the institutions, both contemporary and historical, that showcases Black and Latina/o/x power, community and Black/Brown art? What are the methods, processes, practices and visual art theories of Black/ Brown LA art that inspire Black/Brown arts in the twenty-first century? Building from the past, what are the futures of Black/Brown visual arts and art theory?

In asking these principal research questions, I hope to identify specific methods that people of color in LA use to oppose white supremacy, implicitly or explicitly, through their creative art practices. I am especially asking this within a relational racial lens because I agree with Natalia Molina when she asserts "A relational treatment of race recognizes that the construction of race is a mutually constitutive process…"[13] I believe that by looking at how Black Angelenos make art, we gather a fuller impression of Latina/o/x creative practices in LA, as well. Furthermore, this lens empowers us to move away from a Black/white binary that tends

[13] Molina, "Examining Chicana/o History Through a Relational Lens," 522.

to obscure many other people of color and their experiences. This binary also frames whiteness as the central component to all other racialized experiences, therefore by rejecting that binary and placing racialized groups in closer historical context, we can understand the connectedness of their past, present and futures. Finally, Molina offers another important reason to use a relational racial lens—to recall the ways that our experiences overlap. For example, in her article, "Examining Chicana/o Studies through a Relational Lens," Molina reminds us that the Mendez family from the groundbreaking Mendez v. Westminster case was able to move into their home in Orange County *only* because the former owners were a Japanese family who were forced into an internment camp. This terrible history it is important to treat with respect and close historical analysis. Moreover, by locating the origin of the Mendez family's housing opportunity as occurring precisely because of the imprisonment of a Japanese family, we see that racialized groups were often pitted against each other in order to survive. While this example is not a joyous history to recover, it does contextualize the ways that white supremacy and the white spatial imaginary have taken shape not just discursively, but physically in affecting families, communities and even legal processes and precedents. Finally, it demonstrates the connected ways that people and families of color have lived in proximity to each other and how their lives are connected. These connections are sometimes formed around competition or scarcity of resources, but they are also worth exposing and unpacking.

Literature Review

While there are many books, blogs, articles, songs and music videos, essays and poems across a number of disciplines that influence my work and process, in this section, I outline here the four main fields that I build on and contribute to. These areas, Art History, Black and Brown

Los Angeles, critical geography and freedom dreaming, are each significant to the ways that I develop conceptual frameworks and offer visual analysis to art objects. I begin with art history because it is the field I believe I will make my biggest contribution.[14]

I am not the first art historian to advocate for the study of art histories of marginalized peoples.[15] Additionally, other scholars before me have also been critical towards the centering and supremacy of European art and European epistemologies within the field of art history.[16] I am, however, very proud to be part of a genealogy of art historians who oppose the reproduction of white supremacist ideologies by rejecting colonial epistemologies, methodologies, and frameworks that obscure the world outside of the West. In this way, I join arms with art history giants like Shifra Goldman, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, Amalia Mesa Baines and Guisela LaTorre Davalos in asserting that making and studying art is a cultural, racial, spatial and political act. Furthermore, by resisting the "capital role of European Renaissance Studies within Art History"[17] and focusing instead on art histories that are locally, culturally and socially specific to Black and Latinx people in Los Angeles, this project offers radical art histories that not only tell the stories of our communities, they offer new language and theoretical possibilities to a powerful and growing discourse. Instead of believing that Europe is the universal standard,

[14] While I believe the work I present is very important for Ethnic Studies and other fields, I believe Art History has the most to learn from this body of work.

[15] For more on this topic, see Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation"; Cornejo, "'Does That Come with a Hyphen? A Space?'"; Paul Von Blum, "Before and After Watts: Black Art in Los Angeles"; Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Guisela Latorre, *Walls of Empowerment: Chicano/a Indigenist Murals of California* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008); and Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

[16] Bowles, "Blinded by the White," 39.

[17] Jeanette Kohl, "'Work Hard, Dream Big': Whose Renaissance?"

knowing Black and Brown art history becomes a specific form of self-acceptance, self-empowerment and joy for Black and Brown students and scholars.

While I am a part of this academic tradition, I also benefit from the struggles and wins of these pioneers before me. As a PhD student at UCLA, Shifra Goldman fought with art history faculty in order to create the opportunity to study Mexican muralists and Chicano murals. As a PhD student in the Department of Chicana/o and Central American Studies at UCLA, I have been affirmed time and again, to pursue my art historical endeavors of Black and Latinx Los Angeles. Goldman was bold and unafraid to write about art in unconventional ways; she sometimes wrote about art histories by detailing the social and political contexts in which an artist lived or in which a movement developed without describing art objects. In her essay, "The Mexican-Latino Connection," Goldman subverts the otherwise standard practice of close visual analysis and instead discusses gendered, political and social conditions of life through the artworks and artists she highlights.[18] Openly engaging in a political act, she decenters the artwork in order to contextualize and analyze the conditions of the artwork's creation. In another essay, "Assembling the Capirotada," Goldman effortlessly connects Chicanos' use of rasquachismo to Black Americans' proliferation of "soul" "funk" and "blues."[19] Although she briefly discussed the ties between Black and Chicano social conditions, she showcased the common ways Black and Chicano communities turn scraps into masterful works of art. While some critique Goldman for overlooking the contributions of women to the Chicano Movement, I expand on her work by studying women and men from a wide range of history.

[18] Goldman, *Tradition and Transformation*, 33.

[19] Goldman, *Tradition and Transformation*, 11.

In her book, *South of Pico* and through her curatorial work in *Now Dig This*, Kellie Jones urges fine art professionals and art lovers alike to think about race and space—to think about how segregation in Los Angeles has impacted creative networks, artworks, and gallery exhibitions. Branching into fields of geography, urban studies and African American Studies, Jones builds on scholars like Katherine McKittrick and George Lipsitz to frame her expressions of Black art histories of Los Angeles.[20] This is incredibly important for my project, as I offer a very similar framework and historical overview that contextualizes not just the artworks that Black and Brown folks produced, but the materials they used and galleries they displayed in.

In her most recent book, *Chicana/o Remix*, Karen Mary Davalos, a trained anthropologist who studies art, combines feminist theory with critical ethnic studies and art history to reconsider the meanings and historicization of Chicana/o art. Much like Jones, Davalos builds an interdisciplinary project around artists, artworks and exhibitions, engaging the social, political and spatial histories of artworks and artists. *Chicana/o Remix*, therefore, is a key text for this project, as it models a Chicana/o art historiography within a global context. Perhaps most importantly still is the way that Davalos puts history together by placing exhibitions, artists and art institutions in conversation with each other. Throughout the book, she weaves stories together and showcases the personal, political and social relationships that informed Chicana/o art history from the 1960s and 1970s.

Each of these three art historians takes a unique approach to doing something radically different within the field. They build from their own experiences, training, and politics to produce art history with a new lens. They offer known and forgotten art histories with criticism and compassion in order to humanize the artists and contextualize the conditions in which Black

[20] Kellie Jones, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (Duke University Press: Durham, 2017), 12–17.

and Latina/o/x peoples made art. Together, Goldman, Jones and Davalos are a powerful reflection of brilliant art historical scholarship over the past 60 years.

Another important body of scholarship that influences this project and informs my scholarship is Los Angeles Black and Brown history. The principal Los Angeles Black and Brown academics I engage with are interdisciplinary and collaborative intellectuals like Laura Pulido, Josh Kun and Gaye Theresa Johnson. These three in particular have written books, chapters and articles that focus on the ways that Black and Latinx people in Los Angeles have struggled together, made community and set roots in the city of angles.

In Josh Kun and Laura Pulido's co-edited collection *Black and Brown in Los Angeles: Beyond Conflict and Coalition*, Kun takes great care to demonstrate the demographic shifts in Los Angeles through music trends and radio. He makes musical and pop culture connections to demonstrate the ways that Black and Brown communities enjoy the same songs and cultural experiences. Laura Pulido's *Black, Brown, Yellow and Left*, is groundbreaking for its deep investigation of interracial activism in LA from the 1960 and 1970s. As she introduces the book, she expresses the unique intervention that she offers by reframing social history relationally. While looking at activist of color history is incredibly significant in its own right, Pulido reminds readers of the shortcomings of previous histories that look at certain groups without a relational lens. She writes, "they are limited by being written from an individual perspective."[21] She goes on to explain that, "…a multiethnic approach enables us to see the interaction among various racial/ethnic groups and their influences on each other."[22] The simplicity of her multiethnic approach is also powerful in that it does more than reframe history, it retells it more accurately

[21] Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 2.

[22] Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left*, 3.

by discussing revolutionary leftist movements as mutually constituted networks rather than simultaneously occurring movements.[23] Furthermore, she makes the interconnected radical leftist histories of Black, Brown and Asian peoples more visible, which, I believe, has radical potential for readers all over the world. In this way, I build on Pulido's framework for looking into multiethnic/racial groups, especially Black and Latina/o/x groups, to unpack the complex and sometimes, mutually constitutive experience.

In Gaye Theresa Johnson's *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity*, Johnson offers a rich alternative history to deficient models that often times pit Brown and Black communities against each other. Instead, she demonstrates the ways that Black and Latina/o/x communities in Los Angeles have reclaimed spaces and social membership through expressive culture and music as she advances her term, spatial entitlement. Spatial entitlement is fundamental to for my research, as it empowers my project to read the spaces and instances where Black and Brown artists, neighbors, and art institutions hold space for each other. It is also useful for thinking about historical instances where Black and Latina/o/x communities faced social and economic exclusion, segregation and/or racism and transformed those limitations into creative visual artworks, practices and communities. In her book, she writes, "If we wish to envision and enact a future in which mutual and separate struggles will come to just fruition we have to rewrite the story we've been told about who we are and about our values to each other."[24] The project I embark on is a response to this call, and an effort to work toward a more just future.

Where the previous three authors discuss Black and Brown communities in Los Angeles, Josh Sides, Katherine McKittrick and George Lipsitz advance concepts about race in space more

---

[23] Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left*.

[24] Gaye Theresa Johnson, *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), xxii.

broadly. These academics and their scholarship offer me more pointed language, historical context and critical analysis for thinking about the theoretical possibilities within my dissertation. For example, in his book *LA City Limits*, Josh Sides outlines the ways that African Americans migrated from the South to the West and settled in Los Angeles. Although my project is less focused on Latina/o/ox and African American migration, Sides's work locates Los Angeles as a hub for people of color. Without investigate the impetus for Black and Brown migration, this project does recognize migration as a significant part of how Los Angeles took shape. In a similar way, building on concepts introduced by George Lipsitz and Katherine Mc Kittrick empower my theoretical framework and inspire visions for the future of Los Angeles. As previously mentioned, Lipsitz's concepts of Black spatial imaginary and white spatial imaginary are foundational to this project and support my critical engagement of the built environment (like segregation and gentrification) as well as my ability to discuss futures in aggrieved communities. By coupling Lipsitz's powerful concepts along with McKittrick's oppositional geography, reading and writing histories and futures of Black and Latina/o/x communities in LA becomes layered with even more possibilities. For example, in the last chapter of the dissertation, I dream about theoretical possibilities for Emoji Mapping. I believe that much can be achieved by applying black spatial imaginary, white spatial imaginary and oppositional geography to Emoji Mapping. I have already begun to conceptualize some of these possibilities in my forthcoming publication, but hope to respond to newer possibilities as they develop from my fieldwork.

Finally, I also draw from freedom seekers and pleasure activists like Audre Lorde, bell hooks, adrienne maree brown, Robin D.G. Kelley, Favianna Rodriguez, EbonyJanice Moore and others who remind us and center pleasure and freedom. I advance that while we must rest to sustain our resistance, we must rest so we know what freedom feels like.

Methodologies

Beginning in the summer of 2015 continuing until the summer of 2018, I worked in African American and Latinx communities in Los Angeles. As a fellow with the National Trust for Historic Preservation, I advanced my fieldwork by learning about experiences from community members and by introducing Emoji Mapping to residents in Watts, Baldwin Hills, Leimert Park, and Compton. I also continued working with Emoji Mapping in some instances. In other circumstances, I drew from social explorer maps that visualize my findings. As a part of organizing my data and understanding my finding, I spent a considerable amount of time transcribing and analyzing my interviews and taking notes of my observations. Additionally, I spent the summer of 2018 in the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art as a graduate fellow. I also explored archives at The Southern California Library, SPARC, and the UCLA Special Collections. These institutions each boast an important collection of primary sources from exhibitions, panels, gallery openings, community actions, meets and other events. These documents helped me to locate art and social histories of LA over the 19th 20th and 21st centuries. Finally, I used visual and historical analysis to discuss works of art. This important and exciting step is deeply connected to my training and also, my own interpretation. I believe that during the visual analysis step, and also my intervention of Afro-Latinx Futurism, I offer new and important readings to artworks that support liberation and wellness for Black and Latinx communities.

Chapter Breakdown

This first chapter of this dissertation frames this dissertation historically by setting up the colonial context in which Los Angeles was founded. While this chapter still looks at Black and Brown art in LA, more importantly here I examine the history of how certain spaces were

organized, how people of color came to live in proximity to each other, and what that space meant for them as (creative) communities. As a part of setting up a spatial and geographic background to describe how people of color came to settle in Los Angeles, I build on colonial histories to juxtapose contemporary geographies and art histories. In these ways, I investigate Casta Paintings from early eighteenth-century New Spain to think about race, miscegenation and the formation of a racial hierarchy in this region. Discussing racist ideologies and social control will underscore how Black and Latinx people were able to form anti-racist, anti-colonial ways of living in Los Angeles and how they were able to support each other. I then connect this discussion to the life of Biddy Mason, a formerly enslaved woman and mother who became a highly influential person through her thriving real estate business, her work as a skilled nurse and midwife, her philanthropy and other charitable works in Los Angeles. Mason helped diverse people of color find housing before the onset of redlining, segregation and racially restrictive covenants. Finally, I analyze the Biddy Mason Park, which is located in downtown Los Angeles. The monument in the park was designed by one of the great Black artists in LA history, Betye Saar. In the analysis of this park and monument, I apply Katherine McKittrick's text which discusses the significance of naming geographies as Black as it relates the legacy of Biddy Mason, Black Mexicans, and African Americans who helped her fight for her freedom. Additionally, I advance George Lipsitz's theories of how racism takes place—the Black spatial imaginary and the white spatial imaginary as we think about the spatial entitlement and futures of Black and Brown geography.

Chapter two continues to reflect the development of Los Angeles as an urban city and geography in its own right, but most importantly, it offers an analysis of two murals: *America Tropical* and *The Black Experience.* In looking closely at these two murals, the respective artists,

social trends and political shifts of their time, I demonstrate a unique instance of a shared experience of creation, disappearance and miraculous return by Black and Brown murals in the 20th century LA. Both murals are affiliated with prominent Los Angeles institutions, were censored or disappeared at the height of political moments and both reappeared decades later. With each of their rebirths, the murals offer a new message of resilience, but also, an updated version of the same struggle against U.S. imperialism, legacies of colonialism and white supremacy. While the artists may not have known each other or necessarily seen their common effort and experience, I advance that they "expand the space of politics beyond the voting booth by creating physical and discursive space that could support and sustain constellations of struggle."[25] In these ways, these artists and works of art lift each other up and reflect back their shared vision of a world without suffering from colonialism and racism, which gets directly to the heart of my research questions. Using visual analysis, as well as historical and archival research to unpack the stakes of the works of art, I pair these two murals for perhaps the first time ever. Finally, this distinct pairing is an explicit celebration of Black and Brown liberation and solidarity against white supremacist policies, histories and futures.

Chapter three looks at a deeply significant mural that has received very little attention in scholarship, *Education is a Basic Human Right*. This work of art was made in South Central LA by Alma Lopez and Noni Olabisi in 1998, two queer women who, in the wake of Latasha Harlins's murder and Rodney King's grueling beating, responded with a direct message of student power, educational opportunities for Black and Latinx students and relationships that reciprocated and advanced visions and realities of wellness for future generations. The mural is a beautiful remembering of the struggle for equitable education for Black and Latinx children in

[25] Johnson, *Spaces of Conflict, Spaces of Solidarity*, 29.

the U.S. including the Supreme Court Case *Brown v. Board of Education* and Los Angeles's history of protest around the Chicano Studies Program at UCLA in the 1990s. This chapter uses interview, visual analysis; it builds on the archived materials that offer insight about the origins of the library where the mural was installed and advances a myriad of documents and texts that discuss the geography and history of South Central.

Chapter four offers a wealth of original research and unique research methods in the service of creating a mural in South Central that would celebrate the Black and Latinx past, present and futures for the community. While the mural remembers some of the difficult histories of the community, including the presence of the National Guard in the1965 Watts Rebellion, it also celebrates the public works of art in Watts and envisages the future for community, according to on-going projects and what the community wanted to see, but mostly, it centers six children as they dream about their passions and hopes for what's next. In this sense *Watts Still Rising* the mural and the chapter are also very different from the last in that they center the potential for a very specific neighborhood in Los Angeles that has both African American and Latinx histories and communities.

The fifth chapter is distinct in that it deploys works of art as catalysts to introduce and demonstrate a theory I advance called "Afro-Latinx futurism" (ALF). ALF is a theoretical framework or lens with which to read works of art or visual culture that centers Black and Latinx pleasure, ease, joy, play, rest, beauty and/or freedom. In this sense, ALF is not a genre, or bound to any particular style, movement, or historical period, rather, it is a practice of freedom that centers and celebrates Black and Brown humanity, rest and beauty. This intervention is powerful for several reasons. My intervention of ALF as a practice of freedom, therefore, is a visual counter-narrative for Black and Brown wellbeing with limitless potential. For example, it helps

us expand on concepts put forward by scholars, artists and pleasure seekers like Audre Lorde, bell hooks and Favianna Rodriguez as we activate visuals to speak and see the art/world around us and take pleasure and satisfaction in Black and Latinx life. Additionally, this framework does not center coloniality or need to be attached to any particular expression of oppression or abuse, although it has the versatility to be applied to works of art that are created under those circumstances as well. Since ALF does not require a colonial past or a decolonial future—a future that is inevitably informed by or connected to our (de)coloniality—it can be deeply playful and satisfying. Although Audre Lorde reminds us that love is political resistance, that "self-care is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare,"[26] I expand that, even more importantly, caring for the self is also, primarily, good for our wellbeing. While self-care can sustain our struggle against oppression, it is more than just a coping mechanism; I believe that self-care is a practice for freedom. Put another way, I assert that feeling at ease, taking time to rest, being filled with joy and taking pleasure in one's life *is* part of being free, even if it is momentary. Self-care is both political, and deeply personal, however, in conceiving ALF, I observed that we don't always need to justify or weaponize our right to rest, to take joy in life, to play or enjoy our love of beauty. When we detach our self-care from the things we resist, we center ourselves, which is the whole point of the fight.

The conclusion reflects on the intervention of each chapter and synthesizes them into a single expression of solidarity across difference, anti-colonial art historical traditions as well as a reading of liberation and a dreaming of freedom in murals and digital works of art. This section underscores the stakes for this effort and concludes this project with visions and hopes for the future in the visual arts for Black, Latinx and Afro-Latinx artists and communities.

---

[26] Adrienne Maree Brown, *Pleasure Activism* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2019), 59.

Chapter 1: A Colonial History of Los Angeles

> It is as though the Renaissance involved a double movement of reducing the gap between God and Man while also creating an insurmountable divide between the European Man, the Native and-–as Wynter would argue—the Black enslaved subject…[27]
> —Nelson Maldonado-Torres

Any history of Los Angeles must begin with the Indigenous Tongva people, who "successfully occupied" what is now the city "for generations before colonization."[28] They comprised a thriving hunter-gathering community that settled in the very fertile lands near the river and looked after the region for many decades. At the same time, the history of Los Angeles must also take into account the development of colonialism in early modern Europe. In the times of the European Renaissance, from roughly the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, artists, thinkers, creatives and others were turning away from a religious order *en masse* and cultivating interest in secular knowledge, in science, ethics and beauty.[29] We now call this turn *modernity*. This interest in rationalization, organization, systems and other forms of knowledge reference the early modern or modern Western world. This cultural shift helps to clarify the wide-spread impetus for imperialism that would take place around this time. It also offers us a backdrop to witness, through history, the ways that colonialism and imperialism were developing from Europe. In his paradigm shifting essay, "On Metaphysical Catastrophe," Nelson Maldonado-Torres reminds us that there is a cultural, social, spiritual, perhaps even cognitive or ontological

---

[27] Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "On Metaphysical Catastrophe, Post-Continental Thought, and the Decolonial Turn," in *Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago*, ed. Tatiana Flores and Michelle Ann Stephens (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 253.

[28] William David Estrada, *The Los Angeles Plaza: Shared and Contested Space* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 15.

[29] Estrada, *Los Angeles Plaza*, 249.

move that occurs around colonization when Europeans leave their continent. He writes, "Colonization, then, was not one among other actions performed by Europeans, but the action that helped define the European perception of autonomy from the divine."[30] Therefore, in separating from the divine, a new order or power was created, where European men challenged the authority of God himself; in doing so, they articulated themselves as supreme and people from Asia, the Americas, Africa, and Australia, other and lesser than. This belief system became ubiquitous within colonial and imperial expansions and served colonial interests of grabbing land, kidnapping, enslaving, brutalizing and raping Indigenous and African others.

For example, John Lok, a British merchant sailed to The West Coast of Africa in 1561 and wrote of his experience saying that, Africans are "people without heads, having their mouth and eyes in their breasts."[31] Beyond hyperbole, this deeply fetishizing account describing African people as non-human had a distinct purpose—it was one of many ways that European imperialists dehumanized the people across the world, and indirectly, secured their own position as superior. I would argue this account is also an early example of social death, where oppressed people are not accepted as fully human by another section of society. Vincent Brown also reminds us that social death is "a theoretical abstraction that is meant not to describe the lived experience of the enslaved so much as to reduce them to a least common denominator that could reveal the essence of slavery in an ideal-type slave, shorn of meaningful heritage."[32] It is here that we see Lok's reading of African people as a decisive attempt to bastardize and obscure their appearances and cultures. While the behavior is not subtle, it does reinforce certain principles

---

[30] Maldonado-Torres, "On Metaphysical Catastrophe, Post-Continental Thought, and the Decolonial Turn," 252.

[31] Andrew Hadfield, ed., *Amazons, Savages and Machiavels: Travel and Colonial Writing in English, 1550–1630: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 16.

[32] Vincent Brown, "Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery," American Historical Review 114, no. 5 (December 2009): 1233.

that those with power and those who abuse power are justified in their actions, while those who are abused are deserving of brutality because they are disgraced with dark skin and non-Western features.

Maldonado-Torres's most important contribution, however, is offering an alternative method for reading European imperialism in the Caribbean from a Person of Color perspective. Building off of Maldonado-Torres's frameworks for colonialism and the decolonial turn, I offer yet another reading that recognizes the very unique expression of imperialism that took place in Los Angeles from 1781 on. The story of Black and Afro-Latinx people in what's now Los Angeles begins with diaspora and traditions of resistance and collectivity, but also colonialism, capitalism, and their justifications: white supremacy; it is also very unique in the history of European imperialism. European colonialist powers captured and transported many nations of African peoples, mostly off of the western coast of the continent, across the Atlantic to North America, South America, and the Caribbean. While African people were suffering and dying on dangerous, filthy, contaminated ships, they were also living. They first arrived in the Caribbean on the island that is now Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Although it is said that the first African people arrived in California in 1535, this project begins two centuries later, in the late 1700s, with the founding of Los Angeles as a city.[33]

In 1781, El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles del Río de Porciúcula, or Los Angeles, was settled under Spanish rule and became a part of New Spain. Although this territory was an important part of the Spanish empire, the labor of farming and irrigation,

[33] Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time*: *Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 24.

building homes and perhaps even building a plaza[34] was executed by a diverse group of Mexicans, many of whom were African or of African ancestry.[35] At least twenty-six of the forty-six *pobladores* were African or partially African, which means that Los Angeles as we know it today has distinct Black origins.[36] While some scholars recognize this historical fact, it is not widely taught in public schools and is therefore less known to Californians and Angelenos. This is one of many hidden Black histories in North America. The origins of the *pobladores* are important in that they contextualize the history as well as contemporary experiences of Los Angeles. Katherine McKittrick says it this way: "space and place give Black lives meaning in a world that has, for the most part, incorrectly deemed Black populations and their attendant geographies as 'ungeographic' and/or philosophically underdeveloped."[37] In this sense, building from Nelson Maldonado-Torres, we can read a decolonial turn in the founding of LA by people of African descent. By locating Black people in a foundational history of Los Angeles, we locate powerful Black histories and Black geographies. Even more still, these Black *pobladores* or "populators" were not enslaved or part of chattel slavery—they were free people who willingly took this job of journeying up to Alta California. They were *paid* laborers who farmed the land and grew wheat and garbanzos, worked with livestock like bulls, horses and goats, and built homes and plazas in Los Angeles.[38] However, not everyone who took this paid position fell in

[34] William M. Mason, *Living Under the Spanish Flag*: *Spain's New World* (Burbank: Southern California Genealogical Society, 2004), 13.

[35] Mason, *Living Under the Spanish Flag*, 65–66.

[36] Paul Robinson, "Race, Space and the Evolution of Black Los Angeles," in *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities*, ed. Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2010), 22.

[37] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xiii.

[38] Mason, *Living Under the Spanish Flag*, 13.

love with the job and within less than a year's, time three of the original forty-six settlers left Los Angeles. The three who left were José de Velasco (Lara), Luis Quintero and Antonio Mesa. De Velasco (Lara), of Spanish ethnicity, left because of a complicated family matter where he accidently found himself married to two women at the same time and fled for fear of retaliation.[39] The other two, Quintero and Mesa, were both *Negro*, or Black.[40] Neither of these men were chased down or forced to stay; they had the will and the right to leave without violence or any threat against them. In fact, Quintero, his wife, María Petra Rubio, and their five children decided to head to Santa Barbara because Quintero wanted to continue his work as a tailor. Mesa and his wife, Ana Gertrudis López, and their two children made their own way as well, returning to Sonora to be with their family there. This is absolutely remarkable, because at this time, slavery of Africans was completely legal, and also, it was the primary form of labor that would go on to build the U.S. into an economic global power.

Of course, colonialism is never something to celebrate—this land was taken from the Gabrieleno and Tongva peoples. That being the case, it is still very unique in the history of European imperialism, coming from a legacy of modernity, that people of African descent would be in the position to own land, develop a city and be free while doing this work. When considering the simultaneous legacy of slavery in the Americas, this part is truly rare. Pobladores expanded Los Angeles by transforming it into New Spain, and they populated it by bringing their wives and having children in Los Angeles. In this way, LA was not only founded by Black people, it has distinct Black generations in the 18th century. "During the first ten years the settlement gained twenty families among them men with such familiar names as Pico,

[39] Mason, *Living Under the Spanish Flag*, 13.

[40] Mason, *Living Under the Spanish Flag*, 65.

Sepulveda, Figueroa and Soto."[41] Even some of these families, like the Picos, were of African descent. Their work and public service in building Los Angeles into an urban center is still notable and virtually singular in the Americas. Below, we see Catarina Moreno, a young woman who, through her name and her family line, and even in marriage, is connected to these early histories of people of African descent in Los Angeles. Moreno married General Andrés Pico, the brother of Pio Pico, Governor of California, who was also of African descent. It is also worth noting that this photo was gathered while searching through archives in UCLA's Special Collections and was donated by Miriam Matthews, the first Black librarian to be hired by the Los Angeles Public Library system; Matthews was an advocate for Black history, intellectual freedom and the arts. Her legacy is still celebrated, as she was a prominent Black intellectual in LA.

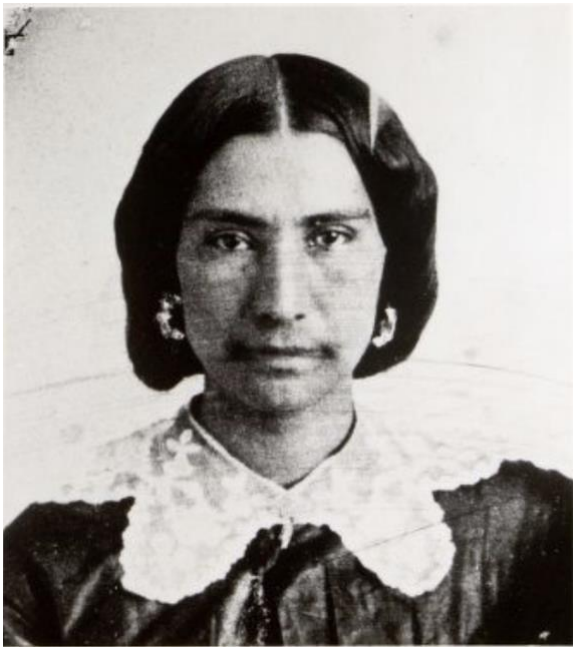


Figure 1. Catarina Moreno, 1860, granddaughter of José Moreno, a Negro founder of Los Angeles, photograph, UCLA Special Collections, accessed October 30, 2018.

[41] John D. Weaver, *Los Angeles: The Enormous Village 1781–1981* (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1980), 13.

I submit that this history gives Black people and other marginalized people a greater sense of self and future self in that here, we possess a legacy and lineage in LA. Furthermore, the telling of Los Angeles's Black history often begins in the early twentieth century, not two centuries earlier. For example, it may come as a surprise to some Angelenos that Tom Bradley was not the first Black mayor of Los Angeles—as he is often credited for—he was the fourth, after Francisco Reyes (elected in 1793) Manuel Victoria (1831-1832) and Pío Pico (1832, 1845-1846).[42] This fact indicates that Black people in Los Angeles experienced more opportunities for leadership and upward mobility under Spanish and Mexican rule than they did as a part of the United States of America. This is worth considering closely because despite a rigid racial hierarchy within the *casta* system that diminished African and Indian peoples in particular, it also seems possible that Black Mexicans and Black Americans enjoyed more social equity with criollos and mestizo Mexicans than they did with Anglo Americans—for example, they were free and unbound, paid laborers who lived with their families, whose names we still utter every time we move around Sepulveda and Pico Boulevards. While the evidence for solidarity across difference at this historic moment deserves more research, the cultural and legal practices around this historic moment are unique.

Spanish rule came to an end when Mexico asserted power as an autonomous nation. Mexican rule in California lasted some twenty-four years beginning in 1822, until California was seized by the United States in 1846, only two years before an even greater land grab that was solidified in the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.[43] While the land itself was not

[42] Robinson, "Race, Space, and the Evolution of Black Los Angeles," 25.
[43] The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed to end the war between the U.S. and Mexico; it negotiated the annexation of parts of present-day Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada, Texas and Utah into the U.S. Those territories were formerly part of Mexico. In this transaction, Mexico lost roughly half of its land mass.

changing with each new nation who claimed it, national identities were. In this sense, we can trace a very clear history of race in space to the annexation of California by the United Sates. In other words, although race meant different things within different national scopes, it was always meaningful, and now that California was a part of the United States, a distinct racial shift occurred where white supremacy was inscribed within the landscape, one that differed from Spain's more equitable treatment of Black, indigenous and mixed-race people in the late 1700s. In his book, *How Racism Takes Place,* George Lipsitz reminds us that "The plantation, the prison, the sharecropper's cabin, and the ghetto have been the most visible and obvious manifestations of white supremacists' uses of space."[44] While slavery was a thriving institution in much of the United States at that time, California was a free state, which meant that slavery could not be practiced there; it also meant that once enslaved people arrived within state lines, even if with their masters (or otherwise did not run *away* from their masters), they were legally free. However, the Fugitive State Law of California was passed in 1852, and remained in law until 1855. This law protected slavery by making it illegal for enslaved persons to run away from their masters and also consequently, also had the effect of jeopardizing free Black people in California, chiefly those without freedom papers.[45] While this was the case, it is also created a series of circumstances for an enslaved woman named Biddy Mason, and her sister Hannah and their children, to traverse from the white spatial imaginary to a beautiful and thriving Black spatial imaginary. That is, with the help of Robert Owens, a free Black man, and his family, Mason was able to escape the bondage of slavery and also, the violence of racialized spaces and the white spatial imaginary where white supremacy was normalized and largely unnoticed by

[44] Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 52.

[45] Paul Robinson, "Race, Space and the Evolution of Black Los Angeles," 30.

whites, and create a "Black spatial imaginary and its socially shared understanding of the importance of public space as well as its power to create new opportunities and life chances."[46]

Biddy Mason, born August 15, 1818 in Georgia, along with her sister Hannah and their 11 children, were enslaved and belonged to Robert Smith and his family, who had relocated from Mississippi to Utah as members of the Mormon faith. After drifting away from the Church of Latter Day Saints, Smith briefly moved to Los Angeles, and was preparing to move once again and settle in Texas. As a free man, Owens became a wealth and prominent businessman in Los Angeles. When Owens learned that Robert Smith intended to leave Los Angeles and relocate to Texas, a notoriously harsh slave state, he reported the Southern slaver-owner to the local sheriff for violating the rights of freed Black people. This incredibly brave undertaking between strangers would change the course of Los Angeles history. Additionally, this act of humanity would lead to a friendship, a kinship and eventually a family dynasty. Because Owens's claim was aligned with the legal standard for enslavement, local law enforcement helped Mason and her family leave the Smiths; they found shelter with the Owens family for a while until Judge Hayes placed them in the county jail for twenty-one days as a form of protective custody.[47] Robert Smith was adamant about bringing his 13 slaves with him to Texas, and tried to move outside the law to get Biddy, Hannah and the children back. When he spoke to the judge, Smith claimed that, rather than enslaved and bound workers, they were his family and they deserved to be together. When the judge was not convinced by this appeal, Smith attempted to coerce Hannah to join them and leave the Owens family. It was at this point that Judge Hayes moved Mason and her group into protective custody and forced them to live in the jail. While the

[46] Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 52.

[47] DeEtta Demaratus, *The Force of a Feather: The Search for a Lost Story of Slavery and Freedom* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2002), 81.

conditions were grim, they were safer here than with the Owens family. In fact, the Smiths were *so* insistent on bringing Mason, Hannah and the children with them, they even attempted to break them out of jail and kidnap them. When they were unable to break through the jail building and kidnap Mason, Hannah and the children the Smiths immediately fled California for Texas.[48]After the threat of the Smith family seemed to settle, the Los Angeles judge granted them their freedom.[49] On January 19, 1856, Judge Benjamin Hayes declared, "All the said persons of color are entitled to their freedom and are free and cannot be held in slavery or involuntary servitude, it is therefore argued that they are entitled to their freedom and are free forever."[50] Judge Hayes, proving to be a man true to his convictions, went on to say much more in his deposition, including, "And it is further ordered and adjudged that all the costs accrues in the case up to the present date…shall be paid by the said Robert Smith."[51] Biddy Mason, Hannah and their children were never again bothered by the Smith family and remained in California for the rest of their lives.

By the 1860s, Mason's oldest daughter, Ellen, married Robert Owen's son, Charles and "a family dynasty was born."[52] Their families were a major part of the thriving Black community in Los Angeles through their business in real estate, their great capacity for philanthropy, and their networks and local leadership. While living with the Owens family, Biddy Mason began working as a nurse, assisting Dr. John Griffin in the county hospital and jail, paying her as much

---

[48] Marne L. Campbell, *Making Black Los Angeles: Class, Gender, and Community, 1850–1917* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 51.

[49] Robinson, "Race, Space, and the Evolution of Black Los Angeles," 31.

[50] Delilah L. Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California* (Los Angeles, CA: Times Mirror Print and Binding House, 1919), 89.

[51] Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California*, 89.

[52] Robinson, "Race, Space, and the Evolution of Black Los Angeles," 31.

as $2.50 a day.[53] She increased her income by working as a midwife, and caught babies for the rich and poor alike. Because of her skills as a medical practitioner, her work was in high demand. After living frugally and saving her earnings for nearly a decade, she purchased a lot on Spring Street for $250 from William M. Buffum and James F. Burns. This was not Mason's first encounter with Burns, in fact, "[he] had been a deputy sheriff during the time Biddy and the children were held in the county jail."[54] She quickly learned the trends for buying and selling and became a real estate tycoon of sorts. That very property she purchased for $250 she later sold the northern half of for $1,500. She went on to purchase several other properties and earn a substantial return when she sold. She went on to build her homestead into a two-story brick home where she occupied the top floor and rented out the bottom floor to people of all racial backgrounds. Her timing in Los Angeles gave her a certain advantage, as greater demand for space resulted in the land boom of the 1880s. Biddy Mason's financial success in Los Angeles was unusual for a woman of color, especially a formerly enslaved Black woman, making her prosperity even more satisfying. After a life full of extreme hardship and countless difficulties, she gained freedom and wealth, however, she didn't stop there. Perhaps the most inspiring part of her story is that Mason was deeply committed to improving the lives of people within her community. She was deeply compassionate and generous to those who were incarcerated, to migrants who were without housing, to the sick and elderly and those in need. With her real estate businesses, she and the Owens family bought property all over Los Angeles, without restriction or limitation due to race. Before racially restrictive covenants were put in place in the 1890s and becoming common place in the early twentieth century, there was a Los Angeles that

[53] Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California*, 174.

[54] Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California*, 174.

was owned by a prominent Black family. Through her work as a midwife and her proximity to Spanish-speaking Mexicans, Californios and others, Mason was known to speak Spanish,[55] and probably, rented homes and provided medical services to African American, Afro-Mexican, indigenous, criollos, mixed-race people and others. Since Biddy Mason sold and/or rented homes to Spanish-speaking Mexicans and others, I believe that she was a critical figure in the creation of a non-segregated Los Angeles, one where people of racial, language and cultural difference lived among each other. Over 100 years before Lipsitz coined the term "Black spatial imaginary," Mason was out there creating a place in Los Angeles where people of color could thrive, could create their own opportunities, could influence their own life chances.

In 1935, while racially restrictive covenants were widely used in California, Bernard Zakheim and his assistant, Phyllis Wrightson, were commissioned by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to create a series of murals at the University of California, San Francisco Medical Center, that commemorated the histories of medicine and medical practices in California.[56] One section of their mural project is pictured below.

[55] Robinson, "Race, Space, and the Evolution of Black Los Angeles," 31.

[56] Demaratus, *Force of a Feather*, 174.

Figure 2. Bernard Zakheim and Phyllis Wrightson, *The History of Medicine in California,* 1935-1936, fresco mural, Toland Hall, UC San Francisco, accessed January 11, 2020.

These fresco murals were created on 10 panels in Toland Hall, one of the lecture auditoriums on the UC, San Francisco campus. These works of art visually recall several different types of medicine that have been practiced in California, including "superstitious" and "rational" medicine. In the detail above, we see Biddy Mason, the only Black woman in any of the panels, tending to someone in great need, perhaps a solider suffering from malaria.[57] With her hair covered and ears adorned with gold hoops, we see Mason assisting Dr. Griffin, her employer, as he holds a note calling on his medical expertise. It is remarkable to see Biddy Mason pictured here for several reasons—one being that Mason never treated patients in San Francisco, yet her skill, knowledge and practice as a medical care provider were so prolific that she is remembered and memorialized even in the Bay Area. Secondly, Dr. Griffin was one of perhaps two college

[57] According to *Found* San Francisco's Digital Archive, this patient is a solider inflicted with malaria. http://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=UCSF%27s_Depression-Era_Medical_History_Murals

educated physicians in Los Angeles in the late 19th century, and because of this, he was highly sought after as a celebrated man of medicine. Seeing Mason with such an important physician helps to locate her as an essential part of an elite heath care team in Los Angeles. Although she was not trained in the same way as Dr. Griffin, Mason's immense knowledge of medicine and her expertise in herbalism and midwifery came from her experiences and labor as an enslaved woman.[58] Because of this, her technologies for healing were often outside of Western conventions. Beyond this still, I believe that she disrupts what bell hooks calls imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy both ontologically and methodologically as a Black woman who heals with the earth. Finally, Mason, who was denied a formal education, heals and cares for others, subverts Western conventions of knowledge and even now, she teaches medical students at Toland Hall through her image in the mural. Biddy Mason's presence in this mural, located at one of the most prestigious public universities for the study and practice of medicine, is a reflection of the exceptional life she lived.

Although it is not clear in this detail, this panel of the wall is curved and gives the viewer an interactive and dynamic feeling. Mason and her colleagues are not disturbed by an audience watching; they are deeply focused to the task at hand. We see Mason and the others rendered in a powerful social realist style with heavy brush strokes, broad movements and sculpted figures. This social realist style signals to us that Mason is not only a legend, she is remembered as a radical healer within a tradition of radical muralism in the Americas. After fighting in the First World War, the artist, Zakheim and his wife settled in San Francisco where Zakheim opened a furniture business, taught art classes and made social realist paintings about life. In 1930, he sent a collection of his sketches to the great Diego Rivera and received an invitation to study and

[58] Mason was enslaved for the first 36 years of her life until she was granted her freedom in 1856, nine years before slavery was abolished in the United States.

work in Mexico City along with the great master. From about 1930 to 1931, Zakheim learned from one the most important artists from the twentieth century, acquiring knowledge of Rivera's fresco technique, painting ethos and social realist aesthetic. Bringing them back to San Francisco, Zakheim employed them beautifully to remember and celebrate the amazing life and contributions that Biddy Mason offered to California, the U.S. and the world in the mural mentioned earlier. Even this work of art, although it lives in a university building, advances Mason's legacy, recalling and reinscribing the Black spatial imaginary outside of Los Angeles. Created by a veteran, a refugee and a muralist trained in a great tradition of social art and art for liberation, Lipsitz reminds us that "…works of expressive culture function as repositories of collective memory, sources of moral instruction, and mechanism for transforming places and calling communities into being through display, dialogue and decoration. Like activists, artists committed to Black freedom proceed by promoting new understandings of the scale, scope and stakes of place and space by burrowing in, branching out and building up."[59] I believe this mural offers an exciting example of just that, and holds literal space for Black empowerment and Black power for generations to come.

In 1891, Mason, very well loved, died an elderly woman with great wealth and influence in Los Angeles. Many all over the city mourned her death; her funeral services were held at the Fort Street M.WE. Church and she was buried at Evergreen Cemetery in Boyle Heights.[60] Around the turn of the 20th century, Los Angeles was becoming populated by Anglo residents; despite this growing white majority, there was still a reputable group of wealthy and powerful

[59] Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 60.

[60] Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 165.

Black residents, most of whom were descendants of the Mason and Owens line.[61] Several years after his grandmother Biddy passed, Robert C. Owens built a six-story building on her homestead for $250,000. Of course, this was directly against his grandmother's wishes, and Owens was met with resistance from family members, and even found himself in court fighting to proceed with his plan. Eventually, he was successful and his grandmother's home was destroyed to give way to another building. The *LA Times* described Owens as the "Richest Negro in Los Angeles" and for a short while, he had even more wealth than his grandmother.[62] Despite his initial success, Owens sustained great financial loss in the depression of the 1930's and as a way of paying off his debt, he sold the six-story building, losing ties to the land where Biddy Mason once lived.

While her descendants still remembered her, there wasn't much of a public or spatial reference to her life and legacy until 1989 when the Biddy Mason Park was opened in downtown Los Angeles at 333 Spring Street, only one residence away from the site of her first home.[63] Major Los Angeles figures like Mariam Matthews, Dolores Hayden and Betye Saar, along with Donna Graces, Sheila Leverant de Dretteville and Susan King, were a part of the team that created this public space and monument. Without much space to use, they turned an ally into a walkable park with a few trees and a memorial wall that chronicles the life of the great Biddy Mason. Using images, wall text, and plaques, as well as some of her land deeds and freedom papers, the wall commemorates her extraordinary life and transformation from a woman bound by slavery to a free, self-possessed and self-actualized real estate mogul, a skilled nurse and midwife, a loving grandmother, a person of faith and generous philanthropist. Since its opening,

---

[61] Hayden, *The Power of Place*, 165.
[62] Hayden, *The Power of Place*, 167.

[63] Biddy Mason bought her first home at 331 Spring St. in 1866.

this park been visited by children and families, students, educators, politicians, members of Masons church, her descendants and many others. Because it is an outdoor park and not a museum or university, this space is much more open to kinesthetic learning like touching and tracing the walls.

This park is discussed in *A People's Guide to Los Angeles,* as well as Dolores Hayden's book, *The Power of Place,* and a number of others. Even though this site is somewhat of a hidden gem in Los Angeles, I strongly contend that it is an incredibly important space that very much reflects the same outcomes of the Black spatial imaginary, where Black people transformed spatialized hardship into a source of power, a place for community and life. In many ways, this park is not just a memorial for Mason's emancipation, it is a blueprint for a community-minded, socially just and generous way to live.

Figure 3. Sheila Lavrant de Bretteville with the Power of Place, 1989, Biddy Mason Park, 333 South Spring Street, Los Angeles 90013, accessed April 3, 2018.

Twentieth-Century Los Angeles: Racist by Law

By the turn of the twentieth century, racially restrictive covenants were commonly used in housing agreements in Los Angeles, such that undesired residents of color could be excluded from real consideration as renters or homeowners.[64] Restrictive covenants, while not yet officially part of the law, were enacted against a variety of peoples of color, including those described as Negros, Mexicans and Japanese, toward the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. With explicit language that restricted certain racial and ethnic groups from living in specific individual homes, restrictive covenants were practiced and upheld by individual homeowners, real estate agents or real estate companies. In 1932, however, The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and Veterans Affairs (VA) began their racist lending practices spanning to 1964.[65] During that time, they sustained unfair advantage for white people who sought to purchase a home, approving of white applicants and rejecting people of color. One year later, in 1933, the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) was created as a part of the New Deal, intending once again to support white home buyers and reject homebuyers of color. These three major federal institutions justified their lending policies by codifying Black applicants and other applicants of color as risky, dangerous people and therefore, unfit for a home loan. This act of restricting housing in the early to mid-twentieth century would have major implications for essentially all communities in Los Angeles, especially, Afro-Latinxs, Latinxs and Black peoples. Furthermore, it would go on to exacerbate wealth inequality for generations to come, up to the present moment. These skewed housing opportunities would also

[64] Jones, *South of Pico*, 13.
[65] George Lipsitz, *Possessive investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998), 6–7.

abruptly change the trajectory of equitable and egalitarian housing practices established the century before when Biddy Mason and Robert Owens were selling and renting real estate to people of all racial backgrounds, languages and incomes. Since this moment was congruent with the mass migration of Black folks and Latinxs that began in the 1930s and continued for the rest of the century, it would dictate and determine the ways neighborhoods, communities, schools, jobs and cities within LA would take shape for generations to come. Of course, these policies and plans were deliberate and sustained over the course of the century, even after the law condemned racist lending practices. This type of urban development was anything but neutral and certainly not a natural way to think about people within a built environment. Rather, this was an intentional project that racialized space; George Lipsitz said it this way:

> Racialized space has come to be seen as natural in this nation. Spatial control, displacement, dispossession, and exclusion have been linked to racial subordination and exploitation in decisive ways. From the theft of Native American and Mexicans lands in the ninetieth century to the confiscation of Black and Latino property for urban renewal projects in the twentieth century, from the Trail of Tears to the Japanese Internment, from the creation of ghettos, barrios, reservations and "Chinatowns" to the disproportionate placement of toxic hazards in minority neighborhoods, the racial projects of U.S. society have *always* been spatial projects as well.[66]

Separation of racial and ethnic peoples resulted in suffering and oppression. Well-funded schools funneled more educational and professional opportunities for students in white neighborhoods. With better homes, schools, earning potential and accumulation of wealth, neighborhood segregation was essential to maintaining white supremacy. At the same time, scholars have also noted the ways that people of color created congregation out of segregation.[67] After the Second World War, especially in the 1930s and 1940s, Black migrants left the Jim

[66] Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 52.

[67] Johnson, *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity*, 65.

Crow South in great numbers and moved west in search of employment opportunities and a more equitable life.[68] They settled in places like Oakland and Los Angeles, where car and tire industrial and factory jobs were booming. Many of those who chose Los Angeles settled in Watts, a swampy area that was described as a little piece of the South. At that time, Watts was one of the only places in South Los Angeles where people of color could live. Although it was a small muddied town, it was a heterogeneous community where African Americans, Mexicans, Japanese, Chinese and other peoples made home.[69] Around the same time, Mexican migrants were arriving in Los Angeles and California as members of the Bracero Program. Between 1942 and 1964, roughly 4 million Mexicans participated in this program and came as temporary workers.[70] As Mexicans migrated temporarily and sometimes settled permanently in the United States, 35,000 Mexican nationals and Mexican Americans were repatriated to Mexico as a part of the red scare. This movement and violent displacement of people, I argue, is also a part of what Lipsitz underscores in his description of racialized space, including intimate, communal and even transnational spaces.

While many thousands of Black and Mexican peoples were migrating by will or by force at this moment, there were also many instances of Black and Mexican solidarity and mutual inspiration. For instance, many African American artists and athletes made homes in Mexico in the early twentieth century.[71] People like Lorraine Hansberry, Elizabeth Catlett, Chandler Owen, Willie Wells and Roy Campanella recognized that Mexican citizenship would leave them with

---

[68] Horne, *Fire This Time*, 33–35.

[69] Horne, *Fire This Time*, 33–35.

[70] UCLA Labor Center, "The Bracero Program: Bracero History Program," accessed July 28, 2020, https://www.labor.ucla.edu/what-we-do/research-tools/the-bracero-program/.

[71] Gerald Horne, *Black and Brown: African Americans and the Mexican Revolution, 1910–1920* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 181–192.

"better protection than U.S. citizenship if they were threatened with harm…"[72] Each of these folks traveled to Baja California, Veracruz, Mexico City and other areas of Mexico to study, create, compete and make a living. Hale Woodruff, for example, was also one among many African American who found something special in Mexico. Born in Cairo, Illinois, Woodruff studied directly with Diego Rivera and went on to have a prolific career in the United States and abroad.[73] Charles Alston was another Black American who gained skills and perspective in Mexico as he studied with Rivera and Orozco in the mural tradition. Upon their return to Los Angeles, Alston collaborated with Woodruff to create a series of panoramic murals in West Adams, Los Angeles.[74] Although painted solely by Alston, *The Negro in California History—Settlement and Development* is a vital part of Los Angeles history, especially because it is housed in the Golden State Mutual Building, a site of great Black history and pride. Since 2011, the building has been designated as a City Historic-Cultural Monument.[75]

[72] Horne, *Black and Brown*, 183.

[73] West Adams Heritage Association, "Paul R. Williams Landmark in West Adams Becomes L.A.'s Historic Cultural Monument No. 1000," reprinted from February 2011 newsletter, http://www.westadamsheritage.org/read/1242.

[74] West Adams Heritage Association, "Paul R. Williams Landmark in West Adams."

[75] West Adams Heritage Association, "Paul R. Williams Landmark in West Adams."

Figure 4. Charles Alston, 1949, *The Negro in California History—Settlement and Development*, oil-on-canvas murals, each 16'5" long and 9'3 1/4" tall, 1999 West Adams Blvd, Los Angeles CA 90018, accessed May 6, 2018.

While the Mexican influence in this mural or in the trajectory of the careers of Woodruff or Alston may not be strikingly visible to audiences, I submit that they were deeply important to these artists and their conception of social realism, muralism, their respective art practices, as well as their political ideologies of nationalism and belonging, as Alston "noted the parallels between Mexican art and that of African Americas."[76]

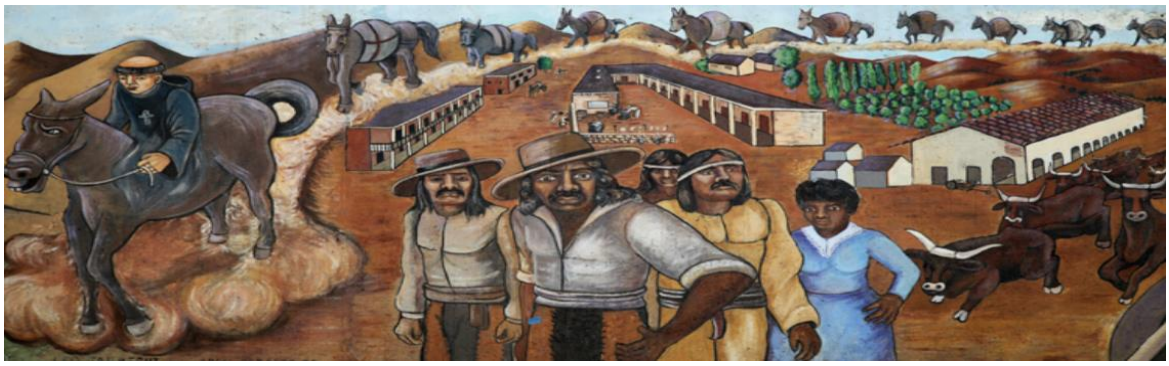
In the mural above, Alston takes a creative approach depicting time and space, merging a number of historical events and historical figures in proximity to each other within the same frame. While most of the figures in the mural are anonymous, a few are specific people who contributed to the settlement and development of California, including James Beckwourth, pictured in the top register of the mural, wearing a fur cap and animal hide donning a rifle.

[76] Charles Alston, as quoted in West Adams Heritage Association, "Paul R. Williams Landmark in West Adams."

Beckwourth was a formerly enslaved man who became a prominent fur trader, horse wrangler and explorer. He married the daughter of a Native American chief and according to his book, he ascended to rank of chief of the Crow people. A rugged and traveled Black American who settled in California, several trails, passes and cities are named after him. Next to him, directly to his left, is the figure of a woman wearing a yellow hood moving quickly with two children and a baby. Although we cannot see her face, this woman is Biddy Mason. In an abbreviated visual representation of her path to freedom, Alston depicts Mason as a smart leader, a courageous woman, a mother and of course, very focused on her goal, to get her family to safety. Although she is not depicted as a real estate mogul or philanthropist, her journey to Los Angeles is an integral part of California history.

Bernard Zakheim and Charles Alston were not the only muralists to depict Biddy Mason as an important figure in Los Angeles and California history. Of course, the longest mural in the world also memorializes Biddy Mason as a prominent figure. Judy Baca's *Great Wall of Los Angeles*, made between 1976-1983 with over 400 youth helping design, research and paint the mural, has segments that depict the African descended and Mestizo founders of Los Angeles as well as other African Americans who left a legacy in California, including Mason, Mary Ellen Pleasant and Mifflin W. Gibbs.[77] Together these segments help us to see and imagine the contributions people of African descent offered Los Angeles over the centuries.

[77] Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC), "The Great Wall – History and Description," last accessed July 23, 2020, https://sparcinla.org/the-great-wall-part-2/.



Figures 5 & 6, Judith F. Baca, *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*, 1976-1983, approx. 2754 feet, Between Oxnard and Coldwater Canyon, accessed July 10, 2020 https://sparcinla.org/the-great-wall-part-2/.

In 2015, Jane Chu, Chairperson for the National Endowment of the Arts, toured the *Great Wall of Los* Angeles, and I had the rare privilege of joining her and the SPARC staff seeing the mural up close. While we were down in the basin of the LA River, I noticed for the first time the sepia-toned portrait of Biddy Mason standing as the head of the golden state of California. In the portrait, Mason is clearly alone and singular. That is, despite the fact that to her right three persons hang from trees, lynched, Mason timelessly offers a direct yet caring look out to us. To her left is a sign that reads "White Only" next to a confederate flag. In this portrait and in her own life, Mason was in direct proximity to danger, to dispossession and to death, yet, she is peaceful, brave and full of hope. With her portrait at such a prominent place, she is remembered here as a leader in California and an extremely capable woman. Although the portrait does not convey the richness of her incredible life's story, it annotates one of her most important contributions to the city of LA, as a founder of the AME Church.

The second image here, figure 6, depicts the founders of Los Angeles who, along with their families, traveled from Mexico to Alta California to settle the City of Angels. With opportunities for upward mobility and landownership, this diverse group of men and women farmed, raised cattle, erected buildings and created plazas. While miscegenation was common in New Spain and Los Angeles, racial hierarchy was less important and less rigid in this developing urban center. Despite the *pobladores*'s status as land owners, they also raise the question of *mestizaje* or racial mixing.[78] This term refers to the racial and ethnic mixing that specifically occurred during and after the years of Spanish contact where Spanish and Indian parents made *mestizo* children who are now Mexicans, and Chicanxs. While pseudo-scientific, anthropological, phonotypical or biological claims to the organization of race have been demystified and proven false in more modern times,[79] the impacts and outcomes of race and racism are very real, just as they were centuries ago.[80] Since the European occupation of the Americas in the fifteenth century, race in the Americas has been a cornerstone for organizing class structures, gender roles and power dynamics across groups of people. In her essay, "Social Dimensions of Race," Patricia Seed says that during the seventeenth century, "race and presumed racial differences were the basic criteria for social differentiation."[81] Furthermore, as a part of the European tradition of fascination with and curiosity about the New World in the seventeenth century, casta paintings became very popular in New Spain and were often sent back

---

[78] Laura Pulido, "Geographies of Race and Ethnicity III: Settler Colonialism and Nonnative People of Color." *Progress in Human Geography* 42, no. 2 (2018): 309–318.

[79] Ian Haney López, "The Social Construction of Race: Some Observations on Illusion, Fabrication, and Choice," Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review 29, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 34.

[80] Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 20.

[81] Patricia Seed, "Social Dimensions of Race: Mexico City, 1753," *Hispanic American Historic Review* 62, no. 4 (1982): 569.

to Europe for upper class patrons.[82] These paintings visualized and documented the hierarchy of racial mixing or mestizaje within sixteen different scenes moving from left to right and top to bottom, respectively, as they articulated the racial identities of the couples and families they depicted. While the paintings were and still are important to art historians and others, they also offer an equally important reflection on racial hierarchy and on social status in Mexico and Mexican culture.[83] I draw from art history as a way to demonstrate the social, cultural and even artistic investment in mestizaje, and to underscore the idea that race and racial mixing was never meaningless—they has always been full of meaning.

Returning to her essay, "Social Dimensions of Race" Patricia Seed writes that, "Initially the elite were (white) European-Spanish peninsulars, the slaves were Black and the peasants were Indians."[84] Although her description comes from centuries past, racial hierarchy was an important element of the twentieth-century construction of social and racial identity with *el movimiento.* For example, José Vasconcelos, the Minister of Education in Mexico, built on the concept of mestizaje in his 1925 essay, *La Raza Cosmica*. In that text, Vasconcelos expands on the provincial idea that only four races existed, "the Black, the Indian, the Mongol and the White."[85] He goes on to assert that the new race that would inevitably become the fifth and final race is the *mestizo.*[86] While his intention was to empower Mexicans and Chicanos in the United States and to oppose white supremacy, his work was peppered with racist, anti-Black and anti-Semitic language that further upheld logics of racial superiority instead of mutual liberation. In

---

[82] Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn,"Hybridity and Its Discontents: Considering Visual Culture in Colonial Spanish America," *Colonial Latin American Review* 12, no. 1 (2003): 9.

[83] Dean and Leibsohn, "Hybridity and Its Discontents," 9.

[84] Seed, "Social Dimensions of Race: Mexico City, 1753," 569.

[85] José Vasconcelos, *La Raza Cósmica* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997; originally published 1925), 405.

[86] Vasconcelos, *La Raza* Cósmica, 412.

Laura Pulido's fearless article "Geography of Race and Ethnicity" she says **"**mestizaje, the idea of cultural and biological mixing was a nation-building strategy that both assimilated and erased *lo indio."*[87] Here, Pulido excellently articulates one of the most problematic elements of mestizaje as it relates to Aztlán and erasing African, Indians and indigenous peoples. It seems even more shameful, then, that mestizaje has not been more broadly critiqued and reconsidered within the field of Chicanx Studies. In this way, the problem of mestizaje is not just theoretical; it has had a terrible impact on many Latin American countries and cultures. For example, even though Mexicans of African descent have been present just as long as Mexicans of Spanish heritage, the term Afro-Mexican was adopted into the constitution only recently, in 2019; Mexicans of African ancestry responded to an intercensal survey in 2015; and this year, 2020, was the first time they had space on the regular census. Taken all together, this means there were many generations of Black erasure in Mexico. The implications for this erasure include a lack of services, rights and even visibility for Black Mexicans.

Although this dissertation focuses on works of art from the 20th and 21st centuries, the rich and complex colonial historical backdrop reminds us of the stakes of this project. For example, if we started without acknowledging the powerful and important Black histories from 18th century Los Angeles, we might miss an opportunity to appreciate the great continuity of Black excellence and Latinx solidarity. Furthermore, this deeper historical scope offers us more perspective from which we can draw, dream and activate for our futures. In other words, knowing our deep Black histories helps us to imagine even more exciting Afro-Latinx futures. We can imagine building on these histories for hundreds of years and create foundations for generations to come. For me, getting these histories back was so empowering that I decided to

[87] Pulido, "Geographies of Race and Ethnicity," 5.

write my dissertation about them and the iterations they would influence for the next few hundred years. As such, the research done in service of this project illustrates that Los Angeles is rich in Black and Brown movements of solidarity, mutual inspiration and a shared interest in freedom. Through interviews and archival research, visual analysis, and since our freedom is bound up in each other, it is even more important that I offer historical frameworks for discussing the past and later on in chapters 4 and 5, a rich an robust discussion of the present and future.

Chapter 2: Ghost-like Resistance

> "While their subject matter offers insight into history and contemporary issues, murals themselves are offered sites to negotiate memory, identity, representation and through them, struggle."[88]
> —Freida High

> "I feel that my art historical research and political convictions are in conjunction with each other, and are framed by…the intersections of cultural practices within their social and historical context, ideally with the two acting in praxis."[89]
> —Shifra Goldman

The previous chapter laid out an early history of Los Angeles beginning in 1781, focusing on Black founders and settlers of the city through several murals and one public monument. It also engaged a discussion of the ideologies and problems of *mestizaje* in order to consider the previous discussions of racial mixing and racial hierarchies. In this chapter, we move into the 20th century to consider two anti-racist and anti-colonial murals that were created generations apart that somehow, shared an uncommon experience. Each of these murals, *America Tropical*, 1932, and *The Black Experience*, 1970 speaks to its own cultural group, and in this sense, they differ from the murals discussed in the previous chapter that often connect the histories and lives of Black and Brown people in the same frame. *America Tropical* centers a Pan-Latinx or Pan-Latin American point of view and *The Black Experience* focuses on life for those who belong to the African diaspora. When we look at them next to each other, they are not only congruent, they mirror each other in profound ways. It is in this analysis, putting them side-by-side, that I offer a reading that advances Black and Brown liberation. In order to do this, just

---

[88] Freida High, "*Chiasmus*-Art in Politics/Politics in Art: Chicano/a and African American Image, Text, and Activism of the 1960s and 1970s," in *Voices of Color: Art and Society in the Americas*, ed. Phoebe Farris-Dufrene (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1997), 134.

[89] Shifra Goldman, *Dimension of the Americas: Art and Social Change in Latin America and the United States* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 2.

as in the previous chapter, I begin with a discussion on the built environment and pull back the curtain to observe the origins of the murals and the significant impacts they made. I offer that these second births are incredibly meaningful to contemporary viewers, as I have observed from teaching these histories to my own students. Furthermore, these murals and the analysis I offer are still full of powerful messages for the viewers in the future to interpret.

Spanish Past Olvera Street and América Tropical

> "Culture has replaced brutality as a means of maintaining the status quo."[90]
> —Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge

After years of lobbying, fundraising, planning and construction, Christine Sterling's (born Chastina Rix) vision of Olvera Street in what is now downtown Los Angeles opened on Easter Sunday in 1930. This tourist attraction was most often frequented by Anglos and portrayed an enchanting make-believe past of Mexican Los Angeles, including beautiful *señoritas* in costume, vendors selling *tamales* and sounds of strumming guitars. Sterling, a San Francisco socialite, relocated to Los Angeles in the 1920's[91] and was disappointed when, upon her arrival, she did not see a "beautiful little Spanish Village complete with balconies and senoritas with roses in their hair."[92] As a wealthy woman with charm and social skills, she wasted no time becoming familiar with local politicians, journalists, wealthy elite and others to build the "old Mexican" fantasy theme park. Her plan was to create the version of Los Angeles

---

[90] Dot Tuer, "Is it Still Privileged Art? The Politics of Class and Collaboration in the Art Practice of Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge," in *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*, ed. Nina Felshin (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995), 195.

[91] Phoebe S. Kropp, "Citizens of the Past? Olvera Street and the Construction of Race and Memory in 1930s Los Angeles," *Radical History Review* 81 (2001): 37.

[92] Kropp, "Citizens of the Past," 37.

she had believed in popular literature from decades prior.[93] Of course, while the idea was deeply romantic for an outsider like Sterling, it was also steeped in stereotypes and white supremacist concepts of land and belonging. Without consulting them, working with them or working in their best interest, Sterling superimposed her vision of a dreamy Spanish amusement park onto Mexicans during a precarious moment for Latinas/os in Los Angeles.

Figure 7. Young women performing at Olvera Street C. 1936, photograph, Los Angeles Public Library, accessed July 11, 2018.

In the late 1920's the Avila Adobe was significantly deteriorating and condemned by the Department of Health, however Sterling intervened by opposing the Department of Health and questioning their choice to condemn the home. She won great attention after her public protest and garnered support from many of LA's elite residents. While in the spotlight, she enlisted the

[93] Books like Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* were popular at this time. Written in 1884, *Ramona* romanticized the image of the West and had lasting pacts on the popular imaginary. See Helen Hunt Jackson, *Ramona* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1900).

financial support that Olvera Street would need in order to be realized according to her imagination. In the spring of 1929, Sterling threw a fundraising barbecue for city officials that offered a taste of her vision of "old Mexico" in hopes of increasing monetary support of her project. Guests of this social occasion were captivated by the delicious foods, the exotic workers in costume and the sensational environment that Sterling delivered. Her effort was quite successful, as many decided to donate monies and other resources to the creation of Sterling's Old Mexican fantasy. More telling still, Police Chief James "Two Gun" Davis even pledged to send shackled prison inmates to do the bulk of the physical labor if others would agree to fund other necessary purchases.[94] In this way, Olvera Street was literally paved by chain gang laborers who were exploited in order to build Sterling's "romanticize[d] Mexican folk culture as well as to publicize her 'expertise' on all things Mexican."[95] According to historian Kelly Lytle Hernandez, by 1924, Los Angeles Police Department made orders to arrest unemployed or protesting Mexicans in LA and force them to work for free. In her incredible book, *City of Inmates*, Hernandez writes, "Some evidence suggests that labor control was the main reason why the LAPD arrested so many Mexicans on public order charges."[96] And while many who were arrested were of Mexican descent, many others were of African descent. It is necessary to mention that many incarcerated Black and Latinx men were exploited as unpaid laborer. In fact, these same men built much of what is now downtown Los Angeles.[97] I believe that Sterling and

[94] Estrada, *Los Angeles Plaza*, 188.

[95] Estrada, *Los Angeles Plaza*, 190.

[96] Kelly Lytle Hernández, *City of Inmates*: *Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of the Human Caging in Los Angeles 1771–1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 148.

[97] While many Black and Latino incarcerated men built Los Angeles, it is also true that Biddy Mason helped to create a different Los Angeles that was fair and kind to all people, especially to the sick, to those in prison and those in greatest need.

other Anglo supporters were unconscious that Olvera Street was layered with violence and violations against people of Mexican descent. For example, Sterling was new to Los Angeles and not a member of the community she wanted to make into an amusement park, yet this didn't deter her. Because Sterling read a novel and believed in it, she propelled historical falsities and fantasies against Mexicans in a city full of residents of Mexican descent without consulting or considering real people. Secondly, incarcerating Mexicans in order to access free labor that would be used to perpetuate Mexican minstrelsy is not just cynical, it is especially cruel. I submit that this abuse of power is not obscure or done in ignorance—it is a certain type of social control over a historical narrative, cultural expression and physical environments that have had the potential to continuously decenter and caricaturize people of Mexican descent in Los Angeles. Even more still, we can understand this as an unfolding of white supremacy, where a recently relocated outsider can quickly access city officials, public institutions, unpaid workers, social power and the ability to dramatize the experience of another's community with their bodies and their labor, but not their input.

Described by local press as "A Mexican Street of Yesterday in a City of Today,"[98] Olvera Street concealed the real histories of Mexican people in Los Angeles. To that end, it exchanged the memories and realities of Mexican and Mexican Americans for consumable entertainment. Further, through the performance of "old Mexico," Olvera Street placed Mexicans in the past, obscuring the lives and experiences of contemporary Mexicans and Mexican Americas. This obscurity is particularly egregious because while Sterling had them performing for Anglo tourists, the LAPD were criminalizing Mexicans and Mexican Americans through incarceration and deportation. Through law enforcement— arresting and incarcerating Mexicans—the police

[98] Kropp, "Citizens of the Past," 36.

could control the population and extract free labor. At the same time, police were also raiding homes and work places in efforts to deport them to Mexico regardless of their citizenship status.[99] William David Estrada says it this way, "Indeed, the policing and the racial attitudes that guided Sterling's reforms are as ironic and compelling as the historical past she sought to preserve."[100] It is clear now that Mexican descended peoples were valuable for their ability to represent a historical moment, however most Anglo patrons missed the tension between the charming make-believe Mexican past and the aggrieved realities for their Mexican neighbors.

Even though her creation of Olvera Street was themed around the Spanish past, rather a Mexican fantasy more than anything else, it was deeply connected to whiteness, white supremacy and the white spatial imaginary.[101] Lipsitz introduces the concepts of the white spatial imaginary as "Seemingly race-neutral urban sites [that] contain hidden racial assumptions and imperatives…Even more important, these sites serve to produce and sustain racial meaning; they enact a public pedagogy about who belongs where and about what makes certain spaces desirable."[102] Here, we can see clearly that Olvera Street, although designed for amusement and recreation, was, in fact, a site that had race and racial difference deeply inscribed into it. This is even more evident when we consider the early audience were almost all Anglo Americans who, in the middle of the 1939 stock-market crash, had leisure time and discretionary funds for such entertainment. Rather than seeing the contradiction she was a part of, celebrating Mexican *culture* and simultaneously criminalizing, incarcerating, deporting and exploiting, Mexican *people*, Sterling expanded her cultural minstrelsy projects in Los Angeles. Several years after

---

[99] Kropp, "Citizens of the Past," 36.

[100] Estrada, *Los Angeles Plaza*, 198.

[101] Kropp, "Citizens of the Past," 40.

[102] Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 15.

founding Olvera Street, Sterling created China City. Sterling was one of the people who "…realized the economic potential in creating a new Chinatown"[103] and seized the opportunity. Especially after her previous successes with Olvera Street, she was empowered to create a plan for new Chinese businesses that would serve mostly Anglos, just like at Olvera Street. Furthermore, Sterling's vision meant that "New Chinatown would not be accessible to the poorest members of the Chinese American community."[104]

Figure 8. China City, c. 1938, photograph, 9 x 14 cm. Loyola Marymount University Hannon Library, accessed May 12, 2020.

While reflecting on Sterling's deep interest in ethnic-themed entertainment for Anglo consumption, I turn to Dr. Martin Luther King who asserted, in his book *Where Do we Go From*

[103] William Gow, "Building a Chinese Village in Los Angeles: Christine Sterling and the Residents of China City, 1938–1948," *Gum Saan Journal* 31, no. 1 (2010): 39–53.

[104] Gow, "Building a Chinese Village in Los Angeles."

Here?, that instead of asking about a "Negro" problem, or in these cases, a Mexican or Chinese problem, we must first "turn to the white man's problem."[105] In this way, Dr. King challenges the assertion that the problem is germane to communities of color and reframes and orients the order of the problem by reflecting on historical relationships to power. He helps us to consider those being used as for their culture and those who profit from exaggerated cultural performances. Furthermore, it would be accurate to say that Sterling and others were masters of cognitive dissonance. The dissonance required in order to create Olvera Street in this way resembles settler colonialism and the logic of elimination, a concept brought forward by Indigenous and Native Studies scholars that points to the ways that a settler society creates a past and a present that supports their claim to land, their framing of a narrative and their benevolence within the situation.[106]

Although the creation of Olvera Street is steeped in white supremacy and settler colonialism, it would also be a mistake to say that there were no instances of resistance and representation for Latinxs. Because of this, it is, therefore, crucial, to express in some detail the larger historical background and social condition at the moment of Olvera Street's creation in order to understand and appreciate the environment David Alfaro Siqueiros was in when he arrived to Los Angeles and created *America Tropical*. This historical background helps us to

---

[105] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 71.

[106] Although I cannot expand on the depth and scope of the logics of elimination in this dissertation, I am compelled to make clear the interconnectedness of this method of strategic violence against Native peoples as well as other means of suppression, subjugation or cruelty against different people of color in what is now the United States. Said another way, white supremacy can transform at times in order to maintain its aim of supremacy. Within that, it can exist in contradictory ways to create and uphold social inequality. For example, blood quantum policy used to justify chattel slavery against persons of African descent in the US was in direct contradiction to blood quantum policy utilized to dispossess indigenous peoples from their land. Where one drop of African blood made a person eligible for slavery, conversely, Native Americans are forced to prove a minimum percentage of indigenous lineage in order to be recognized by the federal government. Although these two practices are at odds with each other, both of these policies optimize the experience for white slave masters and/or land owners.

locate the meanings it might have held when it was created and helps us find new meanings today. I discuss these historical conditions because, just like radical art historians Shifra Goldman, Semela Lewis, Karen Mary Davalos and Kellie Jones, I believe that good art history can and *does* engage the social, political and economic settings in which artists work, especially in a dynamic and innovative city like Los Angeles. Furthermore, this approach is more than a theoretical framework interested in diversity or multicultural politics; I move in this vein because this analysis is deeply connected to a moral issue of justice and representation in the field of art history and in the material world. This framework seeks to both challenge and advance the field of art history by offering more socially, racially and politically centered discourse. It should come as no surprise that political, racial and social research contributes to more dynamic and multi-dimensional art history that is also more rigorous, sound and engaged.

Although the reality for workers of Olvera Street may have been grim, in the 1930s, Mexican and Mexican Americans in Los Angeles were active in fighting for freedom. Their activist labor increased and gained great momentum. In fact, one month after Olvera Street opened to tourists, crowds protested against it and the general oppression of the day.[107] Partially as a response to the belittling environment of Olvera Street and largely in protest to over policing, deportations and structural racism, people of Mexican descent pooled their power by gathering, protesting and demanding changes.[108] While the people were an incredible example of a transformational political moment, David Alfaro Siqueiros's 1932 mural *América Tropical* would become a symbol of and force for resistance against US imperialism and white supremacy. With its bright colors, rounded figures, pan-Latin American imagery and active

[107] Estrada, *Los Angeles Plaza*, 165.

[108] Estrada, *Los Angeles Plaza*, 165–167.

interest in the natural environment, the mural would stir up Los Angeles in several ways for generations to come.

América Tropical was originally commissioned by Franz K. Ferenz, the director of the Olvera Street Art Center, and was painted on the second story of the Pelanconi Building. The name "Tropical America" was designated when Ferenz proposed the commission so that the mural would represent both the "exotic and picturesque."[109] It was intended that the mural would advance a tropical experience for diners and shoppers. Siqueiros's wife, Angélica Arnel de Siqueiros, recalled in 1980 that many expected the mural to be "a kind of paradise or promised land, represented by a jungle full of exotic birds and fabulous fruit, and its inhabitants…happy with their abundant riches."[110] For these reasons, it is even more important that Siqueiros was aware of the cryptic title "Tropical America" and resisted the vision that Ferenz had for it in its content, form and process. By understanding the meanings of the title and Siqueiros's ability to invert the dynamic, we can see how powerful Siqueiros was.[111]

When Siqueiros arrived from Mexico City to Los Angeles, he was recently released from jail and exiled in the United States.[112] As a political revolutionary and well-known communist, he was vehemently opposed to the "picturesque" description of the Americas because he was aware of potential impact that image and message could have to liken the Americas to a commodity. Therefore, he resolved to create a mural that would contradict and undermine the commission's goal in order to craft a Pan-American experience of US imperialism. Estrada

---

[109] Estrada, *Los Angeles Plaza*, 209.

[110] Estrada, *Los Angeles Plaza*, 209.

[111] These are the deliciously rich details that art historians can offer to the field that not only tell a more historically accurate story—they also demonstrate the power of the arts in a highly political moment in Los Angeles.

[112] He was in prison for his communist practices and he moved to LA as a political refugee.

writes, “All anticipations of an artwork depicting Southern California as an idyllic land of perpetual sunshine…were instantly shattered. Siqueiros was true to his conviction that art and politics were inseparable.”[113]

Prominently painted in the center of the mural, Siqueiros depicted an indigenous man crucified on a double cross with a giant North American eagle balanced above him. The man has died with his hands and ankles tied to the cross and his head hanging heavily to one side. His exposed body is rendered with a great sense of volume, as the light and shadow on his torso express the weight of his expired person. On the viewer’s right, two revolutionaries point rifles at the bird; they juxtapose and interrupt the lush jungle and pre-colonial Mesoamerican temple left in ruins. The ruined pyramids are a sign of the prosperity in Latin America before the onset of colonization. This mural stands 18 by 80 feet and faces city hall—even viewers who drove past it would have be subject to the scale and message of this work of art.

Figure 9. Roberto Berdecio, a close associate of Siqueiros during the 1930s, stands in front of *América Tropical* shortly after completion. Mural: © 2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOMAAP, Mexico City. Photo: The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, accessed February 18, 2018.

[113] Estrada, *Los Angeles Plaza*, 210.

In addition to the confrontational subject matter, this mural has left such a profound impact because of the innovative painterly techniques with which it was made. Since this mural would live outdoors, Siqueiros was unable to use traditional lime and sand for fresco techniques he preferred. Connected with LA's elite circles, Siqueiros consulted with the prominent architect Richard Neutra[114] when he decided to work with waterproof white cement and airbrush for the modern wall. This new method of production was innovative and impressive for its time. It would mean that paint for this colossal mural could be applied without a hint of brushwork. Furthermore, I speculate that it might have supported the lifespan of the surviving mural over the years, as a fresco painting made of organic materials would almost certainly have deteriorated many years earlier. While the work was ultimately censored, upon its unveiling, "much of the Los Angeles art community hailed Siqueiros's southern California sojourn and praised his few works there."[115] To the few who were privy to see the mural in person, it was a sensational rejection of a capitalist market and local amusement park that exploited peoples of Latin American descent. Nevertheless, the mural was concealed shortly after its début. To those who believed in Sterling's vision of a pleasant and consumable Mexican past, it was seen as aggressive and off putting, especially to Anglo patrons, so instead of removing it, it was painted over with layers of white paint. Sterling enforced its obstruction by forbidding any new tenants of the Pelanconi Building to uncover the mural. In general, Christina Sterling went to great efforts to depoliticize Olvera Street, especially regarding concerns of justice, labor and autonomy that were connected to Mexican and Mexican Americans. The mural was painted in about three months and was visible for even less time. After it was whitewashed, it was lost to several generations of Angelenos; it was never photographed in color, so for art historians and

[114] Estrada, *Los Angeles Plaza*, 209.
[115] Kropp, "Citizens of the Past," 50.

conservators, we will never know its entire glory or likeness. While there were great losses in the whitewashing of *America Tropical,* it would *still* prove to be something of a miracle.

In the 1960's, much of the world was in revolt and the US was no exception. Students, religious leaders, and others protested against the Vietnam War and in favor of civil rights; Latinas/os and Filipinas/os organized the Farm Workers' Movement; mostly white women advanced the Women's Movement, and straight men became the face of the Chicano Movement during this decade. While all these movements were taking place throughout the US, Los Angeles was facing many of its own obstacles in 1965. Because of the discrimination from racially restrictive covenants, zoning, redlining and racist home loan programs run through the federal government, Los Angeles, like much of the United States, was deeply segregated. Although west coast segregation and Jim Crow practices both used the law to restrict the movement of people of color in the city, these spatial ordinances were culturally very different and implemented with different methods. Nevertheless, this segregation specifically impacted the possibilities of what Los Angeles could be for *certain* people in *certain* places. Especially in Watts, where Black people and other people of color had been relegated to live since the early twentieth century, finding employment and transportation was not just challenging, it was exceptionally limited, partially because of the lack of job training and public transportation. Residents of Compton and Watts had limited mobility as a result of blatant segregation, racial discriminatory hiring practice, police violence, disinvestment from public transportation and other government facilities. There was an outbreak on August 11, 1965, which would come to be known as the Watts Rebellion. The rebellion turned into six consecutive days of unrest in Watts and other parts of South Los Angeles. The loss of lives and damage to homes and businesses were devastating. Gerald Horne writes, "At least 34 people died…1000 more were injured, and

4,000 arrested." Some 200 million dollars of property damages was estimated within a broad perimeter of South LA, which exacerbated poverty in the area for decades thereafter.

At the same time, in 1965, Shifra Goldman, a radical Chicana[116] activist and art historian, began the work of restoring *America Tropical*. That year, she traveled to Mexico City to interview David Alfaro Siqueiros; scholars now believe that it was there that she learned of *America Tropical*.[117] Until that point, *America Tropical* was largely lost. Very few photographs of it existed and only a few dozen people had ever seen it.

This mural was painted and censored as a Mexican piece, but upon its timely reappearance in the 1960s and popularization in the 1970s, it was embraced and reframed as a Chicana/o mural during the height of the Chicana/o Mural Movement. This mural and new interpretation would become very important parts of the Chicana/o Movement in Los Angeles.[118] *America Tropical*, its imagery, history and recovery resonated with Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles who were simultaneously struggling against systemic racism in schools, over policing and excessive police force against youth, limited professional opportunities and other forms of racism. In this way, *America Tropical* represents a sort of transformation through semiotics, and in a more rasquache interpretation, might see this mural as ghostly, even spiritual, in its ability to autonomously appear at this moment. Its lifeforce, resurrection, so to speak, and divinely timed return inspired many who were already fighting against U.S. imperialism and racism. For

---

[116] Shifra Goldman (1926-2011) a Jewish American woman was born in New York and trained as an art historian in Los Angeles. Although she was not Mexican-American by ethnicity or nationality, she was, however, an active member of the Chicano movement and was politically aligned with Mexican American struggles for many years. In this respect, I assert that she is a Chicana as a means to describe her social politics rather than describing her racial, ethnic or national identity.

[117] Rebecca Zamora, "Shifra Goldman and David Alfaro Siqueiros's *América Tropical*," *Getty Research Journal*, no. 6 (2014): 115.

[118] Zamora, "Shifra Goldman and David Alfaro Siqueiros's *América Tropical*," 115.

example, in the early 1970s, this work of art inspired Chicano artist Gilbert "Magú" Luján, who was coming into his own as a sculptor.

America Tropical is powerful in a multitude of ways, including the circumstances of the original commission, its strikingly noncompliant imagery and radically political iconography, the strong reaction it caused some viewers, which led to it being censored almost immediately and decades later, and its autonomous resurrection. To this end, the timing is incredibly powerful for those who believe in miracles and signs appearing in art objects, especially within a Mexican and Chicana/o tradition. However, while this mural is incredible in its own right, it is not the only instance of a political mural having a life of its own and inspiring aggrieved peoples in Los Angeles.

The Black Experience

> "Art is only important to the extent that it aids in the liberation of our people."[119]
> —Elizabeth Catlett

> "Like activists, artists committed to Black freedom proceed by promoting new understandings of the scale, scope, and stakes of place and space, by burrowing in, branching out and building up."[120]
> —George Lipsitz

Just as Mexican-American youth were claiming their Chicano Power and the Chicano Mural Movement was taking place in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s, the Black Power Movement and the Black Panther Party were also building a foundation in Los Angeles. In the wake of the Watts Uprising, the notoriously harsh LAPD and the need for public resources, the Los Angeles branch of the Black Panther Party was created. In 1967, Alprentice "Bunchy"

---

[119] Elizabeth Catlett, *Traditions and Transformations: Contemporary Afro-American Sculpture; The Bronx Museum of the Arts, February 21–May 27, 1989* (New York: The Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1989).

[120] Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 60.

Carter established Los Angeles's chapter of the Black Panthers after meeting Huey P. Newton and other members of the Oakland-based Black Panther Party (BPP). Until that point, Carter was a member of the Slauson street gang and was nicknamed "The Mayor of the Ghetto" because he was a natural leader and capable organizer. In November of the same year, Erica and John Huggins, both college students and politically minded, moved from New York to Los Angeles and joined the BPP at UCLA. John Huggins and Carter became good friends and went on to lead the BPP together. Of course, some African Americans did not agree with the pro-gun militant group, yet many others were in favor of the BPP's unwavering political identity, Black Nationalist ideals and community programming, including the free breakfast and youth programs, the People's Health Clinics, the People's Free Ambulance Service, the People's Free Food Program, the Black Panther Newspaper and Self Defense Workshops. Adults and children alike greatly benefited from programs likes these. While the BPP were creating programs and networks to take care of their own, the U.S. government, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, was becoming increasingly hostile toward them, interpreting their actions as an explicit threat to national security. While at the same time, the government was neither intervening nor advocating for equitable access to fair housing, jobs, food, health or wealth for Black people in the U.S. Tensions were swelling with the rise of Black empowerment. In fact, that same year, A.B 1591, also called the Mulford Act, was passed, making it a felony to publicly carry a firearm, openly or concealed. This law was written as a direct response to the dozens of BPP members openly carrying firearms in Oakland who were "copwatching" or holding the police accountable by watching them and carrying weapons for self-defense.[121] Furthermore, the

[121] 1967 Mulford Act files, Series 1, Bill Files 1961–1970, David Donald Mulford Papers, California State Archives, Office of the Secretary of State, Sacramento, CA.

first twenty-eight pages of the Mulford Act is a report on the Black Panther Party, including pro-Black literature produced by the BPP, newspaper articles reporting on BPP use of guns and a memo from Don Mulford stating that, "Law enforcement officials requested that I do everything possible to expedite the passage of AB 1591."[122]

I speculate the thought of empowered, armed Black community did possess a certain threat to the status quo, as we can see in our current moment of social unrest, police violence and mass protest. Nevertheless, this reality of oppression fueled by fear was demonstrated in the daily experiences of racism and discrimination for Black people all over the country, including Los Angeles.

By the 1960s, South Central was a hub for Black life in LA, although it wasn't exactly thriving. The poor conditions that Blacks lived in was largely because of structural inequality and a lack of access to resources, which put Black communities in a cycle of poverty, overcrowding, poor jobs and few opportunities to upset that cycle. Hidden in plain sight, white people largely judged Black distress by blaming them and "promot[ing] the quest for individual escape rather than encouraging democratic deliberations about the social problems and contradictory social relations that affect us all."[123] While at the same time, racist laws, ideologies and discriminatory practices against African Americans deeply impacted the quality of life in highly segregated South LA. In fact, in the 1940s and 1950s racially restrictive covenants were not only commonly used in Compton, they were vehemently enforced by white residents and local law enforcement.[124] Today the public imagining of Compton tends to picture African

---

[122] "Memorandum to the Assembly," written by Don Mulford, July 27, 1967, in the 1967 Mulford Act files, Series 1, Bill Files 1961–1970, David Donald Mulford Papers, California State Archives, Office of the Secretary of State, Sacramento, CA.

[123] Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 29.

[124] Josh Sides, in an interview with Zach Behrens, "From the South to Compton: On Race."

American and Latinx residents, however, during the post WWII moment, Compton was so segregated that some even considered it "lily white."[125] At that same time, thousands of Black Americans migrated from Southern states to the North and West, and settled in places like Oakland and Los Angeles, two sites for the BPP. While many white Angelenos at this time distinguished themselves from their white counterparts to the South as more progressive and less hateful, yet they still fully supported racially restrictive covenants and the segregation of their communities. Scholars speculate that these white homeowners justified their support of racial segregation because of their concern about property and not about their personal hate of people of color. They believed that Black neighbors would negatively impact their property values and essentially, their wealth. This speaks to Lipsitz's concept "white spatial imaginary" to understand the ways that white people were able to capture and control assets and other advantages for their benefit while exposing the reality that this created for people of color, especially Black people. With his innovative scholarship, we learn that suburban white homeownership was in fact a hostile business that used "defensive localism" to include some and exclude others for generations, impacting access to generational wealth, interest, and much more. Lipsitz offers this:

> Instead of recognizing themselves accurately as recipients of collective public largess, whites came to see themselves as individuals whose wealth grew out of their personal and individual success acquiring property on the 'free market.' At the same time, whites viewed inner-city residents not as fellow citizens denied the subsidies freely offered to whites, but as peoples whose alleged failures to save, invest and take care of their homes forced the government to intervene on their behalf, to build housing projects that were then ruined by alleged Black neglect.[126]

---

[125] Sides, in an interview with Zach Behrens, "From the South to Compton: On Race."
[126] Lipsitz, *Racism Takes Place*, 27.

Again, Lipsitz reveals to us the ways that the white spatial imaginary is unfolding in the minds of white people as it interprets and impacts realities for Black people. This way of thinking and moving in the world is also a form of bigotry and racism, even from the most benevolent of homeowners.[127]

Although West LA was not revolting along with South Central in 1965, the impacts of the racial disparities in Los Angeles were unfolding in Westwood at UCLA. In fact, a few months before the Watts Rebellion broke out, Martin Luther King Jr. addressed over 5000 students on the Janss Steps on UCLA's campus.[128] The next year, in 1966, the Afrikan Student Union was created in order to advocate for students of African descent on campus. Furthermore, in 1969, the same year that Dr. Angela Davis was hired as a Philosophy professor, she was fired for her politics as a communist. Ronald Reagan, the then-governor of California and regent of the UC system, was at the center of her dismissal. Although she was reinstated in 1969, she was fired again in 1970 for addressing the police as pigs and murderers. That same year, two Black Panther Party members were murdered at UCLA's Campbell Hall as a result of the FBI's interference in Black student organization's efforts to assemble and self-organize. While there are several different versions of the story, John Huggins's widow Erica Huggins recalls that on January 17, 1969, her husband and Bunchy Carter were murdered in Campbell Hall.

In addition to the structural inequality felt by Black residents and the unrest that unfolded in Los Angeles in the 1960s, the makers of the *Black Experience* mural have expressed that they reached a tipping point when 30 students at Kent State were shot, including 4 who were killed in protest against the Vietnam War. Shortly after these events at Kent State, two Black students

---

[127] Racism is a system, not a feeling.
[128] UCLA Black Alumni, "Significant Moments in Black Bruin History: The Civil Rights Movement," February 2017, last accessed July 23, 2020, https://newsletter.alumni.ucla.edu/connect/2017/feb/black-history/default.htm#civil.

were killed in their dorm rooms by the National Guard at Jackson State University, Florida. At this point, protest and unrest escalated even further, including at UCLA. Governor Reagan declared a state of emergency and shut down all California colleges and universities for a week. In solidarity with students at Kent State, Jackson State and across the country, and in contestation of the expansion of an imperialist war and a fascist government that planned to continue to draft men into the military—a process that disproportionately drafted and Black and Latinx young men—the collective decided to create a mural. Facing greater risks at home and abroad than their white counterparts, these students drafted a proposal, asked for $300 and presented their ideas to the Dean of Students who supported the project and funded it.[129] The seven students worked twelve hours a day for three works to create this work of art.[130] The following year, seven Black UCLA students made and installed *The Black Experience* mural in Ackerman Student Union.

[129] Jason Song, "A long-hidden mural is revealed, along with a piece of UCLA history," *Los Angeles Times*, June 7, 2014, https://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-adv-ucla-mural-20140608-story.html.

[130] *The Black Experience Mural: Out of Chaos, Collaboration*, wall text, no author named, 1970. Ackerman Student Union building, 2nd floor, University of California, Los Angeles.

Figure 10. Marian Brown, Neville Garrick, Andrea Hill, Jane Staulz, Joanne Stewartm Michael Taylor and Helen Singleton, *The Black Experience*, 1970, mixed medium mural, Ackerman Hall, UCLA, accessed May 8, 2018, https://newsroom.ucla.edu/file?fid=55e0bfab299b506836003f35.

Although visually, materially, spatially and formally this mural departs sharply from Siqueiros's *America Tropical*, they share a number of similarities including their struggle against white supremacy, fascism and US imperialism, as well as racial representation and solidarity across ethnic difference. Rather than depicting an idealized, fantasized depiction of the past, these students included hardships and realities from the past that Black people all over the world have experienced. This black and white photo collage group portrait reflects all seven of its makers and it is clear that each figure is represented with a different style and mood. We see that the composition is split in two halves—the men are on the left and women on the right. Helen Singleton, an artist and social activist in many rights, is depicted fourth from the left of the image divide with the curving lines on her blouse. In 1961, Singleton, originally from Philadelphia, was a freedom rider in the 1960s. She and her husband, Dr. Robert Singleton, now a retired professor from Loyola Marymount University, along with 15 other young activists, rode desegregated

busses into Jackson Mississippi and were arrested and incarcerated at the infamous Parchment Penitentiary.[131] With over 400 students, religious leaders, and activists who participated in these freedom rides, tremendous pressure was put on states like Alabama and Mississippi to enforce desegregation laws and rights of all citizens to travel safely in the U.S. Eventually, John F. Kennedy and his brother, the Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, were involved in bringing national guard to protect the rights of travelers in the deep south. Helen Singleton was profoundly invested in the freedom movements of her generation, and an artist and fine art major at UCLA, it is no surprise that she was a collaborator for this work of art.

The Black Experience was a non-violent expression of Black humanity, history and commitment to freedom at UCLA, in the U.S. and around the world. Although there was violence occurring on and off campus for Black people, in an interview in 2014, Singleton expressed "We were responding to the emotional turmoil on the campus."[132] Instead of thinking of this mural as a result of any one event or moment at any one place in the world, it is a collective reflection of the experiences of a global Black community. As such, each portrait contains in it a collection of smaller images of other Black people and other Black experiences. Generally, the chronology was split in the composition between left and right where images in the portraits are of historical events, peoples, documents or renderings were on the left side of the mural. African masks are represented, as well as abolition literature, auction blocks and images of Fredrick Douglas and Sojourner Truth. On the right, we see images of contemporary icons and political leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., Assata Shakur Malcolm X, Angela Davis, Shirley

[131] Singleton, in a personal conversation with the author, February 23, 2019.

[132] Helen Singleton, *The Black Experience Mural Gives Snapshot of 1970*, interviewed by The Daily Bruin, April 22, 2014

Chisholm, Muhammed Ali and others. In its time, this mural would have been hugely important for Black students, staff and faculty on campus, as their numbers were and remain uncharacteristically low given LA's Black neighborhoods. This mural was highly visible for over a decade until it was disappeared. At the time it was created, it was an important point of pride for Black students.

While it is extremely unlikely that a whole mural would vanish, this one did. In 1992, during some construction in Ackerman Hall, an artificial wall was superimposed onto *The Black Experience* mural, causing damage and covering it for the next twenty-two years. Another two generations of students would lose the opportunity to see this incredible work because the mural under the false wall was forgotten. While this forgotten mistake was said to have been unintentional, I offer another interpretation. It was at the same time in Los Angeles in 1992 that Black folks were revolting in anger again due to the unjust results of the Rodney King case, in which four police officers were acquitted of brutalizing King the previous year. The results of this case were particularly offensive to Black Angelenos because the violent encounter was caught on camera—there was no ambiguity as to what happened that night. People all over the nation speculated that four police officers kicking and beating Rodney King with batons for over fifteen minutes was an excessive use of power, not reasonable for his traffic violation. Within hours of the results, Los Angeles was burning. Violence broke out in places like South Central. Violence was especially pronounced there because that same month, Latasha Harlins, a 15-year old girl, was shot and killed by a Korean shop owner who accused her of stealing an orange juice. This loss was fresh and of course, it was even more racially charged because the store owner only received probation and a $500 fine—not nearly a sufficient response to his actions.

With Black pain and anger expressing itself heavily in LA again, I am not sure the disappearing of the *Black Experience* mural was exactly by chance, especially since the impetus for the mural was largely a response to the activities taking place in the city—not just on campus. This is important to note, as not many Black people, especially Black students, were from or lived in Westwood. Most Black students at UCLA were from South Central or other areas of California, so they might have also been deeply hurt by the verdict in the Rodney King case. Jason Reed, the executive director of Associated Students UCLA from 1981 to 1995, remembers that "the mural had stopped matching the décor and ambience of the Ackerman first-floor cafeteria…To attract potential bidders to bring their business to Ackerman, a decision had to be made regarding the mural, and it was one that did attract some controversy."[133] Reed goes on to say that, "Among the Black grad students and grad student leaders, whether Black or not, the mural was a point of pride and reverence, and here it was going to be taken away or at least not visible anymore."[134] Perhaps in addition to attracting a food vendor for the Ackerman cafeteria, this effort also stifled Black anger, organizing and political actions at UCLA during a testy moment. It is here, in the image below, that we can see the false wall imposed on top of the mural, as some of the false wall is being removed. Furthermore, we see other architectural features like tile and an artificial ceiling that were added on top of the false wall above the mural. These several layers and extra features were, of course, not accidently created, but designed and executed at the exact same time that Black LA was revolting and resisting state sanctioned violence and discrimination. With the political history of UCLA, and the origins of this mural,

[133] Will Weiss and Ravi Doshi, "Ackerman Union's hidden mural," *Daily Bruin*, May 11, 2010, https://dailybruin.com/2010/05/11/Ackerman-Unions-hidden-mural.

[134] Weiss and Doshi, "Ackerman Union's hidden mural."

and the reality that art is a powerful agent for representation and change, I submit that this mural was deliberately hidden and strategically forgotten for two generations.

Putting Them Together: America Tropical and The Black Experience

> We are together with you in spirit and in determination that our dreams for a better tomorrow will be realized.[135]
> —Martin Luther King, Jr. to César Chávez, 1966

Figure 11. Marian Brown, Neville Garrick, Andrea Hill, Jane Staulz, Joanne Stewartm, Michael Taylor and Helen Singleton, *The Black Experience* Mural behind the false wall, 2013, mixed medium mural, Ackerman Hall, UCLA, accessed May 8, 2018, https://newsroom.ucla.edu/file?fid=55e0bfab299b506836003f35.

In the image above, we can see the *Black Experience* mural emerging from behind the artificial wall near the Panda Express restaurant. Not unlike *America Tropical*, this mural was made in a political moment by political artists who had specific stakes in the creation of the work of art, in its messaging and in its lifecycle. These artists were, of course, not told or consulted when the mural was being covered, and, like Siqueiros, they were subject to censorship, but in a

135 Telegram from Martin Luther King, Jr., to Cesar Chavez on September 22, 1966, Martin Luther King, Jr., *Encyclopedia*, Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia.

very different way. Similar to the white paint that covered *America Tropical,* which both protected and damaged the mural for many years, the false wall on the *Black Experience* did the same thing. Although this mural did not resurface in the same way, its return came at a powerful moment for Black people, at the onset of the Black Lives Matter movement, which also started in Los Angeles. Similar to *America Tropical,* this mural's rebirth and connection to the moment and the location took on a new political meaning that was framed by its new lifecycle and potential to defy the limits of censorship. It has been celebrated in the press and was visited by some of the original makers, as well as political activist Angela Davis and others. I have brought two classes to visit it and have given several lectures on the *Black Experience* mural because I understand how important it is in the history of art and in the history of political movements.

In 2012, Jason Smith, a Black student and member of the Afrikan Student Union, was enrolled in Professor Judy Baca's "Beyond the Mexican Mural" course, where he learned about the power of public monuments. Smith said, "The professor really wants us to focus on art, specifically monuments like murals [that] speak about human experiences and social issues."[136] Having read about *The Black Experience* mural two years earlier in an article in the university press, *The Daily Bruin,* he was ready to take action to locate it because of the class. With his colleagues at the Afrikan Student Union, they addressed the issue to the ASUCLA Board of Directors, who then met with art preservationists from the Getty and the Fowler museums to consider ways to restore the mural and make it available for public viewing. While this series of events was not exactly intentional, it is also true that Professor Baca's class that looks at and beyond Mexican murals and monuments, became a catalyst for the return of *The Black*

[136] Estefani Herrera, "Student Group Pushed for exposure of 'The Black Experience,' a mural hidden in Ackerman for more than 20 years," *Daily Bruin*, February 22, 2013, https://dailybruin.com/2013/02/22/the-black-experience-a-hidden-mural-in-ackerman-to-be-exposed-after-over-20-years.

Experience mural over twenty years after it was disappeared. In a similar way that the return of the mural was incredibly meaningful, the way it returned is also a source of inspiration and a form of Black and Brown solidarity in the arts.

The final point I will offer, in addition to discussing how *The Black Experienc*e and *America Tropical* are both groundbreaking pieces that defied all expectations, is of a 2014 performance piece by Luis Tentindo. At that time, Tentindo was an MFA student in the Department of World Arts and Cultures at UCLA when he read of *The Black Experience* from the *Daily Bruin* and decided to interact with it and students to raise even more consciousness around it. The artist dressed in a similar uniform to Panda Express workers, held a tray with toy animals on it and gave them to students in the Ackerman building. Because of his presentation, students thought he was employed at Panda Express offering samples, but in fact, he was offering lessons. Tentindo was sharing the history of the mural with students and giving away small toy animals to help students remember what they learned. As a simple yet interactive performance, Tentindo blended in to the built environment, garnered trust with students and was successful in his performance. The artist was able to share powerful art histories with unsuspecting patrons of Panda Express in an almost effortless way. Finally, it is worth mentioning that Tentindo is not of African descent, rather he is Argentinian, yet he was moved to participate in the sharing of this story and lifting up an important part of UCLA Black history. Although he is not racially or ethnically connected to the history or legacy of the mural, I believe he understood that this mural and the history it represents is an important part of our shared goal in liberation and in journey to freedom. As an artist himself, Tentindo would have understood the politics of censorship and the institutional struggles for artists of color to create without limits. He might have recognized the significance of this moment and made a performance in which he

could pay his respect. Furthermore, and in an act of solidarity, Tentindo joins with this work by promoting its history, message and presence on campus in a humble performance. Instead of asserting his goals on top of the vision of the mural or demanding a similar mural be created, but for a Pan Latinx struggle, he finds mutuality with *The Black Experience* and uses his craft to advance it. This beautiful example of people across difference working together to elevate and mutually create art that frees us all demonstrates the precedent, strength, intelligence and potential for Afro-Latinx futurism. That is, without overshadowing or needing to retell the story, Tentindo works with and for the legacy of this mural and its message for and with all of us, especially Black people. Perhaps, like Kelley said, this is not protest art, but art that helps us see and feel differently.

Figure 12. Luis Tentindo still of *Panther Express* C.2014, live performance, Ackerman Hall, UCLA, accessed April 2018, http://luistentindo.com/.

When we put *America Tropical* and *The Black Experience* next to each other, we see two Los Angeles murals that resisted imperial wars, state sanctioned violence and meaningless

suffering by people of color. Both of these works of art, *America Tropical* and *The Black Experience*, center their unique racialized experience as both subjects of U.S. imperialism and racism. Furthermore, and perhaps most interestingly, both of these murals somehow resurfaced after decades of being disappeared. In this sense, they both do two radical things—they admonish white supremacy in the U.S and they both are living examples of resistance in multiple life cycles. While the two works of art do not necessarily offer alternative dreams for the future, they both do beautiful demonstrations of the power of creative works of art. Even more to that effect, these two murals may not necessarily depict an alternative future; however, they embodied an alternative life cycle where their messages are not only told over and over again, they are deeply celebrated and protected as gems of Los Angeles public arts.

Chapter 3: *Education is a Basic Human Right*

> …I graduated from school still believing that education was enabling, that it enhanced our capacity to be free.[137]
>
> —bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*

As the world continues to spiral from a plethora of uncertainty and countless devastating events, including the very serious injustices and tragedies created and exposed by COVID-19, this dissertation focuses on the forces that keep people and communities together, especially Black and Latinx communities in Los Angeles. In the past twenty years, scholars have taken a great interest in coalition building between diverse peoples. One such coalition between Black and Brown communities has become an important one, especially in scholarship in Los Angeles, where African American and Latinx communities have deep, rich and connecting histories, some of which I laid out in the first chapter of this project. Although Black and Latinx communities have historically been pitted against each other within paradigms of scarcity for jobs, housing and other resources,[138] they have also been the source of each other's inspiration and power as they share pasts and futures. In this chapter, I offer detailed historical background and visual analysis of a 1998 Los Angeles mural, *Education is a Basic Human Right*. As such, I highlight this work of art that still stands inside the Angeles Mesa Branch Library in South Central Los Angeles, while also celebrating Alma Lopez and Noni Olabisi, the powerful and empowered artist duo who created it. Additionally, I chronicle the journey they went on to make this commemorative homage to Black and Latinx solidarity, mutual education, student empowerment and Afro-Latinx futures via freedom dreams. Building on spatial analysis as demonstrated in

---

[137] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Oxford, UK: Routledge, 2014), 4.

[138] George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 3.

each of the previous chapters, I consider the built environment and social conditions at the time of the mural. Additionally, while this chapter centers *Education is a Basic Human Right*, I also look at another work of art that Olabisi and Lopez made together called, *It Takes a Village to Raise a Child* and one that Olabisi made as an individual *Protect and Serve*. Taken all together, these works of art highlight the power of community to educate, serve and uplift the most vulnerable, including children, families and the elderly.

In 1998, Alma Lopez and Noni Olabisi completed a collaborative mural that depicted several generations of struggle against racism in public school systems called *Education is a Basic Human Right*.

Figure 13. Alma Lopez and Noni Olabisi, *Education is a Basic Human Right,* 1998, mural installation, Angeles Mesa Library, Photo taken by Kaelyn Rodriguez, November 22, 2019.

With great care and intention, these two artists of color deliberately responded to a racially divisive narrative that circulated in the aftermath of the Rodney King rebellion in South Central Los Angeles in 1992. As a way of centering the historic and contemporary power of African

American and Latinx communities and celebrating the individual and collective victories made between these groups, Lopez and Olabisi created this work of art that was installed at the Angeles Mesa Public Library in South Central LA. Their message is the same as the title of the work of art, education is a basic human right for all, but especially important to protect and make accessible to young Black and Latinx children. They emphasized this message time and again by focusing on desegregation in educational settings, including the protests and hunger strikes that took place in order to save the Chicana/o Studies Program at UCLA in 1993. By animating several generations of struggle for equitable and accessible education, this artist duo offered a message to the Black and Brown children of South Central—that many struggled before them so that they could enjoy their right to learn. Moreover, this mural signals to the children who patronized the library that they shall inherit the beautiful and powerful legacies of Black and Latinx progress and advancement in efforts to becoming more free. This birthright is very much at the heart of this mural, as both Lopez and Olabisi knew that education is not simply an accumulation of information, but a method for connecting to power, a means of locating one's purpose and a source for imagining the future unfold through learning about the past.[139]

In this chapter, I will describe how this mural, *Education is a Basic Human Right*, was made, as well as the social-political circumstances it was made under in order to celebrate this work of art that has scarcely been written about before. Furthermore, as a way of answering my research questions laid out in the introduction, in this chapter I will highlight the ways that this mural, and several others, demonstrate anti-colonial and anti-racist traditions that Black and Brown Angelenos have created to not just make artworks, but express cultural pride and solidarity with each other. Additionally, we will consider the methods, processes, practices and

[139] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 21.

visual art theories of Black/Brown LA art that inspire Black/Brown arts in the21st century. That is, I believe that although this mural has not received the public recognition it deserves, it still serves its community and inspires the youth who gather there.

Around 1991, Alma Lopez, a queer Chicana artist, and Noni Olabisi, a Black lesbian muralist, met at the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) in Venice, CA. It was there that they realized their mutual passion for the arts and shared belief in art as a conduit for social change and empowerment. A natural friendship was born as Lopez and Olabisi became a powerful artist duo. Despite being from different racial backgrounds, these two working class queer women of color had a common way of understanding the world around them. They knew the daily challenges of racism, sexism, homophobia and classism as well as the structural and institutional limitations within the art world for young queer women of color from South Central—they knew them as intersectional and individual forms of marginalization. Their many identities and experiences, along with their families and histories, were guiding forces that informed their creative practice. As muralists, these social practitioners used paint and walls to visually represent ideas about the world within a specific community space.

Shortly after their friendship started to blossom, the Rodney King Uprising broke out due to years of racial and economic injustice mounting in South Central LA; on April 19, 1992, thousands revolted once again.[140] Residents were angry about the deliberate abuse and undeniable lack of care from the Los Angeles Police Department, and they were deeply hurt that the jury acquitted four LAPD officers of excessive use of force against Rodney King. On the night of the incident, March of 1991, a neighbor in the area happened to video record the four

[140] The previous rebellion in South Central was in 1965, only 27 years earlier, when residents revolted over a police brutality incident in Watts. See Chapter 3, *Watts Still Rising*, for a detailed historical analysis of this project.

police officers who brutalized and beat King for about 15 minutes.[141] There were also a dozen other police officers at the scene watching the excessive use of force unfold, offering no intervention or medical attention to King. Even before the trial took place, there was great interest in this case within Black communities in Los Angeles, because this time, there was substantial video evidence that could definitively demonstrate racial injustice in LA from LAPD officers.[142] Until that point, African Americans in LA and other parts of the US already strongly distrusted the police, but there was seldom video evidence to verify their experiences. And so, when the jury announced its verdict—that the officers were acquitted of the excessive force charges—many Black people in South Central were inconsolable, and understandably so. Their collective experience of police brutality was effectively seen through Rodney King, and yet, was still unseen and insignificant to the mostly white jury and to the justice system, which essentially exonerated and excused the officers in question. Unable to withstand such blatant abuse of power and anti-blackness, residents were heartbroken and many were grief-stricken. As Dr. Martin Luther King once said, "A riot is the language of the unheard."[143] In this time of persistent and unwavering injustice, Black Angelenos were feeling unheard and rejected.

As such, unrest unfolded in Los Angeles, especially in South Central. This time, Seasoned and well-respected lawyer and professor of law at the University of Southern

---

[141] Anjuli Sastry and Karen Grigsby Bates, "When LA Erupted in Anger: A Look Back at the Rodney King Riots," *NPR*, April 26, 2017, https://www.npr.org/2017/04/26/524744989/when-la-erupted-in-anger-a-look-back-at-the-rodney-king-riots.

[142] It has long been known within Black communities in the U.S., as well as other aggrieved communities, that the police are violent, poorly trained, and tend to abuse their power. Furthermore, as an institution with deep roots in the suppression of Black people and in the maintenance of white supremacy, many Black people have been targeted by the police over the centuries.

[143] Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Other America," speech recorded April 14, 1967, at Stanford University, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/news/50-years-ago-martin-luther-king-jr-speaks-stanford-university.

California Jody David Armour described the dissonance as such, “There was ocular proof of what happened. It seemed compelling. And yet, what we saw was a verdict that said we couldn’t trust our lying eyes. That what we thought was open and shut was really a reasonable expression of police control towards a black motorist.” This type of blatant disregard for Black people was not new, especially in South Central. While this conflict may seem unthinkable, it is, unfortunately, part of what George Lipsitz calls the possessive investment in whiteness. That is, “Whiteness is invested in, like property, but it is also a means of accumulating property and keeping it from others.”[144]

Although the grief and pain from Rodney King was real, there was another wound that Black South Central sustained around the same time. Less than two weeks after King was beaten by the LAPD, Latasha Harlins, a 15-year old Black girl, was shot in the back of the head at a convenience store over a $1.79 bottle of orange juice by Soon Ja Du, Korean-born shop owner. In court, Du testified that she believed Harlins was going to steal the juice, even though Harlins had the money to pay in her hands. Historian Brenda Stevenson reminds us that even though the uprising was named after Rodney King, locals were deeply hurting over the loss of Harlins’s life. The community recognized that murdering a young child over such an insignificant encounter was a tragedy and they were outraged.[145]

While some used the unrest in South Central as evidence that Black people were simply unfit for freedom or the cause of their own destruction,[146] others drew conclusions that the loss

---

[144] Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, viii.

[145] Brenda Stevenson, *The Contested Murder of Latasha Harlins: Justice, Gender, and the Origins of the LA Riots* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 309.

[146] Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 1.

of Black life was an opportunity for a growing stock market.[147] However, many more like Lopez and Obilasi actively resisted and countered that narrative. Both artists being from South Central and being deeply impacted by the 1992 Rebellion, they made the intuitive and deliberate choice to collaborate and resist police violence and other state sanctioned violence; they resisted the divisive anti-Black sentiment. Lopez and Olabisi were greatly aware of what their friendship meant at the time, and leveraged it in a highly charged moment with a mural, their area of expertise. Lopez knew that they were stronger together and that through most of her life, her neighbors looked out for each other, regardless of racial difference. As an undergraduate student at UC, Santa Barbara, Lopez read about Charlotta Bass and the Sleepy Lagoon Case. She was educated on this important historical case where Black communities not only stood up for their Latinx neighbors, they used their platforms and means of power to spark change. Bass, an African American woman and chief editor of the Los Angeles based Black newspaper, *The Eagle*, was outspoken about the Sleepy Lagoon case and, on multiple occasions, used newspaper headlines to criticize police brutality towards young Black and Latinx men. She was keenly aware of "the role of culture in both the oppression and the freedom of marginalized communities"[148] They didn't just resist together, they dreamed and achieved together. Lopez also knew that African Americans and Latinx folks drew strength and power from each other. Lopez had also studied the Brown v. Board of Education case from 1954, and knew that its precedent was set by the Mendez v. Westminster case from Orange County in 1947. With a clear vision of themselves, their histories and the tumultuous moment, Lopez and Olbaisi decided to make *Education is a Basic Human Right.*

[147] On June 5, 2020, Fox News used a graphic depicting trends of market growth after the murder of MLK, the Rodney King Uprising, the murder of Michael Brown, and the murder of George Floyd.
[148] Johnson, *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity*, 25–26.

Education—a Historical Struggle

> The call for a recognition of cultural diversity, a rethinking of ways of knowing, a deconstruction of old epistemologies and the concomitant demand that there be a transformation in our classrooms, in how we teach and what we teach has been a necessary revolution—one that seeks to restore life to a corrupt and dying academy.[149]
> —bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*

Although the impetus for the mural was inspired by the moment of racial tension in the aftermath of the Rodney King Uprising, they wanted youth to know their right to education and the power of knowledge. Therefore, the theme of education was informed by the great acts of activism on campus at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1993.[150] A year after the Rodney King Uprising, UCLA's Chicana/o Studies program was at risk of being shut down due to budget retrenchment. Still grieving the recent passing of Cesar Chavez, students and faculty were unwilling to passively lose a beloved program that started in the 1970s, during the peak of the Chicano Movement and the early years of Affirmative Action. With Latinx and American Indian students enrolling in greater numbers than ever,[151] it was clear that students of color were empowered in their education and greatly believed in their future possibilities. Therefore, in response to threats of shutting down the Chicano Studies Program, students and faculty activated their collective power by organizing demonstrations and marching across the UCLA campus, where they were met by the LAPD and UC Police Department. Although 99

[149] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 29.

[150] Alma Lopez, in an interview with the author, November 26, 2019.

[151] From 1970 to 1990, Latinx and American Indian student enrollment increased significantly. See Bridget Shackleford, "The changing face of UCLA diversity," *Daily Bruin*, September 23, 2006, https://dailybruin.com/2006/09/23/the-changing-face-of-ucla-dive/.

students were arrested for their protesting, the movement was not diminished. After the march on campus, five students, three community members and one professor engaged in a 14-day non-violent hunger strike in the heart of north campus. This peaceful hunger strike garnered media attention and great support from all over Los Angeles. Below is a photograph of Cindy Montañez, a first year undergraduate student who put her body on the line by fasting for this movement. Although she was quite young, she was a significant part of the effort to save the Chicana/o Studies program. After graduating, Montañez went on to have a very active and effective career as a public servant.

Figure 14. Cindy Montañez, a first year economy/business major, was one of hunger strikers, 1993, photo, courtesy of "UCLA: The First Century", accessed February 19, 2020.

Their political will added great pressure to the UCLA administration and resulted in a substantial win, as their demands were realized when they avoided budget cuts *and* secured funding to create the César E. Chávez Department of Chicana/o Studies, including a budget to maintain six full time faculty. For people of color, the fight for public education was ongoing, but the success of this struggle was monumental. In fact, that victory continued to expand over time, as the department sustained its growth; in the fall of 2012, a graduate program was added and an

inaugural M.A./ Ph.D. cohort was welcomed to the department. I was admitted to the same department two years later in 2014, and am humbled to be a part of this important history and genealogy. I situate both this chapter and this entire dissertation project within the legacy of those who came before me and fought for education and basic human rights. It is an honor to add my voice and highlight creative works of art by Black and Brown people in Los Angeles.

In addition to the local and contemporary struggle for education at UCLA that inspired the theme of the mural, Lopez and Olabisi were deeply influenced by the Mendez family and their struggle for a dignified education. In 1945, Gonzalo Mendez, a Mexican-born US citizen, and his Puerto Rican wife, Felicitas Mendez, moved their family from Santa Ana to Westminster, Orange Country, California, about 10 miles west, to a 40-acre parcel of land.[152] When the Mendez children were not allowed to attend their neighborhood school due to ethnic segregation, Mr. Mendez was infuriated and acquired a lawyer who suggested that a class action lawsuit demonstrating the large impact of this injustice would be most compelling. As such, the Mendez family organized with several other Latinx families from different schools within Orange County who also experienced racial and ethnic discrimination from their local public schools. In the trial, Mendez et al. presented 25 different testimonies from individuals, including some of the children themselves and an expert witness, Dr. Ralph Deals, the head of the Anthropology from UCLA. Dr. Deals drew strong parallels between school segregating practices and the Third Reich, testifying that, "separating Mexican American children from White children would stamp the Mexican American children with a badge of inferiority and the White children

[152] This land previously belonged to a Japanese family who were forcibly removed and incarcerated at this time, along with some 12,000 other families of Japanese origin. While the Mendez family did not create the situation that would put Japanese families in prison camps, they did benefit from the land being available. For more, see Frederick P. Aguirre, "*Mendez v. Westminster School District*: How it Affected *Brown v. Board of Education*," *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* 4, no. 4 (October 2005): 321-332.

with a badge of superiority" and "that Nazi Germany had recently labeled as inferior such people as Jews and Gypsies but that Americans should not follow such attitudes and practices."[153] With a much stronger argument, a substantial number of witnesses, and the moral imperative on their side, Mendez et al. won their case.

However, after winning in Federal Court in Los Angeles in July of 1945, the Orange County school districts refused this defeat and appealed to the 9th Circuit Court in San Francisco. Renewing their cause for a dignified and equitable education for their children, Mendez et al. applied another compelling strategy in a striking move of solidarity between the National Lawyers Guild, the ACLU, the Jewish American Congress, the Japanese American Citizens League, the NAACP and the Attorney General of California. Each of these legal, political, social and cultural institutions wrote amicus briefs on behalf and in support of the Mendez case.[154] In a similar way that the believability of the case was bolstered by becoming a class action lawsuit, this opposition to an appeal was amplified by the strength of solidarity between such diverse and reputable groups. In fact, Thurgood Marshall, along with Robert L. Carter and Loren Miller, wrote the NAACP's Amicus brief and were enthusiastic in their support of Latinx children in Orange County, and wrote this:

> We have developed and practiced a theory of government which finds distinctions on racial grounds inimical to our best interests and contrary to our laws. Our Democracy is founded in an enlightened citizenry. It can only function when all of its citizens, whether of a dominant or of a minority group, are allowed to enjoy the privileges and benefits inherent in our Constitution. Moreover, they must enjoy these benefits together as free people without regard to race or color. It is clear, therefore, that segregation in our public schools must be invalidated as violative of the Constitution and laws of the United States.[155]

---

[153] Aguirre, "*Mendez v. Westminster*," 325.
[154] Aguirre, "*Mendez v. Westminster*," 326.

[155] Thurgood Marshall and Robert L. Carter, "Brief for the National Association of Colored People as *amicus curiae*," *Westminster v. Mendez*, 161 F2d. 774 (9th Cir. 1947), 31.

Marshall and his team were also keenly aware of the significance of this case, as it may have had the power to set a precedent against segregation in schools with other children of color, including Black children.[156] Perhaps in anticipation of future reference, Marshall's team made no particular mention of the Mendez children's specific ethnic background, as it in itself was not as important as the larger argument that our democracy "can only function when all of its citizens, whether of a dominant or of a minority group, are allowed to enjoy the privileges and benefits inherent in our Constitution."[157] In fact, they were right; Mendez won again, and the Orange County school districts did not have the means to sustain another appeal, and were forced to integrate Latinx students into all public schools. In 1956, Thurgood Marshall would build a case for *Brown v. Board of Education* that mirrored some of the most precise and unique arguments from *Mendez.* For example, they both took a class action approach, they both applied the 14th amendment to both cases, arguing that segregation created an implicit social and racial hierarchy that deprives children of color of equal educational opportunities.[158]

This beautiful example of solidarity demonstrates our connectedness, common interests as well as the impact of and potential for pooling power. When members of the NAACP supported *Mendez*, they were also helping other children of color in the United States; and when *Brown v. Board* won, making segregation in schools unconstitutional, it affected the rest of the country, and nations around the world took notice. Although some have since critiqued the mandate to integrate educational systems in favor of protecting communities of color from

156 Aguirre, "*Mendez v. Westminster*," 326.

157 Marshall and Carter, "Brief for the National Association of Colored People as amicus curiae," 31.

158 Sarah Sadlier, "*Méndez v. Westminster*: The Harbinger Of *Brown v. Board*," *Ezra's Archives* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 83.

curricula that normalized and upheld white supremacy, others offer another interpretation to learning itself. In her phenomenal book, *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks reminds us that education should be engaging, exciting, fun, pleasurable and most importantly, it should be a practice for freedom.[159] It is with this in mind that I consider Lopez and Olabisi's amazing work of art—that teaches Black and Brown communities about the past through its imagery and its presence, but most importantly, it demonstrates several layers of freedom practices. By this, I don't exactly mean Robin Kellye's concept of freedom dreams;[160] rather, I offer that the narrative within the mural and the specific images and icons it uses visualize aggrieved peoples fighting for education, asserting their basic human rights, and therefore, practicing freedom. Furthermore, this mural demonstrates a freedom practice by picturing Black and Latinx histories in tandem, and also implicating shared futures between these communities. As the social historian Gaye Theresa Johnson says, "The future has a past."[161] In this mural, the artists reflect nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century connections between African American and Latinx folks, visually connecting our communities and tracing kinships between them. Even more to this point, without much room in the composition itself, I believe the work of art inspires contemporary views to dream up a future where Brown and Black children are educated about their power for the benefit of their own.

---

[159] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 21.

[160] In Robin Kelley's inspiring book, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Kelley reminds us that through our imagination, we can envision freedom that isn't a reaction to oppression, rather, we can create room for an untethered, unlimited and abundant freedom. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Radical Black Imagination* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2002).

[161] Gaye Theresa Johnson, in conversation with the author, February 11, 2017.

Visual Analysis—Reading the Work

> Poets, prophets and reformers are all picture makers—and this ability is the secret of their power and of their achievements. They see what ought to be by the reflection of what is, and endeavor to remove the contradiction.
> —Frederick Douglass

In the images below of *Education is a Basic Human Right*, we can see that the artists use the composition vertically to unfold several iterations of the fight for and right to education. In particular, they expand and connect historical events by creating three visual registers, or a foreground, middle ground and a background that orient the viewer. This incredibly successful technique is important because the mural is read from left to right, top to bottom, so creating horizontal lines and sections to direct viewers empowers people of all ages who are not familiar with the histories pictured to grasp a sense of chronology, consistency and solidarity within a US struggle for education. In addition to connecting Black and Brown communities, they image Black and Brown histories as impacting each other.

Figure 15. *Education is A Basic Human Right* (with both artists pictured), Alma Lopez and Noni Olabisi, 1998, Angeles Mesa Public Library, accessed March 3, 2019 https://almalopez.myportfolio.com/public-art.

In this image, we see both artists in the foreground with their mural proudly behind them. Without a guide or didactic to explain the figures, the colors help the viewer synchronize the events and figures. Additionally, the artists use vivid color and monochrome to indicate distinct moments in time. As such, we can clearly see that the figures in the foreground and the background represent historical moments, whereas the vibrant youth in the middle ground indicate a contemporary struggle. This is especially interesting to me because although Lopez and Olabisi painted this mural in the 1990s, some 25 years ago, the message remains timeless: education is still a fundamental human right that not only needs to be defended, it still needs to be achieved in the US and around the world.[162] In fact, at this moment, many are calling on city leaders, mayors and other to abolish and specifically defund the police, inspiring many to imagine the possibilities of funding public education, libraries, parks and museums.

In the background, we see a beautiful family portrait of the Mendez family, including the youngest daughter, Sylvia Mendez,[163] her two brothers and her parents Felicitas and Gonzalo Mendez. The children seem to be standing in front of a school house, but the mural does not specify which school it is, whether is it segregated or integrated. Directly below them are the Brown family, including the young daughter Linda Brown and her mother Leola Brown and another woman, perhaps a neighbor or relative, walking together holding hands. The Brown family are flanked by police officers who escort them. While the most important elements of this mural are very easy to see, the artists cleverly left several more subtle hints to viewers to draw

[162] This fact is made ever more apparent since schools throughout the country and world have closed due to the COVID-19 crisis. As parents in the U.S. are expected to home school their children on digital platforms, families without access to internet or computers are even vulnerable and may have to deal with the results in the future. This is especially true for those families who are also struggling to feed their children, those who cannot pay rent and of course, those who are experiencing sickness or loss of a loved one.

[163] Sylvia Mendez was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Barack Obama in 2011 for her advocacy for educational rights for all children in the U.S.

them in and layer the stories they offer. For example, between the two families, the artists stacked books with “Mendez” and “Brown” written on the spine, as pictured below. This visual clue works on two level—first, it is a reflection of the impact that both families made in history, such that their stories would be written and recorded. Secondly, these two books echo the message of the mural since they represent education as a human right and learning as a source of power.

Figure 16. Detail of *Education is a Basic Human Right*, showing two books with the names, *Mendez* and *Brown,* Alma Lopez and Noni Olabisi, 1998, Angeles Mesa Public Library, photo taken by Kaelyn Rodriguez, November 22, 2019.

Additionally, the wall text mentions both the *Mendez v. Westminster* and the *Brown v. Board of Education* cases by name. And while we know that Linda Brown is pictured, the image nods to the famous photo of Ruby Bridges, who was a very young Black child when she was escorted into an integrated public elementary school by U.S. marshalls on either side of her. In both images, young Black girls are bravely walking in or out of very tense moments donning some of their finest clothes, emphasizing their innocence within this system, their right to opportunity and their eagerness to put their best foot forward despite pressure and abuse from children and adults. While the Mendez and Brown families are in pursuit of education, they’re depicted as black and

white figured against a visually striking red background, impressing a sense of both stress and critical importance of the moment they are immortalized in here. On the one hand, the red creates a sense of danger, and at the same time, it is the color of protest, and the visual thread the moves the past into the present moment in the register below.

Figure 17. Detail of *Education is a Basic Human Right*, showing elders picking cotton and strawberries in the U.S. flag, Alma Lopez and Noni Olabisi, 1998, Angeles Mesa Public Library, photo taken by Kaelyn Rodriguez, November 22, 2019.

As we continue looking closely, we can also see the ancestors in the foreground who, I believe, have since passed. We remember, honor and appreciate the back-breaking work they did, harvesting strawberries and picking cotton in the fields of the Deep South and Central Valley,[164] while, these two crops reflect the race and racialized experience of the laborers. It is clear that both figures are working in the fields, and while they are not related to each other, their struggle is almost identical. The African American woman picking cotton represents the struggles of

[164] This interpretation is presented by the author, and was not verified by the artists.

share cropping and before that, the torture and trauma of chattel slavery. The Latinx man right next to her is stooped over low, wearing a cap with a bandana around the back of his head, protecting his face and neck from the heat of the sun and the harsh chemicals the fruit is treated with.

They are depicted in black and white, as the Mendez and Brown families are, yet they are ghostly; the stripes of the U.S. flag move through them. I believe the artists chose to depict these figures in this way for two reasons. The first demonstrates that education for Black and Latinx children should be easily accessible because of the immense work and creation of wealth their ancestors generated.[165] In fact, their work is so deeply connected to soil, that they are the very roots of the US, and represent the foundation of American prosperity—a prosperity they haven't been able to enjoy or benefit from.[166] In this sense then, the artists offer an even more powerful argument that education is a basic human right *and* that quality education for Black and Brown children is a minimal form of reparation after centuries of unpaid and low-wage labor while building masses of wealth for white, land-owning men and their families. The second reason why I believe that Lopez and Olabisi chose to depict the elders as ghostly figures is to emphasize their influence on the youth. The artists rightfully position African American and Latinx youth as powerful agents for change, protesting for education, opposing the ban on affirmative action and the prison industrial complex. It is here, on a protest flag that the elders are remembered for their labor and formation of the U.S.

Another important component to discuss is the color scheme. While the red, black and white colors are highly effective for guiding viewers in this historical lesson and call to action

---

[165] Alma Lopez, in a personal conversation with the author, November 26, 2019.

[166] Data on family wealth based on race in the US—even including education and income.

mural, they are also a part of Noni Olabisi's method for painting. That is, in almost all of her single-authored murals in Los Angeles, Olabisi only paints in these three colors.[167] As seen in the collage below, there is occasion for use of other colors, however, that is only when Olabisi is collaborating with other artists. It is worth mentioning that she usually adds a yellow dot in her black, white and red paintings to represent the sun. She says, "It is the giver of life,"[168] and in this way, even when she depicts moments of struggle or pain, she is highly aware and connected to new beginnings that come with the light. While there is no yellow dot in *Education is a Basic Human Right*, I believe the beautiful yellow tee shirt worn by a protesting student may function with the same purpose. In an interview with Isabel Rojas-Williams, the executive director at Mural Conservancy Los Angeles, Olabisi mentioned that her collaboration with Lopez and other Latino artists is so important to her as a way of showing common histories and equity between the cultures.[169] In light of this, it is powerful to read the use of colors as a visual signal of solidarity and mutual power.

The middle section is hardest to see in reproduction because of the hanging lamps that obscure the view. Nevertheless, it is important and unique because it is the only section painted in full color, with vivid yellows, blues, pinks, purples and browns. Seamlessly, Lopez and Olabisi used photos from the 1993 strikes at UCLA and painted them into their multi-

---

[167] It is important to mention that she usually adds a yellow dot in her black, white and red paintings to represent the sun. She says "It is the giver of life" and in this way, even when she depicts moments of struggle or pain, she is highly aware and connected to new beginnings that come with the light. While there is no yellow dot in Education, I believe the beautiful yellow tee shirt worn by a protesting student may function with the same purpose. Taken from her artist's statement, Noni Olabisi, "Noni Olabisi: Artist Statement," California Community Foundation, https://www.calfund.org/nonprofits/featured-funds/fva/2010-gallery/noni-Olabisi/. REPEATS IN TEXT

[168] Noni Olabisi, "Noni Olabisi: Artist Statement."

[169] Noni Olabisi, in an interview with Mural Conservancy LA, "MCLA June 2012 Artist of the Month: Noni Olabisi," YouTube video, 9:11, uploaded by MuralConservancyLA, June 14, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DySjC8XDnJc.

generational struggle for education for Black and Brown children. With their protest signs and fists raised high, the artists repurposed an earlier struggle for the more contemporary one—Proposition 209, which would effectively end affirmative action and once again, ignore race, ethnicity and gender in schools, including in admissions. In the aftermath of trying the color-blind approach, public colleges and universities remain segregated and many underserve their most marginalized students. As a result of this staggering reflection of this unequitable access to education, on June 15, 2020, the UC Board of Regents voted to repeal Prop 209—the proposition may be included on the November presidential election ballot.[170]

Figure 18 and Figure 19. Top: Noni Olabisi, *Trouble Island,* 2003; Bottom left: Olabisi and Lopez, *History in our Hand*, 2009; Bottom center: Olabisi, *To Protect and Serve*, 1992; Bottom right: Olabisi, *Freedom Won't Wait* C. 1992. Accessed March 12, 2020, https://picsandbrushes.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/noniolabisipicstitch.jpg.

In the Making

Working with the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA), Lopez and Olabisi were awarded a modest budget to create the mural. Additionally, creating a mural made with

[170] UC Office of the President, "UC Board of Regents unanimously endorses ACA 5, repeal of Prop. 209," media release, June 15, 2020, https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/press-room/uc-board-regents-endorses-aca-5-repeal-prop-209.

public funds meant that the imagery could not go against DCA guidelines. They began by locating a home for the mural and found that the Angeles Mesa Library was an idea location for several reasons, including that it was in South Central, near both artists and the communities they were a part of and lovingly represent. Additionally, the library has an impressive and longstanding history of serving its community. After reviewing primary documents from the library's public archive, my research indicates that the library was first started in 1914 by three local women from the Church Guild of the Mesa Congregation who noticed a need for more books in the community. The desire for reading rapidly and a full-time librarian position was created to maintain the books. Eventually, the library was moved to Fifty-second street and Fifth avenue, only a few blocks over from where it originally was. It is still there now, across the street from Angeles Mesa Elementary School, where the children feed from the school into the library most days. In this way, Lopez and Olabisi were aware that there were many children in the area who would see their mural, and would learn directly from it; Noni and Alma even went to the school to make sure they were in support of the mural at the library across the street. Selecting a quiet interior space where Black and Brown children could see their history and their legacy celebrated in a location designated for reading and learning was a masterful choice, in my opinion, as most other murals by the artists live outdoors, on the exterior walls of buildings. I believe that making the mural both public and intimate nurtures the children's imagination and sense of self. Of course, the design came with some resistance from a retired member of the Department of Cultural Affairs, so Lopez and Olabisi were thorough in making sure the mural had community support.[171] They knocked on doors and acquired signatures from residents who agreed with the design. Their design was affirmed.

[171] Alma Lopez, in a conversation with the author, November 26, 2019. Lopez mentioned that a retired person from the DCA held an opposing point of view, that the image was violent and unfit for children to see.

As is often the case when making murals with government funds, *Education is a Basic Human Right* took several years to create. One reason for this was that the artists were dedicated to doing excellent research to represent the histories of Black and Latinx solidarity well. In addition to reading about the legal cases they depicted, they also drove to Orange County with Yreina Cervantez to meet with Mrs. Felicitas Mendez. In fact, Mrs. Mendez even showed Lopez and Olabisi photographs from the time of the trial and gave them newspaper clippings for their own reference. With such generous support and encouragement, the artists were even more inspired to paint from the heart. In addition to researching and creating drawings for this mural, Lopez and Olabisi were offered space at the Watts Labor Community Action Committee to make the painting. The work was made on a separate canvas and was later installed in the chimney of the library's fireplace. The artists and the library decided this was the most effective and safe method for painting because the hanging lamps that are seen in the photographs of the mural were not allowed to be removed. As such, this mural was created in one of the most powerful and liberating sites for Black and Brown people in South Central. The Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC) was founded by Timothy Watkins in 1965, several months before the Watts Rebellion, and still stands today. The late Mr. Watkins was a union organizer and used his skills and leadership to create a space in Watts for people of color, especially Black people, to learn skills, find jobs, grow and harvest food. Today, the WLCAC has a skate park, the Cecil Ferguson Art Gallery, along with studios and foundries for painting, ceramics, glass blowing, theater, woodshop and more. They are and have been an incredible force for good in Watts and in South Central Los Angeles and are known for their interest in working in solidarity. To that end, Cesar Chavez and Mr. Watkins were good friends and supported each other as allies. It was

here, in this very place, that *Education is a Basic Human Right* was created, which offers even more rich texture and history to this amazing work of art. *Education is a Basic Human Right* was completed in 1998 after years of planning, gathering community support, painting, and installation. It is a beloved gem in the Angeles Mesa area and will continue to tell the stories of African American and Latinx solidarity, shared power and dreams for freedom for the many generations to come.

To Protect and Serve

Education is a Basic Human Right was finished and installed in 1998, but a year earlier, Olabisi finished another mural that was full of controversary. Noni Olabisi's mural, *To Protect and Serve*, was delayed from 1994-1996 when LA city funding and its location were under question due to its unfavorable yet accurate depiction of individual and institutional white terrorism against Black people and the Black Panther Party's strength in response. Olabisi did not picture a false history of the U.S., only one that was so blunt it scared public officials. Eventually, Olabisi refused city funding, as the city's conditions were becoming "dangerously close to censorship."[172] The mural was funded by SPARC and other members of the public who supported the work of art and welcomed it in their community. In it, Olabisi turned the motto "To Protect and Serve" on its head, memorializing the service and protection that Oakland and Los Angeles chapters of the Black Panther Party provided for Black children, families and community members—services and protection that was never provided by police officers. On the left side of the mural, Olabisi depicts suffering and violence against Black people. For example,

[172] Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC), "Conservation of 'To Protect and Serve' by Noni Obalisi," https://sparcinla.org/conservation-of-to-protect-and-serve-by-noni-olabisi/.

we see two police officers forcefully arresting a young Black person, above them, institutional violence in the form of the justice system, personified by an older white judge with a US flag blindfolding him as he rules on a case. Next to him are two hooded men, members of the Ku Klux Klan, holding a rope behind a beaten Black man who appears to have a rope, or perhaps marks from a rope, around his neck. Taken together, Olabisi connects the dots between law enforcement, the so-called justice system, vigilantes and Black suffering in the U.S. This terrible imagery is separated from life-affirming images on the right side of the composition, where members of the BPP serve breakfast—scrambled eggs, toast and bacon—to Black children. We see Black women with their bags of groceries from The People's Free Food Program, a Black father holding his new born baby and a collection of Black activists advancing the rights of Black people.

Figure 20. Noni Olabisi, *To Protect and Serve*, 1997, painted mural, 3406 11th Ave, Los Angeles, CA 90018, accessed June 3, 2020, https://sparcinla.org/to-protect-and-serve-noni-olabisi-cd-10/.

Even many years after this mural was made, some people resisted it and its message. In 2015 the mural received conservation services from SPARC, where I was employed at the time.

Working along the conservation team and supporting artists with administrative work, I was privy to meetings with Olabisi, the lead conservation expert, Carlos Rogel, as well as the owner of the shop where the mural was painted. As a way of working in cooperation with the local business community, we met the business owner and shared our plans to conserve the mural and improve its sun and water damage, apply a protective covering and a fresh coat of paint, yet we were met with hostility. The shop owner was not from the area and without blinking an eye, said to my colleague and me that he did not want us to improve the mural because he did not want to attract Black people to the area. The mural is an unmistakable expression of Black pride, Black humanity, Black love and service, and still, many find it to be a problem. Nevertheless, the mural was fully conserved with Olabisi's support and stands today beautifully at Moe's Hair Salon at 3406 11th Ave Los Angeles.

Freedom Dreams

> The question remains: What are today's young activists dreaming about? We know what they are fighting against, but what are they fighting for?[173]
>
> —Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*

This quote really gets to the heart of the mural and helps us understand what is at stake for this visual project. In that sense, I think it is important that we reflect on the subtleties between what the youth are fighting against, fighting for and dreaming about. It might seem outside of our ability to attempt an answer for what they might be dreaming about, however, combining our knowledge of historical events with close visual analysis and sensitivity and love to Black and Brown solidarity, I assert that we can create our own interpretation of dreams for

[173] Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 8.

the future. Our new interpretation does not need to singularly represent the dreams of the youth, but may serve as one of many possibilities for their dreams for themselves. I offer this reading as a social art historian, but also as an Afro-Latina who attended integrated public schools, including my graduate education at UCLA.[174] In my own experience as a student, scholar, African American and Chicana, I believe my experience is closely connected to the message, meaning and even the goals of the mural.

Upon reviewing the mural, we discussed the ancestors on the flag, who represent the generations of laborers who built the wealth of the U.S. However, I want to add that the ancestors are not simply on a flag, the flag is used as a protest banner. The artists rightfully position African American and Latinx youth as powerful agents for change, against the ban on affirmative action and the prison industrial complex. They are fighting against systemic injustices, but more broadly, they are resisting the social limits that are placed on Black and Brown youth and adults. It is here, on a protest flag, that the elders are remembered for their labor. In this sense, the youth are appropriating the flag and using it to represent its symbolic potential for freedom, justice and belonging. While these core values are deeply American, they have always been in contradiction with the practices that created the US as we know it today. For example, in his book, Kelley asserts that "freedom today is practically synonymous with free enterprise,"[175] reminding us that freedom means many different things to different communities. Because of centuries of social domination, white supremacy has become normalized and virtually made invisible because it is ubiquitous and also highly adaptable in U.S. culture and society. George Lipsitz says it this way:

---

[174] UCLA historically has underserved Black and Latinx communities, especially in Los Angeles.
[175] Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, xi.

> It is not so much that Blacks are disadvantaged, but rather that they are taken advantage of by discrimination in employment, education, and housing, by the ways in which the health care system, the criminal justice system and the banking system skew opportunities and life chances along racial lines.[176]

Richard Dyer expands that "White power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular."[177] And since white supremacy was woven into the foundation of this nation, the advancement of communities of color is both antithetical to and deeply connected to this country's promise of liberty, justice and freedom for its citizens. It is within this paradox and historical context that the youth in the mural protest for their rights to an education and dignity for their families and their legacies.

The mural depicts the students not only fighting against white supremacy, but fighting for a dignified education and educational opportunities. In this sense, I believe that the youth in the mural are advocating for something that their parents and grandparents struggled for and still did not fully attain—opportunity. These youths are not struggling to become more aligned with whiteness, rather, they are working to make educational opportunities less racist. By this, I mean that the youth do not believe the lie that quality education is reserved for white children, as was the case before segregation was finally outlawed. They are empowered by the histories that surround them and with full possession of their futures, they are fighting for their right to not just education, but educational resources, including mentorship, libraries, college and career counseling, future opportunities, upward mobility and more.

Finally, in my opinion, these students are dreaming about the "radical openness" where they are totally free to learn, grow and explore without limits or even fear.[178] I believe that this is

---

[176] Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 2.
[177] Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1997), 9.

[178] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 207.

the greatest purpose of education—to empower children, youth and adults to use their minds in critical and creative engagement for their own limitless possibilities. In addition to this type of freedom, through dreaming and learning, I believe that sense of possibility is enhanced when we pair them with pleasure, excitement and inspired imagination. I know this personally as a student and an educator, that love and expansive ideas are a powerful catalyst for freedom in my mind and my heart. It is my interpretation that these students are moving towards this same open space for intellectual and personal freedom and joy. As Kelley reminds us in *Freedom Dreams*, "Now more than ever, we need the strength to love and to dream."[179] While we may be facing hard times in many fronts, we have never been hopeless—we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us, those who fought against social limitations, fought for opportunities, but more than anything, persisted because of their great desires for the pleasure and joy of freedom.

[179] Kelley, *Freedom Dreams,* xi.

Figure 21. Alma Lopez and Noni Olabisi, *It Takes a Village to Raise a Child 2*,2009, Acrylic on concrete, 13 ft x 11 ft, 6310 San Vicente Boulevard, Suite 400, Los Angeles, CA 90048, first accessed March 3, 2019.

While they struggled in their own ways, they also were bold enough to dream big, to freedom dream. This mural brings their dreams close to us so that we can remember, carry them on and expand on them for an even better future.

Chapter 4: Watts Still Rising[180]

> Or put another way, the most radical art is not protest art but works that take us to another place entirely, envision a different way of seeing, perhaps a different way of feeling.[181]
> —Robin D.G. Kelley

Background

Whereas the previous chapter inquires about and celebrates *Education is a Basic Human Right*, this chapter offers a wealth of original research and unique research methods in the service of creating a mural in South Central that celebrates the Black and Latinx past, present and futures for the community. While the mural remembers some of the difficult histories of the community, including the presence of the National Guard in the 1965 Watts Rebellion, it also celebrates the public works of art in Watts and envisages the future for community, according to on-going projects and what the community wanted to see, but mostly, it centers six children as they dream about their passions and hopes for what's next. In this sense *Watts Still Rising* the mural and the chapter are also very different from the last in that they center the potential for a very specific neighborhood in Los Angeles that has both African American and Latinx histories and residence.

This chapter comes out of a creative arts project in Watts that the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) and I began working on in the summer of 2015. While this academic writing is an important component to the work I have committed myself to, it is not the pinnacle of this public art project. There are many moments within my experiences in Watts that I could never retell or recreate, yet I offer this chapter as a fragmented representation of some of those moments. Furthermore, this chapter is a scholarly endeavor of the history, geography and

[180] This chapter was the topic of my MA thesis and a section of it was published in a peer-reviewed article in the journal *Diálogo*, in the Fall of 2018.

[181] Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 11.

historical geography in Watts that required research, reading and interviews. This academic work often times meets the community work, as they each inform the other. It is a reflection and analysis on the final mural design and the accompanying monuments.

In the summer of 2015, several members at SPARC, including myself, a Graduate Summer Research Mentee, organized an application to the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA) for a mural commission in Watts. The DCA created an open call for applications: Watts Riots/Rebellion 50th Anniversary Commemorative Mural Project. The concept for the commission was to represent the history of the 1965 rebellion in Watts while at the same time, to depict a present and a future that Watts envisions of and for itself. After learning that our application was accepted by the DCA and that we won the commission, we moved forward quickly. Our project proposal was more than a single mural, it was a mural and a series of monuments in Watts that would link and celebrate existing artworks with our emerging mural. Our work was also *Memories on Charcoal Alley*, a walking path at 103rd Street and Compton Avenue of sandblasted quotes from five community members. Each community member reflected back on the uprising or life in Watts today and we cut and selected them together to present a meditation on Watts over the past 51 years. As we moved forward with our plans, everyone on the team took on a role or responsibility in the project, and I, along with Pilar Castillo, worked on community engagement. We knew that this mural would be a failure and a disservice to residents in Watts if it were not made in collaboration with community members. We were aware of the stakes of this project, and for that reason, Pilar and I invested time and effort working with community members in Watts for nearly a year. We joined the community movement called I Heart Watts as members and supported the group's initial goals.

We attended meetings and volunteered our time on local efforts like community picnics and clean-up days. We listened to residents of Watts and became friends with them. In order to represent a history of the 1965 uprising in Watts, we had to learn more about Watts before, during and after the revolt. Drawing primarily from Gerald Horne's *Fire This Time*, along with other primary documents like the McCone Report and the Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC) report, I became familiar with the midcentury history of Watts and Los Angeles.[182] I also learned about these histories from elders in Watts who shared their experiences with me. After situating this historical foundation in the chapter, I move forward to discuss and analyze the spatial and racial makeup of Watts and South LA from the 1930s to the 1960s. Drawing from census data and the mapping software Social Explorer, I offer visuals that demonstrate the spatial demography of Los Angeles. This data becomes an important part of this case because it offers visuals and analysis to the redlining in Watts and the plight of housing segregation.

From there, I demonstrate the community engagement that this dissertation research required and to offer a better sense of the extent of the labor and methods that were used within the community. Not only does this section allow us to see what's important to the community, and offer us details to allow us to see how residents live, it helps us connect theory and practice for decolonial praxis of Watts. Finally, I offer a visual analysis of *Watts Still Dreaming* design and the respective monuments. By offering a robust (spatial) history of Watts, coupled with the community engagement, I contextualize the visuals and aesthetic in the design. I also describe

[182] John McCone, "Violence in the City—An End or a Beginning?" December 1969, Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC) Collection, California State University, Dominguez Hills, CA; Ted Watkins, "Report Watts Labor Community Action Committee and Final Report," July 1967, Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC) Collection, California State University, Dominguez Hills, CA.

the function of the monuments such that the viewer/participant will locate themselves in the history of Watts, but also, use the present to dream of a future.

Memory, Spatial Imagination and the Watts Rebellion

> On hand to oppose them were 16,000 National Guard, Los Angeles Police Department, highway patrol, and other law enforcement officers; fewer personnel were used by the United States that same year to subdue Santo Domingo.[183]
> —Gerald Horne

There was a heat wave in Watts the night of August 11, 1965. Amenities such as air conditioners were scarce and public pools were even more limited to residents of color due to local [civic] segregation. With few methods to stay cool in the enduring summer heat, residents in South LA regularly sat outside their homes to cool down and socialize with neighbors. Some 200 residents were present that August evening in 1965 and witnessed first-hand Lee Minikus, a white California Highway Patrol officer, arrest Marquette Frye, his brother Roland Frye and their mother Rena Frye on Avalon and 116th Street.[184] Roland, a recently discharged member of the US Air Force and Marquette were driving home at 6:00 PM when they were stopped, possibly on suspicion of driving under the influence. In his widely recognized book, *Fire This Time*, Gerald Horne offers two accounts of what happened that night, as told by the CHP officer and Marquette Frye. Marquette said the exchange with the officer was routine and the officer was about to let them go when another officer with a "nastier attitude"[185] arrived. The Frye residence was not far from Avalon and 116th, and Mrs. Frye walked over soon after her sons were pulled

[183] Horne, *Fire This Time*, 53–54.

[184] Horne, *Fire This Time*, 53–54.

[185] Horne, *Fire This Time*, 54.

over. She witnessed her sons in an exchange with CHP officers as a crowd of hot residents continued to gather. Mrs. Frye took issue with the way her children were being treated and objected to the authorities themselves when she was abruptly handcuffed by one of the CHP officers. Accounting for Marquette's version, Horne writes that "the first officer then twisted her arm behind her back and seemed to lift her off the ground and put handcuffs on her, causing her to cry and scream due to the pain."[186] An officer hit Marquette Frye on the head multiple times, kicked him and slammed his leg in the door of the patrol car. The contusions on his head were evidence of his story. Mrs. Frye was slapped in the face and hit on the knee. After witnessing this excessive force, the crowd became boisterous, while still others in the crowd were also struck.

Beginning on August 11, the rebellion turned into six consecutive days of unrest in Watts and other parts of South Los Angeles. The loss of lives and damage to homes and businesses were devastating. Horne writes "At least 34 people died…1000 more were injured, and 4,000 arrested."[187] Some 200 million dollars of property damages was estimated within a broad perimeter of South LA, which exacerbated poverty in the area for decades thereafter. Over-policing was not new in Watts yet this instance of hyper-policing and omnipresent law enforcement affected the whole community; Horne accounts that "16,000 National Guard, Los Angeles officers, highway patrol and other law enforcements officers; fewer personnel were used by the United States that same year to subdue Santo Domingo."[188] Furthermore, marshal law went into effect and officers enforced a curfew for residents that required all individuals seen outside of their homes after 10 PM to be shot on sight.[189] During the six days of rebellion and

[186] Horne, *Fire This Time*, 55.
[187] Horne, *Fire This Time*, 3.
[188] Horne, *Fire This Time*, 3.
[189] Alice Patrick (artist and former resident of Watts), in discussion with the author, August 25, 2016.

fires, grocery and drug stores were closed, burned down or looted, making it very difficult for families to access food and drugs.

The fight between the Frye family and the CHP officers would become known as the beginning of the uprising in Watts that summer of 1965. While over policing and police violence within communities of color are much older than the mid-century uprising in Watts, the encounter with the Frye family and the CHP officers was widely seen as the last straw for residents in South LA. It was not the impetus for the rebellion, only the last public expression of Black oppression and neglect residents could stand. In his book, *Black Arts West*, Daniel Widener reminds us that flames were stoked by decades of marginalization and injustice as the rebellion was "years in the making."[190] Furthermore, Horne asserts, "There were many causes and reasons for the tumultuous event…[and] it should have come as a strange surprise only to those who were not paying attention."[191] While residential segregation exacerbated poverty by localizing it, poor transportation options and few social resources might have signaled to local government their responsibility to intervene and develop more support. Yet Watts was bastardized by Los Angeles from its inception, as it was only formally included in Los Angeles city *or* county based on a financial incentive. Although this incentive benefited the City of Los Angeles, Watts was still marginalized within its new zone, a topic that I will offer in more detail later in this paper.

Although the signs indicating uprising were plenty, there were still many Angelenos and others who were surprised by the rebellion in Watts. A simply inquiry into news broadcasting or mainstream periodicals from August 1965 will demonstrate the harsh portrayal that of residents

---

[190] Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) 92.

[191] Horne, *Fire This Time*, 36.

in South LA by the media. *Time* magazine famously called two children facing arrest "prisoners" and in so doing, characterized these kids as criminals at the same time. In 1965, on his television talk show, Merv Griffin, who, at that time, had never visited Watts, presented a point to Dick Gregory that, "There is a rumbling right now. Even among people who want things to happen for civil rights, who want the Negro to have all his rights…to protect the Negro with laws. There is a feeling, if many disobey the law, disobey the constitution, that it's going to be a terrible chaos in America."[192] These examples of news media, both print and broadcast, offers us an important insight to the framing of race and racism in the US. By raising this point, especially within a mainstream media platform, Griffin's singular view and participation in behavioral politics demonstrates acceptance of white innocence and belief in the neutrality of law. It ignores the many years of systemic violence and marginalization that Black Americans and others have endured. His question obscures dominant culture's active participation in both legal and social marginalization of Black communities and other communities of color. Furthermore, the message of his question reveals the reality that "white vanity is valued more highly than Black humanity."[193] In this way, Griffin effortlessly forgets that white privilege and public policy directly contribute to Black poverty. He minimizes the context in which Black people (and others) have been confined to live in the small ghetto of Watts and face fewer opportunities to work post World War II. The framing of the question "attributed urban decay and poverty to the behavior of Black people, not to discrimination and ill-conceived public policy."[194] In this way, the comment focuses only on Black Americans and their logic in rebelling. Finally, by discussing

[192] Dick Gregory, in an interview on the Merv Griffin Show, filmed in New York in 1965, black and white film.

[193] Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 20.

[194] Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 28.

Black disobedience as the main problem, Griffin reminds us that "Today's segregated schools, neighborhoods and workplaces produce white people who know very little about Blacks and even less about themselves."[195] In other words, segregation and the white spatial imaginary reinforce and recreate racism and racial ignorance.

In early 2016, I had an impromptu discussion with an elderly white couple from the San Fernando Valley who remember the Watts Rebellion. They described seeing smoke from fires in Watts while they were at Chavez Ravine taking in a Dodger game. The couple reminisced about Black protesters interrupting a family member's graduation ceremony at California State University, Northridge (CSUN) the following year. While their description seemed to be consistent with other accounts I've read, it was clear that this couple *still* did not understand the causes of the rebellion, the conditions residents in South LA lived with, nor did they understand the lasting impact the rebellion would have in Watts. For them, the rebellion was part mystery, part national shame. The social realities that residents in Watts had experienced since the creation of the sequestered city were not realities that fit within what George Lipsitz calls, the white spatial imaginary. Lipsitz uses the term white spatial imaginary to reveal the processes, mechanisms, social contracts and laws that, combined, uphold the divisions that allow all-white spaces to exist and appear to be natural and neutral rather than actively racist. In other words, the "hostile privatism"[196] that sustains white supremacy and racial segregation were the same rationales that justify how some white people could misunderstand the rebellion as anything but "an expression of disappointment and outrage."[197] The couple I spoke with maintained that

---

[195] George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 15.

[196] George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* 13.

[197] Dr. Chris Hickey (resident of Watts), in discussion with author, March 1, 2016.

residents of South LA, a racially coded description of Black people, were responsible for the destruction of Watts and for inconveniencing their graduation ceremony at CSUN. Their analysis was rooted and invested in white spatial imaginary, which allowed them to observe cities and environments as inherently neutral, yet at the same time, more available and accommodating to whites. Of course, it would be problematic to suggest that this couple was inherently racist; rather, my goal by offering this example is to point to the conditions that informed their understanding of land use, spatial entitlement, the construction of race and the meaning of the rebellion in Watts.

Building on the works of Katherine McKittrick, George Lipsitz, Gaye Theresa Johnson, Natalia Molina, Laura Pulido, Darnell Hunt, Edward Said, David Harvey and Bobby M. Wilson, I join this important tradition of scholars who apply spatial studies to racial studies and racial formation to make interventions to what Henri Lefebvre calls *abstract space*. Because spatial exclusion, redlining and racial segregation were major contributors to the Watts Uprising of 1965, it is imperative to begin this work in the spatial history of the city of Watts. Finally, this paper will continually draw from the rebellion as the historical backdrop for the community-centered mural project. My goal in this is to discuss *Watts Still Dreaming* and subsequent monuments in relationship to the history of Watts in order to center the history, to celebrate the community approach to the project and to demonstrate the design process of the mural as parts of a decolonial public arts practice and interdisciplinary art history.

Scholars note that similar unrest almost broke out the summer of 1966 since social conditions and police relations in Watts had not much changed. In fact, living conditions worsened for many because of "declining home values, the hemorrhaging of jobs and the flight

of middle-class African Americans *deepened poverty*."[198] These factors and others contributed to the poverty and rise in gang culture from the 1960s. Nevertheless, in the 1960s, Los Angeles was largely considered to be a safe haven for Black migrants from the Jim Crow South. Yet the reality for Black people in LA was not consistent with the myth of a Black oasis. According to Paul Von Blum, a Los Angeles art historian, "the riots profoundly accelerated the development of the black arts movement in the city. The uprising and its aftermath put pressure on government agencies to provide funding for social, artistic, and cultural programming in black communities."[199] As Black people in LA, especially South LA, were fighting for civil rights, grassroots movements began to shape the culture and the arts that were being produced at the time. While art historians and others sometimes obscure art from its social and political context by centering the single artist as genius,[200] I cannot separate the political content from the artistic practice, as many artists were intentionally engaging in socially conscious work.[201] While a significant art emergence came out of the influx of funds after much unrest, scholars like Robin D. G. Kelley and others remind us that the arts were already a strong component in life in South Los Angeles *before* the rebellion.[202]

Daniel Widener, Steven L. Isoardi, Robin D. G. Kelley, and others offer us a history of artists in South LA before the uprising, demonstrating how a local cultural expression grew even

---

198 Robin D. G. Kelley, "Watts: Remember What They Built, Not What They Burned," *Los Angeles Times*, August 11, 2015, https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-0811-kelley-watts-civil-society-20150811-story.html.

199 Paul Von Blum, "Before and After Watts: Black Art in Los Angeles," in *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities*, ed. Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón (New York, NY: New York University, 2010), 243–265.

200 See Judy Baca, "Whose Monument Where? Public Art in a Many-Cultured Society," in *Mapping The Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, ed. Suzanne Lacy (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995), 131–138.

201 Widener, *Black Arts West*, 118.

202 Widener, *Black Arts West*, 118.

stronger in the wake of the destruction. In an essay published by the *Los Angeles Times*, Kelley recounts the founding of the Underground Musicians Association in 1961 by Horace Tapscott, and the progressive agenda of Studio Watts, a collective of writers, dancers and visual artists who advocated for affordable housing in 1964, as well as other community-based art practices**.** These grass roots institutions were ever more important to community members who experienced the rebellion first hand because they recall that upon returning to school that autumn in 1965, teachers went on with the same lessons they had before; the violence and destruction were absent from classroom curriculum. Watts native and author Dr. Chris Hickey accounts, "It wasn't a topic at school as a part of our lessons. We were still getting math and the history we were getting was the history of white folks. That was all I had ever seen, and it didn't change."[203] Later on in our interview, Dr. Hickey underscored the significant impact art teachers and elders had impressed upon him as a youth: "There was a lot of talk from some of the elders, a lot of consciousness talk in the context of being artistic and creative. A lot of that creativity and that artistry was around these feelings of neglect for our community…And through that artistic expression we were also being awakened consciously about what our conditions were."[204] This inter-generational creative platform went on to make huge contributions in Watts as it empowered individual artists and collectives, as well as mainstream culture through Hollywood television and music. In this way, the local art institutions that were established both before and after the uprising was critical for providing space and opportunity to youth and others to process the rebellion they experienced.

[203] Dr. Chris Hickey (resident of Watts), in discussion with author, March 1, 2016.

[204] Dr. Chris Hickey (resident of Watts), in discussion with author, March 1, 2016.

It is critical to understand that while the arts were burgeoning in the early 1960s in Watts, it is critical to make two points; the first is that the police violence that occurred on August 11, 1965 is neither the source nor the origins for the arts movements in South LA. As discussed earlier, the arts were an important part of life in Watts years before the rebellion broke out. The second point is that while Black, Latino and other residents in Los Angeles experienced violence from police much earlier than 1965, the eruption of the Watts rebellion would crystallize art from the 60s in a very particular way. As expressed by Dr. Hickey, there was a new imperative and context to create artwork that would elevate a community's social consciousness. While these two points may seem to be in opposition of each other, I submit that they are not opposing but rather congruent and connected to the temporality of the period. In fact, they affirm each other; they point to the arts movements in Watts before and after the uprising and distinguish different creative imperatives and institutions. For this reason, and the fact that our mural and monuments commemorate the 1965 uprising, I choose to start and situate this historical review in the 1960s. Building especially from Kelley and Widener, from Darnell Hunt and Josh Sides, I begin thinking about the present and future of Watts by looking back to the 1960s.

As previously mentioned, some Angelenos were not paying attention to the conditions in Watts and South LA before or even after the rebellion. The reasons may vary, but some might have been because of geographical distance between West LA and South LA, or possibly because of racial segregation and racial tension. George Lipsitz, however, reminds us that white spatial imaginary is not neutral or natural. He asserts that, "whites viewed inner-city residents not as fellow citizens denied the subsidies freely offered to whites, but as people whose alleged failures...forced the government to intervene on their behalf, to build housing projects that were

then ruined by alleged Black neglect."[205] In his quote, Lipsitz reminds us that the white spatial imaginary actively penalizes and inherently incriminates black peoples, and other people of color. Pushing this concept even further, white spatial imaginary coupled with Henri Lefebvre's concept of abstract space can frame the issue of social uprising with roots in racial and spatial hegemony. To put it another way, if we pair the concepts of abstract space and white spatial imaginary, we can use these lenses to see exactly how race and space reinforce each other in ways that uphold white supremacy, white fragility, colorblindness and white privilege in society.

Community Engagement

> If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.
> —Lilla Watson

This section of the chapter builds from the geographic and spatial analysis of Watts to the human and personal experiences I had with residents there. It details my community involvement in Watts while also offering some description of life for residents. As I prioritize my commitment to the community along with my academic research, I take on a challenge that many scholars before me have faced. The challenge is to respectfully and accurately represent a historically marginalized community, while also caring about them and respecting their humanity and their privacy. As an insider-outsider to Watts, a woman, a Black Chicana, a native Angeleno, a poor person with class privilege, a young scholar at UCLA, an artist and a summer research fellow, I hold conflicting positions that point to tensions in my positionality. Yet I, like many scholars before, take seriously these risks and do my best to uphold the community and their interests.

[205] Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 27.

The participant-observer methodology of data collection is not always simple and requires flexibility, as I often move between roles; nevertheless, it is an important method for scholars and others who seek to serve the communities we love. It requires that sometimes I listen and observe, while other times I join in on discussions and activities. Because of the sometimes violent and exploitative relationships that develop between scholars from research universities and historically vulnerable communities, I have worked to create relationships with community members and local leaders. Trying to avoid the pitfalls that cultural anthropologists and others have committed years before my undertakings, I take my friendships and relationships with community members seriously. In this way, I've come to fulfill a dual role as scholar and an activist. While part of my responsibility is to listen to residents and learn about them personally to represent their lives in my work, I am also a part of a local alliance and assert that sometimes, "Our stories are not for sale."[206] By keeping certain information private and maintaining relationships with friends, my goal is to stay connected with community and advocate where and how I can. I hope to demonstrate throughout the remainder of this chapter the ways that I have navigated this condition. Our collaboration and engagement with the community has become very meaningful and important to us personally, but also as young scholars and representatives of SPARC.

One important contribution I offer is to recount Black and Latinx histories together and to describe the beauty, the nuance and power of two communities that have sometimes been in conflict, but have often been in solidarity.[207] I discuss the struggles that Black and Latinx

---

[206] Gaye Theresa Johnson, guest presentation in Robin D. G. Kelley's Historiography of African American History seminar, March 14, 2016.

[207] Johnson, *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity*, x.

communities have experienced and detail the opposition these communities expressed to over-policing, inaccessibility to resources and everyday racism. I lay out the very high stakes in the construction of space and the "role that space plays in everyday life, as well as the cumulative role that everyday life plays into the development of mass movements."[208] For all of these reasons—and many others—documenting these recent histories next to this contemporary project requires grace, flexibility and strength.[209] Chela Sandoval says,

> enough strength to confidently commit to well-defined structure of identity for one hour, day, week, month, year; enough flexibility to self-consciously transform that identity according to the requirements of another oppositional ideological tactic if reasons of power's formation require it; enough grace to recognize alliance with others committees to egalitarian social relationships and race, gender, sex, class and social justice, when these other readings of power call for alternative oppositional stands.[210]

Sandoval precisely describes the different modes that community engagement and local activism requires. Adding to her description, I submit that for this project, it requires real relationships and friendships with residents of Watts and local leaders. It requires accountability and transparency on my part as I work to build with community in Watts.

My community work began in January of 2016 when I joined the group I Heart Watts. In fact, I joined as the group young and still developing, and so I have had the opportunity to see the community participation grow over time. Right away, I shared with them my reason for participating with the group and spent most of the first meetings just listening. After that, I spent several months volunteering my time and supporting the group's goals before I asked for an interview or for feedback on our mural design. Since then, my colleague Pilar Castillo and I have been working closely with I Heart Watts. In addition to attending bi-weekly meetings, Pilar and I

---

[208] Johnson, *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity*, xiii.

[209] Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 60.

[210] Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, 60.

participated with the "Ride for Love"/ Grand Opening of the Hamwich Shack, where we volunteered to make crafts, play with children and paint nails for residents. This cross-promoting event was designed to celebrate the opening of a much-needed healthy restaurant and designed to invite locals and others to join for a community bike ride. This was my first large-scale glimpse of the beauty of residents of Watts. Feeling shy and a little bit like an imposter, I was met with hundreds of friendly neighbors and bike riders. Hundreds of excited residents ordered turkey burgers and salads from the fresh menu while hundreds of others mounted their bikes for the ride. Within all of the excitement, children and parents were glad to see our table of games, crafts and nail decals, and in a way, we were offering an important service to folks: play.

Several weeks later, we helped to organize the first annual I Heart Watts Community Picnic. This picnic would inspire us to develop a mapping methodology that was specifically designed for residents of Watts. Motivated by our desire to engage community, to have some fun together and to learn more about their lives, Pilar and I created emoji mapping. Emoji mapping, cutting out paper emojis and gluing/taping them onto a map of Watts, was a way for community members to share as much as they liked and still respect their privacy. It is also an interactive method that asks the interlocutor to think about the sites in Watts where life occurs. Emoji mapping encouraged residents in this multilinguistic community to share memories beyond and across written or spoken language and to express their personal histories in emojis. It was also a way for those without writing or reading skills to participate without marginalization or humiliation.[211] Folks could place sites and landmarks onto their maps *and*, at the same time

[211] Illiteracy is a serious issue in Los Angeles. See Jean Merl, "Study finds Rampant Illiteracy in L.A. County," *Los Angeles Times*, September 9, 2004.

Figure 22. Detail of photo of paper emojis, photo taken by Kaelyn Rodriguez, November 17, 2018.

locate personal histories and map out memories in space. Residents selected from hundreds of emojis to share their stories with us. Some of these emojis include stacks of books, police cars, single and multi-family housing, churches, guns, paint pallets, soccer balls and the Watts Towers. This method would prove to be an instant success: not only were folks sharing stories with us, they were reliving memories and connecting meaning to place. Multiple picnickers would remark on their emotional response and the significance of identifying spatial patterns on the map. Furthermore, several others invited us to their community groups to share emoji mapping with their members.

The data we gathered from the emoji maps primarily offered us demographics and indicated significant locations to residents —where and how life took place in South LA, like family histories, personal losses, and love stories. However, what proved to be very significant to Pilar and me was more than the data we gathered, rather, the way that children and adults found

this activity personally meaningful and affirming. It became a method for telling stories about life, for locating intersections and blocks where lots of living took place. It became a way of doing a human geography and a personal narrative at the same time, and our interlocutors relished that.

This activity was born out of other failed attempts to discuss life and lived experiences in Watts with residents. For Pilar and me, asking community members questions about their families, their work or relationship status was not a simple thing. These questions were loaded with tensions and misunderstandings about race, poverty and death. Keeping in line with our creative goals and our desire to do better than social anthropologists before us, we decided to move into a visual, rather than verbal, historical narrative with the mapping activity. We choose to use emojis because of their symbolic capacity and their capability to work beyond any one language and allow for a visual narrative to unfold in space.

About two-dozen individuals participated with us at the I Heart Watts Picnic, and many shared with us the power of visually locating life experiences. While this activity is visual, residents naturally began speaking to their kids and partners to reflect on the histories they wanted to share. They asked questions of each other to verify locations or dates, and collectively, shared their knowledge with us and also exposed that there are great archives in Watts. This was an unexpected element of the activity, yet it was very significant. This reflecting component of the map was important for many participants as they noted patterns between site and major life events. In the image below a couple in their 60's made a map together and noted when they first met as junior high school students at Markham Middle School.

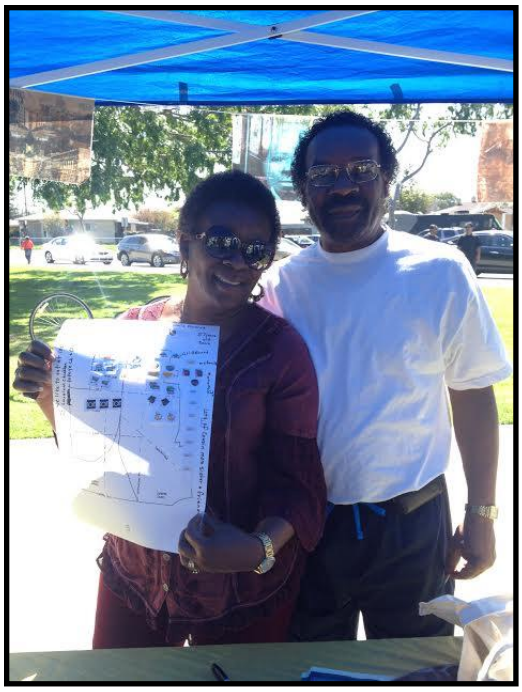


Figure 23. Residents of Watts show their emoji map at the I Heart Watts Picnic, photo taken by Pilar Castillo, March 12, 2016.

This couple also marked their places of employment, favorite restaurants and losses of loved ones. They mapped their everyday life *and* major life moments on this map, allowing us as researchers and outsiders to analyze their stories from their narrative, not an imposed one. In this way, emoji mapping became a decolonial cartographic place/space making activity and methodology that we continued to use at events. By centering residents' lived experiences, we necessarily recreate meanings of space, oppose white spatial imaginary and resist historic systemic and symbolic spatial violence residents have endured. We do this by creating alternative spatial narratives that celebrate and honor the lives of residents and empower community to define its history based on their own memories. I believe that in doing this, we achieved part of our goal in practicing innovative, interdisciplinary methods that allow us to gather data, engage community with decolonial pedagogy and epistemologies. What might be even greater, still, are the implications for emoji mapping in the future for doing oppositional

geographies in historically looted communities, and for employing cartography to visualize environmental and spatial racism takes place.[212]

After the First Annual Community Picnic, I Heart Watts was invited to participate with 96th Elementary School for their annual Sharefest, a day of cleaning bathrooms, landscaping gardens, picking up trash and painting murals. Over the following two weekends we participated in two other events: Arts War LA, Watts and CicLAvia. Both events were held in Watts and both were ways for members of the community to enjoy safe healthy, and free activities. Arts War LA was curated and organized by a member of I Heart Watts. There, local artist organized an art making contest for on-site painting, a contest for completed paintings, as well as prizes for spoken word poetry and other performative arts. While we did not present any artwork, we participated by giving free face painting to children and adults. This event was another huge success for Watts, as over one hundred residents and community members attended. CicLAvia was an even bigger event that beckoned thousands of Angelenos to visit Watts and South LA. It was an important achievement that was in the works for several years. During this event, I Heart Watts held a fundraiser, but more importantly, we lent out bikes for children and adults for free so that families could enjoy a bike ride together. This service was important to visitors without bikes as it allowed them to participate with the day. This event allowed us to have time to meet with more residents and invite them to participate with us.

In addition to these events, Pilar and I met often to discuss our work and plans. I also met with I Heart Watts leader, Adrian Acosta, several times to discuss funding opportunities, grant writing and plans for the future. All of these events and meetings were and are important for our work with this project. Each one offered opportunities to build with residents, to be with friends,

---

[212] *Oppositional geography* is a term I borrow from Katherine McKittrick. For more, see Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xi.

expand our network and work toward our goals. Building relationships and building community with residents in Watts has allowed us to foster important friendships, connect with police officers like officer Paul Rodriguez who patrols the Jordan Downs housing project, but also to advance our goals of the mural project. Officer Rodriguez would become someone that I would interview for another element of this project. In these ways, spending time on these smaller projects has allowed us to get closer to Watts and to begin to understand how its history has informed the city and residents up to today. It gives us a stronger position as scholars doing this community work, and allows for our work to be centered in life experiences rather than solely focused with theoretical discourse or secondary sources. In other words, this community work grounds our project within the heart of the community and overlaps in interest with other project and events. While Pilar and I have not been able to attend every meeting or event, we do our best to be consistent with the goal of this mural project and to engage in work that supports and uplifts people and history that has all too often been erased and forgotten from mainstream memory and mainstream arts.

August 11, 2016, marked the fifty-first anniversary of the Watts Rebellion and in those fifty-one years, much has changed in the community, but not enough. It has since been well documented that the rebellion broke out after a Black motorist, Marquette Frey and his brother Ronald Frye, were pulled over by the California Highway Patrol Officer and a brawl broke out. Residual policing most certainly contributed to the community's chronic disappointment and frustration.[213] Furthermore, the end of the Second World War depressed job opportunities for people of color in Los Angeles, especially Black Angelenos.[214] Declining conditions in the

[213] Horne, *Fire This Time*, 37.

[214] Horne, *Fire This Time*, 37.

housing projects signaled divestment from Watts, while deficient and expensive transportation made it even more difficult for commuters to travel outside of South LA.

An uprising broke out again in 1992 when footage of Rodney King, a Black motorist, was brutally beaten by police officers. The videotape captured several officers accosting King with excessive force, yet video evidence was not enough to ensure justice for King. Three of the police officers were tried on assault with a deadly weapon and excessive force charges, yet all three were acquitted. Before that, many residents in Watts believed another uprising would have been impossible.[215] Many residents in South LA were shocked and angry that video footage was not persuasive enough as evidence to uphold the charge for assault and excessive force, and once again, Black LA revolted. Although this second uprising was under different conditions, the wound of exorbitant law enforcement in the Los Angeles Police Department was exposed anew. The media's portrayal of South LA, especially its representation of these two rebellions and the subsequent war on drugs, has since cast an enduring shadow on the name of Watts. Through media, primary definers of Black criminality like law enforcement and tough-on-crime-politicians have created discourses around morality politics and wanting family values to justify the hyper-punishment and shame that Black communities experienced in the wake of community devastations.[216] In this way, Black Angelenos were, and sometimes still are, painted with a single brush—as inherently violent, fatherless thugs —a narrative and mythology that was peddled by media outlets for years. This chapter specifically, and this dissertation generally, vehemently opposes that narrative and recognizes it as racism cloaked as morality, family and behavioral politics.

---

[215] Dr. Chris Hickey (resident of Watts) in discussion with author, March 1, 2016.

[216] Jimmie L. Reeves and Richard Campbell, *Cracked Coverage: Television News, the Anti-Cocaine Crusade, and the Reagan Legacy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 186–188.

In addition to tough-on-crime politics and policy and the hyper-representation of Black criminality in the media, George Lipsitz identifies historic and contemporary examples of the white spatial imaginary[217] as largely ignored in history or public discourse, yet having monumental impacts on creating mythologies around Black people that inform Black displacement and neglect. Lipsitz's white spatial imaginary offers us a race/space analytic that highlights systemic divestment from Black communities in the interest of structural investment for white families as homeowners. His discussion of redlining and official discriminatory practices by the Federal Housing Administration from 1934-1968 are particularly relevant to this chapter, as we examine, in part, how space is made racial and how race is spatialized. Furthermore, and in addition to a sort of federal or public discourse around Black divestment, Lipsitz uses examples from real estate manuals for professional brokers to further demonstrate how Black people and homeownership in white neighborhoods was largely considered criminal.[218] This assertion of criminality was accepted in national discourse from the top down, but it was also reproduced and practiced by white-collar professionals in local levels that *still* impact the makeup and monetary values of neighborhoods and communities. The proliferation of thought that Black homeowners, Black families, middle-class Blacks and working-poor Blacks were criminal only reinforced media portrayal of Black criminality. In this way, painting Black folks in Watts with a single brush became multiple brushes painting a single line.

While the destruction in Watts was severe and still affects the community in different ways today, I believe that the chance to create a mural in Watts and to build relationships with community was an important opportunity for us as a team of artists and scholars to work to shift

[217] Lipsitz , *How Racism Takes Place*, 13.

[218] Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 25.

this narrative. Furthermore, our project supports the depicting of a difficult history while also celebrating the treasures in and of Watts. It celebrates the work and legacy of Watts leaders like Ted Watkins, the Watkins family and the Watts Labor Community Action Committee, which was tremendously important since its inaugural year of 1965. This project allows us to center the community's lives and experiences today, to showcase some of the artistic contributions in Watts and to dream together of a future that residents in Watts desire and work toward every day. Furthermore, this project situates itself in a genealogy of people of color whose activism and artwork precede us. The likes of the Watts Prophets, the WLCAC, Ted Watkins and the Watkins family, Horace Tapscott, and others who come before us in a long tradition of arts and community activism have forged an important tradition that we, along with others, work within.

One of our earliest goals in this project was to work with community and to support their local groups and organizations in Watts, and also, to center the voices of the community in the mural and in our methods. We wanted to keep our focus in Watts, to maintain constancy in both the telling of this history and in the collaboration we do with current residents, and to highlight their situated knowledge of Watts. In this way, we offered examples of oppositional geography by selecting Markham Middle School as the site for the mural. We decided that its long-standing presence from before the 1965 uprising and its contemporary prominence as community hub along with its proximity to Charcoal Alley[219] made it an important location.

In addition to Markham Middle School's longstanding presence in Watts and its survival of both the 1965 and 1992 uprisings, we assert that in selecting Markham Middle School as our mural site, we "bring into view material referents, external, three-dimensional space, and the

[219] The nickname *Charcoal Alley* was developed after the entire block on 103rd and Compton was burned to ash in the wake of the fiery destruction from the 1965 uprising. See Horne, *Fire This Time*.

actions taking place in space as they overlap with subjectivities, imaginations and stories."[220] Furthermore, in selecting Markham Middle School, we pointed to this school as a historic site that embodies oppositional geography—a site where social justice and equality are part of the local memory and ongoing civic engagement. By this, we highlight and celebrate the community organizing that still takes place at Markham Middle School in addition to locating the history of Watts in the walls and halls of the school's buildings. Finally, Markham Middle School boasts at least a dozen murals on its campus, ranging from large graffiti writing murals to small renderings of the school's mascot. By installing *Watts Still Dreaming* on the façade of the street-facing auditorium, we situate the mural in conversation with a collection of others and celebrate a legacy of arts, especially murals, on this campus. Finally, in selecting Markham Middle School, we make a call for educators and administrators to create curriculum that includes the history of Watts, a history that was largely ignored in 1965 up to the present day.[221] We hope *Watts Still Dreaming* will spur on conversations in classes and meetings alike that center the tremendously important local history and the legacies of the arts that surround it.

In addition to building relationships, conducting interviews and supporting community events, we decided that connecting with the youth at Markham Middle School was paramount to us. Markham is an important site because it is one of a handful of local institutions that survived the 1965 (and 1992) uprising. We also take into account its proximity to serious destruction just two blocks over in the wake of mass fires that August of 1965. In this way, this site is important to the genealogy on which we build, yet the memories held at Markham Middle School informs this project's theoretical approach to construct space, place, memories and futures with this

[220] McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xiii.

[221] Dr. Chris Hickey (resident of Watts) in discussion with author, March 1, 2016. Ms. Blanks, teacher at Markham Middles School, corroborated that the history was not and is still not taught in Watts.

mural. Although the mural is for the whole community of Watts, we acknowledge that staff, administration, parents and students will view it most often. In appreciating this reality and taking seriously its implications, we are moved to conduct our project in a way that is connected to the youth who will encounter it daily. I submit that our goals to affirm the youth's sense of self through their local history and by supporting their dreams are, therefore, even more important for us during this country's current social and political climate. As such, creating a workshop series that would discuss the history of the Watts Uprising and the significance of the arts in South LA before *and* after the rebellion helps us to uplift the youth in the arts.

Moving forward, we specifically designed this workshop series for students at Markham Middle School. They were created with the goal of supporting and encouraging students in the arts. Our aim is to share our creative project with them, and to encourage their creativity and sense of self-identity. The three workshops built on each other to create a sense of continuity and creativity. Each workshop included a lesson, discussion and activity. In the first workshop, I presented on the history of Watts and then had the students create an identity map. Our hope with this was to ask the students to think about who they are and to identify some of the roles they play in their lives. The next session introduced ideas of space and place. We discussed three artists of color, Mark Bradford, Betye Saar and Fred Wilson, who use maps/globes in their work to think about space, place and power structures. Students made an emoji map where they use emojis to map out their lives and experiences in Watts. They used the symbols to describe where they go to school, where they play, worship, live, etc. The final workshop introduced *The Great Wall of LA,* a famous mural that lives in the basin of the LA River. We used the mural as a metaphor in this project, and describe it as a tattoo on a scar where the river once ran free. We then asked the students to create a design for the Watts Towers. Our goal was to use an example

of reclaimed space for community empowerment and have them create images that do the same thing in Watts. Building off of Judy Baca's approach to community cultural development, as well as the writings of Katherine McKittrick and George Lipsitz, I situate this project as an epistemological tool for marking space, making meaning and drafting spaces in terms of community members' situated knowledge.

By beginning the series with a historical lens, we centered our pedagogical and epistemological foundation in a philosophy that comes from the personal, the local and the self. Putting our work in conversation with the likes of Emma Perez, Natalia Molina and Edward Said, this project expanded on an interdisciplinary body of scholarship that deal with space, race, knowledge production, situated knowledge and memory studies through reclamation. In *Decolonial Imaginary*, Emma Perez urges us to examine "the process of, not the origins"[222] and take seriously violence we face when a fictive past becomes the knowledge used to negotiate the 'other' culture's difference. Therefore, by centering our workshops in decolonial and local knowledge, building from the work of the scholars previously mentioned, as well as elders from the community, we place our work within the struggle for liberation and liberatory pedagogy. While we certainly had areas that deserve improvement, I believe our approach worked because we spoke to histories that were unknown to the children, yet we discussed conditions of those histories that were personal and familiar.

In the first workshop, we asked the students if they were familiar with the histories of the Watts rebellion and many were not. They did not recognize images of Marquette Frye or his family, nor were they aware of the magnitude of the destruction in their community only two generations before them. While trying to discuss the impact of the uprising is difficult for any of

[222] Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), xvi.

us who were not present during that tumultuous moment, my words were insufficient in describing the rebellion to the students. There was a disconnection between the students and the narrative I was sharing. I struggled to articulate the magnitude of the pain and devastation in a way the students could understand or relate to. I was also concerned that the historic black and white photographic images of destruction and unrest I showed may have further distanced the rebellion by aging it.

While the discussion began slowly, the workshop became more relevant and dynamic when we moved into the personal. In an interview we watched together, a Black elder described what his experiences were like during the uprising as he encountered violent law enforcement, fearful neighbors and devastated buildings. By watching this interview, the students could see and hear the expression in the man's body and face; they could relate to the history a little more through his humanity. The students identified that the man in the interview was not treated fairly during the riots. They observed the militancy of the police 51 years ago, and time and again, they indicated that they are still hyper-policed in Watts. They understood that people were in pain during the rebellion and later on in the workshop, they spoke about the shooting they heard in their neighborhood just the night before, a shooting that kept them from sleeping. We went on to talk about the food desert in the 1960's and how it contributed to social neglect in Watts. We talked about the very *few* healthy food options in Watts today and asked why that was. We were making connections between the conditions for the rebellion and the lived experiences of the students. Although connections were made slowly and over time, the students were gathering an awareness of the rebellion and the history of Watts. The connections gathered were not made through spiritual vibrations; they were clear articulations of the lives that the children know and

experience. In other words, "links between race and place created in the past continue to shape social relations in the present."[223]

After the initial discussions, we talked about the mid-century art movement in Watts and South LA. I showed images of local artists and art collectives, like the Mafundi Institute, the Watts Writer's Workshop and the Pan Afrikan Arkestra, and to my pleasant surprise, they recognized some of the images. They identified the Mafundi mural on the façade of the Watts Coffee House, one of the very few sit-down restaurants in Watts. We talked about huge impacts these artists made in South LA and the legacy of the art community in Watts. We also reflected on being an artist, and what it means to make art. Building from a quote that I opened with, we looked back at the words of Kara Walker, a fierce Black artist, who said, "There's no diploma in the world that declares you as an artist—it's not like becoming a doctor. You can declare yourself an artist and then figure out how to be an artist."[224] Without much explanation, the students understood her message and seemed to relate with its sentiment. Many went on to own their artistry and identify strongly as artists.

[223] Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 124.

[224] Kara Walker, in "Kara Walker: Starting Out | Art21 'Extended Play,' " YouTube video, 4:31, uploaded July 25, 2014, by Art21, https://youtu.be/MhByMffG9IA.

Figure 24. Watts Writers' Workshop, created in response to the 1965 Watts riots. Photo credit *Los Angeles Times*, accessed June 11, 2016.

After the discussions, we moved on to creating an identity map. In this activity, I asked students to think about their identity and the impact identity has in their everyday lives as students, children, siblings, athletes, artists and so on. As seen in the image below, I demonstrated and described how to make an identity map by using myself as an example, yet several of the students struggled to with the concept of this activity. They were confused or unsure of what to do exactly, since the directions required them to reflect and determine their own identity. While this type of introspection sometimes takes practice, beginning with this workshop was an important first step, one that we continued to build on for the emoji maps when we would meet the following Monday.

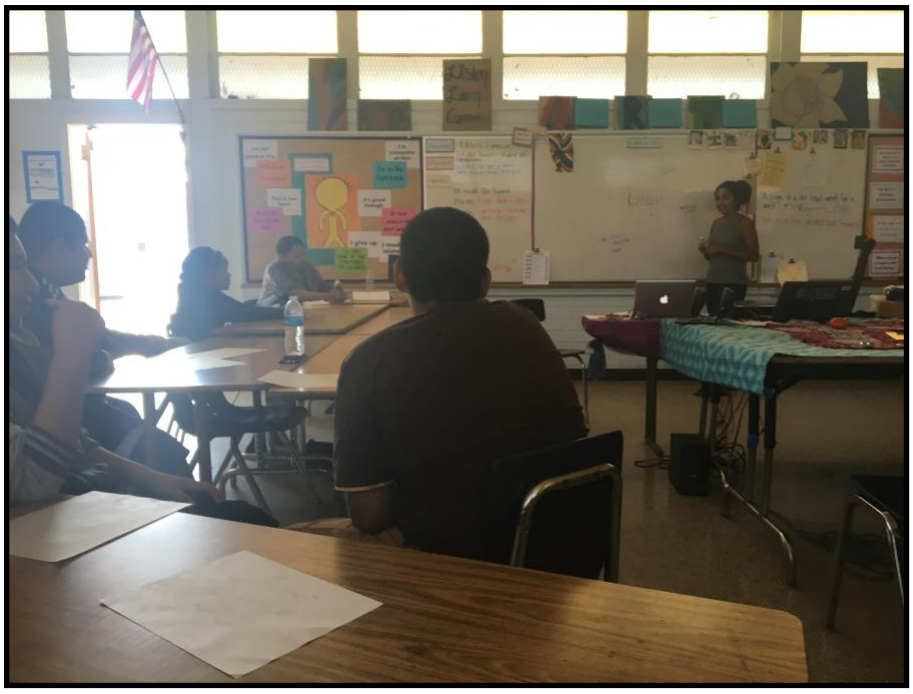


Figure 25. Kaelyn Rodriguez leading workshop at Markham Middle School.
Photo taken by Pilar Castillo, July 13, 2016.

In our next meeting, we combined two workshops into one session. We began with a quick review of our previous workshop and then moved into the emoji mapping activity. We asked the students to cut out the paper emojis and place them on the map in a way that would represent their everyday lives and activities in Watts. We showed them examples of what their map might look like and they got started right away. While listening to music in the background, Pilar and I helped the students locate their favorite places to eat, their homes and the Alma Reaves Woods Library on Compton and 103rd. They also located personal histories that, unlike monuments or businesses, would typically not be placed on a map. They mapped sites where they saw or heard gun-shots, where they met their friends or where they saw the police. By doing this, they were marking memories in space, adding depth to their community by sharing their experiences and complicating the built environment in which they live.

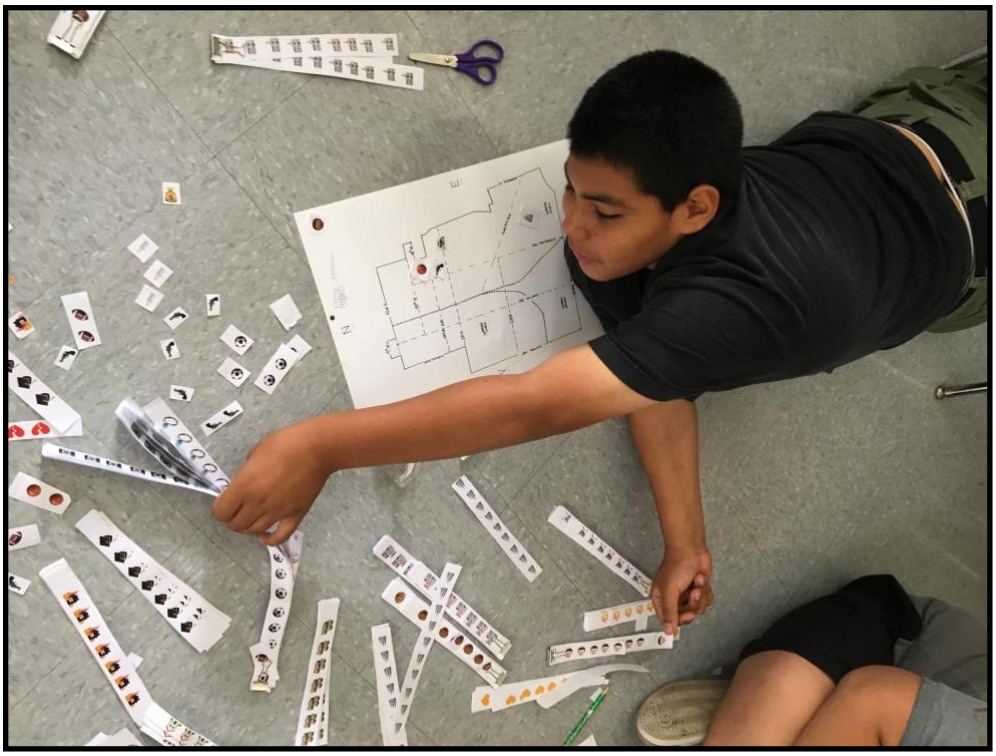


Figure 26. Student making emoji map at workshop, Markham Middle School, Photo taken by Pilar Castillo, July 13, 2016.

I assert here that this activity was a material expression of decolonial pedagogy that directly opposed the tradition of geography that asserts the concreteness and neutrality of geography.[225] McKittrick says it best here:

> If prevailing geographies distributions and interactions are racially, sexually and economically hierarchical, these hierarchies are naturalized by repetitively spatalizing 'difference.' That is, 'plac[ing] the world order within an ideological order,' unevenly. Practices of domination, sustained by a unitary vantage point naturalize both identity and place, repetitively spatializing were nondominant groups 'naturally' belong. This is, for the most part, accomplished through economic, ideological, social and political processes that see the positions that racial-sexualizes body within what seems like predetermined or appropriate, places and assume that this arrangement is commonsensical…If *who* we see is tied with *where* we see through truthful, commonsensical narratives, then the placement of subaltern bodies deceptively hardens spatial binaries, in turn, suggesting that some bodies belong, some bodies do not belong, and some bodies are out of place.[226]

[225] McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds,* xiii.

[226] McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds,* xv.

Moving away from McKittrick's critique of commonsensical geography and asking the students to assert their own views of space—varying and nonhierarchical vantage points of their community—the students sited places and events on the map that were significant to their lives. This intervention is an important discursive move for opposing dominant epistemologies of space, in addition to employing Lipsitz's Black spatial imaginary. In applying the Black spatial imaginary to this workshop, two points must be discussed. The first is that the majority of the students working with us are Latinx. While the Black spatial imaginary describes space and power relations about Black peoples and communities, it is also "flexible, fluid and relational, the contours of anti-Black spaces are relevant to all communities of color."[227] In this way, by applying the Black spatial imaginary as a theoretical concept that is capable of application to other communities of color (especially in Watts, a historically Black community with a Latinx majority population), we can do relational and fluid work. The second point is that the Black spatial imaginary offers us theory for this very instance of "turn[ing] sites of containment and confinement into spaces of creativity and community making."[228] I submit that the students did just that with this activity. They saw their 2-square-mile community with eyes for marking home and making art.

One of the most interesting observations I noted in this activity was how some of the students took to it with ease, noting local sites and sharing personal histories, while others seemed stifled by it. Those who struggled seemed unsure how to fill in the map, and used only four or five emojis noting locations like their homes and school, rather than sites of memory. Other students, however, included many details from their lives, including the homes of their

---

[227] Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 12.
[228] Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 53.

friends and relatives, stores they patronize with their parents and local monuments like the Watts towers. Those who created more comprehensive maps tended to work in conversation with their classmates, asking them where they had their first love and their first break up, sharing stories, secrets and laughter. As we finished the activity and began the discussion, I asked the students to reflect on how it felt to make their maps and I was moved to hear multiple students say that they felt proud and happy while creating their maps. They elaborated that reflecting on their lives and community gave many a stronger sense of self and they were happy to see their lives in this way. As the workshop leader and advocate for these youth, I was so grateful to see the power of spatial dynamics and mapping uplifting the students and I cherished their feedback. Their comments underscored the importance of community engagement in this project and the powerful connections we, even as children, have to the environment in which we live. In the future, I hope to use these maps as both primary sources and raw data to help describe Watts and her proud residents.

Figure 27. Detail of a completed emoji map, photo taken by Kaelyn Rodriguez, July 20, 2016.

After the emoji mapping activity, we discussed the lesson for the day: maps, space and power. We talked about the colonial history of maps and noted how charting space would become a source of social control for colonists. We discussed a cartographic practice of misrepresenting Africa and Asia by diminishing their scale and pondered the implications of reducing the size of certain geographies. We transitioned into looking at the work of Fred Wilson, Mark Bradford and Betye Saar, all of whom use maps or globes in their work at times. The students were cleaver and intuitive when discussing the possible interpretations of Betye Saar's instillations. Several of the students expressed their emotional response to Saar, Wilson and Bradford's works while others accessed what the artists intentions might have been. I was, once again, moved and deeply excited to see the youth connect emotionally and conceptually with such important artists and such relevant messages. These connections demonstrated the students' natural curiosity and their strong and cleaver minds. They also impressed upon me how important it is for the students to have more art and art history in and outside of school. Throughout the conversation, the students created a critical art historical discussion that challenged an artist's aesthetics, considered the respective materials used, and located race, power and space in the artworks. The students were very awake.

Although many students were highly engaged, I was concerned that a few of them were bored of the topic of maps and space. Yet as the class was closing, one of those restless students shared a rap with us. He had been writing or taking notes in a lyrical form and he read his flow to us; in it, he reflected on the power of maps and the history of cartography, my purple blouse, the pleasure of making art, and his practice of rapping. His performance coupled with his powerful rhymes were not only creative and strong, they were inspiring and full of knowledge! We all

celebrated his performance and I was humbled that he proved beyond my expectation that he was engaged, listening and even producing knowledge.

As we moved into the last segment of the workshop, I shared with the students a brief history of Judy Baca's mural, *The Great Wall of LA*, the largest mural in the world. We talked about the mural as a tattoo on a scar where a river once ran free, a metaphor that allows us to think about space more broadly and gives us permission to reimagine the meaning of older narratives. I asked the students if they had any scars on their bodies and if they could share the stories behind them. We talked about transforming the meaning of those scars from something painful into something beautiful, positive or powerful. Since *The Great Wall of LA* is in the San Fernando Valley, we decided to have the students create a symbol for the Watts Towers. In doing this, the students could create a meaningful symbol of a local landmark that held more personal significance. We asked them to abstract the meaning of the Towers so that they would reflect on their relationship to it and its personal meaning to them. While some students simply drew the towers, others drew geographical shapes and intersecting webs of lines. I was excited to see students turning their papers upside-down, using multiple planes and alternative viewpoints to describe the Watts Towers. Other students used text and image to describe how the Towers make them feel, and shared their sense of love and pride for the monument.

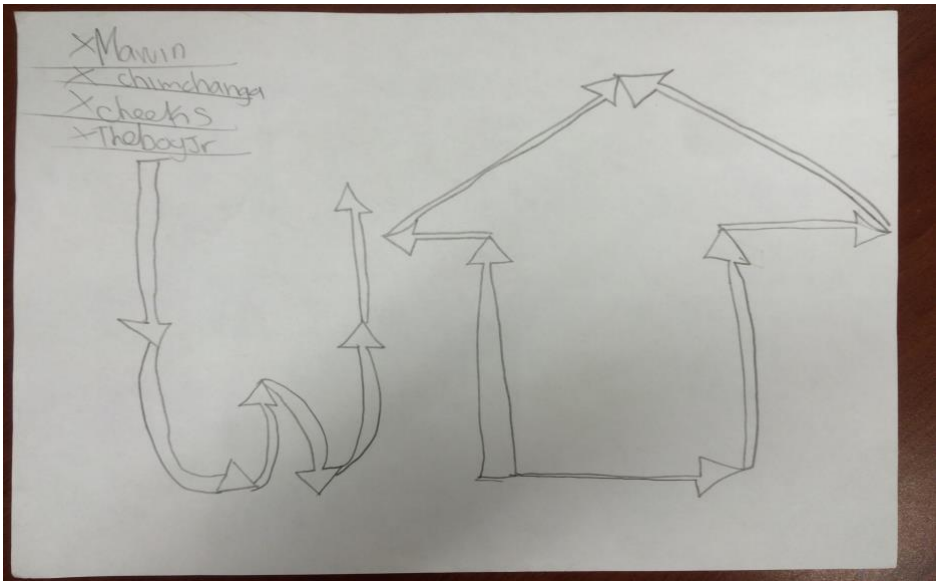


Figure 28. Watts Up drawing from student during workshop at Markham Middle School, Photo taken by Pilar Castillo, July 13, 2016.

In concluding the workshop, I showed the students images of artworks in Watts today and reminded them of the incredible legacy of art in their community, a legacy they are part of. We looked at images of *Mother of Humanity* and *Resurrection of Watts,* two beautiful and important artworks that exist at the Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC). The students seemed excited and even surprised to see the image of *Resurrection of Watts* because they did not recognize it, nor had they seen it in person. I encouraged them to visit these incredible works of art that exist only a few blocks away from their school. I also shared a walking field trip that I put together for another event so that they might take an arts tour of their community another time.

In working with these students, I was surprised more than once, and in those instances, I recall feeling most moved when students expressed their emotional response to the activities and discussions. Hearing them say that they felt proud during the emoji mapping activity was one of those moments for me. Their responses were powerful in that they seemed to gain new eyes for

themselves, for their community and for their relationship to it. In emoji mapping, they made place, they sited/cited memories and celebrated themselves, not as consumers or cultural producers, but as children and residents of Watts. They saw their lives play out in space and recognized the power and pride in knowing oneself and one's community.

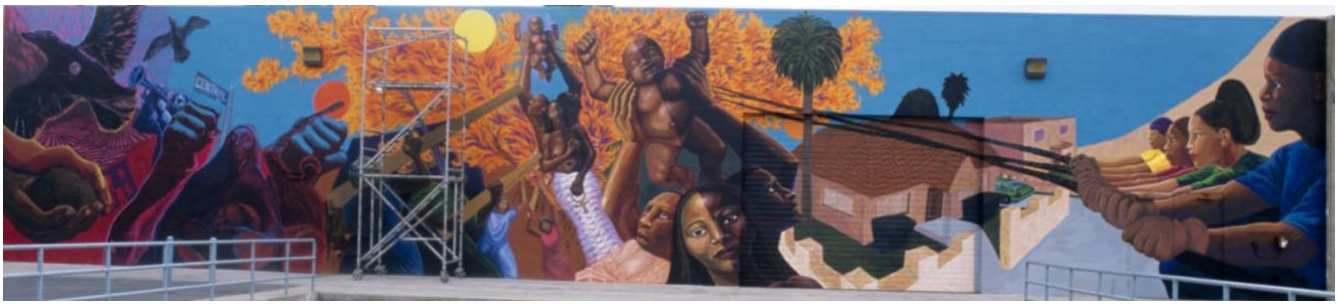


Figure 29. Ras Ammar Nsoroma, *The Resurrection of Watts*, 2002, 10950 South Central Ave, Watts CA, accessed July 27, 2020, http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15799coll15/id/1292.

As we were concluding, I also showed them the plans we at SPARC have for their mural and other monuments. I asked for their opinions of our designs and reminded them that this mural, while historical, was for and about them and their futures. I shared with them our desire to represent them well and we discussed what they saw in the mural. Many of them expressed that they liked the work, and asked questions about different elements in the mural. We discussed the map in the image and reflected on why and how that was significant. In the interest of refining the design, I was hoping the students might express a few critiques of the design. Although they did not, they gave lots of feedback that was positive, helpful and much appreciated.

Figure 30. Judith F. Baca, earlier draft of *Watts Still Rising, c. 2016,* photo courtesy SPARC.

When it was time to leave the students, I was surprised that so many of them asked for more. They were not ready for the workshop to end nor did they want to say goodbye. They asked us to come back with more lessons and activities and Pilar and I promised that we would soon. While it was difficult for us to leave them, their desire for more art and more history supports my belief that the workshop was a huge success.

Reflecting back, it is clear that the students drew from their own identities and their unique lives to make the identity map. They built upon that foundation while making the emoji maps. Our discussions of space and power moved between the topics of self-identity and practices for making artwork. In that way, each lesson and activity built on the former to reinforce the confidence of the students, to remember the histories of Watts together, to encourage the students in their own creativity, to implore them to challenge their conceptions of space and to empower them with the resources we possess as artists and students.

While we all benefitted from the workshop, I was so grateful to collaborate with Ms. Blanks. She was kind in allowing us the opportunity to build with her students and to

accommodate our every request. She trusted us with her students, and that allowed us to do our best with them. Her participation and generosity were crucial for our success and we are very pleased to continue to collaborate with her. Ms. Blanks is an incredible artist and educator, and as a teaching assistant and scholar-in-training, it was a true privilege to work alongside her and observe her pedagogy and her relationships with the students. My partner in the workshop and colleague at the Social and Public Art Resource Center, Pilar Castillo, was also an incredible support for this workshop series. She offered valuable feedback, helped to facilitate the lessons, engaged students with questions and helped in all of the planning. She also documented the workshops by taking photos and making notes of my presentations to the students. Her warmth and generosity of spirit helped to forge instant connections with the students and served us all. Working with such incredible women was a joy.

This workshop was an excellent opportunity for us to outreach to the youth and solicit feedback on our designs, but it was also important for our larger goals. It allowed us to engage youth in a dynamic and expressive way, to build relationships with them and to encourage them in their creative endeavors. It also helped us to build relationships with teachers, administration and parents.

While the workshops were not perfect, and I believe there is room for improvement, I am very pleased and proud of the response the students had to us. The deep connections to artwork they had and their engagement with the activities leads me to believe that they are hungry for more, and I am enthusiastic to continue to work with them as well. In moving forward, we are learning from our mistakes by preparing presentations and activities in more specialized ways, avoiding a lecture style method of learning and engaging discussion more and more. I am very eager to craft our next workshop to serve the students of Markham Middle School and relish the

opportunity to connect the socially engaging praxis of my community work to the research and writing I do as a scholar in training.

Watts Spatial Imaginary, Past, Present and Future

> Public art could be inseparable from the daily life of the people for which it is created. Developed to live harmoniously in public space, it could have a function within the community and even provide a venue for their voices.[229]
> —Judith F. Baca

Because this is a digital mural, our process for production is different from most traditional mural painting. We printed an under painting of 36 feet wide by 16 feet high and 576 square feet on an outdoor rated synthetic canvas, which would become the final mural. The under painting was installed at SPARC's Digital Mural Lab for painting until it was installed on the façade of Markham Middle School's auditorium in 2018. One benefit from working with a digital mural is the simplified maintenance procedure in case of weather damage, structural damage or graffiti. In case of any damage we are able to remove the canvas, clean or paint the mural and reinstall it. Nevertheless, some are critical of digital murals because they require expensive, premier technology and access to large-scale printing, and sometimes prove out of reach for everyday people. This critique is sometimes expanded when reflecting on the history of Chicano murals as they embraced a rasquache aesthetic and method. Nevertheless, I submit that this mural is rasquache in neither aesthetic nor method, yet it was made very closely with community members, and in that way, maintains a certain cultural capital that rasquachismo might otherwise embody. Furthermore, in our case, the mural was sponsored by the DCA, so the digital technologies required were covered by the city of Los Angeles.

---

[229] Judy Baca, "Whose Monument Where? Public Art in a Many-Cultured Society" Edited by Suzanne Lacy in *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995) 135.

Designing this mural would take over a year; from its initial design for the DCA application to the changes made on canvas itself, the mural would evolve time and again. While many of the elements remained the same or quite similar to the original design, the major shifts that occurred were in the interior ellipse of the mural. Some of the changes made in the mural were informed by the work I conducted in the community. That work and the relationships built over time helped us to gather feedback for the mural's scheme, which required that we made changes to reflect the interests and visions of the community. While this process requires flexible artists, cooperation, and more time than other mural design practices, it was very successful in its ability to adapt visuals over time, and in so, successful in centering the voices of residents and community members over our own.

Before I offer a close visual analysis, I would like to highlight the purpose of this particular analysis in such an interdisciplinary project. Like most art historians, I use visual analysis to discuss the visual elements and principles of the artwork as well as the interpretations and functions of the piece. As both artists and art historian in this project, I move between multiple roles, which requires flexibility and creativity. In this way, my formal analysis sometimes functions as descriptive, historical in context, or even somewhat didactic. Furthermore, I sometimes depart from traditional models of visual analysis, yet I submit that the didactic descriptions support the analysis and add depth to the visual elements. Moreover, by including visual analysis in this section of the dissertation, I position this chapter within the tradition of art historical writing and methodologies. In many ways, this chapter and my own analysis of the mural break away from traditional art historical writings such that I am one of the designers and artists on this project and offer an analysis of my own work. It is also atypical that

an art historical research project might offer geographical histories and methods; nevertheless, this type of interdisciplinarity is crucial to this project and to the goals of the mural.

Returning to the visual, the canvas of the mural is rectangular in shape and has a large diagonal ellipse inside of the rectangle. These two shapes function as windows to two different temporal realities. Within the rectangle but outside of the ellipse is a blue sky with the sun rising along a majestic skyline. In the top left portion of the mural, the sun shines against the cerulean sky and offers a note of hope and strength. However, this hopeful note of sunshine is subdued under the looming presence of the National Guard standing with his bayonets. As the blue sky wraps clockwise around the ellipse, the color gradually darkens, and the warmth from the morning fades into the shadows of night. The dark and muted blues of the night challenge the hopeful blues from sunrise, creating a distinct dialectic between hope and despair, a tension between nature and humanity. Even more importantly, in either blue area, silhouettes of national guards stand looming over and through areas of Watts inside the ellipse. In the days and weeks after the uprising, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Time* magazine and other presses widely published images of national guards with bayonets in shadows and silhouettes; these images would become widely recognizable symbols of the violence and militarization of police in Watts in 1965. That week of August 11, 1965, some 16,000 trained soldiers and police officers occupied Watts,[230] stood on residents' lawns and surveyed the community all night.[231] Building from this historical event, we envisioned the silhouettes of law enforcement as oversized and larger than life as a way to represent the horrifying police presence in Watts. That week, many residents were in a very real state of fear of police and national guards.[232] As we look closer still, we observe in the

[230] Horne, *Fire This Time*, 4.

[231] Dr. Chris Hickey (Resident of Watts) in discussion with author, March 1, 2016.
[232] Dr. Chris Hickey, in discussion with author, March 1, 2016.

lower right corner of the mural, the national guards stand uniformly in procession on 103rd Street, what would become commonly known as Charcoal Alley. They are balanced in composition and read from left to right, and top to bottom.

Figure 31. Judy Baca and SPARC, *Watts Still Rising,* 2018, photo courtesy SPARC, accessed June 12, 2018.

While our concepts for representing the National Guard are clearly defined and symbolic of a historic moment, this particular rendering was not without critiques from community members. While asking residents for their feedback, some local artists and residents expressed a visual conflict that made the ellipse and everything inside of it appear entrapped between and underneath the soldiers. This illusion created the feeling of permanently being hemmed in a historical moment of unrest and fear. Others shared a similar sentiment that, in general, the ellipse felt physically or geographically containing since it exists inside a larger rectangle. While these critiques were strong and valuable to us, this sentiment may be partially contextualized by the historical reality that Watts has both, materially and symbolically, been marked by the 1965 and 1992 uprisings. The social reputation as well as the economic, housing, transportation and

educational realities in South LA, especially Watts, create a particular narrative about a poor neighborhood of people of color. While the team of artists on this mural is very aware of this popular narrative, the design was made with a different set of intentions and a different visual lexicon and interpretation.

The critiques offered by community members are very important to the way we conceptualize this work, yet the lead artist, along with the rest of the team, shape the mural in the tradition of David Alfaro Siqueiros. In this way, this work is consistent within Judy Baca's oeuvre of Chicanx murals. Putting this mural next to some of her earlier works, for example, *La Memoria de Nuestra Tierra, Colorado,* helps to confirm this. *La Memoria* was installed in the Denver International Airport in 2011 and is seen by thousands of travelers each year. Some of Baca's most important themes are land and memory, and she works toward visualizing them together by playing with balance and movement. By making the ellipse diagonal inside of the rectangle, the viewer tends to lean her head to the left and right, scanning the image back and forth. In this way, the piece becomes dynamic and incites movement physically, historically and symbolically. This sense of dynamism begs the viewer to orient and reorient herself while obscuring thresholds between viewing an artwork and participating with it. In this way, the viewer becomes an active player in remembering the past, living the present and dreaming of the future, which, I submit, is an important and beautiful form of community engagement in public arts. While there are many ways to see this piece and a multiplicity of perspectives and artists contexts, this piece was designed for close looking and community engagement. These goals are underscored by the large scale of the mural, and its particular location on an elevated façade at Markham Middle School.

While the silhouettes of the National Guard are the only visual reference to the rebellion and the militarization of Watts, other elements within the mural underscore historical moments in Watts's past. The growing plants in the foreground of the mural are examples of a historical moment in the 1920s and 1930s in Watts when residents lived off of the land and gardened. The small, planted foliage bare their roots while, at the same time, remind us of the agrarian histories in Watts before 1926, when Watts was not a part of Los Angeles, but rather, an island in segregated Southern California. Gerald Horne outlines the rustic histories of Watts as a marsh area in Southern California, where family gardens flourished and people fished for catfish and crawfish in the muddied swamps.[233] He reminds us about the wetlands where rice patches and other vegetables gardens used to thrive.[234] In this way, farming and gardening was a significant component in residents' autonomy and resilience.

While the young plants in the foreground are a nod to a swampy Watts in the early 20th century, the images of plants also reference another historical moment—a moment of local strength and self-determination in the early late 60's and early 70's when the WLCAC created Watts Feeds Itself (WFI). WFI was an important plan of action that would train youth to farm oats, hay, pumpkins, onions, corn, mustard greens, alfalfa and other produce.[235] Residents also harvested the produce, raised livestock, chickens, and pigs and sold eggs.[236] Although Watts is a small area, spatial barriers did not restrict residents from farming land and thriving. While this

[233] Horne, *Fire This Time*, 27.

[234] Horne, *Fire This Time*, 27.

[235] Dapo Odebiyi, *Watts Feeds Itself* (Los Angeles: WLCAC, 1970), 12.

[236] Odebiyi, *Watts Feeds Itself*, 12.

history is largely forgotten in the more popular narrative of Watts, it is well remembered and cherished by older members of the community.[237]

Finally, in reference to the small plants in the foreground of the mural, I submit that they refer to a third temporal moment—the future. Members at the WLCAC, I Heart Watts and other organizations are currently working toward creating local produce gardens that will help sustain healthy food options and support wellness for families and children. As these projects begin to unfold, they take several different forms and represent different stages in the process, yet they each underscore a need and a historical precedent for farming and gardening. The WLCAC, for example, is in their second stage with MudTown Farms, which includes a cannery, a general store and a roadside fruit stand.[238] On their website, they say, "MudTown Farms will not be simply an urban park or simply an urban farm. It will be a self-sustaining community center with education, job training, community gardening, farming, and entrepreneurship for stakeholders of all ages and backgrounds."[239] Their holistic approach to thriving reflects their vision of wellness, which requires more than material wealth or health, but community, collaboration and creativity.

Moving forward from the small plants in the foreground of the mural, we see a cornfield, lush gardens and an urban farming greenhouse. While the cornfield and garden are nods to the past, the greenhouse is a clear move toward future technological advancements in gardening and self-sustainability in Watts. A fellow member of the I Heart Watts community group, Pinkus Crowther, shared the greenhouse idea with me in the spring of 2016. Crowther is working in collaboration with others to fund and create greenhouses in different housing projects so multi-

---

[237] Michael Franklin, in a personal conversation with the author, July 7, 2016.

[238] Watts Labor Community Action Committee, "Our Future," last accessed July 23, 2020, http://www.wlcac.org/our-future.htm.

[239] Watts Labor Community Action Committee, "Our Future."

family living areas have close access to local gardens.[240] While the greenhouses are still a dream, they represent an important trajectory of urban life and sustainable, renewable options for wellness.

A small detail, but another important reference to the present and future of Watts, are the people riding bikes. These bicyclists represent the future of Watts: healthy, mobile and active. They are symbolic of alternative modes of transportation in Watts. The bicyclists also affirm and reflect the prominence of bikes by way of bicycle events in Watts in 2016, like the Ride for Love and CicLAvia. Furthermore, bikes are a mode of transportation sometimes used by those without a car or a driver's license. While freeways and freeway off ramps have sometimes divided poor families of color making them vulnerable to pollution and isolation,[241] and metro stations usher in waves of gentrification,[242] bikes offer an alternative to more democratic forms of mobility and space. In this way, they also disrupt transportation systems of environmental racism, encourage exercise and wellness.

In different areas within the ellipse, we reimagined and designed single family and multifamily homes. Residents raised concerns around housing because some housing conditions in Watts have not much improved since the rebellion in 1965.

Overcrowding in several of the housing projects has been an ongoing issue for many. Contemporary crowding has been ongoing and is exacerbated by the poor conditions of the homes, since they were built for World War II soldiers but were suddenly neglected as the

---

[240] Pinkus Crowther, in a personal conversation and personal correspondence via email with the author, June 28, 2016.

[241] Horne, *Fire This Time*, 37.

[242] Marlon G. Boarnet, Evgeny Bruinskiy, Raphael Bostic, Seva Rodyansky and Allen Prohofsky, *Gentrification and Displacement Near Los Angeles Rail Transit Stations*, https://its.ucdavis.edu/wp-content/uploads/Gentrification-and-Displacement-Near-Los-Angeles-Rail-Transit-Stations.pdf.

demographics shifted. Furthermore, Jordan Down, an outdated housing project in Watts, is currently being rebuilt for residents in the twenty-first century. In our rendering of housing, we designed larger homes with green spaces and pools for families and communities to enjoy. In this way, according to the consultation of community members and our own imaginations, we created spaces where families can live and thrive.

Within the rest of the ellipse, we rendered important sites, artworks or monuments in Watts to celebrate the cherished artworks in the community. For example, we represent *Mother of Humanity*, *Mafundi Institute*, and the Watts Towers. Each of these public artworks has an important history in Watts and represents some of the world-class artwork and art history in South LA. In addition to these artworks, we also represent the Ted Watkins Memorial Park with the flagpole and pool. This park is an important community hub where local groups gather to meet, where children and families play or take classes. It also hosts the weekly farmers' market and annual picnics. Ted Watkins Memorial Park is a place where elders gather to play cards, where children go to swim, where runners go to exercise. It is an important place in the community and was named after Ted Watkins, founder of the WLCAC and a champion of Watts. We were sure to render the park with a pool, the way it is today, for accuracy but also to contextualize the history of Watts. The pool represents advancement in the community that was not available in 1965 when the rebellion broke out. While there were many complicated factors that contributed to the uprising, barriers like segregated pools kept residents in South LA hot and humiliated. In this case, the pool represents recreation and play, but also symbolizes peace and the humanity of residents.

Circling back to the left side of the image, we see six children in the foreground. The self-portraits of the children claim the majority of the mural and dominate the left side of the

image. The kids appear to be stacked on multiple planes in a similar, yet less dramatic style to Jacob Pontormo's mannerist altarpiece made in 1528 in Florence, *The Deposition from the Cross*, as seen below. They move up, rather than back in space to maintain attention on the surface of the wall and to keep the eye moving from left to right. The six kids, three boys and three girls, collectively represent the future of Watts. They represent a Watts that is both Black and Latinx, a Watts that is strong, united, smart, creative and passionate. The children stand confidently with their ambitions in hand; the boy in the red shirt is a business owner and fashion designer, and the girl in the back row is a detective with a clue, while the others are librarians, travelers, beauticians and architects.

Figure 32. Jacob Pontormo, *The Deposition from the Cross*, 1525-1528, oil on canvas painting, 10x 6, accessed November 12, 2016, https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/Civilization/id/937/.

Five of the kids smile and look back at the viewer while the boy holding the world lifts his eyes and looks up at world ahead of him. While each child poses differently displaying the

accoutrement of their professions, they stand with pride and a clear determination. Each of these kids expressed their dreams of their futures with an undergraduate or graduate student at UCLA in workshops hosted at Markham Middle School and The Judy Baca Arts Academy. The UCLA students helped the kids to visually express what their future looks like and we formatted those portraits into this mural. Additionally, four of the six portraits are self-portraits that took months for the kids to conceptualize and then digitally paint. While the kids are the largest element in the mural, they are in direct contestation with the looming guard above them. The autoimmunity of the guard next to the very specific portraits of the kids creates a visual dialectical and a social narrative of the omnipresent and timelessness of policing of youth of color.

This group portrait is one element that many residents in Watts resonated with and expressed pleasure in. Several individuals expressed to me the importance of rendering a strong message about the future for the youth so they could see themselves achieving their goals.[243] By representing the kids as children who look ahead and dream big, we affirm their

Figure 33. Judith F. Baca and SPARC, detail of *Watts Still Rising,* 2018, photo courtesy SPARC, accessed June 12, 2018.

[243] Dr. Chris Hickey, in discussion with the author, March 1, 2016.

dreams and support their goals for the future. We also celebrate the range of interests and goals and appreciate the creativity and passion in these youths. We also wanted to represent Black and Latina/o/x kids in equal numbers, as they are the future of the community.

An ensemble of SPARC artists, myself included, produced this mural and subsequent memorial marker in collaboration with past and current partners in the Watts area. In addition to the mural, we created seven sites of public memory including important cultural assets culminating in a mural at the Markham Middle School. The intention is to make clear and more visible the events that precipitated the largest revolt in United Stated history in 1965.[244] Today, nothing remains of those events but a profound *absence* as the sites are without markers or memory. These sites will be marked via etched concrete sandblasted into existing sidewalks and connected via a walking, biking or car tour created for the public with didactic materials. We have designed memorial plaques for each site so passersby can read along and activate the space with their own social engagement. Each site contributes to the unfolding story of the development and escalation of the uprising in the Watts area.

The artistic approach we take is both traditional and unconventional, as the work proposed is more than a single mural. It required fieldwork and historical research, conducting interviews, watching historical interviews, making maps and mastering digital soft wares like Photoshop. As a way to build on and draw attention to the important cultural productions in Watts, we also celebrate local artworks and centers, including the Cecil Ferguson Center, Richard Wyatt's Neighborhood Pride mural at Watts Towers Art Center along with Simon Rodia's Watts Towers. All of these artworks and art histories are an important part of Watts and

[244] Horne, *Fire This Time*, 54.

we are proud to build with the community to make this mural and to celebrate the great works of the past.

While there are many forms and methods for producing public art, we chose to create a landscape or spatial representation of Watts because of the deep connection between land and memory. Since the goals of the mural are to connect the past to the present and future, to commemorate the history of the 1965 rebellion with visions for what comes next, we wanted to be as intentional as possible in selecting the mural's physical location at Markham Middle School and also in rendering temporal visions of Watts. By centering different temporal moments in the image itself, we necessarily imagine Watts as a spatially specific and geographic area in South LA. Furthermore, building on the discussions from earlier sections of geography, we use this spatial theme to counter the history of geography and the "built environment [that] privileges and therefore mirrors white, heterosexual, capitalist and patriarchal geopolitical needs."[245] Therefore, this rendering of Black and Latinx people thriving in the built environment, riding bikes and growing their own produce is a celebration of people of color, but also a rending of a political struggle that envisions a community for women, for people of color, for LGBTQ folks, for children, families and immigrants.

Conclusion

Looking back, there are several things I might have changed or done differently throughout the life of this project. I might have kept closer field notes or attended more arts events in Watts. I might have offered supplemental mural designs or developed the emoji mapping method more fully. While the opportunities for improvement in the future, I am very

[245] McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 6.

grateful to have fulfilled some of the most important goals of the project. Those goals were to work with community, to ask and learn three questions: how do residents in Watts understand its past from 1965? What is Watts' identity for itself now? And finally, how do residents in Watts envision the future? These three questions guided the development of the mural and accompanying monuments in Watts. They also informed the research, methods and theory that I used in this chapter. They would inform the workshops and activates that I created and led in Watts.

Before asking how residents in Watts understand the past from 1965, I also had to become familiar with that history. Reading Gerald Horne's *Fire This Time* was incredibly important for my understanding of what occurred during the rebellion, for contextualizing the social conditions Watts' residents endured, and for considering some of the potential causes of the revolt. His book, along with the McCone Report and the WLCAC report, each informed the ways I understood not just the conditions of Black Los Angeles and the events that transpired in 1965, but they informed my knowledge of the politics at the time. In addition to reading about the past, I talked with elders who lived through the 1965 uprising and learned about their experiences. These intimate conversations offered more than a historical framework; they animated the emotional responses that my interlocutors experienced. Being so close to someone else's emotions was humbling and encouraged me to maintain transparency in my community work and in the goals of this project. In addition to the interviews I conducted, I watched published interviews from 1965 and 2011. Listening to these gave me more perspective on the experiences of others. In addition to conducting and listening to interviews, I created maps on Social Explorer, which offered profound geographic and spatial data on the history of Watts. That data then required spatial analysis of Watts and an analysis of its relationships to the city of

Los Angeles. This section of the chapter is very important since it implores us to think about the connections between racism, space, resistance and rebellion in 1965. Finally, in visiting Watts, spending many days there with community, attending meetings and events, I became familiar with the two-square mile city in South LA. I drove, biked and walked around the community, I attended classrooms, visited the WLCAC numerous times and observed for myself the large absence of historical markers and historical knowledge in Watts. This ethnographic component of the project informed the creation and development of emoji mapping and influenced the workshops we conducted. In this way, some of the methods and research were centered and grounded in Watts and apply to Watts in very specific ways.

Putting all of this research together, I have observed that many residents in Watts have largely forgotten the rebellion. Either they were born after 1965 or their family moved to South LA years after the revolt. I learned that many residents recognize that the rebellion occurred in their community, but very few recognized the name of Marquette and Roland Frye. Today, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Rayshard Brooks have become household names, in Los Angeles and all over the world, but the Frye family's story is lost in Watts. Of course, we do not celebrate the departed who lost their lives to excessive force by the police[246]

With respect to the second question of how Watts sees itself today, my research method also required interviews. The questions required that I be as close to Watts and residents as possible. Certain weeks in the summer I drove to Watts almost daily and attended events or went simply to spend time in the community. I also learned about how Watts sees itself today by reading newspaper articles from the last two years. One important article that helped me to locate

[246] In the case of Ahmaud Arbery, he was murdered by a *retired* police officer and his family.

the current demography in Watts is *Los Angeles Times* article, "Latinos Now Dominate Watts, But Some Feel Blacks Still Hold Power."[247] While this article outlines some of the historical strongholds Black people in Watts cultivate, my experience in community groups demonstrated that most community advocates were Latina women, young mothers, grandmothers and single women of all ages. In addition to the articles I read, emoji mapping was an important method for learning about how kids and adults live and relate to Watts today. It allowed me to gain an insight to residents' past and present lives. While I did learn about people's histories, I also learned about how people live today, which was an important contribution. One of the more innovative I ways that I learned how Watts sees itself today or relates to the historic moment of 1965 was Community Coalition's "modern retelling of the historic timeline of the events known as The Watts Riots of 1965. Live tweeting August 11-17."[248] This tweeting campaign was a powerful way to connect the past to the present and geographically locate a historical event in the contemporary environment. Furthermore, the social media approach activated the history in a way that mimicked the real time development of the rebellion. It also visualized a past and humanized the unrest similarly to the unrest we've seen in Ferguson or Baltimore, as captured in the image below.

---

[247] Esmeralda Bermudez and Paloma Esquivel, "Latinos now dominate Watts, but some feel Blacks still hold power," *Los Angeles Times*, August 10, 2015, https://www.latimes.com/local/wattsriots/la-me-watts-riots-latinos-20150809-story.html.

[248] Watts Riots 50 (@WattsRiot50), Twitter, August 4–18, 2015, https://twitter.com/wattsriots50.

Figure 34. Sonsandbrothers, *Watts Riots 50*, tweet of a photo, accessed August 22, 2015, https://twitter.com/wattsriots50?lang=en50

Asking how residents envision the future was perhaps the most exciting of the three questions because it required that we dream together. It afforded me the privilege to learn about ongoing plans in the community and to ask my friends in the community what they want to see in years to come. They made a list of 25 items they wanted to see ranging from sit-down restaurants, green spaces, safe community, and activities for kids, unity, and more affordable housing. We included many of these items and others directly into the mural as we visualized a landscape, a spatial experience that is both real and imagined, that builds from the past and present and looks ahead to the future. Building from the previous two questions and dreaming with residents about a future, we collected the data we gathered and we placed some of that data into the design. In this way, we hope that some of the elements that mark the future will become realities for today's children and youth.

In addition to these questions, I position this mural and the accompanying monuments as acts and markers of resistance. They lay out a history that has otherwise been profoundly absent in the space that is Watts, in the education that children receive and in the lives of residents today.[249] The places where history was made are largely unceremonious and without plaques or didactics to describe or envision what occurred and how residents experienced the rebellion. In this way, the mural and the respective monuments mark sites and assert otherwise forgotten memories. By collaborating with community to create images and monuments that remember histories and to imagine futures in Watts, we are producing creative artworks, activating histories, exploring futures and also producing space and its meanings.[250]

Finally, this chapter offers an interdisciplinary approach to the study of murals and community engagement. They produced an original form of mapping space and memories via emoji mapping, a methodology that has important implications in the future in many fields of study. This work is also more than a theoretical approach to history or a visual analysis of a painting; it is a practice-based community orientated project that will produce permanent artwork and public monuments in and for the Watts community. The mural and the monuments will have a life outside of this paper and hopefully, will have an impact on current residents and generations to come. Sometimes, when community-based work is conducted, its results are typed up as an essay, dissertation or book project and prove to be very important for scholars, but are much less useful for the residents they worked with. In addition to scholarship, this project, however, offers lasting monuments that are accessible and available to residents and visitors alike for years to come.

---

[249] Ms. Blanks, in a personal conversation with the author.

[250] McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xi.

Chapter 5
Afro-Latinx Futurism: Getting Free Through Pleasure

> Pleasure is actually a pathway to freedom.
> —Favianna Rodriguez

> Decolonizing the future, therefore, entails a decolonization of the past and present, a temporal simultaneity that delinks from a Western rationality of time and space in the making of decolonial epistemologies and ontologies that can exist in a pluriverse.[251]
> —Kency Cornejo

> Yo, bust this, Black
> To the future
> Back to the past
> History is a mystery 'cause it has
> All the info
> You need to know
> Where you're from
> Why'd you come and
> That'll tell you where you're going
> Black to the future[252]
> —Def Jef

What Does It Mean?

This chapter is different from all of the others, in that although it does critically discuss several works of art, those works of art are catalysts to introduce and demonstrate a theory I advance called "Afro-Latinx futurism" (ALF). ALF is a theoretical framework or lens with which to read works of art or visual culture that centers Black and Latinx pleasure, ease, joy, play, rest, beauty and/or freedom. In this sense, ALF is not a genre, or bound to any particular style, movement, or historical period; rather, it is a practice of freedom that centers and celebrates Black and Brown humanity, rest and beauty. This intervention is powerful for several

[251] Kency Cornejo, "Decolonial Futurism: Ancestral Border Crossers, Time Machines, and Space Travel in Salvadoran Art," in *Mundo Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas*, ed. Robb Hernándes, Tyler Stallings, and Joanna Szupinka-Meyers (Riverside, CA: UCR Artsblock, 2017), 21.

[252] Def Jef, "Black to the Future," Delicious Vinyl, *Just a Poet with a Soul,* 1989.

reasons. As I write these words, Latinx and African American communities are at a disproportionately higher risk of contracting and dying form COVID-19[253] while still being murdered and brutalized by police at alarming and terrifying rates. In fact, some are saying that there are "Two Pandemics"—the global crisis that is COVID-19 and the excessively violent and deadly police.[254] Social death is more than an idea about not being seen as fully human, it is still a reality for Black people and other aggrieved communities in the US society. My intervention of ALF as a practice of freedom, therefore, is a visual counter-narrative for Black and Brown wellbeing with limitless potential. For example, it helps us expand on concepts put forward by scholars, artists and pleasure seekers like Audre Lorde, bell hooks and Favianna Rodriguez as we activate visuals to speak and see the art/world around us and take pleasure and satisfaction in Black and Latinx life. Additionally, this framework does not center coloniality or need to be attached to any particular expression of oppression or abuse, although it has the versatility to be applied to works of art that are created under those circumstances as well. Since ALF doesn't require a colonial past or a decolonial future—a future that is inevitably informed by or connected to our (de)coloniality—it can be deeply playful and satisfying. Although Audre Lorde reminds us that love is political resistance, that "self-care is…self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare,"[255] I expand that caring for the self is also, primarily, good for our wellbeing. While self-care can sustain our struggle against oppression, it is more than just a coping mechanism, I believe that self-care is a practice for freedom. Put another way, I assert

[253] Sherita Hill Golden, "Coronavirus in African Americans and Other People of Color," *Johns Hopkins Medicine*, posted April 20, 2020, https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/covid19-racial-disparities.

[254] Ivan Natividad, "Police Violence Makes COVID-19 Worse for Black Americans," *Futurity.org*, April 27, 2020, https://www.futurity.org/police-violence-covid-19-2348242/.

[255] Brown, *Pleasure Activism*, 59.

that feeling at ease, taking time to rest, being filled with joy and taking pleasure in one's life *is* part of being free, even if it is momentary. Self-care is both political, and deeply personal, however, in conceiving ALF, I observed that we don't always need to justify or weaponized our right to rest, to take joy in life, to play or enjoy our love of beauty. When we detach our self-care from the things we resist, we center ourselves, which is the whole point of the fight.

Instead, I build from Afrofuturism. The term Afrofuturism was coined in 1994 by Mark Dery in his groundbreaking text, "Black to the future," where Dery reflects on the surprisingly few number of Black science fiction writers, when science fiction is a place where all things are possible, including time travel, super powers and alternate realities, a wide open space where Black people have unlimited opportunities to live, thrive and imagine futures. Over the years, Dery's notion of Afrofuturism has expanded extensively and has become an important part of US creative expression. Ashley Clark, a film critic and curator, has defined Afrofuturism as "The centring of the international Black experience in alternate and imagined realities; whether fiction or documentary; past or present; science fiction or straight drama."[256] Her description includes creative works of literature, visual arts, films, music videos, stories and much more with the infinite potential for people of African descent. Similarly, Afrofuturism is capable of doing what *The Decolonial Imaginary* does by remembering and placing Chicanas in history, "going outside the accredited realm of historiography…traversing new territories and disciplines, mapping fresh terrains…"[257] In this sense, Afrofuturism possesses flexibility to look back in time, and also, room to explore the present and future with a specific eye toward Black and Brown joy, peace, rest and freedom. I have found personally that I can access my own freedom more easily when I

[256] Ashley Clark, "Afrofuturism on film: five of the best," *Guardian*, April 2, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2015/apr/02/afrofuturism-on-film-five-best-brooklyn-bamcinematek.

[257] Pérez, *Decolonial Imaginary*, xiii.

am deliberate about where I place my focus and my gaze. By that I do not mean ignoring histories or current realities—on the contrary—by understanding what brought us to our current moments we can be more empowered in our resolve to rest and feel free.

I add here that this practice is not just about feeling good for fear of reality; it is not about ignoring real pain and suffering. It is guided by the philosophy that in order to create real change, in order to get closer to freedom, we must know who we are and we must be under the influence of our own energy. In fact, ALF is about futurity and the infinite possibilities in our futures and also in our imaginations. ALF allows us to see beyond; it allows us to see with an eye toward Black and Brown pleasure and ease. As a visual practice with an imperative to seeing, we're not decolonizing the gaze, we're using our gaze to get free and enjoy it. As such, art history is the perfect place to practice this theoretical framework, a field that's strength is visual analysis. Still larger than that, this lens connects to the many facets of life, spiritual practices, future imaginaries, pleasure, joy and freedom behind several works of art. This chapter is informed by ancient knowledge and inspired by real people connecting to joy and creating from a place of love. It is about leading from the heart, especially in difficult circumstances. Although I will center a few works of art, this chapter uses those works to demonstrate the life-affirming ways that African American, Latinx and/ or Afro-Latinx artists practice Afro-Latinx Futurism.

At the time of this writing, hundreds of thousands of people are protesting for George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man who was senselessly murdered by Minneapolis police officers last week.[258] Communities around Los Angeles, Washington D.C., Detroit, Indianapolis, Houston, Denver, Atlanta, Louisville, Chicago, New York, New Orleans, as well as Toronto,

[258] This section of the dissertation was written the first week of June in 2020; George Floyd was murdered by the Minneapolis Police over a twenty-dollar dispute. Derek Chauvin, a member of the Minneapolis Police Department, knelt on the back of Floyd's neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds before Floyd went unconscious and died in a hospital shortly thereafter.

London and Berlin are organizing to stand against contemporary anti-Black violence and a legacy of deadly police force against non-violent Black people in the US.[259] The collective pain and suffering have reached a tipping point and lead thousands of people all over the US and the world to leave their homes, from which they shelter in place, to dissent. I recognize the suffering and believe the pain is acute and exacerbated by not only the recent tragedies and economic hardships from COVID-19, but from generations and centuries of violence and abuse against Black people. I know that the expression of deeply painful emotions is an important and necessary part of catharsis; it is a meaningful point in our healing journey. While that is true, "…grief and suffering cannot sway us away from healing and wellbeing."[260] As a way of anticipating and believing in our freedom, our pleasure, joy, ease and rest, I also ask, how do we get there from here? How does our current suffering connect to our future ease? Are we practiced in our own beauty and play so that we can be fully present for our freedom? Once our fighting has opened way for us to be free, will we know how to enjoy it? Will it have the residue of struggle and resistance attached? If we don't believe it is possible in the future, what does our current struggle mean?

As a way of thinking about the stakes for Afro-Latinx Futurism, I offer a few more questions: what is the difference between building from a place of struggle and resistance versus creating from a place of ease, joy and play? What are the implications, especially for those who have been left to the margins, of centering rest, beauty and freedom in the visual arts? Even in asking these questions, I draw attention to some of the more subtle places artists create from, as well as some of the subtle ways viewers understand or critique works of art. These questions will

[259] In the month of May 2020, as this document was being written, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd were murdered by police or retired police officers.

[260] Celia Burke, in a phone conversation with the author, May 29, 2020.

help us to consider the works of art that have been discussed in previous chapters, but more importantly, will help us to understand the limitless potential for Afro-Latinx futurism. Afro-Latinx futurism builds on theories like Decolonial futurism,[261] freedom dreams,[262] Afro-futurism,[263] and Chicana futurism.[264] While my theory draws from others before it, it is unique in that it expands on them and offers another layer with which to see the world around us and make life even more satisfying by looking back, imagining a future with ease and joy and inserting a practice for making those things real this very moment.

How It Works: A User Guide

> What critical methods are required to ensure that the study of whiteness does not itself become a means to privilege the work of white artists?
> —John P. Bowles, *Blinded by the White*

Because the impetus for Afro-Latinx Futurism is to see Black and Brown people thriving in visual arts and to trust in the reality of Black and Latinx freedom past, present and/or future, we must have a set of parameters in which we use this lens. In other words, because this theoretical framework is inherently connected to personal identity and positionality, it requires that the user be personal with it. This is our distinctive responsibility. With these guidelines, I believe it is possible for any person, regardless of their own personal background, to use ALF for

[261] Kency Cornejo, "Decolonial Futurism: Ancestral Border Crossers, Time Machines, and Space Travel in Salvadoran Art," in *Mundo Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas*, ed. Robb Hernándes, Tyler Stallings, and Joanna Szupinka-Meyers (Riverside, CA: University of California, Riverside (UCR) Artsblock, 2017), 21–31.
[262] Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*.

[263] Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994).

[264] Catherine Ramirez, "Afrofuturism/Chicanafuturism: Fictive Kin," *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 185–194.

its original purpose of reading, interpreting and celebrating Black and Latinx ease, play, beauty and freedom. These are the guidelines:

1. Before a person begins reading a work of art or visual culture with ALF, **they should interrogate who they are and why they are using Afro-Latinx Futurism**. For example, I am a Black Chicana from Los Angeles with an eye and heart towards liberation for my communities in the material, emotional and vibrational forms of rest, play, joy and freedom. I created and use ALF because it provides me and others with a lens to center Black and Brown pleasure in visual works of art in new and important ways. I see this intervention as incredibly powerful because art history, as a field, has historically centered white artists and subjects, putting all others to the margins. This is only a reflection of a larger system of white supremacy, yet, "the power of art lies in being visionary."[265] In this way, we can be empowered with our vision of images and our visions of freedom for aggrieved communities. Afro-Latinx Futurism provides us with a tool to center Black and Brown people with the intention of reading their wellness.[266]
2. Before applying ALF, **the user should clearly and thoughtfully indicate how they are implicated in the ideas of play, rest, ease, pleasure and freedom**. For example, do you come from a culture or family line that suffered under capitalism? Are/were you or your people overworked, under paid, unpaid, un-rested or exhausted from labor? Did your family's labor provide you with a model, practice or actual time and space to rest, to be at ease with yourself, to take pleasure in daily life, to feel free?

---

[265] Favianna Rodriguez, "Pleasure is Freedom," filmed January 9, 2016, at TedxSanMigueldeAllende, YouTube video, 13:46, uploaded by Tedx Talks, May 10, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9beK8fotls.

[266] Here I emphasize Black and Brown wellness because we often see works made by and about Black and Latinx communities with a deficit view. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, I believe expressing pain and suffering are an important and necessary catharsis—and the first step towards freedom.

3. While using ALF, **the user must identify how Black and/or Latinx figures, people or artists are implicated in a discussion of freedom, ease and pleasure.** For example, since ALF can be applied to works of art from the past, present and read with an eye toward the future, the user must ground the work of art in its history and/or social context. What would freedom, ease and pleasure have looked like for Black and Brown people in that time and place? How are you reading it in this context?
4. **The user must ask if the work of art they look at does in fact serve Black and Latinx people in being, feeling and becoming free, past/present/future. The answer doesn't need to be yes, but the user should explain the answer to the question and its usability for Black and Brown people.**

I believe these guidelines will help fulfill the purpose of this theoretical lens. They also embed equity, transparency and responsibility on the side of the user, which is appropriate. In this sense, this lens does make assumptions about the user, their training, positionality or sense of responsibility to liberation. Although this may seem unconventional, I offer these guidelines in order to support the vision of ALF and support Black and Latinx wellness.[267]

Case Studies: Afro-Latinx Freedom

This section will center three works of art to demonstrate the life-affirming ways that we can practice Afro-Latinx Futurism. At the beginning of the 18th century in New Spain, artists were doing the deeply political work of categorizing racial miscegenation for Spanish colonial

[267] As discussed in length later in this chapter, the stakes of social death are material, imagined, and take shape in visual arts and visual culture.

power and entertainment. At that time, casta paintings were a new genre, and were used to record the daily lives of mixed race families in the new world. The purpose of this was novel and largely out of speculative interest, as many Spaniards were unfamiliar with heterogeneous societies and families in this way.[268] Additionally, this genre also served a desire and social need to maintain a hierarchy where wealthy, white, male, Spaniards were on top and Indian, African and mixed-race people were on bottom.[269] By organizing individuals and families into a hierarchical grid, the artists could name and typify each new mixed race child categorizing them for the Spanish gaze and for Spanish social power. Furthermore, casta paintings could indicate who had certain rights and privileges—for example, they could visually express who had the right to bear arms or own livestock.[270] In this way, casta paintings functioned similar to legal guidelines or legal references for Spaniards and others to understand power, wealth, work, labor, gender roles and more. Casta paintings are traditionally painted in a series of fourteen or sixteen portraits or smaller vignettes, each one an attempt of an ethnographic study on race, class, gender, gender roles and miscegenation.

[268] Kelly Donahue-Wallace, *Art and Architecture of Viceregal Latin America, 1521–1821* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 217.

[269] Donahue-Wallace, *Art and Architecture of Viceregal Latin America*, 217–218.

[270] Donahue-Wallace, *Art and Architecture of Viceregal Latin America*, 217.

Figure 35. José de Alcíbar, *From Spaniard and Black, Mulatto*, c. 1760, oil on canvas, accessed May 1, 2020, https://denverartmuseum.org/object/2014.217.

This painting, *De Espaniol y Negra, Mulato,* was made by José de Alcíbar around 1760, and in it, the artist depicts a sweet and intimate moment of a family in the kitchen. The African mother and wife is beautiful and caring; she makes Mexican hot chocolate for her family in a copper pitcher. Her mulatto son holds a silver brazier, as his father lights a tobacco cigarette. The wealthy Spanish father and husband shares this sweet moment with his family. Although this family aren't particularly doing much, they are surrounded by delicate fabrics and jewels, expensive objects and products, pointing to the family's wealth. For example, the man's dress coat is a banyan, or housecoat, probably made of silk or cotton, that was imported from Asia.[271] It was common at that time to pair banyans with a turban-like cap in lieu of a powdered wig or other head covering. The woman wears a beautiful striped rebozo that was commonly worn by

[271] Jose de Alcibar, *De Espanol y Negra, Mulato (From Spaniard and Black, Mulatto)*, c. 1760, oil on canvas, https://denverartmuseum.org/object/2014.217.

middle class Mexican women, while the boy wears a European-style coat. It is clear that while this family is not royal, they are of means and have access to international luxury objects. Each family member is adorned in beautiful and even international clothing and accessories. Additionally, their access to chocolate and tobacco in the New World indicates that they are well off and living very comfortably.

While the African woman in this painting may seem very quiet, maybe even a little subdued, I believe that she is full of peace and takes pleasure in her family and her life; despite there being a colonial context to this painting, I see a clear Afro-Latinx Future here. For example, when compared to other casta paintings, it is evident that this Black woman has access to and enjoys the finer things in life, including local delicious chocolate and the best cookware to prepare the chocolate with. Although she wears a very common rebozo over her shoulders, she is also dressed in a beautifully colored turquoise blue skirt and a white blouse with a matching turquoise blue thread that ties the bust together. The attention to detail in her clothing here indicates her means and interest in fashion and beauty. Additionally, her delicate and dangling pearl earrings shine bright and garner our attention. I wonder, did she select those earrings for herself or were they a gift from an adoring husband? While some scholars and art experts have observed that the Spanish husband is dressed much more finely than his wife, I assert this this difference does not interrupt her peace nor does it outshine her natural beauty. While it is true that her clothing is less expensive than his, we can see in her gorgeous features and her comfortable body language this is not reflected in her joy or sense of self. What is most compelling as I read the painting for moments of joy and ease is that in 1760, this beautiful African woman is enjoying her own freedom. At a time when slavery was still legal in the British colonies that would become the United States in 1776, this woman lives a peaceful life full of

love, luxury and family. Her husband provides her with a comfortable, safe home where they can raise their son together, even in the midst of chattel slavery. Slavery wasn't abolished in the US until 1865 and in Mexico in 1829, yet, "…Africans and mixed-race individuals enjoyed greater social mobility [in New Spain]"[272] In fact, this woman is not worried about her safety or her child's, she is at ease as she lives her beautiful Black life.

In her essay "The Pleasure of Taxonomy," Rebecca Earle offers an important critique for reading casta paintings. She reminds us that the language and logics used to describe a person's race were fluid and largely inconsistent and as a result, casta paintings were less useful as documents about lineage and perhaps more accurate, "They…agreeably roused the pleasure of the imagination. Pleasure was central to the aesthetics of paintings and also in the practices of natural history. It moreover infused colonial ideas about race and sexuality."[273] In her offering, she teaches us to recognize the pleasure these paintings would give to their colonial audience. Moving one step further, I advance that we center the pleasure for the Black and Latinx subjects of this work of art, especially the Black woman. That being the case, it is easy to identify the peace, pleasure, beauty and freedom in this painting. However, for me, as a Black Latina, this work of art gives me great satisfaction to know that despite the many atrocities that Africans have endured in North America, there were also Black people who were free, who enjoyed fashion, chocolate and beauty and raised their children without fear of death or family separation during a very dangerous time. Because of this, I see that freedom was possible for some of my ancestors during the 18th century, and while I wish it was available to all people at all times, I am humbled to know that somehow, the impossible has always been possible. I am also inspired and

[272] Robinson, "Race, Space, and the Evolution of Black Los Angeles," 22.

[273] Rebecca Earle, "The Pleasure of Taxonomy: Casta Paintings, Classification and Colonialism," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (July 2016): 432-433.

renewed to continue to dream and ask for more rest, more ease and joy for my communities and me—now, and in the future. I consider this form of inspiration to be more than a feeling, it is an actionable item that, I believe, may live in me and beyond, just like this casta painting.

This second work of art is much more contemporary, made in 2018, and was created by a Black artist named Jessi Jumanji. This digital work of art, *Bardi Lisa*, was made in Los Angeles, yet it has had a significant impact all over the world because of the attention it garnered on Instagram. Some online viewers thought that this version of *Mona Lisa* as Cardi B, the prolific

Figure 36. Jessi Jumanji, *Bardi Lisa*, 2018, photoshop image, courtesy of Jessi Jumanji.

stripper-turned-rapper, song writer and actress, defaced the Italian Renaissance original. In an interview with the artist, Jumanji shared with me that she received messages and comments that questioned and disapproved of her audacity to remake a priceless masterpiece.[274] Jumanji took the opportunity to insert her own thoughts on a "Much needed conversation about who owns the

[274] Jessi Jumanji, in a Zoom meeting interview with the author, May 23, 2020.

rights to the image and who has the authority to manipulate these images."[275] I found this to be not only very important, but a bit comical, as the history of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* is one of non-convention, innovation, mystery and even some controversy. For example, the fact that this painting was commissioned by a Florentine merchant, not a member of royalty or nobility, is outside of the convention for portraits at this time.[276] Furthermore, the sitter is an otherwise anonymous woman who wasn't, in her time, a prominent name or conventional beauty. Despite it becoming one of the most recognizable and famous works of art in the world, it started out as a remarkably ordinary commission of a woman who left very little impact on society, even though her image did.

Nevertheless, the *Mona Lisa* would become one of the most important paintings to come out of the Italian Renaissance, and superimposing a contemporary image of Cardi B on top does have important meaning, especially for using Afro-Latinx Futurism. I believe this lens allows us to recontextualize the work of art completely and center play, beauty, joy and freedom both historically and contemporarily. Even more, I believe the joy, play and freedom expand even more as we examine this work of art. For example, when we use am ALF lens, the self-proclaimed "trap Selena" may also be the trap *Mona Lisa,* as we experience her timelessness, immortality and fame.[277] By elevating Cardi B to the same level of the *Mona Lisa*, we not only celebrate her music and career from the 21st century, we memorialize Cardi B with the greatest masters from the Italian Renaissance. This inversion, therefore, creates a whole new world of meanings, where Cardi B is both present and past, trap and high art, New York and Florence all

[275] Jessi Jumanji, in a Zoom meeting interview with the author, May 23, 2020.

[276] Loren Partridge, *Art of Renaissance Florence 1400-1600* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 122.

[277] This rhyme and play on words is a playful, joyful way of placing Cardi B in both the history of rap and the Italian Renaissance.

at the same time. This Afro-Latina is also one of the most decorated women rappers of all times and simultaneously, the sweetheart of the western canon. Perhaps Jumanji created a portrait of a beautiful, powerful Afro-Latina in the place of ma donna, Lisa Gherardini. If we couple this with her international profile, perhaps we can enjoy imagining a reality where Cardi B was an important woman during the Italian Renaissance, stripping, rapping and living her best life all the way to the Louvre. Perhaps her legacy has become so expansive even Leonardo was inspired to paint her likeness.

Some art historians say that the Mona Lisa is so significant because it was perhaps the earliest example of a portrait in the Italian Renaissance where we see a mysterious, yet deeply human sitter smile softly. Mona Lisa clearly engages us, making direct eye contact and faces us with her torso and hands. Today, the half-length portrait may seem insignificant, however, Leonardo's innovation gave us a sitter who is present with us. Jumanji also gives us a sitter who is fully human, wearing a fashionable bob wig, bright red lipstick and hoop earrings—she is a someone a contemporary Black or Latinx viewer could recognize and relate to.

Figure 37. Lexi Bella, Bushwick Collective, *Bardi Lisa,* 2018, photo courtesy Jessi Jumanji, accessed May 23, 2020.

Later in 2018, a mural of the *Bardi Lisa* was painted, so in a way, it was birthed into a physical life in New York City.[278] For me, as a fan of Cardi B and a student of Renaissance arts, I feel not only represented in this image, but respected and excited. In 2011, I spent the summer in Florence, and noticed very few Black people in the city. As a largely homogenous city with a rich and deep history, it was difficult to know that it wasn't very accessible to other Black or Latinx people. In seeing Cardi B in this work of art, I experience representation and satisfaction knowing that art history can retroactively celebrate Black and Brown peoples when they were largely excluded. While I believe Cardi B has great access to joy, beauty and play in her own life, I also hold that this interpretation empowers others and see their potential for play, pleasure and freedom within old histories and conventions.

The final work of art I will discuss with an Afro-Latinx Futuristic lens was made in 2015 by the highly celebrated, first generation American Latinx artist, Favianna Rodriguez. In a 2016 Ted Talk, Rodriguez discussed the need to center pleasure in our liberation. She says that "Embodied pleasure is the very core to building a better society."[279] She reminds us that pleasure is a natural signal that we are embodied and in touch with ourselves, which increases our sense of empathy.[280] In her monotype linoleum block print series *Deliberate Orgasm*, Rodriguez depicts a brightly colored vulva, including the urinary opening, vagina, clitoris and labia, at orgasm. We can tell orgasm is occurring because of the excited, bright and vibrational shapes around the vulva. Green, blue, yellow, pink shapes all sing in harmony in this work of art. Inside

[278] There was a bit of controversy around this mural. In speaking with Jessi Jumanji, I learned that Lexi Bella, the muralist, asked for permission to reuse Jessi Jumanji's image but did not credit Jessi Jumanji as she promised. There was no real resolution between Jumanji and Bella; this is an important example of white artists stealing from artists of color.

[279] Rodriguez, "Pleasure is Freedom."

[280] Rodriguez, "Pleasure is Freedom."

the labia, golden bubbles fill the vulva, while a whimsical and airy layer of bubbles drape around the bottom of the genitalia, like an overflow of energy. The shape of the vulva is also familiar and mimics the silhouette of a woman with a head, voluptuous curves and her own genitals. This vibrating vulva seems to be pulsating, as it is surrounded by a series of outer black lines that feel like a halo or a sign of enlightenment. It may also feel like an abstracted version of the Virgin Mary, yet this time, the central figure's power is not connected to her responsibility to mother the son of God, her power is in the ecstasy she embodies at this very moment. To that end, her spiritual climax seems everlasting, not just momentary, but a state of being, nirvana.

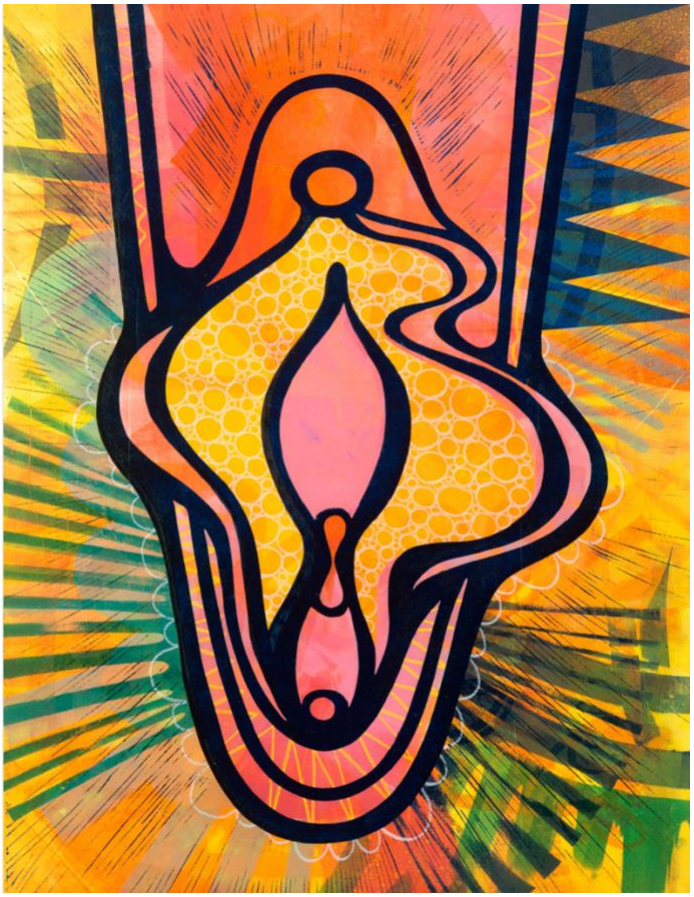


Figure 38. Favianna Rodriguez, *Deliberate Orgasm AP 1*, 2015, monotype, color pencil and linoleum block, 25 x 19.25 inches, accessed June 2, 2020, https://favianna.com/artworks/deliberate-orgasm-ap-1.

This print is a part of a vast body of work around pleasure entitled *Pussy Power*. Empowered in her message, her words, her body and her artistic practice, Rodriguez provides us

with an excellent case study for ALF. Rodriguez understands that while many of us come from great suffering, she also knows that we don't always learn how to conceptualize what it is that we want in life. Instead, we know what we do *not* want and focus our full attention there, without creating room to imagine what we do hope for ourselves. She expands that this is a way of framing our narratives through our suffering. We might also call this a defect view, opposed to a growth mindset. Instead of putting that defect on ourselves, Rodriguez advocates that we connect to our bodies, our vessel for being in the world, in order to connect with who we really are and to feel pleasure as a practice of freedom and social change.

In addition to feeling pleasure as a means to change our narrative, Rodriguez advocates for young people and especially young girls of color to be empowered to have great sex by asking for what they want, for negotiating their boundaries at a pace that works for them. This is also power. This is the center of pussy power and embodied pleasure as social change. "We are in an age when every single industry from math, science, law, global banks, global economies, the art, education is dominated by men. Unless we have women's leadership, we are not going to solve the most urgent problems in the world. Women's leadership is going to begin with our full embodied power." Her argument is that if women can ask for what they want with their own bodies, if women can feel connected in their own sexuality and sexual encounters, they will be embodying the power and practicing the skills to lead the world in whatever way they see fit.

For me, as a cisgender Afro-Latina who was body shamed as a girl and taught that sex was forbidden, connecting my power to my body is a revolutionary idea. I see great potential for other Black and Brown women, and people of all genders who can benefit from becoming more at ease with the self, the body and respecting and loving the body's ability and power for pleasure. In this sense, when we reimagine play, joy and beauty with our pleasure, bodies and

sexual experiences, we have so much freedom to gain. I believe Rodriguez's *Pussy Power* project has and will continue to serve Black and Brown people who were shamed out of pleasure or self-acceptance through religious dogma or culture.

In looking at these three case studies, we can clearly see the power in using this liberatory lens as we center pleasure, joy, ease, beauty, play and freedom for Black and Brown peoples, whether they be the subjects in the works of art or the intended audience. This lens was created for the total benefit of Black and Brown peoples, not just in seeing potential for pleasure in works of art. In fact, this lens helps us do much more meaningful work by practicing and drawing on Black and Brown freedom in places it was not necessarily designed for. With this belief in mind, it is my hope that this visual exercise becomes a meditation of the visual so that, even when we are suffering, we have tools to look around, to identify what it is we do not want and focus on what we believe in. While suffering cannot be eliminated simply by looking away, we *can* increase our freedom, make it more present and more accessible, when we see it in the world around us, including works of art, regardless of the time or place.

Social Death

Although this dissertation is not at all about white people, white art or histories of white ways of being, it is integral that I outline the historical background of whiteness, chattel slavery and genocide in the United States in order to contextualize what my theory means and why it is so important. By revealing the stakes of this theory and this entire dissertation project, my intention is to offer a sincere and empowered interpretation of Black and Brown strength, resilience and love of life. In this way, this chapter, like those before it, is a deliberate celebration of Black and Brown life and creative expressions.

As the U.S. was becoming an economic force in the world, they were one of many Western nations practicing chattel slavery and genocide in order to expand wealth and global power. Long before the British colonies would become an independent nation in 1776, Portugal, Spain, England, France and other European countries were kidnapping people from different cultures and nations in Africa, including modern-day countries like Morocco, Senegal, Ghana, Benin, Sierra Leon, Nigeria, Cameroon, Congo, and Madagascar,[281] and forcing them into a lifetime of unpaid and inhumane labor. Stevenson expands that as early as the 1600's, "Sugar, alone, accounted for the labor of 70 percent of the African imported slave labor in the New World over the centuries."[282] Not only was chattel slavery the fabric of American wealth, it was the fiber that created the nation. Brenda Stevenson, an internationally recognized historian who focuses on slavery, race and gender in the U.S. writes this in her 2015 book, *What is Slavery?*

> The evolution of the trade in African labor to the Americans from the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries, known as the Atlantic slave trade, marked a significant change in the definition and practice of slavery. The sheer volume of the trade itself – in terms of the millions of Africans enslaved; its four centuries length; the numbers of slave-trading institutions, industries, professionals, and skilled laborers responsible for the multiple attributes of the business of slavery; the geophysical space of the continent of Africa and the continents of North and South America affected; the global mercantile implications; the destruction of vast expanses of western and central western Africa; the numbers of European countries engaged; the immense wealth that the trade produced; the new crops advanced that became household necessities for some and markers of elite status for others – made certain that the Atlantic slave trade would have tremendous impact on creating, and shaping, the modern world. This is to say nothing of the creation of "race" as a category of social, economic, political, cultural, and "biological" significance upon which some of the most basic human interactions would, and still, depend.[283]

Unpaid, enslaved Africans worked the lands of the Deep South, New England, and other regions in the US, providing landowners huge economic return. These landowners were also

---

[281] Brenda Stevenson, *What is Slavery?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015), 24. This is not a comprehensive list of African nations who lost community members to chattel slavery.
[282] Stevenson, *What is Slavery*, 24.
[283] Stevenson, *What is Slavery*, 24.

called slave masters, because enslaved African workers were not seen as humans, but rather, as property. However, as long as Black people "could preserve [their] 'ontological totality,'" they were able to resist what Aimé Césaire calls "thingification." I'm sure I can never know the tremendous amount of mental strength and intention it would take for anyone enslaved to believe in oneself, mind, body and soul. I am also at a loss when considering the mental gymnastics it would take to believe and perpetuate that a whole person or group of people are in fact, not human. It goes without saying that this belief was used to justify the incredibly cruel, brutal and horrific actions that were taken against enslaved Africans such as lifelong bondage, rape, physical and emotional violence, separating families, forced religious conversion and much more. How could people who resisted the great tyranny of taxes from the British ignore their own excessive violation of humanity? Did they really not know that Black people were human? I cannot help but imagine the great lengths that they went to in order to maintain their cognitive dissonance—beating, brutalizing their salves, raping and impregnating women, and considering their own children to be subhuman.

While I cannot know the depths of denial and shame that white slave masters experienced, I do know that Thomas Jefferson was terrified to end slavery and live near the formerly enslaved thereafter.[284] Rather, he preferred the idea of deporting freed slaves to Africa or the West Indies to avoid retaliation or revolt. Jefferson held the positions of vice president and president during the span of the Haitian Revolution and was, therefore, well aware of the financial struggle that France faced due to the 12 years long rebellion. In fact, it was at this exact time, under these very circumstances that France sold the Louisiana Territory to the U.S., under Jefferson's presidency, in order to help amend the financial hardship they endured in battle in

[284] Frances K. Pohl, *Framing America: A Social History of American Art* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2012).

Haiti.[285] Span, France and the US were terrified of a Black republic in the Americas and fought to specifically suppress this possibility. He couldn't imagine a world where former slaves would not be full of vengeance against their former owners. I do not know if peace would have been possible, but I can see in Jefferson's logic that he believed a violent revenge was justifiable as an equal and opposite reaction to slavery. As such, it is clear to me that Jefferson was well aware of the explicit tyranny he was upholding by participating in and protecting the institution of slavery, and still, he was conscious of his apathy for those who were enslaved. He held the contradiction that "all men are created equal" and yet, he *owned* at least 83 enslaved Africans as items of property, including his sister-in-law, his wife's half-sister, Sally Hemmings.

Although importing enslaved Africans was finally made illegal in 1806, slavery was still a thriving institution in the U.S. As a part of the abolitionist strategy to appeal to the humanity and conscious of pro-slavery stake-holders, Americans adopted and used this British woodcut print, which was widely reproduced in publications and flyers.[286] The print is seen below and askes, "Am I not a man and a brother?", positioning the enchained figure as a person with full humanity, fraternity and family. This figure, with beautifully dark skin and coiled hair, kneels with his hands in a prayer position, looking up with his eyes and mouth open, asking to be seen as a man, not a piece of property or an enemy. His humble posture, mostly nude body and chained wrists and ankles demonstrate that this man, is in fact, asking for the chance to live a life with humanity, too. This simple approach attempts to disrupt cognitive dissonance about Black humanity by making Black humanity visible for a white audience—perhaps for the first time.

[285] Jefferson helped the U.S. acquire the Louisiana territory in 1803, the year before the Haitian Revolt ended.

[286] "Am I a man and not a brother?" 1837 woodcut on wove paper, 26.7 cm x 22.8 cm, Broadside Collection, portfolio 118, no. 32a, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2008661312/.

Interestingly, this approach is very intentional in not upsetting White Fragility.[287] For example, there is no judgement or harsh decree, no use of religious text or doctrine to condemn slavery and those who benefit from it—rather, the request for humanity is humble and unthreatening to pro-slavery stake-holders and all white people who believed in white superiority or white supremacy. I speculate that it would have been dangerous and counterproductive at that time to present an image of a Black person with dignity and respect. Furthermore, the claim for Black personhood is not at all connected to a capitalist imperative for Black people, or accumulation of Black power—rather, it points to the one thing that even slavery and white supremacy cannot bastardize, the inalienable humanity of people of African descent.[288]

Figure 39. Artists unknown, *Am I Not a Man and a Brother*?, 1837, woodcut on woven paper, 26.7 x 22.8 cm, accessed May 22, 2020, Library of Congress, Washington DC. https://www.loc.gov/item/2008661312/.

[287] White Fragility, a term coined by Robin DiAngelo in 2011, "is a state I which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, and guilt…" See Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 54–70.

[288] It is also true that neither white supremacy nor slavery could bastardize the humanity of any group of people, ever. These powerful forces have created devastating destruction all over the world, however, they have never been able to remove a person from their humanity ever.

In February of 1968, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, two Black garbage collectors, were crushed to death by a faulty garbage truck in Memphis, Tennessee. Less than two weeks later, 1,300 Black men from the Memphis Department of Public Works went on strike due to the city's very slow response and clear lack of concern for safe working conditions for African American laborers. Their cause resonated with many and became national news when college students, white and Black ministers, representatives from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King Jr. joined their effort for fair wages, safe working conditions and the right to organize with a union. One of their most powerful slogans during the strike was, "I AM A MAN," as seen in the image below. Here, again, we see Black working people using language that emphasizes their humanity and personhood in order to demonstrate their just call for the right to live without threat of death and constant economic struggle.[289] Certainly, the social and legal circumstances had changed since the previous protest image was created. In fact, the photo below was taken approximately 103 years after slavery was abolished in the U.S. In this iteration, we can see that the protest language is more affirmative, not asking, but asserting manhood and personhood. Additionally, the photograph is compelling because it easily demonstrates the men stand together, collectively in their power. Standing shoulder to shoulder with signs and self-awareness, these men maintain their dignity and push back against the racist government who employees them and destroys them.

[289] It is likely that constant and generational economic struggle is also a result of social death.

Figure 40. Photographer unknown, *I AM A MAN*, Memphis, Tennessee 1968, photograph, accessed May 24, 2020, https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/texts/i-am-a-man.

In 2013, as the nation was watching George Zimmerman's acquittal after he murdered Treyvon Martin for walking home in the rain with a hoodie over his head, three Black women, Patrice Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi, coined a slogan and hashtag that inspired a movement—Black Lives Matter.[290] Using affirmative, clear and definitive language, these trailblazers put the humanity of all Black people at the center of the call for justice, peace and dignity. I assert here that this iteration of the phrase is a 21st-century, gender inclusive expression that invokes a similar call for peace and dignity for African people throughout the diaspora in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries in England and the US. In this way, the same, or very similar expressions have held strong—that is, people of African descent are human and deserve to live without violence, threat of death, abuse and oppression; they deserve to live with peace, dignity and a basic respect for human life. In this sense, the claim that Black lives matter is profoundly simple, redundant even, and at the same time, it is radical, powerful and extremely threatening to

[290] See photograph on next page, from "Herstory," *Black Lives Matter*, last accessed July 23, 2020, https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/.

people, logics, structures and traditions that consciously, unconsciously, explicitly and/or implicitly hold Black people in a subhuman position.[291] In this sense, each of these three case studies indicate slogans and visuals that oppose social death and affirm Black life.

Figure 41. Photographer unknown, Patrice Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi, photograph accessed June 2, 2020, https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/.

I believe this historical trend and reiteration of the same expression of the value of Black lives and humanity of Black people is a clear way of interrupting white cognitive dissonance and social death against Black people. For example, by stating over and over again that Black people are in fact people, I believe that three things happen. The first is that Black folks refuse to be made into objects, pieces of property or laborers for white use and consumption—affirming Black humanity. Secondly, asserting Black humanity requires that oppressors see that they have a choice in fearing, vilifying, oppressing and brutalizing Black people, and that they can simply

[291] The expression and movement "Black Lives Matter" was so threatening to some that countermovements were created as a way to decenter Black people. For example, "All Lives Matter" a movement lead by mostly white people and "Blue Lives Matter" a call to respect police officers came after the "Black Lives Matter" movement gained national recognition.

treat Black people with respect and decency. Finally, I believe this affirmative, self-realized fight for Black lives is generative and powerful in a way that pushes the limits of what life can be. It is specifically and necessarily counterhegemonic and in that sense, it is a bold and beautiful thing. Of course, it is tiring to say over and over again, yet, it remains true as ever, that Black people are human and deserve to live life with peace, dignity and autonomy. It that sense, it both tires and empowers us to say that Black lives matter, but our resolve to be who we are and live and dream is an unstoppable force that I believe is an exciting place for creating.

Although this chapter is about Black *and* Latinx communities, I dedicated most of the discussion about social death and images that advocate for humanity to Black Americans because I believe that anti-Black racism is less complicated to mark. By this, I mean that not all Latinx and/or Hispanic peoples are people of color, and therefore, sometimes Latinx/Hispanic people and communities have access to (legal) whiteness.[292] While some Latinx people are white or white passing, I know that many others live very racialized, marginalized lives. Latinas, queer and trans Latinxs, immigrants, poor, over-worked, under-educated Latinxs also struggle in a similar set of circumstances where their humanity is not fully seen and acknowledged in society. Latinx artists have also made works of art that center those who have been marginalized in and outside of the culture, like this print by Dignidad Rebelde's 2017 print, *Viva La Mujer*, celebrating the humanity and resilience of women. Like George Lipsitz does in *How Racism Takes Place*, I offer the evidence of social death for Black communities over the centuries in the US as evidence for the same and similar treatment to other aggrieved communities. Lipsitz reminds us, "Because racial projects are flexible, fluid and relational, the contours of anti-Black

[292] Ian Haney López, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 8.

spaces are relevant to all communities of color. They are crucibles where others kinds of cruelty are learned and legitimated. When discrimination succeeds, it does not stop with one group but rather becomes generalized as a social principle and practice."[293] In this sense, starting this discussion with struggles that face Black people is important—not at odds or in competition to struggles that Latinx communities face. By offering these Black histories, we can see more clearly the needs within Latinx communities as well.

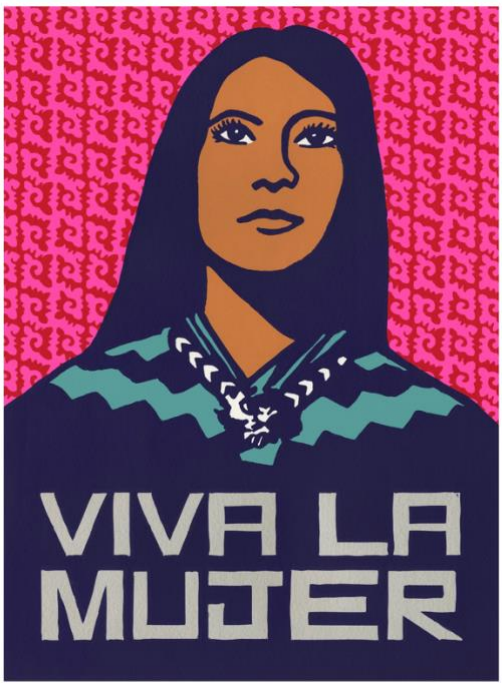


Figure 42. Dignidad Rebelde, *Viva La Mujer*, 2017 print on archival paper, 8.5 x 11 inches, accessed June 1, 2020, https://shop.dignidadrebelde.com/product/viva-la-mujer-2016-teal.

What are the stakes for Afro-Latinx Futurism as we move forward? Of course, this highly charged moment yields great potential for change because our collective humanity has become more present after months of staying home with family. The need to stay safe, be well, access food, take care of elders, respect nature and work less have become a beautiful side effect of the global COVID health crisis. Once it was clear that life was changes, there was fear and

[293] Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 12–13.

uncertainty, but also we witnessed locally and globally great expressions of empathy and compassion for the houseless, those who face food insecurities, those who could not pay rent, those who had to teach their own children and work from home and many others. It is also true that there have been countless tragedies from and casualties of COVID. There are disparities and injustices within the losses, the suffering and the labor. But even within this, there is a greater need for awareness of others, for care for those who have endured the most suffering and mutual support, especially in the interest of those who have the most to gain.

It is my hope that this moment we're in, where the structural inequality and state sanctioned violence against Black and Latinx peoples is rendered visible, that Black and Latinx peoples also become more aware of their thoughts and internalized beliefs. Negative self-worth, suppression of the true-self, rejection of pleasure, shame of sexuality, refusing to rest are all signs of an internalized philosophy deeply connected to capitalism, and the racism that catalyzed it. These internalized belief systems and behavioral patterns reflect the capitalist/racist lie that racialized people are good for labor, capable of struggle, but do not deserve to live well. Put another way still, these philosophies imply that Black and Brown people *deserve* to suffer. This exact logic was used to perpetuate slavery and the violence of kidnapping and enslaving; it was used to advance genocide and mass death; used to justify colonialism and imperialism; are still used as core beliefs in neoliberalism, American exceptionalism and white-supremacy. Therefore, dreaming about our ease, seeing our beauty, inserting our joy in works of art (and also in life) becomes not only a radical act of resistance against these institutions what were created to disenfranchise, exploit, abuse and dehumanize Black and Brown peoples in the U.S., it becomes one of our sources for our own self-love, empowerment and collective and generational healing. Believing in our own rest, pleasure and joy are useful tools for resistance, but more importantly,

they are the *goal* of resistance. Because this is so, we achieve our goal when we play and enjoy our beauty. We are free, even if only for a moment, when we take pleasure without guilt or fear. We reframe rest when we believe that our purpose is not labor, but our natural right to live well. We release colonial logics without reinstating them when we can focus on our own good for the purpose of our own good—Afro-Latinx Futurism can help us to practice and realize all of these truths and more. This is so because works of art are both real and imagined at the same time and may serve as a portal for what is possible through envisaging, dreaming and seeing (into the future). As Favianna Rodriguez shares in her Ted Talk, "pleasure is actually a pathway to freedom" and ALF is a method for us to see and experience pleasure in the visual world, in art history, in museum culture, all of which desperately need divest from white standards of beauty and white supremacy.[294]

While I offer these truths to advance Black and Brown freedom, I also know that we must continue to work for a material freedom that includes structural changes. In the interest of Black and Latinx ease and joy, we must make sweeping changes to public school systems and educational curriculum, we must make colleges and universities tuition free, we must cancel student debt, we must address our heath care systems and our housing crisis. We must abolish police and all prisons. But before we do, we must imagine a world without police, without food apartheid for poor people, without crippling debt and systemic inequality. This work of imagining is very serious and, we can start in the visual arts, where imagination and envisioning are a core part of our discipline, where visual language and analysis are a pillar of our field. With acute skillsets around looking and interpreting meaning along with historical knowledge of visual arts, art objects and artists, art historians can offer incredibly important contributions for

[294] Rodriguez, "Pleasure is Freedom."

creating a new, equitable society. This is one reason why I agree with witch and author Gabriella Herstick when she says, "I…want to… acknowledge the power in destroying these statues. Those statues represent racism and evil. When we do something on a physical level it also happens energetically. It literally is an act of *magick* when we take down those statues and egregores."[295] Her words point to the power that monuments hold, especially as objects in outdoor spaces, and the potential for both liberation and oppression in the removal or erection of such objects. In this way, when we are deliberate about the visual objects that we see and the manner in which we see them, we are actually participating in freedom movements, all of which start as a dream and belief in a different reality.

Conclusion: What Is It For?

> Call me utopian, but I inherited my mother's belief that the map to a new world is in the imagination, in what we see in our third eyes rather than in the desolation that surrounds us.[296]
> —Robin D. G. Kelley

> 12. The work is never done.[297]
> —Ariana Brown

Overview of the importance of this work

In the Hindu ritual tradition, there is a term that expresses the act of seeing as a sacred thing or a devotion of the heart; it is called darśan. Although this dissertation does not focus on religious works of art, per se, I have resonated with this approach of beholding images since I

[295] Gabriella Herstick, Instagram post, June 12, 2002, emphasis added by the author.
[296] Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 2.

[297] Ariana Brown, "Volver Volver," filmed at CUPSI 2014, YouTube video, 3:14, uploaded by Button Poetry, March 19, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Kn4laUEXo0.

was a child. Seeing is sacred to me, it is auspicious to have sight, so considering each work of art from each chapter, I offer this body of writing as a sort of meditation on looking at a collection of murals that can offer an unexpected story of solidarity, of resisting and uplifting, of dreaming and finding freedom from images and the places in which they were made. Pairing spatial and racial histories with works of art so we can *see* social movements and social objects in their most full contest gives new life to both. This unique approach also offers limitless potential for reading works of art as visual and spatial. While these were my approaches, or perhaps, part of my methodology, the real contribution this dissertation offers is to Black and Latinx people everywhere. This meditation is for you—for us. Looking at our histories in Los Angeles through the built environment and the inspirational works of Black and Brown public art that have been produced over the decades has been an honor and a pleasure. I have learned so much about my city and forever, I am proud and grateful to be born here. While the first three chapters outline specific murals, comparing and contrasting them in their own right, some of the most important and unique contributions I offer are from the last two chapters. In chapter 4, *Watts Still Rising*, I provide a substantial amount of primary research in creating a mural for the historically Black and growing Latinx neighborhood of Watts. The work I did in Watts and supporting the mural project was a thrill and highlight in my graduate career. The final chapter, which offers a great interest in the future, was perhaps the most transformational writing I have ever done. In order for me to write about freedom dreams, I had to hold the belief that I could freedom dream myself. Holding this vision during the outpouring of pain and suffering as a result of the senseless murder of George Floyd was a challenge I felt in my body, mind and spirit—but one I saw through to the other side of peace, joy and ease. I found through this experience what it was

to be soft, yet I knew that the words on the page were creating opportunities for new life, for dreaming and embodying freedom for those of us with the most to gain.

Recommendations for the field

My recommendation to the field of art history is to deliberately and systemically decenter whiteness, Western ways of knowing and white supremacy. Sometimes words like "conventional" or "benchmark" stand in for practices that are actually discriminatory, limiting and corrupt. In addition to moving away from epistemes that center and re-center whiteness, I recommend that art history advance its methodologies and theories with more critical technologies and ideas. Building off the interdisciplinary work our colleagues in history, literature, ethnic studies, sociology, urban planning, and gender studies have created would not only benefit scholars within art history, it would benefit our readers, our students, our communities, our colleagues, our institutions and our worlds, bringing them closer together.

Finally, this project offers many contributions to the field of Chicanx Studies. It offers an interdisciplinary approach to the study of murals and community engagement. The project presented in chapter 4 produced an original form of mapping space and memories via emoji mapping, a methodology that has important implications in the future in many fields of study. This work is also more than a theoretical approach to history or a visual analysis of a painting; it is a practice-based community orientated project that will produce permanent artwork and public monuments in and for the Watts community. The mural and the monuments will have a life outside of this dissertation and hopefully, will have an impact on current residents and generations to come. Sometimes, when community-based work is conducted, its results are typed up as an essay, dissertation or book project and prove to be very important for scholars, but are

much less useful for the residents they worked with. In addition to scholarship, this project, however, offers lasting monuments that are accessible and available to residents and visitors alike for years to come.

Future work

In the future, I plan to transform this manuscript into an interdisciplinary art history book about Black and Latinx works of art that share an interest in liberation for people of color in Los Angeles. At this point, another version of chapter 3, "*Education is a Basic Human Right*," was accepted for publication and is currently being edited before the essay goes to press. Furthermore, a section from chapter 4 was published in *Dialogo* in 2018. I hope to continue to expand this effort and share it with the world. I would like to return to an art making-practice where I can collaborate with friends, colleagues and students where we continue to dream, imagine and image freedom.

Bibliography

Interviews, Conversations, Correspondence

Celia Burke, May 29, 2020.
Pinkus Crowther, June 28, 2016.
Michael Franklin, July 7, 2016.
Dr. Chris Hickey, March 1, 2016.
Jessi Jumanji, May 23, 2020.
Alma Lopez, November 26, 2019.
Alice Patrick, August 25, 2016
Helen Singleton, February 23, 2019.

Archival Sources

David Donald Mulford Papers, California State Archives, Office of the Secretary of State, Sacramento, CA.

Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC) Collection, California State University, Dominguez Hills, CA.

Secondary Sources

Aguirre, Frederick P. "*Mendez v. Westminster School District*: How it Affected *Brown v. Board of Education*." *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* 4, no. 4 (October 2005): 321–332.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza.* San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 2012.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *The Gloria Anzaldua Reader*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009.

Baca, Judith F. "Whose Monument Where? Public Art in a Many-Cultured Society." In *Mapping The Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, edited by Suzanne Lacy, 131–138. Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995.

Barraclough, Laura R. *Making the San Fernando Valley: Rural Landscape, Urban Development and White Privilege*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011.

Beasley, Delilah Leontium. *The Negro Trail Blazers of California: A Compilation of Records from the California Archives in the Bancroft Library at the University of California, in Berkeley; and from the Diaries, Old Papers and Conversations of Old Pioneers in the State of California; It is a True Record of Facts, as They Pertain to the History of the Pioneer and Present Day Negroes of California*. Los Angeles, CA: Times Mirror Print and Binding House, 1919.

Bermudez, Esmeralda, and Paloma Esquivel. “Latinos now dominate Watts, but some feel Blacks still hold power.” *Los Angeles Times*, August 10, 2015. https://www.latimes.com/local/wattsriots/la-me-watts-riots-latinos-20150809-story.html.

Bowles, John P. “Blinded by the White: Art and History at the Limits of Whiteness.” *Art Journal* 60, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 39–44.

brown, adrienne maree. *Pleasure Activism.* Chico, CA: AK Press, 2019.

Brown, Ariana. “Volver Volver.” Filmed at CUPSI 2014. YouTube video, 3:14, uploaded by Button Poetry, March 19, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Kn4laUEXo0.

Brown, Vincent. “Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery.” *American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (December 2009): 1231–1249.

Campbell, Marne L. *Making Black Los Angeles: Class, Gender, and Community, 1850–1917.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016.

Campt, Tina M. *Listening to Images*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017.

Catlett, Elizabeth. *Traditions and Transformations: Contemporary Afro-American Sculpture; The Bronx Museum of the Arts, February 21–May 27, 1989*. New York: The Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1989.

Chicano! The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement. Coproduced by Galan Productions, Inc., and the National Latino Communications Center, in association with KCET Los Angeles, 1996. [videorecording]

Clark, Ashley. “Afrofuturism on film: five of the best.” *Guardian*, April 2, 2015. https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2015/apr/02/afrofuturism-on-film-five-best-brooklyn-bamcinematek.

Cornejo, Kency. “Decolonial Futurism: Ancestral Border Crossers, Time Machines, and Space Travel in Salvadoran Art.” In *Mundo Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas*, edited by Robb Hernándes, Tyler Stallings, and Joanna Szupinka-Meyers, 21–31. Riverside, CA: University of California, Riverside (UCR) Artsblock, 2017.

Cornejo, Kency. “ ‘Does That Come with a Hyphen? A Space?’: The Question of Central American-Americans in Latino Art and Pedagogy.” *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 40, no.1 (Spring 2015): 189–210.

Davalos, Karen Mary. *Chicana/o Remix: Art and Errata Since the Sixties*. New York: New York University Press, 2017.

Dean, Carolyn, and Dana Leibsohn, "Hybridity and Its Discontents: Considering Visual Culture in Colonial Spanish America." *Colonial Latin American Review* 12, no. 1 (2003): 5–35.

Def Jef. "Black to the Future." Delicious Vinyl, *Just a Poet with a Soul*, 1989.

Demaratus, DeEtta. *The Force of a Feather: The Search for a Lost Story of Slavery and Freedom.* Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 200.

Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." In *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, edited by Mark Dery. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994. Originally published in *South Atlantic Quarterly* 92, no. 4 (Fall 1993): 735–788.

DiAngelo, Robin. "White Fragility." *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 54–70.

Donahue-Wallace, Kelly. *Art and Architecture of Viceregal Latin America, 1521–1821*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008.

Dyer, Rychard. *White: Essays on Race and Culture.* London: Routledge, 1997.

Earle, Rebecca. "The Pleasure of Taxonomy: Casta Paintings, Classification and Colonialism." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (July 2016): 427–466.

Estrada, William David. *The Los Angeles Plaza: Shared and Contested Space.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008.

Golden, Sherita Hill. "Coronavirus in African Americans and Other People of Color." *Johns Hopkins Medicine*. Posted April 20, 2020. https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/covid19-racial-disparities.

Goldman, Shifra. *Dimension of the Americas: Art and Social Change in Latin America and the United States.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Goldman, Shifra. *Tradition and Transformation: Chicana/o Art from the 1970s through the 1990s*. Edited and introduced by Charlene Villaseñor Black. Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2015.

Gow, William. "Building a Chinese Village in Los Angeles: Christine Sterling and the Residents of China City, 1938–1948." *Gum Saan Journal* 31, no. 1 (2010): 39–53.

Gregory, Dick. Interview by Merv Griffin. *Merv Griffin Show*. New York, 1965. Black and white film.

Hadfield, Andrew, ed. *Amazons, Savages and Machiavels: Travel and Colonial Writing in English, 1550–1630: An Anthology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Haney López, Ian F. "The Social Construction of Race: Some Observations on Illusion, Fabrication, and Choice." *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 29, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 1–62.

Haney López, Ian. *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race.* New York: New York University Press, 1996.

Hayden, Dolores. *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995.

Herrera, Estefani. "Student Group Pushed for exposure of 'The Black Experience,' a mural hidden in Ackerman for more than 20 years." *Daily Bruin*, February 22, 2013. https://dailybruin.com/2013/02/22/the-black-experience-a-hidden-mural-in-ackerman-to-be-exposed-after-over-20-years.

High, Freida. "*Chiasmus*-Art in Politics/Politics in Art: Chicano/a and African American Image, Text, and Activism of the 1960s and 1970s," in *Voices of Color: Art and Society in the Americas*, ed. Phoebe Farris-Dufrene, 118–165. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1997.

hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom.* New York: Routledge, 1994.

Horne, Gerald. *Black and Brown: African Americans and the Mexican Revolution, 1910–1920.* New York, NY: New York University Press, 2005.

Horne, Gerald. *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995.

Huggins, Erica. "A Remembrance of John and Bunchy 50 Years Later." *Erica Huggins: The Official Website*. Published January 17, 2019. https://www.erickahuggins.com/a-rememberance-of-john-and-bunchy.

Jackson, Helen Hunt. *Ramona.* Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1900.

Johnson, Gaye Theresa. *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013.

Jones, Kellie. *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017.

Jones, Kellie. *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960–1980*. Los Angeles, CA: Hammer Museum, 2011.

Kelley, Robin D. G. *Freedom Dreams: The Radical Black Imagination.* Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2002.

Kelley, Robin D. G. "Watts: Remember What They Built, Not What They Burned." *Los Angeles Times,* August 11, 2015. https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-0811-kelley-watts-civil-society-20150811-story.html.

King, Martin Luther, Jr. "The Other America." Speech filmed April 14, 1967, at Stanford University. YouTube video, 47:54, uploaded by Stanford University Libraries, September 23, 2016. https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/news/50-years-ago-martin-luther-king-jr-speaks-stanford-university.

King, Martin Luther, Jr. *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1968.

Kohl, Jeanette. "Work Hard, Dream Big: Whose Renaissance?" *Kunsttexte,* no. 4 (2012): 1–7.

Kropp, Phoebe S. "Citizens of the Past? Olvera Street and the Construction of Race and Memory in 1930s Los Angeles." *Radical History Review* 81 (2001): 34–60.

Kun, Josh, and Laura Pulido. *Black and Brown in Los Angeles: Beyond Conflict and Coalition*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.

Latorre, Guisela. *Walls of Empowerment: Chicano/a Indigenist Murals of California.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008.

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space.* Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1984.

Lipsitz, George. *How Racism Takes Place.* Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2011.

Lipsitz, George. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics.* Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998.

Lytle Hernández, Kelly. *City of Inmates*: *Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of the Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771–1965.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017.

Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. "On Metaphysical Catastrophe, Post-Continental Thought, and the Decolonial Turn." In *Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago,* edited by Tatiana Flores and Michelle Ann Stephens, 247–260. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017.

Marshall, Thurgood, and Robert L. Carter. "Brief for the National Association of Colored People as *amicus curiae*." *Westminster v. Mendez,* 161 F2d. 774 (9th Cir. 1947).

Mason, William M. *Los Angeles Under the Spanish Flag*: *Spain's New World*. Burbank, CA: Southern California Genealogical Society, 2004.

McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and Cartographies of Struggle.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

McKittrick, Katherine, and Clyde Woods. *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place.* Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007.

Mercer, Kobena. "Black Art and the Burden of Representation." In *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies.* New York: Routledge, 1994.

Merl, Jean. "Study Finds Rampant Illiteracy in L.A. County." *Los Angeles Times*, September 9, 2004. https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2004-sep-09-me-literacy9-story.html.

Molina, Natalia. "Examining Chicana/o History through a Relational Lens." *Pacific Historical Review* 82, no. 4 (2013): 520–541.

Natividad, Ivan. "Police Violence Makes COVID-19 Worse for Black Americans." *Futurity.org*, April 27, 2020. https://www.futurity.org/police-violence-covid-19-2348242/.

Odebiyi, Dapo. *Watts Feeds Itself.* Los Angeles, CA: Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC), 1970.

Olabisi, Noni. "Artist Statement." California Community Foundation. https://www.calfund.org/nonprofits/featured-funds/fva/2010-gallery/noni-Olabisi/.

Olabisi, Noni, in an interview with Mural Conservancy LA. "MCLA June 2012 Artist of the Month: Noni Olabisi." YouTube video, 9:11, uploaded by MuralConservancyLA, June 14, 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DySjC8XDnJc.

Ontiveros, Mario. *Baca: Art, Collaboration, and Mural Making*. Los Angeles, CA: Angle City Press, 2017.

Pérez, Emma. *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

Pohl, Frances, K. *Framing America: A Social History of American Art, c.200 BCE – 1900*, vol. 1. New York, NY: Thames & Hudson, 2017.

Pulido, Laura. *Black, Brown, Yellow and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

Pulido, Laura. "Geographies of Race and Ethnicity III: Settler Colonialism and Nonnative People of Color." *Progress in Human Geography* 42, no. 2 (2018): 309–318.

Pulido, Laura, Laura R. Barraclough, and Wendy Cheng. *A People's Guide to Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

Ramirez, Catherine. "Afrofuturism/Chicanafuturism: Fictive Kin." *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 185–194.

Reeves, Jimmie L., and Richard Campbell. *Cracked Coverage: Television News, the Anti-Cocaine Crusade, and the Regan Legacy.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994.

Robinson, Paul. "Race, Space, and the Evolution of Black Los Angeles." In *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities*, edited by Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón, 21–59. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2010.

Rodriguez, Favianna. "Pleasure is Freedom." Filmed January 9, 2016, at TedxSanMigueldeAllende. YouTube video, 13:46, uploaded by Tedx Talks, May 10, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9beK8fotls.

Sadlier, Sarah. "*Méndez v. Westminster*: The Harbinger Of *Brown v. Board*." *Ezra's Archives* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 76–89. https://ecommons.cornell.edu/bitstream/handle/1813/47956/4.8%20Mendez.pdf.

Sandoval, Chela. *Methodology of the Oppressed.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

Sastry, Anjuli, and Karen Grigsby Bates. "When LA Erupted in Anger: A Look Back at the Rodney King Riots." *NPR*, April 26, 2017. https://www.npr.org/2017/04/26/524744989/when-la-erupted-in-anger-a-look-back-at-the-rodney-king-riots.

Seed, Patricia. "Social Dimensions of Race: Mexico City, 1753." *Hispanic American Historical Review* 62, no. 4. (1982): 569–606.

Shackleford, Bridget. "The Changing Face of UCLA Diversity." *The Daily Bruin*, September 23, 2006. https://dailybruin.com/2006/09/23/the-changing-face-of-ucla-dive/.

Sides, Josh. Video interview by Zach Behrens. "From the South to Compton: On Race." Video featured in Zach Behrens, "Before the 1950s, the Whiteness of Compton was Defended Vehemently," *KCET*, January 11, 2011. https://www.kcet.org/socal-focus/before-the-1950s-the-whiteness-of-compton-was-defended-vehemently.

Sides, Josh. *L. A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Migration to the Present*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC). "Conservation of 'To Protect and Serve' by Noni Obalisi." https://sparcinla.org/conservation-of-to-protect-and-serve-by-noni-olabisi/.

Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC). "The Great Wall – History and Description." https://sparcinla.org/the-great-wall-part-2/.

Social Explorer. "Explore Maps." Last accessed July 23, 2020. https://www.socialexplorer.com/explore-maps.

Song, Jason. "A long-hidden mural is revealed, along with a piece of UCLA history." *Los Angeles Times,* June 7, 2014. https://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-adv-ucla-mural-20140608-story.html.

Stevenson, Brenda. *The Contested Murder of Latasha Harlins: Justice, Gender, and the Origins of the LA Riots.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Stevenson, Brenda. *What is Slavery.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015.

Tourmaline. "Filmmaker and Activist Tourmaline on How to Freedom Dream." *Vogue,* July 2, 2020. https://www.vogue.com/article/filmmaker-and-activist-tourmaline-on-how-to-freedom-dream.

T-RACES: Testbed for the Redlining Archives of California's Exclusionary Spaces. Accessed July 11, 2016. T-Races. Accessed July 11, 2016. http://salt.umd.edu/T-RACES/data/la/ad/ad0425.pdf.

Tuer, Dot. "Is it Still Privileged Art? The Politics of Class and Collaboration in the Art Practice of Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge." In *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*, edited by Nina Felshin, 195–220. Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995.

UCLA. " 'The Black Experience Mural' Gives Snapshot of 1970." YouTube video, 3:57, uploaded by UCLA, April 22, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xN6dWuZv4Lc.

UCLA Black Alumni, "Significant Moments in Black Bruin History: The Civil Rights Movement." UCLA Black Alumni Newsletter, February 2017. https://newsletter.alumni.ucla.edu/connect/2017/feb/black-history/default.htm#civil.

UCLA Labor Center. "The Bracero Program: Bracero History Program." Accessed July 28, 2020. https://www.labor.ucla.edu/what-we-do/research-tools/the-bracero-program/.

UC Office of the President. "UC Board of Regents unanimously endorses ACA 5, repeal of Prop. 209." Media release, June 15, 2020. https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/press-room/uc-board-regents-endorses-aca-5-repeal-prop-209.

Vasconcelos, José. *La Raza Cósmica.* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. Originally published in 1925.

Villaseñor Black, Charlene. “New Fronteras.” *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 41, no. 2 (2016): 1–10.

Von Blum, Paul. “Before and After Watts: Black Art in Los Angeles.” In *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities,* edited by Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón, 243–265. New York, NY: New York University, 2010.

Watts Area Description, Security Map of Los Angeles County. T-RACES: Testbed for the Redlining Archives of California’s Exclusionary Spaces. Accessed July 11, 2016. http://salt.umd.edu/T-RACES/data/la/ad/ad0425.pdf.

Watts Labor Action Committee. “Our Future.” Accessed November 14, 2016. http://www.wlcac.org/our-future.htm.

Watts Riots 50 (@WattsRiot50). Twitter, August 4–18, 2015. https://twitter.com/wattsriots50.

Weaver, John D. *Los Angeles: The Enormous Village, 1781–1981*. Santa Barbara, CA: Capra Press, 1980.

Weiss, Will, and Ravi Doshi. “Ackerman Union’s hidden mural.” *Daily Bruin*, May 11, 2010. https://dailybruin.com/2010/05/11/Ackerman-Unions-hidden-mural.

West Adams Heritage Association. “Paul R. Williams Landmark in West Adams Becomes L.A.’s Historic Cultural Monument No. 1000.” Reprinted from February 2011 newsletter. http://www.westadamsheritage.org/read/1242.

Widener, Daniel. *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

Zamora, Rebecca. “Shifra Goldman and David Alfaro Siqueiros’s *América Tropical*.” *Getty Research Journal,* no. 6 (2014): 115–27.