UC Santa Cruz
UC Santa Cruz Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title
Painting Central America: U.S. Central American Visual Art of San Francisco

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/493828s3

Author
Ramirez, Mauricio Ernesto

Publication Date
2021

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ

PAINTING CENTRAL AMERICA: U.S. CENTRAL AMERICAN VISUAL ART OF SAN FRANCISCO

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

LATIN AMERICAN & LATINO STUDIES
with an emphasis in VISUAL STUDIES

by

Mauricio E. Ramírez

June 2021

The Dissertation of Mauricio E. Ramírez is approved:

Professor Catherine S. Ramírez, chair

Professor Jennifer A. González

Professor Gabriela F. Arredondo

Professor Cecilia M. Rivas

Quentin Williams
Interim Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

Copyright © by
Mauricio E. Ramírez
2021

Table of Contents

List of Figures iv

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction: Rethinking U.S. Central American and Latinx Art of San Francisco 1

Chapter 1: Salvadoran Artists Paint the Mission Barrio: Resistance from El Salvador to San Francisco 23

Chapter 2: Visual Solidarity: San Francisco Bay Area Chicanx Artists in Solidarity with Central America 58

Chapter 3: Walls of Resistance: PLACA Murals and Transnational Solidarity with Central America 103

Chapter 4: Visualizing Memories of Space and Belonging: U.S. Central American Art of the Mission Barrio 131

Epilogue: U.S. Central American Visual Art During an Era of Displacement in San Francisco 172

Bibliography 179

List of Figures

Figure 1. 1. Sigüenza, Herbert and Unidentified Artist. *It's Simple Steve*. Ca. 1980. 28

Figure 1. 2. Sigüenza, Herbert. *Untitled.* 1982. Mural on Galería De La Raza's billboard. Photo Courtesy of Timothy Drescher. 31

Figure 1. 3. Llort, Fernando. *The Relic of Archbishop Romero.* Courtesy of the Archbishop Romero Trust.. 35

Figure 1. 4. Sigüenza, Herbert. *After the Triumph/Después del Triunfo*,1984. Located in Balmy Alley. Photograph by Jim Prigoff. Courtesy of Artstor. 36

Figure 1. 5. Meiselas, Susan. *Mano Blanca*, 1980. Photograph. Signature of the death squads left on the door of a slain peasant organizer. Arcatao, Chalatenango Province, El Salvador. 38

Figure 1. 6. Mata, Isaías. *500 Años de Resistencia/500 Years of Resistance*, 1992. Mural on Saint Peter's Church, located on 24th and Florida Streets. 47

Figure 1. 7. Mata, Isaías. *500 Años de Resistencia/500 Years of Resistance*, 1992. Mural on Saint Peter's Church, located on 24th St. and Florida St. 50

Figure 1. 8. Mata, Isaías. *500 Años de Resistencia/500 Years of Resistance*, 1992. Mural on Saint Peter's Church, located on 24th St. and Florida St. Photo by Mauricio E. Ramírez.. 51

Figure 1. 9. Sigüenza, Herbert. *After the Triumph/Después del Triunfo*, 1984. The current state of Sigüenza's mural located in Balmy Alley. Photo taken on March 2021 by Mauricio E. Ramírez. 56

Figure 2. 1. *El Tecolote*, August 1981. Courtesy of El Tecolote Archives……….... 65

Figure 2. 2. Alicia, Juana. *Las Lechugueras/The Women Lettuce Workers,* 1983. Mural located on York and 24th Streets. A commission from the Mayor's Office of Community Development and the San Francisco Arts Commission. Destroyed and replaced with *La Llorona's Sacred Waters*, also by Juana Alicia in 2004. 69

Figure 2. 3. Alicia, Juana. *For the Roses/ Para las Rosas*, 1985. Courtesy of Artstor. 71

Figure 2. 4. Alicia, Juana. *For the Roses/ Para las Rosas*, 1985. Close up of guerrilleros on top left and woman and man holding rifles. Courtesy of Artsor. 72

Figure 2. 5. A collective mural project with Juana Alicia, Miranda Bergman, Nohelia Cerrato, Boanerges Cerrato, Vicente Cerrato, Rosa Lopez Hernandes, Hector Noel Méndez, Pablo Paisano, Ariella Seidenberg, and Arch Williams, *El Amanecer*, 1986, retouched 1993. Acrylic on stucco. Located in Plaza España, Parque de las Madres, Managua, Nicaragua. Photograph by Arch Williams. Courtesy of Artstor. 73

Figure 2. 6. Alicia, Juana. *Alto Al Fuego/Cease Fire*, 1988, retouched in 2002. Photograph by Steve Rotman. Located on the corner of 21st and Mission Streets, San Francisco, CA. Destroyed by graffiti. 75

Figure 2. 7. Alicia, Juana. *Alto Al Fuego/Cease Fire*, 1987. Poster. Courtesy of Juana Alicia. 76

Figure 2. 8. Juana, Alicia. *Una Ley Inmoral Nadie Tiene que Cumplirla*, 1996. Located on Balmy Alley, San Francisco, California. Photograph by Mauricio E. Ramírez. 78

Figure 2. 9. Fuentes, Juan R. *Romero Presente!* 1991. Screen print. 85

Figure 2. 10. *Miliciana de Waswalito* by Orlando Valenzuela in Matagalpa, Nicaragua, 1984. 86

Figure 2. 11. Montoya, Malaquías. *FSLN Juventud Sandinista* Montoya, 1979. 93

Figure 2. 12. Montoya, Malaquías. *"I Will See My Land Again…" FMLN*, 1991. 95

Figure 2. 13. Montoya, Malaquías, *Carnal Del Sur.* 1987. 97

Figure 3. 1. Las Mujeres Muralistas, 1973. Photographed by Tim Drescher. Located in Balmy Alley. Courtesy of Artstor……………………………………………..113

Figure 3. 2. Brigada Orlando Letelier, *Casa Sandino*, 1979. Balmy Alley at 24th Street. Photographed by Tim Drescher. Courtesy of Artsor. 114

Figure 3. 3. Untitled photograph. K.K.K. defacement of primed garage door on Balmy Alley, 1984. Photograph by Jim Prigoff. 116

Figure 3. 4. Patlán, Ray and Francisco Camplís. *Camino Al Mercado/ On the Way to the Market*, 1984. Located in Balmy Alley. Photo by Timothy Drescher. 116

Figure 3. 5. Alicia, Juana. Te Oimos Guatemala/ We hear you Guatemala,1984. Located in Balmy Alley. Photo by Nicole Emmanuel. Courtesy of Artstor. 119

Figure 3. 6. González, Carlos. *Keeping the Peace in Central America/ Preservando la Paz en Centro America,*1984. Located in Balmy Alley. Photo by Nicole Emanuel. Courtesy of Artstor. 122

Figure 3. 7. Cervantes, Susan K. *A Dream of Death Falling*, *Spirit Rising: Peace to Central America/ Sueño de la Muerte Cayendo y el Espiritu Levantandose: Paz para*

Centro America. 1984. Located in Balmy Alley. Photo by Jim Prigoff. Courtesy of Artstor. 125

Figure 4. 2. Close up of Victorian homes, photographs by Natalie Aleman and paintings by Jasmin Cañas at the opening exhibition of *Ode to Our Barrio: A Tribute to The Mission by Dos Centroamericanas* Photograph by Mauricio E. Ramírez…..149

Figure 4. 3. Martilla, Max and Fred Alvarado, Precita Eyes' Urban Youth Program Muralists, *Latin House,* 2017. Photographed by Mauricio E. Ramírez at 25th and York Streets on November 2020. This juxtaposition depicts the "gray washing" of San Francisco homes.......... 151

Figure 4. 4. Cañas, Jasmine. *Mission Altar*, 2018. Acrylic paint on wooden Panel. Image taken from the artists' website: http://www.jasmincolores.com.......... 153

Figure 4. 5. Image of blue and red pinwheel mosaic tile pattern found on the sidewalk of Mission St. The first two blocks in which these tiles begin at is the intersection of Mission St. and 23rd St. and end on Mission St. at 25th St. The second two blocks begin at the intersection of Mission St. and 15th St. and end at Mission St. and 17th St. 158

Figure 4. 6. Rojas, Josué. *Two Fires*, 2016, Acrylic on canvas. Image Courtesy of Josué Rojas.......... 162

Figure 4. 7. Rojas, Josué. *Amor: The Perfect Lotus*, 2016, Acrylic on canvas. Image courtesy of Josué Rojas.......... 165

Figure 4. 8. Rojas, Josué. *Alex Nieto*, 2018. Mural. Located on a parking lot on 24th St. and Capp St. Photograph by Mauricio E. Ramírez.......... 167

Figure 4. 9. Oree Originol, *Justice for Alex Nieto*, 2014. Digital print. Image courtesy of www.oreeoriginol.com. 169

Acknowledgments

I complete this dissertation not only as a student, but as a son, brother, husband, and father and so I have many people to thank, starting with my parents, Gloria and José Ramírez. Without their support and inspiration, this work would not have been possible. I also thank my sister, Ingrid Lee, for setting a high bar for education as I trailed behind her. My wife, Fatima Ramírez, has also supported my academic aspirations since we first met back in 2012. Our fruitful conversations around our common passion for visual arts have made writing this dissertation worthwhile. Our son, Victor, has increased my capacity for love and reminds me that I write U.S. Central American art history for future generations.

The seeds of my research were planted when I participated in UC Santa Cruz's Faculty Mentor Program (FMP) and studied in Chile as an undergraduate. My FMP mentor, Dee Hibbert Jones, was my first guide to the murals and graffiti art of San Francisco. Dr. Nick Mitchell also gave me a greater understanding of urban renewal, gentrification, and San Francisco's permutations over the decades. As an art major, I was not aware of how critical research is to art history and Latinx history. The colleagues I met through FMP inspired my pursuit of research. Jack Cáraves in particular encouraged me to apply to Ph.D. programs. In 2011, while studying in Chile, I had the good fortune to meet Dr. Francisco A. Lomelí, who also inspired me to pursue a career in academia and provided feedback on my first writing about U.S. Central American art of San Francisco.

My advisor, Dr. Catherine Ramírez, has supported me since I enrolled in the Latin American and Latino Studies (LALS) Ph.D. Program at UC Santa Cruz. Her consistent feedback and guidance have helped me grow as a scholar by pushing me to consider new and different perspectives. Dr. Gabriela Arredondo maintained faith in me and my project. In my first year of the Program, she also taught me a great deal about oral history. Dr. Cecilia Rivas enrichened my knowledge of Central American—notably El Salvador's—history. Outside of LALS, I found helpful advisors in the History of Art and Visual Culture's (HAVC) Visual Studies Program. Dr. Jennifer González encouraged my project early on, guided me at critical stages of my graduate career, and introduced me to the world of Latinx and Chicanx art history. My rich conversations about diasporas with Dr. Stacy Kamehiro helped me situate my project. In addition, Dr. Norma Klahn and Dr. Grace Peña Delgado were helpful and supportive sounding boards.

I am grateful to the entire LALS Department for buoying me throughout my academic career. One of the first classes I took as an undergraduate at UC Santa Cruz was in LALS. It opened my worldview not just to Central America, but to the Americás. I am grateful to the LALS professors who saw my project expand and grow: Sylvanna Falcón, Patricia Zavella, Patricia Pinho, Jeffery Erbig, Fernando Leiva, Justin Perez, Jessica Taft, and Adrián Félix. I am also fortunate to have worked alongside brilliant classmates and colleagues, particularly Victoria Sanchez, Karla Cativo, Candy Martínez, Ismael Illescas, Emilia Valenzuela, Rafael Delgadillo, Cesar

Estrella, Alina Fernandez, Marie Tolan, Karina Ruiz, Karla Reyes, and Juan Carlos Davila. I thank them for their intellectual stimulation and company.

In addition, I benefitted from the intellectual community in HAVC. I learned new perspectives regarding visual studies from Dr. Boreth Ly and Dr. Martin Berger. Madison Treece, Alexandra Macheski, Tatiane Santa Rosa, Maggie Wander, Michelle Yee, and Kristen Laciste, all inspired me to continue my research on murals and public art.

Beyond UC Santa Cruz, Dr. Cary Cordova's research and scholarship led me to dig deeper into the Latinx art history of San Francisco. The conversations we had about murals and the history of the Mission District murals have been illuminating. I've reread countless times Dr. Ana Patricia Rodríguez's book and articles to learn the rich history of Central Americans in San Francisco. Her research and scholarship on U.S. Central Americans in Washington D.C. also presented me with a new world of Central American diaspora across the United States. Dr. Carlos Cordova has also been foundational in sharing his photographic archive and stories of San Francisco's many Central American artists. Dr. Kency Cornejo's writings and mentorship have helped me understand U.S. Central American art. She has been inspirational as a scholar and as a person. Likewise, Dr. Tatiana Reinoza's wide-ranging scholarship on Latinx artists has been instrumental. Dr. Steven Osuna has been a mentor and a figure I look up to since I was an undergraduate in the Unión Salvadoreña de Estudiantes Universitarios (USEU). Lastly, I thank my writing coach, Barbara D'Angelo who provided me with exceptional feedback throughout each draft of this dissertation.

This research would not have been possible without funding from the LALS Department, the Division of Social Sciences, and the Research Center for the Americas at UC Santa Cruz. In my third year, the Social Science Research Council's Dissertation Proposal Development Program helped push my dissertation forward. In my last year, the University of California President's Pre-Professoriate Fellowship has allowed me to finish this dissertation.

Lastly, many thanks go to the artists I discuss within these pages. All made themselves available to answer my questions. I am forever appreciative for their help, insight, and inspiration.

I hope that, at least in your eyes, I've earned what all of you have given me.

Introduction: Rethinking U.S. Central American and Latinx Art of San Francisco

"The past is not waiting for us back there to recoup our identities against. It is always retold, rediscovered, reinvented. It has to be narrativized. We go to our own pasts through history, through memory, through desire, not as literal fact."[1]

– Stuart Hall

This dissertation fills a void in the U.S. historical narrative that overlooks the artistic contributions of U.S. Central American visual artists and those who painted in solidarity with Central Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area.[2] In this dissertation, I demonstrate how visual artworks created in the city of San Francisco during the 1980s and 1990s in response to the U.S.-backed civil wars in Central America, specifically in El Salvador (1980- 1992), Guatemala (1960-1996), and Nicaragua (1979-1990), expand the notion of U.S- Latinx Art.[3] I also examine how first-generation, 1.5-generation, and second-generation U.S. Central American art practitioners have used visual art as a means of visibility (both politically and culturally) to self-represent and enunciate their presence within the city. As the third largest Latinx subgroup in the United States, U.S. Central Americans and their art are rarely analyzed. By centering overlooked U.S. Central American art and artists, I

[1] Hall, Stuart. "Old and New Ethnicities," unedited transcript for the second of two lectures delivered in conjunction with the Third Annual Symposium on current Debates in Art History, *Culture, Globalization, and the World System: Contemporary Conditions for Representation of Identity*, organized by Anthony Kink, Departments of Art and Art History, Statue University of New York at Binghamton, March 14, 1989, p. 28.

[2] For this research, I employ the term "U.S. Central American visual art" as a descriptor of art created by Central American artists in the United States.

[3] The term Latina/o used to describe the population of Latin American descent living in the United States has varied over time. This book uses the term Latinx with the understanding that the "x" is gender inclusive and stands in for "a" and "o" gendered endings as well as allows for identities that complicate or refuse identifying with a gender.

offer a new paradigm for understanding not only Latinx art and visual culture, but Latinxness itself. More broadly, this interdisciplinary study asks: How did the U.S. Central American artwork of San Francisco—created by Central Americans and other Latinx groups—articulate and depict solidarity, transnationalism, and the Central American diaspora? And how have those articulations and depictions of U.S. Central Americans expanded Latinidad and Latinx art?

My work contributes to a growing body of scholarly work known as U.S. Central American Studies. Few scholars have explored the role art activism has played in the solidarity movement for the liberation movements of Central America in the 1980s or art activism's impact on successive generations of U.S. Central American artists.[4] I demonstrate how U.S. Central American artists develop a visual language of art practices as they articulate and conceptualize critical understandings of place, solidarity, diaspora, and knowledge. I argue these critical understandings emerged from art activism that denounced U.S. involvement in Central American conflicts during the 1980s and 1990s. The activism that emerged from these events strengthened the relationships of U.S. Central American artists with other artists and activists, especially Chicanxs.

[4] See Cordova, Cary. "Hombres y Mujeres Muralistas on a Mission: Painting Latino Idenities in the 1970s San Francisco." *The Heart of the Mission: Latino Art and Politics in San Francisco.* University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017; Rodríguez, Ana Patricia. *Dividing the Isthmus: Central American Transnational Histories, Literatures, and Cultures.* University of Texas Press, 2009; Cornejo, Kency. "US Central Americans in Art and Visual Culture," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, February 2019; Barnet-Sánchez, Holly and Tim Drescher. "Taking Chicanoa and Solidarity Murals Seriously." *Rewrting the Chicano Movement: New Histories of Mexican American Activism in the Civil Rights Era*, edited by Mario T. García and Ellen McCkraken, University of Arizona Press, 2021; Duganne, Erina. "In Defense of Solidarity." *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture,* vol. 2, no. 2, 2020, pp. 99–103.

The civil wars of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua sparked a massive migration; thousands of Central Americans arrived in the city of San Francisco. Guatemala's civil war lasted thirty-six years, from 1960 to 1996, and caused approximately 100,000-200,000 deaths. Most of those deaths were suffered by the indigenous population. Nicaragua had two civil wars, the Sandinista Revolution from 1974 to 1979, which ousted the long-ruling Somoza dictatorship, and the subsequent Contra War 1979 to 1990, causing the death of approximately thirty thousand. El Salvador's twelve-year civil war endured from 1980 to 1992, causing approximately seventy-five thousand deaths. During these intense years of civil wars, many Central Americans found refuge or were forced to live in exile in countries around the globe. The United States became a primary destination for millions of Central Americans; yet, others ended up in European countries and some traveled as far as Australia.[5] In the United States, the Salvadoran population skyrocketed from a little under one hundred thousand people in 1980 to well over half a million people by 1990.[6] San Francisco and the Bay Area became a destination for many Central Americans fleeing these civil wars.

---

[5] Australia and El Salvador formally established diplomatic relations in 1983. In response to the civil war in El Salvador, between 1983 and 1986 Australia accepted around 10,000 Salvadorans under the Special Humanitarian Program. The Salvadoran community in Australia is estimated at 20,000. Australia is home to the third largest Salvadoran community living abroad. According to *Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade*.

[6] These numbers are estimates and since so many Salvadorans arrived without documentation, some estimate this number is closer to one million. Carlos B. Cordova discussed the unreliability of the 1990 and 2000 censuses in his book, *The Salvadoran Americans*.

The history of Central Americans in San Francisco began in the late nineteenth century due to the coffee and other wartime industries. In the mid-nineteenth century, "members of the Salvadoran and Central American elite classes, political dissidents, and labor migrants associated with multinational fruit companies, railroads, and the Panama Canal began to migrate to cities including New Orleans, New York, and San Francisco." [7] In the 1940s, wartime industries in San Francisco continued to recruit Nicaraguans and Salvadorans.[8] Consequently, by the 1950s, Central Americans outnumbered Mexican-born residents in San Francisco.[9]

When the Salvadoran, Nicaraguan, and Guatemalan civil wars reached their peak in the 1980s, migration to San Francisco continued to increase steadily due to the kinship networks established in prior decades. The majority of Central Americans arrived in the Mission District, which led to a proliferation of Salvadoran and Nicaraguan restaurants, businesses, and courier services in the neighborhood. At one point in the 1990s, Salvadorans constituted the largest Latinx population in San Francisco. Although San Francisco never received as large an influx of Central American immigrants as Los Angeles, it has the longest continuous history of Salvadoran migration of any U.S. city.[10]

---

[7] Pinderhughes, Raquel, Carlos Cordova, and Jorge del Pinal. *Central and South Americans. Our Multicultural Heritage: A Guide to America's Principal Ethic Groups,* 1999.
[8] Menjívar, Cecilia. *Fragmented Ties: Salvadoran Immigrant Networks in America.* University of California Press, 2000, p. 9.
[9] See Godfrey, B. J. *Neighborhoods in transition: The making of San Francisco's ethnic and nonconformist communities.* University of California Press, 1998.
[10] Menjívar, Cecilia. *Fragmented Ties: Salvadoran Immigrant Networks in America.* University of California Press, 2000. p. 10.

The atrocities committed by the U.S.-supported military dictatorships in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua triggered the creation of numerous transnational solidarity organizations across the United States during the 1980s. San Francisco became a sanctuary city for Central Americans fleeing these brutal wars. As a counterhegemonic movement against the Ronald Reagan administration, the sanctuary movement opposed military intervention in Central America and created networks to help undocumented Central Americans seeking refuge in the United States. The influence of the longstanding sanctuary movement and solidarity movements played an important role in shaping art-activism against U.S. intervention.

By positioning the Mission District as a site of intensive Latinx cultural production, I underscore the activist role those non-Central American artists have played in creating solidarity art. There are three terms I use throughout the dissertation that signal the concept of solidarity. My use of solidarity in this dissertation aligns with the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of it as "Unity or agreement of feeling or action, especially among individuals with a common interest, mutual support within a group." By "solidarity art," I refer to visual art in paintings, murals, posters, etc. which represented Central American themes related to civil wars or which promoted solidarity with Central America. I employ the term "solidarity artist" to refer to artists who created visual art related to Central American subjects and themes. I implicitly argue the importance solidarity artists, particularly Chicanx

and Whites, played as agents for social change and in constructing U.S. Central American art in San Francisco.

The allure of the Mission District and its association with Latinidad since the 1960s have served as signifiers of foreignness, difference, and bohemianism. People from different walks of life have gravitated to the Mission District as a neighborhood for nonconformity. [11] As Cary Cordova observes, "Latino markets, murals, and galleries conveyed the culture of a foreign land for people seeking an alternative lifestyle within the United States. By locating in the Mission District, some Anglo Americans have sought nonconformity."[12] Not unlike San Francisco's North Beach or New York City's East Village, the Mission District boasts a legacy of attracting artists, non-conformists, bohemians, and people with progressive politics. I discuss how Anglo-Americans became important allies to Central Americans fleeing civil wars in the Mission District. Along with Chicanxs, they form an important component of solidarity.

This dissertation also acknowledges the earlier history of Latinx San Francisco artists of the 1970s who worked within the Central American solidarity movements. Chicanx artists played an essential role in producing posters and murals around these issues. Many of them were influenced by the Chicanx civil rights movements, anti-Vietnam war movements, and the Black freedom struggle. As the

---

[11] Cordova, Cary. *The Heart of the Mission Latino Art and Identity in San Francisco*. University of Texas Libraries, 2005, pp.5-6.
[12] Ibid, p.6.

larger Bay Area played an essential role during these mass political movements, art again played a fundamental role in articulating politics and disseminating information. These events and the heightened political activism bore many artist's careers. Yet, the academic literature on Chicanx art history often overlook the momentous importance of Chicanx solidarity with Central America.

I uncovered a wealth of posters created by Chicanx artists in solidarity with Central America throughout my investigation. The rich history of the Chicanx civil rights movement helped initiate art-activism in solidarity with Central America. As a site of intense cultural production, the Mission District was critical in fostering solidarity amongst Latinxs and other racial groups. As Cordova stresses, "the neighborhood's history of cultural production, coupled with its political activism, not only has been instrumental in the formation of a local community identity, but has provided a crucial voice in the Chicanx Civil Rights movement and has influenced the direction of a widespread Latino cultural renaissance."[13] I argue that at a crucial point in time, Chicanxs linked their unique experiences of racial oppression and systemic inequality to those of Central American refugees. Here I pay attention to two dynamics, beginning with the political openings for coalition-building amongst artists. The Mission Districts physical and racial landscape proved ideal for coalition building, occupying a mere thirty-block radius; the diverse Latinx communities forged alliances and established Latinx institutions throughout the Mission District.

[13] Ibid, p. 4.

Secondly, the international circulation of people in the Mission District made global political connections viable, particularly in a heightened moment of opposition to U.S. involvement in foreign affairs. This political openness between Latinx and White artists allowed for visual solidarity with Central America. Key examples of this political sensibility included joint protest actions, shared experiences of political repression, and strong critiques of U.S. imperialism.

My study primarily traces the Mission District from the 1980s to the present. The Mission District has long been described as a "barrio," particularly by Latinx academics, poets, and artists. However, as gentrification seeped in through multiple waves of gentrification, the borders of what would be considered the Mission "barrio" changed.[14] For example, most noticeably, Valencia Street drastically changed in the 2000s when the Dot.com era ushered in hipsters and techies.[15] Valencia Street used to be considered part of the Mission "barrio," with a "mix of auto body shops, papered-over storefronts, and hole-in-the-wall restaurants."[16] But slowly, the street was transformed and began to cater to hipsters and their tastes. Chic boutique clothing stores, minimalist coffeehouses, tattoo parlors, and stores that offered "organic

---

[14] The Mission District had undergone multiple waves of gentrification beginning in 1972 when two Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) subway stations were installed at 16th and 24th Streets along Mission Street, increasing rent prices and displacing longtime merchants. Then in the 1990s and early 2000s, the dot-com boom ushered in new tech urbanizers to San Francisco. For more information see Juan Cruz and G. Roginsky, "Mission Fires: Urban Renewal Made Simple?" *El Tecolote*, April 1977, p. 5; Richard A. Walker, *Pictures of a Gone City: Tech and the Dark Side of Prosperity in the San Francisco Bay Area,* Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2018.

[15] According to the Oxford dictionary, hipsters are people who follow the latest trends and fashions in clothes, music, etc., especially those that are outside the cultural mainstream. The term was popular to describe the hipster wave of gentrification that enthralled the Mission District in the 2000s.

[16] Dicum, Gregory. "Hipster Hunting Ground," *New York Times*. July 13, 2008.

jewelry" began to appear. Only certain parts of the Mission District would be considered a "barrio" vis-à-vis areas where most of its inhabitants are of Latinx descent. By 2019, the barrio lines were blurred when old Victorian apartments with working-class Latinx tenants lived next to multimillion dollar condos and homes. The dichotomy and tension between Latinx immigrant working class residents and affluent tech workers is ever present and highlighted in chapter four.

Definitions of the barrio have also evolved over time. As noted by Johana Londoño, "writers of the Chicanx and Puerto Rican nationalist movements of the 1960 and 1970s describe a dichotomous midcentury racialized urbanization that made barrios and their inner-city counterparts–ghettos and Chinatowns–cultural and political antithesis of majority white suburbia."[17] Londoño identifies the various academic strands of thought around the term "barrio." One strand of thought began in 1979, when social scientists coined the term *barriorization*, which discusses how Latinx were considered "second-class" residents forced to live in downtrodden urban areas.[18] The other strand of thought, which is in line with this dissertation, is the cultural studies approach that shows how residents use creative expression, including murals and bright colors to challenge the barrio's socioeconomic marginality. Specifically, the murals I discuss throughout the dissertation were created in areas described as the Mission barrio. Reference to the Mission as a barrio shows itself in

---

[17] Londoño, Johana. *Abstract Barrios: The Crises of Latinx Visibility in Cities*. Duke University Press, 2020, p. 11.

[18] Camarillo, Chicanos in Changing Society, 53–78; J. Gonzalez and Portillo, "Undereducation and Overcriminalization of U.S. Latinas/os"; Londoño, Johana. *Abstract Barrios: The Crises of Latinx Visibility in Cities*. Duke University Press, 2020. p.14.

the artwork. For example, I discuss Jasmin Cañas and Natalie Aleman's art exhibition, *Ode to Our Barrio: A Tribute to the Mission District by Dos CentroAmericanas* and analyze how their visual art enunciate a Central American and Latinx presence within a gentrifying neighborhood. Thus, the "barrio" is vehemently linked to Latinx and U.S. Central American visual art production of the Mission District.

The Mission District's Latinx organizations, established in the late 1960s and 1970s, play an important role in the continuum of Latinx visual art production that has endured into the present. Mission District artists and activists began identifying with the term "Latino," or as "raza" (the people), which was reflected in many of the Latinx cultural institutions created in the 1970s. For example, Galería de la Raza, Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts, La Raza Silkscreen Center (later known as La Raza Graphics), and El Tecolote/Acción Latina are some of the institutions that were created in the early 1970s that embraced a pan-Latinx identity in and beyond their naming. These institutions remain pivotal to the establishment and formation of San Francisco's Mission District Latinx and U.S. Central American visual art scene.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

My interest in the visual images (murals, posters, photographs, and paintings) I have chosen to analyze is based on two factors: first, their importance in understanding Central American solidarity and secondly, their power as Central American representations. John Mraz, author of *Historiar Fotografias*, makes the distinction between telling history with photographs (a form of social history) and

writing histories of photography (cultural history). He argues for doing both simultaneously and linking the social and the cultural to produce a more profound historical analysis.[19] In this dissertation, particularly in my analysis of U.S. Central American visual art, I extend Mraz's framework beyond photography to include other artistic media such as murals, posters, and paintings, all of which produce representations central to a social and cultural understanding of history. This dissertation represents an effort to tell a history of U.S. Central American visual art of San Francisco *with* and *of* images.[20]

To frame the discussion on visual art practices, I focus on three critical art practices: posters, murals, and public art exhibitions concerning U.S.-Central American artists and artists in solidarity with them. According to Chantal Mouffe, "Critical art practices are those that contribute in a variety of ways to unsettle the dominant hegemony and play a part in the process of disarticulation/rearticulation that characterizes a counter-hegemonic politics."[21] All three critical art practices were indispensable for the U.S. Central American solidarity movement because they were community-driven and intended to inform the public audience. Especially in the 1980s, the sale of artwork and posters functioned as fundraisers to give monetary aid to Central American causes. These art practices facilitated a solidarity between

---

[19] Mraz, John. *Historiar Fotografías*, pp. 17-18.
[20] The concept of telling a history *with* and *of* images is adapted from McCaughan, Edward J. "'We Didn't Cross the Border, the Border Crossed Us': Artists' Images of the US-Mexico Border and Immigration." *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2020, pp. 6–31.
[21] Mouffe, Chantal. "Artistic Strategies in Politics and Political Strategies in Art." *Truth is Concrete: A Handbook for Artistic Strategies in Real Politics* by Florian Malzacher. Sternberg Press, 2014, pp. 69-70.

socially engaged artists of the Bay Area and Central America. More importantly, socially engaged artists sometimes "speak" with new representations and discourses that allow us to think, understand, feel, and act in new ways. Their representations have the potential, in Stuart Hall's words, to "constitute us as new kinds of subjects."[22]

U.S. Central American art practitioners and solidarity artists of San Francisco constitute a new approach to understanding U.S. Central American visual art, prompted in large part by civil wars, U.S. intervention, and diaspora. In so doing, they helped produce new subjects: Central American Americans.[23] Several U.S. Central American scholars have used the concept of Central American American to analyze Central American subjectivity and experiences in the United States. Most notably Arturo Arias's 2003 article "Central American-Americans: Invisibility, Power and Representation in the U.S. Latino World," argued that Central Americans immigrants were often perceived as communist or subversive. Thus, when they entered the United States, they purposely remained in the margins, representing what Arias calls the "ambivalence of non-identity."[24] Maritza Cardenas complicates the concept further in her book *Constituting Central American-Americans* by proclaiming, "cultural expression and the construction of a Central American American

[22] Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," p. 571.
[23] Guatemalan American poet Maya Chinchilla coined the term in her poem "Central American-American" as a neologism, which refers to Central Americans born or raised in the United States with ancestry from Central America.
[24] Arias, A. "Central American- Americans: Invisibility, Power and Representation in the US Latino World." Latino Studies, 168–187 (2003).

subjectivity function as a radical form within Latinidad, one that through its persistent and pronounced exclusion from dominant imaginaries threatens the stability and ideological underpinnings of the concept itself."[25] Cardenas's articulation of Central America America signals a complex and nuanced approach to the analysis of Latinx identities that are being forged in the United States. This dissertation with its focus on U.S. Central American artists contributes to the complexity and history of Central America America through demonstrating how U.S. Central American art has been excluded from dominant imaginaries of Latinidad and Latinx art, particularly of San Francisco's Mission District.

To form the discussion on transnational solidarity, I examine the practices of solidarity-based visual art production, the social and intellectual impetus of artists, and the strategies of expression and representation that emerged from and alongside the transnational solidarity movement with Central America. In particular, chapters 1-3 of this dissertation examine transnational solidarity with Central America that was manifested through the visual arts. *The Art of Solidarity: Visual and Performative Politics in Cold War Latin America*, edited by Maria del Carmen Suescun Pozas and Jessica Stites Mor, is productive in framing how visual art contributes to solidarity action. As stated by Pozas and Mor in their introduction:

> Cultural production and art produced as part of solidarity action, participating in the work of framing social issues and discourses, present visual and performative pathway-spaces through which subjectivities can be crafted and realigned. In this way, such activism

[25] Cardenas, Maritza E. *Constituting Central American-Americans: Transnational Identities and the Politics of Dislocation.* Rutgers University Press, 2018, p.138.

> can heighten the collective focus and contribute to the evolution and, ultimately, to the success of a movement."[26]

When art activism is thought of as the process that supported the success of the Central American solidarity movement, this study becomes fruitful for transnational solidarity history.

When I investigated the ideas, concepts, and literature around solidarity, I found that few frameworks encapsulated the "solidarity" that occurred among artists from different backgrounds in the San Francisco Bay Area and as artists from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. White, Chicanx, and people of mixed heritage came together and created works of art in solidarity with Central America. I have found that a relational framework was a productive tool to interpret the multifaceted solidarity that exists at both social and visual levels. The motivations for artists were deeply personal as they understood that their visual and artistic contributions could change the outlook of others. Many White and Chicanx artists inherently felt that their governments were responsible for actions occurring in the Central American civil wars. Their visual art contributed as an activist approach to rebel against their own government and simultaneously represented a relational resistance. Often, racial identity is made in relation to other racial groups and those experiences are intersectional. A relational framework helps us understand the social environment that encouraged visual and artistic solidarity with Central Americans in

[26] Stites Mor, Jessica, and Maria del Carmen Suescun Pozas. *The Art of Solidarity: Visual and Performative Politics in Cold War Latin America.* University of Texas Press, 2018, p.5.

San Francisco. I find the concept of *relational resistance* useful for understanding multiracial, multiethnic, and international alliances because it is a process by which communities with distinct processes of racialization began to define their liberation in relation to, and in solidarity with, other aggrieved populations. In the case of Chicanx and White solidarity with Central America, this process allowed for artists to define their liberation vis-à-vis the Central American people.[27] Michael Albert Schulze-Oechtering states the following regarding his concept of *relational resistance*:

> This references a process by which communities with distinct processes of racialization began to define their liberation in relation to, and solidarity with, other aggrieved populations. By no means was relational resistance a forgone conclusion. Rather, it was a political choice and a capacity that certain organizations strove to foster. As such, relational resistance names both the grassroots practices that activists developed to foster multiracial unity, as well as movement participants' evolving political analyses.[28]

Each chapter in this dissertation analyzes these important intersections displayed through solidarity art, via the lens and experiences of individual artists. I argue that the organizations, institutions, activists, and artists of San Francisco demonstrated their solidarity with Central America vociferously and physically changed the visual landscape of the San Francisco Mission District with the addition of solidarity murals for decades to come.

---

[27] The concept of *relational resistance* was put forth by Michael Albert Schulze-Oechtering in *Blurring the Boundaries of Struggle: The United Construction Workers Association (UCWA) and Relational Resistance in Seattle's Third World Left*, Ph.D. diss., UC Berkeley, 2016.

[28] Schulze-Oechtering, Michael. *Blurring the Boundaries of Struggle: The United Construction Workers Association (UCWA) and Relational Resistance in Seattle's Third World Left*, 2016, p. 5.

The methods I use for this study are visual analysis, oral history, and archival research. I use oral histories to highlight personal stories of artists and activists who participated as cultural workers in the social transformation and evolution of U.S. Central American art of San Francisco. More than twenty artists and activists have shared their stories and memories with me. I also draw on oral histories from the California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives at University of California, Santa Barbara, and the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art. These oral histories are critical to the dissertation, as individual experiences inform the context in which the works of art were produced and foster my visual analysis. I connect the lives of my interviewees' experiences with historical trajectories, the work of their peers, and the history of Latinx social movements; all of which enrich my reading of U.S. Central American art of San Francisco.

U.S. Central Americans as Art Practitioners

Few academic scholars, literatures, and disciplines focus on Central American art practitioners in the United States. Ana Patricia Rodríguez, Cary Cordova, Kency Cornejo, and Tatiana Reinoza are key scholars forging a path for a U.S. Central American visual art canon to exist. Notably, Cordova's book, *Heart of the Mission,* contains a chapter that provides critical insight into Salvadoran visual artists of San Francisco during and before the 1980s. Throughout the book, there is a keen focus on Central American issues. Similarly, Rodríguez gives important insight to Central American and Latinx cultural alliances by analyzing U.S. Central American visual art and literature that took place in the Mission District in the 1980s-1990s in her book

Dividing the Isthmus. While Rodríguez and Cordova's regional focus on U.S. Central American art of San Francisco does not represent all Central American artists across the nation, it does offer a nuanced reading of the U.S. Central American visual art and its impact on the local history of San Francisco. However, a larger more in-depth engagement of U.S. Central American art of San Francisco remains largely undocumented.

This history of U.S. Central American art is particularly important to San Francisco as a significant number of Central Americans participated in creating art that enunciated their stories, struggles, and politics. Cornejo reminds us that from the late 1970s to 1990, "images and representations of Central Americans were made, selected, disseminated, and framed to produced empathy and encouraged action with the region across the world, establishing a reductive visual trope about Central America that is still used today."[29] These visual tropes often frame Central Americans as victims with references to tropical landscapes, volcanoes, revolutions, and guerillas. Cornejo argues that the reductive tropes set a pattern for the ongoing visual objectification of Central Americans in popular media culture and have remained present to this day. I challenge these reductive images with a focus on U.S. Central American art practitioners. U.S. Central American artists enunciate critical reflections and commentary on contemporary sociopolitical conditions in Central America while also enunciating their presence in the Bay Area. To follow Hall's approach in

[29] Cornejo, Kency. "US Central Americans in Art and Visual Culture." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature. Oxford University Press*, 2019, p.1.

recovering the past, I recognize that histories are "always retold, rediscovered, reinvented."[30]

In writing a history of U.S. Central American art of San Francisco, I deliberately focus on U.S. Central American artists who have not been extensively acknowledged in publications. Many of the first wave of Central American visual artists that made a career in San Francisco Bay Area were largely of Salvadoran descent; some were fleeing the Salvadoran civil war. For example, visual artists Martivón Galindo and Victor Cartagena have been discussed extensively by Cordova.[31] Previous to the 1980s, Salvadoran and Guatemalan artists such as Gilberto Osorio, Carlos Loarca, and Elba Rivera were contributing visual art in San Francisco. However, I have chosen to discuss artists that have not been mentioned or whose histories are limited in academic publications. I discuss artist and actor Herbert Sigüenza, a U.S. born Central American artist who produced murals and posters in the late 1970s and 1980s. Sigüeza's contribution is unique to the history of Central American art in San Francisco, as his murals are the first to engage on the theme of Central American civil wars and revolutions created by an artist of Central American origin. I also focus on muralist Isaías Mata who fled the civil war of El Salvador; with

[30] Hall, Stuart. "Old and New Ethnicities," unedited transcript for the second of two lectures delivered in conjunction with the Third Annual Symposium on current Debates in Art History, *Culture, Globalization and the World System: Contemporary Conditions for Representation of Identity*, organized by Anthony Kink, Departments of Art and Art History, Statue University of New York at Binghamton, March 14, 1989, p. 28.

[31] For more information on these artists see: "The Activist Art of a Salvadoran Diaspora: Abstraction, War, and Memory in San Francisco." *The Heart of the Mission: Latino Art and Politics in San Francisco*, by Cary Cordova, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2017, pp. 178–206.

the extensive help of a transnational solidarity movement, he was able to live in San Francisco as a political refugee in exile. I discuss his mural *500 Years of Resistance* extensively and the history of how he arrived in San Francisco. Furthermore, I focus on a newer generation of artists that classify as the 1.5- and second-generation artists whose parents fled the civil wars of Central America and who were raised in San Francisco's Mission District. These three artists are Jasmin Cañas, Natalie Aleman, and Josué Rojas. Their art exhibitions give insight into the Central American diasporic identities created in the Mission District and which currently construct a contemporary history of U.S. Central American visual art in San Francisco.

Chapter Outline

The first chapter, entitled "Salvadoran Artists Paint the Mission Barrio: Resistance from El Salvador to San Francisco," sets the stage for two Central American artists, Herbert Sigüenza and Isaías Mata, and their Central American mural contribution to San Francisco's Mission District. I demonstrate how these two Central American muralists were the first to paint on Central American issues in San Francisco. They both created Central American murals among a neighborhood filled with murals that mostly had been created by Anglo and Chicanx artists. By taking into account a history of U.S. Central American art of San Francisco, their contributions are especially useful for mural scholarship of California and San Francisco.

In chapter 2, "Visual Solidarity: Bay Area Chicanx Artists in Solidarity with Central America," I examine the Central American solidarity artwork produced by

three Chicanx artists, Juana Alicia, Juan Fuentes, and Malaquías Montoya. All three artists contributed a substantial number of posters and murals in solidarity with Central Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area from the late 1970s to mid-1990s. Taking solidarity-art and activism as a point of entry, I examine how the concept of "relational resistance" develops in these artists' artworks. Through oral histories and interviews, I explore critical moments in each artist's lived experience that influenced their motivation to produce artworks in solidarity with the Central American liberation movements.

The third chapter, “Walls of Resistance: PLACA Murals and Transnational Solidarity with Central America,” focuses on the transnational solidarity that took place within the collective multi-ethnic mural group known as “PLACA” in Balmy Alley of San Francisco’s Mission District. I use a methodological approach of relational resistance to understand the process of art-activism and solidarity that took place amongst PLACA artists, who created twenty-seven public murals by thirty-six participating artists. I use relational resistance as a lens to analyze the visual significance of the PLACA murals in relation to U.S. Central American Studies and the Central American civil wars of the 1980s. The racial makeup of PLACA members makes it a valuable context for relational race studies and how artmaking contributes to solidarity movements.

In the fourth chapter, “Visualizing Memories of Space and Belonging: U.S. Central American Art of the Mission Barrio,” I focus on three U.S. Central American artists who were raised in San Francisco. I analyze two art exhibitions presented at

Acción Latina's Juan R. Fuentes Gallery, one created by Jasmin Cañas and one by Natalie Aleman, as well as a solo exhibition by Josué Rojas. These three U.S. Central American artists depict cultural representations of Central Americans who grew up or were born in San Francisco during the 1980s and '90s and form part of the 1.5 and second-generation of U.S. Central American artists. To fully explore the canon of U.S. Central American visual art of San Francisco, the 1.5 and second-generation artists cannot be ignored. A plethora of 1.5 and second-generation U.S. Central American artists exist and most have a connection or were raised in the Mission District. This chapter functions as a glimpse into the contemporary visual enunciations that speak towards issues of gentrification, displacement, and a politics or visibility of Central Americans in the Mission District of San Francisco.

Conclusion

Central America extends across seven countries: Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama. Yet beginning in the 20th century, Central America's history and economy becomes inexorably linked to the United States via coup d'état's, military intervention, foreign investments, banana republics, The Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), to name a few. President Donald Trump and his administration vocally opposed Central American and Mexican migration to the United States, going so far as to call Central America a place of small "shithole countries" whose people need to "go back to their huts."[32]

---

[32] Watkins, Eli and Abby, Phillip. "Trump Decries Immigrants From 'Shithole Countries' Coming to US" *CNN*, January 18, 2018.

This hostile rhetoric has made the labor of U.S. Central American studies a project on the defensive, one that often speaks back to oppositional rhetoric through the critical approach of historicizing and spotlighting the origins of present-day inequalities.

However, in this dissertation I explore how Central American Americans enunciate their presence beyond the image of crisis by examining U.S. Central American visual art of San Francisco. By envisioning and enacting Central American and U.S. Central American subjectivity, solidarity artists, Central American artists, and activists, I bring a history of U.S Central American visual art into being. To begin to understand this nuanced history, the next chapter will focus on the first artists of Salvadoran descent who painted murals depicting Central American civil wars in the Mission District.

Chapter 1: Salvadoran Artists Paint the Mission Barrio: Resistance from El Salvador to San Francisco

"They are creating art and images and a countering visual discourse from a diasporic perspective where Central Americans are creators of images rather than subjects for representation."[33]

— Kency Cornejo

This chapter aims to revive the history of Salvadoran visual artists Isaías Mata and Herbert Sigüenza by tracing the origins of their artistic careers and their public murals in the Mission District. I trace their efforts to represent transnational solidarity with Central America through the murals they produced in San Francisco. Their contrasting personal journeys as visual artists reveal the rich history of Salvadoran visual artists in San Francisco. A close analysis of the artists' motivations to create visual art about Central American civil wars illustrates the value of investigating community murals created by non-Chicanxs in an era in which Chicanxs and Whites produced almost all murals created in solidarity with Central America in San Francisco's Mission District. Sigüenza and Mata's murals underscore the diverse contributions of Latinx murals in the Mission District by giving insight into how Central American art practitioners form part of the historical canon. This chapter's key questions are, what interventions do Mata and Sigüenza make, as Salvadoran-origin artists, to the Mission mural scene? How do they add to the conversation about Latinx art?

---

[33] Cornejo, Kency. "US Central Americans in Art and Visual Culture," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*. Oxford University Press, February 2019, p. 11.

As a neighborhood that has long been associated as pan-Latinx neighborhood, the Mission District often gets credited and written about as an important site for intense Chicanx cultural production. The Mission District's Latin rock scene (e.g., Carlos Santana, Malo), Chicanx murals, Chicanx art, lowrider culture, Mexican restaurants and *panederias*, the Day of the Dead celebrations, and the Mission burrito (also known as a San Francisco burrito or a Mission-style burrito) are all staples of the neighborhood's history that are characterized as Mexican American and Chicanx culture. For these reasons, I argue Sigüenza's and Mata's murals inserted a Central American presence into the Mission District's mural scene. More importantly, Sigüenza's and Mata's murals became some of the first public works of art to signal transnational solidarity with El Salvador and Central America in the 1980s. Their counter-hegemonic visual artworks are influenced by their lived experiences, which informed the local public on the issues occurring in the isthmus, creating a transnational dialogue between North Americans and Central Americans.

Several Mission District murals the were created by Chicanx, White, and other Latinx muralists; yet, Central American artists were largely absent from the mural movement. The 1980s proved to be a decade in which Central American muralists began to participate in the Mission District's mural scene, albeit with sparse contributions. A notable mural created by a Central American before Sigüenza and Mata was a 1982 mural by Carlos Loarca, Betsie Miller-Kusz, and Manuel Villamor. Loarca is a Guatemalan painter who arrived in the United States at nineteen and

dedicated his life to the arts.[34] Loraca, Miller-Kusz, and Villamor designed the massive 3,700- square-foot mural for Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts building, titled *Spirit of the Arts*.[35] Using Incan, Mayan, and Aztec symbolism, they envisioned a vibrant array of colors that portrayed the many art classes offered at the Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts.[36] Acknowledging this historical mural which included the Guatemalan artist Loarca is important for the history of U.S. Central American visual art of San Francisco. The 1980s proved to be a decade in which Central American muralists began to participate in creating murals, albeit few contributions. In this chapter, I segue to Mata's 1992 mural and Sigüenza's 1980s murals to focus on the direct connection to the Salvadoran civil war in terms of content and the circumstances that led to the mural production.

Mata's and Sigüenza's murals demonstrate how Salvadoran artists contributed to the Mission District. By 1992, the Mission District was a neighborhood well-known for its Chicanx murals. One of the first books on the national community mural movement, *Toward a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement*, published in 1977, speaks about the importance of California to the Chicanx mural movement:

> Most of California's Chicano murals have grown out of the larger political context of La Raza movement, which has epitomized the nation… As the mural movement in California has grown since its inception in 1971-1972, and as many artists have come to feel a

[34] Chavez, Lola M. "Mission Cultural Center mural gets a makeover." *Mission Local.* April 17, 2017.
[35] This mural was restored in 2017.
[36] Chavez, Lola M. "Mission Cultural Center mural gets a makeover." *Mission Local.* April 17, 2017.

> primary identification as muralists, there has begun a search for ways to unite Chicano mural artists throughout California.[37]

In San Francisco's Mission District, countless Chicanx murals were produced throughout the '70s and '80s. Since this publication, many other publications on Latinx Mission District murals largely focus on Chicanx murals because Chicanx muralists were the only ones creating murals in the neighborhood. Thus, the contributions by Mata, Sigüenza, and Loarca are some of the first Central American artists to contribute to the extensive Latinx murals of San Francisco's Mission District.

Imagining El Salvador Post-Civil War: Sigüenza's Salvadoran Murals

Herbert Sigüenza, a Salvadoran American, is best known for his work as an actor and writer; his early works as a visual artist are not extensively analyzed. With José Antonio Burciaga, Marga Gómez, Monica Palacios, Richard Montoya, Ric Salinas, and Rene Yañez, he is recognized for co-founding the Chicanx theater troupe Culture Clash in 1984 at Galería De La Raza in San Francisco. Only three members now form the comedic troupe: Herbert Sigüenza, Richard Montoya, and Ric Salinas, who continue to perform nationally. At first, Culture Clash was closely associated with the Chicanx movement and, as time went on, the group focused its comedic plays on the larger U.S. Latinx experience. Sigüenza has continued his career as an actor, has performed in movies and television shows, and has written his own plays.

---

[37] Cockcroft, Eva Sperling., et al. *Toward a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement.* University of New Mexico Press, 1998, p. 59

Most notably, Sigüenza played the voice of identical great-great granduncles Tío Felipe and Tío Oscar and served as one of the cultural advisors for the 2017 Disney Pixar animated film *Coco*.

Yet, his early work as a visual artist is not widely analyzed as it is overlooked due to his success as an actor. Sigüenza worked at La Raza Graphics Center in San Francisco's Mission District for ten years. During his tenure there, he produced several posters for local and national events, political campaigns, and charities as a for-hire artist. La Raza Graphics Center was committed to creating posters for community organizations and events. In the early 1980s, they received substantial requests for Central American solidarity events, fundraisers, and charitable events. Thus, Sigüenza produced several posters in solidarity with the Central American liberation movements and was one of a few Central American artists to produce posters among a cohort of largely Chicanx artists.[38] Because of his association with Culture Clash and La Raza Graphics Center, Sigüenza is often assumed to be a Chicanx artist and his work is categorized among Chicanx art. For example, more recently, several of Sigüenza's posters, including *It's Simple Steve*, created in 1980, were recognized in the traveling art exhibition *Just Another Poster? Chicano Graphic Arts of California* (2001) and the Smithsonian Institution's American Art Museum's *Printing the Revolution: The Rise and Impact of Chicano Graphics 1965-Now* (2020)

[38] The poster was a key art for many Chicanxs artists participated in the Bay Area. From the 1960s through 1990s. I discuss more Chicanx artists in solidarity with Central America in chapter two of this dissertation.

(fig. 1.1). In addition to creating hundreds of posters, Sigüenza painted two murals in solidarity with El Salvador's liberation movement, which this chapter will focus on.

Figure 1. 1. Sigüenza, Herbert and Unidentified Artist. *It's Simple Steve*. Ca. 1980.

Herbert Sigüenza's story is remarkable for a person of Salvadoran descent. He was born in San Francisco in 1959 but he was partially raised in El Salvador as a child and adolescent. His father emigrated from El Salvador in the 1940s as an upper-middle-class Salvadoran and landed in New York City with his cousins. After his father and his father's cousins enlisted in the U.S. army and served in World War II, they were granted U.S. citizenship. From New York, Sigüenza's father moved to San Francisco where he met Sigüenza's mother in a boarding house for Salvadorans. His parents decided to move back to El Salvador and returned to San Francisco in the mid-fifties. Soon after Herbert Sigüenza was born. Sigüenza's parents were part of what Ana Patricia Rodríguez calls the *pionera/o* generation, the generation of "pre-

1980 Central American/Salvadoran immigrants."[39] As studies of Central American immigration largely overlook the immigration narratives of Salvadorans who arrived prior to the large waves of Central American migration of the 1980s, the term *pionera/o* refers to the pioneering individuals who were the first in their families to leave El Salvador and begin a new life in the United States.[40] Furthermore, Sigüenza's parents' migration to the United States forms part of the second Central American migration wave to the United States (1930-1941). This second wave was "the first time a significant population of Central Americans began to resettle in the San Francisco Bay Area, New York, and Los Angeles," according to Carlos B. Cordova.[41] Therefore, Sigüenza's presence in San Francisco is uncommon as he was not part of the generation that fled El Salvador's civil war; his parents' generation laid their roots in San Francisco during the 1940s-1950s. First-generation *pionera/os* like Sigüenza's parents helped establish the city of San Francisco as a future Salvadoran/Central American for subsequent waves of Central American immigrants to the United States.

The life Sigüenza knew in the U.S. shifted when he went to live with his father in El Salvador for six years, from age eight to fourteen. While living in El

---

[39] Ana Patricia Rodríguez uses this concept to explain her parent's migration from El Salvador to the United States in her chapter "Salvadoran Immigrant Acts and Migration To San Francisco (Circa 1960s and '70s)" in *U.S. Central Americans: Reconstructing Memories, Struggles, and Communities of Resistance*. She notes that Carlos Cordova traces these unique waves of Central American migrants to the United States in *Salvadoran Americans*, 2005.
[40] Ana Patricia Rodríguez, "Salvadoran Immigrant Acts and Migration To San Francisco (Circa 1960s and '70s)" in *U.S. Central Americans: Reconstructing Memories, Struggles, and Communities of Resistance.* University of Arizona Press.
[41] Cordova, Carlos B. *The Salvadoran Americans*. Greenwood Press, 2005, p. 62.

Salvador, Sigüenza witnessed economic differences between people of different social classes. His family owned a coffee farm in El Salvador, which made him aware of a reality of economic inequality that was unlike San Francisco's. There existed a robust middle class in the United States. He noticed the marked differences between the rich and the poor in El Salvador, witnessing the poverty of campesinos. As Sigüenza remembers:

> I hung out with the campesinos, that's what I liked better. And so, I just had this empathy for them. I really think I would have never been who I am if I hadn't gone to El Salvador to see that, those differences. When I came back from El Salvador and went back to junior high and high school in San Francisco, Burbank [Middle School] and Balboa [High School], I already had kind of like…I really had a political point of view, without really knowing it. And I always knew I wanted to be an artist since I was little, I drew really well.[42]

Sigüenza returned to San Francisco at fourteen to finish middle school and then high school. After graduating high school, Sigüenza enrolled at California College of Arts and Crafts (CCAC) and received a B.A. degree in art, printmaking, and silk-screening. During his time at CCAC, he learned silk-screening techniques and trained with the renowned Chicano artist and professor Malaquías Montoya. Soon after, Sigüenza worked at La Raza Graphics Center for ten years. As early as 1970, La Raza Silkscreen Center / La Raza Graphics produced silkscreen prints by Chicanx and Latinx artists. Once Sigüenza joined in the early 1970s, the Center expanded its printing services and provided silkscreen classes for neighborhood residents and local artists on a fee-for-service basis. It also introduced a training program to teach local

[42] Sigüenza, Herbert. Interview. Conducted by Mauricio E. Ramírez, 10 February 2020.

youth the art of silk screening.[43] During this era, the Chicanx poster movement was in full bloom, as posters became an essential method for circulating news about local community events since they could be hung on shopfronts, windows, and streets. Immersed in this movement, Sigüenza produced posters with various Chicanx colleagues.

Figure 1. 2. Sigüenza, Herbert. *Untitled.* 1982. Mural on Galería De La Raza's billboard. Photo Courtesy of Timothy Drescher.

Albeit temporary, Sigüenza's 1982 untitled mural on Galería De La Raza's billboard is important to the history of U.S. Central American visual art because it is one of the first murals depicting the 1982 civil war in El Salvador that was created by a Salvadoran American artist from San Francisco (see fig. 1.2).[44] The mural was short-lived. Galería De La Raza's billboard tradition is temporary and evolving, and after a couple of weeks or months a new mural goes up. As a result, countless

---

[43] Borvice, Al, et al. "Linda Lucero Collection on La Raza Silkscreen Center / La Raza Graphics*"* *Califronia Ethnic Multicultural Archives,* UC Santa Barbara.

[44] This mural could potentially be the first mural created by an artist of Central American origin depicting the Central American civil war in the United States.

Chicanx/Latinx artists have contributed temporary murals to the Galería de la Raza billboard.

Founded in 1970, Galería de la Raza is a non-profit dedicated to promoting Chicanx/Latinx art and culture. Its "creative place keeping" ethos is rooted in social inclusion, justice, and community arts as central to navigating the complex intersection of urban development, social inequality, affordable housing, and the historical-cultural legacies of communities of color.[45] Galería De La Raza has become an important organization for the Central American solidarity movement, particularly in promoting social justice through its *Day of the Dead* celebrations.[46]

The inspiration for Sigüenza's untitled mural was a sketch he drew for the promotional 1982 calendar for Casa El Salvador and La Raza Graphics Center. Sigüenza drew the sketch with black lithography pens at La Raza Graphics Center and did not use any grays in his original drawing. Felix Curry, a Salvadoran professor at San Francisco State University, who was involved with various Central American solidarity movements in San Francisco, saw the print and asked Sigüenza to paint the drawing as a mural on Galería De La Raza's billboard. Sigüenza agreed and, with the help of Chicano muralist Emanuel Montoya, hand painted the original sketch into a mural and added grey tones to it.

---

[45] See Galería De La Raza's website: http://www.galeriadelaraza.org/eng/about/index.php

[46] To learn more on the contribution of Galería de la Raza's Day of the Dead and its connection to Central America see Cary Cordova's chapter "The Politics of Día de los Muertos: Mourning, Art, and Activism" in *The Heart of the Mission: Latino Art and Politics in San Francisco*. p. 207- 233.

The mural evoked a playful and cartoonish sensibility. However, Sigüenza's images of family, education, and children were also reminders of the more serious working-class struggles in El Salvador. Furthermore, the facial expression of each human character was somber, neither sad nor happy, and in this context the mural held a more serious tone. In the middle of the mural were a campesino and a campesina. Shirtless and wearing a straw-hat sombrero, the man had a muscular build. He held a bag of coffee beans. His right arm was extended and touching a donkey, which held a burlap sack with the word "café" on it, a reference to the coffee production of El Salvador. The man's bare torso and the sack of coffee beans were visual indicators that he was a laborer who harvests coffee beans for a coffee plantation. Directly next to the man was a woman, presumably his partner. She wore a polka dot dress and held an infant, a signal that this heterosexual couple was caring for their offspring. On opposite ends of the mural there were a boy on the left side and a girl on the right, both holding books. The girl looked to be balancing a fruit basket over her head, suggesting she was balancing labor and providing for others, like her family, with education represented by the book she cradled in her left arm.

Although subtle, there is also revolutionary iconography that is specific to the Salvadoran civil war in Sigüenza's mural. Images of a clergyman and a leftist revolutionary brandishing a rifle provide a deeper context of the Salvadoran civil war. Near the center right, the clergyman held a white dove as a symbol of peace, a direct reference to Archbishop Óscar A. Romero of El Salvador, one of the most vocal religious figures to oppose the Salvadoran civil war. On March 24, 1980, Romero was

assassinated by the Death Squads while celebrating mass. However, Romero was not the only priest to be assassinated during the Salvadoran civil war; many others were silenced, disappeared, or forced into exile.

The background demonstrated the lush and tropical trees and flowers and, in the center of all the foliage, there was a guerrilla like figure resembling the Argentine revolutionary Ernesto “Che” Guevara. With his beret with a star in the center, the guerilla was the mural’s focal point. The red star has a long history of representing people's struggle, socialism, and communism and the beret with a star is one of the most iconic and culturally recognized symbols associated with the Cuban revolution and Che Guevara. As stated previously, the deep divide between the working class and the rich was clearly legible to Sigüenza as an adolescent. To paint images with a revolutionary sentiment further demonstrates his sympathy with the liberation struggles of El Salvador.

Figure 1. 3. Llort, Fernando. *The Relic of Archbishop Romero.* Courtesy of the Archbishop Romero Trust

Sigüenza 's style was also notably different from many of the Chicanx styles present in the Mission District. For his untitled mural on *Galería De La Raza's* billboard, Sigüenza references one of the most well-known visual artists of El Salvador, Fernando Llort (fig.1.3). Llort passed away on August 10, 2018, leaving both a legacy and archive of "folkloric art" central to forging of Salvadoran identity and selfhood. Llort popularized the iconic *La Palma* style of Chalatenango starting in the 1970s with the creation of *La Semilla de Dios*, an artisan workshop that taught townspeople the practice of creating and selling artisan works. *La Palma* style celebrates colorful images of landscapes, villagers, adobe houses, and animals to capture *lo cotidiano* of El Salvador. Today, Llort's legacy remains visible through

prints, beach towels, and trinkets and are often found as decorative pieces in the homes of Salvadorans, Salvadoran Americans, tourists, and more. His art has influenced many others and his iconic style is often replicated beyond the borders of El Salvador, often appropriated in murals, paintings, and prints produced in the diaspora to promote a sense of Salvadoran-ness, sometimes standing in for Central American-ness as well. Despite the history of violence caused by the civil war, Llort's art is generally considered apolitical, allowing us to imagine a flourishing, peaceful, and humble Central America, a view counter to mainstream projections of a region in perpetual crisis.

Figure 1. 4. Sigüenza, Herbert. *After the Triumph/Después del Triunfo*,1984. Located in Balmy Alley. Photograph by Jim Prigoff. Courtesy of Artstor.

Two years later, in 1984, Chicano muralist Ray Patlán asked Sigüenza to join him in creating a mural in Balmy Alley (located in the Mission District), around the theme of halting U.S. intervention in Central America and the celebration of Central

American culture. Patlán along with Chicana artist Patricia Rodríguez were pioneers in forming a collective mural group known as PLACA.[47] Sigüenza agreed and in the summer of 1984, he painted *After the Triumph/Después del Triunfo* as a PLACA member (fig. 1.4). The conception for this mural was to create a theater set design to replicate an imaginary post-revolutionary El Salvador. In 1984, the same year this mural was created, Sigüenza co-founded Culture Clash at Galería De La Raza, which was housed in a building located only a few blocks away from Balmy Alley. *After the Triumph/Después del Triunfo* testifies to Sigüenza's theater experience and sensibilities as well as his experience living in El Salvador as an adolescent for six years.

In *After the Triumph/Después del Triunfo,* Sigüenza depicts two alternative futures for the war-torn country of El Salvador. This mural is read from left to right. The left side represents the violence of the war while the right side of the mural symbolizes a new beginning, after the triumph of the revolutionary forces as the title indicates. On the left side, we see a red door with the word "muertos" (the dead) written above it. The door is riddled with several bullet holes which are painted to look similar to what a machine gun would leave as an impression on the walls. On the door, there are two white handprints, symbols of the dreaded Mano Blanca (the white hand). The word "asesino" (murderer or assassin) is painted in gray aerosol spray paint. The use of words and symbolic imagery clearly link this door to violence and

[47] More information on PLACA will be discussed in chapter 3.

death. The presence of La Mano Blanca handprint evokes fear in the public or any passerby who reads the images.

Figure 1. 5. Meiselas, Susan. *Mano Blanca*, 1980. Photograph. Signature of the death squads left on the door of a slain peasant organizer. Arcatao, Chalatenango Province, El Salvador.

The Death Squads were state-sponsored terrorist groups that exterminated rebels during El Salvador's civil war. As a visual signifier, La Mano Blanca connoted fear and death in the eyes of Salvadorans. During the civil war, if a person was accused of being involved in subversive activities, the Death Squads would leave a white handprint on the front door of the alleged subversive's house. One of the first appearances of La Mano Blanca was in Guatemala in the 1960s; several death squads from other Central American countries appropriated the white handprint. Susan Meiselas was one of the few photographers who captured the white handprint in her now iconic photo "La Mano Blanca" taken in Arcatao, Chalatenango Province of El Salvador in 1980 (fig. 1.5). Meiselas took the photograph of La Mano Blanca while

she was visiting El Salvador during the civil war. She heard of the killing of a campesino leader, Enrique Menjívar, who had been targeted for organizing the local campesinos of his village. Meiselas entered a ghostly town that was silent and empty. Walking around the town, she encountered the white handprints on the door and, although she had heard of La Mano Blanca, she had never seen it and decided to capture the scene.[48] As the only photographic proof that La Mano Blanca did, in fact, exist in El Salvador, the photograph was widely circulated in the news throughout the 1980s and notably made it to the cover of *The New Republic*.[49]

The Death Squads first appeared in Latin American as a quasi-military clandestine operation to thwart revolutionary activity. Members of Death Squads were typically recruited from police and military forces; these groups set their sights on anyone who was suspected of involvement in subversive activities. The Death Squad's victims were then tortured, murdered, or disappeared. Numerous people disappeared, including students, professionals, and campesinos.

In contrast to the door on the left, the door on the right-hand side of *After the Triumph/Después del Triunfo* reads "Escuela Roque Dalton #2" or "Roque Dalton School #2." This door demonstrates an alternative future, one far from imminent death, for the working-class *campesino*. The school "Escuela Roque Dalton #2" is a direct reference to Roque Dalton, one of El Salvador's most recognized poets and

---

[48] Meiselas, Susan. "Story of an Image: Susan Meiselas on Mano Blanca." *YouTube,* uploaded by Hasselblad Foundation, 30 October 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XazC5J1IDiI
[49] Ibid.

intellectuals who wrote on a range of different topics including love, death, and politics. Dalton was involved in Marxist politics and traveled to Europe and South America, which shaped his political ideologies, and allowed him to witness broader international network of Marxist thinkers outside of El Salvador. To name a school after Roque Dalton would make sense in post-revolutionary imaginary in which the leftists prevail. Furthermore, small lettering painted in blue states “Classes de leer a las 7 p.m.,” which translates to English as “Reading classes at 7 p.m.” The future *After the Triumph/Después del Triunfo* envisions the revolutionary ideals of networks of education for the working class, ideally in the form of night school, as a substantial portion of the Salvadoran peasant and working classes were illiterate.

In the center of the Escuela Roque Dalton #2 door, sits a young working-class couple reading a book together. Directly to the left of the couple, a campesino is holding a burlap sack filled with coffee beans, a nod not only to Sigüenza’s untitled 1982 mural, but also to the salient role coffee has played in El Salvador’s history. The country of El Salvador has a long history of coffee export to the United States, cycles of the coffee industry in the nineteenth century created the colloquial term that Salvadorans call coffee beans “El grano de oro” or the grain of gold. Coffee gave birth in the late nineteenth century to “las cartoce familias,” the fourteen families, who compromised an oligarchy that controlled most of the wealth and land of El Salvador through the twentieth century. Often coffee plantations exploited campesinos; therefore, the image of the coffee bag makes a subtle yet impactful reference to the complexities of the coffee bean and its connection to imperialism,

capitalism, and worker exploitation. In part, his personal experience having seen the conditions which campesinos lived in El Salvador expanded his worldview on the capitalist commodity of coffee.

In large bold green letters, the words Guardia Nacional (National Guard) loom along the top of the entire garage structure on which *After the Triumph/Después del Triunfo* is painted. Sigüenza incorporates this signage to replicate a Guardia Nacional precinct of El Salvador. Blue and white stripes also run across the top of the mural representing the national flag of El Salvador. The Guardia Nacional developed a reputation for police brutality and human rights abuses in El Salvador during the civil war. Since the mural is set in a post-revolutionary El Salvador, Sigüenza imagines that this Guardia Nacional precinct has been abandoned and been converted into a school. To envision that future, Sigüenza highlights La Guardia Nacional in his mural only to have the institution disappear after the revolutionary leftist triumph. Although the left-wing triumph never occurred, the dissolution of La Guardia Nacional became a reality when it was disbanded on the 16th of January 1992 in accordance with the Peace Accords of Chapultepec to end the Salvadoran Civil War.

The murals Sigüenza painted in 1982 and 1984 are testaments to Central American solidarity created by a U.S. born Salvadoran American artist. Having lived in El Salvador, Sigüenza's solidarity murals and posters demonstrate his transnational relationship with Central America. Next, I focus on a Salvadoran artist who arrived in San Francisco under different circumstances as an exiled artist and immigrant.

Transnational Solidarity at Work: How Mata Arrived in San Francisco

Isaías Mata was born in 1956 in El Salvador. He is a professor, painter, and internationally recognized muralist who has created murals throughout South America, Central America, the United States, and Europe. The threat of violence led him and thousands of other Salvadorans to seek refuge outside of Central America. In the United States, the Salvadoran population skyrocketed from a little under one hundred thousand people in 1980 to well over half a million people by 1990.[50] San Francisco and the Bay Area became a destination for many Central Americas fleeing the civil wars. In 1992, the Salvadoran peace accords promised an end to the brutal twelve-year civil war. Still, the deaths of approximately 80,000 citizens and the dispersal of one million Salvadorans across the globe created a diaspora. The expatriate Salvadorans colloquially became known as "los hermanos lejanos," the distant brothers or siblings, a diaspora existing entirely outside the nation's physical boundaries.[51] In a sense, Mata became an hermano lejano during his time in San Francisco as an artist living in exile.

Mata's journey and arrival in San Francisco was uncommon as many Salvadorans who fled the civil war did not receive political asylum by the United States government. In 1983, the *New York Times* reported that the U.S. "Government

[50] These numbers are estimates and since so many Salvadorans arrived without documentation, some estimate this number is closer to one million. Carlos B. Cordova discussed the unreliability of the 1990 and 2000 censuses in his book, *The Salvadoran Americans*.
[51] See Rodríguez, Ana Patricia. "'Departamento 15': Cultural Narratives of Salvadoran Transnational Migration," Latino Studies vol. 3, no. 1, 2005, pp. 19–41.; Baker-Cristales, Beth. "El Hermano Lejano: The Transnational Space of Salvadoran Migration to the United States." 1999. University of New Mexico (Albuquerque), PhD dissertation.;Baker-Cristales, Beth. *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California: Redefining El Hermano Lejano*. University Press of Florida, 2004.

says the vast majority of Salvadorans seeking asylum are not ‘political refugees,’ who would face persecution if they were deported to their war-torn country, but rather ‘economic migrants’ fleeing poverty.”[52] Furthermore, the U.S. government would not admit that the Salvadoran government and military, who they supported, were committing human right violations. One of the primary driving forces leading to Salvadorans flight was the violence perpetuated by the Salvadoran military and Death Squads. Peter Schey of the National Center for Immigrants' Rights stated, "If we gave the refugees asylum, it would be an admission that the Government in El Salvador, which we support, violates human rights.”[53] Therefore, the impressive transnational effort by San Francisco Bay Area activists, artists, politicians, and professors made it possible for Mata to gain visa entry to legal entry into the United States.

Mata physically changed the Mission District with the masterpiece he painted on Saint Peter’s Church, *500 Years of Resistance*, which still stands at the corner of 24th Street and Florida Street, for nearly three decades after its creation. This mural speaks to the exile of a Salvadoran artist; it also narrates a story about colonialism and its effects on Latinx residents in the Mission District. His journey as an artist began when he enrolled in Centro Nacionales de Artes (CENAR) of San Salvador in 1976. Soon after, he enrolled at the University of El Salvador to study humanities but did not complete his degree due to his political activities. In his early activism, he deliberately expressed his leftist ideals with the revolutionary causes that were

[52] Lindsey, Robert. “A Flood of Refugees from Salvador Tries to get Legal Status”
[53] Ibid.

brewing in El Salvador. In the 1980s, amid the civil war, Mata was a member of the Frente Farabudo Martí Para La Liberacion Nacional (FMLN), worked as a professor at the University of El Salvador, and served as the art department's director.

Throughout the 1980s as the civil war deepened, Mata's participation became more active as a militant of the revolutionary FMLN forces. In 1989, he participated in an offensive attack against the Salvadoran military and was subsequently captured and kidnapped by the national security forces known as the "Policia de Hacienda." Mata was transferred to La Esperanza prison in El Salvador, commonly known as "Mariona." He was then placed in a hidden cell under the National Police. Carlos Cordova mentions that it was typical that the National Police would hide their inmates in hidden jail cells whenever Amnesty International was visiting.[54] One day the guards let Mata out of his cell and by chance Amnesty International was visiting saw him. Amnesty International was able to alert their solidarity network and became a key factor in helping release him from jail as a political refugee.

Cordova was part of the network that helped bring Mata to the United States in 1989. He was contacted by Holly Near, the American singer-songwriter, and Sylvia Walters, chair of the Art Department at San Francisco State University. A committee created for Mata's defense strategized how to free him from jail. Cordova, Near, and Walters wrote a strong positioned letter asking for his release from prison. Other organizations also contributed letters and gathered support for Mata's release

---

[54] Cordova, Carlos B. Interview. Conducted by Mauricio E. Ramírez, 8 May 2019.

from prison. Several well-known musicians, actors, politicians, and writers supported his release of Mata, including Carlos Santana, Bono from U2, Danny Glover, Jane Fonda, Nancy Pelosi, and Alice Walker.[55] Unbeknownst to Mata, his kidnapping helped spark a strong network extending from the San Francisco Bay Area. By 1990, the U.S. public was attuned to the U.S. involvement in Central America, thus helping facilitate a strong public campaign for Mata's entry into the United States.

While it was rare for Salvadorans to receive amnesty, asylum, or legal entrance to the United States during the civil war, Mata was able to receive a visa to live and work in San Francisco, in great part because of his supporters in the San Francisco Bay Area. Mata lived in San Francisco for four years from 1990-1994. The visa allowed him to work various jobs as a lecturer at SF State University. He also worked as a curator and taught classes at the Mission Cultural Center for the Arts, collaborated with Central American Resource Center, often gave talks at various universities, and held a fellowship position with the California Arts Council for three years.

How *500 Years of Resistance* Came to Life

In 1992, during his stay in San Francisco, Mata painted the mural *500 Years of Resistance*, commissioned by Father Jack Isaacs, a liberation theologian and priest at Saint Peter's Parish, a Catholic Church in the Mission District. The exterior walls of Saint Peter's Catholic Church function as a triptych outdoor mural reflecting the

[55] Mata, Isaías. Interview. Conducted by Mauricio E. Ramírez, 10 December 2020.

struggle of indigenous people of the Americas. The mural decorates the corner of the church, which faces the intersection of Florida Street and 24th Street.

The creation of *500 years of Resistance* was tumultuous and took a dedicated fundraising effort from local community churchgoers and Father Isaacs. Initially Father Isaacs wanted a mural that would provide a sense of pride to the local Latinx community of the Mission District and identified Mata as the right artists to paint the mural. At first Mata took a conservative approach in drawing out a sketch of the mural because he believed that he would not have the liberty to create a mural with a political perspective on a Catholic institution. However, upon presenting his first draft sketch, Father Isaacs believed the subject matter was too light and he wanted the mural to take on a more critical stance. Mata decided to modify the sketch and took a *cosmovisión indigena* (indigenous worldview) approach for the mural's theme, one that does not necessarily play into Catholic views.[56] Father Jack Isaacs approved his second sketch, and it ended up being the blueprint for the mural that still stands to this day.

---

[56] Ibid.

Figure 1. 6. Mata, Isaías. *500 Años de Resistencia/500 Years of Resistance*, 1992. Mural on Saint Peter's Church, located on 24th and Florida Streets.

Father Isaacs had the vision for *500 Years of Resistance* to be painted on Saint Peters Church but there were no funds to pay for materials and Mata's commission. As a result, the local Latinx church community played an important role in raising funds for the mural. The collection of alms was an important component of fundraising, as often the priest or Mata explained the purpose of the mural during announcements at mass. They prevailed in winning the community's support and raising the money needed for the mural.

The church and the mural together offer an alternative theology of social justice, an alternative perspective of the five-hundred-years since Europeans invaded the Americas, thus answering the question, how can the marginalized and disappeared appear in history? Mata's mural is an essential contribution to San Francisco's Mission District mural movement because he captures a visual representation of

struggle within the canonical history of Latin America, specifically Mesoamerica. Read from right to left, the mural's starting point is on 24th street and it ends on the left-hand side of Florida Street. On the second side of the mural on the wall facing Mission Street, starting from the far-left side, Mata paints iconic indigenous figures that symbolize pre-Columbian cultures. On the right side of the wall Spanish colonizers collide with indigenous Americans as a large indigenous person is hovering over a cross (fig. 1.6). This indigenous figure holds an arrow on his left and a machete in his right hand showing that he is ready to defend himself. The figure has full wings on his back; this anthropomorphic feature can symbolize a Mesoamerican deity such as Quetzalcoatl or Kukulkan. The clash between Spanish and indigenous peoples represents a seismic shift in the history of the Americas as colonization created nation states throughout Latin America.

***500 Years of Resistance:* Complicating the Cosmovisión Indigena**

Resting on the left window is an open book with a passage from the ancient sacred Mayan story *Popol Vuh* on one side with a passage from the Catholic Holy Bible on the second page. The subtle gesture Mata created by contrasting two passages from two distinct holy books comments on how the arrival of the Spaniards displaced Mesoamerican cultures and beliefs. One book is from the Mayans, a Mesoamerican native empire of the Americas (largely what is today known as Mexico and Central America) that was colonized by the Spaniards upon their arrival in Yucatan in 1521. The second book, the Catholic Bible, was brought by the Spanish conquistadors and imposed on the indigenous cultures. Mata is demonstrating the

importance of indigenous culture and history of the Americas by putting *Popol Vuh* on par with the Bible.

There is a clear parallel between the two texts chosen by Father Isaacs to be included in the mural. Both passages are about the earth and the life it supports. In the Catholic Bible, the entry is from Isaías 45:18: “Asi habla dios, yo no he creado los cielos y la tierra para que sean vacios sino para que sean habitados/ This is how God speaks, I have not created the heavens and the earth to be empty but to be inhabited.” From the *Popol Vuh*, he chose the third part:1: “De Maiz Amarilla y de maiz blanco se hizo su carne de masa de maiz hicieron el hombre/ From yellow corn and white corn their flesh was made from corn dough, they made man." Mata depicts the creation of man according to the *Popol Vuh* but replaces the man with a woman. Sitting squarely at the center of the protruding corner of 24th Street and Florida Street, the woman is surrounded by corn husks and looks to be praying with her head down and her feet transforming into roots. The woman represents the *Popol Vuh* passage, but also Mother Earth, a concept known in the South American Andes as the "Pachamama.” Pachamama is a goddess revered by the indigenous peoples of the Andes; she is known as the earth/time mother. In Inca mythology, Pachamama is a fertility goddess who presides over planting and harvesting, embodies the mountains, and causes earthquakes.

Figure 1. 7. Mata, Isaías. *500 Años de Resistencia/500 Years of Resistance*, 1992.
Mural on Saint Peter's Church, located on 24th St. and Florida St.
Mata originally painted the Pachamama naked with bare breasts exposed.

Several churchgoers were offended by the painting and went to complain directly to the archbishop of San Francisco (fig. 1.7). The archbishop called Father Isaacs and said the painting of bare breasted woman was offensive to many people. He left Father Isaacs and Mata no alternative but to change the mural or else it would be erased. Mata commented that he found it ironic that at the corner store directly across the mural there was a beer advertisement of a woman in a bikini.[57] He resolved the conflict by covering the woman with a corn husk.

[57] Ibid.

Figure 1. 8. Mata, Isaías. *500 Años de Resistencia/500 Years of Resistance*, 1992. Mural on Saint Peter's Church, located on 24th St. and Florida St. Photo by Mauricio E. Ramírez

Towards the end of the mural, the wall facing Florida Street contains figures and scenes of resistance and struggle set in modern times (fig 1.8). On the far left-hand side, a group of people of different races are unified and protesting with a city skyline as their backdrop and displaying signs that say, "No More War," "Paz con Justicia Social." One of the figures in the protest scenes is United Farm Worker leader César Chávez holding a poster that says, "Viva La Huelga Strike." On the top right-hand side, portraits of historical figures who had an affiliation towards religion

include Martin Luther King Jr., Archbishop Romero, Sor Juana Inés De La Cruz, Fray Bartolome De Las Casas, Kateri Tekakwitha, and Miguel Hidalgo Y Costilla. At the center, there is a group of working-class men and women hauling an enormous wooden wheel. This scene represents the innovation of humanity with the creation of the wheel. These scenes depict the modern-day struggle since the arrival of 1492 to the New World. Despite the colonization of the Americas and its indigenous people by the Europeans, humanity has made remarkable strides in innovation, architecture, and technology. But with these same innovations, issues of slavery, civil rights, indigenous rights continue as people remain fighting for social justice, equity, and peace during war time. This mural is a reminder that 500 years past the 1492 arrival of the Europeans to the Americas, people continue to "resist" in their struggles against imperialism, racism, and violence.

Mata's story highlights an important moment in the history of the mural movement of San Francisco by recognizing a Salvadoran's contribution to it. The mural movement of the Mission District was led largely by Chicanx artists and Anglo artists. Mata's intervention and contribution showed a high degree of mural mastery, and the ability to carry out a mural with the sophistication of *500 Years of Resistance* in the Mission was unmatched in sheer size and skill. Mata stated his style differed from many of the Chicanx murals that preexisted in the Mission District. As Mata remembers:

> The decade of the 80s, 90s and long before ... Chicanos had the ability to create many objects, art, murals. They were a flag of struggle and resistance. When I arrived in the 90s, Chicano art in San Francisco was

still very strong and the people who maintained most of the murals were Chicanos and created Chicano style murals. There was Ray Patlán, Juan Fuentes, Susan Cervantes, and Juana Alicia, who is a great friend of mine. When I arrived, I think that no one believed that a Salvadoran could create a mural of that magnitude. I don't want to be self-centered or egocentric, but the *500 Años De Resistencia* has differences in composition and color in respect of the Chicano style, it has different components. My mural is an X-ray of the continent, contains poly-argumentative themes and a narrative voice.[58]

Mata makes a keen observation, while many Latinx murals existed in the Mission District, Central Americans created very few murals there. Mata's painting skill is remarkable. His attention to skin tones, color, human proportions, and composition is realistic. The painting quality for a mural of this size essentially went unmatched for an outdoor mural of the Mission District until the Maestrapeace Mural appeared on the Woman's building in 1994. However, Mata's *500 Years of Resistance* did not deviate too far from prominent Chicanx indigenist imagery. Many of the murals of the Mission District created up to 1992 contained characteristics of the Chicanx movement, such as references to indigeneity, Mesoamerican and Aztec cultures, or the Farm Workers movement.

To examine Chicanx indigenism more closely, Sheila Contreras explains Chicanx "indigenismo" as "the stylistic appropriation of Indigenous cultural forms and traditions by non-indigenous artists and intellectuals" in her book *Bloodlines*.[59] Similarly, in painting the narrative of *500 Years of Resistance* on Saint Peter's Church, Mata appropriated indigenous Mesoamerican figures and symbols that were

[58] Ibid.
[59] Contreras, Sheila Marie. *Blood Lines: Myth, Indigenism, and Chicana/o Literature*, p. 24.

prominent in the tradition of Chicanx murals and art, such as the incorporation of the Olmec head, Quetzalcoatl, and corn. Therefore, we can see similarities in the Chicanx indigeneity art symbols and Mata's vision of a *Cosmovisión Indigena* in *500 Years of Resistance*.

Conclusion

The murals painted by Sigüenza and Mata are essential contributions to the history of the U.S. Central American art of San Francisco because they demonstrate socially engaged themes pertinent to the Central American diaspora. Sigüenza's focus on the Salvadoran civil war proves to be the earliest mural that relates to the Salvadoran civil war created by an artist of Salvadoran origin. The murals created by Sigüenza and Mata expanded the notion of Latinx art and Latinidad by inserting the Central American presence in the Mission District.

Sigüenza's 1984 mural, *After the Triumph/Después del Triunfo,* marks the last he painted in the Mission District; it was also the same year the comedic performance troupe Culture Clash formed. 1984 marks a momentous year in which Sigüenza shifted his focus from a visual artist to a career as an actor. By 1990, he had moved to Southern California and lived in Los Angeles and then in San Diego while continuing his career as a successful actor.

In 1994 Mata decided to return to El Salvador as the 1992 Peace Accords had been signed as he felt safe enough to return to his home country. Mata continued as a professor at the University of El Salvador. The year 2022 marks the 30-year anniversary of *500 Years of Resistance*, which still decorates Saint Peters Church's

exterior walls on the corner of 24th Street and Florida Street. In 2013-2014, Mata returned to San Francisco and repainted *500 Years of Resistance* adding several decades of life to the mural. Mata's contribution to the Mission District and San Francisco is unique and truly speaks to how international efforts of transnational solidarity and community organizing potentially saved his life from torture and death by the Salvadoran military. After returning to El Salvador, Mata continued his life as an artist, muralist, and professor. His murals adorn different countries throughout the Americas, including Boston, New York, San Francisco, Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Quito, Ecuador.

Figure 1. 9. Sigüenza, Herbert. *After the Triumph/Después del Triunfo*, 1984. The current state of Sigüenza’s mural located in Balmy Alley. Photo taken on March 2021 by Mauricio E. Ramírez.

In contrast, Sigüenza's *After the Triumph/Después del Triunfo* still exists in Balmy Alley but only as a visual palimpsest (fig. 1.9). Only the faded letters of "Guardia Nacional" remain visible. Since 1984, the mural has been covered by graffiti, *ad hoc* wooden panels, covered up by potted plants, and has fallen into a state of disrepair. Sigüenza's faded mural remains a symbol of Central American resilience, having endured civil wars and displacement in a gentrifying neighborhood. *After the Triumph/Después del Triunfo* is a reminder that as the residents and people of San Francisco continue to evolve, the Central American presence remains in Balmy Alley.

The three murals enact a U.S. Central American or Central American American subjectivity and presence within the Mission District mural scene.

The following chapters will demonstrate how the 1980s-1990s became a critical decade for Chicanx, Latinx, and White artists to display solidarity with Central America via murals and posters.

Chapter 2: Visual Solidarity: San Francisco Bay Area Chicanx Artists in Solidarity with Central America

When Central Americans arrived in the United States in large numbers during the 1980s, the historical leftist politics and antiwar movements of San Francisco made it a city that welcomed Central American immigrants and rejected U.S. intervention in Central American conflicts. Thus, to see leftist sentiments visually portrayed in Latinx art of San Francisco is no surprise. As Cary Cordova notes, "leftist politics of San Francisco have dominated the construction of Latino art in the Bay Area."[60] During the Central American civil wars, many Latinx artists demonstrated solidarity through art activism by producing paintings, posters, and murals that often helped raise money for Central American organizations. The concept of solidarity became a key motivator for various Chicanx artists, especially in a city where several grassroots and religious organizations committed to helping Central American refugees through the sanctuary movement which provided shelter, food, and legal advice to new arrivals. Ana Patricia Rodríguez states, "During that period of war, U.S. Latinos/as (especially Chicanos) began increasingly to support antiwar efforts and to participate in underground networks assisting Central American refugees and immigrants."[61] Thus, Chicanx artists also became part of the cause to visually create and spread consciousness toward the Central American civil wars and U.S. involvement.

---

[60] Cordova, Cary. *Heart of the Mission: Latino Art and Politics in San Francisco*, p. 10.
[61] Ana Patricia. *Dividing the Isthmus: Central American Transnational Histories, Literatures, and Cultures*, p.130.

In this chapter, I examine artworks of three Chicanx artists—Juana Alicia, Juan R. Fuentes, and Malaquías Montoya—who created an extensive body of visual artwork in the Bay Area in solidarity with Central Americans. From their voluminous art production, I selected works that showed a connection to Central American themes, in particular the civil wars. By taking solidarity art and activism as a point of entry, I ask how relational resistance in their art is represented in solidarity with Central America. Furthermore, how and why were these artists motivated to produce works in solidarity with Central America? I use oral histories and interviews to explore key moments in each artist's life that influenced their motivation to produce works of art in solidarity with the Central American liberation movement. Shedding light on the particular moments in which these artists began to change and awaken their consciousness in solidarity with the struggles of Central American liberation recovers a new perspective on Chicanx history. Through a lens of relational resistance applied to the artworks of three Chicanx artists in the Bay Area, the important position of Chicanx artists in Central American issues is revealed. Alicia, Fuentes, and Montoya's stories serve as examples of Chicanx artists who identified with Central American revolutionary struggles against U.S. imperialism and capitalist exploitation.

This chapter adds a unique contribution to both U.S. Central American and Chicanx art history by highlighting the intersection of Chicanx art and U.S. Central America art in order to gain a better understanding of both histories. Alicia, Fuentes, and Montoya are prominent Chicanx artists who resided in the Bay Area and have

been written about extensively, particularly for their significant contributions to the Chicanx art movement.[62] Yet, they are not the only Chicanx artists who created artwork in solidarity with Central America; many other Chicanxs and Mexican artists from the Bay Area also actively participated (e.g., Yolanda López, Louie "The Foot" González, and Enrique Chagoya). Alicia, Fuentes, and Montoya, along with many other Chicanx artists, were part of a generation that emerged from the Chicanx civil rights movement and used visual art as a tool to combat U.S. imperialism, colonization, and exploitation. As Guisela Latorre states, "The Chicano movement and the political activism of the 1960s and 1970s provided a fertile ground and a powerful impetus for the emergence of a truly radical art."[63] The generation of artists who came of age during this time knew visual art had a consciousness-raising

[62] A critical publication on one of the first Chicanx art exhibition in the U.S. was the traveling exhibition Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation for which all three artists participated in. For more information read: Griswold del Castillo, Richard., et al. Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985. Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles, 1991. Other publications that include all three artists are: Cordova, Cary. The Heart of the Mission: Latino Art and Politics in San Francisco. University of Pennsylvania Press, Inc., 2017, Jackson, Carlos F. Chicana and Chicano Art: ProtestArte. (University of Arizona Press, 2009). For more information on Malaquias Montoya see: Miner, Dylan A. T. Creating Aztlán - Chicano Art, Indigenous Sovereignty, and Lowriding Across Turtle Island. University of Arizona Press, 2014, Jackson, Carlos Francisco. "Serigrafía. Constructing the Chicana/o Imaginary." Boom: A Journal of California, vol. 4, no. 1, University of California Press, 2014, pp. 78–85. Rivera, Jana. "The Arts: Chicano Art; The Power and the Polemic Coming of Age or Selling Out?" The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education, vol. 7, no. 9, The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education, 1996, p. 7. González, Jennifer A., et al. Chicano and Chicana Art: A Critical Anthology. Duke University Press, 2019. Romo, Terezita. Malaquias Montoya. UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2011. For Juana Alicia see: Mazurana, Dyan E. "Juana Alicia's Las Lechugueras/The Women Lettuce Workers." Meridians (Middletown, Conn.), vol. 3, no. 1, Duke University Press, 2002, pp. 54–81.

[63] Latorre, Guisela, "The art of disruption," in Routledge Handbook of Chicana/o Studies ed. Francisco A. Lomelí, Denise A. Segura and Elyette Benjamin-Labarthe. Routledge, 2018, p. 359.

function that allowed for the expression of collective sentiments and for the enactment of community building.[64] Furthermore, Latorre reminds us:

> Chicana/o artists could not afford to simply retreat into their studios to explore the contours of their own artistic imagination, for they were often compelled and driven to understand how their individual creativity related to the process of community building and preservation, a task they could not achieve by remaining in cultural, social, and political isolation.[65]

Thus, the social, political, and cultural contexts that gave rise to the greater visibility of Chicanx art is reflected particularly in the Mission District of San Francisco through the establishment of various arts-related community centers and organizations. The nuanced murals and posters these three artists created demonstrate a deep understanding of the Central American conflicts; their knowledge was not created by accident. The Mission District and San Francisco played an important part in the spread of solidarity through the extensive network of Latinx solidarity organizations. Poetry readings, music festivals, film screenings, and cultural events in these Latinx solidarity organizations played an important role in representing Central American conflicts.

These three artists were not superficially engaged in learning about Central American wars. On the contrary, they were deeply committed to reading poetry created by either solidarity writers or Central American poets. Poems cited by Fuentes and Montoya served as inspiration for the solidarity artworks that I analyze in

---

[64] Ibid.

[65] Latorre, Guisela. *Walls of Empowerment: Chicana/o Indigenist Murals of California.* University of Texas Press, 2008, p. 8.

this chapter. Like many other activist–artists, these three artists opted for a socially engaged art that could be more accessible to communities of color.

Solidarity, particularly with Third World Peoples of the 1960s and 1970s, is tied explicitly to the Chicanx civil rights and art movements. Yet, how these Chicanx sentiments of solidarity through visual art continued beyond the 1970s and into the 1980s and 1990s when Central American civil wars erupted is seldomly analyzed or discussed. Reviewing the history of Central America and Chicanx relationally, rather than in isolation, recognizes where these histories meet to engage in a more comprehensive understanding of both movements and their relationship with each other. I explore how motivations for these artists were deeply personal as they understood visual and artistic contributions could change the outlook of others. Yet, there is a local temporality to this awakening of solidarity consciousness among this group of Chicanx artists. Bay Area universities, institutions, and collectives allowed these artists to work among a community of artists and cultural workers and provided the praxis for them to create a substantial body of work throughout the 1970s, 80s, and 90s in solidarity with Central American causes. San Francisco's local institutions and organizations enabled these artists to share the same discursive spaces between like-minded individuals and cultural workers.

Building a Central America Solidarity Consciousness in the Bay Area

The art activists that arose from San Francisco in the late 1970s and 1980s opposed the foreign policy of the Ronald Reagan administration to quell revolutionary efforts in Central America. In part, solidarity was directed against U.S.

policies that supported right-wing governments, counter-revolutionary movements, death squads, and militias. Various religious congregations and denominations throughout the Bay Area participated in the sanctuary movement, a religious and political campaign in the United States that began in the early 1980s to provide a safe haven for Central American refugees fleeing civil war. As the solidarity and sanctuary movements grew throughout the 1980s, posters, newspapers, printed ephemera, and public murals became necessary art forms to raise awareness of Central American civil wars and to enunciate a Central American presence in the barrio. The intense production of solidarity art was a visual affirmation of Central American presence in San Francisco, particularly in the Mission District.

In the previous chapter I delved into the importance of the Salvadoran diaspora and how Isaías Mata became an artist in exile, finding refuge in San Francisco as did many other Salvadorans fleeing the country's civil wars. Yet, before the Salvadoran civil wars fully erupted in 1980, events prior to the Sandinista revolution of 1979 led to an influx of Nicaraguans to San Francisco throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s. As Cary Cordova notes, "San Francisco support for Sandinistas swelled as migration from Nicaragua increased."[66] Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal described how the cultures of San Francisco and Nicaragua merged in the Mission District.

> Like the Puerto Ricans in New York, the Cubans in Miami, and the Mexicans in Los Angeles, it was the Nicaraguans in San Francisco. Mission Street was the street of the Nicaraguans; there were

[66] Cordova, Cary. *The Heart of the Mission: Latino Art and Politics in San Francisco*, p. 158.

> Nicaraguan restaurants and bars, they sold Managua's newspaper *La Prensa*, they drank Nicaraguan beer. And there was even an office of the Sandinista Front: with the red and black flag, portrait of Sandino, revolutionary posters; under the threat and surveillance of the FBI and CIA.[67]

By the 1980s, the work of investigative journalists, testimonies from refugees, and a network of cultural workers began to shed light on U.S. involvement in Central American conflicts. In response to the political turbulence that the Central American civil wars generated, White, Chicanx, Central American, and other Latinx artists residing in the Bay Area supported revolutionary efforts for liberation by creating antiwar art. Other well-documented forms of solidarity (e.g., mass protests) took hold in San Francisco (fig. 2.1). Yet, in the realm of visual art, artists in the 1980s were creating unique images throughout San Francisco that visually supported revolutionary efforts in Central American civil wars. These public art forms were produced as posters and murals but were also displayed in local galleries through fine art paintings and installations. An achievement and commitment that went unmatched. Alicia's contribution came mainly in murals dedicated to Central America and created four murals in the Mission District and two murals in Managua, Nicaragua. Fuentes and Montoya were prolific poster makers; they each produced well over a dozen posters for various Central American causes and organizations.

[67] Cardenal, Ernesto. *Las Ínsulas Extrañas Memorias II*. Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2003.

EN INGLES Y ESPANOL -- UN PERIODICO TOTALMENTE BILINGUE EN LA AREA DE LA BAHIA

EL TECOLOTE

VOL. 11 NO. 11 AUGUST 1981 (415) 824-7878 P.O. BOX 40037 SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94140

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, EL TECOLOTE! – AUGUST 24, 1970

Central American Solidarity; 5,000rally in San Francisco

FMLN

FDR

CASA EL SALVADOR SALUDA SEGUNDO ANIVERSARIO DE LA REVOLUCION SANDINISTA

–Pilar Mejía

Citizens demand civilian surveillance of police

A few months ago a young Latina protested to San Francisco police officers when she saw them arrest and beat up another woman. One officer answered her protest by throwing her against a car cutting her lips. Another broke her arm in several places. She told the police her arm was broken–they didn't do anything about that; just pushed her into the squad car and took her to the police station. She was kept there two hours before being taken to a hospital. The youth, Ana Serrano, reported this incident that happened to her to the police departments Internal Affairs Bureau – the police component

Figure 2. 1. *El Tecolote*, August 1981. Courtesy of El Tecolote Archives

Another important motivation and inspiration for the visual artwork of all three artists was the Latin American Nueva Canción musicians who arrived in San Francisco, usually in exile, to play music. Nueva Canción is a musical genre that emerged in Spain and Latin America in the 1960s; it features traditional folk-inspired styles and instruments with left-wing socially committed lyrics. Nueva Canción is a genre of music credited for renewing traditional Latin American folk music and was associated with revolutionary movements (e.g., Latin American New Left, liberation theology, and human rights). Nueva Canción musicians often faced censorship, exile, torture, death, or forceful disappearances by the wave of right-wing military dictatorships across Latin America. Thus, the Bay Area became a destination for many traveling musicians in exile. In oral histories and interviews with Alicia, Fuentes, and Montoya, each explained how music became an important tool for raising their awareness of Central American issues.

In addition, all three artists attended college in the Bay Area, which inspired a change in their perspective as art activists. Alicia credits her awareness of U.S. intervention in Central America to being a student at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UC Santa Cruz). As Alicia remembers:

> Sometime after I graduated, there was a wonderful professor at UC Santa Cruz named Roberto Crespi. He taught Arabic and Middle Eastern studies, and he was also an expert in Latino and Latin American studies. And I remember there was a reception for Guzmán on his return from Washington to UC Santa Cruz. Crespi, angered at Guzmán's perceived betrayal of Central America, walked up to Guzmán at the reception and spit in his face. There was a lot of solidarity of Chicanos, that I remember, from that time on, with the struggles in Central America.[68]

A professor of politics and community studies, Dr. Ralph C. Guzmán worked as a deputy assistant secretary of state to Latin America in President Jimmy Carter's administration from 1978–1979. Dr. Guzmán returned from Washington D.C. to his position as professor in the Politics Department at UC Santa Cruz where Roberto Crespi was a professor of literature. Dr. Guzmán was criticized for the U.S. involvement in supporting the Somoza regime in Nicaragua prior to the Sandinista revolution of 1979.

Fuentes attended San Francisco State University (SFSU) where he learned political organizing, how to create silkscreen posters, and became politically conscious of the Third World Liberation movements and the New Left. Fuentes credits his experience of meeting other people from Latin American countries both at

---

[68] Alicia, Juana. "Visual Solidarity with Central America: An Interview with Maestra Muralista Juana Alicia." Interview by Mauricio E. Ramírez, p.117.

SFSU and in the Mission District. These critical moments allowed him to see himself connected to larger movements beyond a singular Chicanx identity.

Montoya attended the University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley) in 1968 at the height of the Third World Liberation strikes and joined the Third World Liberation Front, which allowed him to become politically conscious of the U.S. involvement in wars happening abroad (e.g., Vietnam). He taught in the Chicanx Studies Department soon after he graduated from UC Berkeley and held a print class in the Chicano Art Center located near the campus on Telegraph and Haste Streets.[69] Having a physical printing studio located in Berkeley allowed Montoya to produce posters for various movements happening across the Bay Area.

The Bay Area, its left-wing organizations and the antiwar, civil, and Chicanx rights movements of the 1960s set the precedent for all three artists to further contribute to the Central American causes that would ensue in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The Bay Area became an important and pivotal place for the Central American solidarity movement to blossom.

Juana Alicia and Solidarity Murals

Juana Alicia is a renowned Chicana maestra muralista who has painted murals on walls in the Bay Area and abroad for over 35 years. Many of Alicia's murals focus on themes of social justice, climate change, antiwar movements, indigeneity, and feminist art. Alicia was born in Newark, New Jersey and grew up in Detroit,

---

[69] Montoya, Malaquías. Interview. Conducted by Mauricio E. Ramírez, 20 October 2017.

Michigan. Having been raised in the Midwest, she was unaware of Latinx identities and cultures outside of Mexican American and Puerto Rican contexts. She moved to California in the early 1970s and learned about Central American conflicts as a college student at UC Santa Cruz and by living in San Francisco's Mission District. In 1982 Alicia settled in the Mission District and lived on Hampshire Street between 21st and 22nd Streets until 1987. Later she moved to the Lower Haight but once the first dot.com bubble occurred, Alicia was priced out and moved to Berkeley in 1995. However, throughout her time living in San Francisco, Alicia produced an extensive body of murals in the Mission District. In total, Alicia produced four murals in the Mission District dedicated to Central America: *Te Oímos Guatemala* (1984–85), *Para Las Rosas* (1985), *Alto Al Fuego* (1988), *Una Ley Inmoral Nadie Tiene Que Cumplirla* (1996). In this chapter, I analyze *Alto Al Fuego*, *Para Las Rosas,* and *Una Ley Inmoral Nadie Tiene Que Cumplirla*. I analyze *Te Oímos Guatemala* in further detail in Chapter 3.

The United Farm Workers Union shaped Alicia's early political consciousness. She was recruited by Cesar Chavez to work with the United Farm Workers Union; an experience she credits with teaching her about artists' ability to spark change.[70] Unbeknownst to her, Alicia's early labor picking lettuce for Interharvest (United Fruit Company– a U.S. owned company) in the fields of Salinas, California was linked economic exploitation beginning in the early 20th Century

[70] Orriss, Grace. "Bay Area muralist Juana Alicia Araiza discusses her work, social justice and accessibility." *Daily Cal*. April 11, 2019.

through United Fruit Company's investments in Central America.[71] United Fruit Company exploited several countries in Central America, the Caribbean, and South America to reap massive financial wealth from trading tropical fruit (primarily bananas) grown on Latin American plantations and sold in the United States and Europe. The company maintained a monopoly in certain regions through ownership of large swaths of land, railroads, and the needed infrastructure to produce fruit crops. This aggressive control over banana plantations led to those countries becoming known as "Banana Republics" (e.g., Costa Rica, Honduras, and Guatemala).

Figure 2. 2. Alicia, Juana. *Las Lechugueras/The Women Lettuce Workers,* 1983. Mural located on York and 24th Streets. A commission from the Mayor's Office of Community Development and the San Francisco Arts Commission. Destroyed and replaced with *La Llorona's Sacred Waters*, also by Juana Alicia in 2004.

Prior to the regulation of pesticides due to the Clean Air Act (1970) in the U.S., farmworkers had to deal with egregious exposure to harmful pesticides, a

[71] United Fruit Company is now known as Chiquita Brands International.

memory Alicia did not forget as it was largely a Mexican and Chicanx labor force that worked among and lived near contaminated fields.[72] The brutal conditions farmworkers faced were in the name of exploitative capitalism. Alicia's first mural, painted in San Francisco's Mission District, *Las Lechugueras*, depicts lettuce pickers harvesting the crop (fig. 2.2). The main subject in the center of the mural is a heavily pregnant woman; a fetus can be seen in her transparent uterus. As Alicia began to gain political consciousness toward the civil wars in Central America, it became obvious that the struggles she endured in picking lettuce for Interharvest were inexorably tied to Central America. As Alicia remembers:

> Through MEChA at colleges and universities, and in our communities, we had a strong Chicano/Mexicano identity, but we came to realize that the same destructive policies going on with the U.S. government domestically were in full force all over Central America. The same exploitation of labor, the same undermining of labor unions and strikes. In fact, the very company that I worked for picking lettuce in Salinas, Interharvest, was part of United Fruit's ubiquitous holdings. So, if we were on strike in Salinas, the corporation could just write us off, while reaping huge profits all over Central America. We were part of the international dynamics of global capitalism, and international labor struggles, a reality that impacted us in what we originally perceived simply as local to California. [73]

Alicia's point of view reveals a nuanced approach to how transnational corporations such as Interharvest were able to profit from farm workers in the Central Valley as well underpaid labor in Central America. This act of caring and solidarity shows Chicanx artists like Alicia were aware of the U.S. capitalist exploitation that

---

[72] Mazurana, Dyan. "Juana Alicia's Las Lechugueras/The Women Lettuce Workers." *Meridians*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2002, pp. 54–81. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40338543.
[73] Alicia, Juana. "Visual Solidarity with Central America: An Interview with Maestra Muralista Juana Alicia." Interview by Mauricio E. Ramírez, p. 218.

Central America endured before the civil war. After arriving in the Mission District in 1982, her experience having met Central and South Americans who fled persecution changed her perspective, showing how her struggle was also intertwined with theirs. Alicia's personal experiences led to a form of relational resistance and recognition that Chicanx and Mexican-American farmers experience could not be separated from the struggles in Central America.

Two years after creating *Las Lechugueras*, in 1985, Alicia painted two murals related to the civil wars to demonstrate relational resistance with Central America. The first was on San Francisco's Mime Troupe building and was titled *Para Las Rosas* (fig. 2.3). The San Francisco Mime Troupe is a theatre of political satire that focuses on socialist ideals and offers free shows in parks in the Bay Area and across California. Although *Para Las* Rosas, as a whole does, not depict Central America, there are scenes that cite the revolution occurring in El Salvador and Nicaragua.

Figure 2. 3. Alicia, Juana. *For the Roses/ Para las Rosas*, 1985. Courtesy of Artstor.

Figure 2. 4. Alicia, Juana. *For the Roses/ Para las Rosas*, 1985. Close up of guerrilleros on top left and woman and man holding rifles. Courtesy of Artsor.

The mural *Para Las Rosas* depicts scenes from different plays written by the Mime Troupe. At the center of the star, a campesino man and woman are holding rifles to defend their land, meant to be a depiction of Mexican revolutionaries for the Mime Troupe play *Nos Engañaro/False Promises* (fig. 2.3). Alicia re-used this image to create a poster sold to fundraise for the nonprofit Central American Resource Center better known by its acronym CARECEN. Above the campesinos, there is another scene of two guerrilla soldiers holding rifles and laughing with a man lying in front of them playing his guitar. This scene depicts the Mime Troupe's play, *Last Tango in Huehuetenango*, a play based on the wars in Central America.[74]

The other mural Alicia painted—*Te Oímos Guatemala*—was part of PLACA, a mural collective consisting of thirty-six artists who painted twenty-seven murals in

[74] Huehuetenango is a city and municipality in the highlands of western Guatemala

Balmy Alley that conveyed a dual theme: (a) peace in Central America and (b) the celebration of Central American culture. I will discuss *Te Oímos Guatemala* in Chapter 3.

Figure 2. 5. A collective mural project with Juana Alicia, Miranda Bergman, Nohelia Cerrato, Boanerges Cerrato, Vicente Cerrato, Rosa Lopez Hernandes, Hector Noel Méndez, Pablo Paisano, Ariella Seidenberg, and Arch Williams, *El Amanecer*, 1986, retouched 1993. Acrylic on stucco. Located in Plaza España, Parque de las Madres, Managua, Nicaragua. Photograph by Arch Williams. Courtesy of Artstor.

In 1985, Alicia traveled to Managua, Nicaragua along with other muralists such as Miranda Bergman and experienced the Sandinista revolution firsthand. Invited by the Sandinistas, the government requested the San Francisco muralists create murals in solidarity with Nicaragua. Along with other artists, the muralists painted *El Amanecer* on Casa ANDEN, headquarters of the national teachers' union located in El Parque de las Madres (fig. 2.5). The trip proved to be inspirational and deepened Alicia's solidarity with Central America. After her return from Nicaragua in 1987, she learned that the United States had invaded Honduras without Congress's

approval. Alicia believed this invasion was unacceptable—another U.S. intervention in a Central American country after what she had just witnessed in Nicaragua. Inspired by events unfolding in Honduras and Nicaragua, Alicia created the mural *Cease Fire/Alto al Fuego* that was once located at the corner of Mission and 21st Streets (fig. 2.6).

There were political protests going on Mission Street, and a lot of solidarity from the Latinx community, against the war in Honduras.[75] Alicia explains the inspiration behind the mural and why she chose to include a young boy in the mural:

> The exact inspiration was an eleven-year-old child I had met at our mural site in Managua, Nicaragua, with his very full, leather book bag with a broken handle, sort of falling apart at the seams. This was typical of young students in Nicaragua while we were there, painting the murals at the Parque de las Madres in Managua. This child hung out and watched the mural evolve there.... And he would come up and talk to us as we were painting. He could recite the poetry of seventeenth-century Mexican feminist writer Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Here was this eleven-year-old boy, who's so literate, not only in Nicaraguan poetry and history but also in Mexican literary tradition, that it just blew me away. The priority that the Nicaraguan revolution put on literacy was so moving.[76]

The power of the image are the two hands trying to halt automatic guns to protect the innocence of a child. As a universal message, the mural conveys the harsh reality of how wars often kill innocent human beings. The most vulnerable populations are often victims of war. In this regard, the mural's message can

---

[75] Alicia, Juana. "Visual Solidarity with Central America: An Interview with Maestra Muralista Juana Alicia." Interview by Mauricio E. Ramírez, pp. 117.
[76] Ibid, p. 122.

represent all wars in which bystanders and children die. That same year, Alicia uses the sketch for *Cease Fire/Alto al Fuego* and designs a poster to support protests on arms shipments from the Concord, California Naval Weapons Station to Central America (fig. 2.7). The protests received national attention when Vietnam veteran and peace activist Brian Willson laid down on the railroad tracks as a form of protest to prevent the train from transporting weapons; the train did not stop and Willson lost both of his legs.

Figure 2. 6. Alicia, Juana. *Alto Al Fuego/Cease Fire*, 1988, retouched in 2002. Photograph by Steve Rotman. Located on the corner of 21st and Mission Streets, San Francisco, CA. Destroyed by graffiti.

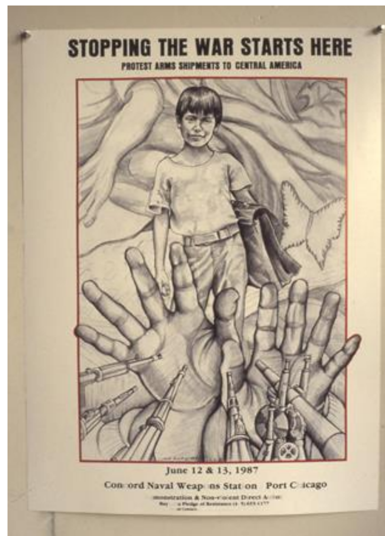

Figure 2. 7. Alicia, Juana. *Alto Al Fuego/Cease Fire*, 1987. Poster. Courtesy of Juana Alicia.

In 2002, Alicia repainted the murals using a more *chiaroscuro* tone to reflect the ongoing nature of its theme. Though the wars in Central America had ended, the U.S. government continued to wage war in Palestine, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Thus, though Nicaragua and Honduras originally inspired this image, the universalism of the image and its message act as a timeless piece that continues to speak to antiwar efforts. Unfortunately, this mural no longer exists. In 2012 the mural was destroyed after multiple graffiti attacks and it is no longer visible.

Nicaragua's Contra War ended in 1990 and El Salvador's 12-year war ended in 1992. The last year of civil war in Guatemala, 1996, was also the end of all Central American civil wars and some of the activism around Central America began winding down. As Andrés Torres noted, "Salvadorans who arrived in the 1990s, however, received far less public attention. The Solidarity Movement waned after the wars in Central America ended, and many of the non-Central American activists diverted

their energies to other causes."[77] Alicia kept the memory of El Salvador alive in Balmy Alley as it already marked an important space for the Central American diaspora. Her previous murals were inspired by the struggles of Nicaragua and Guatemala. Her 1996 mural, *Una Ley Inmoral Nadie Tiene que Cumplirla* was specifically inspired by Salvadoran Archbishop Óscar A. Romero and the grave impact he left on the Central American people (fig. 2.8). Archbishop Romero was one of the most vocal religious figures to oppose the Salvadoran civil war. He was assassinated by the death squads on March 24, 1980, receiving a bullet to the heart while conducting a sermon for mass.[78] Archbishop Romero embraced liberation theology, a synthesis of Christian theology and socio-economic analysis, that emphasizes "social concern for the poor and political liberation for oppressed peoples."[79] Liberation theology developed in the Catholic Church in Latin America in the 1960s, arising principally as a moral reaction to the poverty and social injustice in the region.

[77] Andrés Torres, *Latinos in New England*, p.162.
[78] "Salvador Archbishop Assassinated by Sniper While Officiating at Mass". *The New York Times*. 25 March 1980.
[79] Cook, Chris. *Dictionary of Historical Terms.* Second Edition. Gramercy, 1998, p. 203.

Figure 2. 8. Juana, Alicia. *Una Ley Inmoral Nadie Tiene que Cumplirla*, 1996. Located on Balmy Alley, San Francisco, California. Photograph by Mauricio E. Ramírez.

By 1996—the year the Guatemalan civil war ended—12 years had passed since Alicia’s *Te Oimos Guatemala* was originally painted as part of the PLACA murals in Balmy Alley. Owners of the house had replaced the garage door and thus Alicia’s 1984 mural was gone; however, she held rights to paint in the same location. That year she replaced *Te Oimos Guatemala* with *Una Ley Nadie Tiene que Cumplirla*. Alicia explains the impetus behind the mural:

> Monseñor Romero was a poignant figure and very important. I see the work as an educational tool, and a testimonial to preserve his memory. There's another mural up on Balmy Alley that also celebrates him, that was done by Jamie Morgan and Arch Williams. And I just thought, in the light of everything that was happening, of Romero’s lema: “No one should comply with an immoral law.” That is a pretty good standard to live by. Right? The quote is painted in reference to Salvadoran style

> and painting tradition. The lettering celebrates the beauty of the landscape and it's an homage to folk-art form as well.[80]

The stylized block letters that illustrate the quote "Una ley nadie tiene que cumplirla/No one should comply with an immoral law" is a reference to "La Palma" painting style popularized by Fernando Llort, as discussed in chapter one. Alicia decided to reference this iconographic style to make the painting familiar to Salvadorans and Central Americans who frequented Balmy Alley.

Juan Fuentes Solidarity Posters

Juan Fuentes was born in Artesia, New Mexico in 1950. His introduction to political posters came from his enrollment to SFSU in 1969. As a recipient of inclusionary practices due to the Third World Liberation strike held at SFSU from 1968–1969, Fuentes experienced the tail end of the Third World Liberation strikes and immersed himself into a world of activism. Having grown up and worked in the fields of Salinas Valley, Fuentes was aware of the oppression farmworkers faced in the United States. His admittance into SFSU changed his perspective; he gained a third-world consciousness with an awareness of the New Left on the rise. Enrolled as an art student who specialized in painting and drawing, Fuentes soon found his calling was to create posters and graphics for political causes.[81] His participation in creating posters for the anti-war and third world movements helped him define his class identity and connect with people that were part of a larger struggle.

---

[80] Alicia, Juana. "Visual Solidarity with Central America: An Interview with Maestra Muralista Juana Alicia." Interview by Mauricio E. Ramírez. p. 120.

[81] Fuentes, Juan R. Interview. Conducted by Mauricio E. Ramírez, 7 May 2015.

In the early 1970s, Fuentes joined a non-official organization he described as a "small cadre of primarily Latin Americanists" from SFSU and the Mission District.[82] This group was nameless and not associated with any organization. They were inspired by revolutionary struggles abroad and dedicated themselves to studying leftist and revolutionary political literature and attending local protests. Many of the people in the cadre were primarily Salvadoran, Nicaraguan, and Mexican (however not Chicanxs). Fuentes involved himself with this group and studied and read literature on political struggles. The group was inspired by the readings of Mao Zedong and the Russian revolution. However, Fuentes's participation was short-lived, as he soon realized armed struggle was not the way he could participate in anti-war movements. As Fuentes remembers:

> I got together with a group and I studied, we did political study for a while with them and then I realized that I was out of my league in the sense that these guys were really talking about revolutionary struggle or armed struggle and I had no clue what that meant. I mean, I was pretty young, and I was like, "No, I'm not ready for that." So, I stepped away from it.[83]

Through his participation in this group, Fuentes dabbled in creating one of his first protest posters. The group knew Fuentes could draw because he was majoring in drawing and painting, so he assisted in creating a Nicaraguan poster. Although his participation with this group was short, creating one of his first posters unknowingly began to define his role in the antiwar movement. He realized he was not going to

---

[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.

train as a revolutionary or physically participate in the armed revolution of Nicaragua as many Bay Area leftists, activists, and college students later committed to.

Through connections with organizations linked to anti-war movements, Fuentes began connecting with other Bay Area political organizations. In 1973 Fuentes visited Cuba with the Venceremos Brigade, which played a crucial role in his appreciation of social justice issues and visual arts.[84] In Cuba he visited the Organization of Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (OSPAAAL), a local political movement with the stated purpose of fighting globalization, imperialism, neoliberalism, and defending human rights. Acting as the "key bridge" to unite liberation struggles and movements in the three continents, OSPAAAL's main objective was the promotion of anti-imperialism and socialism.[85] OSPAAAL's running theme of solidarity with the third world opened a whole new venue and perspective for Fuentes. Through his experience in Cuba, he realized how much artistic emphasis was put into billboards, posters, and propaganda. The explicit link between art and Cuban social causes became a key influence in Fuentes's artwork. Cuba also served as a motivation to continue creating posters. As he remembers, "because at that point…I really couldn't quite figure out where my art was going to—how it was going to be used, or how I was going to be able to survive

---

[84] The Venceremos Brigade is a politically motivated international organization founded in 1969 by members of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and officials of the Republic of Cuba. See Sale, Kirkpatrick. *SDS.* Random House, 1973.
[85] "The Art of The Revolution Will Be Internationalist". Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research.

with it… But going to Cuba…I actually saw the work integrated into society in a lot of different ways."[86]

Fuentes returned to SFSU to finish his degree with a new sense of purpose. He took screen-printing classes with Chicano artist Rupert García and met Malaquías Montoya, who also served as inspiration for creating political posters in the Bay Area. As Fuentes recalls:

> It was at San Francisco State that I took my first silkscreen class with Rupert García and then Rupert had already done some of the posters for the student movement, and then he started doing other political posters. It was through Rupert that I basically started to learn how to do silkscreening. And then from there I branched out on my own. I was also introduced to Malaquías Montoya who was one of the early Chicano poster makers by this time. I'm pretty much hooked… I start doing posters for different venues and as I'm doing them, organizations figure out who are the artists in the Bay Area that are doing political posters that you can tap on to do them.[87]

The influence of meeting other people of Latin American descent also helped define Fuentes' identity as more than just Chicano. By participating in grassroots organizations that emerged from the Third World Liberation Strike, he fostered a sense of solidarity and class identity that he believed in.

The Mission District was a cosmopolitan hub and included diverse Latinxs from different Latin American countries. Fuentes met people from different parts of Latin America which began to awaken his class consciousness because he didn't

[86] Cordova, Cary. *The Heart of the Mission: Latino Art and Politics in San Francisco*, p. 121.
[87] Fuentes, Juan R. Interview. Conducted by Mauricio E. Ramírez, 7 May 2015.

identify himself as merely Chicano but as part of a larger struggle. As Fuentes explains:

> So, it was definitely a class identity as well. I think that was important. I mean that was important to me because I really felt connected in that sense. I felt connected to people that were part of the struggle and I think it was through that experience where I was introduced to the struggles of Latin America and it was through people that I met in the Mission... Because before this I'd never considered myself a Latino… I always thought I was Mexican that's all I was. I mean, Chicano, but Chicano didn't come into my world until the Chicano movement happened. And then I was able to transform myself into a Chicano because it made sense at that point, but Latin American or Latino? No. It never occurred to me until I was at San Francisco State, until I met people that were from Central America, South America and it started to make sense, especially in the Mission because there's a big influx of Salvadorans, Nicaraguans, and Costa Ricans.[88]

The Mission District proved to be a welcoming community for Fuentes artistic skills. His involvement and volunteering with organizations such as El Tecolote Newspaper and the Mission Cultural Center made him aware of Latin American struggles and how the United States was intervening in foreign affairs. Creating artwork in solidarity for a variety of social causes allowed Fuentes to realize he could connect to struggles beyond the Chicanx movement. Throughout the 1970s–1990s, Fuentes created a series of silkscreen prints intended to rally support for Central American events including *Poetry for the Nicaraguan Resistance* (1976), *Poetry for the Nicaraguan Struggle* (1976), *El Salvador* (1982), *En Lucha, Ernesto Cardenal* (undated), and *Rigoberta Menchú* (1993).

[88] Ibid.

One such poster that epitomizes Fuentes nuanced understanding of the Salvadoran civil war is *Romero Presente!*, created in 1991 (fig. 2.9). By 1991, Fuentes had created dozens of posters in collaboration with Central American organizations for Central American benefits at Mission Gráfica. But he did not create *Romero Presente!* in collaboration with an organization, it came from his own understanding of the Salvadoran civil war. With mixed methods of photomontage, printed literature, and hand-drawn illustrations, this poster creates a powerful assortment of iconic images. The title, *Romero Presente!*, references the life and death of Archbishop Óscar A. Romero. Fuentes' initial connection to liberation theology came from being raised Catholic and once he learned about liberation theology through the writings of Nicaraguan priest Ernesto Cardenal, it resonated with him.

Figure 2. 9. Fuentes, Juan R. *Romero Presente!* 1991. Screen print.

Created in 1991, a year before the Salvadoran civil war officially ended, Fuentes’ poster made a statement about the future of El Salvador by looking at the past and its bloody history. The poster, therefore, contains several layers of meaning. The foreground image nods to the future of El Salvador, with a mother holding a breastfeeding child. The child represents a new birth or rebirth connected with the theme of looking to the future. As Kency Cornejo observes, “the bold colors accentuate the figure of an isolated woman in the foreground with a powerful gaze that confronts and connects the viewer to the scene, conveying the message that nurturing a new nation preempts mourning death.” [89]

[89] Kency Cornejo, “Visual Disobedience: The Geopolitics of Experimental Art in Central America, 1990-Present” 2014, Dissertation, p. 9.

Fuentes's rendition of a mother breastfeeding her child is an allusion to Orlando Valenzuela's photograph *Miliciana de Waswalito* taken in Matagalpa, Nicaragua in 1984 (fig. 2.10). The photograph was taken during the Contra War, which occurred after the triumphant 1979 Sandinista revolution that ousted the 43-year reign of the Somoza dictatorship. Valenzuela's photo became iconic; it captures a moment in which a woman represents her position as both a guerilla soldier and as a mother for the Sandinista revolution.

Figure 2. 10. *Miliciana de Waswalito* by Orlando Valenzuela in Matagalpa, Nicaragua, 1984.

Visual representation of armed motherhood in militant groups humanize rebellion and signal the nobleness of struggle.[90] However, unlike characteristics

[90] Loken, Meredith. "'Both Needed and Threatened': Armed Mothers in Militant Visuals." *Security Dialogue*, vol. 52, no. 1, SAGE Publications, 2021, pp. 21–44.

captured in *Miliciana de Waswalito*, Fuentes does not depict a cheerful, youthful, and smiling mother. The mother's gaze grounds the viewer to understand the experience of pain, loss, and mourning felt during times of war. In *Romero Presente*!, instead of a rifle, a bag is slung over the woman's shoulder. Replacing the rifle with a domestic bag also signals the end of the civil strife. However, *Romero Presente*! is a commentary on the Salvadoran civil war, not the Nicaragua revolution. Thus, the explicit visual reference in 1984 to a triumphal mother of the Sandinista revolution appears in stark contrast to a Salvadoran revolution that by 1991 had not yet ended.

The military government of El Salvador has a long history of suppressing uprisings. The most well-known event is known as La Matanza ("the massacre" in English); a peasant uprising that began on January 22, 1932, in the western regions of El Salvador. Social unrest in El Salvador had begun to grow in the 1920s, primarily because of perceived abuses of the political class and the broad social inequality between owners and exploited peasants used for the coffee trade production. Coffee had opened a profound chasm in the Salvadoran means of production, where few families owned the majority of agricultural land. The coffee trade created a super-wealthy class that correlated with the land they owned and the sale of coffee beans to Germany and the United States. Descendants of the powerful coffee families married foreigners, were educated abroad, and were typically light

skinned.[91] In time, the upper-class coffee owners became indifferent to the majority mestizo population of El Salvador.

The 1932 peasant massacre marks a moment in Salvadoran history when the government and elites blatantly "disappeared" thousands of working class and Indigenous peasants, the majority of whom were Pipil people, forever changing the course of Salvadoran history. It is estimated the military killed ten to forty thousand Indigenous people on the orders of general Maximiliano Hernández Martínez. After La Matanza, the majority of Indigenous people were afraid to identify as Indigenous since the killings particularly targeted people of indigenous appearance, dress, or language. In the decades that followed, Salvadoran Indigenous peoples increasingly abandoned their native dress and traditional languages from fear of further reprisals.[92]

At the bottom left-hand side of *Romero Presente*!, there is a poem by Salvadoran poet Lilliam Jimenez titled *To the Soldiers of El Salvador Who From 1931–1980 Have Ruled the Country Through Military Dictatorship*. This powerful poem includes the following lines aimed at the Salvadoran military:

> But tomorrow, even without desiring it, they will have to see what must be seen. They will have to pay for the horrible fate of each victim, for all the lips they silenced, for all the dreams they ripped out of our breasts. Tomorrow, in the center of their eyes, the coffins will open up. They will see face to face all those whom they have assassinated, all the luminous immortals fallen. The thousands and thousands of tortured and slain will rise as a rising tide against them.

---

[91] Anderson, Thomas P. *Matanza: El Salvador's Communist Revolt of 1932*. University of Nebraska Press, 1971, p. 24.
[92] Garrard-Burnett, Virginia. "Reviews of Books:1932: Scars of Memory (Cicatriz de La Memoria) Jeffrey Gould, Carlos Henriquez Consalvi." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 109, no. 2, 2004, pp. 575–76.

This haunting image of mother and child in *Romero Presente*! reminds the viewer that a new day is to come and, in reference to the poem by Liliam Jimenez, imagines a new generation of Salvadorans that will have to reckon with the violence, trauma, and war caused by the military dating back to 1932's La Matanza.

Jimenez's poem echoes a sentiment that poet Roque Dalton also explored. One of Dalton's famous poems, "Todos," begins by stating, "Todos nacimos medio muertos en 1932" (We were all born half dead in 1932). The reference represents the open wounds of Salvadoran imaginary; one in which, two generations removed from the 1932 massacre, people still remember the reason for which people suffered. The half-dead conditions which Salvadorans endured may be the reason why the central maternal figure in *Romero Presente*! is surrounded by images of a protest and silhouettes of policemen. Jimenez's poem, when put into context with the visual elements of a protest in the name of Archbishop Romero and the breastfeeding mother, reminds the viewer of the resiliency of Salvadorans. Despite Salvadoran military repressive forces which manifested violence through the work of paramilitary groups, death squads, and other war mechanisms that caused collateral deaths, people continued to live and protest. Everyday life continued and a new generation of Salvadorans was born.

The second layer of *Romero Presente!* is a ghostly and transparent layer of police dressed in riot gear. Behind the transparent layer of the police stands a group of people protesting, presumably in El Salvador. The people protesting are holding up various posters and photographs of Archbishop Romero. Combining a photomontage,

Fuentes uses an image of protestors in El Salvador as a reference to the past that is still present. Alluding to the past in the title of the poster, *Romero Presente!* translates to “Romero is Present” in English.

As much as *Romero Presente!* has to do with El Salvador, in many ways this image also speaks to Central Americans and Salvadorans in the Latin American diaspora. For example, the image speaks to those who are 1.5-generation or of second-generation descent who were not raised in El Salvador. Ambiguously—which refers to the gendered perspective of this piece—the viewer does not know if the infant in *Romero Presente!* has lost their father. This image can be regarded as a commitment to mothers who may not have been involved in the armed struggle but who have suffered the loss of their loved ones while trying to raise a child during wartime.

Fuentes added the poem and the layered images to create an amalgamation of iconoclastic images depicting decades worth of history into one serigraph poster. The combination of poetry and the layered history, although subtle, is a testament of Fuentes’s nuanced reading of Salvadoran history and its civil war. This poster serves as another prime example of solidarity with El Salvador and a perspective of relational resistance by illustrating some of the benevolent contemplations on the future of El Salvador. By 1991 the civil war was about the end; however, after 11 years of enduring a longstanding civil war, a poster like *Romero Presente!* grapples with the uncertainty of the Salvadoran future and future generations, represented in the baby and what is in store for a nation mourning its violent past.

Malaquías Montoya Political Poster Art and Social Justice

Malaquías Montoya, born in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1938, is a Chicano painter, muralist, and poster maker. Montoya served in the U.S. Marines in the 1960s and used his G.I. benefits to enroll at UC Berkeley. During his undergraduate years at UC Berkeley, Montoya emerged as an important figure in the development of Chicanx poster art. As a student, Montoya participated in the Third World Liberation strike and created several posters for various on-campus movements and protests. His awakening and politicization toward a Third World Liberation consciousness was fostered by participating in the Third World Liberation Front, a pivotal 1969 student movement that helped establish ethnic studies as an interdisciplinary field in the United States.

Internationally recognized for his posters, Montoya focuses on human rights and social justice issues. As historian Ramón Favela noted, "What began as an art form in the service of the movimiento Chicano has become for Malaquías Montoya an art for the struggle of all Third World oppressed peoples."[93] Along with other Bay Area Chicanx artists (e.g., Ester Hernández, Juan Fuentes, Rupert García), Montoya pushed the poster aesthetic from propaganda to a more artistic sensibility. In this quest Montoya also experimented with new printing techniques and began to express his painterly sensibility in his prints.

---

[93] Ramon Favela. *Malaquías Montoya: Postermaker to el Pueblo Chicano*, exhibition brochure, La Raza Graphics Center, San Francisco, 1989

Throughout the 1970s, Montoya created a substantial number of posters in solidarity with the Cuban revolution and, post-1973, he focused his attention on denouncing the Chilean coup d'état. Montoya references how important the socialist revolution with Salvador Allende in Chile and the Cuban revolution was to his awakening to U.S. intervention in Latin America.[94] These key moments of revolution in Latin America were the experiences that led up to Montoya's sentiment around creating murals in solidarity and in relational resistance with Central America.

In the late 1970s, Montoya began seeking interest and solidarity on Nicaragua's and El Salvador's civil wars. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Montoya created a series of prints intended to rally support for Central American benefit events, including *Nicaragua, Mi Tierra el Mundo mi Vida* (1978); *Nicaragua Quien la Defiende es que la Ama Mas* (1979); *El Salvador, U.S. Workers must not support….* (1981); *They took both of them that night… Children of El Salvador* (1988); and *In Solidarity with the people of Cuba and… FSLN* (1989). As Montoya remembers:

> Chile was also very important, because it was one of the first you might say South American, Latin American countries that was in the struggle, especially after the assassination of Allende. So, we were all doing posters for that struggle, and it was easy to, then Nicaragua, and El Salvador, especially at the time that a lot of people in Central America, especially the poets, artists, musicians, some of them were in exile at that time for their singing, and the fact that they were in exile. Many of them were able to come to the United States to visit, and it was that connection also that put us in touch with what was taking place. And listening to their songs, listening to them speak, you realize boy, it's the same struggle that we have here, except it's in Central

[94] Montoya, Malaquías. Interview. Conducted by Mauricio E. Ramírez, 20 September 2017.

> America. The Palestinians are in the same struggle. And so, it seems like all the need to struggle was caused by the same people that created the need to struggle here, and that's globalization, capitalism, imperialism, all of those awakened us to what was taking place in other parts of the world.[95]

Figure 2. 11. Montoya, Malaquías. *FSLN Juventud Sandinista* Montoya, 1979.

Montoya created several posters in solidarity with Central American revolutionary movements and did not shy away from imagery that refers to guns, violence, or death. For example, *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN), a youth poster, demonstrates a photograph of youth and young adults involved in the Sandinista revolution. Montoya primarily focused on Nicaraguan and Salvadoran conflicts often with reference to the revolutionary guerilla forces [Figure 11]. His use of Central American imagery in posters made them legible to viewers who knew what these symbols represent. Particularly to those cognizant of the two leftist's

[95] Ibid.

revolutionary groups, the *Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional* (FMLN) of El Salvador, and the FSLN of Nicaragua. Yet, his artworks in relation to Central America are not the only ones that reference violence; stylistically, he incorporates images of human suffering and torture in other artwork. His posters and paintings capture the realistic sensibilities of civil war, including the harsh conditions people had to endure. Documented through oral histories, journalism, and photojournalism, stories on the military or death squads terrorizing civilians into submission often cite horrendous instances of torture, violence, and mutilation.[96] Thus, for Montoya to include violent imagery in his posters is of no surprise, as violent images were circulating in the U.S. media and press.

Furthermore, Montoya incorporates text in his posters in the form of passages or quotes from literature, public figures, philosophers, poets, politicians, and political prisoners.[97] He embeds these quotes in his posters to challenge the viewer, both artistically and politically.[98]

---

[96] The work of primarily foreign journalists/photographers covered the Central American civil wars extensively. They often risked their own lives to document the killings and violence in the Central American civil wars. Victims who survived the civil wars also played a crucial role in giving testimony to what had happened in their countries. Some key figures who used their testimony to present their experience with the civil wars were Rigoberta Menchú of Guatemala and Rufina Amaya, the sole survivor of the El Mozote massacre in El Salvador.
[97] Tere Romo, *Biography of Malaquías Montoya*, p. 6.
[98] Ibid.

Figure 2. 12. Montoya, Malaquías.*"I Will See My Land Again…" FMLN*, 1991.

Taking inspiration from a Renny Golden poem, in 1991 Montoya uses his painterly and graphic sensibilities to illustrate a man and a woman looking into the bleak unknown and holding a FMLN flag in the poster *"I Will See My Land Again…" FMLN* (fig. 2.12). On the bottom left-hand side there is a bust of a man with a white collar that identifies him as a priest; he has no hair or facial features and is bleeding from the forehead. This anonymous priest could signal Archbishop Romero; however, Archbishop Romero was not the only priest or religious figure killed during the Salvadoran civil war. Some of the most well-known killings of religious persons occurred in December 1980, when five members of the El Salvador National Guard raped and murdered four Catholic missionaries (Maryknoll Sisters) from the United States who were working in El Salvador. In November 1989, Salvadoran Army soldiers killed six Jesuits and two others at their residence on the campus of Central American University in San Salvador. Thus, Montoya leaves the face of

the priest anonymous and nameless, possibly referring not to Romero but to the countless clergy killed during the Salvadoran civil war.

The blood flowing from the anonymous priest's face recalls the red color of the star-spangled banner flag. This subtle display of the priest's blood turning into a U.S. flag is a hint toward the U.S. intervention that caused the civil war to prolong. In 1987, the United States maintained a strong foreign policy against any revolutionary attempts in El Salvador. The text is a transcript of a longer poem written by Renny Golden; the excerpt Montoya uses in *"I Will See My Land Again…" FMLN* is:

> I will see my land again when the revolution triumphs. That soil which holds forever in its dark blood womb the bones of Farabundo Martí and all the fallen ones. Every seed that swings a green shoot skyward defies despair. We will harvest a nation from a graveyard. With every murder, they grow another revolutionary sweet and defiant as corn.

Montoya visually illustrates Golden's "defiant" corn growing from a graveyard filled with white crosses. These white crosses presumably represent civil war casualties. On the right side of the poster there is a large red flag with the initials "FMLN," representing the leftist guerilla revolutionary group.

Figure 2. 13. Montoya, Malaquías, *Carnal Del Sur.* 1987.

Another poster that demonstrates transnational solidarity with Central America is *Carnal Del Sur,* which Montoya created in 1987 (fig. 13). This poster articulates an imaginary letter exchange between a Chicanx man and an ambiguous person from "south" of the United States, which could indicate someone located in Central or South America. The poster has two halves; on the upper portion there is a letter of support written by a Chicanx man and a large outline of Latin America painted in red. On the bottom half there is a response letter presumably written from the "carnal" of the South. A face of a man adorns the center, looking to his left toward small silhouettes of green helicopters hovering over a red background. This split image and black line at the center of the image indicates north and south.

The word “carnal” is in yellow in bold letters at the center of the poster. In standard Spanish, “carnal” is a translation of carnal in English. Just as in English, carnal is an adjective in reference to the flesh or the physical body. However, in Mexican Spanish or Chicanx slang, “carnal” is often used to refer to someone who is a friend, buddy, pal, or to express family ties. The word carnal is popularly used among men but its feminine form, “carnala,” can be used to refer to women. Thus, the title *Carnal del Sur* translates to “brother of the South” indicating solidarity and close ties to those undergoing civil wars south of the United States–Mexico border. The letter exchange gives the viewer a closer insight as to what is occurring:

> Sept. 21, 1987
>
> Carnal del Sur,
> Unas lineas para saludarte and to say que todos aqui support your struggle y…extender nuestro…para un…
>
> 10 de Octubre
>
> Compañero Chicano,
> Gracias por su apoyo porque si Nicaragua venció El Salvador vencera y por eso compa, nos tenemos que juntar… Solidaridad somos…

Another reference to Chicanx culture is that the first writer uses English and Spanish. Using “todos aqui support your struggle” meaning “everyone here supports your struggle” is telling of Chicanxs use of English and Spanish when speaking, sometimes creating Spanglish. Though “todos aqui support your struggle” is not an example of Spanglish *per se*; the term demonstrates how sometimes second generation or U.S.-born Mexicans are not fluent in Spanish and switch between both

languages. As a response, the person writing back distinctly states “Compañero Chicano” as if they know the person is of Mexican origin yet born in the United States. The Spanish and English languages give the viewer a more concrete understanding of the Chicanx identity being displayed through this letter exchange.

Montoya employs a relational approach in *Carnal del Sur* to express how Chicanxs are supporting the struggle abroad. This demonstration through letter exchange serves a didactic purpose for a Chicanx and U.S. audience; someone located in the United States would have seen this poster first before ever arriving to Central America. This fictional letter exchange demonstrates a call to solidarity. It is difficult to know if a Salvadoran or Central American would have known what the term “Chicano” meant; nevertheless, Montoya extends the concept of carnal or carnalismo to southern (i.e., Latin American) “brothers.”

The solidarity captured in *Carnal del Sur* is also an example of the Mayan concept “In Lak'ech” ("you are the other me”) that Luis Valdez popularized during the Chicanx movement in his 1973 poem “Pensamiento Serpentino:”[99]

> You are my other me.
> Si te hago daño a ti, / If I do harm to you,
> Me hago daño a mi mismo. / I do harm to myself.
> Si te amo y respeto, / If I love and respect you,
> Me amo y respeto yo. / I love and respect myself

[99] In 2010, this poem was banned from was illegally banned as part of the removal of Mexican American Studies Programs (MAS) in Tucson Unified School District.

As scholar Yolanda Broyles-González states, Valdez incorporated “Indigenous knowledge” in his work, replacing Judeo-Christian beliefs with a call to “return to Indigenous spirituality to revitalize ancient cultural practices that could enable Chicanas/os to resist more successfully the debilitating effects of Anglo-American hegemony.”[100] In line with the Chicanx movement, Montoya’s *Carnal del Sur* validates the sentiment of In Lak'ech through extending solidarity with Central American carnales suffering civil war. This letter exchange may have been fictional; however, it demonstrates how the U.S. Chicanxs extended their hand in solidarity with a Central American revolutionary movement. Montoya and the Chicanx movement could have easily ignored issues happening abroad and remained focused on issues occurring in the United States. But as Montoya’s third world consciousness expanded to Central America, he visually demonstrates how the concept of “In Lak'ech” inspired sympathy with a brother from the south.

Conclusion

Rooted in relational resistance and motivated by Chicanx movement goals that intersected with the plight of Central American refugees, Alicia, Montoya, and Fuentes demonstrated their artistic solidarity with Central America. Chicanx artists became essential to the Central American solidarity movement of San Francisco through the creation and spread of consciousness of U.S. intervention in the Central American civil wars. Alicia, Montoya, and Fuentes used their artistic skills to help

[100] Broyles-González, Yolanda. *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement.* 1st ed., University of Texas Press, 1994, p.120.

fundraise for events largely through the sale of reproductions of their posters and murals. In particular, Fuentes' poster production demonstrates a nuanced understanding of the civil wars of El Salvador through questioning the future by looking at the past. Montoya extends visual solidarity through explicitly stating that Chicanxs were in solidarity with Central America through the concept of In Lak'ech. Montoya and Fuentes's posters demonstrate how Chicanx solidarity with Central America played an important role in increasing the collective focus on Central American issues.

Alicia's contribution largely came in the form of public murals, by employing Central American iconographies which depicted Central American issues. Her murals also contributed to the many Latinx murals of the Mission District by adding a Central American perspective. Only *Una Ley Inmoral Nadie Tiene Que Cumplirla* remains visible in Balmy Alley. Alicia's Central American themed murals lived among the Latinx community of the Mission District and enunciated Central American presence to any public passerby who witnessed her mural in the 1980s-to the present date.

Poetry, documentaries, and the testimonies of the Central American plight served as inspiration for many of their solidarity artworks. Living as Chicanx art activists amongst Bay Area communities and organizations committed to Central American solidarity further solidified Alicia, Montoya, and Fuentes's commitment to visually representing the Central American issues. The stories behind their personal

motivations prove how relational resistance was a formative part of U.S. Central American visual art history in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Chapter 3: Walls of Resistance: PLACA Murals and Transnational Solidarity with Central America

"If, as artists, we can silently witness the destruction of other cultures, we forfeit the right to make art of our own." [101]

– *Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America*, general statement, January 1984

January 1984 was a typical wet and foggy winter day in San Francisco's Mission District. In Balmy Alley, Chicana/o artists Ray Patlán and Patricia Rodríguez organized a group of thirty-six muralists known as PLACA to map out and share their vision for the twenty-seven murals they would add in Balmy Alley, an alley lined with garage doors and fences on the backside of Victorian homes. It was their third group meeting and Patlán had asked Ron Wheeler, the distributor of Polytech acrylic paint — a special paint developed by Mexican muralists in the 1930s — to drop off the paint during their meeting with the hopes of igniting some excitement among the artists. Midway through the meeting, Wheeler called Patlán and informed him that his truck broke down and that he could no longer meet on time. Patlán told him, "I have some money, hire a cab, get that paint here!"[102] After a lengthy meeting, the PLACA members were getting ready to leave when, suddenly, Wheeler arrived in a taxicab. Wheeler greeted Patlán and the cab driver opened the trunk and revealed several gallons of Polytech paint. The eyes of the artists gleamed with excitement as the gallons of paint solidified their vision. Sketches would soon materialize into murals.

---

[101] Lucy Lippard, "Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention" *NACLA Report On The Americas.* May/June 1984, pp. 15-16.

[102] Ray Patlán, Interview by Carla Wojczuk and Julian Rowan, *These Walls Speak*, 2015.

After that meeting, the PLACA artists left, inspired with a sense of solidarity for what would soon transpire: the first mural environment in the nation to depict a visual representation of Central American civil wars, while also contesting U.S. foreign policies in Central America.

Inspired by the nationwide "Artists Call: Against U.S. Intervention in Central America," a movement that began in New York City in 1983, Patlán and Rodríguez began their journey to recruit local artists to bring attention to the civil wars of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. They both resided in Balmy Alley and envisioned creating several murals that denounced U.S. intervention in Central America but did not want to associate their project with the nationwide Artists Call. Patlán and Rodríguez decided to name the project PLACA. In the Spanish language the word "placa" holds multiple meanings, such as "badge," "nameplate," "license plate," or "plaque." Yet, the aim of PLACA was closely aligned with the slang term of "leaving your mark" or "graffiti tag," also known as a *Placazo* in Spanish. One of the main goals of PLACA was to leave a permanent mark in Balmy Alley with the creation of twenty-seven murals by thirty-six artists and completely transforming the walls of the alley.

The project began strategically, as PLACA added twenty-seven murals in the span of nine-months to Balmy Alley between 24th and 25th Streets. PLACA was

funded by a single $2,500 grant by the Zellerbach Foundation.[103] Timothy Drescher, a PLACA member and historian noted, "A key element in Balmy's impact lay in its presence as a mural cluster, i.e., a group of murals painted in a single location, thereby forming a presence that any single piece could not command."[104] The clustered murals transformed the entire alley and allowed for its visual presence to be felt and appreciated by the public. Art historian Guisela Latorre defined "mural environment" as "a series of murals in close proximity to one another and within a defined and limited space. These murals are not supposed to be seen as single works of art, but rather, their position and iconography should be understood in function of the surrounding murals and in relation to the space in which they reside."[105] Thus, PLACA's characteristics as a mural environment marked a new moment for community mural history in San Francisco.

Further insight into the collective action, purpose, and goals of PLACA is documented in the group's mission statement. The collective agreed that the visual representation and goal of PLACA was to purposefully denounce the Reagan Administration's foreign policies on Central American affairs. The following is the official PLACA artists statement, reproduced in *Community Murals* magazine:

> As artists and muralists, PLACA members aim to call attention to the situation that exists today in Central America, as a result of the current administration's policies. The situation in El Salvador, the situation in Nicaragua, the situation in Guatemala, the situation in Honduras.

[103] Drescher, Timothy. "Street Subversion: The Political Geography of Graffiti and Murals." *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture*, edited by James Brook, Chris Carlsson, and Nancy J. Peters, City Lights Books, 1998, p. 235.
[104] Ibid, pp. 235-36.
[105] Latorre, Guisela. *Walls of Empowerment: Chicana/o Indigenist Murals of California*, p. 142.

> PLACA members do not ally themselves with this administration's policy that has created death and war and despair, and that threatens more lives daily. We aim to demonstrate in visual/environmental terms, our solidarity, our respect, for the people of Central America.[106]

PLACA members were politically motivated to change their environment. For their message to be well-received by the general public, the artists agreed not to paint "blood or guts," or overtly gory scenes or images since children played in the alley. However, violence, death, and torture are visually referenced in several murals, which I will discuss in my analysis below. The interracial group had different levels of painting skills, not all were formally trained artists, and some murals were collaborative. Therefore, a range of artistic styles and skill levels were present in the murals produced. Some of the murals were abstract while others have direct messages.

More importantly PLACA, as part of an effort of a larger transnational solidarity with Central American liberation efforts, demonstrates a reconstitution of space altering an alley for decades to come. Latorre also explains how mural environments allowed for Chicanx artists to "reclaim space and challenged the notion of the barrio as a 'dangerous space.' As Chicanx artists created these environments with the express purpose of transforming increasingly deteriorating barrio spaces and others were erected to change the predominantly negative attitudes"[107] Latorre applies this analysis to Chicanx murals of California and, in the case of PLACA, this stands

---

[106] "PLACA," *Community Murals Magazine*, Fall 1984.
[107] Ibid.

true to a certain degree. While two self-identified Chicanx artists initiated the PLACA project, overall the PLACA group would not constitute itself as a solely Chicanx or as a strictly Latinx collective. Out of the group of thirty-six artists, approximately forty percent of its members, identified as White-Anglo and sixty percent identified as Latinx. Within the category of White-Anglo and Latinx, there are subgroups; however, the overwhelming majority of the Latinx PLACA members self-identified as Chicanx. Similarly, the Mission neighborhood in the 1980s was predominantly Latinx, but also home to other racial groups, making it one of the most diverse neighborhoods in San Francisco. The racial makeup and diversity of PLACA makes it a valuable context for relational race studies and how artmaking contributes to solidarity movements.

PLACA demonstrates the cultural mobilization of visual artists within the larger U.S. Central American solidarity movement. I argue that Michael Albert Schulze-Oechtering's concept of *relational resistance* allowed for PLACA artists to define their liberation vis-à-vis the Central American people. Many PLACA participants were of White, Latinx, and Chicanx descent and expressed their political motives for supporting the PLACA project. In many ways, the murals bridge cultural differences and express solidarity with people who share similar values but were of different racial backgrounds. Thus, PLACA became a critical signifier for social and cultural change within the Mission District. The PLACA murals invite us to rethink solidarity in art practice and collaboration. These murals visually recognized and gave visibility to Central American subjects, even though only one participant was of

Central American descent, which was Herbert Sigüenza (as discussed in chapter 1). The collaborative and collective effort of PLACA was clearly driven by a sense of transnational solidarity, but what underlying motivations and social relations led to this solidarity? What informed these artists on the events that occurred in Central America? Did class, location, or political affiliation motivate artists to paint in-solidarity with Central American conflicts?

To address these questions, this chapter examines four distinct PLACA artists and how their murals visually demonstrate *relational resistance*. Rather than discuss each PLACA mural in detail, I focus on four murals that represent the conflicts in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua and the stories and motivations behind the artists who created them. I also investigate the murals' interactions with multiple audiences, considering historical, social, political, cultural, and geographical communities. The images of Central American iconography in PLACA murals operated as visual signifiers for the inclusion of Central American narratives within the Mission District. The visual iconography and signs within the murals may not make sense to the ordinary viewer. Thus, what I will illustrate in this section is how the visual signs and iconographies used in the PLACA murals speak directly to Central American culture. I connect historical events and facts with the visual symbols and shed light on how the cultural themes and imagery of the murals function as a way of visualizing solidarity and *relational resistance*. Even though most PLACA muralists were not of Central American origin, they identified with Central American struggles against U.S.

imperialism and capitalist exploitation. Their murals in Balmy Alley helped make it a site of solidarity.

A visual analysis of the murals can help us understand PLACA murals in relation to Central American experiences. Taking Stuart Hall's approach to reading an image and representation, I ask what the images in the PLACA murals enunciate. Hall argues the process of representation itself constitutes the world it aims to represent and explores how the shared language of a culture, its signs and images, provides a conceptual roadmap that gives meaning to the world rather than simply reflecting it. Given that these murals were not painted by Central Americans, but were depicting stories and issues faced by Central Americans, how can we read these artworks and the motivations behind the story of the images used within the murals? Analyzing these images and iconography provides insight into how these artists expressed a collective and transnational solidarity towards Central America. The content of their murals demonstrates the complexity of the PLACA artists as they were aware of the multiple meanings behind Central American iconography and cultural production.

The Emergence of PLACA and Solidarity

Within the group of thirty-six PLACA artists, there were approximately nineteen artists of Latinx descent. Several participating artists saw themselves as cultural workers and had participated in the Chicanx civil rights movement and Third World Liberation movements, in particular, the growing movement against U.S. intervention Vietnam, which ended in 1975. Therefore, when Central Americans

arrived fleeing civil wars, it was only natural that the Latino population of the Mission District received refugees with sympathy. As Cary Cordova states, "The ideology of transnational liberation shaped the [Mission] neighborhood's cultural production, defined what it meant to be Latino, and contributed to the ways that action abroad and at home merged."[108] Solidarity became foundational to not only PLACA members, but it was a mentality that pervaded many Mission District cultural workers. These sentiments were not only represented in the murals but were also echoed in poetry, literature and local newspapers that reported on the civil wars, including *Tin Tan, El Tecolote, El Pulgarcito,* and *La Gaceta Sandinista.*

Against the backdrop of activist-art struggles for racial justice "at home" and decolonization movements abroad, artists and activists of color in the United States began to refer to themselves as "Third World People" during the late 1960s and 1970s. [109] This political identity represented their opposition to white supremacy, capitalism, and colonialism. Bay Area visual artists of different ethnic backgrounds began to stand in solidarity with "Third World leftists," a process by which communities began to define their liberation in relation to, and in solidarity with, other aggrieved populations. This relational approach to resistance was critical to building solidarity, as it was a political choice and process artists fostered within their communities.

---

[108] Cary Cordova, *The Heart of the Mission: Latino Art and Politics in San Francisco,* p.160.
[109] Schulze-Oechtering, Michael. *Blurring the Boundaries of Struggle: The United Construction Workers Association (UCWA) and Relational Resistance in Seattle's Third World Left*, University of California, Berkeley, 2016, p. 1.

However, it was not only artists and cultural workers of color who experienced sentiments of decolonization. White artists such as Osha Neumann, Susan Cervantes, Susan Greene, Randall Bronner, Jim Lewis, Kriska Boiral, Keith Skylar, Jaimie Morgan, Miranda Bergman, O'Brien Thiele, Jane Norling, and Brooke Fancher, were also in solidarity with these liberation movements and participated in PLACA, making up approximately forty percent of its members.

Creating a Mural Environment

Ray Patlán and Patricia Rodríguez had lived in Balmy Alley before organizing PLACA. There are few alleys in the Mission District; however, this alley lays squarely off of 24th Street, one of the main corridors that host several Latinx businesses, restaurants, and markets, making it a prime location for foot traffic. Rodríguez had lived in Balmy Alley for 25 years and painted a mural in the alley before she helped form Mujeres Muralistas, an all-female, mostly Chicana, artists collective based in the Mission District during the 1970s. Patlán is originally from the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois, where he produced several murals and became deeply involved in the emerging community mural movement. When he arrived in San Francisco in 1975, he put his skills to work and painted several murals around the Mission District and also in Berkeley. One of Patlán's most significant murals was *Song of Unity* (1978) which adorns the façade of La Peña Cultural Center in Berkeley, a mural that depicts Victor Jara, a Chilean folk singer who was tortured for his political views and protest songs and violently killed by the Pinochet regime.

After his assassination, Jara became an international symbol of hope and peace, and his music continues to resonate among peace movements.

Rodríguez and Patlán began to talk to neighbors in Balmy Alley and held meetings with the local tenants to receive permission to paint murals on the fences and the walls of their garages. Balmy Alley has a rich history of mural activity that dates to the early 1970s. The first mural that adorned Balmy Alley went up in 1972 when Mia González and Susan Kelk Cervantes directed a group of preschool children to paint a mural in the alley near the entrance at 24th street. The following year, Graciela Carillo and Patricia Rodríguez painted a mural as Mujeres Muralistas (fig. 3.1). Since Rodríguez lived in Balmy Alley and decided to ask the neighbors who lived directly across from her if she could experiment with painting techniques. The owner agreed, and Carrillo and Rodríguez painted their experimental mural on a wooden garage door opposite their building. Other than those two murals, Balmy Alley was mostly empty and remained as a site that held several graffiti tags created by local youth and gangs.

Figure 3. 1. Las Mujeres Muralistas, 1973. Photographed by Tim Drescher. Located in Balmy Alley. Courtesy of Artstor.

During the late 1970s, a pro-Sandinista community organization named Casa Nicaragua appeared on the corner of Balmy Alley and 24th Street. Casa Nicaragua hosted public forums, guest speakers, film presentations, and cultural events to promote Latin American cultural expressions and contributed material aid campaigns to support the reconstruction of Nicaragua. In 1979, when the Sandinistas won their revolution in Nicaragua and forcefully ousted President Somoza, a group of Chilean artists known collectively as the Orlando Letelier Brigade (Brigada Orlando Letelier) painted "Viva Nicaragua" on the exterior walls of Casa Nicaragua. The mural wrapped around the corner of 24th Street and Balmy Alley. On the wall facing Balmy Alley, two large hands reaching out to each other, each hand emblazoned with a

Chilean and Nicaraguan national flag, representing solidarity among Chile and Nicaragua. The mural was painted with bold graphic lines, a style adopted in Chile during the Salvador Allende government. On 24th Street, a portrait of the revolutionary Augusto Sandino lay in the center with a FSLN flag and Nicaragua flag floating behind him (fig. 3.2).

Figure 3. 2. Brigada Orlando Letelier, *Casa Sandino*, 1979. Balmy Alley at 24th Street. Photographed by Tim Drescher. Courtesy of Artsor.

The promise of a liberated Nicaragua spoke to the dreams of many leftist and progressive thinkers in the Bay Area. The brigade was established in homage to the Chilean diplomat, Orlando Letelier, who was assassinated on September 21st, 1976, in Washington D.C. via a car bomb planted by Pinochet's secret police. This mural was significant because it demonstrated a level of transnational solidarity and displayed relational resistance with the people of Central America. Although geographically distant, both Chile and Nicaragua had experienced military dictatorships and U.S.

interventions, thus fomenting a sentiment of solidarity among the artists. The Chilean presence in San Francisco was born prior to the Sandinista revolution of 1979, so when Nicaraguans arrived, Chileans welcomed them and their revolutionary efforts in Nicaragua.

After securing approval from the neighborhood and community, PLACA got off to a bumpy start. On the first day of painting, all the walls, fences, and garage doors were primed in white paint for the muralists to begin on a new canvas. The following day K.K.K. and Nazi swastika signs were spray-painted across the primed walls and garage doors in the alley (fig. 3). No one knows who painted these signs and symbols, but it was clear to PLACA members that someone did not like the idea of the PLACA murals or had committed the act to intimidate them. The neighbors were furious, and many believed the act of vandalism was done by someone that was not from the neighborhood.[110] Although local graffiti and tags were present in the alley before the priming of the walls, there did not exist any racist graffiti that signaled white nationalism. Swastikas marked a clear racial sentiment in a neighborhood that had historically housed immigrants from different nations including Irish, Italian, Germans, and Latin Americans. They also signaled someone knew the motivation behind the PLACA efforts. Notwithstanding, the PLACA murals moved forward and the Nazi and K.K.K. symbolism did not faze the artists. In the end the artists re-prepared the walls and continued to paint their proposed murals.

[110] Ibid.

Figure 3. 3. Untitled photograph. K.K.K. defacement of primed garage door on Balmy Alley, 1984. Photograph by Jim Prigoff.

Painting Civil War or Central American Culture?

Figure 3. 4. Patlán, Ray and Francisco Camplís. *Camino Al Mercado/ On the Way to the Market*, 1984. Located in Balmy Alley. Photo by Timothy Drescher.

Ray Patlán collaborated with Francisco Camplís to paint *Camino al Mercado*, articulating the role of women during revolutionary movements in Central America (fig. 3.4). Inspired by a photograph he took from a second-floor building during one of his stays in Mexico, the mural gives the viewer a bird's eye view of two women wearing white dresses, black rebozos, and carrying pink shopping bags. The angle in which the viewer sees the image is important in manipulating the viewpoint, as Holly Barnet-Sanchez and Tim Drescher observed:

> Their mural manipulates the viewer… by moving the vanishing point and giving the mural depth. *Camino al Mercado* identifies Balmy Alley with Central America by being painted as if someone in the alley were looking down on it, thus erasing the alley's narrowness and making viewers a bit more participatory because they have a privileged place from which to view it.[111]

At first glance, the depiction of the two women walking may make it difficult to understand that something else is going on in this image. Upon closer observation, it becomes apparent that the two women are carrying heavy assault rifle machine guns hidden by their black *rebozos*, with only the barrels of the rifles visible. The unsuspecting attire of the two women carrying assault rifles makes the scene more ominous as a military member hiding in the shadow of a door, seen at the top center of the mural.

This scene represents the important role women played in the revolutionary efforts for liberation. In the U.S. imaginary, wars are a gendered act in which men

[111] Barnet-Sánchez, Holly and Tim Drescher. "Taking Chicanoa and Solidarity Murals Seriously." *Rewrting the Chicano Movement: New Histories of Mexican American Activism in the Civil Rights Era*, edited by Mario T. García and Ellen McCkraken, University of Arizona Press, 2021.

play most roles. However, women played a significant role in all the revolutionary movements of Central America. The role of *guerrilleras* was paramount in the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran civil wars. Many women joined the revolutionary guerrilla armies to fight against the draconian governmental armed forces. Within the FSLN of Nicaragua an estimated "thirty percent of the combatants, and many of the top guerrilla leaders, were women." [112] For the FMLN movement in El Salvador, "approximately forty percent of the FMLN membership, thirty percent of the combatants, and twenty percent of the military leadership were women." [113] Therefore, Patlán's contribution to the PLACA murals reflects the importance of women in El Salvador and Nicaragua's revolutionary efforts to fight against oppressive military forces.

[112] Kampwirth, *Women and Guerilla Movements*, p. 76.
[113] Ibid.

Figure 3. 5. Alicia, Juana. Te Oimos Guatemala/ We hear you Guatemala,1984. Located in Balmy Alley. Photo by Nicole Emmanuel. Courtesy of Artstor.

Te Oimos Guatemala is one of the few PLACA murals that directly relates to the country of Guatemala. Alicia's mural allows the viewer a glimpse of what the native Mayan population suffered in Guatemala thirty-six-year civil war. Specifically, Juana Alicia's contribution, also speaks to the indigenous Mayan women who lost their husbands (fig. 3.5). The mural was inspired by a scene in the documentary film *When the Mountains Tremble* (1983). Alicia describes the moment she chose to paint her mural:

> The image for *Te Oimos Guatemala* was inspired by the movie *When the Mountains Tremble*… In the scene that showed the images of the women crying over their deceased husbands, brothers, sons, victims of a massacre in Guatemala. I was so moved by that scene, and the women's cries, and how

> incredibly tragic and horrible it was. It really shook me to the core. My gut response was, "I need to paint that scene."[114]

Alicia depicts a kneeling Mayan woman mourning over the body of her husband. The Mayan woman is charged with emotion, a mixture of sadness and anger in her face, as she looks away from the dead body. In the background, there is a banner that states “Te oímos Guatemala,” in reference to the transnational solidarity occurring between the Mission District neighborhood and the Mayans of Guatemala who were suffering and fighting for liberation under a thirty-six-year civil war. Beside the words, “Te oímos Guatemala,” Alicia painted a city representing the city of San Francisco as a landscape backdrop. Beneath the words there is a yellow mountain, presumably a reference to the highlands of Guatemala. The juxtaposition of the cityscape and mountains points to the distance between San Francisco and Guatemala, but the words forge connection between these sites.

The mural also speaks beyond the visual and adds an auditory dimension. Alicia’s intent in the title “te oimos,” which translates to “we hear you,” is twofold. First, the cries from Guatemalans as they mourn for the deceased appear and disappear as sound waves vibrating throughout the landscape. The depiction of the sonic sound waves is evident in the light red and orange waves across the central woman figure and across the mountain behind the main figure. Secondly, it also asks the viewer to pay attention to the atrocities occurring in Guatemala. In other words, to

---

[114] Alicia, Juana. “Visual Solidarity with Central America: An Interview with Maestra Muralista Juana Alicia.” Interview by Mauricio E. Ramírez, p. 119.

say the collective “we hear you” is to state that from the United States, or more specifically from the Mission District of San Francisco, people are paying attention and listening to the atrocities in Guatemala. This adds a layered element in demonstrating the process of solidarity. In Guatemala, for instance, many of the troops that carried out the attacks on the Maya had been trained under the U.S. Alliance for Progress program.[115] Alicia was conscious of the mass genocide of Guatemalan Mayans and its connection to U.S. military intervention. As Latorre reminds us, this act of solidarity between the Chicano/Mexican and Central American experiences, including the Maya, were not lost on Chicanx artists and activists; thus, in many ways it further galvanizes the relational resistance displayed between these two groups.

Transnational Opposition and Keeping the Peace in Central America

[115] Loucky and Moors, *The Maya Diaspora*, p. 3.

Figure 3. 6. González, Carlos. *Keeping the Peace in Central America/ Preservando la Paz en Centro America,*1984. Located in Balmy Alley. Photo by Nicole Emanuel. Courtesy of Artstor.

Painted by Carlos "Kookie" González, *Keeping the Peace in Central America,* allows the viewer to understand the politics of the United States at home and abroad in Central America in 1984 (fig. 3.6). González describes himself as a Chicano artist who was raised in the Mission District and who viewed Patlán as a mentor. At the time, González was one of the youngest PLACA members. A twenty-two-year-old college student attending San Francisco State College, he was aware of the conditions in which Central Americans lived during the war and attributed his knowledge of the conflicts from local residents who shared their stories of their war experiences.

Placing González's mural in a historical context brings into relief the sharp political critique of its complex, yet simple, iconic imagery. The majority of *Keeping the Peace in Central America* is painted on the outside façade of a garage, a roll-down garage door, and partially on a wooden door. The mural contains a dual theme

relating to issues occurring in the United States and Central America. In the upper left corner, there is a scene of a bald eagle gripping a white dove in its talons. Although subtle, these two birds juxtapose war and peace, which directly relates to the civil war occurring in El Salvador. During the summer of 1984, the Olympics took place in Los Angeles, California; Sam the Olympic Eagle was the official mascot. Sam the Olympic Eagle was a non-threatening cartoon character. Reminiscent of Uncle Sam, Sam the Eagle wore a red and white striped bowtie and an oversized top-hat featuring red and white stripes and a white Olympic logo over a blue hatband. In González's mural, Sam the Olympic Eagle is an imposing figure, clutching a dead dove in its talons. González elaborates on the juxtaposition he used in the mural, "I took the mascot, Sam the Olympic eagle, and used him as a 'bad guy' in Central America, holding a dead dove, which is the symbol of peace, flying through a blown up Central American village… and in the background there is a blown up house with a Death Squad hand, *La Mano Blanca,* imprinted on the door."[116] González re-animates the bleak narrative that Salvadorans endured during the civil war through his direct and layered iconography.

Reimagining Violence: A Dream of Death Falling, Spirit Rising: Peace to Central America

Susan Kelk Cervantes is a master muralist and co-founder of Precita Eyes Muralists, a non-profit mural arts organization that has been in the Mission District

[116] González, Carlos. Interview. Conducted by Mauricio E. Ramírez. 14 March 2011.

for over 40 years. In 1961, Susan Cervantes moved to San Francisco from Dallas, Texas to continue her art education at the San Francisco Art Institute. There, she met her life partner, visionary Chicano artist, Luis Cervantes. Luis was involved in the mural arts scene in San Francisco since the early 1970s. Although Susan is not considered a Chicana, she has created several murals that depict issues affecting the Latinx and Chicanx populations. Susan and Luis Cervantes established Precita Eyes Muralists in the Mission District in the year 1977. Since its founding, it has run workshops with local artists, youth, and the community and has contributed hundreds of murals across the larger San Francisco Bay Area. Many of Precita Eyes' murals are in the Mission neighborhood. Precita Eyes specializes in the restoration of old murals; its ongoing maintenance, care, and preservation has enabled murals throughout the Mission District to exist to this day.

Susan's contribution to PLACA, *A Dream of Death Falling, Spirit Rising: Peace to Central America*, consists of a scene referencing El Salvador painted on two large garage doors that open outwards to the street side of Balmy Alley (fig. 3.7). The doors are composed of a series of small square-shaped windowpanes in which she incorporated the imagery of her mural. Her mural communicates a clear message through use of text, painted in both English and Spanish. In English, the text reads *A Dream of Death Falling, Spirit Rising: Peace to Central America*. The mural presents a dichotomy between life and death. The use of words allows the viewer to create a direct connection with Central America. Susan based her mural on a haunting photograph of a family lying dead on the dirt during the Salvadoran civil war. She

states the photograph contained an image of a child with his fist clenched, an image that struck her with awe. She saw it as a posture symbolic of the Salvadoran resistance.[117]

Figure 3. 7. Cervantes, Susan K. *A Dream of Death Falling*, *Spirit Rising: Peace to Central America/ Sueño de la Muerte Cayendo y el Espiritu Levantandose: Paz para Centro America*. 1984. Located in Balmy Alley. Photo by Jim Prigoff. Courtesy of Artstor.

Susan painted the young boy's spirit rising up, located at the center of the mural, representing resistance and the light of spirit that came through his transcendental body. She deliberately decided not to paint realistic representations of the photographic dead bodies on the floor; instead, she abstractly portrayed the bodies as silhouettes. These silhouettes are outlined in red and the interior profiles contain images of Salvadoran tropical landscapes. The negative space around the silhouettes

[117] Cervantes, Susan. Interview. Conducted by Mauricio E. Ramírez. 17 March 2011.

is dominated by the color black; the bright and colorful images of the countryside capture the viewer's attention. The deliberate use of silhouettes instead of actual images of dead bodies counteracts numerous photographic images of dead bodies circulated in journalism. Images of dead bodies were captured by international photojournalists during the Salvadoran civil war and widely circulated in and outside Central America. These images were captured because bodies were often deliberately left in public areas by the military or death squads to provoke fear in Salvadorans. Dead bodies served as a visual reminder that death was imminent to all those who participated in liberation struggles.

We can think of the bodies of the original photograph Susan used as a study to imply that bodies are read as "simultaneously a physical and symbolic artifact, as both naturally and culturally produced, and as securely anchored in a particular historical moment."[118] In the United States, images of Central Americans were selected and curated more by the media and journalists more than by Central American themselves. Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua had become popular destinations for U.S. and international photojournalists who covered the civil wars. Kency Cornejo reminds us that "next to images of revolutionaries, the most popular subject matter for photographic images of Central America during the 1970s and 1990s was scenes of atrocities committed by the U.S.-funded militaries. These images of injured, tortured, and assassinated civilians and combatants, extreme poverty, and

[118] Scheper-Hughes, Nancy, and Margaret M. Lock. "The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology." p. 7.

refugees aimed to induce empathy and action by exposing suffering and inequality."[119] Images of Central Americans amid violence and misery, without the critical context of the U.S. role in the creation of inequalities and violence, became the default visual backdrop for the region, what Cornejo has referred to as an "aesthetics of violence."[120] Therefore, Susan's mural hints at dead bodies yet paints visual landscapes inside of them, giving the viewer a glimpse into lush Central American scenery.

In the center of each windowpane, there is a series of eight crosses that also represent the dead and disappeared. The crosses are a reference to the iconic image of Jesus Christ's crucifixion. Many Central Americans adhere to the Christian and Catholic religious faiths because Spanish and Portuguese colonizers imposed their religion on the "New World" of Latin America post-1492. The Catholic faith also played an essential role in the Salvadoran civil war. It was not uncommon to see unmarked graves with makeshift wooden crosses, visual signifiers of the dead. Susan paints a simplified version of a white crosses, replicating the wooden white cross often left on top of unmarked burial graves. She decided to make a connection towards how buried dead bodies make a corporeal connection to the earth and soil. Despite the lush landscapes of Central America, the death and violence taint the tropical paradise into a dark reality. The dichotomy between death and the spirit

[119] Cornejo, Kency. "US Central Americans in Art and Visual Culture," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, February 2019, p. 4.
[120] Ibid, p. 5.

rising leaves a positive outlook on a grim reality depending on how the viewer interprets her mural.

Susan did not travel to Central America during the 1980s; however, as stated previously, images of dead bodies circulated throughout mainstream news and the Central American civil wars became relevant to her as she served the local Mission District community through Precita Eyes' muralists the creation of community murals.

Conclusion

PLACA murals remain an influential moment for San Francisco's mural history as twenty-seven murals were added in one alley over the span of nine months, physically changing the space of the Mission District. The group of thirty-six artists were driven to denounce state-sponsored violence and stood in solidarity with the revolutionary ideologies of Central America.

The importance and legacy of PLACA in Balmy Alley has been its contribution to fight injustice and take a political stance in a public art form within the community. Not only did it create a space and place for murals in an alley (and one of the first collaborative projects to do so), but it also developed a sustained production of murals. Once the paint of the PLACA murals weathered and faded, new murals created by younger generation of artists replaced them. More importantly, these murals set a precedent for future Central American murals in Balmy Alley and the Mission District in general. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, as the civil wars evolved, more Central American murals sprouted across different sites in the Mission

District. Out of the original twenty-seven murals, only one mural was fully restored in 2015, Miranda Bergman and O'Brien Thiele's *Culture Contains the Seed of Resistance that Blossoms into the Flower of Liberation*. However, if one walks in present-day Balmy Alley, there are a total of six Central American themed murals created by non-Central Americans, and one created by a Salvadoran-American artist Josué Rojas (see chapter 4).

The cultural mission behind the PLACA murals was to raise consciousness about U.S. involvement in Central America and to generate solidarity with Central Americans. Ultimately, PLACA remains a symbol for hope for transnational solidarity. As Bergman put it, "PLACA was a symbol and metaphor for transformation, that if we can transform this alley with paint, then we can transform our human cultures."[121] Newer murals, post-PLACA, continue to carry on this mission, as Balmy Alley continues to offer a comparative and anti-authoritarian vision of justice.[122] Several artists have left their mark on Balmy Alley. Some have chosen to stick to the theme of Central America while other topics include indigeneity, Chicanx art, and gentrification. Yet, the theme of Central America has remained consistent and continues to be relevant as immigration from Central America to the San Francisco Bay continues. With the recent mass migration of unaccompanied minors from Central America at the U.S. Mexico border (2014-2017)

[121] Bergman, Miranda. Interview. Conducted by Mauricio E. Ramírez. 16 November 2020.
[122] Harford Vargas, *Forms of Dictatorship,* p. 189.

and, more recently, the Central American migrant caravans (2017-2018), Central Americans continue to be at the forefront of migration into the U.S.

The experience of painting for PLACA influenced the artists to learn more about the Central American conflicts on a first-hand basis. For example, at the invitation of a teacher's union and the FSLN, PLACA members Juana Alicia and Miranda Bergman traveled to Managua, Nicaragua to paint a mural *El Amanacer/Dawn* in 1986. Alicia was one of the most prolific muralists who continued creating murals in solidarity with Central America (as discussed in chapter 2). Other members continued creating posters and artwork in solidarity with the Central American cause. In a neighborhood that has endured multiple waves of gentrification and displacement, these murals are a testament to ongoing community efforts to preserve the history and murals in the Mission District. The relational analysis demonstrates that culture and activism among solidarity artists of San Francisco could create a deep impact on the Mission District. In the spirit of PLACA and art-activism, Balmy Alley continues to exhibit cultural and political murals related to Latinx issues and remains a popular mural site in San Francisco.

Chapter 4: Visualizing Memories of Space and Belonging: U.S. Central American Art of the Mission Barrio

"One of the more chaotic elements of gentrification is the point of transition where longstanding residents are left with negotiating disparate memories of space and belonging, while at the same time, new residents redefine space on their own terms, with their own narration." [123]

—Nancy Raquel Mirabal, "Geographies of Displacement: Latina/os, Oral History, and The Politics of Gentrification in San Francisco's Mission District."

"There is a deep politics to memory, and each age attempts to refashion and remake memory to serve its own contemporary purposes. Memory is sustained through the interplay between collective recollection and repetition."[124]

—Katharyne Mitchell, "Monuments, Memorials, and the Politics of Memory"

The 1990s-2010s marked an era in which the 1.5- and second-generation U.S.-Central Americans were coming of age in San Francisco's Mission District. Simultaneously, the technology industry steadily changed the neighborhood as high-earning tech workers moved in. As stated in previous chapters, the 1980s introduced the largest waves of Central American immigrants to the San Francisco Bay Area as civil wars occurred in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Many Central American adults who arrived in the United States during the 1980s and early 1990s came with children or decided to have children during these turbulent decades. The first generation of Central Americans who endured the treacherous journey and

[123] The title of this chapter was inspired and adapted from this quote authored by Nancy Raquel Mirabal in her article "Geographies of Displacement: Latina/os, Oral History, and The Politics of Gentrification in San Francisco's Mission District."
[124] Mitchell, Katharyne. "Monuments, Memorials, and the Politics of Memory," p. 443.

arrived in the United States (or elsewhere) are considered parents of the 1.5- and second-generation U.S. Central American children. The 1.5 generation refers to individuals who emigrate to a new country before or during their early teens.[125] The first and 1.5 generations of Central Americans who experienced the treacherous journey to arrive in the United States often experienced a feeling of displacement from their home countries. The 1.5- and second-generation children inherited stories of their parents' experiences or, in some cases, were raised in silence and never told their family history. Thus far in this dissertation, I have discussed an older generation of Central American and solidarity artists. Many solidarity artists had experienced prior movements such as the Third World Liberation movement, Chicanx, and Civil Rights movements or experienced the Central American civil wars firsthand and arrived in the Bay Area as adults/ young adults. Yet, to fully explore the canon of U.S. Central American visual art of San Francisco, the 1.5 and second-generation artists cannot be ignored. A plethora of 1.5 and second-generation U.S. Central American artists exist, and most have a connection with or were raised in the Mission District.

This chapter analyzes two art exhibitions presented at Acción Latina's Juan R. Fuentes Gallery; one created by Jasmin Cañas and Natalie Aleman and a solo exhibition by Josué Rojas. These three U.S. Central American artists depict cultural

[125] 1.5ers earn the label the "1.5 generation" because they bring with them or maintain characteristics from their home country, meanwhile engaging in assimilation and socialization with their new country. However, depending on what age the 1.5 generation arrived in a new country, they may not have any memory or characteristics form their home country.

representations of Central Americans who grew up or were born in San Francisco during the 1980s and ‘90s.[126] In 2016, Rojas, a 1.5-generation Salvadoran American artist, exhibited *¡Gentromancer!* as a response to the violent displacement of Latinx residents due to gentrification occurring in the Mission District. In 2018, Aleman and Cañas, both second-generation Central American artists, exhibited *Ode to Our Barrio: A Tribute to The Mission by Dos Centroamericanas*, depicting their intimate connection to urban space and culture of the Mission District.

The artworks in these two exhibitions demonstrate the complexities and nuances of being raised as U.S.-Central Americans in San Francisco. I posit that these three U.S. Central American artists use their collective memory expressed through their visual art to reimagine, document, and explore issues of gentrification and displacement experienced amongst the Latinx community of the Mission District. The concept of “historical memory,” often expressed as “collective memory” or “the politics of memory,” refers to the ways in which groups, collectives, and nations construct and identify with particular narratives about historical periods or events.[127] By examining the artworks of three U.S.-Central America artists raised in San Francisco, I demonstrate how they enact historical memory in two distinct ways.

---

[126] I use the term “U.S. Central American art” as a descriptor of art created by artists of Central American descent. I use the term to distinguish it from “Central American art” (art produced in Central America by Central Americans). By placing “U.S.” in front of Central America, I am explicitly referring to art created in the United States. The term “U.S. Central Americans” forms part of the Central American studies lexicon, a term first introduced by Ana Patricia Rodríguez in her book *Dividing the Isthmus* and now more widely used after the publication of the book *U.S. Central Americans: Reconstructing Memories, Struggles, and Communities of Resistance* edited by Alvarado, Karina O., Alicia I. Estrada, and Ester E. Hernández in 2017.

[127] Hite, Katherine. “Historical Memory” *International Encyclopedia of Political Science*, edited by Bertrand Badie, Dirk Berg-Schlosser, and Leonard Morolino. Sage, 2011, pp. 1078–82.

First, the artists enact historical memory through their artwork. The themes of both exhibitions represent a claim to public space and architecture as they negotiate gentrification and the displacement of Latinx peoples of the Mission neighborhood. I analyze how specific artworks in the exhibition enunciate historical memories of these three U.S. Central American artists by retrieving their recollections of the Mission barrio, as these remembrances are sustained via the visual artworks they create. Secondly, the two art exhibitions enact historical memory by being displayed in the community-based Juan R. Fuentes Gallery.

The Juan R. Fuentes Gallery functions within a non-profit organization and outside of the confines of traditional private for-profit gallery circuits. As a community-driven gallery allowing emerging Latinx curators display their shows, coupled with a mission statement for exhibiting Latinx art, there is power on deciding what qualifies as exhibition worthy "Latinx art." As Katherine Mitchell reminds us, "the capacity for those remembrances to be sustained is vastly dependent on the socioeconomic power of the groups who produce and maintain them."[128] Thus, as a small non-profit gallery, Juan R. Fuentes Gallery allows to "produce and maintain" Latinx art. These qualities are critical when put into contrast with the fact that U.S. Central American artists remain "nearly invisible in Latino art exhibitions and scholarship," as art historian Kency Cornejo points out.[129] Thus, when U.S. Central

[128] Mitchell, Katharyne. "Monuments, Memorials, and the Politics of Memory," p. 443.
[129] Kency Cornejo has argued that very few Central American artists are exhibited on the national scale despite being the third largest Latinx subgroup in the nation. To learn more read her article "'Does That Come with a Hyphen? A Space?': The Question of Central American-Americans in Latino Art and Pedagogy," p. 190.

American artists are allowed or welcomed to display art in a gallery is a feat in itself, as few Central American-themed shows by the 1.5- and second-generation have been documented. For example, there have been a few group exhibitions of the works of 1.5- and second-generation U.S. Central Americans. The most notable of these were Mourning and Scars: 20 Years After the War, a group exhibition presented at SOMArts Cultural Center in San Francisco in *February 2013 and Connected Diaspora: U.S. Central American Visuality in the Age of Social Media* at Duke University in 2019 and later exhibited at the University of Maryland, College Park, in 2020. Furthermore, since the inception of the Juan R. Fuentes Gallery, the gallery has displayed a total of three U.S. Central American based art exhibitions which were: *¡Gentromancer!* (2016), *Ode to Our Barrio: A Tribute to The Mission by Dos Centroamericanas* (2018), and *Diaro Entrada Uno* (2020) a solo exhibition by Guatemalan/Salvadoran artist Kiara A. Machado.

¡Gentromancer! and *Ode to Our Barrio: A Tribute to The Mission by Dos Centroamericanas* represent a U.S. Central American perspective in visual art, and enunciates a Latinx presence specific to San Francisco's Mission District, thereby contributing to an expanding definition of U.S. Latinx visual art. Although the artists did not live through the Central American civil wars, their stories and visual art represent experiences of being raised in the United States and born to Central American parents who did live through the wars. Natalie Aleman, Jasmin Cañas, and

Josué Rojas found a realm of artistic empowerment growing up among the artists and cultural workers whose vision permeated the Mission District. I argue that these two exhibitions were not coincidental, as Central Americans have a long historical connection with Acción Latina. Furthermore, the relatively new Juan R. Fuentes Gallery enabled Latinx artists to display their artworks in a city where few galleries provided this opportunity.[130] To further analyze the politics of visibility/memory, it is critical to examine how the Juan R. Fuentes Gallery began to exhibit Latinx-themed shows. Acción Latina is an institution that plays a critical role in maintaining the tradition of visual arts in the Mission District, despite the several waves of gentrification that the neighborhood has endured. Furthermore, Acción Latina has been able to exist and realize the Juan R. Fuentes Gallery primarily through ownership of the building that houses the gallery and having not been displaced by external forces such as skyrocketing rents and eviction.

U.S. Central Americans of the Mission District were invisible (as argued in previous chapters). Similarly, art exhibitions by 1.5- and second-generation U.S. Central American Bay Area artists were and are rare. One complicating factor might be the popularity of showcasing artworks through online social networks, especially among millennials. The rise of online platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, and personal websites, since the 2010s may be sufficient exposure for these artists, thus

[130] Before Acción Latina's Juan R. Fuentes Gallery came onto the scene, Galería de la Raza, The Mission Cultural Center, and Precita Eyes muralists exhibited Latinx artists and art shows for over thirty years and continue to do so. These three organizations exist within the Mission neighborhood. Outside of these three organizations Casa Nicaragua, CODICES, and Piñata Art Studio Gallery were other community spaces that functioned as galleries; however, they no longer exist.

limiting the need for in-person exhibitions. Or it could be that mainstream galleries do not specialize in Latinx art and are uninterested in exhibiting Latinx artists in the Bay Area. Finally, the lack of Latinx curators at major galleries and museums has been thoroughly researched by Arlene Dávila, who stresses that there are few experts in the field of U.S. Latinx art.[131]

In this chapter, I begin with a brief history of how Acción Latina established itself as a non-profit organization in the Mission District and its historical connection to Central American causes. Then I discuss the significance of Victorian homes as an identifying marker of the Mission District and in both art exhibitions. Finally, I provide a visual analysis of two individual exhibitions and how they enunciate U.S. Central American historical memory within a gentrifying neighborhood.

Brief History of Gentrification in San Francisco's Mission District

A longstanding, diverse, and predominantly Latinx neighborhood, the Mission District of San Francisco has been the epicenter of Latinx art production in Northern California since the 1960s. A combination of the 1968 Third World Liberation strikes at San Francisco State University, the Chicanx Civil Rights Movement, Third World Consciousness, and the New Left, prompted several cultural centers and organizations

---

[131] Arlene Dávila has argued this point extensively in her book *Latinx Art: Artists, Market, Politics* (2020). Dávila points to a study conducted by Adriana Zavala in 2015, investigating how few Ph.D.'s in Art History graduate dissertations based on U.S. Latinx art, yet dissertation on Latin American art is more common. Zavala's results demonstrated that between 2002-2012 a total of ninety-six dissertations were based on Latin American art, whereas thirteen dissertations were based on U.S. Latinx Art. As the professionalization of curators has emerged, higher education degrees in art history are needed to become a curator. Both Dávila and Zavala point to the fact that few Art History programs focus on U.S. Latinx Art, and often U.S. Latinx Art Ph.D.'s are being produced under different disciplines. See Zavala "Latin@ art at the intersection." *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 40. No.1, pp. 125-40, 2015.

to flourish in the Mission District such as Galería de La Raza, Precita Eyes Muralists, El Tecolote Newspaper/Acción Latina, Basta Ya!, and Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts. The institutions that developed from the vigorous activism of the late 1960s were firmly established by the 1970s. Latinx art production was considered vital to the goal of raising consciousness on the Chicanx and Civil Rights movements and the Vietnam War. Many of these grassroots organizations were founded in the Mission District and played a critical role in offering spaces for activism and Latinx art to flourish for decades to come.

The Mission District faced drastic neighborhood transformation during the late 1990s as Silicon Valley expanded into a booming technology industry. Gentrification and displacement ensued in several working-class neighborhoods across the San Francisco Bay Area. The late 1990s and early 2000s marked the dot.com era which brought new tech urbanizers to San Francisco. Communities including South of Market (SOMA) and the Mission District were transformed as warehouses and factories were converted into tech offices and residential lofts.[132] These new housing structures displaced artists and later attracted "techies," workers in the field of computer technology, to live close to their workplace. The foreclosure crisis of 2008 and the tech boom provoked further displacement that engulfed many communities across the Bay Area. This trend continued as the tech boom of the 2010s ushered in successful tech companies like Yelp, Twitter, Airbnb, and Uber. Veteran

---

[132] Walker, Richard A. *Pictures of a Gone City: Tech and the Dark Side of Prosperity in the San Francisco Bay Area*. PM Press, 2018, p. 165.

companies like Facebook, Google, and Apple also set up branches in the city of San Francisco. Simultaneously, newcomers hailing from different parts of the country (and world) began to move in, aspiring to create the next unicorn startup company (a term in the business world to indicate a privately held startup company valued at over $1 billion) or a phone application that would change the world while concurrently and unwittingly displacing longtime residents. This new wave of displacement ushered in cafes and restaurants that catered to young affluent techies. By 2010-2013, the Mission District began to physically change as many Latinx owned businesses, stores, panaderias, and restaurants left the neighborhood due to skyrocketing rents that they could no longer afford. However, several Latinx cultural institutions that were rooted and established in the 1970s remained in the Mission District. All the while Latinx murals, old and new, created by youth and artists continued to cover the walls and fences of alleys, businesses, parks, and homes throughout the neighborhood, creating a visual palimpsest of Latinx presence.

The neighborhood landscape began to physically and visually change as real estate speculators, landlords, and tech workers with six-figure salaries began to take interest in buying or selling real estate in a skyrocketing market. Some Victorian apartments and homes were gutted and flipped into luxury condos or single-family homes that catered to the taste of affluent buyers. Yet, it was longtime renters of the barrio who experienced the change as a majority of Latinx and working-class residents did not own their homes or apartments. Landlords were able to displace their tenants with impunity using the California state law known as the Ellis Act, a

1985 California state law that allows landlords to evict all their residential tenants from an apartment complex/building to get out of the rental business. Use of this act often led to legal and illegal tactics to forcefully displace long term tenants. Landlords converted their apartments into condos or sold the entire building and reaped massive financial gains in the process. From 2004-2014, no affordable housing units were built in the District despite luxury properties sprouting up on nearly every block; Ellis Act evictions were at an all-time high.[133] From 2008 to 2018 over 8,000 Latinxs were displaced from the Mission District, representing over 25% of its community.[134] This trend continued to the end of 2019 as tenants faced eviction and displacement and as they witnessed houses and apartments where they once lived become luxury condos, intensifying the economic disparity of the neighborhood.

A Brief History of Acción Latina's Juan R. Fuentes Gallery and Curating Central American Art Exhibitions

The history of Acción Latina and its cornerstone media project, *El Tecolote*, is deeply rooted within U.S. Central American history. Acción Latina laid roots in the Mission District through *El Tecolote* (The Owl) which was founded on August 24, 1970. The bilingual newspaper began as a journalism project in a Raza Studies class at San Francisco State University under the direction of Professor Juan Gonzales.[135]

---

[133] Mission Economic Development Agency (MEDA), "Collectively Turning the Tide of Displacement in San Francisco's Mission District," December 2018.
[134] Ibid.
[135] La Raza Studies was initiated in the Fall of 1969 as one of four Ethnic Studies programs at San Francisco State College in direct response to the demands of the multiethnic coalition of students, faculty, and community activists who organized the 1968 Third World Student Strike.

El Tecolote had an extensive track record of covering issues concerning Central America dating back to the late 1970s. The newspaper consistently reported on Central American civil wars, murals, and cultural and fundraising events affecting the Mission District. The strong historical documentation of Central American history of the struggle and liberation among activists and cultural workers in San Francisco is unmatched. While other news organizations might have glossed over the issues of civil wars in Central America, *El Tecolote* did not. Additionally, U.S. Central Americans joined or volunteered with *El Tecolote* as writers and artists. For example, the Guatemalan-American journalist, author, and novelist Héctor Tobar worked as editor in chief at *El Tecolote*. Additionally, Salvadoran-American author and journalist, Roberto Lovato, wrote several pieces for the newspaper while Tobar served as editor in chief. Herbert Sigüneza also illustrated various comic strips for *El Tecolote*. As a bilingual Spanish/English newspaper that served the local Latinx community of San Francisco, *El Tecolote* sustained the socioeconomic power and capacity for writing, documenting, and creating events for Central American causes. Thus, the Central American presence in San Francisco has always been part of *El Tecolote* and Acción Latina's legacy.

By 1982, volunteers from *El Tecolote* and San Francisco's New College of California decided to organize and sponsor the first *Encuentro del Canto Popular*, a multi-day festival of the *Nueva Canción* genre, to celebrate Latin American music

with a social justice message.[136] Many artists and activists from the 1980s credit this transnational dialogue with *Nueva Canción* artists from Latin America as awakening and deepening their solidarity with liberation movements across South and Central America (as stated in chapter 2).

In 1987, Acción Latina was born out of *El Tecolote* and incorporated itself as a nonprofit, tax-exempt institution. This same year, the James Irvine Foundation awarded Acción Latina a two-year grant to help build organizational infrastructure and it hired its first executive director. In 2000, Acción Latina purchased its building – its current permanent home - located at 2958 24th Street in the heart of San Francisco's Mission District. As the price of real estate continued to skyrocket due to the rise of the tech industry, securing a permanent home was undoubtedly fortuitous for Acción Latina. The neighborhood began to drastically transform and gentrification aggressively took over throughout the 2010s.

In December 2015, with support from the San Francisco Arts Commission, the Mayor's Office of Economic and Workforce Development, the Voluntary Arts Contribution Fund, and individual donors, the Juan R. Fuentes Gallery was constructed in the front facade of Acción Latina's building. The namesake of the gallery is Chicanx printmaker Juan R. Fuentes, who has created countless posters in solidarity with various causes, including Chicanx Civil Rights, Central American civil wars, Anti-Zionism, and the Free Palestine Movement. The expansive see-through

[136] The festival is also conceived as an event that can raise funds to support the ongoing operation of *El Tecolote* and continues to the present day.

window and a glass door allow passers-by to view the gallery exhibition from 24th Street, one of the busiest corridors of the Mission District. With its many Latinx businesses, restaurants, and organizations; 24th Street has been dubbed the heart of the Mission District. Visible at street level and often with its doors open for the public to view the exhibitions on display, the Juan R. Fuentes Gallery enacts the politics of Latinx presence in a rapidly gentrifying Mission District. The gallery is also a significant gathering place. On art opening days, it is common to see upwards of 500 people visit this relatively small gallery space.[137]

The Juan R. Fuentes Gallery is community-oriented and mounts exhibitions by both emerging and established artists and curators, Latinx and non-Latinx alike.[138] Often small galleries and venues play an important role for emerging artists to receive their first start to enter the art world. Community-driven, the Juan R. Fuentes Gallery works outside of the confines of private, for-profit gallery spaces. In this context, *¡Gentromancer!* and *Ode to our Barrio,* two U.S. Central American art exhibitions, are innovative. As Cornejo reminds us, few Central American art exhibitions occur on a national scale.139

[137] The only other gallery publicly visible on 24th Street was Galería de la Raza, which was displaced in 2018 after running for 46 years, due to the landlord's demand for a 100-percent rent hike and capital improvements to the space, which Galería could not afford.137 By 2021, Galería de la Raza will move into its new permanent home at 16th Street and Folsom St.

[138] The gallery is named after local artist, Juan R. Fuentes, in honor of his enormous and sustained artistic contributions to Acción Latina over the past four decades. The gallery seeks to showcase the work of established and emerging Latino artists as well as that of non-Latino artists whose work reflects the nuances of Latino life locally, nationally, and internationally. For more information see, "Acción Latina presents the Juan R. Fuentes Gallery" by *El Tecolote*, December 3, 2015

[139] Kency Cornejo has argued that very few Central American artists are exhibited on the national scale despite being the third largest Latinx subgroup in the nation. To learn more see Cornejo, Kency. "'Does That Come with a Hyphen? A Space?': The Question of Central American-Americans in

In 2017, a year after Rojas' *¡Gentromancer!* exhibition, Rojas stepped into the role of executive director of Acción Latina. He was the first U.S. Central American Executive Director of Acción Latina, a testament to the changing dynamics of the Mission District. As Executive Director, he had the initial idea of asking Cañas and Aleman to apply for an exhibition. Cañas and Aleman had already begun their collaboration. Cañas was painting the photographs that Aleman took of local Mission District Victorian homes. Rojas wanted them to take their artwork a step further and suggested their exhibition be a celebration of Mission District culture. This creative idea and inspiration led Jasmin Cañas and Natalie Aleman to conceive of *Ode to Our Barrio: A Tribute to The Mission by Dos Centroamericanas*, which opened on September 1, 2018.

Both Aleman and Cañas were born in San Francisco and are self-taught visual artists. Cañas was raised in the Mission District and lived near 18th and Mission St. for seventeen years while Aleman also grew up in the Mission District. Aleman's parents are from Nicaragua and Cañas' parents are from El Salvador; thus, they decided to include their identity as U.S. Central Americans in the show's subtitle. Cañas elaborated, "For us it was the pride of both being from there [Central America] and the fact that most shows in the Mission are usually by Chicanos. We believed it was important to amplify the fact that we were both women, and our families are

---

Latino Art and Pedagogy." *AZTLAN - A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 40, no. 1, Chicano Studies Research Studies Center Publications, 2015, pp. 189–210.

from there. I'm Salvadorian and she's Nicaraguan."[140] The two artists wanted to underscore that not only Latinxs, but Central Americans in particular, claimed the Mission District as home.

Victorian Homes and "Painted Ladies" of the Mission District

The goal of *Ode to Our Barrio* was to highlight places, portraits, landmarks, and architecture of the Mission District through paintings and photographs. In the artists' words, the exhibition was a "testament to the beautiful resiliency of the Mission and its people."[141] By focusing on Victorian homes, Cañas and Aleman's original, and realist, gesture invites numerous interpretations about the Mission as a *barrio.*

Victorian homes are omnipresent in *Ode to Our Barrio*, as Aleman and Cañas deliberately choose to visually represent the colorful polychromatic homes as important visual signifiers of the Mission District. As part of the exhibition, one entire wall displayed a total of 15 pieces, composed of five paintings by Cañas and eight photographs by Aleman, was dedicated to highlighting Victorian homes of the Mission District. Thus, the explicit presence of Victorian dwellings is a crucial subject matter for Aleman and Cañas. Rojas also references Victorian homes in *¡Gentromancer!* to symbolize the rash of apartment fires which occurred in the Mission District from 2014-2017, which I will discuss later.

[140] Cañas, Jasmin. Interview. Conducted by Mauricio E. Ramírez. 16 September 2020.
[141] Cañas, Jasmin and Natalie Aleman. *Ode to Our Barrio: A Tribute to The Mission by Dos Centroamericanas*. Artist Statement, https://Acciónlatina.org/en/ode-to-our-barrio/

"Victorian" and "Edwardian" are umbrella terms used to describe two periods of architectural style in England that came to dominate building practices in the United States. The Edwardian era superseded the Victorian era after the death of Queen Victoria in 1901. During the Victorian and Edwardian eras, specific decorative tropes were popular including Gothic Revival, Italianate, Stick, and Queen Anne. Each of these ornate styles characterize the Victorian and Edwardian homes which make them easily distinguishable from modern architecture. The catalyst behind building Victorian and Edwardian homes was the massive influx of fortune seekers and miners who participated in the California gold rush beginning in 1848 and ending in approximately 1860.[142] The city's population exploded from 57,000 to 233,00 between 1860 and 1880. The gold rush brought riches and settlers with families who demanded houses amidst a booming industrial age marked by new technologies including machine-made nails, standardized paint colors, catalogs of house plans, and lithography for printing color charts.[143] Northern California's abundant redwood trees allowed for thousands of Victorian style homes to be mass manufactured. According to Elizabeth Pomada and Michael Larsen, about 50,000 houses in the Victorian and Edwardian styles were built in San Francisco between 1849 and 1915 and many were originally painted in bright colors. After the 1906 earthquake, an estimated 13,437 Victorian homes survived and from 1976 through

[142]The Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* "California Gold Rush" Encyclopedia Britannica, May 27, 2020, https://www.britannica.com/topic/California-Gold-Rush
[143] Pomada, Elizabeth., and Michael Larsen. *The Painted Ladies Revisited: San Francisco's Resplendent Victorians Inside and Out,* p. 11.

1989 thousands of Victorian homes were restored in San Francisco.[144] However, the Mission District was largely spared from the devastating 1906 earthquake as the fires it triggered ended near the north section of the neighborhood. As a result, many Victorian homes still stand in the Mission District.

The concept and term "Painted Ladies" is intimately connected to the history of San Francisco and the Mission District. Pomada and Larsen coined the term to describe colorful San Francisco Victorian homes in their 1978 book *Painted Ladies: San Francisco's Resplendent Victorians*. By definition, the term *Painted Lady* refers to a Victorian structure that displays polychromatic colors on its exterior and fits the following criteria: it must be balanced, have a felicitous blend of color and architecture; be painted in three or more contrasting colors; bring out the decorative ruffles and flourishes.[145] By 1990, the phrase "Painted Lady" appeared in the American Heritage Dictionary. According to Pomada and Larsen, the first Painted Lady appeared in 1963 in the Mission District when designer Butch Kardum painted his Italianate home on San Jose Avenue with intense blue and green colors.[146] Initially Kardum received negative reactions from his neighbors but after a short while his entire block had been repainted in colors as colorful as his own. He learned the colorful palette brought a heightened awareness and sense of pride to homeowners on the block and even inspired the colorist movement.[147] Others argue the so called

[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibid, p. 10.
[146] Ibid, p. 11.
[147] Ibid.

"Hippie House" on Steiner Street, painted in psychedelic colors in 1967, sparked the Colorist movement. Yet, by the 1970s the Colorist movement transformed neighborhoods across the city as homeowners painted their Victorian homes in bright, polychromatic paints, setting an iconic trend for San Francisco's visual landscape.

Cañas and Aleman's mutual appreciation of the Painted Ladies of the Mission District prompted a visual collaboration. Aleman's interest in photographing the beauty of the Victorian homes in the Mission District initially inspired the idea of creating a collaborative exhibition. Aleman posted several photos of splendorous polychromatic Victorian homes of the Mission District on her Instagram account. However, not all of Aleman's photographs of Victorian homes focus on Painted Ladies. Some of her shots focus on stoops and doorsteps of Mission District homes which may or not be from the Victorian era (fig. 4.2). Cañas was attracted to Aleman's photographs and asked if she could paint her photos of Victorian houses. Cañas wanted to honor the beauty of Victorian houses of the Mission District since she had grown up there and remembered seeing colorful Victorian homes throughout her childhood. Aleman agreed and thus began the first phase of their artistic collaboration.

Figure 4. 1. Close up of Victorian homes, photographs by Natalie Aleman and paintings by Jasmin Cañas at the opening exhibition of *Ode to Our Barrio: A Tribute to The Mission by Dos Centroamericanas* Photograph by Mauricio E. Ramírez.

That said, Victorian homes are not unique to the Mission District as they exist in various neighborhoods across the city and in cities across the United States. Victorian homes are a reminder of the past and, for Cañas, they are also a reminder of survival. They are a reminder of being a child growing up in the Mission District, of a time when polychromatic colors and paint, and the vibrancy of the murals made the Mission a colorful place.

Yet the first dotcom explosion and gentrification ushered in a visual shift in the color of the Mission's urban landscape: the color gray (fig. 4.3). Photographer and

Professor, Sergio De La Torre dates the city's "gray washing" to 2014. The "graying" of San Francisco houses is an aesthetic style that can be attributed to the tastes of the high-earning class and remains as a visual manifestation of gentrification. When De La Torre first moved to San Francisco in the 1990s, he was "struck by the variety of colors that dressed the city's homes. In his neighborhood, the Mission District, houses were painted with every color of the spectrum."[148] However, in the wake of the post 2008 depression when several homes were being bought, sold, and flipped, the new luxury condos and homes had to appeal to the affluent tech-class. According to De La Torre, in 2014, a "gray washing" of Mission District houses began not only in San Francisco but in cities across the world. The graying of houses is felt more intensely in the Mission District of San Francisco, where colorful murals, and vibrant house colors dominate the visual landscape, and the muted color of gray makes a more pronounced statement. In 2017, a Zillow analysis found that homes painted gray, especially "greige" (a color that is a blend of gray and beige) sold for $3,496 more than comparable homes painted other colors.[149]

Why do Victorian houses appear in the works of Cañas and Aleman? As an exhibition honoring the Mission District, the spatial aspect of Painted Ladies is part of the neighborhood's identity. For Cañas and Aleman, remembering and honoring the urban and spatial landscape of the Mission District are critical steps towards a politics

[148] Sergio, De La Torre. "San Francisco Is Turning Gray — One House At A Time," September 10, 2019.
[149] Vainshtein, Annie. "How San Francisco Lost Its Color," October 11, 2019.

of visibility amidst gentrification. When old businesses and homes are being completely revamped, gutted, demolished and new buildings appear suddenly, recapturing the colorful identity of the Mission District becomes an act of resistance. As houses continue to turn gray, remembering the glorious Painted Ladies speaks to the lived experience of growing up in the Mission barrio.

Figure 4. 2. Martilla, Max and Fred Alvarado, Precita Eyes' Urban Youth Program Muralists, *Latin House,* 2017. Photographed by Mauricio E. Ramírez at 25th and York Streets on November 2020. This juxtaposition depicts the "gray washing" of San Francisco homes.

Displaying Latinx Cultures Through *Mission Altar: Maferefun Eggun*

Jasmine Cañas' painting *Mission Altar: Maferefun Eggun* also offers a colorful take on Latinidad in the Mission District (fig. 4.4). *Mission Altar* is a photorealistic acrylic painting created on a wooden panel. Using an altar/ throne as the main subject of the painting, Cañas represents multiple Latinx cultures through

use of various symbols and objects within the altar/throne. The artwork embraces two distinct Latinx cultures stemming from the religion known as Santería, developed in Cuba as a process of syncretism between the traditional Yoruba religion of West Africa and the Roman Catholic form of Christianity. The second culture, Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos) tradition which is an infusion of Mesoamerica and Roman Catholicism traditions/celebrations is, represented in the painting with the depiction of altars. *Mission Altar: Maferefun Eggun* is a validation of a pan-Latinx identity, depicting cultures that are not necessarily rooted in Central America. However, they are practiced by Latinx residents of the Mission District.

Figure 4. 3. Cañas, Jasmine. *Mission Altar*, 2018. Acrylic paint on wooden Panel. Image taken from the artists' website: http://www.jasmincolores.com

There are multiple layers of identities represented in *Mission Altar: Maferefun Eggun*. Firstly, "Maferefun Eggun" roughly translates to "Go and pray to spirits of our ancestors" in the Yoruba language, which is used as the liturgical language of Santería. Second, the visual representation resembles and merges a traditional altar from Día De Los Muertos and a throne from the Santería religion. In Santería, altars are not recognized as altars; however, they share very similar characteristics and

purposes. They are recognized as thrones because Orishas (a manifestation of *Olodumare* or God) live in them.[150]

The yearly celebration of Día de los Muertos in the Mission District dates to the 1970s when the Latinx arts community in San Francisco began popularizing the event as a way of acknowledging ethnic traditions and inspiring artistic expression.[151] Día de los Muertos is a holiday celebrated in ancient Mesoamerica (modern day Mexico and Central America) where indigenous groups, including Aztec, Maya and Toltec, had specific dates when they commemorated loved ones who had passed away. Certain months were dedicated to remembering the departed based on whether the deceased was an adult or a child. After the arrival of the Spaniards, this ritual of commemorating the dead was intertwined with two Roman Catholic holidays: All Saints Day (November 1) and All Souls Day (November 2). Día de los Muertos is celebrated on November 1 as a day to remember children who have passed away and on November 2 to honor adults. Recently, Día de los Muertos has become increasingly popular among Latinx communities in the United States and entered the Hollywood mainstream in 2017 with Disney's animated release of Coco. Yet, the communal spirit is a key difference between how Day of the Dead is celebrated in the United States versus Mexico and Central America. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto observed the public and private dimensions of altars in Mexico versus the United States. "The ofrendas [altars] in Mexico are usually family affairs. . . In Mexican/Chicano

---

[150] Cordova, Carlos B. Interview. Conducted by Mauricio E. Ramírez, 8 May 2019.
[151] Cordova, Cary. *The Heart of the Mission: Latino Art and Politics in San Francisco*, p. 207.

communities, the ofrendas [altars] tend to be collective commemorations created by artists in public spaces such as art centers, galleries or museums."[152]

The community participates in Day of the Dead in the Mission District on November 1st. A procession begins on 24th Street and ends at Garfield Park located on Harrison Street between 25th and 26th Street. At the end of the procession, hundreds of people gather in Garfield Park where numerous altars are placed across the perimeter of the park. Often these altars are political and represent the issues of their time. For example, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the AIDS Pandemic and the civil wars of Central America figured prominently in the altares and ofrendas.[153] By the 2000s, many altars displayed themes concerning gentrification because the first dot.com era was plaguing the Mission District. Many altars and tombs stated, "Death to the Mission," as if the tech industry killed the culture and spirit of the Mission District.

The artists discussed in this chapter employ visual markers of the Mission District landscape in their artworks. One theme that becomes apparent from all three artists is the importance of visual reminders of the Mission District. One such important piece is the red and blue spiral tiles that Cañas calls the "Mission tile" (fig. 4.5). Mission Street is one of the lengthiest streets in San Francisco and cuts across the entire eastern portion of the city. Beginning at Daly City's southern border, Mission Street runs for approximately nine miles to the very tip of San Francisco's

[152] Ybarra-Frausto, Tomas. "Recuerdo, Descubrimiento, Voluntad," p. 28; Cordova, Cary. *The Heart of the Mission: Latino Art and Politics in San Francisco,* p. 293.
[153] For more discussion on AIDS and Central American civil wars and its impact on Day of the Dead in the Mission District read Cary Cordova's Chapter "The Politics of Dia De Los Muertos: Mourning, Art, and Activism," *The Heart of the Mission: Latino Art and Politics in San Francisco.*

northeast waterfront in the Embarcadero. Along the Mission Street portion of the Mission District, there exists a blue and red pinwheel mosaic tile pattern in which the center square is red, and the perimeter tiles are blue, creating the visual illusion of a spiral. These blue and red spiral tiles are unique to the Mission District neighborhood because they do not exist anywhere else along Mission Street. The Mission tiles decorate the sidewalks of four total blocks down Mission Street. The first two blocks start at the intersection of 23rd Street and end on 25th Street. The second two blocks begin at the intersection of 15th Street and end at 17th Street. These tiles are located on the San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) stops known as 24th Street Mission and 16th Street Mission. Any passengers that disembark at either one of these BART stops and walks along Mission Street can observe the significant presence of the blue and red tiles along the sidewalk and know that they are in the heart of the Mission District.

The Mission tiles are significant to Mission artists because they symbolize and represent the spatial entity of the Mission District. Having grown up playing on the tiles, Cañas explains the importance of the Mission tile, “I'll start with the mission tile. It's always been an inspiration to me since I was a kid. I used to play hopscotch on it. It was just fascinating that it is a spiral, and it continues, and in the middle, it was a solid red color. It just always reminded me of blood. We all have blood inside of us. We all bleed.”[154]

[154] Cañas, Jasmin. Interview. Conducted by Mauricio E. Ramírez, 16 September 2020.

Figure 4. 4. Image of blue and red pinwheel mosaic tile pattern found on the sidewalk of Mission St. The first two blocks in which these tiles begin at is the intersection of Mission St. and 23rd St. and end on Mission St. at 25th St. The second two blocks begin at the intersection of Mission St. and 15th St. and end at Mission St. and 17th St.

¡Gentromancer!

Josué Rojas is a Salvadoran-born U.S. citizen who arrived in San Francisco at the age of 1½ years, forming part of the 1.5 generation of Central Americans raised in the United States. His family arrived in the Mission District and from a young age he grew up surrounded by the murals in his neighborhood. At the age of fifteen, he lost his father and did not know how to manage his loss and could have become involved in local gangs. However, this same year he was introduced to the Urban Youth Arts program through Precita Eyes Muralists, the non-profit organization described in Chapter 3, dedicated to providing art classes and preserving mural arts in San

Francisco. Rojas learned how to create community murals which he credits for keeping him away from the gangs of the Mission District. Upon graduating from high school, he followed his desire to be an artist and went on to receive his BFA in Painting and Drawing from the California College of Arts and Crafts (2004) followed by an MFA in Painting from Boston University (2015).

Rojas' art also emphasizes the challenges of growing up in San Francisco by exploring issues of displacement, gentrification, and exile. His artwork captures the realities of U.S. Central Americans who have been displaced by war, violence, and gangs from their home countries and then by gentrification in U.S. cities. The themes of his public art and paintings speak to the Central American community locally in San Francisco, nationally, and transnationally. Rojas depicts these realities in *¡Gentromancer,!* illustrating the irony of the double displacement that many Latinxs and Central Americans experience as the Mission District resists gentrification. His work delves into the phenomenon of "double-displacement" by illustrating the parallel realities of Salvadoran refugees who are again being forcibly displaced from their homes in San Francisco along with others affected by the contemporary wave of gentrification. His paintings are not only a response but also a refusal to accept tech-led gentrification. As an artist living in San Francisco, he also had to face the stark choice of either aligning with the processes of gentrification and capitalist wealth or withdrawing from it. *¡Géntromancer!* is a representation of his lived experienced of being displaced from the Mission District in the late 1990s during the first Dot.com era. As Rojas recalls:

> This is something that isn't new, right? I think the gentrification is happening everywhere, it's something that's going on in so many different communities. I think it really isn't anything new. I do think that needs to be addressed. I want to offer an alternative vision to the dominant narrative, which is like "Oh things got expensive, I have to leave." I think it's important for us to stay and to take a stand and stick with community. It's hard. It's hard to tell people to stay in San Francisco if the prices are ridiculous and you can't afford it. I've chosen to stay here and pay this ridiculous rent, so it's a real challenge. It is a real-life challenge, and so artists are being displaced. The Latino community is being displaced.[155]

Contextualizing *¡Gentromancer!* within the broader framework of gentrification experienced by longtime members of the Mission District is essential for understanding how the Salvadoran immigrant experience plays a crucial role in Rojas' artwork

Duality and Double Displacement in *Two Fires*

In 2013, there was a significant rash of fires in the Mission District in which apartment buildings and homes were mysteriously burned to the ground. Most official reports blamed the fires on the "old" Victorian apartment buildings. Notwithstanding the mysterious fires, the overwhelming majority of them had a clear result: the displacement of tenants. For example, one of the largest fires torched a three-story building on 22nd and Mission Street displacing 58 people and causing one death. The rash of fires ended around 2017. Many went unsolved and few government officials seemed to investigate them. However, David Campos, a member of the San Francisco

[155] Rojas, Josué. "*¡Géntromancer!* Battling Gentrification in San Francisco's Mission District: An Interview with Josué Rojas," p. 48.

Board of Supervisors and of Guatemalan American descent, authored an op-ed piece in the *San Francisco Examiner* titled "Why is the Mission Burning?" Campos once represented District 9, which includes the Mission District. He stated, "Reasonable people now believe that arson is playing a part in the rash of fires that are destroying the homes of the Mission."[156] The title of the op-ed piece is inspired by the historic phrase "The Bronx is Burning," referring to the arson epidemic caused by the collapse of New York City's South Bronx in the 1970s. Campos raised the question about who was behind the fires and were they ignited on purpose? Campos was one of the few government figures to question the devastating fire epidemic. Regardless of whether these were a coincidence, or intentional, they represented a violent manifestation of displacement to such an extent that residents lost their lives.

Two Fires demonstrates the harsh realities of gentrification and enunciates a politics of presence and visibility of Central Americans living in one of the most expensive cities in the world (fig. 4.6). Using the "Mission tile" pattern as a template, Rojas utilizes each of the five quadrants to tell an interconnecting story. However, if one is unfamiliar with the spatial significance of the blue/red tile and its connection to the Mission neighborhood, then this could be read as a template like a comic strip layout. When read as a single tile that lies on the floor on Mission Street, the narrative within the image takes on a different resonance that is visually specific to the Mission

[156] David Campos. "Why is the Mission Burning" *San Francisco Examiner,* 2016, p. 2.

District. The segmented images in this narrative symbolize issues of gentrification and greed and represent the state of the Mission District in the 2010 decade.

Figure 4. 5. Rojas, Josué. *Two Fires*, 2016, Acrylic on canvas. Image Courtesy of Josué Rojas.

At the center of *Two Fires* lies a red square box with an image of a volcano erupting, a significant feature of the Central American landscape. This smoke continues to travel up into the top left quadrant and above it is a Mesoamerican character sitting atop the smoke cloud. The significance of a Mesoamerican figure is central to the message of combating gentrification. Rojas is referencing to the

Nahuas, known to native people of El Salvador as the *Pipil*. It is presumed the *Pipil*, along with the neighboring Nicarao people, migrated from Central Mexico to El Salvador around 900 A.D., after the Chichimeca-Toltec civil war. Rojas uses the reference to the Pipil to enunciate the presence of Salvadorans, as they are known as the "people of the volcano." He employs the Pipil metaphorically to represent the "fire" that Latinx/Central Americans carry within themselves– represented by the second fire in the works title – which demonstrates their resilience through the toughest conditions, including living through civil wars or immigrating to a new country.

In addition, the Pipil character is breathing out a peace dove from his mouth and holding a paintbrush in his hand, seeming to halt the skeleton grim reaper below him to his right. The skeleton grim reaper appears to be on fire, rising from the smoke of an old Victorian house on fire and holding a flag that says, "This is all mine," a reference to the avarice of the buildings' owners. This scene can be interpreted as Rojas' representation of a Mesoamerican artist attempting to symbolically stop the grim reaper with the help of a peace dove as the peace dove flies between the reaper and the Mesoamerican figure and appears to attack the grim reaper. Rojas' stylized peace dove also references El Salvador's painter Fernando Llort, who is widely known for the "La Palma" painting style. As stated in previous chapters Llort popularized the "La Palma" folkloric style of painting in the 1970s, and his style is often appropriated by artists of Salvadoran origin.

Remembering Alex Nieto

A portrait of Alex Nieto was displayed at the center of Rojas' *¡Géntromancer!* in the painting *Amor: The Perfect Lotus* (2016) (fig. 4.7). Nieto was 28-years-old when four San Francisco Police Department officers shot and killed him on March 21, 2014, in Bernal Heights, the neighborhood adjacent to the Mission District, where he had been raised. Writer and journalist Rebeca Solnit described Nieto's murder as "Death by Gentrification." [157] Two white men felt threatened by Nieto's presence in a park that joggers, dog walkers, and Nieto frequented. On the evening Nieto was killed, he was eating a burrito and tortilla chips on a park bench before his shift job as a club bouncer when a Siberian Husky dog suddenly approached and barked at him, curious about his food. Nieto became agitated and reached for his taser while the inattentive dog owner called the animal from yards away. When the dog did not immediately return, its owner exchanged words with Nieto using a racial slur and then left the park. Shortly after, two men walking their dogs in Bernal Heights Park called 911 believing the young Mexican-American man looked agitated and to be carrying a gun. When the police arrived, they claimed Nieto had pointed a taser at them and that they mistook its red laser for a firearm. Nieto died that same day after an onslaught of fifty-nine bullets were fired at him by three police officers.[158]

---

[157] See Solnit, Rebecca. "The Killing That Shamed San Francisco" *The Guardian*, March 21, 2016.
[158] See Cary Cordova's chapter entitled "La Raza Unida: Pan-Latino Art and Culture in 1960's San Francisco" in *The Heart of the Mission: Latino Art and Politics in San Francisco.* University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017, pp. 62-91.

Figure 4. 6. Rojas, Josué. *Amor: The Perfect Lotus*, 2016, Acrylic on canvas. Image courtesy of Josué Rojas.

The inclusion of Alex Nieto's portrait in the *¡Géntromancer!* exhibition enacts a politics of presence and visibility. For the residents of the Mission District and San Francisco at large, the story of Alex Nieto is tragic and a reminder of trauma the neighborhood suffered because of newcomer fears of Latinx locals and the policing of brown bodies. Nieto became a symbol in the fight for justice against police brutality and excessive force in a gentrifying neighborhood. As Manissa M. Maharawal noted, "His death is a reminder that the 'colonial' logic of gentrification is not merely rhetorical but often enacted with lethal force on the bodies of Mission residents,

destroying communities and homes through displacement, and ending life with police gunfire."[159] The spatial proximity between high-earning, mostly white, tech-workers and the longtime working-class residents of the Mission District highlights the social, cultural, and economic gap at play.[160] This incident also highlights the politics of a gentrifying space and how it is connected to the preservation of whiteness. Although Rojas never met Alex Nieto, a Mexican-American, he saw himself reflected in him. As a sense of solidarity as a Latinx male having lived and grown up in the Mission District, he saw many parallels. As Rojas states:

> So, my solidarity with Alex Nieto is not that he looks like me, but he could have been me. I could have easily been the young man minding my own business having a burrito in the Mission. I have been to Bernal Heights. I have worn a Niner's coat. I have done all the things that he's done, and so I feel that he could have been me. I think a lot of other young Latino, Latinx, and Latinas, also probably feel the same way that he's one of ours, but particularly as a young, cis-male Latino man I feel that Alex Nieto exactly fits my profile. That being the case, I felt it hit home in a very particular way. There is this feeling that he is one of ours from the Mission District, that is the case for me at least. It was mandatory for me to create a response. Visual art is the way that I can contribute. Art is what I do, and so art is the way that I responded to Alex Nieto's tragic and unnecessary death.[161]

This act of solidarity by painting Nieto in his exhibition, and later creating a public mural on 24th Street (fig. 4.8), demonstrates the profound politics of memory at play for Rojas by identifying with this young Latino male.

---

[159] Maharawal, Manissa M. "San Francisco's Tech-Led Gentrification: Public Space, Protest, and the Urban Commons" *City Unsilinced* Routledge, 2017, p. 39.
[160] Florian Opillard, "Resisting the Politics of Displacement in the San Francisco Bay Area: Anti-gentrification Activism in the Tech Boom 2.0,"
[161] Rojas, Josué. "*¡Géntromancer!* Battling Gentrification in San Francisco's Mission District: An Interview with Josué Rojas," p. 52.

Figure 4. 7. Rojas, Josué. *Alex Nieto*, 2018. Mural. Located on a parking lot on 24th St. and Capp St. Photograph by Mauricio E. Ramírez.

The story of Alex Nieto demonstrates one of the most violent acts of gentrification through racial profiling or mistaken identity. Several factors were at play the day of Nieto's tragic death. For one, the racial profiling of Alex Nieto's body –as he wore a red 49ers jacket, a black 49ers cap, and black trousers– may have caused the police and the two white men to believe he was affiliated with local gangs, as the local *Norteño* gangs wore red. Secondly, the man who called the police had only lived in San Francisco for one year, an insufficient amount of time to understand

the cultural diversity of the neighborhood in which he walked his dog. Yet, it was long enough to reaffirm police forces would protect his sense of privilege in a space where he perceived a threat.[162] This misfortune and the systemic external forces of gentrification, mistaken identity, and what Michael Harriot calls "white caller crime" were at play. Harriot argues white caller crime can be regarded as the "phenomenon of [W]hite people calling police on [B]lack people doing mundane things."[163] Although Nieto is not Black, his Latino brown body and the clothes he was wearing were "out of place" for a park frequented by white joggers and dog walkers. Nieto eating a burrito and a potentially irresponsible dog owner who decided to call the police to "remove" Nieto demonstrates how police and law enforcement are used as tools for gentrification. Tragedy struck when it all could have been avoided, yet the incident exposes deep systemic clashes that occur in gentrifying neighborhoods across the nation. Rojas intentionally preserves the historical memory of Nieto by painting him for the Mission District and for all to witness. Rojas believed it was essential to pay tribute to Nieto and his story within the gentrifying neighborhood after protests and activism emerged in response to the killing of Nieto.

[162] According to Rebecca Solnit, this man only lived in San Francisco for one year prior to the Nieto incident.
[163] See Michael Harriot, 'White Caller Crime': The Worst Wypipo Police Calls of All Time"

Figure 4. 8. Oree Originol, *Justice for Alex Nieto*, 2014. Digital print. Image courtesy of www.oreeoriginol.com.

Rojas' rendition of Nieto was inspired by the artist Oree Originol, who created several vectorized black and white portraits of victims who were racially profiled and killed by police for the *Justice for Our Lives* portrait series (fig. 4.9). In the center of the painting, Nieto's face in the portrait is divided into four quadrants represented by the red on the upper right side and a beige color on the lower left side. The quadrant invokes the Native American Medicine Wheel and the Four Directions. The Medicine Wheel, sometimes known as the Sacred Hoop, has been used by generations of various Native American tribes for health and healing. Various tribes interpret the meaning of the Medicine Wheel and Four Directions differently. The Four Directions

can represent, for example, stages of life, seasons of the year, aspects of life, elements of nature, animals, or ceremonial plants.[164] Often a distinctive color represents each direction, such red, black, yellow, and white. Rojas' depiction of the Medicine Wheel and the Four Directions is a symbolic reminder of Nieto's passing on Bernal Hill, whose summit offers a view of the city of San Francisco. Yearly on March 21st there is a ceremony commemoration on Bernal Hill, where the community pays their respects to the Four Directions.

Conclusion

The visual enunciation created by these three 1.5 and second-generation U.S. Central American artists demonstrates how the historical memory of growing up in San Francisco's Mission District can be captured via two art exhibitions. The Juan R. Fuentes Gallery and Acción Latina's history proves to be a fitting location to display U.S. Central American art given their connection with Central American causes dating back to its inception as a newspaper. Aleman, Cañas, and Rojas represent a generation that did not experience the Central American civil wars; however, their historical memory includes a neighborhood evolving due to gentrification and displacement due to the tech industry. To truly represent the U.S. Central American Visual Art of San Francisco, the utterance of visual art forged by new generations proves U.S. Latinx art is both fluid and nuanced. The visual narratives of U.S. Central Americans continue to be constructed.

---

[164] Mancall, Peter C. "Medicine Wheel." *Encyclopedia of Native American History.* Infobase Learning, 2011, pp. 473–74.

Previous chapters in the dissertation address how U.S. Central American artists display solidarity with the Central American civil wars in the Mission District during the 1980s and 1990s. In this chapter I consider how the offspring of the first generation of Central Americans fleeing the civil wars, reimagine, document, and explore issues of gentrification and displacement experienced amongst the Latinx community of the Mission District.

Epilogue: U.S. Central American Visual Art During an Era of Displacement in San Francisco

One of the key contributions this dissertation makes to the field of Latinx studies is recovering the activism and production of U.S. Central American visual art of San Francisco's Mission District. U.S. Central American visual art is often overlooked in the academic literature; first, because U.S. Central American studies is a new and growing field, and second, Latinx visual art has long been disregarded as part of U.S. art history. As an interdisciplinary project, this dissertation has explored issues of transnational solidarity, art activism, and the significance of solidarity murals and how they function in the public space. This project has expanded U.S. Central American visual art and its essential contributions to Latinx studies through visual analysis, oral histories, and archival research.

Artists cannot be overlooked for their critical contributions to the transnational solidarity movement against U.S. intervention in Central America when writing about U.S. Central American visual art and murals of San Francisco. The nationwide 1984 Artists Call became a catalyst for Ray Patlán and Patricia Rodríguez to spearhead the first mural environment in Balmy Alley. The PLACA murals protested U.S. intervention in Central America and marked a vital facet of U.S. Central American mural history of San Francisco. These twenty-six murals by thirty-six Latinx, Chicanx, and White artists were the first collective public display against U.S. imperialism. This display of international solidarity played a fundamental role in the sustained creation of murals in Balmy Alley. Murals in Balmy Alley continue to

maintain a Central American visual presence as several depict Central American culture in the present day. PLACA was also the inspiration for national projects such as the 1985 *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues* Park in New York City. Artists and community residents reclaimed the park by painting a dozen murals.

My analysis of four PLACA murals serves as but a starting point. There is much room left for a more comprehensive and profound analysis. As I embarked on PLACA mural research in 2010, most studies mentioned the project's roots, but few analyzed individual murals in depth. Notably, Guisela Latorre's 2008 *Walls of Empowerment* discussed Alicia's *Te Oímos Guatemala/ We Hear you Guatemala* mural in depth.[165] Five years later, Carla Wojczuck and Julian Rowand filmed *These Walls Speak,* a documentary that provide a rich setting to understand PLACA's entirety. As time progressed, scholars, such as Cary Cordova, Holy Barnet-Sanchez, and Tim Drescher emphasized more understanding of the significance of PLACA murals in San Francisco through more recent publications.

In this dissertation, I have expanded on that scholarship and available knowledge by giving an insight into how individual Chicanx artists (Juana Alicia, Malaquías Montoya, and Juan Fuentes) created a fantastic body of work that demonstrated transnational solidarity with Central American liberation efforts from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, an era when solidarity movements were vibrant in San Francisco. In line with Chicanx movements, their art criticized U.S. imperialism

[165] Latorre, Guisela. *Walls of Empowerment: Chicana/o Indigenist Murals of California.* University of Texas Press, 2008.

in Central America. Their activism and artworks display scenes, symbols, and messages that relate to the Central American diaspora. Moreover, Montoya and Fuentes created several posters for Central American causes, often working pro-bono. These posters show a profound and nuanced understanding of Central American civil wars. Similarly, Alicia shows her solidarity by creating murals that speak to Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador's civil wars.

I have also shed light on U.S. Central American visual art of San Francisco by focusing on artists of Central American origin who have not been written about in academic literature. Using oral histories as my primary method, I uncovered the stories of several U.S. Central American artists. In particular, the in-depth stories of Herbert Sigüenza and Isaías Mata, both of whom were active artists in San Francisco in the 1980s, provide a rich history of early Central American art practitioners in that city. These two artists demonstrate how vital organizations in the Mission District produced and embraced murals. Mata's journey from El Salvador to San Francisco proves how practical transnational solidarity could be; an organized campaign led from San Francisco allowed Amnesty International to release him from jail in El Salvador. Mata could have become one of the many disappeared Salvadorans during the civil war. Yet through transnational solidarity he obtained a visa to live in the United States and San Francisco's Mission District became his home until he returned to El Salvador in 1994. Father Jack Isaacs became fundamental in providing Mata, a visual artist living in exile, the opportunity to paint *500 Years of Resistance/ 500 Años*

de Resistencia on Saint Peters Church. The mural still stands today and was repainted by Mata in 2013; it remains a testament to his legacy in Mission District murals.

I have demonstrated how Sigüenza, a native San Franciscan with an international upbringing between the United States and El Salvador, understood and sympathized with the liberation efforts of working-class revolutionaries, even though he was born in the United States. His attention to the Salvadoran civil war was evident in the two murals he added to the Mission District. His first, the 1982 untitled mural painted on Galería de La Raza, although short-lived, proved to be one of the first murals to depict scenes of the Salvadoran civil war in San Francisco. His second mural, *Después del Triunfo / After the Triumph,* is also an essential contribution as the first mural in Balmy Alley by an artist of Central American origin.

Furthermore, I have explored how younger generations of artists also complicate U.S. Central American subjectivities as natives of a rapidly gentrifying Mission District. The artwork of Jasmin Cañas and Natalie Aleman allows us to rethink the importance of architectural landmarks that have become part of the Latinx imaginary of the Mission District. The built environment of the Mission district and its long history of Victorian homes built before the 1906 earthquake demarks an architectural history which artists appropriated as visual signifiers of the Mission district to remember the Mission District as a barrio, as it was before the dotcom boom of the 2000s and subsequent gentrification. In the same vein, Josué Rojas' work straddles the line of art activism by demonstrating solidarity with Alex Nieto, a young Mexican American man who was seen as a threat to gentrifiers and became a victim

of police brutality. Rojas' paintings critique the ongoing gentrification felt throughout San Francisco but particularly in the Mission District. His work questions the future of the Mission barrio, where multimillion dollar homes, apartments, and condos are being built to cater to tech workers who earn disproportionately more than the working class. The disparity between the working and affluent classes in San Francisco is stark in the 21st century.

But why is a history of U.S. Central American visual art relevant and needed at the current moment? Longtime Mission District residents have had to endure a sustained wave of gentrification, brewing since the 2000s but now dramatically and physically felt in the present day. What is more, we are in a moment when Central Americans are too often villainized and labeled criminals by politicians, the U.S. government, and the media, and Central American refugees are told they are unwelcome in the United States and deported.[166] The stories of cultural producers and visual artist depict past histories as a recovery project; they also help revitalize the vilification of Central Americans, thereby humanizing Central Americans.

By rethinking past moments when art activists created transnational solidarity with Central America, these same solidarity models can be helpful in examining them now. Art historian Erina Duganne noted the effective collaborative Central American solidarity art practices of the 1980s by stating, "given the polarizing climate of

---

[166] Threats to Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Salvadorans, Nicaraguans, and Hondurans have been ongoing, particularly during Donald Trump's presidency (2017-2021). Violent responses to the Central American migrant caravans traveling to the U.S.-Mexico border continue from 2017 to the present date.

today's political landscape, in which Central Americans are demonized as dangerous criminals, placed on expedited removal, and children removed from their families, this kind of collaboratively produced transnational and contingent model of solidarity is needed more than ever."[167]

This dissertation has offered a glimpse into the history of U.S. Central American art of the Mission District of San Francisco that developed in response to Central American migration to the United States and I have shown that U.S. Central American art is indeed part of U.S. American history. More importantly my contribution has an important impact on U.S. Central American scholarship, making the histories of artists, murals, and artworks known. In these pages we can understand how murals, posters, and fine art provide a material bridge between Central American histories and the U.S. public spaces/galleries that become the sites for modern politics. This dissertation explores "U.S. Central American art" of San Francisco, used here not as a fixed category, but as a term that calls attention to the broad contours of this lesser-known field within the art of the United States. By examining these enunciations by artists of different backgrounds we can begin to construct a U.S. Central American art history of San Francisco and the United States. Whether or not the Mission District will continue to physically serve as an important site for U.S. Central American murals and artists remains to be seen in this era of displacement. However, the impact of the Mission barrio lives on through the artists, murals, and

[167] Duganne, Erina. "In Defense of Solidarity." *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture,* vol. 2, no. 2, 2020, pp. 99–103.

artworks that once enriched the neighborhood. For the artists, activists, and Central Americans who created artwork in the Mission barrio, in the words of Cary Cordova, "they learned a social politics that will not be undone, no matter where they live."[168]

[168] Cordova, Cary. *The Heart of the Mission: Latino Art and Politics in San Francisco,* p. 245.

Bibliography

Alicia, Juana. "Visual Solidarity with Central America: An Interview with Maestra Muralista Juana Alicia." Interview by Mauricio E. Ramírez. *Chiricú Journal: Latina/o Literatures, Arts, and Cultures*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2019, pp. 115–27.

Anderson, Thomas P. *Matanza: El Salvador's Communist Revolt of 1932*. University of Nebraska Press, 1971.

Arturo Arias. "Central American- Americans: Invisibility, Power and Representation in the US Latino World." *Latino Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, pp. 168–87, doi:10.1057/palgrave.lst.8600007.

Baker-Cristales, Beth. "El Hermano Lejano: The Transnational Space of Salvadoran Migration to the United States." 1999. University of New Mexico (Albuquerque), PhD dissertation.

Baker-Cristales, Beth. *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California: Redefining El Hermano Lejano*. University Press of Florida, 2004.

Barnet-Sánchez, Holly and Tim Drescher. "Taking Chicanoa and Solidarity Murals Seriously." *Rewrting the Chicano Movement: New Histories of Mexican American Activism in the Civil Rights Era*, edited by Mario T. García and Ellen McCkraken, University of Arizona Press, 2021.

Bergman, Miranda. Interview. Conducted by Mauricio E. Ramírez. 16 November 2020.

Borvice, Al, et al. "Linda Lucero Collection on La Raza Silkscreen Center / La Raza Graphics.*" Califronia Ethnic Multicultural Archives,* UC Santa Barbara. https://www.library.ucsb.edu/special-collections/cema/lucero

Broyles-González, Yolanda. *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement.* University of Texas Press, 1994.

Camarillo, Albert. *Chicanos in a Changing Society: from Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848-1930*. Harvard University Press, 1979.

Campos, David. "Why is the Mission Burning," *San Francisco Examiner*, June 28th, 2016.

Cañas, Jasmin and Natalie Aleman. *Ode to Our Barrio: A Tribute to The Mission by Dos Centroamericanas*. Artist Statement, https://Acciónlatina.org/en/ode-to-our-barrio/

Cañas, Jasmin. Interview. Conducted by Mauricio E. Ramírez, 16 September 2020.

Cardenal, Ernesto. *Las Ínsulas Extrañas Memorias II*. Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2003.

Cárdenas, Maritza. *Constituting Central American–Americans: Transnational Identities and the Politics of Dislocation.* Rutgers University Press, 2018.

Cervantes, Susan. Interview. Conducted by Mauricio E. Ramírez. 17 March 2011.

Chavez, Lola M. "Mission Cultural Center mural gets a makeover." *Mission Local.* April 17, 2017.

Chinchilla, Maya. "Central American–American." *The Cha Cha Files: A Chapina Poética: Poems by Maya Chinchilla*. Kórima Press, 2014, pp. 21–22.

Clarke, Kevin. *Óscar Romero: Love Must Win Out*. Liturgical Press, 2014.

Cockcroft, Eva Sperling., et al. *Toward a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement.* University of New Mexico Press, 1998.

Contreras, Eduardo A. *Latinos, and the Liberal City: Politics and Protest in San Francisco*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019.

Contreras, Sheila Marie. *Blood Lines: Myth, Indigenism, and Chicana/o Literature*. First edition., University of Texas Press, 2008.

Cook, Chris. *Dictionary of Historical Terms.* Second Edition. Gramercy, 1998.

Cordova, Carlos B. Interview. Conducted by Mauricio E. Ramírez, 8 May 2019.

Cordova, Carlos B. *The Salvadoran Americans*. Greenwood Press, 2005.

Cordova, Cary. "La Raza Unida: Pan-Latino Art and Culture in 1960's San Francisco" in *The Heart of the Mission: Latino Art and Politics in San Francisco,* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017, pp. 62-91.

Cordova, Cary. *The Heart of the Mission Latino Art and Identity in San Francisco*. 2005. University of Texas, PhD Dissertation.

Cordova, Cary. *The Heart of the Mission: Latino Art and Politics in San Francisco.* University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.

Cornejo, Kency. "US Central Americans in Art and Visual Culture." Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature. February 25, 2019. Oxford University Press.

Cornejo, Kency. "'Does That Come with a Hyphen? A Space?': The Question of Central American-Americans in Latino Art and Pedagogy." *Aztlan - A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 40, no. 1, Chicano Studies Research Studies Center Publications, 2015, pp. 189–210.

Cornejo, Kency. "US Central Americans in Art and Visual Culture," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*. Oxford University Press, February, 2019.

Cornejo, Kency. *Visual Disobedience: The Geopolitics of Experimental Art in Central America, 1990-Present*. Duke University, Dissertation, 2014.

Cruz, Juan and G. Roginsky, "Mission Fires: Urban Renewal Made Simple?" *El Tecolote*, April 1977.

Daniel, Leon. "Cleaning up mean streets for Olympics," *UPI National*, July 23, 1984.

Davalos, Karen Mary. "The Print Culture of Yolanda M. López." *West of Center: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965–1977*, University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

Dávila, Arlene. *Latinx Art - Artists, Markets, and Politics*. Duke University Press, 2020.

De La Torre, Sergio. "San Francisco Is Turning Gray — One House At A Time." KALW. September 10, 2019. https://www.kalw.org/show/crosscurrents/2019-09-10/san-francisco-is-turning-gray-one-house-at-a-time

Dicum, Gregory. "Hipster Hunting Ground," *New York Times.* July 13, 2008.

Drescher, Timothy. "Street Subversion: The Political Geography of Graffiti and Murals." *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture*, edited by James Brook, Chris Carlsson, and Nancy J. Peters, City Lights Books, 1998, pp. 231-246.

Duganne, Erina. "In Defense of Solidarity." *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture,* vol. 2, no. 2, 2020, pp. 99–103.

Fuentes, Juan R. Interview. Conducted by Mauricio E. Ramírez, 7 May 2015.

Godfrey, B. J. *Neighborhoods in transition: The making of San Francisco's ethnic and nonconformist communities.* University of California Press, 1998.

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

González, Antonio. "Chicano Politics and U.S. Policy in Central America, 1979–1990." In *Chicano Politics and Society in the Late Twentieth Century*, ed. David Montejano. Austin: University of Texas Press. 1999. 154-172.

González, Carlos. Interview. Conducted by Mauricio E. Ramírez. 14 March 2011.

González, Jennifer A., et al. *Chicano and Chicana Art: A Critical Anthology*. Duke University Press, 2019.

Gonzalez, Juan Carlos, and Edwardo L. Portillo. "Undereducation and Overcriminalization of U.S. Latinas/os" *Educational Studies* vol. 42, no. 3, 2007, pp. 247-66.

Griswold del Castillo, Richard., et al. *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985.* Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles, 1991.

Hall, Stuart. "Old and New Ethnicities," unedited transcript for the second of two lectures delivered in conjunction with the Third Annual Symposium on current Debates in Art History, *Culture, Globalization, and the World System: Contemporary Conditions for Representation of Identity*, organized by Anthony Kink, Departments of Art and Art History, Statue University of New York at Binghamton, March 14, 1989, 28.

Hall, Stuart. "The Work of Representation." In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices,* edited by Stuart Hall, 1-14. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2013.

Harford Vargas, Jennifer. *Forms of Dictatorship: Narrative, and Authoritarianism in the Latina/o Novel.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Harriot, Michael. "'White Caller Crime': The Worst Wypipo Police Calls of All Time," *ROOT*, May 15, 2018. https://www.theroot.com/white-caller-crime-the-worst-wypipo-police-calls-of-1826023382

Herrera, Juan Felipe. "Riffs on Mission District Raza Writers." In *Reclaiming San Francisco: History Politics and Culture,* edited by James Brooks, Chris Carlsson, Nancy J. Peters, 217-230. San Francisco: City Lights Books Press, 1998.

Hite, Katherine. "Historical Memory" In *International Encyclopedia of Political Science*, edited by Bertrand Badie, Dirk Berg-Schlosser, and Leonard Morolino. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage 2011, pp. 1078–82.

Jackson, Carlos F. "Serigrafía. Constructing the Chicana/o Imaginary." *Boom: A Journal of California*, vol. 4, no. 1, University of California Press, 2014, pp. 78–85.

Jackson, Carlos F. *Chicana and Chicano Art: ProtestArte.* University of Arizona Press, 2009.

Kampwirth, Karen. *Women & Guerrilla Movements: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas, Cuba*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002.

Latorre, Guisela. "The art of disruption Chicana/o art's politicized strategies for aesthetic innovation" *Routledge Handbook of Chicana/o Studies*. Routledge International Handbooks, pp. 359-72.

Latorre, Guisela. *Walls of Empowerment: Chicana/o Indigenist Murals of California.* University of Texas Press, 2008.

Lindsey, Robert. "A Flood of Refugees from Salvador Tries to get Legal Status" *New York Times.* https://www.nytimes.com/1983/07/04/us/a-flood-of-refugees-from-salvador-tries-to-get-legal-status.html

Lippard, Lucy. "ARTISTS CALL - Against U.S. Intervention." *NACLA Report on the Americas* vol. 18, no. 3, 1984, pp. 15-16.

Loken, Meredith. "'Both Needed and Threatened': Armed Mothers in Militant Visuals." *Security Dialogue*, vol. 52, no. 1, SAGE Publications, 2021, pp. 21–44, doi:10.1177/0967010620903237.

Londoño, Johana. *Abstract Barrios: The Crises of Latinx Visibility in Cities*. Duke University Press, 2020.

Loucky, James and Marilyn M. Moors. *The Maya Diaspora*. Temple University Press, 2000.

Maharawal, Manissa M. “San Francisco’s Tech-Led Gentrification: Public Space, Protest, and the Urban Commons” *City Unsilinced,* Routledge, 2017.

Mata, Isaías. Interview. Conducted by Mauricio E. Ramírez, 10 December 2020.

Mazurana, Dyan E. “Juana Alicia’s Las Lechugueras/The Women Lettuce Workers.” *Meridians (Middletown, Conn.)*, vol. 3, no. 1, Duke University Press, 2002, pp. 54–81, doi:10.1215/15366936-3.1.54.

McCaughan, Edward J. “‘We Didn't Cross the Border, the Border Crossed Us’: Artists' Images of the US-Mexico Border and Immigration.” *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2020, pp. 6–31.

Meiselas, Susan. "Story of an Image: Susan Meiselas on Mano Blanca." *YouTube,* uploaded by Hasselblad Foundation, 30 October 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XazC5J1IDiI

Menjívar, Cecilia. *Fragmented Ties: Salvadoran Immigrant Networks in America.* University of California Press, 2000.

Miner, Dylan A. T. *Creating Aztlán - Chicano Art, Indigenous Sovereignty, and Lowriding Across Turtle Island*. University of Arizona Press, 2014.

Mirabal, Nancy Raquel. “Geographies of Displacement: Latina/os, Oral History, and The Politics of Gentrification in San Francisco’s Mission District.” The Public Historian, vol. 31, no. 2, University of California Press, 2009, pp. 7–31, doi:10.1525/tph.2009.31.2.7.

Mitchell, Katharyne. “Monuments, Memorials, and the Politics of Memory.” *Urban Geography*, vol. 24, no. 5, Taylor & Francis Group, 2003, pp. 442–59.

Montoya, Malaquías. Interview. Conducted by Mauricio E. Ramírez, 20 Sep 2017.

Mouffe, Chantal. “Artistic Strategies in Politics and Political Strategies in Art.” *Truth is Concrete: A Handbook for Artistic Strategies in Real Politics* by Florian Malzacher. Sternberg Press, 2014, pp. 69-70.

Mraz, John. *Historiar Fotografías* (Oaxaca, Mexico: Instituto de Investigaciones en Humanidades, Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca, 2018), pp. 17-18.

Opillard, Florian. “Resisting the Politics of Displacement in the San Francisco Bay Area: Anti-Gentrification Activism in the Tech Boom 2.0.” *European Journal*

of American Studies, vol. 10, no. 3, European Association for American Studies, 2016, doi:10.4000/ejas.11322.

Orriss, Grace. "Bay Area muralist Juana Alicia Araiza discusses her work, social justice and accessibility." *Daily Cal*. April 11, 2019. https://www.dailycal.org/2019/04/11/bay-area-muralist-juana-alicia-araiza-discusses-her-work-social-justice-and-accessibility/

Patlán, Ray. Interview. Conducted by Carla Wojczuk and Julian Rowan, *These Walls Speak*, 2015.

Patlán, Ray. Interview. Conducted by Mauricio E. Ramírez, 1 March 2011.

Pinderhughes, Raquel, Carlos Cordova, and Jorge del Pinal. 1999. Central and South Americans. Our Multicultural Heritage: A Guide to America's Principal Ethic Groups. http://bss.sfsu.edu/raquelrp/pub/heritage_pub.html

Pomada, Elizabeth., and Michael Larsen. *The Painted Ladies Revisited: San Francisco's Resplendent Victorians Inside and Out.* Dutton, 1989.

Ramon Favela. *Malaquías Montoya: Postermaker to el Pueblo Chicano*, exhibition brochure, La Raza Graphics Center, San Francisco, 1989.

Rivera, Jana. "The Arts: Chicano Art; The Power and the Polemic Coming of Age or Selling Out?" *The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education*, vol. 7, no. 9, 1996.

Rodríguez, Ana Patricia. "'Departamento 15': Cultural Narratives of Salvadoran Transnational Migration," Latino Studies vol. 3, no. 1, 2005, pp. 19–41.

Rodríguez, Ana Patricia. "Salvadoran Immigrant Acts and Migration To San Francisco (Circa 1960s and '70s)" in *U.S. Central Americans: Reconstructing Memories, Struggles, and Communities of Resistance.* University of Arizona Press.

Rodríguez, Ana Patricia. *Dividing the Isthmus: Central American Transnational Histories, Literatures, and Cultures.* University of Texas Press, 2009.

Rojas, Josué. "*¡Géntromancer!* Battling Gentrification in San Francisco's Mission District: An Interview with Josué Rojas." By Mauricio E. Ramírez. Special Issue: U.S. Latinx Art, Then, Now, and Tomorrow. *Hemisphere: Visual Cultures of the Americas*, Fall 2019 (Vol. 12), pp. 42-53.

Romo, Terezita. *Malaquias Montoya*. UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2011.

Sale, Kirkpatrick. *SDS.* Random House, 1973.

Scheper-Hughes, N., & Lock, M. M. "The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology" *Medical Anthropology Quarterly (New Series)*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1987.

Schulze-Oechtering, Michael. *Blurring the Boundaries of Struggle: The United Construction Workers Association (UCWA) and Relational Resistance in Seattle's Third World Left*, University of California, Berkeley, 2016. *ProQuest*, https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/blurring-boundaries-struggle-united-construction/docview/2108971116/se-2?accountid=14523.

Sigüenza, Herbert. Interview. Conducted by Mauricio E. Ramírez, 10 February 2020.

Solnit, Rebecca. "The Killing That Shamed San Francisco" *The Guardian*, March 21, 2016.

Stites Mor, Jessica, and Maria del Carmen Suescun Pozas. *The Art of Solidarity: Visual and Performative Politics in Cold War Latin America.* University of Texas Press, 2018.

Torres, Andrés. *Latinos in New England*. Temple University Press, 2006.

Vainshtein, Annie. "How San Francisco Lost Its Color" *San Francisco Chronicle*. October 11, 2019.

Walker, Richard A. *Pictures of a Gone City: Tech and the Dark Side of Prosperity in the San Francisco Bay Area,* Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2018.

Watkins, Eli and Abby, Phillip. "Trump Decries Immigrants From 'Shithole Countries' Coming to US" *CNN*, January 18, 2018.

Wilkson, Tracy. "Officials, Death Squads Get Most Salvador Blame," *Los Angeles Times*, March 16, 1993.

Ybarra-Frausto, Tomas. "Recuerdo, Descubrimiento, Voluntad."

Zavala, Adriana. "Latin@ Art at the intersection." *Aztlan - A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 40, no. 1, Chicano Studies Research Studies Center Publications, 2015, pp. 125–40.