The Power of Public Art:
The Political Significance of Murals in New York City

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Abstract

From East Harlem in New York City to the Mission District in San Francisco to Pilsen in Chicago, public mural have changed the character of hundreds of American cities. Beginning with the social activism in the 1960s and 1970s, African American and Chicano/a grassroots organizers used mural paintings to challenge the social, cultural and political establishments in their local neighborhoods. Today the contemporary mural movement in the United States continues to inspire communities to articulate strategies of change outside of traditional institutions. While previous research concerning the influence of murals has focused on self expression and empowerment of ethnic identities, few studies extend their analyses to the political significance of public art in the context of urban space and culture. How does public art and politics interact for artists and local residents? How does the mural process shape civic participation for ordinary citizens? From an interdisciplinary lens, I draw from the qualitative methods of observation, personal interviews, and secondary sources to explore the ways in which public murals can operate as sites of insurgent politics in New York City.

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I. Introduction

> "No one asked for the Wall of Respect. It just had to be painted.
> It made a direct statement to the Black community and the
> statement came directly out of the community through its artists."
>
> -Harold Haydon, *Chicago Sun-Times*
> December 13, 1970

From East Harlem in New York City, to the Mission District in San Francisco, to Pilsen in Chicago, public murals have changed the character of hundreds of neighborhoods in America. Beginning with the social activism in the 1960s and 1970s, African American and Chicano/a grassroots organizers used outdoor mural paintings to challenge and to celebrate the social, cultural, and political establishments within their own neighborhoods. It was during this time period in which the mural paintings that emerged from isolated efforts of individual artists transitioned to become a national movement of community organization. The mural movement in the United States continues to inspire marginal voices to articulate their experiences, express concerns and consider strategies of change outside of traditional institutions. In recognizing the different ways in which public murals can shape social consciousness and civic participation in communities of color, my paper will explore how community-based murals can mobilize residents and facilitate positive social change within two neighborhoods in New York City.

This paper will be divided into three main sections. The first section will provide a historical overview of the mural movement in the United States – beginning with the 1930s Works Progress Administration until present day. The second section will provide a critical assessment of the existing literature as well as highlight several examples of scholars across disciplines who have considered the significance of murals in social and political life. Building from these previous studies, I will propose a theoretical framework that enables us to consider forms of everyday politics that are crucial for our democratic society in the twenty-first century. This paper is motivated by two key research questions:

(1) How does public art and politics interact for participating muralists and community members? (2) How does the mural process shape civic participation for ordinary citizens? The third section of this paper will present two case studies of murals in New York City: Flushing in Queens and Southside Williamsburg in Brooklyn. I draw from the qualitative methods of observation, personal interviews, and secondary sources to explore the ways in which public murals can influence politics in communities of color. I will also consider the broader theoretical and empirical implications of this type of research on the future of democratic participation in American politics.

II. Trajectories of Transformation: The Contemporary Mural Movement

Mexican Muralism and the 1930s Works Progress Administration
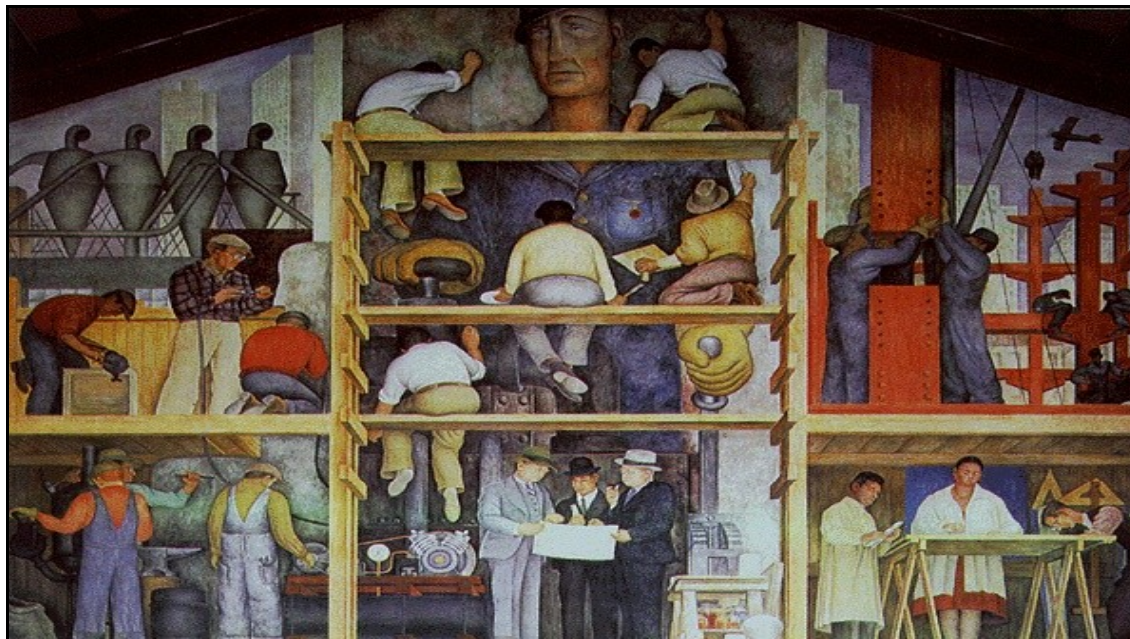
Diego Rivera, *Works Progress Administration Mural,* San Francisco Art Institute (1930).

The contemporary mural movement in the United States has been heavily influenced by Mexican Muralism and revolutionary-era painters like José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaros Siquieros, collectively known as *los tres grandes*. Beginning in the 1920s, the post Mexican Revolution government upheld a universalist philosophy to create public art that had social and ideological messages (Anreus, Greeley and Folgarait 2012). As part of a widespread effort to reunify

the country after ten years of revolution, the government under President Alvaro Obregon commissioned los tres grandes to lead mural projects with nationalistic sentiments on public buildings, former churches, and local schools (Anreus, Greeley and Folgarait 2012). Through the use of a broad range of visual and landscape imagery, President Alvaro Obregon's goal for the public murals was to communicate with a broad and largely illiterate peasant population in Mexico.

Shortly thereafter in the 1930s, the Works Progress Administration was created by President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in order to provide economic relief to citizens and artists who were struggling to find employment during the Great Depression. The Works Progress Administration built schools, provided shelter, and enriched the lives of working class families through literacy, health, and adult education programs (Clemens 2008). Influenced by Mexican Muralism in the 1920s, the government funded the Federal Art Project as part of the Works Progress Administration to hire thousands of artists to collectively create more than 100,000 paintings and murals and over 18,000 sculptures across the country (Taylor 2008). As part of the federal project, famous Mexican muralists including José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueriros were invited to create large-scale murals with socially conscious narratives of work, labor, and history in America which served to empower working class communities (Wagner 2009). Although the Works Progress Administration Program was dissolved in 1943, its creative initiative lasted for several years between 1935 to 1943 and enabled African American, Native American and Latino/a artists to paint in public spaces across the country (O' Connor 1975). The Federal Art Project under the administration led to the creation of the National Foundation for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities which continues to fund mural projects and opportunities for artists of color.

Although the Federal Art Project was influenced by Mexican Muralism, the works of individual artists were seldom in conversation with a larger community movement in the United States (Cockcroft, Weber and Keppel 1977). The artists who were hired by the administration were

commissioned to paint on post offices, hospitals, libraries, public schools, and then expected to leave

the neighborhood once the mural was completed. Given that the murals were usually completed within

several weeks of commission, the Federal Art Project artists were unable to build long lasting

relationships or to nurture a more dynamic understanding of neighborhood concerns. The shift from

individual efforts of artists to a larger political movement occurred several decades later in the 1960s

and 1970s during the Black Arts and Chicano/a Civil Rights Movements in the United States.

1960s and 1970s: The Black Power and Arts Movements

OBAC Artists, *The Wall of Respect*, Chicago (1967).

In early spring of 1967, a group of visual artists from the Organization of Black American

Culture (OBAC) began to paint on a semi-abandoned building on the southeast corner of 43rd and

Langley streets. It was in the center of Chicago's old "black belt" on the Southside, a neighborhood

scheduled for demolition to make way for urban renewal programs (Cockcroft, Weber and Keppel

1977). The idea for the Wall of Respect originated with Bill Walker but the project itself was the result

of a self-determined effort of community conscious college graduates, art students, and teachers who

wanted to involve their artwork to address the neighborhood's impoverished condition (Donaldson 1998). Jeff Donaldson, Wadsworth Jarrell, Barbara Jones-Hogu, Carolyn Lawrence, Norman Parish, Sylvia Abernathy, Elliot Hunter, and William Walker were among the original group of OBAC artists who worked on The Wall of Respect.

During the height of the Black Power Movement in the United States, the Wall of Respect galvanized the Southside neighborhood and sparked a People's Art Movement which spread to other cities across the country (Cockcroft, Weber and Keppel 1977). The Wall of Respect immediately became a symbol for Black artists in Chicago and it attracted community activities from regular poetry readings to controversial political rallies, including one held by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the 43rd Street Community Organization (Huebner 1997). The process of designing and painting the Wall of Respect necessitated collaboration from the local community as well as from small business owners, religious leaders, and street gang members. Often recognized as the first community mural in the United States, the Wall of Respect allowed black artists in different media to collaborate with residents, rival street gangs, and community leaders to create art for the people's sake (Cockcroft, Weber and Keppel 1977). With community approval, the mural included portraits of Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, Malcolm X, Adam Clayton Powell, Paul Robeson, and Marcus Garvey. In commemorating Black heroes, the mural sent a powerful social, ideological, and political message about Black issues and race relations in 1960s America. According to Alan W. Barnett, "The Wall of Respect became a focus of the Southside community, with a number of those pictured on it coming to speak at the site about the urgent problems of Black people" (Barnett 1984).

While the project began without much recognition outside of Chicago, the wall quickly began to receive national exposure, drawing musicians, poets, writers, photographers, and printmakers from across the country to visit the work-in-progress (Huebner 1997). According to Jeff R. Donaldson, a founding member of OBAC, an estimated 25 to 100 people would drive by the mural while arts worked

on it during a weekday and 200 to 300 people would visit the site on weekends (Donaldson 1998). On August 27, 1967, a public rally was held to celebrate the completion of the mural. Shortly after a section of the wall was whitewashed by William Walker, Myrna Weaver, and several other artists not in the original group, the OBAC visual art workshop split into two fractions: those who left the neighborhood when the mural was completed and those who remained in the community to help out with local conditions (Huebner 1997). Those who stayed include William Walker who co-founded the Chicago Mural Group (also known as Chicago Public Art Group) with John Pitman Weber in 1970 and continued to paint in the city until his final mural in 1988. While the Wall of Respect was destroyed by a suspicious fire in 1971, its creation led to similar community murals and waves of activism in Detroit, St. Louis, Philadelphia, Boston and other cities across America (Cockcroft, Weber and Keppel 1977). The Wall of Respect attracted the attention of Chicano/a and Asian American artists who used it as a model to create similar murals in their own neighborhoods.

El Movimiento: The Chicano/a Civil Rights Movement

The 1960s was a turbulent decade in American history, as the Vietnam War and Civil Rights Movement led to protests, marches, and demonstrations across the country. It was during this time that the Mexican American Movement (also known as the Chicano/a Movement) emerged as part of the national struggle for civil rights. The Chicano/a Movement encompassed a broad cross section of issues – from restoration of land grants, to farm workers rights, to educational reforms, to voting and political rights (Muñoz 1989). Inspired by the post-Mexican Revolution muralists, Chicano/a artists used wall paintings to bring attention to their struggles for equality, social mobility, and improved working conditions in the United States (Cockcroft and Barnet-Sanchez 1993). In the West and Southwest, Chicano/a artists were working on murals in their own neighborhoods to challenge social institutions and negative stereotypes of Mexican Americans. The Rebel Chicano Art Front, which was formed by Jose Montoya, Esteban Villa, Ricardo Fauela, and Juanishi Orosco, painted collaborative murals in

California from 1968 to 1979 (Greaney 2002). As part of a more broadly rooted community effort, Chicano/a murals spread across the nation to support local legal struggles, direct-action movements, and self-defense efforts of Mexican American youth (Cockcroft and Barnet-Sanchez 1993).

As part of the Chicano Movement, Chicano/a artists used symbolic language articulated by the United Farm Workers Union and the Mexican American Youth Organization to affirm cultural identity and to combat discrimination against Mexican Americans (Cockcroft and Barnet-Sanchez 1993). Many of the artists adopted the concept of *Chicanismo*, which represented a new political consciousness of the group through the creation of visual art, music, literature, dance and other forms of performance that validated Mexican American heritage and cultural pride (Burciaga 1992). Muralists worked with community members and used the walls of city buildings, housing projects, union halls, public schools, and churches to illustrate counter-narratives of ethnic history in the United States. The Chicano murals in California during the 1960s and 1970s became powerful sites of marches and protests, which paralleled what was going on in the streets of Chicago around the same time.

To narrate the struggle of poor farm laborers and industrial workers in the United States, many of the early Chicano murals included historical figures such as La Adelita and heroes of the Mexican Revolution such as Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa (Cockcroft and Barnet-Sanchez 1993). In addition to depicting historic national figures, numerous Chicano muralists worked with neighborhood leaders, gang members, and churches to document local narratives and community heroes. In collaboration with the neighborhood, wall paintings of the *barrio* were used as survival strategies to tackle issues of police brutality, border crossings, drug addiction, intra-community violence, and poverty (Cockcroft and Barnet-Sanchez 1993). For example, in East Los Angeles, Latina muralist Judith Baca worked with a group of twenty youth from four rival gangs under the name Las Vistas Nuevas ("The New View"). The first mural created by Las Vistas Nuevas entitled Mi Abuelita was painted in Hollenback Park in 1969 to recognize the important role of women in Mexican families.

According to Judith Baca, Mi Abuelita also represented an attempt to mediate gang rivalries and competition for public space in East Los Angeles (Baca 2008). Individual artists like Judith Baca who paint with rival gangs and at-risk youth have been highly influential in the development of community murals in Los Angeles and the success of city-sponsored organizations such as Citywide Mural Project.

Las Vistas Nuevas, *Mi Abuelita*, Hollenback Park (1969).

As compared to the Works Progress Administration era, the wall paintings of the 1960s emerged in mostly neglected and racially segregated urban neighborhoods (Cockcroft, Weber and Keppel 1977). It was during this time period in which the wall paintings that emerged from isolated efforts transitioned to become a movement of muralists and grassroots organizers across the country. Rather than being funded by politicians or professional commissions as in the 1930s, individual artists, local residents, and neighborhood organizations sponsored most of the community murals in the 1960s. There has been tremendous growth in community support and involvement in mural production over time, leading to informal networks of mural organizations, practicing muralists, and older generation muralists from the neighborhoods (Cockcroft, Weber and Keppel 1977). Beginning in the 1980s, there

was pressure to institutionalize mural productions into larger social organizations that could provide both administrative and material support. While some murals productions have moved away from its grassroots origins and shifted toward corporate expression, a significant proportion of murals have retained community involvement as an important component of the process. Many muralists and organizations today are using the same model that fueled the Black and Chicano murals in the 1960s in order to mobilize disenfranchised populations living in impoverished urban areas.

Hundreds of murals today continue to focus on community building, as Cockcroft and Weber write from their own experience as muralists: "Community murals have a rationale of working for the local audience around issues that concern the immediate community, using art as a medium of expression of, for, and with the local audience. They involve artists with community issues, community organizing and community response to their artwork" (Cockcroft, Weber, and Keppel 1977: 30). Even in situations when the mural painting is done by a single artist, there is often still a democratic creative process in which local residents, stakeholders, and community members are incorporated into the project each step of the way. The prominence of mural productions has spread to almost every major city in the United States and a number of rural communities as well. The next section will provide a critical assessment of the existing literature as well as highlight several examples of scholars across disciplines who have considered the significance of murals in social and political life. Building from these previous studies, I will propose a theoretical framework that enables us to consider murals as a form of insurgent politics crucial for democratic politics in the twenty-first century.

III. Building A Theoretical Framework: Public Murals and Contentious Politics

Brief Overview: Previous Literature on Public Murals

Before we move towards building a theoretical framework, it is necessary to provide an overview of the existing studies as well as determine a method that differentiates community murals from other forms of public art. Besides from several books, pamphlets, magazine articles, there has not

been much written about the murals in relation to local politics in the Untied States. The most comprehensive piece written about the murals in the United States include Eva Spearling Cockcroft and John Pitman Weber's *Towards a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement,* which was first published in 1977. As muralists and educators, the authors provide a classic study of the mural movement from the 1960s through 1990s and its impact on urban communities in the United States and Canada (Cockcroft, Weber, and Keppel 1977). By conducting years of ethnographic fieldwork, the authors describe the long-term social impact and spatial development of mural paintings in three cities: Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. Cockcroft and Weber provide a useful historical framework that weaves together the stories of artists, community workers, political activists, and grassroots organizers to trace the origins of the mural movement in Chicago. Throughout the chapters, the authors shed light into the relationship between the artist and the community members, describing some of the strengths, weaknesses, and controversies of the mural movement across time (Cockcroft, Weber, and Keppel 1977). As the first comprehensive academic piece on community murals in the United States, the authors provoke thoughtful discussions on the development of mural organizations including the Chicago Mural Group, Cityarts Workshop, and People's Painters in the twenty-first century.

Another important book on murals in the United States include *Philadelphia Murals and the Stories They Tell,* written by Jane Golden, Robin Rice, Natalie Pompilio, David Grahm and Jack Ramsdale. The authors focus on the mural movement in Philadelphia and in some detail on the development of the Mural Arts Program which was founded in 1986 (Golden et al. 2006). Particularly useful for this paper is the authors distinction between graffiti murals, environmental murals, and community-based murals. Broadly speaking, graffiti murals are done without the approval of the property owner and do not engage community members in the process. In some neighborhoods in Los Angeles and New York, memorial murals are an important part of the graffiti scene, especially to commemorate victims of street violence and gang-related murders. As murals spread across the country

in the 1970s, wall paintings became more sophisticated and split into two traditions: environmental murals and community-based murals. The environmental tradition emphasizes the ability to make art available to the general public while at the same time improving the aesthetics of the city. These murals are often supported by urban planners, architects, developers, and private agencies who advocate for practices to renovate disinvested downtown areas. For instance, in order to alleviate violence, crime and urban chaos in de-industrialized neighborhoods in the 1970s and 1980s, hundreds of environmental murals were commissioned by the state to local artists for large scale decorations in Chicago, New York City, and Philadelphia. Usually painted by white artists without input from community members, environmental murals are meant to be decorative and mostly non-ideological in content. A classic example of an environmental mural in New York City is the 13-story geometric piece on the side of a prewar loft building on West 3rd Street between Mercer Street and Broadway. As pictured to the right, the mural was funded by a private development agency who contacted City Arts Inc. a non-profit organization that commissions abstract artists to paint on walls in New York City.
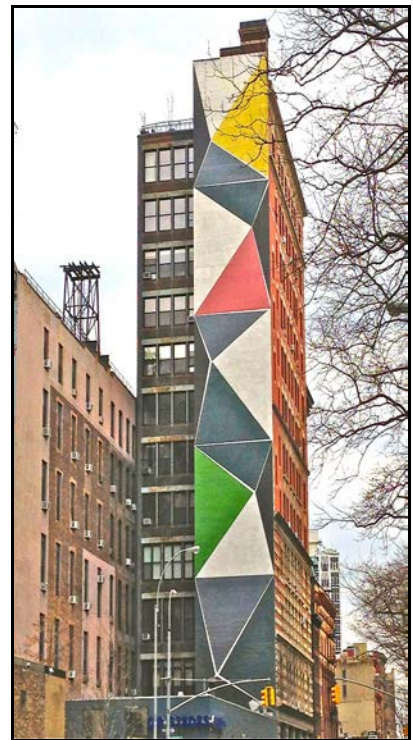
City Wall Inc, 1970.

In contrast to environmental wall paintings, community-based murals are organized in the tradition of the Wall of Respect which reflects the ability of socially conscious artists to work for and with the local audience around issues that concern the immediate community. Rather than being funded by politicians, planners, or professional commissioners, the majority of community murals in cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles are painted on building walls claimed by the community or belong to sympathetic landlords (Golden et al. 2006). There has been tremendous growth in community support and involvement in mural production over time, leading to informal networks of mural organizations with

practicing muralists and older generation muralists. While the process varies for artists in each neighborhood, in general there are six steps to create a community-based mural: (1) selecting a wall: artists, staff, and participants (often youth between the ages 12 to 24) visit the neighborhood where a mural has been requested to find an appropriate wall or check out a wall that has already been identified; (2) brainstorming ideas: the artists will bring together organizers, stakeholders, and community residents to discuss possible theme for the wall – the groups are usually diverse in terms of race, gender, age, and level of artistic background; (3) creating the design: the artist develops the initial design which is presented to stakeholders, local residents, and various groups for feedback; (4) transferring the mural design to the wall: the artist uses a scale and grid method to reproduce the content on the design on the wall until the entire composition has been recreated to actual size; (5) painting the mural; the artists will work with participants, volunteers, and community members to paint the walls; (6) turning the mural over to the community: transferring the finished mural to the community is usually accompanied by a ceremony with guest speakers, performances, food, live music, and poetry readings (Golden et al. 2006). While some steps in the process are more essential than others, the main distinction between community-based murals from other types of wall paintings rest on the presence of local support from start to finish.

In surveying the extant literature on community-based murals in relation to local politics, there has not been much written in the context of the United States. Much of the scholarship has been focused on government sponsored murals and its impact on social communities in Northern Ireland and South Africa (c.f. Sluka 1992; Davies 2001; Dartnell 2002; Marschall 2002; Kolane 2004). More recently scholars in cultural studies have conducted research on the influence of murals on communal self-expression and empowerment of ethnic identities in American society. For example, Guisela Latorre's publication *Walls of Empowerment: Chicana/o Indiginist Murals of California* explores the origins of twentieth-century Chicano/a muralism in several ethnic neighborhoods (Latorre 2008).

Latorre demonstrates how mural paintings in Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Francisco help to foster Chicano/a socio-political identities and politicization in the United States. Drawing on a decade of fieldwork, Latorre provides a useful genealogy of key mural productions in California's Mexican American communities. In another article, *Cultural Representations in Philadelphia Murals: Images of Resistance and Sites of Identity Negotiation,* Kristin Lee Moss explores cultural representations of African Americans living in Philadelphia. Moss uses the Mural Arts Program (MAP) as a case study to ground an interpretive analysis of mural production processes as sites of identity negotiation when ethnic communities are involved. Through her interviews with MAP staff members, Moss concludes that mural images offer new tactics of resistance for disenfranchised communities as well as help cultivate sentiments of ethnic pride, inspiration, and empowerment.

Up until now, however, very few studies extend their empirical analyses to explore the political significance of the mural production process in the context of New York City. A significant contribution include Janet Brain-Reinitz's *On the Wall: Four Decades of Community Murals in New York City.* Her book documents forty years of murals in New York City through interviews with artists, residents, and community sponsors (Braun-Reinitz 2009). In documenting the expressive life of politics behind prominent murals, Braun-Reinitz captures the interactions between artists and residents, in addition to the controversies that even led to the destruction of several murals. With the exception of Braun-Reinitz's elaborate work on murals in New York City, there has not been enough written on how the mural production process can be essential to our understanding of democratic participation. In thinking about ways in which the mural production process itself can function as sites of politics in New York City, some contributions from race theory and ethnic studies studies are valuable for further analysis.

Building a Theoretical Foundation: Broadening the Scope of Civic Participation

In the classic book *Democracy in America,* Alexis de Tocqueville praised "Americans of all ages, all stations of life, and all types of dispositions …" for taking part in political associations

(Tocqueville 1935). Tocqueville reasoned that having citizens come together to plan local events, select their representatives, or deliberate on public matters was a positive aspect for American society. He believed that voluntary associations guarded the state against tyranny of the majority in which decisions made by the majority would take such precedence over minority interests that society would fall to despotism. Ever since Tocqueville's contribution, political scientists have increasingly debated the value of civic participation in churches, schools, and voluntary groups for American democracy.

Some social scientists have observed a rapid decline in American civic participation since the mid-1960s. For example, in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community,* Robert D. Putnam documents the decline of civic participation across American cities. Drawing from the DDB Needham Life Style Archive, General Social Survey (GSS), and various state-level measures of social capital, Putnam shows an aggregate decline in membership of civic arenas such as churches, bridge clubs, labor unions, parent-teacher organizations, and fraternal organizations (Putnam 2000). As civic participation declines, so does social capital – the networks, norms of reciprocity, information, and trust that are fostered among the members of associations by virtue of their experience of social interaction (Putnam 2000). For Putnam social capital allows individuals to pursue shared goals and in the process solidify bonds to overcome problems that require collaboration. Throughout his book, Putnam demonstrates how changes in work life, family structure, suburban growth, technology, gender roles, and other factors have contributed to the alarming decline of civic America in the twenty-first century.

In another empirical study, *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina detail similar trends in the United States. Their contributors show that millions of Americans have been drawing back from community affairs and civic participation (Skocpol and Fiorina 1999). The chapters in their volume demonstrate that the combination of economic inequalities, distrust of government, and socio-cultural changes in American society have accompanied the erosion of citizen participation across time. While there have been major shifts in membership trends in terms

of gender and class, the overall decline in membership associations and rise in advocacy groups suggest that millions of Americans are not participating in community affairs the same ways as before. In order to maintain the basic tenets of American democracy, Skocpol and Fiorina argue that it is necessary for citizens to be well-informed and active in associational life. It is worthwhile to note that in both of the aforementioned studies, there is the inherent presumption that civic participation leads to honest, charitable, and self-confident citizens.

In a more recent publication, Cliff Zukin, Scott Keeter, Molly Andolina, Krista Jenkins and Michael X. Delli Carpini challenge the notion that citizen civic participation is on the decline in America (Zukin et al. 2006). The authors provide a generational perspective and use a cohort study to demonstrate that older citizens participate in civic life by voting while younger generations engage by being active in their own communities. The authors focus on the social and political cultures in which GenXers and DotNets grew up and contend that different socialization experiences lead to differences in civic participation (Zukin et al. 2006). Although the younger generations have been pushed away from traditional forms of politics such as electoral participation, the authors argue that it is still possible to increase youth participation in traditional forms of civic life with the right amount of the motivation, skills, resources, and opportunities. Other scholars have argued civic skills as among the most important determinant of civic participation. In *Voice and Equality*, Kay L. Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Henry E. Brady, present the civic volunteerism model of participation to demonstrate that the resources of time, money, and civic skills are essential for civic life (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 1995). The authors look at Protestant church participation among African Americans to suggest that churches help produce civic resources and skill development necessary for civic and political life. In addition, Verba, Scholzman and Brady argue that differences in participation rates among minority groups are a result of differential exposure to civic skills through associational memberships. However, from their civic voluntarism model, the authors conclude that minorities are less likely to participate

than their white counterparts. To conceptualize civic participation in more expansive terms, this paper will recognize the plurality of spaces and collectives through which alternative forms of civic participation are currently being imagined and mobilized by marginal voices in American society.

At the heart of the civic participation debate is the assumption that all individuals have equal access to the various types of associational memberships that facilitate civic life. What the previous scholarship fails to take into account is the reality that traditional sites for civic community have been built to deliberately exclude certain groups of people from gaining access. As a result of biased laws or practices, this process of systemic exclusion has created differential access to goods, services, and opportunities for people of color as well as non-citizens, women, and immigrants in American society (Haney-Lopez 1996; Jacobson 1998; Lipsitz 1998; Collins 2000; Roediger 2002). The exclusion of people of color from democratic processes has been created and recreated over time for whites to maintain legal, economic, and political control of key institutions in the United States.[1] Although laws have been passed in the mid-20th century to eradicate overt forms of discrimination, structural racism still permeates our society and continues to perpetuate inequities in health care, education, housing, and employment for people of color (c.f. HoSang, LaBennett, and Pulido 2012).

There exists plenty of scholarship and lived experiences that document how formal membership associations throughout American history until the mid-1950s were racially exclusive and gender segregated. When we think about definitions of democratic participation in relation to political voice it is necessarily important for scholars to take into account this larger historical context of systemic oppression of people of color as well as non-citizens, women, and immigrants within these spaces (Marschall and Stolle 2004). As Iris Marion Young writes: "Identifying equality with equal treatment ignores deep material differences in social position, division of labor, socialized capacities, normalized

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[1] This pervasive form of white dominance has been responsible for slavery, internment camps, expropriation of Native American lands, and racial segregation which excludes Black, Latino/a, Asian, Indigenous, and other oppressed groups from every aspect of society.

standards and ways of living that continue to disadvantage members of historically excluded groups"
(Young 2005: 2). From a similar standpoint, commitment to political democracy and social equality
requires scholars to attend to, rather than ignore, such positional differences. To bring this into the civic
participation debate, I contend that it is problematic for scholars who write on civic life to overlook the
issue of race and racism in American society. As we move forward, more scholars need to take into
account systemic policies, practices, and racial stereotypes that work against people of color and limit
their opportunity for civic participation. As political scientists have already expressed, the
consequences of failing to maintain opportunities for civic participation are far-reaching. The strengths
of American civil society and the ability to protect ones interests, derive in large part from the degree to
which individuals take part in civic processes.

　　　W.E.B. Du Bois proclaims that the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color
line, or in other words the role of race and racism when whiteness functions as the norm in America
(Du Bois 1903). The types of democratic participation that have centered scholarly debates in political
science have been about white civic participation and also white civic life. There needs to be a better
understanding of structural racialization, and the cumulative, durable, and race-based effects of
inequities that have been built into the political system and how these circumstances shape American
civic life altogether. What does civic participation look like for people of color, non-citizens, and
immigrants under this system? One of important question that continues to be overlooked in the civic
participation literature is why are people of color and other historically excluded groups more often to
engage in non-traditional or alternative politics than their white counterparts. Rather than privilege
particular spaces and behaviors as inherently political and dismissal of others as not, the goal is to leave
open the possibility of insurgent or alternative forms of politics.

Community Murals: Sites of "Space-Making Politics"

　　　In recognizing the ways in which white dominance operates in American society, the goal of

this section of the paper is to broaden the scope of how we think and talk about politics. To build a new theoretical framework for civic participation, I will first build from Jean Y. Wu's piece "Race Matters in Civic Engagement Work." I contend that we should expect Black, Latino/a, Asian American, and Native American civic participation to function and to operate quite differently than what is written about in scholarship. Since there exists no dominant definition of civic engagement in political science, I draw from Wu's definition of the term: 1) civic engagement as the actions of informed individuals and collectives to respond to the needs created by systems of injustice in the communities in which they live and work 2) the actions can take many forms but in every case they must be requested or approved by the communities themselves and executed in collaboration with community members 3) the actions must involve some form of ethical practice within the community aiming to create a more just and humane world (Wu and Chen 2010: 583). This framework allows us to center race and its impact on lived experiences on urban residents. I take on Wu's challenge for more scholars to explore the meanings and practices of civic engagement in different racial/ethnic/cultural communities in the United States (Wu and Chen 2010: 600). My goal is to broaden the discourse in the field of civic engagement by focusing on community murals as sites of politics in New York City.

What makes community murals political in nature? To begin this discussion, I borrow from Monisha Das Gupta's concept of "space-making politics" in her book *Unruly Immigrants*. In the process of developing a conceptual and historical framework for understanding the significance of feminist, queer, and labor organizations in the South Asian community, Das Gupta offers a unique understanding of grassroots politics. She conducts interviews with members of seven organizations in New York, New Jersey, and Boston that fight against issues of gender discrimination, homophobia, domestic violence, poverty, racism, and xenophobia in the South Asian community (Das Gupta 2006). She maintains that these organizations function as sites of resistance as they actively challenge the larger South Asian mainstream embrace of the model minority discourse and assimilation (Das Gupta

2006). To push against "place-taking politics" in the South Asian community that fails to address systemic issues such as class exploitation, misogyny and homophobia, Das Gupta uses evidence from her interviews to argue that these seven organizations create "space-making politics" for more inclusive social change. In broadening the scope of what is considered to be political space, space-making politics sets the foundation for systemic change and creates alternative structures and resources that transform daily life into an arena of political contest.

The concept of space-making politics is premised on the recognition of difference within the South Asian community. This interpretation deconstructs the image of a monolithic group in order to reveal important differences along race, ethnic, gender, class, and sexual dimensions. Das Gupta shows that the organizations which include South Asian Women for Action (SAWA), South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association (SALAGA), and New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA), offer critical social, economic, and cultural support for newly arrived South Asian immigrants while at the same time work to change larger institutions, practices, and social services that oppress the entire community. While Das Gupta focuses on the South Asian community in particular, the concept of "space-making politics" is applicable to other marginal voices in New York City. I argue that community murals represent a similar manifestation of space-making politics that Das Gupta writes about in her book.

The community murals function as sites of resistance that work within and against the broader discursive framework to highlight narratives of working class, non-citizens, immigrants, women of color, and other marginal voices in urban spaces. As Das Gupta writes: "Instead of playing by the rules of liberal democratic participation, space makers craft a politic that can respond to the invisible, underground, and silenced realities of their constituencies" (Das Gupta 2006: 108). As a space-making site, the community murals (re)center the lived histories and institutional patterns of exploitation to rewrite narratives of the neighborhood for and by the people. In historically neglected and disinvested neighborhoods in New York City, community murals have been painted with social, political, and

cultural messages that challenge the dominant narrative. These collaborative murals inspire those who live on the margins in urban society to articulate shared ambitions, express frustrations and most importantly, consider strategies of resistance that facilitate positive social change.

III. Data and Methods

For this paper, I will incorporate the qualitative methods of observation, personal interviews, and secondary sources to explore the ways in which community murals can influence local politics in New York City. More specifically, I will conduct personal interviews with members from two community-based organizations: One Flushing in Queens and El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice in Brooklyn. These interviews with staff members, artists, and mural participants will provide deeper contextual knowledge of how the mural production process plays out on the ground in different neighborhoods. I used a snowball sampling technique to select interviewees based on their knowledge of neighborhood concerns and community involvement in Flushing and Southside Williamsburg. These personal interviews with staff members and mural participants provide me with a nuanced and more sophisticated understanding of the neighborhoods of interest. The conversations with artists allow me to better understand the trajectory and transformation of murals in urban environments in addition to place individual mural productions into a larger movement context. The next section will draw from the fieldwork I conducted in the Spring of 2014 to present two case studies of mural production projects. I am motivated by two key research questions: (1) How does public art and local politics interact for participating muralists and community members? (2) How does the mural process shape civic participation for ordinary citizens?

IV. Public Murals and the Infrapolitics of Space-Making

Case I: "Flushing's World Fair" By One Flushing: Background

In September of 2013, a crowd of Flushing residents, students, volunteers, and community organizers stood in front of a 40 x 40 cement wall along the Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) station. The

street scene was loud and festive, some people were standing next to the wall with paint brushes and others were in the back with mega phones and digital cameras. Located along Flushing Main Street and 40th Road, the LIRR train station serves as one of the main transportation centers into Manhattan for local residents who live in north central Queens. The "Flushing's World Fair" mural which was painted on the station wall was unveiled in November at a ribbon-cutting ceremony with elected officials, local business owners, and community leaders.

Flushing is bounded by Willets Point Boulevard on the north, Flushing Meadows-Corona Park on the west, Union Turnpike on the south, and Francis Lewis on the east. Flushing contains the second largest concentration of Chinese living in the greater New York area.

"Flushing's World Fair" Ceremony, One Flushing (2013). According to the Asian American Federation of New York, the Chinese population in Flushing has increased from 17,363 residents in 2000 to approximately 33,526 residents in 2010 – a 93 percent increase (Asian American Federation 2012). Historically, Taiwanese immigrants were the first Chinese immigrants to arrive and to develop Flushing's Chinatown in the early 1970s. The area was briefly known as "Little Taipei" in the 1980s. The neighborhood continues to receive large inflows of Chinese immigrants from various socio-economic backgrounds. Today the newly arrived Chinese migrants who settle in Flushing are from diverse regions in mainland China such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Tianjin.

The Flushing business community has grown rapidly over the past three decades. The neighborhood continues to expand in order to accommodate the growing middle and upper income residents as evidenced by the high rise developments along the Flushing Meadows--Corona Park and in

Downtown Flushing. Although the Flushing business community has grown to become the fourth largest commercial district in New York City, a lack of resources and federal assistance has created major barriers for residents who live and work in the neighborhood. According to a Flushing Survey Report conducted by One Flushing, some of the biggest challenges facing the community include: "Lack of parking and transit capacity, escalating rents, targeted enforcement, extreme traffic and transit congestion, increasing utility bills and government fines …" (One Flushing 2013).[2] As organizers of the mural, One Flushing is a community development center that works to build a strong, diverse, and sustainable neighborhood. Founded by Asian Americans for Equality (AAFE) in 2011, One Flushing empowers small businesses owners and local residents with technical assistance, learning opportunities, and innovative strategies to leverage resources. John Choe, the Executive Director of One Flushing, describes the organization's mission: "We are actively encouraging information sharing, cross cultural collaborations and networking so that there's a strong sustainable inclusive community in Flushing. As the city continues to grow… that's really the driving motivation behind One Flushing" (Choe 2014). One Flushing has maintained a key role in developing innovative strategies for small businesses, creating affordable housing, and fostering sustainable development for Flushing residents.

"Flushing's World Fair" By One Flushing: The Mural Production Process

The idea for a mural began with One Flushing's Summer Associate Program. Maple Wu, the Program Associate at One Flushing, mentioned that she thought it was strange that there were no murals around the neighborhood. The fact that local residents did not have an opportunity to express themselves visually was an opportunity for One Flushing to get involved and to mobilize people around an issue (Wu 2014). In the months leading up to the production of the mural, Maple and several interns conducted preliminary research and looked into what other neighborhoods in New York City were

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[2]   The report was based on findings from a door-to-door business survey conducted in the summer and fall of 2012. Over the course of five months, One Flushing visited over one thousand businesses and received 400 survey responses from business owners, managers, and workers.

doing as well as which artists were doing what types of murals. To secure money for the mural, the staff at One Flushing organized the business community and fundraised for several months. As Choe recalls about the process: "I didn't realize how expensive a mural was and so we raised every penny of what we spent from local residents and business owners." (Choe 2014). In addition to reaching out to the business community, One Flushing had an Indiegogo campaign to secure funds and to raise the profile of the campaign. It was the first time that One Flushing used a crowd funding forum with perks such as a Dim Sum Warriors Comic Book for a $50 donation or an acupuncture session for a $100 donation. One Flushing had to raise six thousand dollars for the mural project, and the Indiegogo campaign helped them reach $1,879 of the $3,500 goal in a little over a month.[3]

While the painting of the mural took less than a week in September, the planning process took almost five months beforehand. After compiling a list of artists and speaking to over a dozen for the project, One Flushing decided to invite Lady Pink. In our interview, Choe recalled that Lady Pink was a perfect fit for the mural project because of her visual style of painting and street credibility in the graffiti scene. In addition, as a female artist and an Ecuadorian immigrant herself, Choe believed that: "As a Latina, she is sensitive to some of the issues that we have to deal with here … as a renowned artist she is also aware of some of the racial dynamics in Flushing and how we need to be sensitive to people's perceptions and how this could be an opportunity to shape the narrative of what Flushing is all about" (Choe 2014). As one of the only female graffiti writers in New York City in the 1980s, Lady Pink was selected to star in Charlie Aheam's film *Wild Style* about the explosion of hip-hop in the South Bronx. In describing her earlier work as a graffiti writer, Lady Pink expressed her appreciation for murals artwork: "Murals are not so superior and abstract and intellectual that it leaves the 99% of the people behind and appeals only to the 1%. This is artwork for the masses… " (Lady Pink 2014). For

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[3] For more information about the One Flushing Indiegogo Campaign, see this link:
    <http://www.indiegogo.com/projects/flushing-community-mural-project>

the mural project, Lady Pink invited a dozen teenagers that she worked with at the Frank Sinatra School of the Arts located in Queens to facilitate the painting process.

As with all community-based murals, the design process begins with community input and subsequent approval. According to Lady Pink, the "Flushing's World Fair" theme originated from multiple brainstorming sessions, she recalled that: "One Flushing invited folks from all kinds of different organizations from the city itself to other community organizations. Everybody was there – people of color, elderly people, people in business suits, guys straight out of a restaurant, and there was at least twenty people or more. Everyone putting in their input, suggesting this and suggesting that" (Lady Pink 2014). One of the main concerns that One Flushing had was that the mural would turn into a big graffiti place or that it would attract local vandals. However, the emphasis on the project as a community grounded initiative helped to protect the mural from violation. In reflecting on the preservation of the mural, Choe stated that: "It's almost like miraculous that the site, which has always been tagged and vandalized, remains untouched by people. That's a sign of respect or change in perception. To me that's one thing that I've seen that's changed in the community. When we do have a truly grassroots effort from the community, people take pride, even young people, and they are willing to protect something that they consider beautiful" (Choe 2014). Lady Pink and her credibility as a street artist helped to keep the mural in Flushing clean, she mentioned that: "We were advised that the wall was not going to last and that vandals were going to come and destroy it. That's where hopefully my name and my husbands name helped earn it some respect. The vandals will think twice. They'll see that it was finished up with spray paint and that the names on the corner are some respectable graffiti artists. They won't diss it or destroy it" (Pink Lady 2014). Lady Pink also mentioned the importance of having a community-oriented effort as key to preserving the mural from local vandals and throw up letters. The two images on the next page are of the LIRR station wall before and after the mural was painted in September of 2013.

Flushing LIRR Train Station Before (2013)

Flushing's World Fair Mural After (2013)

"Flushing's World Fair" Mural: Self-Determination and Taking On Stereotypes

One of the ways in which murals and local politics interact for participating muralists and community members is through the expression of self-determination. When I asked John Choe about the motives behind the Flushing mural, he expressed to me that the main goal was to challenge some of the negative stereotypes associated with the neighborhood. For people from outside of Flushing, there are a lot of stereotypes involved with what the neighborhood is like, he expressed to me: "It is somewhat overly simplified and very superficial. You hear things like "It's a Chinatown" or "It's an Asian area" and while I think those things could be true to some extent, they don't measure the real depth of complexity in this area" (Choe 2014). When I asked Choe to describe the neighborhood himself as a longtime resident, he responded by sharing: "We're a multi-cultural enclave of people who have come here because they see Flushing as a way to gain opportunities that aren't available anywhere else … whether it's jobs and business or culture and other ways of connecting to resources that do not exist in New York City or other cities in the United States" (Choe 2014). For Choe and many others, Flushing is a regional destination for individuals and families who come from New Jersey, Connecticut, and other places just to access some of the things that exist in the neighborhood. In describing his own experiences as a longtime resident, Choe was particularly concerned with media depictions and the racial stereotypes that policymakers hold of Flushing and it's small businesses, he mentioned: "There's a narrative that Flushing wants to be like Manhattan in some ways but we're really a working class community at our core. In terms of the income distribution in the downtown Flushing community, we are primarily low and moderate income households. In addition to that we have a lot of immigrants here. We don't always get the attention and the resources that we deserve because politically Flushing is kind of on the margins" (Choe 2014).

In contrasting his experience as a longtime resident with the recent developments in Flushing, Choe spoke about a new hybrid culture: "I like to use the framework of the Flushing Renaissance in the

same way that people saw the development of new culture in the Harlem Renaissance. Many people don't realize that the Harlem Renaissance was actually led by people who were not from Harlem, you know, they were migrants from the South, they were people from the Caribbean, they were people from around the world who came, built, and shaped American culture in a new direction. I see Flushing as in a similar situation. We are at the cusp of a new type of American community" (Choe 2014). This hybrid culture has been largely influenced by an increase in international investment and transnational population that push Flushing into new directions. Flushing occupies an interesting position in New York City politics because the presence of global investment firms and development coupled with a large population of immigrants makes the space both hyper-visible and invisible to policymakers at the same time. To expand on this paradigm, Choe included that: "We continue to have to educate policymakers and to raise awareness about the fact that Flushing is not what I like to call a "model community." I use that word in the sense that Asian Americans are sometimes seen as a model minority. I think sometimes Flushing is seen as a model community where we are doing fine, we don't need any help or that the city should let them do what they want" (Choe 2014). For Choe, this form of misrepresentation is irresponsible and does not place any kind of direct accountability on the people who have the ability to help those struggling in neighborhoods like Flushing.

The model minority stereotype, which depicts Asian Americans as hard working, passive, and well-educated, has excluded Asian Americans from decades of federal recognition and local assistance. This discourse allows officials to overlook Flushing when allocating resources for business, affordable housing, or language assistance. For One Flushing, such a one-dimensional stereotype of an entire community ignores discrimination and social issues that non-citizens, Asian women, and immigrants continue to face in the neighborhood. In addition, when Flushing is viewed as a "model community," the local residents and business owners are viewed as targets for inspectors to issue hundreds of thousands of dollars of tickets and violations. For example, an issue that has disproportionately

impacted immigrant owned businesses in Flushing is the practice of targeted enforcement. According to a report issued by Communities Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAAAV), this practice allows government regulatory agencies to unfairly target certain businesses for minor violations (i.e. missing price tags, failing to post return policies, etc.) to raise revenue for the needs of the city (Communities Against Anti-Asian Violence 2012). According to a report by former Bill de Blasio, inspections by the Department of Consumer Affairs in Queens more than doubled from 46,635 in fiscal year 2009 to 77,481 in fiscal year 2012 (De Blasio 2013). The increase in violations by the Health Department was even greater, from 179,677 in fiscal year 2009 to 311, 465 in fiscal year 2012. Of the ten neighborhoods issued the most violations per business by the Health Department during financial year 2012 seven of them are in Queens. During a news conference in Richmond Hill, Queens, De Blasio discussed the report findings and accused the city inspectors of turning "businesses into their own ATM banks" (De Blasio 2013).

For the participants in One Flushing's "Flushing Worlds Fair," the mural provided a valuable opportunity for people to challenge the "model community" stereotype and to demand greater attention from policymakers who unfairly target immigrants. The mural provided a space for local residents, small business owners, and community organizations to represent their neighborhood in more meaningful ways. As an effort to restore community self-determination, Choe mentioned that: "For a lot of the civic organizations that supported our project, this was an opportunity to bring people together because the mural represented different cultures in Flushing. It gave people an opportunity to say "I want this type of representation for South Asians or African Americans." I feel like creating a mural with Asian, Latino and African American people made this idea of diversity in Flushing more real in some ways" (Choe 2014). Rather than portray Flushing as a one-dimensional "Chinatown" or "Asian" neighborhood, the participants were able to highlight the diversity of local residents which include South Asian, Colombian, Salvadoran, Sri Lankan, Russian, and Italian communities. To present

a more nuanced and complicated image of Flushing, the staff and mural participants included various

kinds of ethnic icons and a unique combination of local heroes and fictional characters.

"Flushing's World Fair" Mural By One Flushing: Facing Local Issues

After the mural was erected along the LIRR station wall, the staff at One Flushing noticed that

policymakers and business owners were paying more attention to local needs. Before the mural went

up, it was difficult for organizations such as One Flushing to work with the business community on

collaboration projects. On the topic of community climate, Choe mentioned to me: "The fact that

businesses are willing to even initiate a conversation is something that was different than before. Now

they know what a mural is and how it could really improve and bring the community together" (Choe

2014). To organize and plan the mural, One Flushing was able to work with several business sponsors

including Taiwan 101 Restaurant, Asian Americans for Equality, New Inspiration Care, Yumcha Yoga,

Regen Acupuncture PC, and Yumcha Studio. According to Maple from One Flushing, one of the

businesses who sponsored the mural is now actively working with One Flushing on other social justice

issues such as equitable development and affordable living in the neighborhood. Talking about the new

partnership, Maple expressed that: "The business owner wants that to be more community oriented so

he is trying to get us involved in seeing if we can work with a developer to make sure that the buildings

that come up [right around his storefront] meet the needs of the community (Maple 2014). In thinking

about how the mural process shapes civic participation for ordinary citizens, it seems as though murals

encourage small business owners in the neighborhood to become more active in community affairs.

In addition to business owners, the MTA has also taken notice of the Flushing mural. As the

development in Flushing continues, there has not been enough government investment in the basic

maintenance of amenities that already exist in the neighborhood. In a report issued by previous New

York City Public Advocate Mark Green, it found that many LIRR stations in Queens suffer from poor

service and inconvenient and hazardous conditions (Green 2000). For example, 8 of the 22 stations

surveyed had dangerous conditions, 11 of them had no benches for passengers to sit on and 10 had no station signs or visible schedules. According to Choe, many of the Manhattan bound train stations in Queens remain in similar conditions and have not been renovated for decades. Prior to the Flushing mural, the LIRR station was an unwelcoming experience for people walking up and down the stairs to get to the Manhattan bound train. As Lady Pink recalled, the walls were covered in graffiti and in the evenings there were no lights that illuminated the walkway. When I asked Choe why the Flushing–Main Street LIRR station was selected as the mural location, he said that: "We identified the Long Island Rail Road as a place that had been for over a decade or more forgotten about by the MTA. We wanted to raise the profile of that station and to bring attention to the fact that the MTA was not properly maintaining the station. They had made promises for years that they would upgrade it, build elevators and modernize the space but at the end the MTA allowed garbage to accumulate, vandalism and graffiti to proliferate, and crime to occur" (Choe 2014). In expressing his frustration, Choe argued that: "If the LIRR station was a local business, they would be fined thousands of dollars a day for all the trash and graffiti, but because the MTA is a state agency, they can get away with anything in Flushing" (Choe 2014). One Flushing saw the mural as an opportunity to advocate for and to pressure the MTA to do their job – which is to ensure that Flushing has a good transportation network.

After the mural was created the residents of Flushing saw a policy response from the MTA. In describing a public hearing One Flushing attended with the MTA, Choe expressed that: "The mural put a lot of pressure on then. I see that they are now putting a lot of effort to maintain that site. There used to be a bicycle rack there that was just overgrown with bicycles. They've removed that. They're on a more regular schedule of trying to clean out the garbage on that site. In some way the mural has created a momentum for the MTA to actually do something" (Choe 2014). In addition to these small steps to clean up the LIRR station, Choe revealed that the MTA will be using eminent domain to begin a large-scale modernization project that includes an elevator installation, which allows people who have

disabilities, people who have children, and people who need an elevator to use the site. In addition, the modernization will dramatically increase the visibility of the station by putting up extra signage and making sure that the facilities are well maintained over time.

While fixing up the LIRR station is a first step in a larger process, One Flushing has been using their visibility to push for a more accessible transportation system for the future. Flushing still serves as a major transportation hub for those who live in north central Queens, Flushing. However, those who use the number seven train to get into Manhattan know too well that the train is over capacity during rush hour. Taking into consideration the major developments in Flushing, Choe argues that the MTA needs to address these impending transportation issues, he states: "Municipal Parking Lot 1 is going to be re-developed. It's going to be hundreds of additional units of housing. The Flushing waterfront is going to be re-developed. It's going to be thousands of additional units of housing. Willets Point, which is right across the river next to the Mets stadium, is going to be re-developed. It's going to be another additional thousands of units of housing. Where are all of these people going to be going if they want to get into Manhattan or anywhere into the city? There's no additional capacity on the number seven train" (Choe 2014). Indeed for the future growth of Flushing, policymakers need to look at alternatives. These are questions that One Flushing has been engaged in with the MTA and local residents in efforts to influence local political outcomes.

From this detailed case study, I hope to demonstrate how the Flushing mural project functions as a site of space-making politics that brings local community needs into dominant discourse. The mural functions as a site of grassroots resistance that work within and against the broader discursive framework to highlight invisible narratives and silenced realities of working class, immigrants, and other marginal voices in Flushing. Having been excluded from the dominant political discourse and misrepresented by policymakers, the Flushing mural provided an opportunity for residents to come together in order to express daily concerns, challenge racial stereotypes, and rearticulate their

experiences outside of traditional institutions. In broadening the scope of what is considered to be political space, this case study demonstrates that the "Flushing Worlds Fair" mural set the foundation for systemic change and alternative structures and resources for those who live and work in Flushing.

Case II: "Nature or Nurture" By El Puente Academy and P.S. 84.: Background

In the late 1970s and 1980s, the Southside Williamsburg neighborhood (also known as Los Sures) was considered to be one of the poorest neighborhoods in New York City. During this time period, neighborhoods like Southside, Brownsville, East Harlem, and the South Bronx went through a period of urban decay and chaos. Many families witnessed a vicious cycle of landlord abandonment, drops in property values, racial tension, single parent homes, large-scale drug dealing, and street gangs. New York City under Mayor Abraham Beame was on the verge of bankruptcy and essential city-services such as fire and police departments were removed from poor neighborhoods. The Southside Williamsburg neighborhood had been called the worst neighborhoods in America, and the mostly Latino community suffered from immense poverty and inadequate resources. The neighborhood has changed since this earlier period as a result of community activism and grassroots organization from neighborhood groups like Southside United and El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice. Today, the Southside community is divided along Division Avenue. On the Southside of Division is a primarily Hasidic community and on the Northside of Division up to Grand Street is a historically Puerto Rican and Dominican community.

El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice is an educational option high school located on Hooper Street and Marcey Avenue in Brooklyn. Founded in 1993 by Luis Garden Acosta, the school opened as result of the public zone school situation in New York City in the 1970s. Many students from the inner-cities were dropping out of school at alarming rates and were looking for alternative options. The Chancellor Joseph A. Fernandez began talking to people like Luis Garden Acosta and Frances Lucerna who were co-founders of El Puente to see what could be done to create a better education

environment for the children in the neighborhood. El Puente Academy was created as an experimental school (similar to Central Park East I and Central Park East II) in which a local population of teachers, students, and community members all worked and lived in the same neighborhood. Along with twenty other schools that opened around the same time, El Puente experimented with reduced school size, transparent and democratic school governance, the abolition of high-stakes testing, and school-community interactions.

Through the influence of Frances Lucerna, El Puente Academy integrates the arts, holistic wellness, and education together to bring about positive change in the Southside neighborhood. As Arts Facilitator and Director of Los Muralistas de El Puente, Joe Matunis has been involved with numerous mural projects in the Southside over the years. As a community artist, Matunis was trained in Chicago with Olivia Gude of the Chicago Public Art Group (CPAG) which was founded by William Walker and John Pitman Weber. In discussing the different models of community murals, Matunis revisited his time with CPAG and shared with me that: "There's all kinds of models for community mural making… but this idea of being able to live somewhere and having an ongoing relationship seemed to me the right kind of thing. I wanted to extend that relationship but also the value of being a community resident rather than an outsider. I wanted that experience in terms of being able to create more nuanced work and relationships with people. The longer you know someone the more you can kind of share information, style and experience back and forth. That was the model I brought to El Puente" (Matunis 2014). As Los Muralistas grew in size, Matunis was able to secure funding from sources like the Department of Labor so that students were able to get paid for summer mural projects. While there are other mural groups in New York City such as Groundswell and City Arts, the murals created by Los Muralistas de El Puente are more politically and socially pointed to specific issues that impact the immediate community. As Matunis described the work of Los Muralistas: "We're able to get away with that because we're not just a mural group. We're in the context of this whole movement in community

organization for Los Sures" (Matunis 2014). Los Muralistas murals are themed around social issues

from gun violence to asthma, and a couple earlier ones commemorate the youth killed on the streets

when the neighborhood was one of the most violent and drug-ridden parts of the city.

"Nature or Nurture" By El Puente Academy and P.S. 84.: The Mural Production Process

Los Muralistas works closely with other branches of El Puente – most notably the Green Light

District. The Green Light District began as an idea that Luis Garden Acosta had to preserve the

Latino/a community in the Southside through arts and culture, education, health and wellness, greening

spaces, environmental justice and affordable living. According to Anusha Venkataraman, the Director

of the Green Light District, her staff works with multiple stakeholders, partners, and also community

residents who know what is happening on the ground. The Green Light District was created as a direct

response to the gentrification that has affected the Southside neighborhood. El Puente Executive

Director Frances Lucerna explained the significance of the initiative in a statement: "It is a "green

light" for community residents to think about a better future for themselves, their neighbors, families

and friends" (Ward and Whitney 2012). Anusha also shared her thoughts on the initiative, she

expressed that: "So many families have been displaced. The Green Light District was an attempt to

think about what the residents want the neighborhood to be and to work together to bring in the

resources that would build relationships and bridges that would make it possible" (Venkataraman

2014). In addressing affordable housing concerns and gentrification in the neighborhood, the Green

Light District collaborated with Los Muralistas on a "Nurture Nature" community mural in the summer

of 2012 which addresses the changing dynamics in the Southside.

Initial conversations around this mural began as a result of El Puente's involvement in the

resistance to charter school movement. According to Matunis, P.S. 84 Jose De Diego School was

located in the heart of the newcomer community, he shared that: "The newcomer community is kind of

split. There are some of them that are scared to death of the Latino community. They want to create

charter schools that don't have Latino kids in there or just the ones that are "high performing" and want to put up a firewall between them. Then there are others who want to make the community as powerful and as functional for everyone as possible" (Matunis 2014). There was a large group of newcomer parents at P.S. 84 who wanted to co-locate a charter school and a Jr. High School into the neighborhood. The Green Light District at El Puente partnered with P.S. 84 to oppose the new charter schools which they argued would further divide the Southside of Williamsburg. While the newcomer parents succeed and P.S. 84 lost the charter school battle, El Puente participation in the charter school discussion allowed the organization to create an alliance with P.S. 84 who had parents involved in similar issues. Matunis mentioned that one of the main purposes of "Nurture Nature" was to: "Help strengthen that alliance and to also publicize that there is a new game in town. We can combine forces and become extra powerful to combat these problems" (Matunis 2014).

The mural itself was centered around the theme of gardening and the environment in order to document the multicultural and diverse nature of the Southside community. According to Matunis, the participants from the neighborhood chose to use a gardening theme as a metaphor for diversity and interdependence of species and of communities. Reflecting on the theme, Anusha mentioned that the idea of "Nurture Nature" emerged from a process of: "Thinking about our local community and how education and intergenerational learning is part of the way that we become stewards of our community and stewards of our own cultures" (Venkataraman 2014). For Matunis the "Nurture Nature" theme emerged from the desire to create communication between residents in a rapidly changing neighborhood, he expressed that: "There was still this tension between the newcomer community and the old community. The school was looking for ways to bring the two communities together – to work on something to build community. That was a really big part of the desired outcome. Can we get the parents of the kids of this side of the street with the parents of the kids of that side of the street?" (Matunis 2014). The image below is a snapshot of the "Nurture Nature" mural on P.S. 84.

Los Muralistas de El Puente and P.S. 84, "Nurture Nature," (2012).

To figure out the logistics Joe Matunis, Anusha Venkataraman, and Francis Lucerna met regularly with the co-presidents of P.S. 84 as well as representatives from the parents teachers association.[4] Anusha's staff from the Green Light District applied for grants to secure funding but the elementary school PTA also contributed donations towards the mural. In addition to securing funding, locating a site, developing partnerships, and scheduling meetings, Los Muralistas made regular visits to P.S. 84 to work with the teachers, elementary school kids, and community residents. At the first public roundtable held in conjunction with the PTA, there were around thirty or forty parents, elementary school kids and staff members to brainstorm mural ideas. According to Matunis, for two months every Thursday for three hours, Los Muralistas would work with the elementary school kids on group drawings in order to brainstorm a list of ideas for the mural. Once their ideas were sketched into a design, it was presented to the P.S. 84 children for feedback and then presented to the PTA and staff members for additional feedback. The mural production process is highly iterative according to

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[4]Joe Matunis mentioned that the presidency at P.S. 84 is a joint position shared by a white woman and a
    Latina.

Matunis: "There's some group of stakeholders who you always want to identify early on so that people don't come out of the woodwork like "Oh, nobody consulted with me and I don't like it." You need to make sure that the principal, a Congresswoman, some local organization or anybody who might feel dissed if they are not consulted as part of the process" (Matunis 2014). In order to ensure that everyone's ideas were well expressed and incorporated throughout the initial process, El Puente advertised the mural project through the local newspaper, media outlets, and did some flyering on the streets. In addition, Los Muralistas held entire days of public workshops so that anyone from the community could sit down and brainstorm about the design.

Los Muralistas de El Puente and P.S. 84, "Nurture Nature," (2012).

"Nature or Nurture" By El Puente Academy and P.S. 84: Facing Local Issues

The Southside is a historically Latino/a community. Beginning in the late 1930s and 1940s, the first wave of Puerto Rican residents migrated into the neighborhood. The second large wave of Puerto Rican migration into the Southside was in the 1950s. By the 1970s and 1980s, the neighborhood was almost an entirely Puerto Rican and Dominican residential area. In recent years, partly brought on by

the 2005 zoning changes on the Williamsburg and Greenpoint waterfront, there has been significant

development in the neighborhood. According to the 2010 Census Report, the Southside neighborhood

went from 67% Latino to 46% Latino in the past ten years (U.S. Census 2010). However, Anusha

mentioned that 46% is still fairly high percentage of residents for the Southside: "When you walk down

the streets you see a lot of Latino residents, especially elderly residents walking around. When I come

down here in the morning and walk down Habermeyer St. or South 4th there are a lot of elderly Latino

folks walking past stores that are clearly for wealthier and almost entirely white folks who have moved

to the neighborhood" (Venkataraman 2014). To flip the disempowerment of gentrification in the Latino

Southside neighborhood, one of the goals of the "Nurture Nature" mural was to bring together leaders

of the parents teachers association, elementary school kids, longtime residents and newcomers.

At the time of "Nurture Nature," Los Muralistas consisted of mainly fourteen and eighteen year

old kids. For six weeks in the summer of 2012, Los Muralistas worked with the elementary school kids

from P.S. 84 and community residents to paint the mural alongside a large cement wall. In order to

bring together longtime Latino residents with the newcomer parents, Matunis recalled that: "We did a

bunch of community paint days where we had so many people … and it's not even a good idea or a

good way to paint murals … but it's a really good way to build community. Having that many people

out there was crazy but everybody's got a brush… but painting everything the wrong color" (Matunis

2014). At the ribbon ceremony in September, Matunis recalled an emotional moment when the white

co-president of the elementary school was saying: "I've been living in this community for seven years

and people give me dirty looks when I'm walking down the street. I feel like I don't belong here. I

really want to be part of this community…" (Matunis 2014). For Matunis, that moment impacted him

as an artist because the mural represented a successful project to bring two separate communities in the

Southside together: "It's that kind of thing and everybody's kind of hugging. There's so many

opportunities for good things to happen between two different communities that we don't often have

the opportunities to do" (Matunis 2014). For both the longtime Latino residents and newcomers, the "Nurture Nature" mural has become a positive visual marker in the Southside community to represent collaboration.

According to Anusha, residents talk abut the mural as a positive part of the neighborhood. Even the newly elected council member Stephen Levin has taken notice of the mural: "On his campaign literature it was a picture of him standing in front of the mural which shows the fact that: "I am involved in the community. I work with local schools on positive change." I think that speaks a lot to the image of the community that people want to promote as well. The mural has become one of those hallmark sites and projects" (Venkataraman 2014). For Matunis, the community mural provided a valuable opportunity for longtime residents to engage in local issues with the broader public, he mentioned: "The murals that are done at El Puente are always done in the context of a larger organizing campaign. We always keep in mind what is the impact that the mural might have on the neighborhood" (Matunis 2014). It is evident that what El Puente does that gives their murals an extra possibility of facilitating change is that they are done in the context of a larger organizing work. The "Nurture Nature" mural with P.S. 84 was done in the context of Green Light District's organizing work around the education issue of charter schools and gentrification in the Southside. In providing a space for dialogue, the "Nurture Nature" mural facilitated a type of space-making politics that created coalitions and alternative spaces for residents to tackle immediate issues such as disempowerment from change. For Anusha, the Green Light District provides opportunities for local residents to say: "Lets be realistic, we're not going to solve total inequities in income, race, and how that plays out in our communities… but there are things that we can do for the community to make sure that folks can stay here, to make sure that the benefits that are built in the community like new parks or businesses are for everyone" (Venkataraman 2014). The collaborative process of "Nurture Nature" allowed local residents to turn sentiments of disempowerment into actions of self-determination that empower the Southside.

The mural production process allows invisible and silenced voices to recenter their narratives and to challenge the dominant narrative. In our interview, Matunis mentioned to me that many of Los Muralista murals include real people from the neighborhood. An essential part of the mural process is to remain conscious of accurate representations of the community. According to Matunis: "We don't do the blue thing, which is like the cop out. You know, make everybody blue, green, and we don't have to worry about a thing. We don't do that to our murals" (Matunis 2014). By making the conscious decision to incorporate real community members on the murals, the community members develop a sense of agency and ability to critique power and privilege in society. Towards the end of our interview, Matunis shared with me that many people in the neighborhood feel empowered by the murals because of familiarity, he said: "When our murals include familiar faces or accurate reflections of the community, people feel pride in seeing that" (Matunis 2014). The second case study provides evidence of how the "Nurture Nature" mural project functions as a site of space-making politics that brings local community members into dominant discourse. The mural functions as a site of grassroots resistance and transformative politics that spotlights the invisible narratives of working class and immigrant voices in the Southside. In broadening the scope of how we think and talk about as politics, this case study shows that El Puente's "Nurture Nature" mural production process allowed longtime Latino residents to build alliances and claim rights in the fight for urban self-determination.

Community Murals, Civic Skills, and Democratic Participation

In the previous sections of this paper, I documented two large-scale community mural projects in Flushing and Southside Williamsburg. From interviews with staff members at One Flushing and El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice, it becomes evident that the mural production process functions not only as a site for space-making politics but it also serves as a safe space for residents, local youth and artists to share resources, skills, knowledge, and networks for civic participation. This section will briefly consider how the mural production process has the potential to increase civic participation for

ordinary citizens.

My conversations with artists and staff members at One Flushing and El Puente suggests that the mural production process is capable of generating the civic skills that Verba, Schlozman, and Brady claim to be essential for political participation. When I asked Lady Pink about her experiences working with students at the Frank Sinatra Arts School in Queens, she mentioned the importance of leadership skills as part of the entire process. In describing some of her previous mural projects with New York City youth, she shared that: "The students I teach mentor other kids well. They are very mature and are very serious about their artistic skills… they pass it on to somebody else. That is my favorite part. The most rewarding thing is to hand down my skill to the youth" (Lady Pink 2014). Since the mural production process is highly interactive, the youth who participate in large-scale mural projects are able to build confidence in their abilities in addition to develop relationships with their peers. In describing a community mural project in Harlem on 117th street, Lady Pink recalled: "I brought a bunch of white kids over to Harlem… we had like thirty ten to eleven year olds. For all of the black kids from Harlem, none of them knew how to paint or anything like that. The older students were being so patient with these younger kids with no art training whatsoever. I had at least three or four mentors per student… it was just amazing to see the younger kids grow more confident with their work after four weeks" (Lady Pink 2014). Often large-scale mural projects involve bringing youth from different neighborhoods together. The ability for youth of color to build leadership skills, cross-cultural relationships, and self-confidence sets an important foundation for subsequent participation in community and local affairs.

Joe Matunis mentioned that his favorite part about being a community muralist and educator is watching the youth grow in the process. The main impact a mural has is on the young people who work on it, and according to Matunis: "That's pretty significant especially for you know young people from impoverished communities. The opportunities are really rare and the window of realizing your potential opens and closes really quickly. If you don't put something in that kids hand at the right time then it's

never going to come… and then every other window that could open down the line from college to a career just doesn't open" (Matunis 2014). In addition to providing the space for youth to develop their potential, Matunis makes sure that everyone involved gains the proper acknowledgment for their work: "That's the kind of promise that I make to my kids. Everybody that's in the group gets their work on the mural somehow. I take them seriously. The community takes them seriously. Its really hard work … that's a really important lesson too. It's going to take us two hundred hours of work in the sun, getting dirty everyday, getting there at seven in the morning, building the scaffolding, putting it up taking it down, talking to people that come by who ask questions. When you consider the complexity and challenges of doing something so big, homework is easier after that… applying for college is a lot easier" (Matunis 2014). For both Lady Pink and Joe Matunis, the process of creating a mural is a crucial way of unlocking potential and providing disadvantaged youth of color a sense of confidence and ownership of their own future. While Verba, Scholzman, and Brady mainly focus on formal organizations as sites that foster civic skills, these conversations demonstrate that community-driven projects such as murals can also have similar outcomes. It is difficult to conclude that the individuals who participate in mural projects will necessarily engage in civic and political life later on, my goal is to simply broaden the discourse of civic engagement by focusing on community murals as sites of insurgent politics in New York City.

Conclusion

In thinking about how community murals function as sites of civic participation, the process allows communities of color to create positive social change within their own neighborhoods. Building from Jean Y. Wu's definition of civic engagement, I was able to center race and its impact on the lived experiences of residents from Flushing and Southside Williamsburg. In addition, I was able to 1) observe how murals and local politics interact for different racial, ethnic, and cultural communities in New York City and 2) examine the ways in which the mural process shapes civic participation for

communities of color. In broadening the scope of how we think and talk about politics, this paper highlights alternative forms of civic participation that critique power and privilege in New York City. By focusing on detailed moments in two neighborhoods in particular, I was able to provide a subtle but sophisticated understanding of politics as a constant struggle between the local community and dominant urban narrative. While this remains preliminary research, future studies should explore how murals in other neighborhoods in New York City, as well as in other cities in the United States, help us to broaden the discourse of civic engagement.

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