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Paredes en Lengua Llena:

The De-privatization of Healing through Third-space Murals

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in Women’s Studies

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Abstract

As a woman of color artist, this thesis is a practice of feminist resistance. It is the telling and retelling of who we are. Of not allowing ourselves to forget. Of not allowing ourselves to be forgotten. This thesis explores art by women of color as a methodology to create community, to articulate a political voice, and to reclaim one’s own narrative through communal forms of healing. I analyze two murals made by women collectives; *Latinoamerica* by the Latina collective Las Mujeres Muralistas and *MaestraPeace* made in collaboration by a group of seven women. I argue that their mural works are collaborative healing pieces that were created from and allow others to navigate through Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s, Chela Sandoval, and Emma Pérez’s theories and concepts of *mestiza consciousness, nepantla, third space, and the decolonial imaginary*. These spaces, imaginary, and consciousness give the room for Chicana artists that is not given in the Chicano Movement and Women’s Movement to be whole creators, healers, and intersectional beings. But to do the work of re-membering one’s self means acknowledging that the breaking was not done companionless, rather, it was done to collectives of people, to communities. Thus the building and healing must also be done as a collective, as a community.

I created this thesis to serve as a third space, allowing for the reader and myself to build community through visual art, poetry, and language. To create in full tongue. To claim wholeness.
Qué pasa cuando nos reunimos?
When we allow ourselves to feel
When we allow others to feel with us
Feel for us?

Qué pasa cuando nos dirigimos al dolor?
Pain that we’ve pushed away
Pain that has remained buried
has remained hidden
Qué pasa cuando recordamos?
When we re-member
Juntos

Qué pasa cuando dejamos que otros vengan en ese viaje con nosotros?
When we don’t cry alone
When we talk through things together
Create together
Heal together

What if we choose love?
Choose community
Choose to heal
Growing up in East LA has shaped me to understand the importance of cultural community organizing, the importance of building by, for, and with the people. At a young age I began to notice the vibrant art that surrounded me: the murals on the walls of my elementary school, the graffiti that gave life to the streets, the sounds of banda, dancing, and laughter escaping from open windows. The predominantly Mexican, Mexican American, Chicana/o community of East LA was a space in which community bleeds through the cracks of the concrete streets. Home to many migrant families, the people of East LA knew fear, knew containment, knew forced silence. It is working through those restraints collectively that birthed a space for a reclaiming of self. I became witness to the role Xicanx forms of art played in navigating through a Eurocentric society; the way it allowed for a space to resist, to remember, and to exist wholeheartedly.

As a Xicanx artist I have found myself most comfortable and freeing when I express resistance through art. Through thinking creatively. Through thinking collectively. I have found power in the coming together and creation of creative communities. I create in order to continue the sacred process of passing down and building ourselves up collectively. I create in order to continue the process of growth and revival. I create to publically thank all my ‘mothers’ for the lessons they have taught and for instilling in me the feeling of need and urgency for the work I take on, the importance of letting our tongues be liberated. This thesis is an embodiment of our feminisms. A feminism that is the practice of our survival. The telling and retelling of who we are. Of how we have been able to survive. Of not allowing ourselves to forget. Of not allowing ourselves to be forgotten.
As I envisioned my senior thesis I knew instantaneously that I wanted to focus on art by women of color as a methodology to create community, to articulate a political voice, and to reclaim one’s own narrative through communal forms of healing. Murals encompassed all these elements and more for me. As a public art form, murals demand to be seen. They not only speak volumes to the legacy of Chicana/o cultural aesthetics by drawing from indigenous traditions, but also are heavily influenced by the community and environment they are showcased in. Murals are a reflection of the community and their experiences; for communities that are often times neglected from dominant societal narratives, murals become spaces in which they can see themselves and their experiences in large full flesh and color. Mural’s community based and centered creation and execution process are evidence to the healing powers murals provide. Through incorporating and involving members of the community in the production and vision, a mural provides space to release, revisit and celebrate histories and traditions that have been erased, critically engage with one another, and imagine a future in which one can be whole.

In this thesis, I analyze two murals made by collectives of women; Latinoamerica by the Latina collective Las Mujeres Muralistas and MaestraPeace made in collaboration by a group of seven women. Their artworks serve as political statements that not only depict the artists’ agency over their stories but also provide a model of culturally rooted strength and power for their communities. I argue that their mural works are collaborative healing pieces that were created from and allowed others to navigate through Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Chela Sandoval, and Emma Pérez’s theory and concepts of mestiza consciousness, nepantla, third space, and decolonial imaginary. By tapping into one’s
mestiza consciousness and working from the third space, Xicana artists are able to name all their names and create in full tongue.

As Emma Pérez writes, mestiza consciousness is a transformative tool; though “colonization may have destroyed our indigenous civilizations, colonization could not eliminate the evolution of an indigenous psyche” (2, 1999). Anzaldúa’s thinking of mestizaje fuses with the Nahuatl concept of neplantla, middle place or place of passage, adding potential for agency within the concept. As we occupy this in-between state of nepantla, Anzaldúa proposes that we are pushed into a place of deep self-reflection, a place where we investigate and learn to negotiate the seemingly conflicting elements of our identities. It requires us to look deep within ourselves to resolve and find answers to the conflicts in our lives. To reflect on our brokenness and create from those spaces.

Pérez’s theory of the decolonial imaginary describes what she proposes is needed in order to write a decolonial history. She states, “the decolonial imaginary is enacted as hope, as love, transcending all that has come before, all that has been inherited only to damage daughters and sons who have fallen heir to a history of conquest, of colonization, of hatred between brown and white” (126, 1999). It is a process of “reinscribing the old with the new,” and by working from this space, we agree to remake our history and transcend an anguished and troubled past (Pérez, 1999). A decolonial imaginary is a methodology that “allows us to reclaim certain spaces in time to retell our stories and thereby resist and transform historical omissions and occlusions” (Licona, 18). Through this reclaimed cultural and historical imaginary we as subjects re-create and re-present ourselves.
The concept of *third space*, much like *neplantla*, is a cultural space of transcendence. In this space a woman of color can be a fully complex human and can begin to unearth the multiple identities (gendered, sexual, cultural) that Western patriarchal society had tried to bury or erase. As Licona describes it, “third space is a site where things are articulated and disarticulated, and a practice that offers an opportunity to reflect on and revision the ways in which discourses have been used to erase, obscure, or exclude” (13). From these spaces we work to survive and to recognize and re-name the historically unnamed and/or our otherwise silenced selves (Sandoval, 2000). These acts of naming and recovering are acts of healing. Healing from the spaces we have been stripped of, healing from our torn tongues, healing from not knowing how to be whole because that was taken from us through gendered processes of colonization and racialization. Not knowing how to claim all parts of ourselves because that was taken from us.

*We have been torn down to our very roots*

*What they didn’t know is what lies in those roots*

*Roots that are intertwined with one another*

*Roots that latch on to each other*

*With seeds that spring even in the toughest of conditions*

*Rising*

*Rising*

*Rising*
Bell hooks highlights the importance of returning to more indigenous ways of life by re-membering and reclaiming the native within us and the power in cross-cultural coalition. Hooks observes that the erasure of this history is in response to a fear that a white supremacist society has when black and indigenous communities engage in political solidarity. The very essence and fabric of that society is threatened when the enslaved and the conquered join together in resistance of the colonial powers that have torn their peoples. She asserts, “it is a gesture of resistance to the dominant culture’s way of thinking about history, identity, and community for us to decolonize our minds, reclaim the word that is our history as it was told to us by our ancestors, not as it has been interpreted by the colonizer” (184, 1992). We must re-member ourselves and our histories.

On healing

Healing can manifest itself in many different ways; community mural works are just one practice of healing that can be used as a medium to disrupt, reflect, meditate, and create. For women of color, healing is the practice of resistance. It is the rejection of erasure, a rejection of false narratives, a rejection of purposeful and institutionalized forgetting. Art gives us the space to express our agency to be in control of our own stories. To do this work of the self means to be vulnerable and self-reflexive; to be soft
and understanding of one’s own limits. But the work is exceptionally rewarding as one is shifting power back to the self. Through art, as Hua explains, there is “a powerful means to have access to our own and another’s experience, a rediscovering and recovering of humanity” (56). The work of healing creatively has the power to be transformative when it occurs in relationships.

For so long we have understood the practice of healing and of undergoing trauma as an individual and private experience, we must reconstruct and challenge the privatization of healing. The exchange of experiences and collaboration in art allows for not only the healing of self but the healing of others. As a larger community we can support one another and provide each other with skills that another might not hold. We can teach and learn from another as we collectively grow. Those relationships only work if we are open and honest about what we bring into the space, what we need from a space, and what we are personally dealing with. Only then can we establish relational accountability and hold ourselves and each other responsible for what we are working towards (Wilson, 2008). With honesty and willingness to accept and proactively react to calling out a community an individual can only grow.

In a society that does not value our existence, our histories, our cultures, our experiences, spaces where women of color can join forces to resist erasure and simply be whole with one another are necessary. Hua states,

“There is a need to openly explore and have honest dialogue about intuitive, experimental, embodied, everyday-life, practical spirituality in a world where insidious traumas, gendered violence, and violations are so prevalent and where our subjectivities-as-wholeness are often fractured and sutured by the history of colonization and racialization, patriarchy, class inequality, homophobia, and late-capitalist exploitations” (58).
To do the work of re-membering oneself means to acknowledge that the breaking was not done companionless. The tearing, the cracking, the shattering was done to collectives of people, to a communities. Thus the building and re-membering must also be done as a collective, as a community.

Yet, spaces for collective healing are not as common as they should be. When we have so much to offer to one another and support in sharing common experiences to give, it is important that we do not sit in our struggles alone. That we reach out for a hand, that we give a hand, and that we link hand in hand to support one another. Hua suggest that “we need to collectively tell, witness, share and exchange our stories- to pass them on trans generationally as a way of maintaining courage in our efforts to mobilize radical change for the greater global good” (59). Hua advocates for the need to join together and “produce knowledge that can transform us into more holistic, organic, sensual, spiritual, intellectual, interconnected, and accountable beings” (58). Transform and heal as a community.

Aurora Levins Morales notes that there is an “imperial history” that is written with an agenda to highlight one side of the story and strip hope and humanity from those that are being dominated. What is noted and purposefully written out of history is a site of pain and trauma for groups that are being erased and whose experiences are invalidated through the rejection of truthful documentation. But fear to face that history only aids in the silencing and invisibility of those stories. We have to put in the work to remember, rewrite, and tell those stories. Morales speaks of the curandera historian that can “research, reinterpret, and popularize new visions of history” (5). She calls for a “medicinal history” that can be a “legacy of pride, hope and rebellion from ordinary
people’s lives” (5). Susy Zepeda would support Morales as she proposes that through oral and visual storytelling marginalized communities can reclaim and reconstruct their own holistic narratives in the medium they choose to. Zepeda claims that a queer Xicana Indigena methodology of remembering creates a disruption of colonial legacies and creates space for decolonized alternatives (Zepeda, 2014). As Cassie P. Steele argues, “Healing from memory means re-membering the split aspects of our existence, re-claiming, the goodness of our bodies, and our spirits, and re-storing to us the ability to use creativity as power: the power to create and not to destroy, the power to empower and not to oppress, the power to envision and not to blind” (11). From these spaces of breakage we radiate potential for the claiming of our whole selves, one that acknowledges the tears and scars of the violence inflicted on them, one that does not erase or sugarcoat the past, present, or future but one that can imagine the ability to breathe and exist as their true selves.

Cuando te dicen?

*When do they tell you- you are not valid?*

*That who you are is wrong*

*Que la cultura mas bella that runs through your veins is poisonous*

*When were you broken?*

*When were you hurt?*

*Do you remember?*

*Remember how to re-member?*
Recuerda!

Recuerda tus antepasados

Recuerda tu historia

Recuerda quien eres

No dejes que te borren

Murals as a Tool of Cultural Recovery and Heteropatriarchal Critique

Murals were a widely popular political artistic medium throughout the late 1960s and 1970s. The U.S. civil rights movement along with the Mexican mural renaissance prompted the motivation and urgency for cultural expression from Chicana/o and Latina/o communities fighting for justice, self-determination, and equity. Their works served the larger public, the communities they identified with rather than mainstream art institutions. Murals were created from a *third space* with the hope to reclaim cultural identity and push back on the American melting pot narrative that promotes the erasure of distinct cultures and the blending into a homogenous Eurocentric Protestant mainstream. (Jackson, 2009). They provided the platform to publically recover and reclaim a cultural identity that was violently erased by American nationalists that saw brown and black folk as a threat to the white identity.

Chicana/o artists reclaimed and developed a new politically conscious identity by referencing their indigenous forms of knowledge, technique, concept and style that they were taught to despise. Their murals were politically engaged and referenced their indigenous roots through images and a community focused process. Carlos Jackson notes
that, “One distinguishing aspect of Chicano muralism was that unlike the Mexican mural
renaissance, which was supported by a revolutionary government and often executed in
prominent government buildings, Chicano murals were painted in predominantly
Mexican American barrios or working-class communities” (75). They were used as a
form to engage and educate their audience about their own untold history. The use of
murals as a form of communication, of telling, of speaking can be traced to
Mesoamerican roots. Murals were understood to permit their audience to read on the
walls a meaning for their lives on earth, to be reflective of their true lived experiences. A
speaking mural can be academic, discursive, and performative all at once; it is a wall with
tongues.

Another important element of Chicana/o muralism is that the mural is often not an
exhibition of an individual’s artistic expression, but rather a community based
collaborative project. Collaborative creation is a way of giving the entire community
ownership of the mural that is meant to serve them. Community engagement is
encouraged in order to create a piece of work that rightly expresses the needs and culture
of the community the mural will continue to live in. Chicana/o muralists would make the
effort to seek out the community views and begin a dialogue with the community before
crafting a mural vision. It is important that the mural accurately reflects the community
and their social and cultural conditions. Chicana/o murals paint a narrative true to a
cultural experience by including voices and images present in the community. Though
inclusion in the practice was not always central to the history of muralist’s work.
**Gendering Mural Work**

The heteropatriarchal gendered hierarchy that existed within Chicano Movement activism at times was recreated within Chicano art and muralist culture. Chicana activists were physically present but discursively absent. Women were erased from the history of the movement or understood to be a secondary participant. Similarly, women were never considered to take on the role as a muralist or were rather expected to take on the role of assistant to a male muralist. However, Perlita R. Dicochea notes that, “Historical evidence provided by Vicki L. Ruiz in *From Out of the Shadows* and Emma Perez in *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* in the late 1990s proved that Mexican and Mexican American women have always been involved in their communities” (77). So why weren’t Chicana women being recognized? Why wasn’t their work and active role in the community being acknowledged? Emma Pérez notes that women were considered a backdrop to the social and political lives of men, “unseen, unthought, merely a shadow in the background of the colonial mind” (7, 1999).

In 1979 Bridget Wynne identified the exclusions that lead Chicanas to a third space when she noted, “The contradictions between El Movimiento's demands for equality and freedom, and many Chicanos' sexism, as well as the contradictions between the Women's Liberation Movement's similar demands and many of its members' racism, created a situation in which politically active Chicanas have had to struggle to be heard, while everyone but Chicanas has told them what their experiences are and how they should be working to make changes” (10). These movements shaped the way Chicanas navigated through culturally and politically charged spaces and gave insight to whose voices and issues were at the forefront: those of Chicano men and white women. In
response to the continuous exclusion and silencing, Chicanas began to work from a *third space*. The *third space* offered Chicanas the availability to tap into the various intersections of their identity; the parts of themselves they were told to switch off dependent on the spaces they were a part of. Too gendered for the Chicano Movement. Too raced for the Women’s Movement. It allowed them to work outside of the constraints society, movements, and men had placed on them, and gave room for possibility. The possibility to create with all parts of their identity.

As Guisela Latorre puts it, “Chicano identity as initially defined by el movimiento, was static, finite, and clearly delineated along masculinist lines” (177). Murals produced by male artist were intended to function as discourse for the liberation of the entire Chicano community but women were often left on the margins or completely out of the image; thus deeming gendered issues as least important to the movement’s goals. Mural work was seen as a male art form that demanded great physical strength and strenuous hours. Instead “women’s” work was understood to take place in the sidelines and only as support to the men who were presumed to lead the movement. Latorre notes that during the 1970s it was difficult for Chicana muralists to work independently or find community with other women artists. They found that in order to be successful or recognized in the field their only way to get a foot in the door was through the help of their male peers. Men took up the seats at the table and the only women involved were their romantic partners; it was extremely difficult to be included in the community without being romantically involved with men in heterosexual relationships. Thus, women’s visible presence on scaffolding for hours on end depicting gendered, political, cultural images declared to the community a resistance to their historical erasing.
Y cuando me vean ellos diran “Oye quien es ella?”

Como si no siempre estuve aquí

Como si no estuve gritando

Como si no tuve voz

Como si no caminaron sobre mi espalda

Como que quien?

Ella es todo

Por qué no la viste?

In *Walls of Empowerment: Chicana/o Indigenist Murals of California*, art historian Guisela Latorre argues that Chicana/Latina feminist murals become a “powerful vehicle for social and political mobilization as well as an effective tool for gender and patriarchal critique” (179). Chicana feminist activists that called out the movement’s obvious sexism and hyper-masculine drive, “…challeng[ed] masculinist aesthetics not by direct militant action but rather through the introduction of new iconography that placed women at the center of the decolonization process” (Latorre,178). Their artwork showcased the intersections of identity including acknowledging an inclusion of gender, Afro-Latinidad, and sexuality. They also revealed a spiritual component rooted in
Chicanos’ indigenous heritage. This is visible in the Mujeres Muralistas’ *Latinoamerica* mural as well as in *MaestraPeace*.

**The Gendered Politics of Las Mujeres Muralistas’ 1974 *Latinoamerica* Mural**

Las Mujeres Muralistas were a Chicana/Latina women’s muralist art collective based in San Francisco that organized in the 1970s. The original collective consisted of Patricia Rodriguez, Graciela Carrillo, Irene Perez, and Consuelo Mendez with others joining in later, including Ester Hernandez. While attending the San Francisco Art Institute Patricia Rodriguez met and roomed with Graciela Carrillo in Balmy Alley, home to the most concentrated collection of murals in San Francisco. The Mission District’s culturally rich and ethnically diverse community flourished with art that brought to life the narratives of the neighborhood. Stunned by the lack of women’s representation not only in mural production but in the images depicted, Rodriguez and Carrillo set out and painted their first mural on a garage door across the alley from the apartment they shared (Jackson, 2009). Their bond and connection through art and identity and their urgency to create space for women became the groundwork for the founding of Las Mujeres Muralistas; later inviting both Consuelo Mendez, a Venezuelan born artist and Irene Perez, a Chicana graphic artist to join the original members of the collective. As the only Latinas at the Art Institute, both Rodriguez and Carrillo continuously craved for a collective of women artists that supported and grew with one another. Las Mujeres Muralistas created that *third space* for them to talk through their experiences as Latina women in full tongue through art, not only for themselves but for their community that
lacked intersectional images that reflected their identities in a neighborhood they called home.

This collective of women artists empowered Chicanas in el Movimiento, and challenged the sexist and stereotypical notions that women were physically not able and politically not meant to create murals that existed within the Chicano Art Movement. As a group that pioneered large-scale women painted murals and sought to centralize the work and experience of women within public discourse, their murals challenged the image of Latin American women and expanded what it meant to be Latinx. Las Mujeres Muralistas brought public attention to gender ideologies and rejected patriarchal norms. Prominent Mujeres Muralistas member Patricia Rodriguez commented on the group's work saying,

"The statements that we made were very feminine and we got a lot of criticism because we weren’t doing soldiers with guns, weren’t doing revolutionary figures. We were painting women. Women in the marketplace, women breastfeeding, women doing art. People got really angry that we were doing that. ‘How could you do this when there’s so much going on?’ but we were saying that being a woman is a revolution in society” (P. Rodriguez, Eternal Queens, 2013).

By reconfiguring traditional icons, challenging patriarchal gender roles, and asserting women’s power Las Mujeres Muralistas complicated the image Chicano nationalists tried to push forward. They, instead, demanded that viewers acknowledge that the personal is political. That the Latinx experience in America and transnationally is a political one. Their call to celebrate indigeneity, transnational solidarity, and afro-latino roots was a political statement. In making their political statements public and community centered, Las Mujeres Muralistas worked from and created a third space that draws an audience to communally reclaim their identity and sense of self. Their mural created space for those
that came into contact with it to sit with their history, sit with their intersecting identities, reclaim their wholeness, and begin to heal. Publically. Unapologetically.

Space, site, and location were critical to the production of the mural. As community artists, Las Mujeres Muralistas strived for their works to reflect and incorporate the community in which the mural was meant to serve. They felt there needed to be a relationship and conversation between the mural and its environment in order for there to be a truthful representation of the lived experiences of its community members. As Latorre puts it, for Chicana/o muralists, “Site specificity functioned under the assumption that the space in which art resides is neither innocent nor devoid of meaning but rather laden with dynamics of signification and, as such, is necessarily complicit with its location” (15). The Mujeres Muralistas mural similarly reflected the energy of its’ location and simultaneously attempted to positively transform it.

Las Mujeres Muralistas’ first publically commissioned mural, Latinoamerica, (Figure 1) was located on Mission Street in San Francisco and produced in 1974. The team for this piece included four lead artists, Patricia Rodriguez, Graciela Carrillo, Consuelo Mendez, and Irene Perez with assistance from Tuti Rodriguez, Miriam Olivas, Xochitl Nevel- Guerrero, and Ester Hernandez. The 70 foot long by 25 foot high mural was painted for the Mission Model Cities organization and was a “homage to Latin America and [a] critical response to circumstances in the United States” (Cordova, 357). The mural was used as an outlet to express and represent the community at a time in which the Mission district was gradually transitioning into a predominantly Latino barrio. The completion of the mural by an all woman team became a statement to the ability and space for women muralists.
The mural itself depicts llamas native to the Andes, Peruvian pipe players, a group of Venezuelan Yare devils, a central holy image of a family in an Indian sun design, a tuiui bird native to the Pantanal of Brazil, a Bolivian diablada figure, and an Aztec fifth sun casting its light on a princess and warrior figure with maguey plants and cornstalk framing the entire mural (Cordova, 2006). Latinoamerica served as a mural that allowed viewers to connect with their homeland and urged them to maintain cultural traditions. The mural connected the experiences and sought to build community amongst Latinx folks by representing indigenous Mexican women, Bolivian and Venezuelan devil dancers, Afro-Latinas, and symbols of life and fertility rooted in Navajo, Mayan, and Central American cultures (Davalos, 2001). In representing the plurality of the Latinx identity, the mural served as a working space for those interacting with the mural to come together and reclaim their identity.

Though the mural did not overtly reference issues of social justice and colonization the same way other Chicano artists would have, through the celebration of rich indigenous cultures their call for viewers to reclaim and remember their Latin American indigenous roots introduced a different approach to the culturally political issues. They centered the need for healing and re-membering of self through “the survival of various cultures in spite of Spanish colonialism” (Cordova, 367). For a group of people that were colonized and force fed the narrative that whiteness was most beautiful and valuable by not only their colonizers but by their own community, it was powerful for Chicanas to claim the indigenous and Afro-mestizo heritage of Latin America. The images of various devil figures in the mural were one of the references to indigenous and African cultures of Latin America. The towering red figure wearing a snake-adorned
devils mask to the right of the mural is depicted in an “intricate costume traditional to the ‘supay’ figures of carnival in Oruro, Bolivia” (Cordova, 368). His presence is a reference to the devil’s dance that emerged from enslaved indigenous and African miners. The devil figures to the left in bright red costumes and colorful masks portray the Venezuelan Yare devils, who is also rooted in African, Indigenous, and Spanish cultures. The mural simultaneously called out and attempted to engage the viewer in a conversation on colorism and self-hatred of denying their own African roots produced by colonial ideals in our own communities and on our own people.

Central to their practice was not creating one narrative but a series of narratives and voices in conversation with each other, a collective dialogue. Las Mujeres Muralistas did not attempt to create a collective style, rather they exhibited the way their different style’s ability to live harmoniously on a wall can mirror coalition building; unified by subjectivity yet still leaving room for individual approaches and representations. In Latinoamerica, “the mixing of their different artistic styles enhanced the group’s vision of cultural diversity” (Ochoa, 40). The artist were able to keep their own style and voice and create a community narrative whose different sections of the mural spoke in conversation with each other. They sought to build solidarity by linking diverse groups of “Third World” coalition. By including figures that referenced the Latin American Diaspora and indigenous roots through images such as the Aztecan figures on the far right, Peruvian musicians on the far left, and Navajo sun star in the center of the mural, Las Mujeres Muralistas highlight the need for community organizing and solidarity building between Latinos and Native Americans in the United States (Cordova, 2006). As Cary Cordova notes, “In representing the African and Indian roots of Latin America, the
mural visually articulated the need for recognizing the shared concerns of African American, Native American, and Latino residents in the United States” (369).

Las Mujeres Muralistas were criticized for not being political enough and not choosing to highlight the death and starvation in Latin America or the oppression of women but as Irene Pérez responded, “our interest as artists is to put art close to where it needs to be” (Latorre, 208). They were expected to be political in a more direct way like the men muralists of that time that painted images of war and violence; but they took a more nuanced and subtle approach. They chose to paint images that referenced a decolonial imagination; returning to their roots and traditions. As a collective of Chicana women in the 70s their mere existence was also a political statement. Climbing scaffolds day after day to paint a 25-foot high mural was a political statement. They works rejected the notion that there was not a space for women muralist. Their works were created from a third-space; through their decolonial imaginary they asserted their agency within the nationalist movement and chose not to reproduce the images of dominant masculinity that were being circulated. Instead, Las Mujeres Muralistas created a space in which one can reflect and reconnect with the beauty of their indigenous roots and traditions. As Latorre notes, “By depicting indigenous figures from various regions in Latin America, Las Mujeres Muralistas pushed the limits of the Indigenist vocabulary utilized by Chicano artists by creating imagery that not only transcended Aztec/Maya archetypes more commonly seen in California community murals, but also gave greater agency to the role women played in indigenous cultures” (186).

Latinoamerica’s emphasis on ceremony, celebration, caretaking, harvest urged the viewer to exist in the third space they created and re-present who they are, where they
came from, and what it means to be in solidarity cross-culturally with colonized peoples. As a group of women of color that were not offered a space to exist and create their stories, Las Mujeres Muralistas had to find spaces of their own where they could claim their experiences as whole beings. Their mural became this space, became the *third space*, became *neplantla*. Their mural gave them and those that came into contact with it a place to heal, to be healed, and help others heal with them.

**Spiritual, Generational, and Transnational Healing in *MaestraPeace* 1994**

*MaestraPeace* (Figure 2) is a monumentally elaborate and detailed mural covering two walls of the five-stories tall Women’s Building in the Mission District of San Francisco. The mural was created and completed in 1994 by a team of seven women muralists: Juana Alicia, Miranda Bergman, Edythe Boone, Susan Kelk Cervantes, Meera Desai, Yvonne Littleton and Irene Perez. Chicana artists, Juana Alicia and Irene Perez both worked with Las Mujeres Muralistas at some point in their careers; Perez being one of the original members of the collective. The culturally, ethnically, and sexually diverse team of women designed a mural that celebrated transnational feminisms and the contributions of women across cultures and time. The collective of women created a vibrant piece and “seized the opportunity to reclaim women’s history with openly, powerful images from women’s culture that patriarchal societies have long suppressed” (Scott, 1995).

Rooted in the tradition of Chicano artwork, the mural represented the demographic of the community in which it served. Latorre claims that, mural’s relationship to site and its symbolic implications is one of the most significant
connections between muralism and indigenism. Latorre references scholar Steven Leuthold who claims indigenous aesthetics are deeply rooted in space consciousness and rests upon social ties and a profound sense of place more than any other particular medium, style, or subject matter (Latorre, 2008). The MaestraPeace collective had a sense of responsibility toward the place, its community, and its environment. Thus, they sought out the qualities and characteristics that were present and worked off of those details while not interfering with the space’s natural qualities; noting that “the practice of transforming and manipulating natural spaces is one closely aligned with colonialist and imperialist enterprises” (Latorre, 15). The collective was aware of the colonial implications of disturbing and destroying a communities natural environment and instead actively sought out to engage and work with the community and space rather than disrupt the natural dynamics of space and place. As Micaela Diaz-Sanchez puts it, “In the context of MaestraPeace, the visual manifestation of African and Indigenous iconographies speak to the multiracial and multicultural communities of the Mission District.” (175) It is a site-specific piece that is very much so a product of the historically multicultural, immigrant influenced, artist-rich Mission District in the San Francisco Bay Area. As a public piece, it is an accessible form or artwork that people of all economic backgrounds can appreciate. The mural becomes a forum for the masses using the public environment as a museum for the people.

Susy J. Zepeda, in her article “Queer Xicana Indigena Cultural Production: Remembering through Oral and Visual Storytelling”, puts forward the theory of indigenismo that is “reflective of our working-class backgrounds, and how we realize that we have to work together as a whole and that each of us has our strengths and we can
build upon that” (121). Like Zepeda, the MaestraPeace collective valued the making of murals collaboratively because it provided an environment in which they could teach one another and tackle a meaningful project that addressed issues that concerned all as a community. In Research as Ceremony, Shaw Wilson argues that through a creating of relationships and understanding of what each person brings into a space we are able to hold each other and ourselves accountable when producing communal knowledge (Wilson, 2008). The critiques of hierarchy and individualism are central to the shaping of the process as spiritual, ceremonial and community based (Zepeda, 2014). We need to transform the privatization of healing, the illusion that our struggles are also private and separate. We need to understand how we can support one another. Collaboration is the manifestation of ceremony. With a community centered focus an individual can create an art piece that not only helps themselves, but the reader/viewer, and the larger community as well.

MaestraPeace serves as a body of healing work in which the process strived to not be damaging or exclusive. Instead the piece was a testament to community involvement and artistic collaboration; the Women’s Building administration sent out a questionnaire to the community and compiled their answers in order to truly create a piece by and for the community. The diverse group of women worked from the communities responses and exemplified the importance and power in coalition building. The mural’s diverse representation showcases the possibility of having an engaging dialogue with all voices present without overstepping and invisibilizing one another. MaestraPeace offers us an image of our interwoven human origins, and our increasingly re-entwined, joyous, creative future. The mural embraces various spiritualties of
numerous traditions represented in San Francisco’s multicultural communities and does so without prioritizing one over the other. Through the images of *MaestraPeace*, the mural “interrupt[s], rather than reinforce[s], patriarchal interpretations” of the powerful deities (Pérez, 59, 2007). As Anzaldúa proposes, the work of *mestiza consciousness* is to break down the idea of a singular subject and instead allow space for the complexities, contradictions, and coexistence. Anzaldúa challenges us to fight back against the dominant narratives and empower ourselves by putting *mestiza consciousness* into practice in the flesh, mind, and in our works.

The mural façade facing Eighteenth Street showcases two female figures that represent the African and Native American ethnicities extending their hands towards each other (Figure 4). Like *Latinoamerica*, *MaestraPeace* urged its’ community to see how our struggles are intersecting, how we can offer each other support, and how as a collective we are a stronger force. Above the two figures is the Goddess of Light and Creativity with a womb revealing a fetus of a girl that represents the future generations of enlightened women. The Goddess, who holds the sun in her hands, serves as an example of the strength women possess to control their own destinies. Her womb is then shown releasing the water of life and flows throughout the entire façade and turns into Celtic textile on one side and Samoan fabric on the other. At ground level there are images of four children representing the four largest continents so that the children who visit the mural can interact with these figures and see themselves in the work.

The Lapidge façade (Figure 3) provides a larger canvas to be filled with images of historical and mythical female figures that have greatly impacted world history. The images not only highlight the contributions of these various women but also explain how
they connect with one another across national borders, racial lines, and class hierarchies (Latorre, 2008). On this wall are figures of former U.S. Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders, UFW activist Jessica Govea, and Mexican curandera Maria Sabrina, all women who excel in the health profession. The various types of healers served as a model to the different approaches one can take for their healing work, not one more favorable over the other. Rather, *MaestraPeace* highlights the woman’s healing power of wisdom and the importance in acknowledging that healing is not linear, healing does not look the same for everyone, and emphasizes the generational, transnational, and spiritual support one has. The public mural is a third space that offers itself up to a viewer to enter and sit in their pain, publically, with the backing of the powerful women depicted.

Depicted, central to the façade, with hands reaching forward is Nobel Peace Prize-winning Guatemalan Indian human rights activist, Rigoberta Menchú Tum. Painted by Juana Alicia and Susan Cervantes, Menchú is depicted in traditional Quiché Maya huipil. In her palms she carries “the figures of Yemayá, African diasporic goddess of salt water, and Coyolxauhqui, the Aztec moon goddess” (Pérez, 63, 2007). The figures embody different spaces of healing, Yemayá through water and Coyolxauhqui through earth healing remedies such as the aloe plant. Juana Alicia explains that both figures represent resistance to the oppressive structures that effect them, claiming that, “Yemayá embodies resistance to slavery during the Middle Passage and beyond, and Coyolxauhqui symbolizes defiance to patriarchy and war” (Pérez, 63, 2007). Chicana artist Irene Perez painted the Coyolxauhqui figure. Unlike the traditional composition, in which Coyolxauhqui is dismembered, Perez depicts Coyolxauhqui pieced back together in full figure breaking away from that stone that constrains her. Latorre explains, “Perez
empowers Coyolxauhqui not only through the subversion of the ancient text and image, but also by depicting her with paintbrushes in hand, an indication of the artist’s self-indication with this tarnished figure of Mexican cosmology” (203). The Aztec deity serves as a model reference of the strength and power of women to do the work of healing and the piecing back together of self. Coyolxauhqui signifies the cultural rebirth of the Chicana struggling to free herself from oppressive gender roles. Cherrie Moraga argues that, “she is la fuerza femenina our attempt to pick up our fragments of our dismembered womanhood and reconstitute ourselves” (Moraga, 74). Her connection to healing is extremely explicit in MaestraPeace as she is seen bursting through in victory.

Yemayá, painted by Juana Alicia, is seen emerging from waves of water victoriously. Yemayá is understood to be the mother of all orisas, a powerful African deity associated with the sea and moon. Latorre notes that “like other Santeria orisas and many indigenous figures in the Americas, Yemayá has become a somewhat politicized symbol of resilience and resistance to colonization and slavery” (229). Like Anzaldúa, MaestraPeace calls for us to expand our mestiza consciousness and question whom and what the borders inflicted on us, and those we put up ourselves, include and exclude. Explicitly linking African lineage in contemporary Chicana/o communities showcases the series of crossings we find ourselves in. Urging the viewer to work from these points of departure, question their own colonial practices of erasure, and work to piece together “our Indian lineage, our afro-mestisaje, our history of resistance” (Anzaldúa, 86).

The placement of the three powerful figures in conversation with one another serves as an example “of the historical alliances and associations between Black and Brown/ indigenous peoples in the Americas” (Latorre, 230). The piece highlights the
strength in the building of relationships between other historically oppressed communities and the space it provides to re-member one’s self. As Morales puts it, “Healing takes place in community, in the telling and the bearing witness, in the naming of trauma and in the grief and rage and defiance that follow” (6). Unlike typical ideologies that homogenize and blend out cultural specificity through multiculturalism, the artist of MaestraPeace aimed to establish social relations in which the different participating entities could function effectively. They worked to reflect the multifaceted image of the community and its cross-cultural members with hopes that it would piece together a peoples that share the same scars in order for us to rebuild and heal together.

**Conclusion**

The presence of de-privatized community healing amongst mural works is central to the pieces created by Las Mujeres Muralistas and the MaestraPeace collective of women. Their works served as spaces in which the community could visit and see themselves represented, see their histories being celebrated, and gave room to re-member themselves and their community. Latinoamerica disrupted the hyper masculine images that excluded and misrepresented women being circulated by Chicano artists in the 1970s. The mural created by Las Mujeres Muralistas instead celebrated the varying narratives of the Latino identity including our African and indigenous roots and urged for cross-cultural solidarity. Through positively representing their indigenous roots, the mural created space for the viewer to come into contact with their erased history, break from a colonial understanding of themselves and allow a piecing together of body, self, and mind. The emphasis on community organizing and solidarity is also seen in
MaestraPeace as the collective referenced figures from various cultures to create a piece that celebrated the role of all women. The mural showcased various prominent women figures that despite it all created space for themselves and their community.

MaestraPeace challenges a singular privatized idea of healing and welcomes the viewer to define their own healing and depicts the lineage of women and community that are on the journey of healing with them.

Both pieces, whether intentionally or not, were sites that allowed for their community to heal. To reclaim their narrative and to do so within their community, in solidarity with others. Latinoamerica chose to do so by presenting a narrative that showcased the beauty in Latinx indigeniety, a history that faced the threat of erasure by colonial ideals. The mural called the viewer to remember their history and by doing so simultaneously re-member their selves. MaestraPeace did so by representing powerful women figures that exemplified the community of women that offer support to the viewer through the work they had done in order for themselves to embark on a healing journey with a community.

Latinoamerica and MaestraPeace were both created by collectives of women that strived to create space for all intersections of their community to have reason and hope. Much like Shawn Wilson speaks of research, “there is motive” when we do art and it is for “emotional reasons. That is the engine that drives us” (52). Art that is done from a space of brokenness has purpose that is rooted in love and hope. Hope that one day we can be whole again and that one day we can define that wholeness for ourselves.
When I feel like giving up, I remember that I am not just doing this for me but for everyone that has come before me

Those who sacrificed everything so I could achieve something

Those who spent their lives building the steps for me to climb

The women that made bridges of their backs

I think about how they brought me, despite it all

Survived, despite it all

This is about us

We are not alone

We must endure

Reflection

Throughout the journey of creating this body of work I found myself experiencing and working through the concepts I had for so long theorized, read about, believed in. I realized that I had been so drawn to the creation of art as a form of resistance, collaborative work, community centering, community building, relationships, remembering, pain, herstory, spirituality, healing because of my desperate need for them. The need to face my own pain. The need to not do it alone. The need to create. The need for community healing. I had to move beyond the “what if’s” and “que pasa cuando’s” of the poetry I wrote and choose to acknowledge my own traumas. So I chose to face my brokenness, the pain. And to do it with love. To be soft, gentle, and compassionate with myself throughout the process. But to also be honest. To push myself to do the work. To be accountable and not give up so easily on myself and the work that means so much to
me. Most importantly I chose not to do it alone. To surround myself with community. To engage, work with one another. To create from a place of brokenness, give space for something new, full of life, beautiful.

It was a difficult process to say the least. I had felt so isolated. My research and work centered the de-privatization of healing and the importance and strength in community work, and yet I sat in my senior thesis carrel barricaded by the wooden panels that separated me from the students on either side going through the same process. We were all together yet so distant. The blank word document would continuously torment me; its harsh brightness of white blinding me, it would stare back waiting to be filled with life; yet I couldn’t seem to form any words. I couldn’t seem to find the voice to ask for help. The process of tackling such an important piece of work and fearing minimalizing the true impact in the art created by women of color overcame me. I felt paralyzed. Alone. It took weeks of sulking and continuously building my own anxiety, for me to realize that this work had such great potential to reflect the theories I studied; for it to be created from the third space. For it to be written in “full tongue” and for it to be honest. Honest about the spirit, pain, humanity that these women of color artists put into their work and into their communities. To be honest about all that they contribute to this work, to acknowledge their involvement, our community.

Acknowledgements

This piece of work is a love letter to myself, to my people, to the practice of healing and hopes to claim wholeness. This thesis is in honor of all the women of color activists, artists, cultural workers that have created space in a world that doesn’t make
room for them to be whole. This is for all my brown and black hermanxs that have had their tongues torn and history taken from them. To all the ancestors that came before me and made seeds of their bodies. Soy quien soy por ti. Esto no es sólo para mí sino para nosotros. This is for my mother, mi vida de mi corazón, whose held me in softness for all my life. For my father, sister, brother, abuelas, abuelos, tías, tíos, y primos. It has been the hardest four years of my life being separated from you, but know that I’ve held you close to my heart every second of the way.

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Works Cited


Images

Figure 1: “Latino America,” 1974. Las Mujeres Muralistas. Mission Street between 25th and 26th Streets, San Francisco. Approx. 25’ x 70’.
Figure 2: Juana Alicia, Miranda Bergman, Irene Pérez, Yvonne Littleton, Meera Desai, Edythe Boone, and Susan Kelk Cervantes, 1994, Maestapeace, mural, San Francisco, California.

Figure 3: Juana Alicia, Miranda Bergman, Irene Pérez, Yvonne Littleton, Meera Desai, Edythe Boone, and Susan Kelk Cervantes, 1994, Maestapeace, mural, Lapidge Street façade, San Francisco, California.
Figure 4: Juana Alicia, Miranda Bergman, Irene Pérez, Yvonne Littleton, Meera Desai, Edythe Boone, and Susan Kelk Cervantes, 1994, Maestapeace, mural, Valencia Street façade, San Francisco, California.

Figure 5: Juana Alicia, Miranda Bergman, Irene Pérez, Yvonne Littleton, Meera Desai, Edythe Boone, and Susan Kelk Cervantes, 1994, Maestapeace, mural, Lapidge Street façade, San Francisco, California.

Figure 6: Juana Alicia, Miranda Bergman, Irene Pérez, Yvonne Littleton, Meera Desai, Edythe Boone, and Susan Kelk Cervantes, 1994, Maestapeace, mural, Lapidge Street façade, San Francisco, California.