

Female Narratives: Analyzing the Depiction of Women in Chicano Park

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The history of strong patriarchal structures in our world has its fingerprints in many aspects of life as we know it, from political institutions, to societal norms and expectations, to art and culture. Because of this, women's stories are often told by men. This study explores the art murals in San Diego's Chicano Park, and in particular, analyzes the narrative that is being told about the women of the Chicano movement in the 1960s in Southern California. Through content analysis, this study analyzes each of the artworks in the park, assessing the role of women in each piece. Contrary to what I hypothesize, this study found that women are featured in the park's artwork more than one might expect. The research will advance the field of study connected to the experiences of women of color in social movements in the United States, commenting specifically on the depiction of Chicana women found in the park.

Introduction

Women of color have long joined men in their efforts against racism, but have often faced sexism within the movement, despite the movement's goal of equality (Garcia 1991). This gender-based discrimination prevents the experiences of women from being fully heard and understood and often ostracizes them from decision-making spaces. Additionally, after the movement fades, women of color are often depicted in ways that taint their role in a movement (Garcia 1991). As society continues to push towards equality, it is important to recognize the stories and doings of women and to honor their bodies for how they have fought for, protected, and cared for their communities.

The creation of Chicano Park near downtown San Diego stemmed from student uprisings in Berkeley, California. The uprisings are a consequence of the complex relationship between America's acceptance and denial of Mexican residents in the United States, which has been a historically tumultuous cycle (Lovell 2018). Prior to 1924, with labor shortages stagnating the country's growth, Mexicans migrated to the United States to provide labor. However, the 1930's

marked a time of deportations of Mexican people out of the United States. Despite the growing Chicano community in the United States, the 1930s saw a wave of deportations of Mexican people from the country, leading many to seek refuge in places such as Barrio Logan, San Diego, where a vibrant Chicano community was emerging.

Many Chicano (a Mexican native living in the United States) people chose to reside in Barrio Logan, San Diego. They created a community of 20,000 Chicanos, which was “the second largest Chicano community in the U.S.” Understandably, Barrio Logan became an especially prominent place to the Chicano population. However, when the city of San Diego began to grow in population and development needs, city leaders started to try to push Chicanos out of Barrio Logan. The city wanted to create more highways and take over the neighborhood and tension began to grow among Chicanos and city leaders. Chicanos claimed the land under the Coronado Bridge as theirs, painting murals on the pillars of the bridge that depicted the history of Chicano people and the movement. This area became known as Chicano Park (Ryan 1992).

This research will serve to offer an analysis of the realities and representation of Chicana women and will take an in depth look at the history and experiences of those within San Diego’s Chicano Park and the movement that took place there. It will also serve to offer an analysis of the realities and representation of Chicana women. Are these women represented correctly? Are they memorialized in the same, honoring way as their male counterparts? When social movements are depicted in the art, is one gender memorialized more than another?

Statement of Research Question

Research Question

Women in Chicano Park played a pivotal role in the establishment and creation of the park, often giving their bodies over in efforts to protect the land the park resides on and to help create the park (Lovell 2018). When claiming their voice to decision-making in the park, Chicana women found themselves fighting two battles. The first was a battle against racism, which Chicana women fought alongside their Chicano brothers to occupy the land under the Coronado Bridge as a memorial site. Chicana women also had to fight to have authority in how the park was going to be created. These women were often omitted from decision making processes concerning the art in the park, the layout of the park, and other key elements (Garcia 1991). According to Collins (2000), women of color face marginalization not only from white individuals, but also from men of their own ethnic or racial group. This intersectional experience of marginalization highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by women of color in achieving equitable representation and participation in decision-making processes. Feminist theories center around the idea that there is a historically general understanding that men are superior to women, which has created prejudice around women. This inequality has led to the marginalization and misrepresentation of women (Lumen Learning). My research question, grounded in this theory, is: *What narrative does the art in Chicano Park tell about women?*

Positionality

When conducting research in a community that is not my own, I must recognize my identity and proceed with caution. As Holmes (2020) states, positionality is the awareness that my identity as someone outside of the group I am studying has the power to inform my study. It is never my intention to harm or do a disservice to the topic I am researching and the people it

involves. I, as a white American woman, am conducting research on the art created by a community of Mexican men and women. I am not here to judge the art's morality, but rather to empirically study a question that has been raised by the Chicana community (Lovell 2018). The research I conduct is not to judge whether the art is inherently good or bad in what it depicts. Instead, my research seeks to objectively assess the depiction of women in the art. I place no judgment on these depictions but hope to offer these descriptions to the Chicana community and allow them to use it to guide their claims if they would like.

Literature Review

There is a large body of academic literature on sexism, racism, and art representation in the United States. A large body of academic literature describes and explains the experiences of Black people in their struggle for equality. There are strong parallels in the struggle for equal rights in America amongst various ethnic groups and there is much to learn from this history. This literature review will cover the experiences of Chicanas in Chicano Park, the experiences of Black women in the Civil Rights movement, machismo culture, and overall art representation on a global scale.

Experience of Chicanas in Chicano Park

The creation of Chicano Park was no doubt a male dominated movement. It is within this environment that women grew to understand that they were being marginalized within their own community. Not only were Chicana women fighting against racism alongside their Chicano brothers, they also had to 'fight' their own Chicano brothers against sexism. In other words, within the Chicano movement, women were fighting two massive battles – against both racism and sexism (Rodriguez 2000). Women grew frustrated with men as they claimed to liberate the

park, undermining the work of women in claiming the territory (Lovell 2018). In this soil is where Chicana feminism emerged as Chicanas increasingly understood that they were not rendered as equals in the Chicano Park movement (Rodriguez 2000).

Despite this marginalization, Chicana women played a significant role in the creation of the park, which Lovell describes as vast and important. There are several reports of women doing duties that are societally expected of women – for instance, cooking large meals for workers, cleaning around the park, and gardening. Along with these common duties are numerous instances where women led the movement and risked their own lives to protect the park. For example, there was a pivotal moment in the creation of Chicano Park where tensions were at an all-time high with San Diego city leaders. Intending to destroy the park, the city brought a bulldozer to tear down the murals and confiscate the land from the Chicano community. It was at this moment that Chicana women interlocked their arms and used their bodies to surround the bulldozer by creating a human chain. They maintained their chain-like form for hours, claiming that they would not budge until the city promised to leave the park alone (Chicano Park Steering Committee).

Lovell (2018) notes that Chicana bodies have also been used as roadblocks in the movement. Chicana women also laid bricks, lifted heavy objects, and worked with their hands in the intense heat. Women helped massively with raising funds for the park by going from shop to shop, asking for donations for the cause. Beyond manual labor, “women were key organizers and advocates, landscape and programming designers, as well as care workers within Peoples’ Parks, adding a new dimension to our knowledge of women's work in the counterculture as a medium for asserting political identity” (Lovell 2018). This highlights the crucial contributions of

Chicana women in the creation and maintenance of Chicano Park and the broader Chicano movement.

Despite the initial exclusion of women from creating art in Chicano Park, their vital role in the broader Chicano movement is emphasized by their significant contributions to the creation and maintenance of the park. Art in Chicano Park was initially only allowed to be created by men. Chicana women report that the first murals that men created memorialized men and misrepresented women in the movement. In conversation with Chicano leaders, women “complained that the representations of women – all painted by men – failed to depict the complexity of women’s experiences, the strength in women’s leadership and physical labor, and the beauty of brown skin tones in ways that had been captured in representations of men” (Lovell 2018, 106). Often, men were the centerpieces of the artwork, with women on the periphery gazing at the men. Women were depicted doing household chores, while men were shown with huge muscles, working the landscape. Women also often looked hypersexualized in the murals. Chicana women grew tired of this misrepresentation and brought their frustrations to light (Lovell 2018). When women voiced their complaints, they were met with a form of undermining from their Chicano brothers. Chicanas were accused of creating disunity within the Chicano movement, as they allegedly distracted the focus of the cause by claiming their own voices (Garcia 1991).

While the contribution of Chicanas to the Chicano movement is often overlooked, it is not the only example of marginalized groups being left out of the historical narrative. Similarly, the vital role that Black women played in the Civil Rights movement is often minimized or forgotten altogether. In this next paragraph, we will delve into the role of Black women in the Civil Rights movement and how their contributions have been underrepresented in history.

Experience of Black Women in the Civil Rights Movement

There are strong parallels between the experiences of women of color in the U.S. Civil Rights movement and the Chicano Park movement. Like Chicana women, Black women developed a group consciousness as they interacted with Black men in their collective fight against discrimination, segregation, and racism. This consciousness grew as Black women worked alongside men and realized that the movement lacked internal equality. It was in those efforts that they realized they were also fighting two battles – against racism with their Black brothers, and sexism both within and outside of the movement (Smith 2021). A feminist group in Boston released the following statement in 1974 in a debrief about the movement, “We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men against sexism” (Garcia 1991). Women in the movement noted that they were welcomed into the movement to help the men fight against racism, but they were relegated to behind-the-scenes tasks that stifled their full contributions. Women were left out of large meetings and were not allowed to be in gatherings that discussed policy and voting reforms. In many conventions about policy reform and the formulation of strategy, women were either not invited or they were only allowed to speak when given permission by a man (Katz 1976). In a 1963 interview, Ella Baker, a key advocate for civil rights and an organizer of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) discussed the sexism she faced as a leader in the movement, noting the silencing of women in committee meetings and the resistance that Black female advocates had from Black male leaders (Baker 1963). In short, Black women experienced similar discrimination and undermining from their Black brothers that Chicana women experienced. Black men did not listen to their pleas for equality within the movement, and women “were accused of disunity and were answered with scorn and ridicule” (Katz 1976).

Strong females were present in both the Chicano Park Movement and the Civil Rights movement. Literature regarding the experiences of women in the Civil Rights movement further proves that women of color are marginalized by both whites and by men within their own race and ethnicity.

Machismo Culture

Machismo culture is prevalent in Mexico and other Latin American countries. This cultural frame dictates the way both men and women are expected to act within society. Men are seen as the dominant and masculine leaders who are supposed to “prove their manliness, often by upholding their masculine and sexual dominance” (Mensa 2019). Machismo framework offers clear guidelines on professional and personal roles: men go to work and bring home the money, while women are confined to domestic duties. Women are pure, to be protected, and must care for the children. Women are soft, gentle, and motherly, while men are strong, strategic, and domineering. The duty of the man is to dominate and lead while the duty of the woman is to be submissive and to grant the man whatever he wishes. In machismo culture, power is often stripped away from women and handed over to men (Mensa 2019).

Art Representation

The representation of female artists around the world in public spaces is far inferior to that of male representation. A study conducted by researchers at Williams College in Massachusetts, found that white men “comprise 75.7% of all artists in our pool” (Topaz 2019). Their study looked at “individual, identifiable artists” in 18 of the most popular museums around the United States (Topaz 2019). Saltz (2007) looked specifically at the Museum of Modern Art and reported that the representation of female artists was not as high as that of male artists. He reported that only 15% of the works at The Whitney Museum of American Art are female

created. These statistics speak to the endemic and entrenched discrimination regarding female representation in both public and private spaces.

This literature review discusses the experiences of women of color, specifically Chicanas in Chicano Park and Black women in the Civil Rights movement. It highlights the parallel struggles of these women as they were fighting against racism and sexism simultaneously. Chicana women in the Chicano Park movement faced marginalization by their Chicano brothers and had to fight for their voices to be heard. Despite this, they played a crucial role in the creation and maintenance of the park, working on manual labor and fundraising, and leading the movement. Similarly, Black women in the Civil Rights movement played a vital role in changing racist policies, yet their contributions have been overshadowed by those of their male counterparts. They faced sexism within and outside the movement, but they persisted and fought for their voices to be heard. It is evident that Chicanas played a significant political role within the movement. They used their bodies to create and protect the park. Yet, to date, their history lacks representation or memorialization. My two hypotheses seek to argue that there has not been a notable shift in representation today in Chicano Park. If my hypotheses are found to be correct, this understanding of machismo culture could possibly explain the misrepresentation of women in Chicano Park. If true, it might be that the depictions seek to portray women in a more idyllic manner.

Hypotheses

Stemming from my research question, I propose two hypotheses that seek to answer my statement of inquiry.

Hypothesis I: The art in Chicano Park depicts women as passive, not engaging in the challenging work of creating the park.

Hypothesis II: The Chicano Park murals idolize the men of the movement, often shifting the focus away from the role of women in the creation of the park and centering the male and his efforts.

The first hypothesis concerns the representation of women in the park. Women played a significant role in the Chicano movement, and it is important to accurately depict their contributions in the park. The hypothesis aims to explore how women were marginalized and portrayed through the artwork. I do not expect the art to match the reality of the activity of women in the park, given the feminist theory previously stated.

The second hypothesis seeks to understand who is portrayed as central to the Chicano movement and who is celebrated as its hero in the artwork. Given that both men and women played integral roles in creating and preserving the park, it is important to recognize their equal contributions to the Chicano Park movement. Therefore, this hypothesis aims to investigate how the artwork in the park represents the contributions of both men and women, and how it honors their efforts.

My hypotheses stem from a place of theoretical knowledge on feminist theory and gender power. They mirror claims that have been voiced by the Chicana community, which has been discussed in the Literature Review.

Operationalization

Variables

The research conducted is descriptive in nature. It will not offer an explanatory relationship, where one variable is proposed as leading to the rise or fall of another variable, but rather will describe the variables in their context, with a focus on presence and frequency. The key variables in this study are passivity and centrality.

Operationalization

To measure whether women are being displayed as passive, I will look at the following indicators that can be described in a yes, no, or not applicable (N/A) manner. Are women engaging in manual labor? Women were gardeners, protestors, builders, protectors - do the images depict this labor? Are women seen sitting or lounging while men are working? To measure centrality, I will be looking at the spatial positioning of women in the mural or art piece. Are women placed on the sides of the piece? Are women gazing at a man (or men) as the central image? Do men appear to take up most space in the image?

Methodology

To measure the variables stated above, I used the quantitative method of content analysis to give me raw data on the murals in the park.

Content Analysis

The art pieces in Chicano Park are on the pillars and walls of the Coronado Bridge. This means that many are high up and are not easily seen at eye-level. Knowing this, I had a group of researchers analyze the artworks digitally – they are available online – so that they could take their time to zoom in on the images and see them clearly.

A 2015 survey of Chicano Park found 87 works of art. Since then, there have been 11 more added (University of San Diego 2015). These 11 have not yet been digitized and therefore

were not used in my study. I selected nine researchers to take part in my study. All nine researchers were sophomores, juniors, or seniors at Point Loma Nazarene University, each pursuing social sciences for their bachelor's degrees. I chose a varying range of ethnicities, ages, genders, and focuses of study represented in my group of researchers.

I set up my content analysis in the following way. To create some continuity, I made sure that each piece of art had two different people analyzing it. I divided up the 87 art pieces into nine different groups, each group containing 8-10 works of art. Each researcher looked at two different sets of these 8-10 artworks. I made nine Google Doc forms and made a copy of each so that each art piece had two different researchers perform content analysis on it (Appendix A). My researchers took a moment to look at each mural and then responded with either “YES,” “NO,” or “N/A,” to each statement listed below:

1. Women are placed on the sides of the art piece.
2. Women are gazing at a man (or men) as the central image.
3. Women are engaging in manual labor.
4. Women are seen sitting/lounging while men are working.
5. Men appear to take up the most space in the art piece.

“YES” to the statement indicated that the researcher agreed with the statement. “NO” to the statement indicated that the researcher did not agree with the statement. “N/A” indicated that either a woman, a man, or both a man and a woman were not present in the image, or that the statement could not be assessed.

Each researcher had several days to analyze their works of art and return the document back to me. Once I received the raw data, I inputted each answer into a Google Sheets form. On the top of the graph, I had ‘Researcher 1’ and ‘Researcher 2.’ On the left side of the graph was the number I assigned to each artwork. In each cell in the middle, I recorded the answer of the researchers.



Image 1: “Chicano Park Takeover” 1976 (USD 2015)

To understand how the researchers did content analysis on the murals in Chicano Park, I will go through the process with the data that they submitted. Two researchers viewed Image 1, “Chicano Park Takeover,” and compared the mural to the five statements. For the first statement, the researchers said “NO,” implying that women are not placed on the side of the mural. In the

middle of the mural, there is a woman standing with a shovel. On the top of the mural, there is a cluster of women nearing the left side of the mural but not all the way on the side. For the second statement, the researchers answered “NO,” implying that women are not gazing at men as the central image. For the third statement, researchers answered “YES,” a woman can be seen holding a shovel, implying that she is engaging in manual labor. To statement number four, the researchers answered “NO,” women are not seen to be sitting while men are working. This can be seen again with the woman in the middle as she is working while the men at the top of the mural are also working. And finally, to statement five, the researchers answered “YES,” that men appear to take up most space in the art piece.

Upon filing all the raw data, I saw that there were several discrepancies in answers between the two researchers who did the content analysis. I searched through the raw data and found each piece of art that had these discrepancies and compiled them all into a document. Then, I had a team of another two researchers go through the document and agree on the final answer to each statement. Whatever the team of two settled on was the final decision that was made, as it provided a majority vote. This gave raw data on each of the 87 art pieces, calculating the passivity and centrality of each artwork.

Analysis of Data

I broke the five statements on the Content Analysis sheet into two sections: statements correlating to passivity (#3,4) and statements correlating to centrality (#1,2,5). The answers to statement number 3 were all inverted to allow for consistency of terms when measuring.

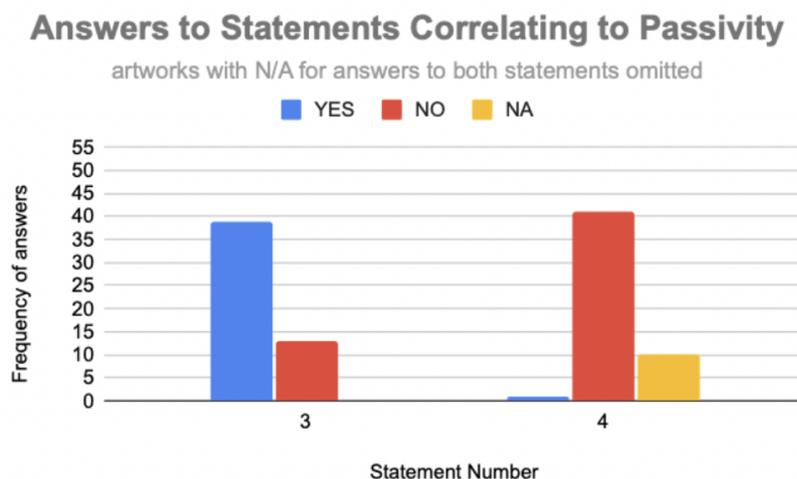
Passivity

Hypothesis I: The art in Chicano Park depicts women as passive, not engaging in the challenging work of creating the park.

Statement 3: Women are engaging in manual labor (answers have been inverted).

Statement 4: Women are sitting/lounging while men are working.

Figure 1: Are Women Depicted as Passive in this Art Piece?



For the question relating to manual labor, 60% of the art pieces showed women engaged in any kind of labor. Of those 52 pieces, 39 of them (75%) depicted women doing manual labor while 13 of them (25%) showed them not engaged in manual labor. In short, three-quarters of the art pieces show women engaged in manual labor which reveals that the majority of artworks in Chicano Park do not depict women as being passive actors in the creation of the park.

For the statement relating to women sitting or lounging, of the 87 pieces of art, only 42 (48%) were assessed, as these others were not relevant to the question (for instance, if no women were in the picture). Of those 42 that were assessed, only one (2.3%) depicted women sitting or

lounging while men worked. The other 41 (97.6%) showed active participation of women when men were working. When the art works that did not pertain to either statement are omitted, the numbers stayed the same. 97.6% of the images show women working, standing or moving while men are doing the same. The key takeaway here is similar to that of the previous statement - the overwhelming majority of the artworks do not depict women to be passive actors in the park. The movement and activity of women is showcased in the murals at a similar frequency to the movement and activity of men.

Centrality

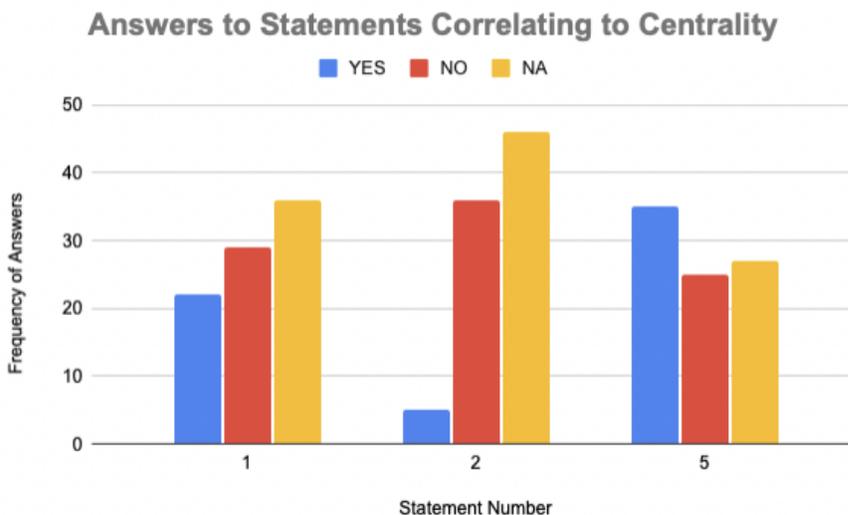
Hypothesis II: The Chicano Park murals idolize the men of the movement, often shifting the focus away from the role of women in the creation of the park and centering the male and his efforts.

Statement 1: Women are placed on the sides of the art piece.

Statement 2: Women are gazing at a man (or men) as the central image.

Statement 5: Men appear to take up the most space in the art piece.

Figure 2: Are Women Centrally Located in this Art Piece?



When the N/A answers are removed from the bar graph, the proximity of the frequency of answers can be seen more clearly. See this relationship in Figure 3:

Figure 3: Are Women Centrally Located in this Art Piece (N/A answers omitted)?

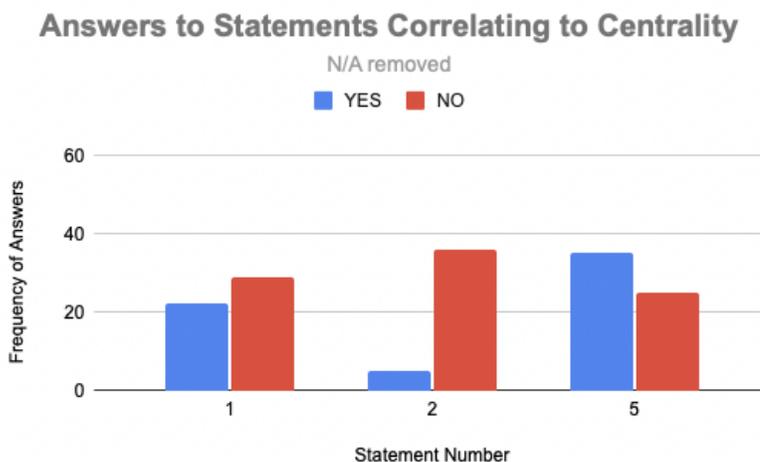


Figure 2 shows that the data for research on the statement regarding women placed on the periphery is that of the 87 art pieces in the park, 22 (25%) of them place women on the side of the art piece while 29 (33%) of them do not. Figure 3 shows this relationship very clearly - when

we take out all the art pieces that do not apply to this statement, 43.1% of them place women on the periphery.

The data for the statement measuring women looking at men as the central image shows overwhelmingly that women do not tend to gaze at a man as the central image. Looking at Figure 3, we can see that only five (12%) of the 41 images that are applicable to this statement showing women gazing at a man as the central image, 87.8% of them do not depict this gaze. In over half of the murals, this statement was not able to be measured. This is either because there was not a male or female (or both) present, or because there was not clarity of eyesight. I believe that the wording of this statement led to a measuring error. It was not very easy for the researchers to gauge the line of eyesight of figures in the artworks.

In all images where the statement where men appear to take up most space is applicable, the data shows that in 58.3% of the artworks, men take up the most space. Of the 60 murals that fall into this category, 35 of them are dominated by men. This shows that men dominate the visual space of the park.

Findings

Based on my analysis, I have not found support for my first hypothesis, as the majority of artwork in Chicano Park does show women engaging in manual labor. The overwhelming majority also shows women standing and moving in much of the same way as men. These two findings offer an unexpected narrative about women not as passive members of the movement, but as strong, significant, and active members. Perhaps a step further into the research of passivity could look at the specific types of manual labor that women are depicted to be doing in contrast to the labor that men are doing. Are they participating in the same activities? Are there

certain aspects of manual labor that only men are shown doing? Are there ways that women used their bodies that are not highlighted?

Assessing the findings of the second hypothesis is less straightforward. When looking at centrality, it is obvious that women are not depicted to be gazing at men as the central image of the murals. However, over 40% of the murals place women on the sides of the image and 58.3% have men dominating the image. In nearly half of the images where women are categorized as being the central image in the mural (a “NO” answer to statement 1), men are still cited to be taking up the most space in the image (a “YES” answer to statement 5). Image 1, as shown earlier, is a great example of this phenomenon. The woman holding the shovel in the image is central to the mural, but men seem to populate the image more than women. This speaks volumes to measuring centrality – even when women are pulled into the innermost part of a mural, men are still the central focus because they take up the most space. Overall, I would argue that the findings suggest that while women may not always be depicted on the periphery of murals, men continue to dominate as the central focus, which highlights the ongoing gender imbalance in art and visual representation.

Conclusion

There are parallels between Black women in the Civil Rights movement and Chicana women in the Chicano Park movement. Just as Black women were invited into the Civil Rights movement but were not given the same rights as men, Chicanas were asked to use their bodies to create and protect the park but at times were dominated in the memorial of the park’s history by the depictions of men as leaders and heroes.

As stated in the literature review, much of the American art world is male-dominated. If art tells stories, then this gender misrepresentation leaves out key voices in that storytelling process. Until we are willing to fund, encourage, and highlight creatives who are women of color, this imbalance will continue.

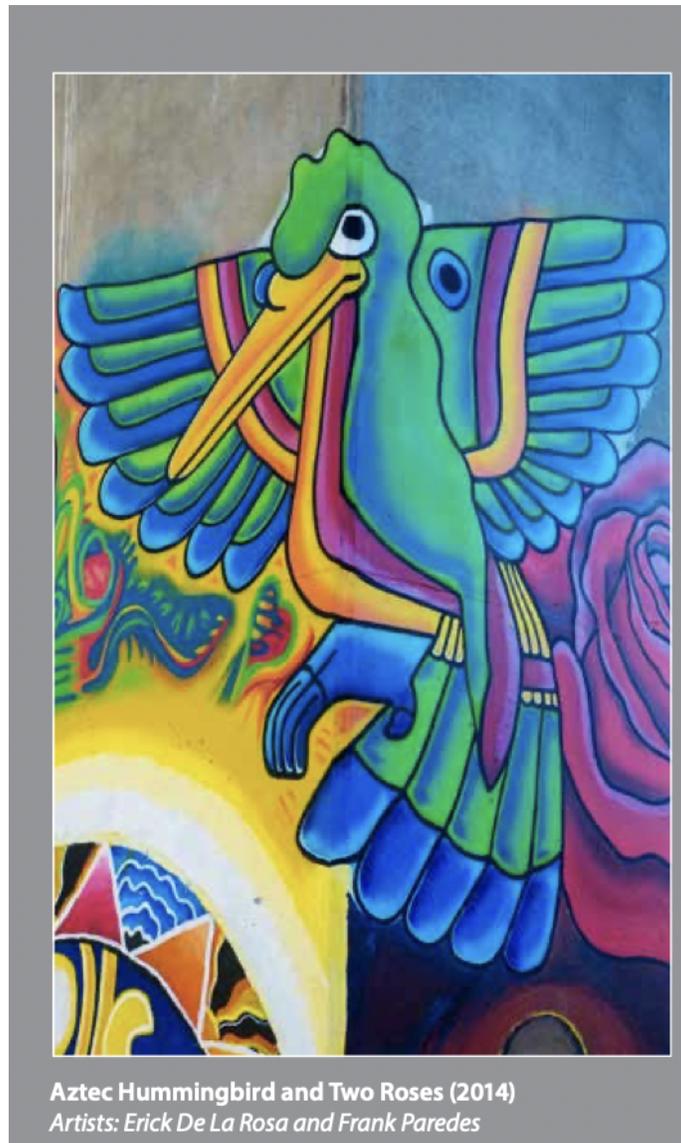
Though my hypotheses might have been incorrect, this research is still powerful as it lays the groundwork for measuring passivity and centrality in settings other than Chicano Park. In Chicano Park, women were more prominently featured than expected but I do not doubt that Chicana women are correct when they say that they are not being portrayed fully accurately. My findings showed that women are depicted to be active members in the Chicano Park movement, which is accurate to the role they played. My findings also show that there is still work to be done. It is clear that men do dominate the visual space of the park and that women are put on the sides of the image in quite a few murals. In the murals that women are brought out of the periphery, I found that this was often paired with men dominating the visual space of the image. Perhaps a more qualitative study can follow and look at each mural in depth to see what themes arise.

It is important to note that there could have been some methodological errors at play. As stated earlier, there were many inconsistencies between researchers in the first round of content analysis. Next time, it would be beneficial to pull ten random artworks from the park and walk through the statements with my researchers to make sure that they all are uniform in how they answer the statements. For two of the statements, over half of the images were not able to be measured and did not apply to the statement. A follow up study could create different statements that measure the artworks better.

Beyond findings and methodological errors, it is important to remember the heart of this study - that the Chicana community believes that there is still work to be done in regards to the representation of women in Chicano Park. The historical narrative of women in the Chicano Park movement is that they were strong, sacrificial, focused members of the movement. They were heroes and mothers, providers and fighters, protectors and strategists. Most of all, they were a valuable part of the movement – without them, Chicano Park would not be the same.

Appendix A

Here is a sample of the Content Analysis survey that I sent out to my team of researchers.



79. Write “YES,” “NO,” or “N/A” next to each statement. See page 2 for definitions of terms, if needed.

1. Women are placed on the sides of the art piece.
2. Women are gazing at a man (or men) as the central image.
3. Women are engaging in manual labor.
4. Women are seen sitting/lounging while men are working.
5. Men appear to take up the most space in the art piece.

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