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Mobility, Ephemerality and Tourist Economies: Graffiti Running Tours in León Guanajuato

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I explore the creation of a running tour showcasing commissioned Graffiti Art, or Urban Art, in León Guanajuato, Mexico. Founded in 2017, the tours are part of a larger economic and cultural shift away from the city's agricultural and industrial roots. Since the 1990s, León has pursued global city status while still trying to claim connections to "tradition." Creative practices such as Urban Art help cultivate an attractive urban image. I argue that the tours dramatize three issues at the heart of both creative cities discourse and the challenges and the frictions that occur in institutionalizing graffiti, namely: mobility, ephemerality, and economy.

Keywords: tourism; urban art; Mexico; urban imaginaries; mobility; ephemerality.

SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

A mid-sized city in Mexico's heartland, León Guanajuato is famed at home and abroad for its shoe and leather industry and its spectacular events such as the hot-air balloon festival and the Rally automobile race. The State of Guanajuato has been a key player on the national stage, beginning with its role in the 1810 Revolution of Independence and later its right-of-center political party, the National Action Party, which took power regionally in the 1980s and nationally at the turn of the 21st century. León is also beginning to make an international splash with its Urban Art programs.

Urban Art describes wall art (such as graffiti and Street Art) that occur within permission contexts. Since 2002, the city's Youth Institute has collaborated with youth practitioners in creating legal graffiti and Street Art murals throughout the city. These murals cover a range of themes, some bearing on regional and local culture and history, popular culture, or playful experimentation. Such partnerships are the result of youth arguing for the need for permission spaces to paint, and the government's desire to "channel" energies productively, lessening unsanctioned graffiti and Street Art that some business owners see as damaging and/or unsightly. Providing paint, planning infrastructure, and sometimes salaries, the Youth Institute is a hub in a broader network of public art production in the city, and its powerful political position has let young artists come up with murals in high-visibility, high-impact locations throughout the city.

In León, youth practitioners of graffiti and Street Art have been active participants in reframing their practice from vandalism/damage to art that has value. The Youth Institute has been a key partner

in such reformulations, which rely heavily on the art itself, and then its uptake through journalism, social media, and public commentary as vectors for recontextualization. These efforts are part of a larger movement in which mid-sized industrial cities are striving hard to shrug off their image as 'dark satanic mills' and instead showcase themselves as hubs of creativity to the wider world. The various Urban Art programs in place since 2012 are in keeping with this goal. However, while tourism is a big element of creative cities policy, formal tourism programs were not drawn up in León until 2017.

In 2017 Luis Hernández, founder of *Run Your Tour*, a business that offers local-led running tours of Guanajuato and León developed a subprogram called *Graffitour*, which showcased the Urban Art in his home city. I argue that this tour embodies three themes — mobility, ephemerality, and economy — that highlight the scope and challenges of using tourism based on Urban Art as means for re-envisioning how a city is imagined. I first discuss my methodology, offer a review of the literature, and definitions of key terms. Then, I briefly discuss the history of graffiti in León and its larger economic, cultural, and political contexts. Next, I turn to *Graffitour*, drawing on an extensive interview with Hernández as my main text, analyzing the discussion through the themes of mobility, ephemerality and economy. I conclude with reflections on the scope and limitations of tourism for reimagining urban space and politics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Graffiti (and related practices of Street Art) often symbolize resistance, the voice of a people, or, to some, disorder and the threat of crime. In the last ten years such aesthetic practices have been increasingly mainstreamed, packaged for city marketing, tourism, and branding at a transnational scale: permission graffiti park as selfie spot. From Chicago to Bogotá, Melbourne to Dubai, monumental Urban Art, often created with aerosol cans, is an increasing fixture in urban marketing. Scholarship and public discourse about creativity, Urban Art, and voice often focuses on major Western cities with seemingly progressive approaches to culture: New York, Los Angeles, London, Berlin, Melbourne, Paris (Austin 2001; Young 2013). When Latin America is considered, places such as Mexico City, Bogotá, and Rio take center stage. This paper covers a mid-sized Mexican city to grasp how such questions unfold in a less internationally visible yet informative context.

Muralism, Graffiti, Street Art

There has been a host of studies on the role of muralism in shaping community, national, and regional identity, particularly in the context of Mexican nation-building and later resistance to the authoritarian Institutional Revolutionary Party (Campbell 1999; Coffey 2012). Major case studies on the role of murals for societies in conflict can be found in cities such as Belfast (Rolston, 2003).

Yet research on graffiti and Street Art has mainly focused on the dynamics of legality/illegality, voice, media, and social protest (Pabón Colon 2018; MacDowell, 2019; Bloch 2020; Lennon 2022). Permission Street Art and graffiti spaces are offered by urban planners and cultural programmers as an alternative to repression (Young, 2010). In the scholarship, graffiti is often located to the style-writing movements originating in Philadelphia in the 1960s and New York in the 1970s, with a focus on aerosol paint and lettering. Street Art has more global origins and is more diverse in terms of medium and composition (including stickers, stencils, brush paint, wheat pasting, and Installation Art).

Many scholars have explored the history and impact of graffiti and street art in Latin American cities. They argue that North American policing methods, such as "zero tolerance," have influenced how urban space is managed there. This approach prioritizes images of order and security for wealthy consumers, rather than creating a diverse and inclusive community space. This argument has been made by scholars such as Swanson (2013) and Galvis (2017).

In cities such as Bogotá where there are permission zones for Street Art and graffiti, scholars have assessed how permissive regimes split graffiti/Street Art communities and create new frameworks for value (Ortiz van Meerbeke and Sletto, 2019). On the other hand, open-air galleries in cities in Chile have been seen as frameworks for democratic voices (La Torre, 2019). Transnational graffiti event spaces have been analyzed as sites for feminist worldmaking (Pabón-Colon, 2018). Fewer studies take up the long-term integration of graffiti into mural and later Urban Art permission programs and their framing to publics through tourism programs.

Creative Cities and Urban Art Tourism

Since the mid-2000s, scholars have begun to track the role of graffiti and Street Art in tourism and place-marketing in cities as well as the role of festivals and event-spaces in shaping public understanding around graffiti and Street Art (Rius-Ulldemolins, 2014; Bruce, 2019). This focus on Urban Art and tourism ties in with a broader scholarly interest in the interdisciplinary field of Urban Studies in the "Creative Cities" turn. The concept of such cities was popularized by Richard Florida in 1995 with his book, *The Creative Class*, which sees creative workers as untapped resources for inter-urban competition and growth. Florida developed his own consulting firm, and in municipal governments around the world founded Creativity Departments, focusing on place-making and creative initiatives to woo tourist and ex-pat dollars. The Creative Cities thesis has been trenchantly criticized for positing that creativity and those who fall into the creative class can make cities more attractive and spawn value for them without much public investment (McAucliffe, 2012; Wilson, 2017; McRobbie, 2018; Mould, 2018). Often, creative cities policies put a beautiful cityscape before inclusivity and democratic policy.

Street and graffiti artists respond differently to the challenges of articulating a sense of authenticity in the wake of growing attempts to market and brand Urban Art. In the case of *Blu* in Italy, erasure served to deny access to their work in tourism circuits (Merrill, 2021). For other artists, within the context of convergence culture, creativity means different things to different artists, enabling them to sometimes merge "authenticity" and the commercial through self-branding (Banet-Weiser, 2011). Within the orbit of Creative Cities, urban tourism has also largely shifted to a focus on experiences and placemaking with a focus on "intangible culture" and "everyday life" (Richards, 2011, p. 1225).

The case of Urban Art tourism in León Guanajuato Mexico extends the above studies, noting how urban branding agents make use and sense of Urban Art. León teaches us how tourism can enable cultural programmers to present Urban Art to local and visitor audiences, using Urban Art as a resource for boosting mobility and economy, within the affordances and constraints of ephemeral landscapes.

DEFINITIONS

In this paper I consider graffiti and Street Art when they are contextualized within the framework of *arte urbano* (Urban Art) in the service of tourism. I define graffiti and Street Art as visual forms of expression that have both textual and graphic elements and are displayed in monumental works that might take the compositional strategy of murals (large scale, collaborative, thematically unified).

Graffiti, Street Art, and muralism have been defined based on medium, legal context, and location (Austin, 2001; Sánchez Hernández, 2008; Bloch, 2020; La Torre, 2019). For instance, strict definitions of graffiti confine it to unsanctioned expression conducted in public space usually done with aerosol or ink pens. In contrast, Street Art is usually understood to encompass a wider range of mediums including stickers, wheat pasting, figurative work with brush paint or aerosol paint, and more, and it too can have a contested relationship with Law. Murals, likewise, can be defined using content, composition, or process (Cockcroft, Cockcroft and Weber, 1977). Often considered to be monumental in size,

and frequently involving a collaborative process, as a genre of public expression, murals are deeply linked to issues of collective identity, even though they can also be carried out in commercial context with little to no meaningful engagement with the communities that surround them.

In Mexico, the history of State-sponsored muralism also shapes what is intelligible as a mural and to whom—for official authorities, it must usually have a didactic element, use a Social Realist aesthetic. Yet for groups contesting State power, such figurative elements might connote vestiges of authoritarianism and so they may seek alternative aesthetic forms (Campbell, 2003; Coffey, 2012).

In Mexico, these three genres are subsumed under the term, *"arte urbano,"* [Urban Art], which enshrines the idea that institutional acceptance elevates such forms of expression to the status of 'Art'. What makes such art acceptable is subjective. Based on my fieldwork, I found that institutional authorities and tour developers define acceptance by looking for popularly legible icons—they focus on image-based, rather than text-based work, and images that are often positive. *Arte urbano* is a term used by cultural programmers to identify work they expect to be likeable and visually attractive. Though graffiti writers might also produce work understood to be Urban Art, letter-based graffiti aesthetics are often formally or informally excluded from many Urban Art programs.

METHODOLOGY

This paper stems from a larger project on the history of graffiti in León. I used a Critical Communication Ethnography framework and a methodology that drew on a mix of interview, photographic documentation, participant observation, official and unofficial archives, and concepts from Political Theory, Rhetoric, Urban Studies, Cultural Studies, Latin American Studies, and Art History. To understand the long history and present of graffiti and Street Art in León, I conducted interviews with 96 graffiti practitioners from the city, 13 artists taking part in Mexican graffiti festivals, as well as interviews with six government sponsors/municipal agents, two scholars, and three media and tourism agents. Participant observation was conducted during short visits annually from 2012-2016, a seven-month residency from 2017-2018, a ten-day follow-up trip in December 2018, and a four-day trip to Mexico City in 2019. I conducted photographic surveys of key sites in León from 2012 to 2018. Archival research took place at the Municipal Newspaper Archive (Archivo Municipal) and the City Planning Institute *[Instituto Municipal de Planeación]*—IMPLAN), and at interviews where writers or documentarians shared their personal archives with me. Analysis was driven by Communication Studies Theory on Visual Culture, Urbanism, Cultural Studies, and Critical Theory resources on the relationship between art, politics and democracy. In my analysis, I relied on concepts that emerged organically from interviews and observation. Here, I focus on three concepts that recurred in my interview with Hernández on *Graffitour*: mobility, ephemerality, economy.

HISTORY OF LEON

León is a mid-sized city surrounded by mountains, scrubland, industry, and farms. Close to the State Capital of Guanajuato and on the road to Guadalajara it is a strategic hub for trade, which has shifted over the years from being mainly agricultural in nature, to industrial, and later symbolic and communicative (García Canclini, 2001, p. 49). Like many cities in Mexico, in the 1990s León underwent a renewed wave of globalization while planners and economic leaders sought to transform its image and main industries from agronomic to a global city with high-quality cultural offerings that would be an attractive staging ground for international capital investment. The passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 meant that capital could more easily circulate, contributing to a remodeling of León's economic and physical landscape. International

franchises such as Sam's Club and Walmart as well as luxury hotels to house corporate visitors became as common as family-owned shoe stores.

At the same time, it was the epicenter for the expanding power of the opposition party, the Partido de Acción Nacional, or National Action Party hereafter, PAN. A conservative intensely Catholic region, the Bajío was a stronghold for the PAN's message of family values and economic autonomy (Téllez Valencia, 2014).

Graffiti arrived on the scene during these transformations. Since the 1980s, members of the *cholo* sub-culture (which has its roots in the indigenous and mixed-race populations of Latin America) have created Graffiti Art in the form of 'tags' in León's fast-growing low-income settlements and neighborhoods. In the early 1990s enigmatic inscriptions could be seen around the city: Keim, a first-generation writer, noted that one of the first graffiti artists she saw was Amor who was "like the Taki 183 of León," along with Moxi (2016). By the mid-1990s tags were springing up across the city: on the sides of buildings in León's industrial Obregón district, along the *Malecón* [riverside promenade] in the Central Area, and across Boulevard López Mateos (Camarena, 2001). In San Sebastian, a *colonia popular* [which is to say, an informally planned settlement], there was a wide variety of legal murals, while the Central Area [*Zona Centro*] was an epicenter for unsanctioned work (Camarena, 2001, p. 201). Graffiti was carried out by largely middle to working class youth. These youngsters found one another and began to gather in the city center. Unsurprisingly, adults often saw such gatherings as a problem, a sign of laziness or worse, delinquency.

Graffiti emerged from national and transnational media flows that combined and mixed with other forms of cultural expression. Many saw images of graffiti and its connection to youth cultures through American movies that were shown in Mexico: *The Warriors* (1979), *Style Wars* (1983); and even *King Kong*, which Wes notes has "a scene where when the train passes and *King Kong* grabs it (Wes, 2015). Music, which has long been an important force in shaping youth cultures in Mexico since the 1950s, strongly shaped graffiti and it included influences from hip hop, rock and roll, and ska. Rubén Jasso explains that graffiti was never "an isolated phenomenon, but rather combined with other youth disciplines: music, biking, and skating" (2012). Zines and magazines provided another axis configuring graffiti culture, central to the *global mobility* of graffiti practice (Ferrell, 1993; Austin, 2001; Pabón-Colón, 2018). Finally, trips to larger cities such as Mexico City, Tijuana, and Guadalajara inspired young writers.

In the early 2000s, the nation was undergoing major economic and cultural changes that greatly affected its global public image. "Zero tolerance," played an important role in shaping the built environment of cities. Zero tolerance is a tough-on-crime, order-based approach to policing that draws on the "broken windows" theory—the idea that visible disorder can snowball into violent crime, justifying aggressive regulation. Graffiti became an urban problem in León in August of 2001, a period in which media coverage on the amount of graffiti, and its appearance on highly visible streets and buildings, skyrocketed. Hundreds of accounts emerged in newspapers framing graffiti as an assault on the urban image, leading to police beatings, surveillance, and massive fines against writers. Youth organized and protested against the repression in 2002. Zero Tolerance never fully ended but the city's organization concerned with youth activity, the Youth Institute, began fostering various permission graffiti programs starting in 2002. An annual event called *Xprésate* [literally 'Express Yourself'] offered writers the opportunity to paint with permission in a competition context. Another program, called "Respect" let youth obtain a "permission form" from the Institute that they could offer to property owners to be able to paint on their walls. Such programs were relatively limited, and many young writers avoided them due to fear of co-option or surveillance.

In 2010 the Youth Institute launched a program called City of Murals (*Ciudad de Murales*). Led by

then-director, Pedro Rangel, the goal was to transform the "face of León" into an artistic city full of murals rivaling the scale and scope of Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program (2019). The City of Murals proved a runaway success in terms of visibility and quality. Starting with a series of murals celebrating the Bicentennial of the Mexican Revolution, the program oversaw the creation of over 500 murals focusing on themes of iconic elements of Mexican culture including *Catrinas* [skeletal figures inspired by Mexico's 'Day of The Dead' celebrations] and *lucha libre* [Mexican-style wrestling], The Golden Age of Cinema, and more León-specific components of the city's urban image, such as the annual hot-air balloon festival, *Globos Fest*. City of Murals had a social media campaign largely run through YouTube and Facebook that sought to humanize writers and familiarize the general public with the youth creating the murals (Rangel, 2019). Young writers played a key role in the program, as it was their art that was the inspiration, and they carefully chose themes to persuade the Leonese public of the value of "artistic graffiti" (Nikkis, 2015; Spok, 2015, Orion, 2015). The institute also published three related books on youth culture, one of which, *When the Walls Speak*, documented the City of Murals project. During this period business tourism took off as a major industry in León along with anything "that supports an image of good governance, innovation, the international" including the permission mural program, City of Murals later on (Gómez Vargas, 2020). Such mural programs were part of a "new culture of visuality in the city", marked by larger urban development including the creation of spectacular sites to "diffuse for global tourism such as *Templo Expiatorio* [church], *Forum Cultural Guanajuato, Parque Metropolitano"* (Ibid).

After the mayoral administration changed in 2013, most of the digital infrastructure for City of Murals were removed and murals were left to decay. Rangel lamented that they were never able to develop a tour around the City of Murals project (2019). It was not until 2016 when the PAN party regained power that Urban Art again became a calling card for the city. This time, it was a program called *Muraleon*, co-led by subdirector of the Youth Institute Rodrigo "Lalo" Camarena. *Muraleon* focused on high visibility murals that would be of interest to both local residents and national visitors. Camarena stated in an interview in *El Sol de León*: "The mural offers an expression of art that is linked to urban color therapy (*cromo terapia urbana*) theory…which gives people a relaxing space… generating a different sense of their surrounds/environment" (Rodríguez, 2017). "Color therapy" was a phrase that Lalo often used to describe the value of *Muraleón*'s work. During the 2016-2018 project, *Muraleon* generated dozens of murals, and Camarena and the Youth Institute worked carefully with the mayor's office, the press and corporate sponsors to publicize their work.

Among some of the higher profile projects were an annual festival held in the riverbed that the city's major highway flanks, the *Malecón* [riverside promenade]. The festival was called *Malecolor*. Another set of major projects were murals in two of the city's main cemeteries, Panteón del Norte and Panteón San Nicolas. The former was a mural of images from the Disney movie *Coco* (2017), the latter a series of works celebrating the film *Macario* (1959), urban legends about León, and pre-Hispanic deities. Finally, *Muraleon* created a series of murals celebrating local and national identity including one in the historic city center about races of the world on *5 de Septiembre* street and then a set of panels on bridge supports in a working-class neighborhood reflecting the site's history as an epicenter for gymnasiums for training famed *Lucha Libre* wrestlers, inaugurated with a series of live wrestling matches. Members of León's municipal administration and the tourism industry saw the *Coco* mural as particularly successful—it linked León to a moment in global popular culture where traditional Mexican culture, namely, The Day of the Dead, was achieving worldwide fame. *Coco*'s co-director, Lee Unkrich, tweeted about the mural, and Youth Institute officials saw the tweet as evidence of the mural's success, and the Leonese media capitalized on this moment [Figure 1]. It was during the *Muraleon* project that *Graffitour* emerged.

Figure 1 The *Coco* film Director's Tweet on the *Coco* mural in Léon, Guanajuato, Mexico.

GRAFFITOUR- RUNNING THE CITY'S GRAFFITI

Hernández founded *Graffitour* in 2017. He had already been leading running-based tours for four years as part of his business Run Your Tour. Hernández noted that while many Leonese residents were well-aware of iconic sites in the city, few knew about the exciting work being done in the realm of Urban Art. He explains:

> I always love to learn about new spaces and places, to escape routine….and I always had the idea of finding something where someone from the city would be able to teach me about *the city*…Five years ago I developed this model and this business called Running Tours where basically I set out to discover Guanajuato and León through running. On each route I try to find a way to connect different points…I have about 12 different routes in León, Guanajuato and [San Miguel] de Allende…tourism in this city is so exciting for me because even though I am not from here, I love this place and I want to learn more about it…beyond the leather and shoe industry that is here, and I realized that

> *arte urbano* [Urban Art] is really developed here in comparison with other larger cities. I began to research this and to get involved mainly with the Youth Institute, with Misraim, Rodrigo, and through them I got to know the kids involved, the crews like RNK—all of those guys. I am aware that on the one hand the local government supports these kids with development, walls and materials, and I felt that what was lacking was dissemination of the work. That is because many people, including those who live here, do not see, know about, or understand what this work is dealing with…so I studied it a bit and though I'm not an expert I really appreciate it… (2018).

Here, Hernández frames tourism as an experiential (Richards, 2011), educational practice, a way of learning about the city. Moreover, running offers new, shifting, dynamic meanings and interpretations of urban space. Finally, he sees the role of tourism as that of "dissemination" – sharing and expanding the impact of young artists' work, and his tour as an extension of the work done by the Youth Institute.

Hernández creates his tours by coming up with a circuit with the same starting point and end point. Using iconic sites in the city, he looks for works of Urban Art nearby to create new layers of meaning. He conducts research with the Youth Institute to learn more about the background and influences for the artists to provide more nuanced information for his visitors. For instance, he noted that he was impressed by the artists' technique of photo realism, and the fact that in 2012 such technique was greatly shaped by visits from international artists such as Belin and Sax from Spain, as well as artists from Germany, all of whom have impressive skills in photorealistic style. Drawing on the existing murals in the city, he created a "catalogue," noting that the *Coco* mural and *Macario* murals at the two main cemeteries, the *Lucha Libre* [wrestling] murals, and the *Malecolor* project, particularly the 2017 "ocean life" theme, were inspiring for his routes. The murals are commented on by a guide, who uses the catalogue as an aid. The tours trace a route around the city that includes its historic center, working class and middle-class residential areas, as well as less improvised paths/roads (a riverbed by a highway). For instance, a tour more focused on the city-center might start in the historic center, strike South to see the *Lucha Libre* mural and then the central cemetery murals, before looping back North to see the *Malecolor* riverbed works, and then heading West towards the city center to see some of the murals there, such as the 'world heritage' mural. A different tour might begin in the city's northern municipal cemetery (where the *Coco* murals are sited), and then go East to see some of the works of visiting artists (such as Belin's) in working class neighborhoods, and then return South to the city center.

Hernández explained that the tours were always evolving not only due to the emergence of new work but also to the potential defacement, decay, or disappearance of old work. Since the tour was launched in 2017 during the *Muraleon* program, the murals created under its auspices have largely been maintained but murals dating from previous administrations were not. The criteria Hernández used for including works in the tour were loosely defined. He stressed his dialogue with members of the Youth Institute to identify and contextualize work, suggesting that the Youth Institute served as informal curators and potential gate-keepers for content. Community members are not directly involved in tour development, though public commentary on murals (such as the celebration of the *Coco* mural) can add to the stature and interest of given works.

Hernández also noted that *Graffitour* mainly caters to "visitors from other states, such as Guadalajara, Queretaro and Mexico City, and groups with locals, most of whom learn of the tours by word of mouth and invitations from friends who find my page or event." He gave an example: "The *Coco* mural was a big hit so I made the most of this success to boost

local interest" (2018). In this comment on the *Coco*-effect, we can see how the graffiti tour gained traction on digital platforms, mobilized local visitors, and helped visualize the potential of Urban Art for economic segments (tourism, the international scene, culture). In what follows I discuss three themes that emerged in our discussion of the tourism project: mobility, ephemerality, and economy.

Mobility

Graffiti in León emerged as a result population flows shaped by histories of immigration, media culture, and economic globalization. Youth traced new trajectories of movement and communication in and on a changing urban landscape. Here, Noel B. Salazar tells us that;

> As a concept, mobility captures the common impression that one's lifeworld is in flux, with not only people, but also cultures, objects, capital, businesses, services, diseases, media, images, information, and ideas circulating around the planet. History tells us the complex story of human mobility – a complex assemblage of movement, social imaginaries, and experience (Cresswell, 2006). People across the globe have long been interconnected, populations have been mobile, and their identities have often been fluid, multiple, and contextualized. (2018)

Yet mobility is unequally imposed and distributed. Not everyone can move when they want, and forced mobility is a fact in a world structured by the imperatives of colonialism, Capitalism, and racism.

Graffitour participates in and comments on some of these politics of mobility. At a literal level, the tour involves a four-to-six-kilometer dash through the city with stops at various murals, using the mobility of the human body to experience the way that aerosol murals transform urban space. This also resonates with Street Art/graffiti practice itself, which requires the moving body as a tool but also sets the stage for how many engage with the work while walking or driving through the city.

More importantly, the tour seeks to create and celebrate mobile meanings for the work, its context, and the city. Hernández often mentioned that while the quality of León's Urban Art is superb at a national and international level, many locals are unaware of the movement. Lack of awareness around Urban Art is not surprising given the history of Zero Tolerance in the city, and which was accompanied by a massive media campaign that the local government and business leaders led in the early 2000s to thoroughly discredit writers and frame their work as vandalism, visual pollution and dangerous. Moreover, inconsistent forms of government support for Urban Art (which is administration dependent) mean that infrastructure for public education and outreach is often sporadic.

Tourism offers an opportunity to reframe graffiti practice within the parameters of Urban Art and culture. Hernández said:

> My basic objective is to share and impact people so that they like what these kids are doing …for example, around *Malecolor* I was able to bring 12 people to watch while they painted live and it was like, 'Wow! [*sic*], they are from León and there are more works like this?' … so, I'm continuing to look for more murals to show and to connect them [the murals] to one another not only chronologically but thematically… (2018)

Here, one should recall that *Malecolor* was a public graffiti festival held in the riverbed of the Río de los Gómez. It is the main thoroughfare for car and bus traffic in the city, splitting it diagonally. Spatially the *Malecón* is an icon of auto-based mobility. Less known is the role of the *Malecón* in the history of graffiti in León. It was a hangout site for youth, a practice zone. In 2010, at the beginning of the City of Murals program, young writers created the first permission mural celebrating the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema. As a result, the *Malecolor* festival took advantage of these multiple contexts to offer a publicly visible spectacle of live painting that could educate neighbors about the layered histories of both the

graffiti movement and the city, evidenced in the reactions Hernández witnessed in visitors. Visitors learned that the *Malecón* was a node in a larger network of Urban Art culture in the city, providing a cognitive framework to participate in more mobile viewing practices – "Are there more works like this?" Phaedra Pezzullo argues that tourism can serve as a vehicle for educating participants, sensitizing them to social issues (2003). *Graffitour* galvanizes both art works and tourist subjects by using tourism as an experiential, visual pedagogy through mobility. *Graffitour* offers more context for the history of Urban Art in León contesting still ingrained stereotypes about writers as 'no-goods'.

The tour also stresses mobility (and plurality) of interpretation. Hernández reflected:

> When I speak with the artists they are really open…one of them who was interested wanted to know the route from my perspective to know what was happening… they always have their own interpretation and the artists say that they like it…that it is cool that the people might interpret it differently…it reminds me of that mural on López Mateos of the *Raices* [Roots] where there is a *Chichimecca* [an Indian resisting The Spanish Conquest] in the middle and then four other races around them, and when I spoke with three [artists] who made this mural, each had their own interpretation including the title…*raices, razas* [roots, races]…nothing is fixed…there are all these possibilities and that's really cool (2018).

Here, Hernández refers to the mobile meanings that Urban Art exhibits. He has spoken to members of *Muraleon* who generally support *Graffitour* because it advertises their work, and also puts interpretation into the hands of audiences. Even if the artist has an initial idea of the work, audiences interpret it differently. "Nothing is fixed." However, this fluidity in the interpretation also applies at the temporal level. That is because many murals are highly ephemeral. In the history of graffiti and Street Art, ephemerality is a major context for work—it is not meant to last forever. This creates opportunities and challenges in translating such expressive practices into tourism programs.

Ephemerality

Hernández framed the ephemerality of Urban Art as a fact, an opportunity, and a challenge:

> I think about the ephemerality of this art a lot but it's kind of hard to explain I don't know if the guys think about their art as ephemeral… which can endure a month or years… something that was not exactly a shock but called my attention [to this issue] were the blue colors in the Malecon last year, how they began to turn black… the works are constantly changing (2018).

The *Malecolor* festival held in 2017 had the theme of "Ocean Life" and so the riverbed was painted in varying shades of blue. Initially vibrant, pollution from drainpipes as well as air contamination from the many passing cars' exhaust turned the walls ever greyer and blacker. Here is ephemerality in one sense—the temporary vibrancy of the artwork is transformed though not entirely erased by its urban context. It is materially susceptible to change.

I have theorized the ephemeral in relation to Street Art as a vehicle for cultivating greater sensitivity to relational networks, the social infrastructure, that makes art-making and urbanism possible:

> I define ephemeral as temporary in the context of Street Art, that is embraced and welcomed, and that occurs with an awareness of the interdependent networks that make future and past expressions possible. The ephemeral also offers a kind of temporal insurgency, to borrow Sharma's phrase, vis à vis the impatient rhythms of creative destruction that emerge out of, and sustain, generalized conditions of precarity. Sharma (2014a) suggested "A temporal insurgency means keeping differential lived time central to political struggle. It also means recognizing that the experience of the contingency is not discrete but relational" (9)

> …Ephemerality, then, is an awareness of the finitude of environments and forms of life, acknowledging the singularity of such scenes and the labor that would be required for their maintenance. A mode of Street Art, where a piece is left vulnerable to the rhythms and vicissitudes of the seasons of the street, the object is intensely dependent on environment, material support, and spectator for subsistence. Ephemerality makes relationality central. (Bruce, 2016, p.16)

Capitalist time, that of creative destruction, imagines urban environments as malleable and mobile in terms of replaceability and progress. By contrast, ephemerality makes us aware of the losses imposed by creative destruction. This emerged in the interview with Hernández where he celebrated how the constant evolution of Urban Art in León was an opportunity to continually renovate his tours but also noted that some kinds of destruction were more problematic than others.

Because many of the major projects are government sponsored, when the government administration changes, the incoming City Council will "whitewash the walls if they don't like them," erasing the works (2018). This raises an important question about value and valuation: some of the practitioners of graffiti and Street Art do not participate in government programs and their work is not valued, protected, or celebrated. The tour responds to the ephemerality of the works and the transitory nature of government sponsorship but the labor involved in adjusting the tour shows that not all kinds of temporary are equally beneficial. Changes in support create excessive amounts of labor for Urban Art practitioners and those who would share their work.

Economy

Finally, some of the challenges in *Graffitour* tie in with León's larger economy. While the city has shifted away from an agronomic model, its service sector where tourism is located mainly stresses spectacular events and business tourism. It also emphasizes the "already known." Hernández explains:

> Here, conventions and business-based tourism have the greatest economic impact. Such tourists seek the well-known and 80 percent of tourism in León is of this kind. So, I am exploring a bit with the other 20 percent, comprising both national and international visitors. For me the big challenge is the local market—to get León city-dwellers to do tourism…so I've looked for other ways to foster that …things like 'even though you might be born in León, I'm going to tell you about things you don't know about.' This is more complicated (2018).

Going back to mobility, it is hard to come up with new paradigms to understand the city. Since Urban Art does not always fit into the "already known," Hernández must rely on works that connect to well-loved, accepted patterns of popular and traditional culture (*Lucha Libre, Coco*, etc.). Yet, by using the "already known" as the framework, it risks fixing the mobility and plurality of Urban Art by ossifying interpretations and reifying normative divisions between "good" (image based, commercial culture informed) and "bad" (letter-based, politically radical) Urban Art.

The labor of the tour is more about shifting economies of attention and culture than it is about capital, at least in the short-term. Rather than runners trying to do the circuit at a breakneck pace, they stop, reflect, and engage with the art works, "changing the mentality of the runner" (Hernández, 2018). The tour also draws attention to the small and the everyday, working against the grain of the dominant tourism economy that stresses "mega events and spectacles such as *La Feria*, the *Globos* Fest, or massive business conventions" (Hernández, 2018). Hernández says he makes little money from the tours. Instead, Hernández grounds his tours in the International Social Tourism Organization model (ISTO)—socially responsible tourism, where he sees himself not as a "third party spectator" who "drops in" a neighborhood but rather as a partner and advocate for the artists, linking their work to larger networks. To my knowledge artists are not paid for the tours, and though some are aware that their work is being

used to promote tourism in the city (like elsewhere) there are no clear policies to address issues such as gentrification and displacement, though those processes function differently in Latin America than in sites like Western Europe where *Blu* staged their protest (Janoschka and Sequera, 2016). Because most of the murals that he shares are those created by the Youth Institute, they are constrained by some of the narratives and objectives of this government para-institution.

The Youth Institute's *Muraleon* made an impact on city policy beyond the *Graffitour* project. In 2018, "Urban Art" became part of the Mayor's strategic plan. In the 2018-2021 report, Urban Art is assigned in the "Secure and Inclusive León" node as part of the "Construction and Safe Environments" program as an element that helps "improve and transform the city" by promoting "citizens' coexistence and recreation through improved public spaces." (IMPLAN, 2018). Here, Urban Art is recognized officially as a placemaking mechanism. The Youth Institute, likewise published a book in 2020 about *Muraleón*, and situated Urban Art as part of "creative industry", which plays a growing role in public policy, requiring not just giving youth space but also making youngsters' art "an activity with which one can generate income" (2020, p. 66, p. 218). In the same book, they highlighted a later digital tour app they had developed with the Dutch app *Street Art Cities* as a way to create a "permanent registry" of work that might "disappear from physical space," stating that as of December 2020, the app had registered 29,555 murals in 716 cities in 90 countries (Youth Institute, 2020, p. 214). This version of tourism stresses Urban Art as a vector for inter-urban competition and international distinction that focuses more on the image of the works than on the embodied experience of engaging with public spaces and their communities and contexts. The Institute supports young artists by claiming that they are entrepreneurs, a framework that facilitates public acceptance in a milieu dominated by the image of the businessperson-politician, creating a narrow economic model for what successful Urban Art ought to do socially, culturally, and politically.

CONCLUSIONS

Tourism is a product and practice of mobility—traveling to a place that is new or little known to transform one's understanding of the world. Often, it involves privilege, and fraught relationships between visitor and resident. Urban Art, too, emerges out of the global dynamics of mobility—globalization, the movement of bodies, capital, ideas, technologies, techniques and styles. Experience or creative tourism, such as *Graffitour*, is part of the larger dynamic of creative cities where metropoles seek to garner distinction and renown at a global scale through creative practice. *Graffitour* in León helps to texture our understanding of how creative cities are iterated in a mid-sized Latin American city that has shifted from agriculture to industry, and thence to services. It shows how the mantra of creativity is not evenly or uniformly distributed or taken up *within* cities: there are variations between how individual tourism workers and government agents imagine the role of creative tourism. Creativity means different things to different people. Tourism is a mechanism for dissemination and education with unpredictable effects. It bids us think about who is considered creative, and in what contexts, and for how long. It also makes us wonder what new urban images are produced in creative cities, and how they are articulated to local, national, and global imaginaries? How does mobility work not just in terms of spatial motion but in temporal terms, and in terms of the relative stasis or fluidity in meanings? The *Coco* murals capitalized on a moment where Hollywood globalized a national cultural practice, and then enabled tourism operators and urban artists to create a template for value that would be legible to a populace ambivalent or unaware of practices that had long been transforming their city. But the *Coco* mural's impact raises a deeper question about the use of Urban Art tours as a technique for marking global status. It is this:

What does a copy of an image of a movie about a national practice really say about *León*? It perhaps reimagines the city as a canvas for artistic expression but what new or distinct knowledge does it provide about the workings and the history of the city itself? In this sense it might be fruitful for *Graffitour* to consider not only the *Coco* mural but also the *cholo placas* [gang markers] and graffiti murals in Los Angeles, in *Las Joyas*, other, less central, less affluent neighborhoods in León that offer more specific narratives on youth voice and mobile identity, places which do not appear in Hernández's tours, nor on the Youth Institute's iteration of the *Street Art Cities* app.

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