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## The Historic Southside Mural Project

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Desegregated Neighborhoods

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# The Historic Southside Mural Project: Pedagogical Art and Community Empowerment in Desegregated Neighborhoods

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*Abstract: Working in collaboration with the Southside Community Association in Flagstaff, Arizona, an Ethnic Studies scholar/artist designed and produced a mural on the exterior of the Murdoch Community Center—located on the site of the segregated Paul Laurence Dunbar School. The mural depicts community leaders from the segregation era, as well as iconic buildings, multi-ethnic faces, and other images reflecting the racial and ethnic diversity which has historically typified the “south side” of the tracks—below Flagstaff’s Route 66—in which African Americans and Mexicano/Latinos/as were segregated in separate housing, schools and churches from the early 1920s to the 1950s. This article assesses how the Murdoch Mural Project embodies the nexus between academic research and community development. It suggests how Ethnic Studies (and multidisciplinary programs incorporating African American Studies, Chicano/Latino/a Studies, Native American Studies, and Asian American Studies) represent an alternative, more productive, utilization of the academic enterprise, preparing scholar-activists, residents and organic intellectuals to leverage their history and culture for empowerment and sustainable communities. The lead researcher/artist relies on literature by Lipsitz, Freire, and Boal to analyze knowledge practices reflected in the mural project and in the community associations mobilized to restore the Southside’s legacy.*

*Keywords: Ethnic Studies Pedagogy, Blacks in Arizona, Community Murals*

This paper analyzes how a community mural project in Flagstaff, Arizona’s segregated Black and Mexicano/Latino/a neighborhoods embodies empowerment strategies linking Ethnic Studies research and art for community change. It suggests theoretical and practical applications of art to reflect and promote historical narratives that can unify and empower communities of color, and explains one case study for doing so during economic and political retrenchment.

The history and legacy of community art projects in America is long and well-documented (McElvaine 1984; Dunitz 1994/95; Mosher 2004; Weissman and Braun-Reinitz 2005; Stevens and Fogel 2010; Patterson 2010; Schrank 2010). Most notably, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Art Project of the 1930s and 1940s resulted in the creation of thousands of murals across the land, reflecting the determination of local communities and artists to join together to tell their stories of hardship and success. More often than not, these mural projects exemplified the spirit of social change and activist artistic visions that mirrored the movements of the day.<sup>1</sup> Borrowing stylistic elements from Mexican muralists such as Rivera, Orozco, and Siquieros, many American muralists during the post-World War II years were heralded for their socially conscious art (Lee 1999; Indyck-Lopez 2009). The WPA Federal Art Project provided a foundation for public art while employing artists to help resurrect local and regional economies. Many of the projects reflected the pride and local histories of various regions, and evinced a “social realist” approach to recognize the power of common folk to control their destinies. The Mexican muralists—“Los tres grandes”—had a political and artistic vision that American audiences and artists sought to emulate. Even avowed communists such as Diego Rivera, however, had to adapt their vision to develop artwork for American cities—not without controversy, however, as the debacle at Rockefeller Center will attest. Rivera’s anti-capitalist mural (*Man at the Crossroads*) was removed, but in doing so, contributed to Rivera’s notoriety and prestige as an artist with social vision. Social visionary artists continued to

produce community murals after World War II, and well into the 1960s and 1970s, but the new wave of artists explicitly addressed racial and ethnic pride in urban centers which had been decimated by urban renewal programs, rebellions, disinvestment and “white flight.” During the 1960s and throughout the 1980s, federal initiatives continued to support forms of art and community engagement—and state and city administrations followed suit by developing programs to reduce neighborhood blight, provide jobs, combat graffiti and youth violence, or to combine cultural enrichment with community development (Rice 1999; Pounds 2005; Scher 2007).

Along with the development of artist projects designed to spur redevelopment efforts, or to attract investment and bring new residents back to the urban core, many cities branched out into youth services programs, anti-graffiti projects, and counseling, jobs training, and intervention activities. Three of the biggest programs occurred in Philadelphia, New York and Chicago—cities with large African American populations and historic communities which have been devastated by economic crises and social disinvestment of the last 30 years. Art works, it seems, to not only attract investment and renewed interest in the inner city, but it can also be used successfully to strengthen existing racial and ethnic populations who have suffered the most from institutional racism, segregation, police brutality, poor schools and lack of jobs. Clearly, putting up pretty pictures is not enough; creating art projects as forms of social intervention, however, has proven to be a viable alternative in many instances. A growing field of study now considers the merger of city planning, cultural enrichment and social services as levers for revitalizing urban centers across the nation—leaving communities of color intact and in control of redevelopment activities (Dunitz 1995; Mosher 2004; Rice 1999; Scher 2007).

Although many of these efforts resulted in scores of murals and public art, economic downturns have gutted programs and left neighborhoods in degraded conditions—particularly those communities which were formerly segregated and which still contain high populations of racial and ethnic minorities. In these areas community activists, neighborhood developers, artists and educators have labored to raise “cultural capital” by elevating the history and culture of African Americans, Native Americans, Chicano/Latino/a Americans and Asian Americans—many groups which have remained underrepresented in community redevelopment projects.

In Flagstaff, Arizona, the cycle of economic distress, declining federal and state development funds, and lingering effects of racial discrimination are still in evidence, but there are indications that the story is being turned around. Using Ethnic Studies<sup>2</sup> faculty and staff, and ethnographic methodologies created in the Ethnic Studies Program at Northern Arizona University, a small neighborhood group (based at a community center located on the site of a formerly segregated school) sponsored a research assessment team and financed the creation of a community mural which could highlight “history, painted on walls” of the African American community. This is the story of how Ethnic Studies pedagogy (the use of oral history methods, historical analysis told from the perspective of racial subgroups, and faculty and student involvement in community service and enrichment projects) was implemented through public art and community research to create an historic mural reflecting the “hidden” contributions of African Americans to the development of Flagstaff and the Southwest.

This story is important, not because it romanticizes the period of racial segregation, but because it explains how the poorest neighborhoods provided the richest approaches to building racial unity, achievement, and success in the city of Flagstaff. Secondly, the story explains the necessity for utilizing the scholarly-activist approach of Ethnic Studies: to provide academic research methods to underserved populations, using community service and public art to energize and educate the entire community (Sleeter 2011, viii). In this article I describe a research-action pedagogy (Ethnic Studies) which is currently under attack in Arizona. I explain how Ethnic Studies and public art can reveal the contributions, stories, and successes of Blacks and other racial groups which have been ignored or understated in the official history of Flagstaff and the state (Friederici 2010; Cline 1994).<sup>3</sup> This story reflects the merger of Ethnic Studies and community art—it represents a departure from other approaches to public art, because it reflects subjugated knowledge practices (Collins 2000) of the disenfranchised and disempowered. Ethnic

Studies, in this instance, represents an avenue for empowering residents through public art expressions such as the Historic Southside Mural.

In the following sections, I will explain the theoretical and methodological approach of the project; provide background on the segregated communities in Flagstaff; examine the demographics of racial diversity, impoverishment and the legacy of Jim Crow segregation; and, finally, explain the significance of merging Ethnic Studies pedagogy and community art as a research practice. This is not so much an historical review of community art, but, rather, an examination of educational art and “reverse ethnographies” (Diawara 1995) that can empower communities of color.<sup>4</sup>

## Theoretical Considerations

In my classroom, and in this project, I rely upon the writings of George Lipsitz (2011) primarily, and also Augusto Boal (1985) and Paulo Freire (1970). These scholar-activists all theorize methods by which communities facing oppression can re-define themselves and, through praxis, re-imagination, and use of arts and popular culture, begin to transform themselves and society at large. Boal and Freire are primarily concerned with educational pedagogy and extending the classroom into the real world, using theater and literacy training to energize racialized communities who may have been denied access to formal education. Lipsitz’s approach, in comparison, describes methods for such communities to restore a spatial imaginary supporting racial identity and cultural history:

People who do not control physical places often construct discursive spaces as sites of agency, affiliation, and imagination. One of the most important yet least known dimensions of Black expressive culture is its consistent preoccupation with place and power. Both canonized works of art and a variety of vernacular expressive practices in Black communities speak to the spatial aspects of racial identity. (2011, 60)

Lipsitz suggests that the development of modern urban life in America was premised on excluding African Americans and other peoples of color from the major goods and resources of the city: housing was segregated, access to better schools was limited, choice of jobs and health care were similarly circumscribed, for most of the twentieth century. Even after the US Supreme Court 1954 *Brown* decision called for an end to segregated schools, federal and state institutions continued to separate society along color lines—such that segregation remains as entrenched as ever (Ogletree 2004). Lipsitz posits, however, that African Americans created “expressive culture” and professional endeavors under their control (Black professional associations, social clubs, unions, businesses, restaurants, benevolent societies, etc.) in order to challenge racial discrimination—often using music, art, sports, and popular culture to define a sense of self-worth and Black empowerment:

These works of expressive culture function as repositories of collective memory, sources of moral instruction, and mechanisms for transforming places and calling communities into being through display, dialogue, and decoration. Like activists, artists committed to Black freedom proceed by promoting new understandings of the scale, scope and stakes of place and space, by burrowing in, branching out, and building up. (2011, 60)

Furthermore, Lipsitz suggests that alternative educational models such as Black Studies and Ethnic Studies are needed to properly capture and reflect the existence of alternative spatial “imaginaries” to counter “white” domination and control of institutional resources. Where segregated spaces were created to exclude, degrade and demean, African Americans transformed those limited spaces into “places” of opportunity, enterprise, opposition, recreation, or artistic expression. From Lipsitz’s perspective, learning about how Blacks turned opposition into opportunity—or “segregation into congregation”—might help modern-day policy planners

design better cities and social engagement. For faculty and students engaged in community research and service at a majority white university such as Northern Arizona University (NAU), training in the history and culture of African Americans under Jim Crow segregation might be an essential tool in preparing them for living and working in a diverse society.

I tested my theoretical approach—to combine Ethnic Studies instruction and an active fieldwork experience in the community—in 2010 and 2011 while teaching two courses in “Race, Space and Segregation,” using Flagstaff as a case study. Students were instructed to use oral history, analyze demographics, and examine media to create history games depicting Flagstaff’s segregated communities from Jim Crow to the present. During this time, other NAU faculty and staff worked with community assessment teams to interview residents and compile information about the declining status of housing, income, jobs, education, and health care in the most diverse neighborhoods of the city. The 2009 *Southside Community Assessment Report*, created by a “Rapid Assessment, Response, and Evaluation” (RARE) fieldwork team led by NAU anthropologist Miguel Vasquez, provided up-to-date information that suggested the impact of segregation had not lessened over the years (Trotter and Needle, et al. 2001).

This irony—that the most diverse neighborhoods had experienced the highest levels of decline since the beginning of desegregation and the Civil Rights Movement—provides a backdrop for understanding why Ethnic Studies pedagogy was necessary to educate students, faculty, and residents on the continuing legacy of Jim Crow. The mural project was begun, in part, to bring to light the history that was left untold. Following Lipsitz’s premise that spatial imaginaries help communities bring their stories to life—and advancing Boal and Freire’s “praxis” of bringing residents together to talk about their lives—the mural embodies three hypotheses: 1) That the history and culture of African Americans in the Southside is reflective of success in the face of systemic discrimination; 2) That placing images and icons on a visual space situated on the building site of a formerly segregated school resurrects historical memories and provides new meaning to the community; and 3) Teaching students and newcomers about the history of struggle and change may provide opportunities to redeem and rebuild community for the present and future. The next section describes the creation of the mural and the reactions of the community to it.

## The Historic Southside Mural Project Comes to Life

In the summer of 2011, the “Historic Southside Mural” was created on the wall of the Murdoch Community Center—the site of the Dunbar School, a formerly segregated elementary school named after African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. Standing on a 20-foot ladder, propped against the outer wall of the Murdoch Center, I was completing a portrait of a resident, Joan Dorsey, one of the first Black flight attendants hired by a major airline, when I heard a comment by a person walking by: “You have the *wrong* people on that wall!” I stopped painting, and asked the person, who was now walking past me: “Well, tell me who are the *right* people who belong on the wall?”... but the person said nothing, and continued walking up the street.

The exchange reminded me that community art can tell powerful stories which remind residents of their history and heritage, but it can also evoke lingering injuries of race, class, and culture which may not have been healed by the passage of time. The historic Southside mural was designed to reflect the powerful heritage of Blacks, Chicano/Latino/as, and Native Americans who came to Flagstaff in the early-to mid-1900s to work on the railroads, in the restaurants, and in the lumber industry, and who faced racial exclusion and segregation. Rather than succumbing to oppression, the residents who were forced to live “south of Route 66” transformed the most diverse neighborhoods of the city—in the words of Lipsitz—into “wonderfully festive and celebratory spaces of mutuality, community, and solidarity...” (2011, 51).

It is these aspects—“celebratory spaces of mutuality, community, and solidarity”—that the mural reflects in the portraits of community leaders, lumber mill workers, icons and images of segregated churches, tourist homes, and Jim Crow schools for Blacks, Latinos and Native

Americans. The passerby objected to seeing African Americans on the wall, and instead wanted to see Latinos—such as his uncle, whom he said once lived near the community center. I urged him to provide more details about his uncle, and his contributions to the Southside, but the person never stopped to share his knowledge or information.

Other residents, however, enthusiastically commented on the mural's creation, and offered assistance and support throughout the summer. Discussion over the impact of the mural on the city was debated on the pages of the local paper, *The Arizona Daily Sun*, and on its website—which posted photos of the mural in progress, along with comments from residents. Most were intrigued by the images of Flagstaff's African American leaders—some famous, such as Wilson Riles, the first Black elected to major office in California; and others, such as octogenarian Katherine Hickman, locally famed for her service to the community. A few complained that city funds might be better served on projects not involved in the arts, but most concurred with the *Daily Sun* editorial, that the “Mural was colorful,” inspiring and represented a necessary telling of the history of segregation:

We were impressed by the enthusiasm for the new Southside mural. It's inspirational and colorful, certainly the two major tests for a successful mural.

Some question why only blacks are being honored in a multicultural neighborhood. But the location is the old Dunbar School (now the Murdoch Community Center), which segregated this community's black children for decades. One of the mural's honorees, Wilson Riles, led the campaign to desegregate it even before Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954.

Whether you like the painting style of the mural is secondary to how it tells its story and upholds the spirit of its setting, which this mural does very well. (*Arizona Daily Sun* August 12, 2011, A-5)

At NAU, faculty, staff and students marveled as the mural progressed from June to September. When they returned to classes in the fall, many commented on their interest in seeing the daily changes that they could observe as they drove past. Many students and residents stopped by to chat, or to volunteer their services. Over the summer, a class of middle-school students studying at a “Freedom School” at the Murdoch Center took turns painting, and pledged to see that no one “tagged” or defaced the mural after it was finished. All these developments reflected the interest and impact of seeing local Black history highlighted in a graphic manner, in the city's historic Southside—an area that had previously reflected little or no historical markers or images depicting African Americans.

## **Ethnic Studies and Community Research Practices**

I am a professor of Ethnic Studies, employed by NAU—the third largest public university in Arizona—and I utilize my faculty position to teach the history and culture of Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans and Asian Americans on a campus with 25,000 students, in this southwestern US city populated by 60,000 residents. Because Flagstaff is actually a small town with a large university housed within it, I draw connections between community dynamics and the pedagogy of race and ethnic studies by creating community projects. In 2010 and 2011, students analyzed oral histories of African American “pioneers” from the World War II era and created history games based on those ethnographies. In 2011, many students, faculty and residents helped paint the mural at the Murdoch Center. I explained that these projects were not “service” activities, but efforts to include newcomers and residents in actions that could create common ground within the neighborhoods of the Southside.

Working in collaboration with the Southside Community Association, I directed artists and community residents to produce a mural that reflected the collective memory of people of color, whose contributions were largely unknown to the general public. Traditional public arts projects might recruit artists to compete for limited funds, and then receive a grant based on their

individual design before creating the mural or public art project. The Murdoch Center, however, envisioned the mural project as a “community building” exercise—in line with its RARE assessment team’s report which called for community-engaged activities, signage, historical markers, and a mural depicting the Southside as a cultural destination, rather than merely a neighborhood passage to the more lucrative Downtown and Route 66 historic sites (*Southside Community Assessment* 2009, 28-29).

The mural at the Murdoch Center depicts community leaders from the segregation era, as well as iconic buildings, multi-ethnic faces, and other images reflecting the racial and ethnic diversity that has historically typified the “south side” of the railroad tracks. Despite the formal end of legal segregation, or “Jim Crow/American apartheid” (Massey and Denton 1993)<sup>5</sup> in the 1950s and 1960s, more African Americans, Mexicano/Latino/as, and Native Americans live in the Southside compared to other parts of the city, and the Southside has more poverty and declining housing than any other part of the city (See Table 1 and 2). In the following tables, the Southside is divided into three different areas: Southside, Plaza Vieja, and Pine Knoll/Brannen Homes—conforming to the pattern of settlement that brought African Americans from Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama to work in the lumber mills and build homes in the “George Washington Carver” section of the city, which became known as Southside. Plaza Vieja (Old Town) was largely settled by Mexicano, Hispanic (Basque shepherders from Spain), and Native American workers; and Pine Knoll/Brannen Homes was built to accommodate the growing African American population, just south of the lumber mills. “Sunnyside,” which is located north of the railroad tracks, is also racially and ethnically diverse, but this is a relatively recent development, based on the influx of Mexicano workers, Native Americans and others who were dispersed from the Southside as *de facto* segregation gradually ended in the 1960s and 1970s. Sunnyside is included in the Table below for comparison to the “Southside” demographics.

Table 1: City of Flagstaff Low Income Concentrations

Neighborhood	Pct. Low-Mod. Income Persons	Median Income	Median Home Value	Pop.	No. of Households
Sunnyside	63%	\$20,554	\$56,733	4,506	1,491
Southside	81%	\$10,981	\$64,050	1,611	671
Southside (Plaza Vieja)	83%	\$13,176	\$63,300	3,006	574
Southside (Pine Knoll/Brannen Hms.)	87%	\$15,296	\$50,600	895	347
<b>FLAGSTAFF</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>\$28,382</b>	<b>\$90,300</b>	---	---

Source: 1990 US Census, in *Flagstaff 2020. Community Profile*. Flagstaff, AZ (1996): 39.

Table 2: City of Flagstaff Race/Ethnicity Concentrations

	Sunnyside		Southside		Plaza Vieja (Southside)		Pine Knoll (Southside)		FLAGSTAFF	
Race/Ethnicity	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
White	2,067	44%	1,466	72%	873	67%	337	53%	41,477	79%
African American	115	2.4%	147	7.2%	61	5%	136	21%	1,079	2%
Native American	976	21%	101	5%	166	13%	154	24%	4,371	8.3%
Hispanic/Latino	1,805	38%	499	25%	296	23%	139	22%	8,657	16.4%
Other	1,509	32%	285	14%	173	13%	8	1.2%	4,516	8.5%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4,721</b>		<b>2,030</b>		<b>1,308</b>		<b>642</b>		<b>52,701</b>	

Source: Special Census, City of Flagstaff April 13, 1995, in *Flagstaff 2020. Community Profile*. Flagstaff, AZ (1996): 39.



These are the negative legacies of Jim Crow segregation, but they are not the only elements of the story: Southside is home to four Black churches, a beautiful Catholic church that was created by Mexican Americans, several historic buildings, and a history of residents who were leaders and accomplished professionals—such as the aforementioned public official, Wilson Riles, and Joan Dorsey, the flight attendant who broke the color line in the airline industry.

My purpose in explaining the history of segregation in the Southside is to contextualize how the Murdoch Mural Project represents a unique nexus between higher education pedagogy through Ethnic Studies, and community building, through a community association that is not primarily focused on traditional development issues. I suggest that Ethnic Studies (and multidisciplinary programs using Black Studies, Chicano/Latino/a Studies, Native American Studies, and Asian American Studies) represent an alternative, more productive, utilization of the academic enterprise, preparing scholar-activists, residents and organic intellectuals to leverage their history and culture for empowerment and sustainable communities. The mural art project demonstrates how art can serve as a bridge between campus and community, and between residents who have various stories that are not part of the “official” history but which are still significant. What is new or unique about this approach is that it is occurring during a period of extreme financial turmoil and racial conflict in Arizona; using a public mural to bring together different racial and ethnic groups is a sign and a symbol of possible racial harmony—and it is occurring under the leadership of racial and ethnic minorities in a state that has promoted legislation (SB 1070, passed in 2010) designed to exclude and criminalize residents using racial profiling.<sup>6</sup>

In Flagstaff’s Southside, the process of creating a mural, based on community assessments and active engagement, has laid the foundation, hopefully, for sustainable development in a neighborhood which faces almost certain gentrification and urban renewal which may improve housing, provide new jobs, and better life conditions for residents—but it is uncertain whether the rich legacy, diversity and heritage of Blacks, Latinos and Native Americans can survive the push to redevelop the community. According to observers, one such redevelopment project to divert the flow of the Rio de Flag—which runs through the Southside—may drive up property values in the area, leading to land speculation, higher taxes and gentrification (Holub 2002).<sup>7</sup>

The presence of historic Black and Mexicano churches, buildings and a formerly segregated school, are powerful reminders of the Southside’s legacy to longtime residents. For those who are new to the community—particularly students and professionals nostalgic for “Route 66” and Flagstaff’s small-town environment—the mural project is a necessary step in resurrecting lesser-known narratives of segregation, congregation and resistance. The expressive culture found in the stories told by longtime residents is encapsulated in the figures in the mural. Creating public art on the site of the former Dunbar School allows residents to recapture and reconfigure space that acknowledges their presence.

## The History of Southside as a Rich “Discursive Space”

What is the Southside of Flagstaff, and why is it the most diverse—yet the poorest—neighborhood in the city? Many residents and historians tell different stories about how the Southside became a city within a city during the mid-twentieth century. The main narrative tells of pioneers, lumberjacks, railroad workers and service workers who came to Flagstaff to escape the South and to seek fortune in an area in which jobs—and independence—were more plentiful (*SouthSide Soul Stories* 2012). According to Coral Evans, a city councilor and niece of Joan Dorsey, many Black southerners such as her grandparents moved to Flagstaff for plentiful jobs. She says that special trains and buses brought African American workers to Flagstaff to cut timber and to work in relative freedom in the lumber mills. Her family chronicle reflects that, indeed, many Blacks did pack up and came to Flagstaff on trains, to join family members, leaving behind more odious forms of racial discrimination. In Flagstaff, however, they discovered they could only settle south of the railroad tracks—which separated the downtown section from the relatively undeveloped Southside, close to the sawmill, and work. Mexican

workers faced the same housing discrimination, but found work in integrated lumber mills populated by Blacks, Native Americans, Whites, and Hispanics (C.J. Evans, pers. comm.).

Flagstaff, located in Northern Arizona near the Grand Canyon, was founded in 1882—thirty years before Arizona statehood—by railroad companies, pioneers, shepherders and hunters who settled on land taken from the Navajo, or Diné, people. There are 13 Native American tribes which still visit the area, to commune on the Sacred Peaks which rise from 7,000 to 12,000 feet high, and which provide a spiritual home for Diné and Native American healers, as well as snow, water, timber, and recreation to the area. Flagstaff is a key tourist stop along historic Route 66, which is the main road through the city (Cline 1994; Paradis 2003; Friederici 2010). But Southside itself was once a major tourist attraction, as the original path of “Route 66” passed through these neighborhoods, populated by diverse residents and workers, and vibrant nightclubs, restaurants, entertainment, musical establishments, motels and the “red light” district (*SouthSide Soul Stories* 2012; Vincent Richie, pers. Comm.).

The Southside is still the most diverse area of the city, home to some 5,000 residents (not counting the NAU campus population), of whom 80 percent have low-to-moderate income; In comparison, Flagstaff overall has approximately 38 percent low-income residents. African Americans, Native Americans and Latinos in the Southside make up approximately 40 percent of the population, and in some neighborhoods within Southside, they total nearly 75 percent. Thus, the majority-minority neighborhoods are the poorest and the most segregated, more than 50 years after the end of formal segregation in Flagstaff (See Table 1 & 2).

But segregation in the mid-twentieth century did not always mean poverty—the residents worked in integrated work shifts at the lumber mills and cutting down pine trees in the woods; many built their own homes using cast-off lumber; others created churches, social clubs, and restaurants which attracted tourists from all over the city (V. Richie, pers. comm.). In other words, one of the most vibrant areas of the city was located south of the tracks—despite Jim Crow segregation.

But there’s more to the story: Arizona had Jim Crow segregation laws that were similar to other parts of the country, but the state began to desegregate before the US Supreme Court outlawed Jim Crow. In February 1953, Phoenix desegregated its high school, due to a court case won by Black plaintiffs who had relocated there from Flagstaff. By July 1953, a second court case forced Phoenix to desegregate its elementary schools, and Flagstaff, led by Wilson Riles and Superintendent Sturgeon Cromer, voluntarily agreed to desegregate soon after—before the Supreme Court outlawed school segregation in May 1954 (Boone 2000; Whitaker 2000).<sup>8</sup> Thus, Flagstaff and Southside represent a legacy that provided legal precedence for the *Brown* decision, even though the U.S. Supreme Court did not cite the Arizona cases—evidently because the schools had already desegregated on their own, and because the Arizona State Supreme Court had denied the school district’s appeal.

The neighborhoods, however, were as segregated as ever. The Dunbar School was closed in June 1954, and Blacks were allowed to enroll at the formerly segregated, Mexicano and Native American dominated, South Beaver School—which was the nearest community school available to Southside residents. They also were allowed to attend schools north of the railroad tracks, but housing discrimination continued for many years afterwards (Paradis 2003).

Nowadays, the housing in Southside is falling into disrepair, because the neighborhoods are part of a major flood zone—which was created in the early-1900s when city fathers diverted the Rio de Flag river to reduce flooding north of Route 66 (Holub 2002). The flood zone makes it more expensive to purchase home insurance, to make repairs, and to build affordable housing—but once the river is re-channeled to protect against floods, the land and housing in Southside will increase in value, and possibly lead to gentrification and removal of longtime residents who have doggedly held onto homes built by their parents and grandparents, but which are now in need of repair and renovation.

The Flagstaff City Council pledged to correct the river flow, and engineer a massive relocation project, estimated to cost \$2.3 million in 2000, but the project costs have ballooned since then, and federal funds have not matched cost estimates. Except for projects led by NAU,

and outside housing contractors, Southside development has remained at a standstill (Gaud 2002).

In light of the current economic and political environment, the work of the Southside Community Association (SCA) to clean up the neighborhood, enrich and educate the public about the history and culture within their midst, might seem to be too little, too late. The reaction to the mural and the SCA's assessment plan, however, has been overwhelming. NAU, the Arizona Community Foundation, a solar energy company, and local philanthropists have each contributed to ongoing programs within the Murdoch Center, using the mural as a "brand" for community engagement. The mural site has taken what was previously seen as a marginal, unremarkable building and infused it with new life and interest—not only by residents and passersby, but by visitors to the area.

With this history in mind, the next section explores the spatial "geography" of the mural design, and discusses the elements within it that reflect how residents turned racial "segregation into congregation," ethnic unity and diverse historiography.

### Mural Geography: "History Painted on Walls"

The structure and design of the mural's images and icons reflect the efforts to incorporate "race and place" into a visual communicative artifact. The mural painting is the distillation of many stories compiled over the years, and depicts some of the key leaders in the Dunbar School/Murdoch Community Center development.

The mural project emphasized residential input and community stories because the project itself was underfunded. The community assessment team collected suggestions for the neighborhood banners and the mural project, but it took another two years before funding could be secured. Even then, the \$5000 from the city's Beautification and Public Art Commission was not sufficient for hiring artists to bid for the job, and then bring the project to fruition. So, I volunteered to be the lead artist and creative designer to produce a mural that could also build community at the same time. The Flagstaff Cultural Partners matched the Beautification Commission funds and the Arizona Community Foundation funded administrative personnel to keep the project moving forward (*Southside Community Assessment* 2009).



Figure 1: "The Historic Southside Mural at the Murdoch Center," courtesy of R. Guthrie

The elements of the mural incorporated many of the suggestions from community residents, and allowed young and old to participate in the painting project itself. The project needed support and “buy-in” from residents, which was achieved by organizing community paint days, art exhibits, and workshops on the programs and history supported by the Murdoch Center.

The mural incorporates specific themes which scaffold a history of race and space, that could be painted and discussed by residents participating in the project. The goal was to create a mural design that could tell the story of pride and cultural enrichment, and represent a virtual tour of significant sites within Southside. The mural elements include the following (See Fig. 1):

- The design begins with the linking of multi-ethnic hands along the bottom of the mural (reflecting the continued racial diversity of the Southside).
- Above the hands, the “SOUTHSIDE” lettering is spray painted in outline to resemble elements of graffiti art found in most urban areas, but with a twist: to include faces of different ethnic groups smiling or waving.
- To the left of the SOUTHSIDE lettering is a portrait of an African American lumber mill worker, with the Sacred Peaks in the background (popularly known as the “San Francisco Peaks” by tourists, and “Dook ’oo’sliid” by the Navajo/Diné), and along the top of the SOUTHSIDE are eleven icons reflecting the historic sites which attracted residents and workers to Flagstaff. The BNSF (Burlington North/Santa Fe) railroad; Arizona Lumber and Timber (one of several lumber mills in the area); Our Lady of Guadalupe Church (which was built by hand by Mexicana women and men in the 1920s when they grew tired of being forced to the back of the main Catholic church during Mass); Northern Arizona University’s “Old Main” building; the Basque Tourist Home (which includes one of the few remaining Spanish handball courts in the U.S. from the World War II era); four African American churches; and the two segregated elementary schools: Dunbar School and South Beaver School—both of which are now closed.
- The background colors reflect some of the color-coding from insurance maps from the 1900s, but also the colors of the rainbow.
- The five portraits at the top of the color map feature key leaders from the Dunbar School era—each of whom represent models for turning segregation into “congregation”: Tilda Johnson (an inspiring Dunbar School teacher who went with students to South Beaver School after 1954), Paul Laurence Dunbar (a nationally renowned African American poet laureate for whom many schools were named during the early 1900s), Wilson Riles, Katherine Hickman (an eminent member of Harbert Chapel A.M.E. Church and a longtime preschool teacher and community leader), and Joan Dorsey. Mrs. Hickman and Ms. Dorsey are the only two who are still alive. The community center is named after Mrs. Cleo B. Murdoch, who was a longtime principal of the Dunbar school who recruited Wilson Riles to join the teaching profession—she passed away during the 1940s, and Riles became principal after her death.

The contributions of these figures are meant to exemplify the best that the city and the community have to offer, and to remind residents and tourists that the pioneers to the area reflected all races, colors and ethnicities. I believe, however, it is the only public site that acknowledges the contributions of African Americans to the city. Wilson Riles has a building named for him on NAU’s campus, but most students today do not know his history, nor his leadership in desegregating Flagstaff (Riles 1984).<sup>9</sup> So, the purpose of painting “history on walls” is to acknowledge what has passed, and raise examples of what citizens can do today, in the midst of economic challenges, racial division, and continued impoverishment of our cities.

## Pedagogy and Persistence

Should art educate, inform, organize, influence, incite to action, or should it simply be an object of pleasure?

—Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*<sup>10</sup>

The creation of an historic mural on an old building in a declining neighborhood might be seen as a benevolent attempt by the city and residents to “beautify” communities long-neglected by developers and city planners. However, this was not the case; the consistent line of thought by the key organizers was to reclaim a marginal space and resurrect the power and influence of Black and diverse residents; it was a community-building project, as mentioned earlier, that could undoubtedly affect future development in the area—but to what end? For gentrification after the older residents pass on, or for a sustainably diverse population, building on the institutions and programs run by SCA leaders and Murdoch Community Center workers?

The answers to these questions are still unknown, but what has become apparent is that the process of “telling the story” (or showing the history on walls) can create dialogues that transform and change communities. This is the essence of Boal and Freire’s “dialogic” educational praxis: that bringing people together to discuss, debate and decide for themselves the meaning of their lives can create positive change—even as the dialogic elements raise contestations over the meaning of the history. As I discovered on the ladder, when the passerby shouted about the “wrong people” on the wall, stories can evoke passionate debate. Artists and educators, however, cannot walk away from these contestations—they provide “teachable moments” for all. And this is the point of the mural project as pedagogy for community building: that resurrecting the history of “race as space” can be difficult for some, but it can also liberate others. The geography of the mural reflects recaptured racial imaginaries—diversifying the story that Flagstaff likes to tell about itself—explaining how racial and ethnic minorities labored in the lumber mills, restaurants, railroads and neighborhoods, and how segregation did not defeat them. This is just one case study that might find application to other cities with much larger populations and urban problems to solve, but it is a test case in this particular city which seeks to carve out its own distinct heritage.

This story of public art as pedagogy for community building diverges from the art/social movement history from the WPA era. It does not approach the magnitude of community development and social engineering projects to combat youth crime or graffiti in larger cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia or New York; but it does begin to synthesize the work of educators, artists, and community organizers who have little financial support to turn around declining neighborhoods. It builds on the notion of human capital and cultural capital arrayed against economic and political forces of decline, and demonstrates that education for action and social change can be inspired through art. These advances may suggest alternative means of community development, but at this stage, the mural project can be measured mostly in its ability to create more “smiles” and “less anger,” in the words of Chapple and Jackson (2010)—who investigated the impact of arts on neighborhoods and social practice.

As Boal (1985) notes, public art may “incite” audiences to action, should they decide to react to art projects presented in public spaces. Boal confirms Freire’s call for art as pedagogy—teaching methods to question and to transform society, through dialectical challenges to the status quo. Because murals are often created in public, they can help reclaim “space and place,” according to Lipsitz, for subordinate groups and communities of color. Reimagining the space, by representing subgroup heroes and “sheroes,” can help groups enact a “counter social warrant” to dominant spatial imaginaries—which seemingly naturalize geographies of racial domination and oppression in modern cities. It is a method of empowering the oppressed, and of codifying knowledge practices that can be shared across racial divides. It is a way to rebuild a “social ethos” that is committed to justice (Boal 1985, 22-24, 40-45).

## Conclusions

The mural is just one example of expressive culture found in Flagstaff’s Southside—designed to help reclaim the site of the former Dunbar School, which was cut in half and redesigned as a community center when the city widened Butler Street to a major thoroughfare in front of the current Murdoch Center. Buoyed by new interest in the building, the Murdoch now offers art exhibits, tutoring, a computer lab, workshops, pre-school and after-school programs, dance

classes and meeting space for a diverse, enlivened community seeking sustainable development. In addition, the Murdoch represents something new: it was the first public building in Flagstaff to install a “Mosaic” solar energy array to reduce electricity consumption in the Southside, and to model solar efficiency supported by investors and donors to the Murdoch.<sup>11</sup>

These examples help the public to re-imagine and re-order society, while building upon racial legacies that can unite communities “by promoting new understandings of the scale, scope and stakes of place and space, by burrowing in, branching out, and building up” (Lipsitz 2011, 60). Lipsitz fervently states that this is not an attempt to reify race, but instead to counter the “white” spatial imaginary that prevails:

Struggles for racial justice require more than mere inclusion into previously excluded places. They also necessitate creation of a counter social warrant with fundamentally different assumptions about place than the white spatial imaginary allows. Race-based social movements that have often seemed to social-movement theorists as expressions of unthinking racial essentialism, nationalism, and parochialism, as evidence of immature and unreflective allegiance to shared skin color and phenotype, in reality owe much of their existence to the ways in which those skin colors and phenotypes become meaningful in the United States largely through shared experiences with racialized places. (2011, 53-54)

The development of counter warrants require a telling of the history of segregation, and examining it through the lens of people who lived that legacy—to identify the barriers to progress, to erase the erasures, and to deal comprehensively with the disease of racism which continues to this day. The Historic Murdoch Mural puts a visible face on that history, and embodies an artistic approach that can unite communities and build bridges. It is history painted on walls, but it is also a lightning rod or gathering point for telling sometimes painful stories that have been ignored, and examining legacies that have not been forgotten.

The academic unit responsible for training and guiding students, community residents, public officials and university leaders through this process is called Ethnic Studies. Ironically, it is Ethnic Studies which is under attack in Arizona, and across the US, for attempting to tell those histories of resistance, and to suggest how the post-racial society is a myth—and a dangerous myth—because it removes from public memory the strategies for racial inclusion, equity and justice which must be articulated plainly during times of economic hardship and political division. That is what’s at stake, and that is what is depicted in the scaffolding of Black leaders and multi-ethnic icons and images on the mural. The mural art project is part of the effort to offer compelling education and learning opportunities to students, based on their peers, mentors and home communities—not on the culture of the dominant oppressors. As Paulo Freire noted:

No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption. (Freire 1970, 54)

The artwork displayed on the wall at the Murdoch Center makes that point evident to all who encounter it. And, in many cases, it generates heated conversation over what is the purpose of art, and who should be allowed to tell the story of communities using public art. But, in the final analysis, that’s what good art is supposed to do: create dialogue and a space for ongoing debate over the meaning of our lives, our culture, and our society.<sup>12</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Southside mural project replicates many aspects of mid-twentieth century community art projects, but it represents something new: the convergence of Ethnic Studies and community organizing—using academic disciplines developed since the late-1960s arrival of Black Studies and similar programs across the nation. For an academic unit to co-sponsor community building in Black neighborhoods in Flagstaff is a rare event, and represents a unique case study for analysis.

<sup>2</sup> Christine Sleeter (2011) provides a detailed description and analysis of what constitutes “Ethnic Studies” in the academy, in part: “Ethnic studies includes units of study, courses, or programs that are centered on the knowledge and perspectives of an ethnic or racial group, reflecting narratives and points of view rooted in that group’s lived experiences and intellectual scholarship. Ethnic studies arose as a counter to the traditional mainstream curriculum. Numerous content analyses of textbooks have found an ongoing marginalization of scholarship by and about African Americans, Latino/as, Native Americans, and Asian Americans.... Ethnic studies curricula exist in part because students of color have demanded an education that is relevant, meaningful, and affirming of their identities.” (vii)

<sup>3</sup> Friederici (2010) compiled new case studies of historiography, ethnography and oral history that include the voices of Blacks, Mexicanos, Native Americans and others who were perhaps given peripheral attention in early Flagstaff histories written for past generations. See Platt Cline’s *Mountain Town: Flagstaff’s First Century* (1994), for instance.

<sup>4</sup> Diawara, through his documentary film, *Rough in Reverse* (1995), promoted the phrase “reverse anthropology” to explain how film and visual media can be used to tell stories from local perspectives, rather than highlighting the interrogating gaze of dominant society. In the Southside, I amplified the oral histories and ethnographies of Blacks, Chicano/Latino/as and Native Americans to “reverse” the story that Flagstaff historians tell about the city’s development. It is a story that frequently marginalizes the contributions of people of color—thus necessitating the use of “reverse ethnography” to uncover hidden transcripts and stories.

<sup>5</sup> Massey and Denton (1993) explain parallels between US Jim Crow and apartheid in South Africa, suggesting how both systems of racial discrimination evolved—with intractable social, political and economic effects still felt today.

<sup>6</sup> The Arizona state legislature passed a law which allowed local police to enforce immigration and naturalization regulations on all persons stopped during “routine” police work. Many provisions of the law were overturned by the US Supreme Court, which ruled that only the federal government had the authority to enforce immigration laws; the most controversial aspect of the law, involving “racial profiling” of Latinos and others, could not stand up to the scrutiny of the highest court. Flagstaff was one of the few cities in Arizona to challenge the provisions of the law.

<sup>7</sup> According to Holub: “When the diversion is complete... it will be a windfall for investors and developers in currently restricted flood zone areas. Property values are expected to skyrocket. The bane of flood insurance would be lifted. David Wilcox of the Northern Arizona Museum spoke of the coming changes. ‘People on the southside will be changed. There are many minority residents with deep roots there. That could all be yuppified,’ he said. ‘The danger from a historic rehabilitation point of view, is that developers have the potential to damage some very important parts of Flagstaff.’”

<sup>8</sup> Boone (2000) tells the remarkable story of Attorney Hayzel B. Daniels, who filed a desegregation lawsuit on behalf of Robert B. Phillips, Jr., Tolly Williams and David Clark, against the Phoenix Union High School District in July 1952, which argued that separate schools were unconstitutional—and expensive; Judge Struckmeyer agreed in February 1953, setting a template to be followed throughout Arizona, and influencing the 1954 US Supreme Court *Brown* decision.

<sup>9</sup> Wilson C. Riles had an exceptional career as an educator and an elected official. He had humble beginnings as an orphaned Louisiana youngster who was adopted and relocated to Arizona. He found work in the lumber mills, but was recruited by Cleo B. Murdoch to enroll in Arizona Teachers College (later named Northern Arizona University); served in the Armed Forces during World War II before returning to Flagstaff and working as principal of Dunbar School; he headed the NAACP, hosted a radio talk show, and then worked with Superintendent Sturgeon Cromer in 1952-53 to desegregate Flagstaff schools. After leaving Flagstaff in 1954, he moved to Los Angeles and worked for the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Delving into education policy, he was the first African American elected to statewide public office, winning terms as Superintendent of Public Instruction from 1970 to 1982.

<sup>10</sup> Boal (1985, xiii) challenged contemporary views of art, theatre and society, and created a theatrical system in which audiences and actors were encouraged to interact in “real time”—changing outcomes of plays and developing community solutions to political problems. Rather than using dramatic arts to induce “catharsis,” for example, Boal directed his actors to break down the walls between spectatorship (and audiences experiencing release through empathy with characters on the stage) and social action—bringing audiences onto the stage, and providing a forum for re-imagining social and political relationships for the oppressed classes within societies ranging from Latin America to North America.

<sup>11</sup> According to the Solar Mosaic website: “In late May [2012], the Murdoch Center received permission to interconnect with the APS utility grid, which allows the organization to export any excess solar energy it doesn’t use and get a credit on their bill. Murdoch’s solar lease with Mosaic commenced on June 1st, and to date the system has been producing an average of 59 kWh/day, the equivalent of planting 1 urban tree daily! Mosaic will be tracking the Murdoch Center’s solar energy production using the Fronius web-based monitoring system.”

<sup>12</sup> News and videos of the mural project can be accessed through websites: “Southside Painting an Inspiration,” [http://azdailysun.com/news/local/southside-painting-an-inspiration/article\\_55af7eb1-112d-5714-8317-d2e069cf9b21.html](http://azdailysun.com/news/local/southside-painting-an-inspiration/article_55af7eb1-112d-5714-8317-d2e069cf9b21.html); “The MURAL at Murdoch video.mp4,” [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opKGjwou\\_ys](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opKGjwou_ys); “SouthSide Soul Stories History 101 Part One,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mzAmEFqOaKM>; “SouthSide Soul Stories History 101 Part Two,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ov5wCksIRQI&feature=relmfu>, accessed July 2012.

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