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Spray-Paint Angst in a Tropical Paradise: Street Art in Costa Rica, the Switzerland of Central America

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Figure 1. Graffiti in Tibás, San José.



Faculty mentor: Dr. Sarah Lyon

A tourist may feel disappointed when they first arrive in Costa Rica and see the capital city of San José. Costa Rica is a small country in Central America known for its beautiful landscapes, abundance of wildlife, and peaceful history. Most attention from the outside world focuses on their tourist spots that offer natural beauty – the rainforests, volcanoes, and beaches. On the other hand, the urban spaces in Costa Rica have less attractive aesthetic qualities. The streets of San José, for example, are full of garbage, poverty, and graffiti. However, the local graffiti can be visually pleasing, informative, or both. For my summer research project, I decided to focus on the graffiti of Costa Rica, a seldom explored subject that offers an interesting view into what the people of Costa Rica try to express.

*(*Clarification: “Graffiti” in this report can be characterized by the repetition of a name or nickname to create publicity or the application of text on a surface, whether by paint, sticker, paper, etc. “Street art” is defined as that which focuses on aesthetic design, on the image more than the text, and which may or may not have a message to convey to the public other than the recognition of the artist.)*

Graffiti locations

Graffiti cannot be found everywhere in the city; one must know where to look. One can usually find graffiti near schools and universities, on telephone boxes, under bridges, on abandoned buildings, and on large walls throughout the city. Usually it is rare to find graffiti on private residences, as there seems to be a preference to deface public surfaces rather than private property. Often graffiti with a political message will be deliberately painted on government and public buildings such as the National Museum, possibly in the attempt to make a “direct statement” to the government.

In terms of cities, San José is the most notorious for graffiti and has the greatest amount of political graffiti. This may be due not only to the large population, but the concentration of

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government buildings in the city such as the Legislative Assembly. San Pedro especially, draws attention for its colorful, skilled street art. (Street art can be differentiated from graffiti by its artistic intention, the intent to create something aesthetically pleasing, instead of graffiti's focus on the publicity of the artist's name.) Cartago, a city in the east which used to be the capital, has vibrant graffiti in the streets.

In comparison with San José, there are moderate amounts in Heredia and Alajuela, two other major cities in the Central Valley of Costa Rica. Jardines de Roma, a suburb of Heredia, has little graffiti and all of it is amateur. Permanent markers have been used in most of the pieces and they are small, with little design element, the main purpose being to put the artist's name up. The lack of skill and works may be attributed to the fact that it is an area that receives little traffic compared to the main roads of the cities, and most of the available wall surface is that of the houses of residents.

Tamarindo, a beach on the Pacific coast heavily populated by Westerners and tourists, has little graffiti. The graffiti artists have avoided the big hotels and restaurants and have created graffiti in small, hidden places such as the signs marking the garbage cans ("Plástico", etc.). It is notable that the small skate park in the town was covered in graffiti, marking the strong links between graffiti and skateboarding, an element of youth culture imported from the United States.

Types of graffiti

Most graffiti is basic spray paint graffiti, as opposed to the tile and poster graffiti found in other countries of the world such as the United Kingdom. The artistic quality of the free-style spray-paint graffiti can range from a disorderly scrawl to highly stylized letters (see Figure 1). Sometimes, stencils are used and familiar images of both political figures (e.g. George W. Bush or the ex-president of Costa Rica, Oscar Arias) and cultural characters (Cocorí, the protagonist of a popular children's book in Costa Rica) are utilized to draw attention to the message. Occasionally, stickers are used. It seems that graffiti is not often removed and is not strictly regulated by the local police.

The graffiti artists

The abundance of graffiti near schools and universities suggests that many graffiti artists are younger, in their teens and 20s, and specifically, are an educated sector of the population. Not all graffiti is produced by Costa Ricans, however. A graffiti artist in San Pedro indicated that of the murals in the neighborhood, several had been produced by foreigners, specifically Panamanians and immigrants from other Latin American countries. Often graffiti artists will work in groups to create a work together, especially for the genre of street art, which requires more skill. One of the most salient groups of the moment is THC – The Highest Crew, who has put up outstanding work all over San José and in the surrounding area. Piloy is a solo artist whose works are often seen in Heredia.

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Topics of concern

Within the area of graffiti and street art, there are many genres involved. One of the principal categories is the traditional graffiti: that which seeks to spread the artist's name, as many times as possible in as many places as possible. Other than this, another prevalent type in Costa Rica is sports graffiti, which is produced by the followers of a specific national soccer team, such as the Ultra Morada fans of Club Saprissa or the fans of La Liga. These groups utilize graffiti to claim territory and the superiority of their team, using their own characteristic alphabet to write messages of alliance to their team. Finally, much political graffiti is to be found. The numerous topics include the free trade agreement with the U.S. (CAFTA, or TLC in Spanish); corruption in the government; criticism of specific government officials, including the president; the demand of equality for homosexuals; and protests against wars and support for revolutionary movements in other countries, such as Tibet. It is evident that the graffiti is not regulated because scores of "NO TLC" graffiti can be found in the big cities of Costa Rica; the treaty was approved in 2007.

Conclusions

Instead of studying Costa Rica simply as a country with a high level of biodiversity, it is important to examine its urban culture. Despite its peaceful, easy-going image, Costa Rica is full of graffiti that protests the political situation of the country. There is still much more exploring to do to fully understand the objectives of the graffiti writers and street artists, and there are many more places to visit. This study was an enriching opportunity to start to examine the art of Costa Rica's streets. With further study, I hope to draw more conclusions on the reasons and messages behind the graffiti and the connection of Costa Rica's graffiti culture to that of other countries.

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