Vandalism or Art? Creative Communities and the Importance of Social Expression

Duke Immerse: Human Rights in the Americas
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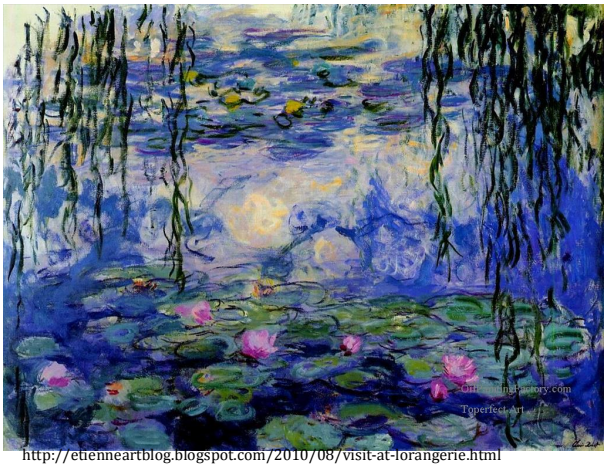
My earliest and perhaps most treasured memory is of my first encounter with a Monet. I was barely four at the time. It was a rainy Sunday when my mother caught me finger painting with ketchup on her fancy silk drapes. After a necessary scolding, we were on our way to the Wadsworth Athenaeum, otherwise known as Hartford, CT's only interesting attraction and the oldest public art museum in the country. My mother insisted on nurturing my newfound artistic inclination in a more civilized manner – and what could be more civilized than 19th century French impressionism?

The exhibit was of Monet's *Nymphéas* series and was absolutely captivating. The Wadsworth's stark marble atrium suddenly had windows into an immaculate French garden where pastel lilies wore lime tutus as they twirled through swirling seas of azure and indigo. Feathery strokes of cotton candy danced with dense dabs of lavender and hydrangea in a gentle mint breeze. I had never seen anything so incredible. "Aren't they magical? And no drapes were harmed in the process!" giggled my mother. "One day we'll visit Monet's house so you can see where he created such beauty. It's one of my favorite places in the world." With that, we left the museum in search of chocolate croissants and some (washable) paints.


http://etienneartblog.blogspot.com/2010/08/visit-at-lorangerie.html

It took me sixteen years to make it to Monet's house in Giverny, France. His rustic rooms are covered in gloriously hued, dancing outdoor scenes. Quaint cobblestone paths meander throughout his breathtaking expanse of gardens and, of course, his sprawling lily ponds. I was mesmerized, but the visit was bittersweet. Art was always an interest I shared with my mom, but her death several years earlier meant that she wasn't able to take me to Giverny. In this sense, my trip with the Duke in Paris program was both a cultural experience and a personal pilgrimage. I immediately sensed why Giverny was one of my mom's favorite places. I could feel her presence in every painting; I could picture her strolling along paths and over footbridges gazing out at the water. It was the first times in years that I truly felt connected with my mom and at peace.

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My personal appreciation for art extends beyond Monet and French impressionism. In fact, I've always been drawn to more modern art concepts and mediums. Many credit the early impressionists for truly revolutionizing artistic perceptions and techniques, and I couldn't agree more. It all began during the late nineteenth century when a group of artists called the Anonymous Society of Painters, Sculptors, Printmakers, etc. displayed their works at an exhibition in Paris. While their sloppy brushstrokes and profound use of color ignited fierce criticism and opposition, the impressionists eventually earned recognition for their "depiction of contemporary subject matter in a suitably innovative style," such as described in Edmond Duranty's 1876 essay, *La Nouvelle Peinture*[i]. As the artistic movement expanded, the impressionists paved the way for many different, more radical movements. Cubism, fauvism, surrealism, and abstract expressionism have always been my favorites. Art mediums also evolved concurrently with these movements – from a landscape one comprised almost solely of oil-on-canvas, artists began integrating sculptural materials, everyday objects, and nontraditional "canvases" into their masterpieces.

Perhaps I prefer these modern art movements because I have an easier time relating to their imperfections. You see, after that fateful day at the Wadsworth Athenaeum many years ago, I began painting. At first I was awful, and not just because I was four years old. I had this intense desire to artistically capture the true essence of Murphy, my Schnauzer. After many failed attempts to paint anything that even slightly resembled a mammal, I tried a more radical technique: what I like to call "extreme printmaking". As in, I covered Murphy's droopy face with paint and then smooshed his long snout and saggy jowls against the paper. I'm not sure what result I was expecting, but all this yielded was a sticky mess of paint, black fur, and a bitten finger. Shortly thereafter, and feasibly in an attempt to prevent future counts of animal abuse, my concerned-yet-supportive parents enrolled me in painting lessons.


http://nga.gov.au/International/Catalogue/Detail

These lessons were great fun, of course, but they were far too structured for my unique artistic desires (and perhaps my yet-to-be-diagnosed ADHD). I vividly recall one class on flowers. First, we learned to draw simple daisies as a combination of ovals and circles; I failed immediately! I remembered Monet's flowers to be anything but flat, basic shapes. When it came time to paint, I messily sloshed the acrylic all over my meager sketch. While the result was more appealing than Murphy's portrait, it still looked like something Murphy might vomit. I loved painting but faced constant frustration in trying to create realistic images. This trend continued until I was around thirteen, when my mother took me to yet another Wadsworth exhibit. This one, of Dutch abstract expressionist Willem De Kooning, was dreamy and surreal. His complex pieces are massive displays of bright colors and ambiguous images. They are the antithesis of artistic realism, and this is precisely why I've always loved them. From then on, I used color and texture to evoke image and emotion in my own abstract paintings. Why paint realistic images

when we have photography and, well, eyeballs? Why recreate what already exists? I soon realized that I, too, contribute to this post-impressionism revolution. De Kooning puts it perfectly:

> The attitude that nature is chaotic and that the artist puts order into it is a very absurd point of view, I think. All that we can hope for is to put some order into ourselves[ii].

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Many of today's artists are the epitome of this chaos-embodying artistic philosophy. During my semester in Paris, I became increasingly fascinated with a very relevant art movement: public art. To me, public art is any type of art that is accessible – for creating and/or viewing – to everyone in a given community. Parisian public art takes on many forms, from Monet's lush gardens to the architecturally striking Eiffel Tour to the conspicuous graffiti masterpieces plastering acres of wall space throughout the city. The Parisian working class *Belleville* neighborhood was the first place to really make me pay attention to public art. My first trip to Belleville was entirely by accident. During my second week in Paris, I took a wrong turn while jogging and eventually found myself in what felt like an entirely different city. At first glimpse, Belleville is a Parisian Chinatown – and no wonder, because it has one of the largest concentrations of Chinese immigrants in France[iii]. But then, around the corner from Chinatown, Belleville exudes North Africa, and after that, Eastern Europe and Italy. It's a bustling melting pot and arguably the most culturally diverse section of the city. Once my nose adjusted to the distinct mélange of ethnic foods and cigarette smoke, my gaze settled upon perhaps the most spectacular street I have ever seen: *Rue Dénoyez.*

The Rue Dénoyez is, unofficially, the most graffitied street in Paris. At first glance, I suspected my favorite cafe's chef of lacing my *omelette mixte* with hallucinogenic mushrooms (it did taste oddly earthy that morning). But no, I was not on drugs – I had just never seen so much graffiti before in my life; let alone graffiti this beautiful. It turns out that Rue Dénoyez is one of several Parisian streets where graffiti is both legal and encouraged. As I meandered past numerous bohemian cafés and stylish young couples, I observed several unassuming artists leaving their mark. The masterpieces were vivid, expressive, and gorgeous – yet often bittersweet. Many walls were covered with images evocative of political unrest, poverty, and racism. A nearby abandoned railroad track held the phrase: *le bonheur est trop court* (happiness is too short), while a commanding overhead billboard reads: *il faut se mefier des mots* (beware of

words).

http://whttp://www.picstopin.com/1587

Belleville, and particularly Rue Dénoyez, is like no else place in Paris. It largely lacks upscale hotels, luxury boutiques, and touristy anythings, and its history reflects this. Since the nineteenth century, Belleville has been Paris's immigration hub. Exorbitant rent prices, housing shortages, and an arguably stifling homogenous culture in central Paris have long been sending inhabitants running to Belleville's cheap apartments and accepting diversity. Midcentury modernization efforts and the economic downturn after the 1973 oil crisis caused the French government to bulldoze many of Belleville's historic Haussmann buildings to make way for low-income housing projects. While Belleville's affordability makes it possible for many lower-income persons to live in Paris proper, the neighborhood is a breeding ground for poverty and crime[iv].

Belleville's fascinating public art encouraged me to investigate the motivations behind such bittersweet graffiti. My current involvement in the Duke Immerse program on human rights has taught me that public art is a great vehicle for political discourse and public opinion. But Paris – the romantic city of lights, the epitome of sophistication, the bustling artistic hub – can't possibly be a city of human rights abuses, right? I learned that Belleville and its bordering suburbs and *cités* – housing projects lining Paris's periphery – have disproportionately suffered as a result of French immigration and social policies. Paris has experienced booming immigration waves since Algeria's independence from France in 1962. This caused a massive increase in Paris's Islamic population. Many claim that the 1970s low-income housing projects were erected to drive these immigrants to the outskirts of the city, away from the "real" Paris where they wouldn't be at risk of tainting the treasured Parisian culture. The French *exception culturelle* – a seemingly benevolent policy that supports public art events, language preservation and uses subsidies and taxes to encourage domestic over international good consumption – is credited for cultivating extreme nationalistic and anti-immigration sentiments[v]. While the exception culturelle is an anti-globalization, cultural proliferation effort, exactly what kind of culture is it trying to preserve?

http://vudubalcon.blogspot.com/2011/03

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Sadly, human rights infringements do exist in the city of lights. The aforementioned exception culturelle limits cultural expression by placing quotas and high taxes on foreign goods

such as films, radio broadcasts, television programs, and music, among others. This policy stresses that French culture is superior to, and also threatened by, all others. Is it ethical for a government to regulate what comprises a nation's culture? Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights suggests otherwise:

> Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

It seems to me that the exception culturelle most definitely limits a person's "social and cultural rights" and thus "the free development of his personality". Perhaps Belleville's vibrant graffiti doesn't really exist in central Paris is because the exception culturelle's influence is much higher in those fancy, wealthier neighborhoods. In this sense, the policy disproportionately afflicts immigrant communities, and that in itself is a human rights infringement.

Furthermore, since 1989, *l'affaire du voile* (the veil affair) has unfairly targeted Islamic females and further cultivated xenophobic tensions in France. The French *Laïcité* (secularism) law has long been manipulated to prevent Islamic females from wearing a traditional headscarf in public schools and government institutions. As a result, hundreds of girls have been expelled from French schools for their decision to wear the headscarf. In 2003, President Chirac passed a law prohibiting public displays of ostentatious religious affiliation, including headscarves, burqas, large Christian crosses, and Jewish kippas[vi]. While France is a thoroughly secular nation, these policies inhibit religious freedom, personal expression, and the right to education. Since Islamic women are by far this law's most targeted group, does that make a policy both racist and sexist? Anti-Islamic tensions in Paris have been rising over the past few decades, and many blame l'affaire du voile. This law certainly contradicts France's national motto of *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* (liberty, equality, brotherhood). I wonder if that's what the Belleville artist meant with "*il faut se méfier des mots"?*

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My newfound interest in human rights and public art lead me to join the aforementioned Duke Immerse program on human rights in the Americas. My courses focused on the history and implications of human rights in North and South America. There was a heavy emphasis on issues particularly pertinent to African Americans, Native Americans, the Mapuche – an indigenous people of southern Chile, and undocumented Latino/a immigrants in our very own Durham. The program included a two-week trip to Chile, in addition to various excursions across North Carolina and community art projects in Durham. I applied to this program on a whim about

twenty minutes before the application deadline, and couldn't be happier with my decision; but that's not to say the program wasn't challenging!

I am not formally affiliated with any of the groups I mentioned, and initially, this was very intimidating. I vividly remember the first day of class, when Miguel, our professor for the course called "building creative communities", asked us to introduce ourselves and explain why we chose this program. I soon realized that I was one of only a few students who didn't speak Spanish. My classmates told inspiring testimonies about tumultuous journeys to American soil as an undocumented immigrant, life as a Tibetan refugee with no nationality, learning English solely from watching American soap operas, and of deep personal ties with Latin America. Almost all of my classmates spoke of issues of identity and identity struggles – especially those connected with racial/ethnic status. I thought, "I'm white and I've never questioned my identity. Should I? Does this make me shallow? Is something wrong with me?" I had never felt so uninteresting and confused before in my life. What did I bring to the table in this situation? Well, it went something like this:

> Um, hi everyone! I'm Chelsea. I'm a senior from a small town in Connecticut. My only connection to Latin America is that my dad's girlfriend is Colombian, and she has made me really want to learn Spanish! My family is half French and I love learning about other cultures and traveling. I'm really interested in the creative parts of the program. I love to paint and I'm fascinated with public art. And I'm really excited to go to Chile!

After that awkward introduction, I actually considered dropping out of the program. How will any of this even interest me? I speak no Spanish and will probably be the joke of the class when we travel to Chile. Oh, and the community art projects we will be working on? They will be mostly in collaboration with Spanish-speaking students and artists on topics that I know nothing about. Later that evening, I slapped myself for acting like such an uncultured, American idiot. Ugh! Thankfully, I realized those thoughts were ridiculous and decided to stick with Duke Immerse, and it really paid off.

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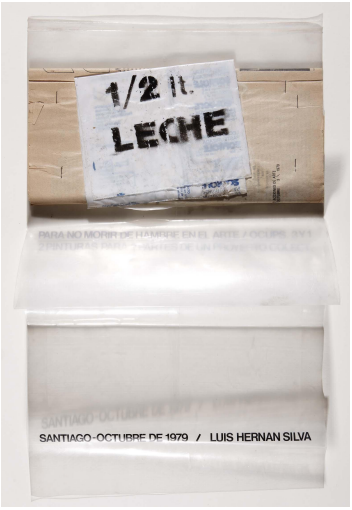
Despite the language barrier and exhausting travel, my trip to Chile was incredible. I thought I had an accurate idea of what to expect because, leading up to the departure, my courses filled my brain with just about everything Chilean. I was especially shocked to learn of the violent human rights abuses suffered during the relatively recent Pinochet dictatorship. Naturally, I anticipated a Chile that would exude somberness and, more importantly, anti-American sentiments. I couldn't have been more wrong! Upon landing in Santiago, I discovered a vibrant, bustling city chock full of lush outdoor spaces, tasty street food, and gorgeous historical monuments. Santiago felt like a mixture of mostly Madrid with a dash of Mumbai – you know, for it's gorgeous architecture, dense pollution and interesting sprinkling of chaos.

Undoubtedly my favorite part of Santiago was the public art. I know – surprise, surprise – but Santiago's graffiti is on par with that of Belleville in both aesthetics and content. The public art movement in Santiago began when the multidisciplinary art collective called CADA (*Colectivo Acciones de Arte* – The Art Actions Collective) was founded in 1979. CADA used the city itself as an art medium for collective work. The group was established during the Pinochet dictatorship in an effort to intervene in and interrupt the establishment of everyday habits and neoliberal consumerism. CADA founders highlighted the effects of Chile's new government and emphasized that these consequences became both habitual and accepted. The group orchestrated various artistic interventions using everyday items and habits as vehicles for "shock tactics" to

interrupt everyday life, cultivate an atmosphere conducive to the questioning of habit, and exhibit the collective action power of art[vii].

Under Pinochet, the Chilean government used fear and authoritarianism to homogenize the country's social and political landscapes. In addition to the over 30,000 people tortured at Villa Grimaldi (and other torture centers), over 3,000 people died and another 1,000 are still missing. Thus, this fear repressed and constricted all traditional means of public political discourse. Accordingly, CADA methods were extremely ambiguous and encouraged conversation and questioning without direct political statements[viii].



If I had been an adult Chilean in the 1980s, I like to think that my sassy, mischievous self would have been involved with CADA. Their tactics were clever, peculiar, and incredibly effective. My favorite CADA exhibition is called *Para no morir de hambre en el art* (to avoid starvation in art). On October 3, 1979, CADA members gave out 100 bags of milk to people in Santiago neighborhood and then asked them to give the milk back to donate to the artists. Sounds bizarre, doesn't it? The idea of artists receiving milk alludes to the Unidad Popular government. Under former President Allende, one of the measures to fight poverty was to ensure that each child would be given one half liter of milk everyday. The milk was then left to decompose in the Galería Centro Imagen. This seemingly crazy gesture epitomizes Chilean street art; it's always political, always unique, and always somewhat puzzling!

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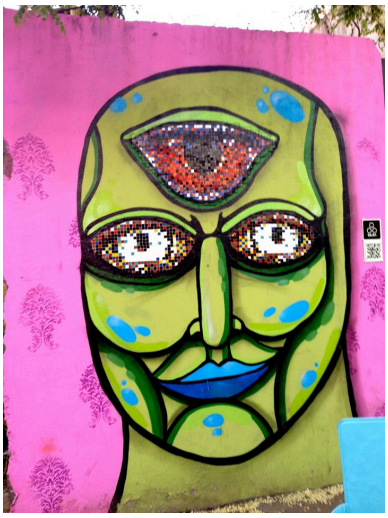
My first encounter with today's Chilean public art actually began with a man I met in a grungy Santiago bar. The bar, ironically called *Harvard*, was packed with quirky, suspicious-looking characters. Apparently, Harvard is a notoriously sketchy place where bar brawls, muggings, and even gun violence aren't too out of the ordinary. Now, as a naïve group of Duke girls experiencing our first night out in Santiago, we did not know any of this! If we had, I probably would have brushed off Andres, a twenty-something artist, when he offered to buy me a drink. Ignorance is bliss, isn't it?

Over a few watery pisco-and-cokes, Andres and I discussed his motivations for becoming an artist. A few years earlier, he was working towards a psychology degree at one of Santiago's private universities when economic hardships forced him to leave school. Chile's exorbitant college tuition is similar to that in the United States, but Chilean students are generally more mobilized and involved in reform efforts. Andres explained his deep desire to support this crucial education movement, but faced one problem: fear. Apparently, during his first student protest, Santiago police violently attacked many students and provoked somewhat of a stampede. Andres was trampled, suffered several broken ribs, and understandably vowed to never again attend a protest. However, determined to stand in solidarity with his fellow students, he supported the movement in a safer, more peaceful way: through art. I was never able to see Andres's works, (mainly because I was not about to leave a bar in a foreign country with a strange man) but he described them as abstract, cheerful depictions of his hopes for Chile's education system. Supposedly, his large, spray paint-on-wood masterpieces began as a hobby but eventually turned into a lucrative career. Andres explained how so many artists turn to Santiago's streets because

apartments are often cramped and gallery spaces expensive. He joked that the city's formal art museums serve no purpose because the best exhibits are always open and always free.



Naturally, I took my next day as an opportunity to absorb more of Santiago's public art. That morning, the Duke Immerse crew began the day in a different, much less touristy part of the city. The neighborhood was mainly residential but, thanks to its spectacular graffiti pieces, was brimming with life and emotion. A nearby mural of an alien was reminiscent, (to me at least) of Chile's tense history of racism and conflict with its very own indigenous peoples.

Next, we met up with a delightful speaker named Gabriela Zuniga. She runs a non-profit that helps families of those who disappeared during the Pinochet dictatorship find their loved ones. Gabriela's deep personal connection with her organization — her husband is of the disappeared — is what really struck me. She candidly, (and often humorously) described her romance and heartbreak-laden story. This candidness is perhaps why I became so emotional during her talk — her friendly tone and openness made it much easier to really connect and empathize with her. I also really appreciated the huge mural on a wall in her courtyard. It had a simple, clear, impactful message: *"Donde?"* What happened to the disappeared? What is justice? This striking mural is the perfect example of how art can be a powerful, mobilizing, cathartic tool.

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My first realization upon returning to North Carolina was that it felt dull and colorless. I live in downtown Durham, an area considered the most vibrant, lively part of the city. Huh? Just like Paris and Santiago, Durham is a city steeped in a history of racism, economic struggle, and inequalities. Why is it that Paris and Santiago are laden with impactful public art pieces whereas Durham really isn't? Granted, Durham isn't exactly a major cosmopolitan capital city, but it's home to one of the best universities in the world and so, at minimum, it's a significant educational, intellectual hub. In fact, most of the few – but rather exceptional – public art exhibitions I found were not created by individuals, but by institutions. A great example of this is the Pauli Murray Project. The Duke Human Rights Center at the Franklin Humanities Institute launched the Pauli Murray Project: a community-based effort to honor, commemorate, and proliferate the goals and values of civil and human rights advocate Pauli Murray. The project describes her as:

> A champion for civil and human rights who grew up in Durham, her insights and vision continue to resonate powerfully in our times. As a historian, attorney, poet, activist, teacher and Episcopal priest, she worked throughout her life to address injustice, to give voice to the unheard, to educate, and to promote reconciliation between races and economic classes[ix].

The Pauli Murray project has erected numerous murals throughout the city to honor Murray's achievements and emphasis past and current social issues. They are one of the only formal, public reminders that issues like racism and economic disparities are still very prominent in today's Durham.

My interest in Durham's few of public art displays lead me to Peter Coyle, a member of Durham's Public Art Commission. Mr. Coyle explained to me how there is a complicated, messy, bureaucracy in place for evaluating and approving all of Durham's publicly funded art exhibits. Graffiti is also considered vandalism and, not surprisingly, is neither legal nor encouraged. Additionally, Mr. Coyle described how even when the committee approves a public art project proposal, Durham residents get the final say. The committee holds public forums for these pieces and often, and when residents leave near the art's proposed location, they tend to be especially vocal. According to Mr. Coyle, public art pieces with certain social messages – such

as those surrounding issues like racism and classism – are more likely to be opposed than others. In fact, in 2012, the Durham Public Art Committee awarded local artist, Brenda Miller Holmes, a grant for a public mural project on Durham's civil rights history. While Miller Holmes has been planning this project for years, public backlash and strict building regulations have left her yet to find a suitable location for the mural.

Unfortunately, this type of public disapproval does not surprise me. Earlier in the semester, my fellow Duke Immerse students and I partnered with several local artists and the Two Way Bridges program to create a public mural to give recognition and voice to Durham's undocumented population. The mural was initially planned for a wall outside of Morgan Imports (in Brightleaf Square), and then instead on the side of Francesca's (on Ninth Street). Eventually, we created the mural on the façade of Torero's on Main Street; Morgan Imports's and Francesca's initial support was revoked when they learned of the mural's content. While the Torero's piece turned out fantastic and very impactful, the Brightleaf Square Committee required one specific change in order for it to remain. The original piece contained a train representing Durham's undocumented population, and this caused so much unrest that we sadly had to paint over it. How is it that the lose interpretation of a harmless image yields so much controversy? Perhaps this is why CADA used such bizarre tactics in their pieces: anything more direct would certainly have caused a ruckus.

http://sites.duke.edu/bridges/public-and-community-art/

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A vibrant, uncensored public art scene is undoubtedly conducive to a community's wellbeing. In this sense, it's just like seeing a therapist. Psychologists everywhere argue that the best way to deal with your personal problems to acknowledge them, to talk about them – public art is therapy for communities. It gives a voice to the voiceless; it draws visitors to different parts of cities; it raises awareness on important issues. In fact, I am the perfect example of why public art is so important. If Belleville wasn't plastered in such striking graffiti, I would have never researched the neighborhood's immigration history or constant xenophobic struggles. I would be one more person living in ignorance. If I hadn't bumped into Andres in Santiago, I likely would have paid much less attention to Santiago's impactful graffiti and Chile's education reform movement. Public art is all about raising awareness on issues that are, all too often, brushed under the rug. Prior to this semester, I knew little about Durham's undocumented population. However, the owners of Morgan Imports and Francesca's are evidence that the issue is as alive

and controversial as ever. These human rights abuses are going to keep happening unless we do something – and what better way to start than with another mural?

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The most important and surprising discovery of my semester was completely unintentional. I mentioned earlier how, at the start of Duke Immerse, I felt shallow and guilty for never having questioned my identity. My initial reaction was, "I'm white. What's there to question?" However, I've learned that there is always so much to question, and none of it has anything to do with my skin color. In reflecting upon the three cities in this essay, I began to compare and analyze their differences. Each city's public art (or lack thereof) illustrates their greatest strengths, deepest flaws, and future aspirations. Public art helps define each city's identity. This is where I had my realization: just like Paris knows that it is and will always be Paris, I know that I am and will always be white. However, my interests and problems and desires are much more indicative and differentiating than my outward appearance. With that, my semester-long identity crisis ended. I'm white, yes, but I identify much more as a creative person; as a Duke student; as a New Englander; as someone who lost a parent; as half French; as an adventurer; and, most importantly, as someone who cares about human rights and my community.

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[i] http://www.leboucher.com/pdf/duranty/b_dura_np.pdf
[ii] http://artquotes.robertgenn.com/auth_search.php?authid=58
[iii] https://www.academia.edu/886857/The_mosaic_pattern_Cohabitation_between_Ethnic_Groups_in_Belleville_Paris
[iv] http://untappedcities.com/2011/02/20/rue-denoyez-belleville-a-multi-cultural-graffiti-haven/
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[vii] https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/2952/cada-art-and-life-chile/
[viii] http://www.cnn.com/2013/09/11/world/americas/chile-coup-anniversary-40/
[ix] http://paulimurrayproject.org/pauli-murray/