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The Writing on the Walls: Street art as a site of participation in discourse and a platform for voice in the Moroccan public sphere

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The Writing on the Walls:
Street art as a site of participation in discourse and a platform for voice in the Moroccan public sphere

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Abstract

Street art is a form of mass communication and a platform for public discourse (Chaffee, 1993, p. 4). Public discourse in the Moroccan context is undergoing a process of limited liberalization, characterized by the hybrid regime’s allowance of a greater plurality of voices to legitimately participate in public discourse while still maintaining surveillance and control over who participates and how they participate (Desrues, 2013). Through qualitative research methods, this study analyzes how individual actors and the Moroccan hybrid regime use street art in the Rabat-Casablanca urban space to participate in public discourse and how street art is related to the process of political liberalization. Because street artists often do not offer their audience a fixed meaning of their art, instead requiring the audience to find their own meaning for the art, it was hypothesized that street art creates space in the public sphere for a greater plurality of narratives, thus leading to higher levels of political liberalization. The findings of this study upheld this hypothesis with the reservation that street art, like all forms of public discourse, is constrained by the redlines set by the hybrid-regime that determine what can and cannot be said in the public sphere.

Keywords: Political Science, Mass Communications, Fine Arts
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“The wall you are working on is yours until you finish, until you sign your name. Once you sign your name, it’s not yours anymore; it’s the people’s wall, the people’s canvass.” (Machima, personal communication, May 5, 2017)
Introduction

Street art is a growing movement in Morocco, rising in prevalence and salience in the past few years and increasingly transforming the buildings of Morocco's urban spaces into canvases, platforms for public discourse. This growth in street art comes as Morocco is in the midst of a process of limited political liberalization, catalyzed by the 2011 Arab Spring experience (Desrues, 2013). The effect of this limited liberalization on public discourse in Morocco is characterized by the hybrid regime’s allowance of a greater plurality of voices to legitimately participate in public discourse while still maintaining surveillance and control over who participates and how they participate (Desrues, 2013). Given street art’s role as a platform for public discourse and the changing political climate regarding liberalization of public discourse in the contemporary Moroccan context, it is apparent that there is a need to explore the relationship between street art and political liberalization.

Focusing on the Rabat-Casablanca urban space, this paper will explore the following questions:

1) How does street art operate as a platform for participation in public discourse?
   a) How do actors use street art to exercise voice in the public sphere?

2) How does the presence of street art affect levels of political liberalization?

To investigate these questions, this paper will give a brief background on the Moroccan political context and on the discursive elements of street art, map the current scene of street art in Morocco, discuss my assumptions and the evolution of my research question, discuss the methods used to gather information about street art, and then analyze the information obtained. In the analysis, this paper will first discuss the way that street art increases plurality of voices in the public sphere both by creating space for individuals of the public to think critically and create their own ideas and by offering new ideas for the public to embrace. Then, this paper will
analyze how participation in public discourse at the site of street art can be limited- how the messages expressed in street art are limited by the redlines that govern all public discourse.

This paper argues that street art contributes to the process of limited political liberalization by creating space for individual to participate in public discourse and encouraging individuals to produce their own individual critical analyses, working to increase the plurality of voices in the public sphere and diminish the hybrid regime’s power to control public discourse.

Before any discussion can take place, it is necessary to define terms as they are used in this paper. Unless otherwise cited, the following information was gleaned during my extensive time spent mapping the field through participant observation.

**Street art** is visual art which uses the exterior walls of pre-existing buildings as a canvass. Street art is desired by the owner of the building and is sanctioned by authorities. Street art is not spontaneous but rather is planned and organized in advance. Street art projects tend to be large in scale, usually covering an entire wall of a multi-story building, and thus are time and resource-intensive. The cost of street art, including the cost of the resources used and cost of the artist’s labor, is paid for by a conglomerate of actors, which may include the government, corporate sponsors, and private actors, who desire the art. (Mohammed, personal communication, April 28, 2017)

**Graffiti**, like street art, is visual art which uses the exterior walls of pre-existing buildings as a canvass, however graffiti is not desired by the owner of the building and is illegal. Graffiti tends to be more spontaneous than street art, as graffiti artists do not need to get permission or funding for their work. Graffiti also tends to be smaller in scale than street art, requiring less time and resources. The illegal nature of graffiti often requires graffiti artists to complete their work quickly to avoid discovery by authorities. Additionally, because graffiti artists themselves pay for the resources used to make their art, graffiti tends to be smaller in scale than street art.
The term **hybrid regime** refers to “political regimes where there are institutional arrangements that are based on principles of democratic legitimacy as well as civil rights and civil liberties, but which are distorted by a series of legal restrictions and subordinated to an authoritarian configuration and exercise of supreme power” (Desrues, 2013, p. 410).

The **Rabat-Casablanca urban space** is a term I use to refer to the singular cultural space that exists in the cities of Rabat and Casablanca in relation to street art. I categorize Rabat and Casablanca as being part of the same cultural space in relation to street art because the same association, EAC L’Boulvart, organizes the street art in both cities, thus creating a single, shared street art culture in the two cities. In this paper, I analyze only the street art found in the Rabat-Casablanca urban space and all of my claims pertain only to the street art found in this area. It should be noted that the grouping of Rabat and Casablanca together in this paper is done in relation to the street art cultural scene only and is not intended to apply that Rabat and Casablanca can be considered part of the same cultural space in any other way.
Background

Political significance of street art

Street art is a medium of mass communication and can be employed by collectives or state actors to inform and persuade the public (Chaffee, 1993, p. 4). Street art can be employed to form a social consciousness by providing a public record and using images to move emotions and shape perceptions (Chaffee, 1993, p. 4). Street art can also gauge political sentiments, especially in authoritarian environments where political beliefs are repressed and where it is difficult to otherwise see a breakdown of the beliefs held by the public (Chaffee, 1993, p. 4). Furthermore, street art “can function as a means of political resistance by envisioning competing futures, inscribing memory and critically commenting on political events” (De Ruiter, 2015).

The Moroccan hybrid regime

In the article “Mobilizations in a hybrid regime: The 20th February Movement and the Moroccan regime,” Thierry Desrues (2013) defines a hybrid political regime as “political regimes where there are institutional arrangements that are based on principles of democratic legitimacy as well as civil rights and civil liberties, but which are distorted by a series of legal restrictions and subordinated to an authoritarian configuration and exercise of supreme power,” (p. 410). In the Moroccan context, the monarchy allows for the existence of a pluralism of political beliefs but maintains strict control over how these beliefs may be expressed (p. 411). The regime sets all the rules of the game and decides who gets to play and how (p. 411). In the Moroccan hybrid regime, there is a certain level of political liberalization, as the regime allows for limited civil movements and political opposition (Belghazi, 2017). Yet, this liberalization serves the Moroccan hybrid regime to give the appearance of democratization in order to gain international and local legitimacy and is NOT political democratization; there fails to be an increase in power of the people over the executive and legislative (Belghazi, 2017). When faced with popular
opposition, the Moroccan hybrid regime uses a strategy of cooption and symbolically meeting substantive demands to neutralize resistance movements (Belghazi, 2017).

**The organization of the production of street art in the Rabat-Casablanca urban space**

I learned about the organization of the production of street art in the Rabat-Casablanca urban space from multiple conversations with various artists throughout my participant observations. According to those conversations (unless otherwise cited), the majority of street art in the Rabat-Casablanca urban space is produced in the following way: an association-like EAC L’Boulvart (Arts and Cultural Education), which describes itself as “a non-profit association that promotes and develops contemporary music and urban culture in Morocco”- organizes a street art festival for a specific city (L’BOULEVARD FESTIVAL, n.d.). EAC L’Boulvart has organized the street art festivals “Jidar” (which means “wall” in Arabic) in Rabat and “S’bagha Bagha” (which means “paint desires/wants” in Darija, the Moroccan dialect of Arabic) in Casablanca. The majority of the street art found in Rabat and Casablanca is the result of these two festivals, which are are sanctioned by the government and under the patronage of King Mohammed IX (Carte et itinéraire, n.d.). The street art festival obtains funding from corporate sponsors and the Moroccan government, specifically from city governments (JIDAR, n.d.). The festival also invites individual artists from around the world and from the local art community to participate in the street art festival. Moreover, the festival finds walls around the city to serve as the sites of the street art festival and gains approval for the art from the building owners and all other relevant authorities. The street art festival also provides all of the resources, including paint, brushes, cherry-picker machines, etc., necessary for the street art projects which will be completed as part of the festival. The street art festival pays for and organizes all participating
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artists’ travel and room and board accommodations and pays the artists for their participation. (see Appendix D for a picture of a street art site during the production of the art)

Assumptions

In this section, I will discuss the assumptions I held prior to collecting primary data. I will also explain how my research question evolved as I mapped the field and found it was not relevant to the realities of Moroccan street art.

At the beginning of this project, I thought of “street art” as a catch-all term referring to all visual art that uses pre-existing buildings as canvases, including both the art that I now define as graffiti and the art that I now define as street art (see Introduction for definitions of street art and graffiti). I divided street art into two categories, “resistance street art” and “state-produced street art”.

I defined resistance street art as visual art created on the walls of pre-existing buildings by individual actors without permission from authorities that was expressing opposition to the power of the state. I assumed that resistance street art is a tool for political resistance movements which resistance movements use as a medium of communication to convey specific political ideas and inform and persuade the public. Additionally, I assumed that resistance street art functions as a “contentious performance” of opposition to authorities by committing an illegal act (De Ruiter, 2015). Looking back, this category of “resistance street art” was not referring to street art at all, but rather referring to art that falls under the category of graffiti (according to my above mentioned definitions of street art and graffiti).

Furthermore, I applied Des Rues’s notion regarding the hybrid regime’s use of co-option when faced with political resistance to my conceptualizations of street art. I assumed that in order to undermine resistance street art’s ability to challenge the authority of the state, the Moroccan hybrid regime created their own street art, which I labeled “state street art,” in order to
co-opt street art as tool of political resistance. I defined “state street art” as visual art created on the walls of pre-existing buildings by artists who were paid by the state, the message of this art being crafted and controlled by the state. I assumed that state-produced street art coopts and compromises resistance street art’s utility as a tool of resistance. I believed that state street art undermines resistance street art’s power by creating a false-impression of deregulation of public discourse, tricking people into believing that there is greater freedom of expression and increased democratization, undermining the claims of resistance street art about the repressive nature of the state. I also believed that state street art is used to create an illusion of the decriminalization of resistance street art, thus negating the resistance street art’s ability to serve as a contentious performance of opposition. Furthermore, I assumed that state produced street art weakens resistance street art’s power in content by conveying propaganda messages that refute the arguments levied against the state by the resistance. Moreover, I thought that state produced street art is used to advertise state’s symbolic closures to the substantive demands of the resistance, placating the public with pseudo-reforms and diffusing tensions that fuel the resistance, further undermining the power of the content, criticisms against the state, of resistance street art. In reality, I did not find a single example of “state produced street art” because street art, as I define the term above, is created by independant artists without direct censorship from the government. In other words, the government does not design or directly control the message of any of the street art found in the Rabat-Casablanca urban space.

My original research question was: “How is street art a site of struggle between resistance movements and the Moroccan state? Specifically, a) how do resistances movements use street art, and b) how does the hybrid Moroccan regime use street art to co-opt and undermine the efficacy of street art as a tool of resistance?” This question was based off of the assumptions enumerated above.
As I began mapping the field, carrying out preliminary participant observations and casually talking to people involved in the street art scene of the Rabat-Casablanca urban space, I realized that my original research question was not relevant to the reality of street art in this space for a host of reasons. The first reason why my original research question was not relevant is that the art that I was calling “resistance street art” was categorized by people in the street art scene as graffiti rather than street art. In reality, street art is never a contentious performance of opposition to authorities by committing an illegal act because street art, by its nature, must be state-sanctioned. In other words, street art takes a long time to make, therefore individuals cannot spontaneously create street art and flee the scene before discovery, therefore street art requires the sanction from the state.

The second reason why my original research question was not relevant is that the state does not control the message of street art in the direct that I assumed it did. As one street artist told me in conversation during participant observation, street art is not directly censored by the government- any censorship is more of a self-censorship due to the soft power used by the regime to regulate all public discourse. In my analysis section, I will further discuss how the hybrid regime exercises soft power to enforce limitations on the discourse occurring at the site of street art.

The third reason why my original research question was not relevant is that street art in the Rabat-Casablanca urban space does not communicate overt, specific political messages as I had assumed. According to various conversations with street artists during participant observation, many street artists don’t have a specific political agenda behind their art, nor do they try to communicate a set meaning with their art. Rather, many street artists purposefully leave the meaning of their art open to interpretation- they want to people to be able to derive their own meaning in the art. Therefore, my notions about that street art operating as a tool of
political resistance by serving as a medium of communication to convey specific political ideas and inform and persuade the public were not relevant, as street art tends to convey vague messages open to interpretation.

After mapping the field and discovering the basics facts regarding the reality of street art in the Rabat-Casablanca urban space, I arrived at my final research question:

1. How does street art operate as a platform for participation in public discourse?
   a. How do actors use street art to exercise voice in the public sphere?
2. How does the presence of street art affect levels of political liberalization?
Methodology

I investigated my research question using the qualitative research methods of participant observation, group discussion, and intensive interview. The term “participant observation” refers to the anthropological technique for gathering information through simultaneously actively participating in and observing a culture, while recording and reflecting on experiences (Jaimangal-Jones, 2013). I chose to use participant observation to gather information because at the beginning of my research, I did not know enough about the reality of street art in the Rabat-Casablanca urban space in order to formulate useful questions to ask people in either group discussions or intensive interviews; I needed to first gather preliminary information and become familiar with the field through participant observation. In order to conduct participant observations, I had to first access the field. I gained access to the field through personal connections to artists involved in the street art scene. I met Badr, the first street artist I came to know, at an art event in Rabat in February. This personal connection with Badr snowballed into multiple personal connections as Badr introduced me to his friends in the street art scene. These friends in the street art scene told me information about the street art in the Rabat-Casablanca urban space. The primary sites of my participant observation include: one non-street art festival related street art project at CDG square in Rabat; completed sites of the first edition of the street art festival S’Bagha Bagha in Casablanca; completed sites of the first and second editions of the street art festival Jidar in Rabat; from the time that painting started until the time that painting ended, sites of the third edition of Jidar in Rabat; other events of the third edition of Jidar in Rabat; and casual, spontaneous social gatherings of street artist in both Rabat and Casablanca. From April 13th, 2017 until May 5th, 2017, I spent about two hours a day on average doing participant observations.
The term “group discussion” refers to the ethnographic research method of composing a group of people sharing a common interest or experience, wherein participants are not only prompted and reacting to the interviewer’s questions, but also to the comments of other participants (Jaimangal-Jones, 2013). I chose to use the ethnographic technique of group discussion because group discussions facilitate more nuanced conservation, as the participants already belong to a pre-existing cultural group (in this case, the cultural group is the street art scene of the Rabat-Casablanca urban space) and thus operate within the same insider-knowledge network. Group discussion allowed me to see how street artists interact with each other and how they interact with the topics I raised. I arranged two group discussions, the first on April 28, 2017 with three artists participating in Jidar and the second on April 30, 2017 with two of the three artists from the first group discussion. These group discussions lasted for roughly an hour each.

The term “intensive interview” refers to the ethnographic technique of holding a conversation one-on-one with an interviewee, where the researcher offers questions to the interviewee and directs the conversation around a range of predefined topics or subject areas while the interviewee elaborates on the subjects they find important (Jaimangal-Jones, 2013). I chose to utilize the technique of intensive interviews in order to prompt conversations about and probe further into the specific topics I was interested in for my research. I carried out two intensive interviews with artists participating in Jidar on May 2, 2017 and May 5, 2017.

My research project is limited from bottom to top by my positionality and the inherent biases present in that positionality. The aspect of my positionality that most significantly impacted my research is my non-Moroccan-ness. Because I am not Moroccan and have only spent four months of my life in Morocco, I am largely ignorant of every aspect of society, history, culture, and the lived experiences of Moroccan people. Everything I know about any given
aspect of life in Morocco I gleaned from either Western media’s portrayals of Morocco, the
assigned readings and class discussions about life in Morocco from the thematic seminar class
of the SIT Morocco: Multiculturalism and Human Rights Spring 2017 program, and my
observations in Morocco and interactions with Moroccan people since first arriving in Morocco at
the end of January 2017. Drawing from such a limited pool of resources for information about
life in Morocco, every piece of information I am exposed to holds disproportionate significance in
my mind compared to it’s significance in reflecting the reality of life in Morocco. Furthermore,
because I am largely ignorant of all aspects of life in Morocco, I subconsciously fill in the gaps of
my information with my own experiences and knowledge about aspects of life in the US, despite
the fact that my experiences and my knowledge are not necessarily relevant to the Moroccan
context. Moreover, I interpret every piece of information I am exposed to through the lens of a
person who grew up in the US, with US morals and political values, a US-centric frame of
reference for every aspect of life and every field of knowledge, and personal experiences I’ve
had in the US. Therefore, everything I claim about any aspect of life in Morocco does not reflect
the objective truth, but rather a processed version, filtered through my own positionality.

My non-Moroccanness also affected the way that other people reacted to me and
presented themselves to me. Because I am not from Morocco, people were likely more careful
with how they presented themselves and how they presented Morocco to me, because I do not
have the context to understand the nuances of aspects of Morocco or aspects of themselves.
People avoid discussing things which they fear will be misinterpreted or attributed
disproportionate significance if taken out of context by a foreigner, so more nuanced subjects,
especially topics that could feed into negative stereotypes which people wish to dispel rather
than propagate, were likely avoided by people who spoke with me.
Also, language abilities limited my research. I am fluent in English only. I am proficient in FusHa, standard Arabic, and I have elementary Darija, Moroccan Arabic, skills. I speak no Amazigh languages, French, or Spanish. Every individual who participated in either group discussions or intensive interviews was fluent in Darija and learned English as a second, third, fourth, etc. language. The majority of the conversation in group discussions and intensive interviews was in English, although I did attempt to use a mix of FusHa and Darija for a few questions. All participants originally said that conversing in English was no problem and said that it would be easier to converse in English than in Arabic due to my lack of Darija skills. However, the language barrier proved to be more present in some conversations than others, and during one group discussion, it was clear that one participant was dominating the conversation because he was more comfortable using English than his peer. Furthermore, during my participant observation I asked artists to speak normally in their language of choice rather than speaking in English simply for my benefit. But because my Darija skills are elementary, I could only grasp the major themes of conversations and I surely missed information due to the language barrier. Ideally, I would have been able to conduct all of my interviews and group discussions in the native language, Darija, of participants and I would have been able to understand everything said in Darija in the conversations that took place during participant observation.

Finally, I would like to state as a general disclaimer that I hold the identities of being a white, middle-class, college-educated, heterosexual, cisgender woman and a US citizen from a medium-sized town in North Carolina who has only been in Morocco since January 29, 2017. My positionality affects everything about how I see the world and process information and how the world reacts to me, and this research is no exception.
Analysis

In this section, I will discuss and analyze the findings of my field work in order to answer my research questions, which are the following:

1. How does street art operate as a platform for participation in public discourse?
   a. How do actors use street art to exercise voice in the public sphere?
2. How does the presence of street art affect levels of political liberalization?

To answer these questions, I will first discuss how street art generally operates a platform for participation in public discourse. Then, referencing specific pieces of street art, I discuss the two functions of street art: creating space for individuals of the public to exercise their own individual voices by thinking critically and conceiving of their own ideas, and offering new ideas for the public to embrace. After this, I will analyze how each of these functions relates to greater plurality in public discourse and how this contributes to increased political liberalization. Then I will analyze how participation in public discourse at the site of street art can be limited- referencing specific pieces of street art, I will discuss how the messages expressed in street art are limited by the redlines that govern all public discourse and how specific works of street art can be be closed to public participation.

**How street art operates as a platform for participation in public discourse**

On the most basic level, street art takes a blank wall that offers no information and adds colors, adds visual information, forming an image which is then presented to the public. The basic significance, as stated by Reda, a Moroccan street artist based out of Casablanca, of street art is that instead of a blank wall, the public now has something to interact with (personal communication, May 5th, 2017). The idea of interaction between the art and the public is central to understanding how street art operates as a platform for public discourse. Interaction means that there are at least two actors which each have the power to affect each other. In the case of
street art, there fundamental actors are the art and the public. Both actors have the power to affect each other; the art can offer a new idea to the public and the public can assign a new meaning to the art. I argue that each of these two types of interaction characterize a specific function of street art; street art can function to create space for the public to develop their own ideas and street art can function to describe a new idea for the public to embrace. Both of these functions of street art increase the plurality of voices in the public sphere.

Creating space for the public to produce their own ideas

Every artist I spoke to said that the most significant function of street arts is creating space for individuals of the public to think critically and produce their own ideas about the meaning of the art. In other words, the most important function of street art is inspiring thought. Street art creates this space for thought by painting an image on a previously blank wall without dictating any specific meaning for the imagine. Because the street art is on a wall that is openly accessible to the public, anyone passing by the wall can view the art and decide what they think it means (Reda, personal communication, May 5, 2017). As expressed by Badr, this space for the public to exercise critical thought is important because it allows for society to “become less monotone,” it allows for plurality of beliefs (personal communication, May 2, 2017).

This function of art to create space for the public to produce their own ideas about the meaning of the art is visible in a street art piece in Casablanca by Moroccan artist Machima (see Appendix C). Machima’s piece does not have any overt or specific message or meaning. Anyone passing the piece can project their own experiences and dreams onto it and derive their own meaning from it. The piece creates space for the viewer to think critically about the identity of the elderly woman portrayed on the wall, what she may symbolize, the significance of the laundry, etc.
While conducting participant observations, I spoke with two individuals about their ideas regarding this Machima piece and their responses illustrate how this piece of street art creates space for original thought. The first individual I spoke with said that they thought the old woman, due to her traditional dress, represented the sole of all Moroccan women. To this individual, the fact that the old woman is doing laundry represents the strict gender roles of domestic duty constructed by society that constrain Moroccan women. The laundry also creates the appearance of a dream world, and the old woman’s distant gaze signifies that she desires to escape and dreams of a different life. This individual felt that the overall message of this piece was elevating the need for women to be able to exercise greater agency and freedom in Moroccan society and break from gender roles. The second individual said that they thought the woman’s dress was merely signifying her identity as Moroccan. They interpreted the woman’s posture as indicating that she is waiting for a message from a loved one. They felt that the overall message of the piece was more about the story of this woman waiting to hear from her loved one and did not see any political messages in the piece.

The unique meanings that each individual created in response to the piece of street art exemplifies how street art inspires thought and creates a platform where individual members of the public can exercise critical thinking and creativity to produce their own original thoughts.

**Exposure to new ideas**

One function of the street art in the Rabat-Casablanca urban space is to visually represent new ideas and offer these ideas to the public to become accepted as new voices in public discourse. This function of exposing the public to new ideas can be observed in the works of some non-Moroccan artists who use their art to describe the culture of their home country to the Moroccan public. However, the work of these street artists only operates as exposure to new ideas if the pieces are describing the culture in a new way. Just because a piece of street
art in the Rabat-Casablanca urban space represents a non-Moroccan artist’s culture, the piece of street art is not necessarily functioning as an exposure to new ideas; the piece of street art must be representing the culture in a new way in order to be functioning as an exposure to new ideas.

This nuance is best explained by providing an example. Mexican artist David Rocha’s wall visually represents the culture of his home country of Mexico (see Appendix A). Greek artist Fikos also visually represented the culture of his home country of Greece in his wall (see Appendix B). Rocha’s wall and Fiko’s wall are similar in that both walls focus on the bringing the culture of the artist’s respective home country to Morocco and both walls do not appear to incorporate any aspects of Moroccan culture nor do they appear to make a concerted effort to relate to the lived experience of Moroccan people. Yet despite these similarities, every individual I spoke with, both during participant observations and during intensive interviews, expressed positive sentiments towards Rocha’s piece, describing Rocha’s wall as a ‘sharing of culture’ with the public and as a creating more cultural diversity in public sphere. Meanwhile, every individual expressed negative sentiments towards Fiko’s piece, saying that Fikos was merely ‘copying and pasting’ his style onto a wall in Rabat without any regard for the community he was working in or making any effort to relate his work to the Moroccan culture (Badr, personal communication, May 2, 2017) (Reda, personal communication, May 5, 2017).

Rocha’s work is accepted as welcome new cultural influence that adds to positive diversity while Fiko’s work is rejected as an imposed, foreign cultural influence.

I argue that the reason for the acceptance of Rocha’s work and the rejection of Fiko’s work is that Fiko’s work fails to describe Greek culture in a new way while Rocha’s work provides an aesthetic representation of Mexican culture that is new to the Rabat-Casablanca urban space. Fiko’s piece strongly resembles classical Greek art. Images of classical Greek art
already exist in the Moroccan public sphere, so Fiko’s work fails to expose a new idea to the public and thus is not accepted as a welcomed new idea as is Rocha’s piece. (Badr, personal communication, May 5, 2017)

The fact that street art is meant to operate as a platform for increased plurality in public discourse can be seen in this Rocha-Fikos example. Street art that offers a new idea, like Rocha’s work, to the public contributes to the plurality of voices present in public discourse. New ideas are desired by the public and thus street art that offers new ideas is accepted by the public. Street art that depicts an idea that is already represented in the public sphere, like Fiko’s work, does not contribute to the plurality of voices present in public discourse and is rejected by the public.

Functions of street art and their relationship to plurality in public discourse and political liberalization

The first function of street art, creating space for individuals of the public to generate their own ideas, increases the plurality of voices present in public discourse in two ways. The first way that this function of street art increases plurality in public discourse is that as each individual person produces their own thoughts about the meaning of the piece of street art, the sheer number of distinct ideas in the public sphere increases. In the example I gave above of the two individuals’ distinct interpretations of the Machima piece, those two ideas about the art increased the number of unique thoughts in the public sphere by two. If Machima’s street art didn’t exist, there would be two less original viewpoints in public discourse.

The second way that street art increases the plurality of voices/ideas present in public discourse is that the act of interpreting the meaning of street art is an exercise in critical thinking which may prompt individuals to think critically about all other information they consume and prompt them to produce their own thoughts regarding all information instead of passively
accepting the dominant narrative. In other words, street art provides an exercise in critical thinking which may condition the public to critically analyze all information and challenge the dominant narrative with their own independent thoughts. With every individual producing their own narratives, the plurality in public discourse would increase exponentially.

Greater plurality of voices/ideas present in public discourse inherently leads to political liberalization because the more voices/ideas present, the less control the regime can exercise over the narrative. With more voices present in public discourse, people will have more opportunities to gather information from varying sources and challenge the dominant narrative. In a political climate characterised by a hybrid regime, such as the Moroccan context, the dominant narrative always acts to quietly maintain the power of the regime. Moreover, as discussed in the film *My Makhzen and Me*, one way that the regime maintains its power is by conditioning its citizens to passively accept information rather than critically analyze information (Bouhmouch, 2012). Therefore, independent thought and critically analyzing information is crucial to increasing the people's power over the regime in controlling the narrative and is a fundamental step in the process of political liberalization.

**Limits on participation in public discourse at the site of street art**

Participation in public discourse at the site of street art is limited because, since street art is a form of public discourse, street art is restricted by the same red lines that govern all discourse in the public sphere.

As Desrues states, though the Moroccan regime allows for a certain degree of plurality of political beliefs and recognizes the legitimacy of political opposition to an extent, there remain “red lines’ that cannot be crossed relating to the fundamental questions of the configuration of the monarchical regime and its head, the Moroccan Sahara, Sunni Islam and the security forces” (Desrues, 2013, p. 414). Many individuals I have met during my time in Morocco have
hinted at the existence of these red lines. Once an independent journalist who I met in a cafe in Rabat told me about his recent experience being detained by security forces and questioned over night about his reporting. He said that no charges were ever brought against him; it was an arbitrary detention. He then told me that in Morocco as a journalist, you can punch a government minister in face and nobody cares but you can never touch the king.

Moreover, both Reda and Mohammed spoke about these red lines in interviews and group discussions. Mohammed specifically said that in street art festival, an artist cannot express direct political messages and cannot criticize the king because the festival is ultimately responsible for the street art that the artists create and “it would create problems for the festival” (personal communication, April 30, 2017). Reda expressed that because street artists are creating art in the public sphere, street artists subconsciously censor themselves to fit the norms of the society where they produce their art. He explained that the government does not overly censor street artists but that there is a soft-power dynamic that leads artists to internalize the red lines and subconsciously avoid certain topics. According to Reda, when it comes to political messages in Moroccan street art, the things that aren’t said speak louder than the things that are said. (Reda, personal communication, May 5, 2017)

Conclusion

Street art creates space for the public to participate in public discourse and can introduce the public to new ideas. Both of these functions of street art lead to greater plurality of voices present in public discourse, which ultimately contributes to greater political liberalization by diminishing the hybrid regime’s ability to control the narrative. But the red lines that limit all public discourse operate within street art and curb street art’s ability to create a truly open space for the free expression of ideas.
Works Cited


**Bibliography**


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Appendices

Appendix A.
Appendix C.
Appendix D.