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# Chicano Park's Skateboard Memorial Murals: Extending the Sacred in Polluted Leisure

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the transformation of murals at San Diego's Chicano Park Skatepark into sites of spiritual struggle. We observe the extension of spiritual identification through skateboarding as a leisure pursuit that is woven with the symbols of Chicano identity. We frame our discussion through the material and symbolic paradigm of polluted leisure, since the park is both contaminated by heavy industry and othered through its ethnic composition. Embedded in this narrative is the struggle over a people encased in a polluted space, and framed alike pollution as unwanted, disposable, and unsightly. Amidst this example of a fraying society afflicted with both the slow violence of substance abuse and internal gentrification, a spiritual connection to skateboarding offers coherence. We conclude by showing how the spirituality of skateboarding works as a recasting of polluted leisure as both a resistant and hopeful act.

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## Introduction

The vibrant murals of San Diego's Chicano Park adorn the imposing concrete columns of the Coronado Bridge. Visitors to this location will be struck by the mythic overture of the space. Not only is the artwork profound, echoing Chicano political and spiritual ancestry, but the monumental architecture is imposing. The concrete pillars echo the prehistoric way stone has been used to ground and edify cultures and their rituals. Yet their material nature resonates with the anthropogenic realities of our time. Coronado Bridge is a monument to urban development, car, concrete, and pollution (Charles, 2015).

Traveling southwest into the park from National Avenue and moving toward the heavily industrialized harbor, you will come across a skatepark. Typically, graffiti covers the spaces of many skateparks, but Chicano Park Skatepark has a unique set of four murals that speak of skateboard history, Chicano culture, and indigenous religion. Surrounding two of these murals are old skateboards with the words "RIP Raymond" and "RIP Jesse" boldly printed on them and set amidst plants, photos, and candles.

In this article, we address a novel aspect of Chicano Park that is emblematic of the broader polluted leisure context of the community. This niche focus is the skatepark and the murals within. These murals signify potent symbolism of both skateboard and Chicano culture and have become sites of memorial for some of the community's skateboarding youth who have died, and which we frame as untimely deaths of despair (King et al., 2022). We address this issue to comprehend the way that skateboarding comes to be significant as a tapestry for the identity and spirituality of skateboarders in Chicano Park. Our discussion contrasts efforts to sacralize skateboarding (O'Connor, 2020) and attempts to retain a local identity in Chicano Park considering social and environmental processes of degradation (Delgado & Swanson, 2019). We conceptualize this dynamic through the concept of polluted leisure (Evers, 2019a, 2019b) that captures both the material and symbolic aspects of pollution. While our context is rife with examples of material pollution, we lean into the symbolic element and extend the polluted leisure thesis to address the social impact of gentrification, persistent racism, gangs, drugs, and violence. We propose that Chicano Park's skateboard memorials signify a process of meaning making that operationalizes leisure in an attempt to mitigate the manifold and divergent experiences of a fraying polluted society.

We proceed by first providing a review of the literature contextualizing the historical development of Chicano Park and its skatepark. We thereby introduce our theoretical frame of polluted leisure and address the forms of sacralization connected to both the park and skateboarding as a leisure pursuit. Secondly, we outline our ethnographic methodology and detail the fieldwork and procedure of the study. Our focus then turns to the description and analysis of the murals in the skatepark



**Figure 1.** Aztec handplant by artist hiram C.V. Cisco. Author's photo.

(see Figure 1), drawing on the symbolism and hybridity of the imagery used. We extend our analysis by focusing on the ways two of the murals have become makeshift altars and demonstrate how these memorials (or *memmurials*) speak to the broader social dynamics of the community and the hopeful pursuit of leisure within it.

### Literature review: the mythic and polluted origins of Chicano Park

To foreground our broader discussion the following literature review is thematically oriented around the park and its historical development. Due to space, this is selective as we seek to address key theoretical motifs of contemporary spirituality, deaths of despair, and skateboarding literature while contextualizing the heritage of Chicano Park. The historic context of Chicano Park helps us understand how it has emerged as a resistant space of leisure. Here, our contribution is to respond to Mair's (2002) notion of civil leisure, suggesting that even non-activist-related forms of play such as skateboarding can take on a political form that addresses "the hegemonic tendencies toward consumerization and commodification" (Mair, 2002, p. 215) of space. Her framing of civil leisure is part of an ongoing conceptualization of oblique forms of leisure such as "serious" (Stebbins, 2001) "deviant" (Rojek, 1995) and "polluted" (Evers, 2019a, 2019b). We observe pollution as a social issue that is combined with the recasting of ethnic and spiritual symbolism through leisure. This is an example and extension of Mair's civil leisure, where the spiritual combines with resistant forms of leisure. Importantly, this is a story of leisure that is rich in symbolism. We present the striving for communal leisure that has been mythologized in murals, and also in the ritualized annual celebration of the origin of the park. Our review of the literature develops the frame of material and social pollution which informs our epistemological position on current debate in leisure studies and, on the other hand, the history of Chicano Park as a prominent and iconic space of civic resistance through leisure.

A longstanding Mexican American (Chicana/o<sup>1</sup>) community have resided in Barrio Logan, where Chicano Park is situated. This historically tight knit community is located only 17 miles from the U.S.-Mexico border and inhabits the southwest of San Diego which has become increasingly industrialized, polluted, and urban since the 1950s (Rosen & Fisher, 2001). A shipyard, heavy industry, and the construction of the imposing Coronado bridge in 1967 uprooted families and transformed Barrio Logan's ecology.

It was this slow violence of compounded racism, industrialization, and eminent domain that led to the occupation of the site under the Coronado bridge on April 22, 1970. Over 250 people took over the space and brought tools to begin constructing their very own park. It was, to the community, a rightful inheritance that they had long been denied and they were spurred to action by news that government construction workers were about to turn the site into a highway patrol base (Rosen & Fisher, 2001; Sandoval, 2018). This was an affront to the community, denying them a leisure space through a racial policy of urbanization typical of the era (Avila, 2014). Today, after the victory, Chicano Park is protected both as a listed space on the Californian Register of Historic Places since 1997 (Rosen & Fisher, 2001), on the National Register of Historic Places since 2013, and also as a National Historic Landmark since 2016 (Figure 2).

What is provocative about the Chicano Park story is the hopeful encounter of leisure it provides. It corresponds with Mair's (2002) discussion on the civil, "using leisure to claim public spaces for the generation of political discussions, and taking personal risks to do so" (p. 217). The very intent of the occupation of the site was to establish a park, a space for leisure. However, this hopeful frame can obscure the more concerning examples of disregard and destruction that the people of Barrio Logan have to contend with. Working with the wider scope of 'personal risks' we propose that closer scrutiny of both the present and historic context of Chicano Park, can be framed as polluted leisure (Evers, 2019a, Evers, 2019b). Firstly, Barrio Logan is a materially toxic location such that the area has been ranked amongst the most polluted spaces in the state of California (Delgado & Swanson, 2019). The human scale of these pollutants can be felt in anecdotes of asthma, cancer, and obstructed walks to school in the face of congested streets of heavy industrial trucks (ibid). It is however no coincidence that the Chicano community has this environmental burden. Conceptually polluted leisure addresses both the material and symbolic presentations of pollution, of which marginal populations are a distinct example. Therefore, and secondly, the ethnic composition of Barrio Logan can be understood amidst the social framing of pollution as 'other', as those *and that which does not belong* (Douglas, 1969).

Evers (2019a) presents a similar dynamic in addressing Japanese surfers who have returned to Fukushima after the 2011 earthquake and nuclear disaster. He identifies that the choice to construct the Nuclear Power Plant in the region was connected to the way in which Fukushima was regarded as an internal colony, a place of 'otherness' and a socially polluted space apposite to accommodate a radioactive hazard. This is also evident in the history of Barrio Logan where naval industry, highway fumes and



**Figure 2.** Murals at Chicano Park at National avenue. Author's photo.

imposing urban infrastructure mark the neighborhood's borders. The historic attempt to construct a highway patrol base amidst the community is another case in point. Thus, the story of Chicano Park is one of resistant leisure amidst the context of material and social 'otherness'. This 'otherness' rejected its labeling as "waste" by urbanization policies (Avila, 2014) and constructed its own leisure space in the shadow of the infrastructure and pollution brought by these same policies.

The discussion on polluted leisure also includes the identification of particular forms of resistance. Evers (2019a) refers to Lora-Wainwright's (2017) "resigned activism" as ways individuals in China's toxic villages adopt accommodating actions to mitigate pollution (p. 8). These might include buying bottled water or closing windows at night to avoid air pollution. In his Fukushima case study Evers (2019b) notes that some surfers purchase Geiger counters to make these 'resigned activist' accommodations. In a contrasting example Borden's (2001) work on skateboarding identifies that skateboarders use space in a resistant manner, albeit that this political act is ultimately hedonistic.

Issues of resistance and activism are at the heart of the Chicano Park story and the pursuit of leisure in this space. This is made overt and vibrant in the artistic zeal that followed the occupation of the site and is the focus of much academic debate on the area (Cucher, 2019; Falser, 2007). The empty space under the highway bridge is arguably at odds with the imagining of a park as an open and salubrious space of leisure. However, the people of Barrio Logan have worked with the polluted space to recast it as both beautiful and meaningful. The space now houses the largest number of public murals anywhere in the U.S. (Sandoval, 2018). The very content of these murals speaks to Chicano and indigenous heritage and have become both political and spiritual repositories. One mural artist describes Chicano Park as "a sacred place" that brings people together through a fusion of culture, history, and shared identity (Sandoval, 2018, p. 310). The political and memorial legacy fixed on the surfaces of Chicano Park is often said to be "sacred" reverberating the concept of sacred and contested space coined to other relevant places in the history of California's ethnic urbanism (Estrada, 2008).

To situate such identifications in a broader literature, it is helpful to recognize that a host of religious transformations have unfolded in the global north since WWII. Greater individualism has seen a turn away from proscribed social roles and greater prominence of the subjective self. Heelas et al. (2005) see a move away from traditional religions and a search toward spiritual activities resonating personal meaning and individual choice. Their findings in the UK are complemented by transformations in American society in which the sacred has become more secular, and the secular has taken on sacred forms (Ostwalt, 2012). A more pronounced example of such dynamics is offered by Crockford (2021) in an ethnography of new age beliefs in Sedona, Arizona. Her work captures a pick-n-mix-pop-culture spirituality that draws on the energy of the natural environment, digital simulation, UFOs, and conspiracy theories. She identifies that part of these transformations are emblematic of the 'spiritual but not religious' zeitgeist, but also part of more complex changes in the American dream and economic transformation. In work on skateboarders O'Connor (2020) notes trends in sacralizing skateboarding, drawing on niche sub-cultural vernaculars to retain and extend meaning in their leisure in the face of transformation and sportification. In such a milieu, many

people are identifying with a spirituality that is personally meaningful to their biographies, and is also optional, flexible, somewhat mirroring the neoliberal context of both individual choice, and flexible versatility. This spirituality frequently intersects with forms of leisure, some of which relate to pop-culture pastimes, movies, music, UFOs, and dance (Clark & Clanton, 2012; Crockford, 2021; Harmon & Dox, 2016; Kraus, 2009). While others connect at the interstices of sport and lifestyle, surfing, skateboarding, and street basketball (Anderson, 2013; Shoemaker, 2023a, 2023b; Woodbine, 2016).

Evocations of the spiritual in Chicano Park correspond with these changes and draw on the popular, the local, the ethnic, and the ancient to generate a sense of the spiritual. It is clear from the extant literature that, within Mexican-descendant communities in the Southwest, a generalized sense of sacredness has developed at the intersection of political struggles, collective memories and contested uses of urban space (Carrasco, 2019; Massey et al., 1990). It is a syncretic and modern sacredness, which is at the same time a tool to (re)appropriate pre-Hispanic indigenous traditions (Galinier & Molinié, 2013; Olivas Hernandez, 2018), to keep alive the link with Mexican Catholicism (López Pulido, 2003), or to express collective feelings of secular spirituality and unity. A sacredness performed and communicated often through various specific uses of leisure time (Olivas Hernandez, 2018). However, the hopeful mythology of both the Chicano Park story and the painted murals belies a confluence of polluted tensions that extend throughout Barrio Logan and are manifest in the community skatepark. Here we encounter some of the threats that have plagued the entire area in recent decades: generational divides, racism, gentrification, and the hydra of gangs, drugs, and violence (Delgado & Stefanic, 2013; Sandoval, 2018).

The topic of the skatepark within Chicano Park acts as a provocative case study to make further connections to spirituality, despair, and pollution. Long before the skatepark was constructed, skateboarders have congregated in the area, skating the ledges and claiming a space for themselves. It was not until 2015 that an actual skatepark was built at this spot providing a legitimate place for skateboarders. Writing in 2001, Rosen and Fisher note the developing heritage debate surrounding the park and its murals, and also the growing disenfranchisement of the barrio's youth. They imply that an increasing incidence of graffiti and tagging has threatened the artwork, signaling that these murals and their rich heritage offer little to the maladies of Chicano Park's twenty first century youth. Compounding this issue is a growth of homelessness, drug use and gang violence in the area, which speak to not just local issues but national transformations too.

Our research resonates with the paradigm of 'deaths of despair', a term first used by Case and Deaton (2017) to capture the increase in mortality connected to substance abuse and self-harm in twenty first century America. Such deaths are a health and social issue and tied to socioeconomic dislocations (Case & Deaton, 2021). Analysis has shown that such deaths are not simply a supply issue, whereby access to prescription drugs and firearms are a primary risk factor. Deaths of despair are also a demand issue in which social and economic conditions are central. Particularly economic stagnation and deprivation are of key relevance to this concept, and are part of a dynamic that result in the poorest tax brackets of American society living 10–15 years less than the richest (King et al., 2022). While complex and multifaceted, growing

economic disparity, industrial transformation, and social change all appear to be part of the broader circumstances that contribute to deaths of despair.

In more recent years Barrio Logan has undergone a very specific and conceptually challenging form of gentrification, one in which the artistic flavor of Chicano Park has been leveraged commercially by a part of the local Chicano community. These transformations have raised property prices and created unprecedented conflicts within the local Chicano community, such as those between the need for primary services and the increase in rents due to the stereotypical ethnic esthetics of the same service-providing infrastructures (Delgado, 2017). This type of social transformation has been sometimes termed *gentefication* (Delgado & Swanson, 2019)—a play on the Spanish *la gente* [the people]—to denote gentrification from within, by a Mexican American “creative class” (Florida, 2002). This portmanteau neologism of community change, read through the micro-context of the local skatepark, is again evocative of the mixed, interstitial topic we explore.

Paradoxically, as Chicano Park has received ever wider cultural and civic recognition and has been awarded more financial support, greening, and environmental protection, so too has it seen some of its most radical social transformation. This resonates starkly with the material and social frame of pollution, as Barrio Logan has become more salubrious it too has become whiter. For example, between 2000 and 2010 the Hispanic population of Barrio Logan dropped from 86% to 72% and the white population grew from 6% to 16% (Delgado & Swanson, 2019). The new residents bring with them new concerns. Drawn to the artistic heritage of the site, but sometimes critical of the noise of cultural performances in Chicano Park (Kühne et al., 2022). The fact that the artistic and cultural locus for *gentefication* orbit Chicano Park, amplifies the relevance of our polluted leisure frame. In this sense whiteness is a paradoxical pollutant, bringing wealth, environmental benefits, but also transforming the culture and heritage of Barrio Logan. However, as King et al. (2022) underline, it is not that despair is ethnically demarcated, only that it is economically distinct. The whitening of Barrio Logan can thus also be read as a signal of the growing inequality between the wealthiest and poorest, especially as evidence suggests the poorest Chicano people are also moving out of Barrio Logan (Delgado & Swanson, 2019).

The skatepark is an exemplar of these new dynamics. The boom in skatepark construction over the last 20 years resonates with the broader commercial and governmental incorporation of skateboarding as a force for good (Lombard, 2010). In the work of Howell (2008), skateparks are neoliberal playgrounds which connect to how skateboarders are co-opted as the shock troops of gentrification (Howell, 2005). Drawing on Florida (2002), Howell (2005) argues that skateboarders are another creative class, frequently used to sweep out unwanted populations, then once they are cleansed, the skateboarders are swept aside themselves. This argument demonstrates skateboarding as a polluted leisure, where skateboarders work as mediators to polluted ‘others’ (homeless, drug dealers, sex workers, gang members) and are regarded themselves as pollution. This is a dynamic demonstrated by Glenney (2023) in terms of material pollution who recognizes that scores of skateparks throughout the United States are constructed on top of Brownfield sites. Notably, amplifying the polluted leisure connection, Barrio Logan is listed as a Brownfield site, and also has a Superfund site nearby the Chicano Park skatepark (Environmental Protection Agency, 2017).



Completed in 2016 the skatepark was funded in part by a \$1million state grant that also contributed toward improved landscaping, a handball court, two playgrounds, and an adult fitness center (Delgado & Swanson, 2019). Additional funds of \$10,000 for the skatepark came from 'The Skatepark Project' founded by professional skateboarder Tony Hawk (The Skatepark Project, 2023). The architecture of the park speaks to the context in which it is embedded with one of the obstacles taking the shape of a car, perhaps a nod to Chicano lowriding culture and the highway above (Chappell, 2012).

The rest of our project draws upon this framework to address the ways in which a set of murals in Chicano Park Skatepark extend a spiritual engagement with polluted leisure. This thematic tour of the literature and accompanying theory identifies a leisure space with a resistant history. A park imagined in spiritual terms, yet also a contested site various framed through the notion of polluted leisure. While heavy industry and racism are part of the legacy of Chicano Park, an increasingly marginalized youth navigate a fraught economic environment which overlap with gangs, substance abuse, and deaths of despair. Our article proceeds to frame the relevance of Chicano Park's skatepark murals as an extension of the sacred.

## Methodology

As researchers we adopt an interpretive qualitative methodology. Our epistemological assumptions in this research align with those manifested in the conceptualization of Polluted Leisure (Evers, 2019a, 2019b). We are invested in a symbolic interpretivist analysis of our data, addressing how the skatepark functions as part of the broader leisure space of Chicano Park, its heritage, and history. By following this general approach, we went about addressing each of the central themes of the article in dialogue with our informants: we participated in the maintenance of altars for deceased fellow skaters (and learned their stories), listened to how the story of the increasing pollution of Chicano Park is told by local skaters (then comparing it with specialized documents) and what various grassroots strategies are in place to resist it (measured in relation to public policy as much as to the more formal activism of those who manage the park). As our literature review identified, the physical and social pollution of Chicano Park are always overlapping just as in the context of surfing in Fukushima (Evers, 2019b) and skateboarding as urban leisure (Glenney 2023; O'Connor et al., 2022). In the more symbolic frame of our epistemology, pollution works as a social sorting mechanism that we see in the work of Douglas (1969, 1992). Her thesis demonstrates that dirt, pollution, or risk can be thought of as a flexible concept enacted when an item, person, or idea is seen to be "not belonging", or "out of place". Bound to this symbolism, and relevant to our discussion on 'spiritual but not religious' above, is the recognition that the sacred is an empty conceptual category as advocated in the work of Durkheim (1965). Anything can become socially and symbolically encoded as sacred, and a vast array of work has demonstrated how leisure "may take on a ritualistic, even sacred, quality" (Scott & Harmon, 2016, p. 3. See also Platt et al., 2021).

Our design works with the nascent field of skateboard ethnography which extends from researchers engaging in the cultural world and practice of skateboarding as part

of their research. This is evident in the work of O'Connor (2020), Glenney (2023), Sayers (2023) and the rolling ethnography of McDuie-Ra (2021a, 2023a). Just as the “wet” ethnography of Evers (2019a, 2019b) works with the act of surfing and the fluid context of his field sites, the “rolling ethnography”, “below the knee” view (Vivoni, 2013) and “sideways” stance (Friedel, 2015) of skateboarders informs their work. Thus, not only did we explore Chicano Park, interview residents, observe the daily milieu as ethnographers typically do; we also skateboarded in this environment and took ‘on board’ the feel of, and connection to, the space.

This approach resonates with a great deal of research in the socio-anthropology of sport where scholars and informants construct an environment of ethnographic intimacy by sharing the same physical activities, whether as experts (Borenstein, 2021) or trainees (Nardini, 2022). Among the pillars of Chicano Skatepark, we therefore adopted a “cross-eyed gaze” (Palumbo, 2018) at once internal and external to the studied group. Riding on the board, being seen as belonging to the same global “imagined community” of skateboarders (McDuie-Ra, 2021b, p. 131), opened access to sharing moments of leisure time with Chicano Park skateboarders without, however, obscuring the estrangement we felt with respect to the context and ethno-political tensions that run through the skatepark. Author 1 became a recognizable and trusted figure in the Chicano Skatepark environment due to his prolonged participation as a skater and mastery of both Spanish and English. Just as credibility was fostered by Harmon and Dox (2016) by repeated attendance at concerts, credibility in a ‘rolling’ skateboard ethnography is developed by participating in skateboard culture. During local skate sessions, he was introduced by privileged actors to an ever widening and plural circle of frequenters, sharing not only time but also food, drink, and spontaneous stories born of curiosity about mutual cultural distance and the shared passion for skateboarding. This can be understood in a broader context in which skateboarding is not only a rather unique object of research, but also opens up innovative methodological perspectives, always played out on the threshold between the simultaneous familiarity of practices and cultural estrangement between researcher and observed actors. Author 2 visited Chicano Skatepark once and instead devoted himself more thoroughly to combining theoretical frameworks in dialogue with the ethnographic data collected by Author 1.

The findings of this paper are part of a longer ethnography on skateboarding culture at the San Diego-Tijuana border lasting fourteen months. For the empirical investigation we adopted a combination of “viewing strategies” and “listening strategies” (Pavanello, 2010, p.111). In the first case, we turned to the visual representations enveloping the skatepark space by analyzing its iconography. We then assayed our preliminary reflections in semi-structured interviews with two of the three artists of the murals. Our analysis concentrates only on the murals by these artists. Our method thus employs a “member checking” component in our analysis of their work (Caretta, 2016). In all exchanges, directing attention to the visual manifestations of the space was a prerequisite for opening a common ground of dialogue between researchers and informants and from there expanding the discussion to more cross-cutting themes such as ethnicity, violence, and spirituality. This fits into ongoing debates in Leisure Studies about the validity of visual methodologies “to produce knowledge in innovative ways [...] whereby researchers, participants, and communities gain access to knowledge

and expressions that might have not otherwise been accessible due to the inevitable strictures of traditional methods” (Pernecky & Rakić, 2019, p. 180). During the participant observation period, Author 1 also focused on the daily liturgies of skatepark patrons with respect to the murals and their altars: preventing their surfaces from being skateboarded on, sharing votive offerings, collective care of the altars, and bottom-up processes of mutual education to respect the “sacredness” of the place. These observed practices, driven by a shared sense of spirituality of place, were then discussed and rehearsed in interviews with the selected actors.

In the second case, we instead targeted local skaters. Between September 2022 and July 2023, the first author went weekly to Chicano Park to identify a niche group of skateboarders with regular attendance at the skatepark. These skateboarders connected him to the key informants, or community gatekeepers with specific knowledge of the context. These individuals became a “reasoned choice” sample (Gobo, 2001, p.77), as we focused on six privileged informants (two muralists, a local artist, two organizers of the annual “Chicano Skatepark Day,” and a skateboarder) recognized by peers as holders of particular knowledge or status.

Interviews were conducted in a mixture of English and Spanish, with an average duration of two hours each. These were performed in accordance with La Sapienza University’s statement of ethical clearance conforming to the guidelines dictated by the University’s Ethics Committee. All interviews, except for one, took place at Chicano Skatepark or in its vicinity. Some interviews began at the murals and continued with tours of the park while others following the reversed path. The theme of spirituality was not directly introduced in the questions, but rather observed whether it emerged from the participants’ stories. The interview conducted outside Chicano Park was used to test whether the esthetic-social environment of the park influenced a spiritual narrative. In all cases, this theme emerged independently after the first questions. Participation and informed consent were sought for all participants. Given their public position, the muralists requested and consented for names to be published while we used a pseudonym to protect the identity of another informant.

## **Results and discussion part I: the murals**

Throughout the rest of this paper, we tie our analysis in connection to three of the four murals at the skatepark and supporting interviews. This process enables us to unravel the layered issues of identification that permeate the social milieu of the space. Moving Northeast through Chicano Park Skatepark, the four skateboard murals are distinct, rendered on the pillars supporting the Coronado Bridge. Moving from left to right the first image is a vivid painting of a skateboarding skeleton with an indignant headdress (Figure 3).

### ***Mural 1***

The form of the skeleton is distinct to skateboarders as its composition mirrors that of an iconic logo from the skateboard brand Powell Peralta and their multiethnic group of skateboarders the ‘Bones Brigade’. The mural is the work of Cris Corona, a skater-artist



**Figure 3.** Cris Corona's mural. Author's photo.

who has been active for more than 25 years. He explained that in his works “all the symbols I paint represent something sacred, something ancient and often indigenous”<sup>2</sup>. Corona's biography is the closest one can imagine to a “transborder life”, that is, a life marked by “constantly changing and shifting identities, outlooks, positions, and selves to cope with the double helix and the quest for achievement in a transborder reality” (Velez-Ibañez, 2020, p. 247). Born in San Ysidro, the southernmost part of the San Diego area tangential to the border, Cris has spent his whole life living back and forth between Tijuana and California amidst his dispersed maternal family and the pursuit of job opportunities. Cris speaks of Chicano Park as something that “belongs to the Chicano culture and it's like a school in a way... a sacred school that is there for everyone, every day... and whenever I passed by there, skating, driving, walking, I always felt protected”. The sense of safety that Cris finds under the Coronado Bridge is the same one he assumed through skateboarding and the niche popular culture of the scene in the 1980s. He first learned about Chicano professional skateboarders from his cousin, and began to identify with skateboarding icons Mark Gonzales, Tommy Guerrero, and Steve Caballero.

It's thanks to them that I could identify myself so strongly since I was 13 years old [...] when I realized that these two stars of the Bones Brigade, Tommy Guerrero and Steve

Caballero were Mexicans, or Chicanos, or Latinos. It gave me more of a cool perspective, I started to think that if it was possible to be pro [professional skateboarder], for me too, I felt that there was an opportunity...

Responding to the call made by the Chicano Park Steering Committee for murals in the newly built skatepark, Cris proposed a graphic combination between two of the most important symbols in his biography. As a transborder middle-aged skater he could take on both the pedagogical character of Chicano art, and the spirituality that skateboarding is able to convey. He describes some of the elements included.

In the background a Mayan symbol, a Hunab-Ku that in any case represents the beginning of life [...] I went to school in Mexico for a while and it is something that was engraved in my mind. [The Bones Brigade logo] I got it from one of the first images I saw as a kid, one of the first Bones Brigade stickers I had, and it inspired me to represent this time in my life, this reminiscence and the strength it gave me as a Chicano skateboarder. [...] I've always felt that I'm not part of a religion, but I do feel that there is a positive energy and great energy, and I especially feel it about skateboarding, it's something that brings me so much happiness, and makes so many people smile, it's a vibe that is not religion but spiritual!

Cris shows us how Chicano Skatepark is a *catártico* [cathartic] site for catalyzing overlapping themes that speak to Chicano identity experience. He recasts the notion of polluted leisure in a hopeful frame, demonstrating how the polluted 'other' as transborder, nomadic, and hybrid ("I go to Tijuana and people treat me differently, and I go to Ocean Beach and the same, they treat me weird, because they see my eyes, my skin, the way I talk") is able to construct a bricolage of elevated meaning and identification. His account shows skateboarding as a leisure practice profoundly marked by ethnic factors, the creative use that can be made of its mass culture repertoires, and finally the sense of spirituality that arises at the intersection of these apparently disconnected planes.

The biographical thickness that the Bones Brigade logo holds for Corona is made collectively significant precisely by its combination with the native headdress and the Mayan background to echo the plural identity of many of the users of Chicano Park. The combination of such a variety of themes gives voice to the sense of collective spirituality Cris always found in skateboarding praxis. But, again, such a spirituality, at the crossroad between biographic and cultural narratives, gains meaning when linked with a pedagogy from below where a mural is able—"tal vez sin palabras" [perhaps without words]—to inspire new generations about the skateboarding potential in bridging people and the importance of collective memory, its celebration of life after death and the power of skateboarding-communitarianism in facing the threat of barrio violence. As Cris states, "if it wasn't for skateboarding, I would have been a *cholo* [gangster], like my cousin, I came close many times".

## **Mural 2**

The second mural (Figure 4) is painted by Ricardo Islas, a 52-year-old artist and former skater from Calexico and is explicitly fitting of Chicano Park mural tradition



**Figure 4.** Ricardo Islas' first mural alongside memorial offerings. Author's photo.

(Sandoval, 2018). It fuses both Barrio Logan imagery in the form of Coronado Bridge and the diverse ancestry of Chicano, Latino communities in the United States. These elements are given a contemporary lilt in combination with skateboarding which has become part of the Californian mythic narrative (Borden, 2019; Butz, 2012; Kennedy, 2016; O'Connor, 2020; Peralta, 2001; Yochim, 2010). The evocative image draws directly from the Yoeme (Yaqui or Hiaki) deer dance ritual and contrasts this ancient folk religious practice with the contemporary scene of Chicano Skatepark. Delgado Shorter (2007) states that “the deer-dancer image speaks to issues of cultural continuity, tribal sovereignty, and ritual sacrifice” (p. 282) for many communities of Yeomem heritage in both Northern Mexico and Southern California. It is therefore significant to interrogate the value and symbolism of this mural and its connection to polluted leisure that is both a historic and concurrent element of Chicano Park mural culture.

I started using symbols from the Yaqui imagery mainly because my family is from Sonora and it's a Yaqui territory, so I kinda found myself in the past years creating several pieces using the Yaqui and sometimes interpreted differently [...] I think it's even odder when you've been displaced, as a culture. We used to say 'we didn't cross the border, the border crossed us': I mean it was Mexico, not California, and now we co-live daily with the border, that's why we are so stuck in searching for roots.<sup>3</sup>

The “Pascola” masks used in the background of the image relate to the author's extensive research into Yaqui culture. However, the most effective reference to pre-Hispanic indigeneity in the mural is strictly semantic, almost textual in nature.

The whole meaning of the mural is played out in the translation, and cultural gap, between the English “to grind” and the Spanish *moler*. *Moler* literally means “to grind,” “to crush,” “to pulverize,” and is a term of great cultural depth in all traditional Mesoamerican societies, whose livelihoods revolve around the corn plant (Lupo, 2009) and the products derived from its grinding. Fuzing this symbolism with the important act of ‘grinding’ in skateboarding (literally grinding the axles of the board along concrete and metal surfaces) the artist layers both ancient and contemporary culture. But Ricardo elaborates further that this grinding is also evocative of the long grind of the people of Barrio Logan to push against discrimination, to find their own voice, and campaign for their own space. The frame of polluted leisure now becomes overt once more. The concrete of the imposing bridge being ground as a metaphor to the abrasive and fraught struggles for community recognition, justice, and leisure space.

Accentuating the prominence of this mural is the fact that it has become a popular memorial site for a deceased skateboarder. The skatepark becomes a significant ritual space for young people to mourn the loss of a friend. In Woodbine’s (2016) account of street basketball amongst Black men in some of Boston’s most deprived communities, the sport is shown to work as a medium through which a collective memory of deceased friends and relatives can be performed. In Woodbine’s ethnography, basketball provides hope and healing in a context of gang violence and substance abuse that lead many to deaths of despair.

Contrasting with Woodbine’s (2016) work, O’Connor (2020) demonstrates how skateboarding connects with religious expression in multiple ways, from myth, iconography and pilgrimage, to invented religion and skateboard cults. In a similar way the Deer Dancer mural connects and extends the arguments of both Woodbine and O’Connor, demonstrating skateboarding as a spiritual resource within the community, but also highlighting how this is hybrid and fused with political, ethnic, and religious tradition. These facets can all be combined in the polluted leisure frame. The mural as a memorial site in Chicano Park, and the Boston basketball court as a site of remembrance speak of the ways ethnic enclaves in the U.S. are socially inscribed as ghettos. They can be framed as ‘internal colonies’, repositories of the ‘other’, marginal spaces housing wasted lives (Bauman, 2004); deemed polluted. In this context drugs and their associations are pollution, and for some a tragic and hopeless form of leisure amidst despairing and fraying social circumstances.

### **Mural 3**

The third mural (Figure 5), also by Islas, extends some of the religious themes addressed in the first one, but the cultural practice is reoriented to more recent times. It depicts legendary skateboarder Tony Alva as captured by the photographer Craig Stecyk. This reproduced and adapted image speaks to the mythic origins of rebellious skateboard culture from the 1970s. It is significant that Alva’s biography is bound to a prominent chapter in skateboarding history and its polluted leisure antecedents. The Dog Town crew of which Alva was a part have been mythologized (O’Connor, 2020) as spurring the modern rebellious subcultural character of skateboarding. This crew sought empty backyard swimming pools in Los Angeles to skateboard and progress their craft beyond



**Figure 5.** Ricardo Islas' second mural alongside memorial offerings. Author's photo.

the streets and into the skies. These swimming pools which provided tight curved transitions pregnant with possibility for skateboarders, were only empty and available because of a prolonged drought in California during 1976–77. Importantly this drought, forged with the paradoxical urban development of a water poor California throughout the twentieth century, demonstrates that skateboarding is born of polluted leisure. Indeed, these droughts brought closer the issue of climate degradation to the Californian dream at the end of the last century.

The mural that echoes this context derives from an earlier painting by Ricardo, which the Chicano Park Steering Committee asked him to convert into a mural. The reference to one of the most famous celebrities in the skateboarding pantheon, as in the case of Corona, stems from a biographical connection that is collectivized through a combination with themes or symbols that recall Mexico and its traditions.

It was based on me growing up when I first start to see, you know, the Z-Boys and I always thought Tony Alva is always been one that really gave the attitude you see skaters



have, he's kinda that one that really made a skater having attitude and then his father is Mexican, so I said ok yeah, we should have him there.

At the time of writing Alva is in his mid-sixties, alive and well, and thus the skeletal representation speaks to the theme of the other skatepark murals and remains evocative of Mexican *Día de Muertos* tradition and iconography:

It's kinda funny that we all have this skeleton imaginary because at the same time it's like a skate topic theme [...] it's something at the edge of skating, punk and Chicano culture.

In a similar way to the Yoeme Deer Dance, the legacy of Tony Alva hopping fences to search for drained swimming pools to skate (Kusz, 2007; Peralta, 2001; Yochim, 2010) functions as its own skillful act of hunt and daring, the kind of “attitude” Ricardo refers to in our interview, at the crossroad between Californian skateboarding and ‘punk lifestyle’.

The skull becomes emblematic of these dynamics and the broader sociological context of risk taking in skateboarding. Indeed, skateboarding can be framed as voluntary risk taking in the paradigm of Lyng's (2005) “edgework”, but it can be also traced to a larger context of pollution and catastrophe outlined by Beck (2013). The skull, symbolizing danger, death and toxicity, resonates with risk taking. At a micro level risk might be balancing on a board, but in zooming outward we might see a social context of navigating street crime and violence. The gap between the risk associated with skateboarding and the social risk surrounding certain skateboarding spaces is made evident by the fact that this mural was also chosen as an altar for another young skateboarder, Jesse, who passed away from fentanyl consumption.

## **Results and discussion part II: spirituality, death and memory against the fraying of society**

Our analysis now focuses on the way in which the two central murals painted by Islas have become ad-hoc sites of remembrance, commemorating local skateboarders. At the base of each mural there is a collection of candles, broken skateboard decks, weathered framed photos, flowers, and a menagerie of objects left in offering (Figure 6). These are essentially altars that local skaters have improvised to commemorate two companions—Jesse and Raymond—both of whom passed away in close succession from substance-related causes. Jesse passed away at the young age of 19 after taking a dose of narcotics laced with fentanyl: a relatively new substance that has led to an alarming number of fatalities in the U.S. Raymond died by suicide, similarly a key national concern, the incidence of which has increased 24% since the turn of the century (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2016). Both young men were well known residents of the neighborhood and active members of the Skatepark community. Observing how these murals have become sites of memorial knits together and combines a host of themes of spirituality in leisure. Most overtly the basketball memorials noted by Woodbine (2016), and the varied ways skateboarders mark losses in their community (Atencio et al. 2018; Johnston, 2016; O'Connor, 2020). In such examples, it is leisure facilities, basketball courts and skateparks that become sacralized and ritual spaces.



**Figure 6.** Memorial for Jesse at Tony Alva mural. Author's photo.

Here we introduce our own neologism to capture the hybridization unfolding on the concrete between formalized representations of local ethnic identity and a leisure driven sense of spirituality from below. The painted plinths become *mem-murials*, as the murals themselves are co-opted as a site of the memorial by the skateboarding community. These *memmurials* thus stand as a spontaneous fusion of leisure, place, and the sacred. Alike Woodbine's (2016) basketball courts, skateparks are often used as sites of mourning and remembrance by skateboarders. Examples abound, but here we offer four succinct instances. In the work of Johnston (2016) remembrance graffiti tags (e.g. RIP) are amongst the most common traces left at skateparks by users. O'Connor (2020) refers to a deceased skateboarder in Hong Kong whose wife scattered his ashes at the local skatepark. In the work of Atencio et al. (2018) reference is made to a makeshift memorial at a San Francisco skatepark, and world-wide skateparks have received monikers in honor of lost friends from the community. Most recently, and attracting international press, a Sacramento skatepark was named in honor of Tyree Nichols who died after being beaten by police officers (Carter, 2023).

Despite its risk-taking image, skateboarding is very seldom life threatening. The tragedy of so many makeshift memorials in skateparks around the world is that they speak of risk and threat beyond that space. Such threats include cars, gangs, drugs, violence, and disease. In this way Chicano Skatepark is alike any other skatepark, however the form of these memorials, tied to the culture and legacy of Chicano Park mural culture comes to be distinct. These *memmurials* follow a script of spiritual remembrance directly inspired by Mexican American material culture, reoriented to address a distinct issue in the fraying of the Barrio Logan's community.

In the deaths of both Jesse and Raymond, drugs played a role, but the prominence of drugs extends to other dynamics that Fernando, a 27-year-old skateboarder, was

able to articulate. His insights about Chicano Skatepark extend from the fact that he is a widely respected “local” of the space as evidenced by several tattoos, and a prominent one bearing the initials C.S.P (Chicano Skatepark). Fernando has also lived in Chicano Skatepark for long alternating periods of his life, hit like so many young people by the housing crisis and soaring gentrified rental prices in San Diego (Mae et al., 2023). While cleaning one of the altars he explained that gang codes and logics prevailed in the area even before the skatepark was built, even amidst the skateboarders. However, it was actually the construction of the skatepark that “one hundred percent, created the whole community”. Whereas: “at the beginning, when we started skating there, we all hang out on a certain pillar, *sabes, los pilares...* then came another clicka [gang], and they started gathering on another pillar, and so on...”<sup>4</sup>

Fernando is certain that the community of skateboarders and fellow sodalists (almost all Mexican American) are going through a time of crisis, that the atmosphere has changed, and there is now a sense of “*oscuridad*” [darkness] in the skatepark, to the extent that “the foos started again to behave so clicky”. In Fernando’s account we see the relevance of the ‘death of despair’ research. This manifests in the intersection of skateboarding and its association with risk and the margins in an increasingly ambiguous and troubling social context. Part of this is attributed to the proliferation of powder narcotics even after Jesse’s death: “That was the season of pure fucking dust, and everyone was getting in, they were trying to buy, it was changing the environment, people’s minds”. Also, the pressure of gentrification has become reflected in the skatepark. The arrival of municipal teams for urban decorum (“Like when the green pants arrived, those from the program, they painted over the graffiti ‘R.I.P. Jesse’. Well, I put it in my [Instagram] story and my buddy ‘el Jojo’ said ‘I’ll be back in about two hours’, and we’ll do it again”) and the general commodification around the attractive Chicano esthetic are reflected in the resentment with which Fernando tells us about his point of view:

I don’t know if you saw all the Chicano movement and all the stuff... all the fucking art, it’s part of the gentrification, and now Logan is one of the last places they try to sell, like before with North Park [...] They think they’re doing something, but the people who do farm market etc., those foos are on the opposite team! There’s no culture, it’s business [...] back in the days it was a movement, it was about the struggle, the revolution, but now it’s all about Instagram... you know... it’s Chicano but a whitewashed Chicano

For Fernando the frame of pollution also pivots toward those who he sees as outsiders, superficially engaged in the exotica of Chicano Park and not the culture. His caustic appraisal of the contemporary scene draws upon, not drugs and gangs in this instance, but the pernicious impact of social media and gentrification. Such insights add depth and context to the way leisure can be understood as polluted. In this example the polluted leisure is the contamination of the Chicano Park movement by vapid pecuniary interests. This ethnographic case, besides critiquing the approach that “treated leisure as a nonpoliticized sphere of being” (Rojek, 2001, p. 119), opens a comparative window into possible forms—spanning individuality and institutionalization—in which leisure activities (like skateboarding or volunteering by Chicano Park’s muralists and activists) can serve as arenas for political, social, or spiritual expressions concerning space and community. This example returns us to the civic leisure of Mair’s

(2002) research, bonding a place of recreation to social and political work. Fernando's stewardship is oriented toward the preservation of the resistant ethnic history of the park. However, his care also represents a spiritual response and extension of the circumstances of polluted leisure.

Consistent with some recent anthropological currents that reflect on the practices of conviviality and collaboration as hallmarks of modern societies (Caillé, 2013; Hart, 2013), we believe it is important not to calcify on superficial conflicts but to instead delve into the plans of coexistence that are given between skaters and the broader context of Chicano Park, as different tactics of coping with common threats of social disintegration and deaths of despair.

Fernando acknowledges that the park's pillars are perceived, and protected, as a sacred space by local skaters. "It's a sacred place actually, you know... first of all its history, second of all, if you're really a Chicano local, you just understand [...] And when you start forgetting, it's like people forgetting themselves, and that's true for the local skaters as well". Whether it is the reminder of indigenous sacredness, the celebration of historical figures in the skateboarding pantheon, or the remembrance of the young skaters and Barrio residents who disappeared due to drugs (or at the intersection of the three), it is precisely the spiritual struggle against oblivion that makes the space a dense "place of memory" (Nora & Ageron, 1997). In this sense, as mentioned at the beginning of the paragraph, the two pillars as surfaces and the altar as technique, are not accidental but represent the synthesis of an attempt at coexistence between identity urgencies, perceptions of social risk and creative responses, respectively organized and spontaneous. Regarding the altars, Fernando states:

It's Chicano style, that's Chicano one hundred percent [...] You can see it also elsewhere but although it's Chicano style, because of the care, the candles you know. And that's why I'm proud of that, I am the proudest I think because this is something I have in my heart, I will never disrespect it and if I am here, I won't let it be disrespected.

The sacredness with which the park is imbued, is confirmed by the narratives of our informants. Both Cris and Fernando express this component. Yet more overtly, the communal transformation of the murals into *memmurials* is a testament to the potent layering of place, identity, spirituality, and leisure in this context. Here it is apropos to connect to the wider discussion on spirituality in leisure pursuits that manifests in music, dance, and sport (Anderson 2013; Harmon & Dox, 2016; Kraus, 2009). However, our discussion is augmented in the capacity that we observe an ethnic script, particular to Mesoamerican cultures. This script stands out and becomes the common arena with which to shape particular conceptions of sacredness that affect different leisure fields to cope with issues of death and loss. Forms of sacredness and spirituality that, according to Chicano Park's legacy, are always imbued with political, ethnic, and/or social meaning.

## Conclusion

Our article focuses on an annex of Chicano Park, the murals painted on the pillars of the skatepark and their two altars. We observe a troubling social context, and an example of polluted leisure in which skateboarding is a vehicle extending

spirituality, as a means of expression and representation, to a marginal community in Chicano Park. The fusion of Chicano cultural motifs, iconic skateboard heritage, and memorials to dead friends works as a microcosm to the broader transformations of Barrio Logan. The skatepark replicates an ongoing narrative in the territory where everyday leisure is infused with concerns of cosmic magnitude. Identity, history, belonging, life and death are the passions that prompted the creation of Chicano Park, and they are the same dynamics at play in the murals and memorials in the skatepark. These *memmurials*, we have argued, are materializations of a polluted leisure, adopted as concrete and spiritual responses to the socio-ecological fraying of the area.

The case of the altars is thus exemplary when observing how a marginalized community within the park endeavors to carve out an experimental space for sharing their own memory and raising awareness, without demonizing, of the various threats of fraying that loom over the Barrio. Here skateboarding recasts an understanding of polluted leisure that works as a form of resistance. Barrio Logan is subject to both material and symbolic pollution. The heavy industry and the highway represent physical pollution. The social fraying of institutional racism, drugs, and gentrification highlight other forms of symbolic social pollution. By amplifying spiritual elements in skateboarding the polluted leisure paradigm takes on an alternative form where deep emotional and cosmic symbolism provide a locus of communal meaning and expression. This differs from the idea of resigned activism that Lora-Wainwright's (2017) and Evers (2019a) refer to in new behaviors that accommodate the norms of pollution. The spiritual encounter with skateboarding in Chicano Park Skatepark is an example of hope (Zournazi, 2003).

We conclude by emphasizing the importance of observing how the pollution that envelops Chicano Park and impacts its communities is confronted by resorting to the most effective and expressive weapon that the park has managed to shape in its more than 50-year history: a sacralized memory. The institutional murals of Chicano Skatepark, constitute a canvas on which to experiment with new forms of community spirituality. The altars, not coincidentally, choose to develop on this canvas by proposing an unprecedented assemblage of styles, techniques, forms, and content that add a specific voice to the common afflatus of struggle against the socio-ecological pollution of place. Skateboarding as leisure, the sense of a shared threat and the field of spirituality, thus become one way in which different communities, not without conflict, find themselves negotiating their presence in a contested and resistant place.

## Notes

1. The first traces of the use of the term "Chicano" date back to the late 1950s. Everyone agrees on its re-appropriative use by Mexican-descendant communities in the Southwest, transforming it from a derogatory term to a political, ethnic, and identity category that claims pride in its Mexican roots (see Cuellar, 2002).
2. Interview, Imperial Beach (San Diego), 07/03/2023.
3. Interview, City Heights (San Diego), 04/04/2023.
4. Interview, Pacific Beach (San Diego), 07/15/2023.

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