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Transgressing Aesthetic Borders: Art, Sex & Marriage in Santa Barbara's Courthouse Murals

This article centers the aesthetic re-staging of Santa Barbara after the devastating earthquake of 1925 in order to interrogate how the city mythologized a white heteronormative patriarchal version of California's history that persists today. Critiquing Santa Barbara's Courthouse Mural Room through a queer, postcolonial lens, I argue that contemporary wedding ceremonies held in the Mural Room can destabilize fixed borders between California's fantasy heritage past and present. Indexing sexuality as Western imperial history through the Courthouse Murals enables my analysis of Mural Room artist Daniel Sayre Groesbeck's "scenarios of encounter" between the Spanish and indigenous Chumash in 1542. I draw on scholar Valerie Traub's geo-spatial construction of race and sexuality in the Renaissance to explore Groesbeck's murals as erotic signifiers of white fantasy projections of a socially and erotically "stable" Santa Barbara onto indigenous bodies. Traub's reading of early modern European cartography as visual evidence of the elision of indigenous genders and sexual identity in the "New World" informs my critical intervention in Santa Barbara's contemporary marriages and material production.

Keywords: settler colonialism, indigeneity, postcolonialism, queer theory, border studies, performance studies, aesthetic placemaking

Introduction

Indexing sexuality as Western imperial history through the Santa Barbara County Courthouse Murals of Daniel Sayre Groesbeck (1878–1950), I apply queer, feminist and postcolonial theory to analyze the artist's "scenarios of encounter" (Taylor 2003: 53–54) between the Spanish and New World Chumash in 1542, as well

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Photo 1. Photograph of wedding and detail of Spanish Colonial History mural by Daniel Sayre Groesbeck at the Santa Barbara County Courthouse, Santa Barbara, California

Source: Santa Barbara Elopement.

as Groesbeck's representation of the Spanish Missionary period between 1769 to 1821. Demonstrating that his paintings serve as the prominent backdrop to contemporary marriage ceremonies in the Southern California Courthouse, I draw on Valerie Traub's geo-spatial construction of race and sexuality in the Renaissance to explore Groesbeck's depictions as erotic signifiers of White Anglo Saxon Protestant fantasy projections of a socially "stable" Santa Barbara onto global and indigenous bodies. Tracing how Groesbeck's scenic representations once participated in the U.S. Progressive Era's re-staging of Santa Barbara as a wealthy resort town after the 1925 earthquake, I contextualize present-day weddings performed in front of Groesbeck's murals as polymorphously dramatic encounters between people and aesthetic representations of the past (Photo 1).

I situate my research within the field of performance studies with an emphasis on urban performances of aesthetic placemaking. My work on the theatricalization of cities and urban historiography overlaps with critical readings of California public spaces and re-readings of the Mission Revival period evident in the scholarship of Kevin Starr and Phoebe Kropp. A city's visual culture forms part

of what French historian Pierre Nora terms “environments of memory” (Nora 1989: 7), a concept that enables this historiographic study of the performances within the Mural Room.

The Santa Barbara County Courthouse and Groesbeck’s murals

Designed for the Spanish Colonial Revival-style courthouse, Groesbeck’s murals were made in 1929 for the County Board of Supervisors’ assembly room, which they used for over thirty years (Jervis 2014). Today, thousands of locals and international tourists alike visit the Courthouse, which was re-built in 1929 after the earthquake destroyed the original, and along with the Courthouse architecture, Groesbeck’s narrative paintings reflect the city’s efforts to re-brand itself as a Neo-Spanish Colonial tourist-oriented town in the 1920s (Breisch 1991: 302). Santa Barbara’s elite preservationists and planners repurposed the city as the **new** New Spain, using seed money from the Carnegie Foundation to “translate their fantasies into law”. Through a “comprehensive building-zone ordinance in 1924”, Santa Barbara’s elites “set the stage for rebuilding the city in ersatz adobe and red tile following the earthquake” (Breisch 1991: 302). California historian Kevin Starr writes, “Hispanizers, in short, seized control of the reconstruction apparatus” (Breisch 1991: 302).

Santa Barbara’s gentrified stage of the 1920s contextualizes Groesbeck’s murals as the scenic backdrop for the city’s fantasy cultural production. The Courthouse Mural Room provides an immersive prop for its urban theater of historical illusion, and Santa Barbara’s present dreamland, in which bodies re-enact imagined scenarios of discovery. Such scenarios as Diana Taylor describes, “transport ‘us’ (as expedition leaders or newspaper readers) from here to an exotic ‘there’” (Taylor 2003: 54). These “transfers” translate “the Other’s systems of communication into one we claim to understand, transform past enactments (earlier discovery scenarios) into future outcomes (usually the loss of native lands). In doing so, the scenario simultaneously constructs the wild object and the viewing subject – producing a ‘we’ and an ‘our’ as it produces a ‘them’” (Taylor 2003: 54). As viewers of Groesbeck’s murals today, “we” as viewing subjects are induced to “other” the bodies depicted in the scene. Transported through Groesbeck’s historical past, visitors are taught how modern “America” was “formed”. A kind of theater architecture, the ornately decorated Mural Room contains bench seating, dramatic lighting and an elevated platform, which provide the setting for marriage ceremonies as real-time participation in Santa Barbara’s self-styled Spanish Colonial spectacle. As couples “tie the knot” within the artist’s cartoonish rendering of European conquest and colonization, they affirm and normalize a U.S. narrative of colonization and inevitable indigenous loss.

A self-taught California artist, Groesbeck's painterly illustrations reflect his subjectivity and training during a pivotal time of 1920s gentrification. He was commissioned to condense the city's fraught colonial history into a visually appealing timeline, which I contextualize as an ideological map (Traub 2000: 49). Feminist scholar Valerie Traub's critique of European sixteenth and seventeenth century maps and voyage illustrations as visual evidence of Western European Renaissance fantasies of global bodies is useful to my analysis of Groesbeck's murals as a conceptual device for a nationalist agenda, predicated on the maintenance of patriarchal Christian institutions of marriage and social order (Traub 2000: 49). I read Groesbeck's depictions of Spanish, Mexican, and Chumash peoples as cartographies of a semiotic visual classification system representative of 1920s understandings of its vanquished Others. Post-colonial scholar Edward Said describes the basis of "othering" as "the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures" (Said 1978: 15). I draw on Said's definition of othering to contend that Santa Barbara furthers such othering practices by choosing to mythologize easy and passive colonization as a universal fact. By continually re-staging itself as a neo-Spanish arcadia, the City and County of Santa Barbara and Groesbeck's murals provide contemporary viewers with visual maps and literacy about how Santa Barbara – and by extension the United States – actively preserves its hegemonic legacy.

Groesbeck's painterly cartography provides evidence of, and inroads to, multiple scenarios of encounter today. "After returning from brief service with the Canadian forces in Russia, Groesbeck established himself as a successful painter and printmaker, exhibiting in major Los Angeles galleries beginning in 1919. His Russian subjects – Cossacks, picturesque peasants, exotic markets and churches – were extremely popular" (*Destined for Hollywood*, 2001). In a Santa Barbara newspaper article from 2011, author Michael Redmon informs us that Groesbeck was a scenic painter and set designer for legendary Hollywood filmmaker, Cecil B. DeMille. Groesbeck's career as a Hollywood studio artist spanned a quarter of a century and he worked on several DeMille pictures such as *The Ten Commandments*, *The Volga Boatman*, *The King of Kings*, *The Crusades*, and *The Buccaneer* (Redmon 2011). However, "With all his success, his [Groesbeck's] murals at the Santa Barbara County Courthouse remain among his greatest achievements" (Redmon 2011). As an example of local "orature" that furthers the myopic performance and celebration of 1920s Spanish Colonialism in Santa Barbara, Redmon's article lends credibility to my argument that the city stages its project of Eurocentric white supremacy in the present through literary, visual, and cultural productions of the early twentieth century. In other portraits of Korean, Japanese, and Tibetan people, Groesbeck exoticized the facial features, creating caricatures that fed an American cultural imagination of global bodies (Karl 2016) (Photo 2).



Photo 2. Daniel Sayre Groesbeck, *Royal Wizard, Lhasa, Tibet*, c. 1928

Source: James Main Fine Art.

In the Mural Room, Groesbeck successfully collapses millennia into a convenient record of the Native American period; European exploration period from 1542 to 1769; the Spanish colonial period, 1769 to 1821; the Mexican period, 1821 to 1848; and United States statehood, from 1850 to present day (Castillo). In this paper, I focus on the artist's depiction of the Native American, European exploration, and Spanish colonial periods. Groesbeck's narrative tableaux function as a cartography of Santa Barbara's origin story, beginning with the first scenario of encounter between Portuguese Conquistador Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo and the indigenous Chumash Canalinos (Photo 3) who formed part of the native groups of the Channel Islands, Santa Barbara, and its surrounds:

From Navidad, Cabrillo sailed up the Pacific coast of Mexico, Baja California, and Alta California, repeatedly contacting native peoples. On October 10, the fleet sailed into Chumash territory at a village they called Las Canoas, probably located near Mugu Lagoon or Ventura. For the next eight days, the Spaniards sailed, anchored, and exchanged gifts with the friendly occupants of the "thickly populated" coast between Las Canoas and Cape Galera. Between Cape Galera almost certainly Point Conception and Las Canoas, Chumash people provided names for roughly 40 mainland towns (Erlandson, Bartoy 1995: 158).



Photo 3. Detail of Spanish Colonial History mural by Daniel Sayre Groesbeck at the Santa Barbara County Courthouse, Santa Barbara, California

Source: Maiza Hixson 2022.

Dropping anchor

On the left wall of the Mural Room, the primary scene of the mural unfolds. The Canalinos appear clustered in a pyramidal formation on a rocky Pacific Ocean bank, across from Cabrillo and his Spanish crew. Groesbeck renders each tribe and crew in hierarchical order in terms of height. One Canalino man stands tall atop a large boulder and holds a spear. He gazes stoically at the Spanish naval procession charging up the shore with its billowing red and gold flags, which rise as high as the Chumash man's stature. Approximately eight Canalinos surround this figure in various states of crouching in preparation for the ensuing encounter. All of them are clad in nothing save for a simple rectangular loincloth, presumably made of hide or skin. Out in front of the indigenous group, a coyote perches on a jutting rock, making the animal the first line of defense against the Spanish invaders. A few feet behind the coyote, another Chumash man is hunched down on all fours, in anxious anticipation of this fateful meeting. Both the coyote and man's

mouths are slightly agape, as if calculating the intruders' next move. In this visual hierarchy, Groesbeck depicts the earliest inhabitants of Santa Barbara as savages. As a commercial illustrator, he was part of a dramatic sketch art tradition that rendered white American film directors' bestial mythologizations of "The Hollywood Indian" visible – a stereotype that Groesbeck transposed onto his Mural Room representations of the Chumash (Jojola 1998: 12–13).

A textual supplement painted at the bottom of the mural reads, "1542 Fifty years after Columbus Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo landed at Las Canoas with the Flag of Spain" (Jervis 2014). This label references the depicted scene, in which Cabrillo "discovers" what will be named Santa Barbara many years later by Sebastian de Vizcaino. To the left of this painted sign, yet another reads "The Canalino Tribe bordering the Santa Barbara Channel were the most **Enlightened** [emphasis mine] of the California Indians" (Jervis 2014). Above the text, Groesbeck paints an indigenous coat of arms – a medallion-like symbol adorned with a buffalo skull, knives, spears tipped with arrowheads, and feathers, dressing a woven basket. A lone indigenous woman's head emerges from behind the heraldry. The only reference to the existence of women within the narrative, her facial features deviate from the way in which the artist renders the indigenous men. Her nose is thinner compared to the men's wider and more flattened noses. Not only does Groesbeck depict an asexual history, he conveniently omits the rape of indigenous women from Santa Barbara's historical visual repertoire. According to James A. Sandos, "Priests taught Indians patriarchy and (...) lowered the status of Indian women within Indian culture. Such devaluation was further compounded by the shameful raping of Indian women by Spanish soldiers and settlers" (Sandos 2004: 166).

Aside from their long black hair held in place by a thin band, the muscular brown bodies of the Chumash almost blend in with their natural rocky surroundings, which partially camouflage them from plain sight. All of the indigenous people remain in profile and peer with uncovered eyes at the Spanish entourage. Our gaze follows those of the Canalinos toward the triangle of four muscular and bearded men, led by the central figure of Cabrillo who stares unflinchingly back at them. In stark contrast to the Chumash peoples' semi-nudity, the Spanish men are fully clothed, their brawn concealed beneath long-sleeved shirts of rich hues. Cabrillo's proud and sizeable chest, protected by a strapping leather vest, virtually precedes him. Although we view his head in profile, his eyes are in shadow, partially obscured by the bill of his helmet; and we mark his prominent bronzed nose and the bushy black mustache covering his upper lip. Given that his eyes remain hidden compared to those of the Canalinos, one could interpret Groesbeck's depiction as a mysterious view of Cabrillo in relation to the indigenous people. Perhaps more than the Chumash, Cabrillo serves as a commanding body to become known. While grasping at his sword in his right hand and pointing its tip down

into the rock, he holds up a giant flagpole with his left arm and summits the island, thus marking his territory. Cabrillo's pose is also in line with the American neo-classicist painter John Vanderlyn's depiction of the *Landing of Columbus* (1836), commissioned by the U.S. Congress for the Capitol Rotunda (Webster 2010: 365).

Three fellow sailors flank Cabrillo's central figure, one of whom forces a small canon up the rock, aimed directly toward the Canalinos. He too bears a sword, though carefully tucked into his side. Behind these frontal figures, a bright blue sky illuminates the background, suggesting a midday scene in which a bustling crew hauls materials and wooden barrels onto shore while another daunting ship pulls in. In contrast to the unlocked jaws of the coyote and Canalinos, the Spanish men's mouths remain firmly clinched within this pregnant dramatic encounter. Their red, gold, green, blue, orange, and yellow clothes, as well as brightly colored flags and textiles, emanate opulence compared to the unadorned indigenous people. Behind Cabrillo, a determined figure rolls up his sleeves in anticipation of what ensues. Compared to the crouching Canalinos whose toned, slender, and weaponless bodies reflect rigorous daily activity, the unfolding narrative would suggest that they are defenseless in the face of the Spanish army. Bearing no arms, swords, or protective clothing, all they possess is that which the artist provides – a delicate swath of fabric to conceal their genitals. The fact that Groesbeck does not feature women within this scene registers as a glaring absence that generates its own haunted presence. In this Canalino-Spanish encounter, Groesbeck navigates 1920s American Puritan standards of impropriety. Although he was primarily fixated on men's bodies – both indigenous and foreign – he deemphasized women and what their bodies might represent. Had the artist included women, it could have hinted at several historical facts, including war rape, which would have been unpalatable to Courthouse newlyweds and their families. Furthermore, the representation of Chumash women and children could have indicated the reality of their matrilineal society or culture (Kettman 2009). Additionally, the lack of balance between the homosocial invaders and the matriarchal Chumash would have appeared more obvious and, conceivably, evoked questions surrounding homoeroticism and Spanish culture.

In a 2014 *Noozhawk* article, Loretta Redd, a board member of the Santa Barbara County Courthouse Legacy Foundation, describes Groesbeck's art as whimsical but admits it is not entirely accurate. "The murals are representative (of the period) and historical, but with tremendous artistic license", she added. For example, the ships are depicted in "full sail, with no anchor" (Jervis 2014). For Redd, the omitted anchor and other artistic embellishments contradict the facts surrounding Cabrillo's landing. However, Redd might also acknowledge the artistic liberty of Groesbeck's other depictions, including painting indigenous people as asexual and childlike, portraying Spanish men as strapping, and rendering women as

basically obsolete. While Groesbeck glorified white male bodies in homoerotic fashion, he also diminished women and people of color. In keeping with racist and misogynistic portrayals of the period, his tourist-friendly, Hollywood version of Santa Barbara's hegemonic history conformed to the expectations of white Anglo-Saxon protestant elites at the time of its creation. Today, however, Groesbeck's Mural Room tragically perpetuates a white supremacist caricature of indigenous histories that smiling couples pose in front of during their Courthouse weddings.

Drawing on Traub's assertion that sixteenth century maps evidence the "naturalization of heterosexuality and the unnaturalness of miscegenation emerging simultaneously, as two sides of the same global body" (Traub 2000: 84), I query Groesbeck's illusory representation of indigenous gender and sexual identity in the New World, which elides difference for the sake of easy and comfortable race-sex-gender representations. However, this spatial void, or lacuna of sexuality also provides a platform for a contemporary "queering" (Coloma 2009) of the Mural Room as a scholarly intervention. Interrogating the relationship between empire and education, Roland Sintos Coloma employs queer theory and postcolonial studies as intersectional research methodologies to examine Western imperialism in the service of the decolonization of indigenous peoples in the Philippines (Coloma 2009: 270). Citing Said's 1978 postcolonial study of Orientalism and the development of queer theory and research by Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick in 1990, Coloma expands post-colonialism to include the U.S. as a current empire. Employing queer and postcolonial methodologies to deconstruct governmental educational campaigns in former and current U.S. territories, Coloma's methodology provides a useful model for my own examination of Santa Barbara's colonial narrative as told through Groesbeck's Mural Room illustrations.

I draw on Coloma's combination of postcolonial and queer methodologies to "queer" Santa Barbara's Courthouse Murals, which I interpret as a form of civic propaganda for the U.S. Neo-Colonial empire in Santa Barbara. Manufacturing civic identity in the 1920s enabled business executives working in concert with government agencies to brand Santa Barbara as a romantic tourist destination. Indeed, selling Santa Barbara through the allure of Spanish nostalgia could be more profitable than oil, citrus, and sea. Infused with myths of Ramona and Zorro, the city itself could be aesthetically preserved and sold as an older and more aristocratic European-style alternative to those looking for a high-end leisurely escape from all of the vulgarities of other American cities suffering from outsized growth and crass commercialization (Starr 1990: 277-278). In *Material Dreams*, Starr devotes two chapters to Santa Barbara's development as a Spanish arcadia for the wealthy. He writes, "Wealth had captured Santa Barbara for its own, and now wealth envisioned its captive city as an escape from getting and spending, and this identity, paradoxically, was also good for the resort business" (Starr 1990: 277-278). Along

with the Old Spanish Days Fiesta, Starr characterizes the Santa Barbara Courthouse of 1929 as an emblem of the city's idealized identity with the completion of Groesbeck's Mural Room as its "final gloss" (Starr 1990: 291).

As a queer reading, I open Groesbeck's subjects up to a re-signification process to introduce alternative queer, feminist discourse surrounding his aesthetic bodies *vis-à-vis* live marital bodies performing within the same space. Vanquished "others" such as the Chumash signify the realities of polymorphous, non-heteronormative, gender non-binary erotic lives. In this performative historiographic analysis of global bodies as mapped subjects, I interpret Groesbeck's asexual representation of "others" as an atlas of compulsory puritanical and heteronormative societal demands of the 1920s, in which the U.S. imperialist framing of such bodies denied interracial coupling and non-heteronormative sexual practices. In the wake of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant re-branding of Santa Barbara as a tourist destination for families after a devastating earthquake, narratives of the city's colonial past were subject to a landed gentry elite's fearful reaction to urban disorder.

The missionary position

Adjacent to the Spanish-Chumash "first-contact" scene, the mural clockwise from the rear wall (containing the entry doors) reveals Groesbeck's visual mapping of the Spanish Mission period (Photo 4). A painted wall label reads: "1786 Fr. Presidente Fermin de Lasuen builds the Xth Mission at Santa Barbara after the death of Fr. Junipero Serra at Carmel" (Jervis 2014). Here, the artist renders the construction of Santa Barbara's imposing mission tower covered in scaffolding, around which brawny workers flex their burly forearms and sinewy, serene indigenous peoples relax under the supervision of Father Lasuen (Jervis 2014). Junipero Serra, credited with the conversion of the Chumash in Santa Barbara, was a self-flagellating Franciscan Friar who practiced medieval corporal torture such as whipping to discipline himself and indigenous peoples (Welizarowicz 2018: 274). Lasuen, who was no less violent than Serra, justified disciplining Indians for their laziness and "inclination to lewdness and theft" in his "Refutation of Charges," which Lasuen wrote in response to claims that Indians were being abused at California Missions (Sandos 2004: 88–89). Groesbeck's conversion narrative conveniently omits the general disregard for indigenous life that missionaries held in his staging of the city's arcadian past. In mapping life as a peaceful co-existence between the "Enlightened" Chumash and Spanish in what Carey McWilliams coined as California's "fantasy heritage" (Welizarowicz 2018: 274), Groesbeck reinscribes a deeply condescending reality of presumptions of indigenous intelligence and sexuality. "In view of (...) admittedly unscientific opinions on the native endowment of the

various races and levels of society in early modern Europe, it is not surprising to find that many Spaniards, although by no means all, regarded the Indians of the Americas, or at least the commoners among them, as limited in their mental capacity" (Guest, Guest 1985: 224). Indeed, according to James A. Sandos:

Franciscans failed to recognize the complex and varied forms of Indian resistance to the conversion process and the Indian struggle to retain their individual cultures. Behavior that deviated from the Spanish norm the priests attributed to an alleged Indian inability to learn the sophisticated elements of a higher spirituality and to supposed Indian deficiencies in intellect and morality. Franciscans misidentified as moral defectiveness Indian resistance to Christianity and Indian cultural preservation. Since by Spanish law the Franciscans stood as guardians or fathers to their neophyte wards, the padres visited the standard physical punishments of their culture, including flogging, upon Indians who failed to meet their Christian moral obligations (1991: 72).

Additionally, despite the fact that Franciscan narratives of contact with Chumash indicate polygamy among chiefs, premarital and extramarital coitus among commoners, as well as the existence of two-spirit gender roles (Sandos 1991: 71), Groesbeck's murals and Santa Barbara's self-mythologization as a Spanish Colonial Disneyland persistently omit these aspects of Chumash culture in their dominant cultural mapping and staging of a fantasy heritage narrative. Regarding indigenous sexuality, Brian McCormack writes:

Spanish explorers and missionaries to Alta California also documented that the pursuit of intimacy and sexual pleasure within several Native societies of the region were not confined to the rigid heterosexual, procreative marriage form sanctioned by Roman Catholicism. The Native sexual universe and the gender and sexual forms contained within it provided additional evidence of Native savagery and debasement and the need for spiritual conquest and salvation. Several Spanish sources note the existence of *joyas* (more generally referred to as berdache in the scholarly literature, a man who adopts the social and sexual role of a woman) within various Native communities of the region. In one instance, Franciscan missionary Fray Francisco Palou briefly recounted how friars at Mission San Antonio caught two male Gentiles, "one dressed as a woman and referring to himself as a *joya*", committing a "vile sin". He added that it was common to find two or three *joyas* in the villages of the Santa Barbara Channel Island region. Their behavior was an abominable vice he hoped the missionaries would uproot with the establishment of missions across this territory (2007: 394).

In his depiction of the Chumash man on all fours like the coyote, Groesbeck's ideological map underscores common stereotypical tropes that "In their pagan state the Indians entered into no contracts marriage" and "mated after the fashion



Photo 4. Detail of Spanish Colonial History mural by Daniel Sayre Groesbeck at the Santa Barbara County Courthouse, Santa Barbara, California

Source: The Jon B. Lovelace Collection of California Photographs in Carol M. Highsmith's America Project, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division. Created/Published 2012.

of animals” (McCormack 2007: 394). While monogamy was the norm, sexual activity varied among the Chumash who widely accepted premarital and extramarital sex (Sandos 1991: 71). Additionally, according to Sandos and as McCormack mentioned, “The Chumash had berdache who appeared to Europeans as effeminate men dressed as women. The Spanish called them *joyas* (jewels), a term that may have been derisive in Spanish culture but inadvertently conveyed the regard with which such men were held in Chumash culture” (Sandos 1991: 71). From the conspicuous absence of the representation of berdache in the Mural Room, it is possible to infer multiple points. Perhaps the most obvious of these is that Groesbeck was entirely ignorant of their existence. Or, assuming Groesbeck was aware of their existence, to have illustrated the berdache figure would have complicated his easy visual mythologization of the Chumash as savage, unsophisticated or lacking more complex cultural processes. Had Groesbeck allowed Canalinos to appear more nuanced, perhaps they would have registered as less one-dimensional. For example, had the artist attempted to render *joyas* as visibly effeminate next to the Spanish, it is conceivable that the ornately outfitted invaders might have in turn appeared queer alongside the berdache. Yet Groesbeck’s depiction of the Canalinos could not have

adequately illustrated their multi-faceted gender performances and sexual identities. Only through their own self-representation could indigenous Chumash people have countered Santa Barbara's hegemonic visual culture of the 1920s.

Conclusions – marital bliss?

Serving as the backdrop to thousands of local weddings annually, the Mural Room generates substantial revenue for the Santa Barbara County government. A Special Events Coordinator schedules it for highly orchestrated wedding events where vows are exchanged and “culturally specific affiliations such as family, religion, and class form the social frameworks of memory” (Roach 1996: 27). The artwork silently narrates each wedding and the Mural Room itself functions as a polytemporal mental space where imagined futures of wedded bliss converge with staged memories of violent empire as well as post-earthquake urban gentrification. Borrowing from Traub, we cannot ignore the history of the West's objectified bodies in visual images, and maps as evidence in a contemporary context, particularly in art that illustrates indigenous peoples in California's history. Confronting Santa Barbara's art historical presentation of “official” colonial accounts, which Groesbeck diligently transcribes in his now-fetishized Mural Room painting, we can analyze this artistic-theatrical setting as a stage that allows for performative reenactments of the present, including thousands of “I Dos”, and metaphorical “I Don'ts”. The painted object functions as both actant and prosthetic device allowing contemporary heterosexual and LGBTQIA couples to transgress temporal borders. Same sex marriage was only permanently legalized in California in 2013 (*Is Same Sex Legal* 2019), but the Santa Barbara Courthouse has since become a welcoming space to gay couples (Patterson 2008). Yet the Groesbeck Murals remain as part of the white supremacist, patriarchal, and homophobic visual history of the city. Thus, when queer couples marry within this space, they must reconcile relatively recent gains in marital justice with a hackneyed twentieth century representation of a more repressive time. In spite of this, a queer re-reading of the Mural Room can also productively center LGBTQIA histories in ways that instantiate an open dialogue surrounding a more inclusive visual representation of Santa Barbara's non-cisgender and non-heteronormative past. As queer and straight couples are now both invited to share in the city's white fantasy colonial heritage in which they are transported not just to the 1500s or 1800s but to the 1900s, an opportunity exists to perform alternatively and against such white, patriarchal, and heteronormative histories. Confronting Groesbeck's Neo-Colonial painting in the twenty-first century illuminates the multitude of ways in which the Mural Room could also be re-narrated from non-white, non-cis-gendered decolonial perspectives.

In addition to intervening in Groesbeck's Mural Room depictions by demonstrating how the omitted gender and sexual narrative provides a platform for discourse surrounding Missionary perceptions of indigenous peoples as unintelligent and animalistic, I have provided evidence for the historically archived cross-dressing berdache, as well as extramarital and premarital intercourse among the Chumash. Furthermore, in his sycophantic desire to please his Mural Room commissioners, Groesbeck neglects to show the sadistic and masochistic practices of Friars Serra and Lasuen, whom Groesbeck mythologizes. Such a fear of "biting the hand that feeds" dovetails with how Santa Barbara chooses to construct its mythical past and perpetuates its fantasy heritage into the present. Through my engagement with the site and space of the Courthouse Mural Room, I have treated a range of themes that re-signify it as an expansive sexual site in which couples wed themselves to the historical past, to the period in which that past was reframed, and to the present, thereby traversing spatiotemporal borders. Here the newlyweds become the ineluctable co-stars of Santa Barbara's Spanish Colonial theater that betroths them to deeply divergent alternatives to hetero and homo-normative coupling under the law.

Reading Groesbeck's murals against the evidence of Spanish abuse and rape of indigenous peoples, in addition to Franciscan narratives describing polygamy among Chumash chiefs, premarital and extramarital coitus among commoners, I ironize the juxtaposition of romantic, hetero- and homonormative wedding ceremonies in the Courthouse chamber haunted floor-to-ceiling by sexual histories of violence and non-monogamous relationships. While these murals obscure past gender and sexual histories, they also perform in the present by reaffirming patriarchal domination and white supremacy. In this feminist, historiographic queering of Groesbeck's paintings, I perform my own desire for legibility of Santa Barbara's queer, homoerotic, and feminist artistic expression, while critiquing the city's colonial narrative of domination and control. The city's denial of its polymorphous sexual subjectivities, past and present, perpetuates the fabrication of Santa Barbara's racist, sexist, and classist aesthetic production.

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