

Sense of Place, Sidewalk Chalk Art, and COVID-19: Identifying Children's Pandemic Narratives in New Haven, Connecticut

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The realignment of everyday life during the initial stages of the pandemic centered work, leisure, and educational activities in and around the home and local community. Preliminary studies have indicated the rise of graffiti, paintings, murals, and rock art during this period, yet little to no research has been conducted on the emergence of sidewalk chalk art in geographical and environmental studies literatures. This study focuses on one neighborhood; Westville, located in New Haven, Connecticut where many drawings of sidewalk chalk art depicted COVID-19 related messages. Applying a visual methodology and analyzed through a thematic analysis, this article discusses and analyzes children's pandemic narratives as presented through sidewalk chalk art. The results of this analysis indicate that children's pandemic narratives focus around four main themes: (1) gratitude and solidarity; (2) safety and risk avoidance; (3) positivity and care; and (4) beyond the COVID-19 dragon. There is value in these findings as it allows for an understanding of how children perceive wider socio-political and economic events, how they traverse into public discourse and enter creative artwork that – while seemingly trivial, mundane, and easily missed – shape senses of place. Consequently, sidewalk chalk art presents a temporary window into seeing how socio-political and economic events are portrayed creatively in public spaces. Given that chalk art can present complicated worldviews within a single drawing and can challenge people to rethink and confront systemic challenges or issues, geographers need to increase their study of sidewalk chalk art as a method of communication that is fundamentally geographical in nature. *Key Words: sense of place; sidewalks; chalk Art; COVID-19; children's geographies.*

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted multiple fabrics of everyday routines and life related to employment, systems of provision, economics, supply chain management, energy generation, consumption patterns, and travel and transport dynamics

(McKibbin and Stuckler 2020; Nicola *et al.* 2020; Tirachini and Cats 2020). In response, a variety of public health measures including lockdowns, self-quarantines, furloughs, and work-from-home protocols were implemented. With families consequently spending more

time in their homes, local communities, and green spaces (Lotfata *et al.* 2022; Ma *et al.* 2022) a subsequent realignment of educational, leisure, and professional activities temporarily centered around familial and neighborhood environments. One intriguing element that emerged during the pandemic was the frequency to which street art depicted issues concerning COVID-19 (Tàpies 2021; McEwan *et al.* 2022). While studies have shown the increase of graffiti (Farran and Smith 2021), paintings (Lakh *et al.* 2021), rock art (Tulloch 2022), and murals (Anstett 2020) during COVID-19, little to no research has been written about the emergence of sidewalk chalk art during the initial stages of the pandemic.

There is scant research on sidewalk chalk artwork in the geography and environmental studies literatures, instead being evaluated from pedagogical perspectives within education studies, and other fields including art history, criminology, and cultural studies (Ross *et al.* 2017). This may be because of its temporariness that sidewalk chalk art never remains in the same state as it was drawn, lay on the ground facing up rather than facing individuals at angles that are more visible, is subject to fluctuating weather conditions, and the sites it is often drawn are variable and sometimes chosen without specific reason. The increase in street art, and sidewalk chalk art particularly, during COVID-19 demonstrates that residents and children are experiencing their neighborhoods differently as sidewalks and streetscapes are transformed for active living, play, and sociability as part of social distancing measures (Mehta 2020). Consequently, there is a need for geography and environmental studies to engage with this element of human behavior that is interwoven with the concept of place and, more specifically, senses of place in response to socio-political and economic contexts and events.

The concept of place is complex and has been the subject of much academic interest and debate (Malpas 1999). For Massey (1995: 50), place is a social construct that is actively made and remade and that our “ideas of place are products of the society in which we live”. The creation of places is therefore influenced by physical, economic, and social realities (Easthope 2004). Place depends on people, who construct and organize it (Sack 1993). A geographical perspective of place is particularly suitable for understanding pandemic narratives through sidewalk chalk art as an example of ongoing and diverse creation, and experience, of place. Place is an aspect of the way we choose to think about the world, what we decide to emphasize, and what we decided to designate as unimportant (Cresswell 2004). Key narratives and messages expressed through sidewalk chalk art present how communities, particularly children, view the pandemic and resulting public health responses adding to a distinctive sense of place.

This study addresses a substantive gap in geographical and environmental studies research, and explores emerging pandemic narratives as presented through sidewalk chalk art. In doing so, this study applied a visual methodology to capture sidewalk chalk art in Westville, a suburb of New Haven, Connecticut between March and November 2020. Analyzed through a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2012), the findings indicate gratitude, safety, overcoming dark times, and well wishes and moving beyond COVID-19 were key pandemic narratives illustrated through sidewalk chalk art during this time. There is value in the findings of this study, as it allows for an understanding of how children perceive wider socio-political and economic events, how they traverse into public discourse and enter creative artwork that – while seemingly trivial, mundane, and easily missed – shape senses of place.

Background: Pandemic Narratives, Sidewalk Chalk Art, Children's Geographies, and Sense of Place

COVID-19 and Pandemic Narratives in Connecticut

The State of Connecticut responded to the outbreak of COVID-19 like many U.S. states and countries. A public health emergency was declared by Governor Ned Lamont on 10th March 2020, and subsequently ordered that all schools close for two weeks after 16th March. Subsequently, an executive order was signed directing all non-essential businesses and not-for-profit entities in Connecticut to prohibit all in-person functions effective 23rd March 2020 (State of Connecticut 2020). Similarly, all Connecticut residents were directed to "Stay Safe, Stay at Home". The executive order directed businesses to employ work-from-home procedures, undertaking telecommuting where possible, except any businesses deemed "essential" which included healthcare, food service, law enforcement, and similar critical services (State of Connecticut 2020). Across the State of Connecticut, as well as across places in the United States, the phrase "Stay Safe, Stay Home" was reiterated via public service announcements online, via television and radio networks, and in public areas via signage. Various phases of reopening Connecticut's businesses have occurred, been postponed, and also moved into stricter lockdown protocols to address the pandemic, e.g., on 6th November, the Phase 3 reopening was scaled back to new Phase 2.1 rules (NBC Connecticut 2020).

The 'Stay Safe, Stay Home' message was widely advertised across the country and the State of Connecticut alike across various platforms. Gaining traction via online platforms such as Twitter and TikTok, the message was further accompanied by viral messages, dances, and tutorials for maintaining social distancing and appropriate

handwashing routines (Business Standard 2020). Additional messages also entered public discourse in March and April 2020 to reinforce public safety to citizens in order to prevent contracting the virus. Such messages included "Stop the Spread", "Slow the Spread", "We're all in this together", and "Flatten the Curve". These messages emanated from various sources including the and its Coronavirus Task Force (White House 2020), the World Health Organization, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Matrajt and Leung 2020).

Sidewalk Chalk Art, Place, and Sense of Place

Cresswell (2004) asserts that place is a way of seeing, knowing, and understanding the world through various forms of engagement, including attachments and connections between people and place, meaning and experience, or resistance to name a few. Thinking of areas as a rich and complicated interplay between people and environment – as a place – frees individuals from thinking of it as facts and figures. This suggests that places, their evolution, and deliberate activities of (re) making place can be sites of expression, identity, and experience. Bartos (2013) reinforces this indicating that place is understood as a process that is created through the coming and going of agents, through repetition of norms, stories, and experiences shared in place. Places are comprised of materiality, meaning, and practice (Cresswell 2009). Communities and towns across the world have their material form such as libraries, streets, sidewalks, and places of worship. At a community level, people are engaged in regular place-making activities e.g., redecorating homes, building additions, and lawn manicuring (Cresswell 2004). These places are spaces which people have made meaningful and are attached to in one way or another. Though meanings are shared, they are never fixed permanently and are continuously

open to counter-meanings produced through other representations (Cresswell 2009). These meanings gain a measure of persistence when they are inscribed into the material landscape. Furthermore, people do things in place. What people do, in part, is responsible for the meanings that a place might have. Cresswell (2009) suggests that mundane practices are a more significant ingredient in place as people go about their daily lives navigating those areas repeatedly.

Places are fusions of human and natural order and are the significant centers of our immediate experiences of the world (Visconti *et al.* 2010). Places are more than just physical space and can be described as a location created, or defined by, by human experience and thus imbued with meaning (Martin 2003). Places, like the communities in which we live, are multi-layered and subjective; they are created when physical attributes, emotional connections and psychological perceptions are combined to impart meaning or value. The meanings that correspond with our neighborhoods and communities are shaped, and reshaped, by continually evolving physical, historical, social, cultural, economic, and political influences (Knox and Marston, 2016). People define, and respond to, places in various ways given our different and diverse experiences; therefore, recognizing the importance of individual positionality and how it affects our relationship with human environments. For example, people can respond to social environments in diverse ways e.g., happy, amazed, fearful, calm, or confused. Such responses support whether individuals feel “connected” or “disconnected” to certain human environments that are often shaped by our ‘sense of place’ (Tuan 1977).

Agnew (1987) outlined three fundamental aspects of place as a ‘meaningful location’: location, locale, and sense of place. With respect to sense of place, Agnew (1987) refers to the subjective and emotional attachment

people have to place. Agnew (2011) comments that the third component of place as sense of place or identification with a place as a unique community, landscape, and moral order. To that end, every place is particular and, therefore, singular. Strong senses of ‘belonging’ to a place, either consciously or as shown through everyday behavior such as participating in place-related affairs are indicative of sense of place (Agnew 2011). These meanings can be individual and based on personal biography or they can be shared sense of place which are based on mediation and representation (Cresswell 2009; Agnew 2011). For example, novels and films often evoke a sense of place which manifest feelings that readers and viewers resonate with what it is like to ‘be there’ (Cresswell 2004). Turner and Turner (2006) state that sense of place remains an emergent property of interaction between an individual and the environment, and while there are some shared components, the experience of place is fundamentally unique to each of us. Rose (1995: 88) explains that “senses of place develop from every aspect of individuals’ life experience and... sense of place pervades everyday life and experience”. Sense of place is shaped in large part by the social, cultural, and economic circumstances in which individuals find themselves (Rose 1995; Easthope 2004).

There is minimal research relating to sidewalk chalk art within the geography and environmental studies literatures. Rather, the intersection of geography and environmental studies with creative public art surrounds other forms of street art and graffiti (Mcauliffe 2016; Ross *et al.* 2017). This body of work explores the implications of such creative artworks in public spaces, for example, the differences between graffiti and street art and graffiti’s integration into street art as a component of formal heritage (Ross *et al.* 2017); illegibility, illegality, and vandalism (Merrill 2015); and how social media platforms e.g., Instagram,

Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok shape social practices underpinning street art and graffiti (MacDowall and de Souza 2018). Yet there are distinctions between graffiti and sidewalk chalk art including (but not limited to): social acceptance, perception of vandalism and (il) legality, temporariness and permanence, age of artists, and perception and interpretation of narrative (Visconti *et al.* 2010; Tàpies 2021). Distinctive art forms have implications for how places are perceived (e.g., as safe or unsafe areas) which inherently shapes sense of place. Indeed, within these areas of scholarship new avenues continue to explore how public artworks in public spaces are understood, categorized, and analyzed within particular concepts of geography e.g., space and place (Jackson 2006). Despite this, there are some historical works that document chalk drawings and messages (e.g., Levitt 1987).

Using chalk to draw on large areas such as driveways and sidewalks is an activity that generations of children have enjoyed, and a practice that can be traced back to sixteenth century Italy (Failing 2012). This is not a limited practice and occurs globally (Lakh *et al.* 2021). Creating art outside on walls or on the sidewalk allows children to feel connected to their neighborhood, community, and school, whether the creation be a game of Hopscotch, puzzle, or drawing (Muri, 1996). This provides children with the ability to express their own perspectives and realities without as much restriction if the artwork was done inside, thus allowing for their creativity to be seen by others. In the United States, sidewalk chalk art has been a mainstay of children's outdoor play for decades yet it has also become a tool of protest for public demonstrators and chalkers have been subject to arrest (Failing 2012). Moreover, Failing (2012) outlines numerous cases where politicalized messages regarding various issues of governance and economics such as the Occupy Movement, racial justice, and environmental challenges have been drawn

across the United States. This demonstrates that sidewalk chalk art, while seemingly harmless, can present powerful beliefs, values, and opinions about how the world is and how it ought to be. Consequently, the image being drawn – irrespective of age or any other socio-demographic characteristic – cannot be divorced from socio-political context and therefore is not a neutral presentation of the world around us but is rather intrinsically value-laden. The images, words, and narratives as presented through sidewalk chalk art are drawn from the positionality of the chalker that communicates meaning on behalf of the author and reader (Bartos 2013).

While the work of Bender (1932) may be dated, there has yet to be any systematic study of sidewalk chalk art. Bender (1932) identifies that children draw for the fun of the thing they are drawing with apparently no other goal than the immediate joy of activity and production except in the case of sidewalk games where the drawings afford the conditions for the game. Children with plenty of chalk, time, and pavement rarely draw isolated and complete figures; rather there are elements of spontaneity in the drawings and may be left to be returned to at a later time or by other children (Bender 1932). Yet given how sidewalk chalk art can influence individual perceptions of inherently socio-environmental, political, and economic issues and events and are temporarily interwoven with local places, it is necessary to discuss the importance of 'place' and its relationship to chalk artwork.

Children's Geographies and Sense of Place

Children interact with place in multitudinous ways that is shaped by age, developmental stage, location, and socio-cultural context including, but not limited to, exploring, playing, learning, and identity formation. Childhood is arguably where the development of an adult's sense of place begins

(Chawla 2007). Skelton (2009) indicates that 'play' and 'mobilities' are key themes studied within the sub-discipline of children's geographies. Play is a significant feature in adult constructions of childhood and deemed essential to the development of healthy, happy, and strong children. Children can devise some aspect of play irrespective of location e.g., the home, offices, shops, sidewalks, and restaurants etc. with everyday objects such as stones, sticks, bags, coins, trees, and other unremarkable objects made into tools of play (Skelton 2009). This supports sensory development among children. Bartos (2013) argues that human senses structure space and define place, which refers to specific sensations, feelings, or modes of experiencing the world (e.g., touching, hearing, tasting etc.). Children are assumed to be more sensually engaged with places than adults (Tuan 1997; Chawla 2007; Bartos 2013). Playing involves many human senses yet is spatially and temporally specific, and what has been understood, accepted, and viewed as desirable play in the correct spaces and times have varied over time and space (Harker 2005). While various theories about the 'meaning' and 'value' of play have been presented, Katz (2004) states that children's play is a core component of making everyday worlds of knowledge while Harker (2005) comments that the importance of play lies at the intersection of being and becoming. There are power dynamics involved with children's play, as adults are the decision-makers of the timing and space where play is ultimately conducted (Skelton 2009).

There is general agreement that children need to explore, engage with, and investigate spaces and places outside of their immediate home environment to support personal and social development, learn to become independent decision-makers, and cultivate social relationships (Ross 2007; Skelton 2009). The 'street' has been used a metaphor for public outdoor spaces e.g., sidewalks, car parks, shopping areas, and transitional

sites, with debates in children's geographies identifying it as a Thirdspace; as it is a lived space where cultural identities are forged, mapped, and performed (Matthews *et al.* 2000; Skelton 2009). While access to the street can be restricted by events and socio-spatial practices that children have little control over, they can also provide their own sense of place. Children get attached to, and develop, an affective relationship with their physical, social, and cultural world over time (Cresswell, 2014; Ergler *et al.* 2020). A further element for understanding children's sense of place is not only the end product of their experiences, but also the process of getting attached to a place and developing a sense of belonging to a place (Ergler *et al.* 2020).

Experience of place have a significant impact on children (Read 2007). Child-scale experiences of places occurs through activities including fort-making, chalk artwork, climbing trees, or playing games whereas family-scale experiences of place provide historical and cultural context for experiences (Derr 2002; Briggs *et al.* 2014). The community-level sense of place is where cultural values and place relations take shape (Derr 2002; Briggs *et al.* 2014). Social affiliation, security, and opportunities for unstructured play are examples of children's needs fulfilled by place (Chawla 1992), with outdoor places as sites for amusement while indoor places satisfied needs for security and social affiliation (Derr 2002). Children's knowledge of a place is acquired through problem-solving affects their interpretation and ultimately how they construct their sense of place (Briggs *et al.* 2014). This is often reflected in how places are used, such as for emotional self-regulation, freedom, and privacy. Outdoor play has been constrained in recent years due to parental safety concerns and busy schedules which restricts spontaneous and unstructured activities that help foster children's sense of place (Briggs *et al.* 2014). How the

COVID-19 pandemic influenced children's outdoor activities and sense of place has yet to be reported in academic literature.

Sidewalk Chalk Art as Text

Communities can be represented through different 'texts' that infer meanings. The word 'text' can apply to anything that communicates and conveys meaning (Shurmer-Smith 2002; McKee 2003; Flowerdew and Martin 2005). In contemporary society, people interpret a wide array of 'texts' including books, maps, speeches, films, television shows, paintings, magazines, and advertisements to obtain a sense of the ways in which, in particular cultures at particular times, people make sense of the world around them (McKee 2003). It is important to acknowledge that different individuals and cultures make sense of the world in very different ways and that texts do not have the same meaning for everyone, therefore people can interpret a 'text' differently, based on their positionality and intertextuality (Shurmer-Smith 2002; Flowerdew and Martin 2005). As a result of these differing positionalities and intertextualities, interpreted meanings are not constant and can often fluctuate over temporal and spatial scales (Shurmer-Smith 2002; Flowerdew and Martin 2005). Shurmer-Smith (2002: 128) comments that "texts are, themselves, constructed not just out of unmediated experience but also in light of other texts" and that this is telling a new story in a recognizable form. Texts depict a place and the usage of space as being a key element of communication and that it is through texts that people imagine places they have never been to (Shurmer-Smith 2002; Flowerdew and Martin 2005).

Sidewalk chalk art is another example of a text. It is 'written' by an author and 'read' by a reader. Texts, including sidewalk chalk art, are a symbolic representation of the world that can be analyzed to understand how people interact

with, and construct, spaces and places around them (Livingstone 2005; Chmielewska 2016). Often created in public places, sidewalk chalk art through its language and symbols can reflect the authors' connection or critique to the place the artwork is in (Lakh *et al.* 2021). Usually drawn by members of the community in which it is located e.g., local children, it can reflect wider socio-cultural values of that community (McEwan *et al.* 2022). With respect to this study, it is children and teenagers who are the authors of the chalk art with (largely) residents in the same neighborhood e.g., other children and adults being the consumers or readers of this text. This means that the artwork primarily shapes local senses of place.

By interpreting a text, it is important to note what is included in the text in comparison to what isn't included within the text and what possible reasons there are for this (Shurmer-Smith 2002). Such reasons, for example, is that the reader should be aware of not only what the writer intends in terms of communication but also what the writer inadvertently communicates through what is presented and what is not presented within the text (Shurmer-Smith 2002; Flowerdew and Martin 2005). Often what is presented through texts could be seen as a "...value loaded representation of the ideological position of the writer because it reveals deep assumptions in its choice of words and phrases" (Shurmer-Smith 2002: 131).

Flowerdew and Martin (2005) state that texts are inescapably political and an engagement with them is about affecting change, perhaps through elaborating new meanings or perhaps by representing resistance to dominant narratives and that texts are placed on a scale that either agrees or disagrees to an extent with the dominant political narratives. Shurmer-Smith (2002) continues to identify that texts and their representations of cultures and landscapes are ambiguous and questions whether it is possible to present a place without representing it. Representation

has two meanings according to Shurmer-Smith (2002): firstly, re-presenting i.e. presenting a place again in a different form and secondly, standing in place of, for example a legal representative. Representation through texts influences the ways in which people encounter spaces and places and as a result places acquire personalities and reputations as a consequence of the ways in which they are depicted and then react to knowledge of their image (Shurmer-Smith 2002).

More recent concepts such as non-representation and post-representation further extend debates around representation. For example, non-representation challenges the idea that representation can accurately capture the complexity of the world given that some elements cannot be represented through language, images, and other forms of communication (Anderson and Harrison 2016). Such aspects include subjective experiences and emotions. Furthermore, non-representation challenges the notion that there is a single, objective truth that can be represented through language or other forms of communication (Anderson and Harrison 2016). Post-representation, however, emphasizes the importance of understanding the ways different forms of communication shape our world and the places in which we live (Harris and Harris 2018; Zicman de Barros 2021). Most notably, post-representation highlights the idea that representation is always mediated by socio-cultural factors, and that different forms of representation can shape our understanding of the world (Zicman de Barros 2021). Specifically emphasizing the non-representational aspects of the world such as affect, materiality, and experiences of place and space.

Methodology

This study explores the emerging narratives of the COVID-19 pandemic as

illustrated through sidewalk chalk art in New Haven, Connecticut. In so doing, this research identifies how public health messages from various sources and replicated across media platforms have shaped sidewalk chalk art messages undertaken by children in this area. This section of the paper outlines the data collection location, the methodological approach of this study, and how sidewalk chalk artwork was categorized using a thematic analysis framework into four distinct themes corresponding to specific narratives.

The data collection site for this study took place in Westville, a neighborhood of the city of New Haven, Connecticut. The area of the neighborhood is around 2.5 square miles and has a population of 8,900 (City-Data 2021). Westville is located in the western part of the city to the west of the West River with many main roads of the city including Whalley Avenue, Fountain Street, Forest Road, and Edgewood Avenue running through the neighborhood. Westville Village, typically along Whalley Avenue, is primarily zoned for commercial use while the majority of the area is residential. Westville is ranked as one of the best neighborhoods to live in as a result of low crime rates, accessibility, and proximity to downtown New Haven, high home values, and walkable streets (City-Data 2021). Many green spaces are a part of, or border, Westville including Yale University's primary athletic facilities (including Yale Bowl) and Edgewood Park. Additionally, it is home to Hopkins School (a private school for grades 7 through 12) and the Edgewood Creative Thinking through STEAM Magnet School (a science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics specialist school with kindergarten to grade 8 students). The neighborhood hosts many local annual events including Westville Artwalk that promotes local arts and crafts (Westville Artwalk n.d.).

Westville's demographics are diverse and is home to much of the New Haven

area's Jewish population. The population of Westville has changed since 2010 with the proportion of White residents decreasing from 61% to 53% in 2020 and an increase of Black and Latino residents in the same 10-year period (DataHaven n.d.). An affluent area, the median household income in 2019 was \$79,618; much higher than the City of New Haven's median household income at \$41,956 (City-Data 2021). The City of New Haven County has numerous communities that are racially and socially distinctive (Wang *et al.*, 2021). New Haven County, Connecticut is a socially and geographically diverse county that closely mirrors the socio-demographic profile of the United States (FiveThirtyEight 2016). It is the third most populous county in Connecticut with a population of 855,000 people, and home to two of the largest cities in the state, New Haven and Waterbury (DataUSA n.d.).

This study applied a visual methodology to data collection and collation and a thematic analysis to explore emerging pandemic narratives through sidewalk chalk art. Visual methodologies are used to understand and interpret images, which can include films, videos, photography, sculpture, collage, artwork, paintings, drawings, advertising, and cartoons (Rose 2016; Glaw *et al.* 2017). Visual analyses have been applied to other texts and forms of urban art, particularly graffiti (Chmielewska 2016) and more recently during COVID-19 (McEwan *et al.* 2022). Moreover, visual methodologies add depth of understanding and value to already existing methods by capturing the multi-vocality and heterogeneity of artists and capturing the rich multi-dimensional data as well as adding valuable insights into the everyday worlds of participants (Rose 2014; Glaw *et al.* 2017). Photographs were taken of sidewalk chalk art between 23rd March 2020 and 23rd November 2020, a period of 8 months. To ensure a systematic approach to data collection,

the researcher walked around the main streets and avenues in the Westville suburb every 3 days. The following streets comprised the data collection site: Fountain Street, Forest Road, Edgewood Avenue, Barnett Street, McKinley Avenue, Alden Avenue, Central Avenue, West Rock Avenue, and Chapel Street. A total of 46 pictures were taken corresponding to an element of the pandemic, lockdowns, or solution to address the virus. Drawings of games e.g., Hopscotch, full names of children, or personal messages were not photographed. These pictures of sidewalk chalk art were then collated and categorized into themes arising from undertaking a thematic analysis.

Studying place (and sense of place) is not necessarily straightforward given that places and people's relationship to places are always changing (Larsen and Johnson 2012). At the community level, Bartos (2013) suggests that studies can lend significant insight into the nuance between people and their environment. However, texts such as sidewalk chalk artwork can provide insights into how people interact and construct places. Analyzing sidewalk chalk art allows for in-depth understanding of how children's language and symbols communicate notions of place as well as how they are shaped by socio-cultural, political, and economic factors (Chmielewska 2016). Given that the timing of the data collection, these texts present meanings of how children are making sense of the world around them at a particular moment in time (McKee 2003); a substantial socio-scalar disruption of everyday practices and lifestyles.

Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative methodological analytical framework that focuses on identifying themes of living or action (Braun and Clarke 2006; Braun and Clarke 2012) and has recently been applied to artwork during COVID-19 (see Lakh *et al.* 2021). It involves several distinct stages including becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, and developing

and review themes (Braun and Clarke 2006; Braun and Clarke 2012). Following data collection and the collation of images taken, initial codes were defined into broader themes that were reviewed and validated to ensure all coded data accurately reflected each theme. For example, sidewalk chalk art including messages of thanking specific groups of essential workers were characterized as belonging to the theme of gratitude while chalk art with song lyrics about elements of subduing the hardships of the pandemic were categorized as being part of the theme of overcoming dark times. The findings of this study are presented in the following section.

Children's Pandemic Narratives in Sidewalk Chalk Art

Overall, the data collation of sidewalk chalk art illustrated that the majority of artwork could be identified in a number of ways. In descriptive terms, sidewalk chalk art of pandemic narratives reflected artwork that was (1) solely written words or text [$n=24$], (2) predominately text with smaller images [$n=8$], (3) solely an image or drawing [$n=6$], and (4) predominately a drawing or image with only a small proportion of text [$n=8$]. Categorizing and analyzing the pictures taken as part of the thematic analysis undertaken for this study

indicates that there were four major themes that underpinned pandemic narratives of sidewalk chalk art in New Haven, Connecticut. These four themes are (1) gratitude, (2) safety, (3) overcoming dark times, and (4) well wishes and moving past COVID-19. They are described and discussed in more detail in the following sub-sections.

Theme 1: Gratitude and Solidarity

As part of this theme, many sidewalk chalk art drawings were largely text and written messages displaying appreciation for essential workers such as healthcare workers, first responders, postal workers, teachers, and waste management employees. Interestingly, these messages reflected wider pandemic narratives of gratitude in other media platforms that direct specific attention to workers deemed essential during times of crisis. Overall, 30% of the pictures of sidewalk chalk art taken in the data collection period related to this theme ($n=14$). Examples of the messages as part of this theme are illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

With respect to the many professions and workers that were promoted as being 'essential workers', it is unsurprising that specific professionals were appreciated as opposed to generic messages of thankfulness. The occurrence of this pandemic narrative



Figure 1. Appreciative message towards health care workers.



Figure 2. Appreciative message towards essential workers

may be explained in a number of ways. Firstly, over the course of the data collection period numerous advertisements, news outlets, and social media platforms identified frontline professionals primarily in the health care fields such as nurses, doctors, care home staff, and first responders as being integral to addressing the COVID-19 crisis. Secondly, this narrative evolved towards including other professionals such as delivery drivers, teachers, and shop assistants. Consequently, it is not just healthcare professionals that are appreciated through sidewalk chalk art in this theme. This narrative of 'gratitude' is not solely identified in the study area but a reflection of wider appreciation and encouragement of essential workers (Evans et al. 2020). This narrative reinforces a sense of community within place, one that is supportive and appreciative of the risks involved that essential workers are confronting. While other forms of support e.g., public clapping occurred in some areas to show appreciation (Conradson 2021), gratitude presented through sidewalk chalk art remains for a limited time as a visual expression of solidarity of a larger community embedded through place.

The sidewalk chalk artwork itself in this theme also reflects other signage that has been used to thank frontline and essential workers such as lawn signs from Yale-New

Haven Health Centers (a blue sign with white writing). While some different colors were used in a number of examples of artwork in this theme, drawings were largely text only, often single-colored, and without elaborate drawings. This may indicate that messages as part of this theme are attempts at replicating gratitude to frontline and essential workers in an alternative and more personalized approach to communication.

Theme 2: Safety and Risk Avoidance

In this second theme, safety messages were a large part of the pandemic narratives in New Haven that reflected public health announcements to participate in social distancing, hand washing, avoid crowded public areas and stay home where possible in a concerted effort to remain safe and not put oneself in an environment where virus transmission was likely. Overall, 41% of the pictures of sidewalk chalk art taken in the data collection period related to this theme (n=19). Given that this theme had the largest number of sidewalk chalk art drawings, it is clear that safety concerns and considerations are the principal components of pandemic narratives of sidewalk chalk art in New Haven, Connecticut. Examples of the messages as part of this theme are illustrated in Figures 3 and 4.



Figure 3. Example message of germ avoidance.



Figure 4. Example message of risk avoidance.

Unsurprisingly, reactions to crises are usually accompanied by solutions. Similarly, considerations of solutions (and their efficacy) to challenges often permeate through public discourse and are evaluated in social settings. Safety precautions that reflected wider pandemic narratives of safeguards against the virus were also reflected in sidewalk chalk art. Many of these messages reflected state-wide and national communications about risk avoidance e.g., “Stay Safe, Stay Home” (State of Connecticut 2020). While some of the artwork identified in this theme repeats broader communication about the state of social distancing and lockdown measures, this itself is intriguing as a replication of message. This repetition demonstrates that such messages filter through to children and presented in a different medium illustrates that the pandemic (and responses to it) are important to residents (McEwan *et al.* 2022). While no research regarding the replication of public health messages through street art influences public perception has been undertaken to date, such narratives are unlikely to go unnoticed by residents and therefore may shape senses of place accordingly i.e., that minimizing exposure to COVID-19 is important to children and the community overall.

However, other messages appear to be a word-play of past slogans, such as ‘make love, not war’ (see Figure 3). Such messages within this theme suggest that pandemic narratives through sidewalk chalk art promote senses of positivity around safety precautions and risk avoidance. This type of narrative shapes local senses of place variously, specifically that solidarity and communal responsibility are integral to pandemic responses. Whether intentional or not, this narrative promotes collective wellbeing (Livingstone 2005). By replicating messages or amending slogans, this narrative embeds pandemic-related wellbeing as part of chalk art as well as children

making sense of the disruptive situation that COVID-19 has brought (McKee 2003; Skelton 2009). Like the artwork in the theme of gratitude, the chalk art incorporated into this theme was largely text only, with a large proportion of the drawings to be single-colored, and few images drawn. Despite this, some artwork did include smaller drawings. As shown in Figure 3, the artwork attempts to communicate the importance of germ avoidance by drawing a ‘germ’. This image may reflect image constructions of the disease including rudimentary host cell and spike protein (see CDC 2020).

Theme 3: Positivity and Care

As part of this theme, messages largely focused on subduing the darkness associated with the impacts of the pandemic. Particularly, such messages involved quotes, song lyrics, and messages that incorporated a positive message about happiness and shared experiences. Such messages are clear attempts at community building to create shared senses of identity and togetherness as a result of experiencing unusual circumstances. Overall, 17% of the pictures of sidewalk chalk art taken in the data collection period related to this theme (n=7). Examples of the messages as part of this theme are illustrated in Figures 5 and 6.

While the artwork in this theme comprised both text and image, the language used in this theme is far from a reflection of talking points and communication matching state or federal messages but rather presents an upbeat perspective on the impacts of the pandemic. The inclusion of song lyrics, colorful text, and inclusion of words such as ‘happiness’ and ‘light’ reflect positivity. Despite the aim of the artist being unknown, it is evident that sidewalk chalk art has the ability to communicate ideas about how the world is and how it ought to be (Failing 2012). It is not unreasonable to assume that



Figure 5. Artwork incorporating song lyrics about overcoming hardships.



Figure 6. Artwork incorporating inspirational message about happiness.

this artwork is colorful and distinct as to be noticed to influence how people perceive the impacts of the pandemic on their individual life and is intended to make the viewer rethink such perceptions. Therefore, this pandemic narrative – while communicating a positive message – may have been drawn with the intent to ‘brighten someone’s day’. This presents themes of caring for others as well as ‘taking care’ (and time) to project positivity (Conradson 2003; Lawson 2007).

Given that sidewalk chalk art is drawn with underlying values being reflected, communicating positivity through artwork can influence how a place is perceived adding a subjective value towards individual neighborhoods and their residents. Lawson (2007) notes that care has spatial extensiveness. Specifically, caring for others, empathy, and collective responsibility can be embedded within communities and place. Care embodies the proactive interest in others’ wellbeing (Conradson 2003; Livingstone 2005). Therefore, the integration of positive messaging with song lyrics and colorful text reflects how children’s sidewalk chalk art draws heavily on creating a positive and caring sense of place.

Interestingly, artwork in this theme can be distinguished from the previous chalk art.

Notably, the drawings and text as illustrated in Figures 5 and 6 present a more colorful, vibrant, and creative message. The inclusion of song lyrics and the different sized and colored text in one drawing presents a more light-hearted and noticeable artwork than single-colored pieces. Consequently, this artwork presents viewers with a different feeling having passed it e.g., singing the song mentioned or reflecting on the message about how one perceives the pandemic. With taking the time and ‘taking care’ of drawing the artwork in such detail provides children with the space for creativity and time to play (Conradson 2003; Skelton 2009). While seemingly trivial, the impact that this has on an individual is more than just the visual aesthetic of the drawing itself and shapes other people’s sense of place in distinctive ways that is not just visual representations of local neighborhoods (Easthope 2004).

Theme 4: Beyond the COVID-19 dragon

As part of this theme, messages were either generic or metaphorical. The drawings incorporated in this theme, which may appear to be a miscellaneous catch-all category, requires broader interpretation as a pandemic narrative. Specifically, messages that could be seen as mere platitudes can also be interpreted



Figure 7. Example message of well wishes to passers-by.



Figure 8. Artwork reflecting the dragon of COVID-19.

as an acknowledgement of compassion and pleasantries. Set aside from the artwork in other themes, these drawings were more ornate, larger, and more colorful. Overall, 11% of the pictures of sidewalk chalk art taken in the data collection period related to this theme ($n=5$). Examples of the messages as part of this theme are illustrated in Figures 7 and 8.

While some of the messages in this theme appear to reflect generic platitudes used in everyday life e.g., 'have a nice day', artwork in this theme presents these messages in an alternative format. A more visual representation of everyday sayings as exemplified by Figure 7 through chalk art is a more personalized message. In this sense, the artwork in this theme represents politeness that while seemingly banal is an attempt to move past the negative associations of the consequences of the pandemic and the implications associated with it e.g., safety precautions and social distancing. Therefore, well-wishing messages such as these

reflect attempts of returning to prior social engagements and the often-repeated platitudes that come with it. This may reflect a sense of comfort for the artist and the passer-by that the everyday engagements of individuals have not been eradicated because of the pandemic and that moving beyond self-quarantines and lockdowns, societal relationships can return to some semblance of pre-COVID-19 normality. Street art during COVID-19 has been equally reactive to public health and wider contexts (Lakh *et al.* 2021; Tàpies 2021). The identification of this theme confirms this in the study area; however it also is optimistically forward-looking. Consequently, this may shape local senses of place as a resilient area in the face of disruption. McEwan *et al.* (2022) reinforces this, stating that public art can influence how individuals and wider communities think.

The artwork comprising this theme occurred much later during the data collection phase as lockdown measures began to ease.

This indicates evolving pandemic narratives away from gratitude and solidarity for essential workers towards living beyond COVID-19. As opposed to the first two themes, the artwork in this theme was markedly different for both text only chalk art and those that were mainly drawings. It is clear from Figures 7 and 8 that the artwork is more detailed, colorful, and more creative. This artwork is visually more capturing, yet unlike the chalk art in the first two themes is bolder and harder to miss when walking. The distinct and elaborate drawings and text with different colors (no artwork in this theme was single-colored) capture a different sense of place and represent a distinctive element to the pandemic narrative of moving past COVID-19; this artwork is to be noticed. It is designed and drawn to be seen and for its message to be communicated, thus reinforcing its message with color and bold designs allow it to be remembered rather than simply being walked across and easily missed. It should also be noted that artwork in this theme was also more likely to be surrounded by other chalk art, and in most cases related to other pandemic narratives as indicated here.

Concluding Discussion

This paper has identified pandemic narratives as they have occurred through sidewalk chalk art between March and November 2020 in New Haven, Connecticut. The findings of this study indicate that there are four major themes underpinning these narratives, they are: (1) gratitude and solidarity towards essential workers, (2) risk avoidance safety to protect oneself against virus transmission, (3) positivity and care beyond COVID-19 and overcoming dark times associated with lockdowns and quarantines, and (4) well wishes and moving beyond the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the majority of the messages and narratives of appreciation and safety presented in sidewalk

chalk art reflect public health announcements and other media platforms, elaborate drawings accompanied by song lyrics that encourage inspiration and happiness to overcome hardships demonstrate unique qualities of artwork that go beyond mere platitudes and media talking points. Rather, such drawings allow for people to feel connected in shared senses of experience and feelings – which subsequently could lead to enhanced senses of place.

Sidewalk chalk art, while seemingly mundane and easily missed, presents a temporary window into seeing how socio-political and economic events are portrayed creatively in public places. Whether the images presented are chalk art or chalk political messages, sidewalk chalk art communicates ideas; ideas which those who walk over them might find agreeable, offensive, or unsettling (Failinger 2012). As more people walk around their neighborhoods to get out of their homes while still following social distancing and lockdown guidelines, sidewalk chalk art supports residents noticing the spaces and places around them. Sidewalk chalk art therefore makes close-to-home spaces more meaningful: a place filled with perceptions and experiences of the pandemic through the lens of local children (McEwan et al. 2022). It is likely that the majority of individuals may traverse over them without any further thought. Despite this, sidewalk chalk art can present complicated worldviews within a single drawing about how the world is and how it ought to be, thus challenging people to confront systemic challenges or issues. Sidewalk chalk art, therefore, not only influences the ways in which people engage with neighborhoods but also wider socio-political and economic issues. This reinforces the notion that places are always temporary and shifting as are people's relationship with them (Bartos 2013), and that sidewalk chalk artwork contributes to people's continuously

changing relationship with place. These processes of human-systems relationships are evidently geographical in nature and require further engagement from geographers in an under-researched area of investigation.

Places shape the stories of our lives. Sidewalk chalk art is one medium through which stories and narratives are embedded, albeit temporarily, in place and further shape senses of place. Thus, further study into sidewalk chalk art is warranted, and could be explored from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. We see this research not as an endpoint, but rather a starting point and a call to action to geographers particularly to explore an area of study that is implicitly geographical. Future research into sidewalk chalk art has numerous avenues for further investigation whether it is exploring the influences of social media platforms (e.g., #chalkart on Instagram has over 960,000 posts), the transitory nature and meanings of the object(s) of study, community perceptions of sidewalk chalk art, and the ways in which chalk artwork shapes place meanings and attachments.

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