



# Outdoor Art in America

Toni Cade Bambara



### Learning Objectives

For pages 524–526

In studying this text, you will focus on the following objective:

**Reading:** Analyzing cultural context.

### Set a Purpose for Reading

Read to learn about the events that inspired Toni Cade Bambara's "The War of the Wall."

### Build Background

Artists and activists use outdoor art, such as murals, to educate communities about their history and the social issues that affect them.

### Reading Skill Analyze Cultural Context

To analyze the cultural context of a literary work, pay attention to details that reveal the values or beliefs of a group of people. Use this knowledge to understand the theme or message of a literary work. As you read, take notes about the cultural context using a chart like this one.

	1960s	1970s	1980s
What were artists' values?			
What were artists' goals?			

In the 1940s, the Rheingold Company started a contest. They would plaster posters of blondes and redheads all over buildings, buses, and highways asking the public to vote for the next Miss Rheingold. One day we found a huge metal grid in the vacant lot we used for play; the thing looked like a giant's easel. We knew it was not the playground equipment promised by the city's park and recreation division. A six-foot-square billboard of the new Miss Rheingold soon filled the grid. The city had decided to lease the lot to the company. Needless to say, I became a community organizer early.

During the 1960s, streets, parks, and other public spaces became the arena for millions of people determined to make democracy a reality for everyone in the country. Many of these determined people were activist artists

of downpressed communities. They used their talents and skills to agitate<sup>1</sup> and educate for social change. These poets, singers, and others shared their training by moving from the privacy of their studios and working outdoors. There it was easier to mobilize neighborhoods around issues of discrimination and exploitation,<sup>2</sup> community and power.

A Chicago-based African-American artist collective called Afrocobra was instrumental in sparking an outdoor art movement throughout the country; it was most immediately experienced in the national black community. Walls of respect were done collectively, in keeping with the

1 **Agitate** means "argue about or discuss a matter vigorously to arouse public interest and feeling."

2 **Exploitation** means "selfish or unfair use."

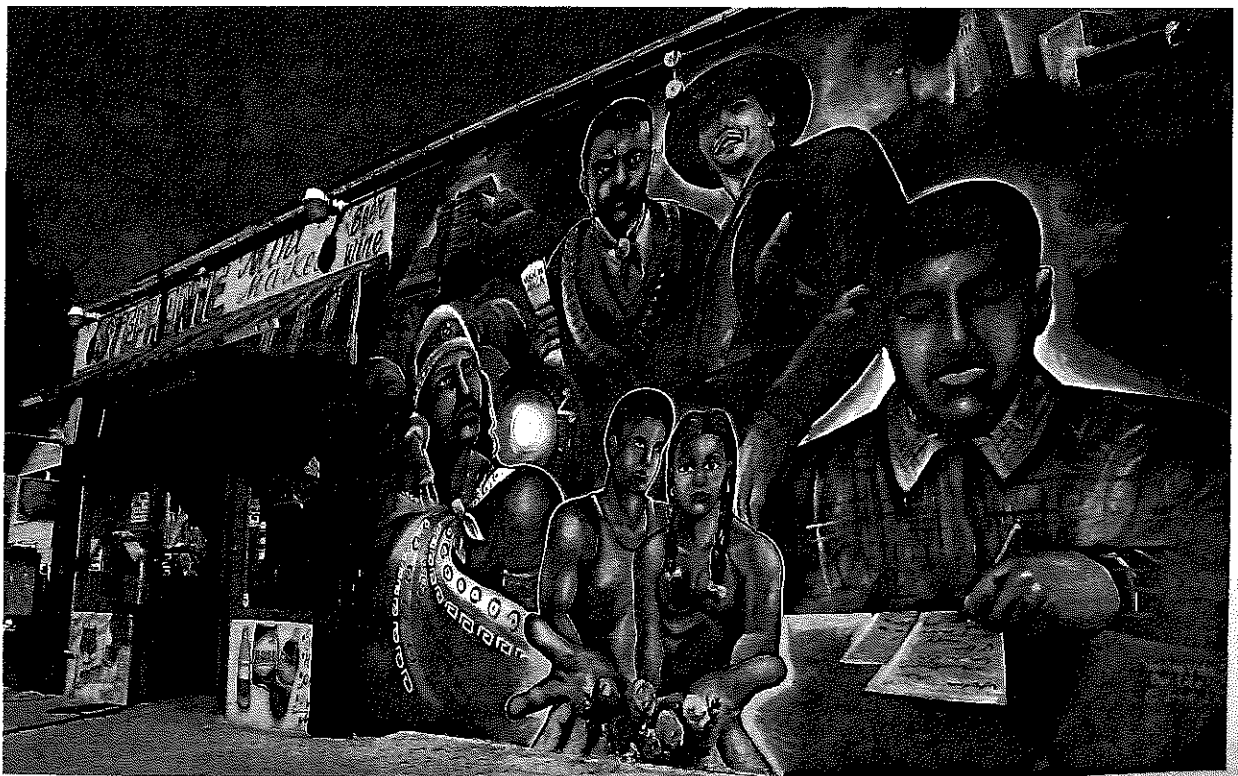
emphasis placed on community. The spirit of the outdoor art movement was arts-for-people's-sake. This idea challenged the arts-for-art's-sake notion that art is valuable only when it is done by one "special" individual and is housed in a big museum.

In the 1970s, youths who drew or painted on top of advertisements that cluttered their environment were called public artists by community people. The authorities called them criminals. To show that the city belonged, not just to corporations, but to young people too, these artists began practicing their craft in park tunnels, on bridges, and on trains. They risked arrest.

---

Mural in Boyle Heights, East Los Angeles, CA

View the Photograph How might this mural be a "wall of respect"? For whom does it show respect?





Detail of The Great Wall of Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA commemorates early leaders of the civil rights movement including Rosa Parks, Los Angeles, CA.

There's an incredible work of collective outdoor art called "The Great Wall of Los Angeles." It was executed in the 1980s by more than one hundred people. Under the directorship of Mexican-American activist artist Judy Baca, the half-mile long mural depicts the history of California from the point of view of Native Americans and Mexican-Americans. Unlike the walls of the 1960s, it is not set in the neighborhood of the artists. Baca chose the wall of a flood channel in a very high-priced district of the San Fernando Valley. The artists were youths from working class

neighborhoods of Los Angeles. Baca "sprang" many of them from juvenile detention centers where they'd been sentenced for art activity in tunnels, bridges, and trains. Warrior art I call it.

This warrior art, this rich heritage of outdoor art led me to write "The War of the Wall." I wondered how people in the neighborhood would react if a stranger started painting on a wall, *their* wall. What reasons might the artist have for painting? What might be the subject of her painting? What would people do if the artist wouldn't talk to them? From these questions came my story. 🎨

## Respond and Think Critically

1. Write a brief summary of the main events in this selection before you answer the following questions. For help on writing a summary, see page 219. **[Summarize]**
2. Why did artists of the 1960s move their art outdoors? Base your answer on Bambara's essay and any background knowledge you have of the 1960s. **[Interpret]**
3. In what ways were Bambara's feelings about the billboard contest different from her feelings about "The Great Wall of Los Angeles"? **[Compare]**
4. **Text-to-Text** In what ways did cultural events affect Bambara's purpose for writing "The War of the Wall"? How are the forms and purposes of "Outdoor Art in America" and "The War of the Wall" alike? How are they different? **[Connect]**
5. **Reading Skill Analyze Cultural Context** How has outdoor art changed from the time in "Outdoor Art in America" to today? Explain.
6. **BQ BIG Question** How did the billboard contest in the 1940s influence Bambara?

