ENTANGLEMENTS OF URBAN ART IN OAXACA, MEXICO

by

WILLIAM BISHOP LAMMONS

B.A., Millsaps College, 2012

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L. Kaifa Roland, Ph. D.

_____
Christian Hammons, Ph. D.

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Gerardo Gutiérrez, Ph. D.

Date_____

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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Entanglements of Urban Art in Oaxaca Mexico
Thesis directed by Associate Professor L. Kaifa Roland, Ph.D.

Abstract

In this thesis, I examine the urban art of Oaxaca, Mexico, specifically that of graffiti and street art. I focus on the ways that urban art genres entangle with one another and with hegemonic centers of power. Focusing on the areas of identity, class, taste, politics, protest, and commercialism, I argue that entanglements reflect and speak to the complex realities in which these expressive forms situate themselves.

For
My parents, George and Sarah Lammons

I do hope that one day they'll really understand what I've been up to all these years with anthropology and what all they have done to make me entangle myself with it so.

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First and most importantly, I would like to most humbly thank all of the incredible people in Oaxaca and Mexico that allowed me to enter into their lives during the course of this research. Since I first went to Mexico in 2011, I have always been astounded at how open and welcoming the people that I have worked with have been towards me. Zepia, Inmpar, Idea, Yankel, "José," Pako, and many others brought me into a world of urban art that is often invisible to the average passerby. Also, many others outside of urban art circles shared valuable insights and friendships, like "Gloria" and Julio. I'm often ashamed by the walls that my country aims to build between our nations, and I pray that relationships like the ones we have built can help to tear them down.

I am extremely grateful to the Latin American Studies Center (LASC) at CU Boulder, the Center to Advance Research and Teaching in the Social Sciences (CARTSS) at CU Boulder, the Goldstein Altman grant fund, the CU Boulder anthropology department, and the Latin American Studies Center Research Cluster for their funding of this research. Each contributed to robust fieldwork, which is exceptionally rare in anthropology master's programs across the country.

I will be forever indebted to my advisor, Dr. L. Kaifa Roland, for all of her support and direction throughout the master's program at CU. She has helped me

to grow in my understanding of anthropology and culture, but she has also helped me to decolonize the ways in which I engage with the world. She has made clear to me the ways that race-, class-, and gender-based biases shape understandings of the world. Through this training, I have become more self-critical and self-reflexive in the ways that I understand and engage with my own biases and those around me. This has particularly been possible through her availability and the ever open door for my many meetings during her office hours. I would also like to especially thank her for the many many drafts and variations of this thesis that she has read; for the patience that she has had for my erratic thoughts and writing; and most of all, for helping me to structure these experiences, photographs, stories, theory, and data into an ethnography. Dr. Roland has taught me most of all that culture is often defined by its "messiness" and that when it comes to writing ethnography, we should always "make it messy." Reality is often found more in mess and attempts to clean the mess than in structure or order.

I would also like to recognize Dr. Chris Hammons for his continued support throughout my graduate career. He has provided the academic and pedagogical support I needed to combine an interest in visual media with cultural theory and ethnography. Throughout much of my time at CU, he has acted as a secondary advisor, and he has always been available to discuss my passions and ideas.

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Finally, I would like to thank my girlfriend and research partner of the last few years, Xime. She has been a constant support through the many obstacles that I have encountered in graduate school, both personal and academic. She has been a rock for me and home to return to and carry with myself, whether in Oaxaca, Boulder, or elsewhere. She has been an incredible sounding board at every opportunity. Her encouragement has often made the difficulties of grad school life more than bearable. *Te quiero mucho.*

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CHAPTER 1
Introduction

Shocked by Graffiti and Urban Art

"You've got to figure out who the hell Yogurt is. You've got to figure out what this stuff means," my undergraduate advisor said, pointing to the tag in Florence, Italy that read "Yogurt." I was taking his three-week study abroad course in Florence, Italy and Munich, Germany, and I had chosen to study the many graffiti tags that decorated the historic center of Florence for my independent research project. It is this moment to which I always return when I explain my dedication to the study of graffiti and urban art. Something about the seeming omnipresent visibility of the tags and their opaque meanings grabbed and dominated my attention, just as my undergraduate advisor shows in this quote.

I find that graffiti and urban art, since that experience in Florence "shocks," or corporeally surprises and affects me through its image (Suhr and Willerslev 2012). From the moment I first saw graffiti and stencils in Florence, Italy and Munich, Germany in the summer of 2010, I also felt "trapped" by it (Gell 1996). Gell argues that art has "agency," and can affectively "trap" its viewer's thoughts (1996: 37). This thesis exemplifies my attempts to unravel this trap and engage with this shock effect that graffiti and urban art have on me. Also, it shows my attempts to shock and trap others through my images and analysis of it.

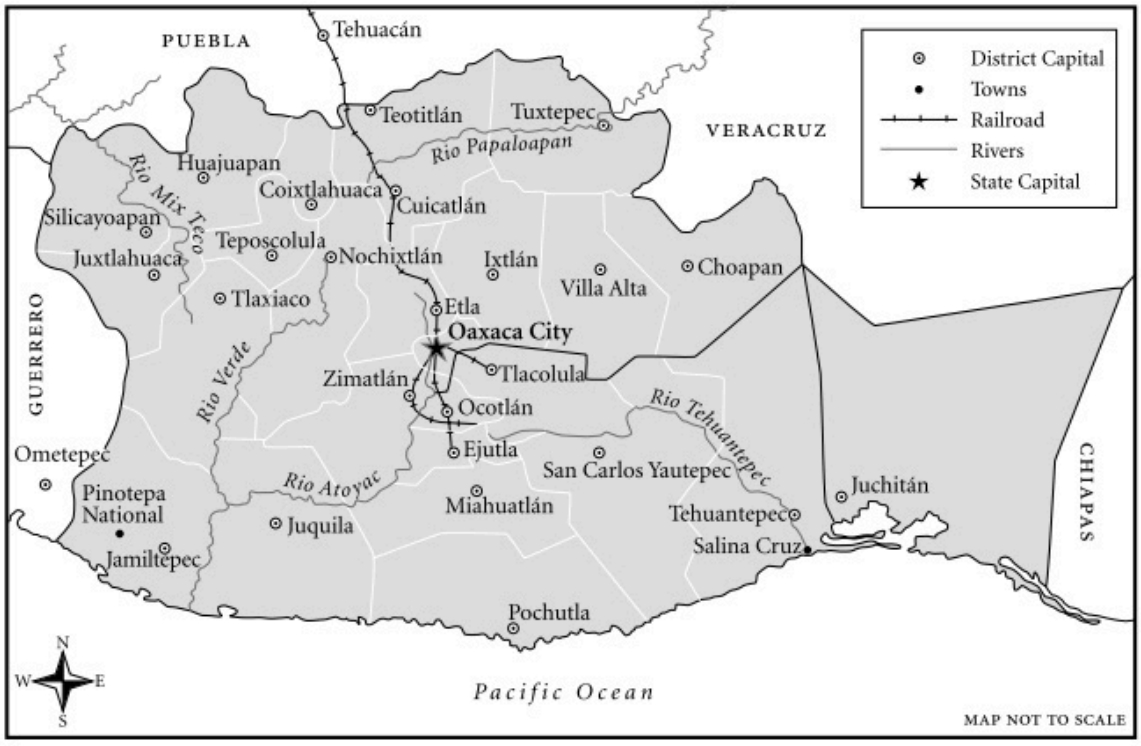
Imagining and Finding Oaxaca

Following my first ethnographic experience with graffiti in Florence and Munich, I conducted research on graffiti in Mérida, Mexico as part of my undergraduate honors thesis, during which questions of Oaxaca constantly arose. Based on my friends' and interlocutors' descriptions of Oaxaca's frequent protests and my own brief investigations into Oaxaca's urban art, I began to imagine Oaxaca's urban art as somewhere between Shirley Chisholm's "unbought and unbossed" activism (1972) and the self-titled first album of the radical rap-rock band, Rage Against the Machine (1992). Mérida's graffiti had provided incredible insights into Mexican and Yucatecan identity, particularly with respect to cultural politics as Joseph, Rubenstein, and Zolov describe (2001), but I yearned to know the protests and associated art that I had begun to imagine in nearby Oaxaca. I came to realize three things during fieldwork in Oaxaca: first, urban art centered around protest is just one part of urban graphic expression in Oaxaca; second, much of Oaxacan urban art has little to do with protest; and third, the protest and corresponding art that I encountered was far more complex than I had naively imagined.

The city of Oaxaca de Juárez (abbreviated as Oaxaca City) is a regional Mexican capital of the southern state of Oaxaca (Maps 1, 2, in Overmyer-Velázquez 2006). The state is famous for its geographical and cultural diversity. It holds 8 different landform regions, including mountains at 8,000 ft. above sea level, valleys at 5,000 ft. above sea level, semi-arid desert, Pacific coast, and the tropical Isthmus

of Tehuantepec to the southeast. The capital sits in the Valley of Oaxaca at the state's geographical center with the Mesoamerican Zapotec archaeological sites of Monte Albán and Atzompa overlooking the city and reflecting Oaxaca's ancient past, which dates to 500 B.C. and before (Joyce and Winter 1996). Oaxaca has the highest number of indigenous language speakers (33%), communal land owners, and communities that use indigenous law in Mexico (Esteva 2010: 982, Stephen 2007: 40 qtd. in Magaña 2017: 18; Norget 2010: 124).

Map 1. Mexico and Oaxaca State



Map 2. State of Oaxaca: District Capitals and Oaxaca City

To understand the role that urban art plays in Oaxaca, one must understand the role of the 2006 protests and the broader movement of Oaxaca's teachers' union. In the summer of 2006 in Oaxaca City, the 70,000-member dissident state branch of the national teachers' union, Local 22 (*Sección 22*) began their 26th consecutive summer protest for higher wages and better working conditions (Magaña 2014; Norget 2010). This was directed towards the state government of Oaxaca, primarily the Oaxacan *PRI* (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*/Revolutionary Institutional Party) party governor, Ulises Ruiz Ortiz (Esteva 2010; Gold and Renique 2008; Norget 2010). This protest escalated into a gridlocked and violent conflict between the protestors, Ruiz Ortiz and the state government and the federal Mexican government from May to December of 2006 (Esteva 2010; Gold and Renique 2008;

Norget 2010). Beginning on June 14, 2006, protestors that were peacefully camped out in the main square or "*zócalo"* of Oaxaca were met with violent police repression on the part of Mexican Federal Police officers (Magaña 2014, 2017). Between mid-June and December of 2006, Oaxaca become known as an "ungovernable society" in which the protest movement grew in response to state repression far beyond that of the teachers' union to encompass many other social movements. These groups, often youth driven, resisted state control and intervention by burning barricades on streets with cars, stacked tires, and other refuse (Magaña 2014). A *graffitero*[1] and close friend during my fieldwork, Zepia, said that during this time, "*Desconocí a Oaxaca.* (I ceased to know Oaxaca)."

During this protest, urban art, particularly that of street art collectives, emerged as a voice of the protest and a medium to critique the government of Ruiz Ortiz (ASARO, et al. 2014; Nevaer 2009). These collectives' artwork positioned themselves against official discourse of the state and depicted Oaxacan leaders as corrupt often with images of the Mexican Revolution, protest slogans, and images from popular culture (ASARO, et al. 2014; Nevaer 2009). These works are often lumped together in the category of "graffiti" (Nevaer 2009), but local participants draw strong distinctions between graffiti and the work of these collectives, which

[1] Graffiti practitioners often define themselves as either "graffiti writer" or "graffiti artist" or both. There is a rich history on the politics behind each name that has do with the commercialism and institutionalization of graffiti (Lombard 2013). In Oaxaca and Mexico, practitioners are almost always referred to as "*graffitero,"* which literally translates to "graffitist." Because this is the most commonly used word in Oaxaca, I utilize it in my writing with no translation, except when I quote a speaker as having used the word "painter" or "writer," in which case I likewise use the corresponding words in English.

they identify as "street art" or "stencils" because of their use of stencils in painting and the noted absence of these techniques from "graffiti."

In preparation for a 2016 field season, I and my partner hypothesized that Local 22 would protest in response to the state governor's election in May 2016, which was projected as favoring the *PRI*. Because the *PRI* was the party of Governor Ruiz Ortiz, and a victory would mean the return of this notoriously authoritarian party following a six-year hiatus (2010-2016), it seemed logical that Local 22 would mount protests against him. The summer of 2016 proved an active and even violent protest season, but the protests nor the art that followed them had much to do with the election. Protests centered on a recent federal education reform, *La Reforma Educativa,* which government officials argued increased the quality of public education in Mexico (2012). Teachers argued, however, that the reform was a labor reform that was rhetorically referred to as an "education reform." Teachers that my partner and I interviewed argued that the reform aimed to disrupt union power and increase teacher responsibilities with no added benefits or compensation which further complicated teachers' jobs.

Some urban artists painted works alongside these protests, but *graffiteros* rarely did. In preparing for my fieldwork, I found that discussion of "graffiti" usually referred to anything painted in the streets that was illegal, rebellious, or out of place (Esteva 2007; Gold and Renique 2008; Nevaer 2009; Norget 2010). In addition, Magaña's emphasis on youth activism and "meshwork," or cooperation and alliances between alternative groups during and following the 2006 protests, led me

to believe that all types of urban artists were somewhat allied and connected (2010; 2014; 2015). In reality, graffiti is one category and genre of urban art practiced by artists. Different forms of urban art are connected, but through ambivalent entanglements to one another, rather than willful alliances of meshwork, as I later discuss in this chapter.

Most "graffiti" in Oaxaca focuses on the stylized names, or "tags," that comprise *graffiteros'* nicknames and is thus is apolitical. In Oaxaca, much of what Nevaer defines as "graffiti" is instead "street art" or at least "stencil" works. Even though graffiti's content is apolitical, the 2006 protests and the continued 2016 protests affect the lives of Oaxaca's *graffiteros,* though their art might not necessarily reflect it. In addition, different painting groups or "crews" of *graffiteros* and street art "*colectivos*" (collectives) often do not get along with one another or other groups in their respective genre. Zepia said, "there's a lot of crews [and collectives], we don't all agree…there's a lot of clashes over ideas [and] styles." Scholars have conceived of the diverse participants in Oaxaca's urban arts scene as one group or contributing to a shared mode of expression. I have rather found that groups dedicate themselves to separate practices and art forms but still overlap with one another, a dynamic I theorize later in this chapter.

The Ethnographic Positioning of Will

I conducted three fieldwork trips to Oaxaca: 1 week in March, 2016; 3 months from May, 2016 – August 2016; and 1 month from May 2017-June 2017. My goal was to be present for the majority of the teachers' protests in 2016 and some

highlights of them in 2017. One night in mid-June of 2016 in downtown Oaxaca over *micheladas* (half beer-half spicy salsa drinks), I said to the *graffitero*, Inmpar,[2] that some of the political street art collective members had been extremely open and even friendly with me, contrary to his expectation and experience as a *graffitero* and Oaxacan.

He said:

> "*Es porque eres gringo* (It's because you're an American guy)…You're not from here, everyone tells you their opinion of what they see and think and all that…That's what's cool, that you get to see everything, like what they all think…It's cool, because if we go, I bet you that they don't even say 'hi' to us, or even if they do, they won't really talk to us."

Many of the spaces that I entered into during fieldwork in Oaxaca were opened to me because of my nationality, gender, and skin color. My identity as a (straight) white U.S. male allowed me privileged access to many situations that other Oaxacan urban artists like Inmpar would likely be denied. In addition, Oaxaca City's history of protest and protest centered urban art that draws backpacking tourists also drew me. This is not to say that these boundaries are impassable for Oaxacans, as Itandehui Franco Ortiz is one such Oaxacan anthropologist and art historian who has written comprehensive and compelling theses on Oaxacan urban art (2011; 2014).

This is only to say that my interests in these dynamics between protest and urban art have the privilege of operating outside and free of the issues and power dynamics that Oaxacans face while interacting with these different groups. For

[2] Inmpar's name is taken from the Spanish word, "*impar,*" which translates to "unique."

example, Inmpar argues that he would likely be refused by members of rival groups if he were to initiate contact as I did. I expand on this, arguing that his assumption or anxiety alone of being refused reveals a reality of urban arts affected by friction, conflict, and limitations of access for certain practitioners. Additionally, I was able to go to Oaxaca for periods of time, then leave with little repercussions on the relationships that I had formed. I had the privilege of observing these interactions, or the lack thereof, with the intention of understanding them and writing about them. Inmpar would have to hold deeply affective relationships to these people, then continue to live alongside them, unable to readily leave as I have. This ethnography is thus one of my experience as a white Western U.S. male whose interest in graffiti and urban art is based on a desire to learn about a kind of urbanity that was out of arm's reach while growing up in the suburban American South. The greatest limitations to my ethnography are these gaps in my understanding, facilitated by the power to drop in and live comfortably for a summer or more in Oaxaca, then leave.

I should also note that I was conducting research accompanied by my partner, who was also my boss. Ximena Velasco Guachalla, or "Xime," was my girlfriend of almost one year and a doctoral student in political science who was studying protest and contentious politics. Oaxaca held compelling research opportunities for both of our work, and Xime had use for my photography and videography skills in the field. She decided to hire me as an assistant, and we also acted as research partners and often conducted interviews and the like in tandem.

She was present for almost all of my interviews, with the exception of perhaps five. She was a constant companion in the field and attended almost all of the same events that I did. She also often asked compelling questions during interviews, taking an interest in my work and finding connections with her own. We often bounced ideas off of one another, and I often sought linguistic clarification from her, as a native Spanish speaker, for things I found vague or ambiguous. My fieldwork and writing would be drastically different without her consistent and almost constant support and feedback.

Finally, I must acknowledge that during my fieldwork, the legalities surrounding urban art practices were unequally advantaged in my favor. In his ethnography of Denver's 1990s graffiti scene, *Crimes of Style*, Ferrell acknowledges his participation in illegal activities like public drinking, painting graffiti, smoking marijuana, etc. He, as a sociologist and criminologist, argues that participating in illegal activities contributed to a necessary methodology of "anarchist criminology" and provided insights to understanding graffiti (1996). I likewise participated in similar practices during fieldwork, but I argue that the privileges ascribed by my identities reduced the risk for me regarding illegal activities. For example, at a paint session in July of 2016, the permission that a *graffitero* had secured to paint a chosen wall was called into question, and the police came to the wall to make all participants stop. They noticed me, particularly my camera and tripod, and asked for my passport. The policeman looked over the photocopy that I kept in my wallet, then asked if I was a student. I said that I was and that I was in Oaxaca to study

urban art. “And that’s why you’re taking pictures, right?” he responded, looking at my camera around my neck. I said yes and looked at the tripod about a foot away from me, but I thought of the spray can I had left sitting beside my partner which I had used to paint illegal tags at the beginning of the paint session. The officer said that I was fine and that as a tourist and a foreigner, I wouldn’t be taken anywhere. He also said that I could keep taking photos, as I was not subjected to the same kinds of laws as Mexican citizens. When they arrived, I was not painting, though my identity and assorted photographic equipment led them to believe that I was in fact not doing graffiti at all, when I actually briefly had.

Mérida to Oaxaca

I was able to lean on my previous experience researching graffiti in 2011 in Mérida, Mexico to build connections in Oaxaca. In preparing for my research in Oaxaca, I reached out to an old friend in Mérida, Yucatán, where I had done my undergraduate honors research on graffiti. The friend was “Bogie,”[3] a seasoned *graffitero* in Mérida that always seemed to know everyone in the graffiti scene. He immediately sent me a Facebook message with names of *graffiteros* in Oaxaca whom I met with in mid-March of 2016 during a week-long exploratory research trip. The first of these was Zepia, of Oaxaca’s *PIC* crew, short for “*pintando influencias callejeras”* (painting street influences). Zepia is a late 20s working class *graffitero* from Oaxaca City who has been painting since his teens. Bogie knew Zepia from painting events in Mérida in 2011, which I actually attended, but never

[3] Pronounced like “Boogie,” as in “Boogie Wonderland.”

met any Oaxacan *graffiteros*. In writing this thesis though, I have realized that I have many photographs of Zepia's graffiti in Mérida, which speaks to the incredible social networks that *graffiteros* across Mexico cultivate. In doing this research, I moved along these same social network lines, building a snowball sample of *graffiteros,* urban artists, and the larger network of connected individuals. Though Zepia was the first *graffitero* that I met, his introduction of Idea, a female *graffitera* was one of the most compelling contacts I made in Oaxaca. Idea was essentially friends with everyone, regardless of the genre in which they operated. She also constantly worked to expand her network.

I worked to maintain relationships with Zepia, Inmpar, and Idea out of a feeling of obligation and humility for their having been so open, frank, welcoming, and hospitable to me and my partner. During my fieldwork, they, and others, did indeed become friends, as well as stewards and companions, or *"compañeros,"* to me.

Interviews, Pseudonyms, and Translations

Because I wanted to pair artists' discursive experiences with my analysis of their images and art, I almost always tape-recorded interviews. In a conference keynote address entitled "Soldiers and Kings: Photoethnographic Exploration of Human Smuggling Across Mexico," Jason De León emphasized that photographic images can bring power to ethnography but that they should be coupled with ethnographic writing (De León 2017). The images alone tell one piece of the story (2017). Throughout my research, I conducted around 60 in-depth and informal interviews with urban artists, *graffiteros*, government workers, protestors, and

scholars. I attended numerous paint sessions, gallery openings, and art expos. The scope of graffiti and urban art took me beyond downtown Oaxaca, including small towns within the Central Oaxaca Valley up to 2 hours from the city, the Pacific Coast, and the Northern Sierra mountains.

My interviews were always conducted with permission and usually tailored to the unique insights that a respondent could provide. For instance, I talked about graffiti history with Zepia but not with politically driven street artists who have never painted graffiti. I also always scheduled interviews in places appropriate to the respondent where they would be comfortable. These were often in downtown Oaxaca's bars and plazas on weekends and weeknights, in art workshops during business hours, etc.

I have translated and transcribed the Spanish-language material that I include in this thesis, at times with assistance from my partner, Xime. In translating, I often aim to write the English quotes to reflect their meaning in Spanish. I have worked professionally as a translator but the quality of my recordings coupled with Oaxacan slang often prove tricky to transcribe. I often leave words or phrases in Spanish when I find it conceptually or theoretically important, then offer translations or definitions in text or footnotes, as other ethnographers in Spanish-speaking field sites have done (Bourgois 2002; De León 2015; Roland 2010a). I have only removed words, phrases, or sentences in quotations to abbreviate rambling and tangents in conversations.

In writing, I employ pseudonyms for government workers, home and property

owners, and artists based on their relevance and context. I often find it necessary to use their art aliases or street names without pseudonyms, because many of them already act as pseudonyms and provide anonymity. For instance, I refer to "Zepia" as simply "Zepia," not by his given name. *Graffiteros* also often do not know one another's given names. While eating tacos after a Sunday afternoon paint session, Zepia and *PIC* crew member, Skort, realized that they did not know one another's given names, despite having painted together for almost a decade. Skort's 11-year-old daughter quipped, giggling, "His mom named him 'Juan,' he named himself, 'Skort,'" to which Skort smiled and nodded in agreement. Per several requests, I do not use photographs that clearly show urban artists' faces (unless the artists approved), and per approval from several urban artists, I use photographs that only show individuals from the back, or at least with faces obscured. My goal is to show urban artists' works without pairing them to their non-art identities, whether in photographs or in name.

During fieldwork, individuals also very rarely asked for anonymity or expressed any desire for it when I brought it up. Only one individual specifically asked that I not use their name. Urban artists that created images with contentious political content frequently brushed off any use of pseudonyms and censorship for their protection, as many of them are known public figures. For many of these individuals, I still find it necessary to use pseudonyms to minimize any unintended impacts or consequences that my work could have.

Visual Methods and Visual Ethnography

During fieldwork, my camera was a constant companion. I typically used it for only still photographs; though during paint sessions and protest marches, I shot video with a small video microphone. This research is situated at the intersection of literatures on visual anthropology and visual culture studies, which make use of photography and film to "transculturally" present culture to the reader. In his article, "Visual Anthropology Is Dead, Long Live Visual Anthropology!" filmmaker and anthropologist Lucien Taylor writes that visual culture(s), "surely cry out for their representation in visual media…there is no earthly reason why this should inhibit written analysis of the same 'visual systems" (1998: 536). Because I study the visual culture of urban expressions of graffiti, street art, etc., I find it important to visually represent this culture, as Taylor argues, through photographs.

Photographic methods in cultural anthropology have gained notoriety through anthropologists like Jason De León (2015) and Philippe Bourgois (2009), but they have also consistently played a compelling role in anthropology throughout its history through anthropologists like Scheper-Hughes (1993), Abu-Lughod (1984), Zora Neale Hurston (1938), Mead and Bateson (1942), Boas (1927), and many others. Similar to David MacDougall's concept of "transcultural cinema," I argue that photography offers the ability to present culture by "acquaintance" (1998), rather than solely presenting it through written description. Ethnographically rendered photographs, similar to MacDougall's transcultural image, can produce a type of non-description, or hyper description that can, in a sense, show culture, instead of simply describe it. Margaret Mead also states in "Visual Anthropology in

a Discipline of Words" (1995 [1976]) that images can show culture and allow viewers to make their own inferences about them.

Creating ethnographic images also requires simultaneous engagement with theory and practice. Filmmaker and anthropologist John Jackson Jr. has argued in "Theorizing Production/Producing Theory…" that image creation in the form of filmmaking is often rejected as academic work because it does not appear to show the rigor that is often argued to define academic work. He argues that in reality, filmmaking (both editing and filming) requires the simultaneous command of theory and practice and often requires as much or more research than a book (2014). Jackson and Deborah Thomas even created a film, *Bad Friday: Rastafari After Coral Gardens* (2011) based on work from Thomas's ethnography, *Exceptional Violence* (2011). I argue that the same is the case of photography. While distinct from filming and filmmaking, photography still requires similar praxis in shooting, as well as in editing and selecting a single photo out of an entire series to adequately represent what the author aims to show.

Entanglements in the Chapters that Follow

Pivoting from Zepia's quote that "not all of us get along," I explore the friction and contestations between urban artists through the connections and entanglements they hold to one another. Urban art and graffiti often sit at what appear to be contrasts and contradictions: almost all large-scale graffiti is painted legally in Oaxaca, collectives protest the government while drawing money from it, and uptown Oaxaca might hold more elaborate graffiti than the working-class

suburbs to which *graffiteros* claim its connection. I connect Maurice Magaña's conceptualization of entanglements in activist social movements in Oaxaca (2017: 12) to reconcile the contrasts and contradictions in Oaxaca's urban art.

In his article, "Spaces of Resistance, Everyday Activism, and Belonging: Youth Reimagining and Reconfiguring the City in Oaxaca, Mexico," Maurice Magaña writes that social movements and activist groups in Oaxaca should be understood as entities of "'entanglement' between the political and cultural" (Magaña 2017: 12). Magaña builds on Alvarez, et al.'s argument that social movements and activist groups are typically "multilayered entanglements of movement" which include a variety of institutions and groups aside from those that are activist and protest centered, such as "universities…the Church, and even the state" (Alvarez, et al. 1998: 15, 16). Magaña and Alvarez, et al. work together to argue that even though these movements focus on changes in political policies, they overlap and entangle with other entities that may be less interested or uninterested in politics (Alvarez, et al. 1998; Magaña 2017).

I use this theorization of entanglements and social movements to inform my own analysis and understanding of urban art and urban artists. It speaks to the complex and often ambivalent connections that urban artists their art hold to things beyond themselves. In Chapter 2, I discuss entanglements as rejected, ignored, or downplayed connections of aesthetics and identity between different urban art genres, including graffiti, *cholo* writing, and street art. I show that *graffiteros* are connected to these latter two genres through various overlaps between aesthetics,

history, and identity. They often reject these as ambivalent connections but cannot fully disentangle themselves from one another. Mulholland similarly argues that *mariachi* music has become a sign and performance of *mexicanidad* (Mexican-ness) and is entangled with Mexican national identity and *macho* male identity (2007: 250, 252). However, some reject this use of *mariachi* to construct Mexican and *macho* identity, instead using it as a site of feminist critique, thus rendering *mariachi* an ambivalent and contested connection to *mexicanidad* (2007: 260, 261). Graffiti similarly pushes against Nevaer's flat labeling of "graffiti" to argue that all sorts of illegal things painted on Oaxaca's walls are not necessarily graffiti. Street artists also push against the definition and practice of graffiti to produce art with sociopolitical critiques.

In Chapter 3, I show that *graffiteros* and the high art of art galleries are entangled with one another, despite the class-based boundaries that gallery members and *graffiteros* try to draw around high (gallery) and low (graffiti) art forms. Some individuals police these boundaries so as to minimize their entanglement and its effects on their art, others relish in their transgression. Building on Alvarez, et al. (1998) and Magaña (2017), I argue that *graffiteros* are entangled with multiple entities that appear to have little to do with graffiti, such as galleries. Most *graffiteros* aim to avoid the influence of high art on their works to maintain graffiti's authentic lower-class and street connections.

In Chapter 4, I examine street art images of the collective, ASARO, as "sites of contestation" to analyze the entanglements between protest, commercialism, and

government influence. I examine the forces behind these images to show that ASARO protests the government largely through their commercialization of revolutionary and protest images and government financial support. ASARO's protest is made possible by its financial entanglements with the government, just as Alvarez, et al. show that activist movements often make use of state resources (1998: 15).

Entanglements support an understanding of the ways multiple types of urban art, as popular culture, become bound with one another. It also speaks to the ways multiple types of urban art connect to hegemonic forces while still distancing themselves from them. Different forms of urban art jockey with one another for position and influence even as they share many connections. Urban artists likewise connect to centers of power against whom they purportedly create their aesthetics, discourses, and identities. Graffiti and street art respectively rebel against high art and the government, but *graffiteros* and street artists often become entangled with these entities of power through their alternative art activities.

CHAPTER 2
Urban Art Genres Entangled as Palimpsest

Introduction

There are multiple kinds of urban art in Oaxaca City and they speak in different ways. This is the story of the articulations of genres of urban art and their overlaps and divergences. Urban art in Oaxaca is the result of decades' worth of aesthetic expressive techniques that have been layered, often literally, on top of one another on walls and urban objects in the form of written, painted, stickered, and pasted ephemera in Mexico and the United States. In Figure 1, a "*bomba,*" or illegal graffiti letter piece, has been painted by Zepia, on top of street art stencils painted by ASARO (*La Asamblea de Artistas Revolucionarias de Oaxaca*/The Assembly of Revolutionary Artists of Oaxaca).[4] Zepia's *bomba* covers ASARO's stencils but the stencil work still shows through.

[4] *Bomba* literally translates to "bomb." "Bombing" is used in some cases as a synonym of painting graffiti (Brighenti 2010; Campos 2013; Chalfant and Silver 1983; Reiss 2008).

Figure 1 *Bomba* by Zepia overlaying stencils by ASARO.

Drawing on Alarcón's analysis of Mexican identity, I argue that urban art is a "palimpsest," which Alarcón define as:

> …a site where texts have been superimposed onto others in an attempt to displace earlier or competing histories. Moreover, this displacement is never completely effective; the submerged texts are often visible, returning to haunt and complicate the dominant text, sometimes even in their very absence or silence (1997: 34).

Alarcón speaks of the fragmentation of Mexican history, but I find the same applies to urban art in Oaxaca, as I have shown and described through Figure 1, above. Urban art pieces in Oaxaca often physically layer over one another, so that the underlying layers are at least partially visible, which Jeff Ferrell and Robert Weide have described as a "palimpsest" (2010: 55). I build on this and argue that the

urban art genres that exist in Oaxaca City today also comprise a conceptual palimpsest, as it exemplifies decades of ephemeral urban art techniques and styles that overlap in influence. Urban art genres overlap conceptually and historically with one another, but their connections and influences continue to show through, just as physical works can overlap and leave their underlying layers visible.

Street Speaking

Mario, a member of the street art collective, *La Mesa Puerca*, explained how urban art is understood by viewers as speech through the medium of the street. [5] *La Mesa Puerca*, who create a multitude of urban art including tags, graffiti characters, murals, silk screened posters, and stickers had invited me to hang out during a silk screen poster printing session after meeting them at a party. During the print session, Mario chatted me up about Oaxaca's urban art. He asked, "Do you know, Zepia?" I responded that he had come to be a close contact and friend during my fieldwork. In an effort to show my literacy of Oaxaca's graffiti, I further said that Zepia was dedicated to old school letter styles and that he had tags (Figure 2) and pieces (Figure 3) all over Oaxaca. Mario smiled and nodded in agreement.

[5] I translate this as, "The Pigsty Table." *La Mesa Puerca* is a collective of three friends that specialize in serigraph screen printing. "*Puerca*" means "dirty," but is very close to the word "*puerco*," which means, "pig." Their stickers, tags, murals, and character pieces frequently play on this and use images of pigs. They're even jokingly called "*los puerquitos*," or "the little pigs," by their friends. "*La mesa*" refers to the table that is used in the serigraph printing process.

Figure 2 Tags Wall - This is a multitude of tags from the uptown La Reforma neighborhood. Another *PIC* crew member, Bekar exhibits tags which are visible on the upper middle right in yellow and purple. He and Zepia have tags painted throughout this neighborhood. Tags frequently accompany one another on walls and doors such as this one.

Figure 3 Zepia's old school piece from a large paint session with some twenty or more *graffiteros*.

"*La calle habla de él. La calle habla de los que se mueven mucho,*" or, "The street speaks of him. The street speaks of those that are active [literally, those that move a lot]." Mario personifies the street as what "speaks" of Zepia, or rather, the street tells Mario that Zepia paints throughout the city, even though the abundance of Zepia's tags and pieces throughout the city are what actually convey this. In "At the Wall: Graffiti Writers, Urban Territoriality, and the Public Domain," Brighenti argues that in graffiti painting, the street acts as a, "visible surface, which becomes a surface of inscription for stratified, crisscrossing, and overlapping traces" (2010: 323). Urban artists pursue street speaking by layering onto the "visible surface" of the street. As they pursue these visible surfaces, their works overlap and stratify on top of one another, which creates physical depictions of palimpsests. These physical overlaps onto visual space likewise reflect the overlaps and stratifications that make up the palimpsest of their genres.

In this chapter, I focus on three genres of urban art: graffiti, *cholo* writing, and street art; and the ways that they speak in Oaxaca City, starting with graffiti. Graffiti consists of the stylized spray-painted (or markered) letters of one's graffiti name. It can be painted as a tag (Figure 2), a *bomba* (Figure 1), a piece (Figure 3), or a character-piece combination, called a "production" (Figure 4). During our first interview, Zepia emphasized the importance that his graffiti crew, *PIC*, places on the street and speaking through it. "We are very steeped in the street…[it's] a

space for expression…Graffiti is a universal language, but one that only *graffiteros* can read.

Figure 4 Section of a wall by TOA crew and others. The blue piece on the right is by Auriest and the character to the left is by Uren. Uren's character is based on an elite bat-god mask from the archaeological site in his hometown of Zaachila, Oaxaca.

It's a language that connects you to other *graffiteros*," he said. Building on Mario's understanding of Zepia's graffiti speech, Zepia shows that *graffiteros* paint their stylized names in the street to speak to other *graffiteros*. In her article, "Voice," Weidman states:

> Studies on the poetics and politics of spoken and sung forms have emphasized vocal practices as creative expressions of social and cultural identity…Related to this is a sense of vocal practice as 'speaking back' to large structures of power…The assumed linking of a voice with an identity or a single person overlooks the fact that speakers may have many different kinds of relationships to their own voices or words, or that a single "voice" may in fact be collectively produced (2015: 236-237).

Weidman refers to speech acts in this article, which I extend to urban art as material and visual speech (2015: 235). *Graffiteros* do not necessarily have one directed entity to whom they agentively "speak back." Instead, their graffiti creates agency around the communal participation in and creation of graffiti aesthetics. Each *graffitero* participates in the collective creation of graffiti language that centers on the proliferation of one's name and the creativity one can use to manipulate it. All of these names comprise the one graffiti genre, and each name reflects an individual identity.

Figure 5 *Sur 13* Old English block letters with the names of *Sur 13* members "Fober" and "Deck."

As graffiti as a language is intended for *graffiteros*, *cholo* writing is likewise intended for *cholos*. Different from graffiti, *cholo* centers on territory, not on

aesthetic creativity. It consists of spray-painted names of street gangs that serve as territory markers (Figure 5). I interviewed a *cholo* who was a member of Zepia's *PIC* crew whom I refer to as, "Cruz." Cruz explained that to be a *cholo* is to protect one's neighborhood as a family. "That's why they make groups, to protect you. When you enter a gang, they convert you into a member of that family, and they all see you as brothers, as *carnales, homies*."[6] *Cholo* street gangs in Oaxaca, according to Cruz, (and many other parts of Mexico) have a number that goes along with their name. The most common one I saw in Oaxaca was "*Sur 13"* (or South 13), which was typically spray painted onto walls.[7] Cruz explained that these paintings mark territory for *cholos*: "As a *cholo*, you realize which neighborhoods you can enter and which you can't, based on the markings on the walls." Graffiti tags are often incorrectly attributed as territory markers, but *cholo* writing literally marks neighborhood territory for *cholos*. If a *cholo* disobeys or transgresses these lines, it can incite conflict. Cruz assured me that violent repercussions based on territory violations usually only impact *cholos* and that I would be safe to walk through a neighborhood with *Sur 13* markings, as I have no *cholo* affiliations. This is not to say that I would be safe in every neighborhood in the city of Oaxaca.

Street art, similar to graffiti, also speaks in the street as a form of agency, yet their political aims differentiate street art from graffiti. Street art is a broad

[6] "*Carnales"* can be translated as "brothers" or "friends."
[7] *Sur 13* is derived from the large *Sureños* (Southerners) gang in Los Angeles, California.

category, but in Oaxaca, it consists mostly of stenciled spray-painted images (Figure 6) and printed graphic images that are adhered with wheat paste (Figure 7).[8]

Figure 6 Dead bird stencil by Lapiztola on solid red background. Lapiztola frequently uses birds in their work as representations of freedom. These likewise represent the many journalists killed in Mexico as an authoritarian assault on critiques of the government and free speech in Mexico.

[8] Wheat paste is a simple mixture of flour or cornstarch and water. It is applied like glue to posters to adhere them to walls and urban objects. It is incredibly effective and resilient.

Figure 7 Linoleum block print wheat paste by ASARO of a *campesino* (peasant farmer) with a poster of Mexican Revolutionary general, Emiliano Zapata (active 1910-1919).

"Juana," a graphic artist who, along with many fellow art school classmates, brought graphic art to the street during Oaxaca's famous 2006 political protests, also emphasized the importance of street speech for street art. As Local 22 (Oaxaca's dissident state branch of the national teachers' union), engaged in a gridlocked violent political protest against the Oaxacan state and Mexican Federal Police officers from June 2006 to December 2006, street art collectives and street artists like Juana emerged as a voice of the protest (Magaña 2013; Norget 2010). Joining in the teachers' rhetoric, they directed much of their critiques to the corrupt government of Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz (ASARO, et al. 2014; Franco Ortiz 2011, 2014; Nevaer 2009). Juana explained, "2006 was seen as this opportunity to show graphic art in the street…to communicate, to show the things that were going on in

the streets [with the protests]. The image was the most direct way to say things." "Alberto," is another politically driven street artist of ASARO. Reflecting on ASARO's mission from 2006 to the present, he summarized, "Our goal has always been to make visible the critique of the government."

Graffiteros, *cholos*, and street artists are all identities, genres, and forms of street speaking, but each of these is anxiously entangled with one another as part of an urban art palimpsest. As I unpack these entanglements, I use graffiti as a theoretical pivot point to move from *cholo*'s conceptual entanglements to those of street art.

Excavating the Entangled Street Scene

Graffiteros in Oaxaca often describe the 1970s and 1980s graffiti scene of New York City's subways, or "old school New York," as the authentic origins of graffiti. During 1970s-1980s multitudes of "mostly poor youth of color" (Dickinson 2008: 32) turned bankrupted New York City's neglected public transportation system into a center of experimentation for graffiti styles that offered youth a space for creativity and sociocultural critique (Dickinson 2008; Iveson 2010; Perry 2004). I emphasize, though, as I later explore in this section, that this is not the only origin story of graffiti; it is the one that the Oaxacan *graffiteros* whom I met value above all others.

The Graffiti Origin Story

Zepia and other *graffiteros* frequently attributed their graffiti to that of New York, specifically by citing the landmark graffiti documentary, *Style Wars* (1983).

During one of our early meetings, Zepia emphasized, "*Style Wars* was the boom of graffiti. Because of this, *Subway Art* is considered the Bible of graffiti, and *Style Wars* the best documentary of graffiti." Henry Chalfant was a photographer who produced *Style Wars* (1983) with director Tony Silver and co-wrote the landmark graffiti photo-history, *Subway Art* (1984) with Martha Cooper.[9] Another *graffitero* and friend of Zepia's, Venok,[10] also echoed the influence of Chalfant's *Style Wars*, saying, "…that's how graffiti started, they were always letters …and the strong [graffiti] movement was in New York. That's where it was cool. Watching the movie, *Style Wars*, you realize that it's more letters and characters." Zepia and Venok trace the origins of graffiti through this film, then reproduce the letter styles and characters from these films as their own. They "mimic" (Bhabha 1994; Newell 2012) the graffiti of this era to show that they themselves are authentic *graffiteros*.

Mimicry is a means by which groups can obtain and embody power of those in "authentic" and assumed positions of power, usually those of colonial or imperial domination (Bhabha 1994; Newell 2012). Homi Bhabha argues that when subjugated peoples access colonial power by mimicking colonizers, they challenge colonizers' claims to power by achieving it through the colonizers' own practices (1994: 88). These groups who mimic represent imperfect and inauthentic copies, and thus reify colonial powers as an unreachable model (1994: 86, 88). This also extends the distance between the colonizers and the colonized (1994: 86, 88).

[9] Through Chalfant's photographic and ethnographic work with old school New York graffiti, he has played a large role in legitimizing graffiti as a respected expressive form (Forman 2004: 2; Gammerdinger 1986; Stewart 1991).
[10] Venok's name is taken from a popular English death metal band, Venom.

Newell softens Bhabha's theorization of mimicry to a more fluid one in his ethnography of Ivoirian men who elevate western fashion in the consumption of their own "faked" versions of popular Western brands like Dockers and Polo (2012). He shows that they do not necessarily challenge or threaten Western power, but instead aim to co-opt aspects of it to appear as modern citizens, albeit "fake" and inauthentic ones themselves (2012). He also problematizes Bhabha's assumption that groups who mimic are 'not quite' copies of their originals, and therefore fake or inauthentic. He argues that Western power and modernity itself is the most notorious fake of all and that faking itself as powerful and modern allowed it to realize colonialism, modernity, and Western supremacy (2012: 230). Authenticity is thus a power struggle in which subaltern groups pursue models of authenticity that they conceive of locally.

As another form of popular culture, I find that definitions of authenticity from studies of music consumption and identity help illuminate the relationship that *graffiteros* have to these models of authenticity.[11] Peterson, in his work on authenticity in country music, defines it as: "being believable relative to a more or less explicit model, and at the same time being original, that is not being an imitation of the model. Thus, what is taken to be authentic does not remain static but is renewed over the years" (Peterson 1997: 220 qtd. in Hess 2005). These *graffiteros* alter the letters they see in *Style Wars* by creating their own letter styles

[11] Definitions of authenticity abound in different topical areas, particularly tourism (MacCannell 1976, 1992; Roland 2013), aesthetics (Korsmeyer 2008; Williams 1977), and museums (Field 2009; Hill 2011; Zimmerman 2010).

based on these originals. For example, Figures 8 and 9 show a *PIC* character-piece production by Zepia and *PIC* member, Skort, that recycles and revises the "Razzberry Lizard" character (Figure 9) and large multicolor 3D block letters (Figure 8).

Figure 8 Razzberry Lizard character by PIC member, Skort.

Figure 9 Letter piece by Zepia, both works are part of one production from Inmpar's home Guelaguetza neighborhood.

Chalfant and Cooper show the same character and similar letter techniques as extremely popular in the subway scene, particularly in the piece by graffiti writer,

Spin, shown in *Subway Art* (1984: 89).[12] In another example, Venok fills his letters with the color schemes of the popular artisanal craft, *alebrijes*, commonly found in Oaxaca City (Figures 10, 11). Skort, Zepia, and Venok reproduce these elements but renew them as their own creations.

Figure 10 Venok's *alebrije* letter piece. It shows similar color schemes as *alebrije* artisanal crafts.

[12] Razzberry Lizard originally comes from cartoonist Vaughn Bodé's underground comics, Cheech Wizard, which were continued by his son, Mark Bodé, following his death. The Bodés work was largely picked up by the old school subway scene in New York (Chalfant and Cooper 1984; Chalfant and Silver 1983).

Figure 11 Group of *alebrije* wooden carved crafts for sale on a street in Oaxaca's tourist district.

In these locally unique renewals of old school New York, *graffiteros* also omit and exclude other genres and aesthetics that have shaped graffiti. On our first meeting, I asked Zepia if his crew painted pieces with political content, as I had come to expect from the protest art I had seen in Oaxaca. "We don't mix political interests with graffiti, because our goals have to do with connecting us with New York…New York is graffiti for us…" he responded. Again, Zepia emphasizes his connection to old school New York, but graffiti in the 1970s and 80s, particularly that displayed in *Style Wars* and *Subway Art*, often held sociopolitical messages that spoke to the difficulties of life in marginalized communities of an economically collapsed New York (Dickinson 2008; Iveson 2010; Perry 2004; Rose 2005). In *Style Wars,* graffiti writer, Skeme, references a piece that he and other writers have painted which bears the message, "All you see is crime in the city" (1983). Subway train letter pieces in the 70s and 80s also often had accompanying messages with

sociopolitical themes like, “The children of tomorrow can’t love the world if we the people of today destroy its beauty before they even see it,” and “How can we destroy and kill ourselves while our killers stand alive and waiting” (Chalfant and Silver 1983). Hip hop lyrics that commonly evoked sociopolitical themes in this era are also featured in *Style Wars*. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s titanic single, “The Message” (1982) is featured in film, both as an improvised a cappella performance by graffiti writers who are fans of the song and its original audio recording (1983). The song’s lyrics evoke the difficulties of life for urban youth in the Bronx and Brooklyn in the late 1970s:

> Broken glass everywhere/People pissin' on the stairs, you know they just don't care./I can't take the smell, can't take the noise./Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice./Rats in the front room, roaches in the back,/Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat./I tried to get away but I couldn't get far/ 'Cause a man with a tow truck repossessed my car./Don’t push me cause I’m close to the edge./I’m trying not to lose my head./It’s like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder how I keep from going under.

Zepia, in particular, frequently cited Chalfant’s works of *Subway Art* and *Style Wars* but chose to not reproduce the socially conscious element of graffiti and hip hop in his own graffiti praxis. One of the founders of Zepia’s *PIC* crew, Ghis, was even deeply involved in political activism and painted graffiti with political content in previous years. Zepia and other *PIC* members, however, focus more on the aesthetics and styles of graffiti itself. This connects it to New York in strictly visual terms and omits specific aspects of its content that were fundamental to its context in New York, which are clearly shown in Chalfant’s texts. Like his own recreation and revision of old school letters, Zepia alters the message and content of his letters

to offer a different construction of graffiti that he layers on top of graffiti's globally conceived palimpsest. Underlying layers of old school New York graffiti shine through the graffiti of Oaxacan *graffiteros*, but they remain fundamentally altered in the Oaxacan context, which erases its socially conscious origins.

Auriest, or "Auri," a seasoned *graffitero* and member of the Toa crew also eclipsed other graffiti influences by emphasizing graffiti's New York origins:

> Graffiti is letters, right?...Let's look back to Taki, to the origins: Taki, letters. Basquiat, even though he was a grand visual artist, in his beginnings, he did letters because he was seeing things in the streets of New York.

Essentially, Auri was correct in his descriptions of graffiti origins, but the reality of these origins is much more broad and complex than he and other *graffiteros* choose to describe. Auri identifies Taki 183, a bike messenger who tagged his nickname, "Taki" along with his street name, "183," along his delivery route in New York City during the 1970s, as the "origin" of letters and graffiti (Stewart 2009). Taki was undoubtedly one of the first taggers to be considered a "graffiti writer," but graffiti writers like Corn Bread and Cool Earl had painted their tags and names all over Philadelphia a decade earlier, in the 1960s (Reiss 2008; Stewart 2009). Hebige even argues that New York street gangs tagged their gang names prior to the existence of graffiti (2004: 226). Regardless, during the late 70s in New York City, "graffiti" grew beyond tagging to become pieces which covered entire train cars and eventually entire trains (Chalfant and Silver 1983; Stewart 2009). Yet, Cool Earl, Corn Bread, and Taki were not the only originators of the graffiti aesthetic.

Other layers within graffiti's palimpsest of letter styles came from any and every popular image material available to youth: movie posters, comic books, cartoons, newspaper comic strips, funk and R&B album covers, etc. (Lewisohn 2008; Reiss 2008; Stewart 2009). Kirchheimer's 1981 documentary, *Stations of the Elevated,* even shows that graffiti drew from New York's widespread advertising culture and acted as a sort of counter or subaltern revision of commercial advertising (1981). Taki deserves the praise that Auri gives him, but I messy this connection between Oaxaca and old school graffiti by arguing that the origins of graffiti letters lie in the multiple layers and precedents that ultimately led to Taki's tag and the creation of detailed letter pieces. Other layers and precedents that are culturally and geographically closer to Oaxaca are also ignored as influences by *graffiteros*.

Cholismo Markers of the *Barrio*

Graffiteros exclude "*cholo,"* or Mexican and Chicano street gang writing and culture from their graffiti narrative to distinguish graffiti as a distinctly different practice. *Cholo* and graffiti comprise, as Alarcón argues of palimpsests, "…a unique structure of competing interwoven narratives" (1997: xvi). Graffiti holds a close relationship to *cholo*, but *graffiteros* are somewhat uneasy about it. Chastanet and Gribble's photo-history, *Cholo Writing,* shows that Chicano and *pachuco* youth (young Chicanos who wore showy "zoot suits" in southern California in the 1940s) painted the names of their street gangs and gang members with shoe polish in "Old English" font in Los Angeles as early as the 1930s (2009). *Cholo* writing in Oaxaca

today compares strongly in aesthetics to its *pachuco* counterparts in 1930s California through the continued use of Old English letters, though *cholos* now use the same spray paint that *graffiteros* use.

Grider shows that this gang-centered writing was painted, as Cruz argued of Oaxacan *cholo* writing and *cholismo*, for one's neighborhood in the context of racial segregation of Latino and Chicano communities in the United States (1975). Grider (1975) and Burciaga (1993) show that in the early seventies along many U.S.-Mexico border states, Chicanos, *pachucos*, and Mexican nationals in the U.S. also wrote stylized versions of their names in public space with the qualifier, "*con safos,"* a street trademark meant to protect the written name from anyone who would deface it (1975; 1993: 6). While I have never seen the phrase anywhere in Mexico, its precedent as a graffiti form contemporaneous with or preceding old school New York graffiti exemplifies another layer of urban art that provided a precedent to Oaxacan graffiti.

Akme and Tokio of the Street Talent crew said that the earliest graffiti in Oaxaca was *cholo*. "It all started in 1994. First there were gangs of *cholos*, then there were two crews that did only tags." Inmpar and Zepia echoed this. Inmpar said that in the early days of graffiti in his neighborhood, "It was lots of *Sur 13* kinds of stuff, there was nothing else…Where I was, there were *cholos*, but they were more like from the *colonia* (neighborhood)…they were like a gang, but also like friends. You hung out with them, but not the ones that were really *cholos*." Zepia also said that there were *cholos* in his neighborhood, and that he and his brother

imitated their paintings. Zepia thus drew on *cholo* writing and subway scene graffiti for inspiration, but now chooses to connect himself to that which he sees as more authentic graffiti. "Real *cholos*," using Inmpar's phrasing, also carry negative connotation because of their gang affiliations, which Cruz was explicit about: "The simple that fact that you are a *cholo*, that you belong to a neighborhood, to a [gang] number [like *Sur 13*], that converts you into a gangster (*pandillero*)." *Graffiteros* tend to disavow any connection between painting and gang activity, because public opinion still envisions and criminalizes graffiti as "vandalism."

Cholos also paint non-*cholo* graffiti letters, specifically in the *PIC* crew. During a conversation with Zepia over a few beers, Zepia explained:

> Here, what *cholos* have involved themselves with is painting graffiti, but they're still like a gang. They have like a crew, at least in my crew, there's a *cholo*, but he paints graffiti...it all comes from the root of California, the illegals, the immigrants of different countries or Latinos in the U.S....It's also very marked in graffiti here in Mexico, because a lot of immigrants that were there became *graffiteros*, but also have that [*cholo*] vibe.

Kroker, the *cholo* that Zepia refers to, is not just a *cholo* that paints in Zepia's crew. He has painted with *PIC* a long time and taught *PIC* member, West, how to employ graffiti techniques of dimension and shading into his pieces. Yet, Kroker's *cholismo* sits somewhat uncomfortably with other *PIC* members. In the same conversation, I kept pressing Zepia about meanings of *cholo* and its place in graffiti. Thinking very little of it, I asked another *PIC* member, Bekar, if he was a *cholo*, to which he shouted and laughed, "NOO!!! No, we're not *cholos*. *Puro graffiti* (pure graffiti, only graffiti), always, nothing more." His loud laughter suggested that I may have struck a nerve. Similarly, at a paint session in Guelaguetza, Zepia and Skort

painted at a wall together and joked with each other about their crew's connections to *cholo*. Referring to West and Kroker, they said, "We've got two *cholos* in the crew now. It has gotten out of control. Their letters are all kinds of *cholo* now." His jab acknowledged the influence of Kroker on West's letters, while also slighting West since he is not a *cholo*, even though Kroker's (Figure 12, piece to the left) and West's graffiti letters (Figure 13), reflect only graffiti aesthetics, not those of *cholo*.

Figure 12 Kroker graffiti piece. These are peces from a paint expo that I attended in Mérdia in 2011. Kroker's piece is on the left, Zepia's is on the right. Though I was present and took this photograph, I didn't meet Zepia or Kroker until 2016, as I referenced in Chapter 1. Note that Kroker's piece bears strong similarity to Zepia's and shows no similarity to the *cholo* writing in Figure 5.

Figure 13 *Bomba* by West from a paint session in Guelaguetza. Notice that it likewise compares to Kroker's piece in Figure 14, rather than the *cholo* writing in Figure 5.

Kroker described this friction and ambivalence as a trend that many Oaxacans hold for *cholos*. He contrasted the racism that *cholos* in California experience in the face of *gringos* with the adversity that *cholos* sometimes feel in Oaxaca. He said:

> here, it's more like the people, the society…based on your appearance, they create the conflict, and there are a lot of people that don't agree with your lifestyle, with the fact that you're tattooed, I don't know, with your way of dressing.[13] From that point, they start to discriminate against you.

In addition to the anxiety that *graffiteros* feel with *cholos* in their graffiti crews, *graffiteros* can also be read as *cholos* and feel this discrimination that Kroker describes. For example, on my last night in Oaxaca in August of 2016, Zepia, Inmpar, Idea, Xime, and I were bar hopping in downtown as a farewell party. We

[13] *Cholos* have an extremely specific and almost ubiquitous form of dress. For *Sur 13 cholos*, this usually consisted of long blue or khaki Dickies brand pants or shorts, oversized white or blue t-shirts, sneakers, tall white socks, flat bill baseball caps, and plaid patterned shirts. I further address this later in this section.

stopped at a bar called Tattoo where we had been on many occasions, but the door woman would not let Zepia in. "The owner doesn't like you, I'm sorry, you can't come in," she said flatly. Zepia was floored. "I don't even know who he is. I've never met him!" he said. "I'm sorry, but he says that you can't come in because you and he don't get along," she repeated. "Nah, it's because of how I'm dressed. They think I'm a *cholo*. Let's get out of here," Zepia said, ending the interaction and leaving me feeling disturbed at the bar's refusal of him. Zepia was wearing a flat bill baseball cap of the local Oaxaca baseball team, jeans, and a flannel shirt, which somewhat paralleled the typical dress of *cholos*: flannel shirts, baggy pants or shorts, and occasionally baseball caps. Similar to how *pachucos* and Chicano youth of the 1930s who dressed in flamboyant "zoot suits" were denied access to spaces in California based on their dress, *cholos* today can face similar discrimination because of Oaxacans' assumption of their delinquency (Kelly 2004). This moment explains how Zepia, a *graffitero*, was read as a *cholo*, thus turning the ambivalence that *graffiteros* feel towards *cholos* back upon a *graffitero*. Despite their attempts to distance themselves from *cholos* and *cholismo*, *graffiteros* cannot fully untangle themselves from the association, which leads them to be mistaken for/interpreted as *cholos* at times.

Political Protest and the Problem of Profit

If *cholo* comprises an older foundational layer of graffiti in the urban art palimpsest, street art represents a newer one. Discussions of "evolution" abound in

Oaxacan urban art discourses, and street art is described by some as the next "evolution" of graffiti. Zepia and I discussed this one evening:

> Zepia – A lot of people that were *graffiteros* become street artists, and now they're in collectives.
> Lammons – Sometimes, people call that an evolution.
> Zepia – Right.
> Lammons – I was thinking of it like a type of evolution.
> Zepia – Yeah, I think so. Or, well, for them, [street artists], at least. For me, no…I evolve in the quality of my paintings, my techniques, more colors."

Graffitero, Kibe, who exclusively painted illegal *bombas* said, "Graffiti was born as a letter…[but] they have started adapting it as street art, and with all this, sometimes one gets confused if it's art or graffiti or vandalism." *Graffiteros* at least recognize street art as a genre and movement that comes chronologically after graffiti, but certain *graffiteros*, like Kibe and Zepia still resist its connections to graffiti. Many *graffiteros* in Oaxaca, though, have become street artists. They often transitioned from *graffiteros* to street art through political activism during the 2006 protests.

Yescka, a founder of the political street art collective, ASARO, turned to street art from graffiti as a means of protest. I asked him to explain the differences between street art and graffiti in Oaxaca. He responded:

> …if you don't have a political or social consciousness…you're never going to support society, nor the political questionings…a *graffitero* is the same…he says, '…ah, I don't know what's going on with all that. I don't give a shit [about this protest], I'm going to paint.'…It happened the same way with me…I said, 'I don't give a shit, I'm going to paint…ah well there's no cops right now because the protest is going by, I'm going to paint *bombas* and throw up my tag…' The [2006] conflict happened, and I got involved, and I realized what I was doing…when we started to see the strength that art has in communicating…you realize that it's not just art for the sake of art.

Graffiteros like Yescka turned to the aesthetics of street art because its use of familiar images and legible messages helped them to inspire political protest and activism. During this turn, Yescka began to see Oaxacan graffiti as an insular practice that ignores the sociopolitical context in which it resides. Yankel, another *graffitero* turned street artist and member of the sociopolitical street art collective, *Lapiztola,* also argued for urban art's ability to use the street as a medium to speak to the public and raise awareness:

> "[Graffiti] is made for the *graffiteros*. Any average person, or like an elderly woman is not going to understand a tag…That's why I stopped painting graffiti. Even though a lot of people see it, they don't understand it… They don't identify with it… I really respect them, all [*graffiteros*], but I think it's stagnant…They don't let it evolve or advance more…the technique has improved, and that's about it…
> [The protests] took the whole city in a period of six months and that's when Lapiztola came up as a necessity to express ourselves, to manifest what one felt in that moment. The feeling is the empathy with the movement and support through the image. This was principally that which brought us to do something...with the stencil, people see it, they identify it, and they understand it.

In contrast to graffiti and *cholo* which look to models born in the U.S. like the New York subway scene, street art collectives look to Oaxaca's 2006 protests for their origins. Instead of "hidden transcripts," which speak back to power "under cover" (Scott 1990 qtd. in Ho 2000: 8) to create "collective" resistance to domination (Gal 1995 qtd. in Lamotte 2014), Lapiztola and ASARO create legible works for the general public in full view of the street (ex. Figure 14).

Figure 14 Megamarch stencils by ASARO members. During a May 2016 megamarch of some 30,000 teachers' union members, students, parents, and community supporters, ASARO members painted these stencils in support of the teachers' movment. The far left stencil shows a *campesino* (peasant farmer) with a machete, a common field working tool that has been used as a symbol of resistance and rebellion. The middle stencil's message translates to "don't give up."

This comprises a conceptual contrast with graffiti, which again, creates art for *graffiteros* in language that only *graffiteros* can understand. Stencils allow politically and publicly motivated street artists to create evocative imagery that speaks to political critique. The 2006 protests were a highly visible conflict in which Mexican Federal Police were firing upon protestors armed with improvised weapons in the middle of downtown Oaxaca, a major international tourist destination and UNESCO World Heritage Site (Magaña 2013, 2010). Because these protests were far from hidden or secret, street artists were enabled to cultivate collective protest through visual and public means.

Yankel explains that Lapiztola chose to use stencils in their work because of

their ability to resist government containment of dissident voices:

> A principle of graphic art is reproduction. That ease of being able to reproduce the images, that's what brought us to it…When you were painting in the street, in a protest march…there were those anti-graffiti squads [that would erase or cover what you painted]…but if you grabbed that same stencil and you painted it ten times in different places, nobody could take it down; then because of that…the power to work in reproduction, that was what brought us to do stencils...

The ability to exponentially repeat images along protest routes allowed street artists in 2006 and 2016 to resist containment and censorship. Benjamin famously argued that mechanical reproduction of a work of art reduces the work's "auratic cult value," or the extent to which viewers consume the work as a singular and sacred object (1968). For instance, this means that copies of Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* would degrade the value and significance of the original (1968). Lapiztola and ASARO's repeated artistic reproductions, however, offer critique to Benjamin by drawing more on the pop art traditions of Andy Warhol.

Strinati discusses Warhol's reproduction of *Mona Lisa,* which, in an interesting connection to Benjamin, Warhol names, *Thirty are better than One,* in reference to his silk screen printing of famous cultural figures (2004: 214). Through reproduction, Warhol's works like *Thirty are better than One* and *Campbell's Soup Can* call attention to the power that images hold as brands and commodities (Jameson 1999: 9; Kitnick 2007). The power of Lapiztola's and ASARO's images likewise use Warhol-like reproduction to bring messages of critique to a broad public (Figure 15).

Figure 15 Lapiztola painting the bird stencil shown in Figure 6. The bird is comprised of several square stencil sections which are sprayed onto the wall in pieces.

Their use of stencils in reproduction prolongs the life of their messages and expands them to a wider audience in the face of "anti-graffiti squads" who paint over their works. As almost identical copies, proliferation allows a single stencil to reach a wider audience than it otherwise would, allowing a stencil to take on a more powerful impact. The "original" in this case, be it the first stencil to painted, or the card stock stencil itself, becomes slightly irrelevant. The most important stencil is the one that a street passerby sees, and if there are thirty copies, instead of one, it is much more likely that the stencil will be seen. Stencils exploit branding practices and show that "Thirty [stencils] are better than One." Rather than consistently weakening their auratic values, they use reproduction to reach a wider audience, and their reproduction makes consumers of (political) critique instead of consumers of conventional advertisements.

Despite their political orientation, *graffiteros* often critique street artists for

their involvement in commercial activity. Inmpar said of street art:

> It's not real real graffiti. It's a stencil…No question. They're not *graffiteros*. They sell that stuff. The people buy it. It costs a lot to sell your stuff. A *graffitero* wouldn't do it…It costs the *graffiteros* who sell their stuff a lot to sell it…Thanks to 2006 and graffiti, they started to paint political stuff. There's a revolution that you sell. What does somebody sell? What somebody buys. In this plaza they sell sandals. It's the same…

Referencing the protests of 2006, he argues that most collectives opportunistically sell revolution instead of waging it. Collectives like Lapiztola and ASARO indeed have stores that sell their stencils on t-shirts, handbags, and posters (Figure 16).

Figure 16 A Lapiztola T-shirt. Lapiztola created a stencil of a child in traditional dress with a quotation by a famous Oaxacan activist, Bety Cariño, killed because of her activist work. They painted the stencil in downtown Oaxaca, but it was later painted over by the city government for ambiguous reasons. It continues to appear on t-shirts sold in Lapiztola's shop.

In addition, the shops of some collectives, particularly ASARO's, are found in Oaxaca's historic center and cater mostly to Western tourists. Inmpar's position can be interpreted in the vein of Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of "the culture industry," in which they argue that culture and entertainment have fused into one and that art satisfies the "ideal" of amusement, rather than artistic value (2002: 96,

114, 115). Horkheimer and Adorno argue that because such works are made for consumption, they are correspondingly "empty" and only "stereotype" what they claim to adapt or represent (2002: 96, 114, 115). In addition to ASARO's apparent "sale of revolution," their street images market consumption for their shop, in addition to waging protest. In 2016, ASARO painted a series of large stencils, many of which had accompanying un-stylized and legible tags, unusual for stencil works (Franco Ortiz 2011). While this does make ASARO's name famous to passersby in the streets of Oaxaca, it also took advantage of more graffiti-centered tactics to market the ASARO brand so that passersby could be more interested in visiting their nearby shop. This example particularly connects Inmpar's critique to Horkheimer and Adorno when they argue that the culture industry, "dresses works of art like political slogans and forces them upon a resistant public at reduced prices; they are as accessible for public enjoyment as a park" (1997: 160). ASARO sells the art they create for political purposes and creates political art to help sell their goods.

However, Yescka responded to and problematized this critique, saying:

> …there's conflict also between *graffiteros* and the new, like, street artists… They say… "No, you sell art," and you say, "Yeah, because I'm not an architect." It's like if I were to ask you, 'Why do you make houses?' Because there's that fight, seriously. So they come to me and say, 'Nah, but you sold out,' and you say, 'Why did I sell out? I dedicated myself to only this. I don't do anything else.'…it's a way to survive right?

Yescka defends himself on the grounds that selling his art at his gallery-studio allows him to make a living through a skill he has spent most of his life developing. Without naming him, he responds to Akme, an architect and the leader of the Street

Talent graffiti crew. Yescka problematizes the assumption that *graffiteros* should not sell their work and that street artists are corrupted in selling theirs. He suggests that Akme would likely not have to be an architect if he could make a living from graffiti. Also, Yescka importantly shows that he has never had the desire, skills, nor means to pursue a career other than art and street art. In addition, two of Lapiztola's members, Beto and Rosario, live solely from the collective's sale of goods, pieces, and commissions. Moreover, whereas Horkheimer and Adorno focus on entertainment corporations (2002), most street artists work and sell things as part of independent collectives.

Despite these kinds of critiques directed at street art, graffiti also has a history with commercialism. Lombard shows that, like Yescka and Yankel, graffiti writers in New York in the 1980s came to careers in art beginning with graffiti as a diversionary activity (2013a: 95). She finds that famous crews like Tats Cru, featured as graffiti writers in *Subway Art*, found careers that created advertisements with graffiti aesthetics, in which they were "able to profit while 'representing' the culture" (2013a: 95). Tricia Rose adds:

> It is a common misperception among hip hop artists [including graffiti writers] and cultural critics that during the early days, hip hop was motivated by pleasure rather than profit, as if the two were incompatible…The problem was not that they were uniformly uninterested in profit, rather, many of the earliest practitioners were unaware that they could profit from their pleasure. Once this link was made, hip hop artists began marketing themselves wholeheartedly (2005: 411).

Graffiteros critique Yescka, ASARO, and Lapiztola for their commercial involvements, but Rose and Lombard reveal that commercialism is part of the

authentic origin that many *graffiteros* connect themselves to. They also emphasize that commercialism can offer positive opportunities for *graffiteros* and street artists alike. *Graffiteros* have found that they can participate in making the street talk while profiting economically from it but have chosen the genre of street art to do so. It seems that *graffiteros*' attachment to an idealized old school that was un-motivated by politics or profit prevents them from entering into the commercial sphere.

Conclusion

I now return to the *bomba* with which I began (Figure 1). Just as Zepia's *bomba* is layered over the ASARO stencils, the genre of street art is layered over that of graffiti, with *cholo* woven into graffiti. Each of these genres offers distinct means of street speaking: graffiti creates a language of creative styles and expressions that connects participants through an alternative creative language group; *cholo* writing proudly marks neighborhood boundaries and claims territories from rival gangs; and street art calls Oaxacans to protest. *Graffiteros* usually shun connections to *cholos*, but *cholo* writing was typically the genre that motivated them to first paint graffiti. *Graffiteros* also see street artists as politically opportunistic sell-outs, though such street artists seem to have mastered a balance between speaking through the street with creative work and entrepreneurship in a way that replicates many early New York graffiti visionaries. Graffiti, *cholo*, and urban art overlap as layers in a palimpsest, with their visible connections revealing the impossibility of one genre's ability to eclipse the others.

In addition to these aesthetic, historical, and political entanglements, graffiti and street art encounter one another in contexts of class, status, and neighborhoods. While critiquing collectives for their commercial activities, Inmpar asked, "How do you sell something to the people (*pueblo)* if you are not one of the people (*pueblo*), or rather something that you haven't lived?" Beyond the critique of commercialization, Inmpar claims that the collectives are not part of the "*pueblo*" or "the people" because of the art they create and correspondingly, the audiences to whom they speak. In the following chapter, I discuss the ways in which different *graffiteros* may both be from the same working-class neighborhoods but speak through different streets to distinctly classed audiences.

CHAPTER 3
The Boundaries and Transgressions of Art of the Street and Art of the Elite

Introduction

While the previous chapter focused on the relationships between the three primary players in "making the streets speak" in Oaxaca – *graffiteros*, *colectivos*, and *cholos* – in this chapter, I consider the art of the street in contrast to the art of the elite. Specifically, I attend to how boundaries are maintained between graffiti and gallery art, and how they are penetrated. Whether it is individuals from the graffiti world circulating in gallery spaces, questions of commoditization, or differentiating between the kinds of art that "belongs to" the elite space of the city center and the surrounding working-class neighborhoods, there are informal rules that aim to keep the elite and the street separate. But, as is so frequently the case, rules are made to be broken.

Rules and Genre Policing – Separating Amidst Overlaps

"Graffiti is not art." "Art is what they sell in galleries." "Art is made to be sold." Almost all *graffiteros* that I met in Oaxaca agreed with or repeated these refrains as rules. These refrains critique elite art as something identifiable only by its designation as a bought-and-sold commodity whose aesthetic and expressive value is apparently absent. For *graffiteros* that repeat these refrains, like Kibe and

Inmpar, (elite) art is what Marx defined as a fetishized commodity, in that its price is only derived from its social value, not its functionality or 'use-value,' (Marx, Tucker qtd. in Roland 2010b: 4). Graffiti, by comparison, is not sold, and thus holds social value without becoming a commodity. The point at which graffiti is sold or commodified, it becomes "art" and ceases to be graffiti, at least according to the *graffiteros* reciting these refrains.

Kibe said, "I don't know an artist that does art only for their love of it. That's the reason I do graffiti [for the love of it] … graffiti is free." *Graffiteros* like Kibe often argue that they paint graffiti completely devoid of commercial interests. In addition, this speaks to common fears in popular culture that commercial influence will produce a "watered down," pop, or gentrified elite version of graffiti that does not live up to its street equivalent (Lombard 2013a; Martínez 2001; Perry 2004: 191; Rose 2005). However, Kara-Jane Lombard, in her study on the commercialization of New York subway graffiti from the 1970s-90s, has argued

> [Commercial] Incorporation is not simply a case of gentrification, corruption, or exploitation…Although commercial incorporation can change the graffiti aesthetic and exploit it, increasingly the commercialization of graffiti is a collaborative process in which graffiti writers are involved in negotiating how the final piece will look (2013a: 102).

Tricia Rose has also shown that the progenitors of hip hop and graffiti in New York immediately turned to commercializing their work when they realized that they could be financially compensated for their creative activities (2005: 411).[14] Inmpar

[14] Other scholars of popular culture in music, art, tourism, and dance have also advocated for understanding commercialization as an agentive means of achieving economic mobility (Ho 2000; Perry 2004; Roland 2010a, 2010b, 2010c; Thomas 2006; Ulysse 1999).

and Kibe, however, resist the commercialization of graffiti that they see in gallery art to set graffiti apart as its own independent mode of expression. They are graffiti purists who do not want to break their rules so as to keep graffiti "free." This means, however, that Kibe and Inmpar have to turn to other livelihoods that still allow them to pursue graffiti. For Inmpar, this is actually done by working in a gallery.

Consequently, Inmpar must navigate this rule of "graffiti is not art/art is what they sell in galleries," as he holds a double positionality of *graffitero* and gallery/workshop assistant. Inmpar helps create paintings and sculptures that typically depict animals in the workshop of Oaxacan artist, Ixrael Montes. The Ixrael Montes Gallery sells works in *el centro*, where Inmpar also helps by hanging art. Interestingly, he said that his work in the gallery "sustains his creativity," but maintained that graffiti was "different" and separate from gallery art. Though he had a foot in both worlds, he policed the boundary between them to keep each one separate from the other. Inmpar took me to see galleries during my initial research, but he never seemed to show much interest in the art. I often pointed out different oil paint, sculpture, and watercolor works in search of an overlapping influence with graffiti. He sometimes explained the process involved in making a work but was frequently dismissive and continually distinguished gallery works from graffiti. Referring to a painting on one occasion, he said "Those lines [similar to those in Figure 17] in that one, maybe, maybe, but no, not really." Inmpar asserted that in graffiti, "The lines are very free, with lots of color [see Figure 18]. In a painting, you

can correct things, but not in graffiti." While some minor aesthetic overlap could and likely does exist between graffiti and high art, Inmpar never expressed interest in acknowledging such a connection.

Figure 17 Abstract art piece from a gallery in Oaxaca's *el centro*.

Figure 18 Inmpar's piece from an April 2016 expo in Oaxaca, organized by the Street Talent crew in an ex-plywood factory. Note Inmpar's use of lines and the lines in Figure 17. Inmpar identified lines as a potential connection between high art and his graffiti, perhaps because lines factor strongly into his graffiti.

Inmpar drew a geographical boundary between graffiti and gallery art that correlated each aesthetic to place- and class-based identities. Over drinks one night, he said:

> They [the galleries and urban art collectives] aren't in the *colonias*. It's more in the avenues where people see them…they don't go [and paint] in their *colonias*…You don't find people making murals from the images in the *colonias*, but you do find murals here in downtown…that's what they should do in the galleries — paint things from the *colonias*.

The *colonia* or the "*barrio*" – working class neighborhoods on the outskirts of the city center – is often treated as the primary space of graffiti practice in Oaxaca. It is the place where most *graffiteros* first see and become interested in graffiti. It is where Inmpar, Zepia, and others learned how to paint graffiti. Inmpar's comments here call attention his own positionality as a resident of *colonia* Guelaguetza and an

art gallery/workshop assistant. He critiques galleries for their omission of *colonia*-related content and how that ignores Oaxaca's lower- and working-classes. Nonetheless, Inmpar does not disturb this dynamic himself. As a gallery assistant, Inmpar is likely unable to incorporate spray paint into his gallery work, and as a *graffitero*, he is likely interested in doing so. In his job, he must reify art of the elite and serve upper-class "tastes," even though he finds critiques for these tastes (Bourdieu 1984). Bourdieu theorizes "taste" as the preferred commodities and practices that elites cultivate through upper-class cultural capital, which then filter down to lower-classes as they strive to raise their status (Bourdieu 1984). Inmpar plays by the rules of both gallery art and graffiti in order to maintain his existence in both worlds.

Masculine Impositions and *Colonia* Policing

Graffitero is a place- and class-based identity articulated through masculine impositions on and connections to *colonias* and *barrios*. *Graffiteros* are steeped in assertions of masculine pride for one's *colonia* and the need to defend it. This replicates connections graffiti holds to *cholo* culture as discussed in Chapter 2 (Franco Ortiz 2011; Hernández Sánchez 2008; Lombard 2013b). Zepia said that he prefers to use graffiti to "fill the *barrios*," instead of painting large mural-like public works in *el centro*, let alone gallery works. Likewise, Akme of the Street Talent crew asserted "…all the *banda* [working class youth] that we have is from all the *colonias*…purely *banda* from different places [around the city]." Akme operates

with an entirely different crew of *graffiteros*, but the connection to *colonias* remains their working-class roots (Magaña 2017: 18).

Studies of *cholo* culture and hip hop have drawn connections between *cholos'* and *pachucos'* (zoot suiters) desires to protect or defend their neighborhoods as havens of Chicano, Latino, and Mexican culture under threat from the powerful white communities from which they were excluded (Farland 2012; Franco Ortiz 2011; Goldman 1997; Hernández Sánchez 2008; Kelly 2004). These *graffiteros* perpetuate aspects of this through the emphasis they put on learning graffiti in *colonias,* intentionally painting in *colonias* or *barrios*, and identifying themselves as *banda* or *colonia* residents. They may leave behind aspects of "patriarchal masculinity," like physical street violence and dominating the *colonia* by claiming territory—traits which Lombard has argued are commonly associated with graffiti and hegemonic masculinity (2013b: 179, 182) —but they continue it in the form of metaphorical violence by tagging and "bombing" the neighborhoods in which they paint (Lombard 2013b: 183).[15] Their graffiti, whether as illegal *bombas* and tags or as legally petitioned pieces, are (typically) impositions of *graffiteros'* names onto the walls of Oaxaca's neighborhoods (Lombard 2013b). "Filling" the walls of *colonias* and *barrios* with their tags is a way these young (mostly) men indicate their patriarchal ownership of these spaces (Zolov 1999).

[15] This is not to say that women do not participate in graffiti. They indeed do; However, the practice in Oaxaca remains male-dominated, despite the contributions of *graffiteras* like Idea. Women have also consistently held a presence in urban art since Lady Pink (and likely before), a female 1970s New York subway writer who is still active today (Ensminger 2011; Dickinson 2008; Chalfant and Cooper 1984).

Nonetheless, graffiti and urban art find support in Oaxaca that cuts across class and neighborhood lines. The upper-class Xochimilco neighborhood in *el centro* exhibits vibrant pieces and murals painted on peoples' houses. Elite uptown Oaxaca, referred to as *La Reforma,* also showcases an abundance of tags, pieces, and murals. In *el centro* proper, that is the historic and tourist center, tags and *bombas* abound, though there are few pieces.[16] Inmpar's own *colonia* Guelaguetza also houses many pieces by *PIC* and other *graffiteros*. Despite the abundance of graffiti and urban art in these areas, property owners and neighbors hold varied attitudes toward it.

Even though *graffiteros* describe *colonias* to be centers for their art of "the street," people in all types of neighborhoods across Oaxaca police graffiti. I suggest the "policing" of graffiti by property owners is a scaled-down, individualized version of the state's longstanding relationship to graffiti. In the late 1970s and early 1980s in New York City, the government of Mayor Ed Koch and the MTA (Mass Transit Administration) responded in force to graffiti as a form of urban decay, crime, and blight (Dickinson 2008; Iveson 2010; Lombard 2012). These interpretations of graffiti usually centered around Kelling and Wilson's "broken window" premise, or the belief that one broken window leads to more broken windows, or more forms of

[16] In Chapter 2, I provide a brief taxonomy of graffiti's expressive categories: tags, *bombas*, pieces, characters, and productions. Tags are small stylized names that are painted illegally in 2-6 seconds. *Bombas* are larger stylized names that are also painted illegally but take about fifteen minutes to paint. They usually consist of bubble letters and two different colors. Pieces are large detailed and stylized names that can take between four and twenty-four hours to paint. They are usually painted legally. Characters are figures that usually accompany pieces and can take any number of forms. They are also usually painted legally. Productions are large combinations of pieces and characters that can take up entire walls and are usually painted by an assortment of *graffiteros*.

crime and urban decay (Dickinson 2008; Iveson 2010; Kelling and Wilson 1982; Lombard 2012).[17] "Policing" graffiti in these circumstances for Koch and later, Mayor Giuliani in the 1990s, consisted of a "war on graffiti" (Dickinson 2008; Iveson 2010), which they practiced by consistently erasing graffiti, assigning prison time for graffiti writers, instituting 24-hour train yard security with patrol dogs, building barbed and razor wire fences around train yards, etc. (Dickinson 2008; Iveson 2010; Lombard 2012). These forms of policing graffiti center on governmental and institutional attempts to limit, restrict, and erase graffiti, particularly by publicly denouncing it as social and urban pathogens (which also allowed such leaders to ignore broader issues of poverty, infrastructure, and social policy [Dickinson 2008: 37]). Oaxacan property owners police graffiti by limiting, restricting, and shaping it based on similar anxieties of urban blight and decay.

A few square blocks of the meticulously maintained colonial Xochimilco neighborhood in *el centro* exhibited some incredible urban artworks that could be described as graffiti, street art, and even a mix of the two. I asked an elderly woman's opinion about the enormous graffiti production on the side of her house (Figures 19, 20, 21).

[17] Similar responses have been studied in other areas, particularly Denver in the 1980s and 90s (Ferrell 1996).

Figure 19 First piece in the production on the Xochimlico homeowner's house.

Figure 20 Second piece in the production on the Xochimlico homeowner's house

Figure 21 Third piece in the production on the Xochimlico homeowner's house, a *chapulín* character.

She responded "I don't know what those things are, nor do I understand what they painted!" She said that *graffiteros* had asked permission to paint, as is common while painting any detailed piece in Oaxaca. She gave permission, but the *graffiteros* did not discuss the content of their painting. She left for the afternoon and came back to find the letter piece completed and the *graffiteros* absent. When I asked if she at least liked how it looked, she simply said that she had left the paintings untouched to prevent anyone from coming back and painting again. *Graffiteros* almost always ask permission to paint large works, but there is often no collaboration between the property owner and the *graffitero.* For this homeowner, the works were illegible and opaque expressions that conflicted with her expectations of what someone would paint on a house. Perhaps because, as Lombard stated, "…the process of commercialization is a collaborative process"

(2013a: 96), some *graffiteros* simply have no interest in collaboration with a gallery, homeowner, or otherwise. Many *graffiteros* simply want to paint their letters with as few restrictions as possible.

Neighboring this house was an example of *graffiteros* who were willing to collaborate with the homeowner and thus allowed their works to be shaped by her input. She gave permission to a group of artists when they solicited it, but she also discussed the themes and content of the works before they began painting (Figure 22).

Figure 22 A mural piece with skeletal figures by Antec on the opposite neighbor's house. The character on the right shows a decorated skull found in Tomb 7 at Monte Albán. The caption reads, "Life begins where reality ends 'God never dies' Oaxaca."

She said that her house had been painted many times, asserting, "I always ask them to do something cultural, not something *asqueroso* (disgusting)." I pointed to

a nearby tag to understand what she qualified as "disgusting," and she confirmed that yes, she was referring to tags and the like. She reiterated that she offered her wall when painters asked but simply provided the stipulation that they paint something "cultural" and not "ugly." Indicating the letter pieces on the elderly woman's house she said, "That, I don't love it. I would want them to paint something cultural. I would've been fine with that grasshopper, that *chapulín."*[18] She further elaborated that in the past, she has painted over things that people asked to paint that she disapproved of. She distinguished between favorable and unfavorable types of urban art, and she implicated graffiti in general as "disgusting" and "ugly" even though she never used the term "graffiti." Tags and letters apparently challenged this woman's norms of urban cleanliness and order (Dickinson 2008; Ferrell 2010; Iveson 2010; Lombard 2012). She conceded to letting the *graffiteros* paint her house, but consistently "policed" its content by setting limits on what people could and could not paint.

Even when graffiti was associated with a type of urban renewal, it encountered resistance from neighbors. In early June 2016, I attended a large paint session at Oaxaca's former railroad depot, organized by the *Zoociedad* Collective.[19]

[18] Red grasshoppers or "*chapulínes"* are a marker of indigenous past and present in Oaxaca and Mexico. In Mexico City, the *Palacio Chapultepec,* or Grasshopper Palace, was home to Mesoamerican Aztec kings, named after the abundance of red grasshoppers on the hill. One of Mexico's most famous TV stars was a superhero named, *El Chapulín Colorado*, or the Red Grasshopper. In Oaxaca, roasted *chapulínes* have been commonly consumed since the days of ancient Mesoamerica and can be bought throughout the city.

[19] Zoociedad is a portmanteau of the words, "zoo," referring to animals, per its Greek root; and "*sociedad,"* or "society." Their concept is to paint animals and animal figures on the walls of society. Mexa paints graffiti characters, but Pako has branched out into various forms of artistic practice, including graphic art, photography, and digital arts.

This rare collaboration of genres included artist, Pako and *graffitero,* Mexa. For some decades, the railroad depot has been defunct, and in the last 8 years, a small group of *graffiteros* and urban artists have cleaned it up and turned it into a lush urban art space, much like the subway train graffiti writers in the 1970s and 80s improved the appearance of the dilapidated New York subways (Lombard 2012; Miller 2002). Many of the derelict cars have been painted with murals, pieces, and installations (Figure 23), and the railroad office now acts as a graphic art studio for Pako. Since Pako and his companions—Mexa, Dreka, and Tokio—have been involved in the railroad space, they have tried to invest in the neighborhood that lies on its southern side, which Pako and Mexa frequently described as "*pesado*" (intense).

Figure 23 One of several decorated and painted trains at the former train depot.

Mexa said that one day, a man with a slit and bleeding throat walked up to the tracks that divide the park in half and died despite their calling the police. Different branches of the government have since gotten involved to cut back the immense vegetation, build a playground, organize cultural and art events in old train cars, build a new museum, and renovate and reopen the failing railroad museum.

Building on this, Paco and Mexa organized this painting day to paint the façades of the houses that bordered the southern part of the railroad, almost all of which were built out of laminate sheeting and corrugated tin. An elderly woman was one of many pedestrians that walked through the park that day. She was accompanied by a younger woman and stopped to comment, saying that the paintings they were creating were very nice and helpful to the community. Yet, shortly after this, the homeowner of the house upon which Mega, Dreka's wife, was painting, emerged and told her that he disliked the image and she had to immediately stop painting (Figure 24). Mega was painting a woman's face instead of conventional graffiti letters, yet, the homeowner still read it as something objectionable, perhaps "ugly." Despite the fact that the organizers had asked permission of the homeowners and many believing that urban art had improved the area, the piece was now effectively illegal.

Figure 24 The incomplete piece by Mega on the side of a house in the former trainyard.

At a paint session in the nearby suburb of San Jacinto Amilpas, I further understood how divided support for graffiti can be. Ronko, a *graffitero*, organized a paint session for a Sunday afternoon on the wall of a cinderblock factory in July 2016. Ronko assured everyone that he had gotten permission for some seven *graffiteros* and *graffiteras* to paint the wall, but two hours into the session, a neighbor who knew the owner of the factory came by and announced that Ronko had not secured that permission. After he called the police, they told us to stop painting.[20] At this moment, a middle-aged female neighbor walked by and said, "I live right around the corner. Come over, you can paint on my house." Despite her offer, no one accepted, as losing the wall where they had been painting for almost

[20] This is the same episode I recount in Chapter 1, in which I was asked for my passport.

two hours had proved too disheartening for everyone. The first neighbor and the police found the act of painting to be illegal in the absence of the correct permission and ordered Ronko to erase it all. The second neighbor, however, offered her house apparently liking their work.

Some *colonia* residents even try to limit and restrict graffiti with similar tactics by using visual street signage akin to graffiti itself. *Colonia* Guelaguetza housed one of the most elaborate anti-graffiti messages that I found in Oaxaca. It reads (in translation), "Neighbors watching vigilantly. We are watching you, rat! Don't risk it. If we catch you, we're going to beat you up! *Graffitero*, we have you in our sights. Avoid problems. Proceed with caution. Watch your speed!" (Figure 25).

Figure 25 Graffiti prevention message on a building in Guelaguetza's neighborhood.

Similar to the neighbor who told Mega to stop painting during the railroad park paint session, this neighbor appears to be staking a claim about as to what sort of painting and individuals are allowed in their neighborhood. In addition to contesting *graffiteros*' symbolic possession of the street, here we see a non-*graffitero* attempt to wage war on graffiti, paralleling the graffiti war of NYC Mayor Ed Koch. The message is also painted beside a *cholo*-like caricature of a *graffitero*. The caricature embodies assumptions that compound stereotypes about graffiti and *cholo*. The caricature appears to be a violent (knife and broken bottle) patriarchal defender of his "*barrio*" (tattoo on his chest). This links *graffiteros* and *cholos* to the *barrio* which they both aim to support and celebrate. Despite the presence of legally painted pieces throughout Guelaguetza, the impression is that those who paint graffiti are seen by this homeowner as violent delinquents who perpetuate urban blight. Even though *graffiteros* and *cholos* believe they are articulating their pro-*barrio* identities, they are still flattened into one stereotypical image of delinquency that some deem detrimental to the *barrio*.

The Overlaps – Graffiti, Street Art, and High Art

Some *graffiteros* situate themselves in an intermediate space between low-class street art and upper-class gallery art, circumventing those fixed graffiti rules enforced by purists. Akme's Street Talent crew has a store in *el centro* that sells graffiti supplies and fashion accessories: t-shirts, spray cans, aerosol caps, etc. (Figure 26).

Figure 26 A sidesection of the things sold at the Street Talent shop: spray cans in cubby holes on the left, high quality instruments in the glass case, attachment cap nozzles that project different spray styles in blue and clear plastic drawers, and a hoody for sale above these drawers.

It is one of the main places to purchase spray paint in the city's metropolitan area. Idea elaborated on the history of Street Talent. She said, "Before, Street Talent wasn't the big deal that it is now. It was a store that sold cans…Right now, I don't know whether or not to call them a crew. [They're more like] a group, but rather a business…yeah, I think it's like a business." I asked Idea why she thought Street Talent's name was in English, instead of Spanish. She responded while chuckling, "It's like street art!" Because Street Talent integrates business practices with their graffiti practices, Idea appears to see them as a type of street art. They seem to occupy an intermediate category in between graffiti's zero-tolerance policy on commercialism and gallery art's commodification of art.

Akme, the owner, is a mid-30s *graffitero* who works full-time as an architect. He stated that he does not aim to make money from the store and organization, but Street Talent still bears similarity to a business. I connect this to Susan Stewart's discussion of graffiti's fetishization of the artist's tag as a form of branding. She argues, "the name's frequent appearance marks the stubborn ghost of individuality and intention in the mass culture, the ironic restatement of the artist as 'brand name'" (1991: 227). *Graffiteros'* stylized names which they proliferate essentially act as brands that increase a *graffitero's* recognition and street respect. Street Talent expands on this by employing other methods of branding in conjunction with conventional graffiti tactics. Street Talent employed *graffitero*, Aztick, to create the group's digital social media content. Aztick used his own Canon EOS 7D camera[21] to create video and photo content of Street Talent paint sessions and expos, which he edited on an iMac computer that Akme provided in a small office space inside the shop, and then uploaded to the group's Facebook page. The page currently has over 23,000 followers and uses a unique Street Talent brand logo (Figure 27). Outside of bringing in more people to buy cans and Street Talent t-shirts, Street Talent's marketing popularizes their name and brand, garnering the same type of style and respect as graffiti. Still, *graffiteras* and *graffiteros,* like Idea, are skeptical of their authenticity as a crew.

[21] A professional quality DSLR video/still photograph camera.

Figure 27 Streent Talent's logo, created by Aztick (Street Talent – Facebook 2018).

Street Talent further straddles the art/graffiti boundary by selling gallery art pieces in the Street Talent shop. Street Talent member, Tokio, who attended Oaxaca's School of Fine Arts paints non-graffiti oil paintings sold at the store (Figure 28).[22] They are displayed on canvas, and as Akme first toured me around the shop, he gestured to the paintings, saying "and over here, we have like a gallery." Tokio, however, chose to not mix his gallery art with his graffiti:

[22] Tokio actually works for the Oaxacan state government in the Ministry of Tourism in a job completely unrelated to his formal art training. He continues to paint but has been pursuing a career other than art.

Figure 28 Tokio's small oil painting work showing a three story house in the country, made of houses stacked on top of one another.

> I don't mix them. It's like they have very different concepts…basically, it could have been the same, because, well, graffiti is freedom and you can do what you want, right? But, I don't know, I don't think it affects it more…in the street, it's like, cooler. It has a lot of colors and shapes and other textures.

The Street Talent store bends the rules on mixing graffiti and gallery art by juxtaposing Tokio's oil paints alongside graffiti tools and *graffiteros,* but Tokio still polices these boundaries and keeps them discrete. Taking graffiti out of the street and into the gallery limits the colors, shapes, and textures that *graffiteros* can explore. Tokio's massive wall-sized piece in Figure 29 contrasts with the roughly 6" x 6" oil paint in Figure 28, because of the sheer scale and the texture of the wall that the piece can incorporate. Tokio also correspondingly shapes the content of the work he produces based on the medium in which he is working. Street Talent often

creates pieces and productions around Mesoamerican warrior themes and content, just like Tokio's piece in Figure 29, which depicts of Mesoamerican Zapotec king, Cosijoeza. These themes do not appear in Tokio's oil paintings, likely because he associates them with graffiti.

Figure 29 Tokio's Cosijoeza piece from Zaachila, Oaxaca for the Zaanarte Urban Art Expo in July 2016. Cosijoeza was the Zapotec ruler of the ancient Zapotec city of Zaachila and is depicted as emerging from the underworld. Rabbits in ancient Mesoamerica were seen as the guardians of the underworld, and owls were seen as ferriers of people between the world of the living and the underworld.

Rule Breaking – Crash's Graffiti-Art Perversion

At least one *graffitero* in Oaxaca, though, was willing to mix graffiti and gallery art and completely transgress the borders between them. It was a Thursday night in May 2017 when Xime and I had come to the Rufino Tamayo Workshop in uptown Oaxaca for a student's gallery exhibition. We were having pony sized Corona beers when Idea introduced me to the artist, who was presenting his first exhibition, entitled, *El Grabado y Otras Perversiones* (*Grabado* and Other

Perversions).[23] The exhibition consisted of a series of grotesque and mostly nude exaggerated female forms that were printed from carved linoleum blocks or acid etched stone. Idea introduced me to him because he was also a *graffitero* who went by the name, "Crash Bandicot," taken from the popular Play Station video game. In his exhibition, there was one piece that did not seem to fit the theme of grotesque and exaggerated female bodies. It was an oil painting on canvas of a Jackson Pollock-like dotted abstract expressionist background with graffiti letters reading "Crash" in the corner, placed on the wall above a small self-portrait (Figure 30).

Figure 30 Crash's graffiti-canvas piece above his self-portrait.

[23] *Grabado* is linoleum or wood blocks that have been carved to serve as a negative from which to make inked prints. Ink is placed on the carved block, then put through a press to make a print. *Grabado* means "recorded" and refers to the process of cutting an image into the linoleum or wood to make a negative from which to print. "Lithography" or lithographs are made through a similar process. Acid is used to cut an image into stone, instead of carving into wood or linoleum.

I asked him about the piece, and he smiled and said, "Ah, my first perversion…I relate it a lot to art. Art should be free [like graffiti]. Graffiti is freedom…I'm breaking all the rules. About 20 years ago, you wouldn't have thought to see this in a gallery." Because of this work's juxtaposition of graffiti letters with Pollock-like aesthetics and on canvas, it "breaks all the rules," and would likely be the most "perverse" work at the exhibition to a *graffitero*, graphic artist, or visual artist. Importantly, Crash flips Kibe's script on "graffiti is free" from the beginning of the chapter by extending this to the freedom to paint any way that one desires, even mixing the art of the street with the art of the elite. Like the *graffiteros*, Stewart takes a more critical approach to the gallery-ification of graffiti in the 1970s and 80s than Lombard:

> Graffiti on canvas, graffiti as artwork or art objects, clearly are the invention of the institutions of art—the university, the gallery, the critic, the collector. And they are an invention designed to satisfy the needs of those institutions to assert their own spontaneity, classlessness, flexibility, and currency (1991: 225, 226).

Crash, however, breaks with the broader precedents of graffiti-on-canvas that Stewart describes. He also shows little need for approval by elite artists to create this graffiti-canvas. His work, in this case, is one of "perversion" in which he sardonically crosses supposedly "artistic" (oil paint on canvas) and "non-artistic" (graffiti) forms. Such work is transgressive against the assumed boundaries of graffiti as a "low art" and oil paint on canvas as a "high art," but it also perverts the definitions of art and graffiti outlined in this chapter. Recalling the refrain that

"graffiti is not art," "art is what they sell in galleries," and "graffiti is free." Crash agrees – and breaks the rules anyway.[24]

Conclusion

Graffiti and gallery art are treated respectively as art of the street and art of the elite, and the border between them is policed by *graffiteros* and non-*graffitero* neighborhood members alike in ways that maintain fixed class connotations. Inmpar sees graffiti as a means to speak for his neighborhood and working-class spaces, which are ignored and omitted by art galleries. Yet, support for graffiti in *colonias* is not universal; in addition to the support that exists in all level of neighborhoods, many residents police graffiti's content as a type of imposition or low-class delinquency. Even though there are frequent moments of intersection and overlap—such as Tokio's oil paintings at the Street Talent shop, Street Talent's use of business marketing tactics, or Inmpar's work for the gallery—few intentionally mix art's commodification with graffiti. Only Crash was willing to transgressively and "perversely" mix graffiti and gallery art together, compounding all of the class, identity, and aesthetic associations that many Oaxacans work to keep separate. These rules and boundaries are revealed as arbitrary markers that are made real through culture, hence Crash's need to designate his piece as a "perversion."

These boundaries also strongly reflect the possibility that graffiti will be consumed and ruined by the powers of Oaxaca's elite art scene. *Graffiteros* avoid commercialization and elite art for its potential to remove graffiti from Oaxaca's

[24] My fieldwork experiences also reiterate Crash statement that such a piece is, indeed, rare. It was the only such one that I came across.

streets, not through censorship, erasure, or even informal individual policing; but by hegemonically compelling *graffiteros* to trade spray cans for canvas and paint brushes.

CHAPTER 4
Images as Sites of Contestation and the Life Beyond Protest

Introduction

While the previous chapter focused on the hegemony of high art over graffiti and overlaps between art of the street and art of the elite, in this chapter I consider the overlaps between political resistance and commercialism in street art. This chapter represents my thinking through one of the most common topics associated with Oaxaca, protest, and how it intersects with urban art. *Graffiteros* are hardly present in this chapter because, during my fieldwork, they rarely combined protest and activism with their art, as explained in Chapter 2.[25] I only include their voices in this chapter as critique, as this reflects how they interacted with visual protest during my experiences in the field. As I showed with Yescka and Zepia, *graffiteros* are often much more interested in graffiti than in politics, protest, or activism. This chapter spotlights ASARO as one of the best known urban art protest groups in Oaxaca, and many conversations and interactions regarding urban art and protest in Oaxaca focused on them during my fieldwork.

ASARO, as I discussed in Chapter 2, is a political urban art and graphic art collective that has "made visible the critique of the state" since their initial

[25] This is not to say at all that *graffiteros* do not protest, nor that they have never protested. I only write from what my ethnographic material reveals, which at times, feels limited given the enormous scope, lifetime, and complexity of Oaxacan urban art.

participation in the 2006 protests.[26] Figure 31 shows an ASARO stencil from May of 2016, in which a protestor shouts the phrase "*Protestar/No Es Un/Delito*" (Protesting/isn't a/crime) captioned by "*No a la reforma educativa*" (No to the education reform).

Figure 31 ASARO stencil in *el centro* from May 2016. ASARO's "tag" is above the stencil.

Oaxaca's state branch of the national teachers' union, Local 22, protested a federal education reform during the summer of 2016 that recently went into effect at the state level in Oaxaca. Teachers decried it throughout the summer, arguing that it restricted their benefits and privileges, such as inherited work positions, retirement pensions, funding for classroom resources, and maintenance of school buildings. The majority of ASARO's works in the street during the summer of 2016 spoke out

[26] Quote from ASARO co-founder, Alberto, in Chapter 2.

in support of the teachers and likewise against the education reform. Shortly after ASARO painted the stencil in Figure 31, I spoke with Alberto, one of ASARO's leaders and co-founders regarding the motivations for their work. He asserted, "that which guides us…is our people that are fighting and protesting (*que está en lucha).*" ASARO creates only images with political content, which it puts up into the street as a form of protest. Yet, Akme and Tokio of the Street Talent graffiti crew expressed an oft repeated critique about ASARO creating protest street art while drawing funds from the Oaxacan government:

> Akme – For example, ASARO…It's like this double moral that they have…
> Tokio – …They proclaim one thing and they do another. They criticize the government and then submit lots of grant proposals…
> Akme – …now they know how to apply for grant projects and draw cash from the government.

Akme's description of ASARO's "double moral" represents a "site of contestation" where their protest images encounter friction with forces of commercialization and government influence (Hubbert 2014: 118).

As Rancière argues that photographs do not offer clear interpretations of the broader context in which the photo was taken, ASARO's images alone do not convey the broader forces that shape their creation (Rancière 2012: 90). In order to sharpen the view, I make use of Hubbert's discussion of "sites of contestation" in images in "Appropriating Iconicity: Why Tank Man Still Matters" (2014). In this article, she analyzes reinterpretations of the "Tank Man" image of a lone man standing in protest before parading tanks in Tiananmen Square, China in 1989 (2014). Hubbert examines political cartoons, an Occupy Movement poster, and a

modified photograph that reinterpret the Tank Man image into different contexts, which she argues, largely render the original Tank Man's context and meaning irrelevant (2014: 118). She argues that these reinterpretations are "no longer a verification of the ideological certainties of the original but a site of contestation" (2014: 118). ASARO's creation of graphic images (like Figure 31 above) also belies a relationship of contestation which is not necessarily visible in the stencil itself. The reinterpretations of Tank Man that Hubbert describes exist in friction and contestation with the original because their meanings conflict with one another. I utilize ASARO's images to similarly reveal how these reinterpreted images contest their originals, and the broader context of ASARO's positionality that likewise contests this stencil's straightforward protest message. In the subsequent sections, I will discuss ASARO's images beyond the protest that they present; first, as entangled with commercialism, and second, as entangled with government influence.

Commercializing Art, Commercializing Protest

Since shortly after 2006, ASARO constituted a business that now benefits financially from its connections. "José," a graphic artist and co-founder of ASARO, said that the intersection of illegal urban art, the 2006 protests, and fine arts school students brought about an "effervescence of graphic art, of paint, of everything…it brought this result that we now have – tons of graphic art workshops, especially with young people. It's become like a type of, of style or fashion." His words suggest ASARO's political street art was born in the context of connections between

"fashion"—which can be conceived as commercialization—and protest.

Almost all of ASARO's members that remain from 2006 were originally graphic art students who were trained to be professional artists hoping to sell their works for a living. ASARO opened its workshop-gallery space, *Espacio Zapata,* in 2008 partially as a result of its members' art school training and professionalization (Franco Ortiz 2011: 284).

José referenced the large number of art galleries in Oaxaca but critiqued them as exclusive institutions that do not welcome graphic art students. He said:

> there's a lot of filters [to keep people out] …they're very difficult to access because they have their painters, their graphic artists. They know what they sell, they already have a line of work, of commerce, and when you, as a youth, come out of school, you get involved with this problem.

ASARO and *Espacio Zapata*, then, provided politically active graphic art students like José a means to create and sell works in spite of the exclusivity of *el centro's* art galleries.

During my fieldwork in 2016 and 2017, *Espacio Zapata* mostly served as a place of commerce aimed primarily at tourists. *Espacio Zapata* sits in the heart of *el centro's* tourist sector, just two blocks from the pedestrian-only street, *Calle Alcalá*, a focal point for downtown's bar, restaurant, souvenir, and art gallery scene. ASARO even has a restaurant inside *Espacio Zapata* with daily specials. To increase foot traffic in 2016, ASARO also began to host events with other graphic art collectives like *Pasaporte Gráfica* (Graphic Art Passport); specifically, they sponsored an evening walking tour of ten graphic art workshop-galleries throughout *el centro* in which participants received a graphic image stamped onto their Graphic

Art Passport at each stop. Of the ten workshop-galleries included, five had members (if not founders) who were also part of the larger ASARO collective.[27] During this tour, participants likely walked by ASARO's illegal street works near *Calle Alcalá* en route to sampling from an assortment of free mescal at the last stop on the tour, which was always *Espacio Zapata*.[28] Inside the space were many framed ASARO prints, paintings, and t-shirts for sale, alongside the printing presses and the members of ASARO who chatted up tourists and stamped their Graphic Art Passports.

I analyze ASARO's connections to commercialism through Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, originally theorized in his *Prison Notebooks* (1999 [1971]). Gramsci theorized hegemony as 'domination' and 'intellectual and moral leadership' (Gramsci 1999: 212 qtd. in Kurtz 1996: 105, 107), meaning that a dominant group:

> uses intellectual devices to infuse its ideas of morality to gain the support of those who resist or may be neutral, to retain the support of those who consent to its rule, and to establish alliances as widely as possible to enable the creation of an ethical-political relationship with the people (Gramsci qtd. in Kurtz 1999: 106).

In this way, as ASARO's members moved their work from the streets into *Espacio Zapata* to be sold as prints and t-shirts, they consented to commercial and capitalist influence. This commercialism is grounded in the education and professional formation of many of its members and in the practices of the art galleries that surround *Espacio Zapata* in *el centro*. These institutions, therefore, act as the

[27] Many graphic art collectives profess to being egalitarian assemblies, in which all have a voice and equal participation. Yet, in many of these five ASARO-affiliated collectives, one individual (usually the collective's founder) practically directs the collective.
[28] Mescal is an agave-based liquor, endemic to Oaxaca, and akin to tequila.

intellectual leaders that "form alliances" with ASARO to commercialize their works. José's description of the collective's origins above suggests this "effervescence" of interests happened concurrently with the 2006 protests. In *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture,* Strinati builds on Gramsci and asserts that subordinate groups, like ASARO, "accept the ideas, values and leadership of the dominant group not because they are physically forced to, nor because they are ideologically indoctrinated, but because they have reasons of their own" (Gramsci qtd. in Strinati 2005: 154). The reason ASARO *chooses* to bring its political images and practices into the commercial arena is because it affords them the ability to cover the economic costs of their protest, or at least, their support of others' protest.

Espacio Zapata takes its name from Mexican revolutionary general, Emiliano Zapata, a major leader during Mexico's class and agrarian revolution from 1910-1920. An iconic image of Mexican populist revolution and Mexican patriotism, Zapata remains an idol and theme for ASARO (Coffey 2012; Hubbert 2014). They continue to produce illegal street works of his likeness, like this wheatpaste (Figure 32) of a *campesino* (rural farmer) holding a poster with Zapata's face from the summer of 2016. ASARO creates images that it uses to protest in the street, and its variations, if not copies, are also sold as prints in *Espacio Zapata* (Figure 33). This commercialization and commodification contests the revolutionary content of these images.

Figure 32 Illegal ASARO wheatpaste that shows a Zapata poster from June of 2016.

Figure 33 Framed ASARO print for sale at *Espacio Zapata* of Zapata throwing a molotov cocktail that translates to, "10 years of ASARO."

Perhaps the most famous example of the commodification of a revolutionary

image is Jim Fitzpatrick's "Warhol Che," derived from Alberto Korda's photograph of Argentine revolutionist, Che Guevara, in Cuba (Screti 2017). Spyer and Steedly argue in the introduction to *Images that Move* that Fitzpatrick's Che (Figure 34) flattens Korda's original photograph (Figure 35) into a simplified high black and white contrast graphic image (2013: 21). "Warhol Che"" is "flat," in that it is lifted from the photograph and eliminates any sort of depth supplied by lighting, facial contours, or variation in color or shade (2013: 21). Because of this simplicity and flatness, Warhol Che is easily reproduced, more similar to a brand than a photograph, which allows it to move beyond its original (2013: 21).

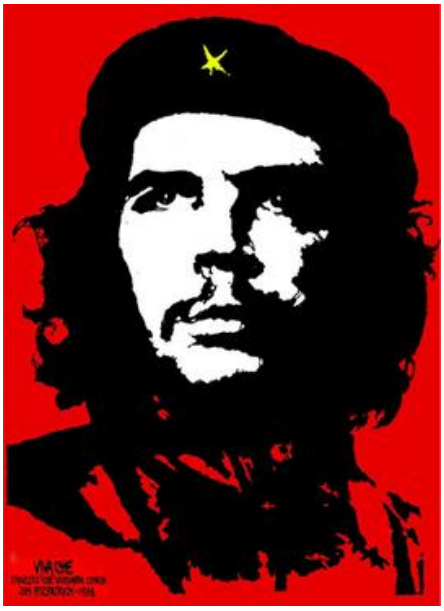


Figure 34 Fitzpatrick's "Wharhol Che" image (Licensed for critical content related to the image, Guerrillero Heróico-Wikipedia 2018b).

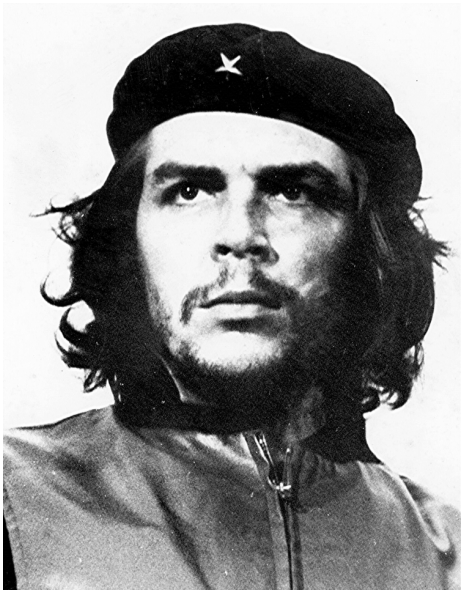


Figure 35 Korda's original photograph of Che in Cuba titled "*Guerrillero Heróico*" (Heroic Guerrilla Fighter) (Public domain license, Guerrillero Heróico – Wikipedia 2018a).

ASARO accomplishes a similar feat in flattening this Zapata photograph (Figure 36) into the wheatpaste, discussed above (Figure 32). Zapata called for "*tierra y libertad*" (land and liberty) for the hundreds of thousands of *campesino* farmers whose lands were controlled by Mexico's 19th century elites and has since been immortalized as an iconic image of under-class revolution in Mexico (Hubbert 2014). ASARO, then, recontextualized his likeness for the 2016 teachers' union protests in Oaxaca (Hubbert 2014). In the process, however, the now contested image minimizes his connection to protest and revolution by framing him into a brand-like commodity through the sale of prints and t-shirts of his image (Figure 40; Hubbert 2014: 123).

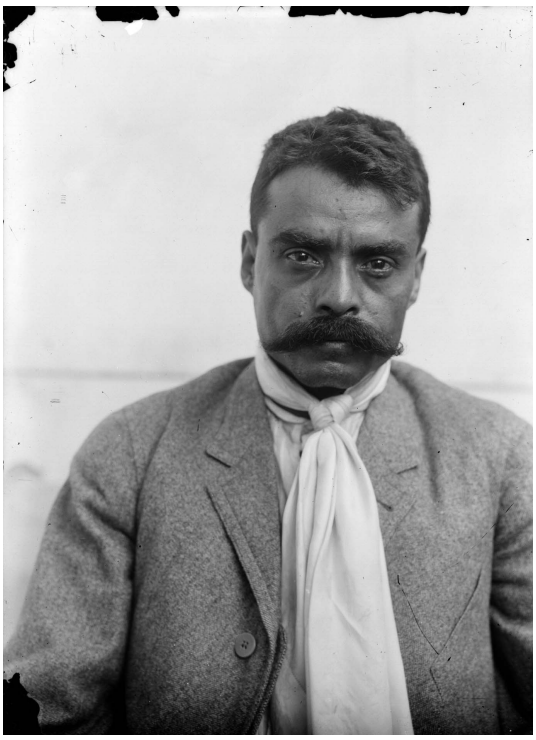


Figure 36 Emiliano Zapata during the Revolutionary era, the same photograph that ASARO lifts his likeness from (Public domain license, Emiliano Zapata - Wikipedia).

Figure 37 T-shirts for sale at *Espacio* Zapata. Zapata appears on the left and a poster supporting the teachers' union appears in the center. Translated, it reads, "Teacher, thank you/For teaching me to/Read, write, add/but most of all to/FIGHT/Oaxaca resists/

ASARO's commercialization of revolutionary images like Zapata's bears similarity to Shepard Fairey's OBEY Propaganda street art/brand (Screti 2017). Screti argues that OBEY's images and words are often overtly political and protest-driven, if not simply derived from associated aesthetics of protest and subversiveness (2017: 369-372). For example, OBEY's slogan is "manufacturing quality dissent since 1989" (OBEY Giant 2018). Just as this statement resonates as a common branding technique inasmuch as it foments protest, Fairey's OBEY represents "the manufacturing and selling [of] visual activism without a political emancipatory praxis" (2017: 368). Even though these images evoke protest or "dissent," Screti argues that they are "completely *counter-revolutionary*" and perpetuate a capitalist system, instead of threatening or challenging it (2017: 377).

Screti quotes Fairey as saying that he intentionally participates in capitalism by selling OBEY's images as prints and merchandise (2017: 368, 269). Screti argues that, as a result, Fairey "deactivates" their potential for protest or revolution (2017: 368, 378). ASARO participates in a similar manufacturing of revolution and activism, particularly through its use of Zapata images. Nonetheless, commodification does not completely erase Zapata's significance.

Depicting this contestation, ASARO's work is situated between hegemonic commodification and resistant protest. Stuart Hall has famously theorized this dynamic between hegemony and resistance as common to popular culture in "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular" (1998). He argues that dominant hegemonic forces reshape the culture and ideology of subordinate groups, but he emphasizes, as Strinati does, that these subordinate groups resist hegemony's impositions by modifying the imposed culture in their own ways (1998: 447, 449). This is relevant to ASARO in two ways. First, ASARO continues to produce political works as an alternative gallery in *el centro*, alongside other galleries that sell politically benign works that often center on animals, much like the Ixrael Montes Gallery, as discussed in Chapter 3. Second, though they commercialize Zapata's likeness, history, identity, and significance; they do not erase or make his likeness "counter-revolutionary" through commercialization. Instead, I suggest here that this commercialization of Zapata creates a contestation between ASARO's images and Zapata's original significance. This contestation creates friction, which might cause some viewers to reject or critique ASARO's images as counter-revolutionary, as

Screti does with OBEY. However, Hall states that the subordinate group in popular culture participates in a "continuing tension" with the dominant culture because it is never completely dominated, nor does it ever resist domination to point that the dominator is rendered powerless (Hall 1998: 449). ASARO's images, like those of Zapata, sit at the overlap in this dynamic – never completely commercialized and never completely protesting. They make a claim to Zapata's revolution and take advantage of it to acquire capital to fuel their protest.

Whereas ASARO's work is exclusively social and political, Screti shows the central image in Figure 38 as a flattened and altered image of the professional wrestler, Andre the Giant, with the single word "Obey" is "nonsensical" (2017: 369).

Figure 38 OBEY's main image, a close up of wrestler, Andre the Giant's face with the caption, "Obey" (Fairey 2018), lifted from the film, They Live (1988).

It is only meant to provoke people to question its meaning and the meaning of

propaganda and advertising at large (2017: 369). In other words, Fairey does not feel a necessity to remain overtly political in all of his work. Moreover, as Alberto defined the collective's mission above, ASARO's work focuses on making the existing critiques of the state visible, not necessarily on articulating new critiques. ASARO essentially draws on the large protests that occur in Oaxaca, rather than organizing them by themselves. OBEY, however, is a company, and it subsists and thrives economically regardless of the protest conditions that exist. Fairey leaves creative space for OBEY to take on various forms, without them necessarily being political. ASARO, by contrast, encounters difficulty maintaining itself, or at the very least, produces less, when there are lulls in protest in Oaxaca.

Living from Resistance – Dwindling Protests and Government Funding

ASARO's mission originally dwindled, according to José, because protest activities in Oaxaca declined in the years since 2006. The collective's membership and resources also contracted during this time. José explained that ASARO covered costs by splitting them among its members, which at its peak in 2006-2007 numbered about fifty. As the protests of Local 22 and the broader heterogeneous assembly of hundreds of radical, grassroots, and social organizations (Magaña 2010: 78) declined after the climactic 2006 protests, so did ASARO's activism:

> all the [street art] groups started to wear out with time…You can deal with it for, let's say, a year, two years…because the movement is still hot or lukewarm, but it starts to cool off so much that all of sudden…you think that [what you're doing] doesn't work, you're not doing anything, or you're repeating, you continue doing the same thing and you don't advance. Then after that, there's those grey lapses…

Another former ASARO member—Itandehui Franco Ortiz, who has written on

graffiti and urban art in Oaxaca (2011; 2014) —clarified in an interview that *Espacio Zapata* closed in 2009 as a result of this "grey lapse," or decline in street art and protest activity following the height of the 2006 protests. However, ASARO gained new life in 2010-2011 when they re-opened *Espacio Zapata* through funds provided by the Oaxacan Secretary of Culture (*SECULTA*).[29]

In the aftermath of the 2006 protests, the government offered grants to community institutions that sought to facilitate intercultural dialogue through groups like ASARO. The group's leader, Alberto, framed ASARO's mission in a way that gave them success at accessing these government funds. A Oaxacan state government document called the *Programa Sectorial de Cultura* (Sectorial Program of Culture) was created in 2011 to "support…politics and programs that contribute to a transparent and responsible administration of our diverse culture" (2011: 7). The *Programa* specifically names ASARO as one group that the government supports, among other collectives, stating that ASARO's *Espacio Zapata* offers "cultural assets" by serving as a space of "intercultural dialogue" (2011: 99). In supporting ASARO and other groups, Oaxaca's government can show that it supports a diversity of opinion which, as the *Programa* states can "contribute to the development of the country" (2011: 7). From 2008-2010 *Espacio* Zapata served as a space that held cultural events like film screenings and concerts that often centered around governmental critique (Franco Ortiz 2011: 284). The *Programa* appears to

[29] *SECULTA* funded a handful of protest art groups in the same year for the same reasons as ASARO, according to José. However, other collectives' inability to easily decide how to use or distribute the money resulted in their fragmentation, if not collapse. ASARO appears to be one of the remaining groups that accepted money from *SECULTA* and is still one of the most active.

incorporate *Espacio* Zapata as part of the governmental apparatus, rather than directly addressing the critiques and claims they bring forward. ASARO's connection to the government allows the government to show that it includes the voices of alternative groups as valid contributions, even as it contests their protest by implicating them within the government's hegemony.

SECULTA today, as in 2010-2011, regularly funds and maintains art projects in the state of Oaxaca in areas including visual arts, dance, music, etc. I interviewed "David," the fast-talking, amicable, and candid government worker in charge of managing the grant submissions. He explained that proposals should, in some way, develop or improve the condition of a *barrio,* a *colonia*, a building, etc. in order to be funded. He said, "These projects are supposed to provoke a reaction in the public who sees their art [because it] looks pretty or nice." Such arguments for the use of graffiti and urban art to cover "ugly walls" parallel comments of Xochimilco homeowners in Chapter 3. He elaborated that successful projects follow this directive: "We get these projects where they want to paint what somebody painted or marked during the previous [protest] marches… they want to…improve that ugly wall covered in marks by putting up a pretty image." *SECULTA* does not engage in Ed Koch's or Rudy Giuliani's "war on graffiti," but instead makes use of groups like ASARO to improve the city's conditions. Strinati argues that in hegemonic relationships, dominant groups grant concessions to subordinate groups so that they can hold influence over them (2004: 154). *SECULTA* concedes to their

revolutionary activism for their ability to paint "pretty" and not "ugly" things on the walls of the city.

"Gloria" had been involved in indigenous activist media organizations in Oaxaca for decades and became a close friend during my fieldwork. She explained that sometimes participants in resistance organizations like ASARO end up "living from their resistance," or drawing primary income through their activist or protest work. This causes them to treat resistance as means to live and survive; that is, protest becomes a form of labor. When that becomes the case, the suggestion is that protest becomes more about a salary than about the issues and critiques. Gloria emphasized that for many who "live from resistance," there is often an inability to leave protest behind in exchange for a "civilian" job. José suggested as much of Alberto during an interview, "Alberto has a very political position, and all of his work experience has had to do with that too…[he] has always participated in those [social] movements." That some ASARO members now likely earn a living thanks in part to government funds in order to continue their protest work *against the government* exposes how commercial interests are considerations for political movements.

SECULTA concedes to ASARO's activism, as their protests pose little threat to the government. They care more about the city's aesthetics that ASARO and others can shape or improve than their political stances. It is worth noting that David identifies sloppy stencils and painted messages as "ugly" elements, which funded applicants would paint over as part of their projects. *SECULTA* does not

necessarily seek ASARO and others out predatorily to eliminate their opposition to state power. They instead opportunistically take advantage of their financial need coupled with their artistic ability and dedication to protest. Whether or not the individuals they fund continue to march or paint illegal "ugly" things is irrelevant to them. *SECULTA* wants to incorporate graffiti and street art as institutional elements in their projects. Notably, Alberto has stated that ASARO receives money to maintain *Espacio Zapata* without having to paint the murals required by other groups.[30] He likewise contests the perception that accepting governmental funds automatically renders ASARO counter-revolutionary:

> [The period since] 2011 has been a moment of critique for us because we don't have resources…the Secretary of Culture [*SECULTA*] allowed us to maintain the group…in the past, the Secretary has wanted people to do murals…and we were the only collective that didn't align itself with the Secretary…We have always made visible the critique of the state…

While *SECULTA* offered funding to political street art collectives in exchange for painting murals, Alberto asserted that ASARO accepted their money but refused to paint the murals that *SECULTA* desired. That is, though they took the money, they did not actually "sell out," because they did not and have still not altered the content of their work to something that the government desired. José posited that their continuing to paint political critiques with government money was like "slapping them in the face."

[30] One likely explanation for ASARO's ability to dodge this end of the government's exchange of money for murals or pretty images is that government funds went towards *Espacio* Zapata. Given that *Espacio* Zapata provides a space for "intercultural dialogue" (*Gobierno del Estado de Oaxaca* 2011) to the city and public it was valuable to the government because it allowed the government to gesture that opposition and critique towards the government existed.

ASARO does continue to create revolutionary imagery, but their imagery does not reveal the fact that *SECULTA* funding makes this possible. Figure 39 shows a 2016 wheatpaste in which *Subcomandante* (Subcommander) Marcos, a leader of the leftist *Zapatista* guerrillas of the nearby state of Chiapas, presents ASARO's 10-year birthday cake with a flaming Molotov cocktail as the lone candle and the icing caption: "10 *años ASARO* (10 years ASARO)."[31]

Figure 39 ASARO's wheatpaste of *Subcomandante* Marcos, likely pasted sometime in late 2016 just two blocks from *Espacio Zapata* outside of one of the graphic art collectives connected to ASARO through its members, *Taller Oaxaca Gráfico*. Photographed in 2017.

In this wheatpaste, Marcos congratulates ASARO on their 10 years of protest against the Mexican and Oaxacan governments, beginning in 2006. During the time in which Marcos was the public face of the *Zapatistas,* from the mid-1990s to

[31] Magaña shows that in 2006, the Zapatistas openly expressed support of Local 22 as part of a project aimed at uniting social movements and resistance across Mexico (2013: 141).

mid-2000s, the *Zapatistas* were a (poorly) armed autonomous group that aimed to increase indigenous land rights and access to human rights while rejecting capitalism and interaction with the state or federal government (Arsenault 2011; Matloff 2013). As with their Zapata images, ASARO reinterprets Marcos into a context that contests the original (Hubbert 2014). Instead of referencing or supporting any sort of protest, this wheatpaste acts almost exclusively as a self-congratulatory piece. It portrays ASARO as a Marcos-like revolutionary group for the last ten years, all the while obscuring the funding relationship that ASARO has with *SECULTA*. Because Marcos is such a strong character and icon in the region, this wheatpaste begs the question as to how much revolution ASARO actually practices.

Revolutionary Graphics, Official Culture

Though ASARO argues that its content is exclusively political and critical in nature, its use of the complex history of Mexican nationalism contests the threat that it poses to the government. In *Revolutionary Art, Official Culture,* Coffey argues that Mexico's muralist movement—made famous by Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco—was critiqued by Mexican thinkers for using revolutionary content that they painted in state halls to serve nationalism (2012). These murals, commissioned by different branches of the Mexican government, bolstered the institutional interests of Mexico's new post-revolutionary conservative nationalism or "official culture" (2012). They painted during and following the Mexican Revolution, combining the massive armed populist revolution

of Mexico's agrarian peasant classes with images inspired by their participation in the Mexican Communist Party (2012). These works allowed the government that followed the revolution to present itself as the result of the successful populist revolution, while actually remaining elitist and authoritarian (2012: 1, 2). Much like *SECULTA's* relationship with ASARO, the Mexican government between the 1920s and 1970s, made concessions to the left-leaning content that muralists insisted on using in their work, just as the muralists made concessions to the government which had commissioned their work (Coffey 2012: 80). The muralists accepted the money and the chance for revolutionary and leftist work to reach a wide audience while the government took advantage of the chance to institutionalize and banalize revolutionary populism (2012: 80).

ASARO's positionality and images replicate many aspects of this dynamic. They accept government money in order to continue their work, and the government takes advantage of them as individuals who can paint "pretty images," even if ASARO avoids having to paint them. Though their images often recontextualize these works as contemporary protest and revolution, they pose little threat to the government because they retain this connection to patriotism.

One mural that ASARO draws on which also exemplifies the kind of intersection of revolutionary art and official culture Coffey describes is Juan O'Gorman's *Panel of the Independence* at Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City (2012). This work (Figure 40) commemorates the start of Mexico's war for independence in 1810.

Figure 40 O'Gorman's Panel of the Independence, *Castillo Chapultepec*, Mexico City (1960-1961). Photographed in August 2016.

At its center stands Father Miguel Hidalgo and a crowd of indigenous *campesino* farmers bearing the standard of the Virgin of Guadalupe with his "*Muera el Mal Gobierno*" (Death to bad government) poster to "confront us with their gaze and entreat us to join Hidalgo's men to defeat Spain, redeem the Indian, and forge a fatherland" (2012: 101). Figure 41 shows an ASARO wheatpaste juxtaposed with

Hidalgo's "*Muera el Mal Gobierno*" phrase, alongside a pair of *campesinos* now recontextualized in the teachers' movement (Figure 41; Spyer and Steedly 2013).

Figure 41 ASARO's"*Muera el mal gobierno*" (Death to mad government) wheatpaste.

Through ASARO's juxtaposition of Hidalgo's protest cry with O'Gorman's image of marching indigenous *campesinos* in the context of Local 22's protests, ASARO paints a critique and protest that is directed towards the Oaxacan government, as opposed to the Spanish crown. Rather than "entreating us to forge a fatherland and defeat Spain," this message and image now entreat viewers to forge resistance and defeat the Oaxacan and Mexican governments. Yet, because this phrase is one of the most famous refrains of patriotism in Mexico, it diminishes the anti-government message due to the patriotism it invokes.

In addition, this wheatpaste shows ASARO's use of revolutionary and official imagery similar to David Alfaro Siqueiros's mural, *From Porfirianism to the*

Revolution. In this section of the mural (Figure 42), the endless Mexican revolutionary armed *campesinos* (peasants) of Generals Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata from the 1900s are juxtaposed with intellectuals who inspired the Mexican revolution, like Marx and Ricardo Flores Magón, a famous Mexican anarchist and political organizer (Coffey 2012: 108; Lomnitz-Adler 2014). This mural and others, like O'Gorman's *Panel of the Independence,* were commissioned by the Mexican government to turn the Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City into a "patriotic sanctuary" where the public could come and learn patriotism and nationalism (Coffey 2012: 79).

Figure 42 David Alfaro Siqueiros's *Del Porfirismo a la Revolución* (From Porfirianism to the Revolution), also at *Castillo Chapultepec* in Mexico City (1957-1966). Photographed 2016.

Returning to Figure 41, ASARO draws from this imagery in its depiction of a female *campesina* with a machete whose companion has a shirt with an image of

Flores Magón.[32] No longer a member of the revolutionary armies, nor the independence movement, this woman is likely imagined to be standing up as a teacher, or in support of the teachers. It connects Local 22's protests to that of Mexico's most prolific resistance and independence movements, but these are updated versions of the same images that have helped cement the Mexican Revolution and independence as the continued labor of Mexico's ruling bodies (Coffey 2012). Though this wheatpaste rewrites historical revolutionary imagery into a contemporary protest, the revolutionary imagery has simultaneously been part of the state's official culture and thus sits in tension and contestation between protest and state hegemony.

Critiques by ASARO's Detractors

Similar to Screti's critique that OBEY is counter-revolutionary, ASARO has plenty of critics who are familiar enough with their positionality that they see the imagery they produce as stagnant or rote. Itandehui Franco Ortiz said during an interview, "Conceptually…They don't say anything more than, 'stop repression,' or 'no to whatever reform.' Sometimes [their messages] need to be thought out more." The workshop manager for the street art collective, Lapiztola, "Andres," offered a similar critique, saying that for the ten years since 2006, ASARO has "repeated" images. He said, "…normally they always put things like the face of Zapata, and '*Zapata vive* (Zapata Lives)', right? Or, *'¡En Oaxaca hay lucha!'* [In Oaxaca there's resistance!] The same as always." While I have situated ASARO's project in

[32] *Campesina* is a female *campesino*.

between revolution and commercialism, hegemony and resistance, Itandehui and Andres see its work as uninspiring and unconvincing. For them, it simply reproduces iconic images of protest and revolution and offers few critical tools for viewers to rethink the world around them.

Though Itandehui and Andres seem to argue that ASARO's work repetitively takes advantage of iconic revolutionary images, Alexander Kitnick has shown that Andy Warhol also practiced reproduction in his pop art and called attention to the power that reproductions hold (Kitnick 2007). Kitnick argues that Andy Warhol's use of consumer goods, like in his *Brillo Box* piece "functions as nothing more than a label. It is not a container of something else – there is no Brillo pad inside it…The reward is in the packaging, on the surface. Labels have become ends in themselves" (2007: 100). If Kitnick praises Warhol for calling attention to the power of brands and branding with relation to commodification, it appears that Itandehui and Andres are less forgiving of ASARO for creating brands out of revolutionary imagery; they are equally critical of images that reify pre-existing brandings, like Warhol Che. Andres' comment that ASARO "only puts things like the face of Zapata" particularly shows that Zapata's face "has become an end in itself." Because Zapata is synonymous with revolution and instantly recognizable as an icon of protest in Mexico, ASARO uses his likeness to legitimize their claims to revolution. ASARO's reproduction of his image and connection to his revolution was challenged most powerfully by David, the worker who managed the *SECULTA* grant submissions:

> …there are a lot of people that are called, how can I say this…they're in this for nothing more than money. They're 'mercenaries of culture.' Here there are some *weyes* [dumbasses]. They're called [pauses to think], ASARO.[33] *Esos weyes* [those dumbasses] make me laugh…they critique the government and they still survive on [government] grants. And they still come [outside of the *SECULTA* building] here and paint [illegally]…I laugh. Sometimes they've come here to protest [with the teachers' union] and close up the street…for me, it's not creativity…

He perfectly articulated the friction that ASARO encounters not with hegemonic institutions, but with the public's perception of their situatedness between revolution, government funding, and commercialization. David contests the sincerity of ASARO's protests with the term "*mercenarios de la cultura*" (mercenaries of culture) because their subsistence as a group has depended upon government grants to continue their protest. It is not simply that ASARO takes or seeks money from the government, but that ASARO sits at the intersection between government influence and government critique. He calls them *"weyes,"* which I translate as "dumbasses," but there can be agency in accepting government money and then protesting outside of the government building that awarded the money, if we recall José's comments about it being intended as "a slap in the face." It may complicate the implications of their protests, but ASARO's attempts to resist the very government influence with which it is entangled highlights its work as a site of contestation.

Conclusion

[33] "*Wey*" is a colloquial Mexican Spanish word that can mean "dude" and/or "dumbass." It can be used as an insult or a term of endearment. In this case, "dumbass" better conveys the speaker's point and attitude towards ASARO.

Throughout this chapter, I have attempted to look beyond the protest imagery that ASARO's work conveys in order to attend to the complex power dynamics that belie them. ASARO's images evoke protest and little else, but when their broader context is considered, they reveal sites of contestations that implicate commercialism and government patronage as elements of ASARO's work. ASARO's *Espacio* Zapata exemplifies this by serving as a commercial space where members sell the same revolutionary images that they illegally put up in the streets of Oaxaca as tools of revolution. ASARO members thus "live from resistance." Much of their work also sits in tension, contesting ASARO's intentions and recontextualizations of images' source material. In particular, ASARO continues to paint revolutionary and protest imagery, but their work reproduces images of revolution that can serve the interests of nationalism by drawing on the revolutionary art and official culture of 20th century Mexican muralism.

As Inmpar stated in Chapter 2, "There is a revolution that you sell. In this plaza they sell sandals. It's the same thing." In propagating a protest messages while receiving money from the government, ASARO does seem to sell revolution. Their images speak to the Mexican Revolution of 1910, Local 22's protest, and their own history of resistance in Oaxaca. Yet, when ASARO only speaks of protest without attending to the other elements underwriting the collective, many Oaxacans experience a friction between these contested interactions. Even the government worker who manages the grants that fund ASARO makes the same critiques of them as so many in Oaxaca's urban art scene. That is, they are viewed

as hypocritical and uncreative hacks who literally protest outside of the government office that awards them grant money. Yet, this kind of "contradiction," or overlap between revolutionary content and state hegemony does not discount the potential for agency. Since the 1920s, the Mexican state has featured patronage that holds hegemonic control over art and politics through their management of popular culture.

Likewise, ASARO members carve out a means of living from their protest and art, even if their images inadvertently uphold the institutions against which they rage. I cited Akme and Tokio in the introduction of this chapter as critiquing ASARO for their government critiques and government purse strings. In the same conversation in which Akme said of ASARO, "…they know how to apply for grant projects and draw cash from the government," he added, "We have to start learning how to do it and observing how they do it." Tokio chimed in: "We have to find the secret formula [all laugh], but to produce what they don't produce. We have the ability to do things, we just don't have the resources." Though Street Talent appears to not take ASARO's protest seriously, because they have a "double moral" or "proclaim one thing and do another," they seem to recognize and admire that their government connection allows them to continue their movement. Given all of these overlaps, it is not always clear what that movement is.

CHAPTER 5
Conclusions

Finding Structure in Entanglements

Categories like graffiti, street art, protest, and high art appear as salient entities, but studying them as sites of entanglement allows for analysis of their disparate and seemingly contrasting elements. Entanglements are the connections they hold to one another that practitioners often reject or ignore. They are sites of ambivalence and friction rather than celebrated areas of association or alliance. In particular, ambivalences and entanglements are fundamental to how individuals participate in diffuse forms of popular culture, like urban art. Each of these individuals and the art that they create overlap between these different genres and hegemonic influences, in spite of the rules they use to limit overlaps. For example: *cholo* writing inspired *graffiteros* like Zepia and Skort, but they somewhat estrange these origins and crew members that have *cholismo* connections; Tokio polices the boundary between high art and graffiti in his own artistic practices; and ASARO accepts and minimizes the influence of government grants in the collective's work.

In this regard, there can be no wholly "unbought and unbossed" protest or *graffiti puro* (pure graffiti, as Bekar said). The moment at which each of these is created as an authentic copy or pure protest is that at which they become open to influence and change by another force, often one of hegemonic power. Some aspect

of these aesthetics, groups, and movements will continue to connect to aesthetics, groups, and movements in a different and ambivalent context. Hegemonic forces like the government, upper class art galleries, or art school professors will likewise influence urban artists to alter their work, positionalities, and identities, causing them to transcend their assumed definitions and categories.

These tensions between commercialism and urban art, government influence and protest, do not simply show the flat domination of these forms of popular culture by hegemonic power. They show that dynamics of popular culture are based on choices and concessions that groups make in order to claim advantageous positions. Urban artists, like many (if not all) groups concede to outside influences for one reason or other, usually in the face of economic pressures. ASARO accepts government grants so that it can continue its movement. Inmpar works in an art gallery because it can provide a steady income and even sustain his creativity. Street Talent pursues branding to increase *graffiteros'* consumption of the Street Talent crew and the sale of their graffiti products. Zepia has also conversely worked to draw boundaries to prevent the contamination of *PIC*'s "street influences" and keep the crew tied to the street. Yet even this helps to minimize the concessions that Zepia's old school street influences made to commercialism. Because of the choices and concessions that they make, groups often become situated at overlaps between resistance and domination, in which they constantly move between the two. They remain entangled with these influences of hegemony, even as they downplay this entanglement.

As hegemonies influence these urban art groups, their modes of expression change, but they continue their "resistance," whether it comes in the form of protest or rebellious expressions like graffiti. ASARO, *PIC,* and Street Talent all continue their activities, but as commercialism and the government have moved in, their activities have likewise changed with them. Their resistance to these entities continues, but it becomes deeply ambivalent, such as when Akme critiques ASARO's government purse strings but treats this as a model that Street Talent can follow.

The reality of popular culture and urban art seems to lie between ASARO's reluctance to divulge its funding sources in its work and its proverbial "slap to the government" by using government funds to sustain a protest of the government. ASARO, the most vocal protestors of the Oaxacan government in urban art, are also perhaps the most consistently bankrolled by a branch of it. ASARO cannot fully disentangle itself from the government, but its members also do not seem very interested in doing so. The meaning of their protest becomes hotly contested, just as it becomes a somewhat sustainable means of drawing a salary.

Future Directions

The most central concept that could enrich this thesis pertains to gender. I briefly address gender in some areas, but its broader importance for urban art certainly has deeper implications. The fact is that urban art often operates in male dominated spaces in Oaxaca City. Women do participate but their participation is not as well-respected as men's participation. In addition, women are often so closely

scrutinized as *graffiteras* and urban artists that they do not wish to participate in it. Yet Idea in particular participated by sitting at the literal overlap between crews and genres by making friends and connections with all urban artists. In future research, much more attention is needed on how gender impacts participation in urban art.

One dimension of entanglements and urban art that this project touches on but does not fully explore is the way that urban art straddles and crosses international boundaries. Simply put, the desire to paint and the desire to expand their painting networks causes urban artists to move. At the end of my 2016 summer field season, an urban art expo in the town of Zaachila, Oaxaca, roughly an hour from the capital included artists from towns all over Oaxaca City, in addition to artists from Mexico City. Prior to my fieldwork, Zepia had lived in Tijuana and traveled all over southern and central Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador, painting graffiti at expos and touring around with new friends and crew members. A crew called One Up also came from Germany in early 2017 and painted several *bombas* around Oaxaca City with Zepia and some of the *PIC* crew members. Idea traveled several times to Mexico City and nearby Puebla to participate in paint events with her extended crew members.

During many of the nights that Zepia and I spent together while talking graffiti, hip hop, and life, we eventually arrived at Zepia's interest in leaving Oaxaca for Canada. Oaxaca has one of the largest migrant populations in Mexico, and one of its largest diasporic communities is in the Canadian province of Quebec.

After a certain number of drinks, Zepia always mentioned that he knew people there, and I always exuberantly hypothesized that there had to be French-Speaking Oaxacan *graffiteros* in Quebec City. As the excitement surrounding our guesses built, especially given Prime Minister Trudeau's relaxing of migration regulations for Mexican citizens, I would always suggest that we go to Quebec together to learn about the Oaxacan graffiti scene. Future research with regards to urban art and popular culture could address the cultural politics of identity for urban artist members of diasporic communities as the rule, rather as unique cases. For example, much work on the old-school New York subway scene focuses on graffiti and hip hop as a very New York cultural phenomenon. It would be compelling to explore the uniquely Puerto Rican and Caribbean components that influenced this urban art as it became considered something uniquely New York. Future questions of the context I have discussed with Zepia could ask: How does urban art of Oaxacans in Quebec overlap with, influence, contradict, and maybe even ignore Quebecois urban art?

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