

What the wall screams: graffiti as subaltern expression and epistemic resistance at the National University of Mexico

Lo que el muro grita: las pintas como expresión subalterna y resistencia epistémica en la Universidad Nacional de México

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ABSTRACT

University apathy is analyzed as a form of political and epistemic resistance manifested in graffiti and murals at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). Using an ethnographic and visual approach, focused on the faculties of Sciences and Political and Social Sciences, these interventions are interpreted as discursive practices that express institutional disenchantment and dispute the legitimate meanings of academic space. Far from being conceived as vandalism, graffiti is configured as forms of situated critical knowledge that challenge university epistemic authority. From the decolonial turn (Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel), the epistemologies of the South (Santos and Meneses), and the notion of subalternity (Spivak), these expressions articulate an epistemic resistance that highlights the colonial wound and questions the hegemonic canons of knowledge. Collective statements inscribed on university walls symbolically reconfigure the academic territory, revealing valemadrismo not as indifference, but as a strategy of symbolic reappropriation and dispute for the right to speak, think, and create at the university.

Keywords: Valemadrismo; Graffiti; Subalternity; Decolonial Turn; UNAM.

RESUMEN

El valemadrismo universitario es analizado como una forma de resistencia política y epistémica materializada en grafitis y murales de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). A partir de un enfoque etno-gráfico y visual, centrado en las facultades de Ciencias y Ciencias Políticas y Sociales, estas intervenciones son interpretadas como prácticas discursivas que expresan el desencanto institucional y disputan los sentidos legítimos del espacio académico. Lejos de concebirse como vandalismo, los grafitis se configuran como formas de conocimiento crítico situado que interpelan la autoridad epistémica universitaria. Desde el giro decolonial (Castro-Gómez y Grosfoguel), las epistemologías del Sur (Santos y Meneses) y la noción de subalternidad (Spivak), estas expresiones articulan una resistencia epistémica que pone en evidencia la herida colonial y cuestiona los cánones hegemónicos del saber. Enunciados colectivos inscritos en los muros universitarios reconfiguran simbólicamente el territorio académico, revelando al valemadrismo no como indiferencia, sino como una estrategia de reapropiación simbólica y de disputa por el derecho a hablar, pensar y crear en la universidad.

Palabras clave: Valemadrismo; Graffiti; Subalternidad; Giro Decolonial; UNAM.

INTRODUCTION

They say that back in 2000...

This mural didn't need to speak; it made itself known with the force of an open wound. On the one hand, you could appreciate the visual pulse of Oaxaca, an aesthetic that evoked images of wet earth and barricades; on the other, it threw us suddenly into the year 2000, when the UNAM went on strike. Each line held a memory, as if the wall had been tattooed with a turning point in the history of university rebellion. It is said that students from the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences kept their weapons in the same room, now marked by a painting of a rifle. It is not a matter of painting for the sake of painting; it is painting so as not to forget that we were also gunpowder, that we were also flame.

Anthropologist Cristina Mazariegos sums it up precisely: "Walls with graffiti are territories of resistance." They are rebellious canvases where the student community appropriates the space to express their way of thinking, their needs, and their disagreements. This is how our tour begins: with a white wall that suddenly lights up with a question: What collective wounds turn university pride into an uncomfortable mirror of shame? Because graffiti is not just marks on cement, it is memory and protest, embodying what we propose to call university valemadrismo as a symbolic, epistemological, aesthetic, and political resistance, embedded in every brick and every notebook. With these graffiti, the students challenge the coloniality of knowledge, denounce institutional exclusion and job insecurity; each stroke defies the official academic order, as Aníbal Quijano warned: "It denounces the racial classification of power". And as Santos and Meneses remind us: "It calls for other epistemologies".

It didn't break just now, and we're not going to fix it.

Have you ever heard of the broken windows theory? "If a broken window remains unrepaired, silence becomes a message: no one cares here, no one looks here, so another window breaks, [...] and in that abandonment, the echoes of crime incubate, disorder calls for disorder, as if the city breathed oblivion through the cracks in the broken glass".⁽¹⁾ That is, where there is a lot of graffiti and trash thrown in the street in public spaces; these types of elements are believed to "attract" crime and vandalism as if they were magnets. With this, many have wanted to explain why in Latin America many people give the impression of being "interested" in destroying and sabotaging their own spaces. Still, that explanation is not enough, because in various parts of the city, regardless of where there is graffiti, vandalism, or something similar, we still end up seeing the appearance of what is known in popular speech as the mythical "Pelados," perceived as people who colloquially end up doing their own thing. In Aires de familia, Monsiváis⁽²⁾ does not name them that way. Still, instead he mentions that: "The Mexican made into a stamp, a witness to himself, tattooed with the certainty that manhood is measured by the volume of noise he makes, not by the ethical consistency of his actions, [...] his image is built on the body of the other: the weak, the faggot, the woman. And so he walks, upright and armored, through the popular imagination, like a moving statue of a nation that has not learned to feel without raising its fist".

Another situation we have normalized is that when something is broken, destroyed, or being repaired, we understand it will take months to be repaired (if it ever is), which creates a sense of a lack of authority.

The only thing public about the spaces of the UNAM seems to be the name, because we constantly see how part of the public scratches, paints, breaks, dirties, or sometimes even steals, and it seems that instead of being something we all use, they are something belonging to an enemy, to someone we hate. It is as if something in our culture, beyond the characters, the classes, or the administrators, there is an infected wound that makes us destroy what could help us improve or, at least, keep us living well. Some might call it "Valemadrismo." The curious thing here is that when people talk about this term, seen through behaviors and people, they say things like, "How inconsiderate!" But let's not be confused, these behaviors are not unconscious. On the contrary, they are very conscious, as they are a big part of a power game that we all play, whether we like it or not, going through: An identity of eternal humiliation, A society of caciques, and A culture of bandits.

Identity of eternal humiliation

There is something more profound than indifference: a wounded identity, a historical complex formed by repeated defeats, by an "epistemic construction of inferiority" left behind after colonization. One's own language, neighborhood, and gestures have been labeled as "inferior." This wound is what enables the phrase: "There is no worse enemy of a Mexican than another Mexican."

A study articulates this from the perspective of subalternity, which is the impossibility of speaking from a legitimate position. The subaltern says, "I cannot speak because my voice is not registered as such, but as noise or excess". Thus, eternal humiliation is not only social or economic, but it is also epistemic. Valemadrismo is a form of symbolic survival when there is no place for dignified expression; it is a structural humiliation that makes us suspicious of our own pride. As Castro-Gómez explains, colonized societies still bear this mark, which shapes "the way subjects think of themselves." The silenced voice of generations is translated into these graffiti, a symbolic survival, the insistence of the marginal voice when no other place has been given to it.

Society of caciques

Valemadrismo is also a twisted mirror of the vertical structures that govern us. The way power is distributed has been inherited from colonial times: there is no state, there are lords, there are no institutions, there are favors. In this context, "obedience" becomes false and authority a farce; respect is feigned while contempt is cultivated.

The society of caciques that governs us also affects the university. Valemadrismo does not arise out of nowhere; it is a distorted mirror of our historical power structures. Santos and Meneses call it internal colonialism: hierarchical pyramids that impose their voice without consultation or dialogue. Under this vertical reign, graffiti studies its own codes, as Santiago Guervós says, becoming "situated interpretation, [...] knowledge that cannot be reduced to universal and tactical systems." The graffiti in the hallways is,

therefore, a coded expression of impotence that shouts.

“You will not tame me even if I pretend to obey.” In each phrase, one can delve into the mockery of the rector or the professor who does not listen. One can read the lucid cynicism of those who do not believe in the system but inhabit it to redraw it from below.

Bandit culture

Valemadrismo is also fueled by bandit culture, where bandits do not justify crime, but rather the idea of breaking unjust rules. Popular culture even romanticizes, for example, narco culture as those who “break free from the margins imposed by the system.” Castro-Gómez⁽³⁾ explains it well: It is a critique of enlightened morality that demands a single form of civility while hiding its own violence. In this sense, the graffiti artist is not the petty thief on the corner, but anyone who disobeys institutional logic. Santos and Meneses even highlight that the bandit can be a form of epistemic resistance. The key to valemadrismo is not only “to disobey, but to obey another logic, that of the body, the neighborhood, and the cry”. In a sense, this is how the history of Latin American countries has been forged, and it is clear that, as a Mexican university, it is pertinent to say that the characteristics mentioned above are not separate from what is experienced daily with the members and spaces that make up the highest house of learning.

From Brush to Marker: Mexican Muralism

Mexican muralism in the 1920s and 1930s filled public squares and buildings with stories laden with meaning. Its purpose was to be a manifestation of public and socially committed art, conveying political and cultural messages through large murals inspired by the Mexican Revolution. This movement became a unique form of expression and social demand. Its leading exponents (Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros) sought to represent class struggle, national identity, and social injustice through images of heroic peasants, popular struggles, and a glorified indigenous origin. The central objective of muralism was not to perpetuate an “identity of eternal humiliation,” but rather to construct a national identity that exalted the subjugated people, primarily through representation of the class struggle. From this perspective, and taking the three pillars of “valemadrismo” (a Mexican slang term meaning “I don’t care”) as a reference, revolutionary muralism is mainly linked to the culture of bandits. Revolutionaries such as Zapata and Villa were depicted almost as heroes who challenged the established order in the name of justice.

Revolutionary muralism is mainly linked to the culture of bandits. Revolutionaries such as Zapata and Villa were depicted almost as heroes who challenged the established order in the name of justice. Symbolically, muralism vindicated the figure of the popular “outlaw” as an emblem of rebellion and social justice, in contrast to the “culture of caciques” of the old elite. On the other hand, it also sought to give voice to workers, peasants, and indigenous people, though always within an official discourse. As a study points out, “the knowledge of the oppressed is often systematically silenced in official history: a ‘sanctioned ignorance’ is generated about subaltern memory.” However, the murals exalted class struggle and national identity; the voice of the people remained mediated by the state and the revolutionary elites. A study states that this “epistemic blindness imposed by Eurocentrism can only be overcome by achieving an ‘ecology of knowledge’ that recognizes other forms of knowledge.” This leads us to an interesting question: can we consider graffiti to be an informal extension of muralism? Urban art, colloquially known as graffiti, is an artistic expression that reflects social events, emotions, and social criticism.

Its history dates back to the Roman Empire, where it served to denounce and ridicule a social group.⁽⁴⁾

Grffiti began to gain popularity in the United States in the 1960s. In the following decades, spray paint became widely used for graffiti, mainly on subway cars. However, the “clean train” project forced American graffiti artists to move their art to the city walls.

Mexican graffiti has a history parallel to the movement in the United States, according to the Mexican magazine *Máspormás* in the article “A conocer la historia del Graffiti en México” (Getting to know the history of graffiti in Mexico), which interviews Pablo Romo, curator of the first section of “Ilegal” at the Foto Museo Cuatro Caminos. He reveals that those who painted graffiti in New York City were Latinos. At that time, it was called Chola or Chicana culture. It was in the 1970s that they were given the name graffiti.^(5,6) There is no single objective, which is what promotes the multiplicity of meanings, including creating spaces in which art and culture are promoted through a message. The Lamudi⁽⁷⁾ website states that “it is about space and graffiti coming together to develop new urban contexts.” In other words, graffiti allows us to appropriate the spaces we inhabit, complementing and, at the same time, confronting muralism. While muralism seeks to generate an aesthetic sense of beauty, graffiti provokes discomfort, questioning space, power, and memory more directly. Urban messages function as an unofficial discourse of the people.

A study illustrates this idea with the story of Bhubaneswari, a young woman who wrote a message on her body before committing suicide, describing it as “a kind of graffiti,” emphasizing that even the most extreme expressions emerge from the margins, thus graffiti can be read as the voice of the subaltern: it does not speak from the elite, but from new places, institutional and non-institutional, where it can be heard. In the case of the UNAM, valemadrismo is neither an accident nor an oversight: it is a rehearsed step, a way of navigating its own paradoxes. On the one hand, it proclaims itself as the “great cradle of critical thinking in the country”; on the other, it reproduces the same logic of exclusion, indifference, and attrition that it so strongly criticizes. Just as in Alice in Wonderland, where it was not normal to celebrate your birthday, but rather your “unbirthday,” at the UNAM, the great festival of silence is celebrated, where everyone plays their part in the general omission. Faced with this gray landscape, graffiti bursts in with its dirtiness, urgency, and discomfort; it is like collective vomiting in the face of an institutionality that, in its cruelest form, no longer even pretends to listen.⁽⁸⁾

Can the subordinate paint?

Based on the culture and everything we saw, we propose a theory called university valemadrismo. What is university valemadrismo? We can think of it as a dialectic, a situated aesthetic that mixes cynicism and hope, characteristic of Latin American

students, in the case of the UNAM, heirs of the “blue and gold pride” of the post-revolutionary “cosmic race.” In everyday practice, it manifests in graffiti and murals on campus, with black humor and rebellion, the university community ironically distances itself from official structures and reappropriates the visual space of the UNAM, so that graffiti speaks its own code, distinct from academic discourse, and challenges the false mirage of excellence.⁽⁹⁾

Graffiti that thinks: subaltern graffiti in the spaces of the UNAM (FCPyS and Sciences):

“We are the shame of university pride”: a phrase painted on a neutral background, subverting the guiding motto “The spirit will speak for my race.” It reads like an ironic punch; the student does not assume pride, but shame for an unequal system.⁽¹⁰⁾

“Darwin Misogynist”: a mocking portrait of Charles Darwin with a pink beard, accompanied by that caption. Painting it this way is a subversive act, highlighting the gender bias and ethnocentrism in traditional scientific discourse. The icon of science becomes critical of “Science with a capital S” that forgets women, their contributions, and their epistemologies. This mural not only denounces historical exclusion but also invites us to rethink science from an inclusive and diverse perspective, vindicating the active presence of women in the production of knowledge, in scientific memory, and in social transformation.

“We Are Roots”: the mural shows a bright yellow corn kernel on a gray background, accompanied by its slogan, and is inspired by Zapatista philosophy. It rejects the division between nature and culture, as Philippe Descola points out, and its use of naturalistic color invites us to “re-examine sensitive relationships with the environment.” The mural functions as a device of knowledge, proposing not universal abstractions, but a situated epistemology, in line with the non-Western ontologies that Descola analyzes. Each stroke and each color seeks to raise awareness of the interdependence between humans and non-humans, while vindicating the autonomy of indigenous knowledge and its link to the earth. In this sense, the work constitutes an indigenous and environmental vindication, a call to originate understanding from the local and from the very root of life (like corn).^(11,12)

Another World Where Many Worlds Fit (Solkitl Fauna, Rosario Quetz, and Fer Ferm): in the course *Struggle and Resistance* in Latin America, our professor challenged us: “Final projects don’t always have to be written,” he asked us, “Who will read those projects?” With that question, he urged us to transcend paper and to think of the Faculty’s space and memory as an open canvas. At the end of the course, groups usually organize themselves to produce fanzines, textiles, posters... and years ago, a group of classmates decided to go further, transforming room A-201 (the classroom where we took the course) into a mural.^(13,14)

The phrase they chose resonates like a collective chant: “people and nature are home, home must be love, the stars shine on us, the future is the answer. In the struggle to sow the seed of freedom, we ride our bicycles to the mountain of courage where we find the flower of autonomy that grows in community.” Each word became a stroke, each line a gesture of resistance. This mural dialogues with urban graffiti, those marks of life that resist oblivion, that challenge passersby and demand that they think of history, nature, and freedom as intertwined fabrics. It is an act of memory and vindication, of making the invisible visible and inhabiting the classroom as a political and poetic space.^(15,16,17) Thus, in front of this mural that opens like a painted heart, the question arises: what other marks could we leave on the world if every word and color were an act of resistance?^(18,19,20)

Calceñ con Rombos-Man: Calceñ con Rombos-Man, a character from *31 Minutos*, holds up a slogan that breaks the routine of the hallways: “Every scientist has the right to find the truth without fear.” The red background is not accidental; it is the color of urgency, of rage, but also of the love that drives us to transform the status quo. The character’s humor and tenderness contrast with the seriousness of the message, reminding us that science is not neutral; it has been historically constructed through silences and exclusions. That intense red screams what academia sometimes silences: that women, with their knowledge and courage, have been relegated in the search for truth. This mural is part of the mural tradition as an aesthetic and political act. It not only beautifies the surface but also redistributes the sensitive, forcing us to look differently and to recognize that each stroke is a stance against fear, invisibility, and epistemic injustice. In its simplicity, it is a reminder that truth should not be a privilege but a right, and that laughter and irony are also forms of resistance. Here, in front of the red wall and the voice of a hero turned prophet, the inevitable question resounds: what would happen if every academic space were painted with the truths that women have yet to tell?^(21,22,23)

“When you read little, you shoot a lot”: its aesthetic strength lies in its simplicity, a brief message, written with firm strokes that break the surface of the wall in the shape of a bullet. Here, beauty does not seek to delight, but to challenge; as Rancière would say: “It is a redistribution of the sensible, a reordering of the visible in public space.” The phrase reveals a direct relationship between ignorance and violence, where books are lacking, and bullets are abundant. Critically speaking, the absence of reading is not only a cultural deficiency, but also fertile ground for barbarism. Benjamin recalled that every document of culture bears traces of barbarism; in this case, the mural warns that without culture, all that remains is shooting. The work is not an urban decoration, but an insurgent memory. Reading is presented as resistance to violence, a different weapon, capable of defusing shots with words.^(24,25)

“The revenge of the victims is memory” and “The struggle that is lost is the one that is forgotten”: written in red on the gray concrete, these slogans are not just graffiti, but cracks in the surface of history. On the one hand, they confront us with the country’s criminal past and, at the same time, call for an inclusive science that recognizes the voices and places of women. As Paul Ricoeur states, forgetting constitutes a “second death”; an event disappears from the historical fabric if it is not narrated and remembered. Hence, a seemingly defeated struggle is not truly lost as long as it remains an active memory, capable of fertilizing futures. On the other hand, when it is forgotten, it is extinguished both as a warning and as inspiration. That is why these phrases resonate so strongly: they remind us that the victims’ revenge is to remember, and that every wall written on is a way to prolong the struggle.^(26,27,28)

University graffiti thus validates a subaltern and multiversal knowledge. It dialogues with Spivak by asking “who speaks?” in those messages, with Santos’ epistemologies of the South by defending the legitimacy of these marginal voices, and with Castro-Gómez’s decolonial approach by diversifying the symbolic space of the campus. They bring to life both a collective memory (of struggles such as the EZLN and Ayotzinapa) and an anti-hegemonic practice of meaning-making. In this sense, even apparent student apathy becomes action: “student indifference (valemadrismo) can be read as a challenge to the hegemonic order of knowledge.”^(29,30)

“Years later, we are still the flame, we will continue to light other fires, and our fire will never be extinguished.”

Graffiti is not empty vandalism; it is the breath of the subaltern, the anti-hegemonic pulse that trembles on the walls. As the UNAM itself warns, “reducing it to vandalism is a sign of ignorance.” Each clandestine message claims other truths, giving visibility to voices that those in power have sought to silence. The painted walls, with their imperfect strokes, are a legitimate art form, as valid as any protest with banners. With poetic urgency, they burst onto the campus, contrasting with the institutional silence and rigidity of the faculties. They are the cracks through which fresh air enters, a reminder that critical thinking is not only written in indexed articles, but also in brushstrokes of rage and hope.^(31,32) Therefore, in closing this presentation, we do not offer a conclusion, but rather a call to action: let us critically reclaim not only the UNAM, but all the universities of Latin America. If campuses are “cradles of critical thinking” and, at the same time, reproduce logics of exclusion, then graffiti is an excellent way to show us the path to vindication from below. We invite you to visit the UNAM facilities. Still, above all, we also invite you to read your own walls and graffiti that each of you carries with you, to question the dominant canon, and to join the dialogue of knowledge. Only then will universities cease to be places of silent non-birthdays and become actual collective conversations. And then, faced with the force of color bursting onto the gray stone, the question remains suspended like an echo: how many of our walls will remain silent, and how many will we dare to write on so that memory is not extinguished?^(33,34,35)

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