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Youth Identities and Graffiti: Multiple Forms of Living, Thinking, and Expressing the City Through Graffiti¹

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*"If eyes they have, that they don't see me,
If hands they have, that they don't catch me,
If feet they have, that they don't get me.
Do not permit them to surprise me by the back, Amen."*
-Prayer found in a wall at Barrio El Refugio in Puebla (Mexico)².

Graffiti is a very interesting urban language. Its firstly, a pictorial language, but it may also develop a collective space of sharing, and some interesting social dynamics. That's why I considered necessary to focus on graffers stories about their practice. This is a work in process, based on fieldwork with some graffers, mostly done on the last summer. It seeks to register the experiences of a group of graffers, not a specific crew, or consolidated collective. They live in different places of central Mexico, but they have met in Puebla for different reasons. It is not a consolidated crew or collective, but I propose that we can track them down as a network. So, these paper is willing to share some of the experiences that three of the interviewers shared with me: Jios, Karas and Tzompantli.³ I am proposing that graffiti, as a communicational potential develop a space of encounter and sharing on the city, while it permits their citizens to narrate themselves while painting. But also, I propose that the term "graffiti" is limitative to refer to a flexible and more complex social process that does not only refer to the illegality of painting on the walls or the technique used.

First, it seems important to me to talk a little about my own process of investigation. When I sent my abstract, I was contextualizing it in San Andrés Cholula, a small town in Puebla, México, which is interesting because we can find different dynamics converging in one space. The first one is confirmed by the people who have live there by generations, they are the "traditional families." Their economy has changed from an agricultural and farming based economy to a service economy since the arrival of the UDLAP (a prestigious university there in Puebla), and the increase on the land

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² Translated from the original in Spanish. Every quote used for this paper has been translated by the author, hoping the main idea of what the subjects said still gets clear.

³ All of them were interviewed and, except for Tzompantli, were recorded with their authorization. They have been informed that their interviews were going to be used with academic purposes.

value. The second group is the one conformed by people who arrived from the past few years. They are mainly foreign who come to study to the multiple universities of the area. It has also been suffering a modernization process, derived by the increase of luxurious residential complexes and a tourist focused project. Cholula is also an important tourism destination because of its archaeological site, one of the most important sites of Mesoamerican archaeology, due to The Great Pyramid of Cholula, which has the largest base recorded on a pyramid in the world. My attempt was to dimension how graffers were responding to these processes of structural change and modernization.

During the fieldwork, I faced a main problem: the graffers I wanted to interview were hard to find because they were inexistent. The subjects in which I based all my investigation weren't graffers in a strict sense. They have been graffers a very short time, and then disappeared of the field of action. They were graffers because they were on a specific life age, the adolescence, which is normal in the region. A most interesting finding was that people of Cholula were not necessarily painting in Cholula, and, people painting in Cholula, were of many different origins.

I was also ready to find a "traditional graffer," a graffer in a strict sense: part of a crew, who protects his territory, that stays on his territory, and has some specific identity codes. Instead, what I found was a subject that constructs himself by its practice, that can sometimes be contradictory, and that is diverse. A subject who is no longer part of "a crew," but that can relate with a bunch of groups, either crews or collectives, and that constructs networks with another subject all over the state, country, or even, in the most extreme cases, all over the world. And it's this situation that marks a breach within we may consider a graffer's "territory." I couldn't find the "traditional graffer," but I did find a dynamic subject who can think of himself as a graffer or as an artist, depending the situation, as a stencil group, or as a propaganda collective when they don't want to paint alone. What I want to share with you are some of these findings towards a first analysis.

These "findings" can be synthesized in the following leading ideas:

- Between the graffers, there are hierarchies, different forms of conceive and use the time and space, and different forms of managing the legality/illegality.

- Graffers process of construction and self-recognition, and the way they live the stigma and/or social acceptance is dynamic and tend to vary with the age, formal education, personal abilities and social context.
- Graffers seek refuge on its practice (graffiti and other graphic expressions), and seek some social mobility or modification of their reality on purpose of their own practice
- Their urban imaginary is mobile and expandable.

“I’m not a graffer, I have developed my own technique.”

“We are studying Plastic Arts, but we want to work in graffiti. Well... we are graffers.” – Tzompantli

“I was so judged when I used a brush, or another tool to make the painting easier. The ones who make a piece, criticized me, they said, “that is not graffiti. Better to let down the brush...” And things like that, when I knew how to use aerosol... Well, according to myself, because maybe I’m lacking some of it. But I didn’t stay with aerosol only, but with the knowledge I was learning on school, all about plastic materials, and the application in the wall. It turns good to me, because I have done a mix, a hybrid.” - Jios

For now, thinking of being a graffer is, for some of them, being illegal, to paint bombs, wild style, tags, and other traditional forms of graffiti, as the one conceived by Silva in urban sites of Colombia (Silva 1987), to be part of a crew, and to paint for the crew and the territory of the barrio. Another important characteristic is that, they also think graffers paint for themselves as a selfish act. But, all my interviewed subjects, who recognized themselves as graffers, while just one of them is part of a specific crew, have done collaborations with other groups, and have painted by themselves, independently. All of them have painted for a social cause or movement, including Cholula Viva y Digna, the CNTE movement, Ayotzinapa cause, even with the Zapatistas, and not any of them achieves the characteristics given for a graffer. Some may think of themselves as graffers because of these characteristics, and some may refuse to be called like these, because, they don’t achieve all these characteristics, especially the thing about being part of a crew and of being attached to a specific territory. They think of this as restricting elements.

The important thing here is that, although they don’t have the same self-identification, they may constitute, with words of one of them “a work team.” They could collaborate with each other. That way, no one is attached to anyone in a strict sense, but by the will of working together, seeking

to collaborate, and to make bounds even of friendship. But, also, to be connected to others may mean future mobility opportunities, but also recognition if they paint with “the correct person” which may mean to paint with an already recognized grafter, but also because they can say they have painted in more distant places. So, graffiti, and other graphical expressions, such as stencil or street art, are first, communicative resources, because it could be an excuse for developing different social processes, such as a specific kind of experiencing the city based on the relationships created, as we may talk later.

The problematic transition between being illegal or legal

“Ilegalear is, for example... sometimes it means going very drunk... There’s some *banda* that is illegal in an unconscious way. Well, maybe they are conscious, but they are on a drunk state, or drugged. Maybe that’s the way of motivating themselves. (...) Sometimes they set their own goal of “*rifarse*” (to dare) and do an illegal. Illegal is not only (painting) without permission. Is to jump the walls, jump into roofs, climb buildings.” (Jios)

Although they express the physical implications of doing illegals, there is an emotional factor as well: adrenaline. This adrenaline is key, because it motivates and empowers them. The adrenaline is the base of gaining respect. One good element in graffiti is to control the physical symptoms of adrenaline, such as a shaky hand, so the painting be successful. It also demands to control those symptoms so the person can react to any dangers, such as the police, “*los tiras*.” They fear the police, because they know how police treat people, any better if the ones that they caught are disposable “criminals.” And graffiti without permission is a crime, as stated on a law approved in Puebla on March 2015, later known as “Ley Antigraffiti.” According to that law, graffiti is such a crime that the punishments may be equiparable to the ones that a thief or even a small grade homicide could receive. Its base is the violation of the private and public property, which to me, it’s very ironic. Another important point is that, as a violation of the property, the treatment is harsher if the transgression falls into public property than into private property.

Public property is defined by law as public monuments, historical buildings, and what is recognized by UNESCO as World Heritage (413 BIS Código Penal de Puebla), because the City of Puebla has these recognition. What is the logic behind? The city, as a regulative structure (Sevilla 2008), with its controlled times, its own rhythms and rules, have stated a logic of consumption. That’s how the citizen has become not a citizen, but a consumer (Lindon 2004). The effect is that as

not being a consumer, they are disposable. They may be acceptable workers, but not anything else. In this logic, the ones who are not relevant to the consumption system, may be excluded. That is how they end without opportunities of good jobs or even life common opportunities, growing up on violent contexts (most of them have been raised on popular barrios, and zones that are considered dangerous, exposed to drugs, and organized crime).

These negation of a common life is not an easy subject on their lives. It has been a complicated process of negotiation with their environment, and with themselves, as one of themselves have told about it,

“it is a process. Is not like from one day to another, you woke up discovering your talent and being like, I’m going to be a *estencilero*. It is a process in which you may ask yourself, why are you doing these, for whom are you painting, is it relevant to the society? Or are you just being as selfish as everyone? That’s what I told to my kids when I give the workshops, even if I was on their place, when there is nothing for you, I could. There’s no need to fall in drugs or alcohol, or violence. I don’t do drugs! Well... I do some alcohol, but everything is controlled. So, that’s the thing, I do these to demonstrate the others that there is always a way, a different way of doing things.” (Karas Urbanas).

So, graffiti, and all the other expressions are also resistance, a way of showing an alternative way of doing things. As it challenges the normal way of doing things, all the regulatory system, the logic of the city, and the property, it is also problematic for them. It challenges even the dichotomy of the prohibited and the permitted. Here’s where we find the wall. A wall is a limit between a space and another, it enunciates these dichotomy, the space of the prohibited, and the space of the permitted. But it is not only a limit, it is also a frontier.

The frontier, is different to a limit. The frontier is a possibility, it is a space in conflict. The wall is a frontier because it has two sides, one is the private side, it’s a house wall, a school wall, a church wall, maybe. The other is the street one. And the street is public. As we have said, the street is a place for meetings, is the space in which relationships may consolidate. As they ask for permission to the same system that rejects them, their own processes of self-recognition are being challenged. And the ones that are not asking for permission are challenged also, thus, because, when some of them legalizes, the others are just the black sheep of the society. Even, there may be a rejection between graffers who asks for permission and the ones that don’t. Some of them have stated that they do illegals when there is no space for them to paint. If there is not a permitted space, they may find a way to paint.

Exclusion and stigmatization

When they paint in legality, they are not just painting with permission, they are looking for legitimation. They are pronouncing their own existence, their own dignity, and the dignity on their practice. Painting as a legal is not a way of surrender, a way of doing the “good thing to do,” is a valid and legitimate way of doing things, it has a political dimension. They say they want to live from graffiti, to make graffiti (or their own graphical expressions) a form of living:

“Once, I won a contest of graffiti. The winner went to paint on Cumbre Tajín (a Mexican cultural and musical massive festival). We went to Veracruz, to the event with all payed, and we painted for the event. It was very cool. And that was the moment in which my parents saw that graffiti wasn’t as bad, that it could be a way. I think that was the moment when they got convinced on what I was doing. That it was not only a waste of time, or a game. That it was serious.” (Tzompantli)

So, in these process, they must convince the others, their near others, that what they do is a real deal. Even though they are convinced, the others’ opinions may hurt them:

“They call us *vagos*, they don’t know all the work that’s behind. I study, I work to pay my materials, and I invest time on my work.” (Tzompantli)

“It hurts when someone calls me at the street, “go get a job!” Because they don’t know what’s behind. It’s my effort. But that’s their opinion. I can’t change their opinion, and I can’t change what they like or dislike.” (Jios)

By the other hand, there’s some “dignity” on these rejection of society, especially for the *illegaleros*. As they are more rejected, the more heroes they become. There’s a crew in Tlaxcala, that has a lot of work in Puebla. In one of the main streets on the historical area of the city, there’s an abandoned building. Right at the top it says “Tepoz,” the crew’s name. It was done at the night, they were drugged and drunk, and the police was close. Still, they do climb the building and painted the bomb. Or at least that’s what they say on the streets. The graffers that know about this stuff knows the story, and when they tell it, they tell it with respect. As the “legals” are trying to legitimate themselves through the school, the illegals are doing these by risk, and each of them will think the worse of the other. Still, we might not think that these categories are absolutes. As a matter of fact, most of them will transit from illegal to legal and back. It will depend on where they are, and with whom they are. If the chance is given, they might take advantage of the situation.

“Before Facebook, there was Metroflog”

“By that time, there wasn’t Facebook, there was something called Metroflog... then, the “banda...” what was useful to graffers in Metroflog, was that they uploaded their paints and you commented to them, or you said to them to find a spot, there, where they lived. Then, with all the pleasure, they invited you. And then while you arrived to the place, surely, they shared something about themselves, about their community, about how they begun with graffiti. Then, it was sort of a network, in Metroflog. There, most of the graffers will put their work, in Metroflog, and then you will leave your signature. And there you also could contact them. I knew a lot of people with Metroflog. And then, there was Facebook, and the people took advantage of that.” (Jios)

Digital social networks are very relevant for these groups. Social networks, such as Facebook and Instagram, are used as a platform to meet other’s work, and to others to know their own work. Most of them have a personal page in Facebook, in addition to their personal profile.

It may seem very important to know people, because, the relevance of being a graffer is right there. It is all about knowing the right people, to be producing graffiti regularly, and the best way to get spots is with the help of networking.

The importance of the networking is to have painting spots. The spots are important because it keeps them producing work, so they have something to upload into their profiles, and people may recognize them. But it also allows them to meet new places. It means that they will know new people, but also, their own urban territories may expand. These expanded territories are important, here is where we find stories. Arfuch (2013) states that the space contains biographies, that people may construct their own biography through their perception and experience through the space. That way, the city (the graffers construct the city) tells its own stories, through graffiti. Graffers may express a feeling, may send a personal code, or maybe just paint what they see, and what they see may vary with their own personal experience: Karas Urbanas paint the faces of the people that he has known and that cause a deep impact on him. That way, he pays tribute to them, and tells their story. He thinks that by doing these, he can make a difference on the world.

Jios, for example, takes with him his own place of birth everywhere. He is from a small town in Tlaxcala, which translation from Náhuatl is “land of Xicotes,” so he paints xicotes, and cactuses, because that’s what his town has. That way, he is giving information of his town to other people, and he also gives them something of himself.

There are such important things of their lives that they want to share with the others. Jios and Albadelia, for example, went to an event on El Refugio, which is a peripheral *barrio* in the city. And they exactly painted some of those things they want to share. They frequently go to a lithography workshop in Tlaxcala to learn. They told me that they spend most of the time there. Their best friends are the ones that they met there. Both met there. So, on these *pinta*, what they painted was a self-portrait of Jios. On the head, he has the lithography tools, and on the sweatshirt, it has the workshop logo. On his hands, there are pieces of lithography's that their friends have done. This *pinta* express the person's motivation, as it declares the space as its own, as it tells a story, their story. That's the thing about painting on the street, they (the people that paints in the street) tell the story, graphically as a *pinta*, and literally, if someone asks for it.

As they know new people, these people, other graffers, mostly, will invite them to paint with them to their own places. And they will not only share their spots, but their own stories. That's how they know each other, by telling their stories while they paint. That way, those new spaces acquire new meanings and new stories. They live the space, and the city in encounters, in relationships made: the territories are expanded, while they can move themselves through the world, and while they paint and sign their works, they expand it in terms of relationships. The work they have done is just the materialization of these process, the significations behind contains this encounter between themselves and the authority, but maybe it is the materialization of the relationship created between the place and them: having visited Athens, for example is not only visiting its touristic points, is marking the wall and signing it as its own. They may narrate themselves through these action, how they did it, with whom, and in which terms. The city is no longer the same as before, and they are no longer the same either, they have talked to people, they have learnt new things, they have experienced some more. So, when they came back home, they may be the one who has painted in Athens, and in Tijuana, that knows Black Le Rat.⁴

As a summary, there are collective subjects who kept constructing and deconstructing themselves through their practice, and conditioned, but not always limited by the space. And there are also individual subjects who are on a constant process of self-recognizing through their *pintas*, through the places they visit and the experience they live, and these places are not limited, they may vary as much diverse are their friends, they constitute extended territories, and extended practices.

⁴ A famous French stencilero mentioned by Karas.

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