Rebel Aesthetics

Street Art, Urban Space, and Militarization in Heritage Mexico

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During a group interview with members of Arte Jaguar, a pioneering graffiti and street art crew in Oaxaca, Mexico, artists shared their memories of participating in a social movement that took grassroots control of the city in 2006. As we sat in the back room of an art space they opened in 2009, they echoed a common theme among young people who participated in the movement: a strong sense of pride in being recognized by elders and community members for their contributions to the movement. For youth in those groups, being praised and respected by elders, teachers, and neighbors for the same practices for which they had normally been criminalized (painting in the streets, confrontations with police, etc.) was transformative, especially in regard to their sense of ownership of public space and "right to the city."[1] An Arte Jaguar member from a periurban *colonia* (neighborhood) named Pueblo Nuevo shared this memory with me of painting a piece at his neighborhood barricade during the grassroots takeover:

> I was at the barricade the first day of the *desmadre* [federal police repression]. I painted a semi-trailer for the people of my barrio because they asked me, since they knew that I painted, "Why don't you paint something over here, in the barrio?" I said "Of course!" [It read:] *¡Viva Pueblo Nuevo! Oaxaca, México*. . . . I remember vividly, it had a woman with her fist raised, and the *pinche* phrase across the whole trailer.[2]

Moments like these continue to inform the collective practices and sensibilities of artists—which I refer to as rebel aesthetics—more than a decade later. Rebel aesthetics include artistic interventions, as well as other space-making practices such as transforming city streets into spaces of celebration and political action through processions, dissident cultural events, and direct actions, and the creation of autonomous social centers where emergent political cultures can grow.[3] Importantly, the participation of artists in the 2006 social movement, including those in Arte Jaguar, went beyond their roles as visual artists. They were active producers of an emergent and multifaceted rebel aesthetics that included erecting and guarding neighborhood barricades and forming the front lines of self-defense against paramilitary and police convoys. Both in 2006 and today, movement artists understand their artistic interventions as part of broader spatial practices rooted in a collective "right to the city" politics.[4]

The popular takeover of the city was violently squashed by the Mexican Federal Police in late 2006. The experience of participating in that experiment with participatory democracy, grassroots governance, and insurgent space making,[5] as well as the brutal repression used by the state to regain control and the explosion in militarization of Mexican society that same year under the guise of the drug war, have all shaped the contours of the rebel aesthetic particular to the current generation of Oaxacan artists and activists. The rebel aesthetic of Oaxacan artists features heavy use of graffiti, wheatpaste,

1. Henri Lefebvre, *Le droit à la ville* (Paris: Anthropos, 1968).

2. Original: "En la barricada en que me toco los primeros madrazos el primer día que se puso el desmadre. Yo me avente un trailer pero era para los colonos de mi barrio porque ellos me dijieron como sabían que yo pintaba 'No pues avientate una pintada acá en el barrio.' Sobres no, Viva Pueblo Nuevo, Oaxaca, Mexico. Y ahí me avente una –me recuerdo mucho una señora con un puño y la pinche frase, tomo todo el trailer." All translations are by the author unless otherwise noted.

3. Maurice Rafael Magaña, *Cartographies of Youth Resistance: Hip-Hop, Punk, and Urban Autonomy in Mexico*, 1st ed. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020). My development of rebel aesthetics is influenced by Jessica Winegar's theorization of aesthetics of protest and aesthetic ordering in the context of the Egyptian Revolution of 2011. Jessica Winegar, "A Civilized Revolution: Aesthetics and Political Action in Egypt," *American Ethnologist* 43, no. 4 (2016): 609–22.

4. Lefebvre, *Le droit à la ville*.

5. Jeffrey Hou, *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

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stencils, and elaborate murals.[6] With the exception of muralism, the other techniques allow for quick production and reproduction in the streets, which are essential qualities for illicit pieces, given the ever-present threat of state and vigilante violence. These techniques also allow artists to amplify their interventions through collective reproduction by distributing their stencils or wheatpaste art to others to apply in the streets.

In this article, I examine how a new generation of artists and organizers in Oaxaca lay claim to space and heritage in a context characterized by the celebration of ethnic difference vis-à-vis neoliberal multiculturalism, and the militarization and violence characteristic of Mexico's "drug war," which has claimed over one hundred thousand lives over the past decade.[7] The spaces targeted by artists are particularly contentious due to the politics of heritage tourism—they are culturally and socially meaningful spaces for Oaxacans because of their historical importance, yet precisely because of this historical importance they are seen as a resource for the state and tourism-related industries. Anthropologist Néstor García Canclini refers to this duality between the historical and structural functions as the "double enrollment" of Indigenous symbols and culture in postrevolutionary Mexico.[8] García Canclini cautions us not to make the mistake of thinking of the relationship between heritage and capitalism as exclusively a one-way, top-down process. The state and capitalist market are hegemonic forces, to be sure. The state, whether through curriculum in public schools, tourism marketing campaigns, or policing practices, shapes the meanings of heritage and its associated spaces, as well as their legitimate uses and users. Artists and organizers, however, also imprint their own meanings and suggest alternative uses for these spaces of heritage and other public spaces via rebel aesthetics.

Thus, newer generations of artists and organizers carve out a niche in local opposition politics that serves as an impactful, though sometimes contentious, complement to the forms and norms of established opposition groups like labor unions and old Left organizations. Together, the creativity and fluidity of rebel aesthetics, along with the powerful reach of traditional opposition groups, form a larger "ecology of resistance" that disrupts politics and business as usual in the city, and offers alternative designs for what public space and urban sociality might look like.[9] This article deploys the metaphor of the palimpsest—the ancient technique of manuscript production where parchment was used and then scraped or washed in order to be reused—in order to help the reader visualize the layered and contentious terrain upon which rebel aesthetics, militarization and surveillance, and heritage tourism intervene. I focus specifically on how graffiti and visual street art are used to challenge hegemonic uses of culture and difference, the ability of the state to control public space, and the invisibility and marginalization of contemporary Indigenous people in Mexico (figs. 1–3). The graffiti and visual street art that I focus on here was selected due to the dialogue and interaction between the images and their placement in spaces (an archeological site and a UNESCO World Heritage Site) that are central to the business of heritage tourism in Oaxaca.

INDIGENOUS SELF-REPRESENTATION AND HERITAGE TOURISM

As I scrolled through my Facebook feed on June 1, 2016, a post featuring two side-by-side photographs caught my eye. The first photo captured a mural of a young woman in typical Zapotec dress of the Central Valley of Oaxaca, covered in tattoos and taking a selfie with a smartphone (fig. 4). The mural was painted in various hues of blue, framed by Zapotec-style figures and geometric detail, and the words "Por ti estoy así/I am like this because of you." The vibrant blue background of the mural matched the nearby street sign announcing the entrance of the archeological site of Zaachila, which was the last capital of the

6. Wheatpaste, also called "paste ups," is a technique involving preprinting an image on paper and then applying it to a wall or other surface using a brush and homemade adhesive.

7. Charles R. Hale, "Neoliberal Multiculturalism," *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 28, no. 1 (May 2005): 10–19, https://doi.org/10.1525/pol.2005.28.1.10; Brianna Lee and Danielle Renwick, "Mexico's Drug War," Council on Foreign Relations, 2017, www.cfr.org/backgrounder/mexicos-drug-war.

8. Néstor García Canclini, *Transforming Modernity: Popular Culture in Mexico*, trans. Lidia Lozano (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 45. Though he was analyzing Indigenous artisanal production in his discussion of "double enrollment," I argue the same logic is at play with pre-Columbian heritage tourism.

9. Othon Alexandrakis, "Incidental Activism: Graffiti and Political Possibility in Athens, Greece," *Cultural Anthropology* 31, no. 2 (May 9, 2016): 272–96, https://doi.org/10.14506/ca31.2.06; Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010); Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

FIGURES 1–3. Stencil being applied collectively and in layers during a march, 2010, Oaxaca (photographs provided by the author)

Zapotec civilization and is located in the present-day town of Villa de Zaachila, roughly four miles outside of Oaxaca City. The mural was on an outside facing wall of a privately owned house adjacent to the archeological site. The Indigenous muralists are Dario Canul and Cosijoesa Cerna, from the nearby city of Tlacolula de Matamoros. Collectively, the artists go by the name of Los Tlacolulokos.[10] They have a very distinct style, frequently combining public art, Indigenous culture, transnational urban culture, and a critique of heritage tourism. I immediately knew the mural was theirs when it popped up in my feed.

The second photograph featured in the post showed the mural sloppily covered up with white paint and political campaign propaganda for upcoming municipal elections (fig. 5). Many saw the literal whitewashing of the mural in favor of electoral propaganda as a clear sign of a political class that doesn't value culture unless it attracts tourists and revenue. I asked Los Tlacolulokos for their interpretation of the whitewashing and received this reply in August of 2018:

> The message is clear. The responsibility for a mural ultimately falls on the property owner and they can easily change their mind for a few pesos. It is culture that pays the cost of social neglect. And to make matters worse, it was political propaganda. This also reflects the inevitable and ephemeral advertisements that contaminate our lives year in and year out.[11]

The Facebook post that first alerted me to the mural and its cover-up was published by Zaanarte, a group that organizes an annual street art and mural festival in the town of Zaachila. Los Tlacolulokos were invited to contribute the mural as part of Zaanarte's inaugural event, which was held in August 2015. The organizers denounced the whitewashing of the mural as symptomatic of a general lack of respect by the political class and its institutions for cultural work and *el pueblo* (the people) more broadly. Both Zaanarte and Los Tlacolulokos lamented the privileging of the political messaging of political parties over public art offered up to the people of Zaachila free of charge.

The mural and its whitewashing are illustrative of how processes of migration, heritage tourism, and state power influence people and space in places like Oaxaca. The southern state of Oaxaca is mostly rural, and although it is rich in natural resources, biodiversity, and ethnic diversity, it consistently ranks as one of the poorest states in Mexico. It is home to sixteen Indigenous ethnic groups, the majority of Indigenous language speakers in Mexico,

10. Tlacolulokos is a play on the name of their town, Tlacolula, and the word *locos* (crazies).

11. "El mensaje es claro, que la responsabilidad de un mural recae en el dueño de la casa y si estés puede ser fácilmente cambiado por unos pesos, la cultura es la que paga caro por descuidos sociales, y para acabarla fue propaganda política que eso también refleja la publicidad necesaria y efímera con la cual nos contaminan año con año."

FIGURE 4. Tlacolulokos collective, *Por ti estoy así*, mural, 2016, Zaachila (photograph provided by Tlacolulokos)

FIGURE 5. Whitewashing of the *Por ti estoy así* mural by an electoral campaign advertisement for the longtime ruling party (PRI), 2016, Zaachila (photograph provided by Zaanarte)

and the highest percentage of communally owned land.[12] Four hundred eighteen of the 571 municipalities in the state are governed through Indigenous customary law.[13] The state's economy increasingly relies on this immense cultural and natural wealth to attract tourists, especially since the decades-long pattern of transnational migration to the United States has been significantly curtailed by the criminalization of immigration and the militarization of the US-Mexico border.

The tourist economy in southern Mexico revolves around the trafficking of ideas around authenticity, indigeneity, and nostalgia.[14] Florence Babb argues that the state has "turned to tourism as both as a development strategy and as a way to refashion nationhood in a time of neoliberalism and globalization."[15] Tourism in Oaxaca relies heavily on the commodification of the state's cultural and ethnic diversity vis-à-vis the marketing of ethnic festivals, textiles, crafts, and other folklore. Oaxaca is also home to beautiful beaches, important and accessible archeological ruins, and the picturesque historic city center of Oaxaca City, which forms part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is the nexus of business and state interests organized around the commodification of Indigenous and colonial Oaxacan history and contemporary folklore, as it is marketed to tourists, that I refer to as *heritage tourism*.

Archeological sites and the historic city center as a World Heritage Site are particularly important because of the spatiotemporal work they are made to do in this economic model. They are crafted into spaces of tourist consumption that are said to "authentically" represent moments of pre-Hispanic and colonial history. Parallel to an increased reliance on tourism in the state, the neoliberal abandonment of the countryside has fueled rural-to-urban migration and exacerbated neocolonial legacies of intergenerational poverty and the historic marginalization of Indigenous people. Far from apathetic or acquiescent, civil society draws on a long history of Indigenous, labor, and popular organizing and resistance to frequently disrupt attempts to manage the carefully crafted public spaces marketed to tourists. For the most part, the state's response has been to militarize and surveil those public spaces central to tourism in an attempt to cleanse them of "indecent displays of political behavior."[16]

VISIBILITY, REBEL AESTHETICS, AND THE DRUG WAR

Mexico has long provided political analysts and scholars fertile ground for theorizing a regime that falls somewhere between democracy and authoritarianism. In the 1990s, after decades of domination and coercion under the rule of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI, Institutional Revolutionary Party), political scientist Jonathan Fox described the Mexican system as "still largely dominated by an authoritarian corporatist brand of electoral machine politics."[17]

Autonomous social movements in the 1990s and following decade, along with international pressures, brought an end to one-party rule in Mexico and ushered in the era of neoliberal multiculturalism throughout Latin America. This era of neoliberal multiculturalism has been characterized by promises of human rights, democracy, and rule of law, largely tied to a politics of recognition and collective cultural rights.[18] Under regimes of neoliberal multiculturalism, Indigenous and other ethnic or racial groups are seen as cultural entrepreneurs leveraging their difference into rights, recognition, and—in the context of heritage tourism—a commodity. Significantly, however, Indigenous organizations and communities have not demanded "rights as minorities" but rather "rights as peoples" with inherent rights to territorial control, self-determination, and political autonomy.[19] Despite

12. Gustavo Esteva, "The Oaxaca Commune and Mexico's Coming Insurrection," *Antipode* 42, no. 4 (2010): 978–93, esp. 982.

13. Lynn Stephen, *Transborder Lives: Indigenous Oaxacans in Mexico, California, and Oregon*, 2nd ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 40.

14. Deborah Poole, "Mestizaje, Distinction, and Cultural Presence: The View from Oaxaca," in *Histories of Race and Racism*, ed. Laura Gotkowitz (Duke University Press, 2011), 179–203. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822394334-008.

15. Florence Babb, *The Tourism Encounter: Fashioning Latin American Nations and Histories*, 1st ed. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 3.

16. Deborah Poole, "Affective Distinctions: Race and Place in Oaxaca," in *Contested Histories of Public Space: Memory, Race and Nation*, ed. D. Walkowitz and L. Knauer, 197–225 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 199.

17. Jonathan Fox, "The Difficult Transition from Clientelism to Citizenship: Lessons from Mexico," *World Politics* 46, no. 2 (1994): 151–84, quotation on 158. He describes authoritarian clientelism as consisting of "imbalanced bargaining relations [that] require the enduring political subordination of clients and are reinforced by the threat of coercion." Fox, "Difficult Transition," 153.

18. Charles R. Hale, "Neoliberal Multiculturalism," *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 28, no. 1 (May 2005): 10–19, https://doi.org/10.1525/pol.2005.28.1.10.

19. Jean E. Jackson, *Managing Multiculturalism: Indigeneity and the Struggle for Rights in Colombia*, 1st ed. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 4.

significant constitutional reforms throughout Latin America, those ideals of rights, democracy, and rule of law have been largely left unfulfilled. Anthropologist Shannon Speed theorizes the current moment in Mexico as one of "neoliberal multicriminalism" or a violent shift away from the ideals of neoliberal multiculturalism toward one of the abandonment of populations—especially Indigenous women—as well as higher levels of authoritarian governance, corruption, and violence.[20] I build on Speed's work by theorizing the current moment in Mexico, and its spatial manifestations, as neoliberal militarization.[21]

While the militarization of Indigenous regions in southern Mexico is nothing new,[22] an unbridled militarization has exploded in Mexico under the guise of the drug war (*guerra contra el narcotráfico*) declared by Felipe Calderón upon taking office in 2006. Since then, the Mexican government has infused billions of dollars to bolster military presence throughout the country, a figure that includes military aid from the United States under the bilateral Mérida Initiative.[23] Militarization is framed as being the necessary response to drug trafficking and the unprecedented level of violence in Mexico. In addition, under the Calderón and Peña Nieto administrations, the federal government declared a "state of exception,"[24] allowing the government to suspend the constitutional and human rights of people accused of organized crime via such laws as the 2008 Penal Reform and 2017 Internal Security Law.[25] Far from making citizens safer, the reforms have fortified the carceral state.[26]

The exact human toll of the drug war is notoriously difficult to quantify, given its nebulous boundaries and government obstruction of investigations into the violence, but even conservative estimates put the numbers at over 100,000 deaths nationwide between 2006 and 2016, over 22,000 disappeared between 2006 and 2014, and 281,418 people displaced between 2011 and 2015.[27] Equally disturbing—and criminal—has been the state's documented role in perpetuating the violence through extrajudicial killings, torture, disappearances, and arbitrary arrests.[28] While seemingly indiscriminate and shockingly widespread, state violence touches certain communities more than others.[29] Scholars have shown that Indigenous people are especially vulnerable to state violence under the guise of the drug war. Speed, for example, argues that "Agents of the state at all levels both act from and redeploy ideologies of race, class and gender in their acts of violence ... and they do

20. Shannon Speed, "States of Violence: Indigenous Women Migrants in the Era of Neoliberal Multicriminalism," *Critique of Anthropology* 36, no. 3 (September 1, 2016): 280–301, https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X16646834.

21. Magaña, *Cartographies of Youth Resistance*.

22. Mariana Mora, "Ayotzinapa and the Criminalization of Racialized Poverty in La Montaña, Guerrero, Mexico1," *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 40, no. 1 (May 1, 2017): 67–85, https://doi.org/10.1111/plar.12208. Lynn Stephen, "The Construction of Indigenous Suspects: Militarization and the Gendered and Ethnic Dynamics of Human Rights Abuses in Southern Mexico," *American Ethnologist* 26, no. 4 (November 1, 1999): 822–42, https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1999.26.4.822.

23. Clare Ribando Seelke and Kristin Finklea, "US-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond," Congressional Research Service Report, August 16, 2010.

24. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, 1st ed., trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

25. Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo and Shannon Speed, "Mujeres indígenas presas en México y Estados Unidos: un desafío hemisférico para los estudios indígenas," *LASA Forum* 43, no. 1 (2012): 17–20.

26. Speed, "States of Violence."

27. Lee and Renwick, "Mexico's Drug War"; Jo Tuckman, "Thousands Displaced by Mexico's Drug Wars: Government Is 'Deaf and Blind' to Our Plight," *The Guardian*, April 3, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/03/mexico-drug-wars-thousands-displaced-from-homes; Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de Derechos Humanos (CMDPDH), "En México 281 mil 418 personas son víctimas del desplazamiento interno forzado por la violencia," *Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos* (blog), February 26, 2015, http://cmdpdh.org/2015/02/en-mexico-281-mil-418-personas-son-victimas-del-desplazamiento-interno-forzado-por-la-violencia/.

28. Human Rights Watch, "Mexico," 2017, www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/mexico.

29. The government's complicity in the violence has been laid bare through the courageous work of journalists, human rights organizations, and survivors. The violence has included the disappearance of the forty-three students and murder of six people from Ayotzinapa Rural Teacher's College in the state of Guerrero in 2014, the mass graves throughout the country where the bodies of thousands of murdered migrants are discarded, and the unprosecuted murder of thousands of women annually in Mexico, at a rate of six every day—an epidemic that stretches back decades. For more, see the investigation by Forensic Architecture, available online https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-enforced-disappearance-of-the-ayotzinapa-students, and Anabel Hernández, *La verdadera noche de Iguala: la historia que el gobierno quiso ocultar* (New York: Vintage Espanol, 2017). John Gibler, *I Couldn't Even Imagine that They Would Kill Us: An Oral History of the Attacks Against the Students of Ayotzinapa* (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2017); Ioan Grillo, "The Paradox of Mexico's Mass Graves," *The New York Times*, July 19, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/07/19/opinion/mexico-mass-grave-drug-cartel.html; Jason De León, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*, 1st ed. (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015); Raquel Rubio-Goldsmith, Celestino Fernández, Jessie K. Finch, and Araceli Masterson-Algar, eds., *Migrant Deaths in the Arizona Desert: La vida no vale nada* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016); Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano, eds., *Terrorizing Women: Feminicide in the Americas* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

so comfortably in the context of ideologically generated impunity."[30]

The drug war and rhetoric of national security also provide cover for the use of extralegal violence and repression to squash dissent in Mexico. National, international, and nongovernmental human rights organizations have denounced political repression as an increasing risk to Mexican democracy and human rights. Human rights reports have documented many such instances in Oaxaca, including a 2016 police attack against protesting teachers and their allies in the town of Nochixtlán that left eight dead and dozens injured and the 2006 government crackdown on a popular social movement that resulted in a death toll of at least twenty-six, with hundreds more arrested and tortured.[31] Youth played a vital role in the 2006 social movement, which took grassroots control of Oaxaca City for six months. They were visible participants in some of the most important spaces produced by the movement, especially those that were organized explicitly around horizontal decision making, as well as autonomous and antiauthoritarian principles. Borrowing from Henri Lefebvre and the work of Fran Tonkiss, I refer to spatial projects produced through the political imagination and practice of social movements as *counterspaces*.[32] These counterspaces included a series of occupied radio stations taken over by women from the movement, a citywide network of barricades, and a series of occupied buildings.[33] Public murals, graffiti art, and other visual interventions by artists added another layer of counterspace and acted as a kind of connective tissue between counterspaces throughout the city by announcing streets and neighborhoods as being in open rebellion against the government.

30. Speed, "States of Violence," 11.

31. Amnesty International, "Mexico 2016/2017," www.amnesty.org/en/countries/americas/mexico/report-mexico/; Victor Raul Martínez Vásquez, *Autoritarismo, movimiento popular y crisis política: Oaxaca 2006* (Oaxaca: Universidad Autónoma "Benito Juárez" de Oaxaca, 2007). See also Magaña, *Cartographies of Youth Resistance*; Comisión Civil Internacional de Observación por los Derechos Humanos (CCIODH), *Informe sobre los hechos de Oaxaca: 5ª visita* (Barcelona: Gráficas Lunas, 2008).

32. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 1st ed., trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992); Fran Tonkiss, *Space, the City and Social Theory: Social Relations and Urban Forms* (Cambridge: Polity Books, 2005); Maurice Rafael Magaña, "Spaces of Resistance, Everyday Activism, and Belonging: Youth Reimagining and Reconfiguring the City in Oaxaca, Mexico," *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 22, no. 2 (2017): 215–34.

33. Lynn Stephen, *We Are the Face of Oaxaca: Testimony and Social Movements* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Esteva, "The Oaxaca Commune"; Magaña, *Cartographies of Youth Resistance*.

I observed how artists were able to quickly and collectively reproduce their art using stencils and wheatpaste during marches and other mobilizations. During a march demanding justice for two slain human rights activists in 2010, for example, I witnessed a teacher helping a couple of artists hold their large stencil while one of them applied it with spray paint (see figs. 1–3). The help provided by the teacher and the other artist helped the painter reproduce the image faster and on more walls than if he was painting by himself. During that same march, I saw another artist handing out posters for others to post on walls, streetlight posts, and other surfaces with wheatpaste. Similarly, it is common for people to bring bags full of cans of spray paint to hand out at marches so protestors can scrawl slogans and denunciations along the route. In all of these scenarios, the mass mobilization provides a temporary environment where artists and activists are relatively free to transform the streets, whether through visual intervention or embodied occupation of public space, without fear of repression.[34]

The state, of course, goes to great lengths to stop such open displays of dissent in the center of the city, especially given its reliance on those very spaces to attract tourist money. Militarizing public space and commodifying it for tourism are two sides of the same coin under neoliberal militarization. Everyday Oaxacans' opinions of these struggles over public space are not easily captured through binaries of popular politics versus tourism, counterspace versus militarized space, or social movements versus government. Regardless of their political leanings, the fact that approximately 74 percent of the workforce in Oaxaca City is employed in the service sector, which includes tourism and tourism-related business, greatly complicates people's reactions to disruptions to business as usual.[35] The local economy took a massive hit during the six months of grassroots rule of Oaxaca City in 2006 and did not recover in any meaningful way until 2011. According to different reports, fifteen hundred workers lost their jobs in the historic city center during the second

34. Judith Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015). For more about the friction that arises from the coexistence of traditional mass mobilization and rebel aesthetics in Oaxaca, see Magaña, *Cartographies of Youth Resistance*.

35. Ana Luz Ramos Soto and Roberto Gerardo Gómez Brena, "Turismo y economía en el estado de Oaxaca," *Turismo y desarrollo local*, no. 3 (2008), https://econpapers.repec.org/article/ervturdes/y_3a2008_3ai_3a3_3a11.htm.

half of 2006, and in the year that followed three hundred businesses shut down and hotel occupancy fell by 43 percent.[36] The economic downturn was likely due to a combination of factors, including the popular takeover of the city, a sustained campaign of government repression in the months and years that followed, the escalation and geographic diffusion of the drug war, and travel warnings issued by governments, including the US State Department. Although the near collapse of the tourist economy post 2006 cannot be pinpointed to a single cause or actor, there is no doubt that government, business interests, and the vast number of Oaxacans who rely on the tourism industry are heavily invested in there being, at minimum, the appearance of order.

In theorizing politics, Jacques Rancière reminds us that the essence of "the police" is not repression but rather "partitioning the sensible," or deciding who and what is seen and what is invisible.[37] Brute force, after all, is not the most expedient way of squashing dissent, especially given the role of external perception and marketing in cultivating tourism. In response to this reality, the state has invested in a growing regime of surveillance in Oaxaca, including installing a network of 230–400 surveillance cameras throughout the city.[38] These cameras are monitored in real time by dozens of police officers. The spread of high-tech surveillance is justified through a discourse of public safety. For example, during a ribbon-cutting ceremony for ninety new cameras in 2014, Governor Gabino Cué assured those in attendance that the growing infrastructure of surveillance had "the sole purpose of ensuring Oaxacans the necessary conditions for security and social order."[39] Nonetheless, violent crime, especially attacks against women, youth, Indigenous people, journalists, and activists, frequently goes unprosecuted. The following quote from a *New York Times* article speaks to the possible role of perception and tourism in installing the network of surveillance cameras:

> Visitors to this colonial city, famed for its art and food, seem reassured by the cameras as well as by accompanying signs warning that the area is under surveillance. Though Oaxaca is not known for high crime, tourists can be targets for purse-snatchers and pickpockets, and the more working-class neighborhoods have their share of drug dealing, auto thefts, fights and violent crime.[40]

At the same time, many artists share stories of being arrested for painting in the streets after being captured on video. They offer this as evidence that graffiti artists and activists are the actual targets of the emerging regime of surveillance and not violent criminals. These claims are bolstered by recent reports that the Mexican government used advanced Pegasus software purchased from an Israeli cyberarms manufacturer for US$80 million to illegally surveil activists, journalists, and other government critics. The spyware, much like the surveillance cameras and the "state of exception," was framed as being needed "only to investigate criminals and terrorists."[41]

GEOGRAPHIES OF INEQUALITY

Surveillance cameras, spyware, and militarization are only the most recent iterations of regimes of social control aimed at regulating difference and power in urban Mexico. Speaking of Porfirian Oaxaca City, Mark Overmyer-Velásquez states that "[e]lites, attempting to reinforce their positions of power, conceived of and organized city spaces to reflect their dominant, class-and-race-exclusive form of modernity . . . that confined nonwhite workers to the city's margins."[42] These exclusionary and racist

36. Ramos Soto and Gómez Brena, "Turismo y economía"; Stephen, *We Are the Face of Oaxaca*.

37. Rancière, *Dissensus*, 36. When Rancière theorizes about the police, he is not referring to the institution of law enforcement or its agents. For Rancière, the police is "a symbolic constitution of the social," whose essence lies in partitioning and distributing the sensible, in dividing community (and the world) into countable and uncountable parts (i.e., the rich, poor, workers, citizens, immigrants, etc.). Rancière, *Dissensus*, 36. Rancière positions the police in contrast with politics, which consists of counting the uncountable, challenging the police logic of division, and making visible and audible those which the police would silence and make invisible.

38. Randal C. Archibold, "Deaf Officers Keep Watch over Crime in Oaxaca," *New York Times*, December 18, 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/12/19/world/americas/deaf-officers-keep-watch-over-crime-in-oaxaca.html; Adam Clark Estes, "An Army of the Deaf Watches Surveillance Cameras in Mexico," November 22, 2013, https://gizmodo.com/an-army-of-the-deaf-watch-surveillance-cameras-in-mexic-1469815334.

39. Original: "sin más propósito que ofrecer a las y los oaxaqueños condiciones de seguridad y paz social." "Con la instalación de 90 cámaras de video vigilancia Gabino Cué pone en marcha instalaciones del C2 en la costa oaxaqueña," *TMBINFO Noticias de OAXACA* (blog), August 24, 2014, http://tmbinfo.com/roja/con-la-instalacion-de-90-camaras-de-video-vigilancia-gabino-cue-pone-en-marcha-instalaciones-del-c2-en-la-costa-oaxaquena.

40. Archibold, "Deaf Officers Keep Watch."

41. Azam Ahmed and Nicole Perlroth, "Using Texts as Lures, Government Spyware Targets Mexican Journalists and Their Families," *New York Times*, June 19, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/06/19/world/americas/mexico-spyware-anticrime.html.

42. Mark Overmyer-Velázquez, *Visions of the Emerald City: Modernity, Tradition, and the Formation of Porfirian Oaxaca, Mexico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 40–41.

geographies persist, especially as more and more Indigenous migrants resettle in the city. Most of the artists and activists included in the current study come either from Indigenous communities that settled in the urban peripheries in the past generation or two, or from towns and villages that were enveloped by the urban sprawl of Oaxaca City in the past fifty years or so. This is reflective of larger migration patterns throughout Latin America in the late twentieth century that saw the region urbanize at a rate rarely seen in human history.

The urbanization of Oaxaca coincides with economic shifts that depend on tourism, extractivism, and migration as engines of development. While the state has invested in these forms of development, it has not sufficiently invested in the rapidly growing urban peripheries where most of the population lives, many in informal settlements. A rapper and activist named Mare described growing up in one such neighborhood after her family migrated to the city from a Zapotec town in the Sierra Juárez, "I lived in a new *colonia* where there weren't even the basic services like water and electricity, the roads weren't paved, there was no transportation, there was no healthcare in the community." A depreciating peso, rising gasoline prices, and a reliance on imports from the United States have only made matters worse.[43] The federal government determined that in 2015 the percentage of people living in poverty in the municipality of Oaxaca de Juárez, where the capital city is located, outnumbered those considered "neither poor nor vulnerable" 39 percent to 27.6 percent.[44] Mare's observations of life for Indigenous migrants surviving on the edges of a booming tourism center and government statistics echo Bianet Castellanos's rich ethnography of the lives of Maya migrants in the shantytowns of Cancún (2010).[45] With a growing urban population, lack of state investment in the peripheries, and an overreliance on the tourism economy, the politics of who has the right to the city is contentious, to say the least. These geographies of inequality, militarization, and surveillance provide the context against which the rebel aesthetics I analyze in this article are produced.

THE PALIMPSEST AND COUNTERSPACE

One way to understand the multiple and entangled histories behind the politics of visibility, heritage, and urban space is through the metaphor of the palimpsest, which refers to the ancient technique of manuscript production where parchment was used and then scraped or washed in order to be reused. Drawing on the work of cultural geographer Milton Santos, anthropologist Christen Smith deploys the palimpsest as a frame for analyzing Black histories, bodies, and experiences in Bahia, Brazil. For Smith, the palimpsest is a powerful metaphor for understanding the "layered space of movement, epochs, objects, information, and ideas, actual, imposed, and superimposed" that make up Bahia's Black geographies.[46] By highlighting the heavily layered, meaningful, and contested nature of public space, the palimpsest provides a generative frame for understanding the cultural politics involved in organizing and mobilizing in geographies like Oaxaca that are shaped by the politics of heritage tourism and militarization.

Another aspect of the palimpsest that is particularly apt for analyzing rebel aesthetics in heritage Mexico is that it allows us to visualize the different temporalities of paint layers and how present and future are produced through their dialogue, interaction, and friction.[47] Of course, when it comes to the actual artwork located on walls and other façades, the palimpsest is both metaphor and material reality. Layers of the palimpsest are products of their times and those that came before them, yet they are also alive in the present and future as they help constitute and give meaning to subsequent layers. With the palimpsest in mind, let us return to the mural and political ad in Zaachila. According to the artists, the location outside the archeological site of Zaachila "was an important part of the concept; we chose it because of the cultural, ancestral, and symbolic power" of the site. They told me that the idea was to "create a reflexive dialogue"

43. Andrés Carrera Pineda, "Avanzan cinturones de miseria en zona urbana de Oaxaca," *Imparcial en linea*, January 4, 2018, http://imparcialoaxaca.mx/oaxaca/106726.

44. "Pobreza Municipal 2010–2015," CONEVAL, accessed August 1, 2022, https://www.coneval.org.mx/Medicion/Paginas/Pobreza-municipal.aspx#.

45. M. Bianet Castellanos, *A Return to Servitude: Maya Migration and the Tourist Trade in Cancun* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

46. Christen A. Smith, *Afro-Paradise: Blackness, Violence, and Performance in Brazil* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 62.

47. Abilio Vergara Figueroa, *Palimpsestos. Aspectos teóricos, territorio, patrimonio, cuerpo y humor* (Mexico City: Navarra Ediciones, 2018).

between artwork and location.[48] With the placement of the mural at the entrance of an archeological site, the artists could also be claiming the cultural and material patrimony of Zapotec civilization for present-day Zapotecs, as opposed to "official" regimes of heritage and tourist imaginaries.[49]

Aymara intellectual Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui argues that "retaking of [one's] own historicity—a decolonization of imaginaries and of the forms of representation" are essential practices of "indigenous modernity."[50] The selfie in *Por ti estoy así* could be interpreted as Indigenous self-representation twice over—Zapotec artists representing Zapotec people, as well as the young Indigenous woman in the mural taking control of her own image through the act of taking the picture. She is announcing that she is here. She is present. And with the combination of the smartphone and tattoos, the image articulates an Indigenous modernity that makes clear that Indigenous people are not stuck in the past. In these ways, the mural counters the invisibility of contemporary Indigenous people in Mexican society and of Indigenous youth and women in particular.

Los Tlacolulokos interpret and layer multiple histories, cultures, identities, and places in their work. They use symbols, for example, associated with Indigenous cultures of Oaxaca and combine them with those associated with Los Angeles street culture and hip-hop. This combination of symbols might seem contradictory to some viewers, but that is part of the conversation the artists are hoping to provoke. Indigenous people, after all, do not exist in an ahistorical space outside of the influence of technology, migration, and urban culture. Through murals like this one, Los Tlacolulokos critique popular representations of Indigenous Oaxacan culture as static, as stuck in the past or bound to place, as a resource to be marketed for outside consumption. So their rebel aesthetics reject regimes of neoliberal multiculturalism that rely on self-disciplined minorities to "become heritage subjects."[51] Instead, by merging urban youth culture with affirming representations of Indigenous Oaxacans, their artwork manifests an insurgent urban indigeneity that disrupts the dominant spatial and temporal ordering of "racial regions, cultural territories, and mestizo urban squares."[52]

The artists also contest the meanings, ownership, and importance of the archeological site vis-à-vis its place in official histories, as a draw for tourism, and as an object of study for archeologists. Los Tlacolulokos reclaim the site as heritage for contemporary Indigenous peoples and as a place for them to be seen and heard. They affirm contemporary Indigenous people's place in Oaxaca, while also questioning the contradictory logic of a heritage tourism industry that profits off of mythologies and artifacts yet mostly ignores contemporary Indigenous peoples' voices and agency. Offering an alternative decolonial logic for using archeological sites as platforms for celebrating the dynamism found in contemporary Indigenous material and visual culture, the artists honor the site's connections to ancestral practices and legacies. Their public art complicates an apolitical multicultural celebration of difference and the postrevolutionary Mexican project of celebrating Indigenous people and culture in the past, in service of a mestizo present and future. Their rebel aesthetics are not driven by a desire or need to be recognized as Indigenous by the state or to be included in dominant economic markets. The dialogue Los Tlacolulokos created with their art and the archeological site at Zaachila provides an affirmative and decolonial counternarrative about Indigenous life, history, identity, and culture in contemporary Oaxaca that simultaneously challenges the state's ability to define the terms, terrains, and temporalities of indigeneity.

The artwork of Los Tlacolulokos also pays homage to the strong ties linking Oaxaca and California produced through generations of migration, exchange, and transna-

48. "El mural de Zaachila fue parte del Festival Zaanarte 2015, si claro que la ubicación del muro fue parte importante del concepto, nosotros lo escogimos porque tiene encarga cultural, ancestral e simbólica con la cual creemos que nuestras imágenes pueden generar un diálogo reflexivo."

49. Mike Robinson and Helaine Silverman, "Mass, Modern, and Mine: Heritage and Popular Culture," in *Encounters with Popular Pasts: Cultural Heritage and Popular Culture*, ed. Mike Robinson and Helaine Silverman (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015), 1–30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-13183-2_1.

50. Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, "Ch'ixinakax Utxiwa: A Reflection on the Practices and Discourses of Decolonization," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111, no. 1 (January 1, 2012): 95–109, quotation on 96, https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-1472612.

51. Maria Fernanda Escallón, "Rights, Inequality, and Afro-Descendant Heritage in Brazil," *Cultural Anthropology* 34, no. 3 (August 24, 2019): 359–87, quotation on 379, https://doi.org/10.14506/ca34.3.03.

52. Magaña, *Cartographies of Youth Resistance*; Poole, "Affective Distinctions," 222.

tional community formation.[53] There are an estimated 180,000 Indigenous Oaxacans in southern California alone.[54] Though the artists Dario and Cosijoesa are not migrants themselves, their hometown of Tlacolula, like many others in Oaxaca, is part of a transnational, transborder space often referred to as Oaxacalifornia.[55] Young artists, musicians, and activists are integral in keeping the bonds of transnational Indigenous communities intact, and even flourishing, across borders.[56]

Los Tlacolulokos have traveled to Los Angeles to create community murals in neighborhoods where Oaxacans live, like in South Central LA, as well as a major exhibit at the Central Library called *Visualizing Language: Oaxaca in L.A.* It was on one of their trips in 2016 that I first met them. We met at a rally in Macarthur Park, in front of the Mexican Consulate. Protestors, most of them Oaxacan and/or Chicanx, had gathered to demand justice for those injured, arrested, and disappeared after a government crackdown against protestors in Nochixtlán, just outside of Oaxaca City. An organization called the Binational Front of Indigenous Organizations (FIOB) helped organize the rally that day, as well as being a major force behind a series of actions carried out in solidarity with the Oaxacan social movement of 2006.[57] Los Tlacolulokos learned of the rally because they were collaborating with members of the FIOB on one of their community murals.

53. Alejandra Aquino Moreschi, *De las luchas indias al sueño americano. Experiencias migratorias de jóvenes zapotecos y tojolabales en Estados Unidos* (Mexico: Publicaciones de la Casa Chata, 2013); Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado, eds., *Indigenous Mexican Migrants in the United States* (La Jolla, CA: Center for US-Mexican Studies, 2004); Stephen, Transborder Lives.

54. Lisa Kresge, "Indigenous Oaxacan Communities in California: An Overview," *California Institute for Rural Studies*, 2007, www.semanticscholar.org/paper/INDIGENOUS-OAXACAN-COMMUNITIES-IN-CALIFORNIA%3A-AN-Kresge/b916becaccd0d10e90e1d6519fc93c88b4bca3ac.

55. Michael Kearney, "The Effects of Transnational Culture, Economy, and Migration on Mixtec Identity in Oaxacalifornia," in *The Bubbling Cauldron: Race, Ethnicity, and the Urban Crisis*, ed. Michael Peter Smith and Joe R. Feagin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); G. Rivera-Salgado, "Binational Organizations of Mexican Migrants in the United States," *Crime and Social Justice* 26, no. 3 (1999): 27–38.

56. Xóchitl C. Chávez, "Booming Bandas of Los Angeles: Gender and the Practice of Transnational Zapotec Philharmonic Brass Bands," in *The Tide Was Always High: The Music of Latin America in Los Angeles*, ed. Josh Kun (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 260–66; Luis Sánchez-López, "Learning from the Paisanos: Coming to Consciousness in Zapotec LA," *Latino Studies* 15, no. 2 (July 1, 2017): 242–46, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41276-017-0061-3.

57. Stephen, *We Are the Face of Oaxaca*.

Through solidarity actions with movements in Oaxaca, the FIOB and allied groups bring attention to urgent political and human rights issues occurring in Mexico, but they also provide visibility for Indigenous people and migrants in Los Angeles. As one young Oaxacalifornian who participated in the 2006 solidarity actions in Los Angeles told me:

> Those marches and rallies were the first time I saw Oaxacans take over in L.A. outside of our own events, like parties, *fiesta del pueblo*, stuff like that. It was dope to see us take over the streets and MacArthur Park and places like that. There were señoras and little kids and everybody, young people, we all showed up. That year was also the immigrant rights marches which were huge and way bigger, but these other ones about what was going on in Oaxaca was mostly Indigenous folks, Zapotecos really.

Self-representation and making Indigenous people visible as contemporary political and social actors are parts of rebel aesthetics that are shared and connect practitioners across space and modalities (i.e., visual art, direct actions, etc.).

Returning to the palimpsest, Mexican anthropologist Abilio Vergara Figueroa reminds us that meaning is created through the friction that occurs as different layers and temporalities interact.[58] The reflexive dialogue that the artists hoped to provoke between their mural and the Zaachila archeological site had an unwelcomed participant—the ruling political party, who with their whitewashing of the mural exerted their power and legitimacy to control the public sphere. This is perhaps the clearest example of why the metaphor of the palimpsest works so well for understanding rebel aesthetics. The mural is layered on top of the archeological site, and the propaganda is layered on top of both. In each instance, the *scriptio inferior* or "underwriting" is still visible. The mural is in clear dialogue with the foundational level of the palimpsest, which is the centuries of Indigenous (both Zapotec and later Mixtec) power, society, and culture. After the whitewashing, both of these layers of underwriting are still visible and present. Despite the power (political and economic) of the ruling party to have their message seen, the previous messages and symbols are still visible. The competing and dialogic process points to the

58. Vergara Figueroa, *Palimpsestos*.

physical, spatial, and temporal dimensions of the palimpsest.

Rebel aesthetics allow the Indigenous, migrant, and urban youth to respond to regimes of invisibility (geographic and social marginalization) and hypervisibility (surveillance and criminalization) by taking control of their own representation through their cultural production and space-making practices. In these ways, rebel aesthetics help create and maintain counterspace. In Oaxaca, such spaces openly challenge the political and capitalist classes' ownership and control of the city's public spaces and public life by creating shared spaces for congregation and organizing, where a capitalist logic would demand spaces of consumption. Counterspaces do not exist completely outside of dominant space, however. Rather, counterspace is a project, a continual process of contestation that exposes the incomplete nature of dominant space while seeking to reclaim the egalitarian promise of public space. The networked counterspaces link ephemeral spaces of direct action with those produced by licit and illicit street art and more permanent spaces like social centers. Networking counterspaces in these ways has been a particularly effective way for artists and activists with little political and economic capital to establish a sustained presence in the city despite the pressures outlined earlier. This kind of networked counterspace resonates with Jeffrey Juris's analysis of challenges and opportunities presented by the #Occupy movements' merging of logics of networking and aggregation.[59]

Counterspace can also complicate distinctions such as private and public. The counterspace produced through the production and engagement with the Zaachila mural, for example, brings the *private space* of a home owner's wall into the *public sphere*. While the wall is private property, the politics and discourse articulated by the publicly visible mural can be understood as producing *counterpublics* or "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs."[60] Building on Nancy Fraser's work, Michael Warner has theorized the *counter* in counterpublic more deeply. For Warner, what makes counterpublics *counter* is not just that they are spaces for alternative discourses but that they directly challenge the decorum of dominant publics or media.[61] Such counterpublics are often received with hostility, not just for their content but also for their breach of dominant forms and norms for public discourse. Indeed, those produced by artists and activists are often received with hostility, if not for the content of their art or political messages then for their disruptions of daily life, of the spatial order, and in the cases examined here, of heritage. The final set of artistic interventions, which I examine in the next section, draws attention to the "sticky materiality" that emerges when universal aspirations of heritage, governance, and capitalism are experienced on the ground or with what Anna Tsing refers to as "friction."[62]

UNESCO AND *CHUPACABRAS* IN OAXACA CITY

On a summer day in 2007, I walked along the tourist-filled streets of Oaxaca City toward the central plaza wondering what I would find on the façade of the eighteenth-century Catedral Metropolitana de Nuestra Señora de la Asunción. Earlier in the week, one of the church walls was covered with a mixed-media piece of street art that combined a series of wheatpaste nonhuman (*chupacabra*?)[63] soldiers each accompanied by a small "Fascismo en México" banner and a message scrawled in red spray paint: "Warning, fascism is in our house! . . . GET OUT, FECAL AND URO" (fig. 6). URO refers to former Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, and *fecal* is an irreverent play on language which takes the acronym for former president Felipe Calderón's name and merges it with the word *fecal*, which has the same meaning and spelling in Spanish as it does in English. Would this piece of protest art still be visible on the church wall? This seemed unlikely, given the care taken by the state and business interests to keep the city center clean for tourists. The historic city center, after all, is part of a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site, with the cathedral and *zócalo* forming the backbone of a marketing campaign

59. Jeffrey S. Juris, "Reflections on #Occupy Everywhere: Social Media, Public Space, and Emerging Logics of Aggregation," *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 2 (2012): 259–79, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2012.01362.x.

60. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 56–80, quotation on 67, https://doi.org/10.2307/466240.

61. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005).

62. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

63. The *chupacabra* (literally, goat sucker) is a mythical creature in Latin American folklore that is said to attack and drink the blood of livestock.

FIGURE 6. Wheatpaste art depicting fascist forces, 2007, cathedral wall, Oaxaca (photograph provided by the author)

that paints Oaxaca City as a provincial city where tourists can enjoy the pre-Hispanic past, Spanish colonial period, and Indigenous Mexico of today.[64] Protest art in the city center, like the fascist *chupacabra* force, disrupts this image.

Not surprisingly, when I passed by the church that day, the protest art had been covered up (fig. 7). Instead of erasing all signs of the artists' illicit intervention, however, municipal workers had sloppily painted over the art with mismatched paint, which was not even opaque enough to hide the wheatpaste art below it. This had the effect of drawing as much attention to the presence of dissent as the initial disruption. The careless whitewashing of dissent stands in stark contrast to the immense resources invested into policing and surveillance, which results in the streets of Oaxaca regularly housing half a dozen different units of local, state, and federal police and military forces, along with the hundreds of surveillance cameras monitored in real time. These spatial cues serve as reminders that the drug war that has ravaged the country, and the accompanying militarization of society and criminalization of dissent, have not spared Oaxaca. The simultaneous marketing of Oaxaca as a colorful, welcoming, and safe provincial city with the widespread militarization does not come easily or cheaply. With the bloated budgets for policing and surveillance, one would think the local government could get funds for matching paint to supply workers charged with removing graffiti and street art, though the haphazard nature of the whitewashing could be seen as a concession to the fact that another illicit intervention is never far away.

Through the wheatpaste intervention on the cathedral wall, anonymous artist(s) transformed the meaning of the highly symbolic cathedral and zócalo for passersby—be they locals, tourists, government officials, police officers, or expats. Instead of being a neutral space of religiosity or colonial architectural beauty, artists converted the area into a highly visible canvas from which to air grievances against the militarization and violence that most Mexicans live with daily. Their art, however ephemeral it may be, transforms ordinary and dominant spaces into counterspace. The zócalo, which houses the cathedral, has been the epicenter of public life in Oaxaca for centuries, as it is in most Latin American cities, and it has long been the

64. William Warner Wood, *Made in Mexico: Zapotec Weavers and the Global Ethnic Art Market* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

FIGURE 7. Brown overpainting of protest art, 2007, cathedral wall, Oaxaca (photograph provided by the author)

site of social movement mobilizations and other dissident actions. Artists like these continue this tradition, which long predates the historic city center's 1987 World Heritage Site designation.[65]

The palimpsest of the cathedral wall is deep and dynamic, with new inscriptions being added regularly. This wall is one of a handful throughout the city center that is regularly targeted by artists and activists for intervention because of its visibility and symbolic cogency. The wheatpaste police captured in the first image (see fig. 6) acts as the *scriptio superior* in the palimpsest, covering previous wheatpaste flyers announcing a social movement mobilization that had already passed. The *scriptio inferior* of both the flyers and fascist police was centuries of power of the Catholic Church and Spanish colonialism, as well as the more recent history of heritage tourism.

In these ways, examining rebel aesthetics in an urban World Heritage Site illuminates the friction of globalization. After all, the whole World Heritage project is premised on locality and place, yet official designation subjects localities to global regimes of tourists, conservationists, scholars, journalists, and politicians, who exert control over sites from a distance and through mass-mediated images of sites.[66] Through their rebel aesthetics, artists and activists challenge official heritage regimes and disrupt tourist imaginaries. Despite the proliferation of technologies that would render them invisible in public space, street artists and activists build on their collective experience of participating in the grassroots control of the city in 2006 in order to be active, visible, and audible actors in Oaxacan public life. Through their rebel aesthetics, artists and activists "imprint on the city . . . the presence of those who are supposed to be invisible."[67]

A third photograph (fig. 8) shows this same wall three years later. Governor Ulises Ruiz was again the subject of an illicit artistic intervention, this time portrayed as a clown and with the text "URO Payaso Asesino" (URO Clown Assassin). In terms of technique, this intervention

65. Setha M. Low, *On the Plaza: The Politics of Public Space and Culture*, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000).

66. Christoph Brumann and David Berliner, *World Heritage on the Ground: Ethnographic Perspectives*, EASA Series, vol. 28 (New York: Berghahn, 2016).

67. Teresa P. R. Caldeira, "Imprinting and Moving Around: New Visibilities and Configurations of Public Space in São Paulo," *Public Culture* 24, no. 2 (May 1, 2012): 385–419, quotation on 400, https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-1535543.

FIGURE 8. *URO Payaso Asesino*, 2010, same cathedral wall as in figs. 6 and 7 with fresh layer of protest art (photograph provided by the author)

was produced using both stencil and freehand aerosol. As mentioned earlier, the stencil, much like wheatpaste, is a nimble and easily reproduced technique for visual interventions and is often used in Oaxaca in the context of mobilizations or urgent political denunciation. The *URO Payaso Asesino* piece was applied to the cathedral wall just over a week after Ulises Ruiz left office in December 2010. There were several mobilizations during the first weeks of the new governor's term, ranging from those supporting the new administration to those demanding accountability for the political violence and repression carried out under Ulises Ruiz. URO Payaso Asesino seems like a clear call for the latter.

Following the logic of the palimpsest, we are reminded that the battle over the walls of the cathedral and surrounding zócalo have been waged over generations and will likely continue. Indeed, the zócalo has long been a central site for popular mobilizations in Oaxaca, and these photographs capture how movement artists contribute fresh layers to the ongoing making of the zócalo as a space for popular politics. Of course, this doesn't mean that everyone agrees on what popular politics should look like, especially in places that are this symbolically charged. One young visual artist who was active in the 2006 social movement lamented to me that he was tired of seeing *his* city defaced by the endless mobilizations and aerosol and wheatpaste inscriptions that accompany them. During an interview with him in 2011, he reflected, "It pains me and causes me much embarrassment that this is the face that many people see of Oaxaca—the graffiti, the encampments, the poorly executed (art) pieces, the *desmadre* (chaos)." This is a reminder of the nuance needed when analyzing any kind of counterhegemonic or popular politics.

It is also important to remember that the power of rebel aesthetics as theorized here is that these visual interventions are connected with other spaces throughout the city that artists and activists shape through their rebel aesthetics, both created through direct actions and more permanent spaces, like youth-run social and cultural centers. In fact, much of the preproduction (i.e., the cutting of stencils, printing of wheatpaste images, preparation of

wheatpaste, etc.) for the artistic interventions discussed here takes place in nearby cultural and activist spaces. Moreover, juxtaposing the Zaachila mural and the mixed-media interventions on the cathedral wall give an idea of the varied techniques and modalities of the visual culture of rebel aesthetics. Some artists, like those in Arte Jaguar, are known to experiment with all of the modalities discussed in this article. Even Los Tlacolulokos, who are known more for their elaborate murals, dabble with wheatpaste and other art forms. Both Arte Jaguar and Los Tlacolulokos also produce sculptures and installation art that have been displayed in important national and international museums.

For the most part, however, these rebel aesthetic interventions are ephemeral and public. They vary both in how long they are up before being covered up or taken down and in how long it takes to apply them. These varied temporal characteristics factor into the artists' decisions when choosing the modality for any given intervention. If, for example, the artists have permission to paint on a wall or have long-term cover allowing them to paint (e.g., in a social movement encampment), then they might opt for a more involved and elaborate mural such as the one in Zaachila or the one at the Pueblo Nuevo barricade during 2006. If the cover is more temporary, such as that provided by a march, then stencils or wheatpaste tend to make more sense. Taken together, the rebel aesthetics produce counterspaces that, when networked, form constellations of resistance and creation that have allowed activists to maintain an organized dissident presence in the city despite the dangers and limitations posed by militarization, surveillance, and criminalization of dissent in Mexico.

CONCLUSION: REBEL AESTHETICS AS A POLITICS OF DISRUPTION

> The police says that there is nothing to see on a road, that there is nothing to do but move along. It asserts that the space of circulating is nothing other than the space of circulation. Politics, in contrast, consists in transforming this space of "moving-along" into a space for the appearance of a subject: i.e., the people, the workers, the citizens: It consists in refiguring the space, of what there is to do there, what is to be seen or named therein. It is the established litigation of the perceptible."
>
> —Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus*

The epigraph above describes the politics of rebel aesthetics perfectly—through their art and activism, youth transform and refigure streets and other public spaces from "space[s] of circulation" where there is "nothing to see" into spaces of politics, "space[s] for the appearance of a subject . . . the people."[68] Such a conception of politics is particularly important in the current era characterized by a departure from the ideals and unfulfilled promises of neoliberal multiculturalism (i.e., human rights, rule of law) into a more violent and militarized form of governance, mass displacement, and entrenchment of borders.[69] Under these grave conditions, rebel aesthetics take on the role of emergent claim-making practices that are not mobilized to seek official recognition from the state or international bodies but instead are used to directly and contentiously intervene into space and politics. This kind of spatial politics resonates with scholars' theorizing how groups deemed "ungrievable" enact politics and stake claims by making themselves visible through the physical occupation of public space.[70] The cases examined here show how the generation of Indigenous, urban, and migrant artists and activists that came of age during the 2006 Oaxaca social movement and the nation's drug war lay claim to space and make their resistance visible. They challenge regimes of invisibility and hypervisibility by making themselves visible and taking control of their representation.

The terrain upon which artists and activists enact their rebel aesthetics is also complicated by the centrality of heritage tourism and the associated regimes of spatial and social control. Whether it be the growing regime of surveillance, the militarized policing of dissent, or the crafting of tourist spaces around ideas of authenticity, indigeneity, and nostalgia, practitioners of rebel aesthetics are not welcomed users or shapers of such spaces. Instead, they highlight the friction that emerges from encounters between local realities and global pressures in the making of official heritage spaces and tourist imaginaries. Put another way, rebel aesthetics give form to the dissonance that occurs "when reverence for heritage collides with other value orientations and livelihood needs."[71]

68. Rancière, *Dissensus*, 37.

69. Speed, "States of Violence."

70. Butler, *Notes*; Zeynep Gambetti, "The Politics of Visibility," *Hot Spots*, Cultural Anthropology website, October 31, 2013, https://culanth.org/fieldsights/401-the-politics-of-visibility.

71. Brumann and Berliner, *World Heritage on the Ground*, 1.

The metaphor of the palimpsest helps us visualize and keep present in our analysis the long histories of organized struggle, spatial formation, and social control upon which young artists and activists inscribe themselves and their communities. Through these practices they directly challenge the invisibility that the dominant neoliberal spatial project prescribes for them and that the militarized state attempts to enforce. In doing so, rebel aesthetics cultivate and ground the radical imagination in ways that invite viewers to imagine alternatives to the current spatial and social orders—an increasingly urgent task.[72]

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72. Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/imaginary-institution-society; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).

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