



The Street Won't Shut Up. Photo by @murodespierto, 2019. All photos of graffiti shown here were taken in Santiago, artists will be indicated where known. Fire has been an icon of the protests since the beginning, as the call to "burn everything down" aired the people's discontent with the government and the system at large.

# The Writing on the Wall

## Street Politics and Combat Graffiti

Celeste Olalquiaga

*Every epoch not only dreams the next, but, while dreaming, impels it towards wakefulness.*  
— Walter Benjamin, "Haussmann, or the Barricades" (1935)

An urban figure has emerged front and center on the political scene in the last few decades. It is a collective singular, something we refer to as one although it is many. It has no face—only a long, hard body that swells and shrinks, coming alive abruptly and then disappearing into the background. Inert yet organic, urban and human, it is one of those binary-breaking phenomena that define the twenty-first century. It is the *street*—as in, the street has come down, the street demands, the street is on fire. Built for vehicles yet overtaken by bodies, the street has become a social agent, a gateway for freedom, a stage of political repression, the last analog platform. The street can make you, the street can kill you, the street speaks.

Street uprisings can be traced as far back as the first urban settings, but in the last two centuries what was originally a pathway has morphed from a place where things happen, a *locus*, to an anthropomorphic vehicle of popular disruption, a voice that speaks, a *logos*. One of the first embodiments of the street as human subject is Eugène Delacroix's famous *La liberté guidant le peuple* (*Liberty Guiding the People*), painted the same year as France's July revolution in 1930, in which a bare-breasted Liberty leads the charge over barricades and fallen bodies. This is Marianne, a symbol of freedom against oppression that personifies the French Republic since its revolutionary foundation in 1789. The painting has inspired artists worldwide, with freedom not as a given, but as something that must be fought for. The Roman goddess Liberty never appears topless in ancient

depictions; she carries a helmet and often a shield and sword too. But Delacroix discarded the female warrior in favor of a maternal Marianne, mother of the République. Far more attuned to the urban reality of his topic than to female representations, he wrote in a letter to his brother: "I've embarked on a modern subject—a barricade. And if I haven't fought for my country, at least I'll paint for her [sic]."

The use of barricades in a labyrinthine Paris helped the popular uprisings that the city would endure in the next half-century. Many urbanists and historians claim that the 1853–1870 modernizing of the city under George Eugène Haussmann was due in part to allow swift military displacements against such rebellions. The most well-known among these, the 1871 Parisian Commune, built almost one thousand barricades on Haussmann's boulevards. This revolution's bloody end, *la semaine sanglante*, was visually recorded by a nascent photography: as the national army enters Paris, the Communards attempted to protect themselves behind barriers of sandbags and paved stones, scant matches for an army that outnumbered them five to one. The revolutionaries were egalitarian and pro-women's rights: the Commune's female soldiers wore uniforms and were known as *pétroleuses*, incendiaries, and there were several women's rights advocates among the Communards. Though short-lived, the two-month Commune inspired Marx's famous manifesto and has remained an urban milestone and myth.

150 years later, national armies and police are still fighting popular uprisings, now huge mass mobilizations, and the street has become an arena where both public space and political identities are shaped. This happens literally, for fighting on the streets of



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A *El vestido chileno* (the Chilean dress) by @jacqueline\_fresard, 2019. This Chilean version of Liberty upholds a pan in reference to the *caceroleo*, or pan-banging, used in protests since 1973. She wears the traditional Trarilonko silver headdress of the Mapuche (native Indian) women, while the Mapuche flag is waved above the Baquedano monument in the upper left section. To the right is the Torre Costanera Center, the quintessential emblem of Chilean neoliberalism.

B Barricade Rue Royale, 1871. Photographer unknown. Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons. The barricades of the Parisian Commune created a temporary architecture of resistance.

C *Hic Meus Locus Pugnare Est Et Hinc Non Me Removerunt*. Art by several artists along the Mapocho River, 2018. Photo by @celestelolalquiaga, 2019. The walls of the river are a canvas for extensive graffiti and the riverside a place to bike or escape from the police. On October 2, 2020, a protester was thrown down to the dry riverbed from a bridge by a Carabiniere and remains hospitalized.

D Thanks for So Much! Photo by @murodespierto, 2020. Chilean high schoolers ignited the 2019 protests by striking against the public transportation fare rise. The blood pouring from their eyes indicates the outstanding number of ocular lesions produced by police rubber bullets and/or teargas grenades.

E Photo by @celestelolalquiaga, 2019. Jumping the turnstiles was the initial way high schoolers protested the transportation fare rise. It is also known as “evade” (to evade) and extended to evading the system at large. Here the reference is to jump over the 1980 Pinochet Constitution that hand-tied the country to private interests.

the *polis*, the city, is to make politics with the body, to enact a new form of citizenship that has less to do with national origins than with the struggle for equal opportunities and rights across class, gender, race, and age. Citizenship in the twenty-first century is defined by where you find yourself and are at home with others; belonging is no longer an issue of birth—an outdated essentialism—but rather about experience and choice. 2020, a year of major global changes, started with Hong Kong’s ongoing confrontation of China’s iron hand, continued with millions of women marching worldwide on March 8 against male violence, and went on to African Americans taking the streets of the United States to demand racial justice, among other protest movements. The year was marked by a spontaneous worldwide rebellion against neoliberalism’s savage version of capitalism, as well as for the recognition of the rights of immigrants, native nations, transgender peoples, and organic beings.

COVID-19 forced us to realize the limits of our bodies and health systems. It accelerated a large part of the world’s urban population into the digital era through cultural changes that normally would have taken decades, a transformation that arrived in tandem with a moment of global resistance and change that is moving towards an era of social awareness and solidarity. The conservative push-back has been relentless, with fanatic crowds and their leaders violently attacking protesters and police forces deploying an unheard-of level of partisanship and repression.

During urban political protests, the street itself becomes a body, a *corpus* of slogans, writings, and images that shouts social injustices and demands, exposes governmental and police abuses, makes fun of political contradictions, and questions established truths—it simultaneously celebrates peace and chaos, love and hate. Unlike digital media, where things are seen once and then vanish instantly, street walls and furniture provide a tactile, material surface where messages are written, drawn, and painted, then whitewashed or wiped out only to reappear anew.<sup>1</sup>

These processes of marking or defacing the *façade*—the face of the city—by inscribing and re-inscribing its skin, are both acts of urban resistance and their traces. They are the city’s tattoos, its scars, the signs of its experience and history, and date back over two millennia to the urban tradition of *graffiti*. Originally from the Greek γράφειν (*graphein*, to write), the term *graffiti* is the plural for the Italian *graffito* or scratch (*rayado* in Spanish) and refers to public drawings and writings on walls. Anonymous, mordant, and full-on, graffiti were plentiful in ancient Egypt and Rome, where they were usually related to power and money in their most blatant forms: sex and politics.

Associated in the modern West with New York City’s 1970s street art scene, graffiti have come to mean contemporary street art and large colorful name tags. Yet graffiti’s main cultural value, now as two thousand years ago, lies in their multiple subversion of codes. For graffiti not only quite literally *scratch* over laws that forbid writing on public or private property, but also test the bound-

aries of what is considered art, bypassing an aesthetic discourse bound to art institutions, including print and digital media. Political graffiti include different supports like stencils and posters. With these tools, posting messages are quickly be understood, circulated, and identified with. Condensed, creative, and humorous, this is, quite literally, the writing on the wall.

Having spent most of my adult life in New York City, I was amazed by the styles, moods, and incredible abundance of graffiti every time I visited Chile, my native country. In cities like Santiago and Valparaíso, entire blocks are covered by political and ethnic paintings, spiritual worlds, cats (many, many cats!), ancient and futuristic characters, poetry, and messages of love. In the city’s periphery and its poorest areas, graffiti cover the walls and serve as time capsules, canvases from different time periods.

Along the edges of the Mapocho river in Santiago, the poem “*Guárdame en ti*” (“Keep Me Within You”) by the Chilean poet Raúl Zurita unfolds over a couple of miles. It is part of the 2018 festival La Puerta del Sur, which commissioned thirteen graffiti artists and Zurita to stamp their creations on the river’s walls.<sup>2</sup> Above the poem, a brief Latin inscription is a paradoxical reminder of the Southern Cone’s 1970s and 1980s dictatorships, a cruel ghost that has come back to haunt contemporary Chile: “Here is my fighting place and from here I will not be removed,” or “This is my fighting ground and from here I will not be taken.” Located near the “zone zero” of the Chilean protests in Plaza Dignidad (formerly Plaza Italia or Plaza Baquedano, the boundary between uptown and downtown Santiago), this phrase used to hang over the Argentinian writer and intellectual Haroldo Conti’s desk before he was kidnapped and disappeared by his country’s military in 1976.

When the “Chilean Spring” (locally called “the social explosion”) broke out in fall 2019 and citizens denounced decades of a neoliberal abuse written and sealed by the Pinochet dictatorship’s 1980 Constitution, the street became the main organ, battleground, and voice of popular protest. After a twelve-day public transportation fare-evasion strike by high schoolers escalated to confrontations with the national police (Carabineros de Chile) and damages to several Metro stations, President Sebastián Piñera’s government (Chile Vamos, a center-right coalition) shut down the entire subway system in the late afternoon of Friday, October 18, 2019. This unexpected measure left tens of thousands stranded on the street and ignited a whirlwind chain of events that included the burning of several subway stations later that night. A one-week military curfew was established the next day, which in turn backfired as massive protests against both the fare hike and the curfew expanded into major socio-economic demands.<sup>3</sup>

These protests were a wake-up call. “*Chile despertó* (Chile Woke Up)” became a popular slogan against an economic system that drastically eroded the middle class and sent the poor into misery over the last forty years. Piñera’s swift appeal to the military, as well as the restriction of public circulation and meetings, were violent *déjà vu* of the Pinochet dictatorship (1973–1990) and massively



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F Never Again in Chile. Photo by @murodespierto, 2020. The protests centered on the savage neoliberalism that drove a huge wedge between rich and poor, making Chile into the country with the highest class disparity in Latin America.

G Let's Not Fall Asleep. Photo by @celeste\_olalquiaga, 2019. The protests were considered a wake-up call for Chile after forty years of submission to the neoliberal system. *Chile despertó* (Chile Woke Up) became a popular slogan.

H Photo by @celeste\_olalquiaga, 2019. Piranha is a nickname for Piñera's voracity.

I *Matapacos* (copkiller). Photo by @celeste\_olalquiaga, 2019. The *matapacos* became a sacred emblem of street fighters.

J Anti-cops. Art by @violeta\_delfin. Photo by @celeste\_olalquiaga, 2019. Hello Kitty and an anti-cop kitty holding a Molotov bomb unite in street fight.

K Suicide City. Art by @aallaan.n. Photo by @celeste\_olalquiaga, 2019. @aallaan.n has an ongoing series of crying kitties that go from sad to furious in a wide range of styles and covering a large swath of the city to the south of Plaza Dignidad.

L Kill your Inner Cop. Photo by @celeste\_olalquiaga, 2019. Spanish distinguishes between male and female nouns, privileging the male noun as universal. There is a huge backlash against this by using X, @, or E to break away from these binary conventions.

M Piñera You're Lost (above) and Assassin State (below). Photo by @murodespierto, 2019. As the March 8 marches grew closer and the Las Tesis hymn resonated on the streets, images of female protesters—here banging pots and covered against teargas—began to multiply.

N Hooded protester. Photo by @murodespierto, 2020. Hoods (*capuchas*) became a symbol of protesters, who used them to protect their identities and cover themselves from teargas. The design here is a reference to Chilean indigenous peoples who painted their bodies with geometric designs. Many graffiti were "framed" to indicate their artistic character for a State and a society that disqualifies them as vandalism.

repudiated by both young protesters and older generations. As the opposition formed an emergency coalition with the government to call an October 2019 plebiscite for a new constitution (one of the main popular demands), the voice of the street denounced backstage political agreements; the government's consistent dismissal and quick makeovers of urgent social needs; and an ongoing and brutal repression against peaceful protesters.<sup>4</sup> The plebiscite, finally held in April 2020, was a tremendous success for the protest movement, as 80% of the voters approved the writing of a new Constitution, leaving the government and those who support it as an outdated minority.

At the onset of the protests, barricades were set up and statues of colonial heroes decapitated and defaced as waves of violence, both unofficial and official, hit urban areas for several days in a row. In downtown Santiago, graffiti popped up like mushrooms, denouncing governmental figures—mainly Piñera and his cousin Andrés Chadwick, the now-constitutionally ousted head of the Interior Department—for corruption and human rights abuses. Past political icons, in particular the overthrown Socialist President Salvador Allende (1970–1973) and Camilo Catrillanca (a *Mapuche*, or native Chilean, leader murdered in 2018 by the national police) reappeared as martyrs. As police repression intensified, stencils and posters with faces of mutilated, assaulted, and dead youngsters created a dark album of the protesters' daily struggle. The memory of the military dictatorship, only half-buried in this country's collective psyche, came out with full force, denouncing the well-known relationship between Pinochet and Piñera in overlapping terms: there was Pinochet or *Pinocho* (the liar) alongside Piñera or *piranha* (the voracious).

Along with these recurrent political figures, a lore of popular characters appeared, most prominently Negro Matapacos, a black stray dog that became famous in the 2010s for running with protesters and barking only at cops (*pacos*), earning the fame of being a "black copkiller," although apparently he only bit one officer and died of old age. Elevated to the category of saint—"the saint of protesters and street dogs"—Negro Matapacos first reappeared on walls and then on t-shirts, stickers, scarves, and other protester items, contributing to a street vendor market of food, beverages, hats, gas masks, goggles (the last two for protection from tear gas and rubber bullets), and lasers (to take down police drones) which flourished along the protests.

Less well-known but equally fierce is the warrior Hello Kitty that showed up mainly in Barrio Bellavista, a former artistic hub that became a restaurant and tourist spot. This *antiyuta* kitty (*yuta* is slang for the police force) raises her fist angrily, looking at spectators straight in the eye as she stands up for women's rights, and sits over burning vehicles. Simultaneously, a crying version of the pink feline appeared along the walls of central and southwestern Santiago, showing varying degrees of sadness, anger, and frustration. Uniting the ubiquitous street tradition of cat graffiti with the feminist demand for equal rights in a country where divorce became legal as late as 2004

and abortion, punishable as a crime until 2013, is possible only in cases of rape, danger to the mother, or non-viability of the fetus, Hello Kitty was rewritten as a fighter in Santiago. Feminism has been gaining substantial traction in this country, where last year the March 8 Women's Day demonstrations almost reached two million.<sup>5</sup> The 2019 street performance of *Las Tesis* (The Theses), an art collective that staged *Un violador en tu camino* (*A Rapist in Your Path*) to world-wide acclaim and reenactment in many languages, states it openly:

Patriarchy is a judge that judges us for being born, and our punishment is the violence you don't see.

Patriarchy is a judge that judges us for being born, and our punishment is the violence you now see. It's femicide, Impunity for my killer. It's disappearance. It's rape.

And it's not my fault, nor where I was, nor what I wore (4X)

The rapist was you  
The rapist is you.  
It's policemen,  
Judges,  
The state,  
The president.

The oppressive state is a rapist man (4X)

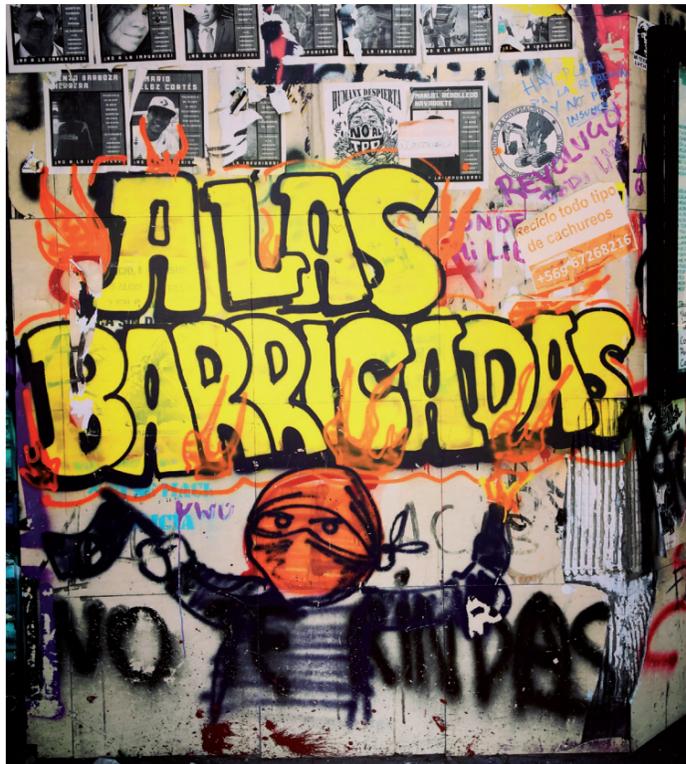
The rapist was you  
The rapist is you.

Stray dogs and warrior cats may seem unlikely protest emblems, but the former are a staple of Santiago's streets (people often knit sweaters for these pooches in the winter), and the latter are a universal symbol of independence which several Latin American artists have made popular on walls.<sup>6</sup> With their usual creativity and wit, some artists have taken to "framing" political graffiti so that they are recognized as art, an action that highlights the importance of preserving the visual testimonies, which many still consider acts of vandalism instead of manifestations of popular discontent.

The conflation between protests and acts of random or intentional violence also happens with the *primera línea*, the first line of protesters who clash with the police. Called *encapuchados* for covering their heads and faces with hoods or *capuchas*, they are stigmatized as *lumpen* (literally!) even though many are high school and university students. Chilean mainstream media promote this conflation by blending the *encapuchados* with the looters that use the marches to violently destroy and steal public and private property, which damages the protesters' image. Yet distinction is fundamental, as these barriers, or human walls, have often shielded pacific



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O No Justice No Peace. Photo by @murodespierto, 2020. An *encapuchado* (hooded protester) lights a Molotov bomb at night. The “No + AFP” flyer refers to the privately held public pensions that make enormous profits while keeping the pensions under \$400/month.

P To the Barricades. Photo by @murodespierto, 2020. An *encapuchado* holding a Mapuche flag and a Molotov bomb.

Q The Street Doesn't Lie. Photo by @murodespierto, 2019.

protesters from the ongoing police attacks, and are as self-directed as the graffiti which accompany, portray, and explain the street struggle. The disproportionate use of force between an armed-to-the-teeth police force and a first line that confronts them with rocks and homemade Molotov bombs is one of the thorniest issues facing the Chilean opposition. Many of these kids have been imprisoned without legal recourse for over a year, while the Carabineros continue to hurt and maim without any penalties and at an all-time approval record of 13% (Piñera is barely at 8% as of this text's writing).

There are many kinds of streets and walls in the extremely segregated city of Santiago. Some streets are just express lanes for business and luxury neighborhoods, others are unpaved roads where poverty is brushed aside from public view, literal dead-ends that belie the glaring image of the Chilean neoliberal “miracle” that the crisis forcefully exposed. This is the gist of “El baile de los que sobran” (“The Dance of Those Who Are Leftover”), the 1986 hit song by the Chilean rock band Los Prisioneros (The Prisoners) that became a hymn against inequality during the dictatorship:

Join the dance, of those who are left over  
 Nobody will miss us / Nobody really wanted to help  
 [...]
 Hey, I know some stories / about the future  
 Hey, when I learned them / times were safer  
 Under the shoes / mud and cement  
 The future is none / Of the promised in the 12 games  
 Others were taught / secrets that you weren't  
 Others were given that thing called education  
 They asked for effort, they asked for dedication  
 And what for?  
 To end up dancing and kicking rocks

It is now being sung again by three different generations of protesters.

Street barricades are raised to break the city's flow. They disrupt daily life and business as usual in order to bring attention to fundamental inequities, just as strikes do. Street barriers also go up to resist and confront a police force that has systematically abused human rights in Chile's urban centers since October 20, 2019. Rather than recognize these abuses, the Chilean government has upped the ante by issuing an anti-barricade law that went into effect in January 2020. To no avail: barricades will continue in the long process that awaits Chileans, which after the public approval of a new constitution, still has to elect the people who will write it and then go to a second plebiscite to approve the final version. No one knows where this process will lead and how many forms and shapes it will take along the way. For many, a new Chile will rise from the ashes of the old one. For others, this new Chile is the end of the world as they knew it, and they will do everything to stop it from happening. But the testimony being left on the monuments and walls must be salvaged as part of this unique

moment in Chile's history, just as it did in ancient times, leaving a major document for the evolution of Classic Latin into Romance languages. In contemporary streets, graffiti help turn *locus*, place, into *logos*, word—that is, into a body that, now more than ever, needs to be valued as part of a non-digital human reality.

#### Notes

- 1 All translations are mine unless otherwise stated. Thanks to the many graffiti artists whose work I show and to Instagram user @murodespierto, who kindly allowed me to use her photos for this piece.
- 2 Zurita first published the poem in 1994 and then added a few verses for the 2018 version. For more information about the festival and the street artists, see <https://www.elmostrador.cl/cultura/2018/10/18/los-versos-de-raul-zurita-y-los-murales-disruptivos-en-el-rio-mapocho/>.
- 3 The burning of the subway stations remains a mystery over one year later. Six were fully burned down, fourteen partially so, and another fifty-six stations from the 136 total were damaged. There are many claims that the government caused in a botched attempt to preempt the student protests.
- 4 As of January 31, 2020, there were twenty-six people dead and 3,746 wounded, including 427 with ocular lesions, 192 claims of sexual abuse, and 418 claims of torture and inhuman abuse. For more information, see the Chilean National Institute for Human Rights' 2019 annual report, available online here: [www.indh.cl](http://www.indh.cl). Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, this institution's 2020 report focused on human rights and pandemic management, so no official figures for the protests since September 2020 are available as of January 16, 2021. The 2019–2020 human rights crisis in Chile was denounced by several international agencies, including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the UN's Child Rights Committee.
- 5 This is the estimate by the organizer Coordinadora 8M, a figure which was reduced to 10% by the police's count during the 2019 protests.
- 6 During the protests I started a photographic record of feline *rayados*, mostly political, which are documented on the Instagram account @miauguerilla. An independent publication under that name appeared in Santiago in January 2021.