

# **As Fluid as a Brick Wall**

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WRITING WITH LIGHT

PHOTOESSAYS FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIXED FORMAT RE-ISSUE

## Writing with Light

Writing with Light was created to bolster the place of the photo-essay within international anthropological scholarship. This project originated as a collaboration between two journals: *Cultural Anthropology* and *Visual Anthropology Review* and grew out of an initiative led by Michelle Stewart and Vivian Choi for the Cultural Anthropology website. The five-person curatorial collective at the helm of Writing with Light is committed to formal experimentation and it aims to animate an ongoing discussion around the significance of multimodal scholarship with an emphasis on the still image.

Multimodal scholarship changes what anthropologists can and should see as productive knowledge. Such projects compel anthropologists to begin rethinking our intellectual endeavors through an engagement with various media, addressing the particular affordances and insights that each form of scholarship offers. How, for example, does photography produce different types of knowledge than text or film? What criteria might we need to interrogate and evaluate each of these forms of multimodal scholarship? As part of a broader set of questions about the relationship between forms of scholarly work and knowledge production, we support the ongoing relevance of the photo-essay.

We would like to acknowledge the support of the journals *Cultural Anthropology* and *Visual Anthropology Review* in this publishing endeavor. Cultural Anthropology has hosted the Photo-Essay project since its inception.

Writing with Light is in reverse alphabetical order: Mark Westmoreland, Arjun Shankar, Lee Douglas, Vivian Choi, Craig Campbell

## Photoessays From the Archives

When the Society for Cultural Anthropology relaunched its website in 2019, it was no longer able to continue support for the custom viewer that hosted the Writing with Light photo-essays on its previous site. At this point we learned a material lesson in the difficulty of sustaining multimedia digital publications over time.

In response to the challenge of preserving digital photo-essays we created the “Photoessays from the Archives: Fixed Format Re-issue” series to give a fixed visual layout for each of the photo-essays in a more stable format (PDF). With permission from the authors and from the publishers we re-present these photo-essays in this new format.

Photoessays from the Archives is an initiative led by the Writing with Light collective. Mark Westmoreland, Arjun Shankar, Lee Douglas, Vivian Choi, Craig Campbell

Layout and design by Craig Campbell with the Writing with Light Collective

# Fluid as a Brick Wall

Livia Stone became fascinated with the surfaces of Oaxaca de Juarez's walls while doing ethnographic research in the city in 2009. She took the images presented here because of her aesthetic attraction to the wall textures and her intellectual interest in how power struggles were playing out visually in different spaces. The written portion of the essay came about as a conversation between Livia (a cultural anthropologist) and Abigail Stone (an archaeologist) about what the physical, visual evidence that people leave behind can tell us about peoples' particular lives, and human beings in general. Although the written and visual portions of the essay are deeply intertwined, the written portion is meant to give context for the viewer to better interpret the images and provide some analysis of what we hoped to accomplish in the visual portion. The images are ordered to lead the viewer through a visual journey, first contextualizing the graffiti images historically and culturally, then giving size and location context clues before delving into the flattened, decontextualized images that isolate the walls' surfaces and textures.

A review dialogue appears below, after the images and essay text.



no.1



no.2





no.3



no.4



no.5



no.6





no.7



no.8





no.9



no.10





no.11



no.12



## Reflective Essay: Graffiti, Power, and Street Archaeology in Oaxaca

The brick and plaster walls that line streets throughout Mexico need constant upkeep and frequent repainting. The alternating forces of rain and sunlight, coupled with moisture seeping through from the cool bricks underneath, quickly degrade the surface and cause the paint to chip and peel and the plaster to crumble away. Natural forces alone mean that the walls are constantly changing, but the surfaces also bear marks of the human interactions taking place around them. Walls are often hand-painted to advertise not just products, but also concerts, festivals, or in the case of the first image in this series, election campaigns.

As in any place in the world, graffiti artists and taggers superimpose and mingle their messages with the legitimate commercial and political advertisements painted on walls. Much to the annoyance of these approved sign-painters and the wall owners, people glue unsanctioned commercial, artistic, and political posters to the walls with wheat paste, making them almost impossible to remove. Some are scraped away and painted over (Images 5 and 6). Others bubble, curl, and mold because of the elements and moisture. Walls document a slow, public dance performed by people who may only interact on their surfaces. Nature, creating an area of chipped paint, a crack in the plaster, intercedes in this dance as an artist with as much personality and creative force as any of the human collaborators. These surfaces provide a physical record, albeit impermanent, of the constant interplay of natural and human interactions taking place around them.

In Oaxaca de Juarez, the capital city of the southern state of Oaxaca, Mexico, the sidewalks can seem perilously high and narrow at times, often bringing the vertical surfaces of walls uncomfortably close to one's face as pedestrians turn sideways to wedge themselves between a telephone pole and the wall or around the sharp edge of a wrought iron window guard. Since an uprising in 2006, when an assembly

of social movements took control of the city for several months, the usual slow, collaborative dance taking place on these walls has been playing out to a distinctly revolutionary tune. The uprising was brutally repressed, but the political struggles and symbolic battles over the ownership of public spaces have continued. In 2009, when these images were taken, graffiti and stencil artists frequently created time-consuming masterpieces or hastily scrawled slogans on the literal boundary between public and private space, only to have them painted over hours later (Images 2–5). The obliteration was more common in the historic city center, where most buildings cater to foreign tourists, a population that is inclined to be frightened of revolutions.

Humorously, the censors or antigraffiti artists covering over these works often made no attempt to blend their contributions into the rest of the wall. Instead, they painted large patches or stripes of contrasting color that, while obscuring particular messages underneath, seemed to only draw attention to the significance and ubiquity of protest graffiti. “Nothing to see here!” a thick line of beige on a brilliant blue wall announces (Image 4), like an agitated security guard on a megaphone. “Everything is normal! No political unrest here!” These attempts seemed much more destructive to the aesthetic of the wall than the original graffiti and did nothing to hide the antiestablishment intentions of the art. If anything, it created the visual illusion of unity amongst the diversity of social movements that were sometimes at odds with one another. At times, the solid, neutrally colored streaks provided a more convenient canvas for artists to paint on than the original color of the wall. “October 2,” someone writes over a line of beige (Image 4), possibly rewriting their original message, possibly comparing the suppression of graffiti to the Tlaltelolco student massacre of October 2, 1968. Attempts to cover up the graffiti sometimes also highlighted their own futility when the original image showed through the thin layer of beige endeavoring to erase it (Image 3).

Graffiti was not always painted over. In some parts of the city and on the sides of some buildings, sympathetic residents or owners encouraged the art and slogans. Other locations were either out of the way or abandoned enough that no one cared to paint over them. The lowered stakes made these walls more attractive to lovers and taggers than activists (Images 7, 8, 9, and 11). These less contested spaces tended to be the same walls on which nature was also allowed to demonstrate its creative touch.



## Power and Archaeology

The result of these struggles and colluding forces was a map of power drawn in full scale throughout the city, on an axis perpendicular to the terrain. Some walls, themselves built by numerous human hands, defined the areas they marked as more collaborative, unregulated spaces that everyone and no one seemed to own. Rather than working at cross purposes, the traces of human and natural intervention painted a picture of creative cohabitation (Images 7–9), or at least of tolerant mutual respect (Image 11). The lines of taggers' names seem to collude and reference not only one another, but also nature's marks of chipped paint and fallen plaster (Image 8). Other walls, like those in the historic center (Images 2–6) announced that the spaces they shaped and colored were highly regulated and deeply contested, not only revealing head-on collisions and sharp rivalries among human actors, but also the constant repression of natural forces.

The overlapping layers that constitute the surface of any city's walls are the result of hundreds of individual actions but can be read as a physical manifestation, both reflecting and creating our collective imagination about a space. This alley is a safe place to tag one's name because dozens of others have already done so without reprisal, while this cathedral wall (Images 3 and 5) is a potent location for a political message precisely because of its visibility and the repeated attempts to keep it clean. Other rivalries (Image 10) are not in the city center, but seem to be sharp competitions between official wall owners, pragmatically maintaining the functionality of their walls by painting and repairing plaster in neatly quadrated sections, and unofficial wall owners scrawling a deeply coded and aestheticized claim on the same space. How people think about and treat spaces comes to be literally written on their walls through collaborations and antagonisms that happen over time.

Text-based scholarship about graffiti in Oaxaca, as in other cities, tends to emphasize individual graffiti artists or collectives (see also ASARO, de la Rosa, and Schadl 2014). Graffiti photography tends to concentrate on individual works (Denham and the CASA Collective 2008; Nevaer and Sendyk 2009). The emphasis in the context of Oaxaca has been on the beautiful and visually powerful style of graffiti that developed in 2006. These are important emphases, but our argument in this visual essay seeks

to emphasize not the artists, taggers, or individual works, but how the changes in walls over time can paint a representation of how they are imagined or constructed socially by all of the people that come in contact with them, sometimes purposefully and sometimes simply as an unintentional consequence of their everyday lives. For this reason, we have purposefully avoided the images most often publicized about Oaxaca graffiti: the beautiful and powerful works of art collectives such as ASARO and Arte Jaguar. The only image in this series that depicts one of these works (Image 3, a work by ASARO) has been painted over. This visual essay avoids the spectacular in order to focus not just on the graffiti, but on the interactions between wall builders, wall painters, wall owners, graffiti artists, and the powerful natural forces of weather that play out over an expansive time scale.

Thinking about walls in this way prompts an interesting set of questions. What can we learn about the idea of public space by noting that the most public of walls—those in the central square and city center—revealed the lowest degree of communal ownership and equal collaboration? What can we learn about human relationships with the natural world that the importance of a wall can be judged by its inverse relationship to the influence of natural forces? What can we learn about the nuances of conceptions of private property in light of the deeply variable ways that the concept is policed in different locations? This series of images indicates that conceptions of private and public are heavily policed in important areas to construct human interactions in very structured, predetermined ways. These images illustrate that although we are heavily invested in conceptions of private property and public space, respectively, our investment is selectively and unevenly wielded to benefit some and exclude others. Furthermore, these images suggest that ideas of the natural world and the forces of nature are among the concepts systematically excluded from and battled against in the most important public arenas.

Reading walls in this way is a deeply archaeological pursuit, requiring a uniquely archaeological skill set. Archaeologists recognize that material culture, including the spaces that humans have constructed and inhabited, both reflects and actively structures human relations and values. Archaeologists must tease apart the impact of competing human and taphonomic (or environmental) forces, using discarded refuse to understand the social organization, political structure, and values of past populations. Just as an archaeologist can infer a great deal about the utility and

symbolic value of a potsherd or a wall foundation by analyzing their construction and use wear, we can better understand the meaning and significance of contemporary spaces and the actions that shape them by looking at the overlapping layers on their walls. As a record of myriad individual human actions, an examination of walls lends itself to posing questions about broad-scale power struggles carried out over long periods of time. Given that the actors involved have varying conceptions of their own role in these power struggles, the visible, physical, and even architectural evidence that they leave behind can provide a valuable complement to interviews and interpersonal experiences.

In the case of Oaxaca after 2006, we suggest three insights that can be gleaned from this visual, archaeological examination of walls. First, these images deepen our understanding of repressive political power. One of us (Livia) was interviewing activists and people from various political and social organizations, at the time that she was walking through the streets every day and watching the changing walls. Activists and artists were much more accessible to her than those individuals and institutions they were fighting against. Who were the men with assault rifles and black ski masks who rode around in police trucks on her street? Who were the men who kidnapped the teenaged daughter of a prominent activist, tortured her for hours, and then dumped her by the side of the road on the other side of town? What were their motivations? How were they organized? How did they imagine themselves? These were dangerous questions, and not ones to be posed lightly. The ugly, neutrally colored patches on the city's walls seem to provide some additional insight into this pattern of repression—visually indexing not only the faceless police and paramilitary soldiers, but the political power of which the soldiers themselves were also masked representations. Because the cover-ups were remarkably quick and done with the same paint across multiple walls, they had the appearance of coordinated and premeditated action. Their consistency and swiftness also revealed an anxiety that seemed disproportionate to the threat posed by the art. Repression of graffiti favored centralized spaces over peripheral ones, and the obliteration of debate over the articulation of ideas. It favored the erasure of political dissent over the eradication of crime. These are important details in understanding the political situation in Oaxaca, and ones that are uniquely accessible through visual illustration and examination.

As with archaeological data, the methodological challenge to reading walls in this way is that it is difficult to gauge with certainty the intentions behind the actions. Did the man hired to paint over the cathedral graffiti (Image 3) paint too thinly on purpose as an act of resistance? Were the original messages behind the beige patch (Images 2, 4, and 5) even political? Were the antigraffiti artists police officers acting as part of a centralized legal effort? Or as paramilitaries on their off-duty time? Or perhaps a completely unrelated group of fed-up downtown business owners? Or many unrelated individuals who just happened to all have beige paint? These questions could be answered through interviews and participant-observation, but cultural anthropologists as well as archaeologists sometimes find themselves working in the absence of words.

This essay's second insight arises not because of the absence of words, but because of the added nuance and depth of meaning that images can bring. These walls and the myriad human actions written on them visually beg questions of private property, public space, and permanence that are debated endlessly among various traditions of political ideology. The accumulated traces of many individuals, political groups, and natural forces on these walls seem to draw into high relief the argument that private property is not a legal and social convention constructed through mutual respect and collaboration, but through a deeply uneven distribution of power that is forcefully policed and resisted. These traces sketch a vision of public space, hemmed in by private boundaries, that is heavily regulated and artificially uniform, but that despite (or maybe because) of its faults is considered a valuable arena for expression. Ironically, these physical structures also (deceptively?) present a deeply agential view of the city in which ideas of private property and public space are created, destroyed, and transformed easily by human hands; to be done or undone at will.

Finally, the natural erosion present in these images emphasizes our embeddedness in the natural world, which written ethnography can sometimes neglect. As important as specific struggles over power and space are, sometimes with life-or-death consequences, the very impermanence of these surfaces belies the lasting influence of any individual struggle. The archaeologist knows that a brick wall, a cliché of obstinate permanence, is really a fluid and short-lived thing. The natural erosion of walls, which were built to literally demarcate an imagined tract of private property, compels us to recognize that rigid legal regulation exaggerates the permanence of



things. Walls, the land they inscribe, and the natural resources that we struggle over are all much less permanent and under our control than we imagine. These images leave natural forces as an actor in the frame.

Popularly, erosion is seen as decay, a parallel to the urban decay with which graffiti can be equated: an absence of appropriate human intervention. An archaeological or aesthetic perspective can help us recognize natural forces not as an absence but as a powerful presence. The graffiti artist who contributed the last image (Image 12) in this series succinctly and playfully articulates a different vision for this impermanence, restyling the wall's decay as the source of new growth.

## Review Dialogue: Selected Excerpts

Comment from Reviewer A: "Maybe the textual parts of the photo essay are more 'essayistic' than the pictures that remain, in contrast, 'documentary' rather than expressive (the photos don't as such contain a visualized argument but mainly serve as visual 'data'). This not a problem, just one possible variant of a visual essay. . . . It might be worth it to rework or reassign parts of the text to captions that fit particular pictures, as the theorizing in the textual part is based on and illustrated by particular pictures (or you might find another way to connect particular pictures to particular parts in the text)."

Response from Authors: "In order to address a few of the reviewers' comments, we added a paragraph at the beginning of the essay that explains the relationship between the text and the images more explicitly. It helps to address questions of why the images are ordered as they are and Reviewer B's concern about the use of archaeology. We're hoping that this paragraph can be offset in some way. It provides some background that is helpful, but displaying it apart from the rest of the essay will mean that it doesn't break with the continuity of the written portion's relationship with the images. (We would ideally like the written portion to remain more about the images than itself.)"

Comment from Reviewer B: "Since the 1960s, street artists in urban centers around the globe have engaged in battles with authorities. How do the authors build on and contribute to the literature that analyzes this history (for example, Schacter 2008)? I'm concerned that Louis Nevaer and Elaine Sendyk's (2009) book *Protest Graffiti Mexico: Oaxaca*, which the authors cite, has already richly documented and explored the ground of this photo essay and text. What insight does the author draw from this work, as well as the *We are the Face of Oaxaca* project, to advance the conversation? The authors might distinguish their intervention from the previous approaches by foregrounding and expanding the discussion of natural forces."

Response from Authors: "The connections between this work and the literature that Reviewer B mentions are greatly appreciated and relevant. (An early title to this photo series, when it was conceptualized as a gallery show, was 'Oaxaca Palimpsest.') Our impression from the vision articulated by the editors is that they want the written

portion to remain short. For this reason, we think that this deep engagement with specific written scholarship would be better served in a subsequent article. Even so, we highlighted and made more explicit how we see this work as an addition to the literature.”

Comment from Reviewer B: “The metaphor of archaeology is compelling but needs more fleshing out. The authors note: ‘Reading the walls in this way is a deeply archaeological pursuit.’ It would be helpful to restate here how they are ‘reading the walls.’ I’m concerned that our archaeologist colleagues might not agree that the approach taken here resembles their practice.”

Response from Authors: “We also reviewed and reconsidered our use of archaeology. We went through versions in which the essay engaged more specifically with archaeological bodies of theories (the tension between 1960s and 1990s traditions of theorizing material culture, for example, and engaging with landscape archaeology theories, as Reviewer B suggested). In the end, we decided to revise this paragraph to include only a few more sentences of general connections to archaeology and a more specific reference to our archaeological expertise at the beginning of the essay. The reason is that all of the telling seemed to overwhelm the visual portion of the essay. We are quite confident that the use of archaeology is appropriate and will appeal to the sensibilities of most archaeologists.”

## References

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This peer-reviewed photoessay was originally published as:

Stone, Livia K., and Abigail C. Stone. 2014. "As Fluid as a Brick Wall." Photo Essays, Cultural Anthropology website, November 10. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/as-fluid-as-a-brick-wall>