

Aesthetics of Indigenous Affinity: Traveling from Chiapas to Palestine in the Murals of Gustavo Chávez Pavón

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My first encounter with the murals of Gustavo Chávez Pavón was on December 31st, 2013, when I arrived with a Palestinian delegation in the autonomous Zapatista community in Oventic in the highlands of Chiapas in Southern Mexico to attend the celebrations of the twentieth anniversary of the Zapatista Uprising. We were also attending the graduation from our first grade at *La Escuelita*¹, the Little School that the Zapatistas have been organizing since August 2013 as an annual global camp for indigenous education and autonomy from below. My companions and I were intrigued by a mural of a Zapatista rebel wearing a pasamontaña, the iconic ski mask of the Zapatistas, designed like a black and white *kuffiyeh*, the traditional Palestinian peasant scarf that has become a popular symbol of Palestinian national identity. Although there was no actual artist signature, we recognized the big bold slogan “To Exist is to Resist,” printed on its left corner. It was a very familiar translation of the spirit of *sumūd* from Palestine. Painted in thin black brush underneath were the small captions in Spanish: “*De Chiapas a Palestina, la lucha por libertad nos hermana*” (From Chiapas to Palestine, the struggle for liberation unites us). We concluded that this mural must have been collectively signed by the Zapatista community in Oventic. For the next four years, I would use a picture that I took of this mural as a background image in my academic presentations as a visual proof to explain my rationale for studying contemporary Mayan and Palestinian literatures within comparative indigenous studies. Until one day, and after a quick research of murals in Palestine, I came across an identical image of the same mural painted at the Apartheid Wall in Bethlehem. While searching Google Images in English and Arabic didn’t yield any specific results besides vague references to the work as Latin American, searching in Spanish led to several interviews in the Mexican press with the artist behind the mural: Gustavo Chávez Pavón.



Figure 1: Gustavo Chávez Pavón, Mexico City, 2017. Photo by Amal Egeiq



Figure 2: “To Exist is to Resist” mural in Chiapas. Photo by Amal Egeiq, 2013.

In 2004, Chávez Pavón arrived in Palestine together with Juan Erasto Molina Urbina, from Chiapas and Alberto Aragón Reyes from Oaxaca. They were officially invited by the Lutheran Bishop of Jerusalem, Dr. Munib Younan, to participate in an international artists residency and give lectures and children art workshops at the International Center of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jerusalem. During the month of the residency, Chávez Pavón painted murals in Qalqilya, Tulkarem, Bethlehem, and Abu Dis, where he also painted a big portrait of Che Guevara. All of these murals are signed at the bottom with four letters: EZLN, *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (Army of National Liberation). Although the mural of “To Exist is to Resist” disappeared from the Apartheid Wall in Bethlehem sometime between 2011 and 2017, most likely due to the increasing appropriation of the Wall as a popular murals site frequented by global street artists such as Banksy (Egeiq, 2018), Chávez Pavón continued to paint murals of solidarity with Palestine on different walls across the world. In fact, since 2004, the brush of the Mexican muralist and Zapatista cultural promoter did not dry. In addition to painting murals in public schools in Mexico within the independent program, *Los Muros en la Educación* (Walls in Education), Chávez Pavón crossed many physical and imagined borders from Mexico to Palestine, Venezuela, Argentina, and Chile, sometimes independently and sometimes as a member of an international brigade of artists called *Murales contra muros* (Murals against Walls) to paint very colorful murals that feature unequivocal and explicit messages of indigenous and global solidarity with Palestine. Despite the powerful presence of his murals in the embassies of Palestine in Mexico City and Buenos Aires, and the *kuffiyeh* that he usually wears as a headband when he climbs walls to paint solidarity with Palestine, Chávez Pavón remains largely unknown in Palestine. Moreover, in comparison with other internationalist artists, more specifically, those of Euro-American origins, who did work in Palestine, his work is largely absent from books and magazines that review or cover Palestinian art and visual culture. In this essay, I introduce the murals of Chávez Pavón based on three interviews that we conducted in Spanish over the phone in May 2017 and in-person in Mexico City in October 2017 and August 2018, respectively. Through this dialogue, my goal is to shed light on key visual elements of Zapatista solidarity and the ways in which they represent collective visions of indigenous liberation in the traveling murals of Chávez Pavón. His enthusiastic participation in these interviews and permission to share his personal archive publicly provide a visual and oral testimony of an untold chapter in the history of indigenous solidarity between Mayan communities in Chiapas and Palestine. This solidarity is transnational at heart

both in its vision of mutual indigenous liberation and the global anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggle.

AE: The murals “To Exist is to Resist” in Chiapas and Bethlehem are almost identical, and in both you combine the *kuffiyeh* with the maize. Why did you choose this particular image?

GCHP: When I received the invitation to go to Palestine, I was painting a mural that was important for Zapatista education at a primary school in an autonomous Zapatista community in Chiapas. It was an important mural that would eventually make me half-famous. I asked permission from the community to leave and when they knew that I was heading to Palestine, they gave me their approval and asked me to deliver warm greetings to the Palestinians together with a collective message of solidarity that emphasizes that we have a lot in common: the struggle for land, freedom, and dignity are basically the same for our peoples. So, I went to Palestine with this image on my mind.

AE: But the subtitles are different. In Chiapas the subtitle is “*De Chiapas a Palestina, la lucha por libertad nos hermana*” (From Chiapas to Palestine, the struggle for liberation unites us), whereas in Palestine, you wrote, “*Viva Palestina libre abajo el muro fascista*” (Long live Palestine under the fa(ck)sist Wall). Why?



Figure 3: “To Exist is to Resist” mural in progress, Bethlehem, 2004. Photo from Chavéz Pavón’s archive.

GCHP: In Chiapas, our solidarity with Palestine is firm and clear, and the words on the mural are only a daily reminder of commitment to our common struggle. On the other hand, in the murals in Palestine, I wanted to denounce the wall of shame by mocking it. So, in Bethlehem, I wrote the word *facista* to make a joke of this wall and say fuck fascists at the same time. In a mural in Tulkarem, for example, I was more playful with words and wrote: “Viva Zapatata” instead of “Viva Zapata”².



Figure 4: the Zapata mural in Mexico City, 2017. Photo from Chavéz Pavón's archive.

AE: Speaking of Zapata, in 2017 you painted a new mural in Mexico City featuring a Zapata dressed up like a Palestinian fighter. We see here a shift in your work with more explicit integration of Palestinian symbols of resistance, such as the *kuffiyeh* and the slingshot. Can you tell us more about this mural?

GCHP: I painted this mural on a bulkhead wall borrowed from the *Museo de Memoria* here in Mexico City. We borrowed the wall from the museum to stage it at a special event that the Palestinian embassy in Mexico organized to commemorate the *Nakba* (The Catastrophe). This mural is about life and memory: long live Zapata together with the memory of Palestine, which is alive too. For me, this mural is important because it generated support from the museum, and the

ways in which this act of collaboration between a Mexican institution and the Palestinian people are significant.



Figure 5: Mural at the Palestinian Embassy in Buenos Aires, 2015. Photo by Khaldun Al-Massri.

Commemorating Palestine on Latin American Walls

In August 2015, Chávez Pavón had another collaboration with a Palestinian embassy. This time in Buenos Aires where he painted together with artists from the collective, *Muralismo Nóamde* and *Arte x Libertad*, a mural with two head figures, wrapped in the same Palestinian *kuffiyeh* while their hands are tied together and a flock of birds flying in front of them. At the top corner, this slogan was written in Arabic, although it is not clear who wrote it: *Hurrīyatunā tārīkh al-shu‘ūb* (Our freedoms is people’s history). Two months after the inauguration of the mural and in preparation for November 29th, the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, the Palestinian embassy together with *El Comité Argentino de Solidaridad con el Pueblo Palestino* (The Argentinian Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian People) launched a contest titled, *Postales por Palestina* (Postcards for Palestine),³ which became an annual competition inviting Latin American artists to revive the tradition of the Palestine Poster Project Archive⁴ from the 1960s by designing posters and painting murals that depict the Palestinian cause and struggle. This invitation led to the appearance of more murals of solidarity with Palestine in the streets and public spaces of Buenos Aires painted by collectives of Argentinian youth,⁵ including Fogoneros, Far,

Junvetud Guevarista and MTR, who incorporated similar iconography of rebellion and revolutionary art.

Reflecting on the meaning of his work in this context of Palestinian cultural diplomacy in Latin America, Chávez Pavón remarks, “When I was invited to paint at the walls of the Palestinian embassy in Buenos Aires, I was asked to paint again the mural of ‘To Exist is to Resist.’ But, instead of replicating the same one, I decided to recreate it by amplifying the message of solidarity it was conveying. This mural is almost double the size. So you see, two *kuffiyehs* instead of one. I also wanted to evoke the spirit of Zapata and the collective story that we have in Mexico that says that he is not dead, but alive somewhere in Arabia. I wanted to send a strong message that reminds us that despite our different languages we are similar people because we are brave at heart as our common legacy of resistance in Mexico and Latin America shows.”

Between Rivera and Freire

In Mexican art magazines and reviews, Chávez Pavón is often described as an “artist of the people,” (Berdeja, 2008) belonging to the Mexican School of Muralism, his art reiterating the works of Diego Rivera, José Celestino Orozco, and David Siqueiros. Although he embraces this recognition and confirms that indeed his art is a continuation of the revolutionary Mexican muralism from the 1920s, Chávez Pavón asserts that his work is not merely a copy of these muralists. He affirms: “It is a recuperation of their values concerning struggle and criticism of the oppressive system” (Ibid). This vision was particularly visible in Palestine in the techniques he used: bold brush strokes, national colors, and a series of red handprints stamped along the Wall.



Figures 6 & 7: Mural in Abu Dis 2004 & 2018.

AE: The EZLN signature and the imprints of your hands are present on all the murals that you painted in Palestine. Can you elaborate more on these artistic choices?

GCHP: When I arrived in Palestine, there was graffiti on the Wall, but not so many murals. Unlike graffiti, murals can't be painted clandestinely, especially when one has to paint for two or three hours in a row and carry liters of paint along. But we did it. Murals have the ability to reverse the logic of the Wall. Murals can change the wall with ideas, forms, and colors. Murals have lots of colors, and colors are life. Colors cheer you up. For example, in the mural at the Wall in Abu Dis, which was very gray in comparison with the Wall in Bethlehem, I painted with the colors of the Palestinian flag flowers and long hair attached to a screaming head. However, I painted a big portrait of Che Guevara in black and white to accentuate a bare, yet personal message of resistance to colonialism and imperialism.

AE: How do you describe your experience of painting in Palestine?

GCHP: As I mentioned before, I came to Palestine while I was in the middle of painting a mural that celebrates the indigenous struggle and Zapatista movement in Chiapas. I was painting from the heart of our people and arrived in Palestine in this mood. At the Wall, we had to paint almost clandestinely. We had two or three hours to paint maximum each day before the Israeli soldiers arrived. We didn't want to paint clandestinely, but we didn't run away either when the Israeli army came to chase us away. We come from a long legacy of fighting back against blows. We are colonized and our resistance as an indigenous movement is still going on. We resist by speaking our native languages, Nahuatl, Zapotec, Tzotzil, Purépecha, and painting murals too. In the social struggle, walls are incredible trenches. The same walls that are being constructed to separate us and segregate us, we use them to create bridges of humanized colors. On these walls, we dig at the rhythm of the sun radiating with internationalist solidarity all the way from Palestine until infinity.

AE: Was there anything in particular that surprised you or called your attention when you arrived in Palestine?

GCHP: Although the war against the Palestinian people is more obvious and the reality of the checkpoints is brutal, I was reminded of Mexico when I arrived. In Mexico there is a subtle war against the Indians and the poor. Yet, wherever there is more struggle and resistance to this war, such as in Chiapas or Ayotzinapa, the government, police and army treat us with similar forms of oppressive violence that the Israelis use. So I wrote ‘to resist is to exist’ as a message to the Palestinians because it also reminded me of my people. I saw the same words written at a barricade that indigenous people were carrying to resist the attacks of the Mexican military in Juchitán, Oaxaca a few years ago. When I came to Palestine, I was reminded of this history of rebellion and the way in which indigenous people in Chiapas and Oaxaca have been dominated and immobilized by a similar military and physiological apparatus seeking to control them and break them down.

AE: Going through the pictures of the murals in your archive, one can notice that you are almost always surrounded by people; whether they are there to physically give you support while you are up on the ladder painting, or with brushes and colors in their hands painting with you. Do you ever paint alone?

GCHP: As Zapatistas, wherever we go, we go because we are invited, not because we are bohemians or good people. As a Zapatista cultural promoter, when I get invited to communities, I go with the intention of learning and receiving feedback. I don’t go to teach anything. You would be surprised at how many artists can be found in a community. Just give people a brush and see how many of them who don’t necessarily self-identify as artists, mostly marginalized groups of women and children, are actually capable of expressing themselves in the most artistic ways.

We don’t get to see this happen everyday because of how capitalism flattens our identities and fragments our communities. As a form of public art, murals socialize art and turn it into an exercise in democracy. For me, muralism can build up communities through a visual critical pedagogy rooted in the liberation philosophy of Paulo Friere⁶ and what he taught us about using collective art to create a new culture of participation.

Sprawling Solidarity

The fusion of the Palestinian *kuffiyeh* and the Zapatista *pasamontaña* became deeply entwined with the revolutionary spirit of public art in a mural that Chavéz Pavón painted in Santiago, Chile, in 2015. He collaborated with a local group of artists called Brigada Ramona Parra to paint a mural on a wall in Pincoya, a neighborhood renowned for its rebellious history. This reputation gained more popularity as the neighborhood became a major site for the muralist movement of *Museo a Cielo Abierto*⁷ (The Open Sky Museum).



Figure 8: Boitcut mural in Chile, 2015. Photo from Chavéz Pavón's archive.

While the iconic image of the masked figure from “To Exist is to Resist” remains the blueprint for the mural, there are several elements from the Palestinian resistance culture that appear alongside it: the slingshot as well as the keys, which symbolize the Right of Return. Next to the image, there is a vivid painting that portrays a Palestinian prisoner in bed being force-fed and a painting of prison bars being transformed into a barcode, with the words “Made in Israel” and “Boicot” sealing it. This part of the mural explicitly evokes the Palestinian prisoners’ hunger strike and the ongoing violation of Palestinian human rights in Israeli prisons and beyond. The “Boicot”

also alludes to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (BDS). The detailed narrative of solidarity that this mural exhibits is further accentuated with the slogan in Arabic at the top right corner: *‘āshat Filasṭīn ḥurrah* (Long Live Free Palestine). What is particular about the rich textual and visual features of this mural is its very explicit and vivid representation of political iconography. In this case, the call for solidarity with Palestine is clearly *written on the wall*.



Figure 9: Palestinian Girl at Pancho Villa School Mural, Chiapas, 2018. Photo from Chavéz Pavón's archive.



Figure 10: Pancho Villa School Mural, Chiapas, 2018. Photo from Chavéz Pavón's archive.



Figure 11: A Zapatista boy co-painting the Pancho Villa School Mural, Chiapas 2018. Photo from Chávez Pavón's archive.



Figure 12: The Palestinian Mexican Flag at the Pancho Villa School Mural, Chiapas 2018. Photo from Chávez Pavón's archive.

This trend of making solidarity with Palestine more visible is also evident in Chávez Pavón's most recent murals. In early January 2018, he finished painting a new mural in another autonomous Zapatista community in Chiapas. This time, the mural is painted on the wall of an educational center named after Pancho Villa, another prominent figure from the Mexican Revolution. He painted Zapatista children happily reading books amidst colorful magical

landscape. Behind them, there is a portrait of a beaming girl holding tightly onto the trunk of a tree, with a flower in her purple hair and a *kuffiyeh* around her neck. This girl, Chávez Pavón confirmed, resembles his own daughter Violeta when she was a child. Like her father, Violeta is interested in reclaiming indigenous traditions and she is now a folkloric dancer. Under her feet in the mural, the flags of Palestine and Mexico are tied together in a celebratory dance of solidarity between Chiapas and Palestine across generations.

On the final destination of his traveling murals, Chávez Pavón concludes, “I wanted my murals to deliver a message to the Palestinian resistance, and for the Zionists to know about it, from the heart of our people in Palestine. The message of ‘To Exist is to Resist’ had to come to the heart of Palestine for people to know it, live it, and savor it because of our common struggle. In our indigenous lands we have been painting murals, singing, writing poetry, dancing and combating the colonizer enemy for the past 500 years. My murals came to share this message of resistance with Palestine” (Facebook Private Message, Oct. 7, 2018). Ultimately, what Chávez Pavón illustrates is that the walls do speak, against all odds and despite borders, to remind us of what binds indigenous peoples across time, histories, and geographies.

*Special thanks to Gustavo Chavéz Pavón, Omar Tesdell and Khaldun Al-Massri for contributing to this essay by sharing photos from their private archive.

Notes

¹ For more information about the philosophy of the school and its program, see Zibechei, Raúl. “Autonomous Zapatista Education: The Little Schools of Below” (2013). <http://woocomerce-180730-527864.cloudwaysapps.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/autonomous-zapatista-education-the-little-schools-of-below.pdf>

²“ Viva Zapata” is a popular slogan from the Mexican Revolution in 1910. The Zapatistas reintroduced it in their marches and political manifestos to evoke the legacy of Emiliano Zapata (1879-1919), the main leader of the peasants who championed “*tierra y libertad*” (Land and Liberty) and promulgated the Plan de Ayala in 1911, which called for substantial land reforms and redistributing lands to the peasants. In fact, naming their indigenous revolution after Zapata, the Zapatistas in Chiapas identify their struggle as a continuation of the Mexican Revolution.

³ For more details on this contest, see this report: “Postales por Palestina Buenos Aires 2015.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Resumen Latinoamericano, 21 Dec. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=37&v=jaYhCRqLdW8.

⁴ For more on the history of posters of international solidarity with Palestine and a collection of these posters, see *The Palestine Poster Project Archive*. www.palestineposterproject.org. Accessed 8 Oct. 2018.

⁵ These murals were a joint initiative of the Palestinian Embassy in Buenos Aires and El Comité Argentino de Solidaridad con el Pueblo Palestino (The Argentinian Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian People). For a short documentation of these murals, see: “Mural por Palestina.Octubre Revolucionario.Buenos Aires.” *You Tube*, uploaded by SuperSalem76, 11 November 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q3mrlpdqyIs.

⁶ Best known for his seminal book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Friere argued that oppressed people can achieve liberation by co-creating knowledge and developing critical pedagogical practices that establish their participation as equals in society.

⁷ For more photo of murals from this neighborhood and the profile of artists visit the official site of the online museum, *Museo a Cielo Abierto*, <https://museoacieloabiertoenlapincoya.wordpress.com>. Accessed 8 Oct. 2018.

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