QUITO GRAFFITI, PART III

(From Ron Alex, Quito: Ciudad de Grafiti). All these graffiti appeared in Spanish on walls throughout Quito in the 1990s. Spelling and accents as found in this book have not been altered or corrected here.

a wall
another page in my diary
(*una pared, una página más en mi diario*)

Time doesn't exist. Clocks do.
(*El tiempo no existe. Los relojes sí.*)

I believe in you, just in case you exist
(*Creo en tí por si existieras*)

Don't feel bad, country; Worse days will come
(*ánimo, país, ya vendrán días peores...*)

Solitude creates poets
(*La soledad engendra poetas*)

Ruin your life before they ruin it for you
(*Arruina tu vida antes que te la arruinen*)

I would believe in a God who knew how to dance
(*Creeria en un Dios que supiera bailar*)

The city falls apart, and I'm painting
(*La ciudad se derrumba, y yo PINTANDO*)

Why are you so useful?
(*¿Por qué eres tan útil?*)

I'm the one who counts syllables at night
(*Soy el que por las noches cuenta sílabas*)

I'm looking for 5 meters of thread to trap the moon
(*Busco cinco metros de hilo para atrapar a la luna*)

Isn't the moon of the street enough for you?
(*¿No te basta la luna de la calle?*)

Quito: A cemetery among the mountains
(*Quito: un panteón entre montañas*)

We weren't born to survive, we weren't born to hope

(*No nacimos para sobrevivir, no nacimos para esperar*)

I'm looking for my mother
(*Busco a mi mamá*)

I don't paint for the powerful nor for the exploited. They already have it all!
(*No pinto para los poderosos ni para los explotados. ¡YA LO TIENEN TODO!*)

Let me walk along the edges of your mind
(*Déjame caminar por los filos de tu mente*)

Your memory is a bullet lost in the desert. I'm not hurt.
(*Tu recuerdo es una bala perdida en el desierto. No estoy herido.*)

Love isn't literatura if you can't write on the skin
(*Amor no es literatura si no se puede escribir en la piel*)

Solitude: Maybe you love me so much you'll never leave
(*Soledad: Tal vez me amas tanto que nunca te vas*)

Remembered country: If you still exist, leave me alone
(Recordado país: Si todavía existes, déjame solo).

Our father who is in heaven, stay there!
(*Padre nuestro que estás en el cielo, !quédate ahí!*)

Life begins when the children leave and the dog dies
(*La vida empieza cuando los hijos se van y el perro se muere*)

(Response): Life begins when they rob your bicycle
(*La vida empieza cuando te roban la bicicleta*)

I like to be quiet...that's why I paint
(*Prefiero callar...por eso pinto*)

What an immense night, what a lonely earth
(*Que noche tan grande, que tierra tan sola*)

The clock is the prison where dreams die
(*El reloj es la cárcel donde mueren los sueños*)

And the day begins when the sun lies
(*Y el día comienza cuando el sol miente*)

Don't kill ideals, they're an endangered species
(*No mate los ideales, son una especie en extincion*)

Nebot [President of Ecuador]: It's great to create misery and then hug beggars
(*Nebot: lindo crear miseria y luego abrazar mendigos*)

There are three human rights: see, hear, be quiet. –Nebot [President of Ecuador]
(*Los derechos humanos son tres: ver, oir, callar. –Nebot*)

More poetry, less pólice
(*Más poesía, menos policía*)

I was born with trees, now I just have smog
(*Nací con los árboles, hoy solo tengo smog*)

Oil flows, the jungle bleeds
(*Fluye petróleo, sangra la selva*)

Morale is low (on the ground). Step on it!
(*La moral está por los suelos. ¡Písala!*)

Help the police: torture yourself!
(*Ayude a la policía: !torturese!*)

Society creates abysses, there are children selling them in the Street
(*La sociedad construye abismos, hay niños vendiéndolos en la calle*).

Dear Country: We received your message in a bottle
(*Querido país: Recibimos tu mensaje dentro de la botella.*)

Forget what you dreamed of, your dreams have been sold
(*Olvídense de lo que soñaron, sus sueños ya fueron vendidos*)

The fence is not in the garden, it's in your mind
(*La cerca no está en el jardín, está en tu mente*)

Yuppies: Has the wind gone out of style?
(*Yuppies: ¿Pasó de moda el viento?*)

Remembered country: What was your name?
(*Recordado país: ¿Cómo te llamabas?*)

I can't silence myself
(*No puedo quedarme callado*)

Journalist: Half a lifetime speaking what you don't know, Half a lifetime silencing what you do know
(*Periodista: media vida habla lo que no sabe, media vida calla lo que sabe*)

Your life: an ocean of trivialities
(*Tu vida: un océano de trivialidades)*

Give me a wall and I will change the world
(*Dadme una pared y cambiaré al mundo*)

If this wall is the limit of your property, let us decorate your limitations
(*Si esta pared es el límite de su propiedad, déjenos decorar sus limitaciones*)

God is dead, Marx is dead, I...am also a little sick
(*Dios ha muerto, Marx ha muerto, yo...ando también un poco enfermo*)

Let's look for the tired day when we can be reborn
(*Buscamos el cansado día en que podamos renacer*)

If your words aren't better than silence, I prefer to keep listening to my solitude
(*Si tus palabras no son mejores que el silencio, prefiero seguir escuchando mi soledad*)

Wopan

Peter Wogan
Magical Writing:
Literacy & Power
in Highland Ecuador
Westview Press, 2004.

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Conclusion

"Dreams—We have no dreams at all or interesting ones. We should learn to be awake in the same way—not at all or in an interesting manner."

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

Anthropologists often promise to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange, but nobody has done this better than Gabriel García Márquez, the master of magical-realist fiction. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* García Márquez describes a town suffering from insomnia and amnesia, and he explains that the town leader, desperately fighting rapid memory loss, took an ink brush and "marked everything with its name: *table, chair, clock, door, wall, bed, pan.* He went to the corral and marked the animals and plants: *cow, goat, pig, hen, cassava, caladium, banana*" (García Márquez 1971:53). The leader soon realized that people might need to be reminded how to use things as well, so he posted explicit instructions throughout the town, such as a sign hung from the neck of a cow that stated, "*This is the cow. She must be milked every morning so that she will produce milk, and the milk must be boiled in order to be mixed with coffee to make coffee and milk*" (ibid.).

This scene is an elaborate joke. The labeling scheme has obviously reached comically absurd proportions, even if the humor in explaining that you mix coffee and milk to make "coffee and milk" *(café con leche)* inevitably comes through better in the Spanish original than the English translation. What is perhaps less obvious is that the joke is on state regulation, the state's use of archival documents to record, name, classify, and control its citizens. Of course, as a parody, the scene exaggerates these state practices—but only slightly. I saw stickers on doors throughout Ecuador indicating that the household, including cows and other animals, had been counted in the 2001 national census. And such regulation is not limited to Latin America. As a Welsh farmer recently complained about European Union regulation of cattle movement and other agricultural practices, "It's got dreadful with forms now" (Jones 2000:71). For taxation and other purposes, the state *does* go into the corral and mark the animals and plants, and it even attaches signs to cows that virtually say, "This is a cow." Such recording of blatantly obvious information—the fact that this animal is a chicken, this person is a farmer—is an inherent aspect of all state bureaucracy. Employing the necessary degree of exaggeration, García Márquez highlights these classification routines in his novel.[1]

On another level, the insomnia scene pokes fun at people whose memories are weakened by reliance on written mnemonics—people who cannot remember a telephone number because they just wrote it down. García Márquez is partly echoing Plato, who feared that writing would "produce forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned it, through lack of practice at using their memory" (Rowe 1988:123).[2] But whereas Plato was worried about writing's effects on dialogical knowledge, García Márquez uses individual memory loss as a symbol for the loss of indigenous cultural memory. Thus, a Guajiro Indian woman first recognizes and explains to the others the truly devastating effect of the plague of insomnia: "a kind of idiocy that had no past" (1971[1967]:50). And while Plato was speaking shortly after the invention of alphabetic writing, when there still seemed to be a chance of limiting its effects (Gee 1988), García Márquez is speaking to readers who, as the heirs to more than two millennia of writing's ascendance in daily life, commonly assume that writing is practical, rational, and superior to oral memory.

García Márquez's scene inverts those assumptions, making writing a surprising object of curiosity. The author refers to the labeling scheme as "the spell of an imaginary reality, one invented by themselves, which was less practical for them but more comforting" (García Márquez 1971:53). The true magic, it turns out, is archival writing.

The "plague of insomnia" scene illustrates the way writing can seem strange when looked at from alternative angles. And this scene is not an isolated moment in Latin American literature: Roberto González Echevarría (1990) argues to good effect that Latin American fiction of the past several centuries has been modeled on images of legal and scientific archives.[3] The "plague of insomnia" scene can stand, then, for the centrality of archival imagery within Latin American literature. But where literary analysis leaves off, ethnographic investigation begins. Obviously indigenous cultures did not die when they first encountered alphabetic writing, nor were their cultural memories wiped clean by colonialism, as harsh as it was; in contemporary Latin America and elsewhere, indigenous cultures are alive and well, despite centuries of contact with documentation. For that matter, archival documents have been the focus of interactions with bureaucratic authorities in the modern era for *all* non-elite peoples, indigenous and otherwise, given the ubiquity of the archival writing that accompanies the nation-state, religions of the book, and capitalism. Thus, the interesting question is: What do specific communities make of bureaucratic archives? Put differently, how did they respond when the "plague of insomnia" reached their towns? This is the question addressed in the preceding pages.

One of the answers to emerge in the Salasaca case is that non-elites themselves grasp the intimate relationship between archives and power. The Salasacas consistently use archival writing as a concrete representation of church and state power, specifically the relationship between state documentation and identity conceptions postulated by previous research (Cohn 1990; Corrigan and Sayer 1985; Kertzer and Arel [eds.] 2002; Scott 1988). A benefit of ethnographic study of literacy (Rappaport 1994a–c; Street 1984), then, is to reveal the way social-science theories get confirmed and replicated in local views. Another benefit is seeing the way literacy symbolism is employed in struggles with church and state power, demonstrating that the purview of resistance studies (Scott 1985, 1990)

has to be expanded to include writing symbolism, rather than just oral expressions. More generally, investigating writing symbolism offers insight into state-local relations and conceptions of power, whether such conceptions take the form of resistance or not (Anderson 1990; Geertz 1980). To understand what people think of power, we have to find out what they think about archival writing.

Although the ethnographic focus here has been a single Latin American community, the underlying conceptualization of literacy, memory, and power can clearly bring about a re-evaluation of entire theories. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1991[1983]), for example, looks different when viewed from the perspective advocated here. In explaining print's effects on the creation of national identities, Anderson points out that, in early modern European history, printed products created a new sense of language permanence, which was useful to celebrations of national languages: "print-capitalism gave a new fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation. . . . [T]he printed book kept a permanent form, capable of virtually infinite reproduction, temporally and spatially" (Anderson 1991[1983]:44). As plausible as this idea is, especially to contemporary Europeans and North Americans accustomed to viewing print as more permanent than speaking, it neglects cultural influences over conceptions of language "fixity." There is no such thing as a neutral, objective measure of language permanence, only cultural notions that make it appear so. Individual cultures have varying definitions of language permanence, and they do not necessarily privilege language stability or print over oral memory. It makes all the difference when these definitions are seen as cultural constructions, rather than inherent aspects of print. From this perspective, the interesting question is not how print transformed national consciousness, but how these transformations went hand in hand with culturally specific conceptions of print itself (Silverstein 1999; Wogan 2001).

This alternative perspective on language permanence has already been suggested by the previous discussion of Salasaca writing-and-weaving comparisons, but a glance at Latin American graffiti makes this case more fully, and, moreover, indicates that a cultural perspective on

archival literacy can explain more than magical beliefs in rural communities. Given that urban graffiti in Latin America (and elsewhere) is characterized by its transience (Silva 1986), one could argue that its very form provides a sardonic commentary on the ideology of archival literacy, which holds that writing is more permanent than human memory. While Anderson and others celebrate the permanence of books, graffiti aims for another kind of language fixity: the staying power in individual memory of a soulful message. Graffiti is more akin to aphorisms, as described by a notorious master of the form, Friedrich Nietzsche: "He who writes in blood and aphorisms does not want to be read, he wants to be learned by heart" (1961[1883]:67).

Ecuadorian urban graffiti, in particular, shares this aphoristic quality. Rather than just saying "Kilroy was here," this graffiti pulses with poetic and philosophical overtones. Walking along busy streets in Quito and Ambato, I have been taken aback by messages like "Let me walk along the edges of your mind," "Mine is a free life but at times I feel alone," and "The end of dreams is the dream of the system" (see Figure 7.1).

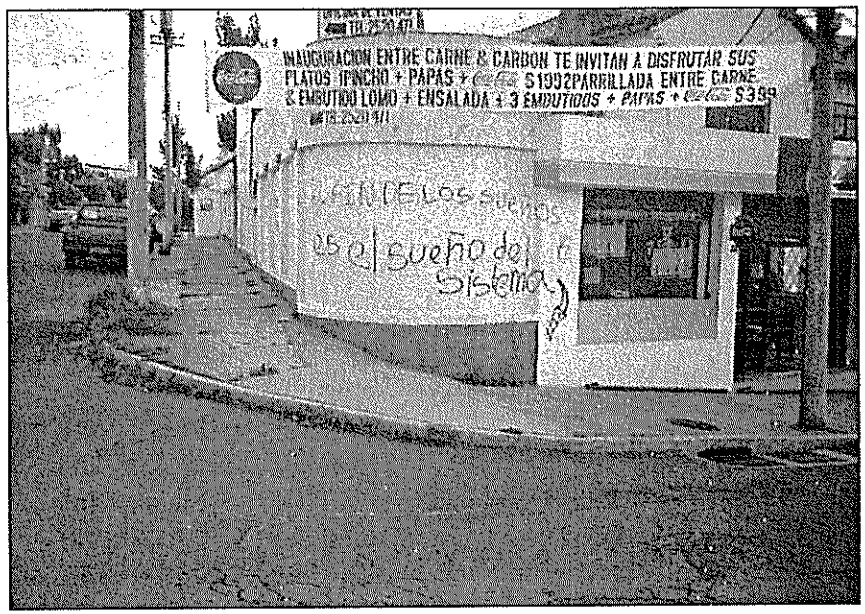

Figure 7.1 *Quito graffiti: "The end of dreams is the dream of the system."*

This is writing not meant to enter the archives but to penetrate and reside in the soul, even to be learned by heart. Interviews with young Quito graffiti writers give some sense of these motivations:

> *Q: What is graffiti for you?*
> *A: It's a medium of communication and an art. We believe that it's a tie that you can put around other people. We seek a way not to be isolated islands in the world; that way is our graffiti.*
> *Q: Do you think people understand your graffiti?*
> *A: We don't know, but the important thing is that you say what you think, and if just one person understands your message, it was worth creating it.*
> *Q: Why do you use a tearful eye as the mark of your group?*
> *A: Because when you cry, you unload yourself; when you make graffiti, you scream at the people what you feel, and that frees you. When there's a profound feeling of happiness and sadness, you cry; it's a nectar of sensitivity.* [Alex 1994:142]

Another graffiti writer puts it this way, with characteristic wit: "Galileo said it right: 'You write for friends who are far away.' And I write for my friends. If they now read others' graffiti, that's not my fault" (Alex 1994:140).

Such graffiti has a dual status: it is public writing, like state documentation, yet unlike such documentation, it lacks archival permanence and is meant to burn itself into individual memory. Like Nietzsche's epigraph ("epigraffiti"?) and the dream imagery in Figure 7.1, graffiti even blurs the lines between unconsciousness and consciousness, night and day: it gets written in the dark hours of the night, so that it can be read in the light of day. Such writing is a public dream: an outward expression of inner sentiments, reveries, and ruminations. Graffiti artists' acts of vandalism (and resistance) also transform private property into public space: a previously unnoticed wall in front of someone's house suddenly becomes a provocative billboard message calling out to passersby. As writing that is both permanent and ephemeral, public and private, graffiti reverses and parodies the conventional relationship between archives and memory in a García Márquez scene writ large—or at least this is one interpretation worth considering. The graffiti example suggests, if nothing else, the possibilities for looking at various forms of writing in terms of their relationship to archives, the state, and memory.

Research could take many other directions. It would be interesting to know, for example, what it says about Thai attitudes toward print and power when monks ward off evil by tapping the heads of worshippers with rolled-up newspapers (Wongpaithoon 1996). Or can any commentary on power be gleaned from the way indigenous Peruvians wrap sacred offerings in white paper and leave written requests for mountain spirits during pilgrimages (Allen 1988:153–156, 197; 1997)?

Such questions will be worth asking as long as power inequalities exist and get exercised through writing—in other words, for the indefinite future. And research possibilities are hardly limited to Third World communities. We can ultimately follow García Márquez in looking at literacy as one of the central myths of European/North American society, turning "the object of attention away from myth as an expression of so-called primitive cultures to the myths of modern society: the book, writing, reading, instruments of a quest for self-knowledge that lie beyond the solace mythic interpretations of the world usually afford" (González Echevarría 1990:29). Taking this tack disrupts anthropology's traditional identity as the study of unconscious orality in non-Western societies (Certeau 1988) and shows that magic and myth abound at all levels.

Notes

1. Reflecting the role of the state, the one who imposes the labeling scheme is José Arcadio Buendía, a state figure who has recently determined the layout of the town's streets and houses, distributed land, and organized commerce (García Márquez 1971[1967]:44–45). The town's evolution at this point parallels the late colonial period in Latin American history: hence the newly independent, more active state arrives at this same time in the figure of the Magistrate, who, authorized by an "official document" from the government, writes an order to have all houses painted blue and white for national independence. José Arcadio Buendía initially resents ceding authority to the Magistrate's written orders, but the two men's families soon become intertwined through intermarriage (García Márquez 1971[1967]:61).