Holy Week in Popayán: Between Cultural Heritage and Racial Hegemony

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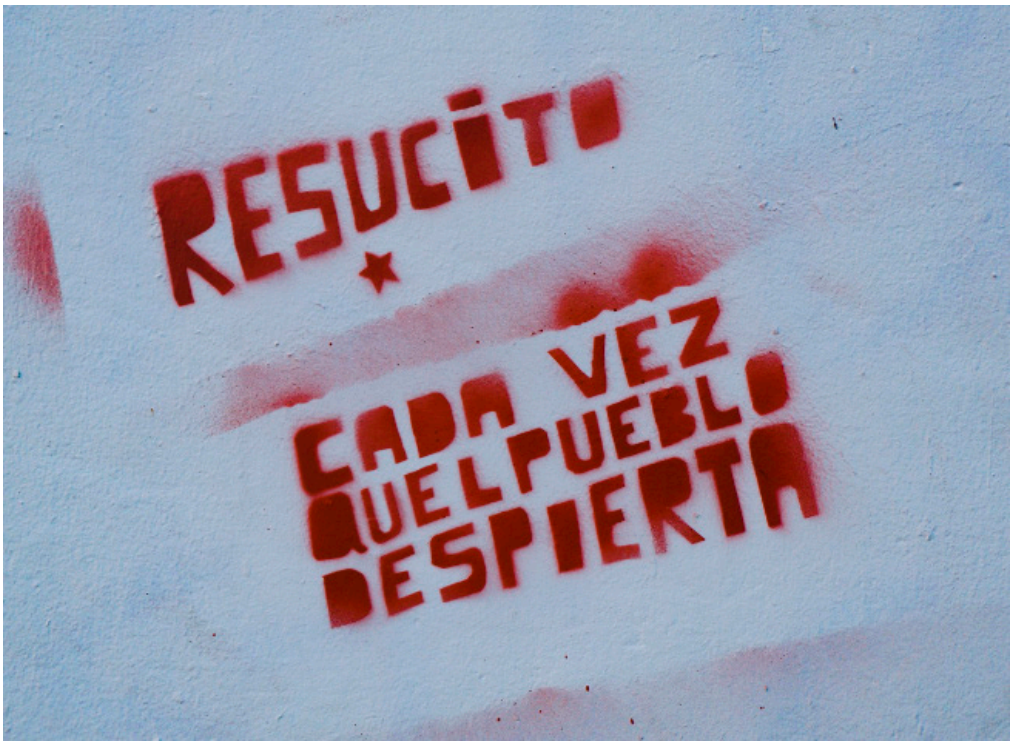

Figure 1. stencil graffiti that demystifies the meaning of resurrection typifying it as an awakening of the people ["pueblo"], an allusion to the social revolt. Photo by the author.

Introduction

Cuaresma [Lent] is one of the most significant celebrations in Latin American Catholicism. It marks the beginning of a period of prayer, penitence, and fasting, aimed at preparing believers for *Semana Santa* [Holy Week]. This solemn festivity commemorates the death and resurrection of Jesus—the central figure of Christianity—and takes place during the final week of Lent.

In Colombia, Holy Week is one of the most important and anticipated religious celebrations of the year. Its meaning extends beyond liturgical practice, permeating social, cultural, and even governmental spheres. Across the country, this commemoration transforms the dynamics of daily life in numerous towns and cities, mobilizing significant resources for the organization of events and the decoration of public spaces, thereby reinforcing its centrality in the collective identity.

Popayán, a city of great historical importance, is an emblematic case of this. Beyond its legacy as the "cradle of Colombia", as characterized by Herschel Brickell in 1944, due to the prominent intellectual, military, and religious figures born there, Popayán is particularly renowned for the solemnity and devotion with which it celebrates Holy Week, also known as *Semana Mayor*. This tradition has solidified Popayán's identity as *La Ciudad Blanca* [The White City], a designation that not only references the distinctive white facades of its colonial architecture but also symbolizes the deeply rooted religious fervour of its inhabitants and the city's historical role as a bastion of Catholic tradition in Colombia.

Holy Week and Popayán's identity as *La Ciudad Blanca* hold profound meaning for *payaneses* (residents of Popayán), who adhere strictly to the mandate that preserves the city's characteristic white facades in the historic center. Encompassing approximately 236 blocks, this district stands as one of the most extensive colonial historic centers of both Colombia and Latin America. Deviating from this aesthetic norm incurs

not only financial penalties imposed by the city administration but also social disproval from residents, who perceive alterations to the architectural uniformity as an affront to their faith, traditions, and collective identity. However, this zeal around the uniformity of white in facades and structures is rooted deeper, not just in faith but also in colonial legacies.

The consensus on urban aesthetics is quite remarkably steadfast—no building or residence within the historic center (known as "casco histórico") deviates from the mandated white facades. Even beyond the official limits of the downtown area, where such regulations are not enforced, many property owners voluntarily maintain the white exterior of their homes. This practice is not merely an act of compliance but rather an expression of commitment to the city's visual harmony, a way to honor Holy Week, or a demonstration of religious devotion. Thus, whiteness in Popayán transcends its ornamental function to serve as a marker of collective identity, reinforcing the values and principles the community associates with its heritage.

In the Catholic imaginary, white is a tone laden with symbolic meaning, traditionally associated with purity, innocence, and moral virtue. It is also linked to notions of good taste, serenity, rationality and modernity—concepts deeply ingrained in the symbolic construction of Western aesthetics. However, from a semiotic and decolonial perspective, the whiteness of Popayán can be understood as more than a mere esthetic choice; it functions as a mechanism that obscures deeper social dynamics. As Eduardo Galeano suggests in his reflections on colonial legacies, this whiteness conceals persistent structures of racism and classism—manifestations of the colonial wounds that continue to shape the urban spaces across Latin America. Galeano assets "It is Latin America, the region of open veins. From the discovery to the present day, everything has always been transmuted into European or later United States capital, and as such it has accumulated and accumulates in the distant centers of power" (Galeano 1973, 2). In this sense, the city's chromatic uniformity does not merely uphold a historical or religious tradition but also reinforces the aesthetic codes of colonial power, potentially erasing the polychromatic diversity that characterizes the cultural history of the region. The enforced visual homogeneity of Popayán, rather than being a neutral or purely aesthetic preference, operates as a mechanism of symbolic control that naturalizes exclusionary social hierarchies.

Holy Week as a ritual, incorporates elements of spectacle and an emotional[1] intensity that resonate with Colombia's dramatic socio-political landscape. During the celebrations, priests don sacred white vestments, signifying their religious hierarchy, while participants in the processions frequently wear white and purple, colors imbued with deep meaning within Catholic iconography. Within this context, graffiti emerges as a disruptive intervention, a form of profanation that both exposes the coloniality embedded in the celebration and constitutes an act of resistance. By defying Popayán's urban aesthetic norms, graffiti introduces a dialectic tension between the sacred and the profane, the canonical and the marginal, the visible and the censored.

Rather than merely representing an opposition between order and chaos, graffiti can be understood as symbolic reconfiguration of urban space—a counter-narrative that challenges the hegemony of whiteness as an aesthetic and ideological norm. In this reading, the long-standing debate around the notions of "civilized" versus "barbaric" is transposed onto the aesthetic realm: the enforced monochromatic uniformity of Popayán does not merely seek to preserve a colonial ideal but also serves to mask the underlying dynamics of exclusion. This essay proposes to examine this tension, analyzing how graffiti, by disrupting the sacralized urban space of Holy Week, not only challenges its visual and ideological codes but also reintroduces to the city the vibrancy of color and the spontaneity of popular culture—elements systematically marginalized from official narratives of the urban landscape.

Holy Week as a Grand Stage

The relationship between Carnaval and Cuaresma, though seemingly oppositional, is in fact one of symbolic and structural interdependence. Their connection is far from incidental: Carnaval comes to its conclusion on Mardi Gras, immediately giving way to Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. This transition establishes a dialectic between excess and abstinence, transgression and penitence, the profane and the sacred. In Popayán, Holy Week, which takes place during the final days of Lent, has acquired a significance that momentarily seems to suspend—at least in appearance—the differences assigned by class, race, and ideology. The city becomes the epicenter of a ritualized spectacle of religiosity, drawing Colombians from various regions who gather for its solemn ceremonies.

From an institutional perspective, Popayán's Holy Week has been described as "a massive manifestation of traditional popular culture, incorporating a wide range of social groups who find in this ritual a means of materializing their belief systems".[2] However, this definition overlooks the tensions concealed within the celebration, tensions embedded in its very structure. The institutionalization of Holy Week has transformed it into a kind of sacralized Carnival, where ritual participants enact highly codified roles within a strictly delineated space.

As early as the 1960s, Luis F. Suarez Pineda noted a nostalgia for "Holy Weeks of the past" when he asserted that, "the ceremonies of previous decades are missed […] for their austerity and sobriety" (Suarez Pineda 1962, 575). [3] He further observed that celebrations had been progressively

losing their splendor and grandeur due to various societal changes. His reflections find an echo in Byung-Chul Han's The Disappearance of Rituals (2020), where the philosopher argues that modernity has displaced collective rites in favor of fleeting, individualized experiences. The decline in austerity and solemnity that Suarez Pineda observed in the mid-20th century can thus be understood as an early manifestation of the broader crisis of ritual that Han identifies in contemporary society—where the symbolic is replaced by a culture of immediacy and so-called "falsely authentic" experiences.

The transformation of Holy Week is also closely tied to its institutionalization and commodification, evident in how different aspects of the festivities are now structured along class lines, with corporate sponsorship playing a central role. La Junta, the foundation responsible for organizing the event, functions much like the committees behind other major festivals, such as the Cali Fair, or Barranquilla's Carnaval, mobilizing various socio-economic sectors around the celebration. Its official mission, dedicated to "preserve and transmit the religious, cultural and traditional patrimony",[4] suggests an institutional response to the perceived decline of ritual in modern society. Anthropologist Julio Caro Baroja similarly observed that "ancient communities crumble, hermitages fall into ruin, and brotherhoods, confraternities, and similar institutions disappear along with the secular societies that sustained them" (Caro Baroja 1988, 19).[5] This tension between tradition and modernity thus reflects a broader secularization process, which Max Weber associated with the disenchantment of the world[6]—a phenomenon that, in this context, threatens to strip Holy Week of its spiritual dimension.

Yet despite these transformations, Popayán's Holy Week remains far from disappearing. Although its ritual aspect may have lost some of its solemnity, its festive dimension has intensified, operating as a mechanism of tradition. As García Pilán suggests, this shift can be seen as a revitalization rather than a decline, wherein the celebration adapts to new social dynamics while retaining its symbolic relevance (Pilán 2011, 3).

According to La Junta's mission, the processions serve as the centerpiece of the celebration, a structure that bears notable similarities to the Carnaval parades. Suarez Pineda also underscores this aspect, asserting that the most popular component of Holy Week is, in fact, its processions (Suarez Pineda 1962, 576). However, while Carnaval allows for symbolic inversion—where hierarchies are subverted, and order is temporarily suspended—Holy Week in Popayán reaffirms normativity through its meticulously choreographed enactment of faith. Yet this religious theatricality is not entirely devoid of carnivalesque elements: the priest, the Knights of the Holy Sepulcher, the altar boy, light bearer, the thurible, the *moquero* (the person in charge of wiping the sweat from the faces of the "cargueros"—the individuals carrying the heavy religious floats known as pasos), the marshal or steward [regidor], the insignia bearer, the banner bearer, the musician, *the sweeper*—all embody roles within a highly structured sacred drama that, paradoxically, mirrors the exuberance and performative nature of Carnaval's representations of excess.

From this perspective, Holy Week in Popayán can be understood within a framework of ritualization, where the sacred and the profane exist in constant tension. The normativity imposed by the celebration is not absolute—just as in Carnaval, there is roleplay, a theatre of the sacred that does not fully eradicate disorder and irreverence but instead reinscribes them within an acceptable framework.

In this sense, graffiti, as an intervention, exposes the cracks in this model, challenging the symbolic authority that Holy Week seeks to impose on the city. If the procession enacts the continuity of order, graffiti disrupts it with a rebellious counter-narrative. Yet both, in their own ways, participate in the same struggle over public space, engaging in a contestation over its meaning through the forces of ritual and transgression.

Configuration of a White Holy Week

The processions of Popayán's Holy Week date back to 1556. In their early stages, Spanish conquistadors and missionary monks led the ceremonies, while the native population played secondary roles, such as carrying the heavy religious images and lighting the way. Over time, participation became more inclusive, allowing indigenous people to take on greater responsibilities in the event's organization. However, it is unlikely that white played a central role in these early celebrations or in the city's decoration, as the association between white and Catholic religious authority had not yet been firmly established. White was formally adopted as the papal "color"[7] by Pope Pius V in 1566, marking the beginning of its symbolic prominence in the Christian imaginary.[8]

The whitening of the Christian imaginary developed alongside the broader erasure of color in the Western civilizational project. As the concept of the "West" was consolidated, an increasing aversion to color emerged, reflecting a preference for homogeneity and the suppression of cultural and aesthetic diversity. In *Chromophobia*, David Batchelor argues that color has long been subjected to extreme prejudice in Western thought, often perceived as a marker of a supposed cultural contamination, primitivism, or excess. This marginalization has linked color with the infantile, the vulgar, the superficial, the exotic, and the queer (Batchelor 2000, 23).

The subordination of color to the monochromatic aesthetic pattern of the West aligns with what Aníbal Quijano calls modernity-coloniality—the persistence of colonial relationships across various social dimensions (Quijano 2022). Within this framework, the association between specific color schemes and racial categories is a construct that emerged from the European conquest of the Americas, crystallizing into hierarchical social identities such as "Black", "Mulatto", "Indian", "Olive", "Yellow", "White", and "Mestizo" (Quijano 2020, 326). The colonization of the Americas thus marks the historical moment in which racism emerged as a systematized means of denying the full humanity of non-Europeans. As Quijano explains, race was not an inherent concept but rather an ideological tool developed to justify new power relations between Iberians and indigenous peoples.

However, Quijano also argues that the association between skin color and race was not immediate. African-descended peoples, for instance, had long been known to Europeans—dating back to the Roman Empire—without the notion of "race" being applied to them. It was not until the 18th century that color became an explicit racial signifier, when the British introduced the concept of the "white human" to distinguish themselves from racialized subjects. In this dialectical relationship, whiteness became not merely a descriptor but a mechanism for establishing superiority and domination over "the other" (Quijano 2007, 132).

Whiteness, Nationhood, and the Social Construction of Status

During the independence movements of the 19th century, Latin American creoles strategically appealed to racialized populations to fight against Spanish colonial rule while simultaneously articulating a discourse of unity. This paradoxical need to mobilize non-white populations while maintaining elite dominance led to reconfiguration of the notion of whiteness within nationalist rhetoric. A century later, whiteness ceased to be solely determined by skin tone and increasingly became an aspirational status, shaped by national context, social class and economic capital (Telles & Flores 2013).

Thus, social mobility in Latin America became linked to symbolic and subjective "whitening", reinforcing whiteness as the standard of normality and superiority. The process was not limited to racial ideology but extended to urban aesthetics. It is no coincidence that Popayán—an historically white city, founded by Catholic Spanish families attracted to the region's gold mines—adopted whiteness as its dominant architectural tone. The city's colonial architecture thus became both a visual marker of Catholic religiosity and an enduring symbol of elite power.

Whiteness as an Economic and Structural Order

Beyond its racial and aesthetic implications, whiteness also implies a structural order within capitalist modernity. Bolívar Echeverría expands on this idea, linking elements that constitute whiteness to an ethos of capitalist discipline—what Max Weber famously described in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. According to Echeverría, the economy imposes an ethical demand upon society, shaping behaviors that align with capitalist accumulation and continuous economic growth. He argues that whiteness, in this context, becomes synonymous with the "virtuous" disposition required by capitalism, defining it as "a requirement of modern practical life based on the capitalist mode of production, fostering a type of virtuous behavior and a humanity adaptable to the needs of constant growth or accumulation" (Echeverría 2011, 243-44).[9]

This logic manifests in Colombia's socio-spatial order, where whiteness remains visibly inscribed in public spaces. In cities such as Popayán, the persistence of white in urban architecture reflects not only religious tradition but also the enduring hegemony of colonial power structures. Through this lens, Popayán's architectural whiteness is not a mere aesthetic preference but a material expression of racial, economic, and ideological hierarchies.

Whitening Subjectivity

In the Americas, whiteness has long been associated with social and economic superiority, distinguishing European colonizers from enslaved Africans and indigenous populations. This contrast between European "civilization" and perceived "primitivism" of the New World not only structured racial hierarchies but also extended into aesthetic and spatial practices. The predominance of white in public spaces, therefore, is not merely an aesthetic choice but a symbol of moral and social superiority.

Whiteness, in this context, operates as an ideological matrix that encodes cultural, historical, and social meanings—including perfection, order, dominance, and rationality—which have been central to the construction of Western civilization. As bell hooks argues in *Black Looks,* the oppositional gaze functions as a racialized mechanism that frames the non-white body as savage, exotic, or inferior (hooks 1992). Within this logic, the whiteness of Popayán's architectural façades reinforces the idea that purity and ideality are intrinsically linked to whiteness.

This phenomenon is not exclusive to architecture, it can also be identified in other spheres, such as cinema, in which a notable absence of chromatic diversity reflects a persistence

of colonial resilience, perpetuating a preference for homogeneity and exclusionary ideals.

Whiteness and Colonial Memory in Popayán

Our white cities, in an ideological sense, are social constructions that connect whiteness to Catholic values such as purity and innocence, while also connoting power and civilization. In the case of Popayán, its architectural whiteness serves as a mechanism for resisting social and historical diversity. As García Quintero notes:

> "[After the wars of independence] a weakened and impoverished Popayan fell into the hands of a local elite that embraced the Spanish aristocratic dream of maintaining social distinction without the necessity of labor, instead relying on the work of enslaved Africans and indigenous peoples" (García Quintero 2014, 90)[10]

Thus, Popayán's commitment to whiteness is not simply an aesthetic preference but a nostalgic attachment to a lost colonial grandeur, as García Quintero further asserts: "[Popayán's society] prefers to bask in the memory of an opulent past—one of splendor and glory—that is now either absent or irretrievably lost" (García Quintero 2014).[11]

The imaginary of purity in Popayán relies on a *habitus*[12] that maintains the city's historical façade, concealing its profound racial and social contradictions. In *Black Skin, White Masks,* Frantz Fanon offers a critical perspective on the alienation and self-negation experienced by racialized subjects under colonialism and domination. Fanon argues that the internalization of white superiority leads to a rejection of one's own culture and identity, manifesting in the adoption of white-coded behaviors and values as a means of escaping oppression and discrimination (Fanon 1968).

This paradox is particularly evident in El Cauca, the department of which Popayán is the capital. Despite being one of the most ethnically diverse regions in Colombia, home to nine indigenous nations and one of the largest Afro-Colombian populations in the country, Popayán's whiteness operates as a mask that suppresses this rich *chromatic* and cultural heritage. The city's monochromatic façade, reinforced by its religious symbolism, thus functions as a mechanism of erasure—its deafening whiteness a visual and ideological silencing of otherness.

In the 21st century, ideological domination persists under new mechanisms that perpetuate exploitation, mitigating it only in a superficial manner. Contemporary myths—such as the nation-state—function as homogenizing forces, relegating inequalities and systemic injustices to the background in the name of national unity. Within this framework, an "imagined community" is constructed around narratives such as mestizaje, which dilute cultural and ethnic diversity, creating an illusion of inclusion and social cohesion. These strategies of homogenization, as Rodrigo Gunter suggests, are not neutral but rather part of a broader ideological system that reinforces colonial discourses, shaping the contemporary subjectivity of our societies (Gunter 2002, 242).

Graffiti: The Destroyer of Myths

Not everything on a white wall is pure, just as not everything in museums and galleries is art, notes Colombian semiologist, Armando Silva. Popayán's Holy Week, with its solemn rituality and monochromatic austerity, is staged as a performance of order and purity. Yet, within this carefully controlled theatricality lies an underlying tension, drawing it closer to a carnivalesque logic. As the city becomes a performative space where symbolic hierarchies are reinforced through omnipresent whiteness, it also opens itself to transgression, reversal, and appropriation of public space. Graffiti, in this sense, functions as a counter-narrative that interrupts the hegemonic whiteness of Popayán's urban landscape.

Just as graffiti transforms the urban landscape and challenges traditional notions of art and space, Holy Week's procession and rituals in Popayán transform the city into a temporary stage of religious devotion, an urban choreography that redefines order and participation. They simultaneously reinforce the racial and social tensions embedded within Cauca. Whiteness, as a dominant visual force during these celebrations, operates as both a symbol of purity and a mask that occludes underlying contradictions. This ambivalence mirrors the dialectic of graffiti: on the one hand, it challenges the city's rigid norms, yet on the other, it opens a space for alternative meanings and resignifications.

Returning to the core argument of this essay, here I refer to graffiti as a dissident, proselytizing act, a clandestine writing on the walls that resists and questions power. These militant scribblings become the antithesis of the apparent calm, meditative and silent—white—walls. It doesn't claim to produce space, but rather, subverts it. In Levebvrian terms,[13] graffiti does not seek a place in the city—it actually reconfigures its space (the city's) dismantling the official narratives inscribed upon it. Against its combative character, the white wall remains passive. It is by no means a coincidence, then, that one of the most recurrent graffiti inscriptions in Popayán denounces this omission: "white walls, black consciences [Paredes blancas, conciencias negras]" (Figure 2).

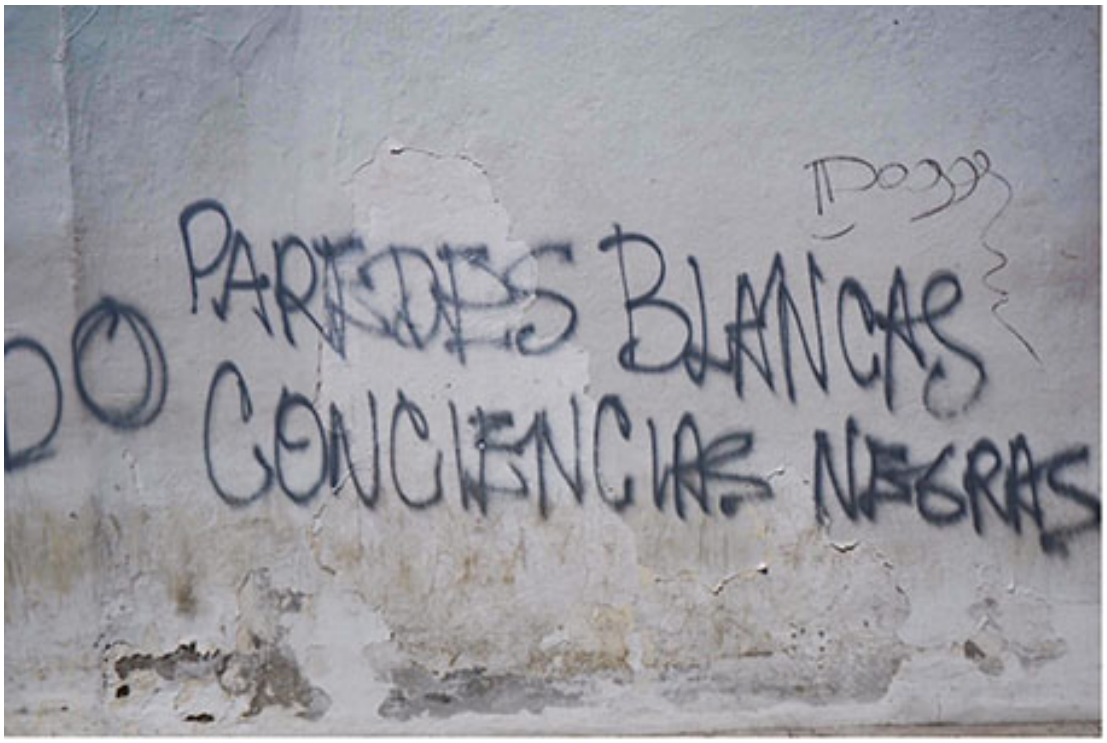

Figure 2. The epithet "White walls, black consciences [Paredes blancas, conciencias negras]" is written on a wall in Popayán. Photo by the author.

Graffiti, in its transgressive nature, disrupts the apparent silence of the wall, compelling it to *speak* and challenging the visual and symbolic order imposed by the city's whiteness. On April of 2021, the immaculate walls of Popayán—typically preserved as a visual marker of order and Catholic devotion—were transformed into a manifesto of resistance. Young artists and students from the Universidad del Cauca took to the streets to protest the *uribista*[14] regime of Iván Duque, inscribing their discontent onto the urban landscape. If Holy Week transforms the city into a performative space, graffiti interventions reinscribe the same space with insurgent meaning, momentarily stripping it of its urban sanctity. The monochrome whiteness that ordinarily functions as a mask of order and devotion was, under the able hands of the graffitists, exposed as an instrument of repression. Every drop of paint, every inscription on the walls, operated as a rebellious voice that, by invoking color and text, ruptured the hegemonic silence imposed upon the city.

In its ephemeral yet rebellious nature, graffiti functioned as a pharmaceutical against historical amnesia, as a stark reminder that beneath the white mask of conformity, persistent forms of exclusion and oppression endure. Its brevity and forcefulness transformed it into an act of rupture in public space, an insurgent form of writing that, unlike institutionalized or legitimized discourse, does not aspire to permanence but rather to immediate impact. Holy Week, with its ritualistic and highly codified character, also constitutes an act of symbolic occupation of urban space, but it does so by reaffirming an ideal of order and tradition. Graffiti, by contrast, destabilizes this order, momentarily interrupting the white city with messages that do not seek to integrate into its visual regime but rather to scratch at the illusion of its purity.

This is not a question of legitimizing graffiti as documentary evidence, but rather of acknowledging its communicative potential in specific socio-political contexts, particularly when urban space has been constructed as an exclusionary stage. The debate here is not about defending or condemning interventions on historical monuments or heritage buildings but rather about understanding graffiti as a political tool that resists an imposed logic of order that presents itself as immutable. If Holy Week reaffirms the hegemonic imaginary of the white city through its devotions and rituals, graffiti contests the discourse, creating disorder and reminding us that every consecration of space is, ultimately, a political construction. As Henri Lefebvre posits, space is not neutral, it is produced and reproduced through social and ideological practices. Graffiti, in this sense, interrupts the constructed nature of urban whiteness and the exclusionary order it upholds.

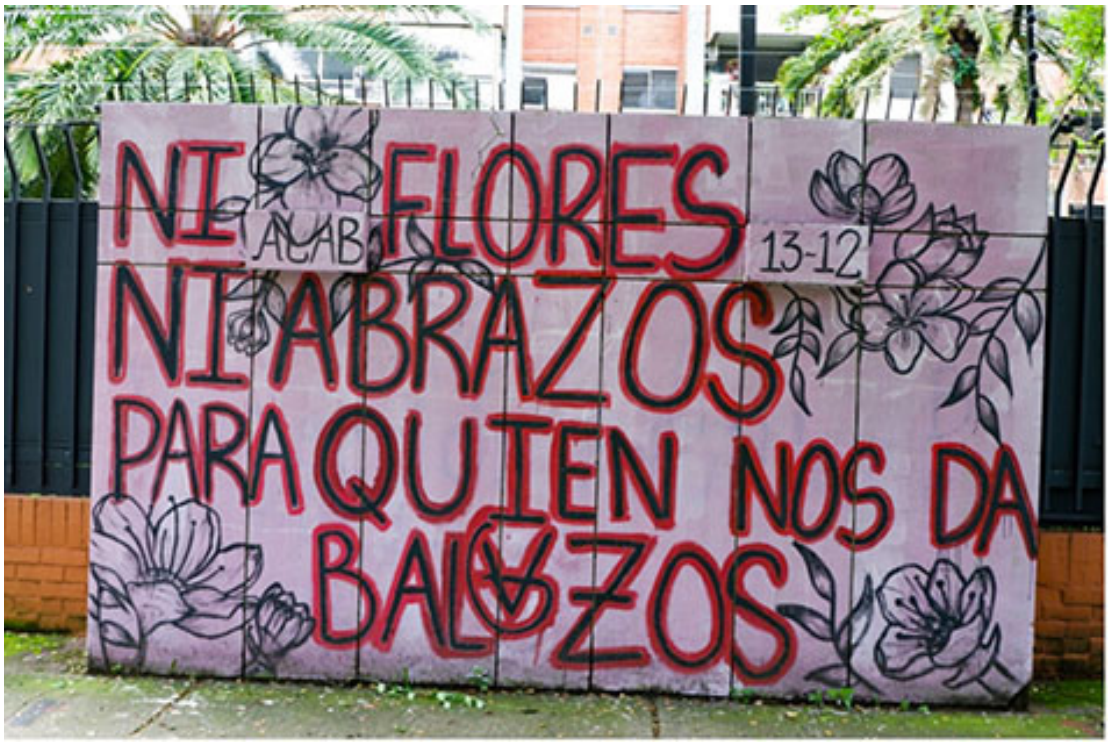

Figure 3. "Neither flowers nor hugs for those who shoot at us [Ni flores ni abrazos para quien nos da balazos]" is read on a wall in reference to the police repression during the social unrest. Photo by the author.

From the Carnival of Colors to the Whitewashed Ritual

Political sociology has long recognized graffiti as a tool of political engagement, a medium through which marginalized voices challenge dominant discourses and institutional power. On April 2021, this function became strikingly visible in Colombia, as a convergence of economic, political, and social factors ignited a nationwide social uprising. Among the primary catalysts was the introduction of a tax reform that disproportionally burdened vulnerable populations. The already deep-seated corruption within the highest levels of government, coupled with a worsening public health crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbated public frustration. At the same time, state violence—long ignored by successive right-wing administrations—escalated, fueling massive protests across the country. Among the demonstrators were trade unions, students, and diverse marginalized communities, all united in their rejection of systemic repression and inequality.

In Popayán, the epicenter of Holy Week's solemn religious processions, the tensions between tradition and dissent became particularly visible. As in previous years, Holy Week was celebrated according to established norms, culminating on April 16, albeit with the restrictions imposed due to the ongoing pandemic. However, the relative tranquility that typically accompanies this period in "the white city" was shattered when students from the Universidad del Cauca staged protests, disrupting the religious spectacle with demands for justice.

The incident that further escalated the unrest in Popayán was the tragic suicide of an underage girl, who had been detained by police during the protest. The day before, taking her life, she left behind a harrowing note alleging that she had been sexually assaulted by police officers during her detention. The public outcry that followed was immediate and visceral. The walls of Popayán, once meticulously maintained as a pristine symbol of Catholic devotion and order, became a canvas of collective indignation. By the following morning, the city's signature white facades had been transformed, covered in politically charged epithets, crude denunciations, and defiant messages (Figure 4). The formerly unblemished "open-air temple" of solemnity had been converted into a carnivalesque plaza of protest.

This rupture in the ritualistic order of Holy Week illustrates the contested nature of urban space in Popayán. While the religious processions seek to reaffirm social hierarchy, tradition, and moral purity, graffiti interrupts this performance, reclaiming the city as a site of dissent and resistance. The contrast between the controlled, codified ritual of Holy Week and the spontaneous, insurgent expressions of protest graffiti underscores the fragility of the city's white façade—both literal and ideological.

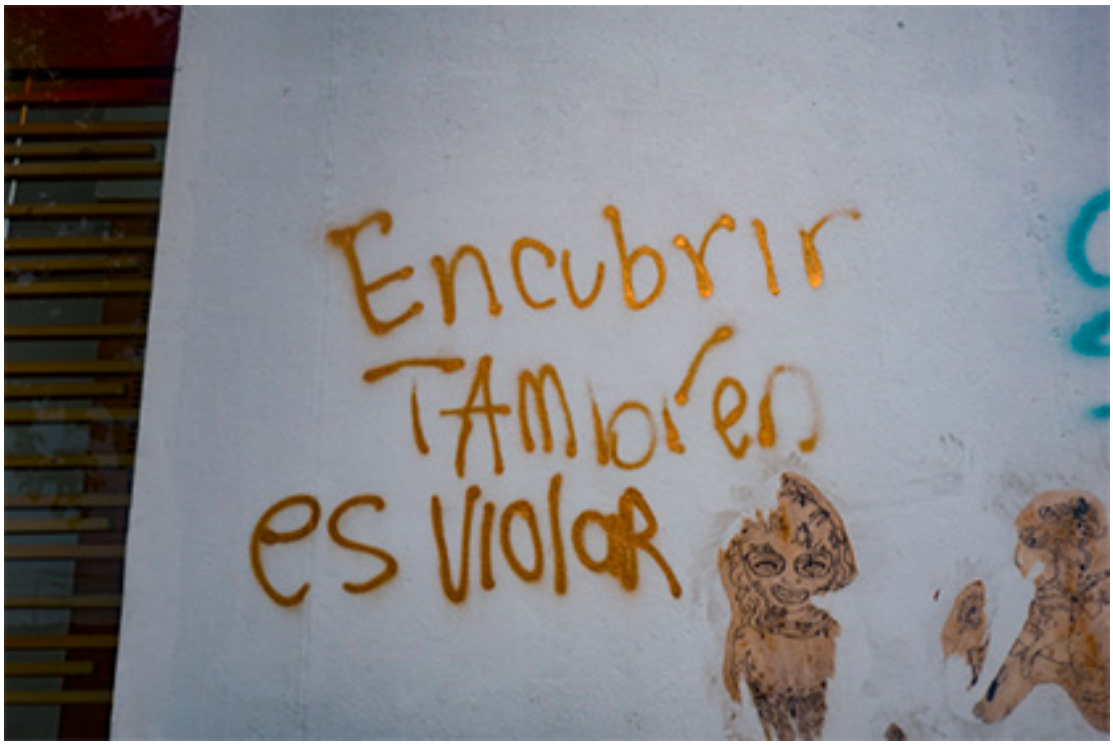

Figure 4. A trigger of the protests in Popayán was the suicide of a young girl who, in a note left behind before taking her own life, accused the police of sexually assaulting her. This tragic event brought national attention to the widespread allegations of sexual violence committed by law enforcement officers against protesters. The phrase "Encubrir también es violar" ("To cover up is also to rape") denounces the complicity of police officers who, by protecting their colleagues, become perpetrators themselves. A slogan appeared repeatedly across different areas of Popayán was "Si tocan a una, respondemos todas" ("If they touch one of us, we'll all respond"), which became a rallying cry throughout the country in defiance of sexual violence. According to the human rights organization Temblores, by May 22, at least 21 cases of sexual violence at the hands of police officers had been officially reported. Photo by the author.

The Morphosis of a City: From Lettered to *Littered*

From being the white city—and, considering Angel Rama's terms,[15] a *lettered city*—Popayán was transformed into a city inscribed with unauthorized, clandestine, and transgressive writing, in a way, *littered*[16]—that is to say, *contaminated*, inscribed in the margins of the civilized order that normally reigns in the city. This shift disrupted the civilizing order that typically prevails in the city, introducing a new textuality that challenged its carefully maintained image of order and devotion.

The restrained silence of Popayán's walls—symbolically sacred—was abruptly shuttered, transformed into an eloquent proclamation of dissent. Graffiti inscribed on these formerly immaculate facades denounced systemic injustices, exposing the underlying social tensions that the city's white façade had long concealed. The accusations were sweeping and uncompromising: oppression, structural violence, animal cruelty, exploitation, sexism, racism, inequality, corruption, and environmental destruction. It was too much for a city that just twelve days earlier had basked in almost celestial harmony. Some graffiti, just like independently produced videos circulated online, revealed the complicity of local economic elites in suppressing the protests. Footage showed affluent individuals, clad in white and arriving in white SUVs, firing weapons at demonstrators—a chilling visual parallel to the city's symbolic whiteness—while police officers stood by, complicit in the violence. The accusations spared no institution: not even the church escaped condemnations (Figure 5).

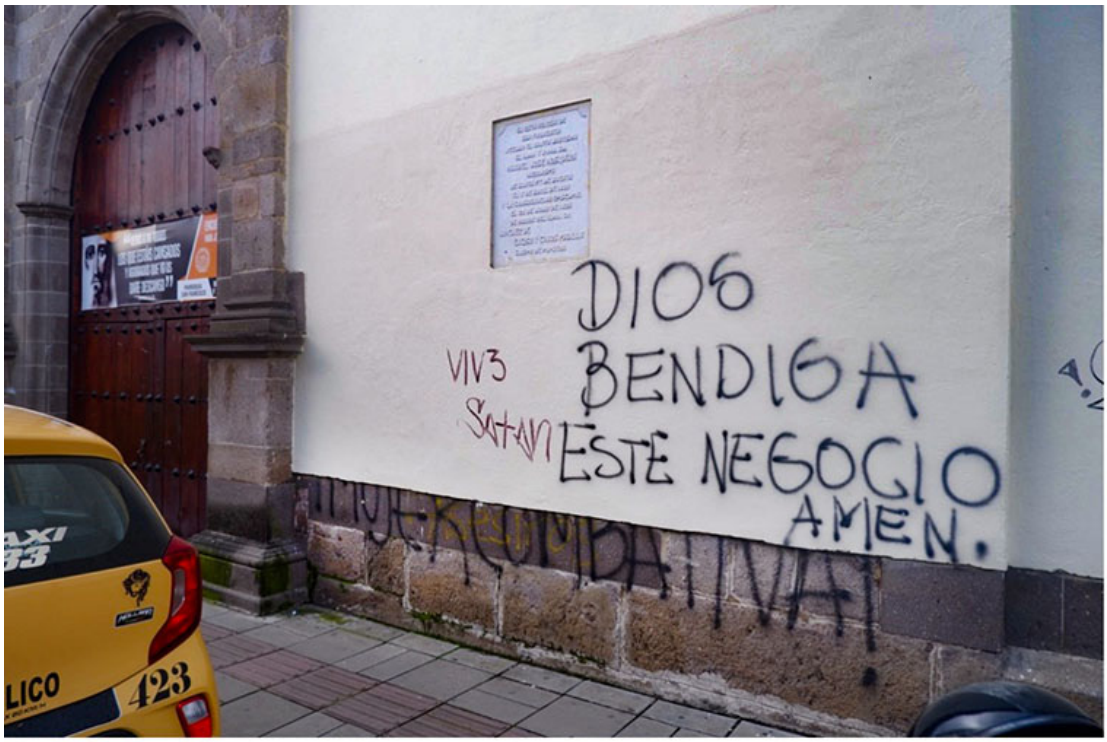

Figure 5. The facade of a church in Popayán is littered with graffiti that reads "Dios bendiga este negocio [May God Bless this business]" that suggests an alleged commodification of religious practice. Photo by the author.

Beyond its textual sociolect of subverting the official discourse, graffiti in Popayán laid bare the brutal realities of Colombian society—realities not confined to this single city but reflective of a broader national condition. This collision between protest and religiosity is evident even in the colloquial language used to describe the nation's devotion.[17] Graffiti, as a medium of textual intervention, exposes the inherent ambiguity of language—its dual capacity to "cure" and to "kill" as well.[18] As Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui asserts in *Sociología de la imagen,* colonialism distorts language, transforming words from instruments of designation into mechanisms of concealment:

> "Under colonialism, words do not designate; they obscure" (Cusicanqui 2015, 175).

In this context, graffiti disrupts the ideological veil imposed by colonial and modern hegemonic discourses. The inscription of meaning on the city's walls was not merely a symbolic act; it was a radical subversion of modernity's hegemonic narratives. Within this logic, graffiti and other forms of urban art thus function as decolonial strategies, exposing the hidden mechanisms of colonial power embedded in cultural practices such as Holy Week, to cite one example. Once instruments of exclusion, control and indoctrination, Popayán's walls were, in a single day (literally), transformed into platforms for popular expression, into spaces of collective resistance where euphemisms held no place. Graffiti's destructive symbolic power is evident both in its aesthetic and ideological dismantling of Popayán's sacralized whiteness and in its disruption of the lettered order historically produced by the city's elites.

Holy Week in Popayán, with its imposing whiteness and rigid rituality, embodies an imaginary of order, devotion, and purity, all central to the city's symbolic construction. However, this whiteness is not merely an aesthetic feature; it is also a mask —one that simultaneously conceals and reveals the racial, social, and political tensions that permeate Cauca's history. As a performative ritual, the procession reinforces a symbolic order that sacralizes urban spaces, legitimizing a historical continuity with the colonial past.

Yet, as with any hegemonic realm, this space remains susceptible to transgression. The eruption of graffiti during the 2021 social unrest inscribed new meanings onto the white streets of Popayán, exposing what its monochromatic façades had long hidden: the resistance of historically marginalized populations. Just as Holy Week transforms the city into a theatre of the sacred, graffiti converts it into a canvas of insurgency, momentarily inverting the visual hierarchy and imposing a counter-hegemonic discourse upon the walls of tradition. In this sense, Popayán's whiteness, far from being a mere reflection of religious or cultural identity, emerges as a contested field —one where history, hegemony, and resistance collide.

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Notes

1. On the *emotive* character of the Catholic celebrations, Caro Baroja asserts "The Christian religion has allowed the calendar to be adjusted to a passional order [...] the familiar rejoicing of Christmas is succeeded by the typical excess of Carnival, and after it, [comes] the obligatory sadness of the Holy Week (after the repression of Lent)" (Caro Baroja, 1986, 19).

2. My translation. See "Semana Santa", in "Procesiones", https://www.procesionespopayan.com/procesiones.

3. My translation of: "las Semanas Santas pasadas"; "se añoran las ceremonias de hace unos lustros, […] por la austeridad y sobriedad de las costumbres de entonces".

4. See https://www.procesionespopayan.com/la-junta. My translation of "conservar y transmitir el patrimonio religioso, cultural y tradicional".

5. My translation of: "los pueblos antiguos se desmoronan, las ermitas se caen, las cofradías, hermandades e instituciones de este carácter desaparecen, al desaparecer toda una sociedad secular".

6. See, for instance, "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions [1915]." In *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (1958): 323-59.

7. It would be more precise to refer to white as a "tone" rather than a "color", as it is theoretically achromatic.

8. Although white held a semantic value associated with innocence and charity within ecclesiastical circles, it was not traditionally used in the outer garments worn by the pope. The preferred color for the public display of the papal cassock was red, a hue symbolizing compassion.

   > "The Supreme Pontiff always appears dressed in a red cloak. Beneath it, however, he wears a white vestment: because white signifies innocence and charity; the external red symbolizes compassion… in fact the Pope represents the person of the One who for our sake stained his clothing red" (Duranti, William. *Rationale,* III, chapter XIX).

9. My translation of "una exigencia de la vida práctica moderna que se basa en el modo de producción capitalista de un tipo de comportamiento virtuoso y de una humanidad adaptable a las necesidades de crecimiento o acumulación constante".

10. In Spanish, the original quote says

    > "[Después de las guerras independentistas] la Popayán apocada por la penuria y la muerte pasa a las manos pulcras pero ociosas de una sociedad local que hizo suyo el sueño hidalgo español de ostentar una distinción sólida en recursos que no requería al parecer del trabajo propio para mantenerse en pie y sobrevivía, en cambio, del esfuerzo ajeno de esclavos e indígenas a su cargo" (García Quintero 2014, 90).

11. "[La sociedad payanesa] prefiere regocijar su existencia limitándola a un pasado opulento, de esplendor y gloria, hoy ausente o ya perdido" (García Quintero 2014).

12. In developing the concept of *habitus,* French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues that individuals acquire a set of dispositions, values and norms through their socialization and lived experience within a particular cultural environment. These dispositions shape their perceptions and behaviors in daily life. Symbolic associations between colors and abstract concepts such as the link between whiteness and purity, often emerge as part of the cultural beliefs and norms that constitute an individual's *habitus*. From an early age, individuals are socialized within a specific cultural framework that instils values, beliefs, and symbolic meanings. Within Catholicism, white is associated with purity, cleanliness, and innocence —a symbolic relationship transmitted across generations, becoming embedded in the habitus of those raised within the Catholic tradition, the dominant religion in Latin America.

13. The reference here is to French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, who, in *The Production of Space,* argues that urban space is socially produced through its use. As such, once consumed, its production falls within a capitalist logic —a connection underscored by the very terminology of his theory, the production of space. The term *production* itself belongs to the semantic field of capitalism, a system whose categorical imperative is, unquestionably, to "produce".

14. A "uribista" is a supporter of the policies implemented by Alvaro Uribe Vélez, who served as President of Colombia from 2002 to 2010. Uribe's government, characterized by its "mano dura" (iron-fist) approach, marked a sharp shift toward the far right in the country's public policies. His political influence extended beyond his presidency, shaping the administrations of his successors, Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2018) and Iván Duque (2018–2022), effectively consolidating a de facto uribista regime for nearly two decades. This period was marked by authoritarian tendencies, particularly under Uribe's direct rule, during which at least 6,412 extrajudicial executions of civilians—later falsely presented as combat kills—were documented by Colombia's Attorney General's Office and the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP). For the most radical uribistas, the fight against guerrilla groups and drug traffickers justified the use of extra-legal measures in the name of national security and counterterrorism. Ironically, it was Juan Manuel Santos—Uribe's former defense minister—who brokered a historic peace agreement with the FARC guerrillas, bringing an end to a five-decade-long conflict and earning him the Nobel Peace Prize.

15. Allusion here is to Angel Rama, the author of *La ciudad letrada* (1984).

16. I'm using a neologism, "literada [littered]" in an attempt to fuse two distinct concepts: on the one hand, "letra" (derived from its etymological root *litera*), and on the other, the English term "litter", which can be interpreted as "to contaminate" or "to produce waste".

17. Many Colombians refer to their country as "the nation of the Sacred Heart [of Jesus]", a phrase that reflects both a deep-rooted Catholic identity and a culturally ingrained sense of divine protection.

18. The concept of "pharmakon" in the context of *Plato's Pharmacy* appears in Jacques Derrida's *Dissemination*", originally published in 1972. In this work, Derrida examines Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*, focusing on the ambivalence of the term *pharmakon*, which can mean both "remedy" and "poison". Derrida employs this notion to interrogate the inherent ambiguity of language, writing, and meaning, demonstrating how they destabilize traditional binary oppositions within Western philosophy.