

# Vandalism as Symbolic Reparation

## Imaginaries of Protest in Nicaragua

---

Ileana L. Selejan

### Abstract

The 2018 anti-government protests in Nicaragua generated a vast amount of photographic imagery, video documentation, and visual graphics. On the street and via social media, everyday citizens engaged with this material, activating a multisensory environment. The production of visual content was nonetheless accompanied by iconoclastic gestures; vandalism became a means of reclaiming Nicaragua's revolutionary past and its symbols, while deploying them towards the making of a yet to be imagined political future. Drawing on examples from Chile and Mexico, the article argues that acts of vandalism may be understood as symbolically reparative. The materiality of the protests, manifested through image, trace, gesture, and sound (slogans, chants, noise) becomes a means towards analysing, ethnographically, revolutionary imaginaries caught within the flux of an unsettled present.

**Keywords:** iconography, Nicaragua, photography, protest, revolution, vandalism

### Imaginaries of protest

The 2018 civic uprising represented the largest and most significant protest movement in Nicaragua since the Sandinista revolution came to an end in 1990. From its earliest days, as civic disobedience mounted in the capital city of Managua and throughout the country, comparisons were made with the popular insurrection of 1978–1979, which toppled the Somoza dictatorship in July 1979, inaugurating a decade of revolution in the country. The revolution profoundly changed and continues to influence national identities in Nicaragua, no matter how fragmented or contested its legacy might be. This is consistent with other post-revolutionary contexts in Latin America and beyond, since revolution, as Myriam Lamrani explains in the introduction to this issue, 'is an elusive thing straddling multiple temporalities with no clear before and after'. In this article I argue that the tenacity of the revolutionary ethos in Nicaragua—to be differentiated from its institutionalised top-down aspects—is premised upon the mutability of visual expressions and aesthetic forms



(the use of art and graphics, as well as graffiti, slogans). Once integral to the revolution, these gestures were oft-repeated and memorialised in subsequent years, thus assembling a repertoire of dissent, a vocabulary of signs and symbols, that could be reactivated and mobilised into the future. Despite official attempts to secure the national narrative and to mythologise the revolutionary past, this 'recursive archive', to quote Pinney, persists in a state of unrest. Its changeability, understood in a future-oriented sense, resonates with his observation that: 'Images pastiche and reconstitute other images: they are already "half-seen in advance"' (Pinney 2004: 206).

Such reconfigured and updated iterations were prominently seen during the 2018 protests, in public space and online. Protesters claimed that the idealism that helped bring about the historic revolution remained relevant, yet had to be reclaimed, and re-signified (see Boutieri in this issue on youth reclaiming democratic transition in Tunisia). The historic Sandinista party, the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (Sandinista National Liberation Front or FSLN), which returned to power under Daniel Ortega in 2006, is perceived as having co-opted the memory of the revolution and its symbolic charge, positioning itself as its only legitimate heir.<sup>1</sup> In terms of aesthetics, we might consider, for instance, how the eponymous figure of Augusto César Sandino, the revolutionary hero who inspired the Sandinista struggle, has been institutionalised by the FSLN. One might argue that his image has been entirely stripped of its Benjaminian aura, repeated ad infinitum on party signage and as a public monument (Benjamin 2008). While for Benjamin this unveiling has emancipatory potential, in this case, its inscription into public space as a means to reinforce official rhetoric merely serves to banalise the image of a national hero. By contrast, during the 2018 protests, students repurposed the image of Sandino by returning to popular iterations from the historic insurrection: Sandino's silhouette, stencilled or hastily traced on random surfaces along the city's streets. The aura of the revolutionary demigod may have been temporarily restored, yet his figure remained elusive, quickly dissipating on- and offline.

Equally significant is that in 2018, as in 1979, as such dissenting gestures took over the streets, they were reinforced by interventions, defacements, and even acts of destruction (officially labelled as vandalism) which were directed at symbols of the ruling regime. As famously stated by Eric Hobsbawm: 'In times of revolution nothing is more powerful than the fall of symbols' (1996). This, it seems, the 2018 protesters were keen to demonstrate, by occupying key locations in the city, graffitiing the streets, tagging public institutions, taking down public monuments, and paint-bombing or ripping apart billboards with portraits of President Ortega and his wife, Vice-President Rosario Murillo. What complicates the recent protests is that the millennial students who initiated them sought to reconnect to the revolutionary past through visual cues, to reclaim those oft-rehearsed, almost ritualised gestures, even rescue them from the grasp of the omnipotent ruling party. Social media became their main platform in this sense, a means they were not only expertly equipped to navigate, but which could also support the heavily imagistic content (photographs, videos, and memes) that they sought to disseminate as quickly and as efficiently as possible to the general public.

In a reversal of terms, just as the Sandinistas toppled the Somoza regime, politically and symbolically, so the 2018 protesters demanded the end of the authoritarian Ortega-Murillo regime, attacking its symbols, while seeking to reclaim certain elements of the historic revolutionary struggle. In this article, I argue that such performative gestures, while labelled as vandalism and criminalised by the regime, constitute nonetheless legitimate forms of protest, necessary in a context where the exercise of civil and human rights is precluded. Furthermore, I suggest that in such cases where the promise of justice is perpetually delayed or postponed, we might interpret them in a *symbolically reparative* sense. Symbolic reparations are measures taken in the aftermath of political violence, where a state might publicly acknowledge past harms, while providing certain protections and guarantees against future victimisation, agreeing to play an active role alongside affected communities in processes of remembrance. Here, I argue for an expanded definition of the term, to foreground the active role that communities themselves might assume by directly intervening in public discourse, while seeking justice. Albeit sharing similar goals, these communities are understood as heterogenous, comprising of different publics which might choose diverse courses of action. Additional reparative measures (e.g., creating impromptu memorials) can hence develop in parallel to civil disobedience acts. In support of this claim, I bring in further comparison with recent protests in Chile and Mexico which generated similar interventions in public space and likewise drew parallels to past political struggles. My reading expands upon Robin Greeley et al. when they ‘urge conceptualizing symbolic reparations as polyvalent processes of reactivation and reactualisation of memory in the service of imagining possible new futures’ (2020: 189). While embedded within and premised upon unresolved or irresolvable past harms, such gestures are integral to greater processes of memorialisation, proleptically extending—through repetition—the ‘never again’. At the same time, driven by present demands, they are aimed towards the future, signalling the desire and need for political transformation.

The 2018 Nicaraguan protests unfolded against the backdrop of a revolutionary aftermath and provoked contestations of memory as much as power. They were directed at the FSLN’s monopoly over the past and targeted the monumentalised, ossified remembrance of the revolution and its aesthetic forms. In Managua, as in Santiago and Mexico City, the intervened city became a means to ensure that official narratives of closure are interrupted and kept unresolved until claims for justice and accountability are answered. Image-making practices, and photography in particular, played a key role in documenting these interventions and highlighting aspects intentionally staged or performed for the camera. This is not unprecedented in Latin America, even outside of revolutionary contexts. Rather it is a familiar, historically embedded strategy, whereby the photographic image and the camera become means to draw attention to one’s struggle, to enhance visibility, and to further the civil contract (Azoulay 2008) by demanding justice and accountability (see Longoni 2010; Macaya 2020; Taylor 2020). Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, from Argentina and Chile to Mexico and El Salvador, civic protests have entailed strong visual and aesthetic components—understood here in an expanded

sense as *multiperceptual* (see Lamrani, this issue). Most recognisable, perhaps, is the practice of carrying ID photos and family pictures of the disappeared and of victims of state violence (Taylor 2003), a form of public-making, and nation-building that demands the respect of human rights as a necessary condition for moving on.

Scholarly inquiry into revolutionary movements has tended to relegate visual engagements and aesthetic practices to the margins, although in the Latin American context important contributions have been made especially in art history with respect to the Mexican, Cuban, and Nicaraguan revolutions, notably Craven (2002). In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, however, multifaceted and cross-disciplinary studies on the intersections of politics and aesthetics in recent protest movements from around the world have amplified (see Khatib 2013; Rovisco and Veneti 2017; Werbner et al. 2014; McGarry et al. 2020), reflecting on the outpour of social media content (a novel feature), images included. Despite the fragmented literature on revolution and protest movements in our field (see Cherstich et al. 2020), there has been a growing body of work that specifically explores aesthetic entanglements and political imagination, as exemplified by the present issue with its focus on ‘inter-relations between perceptual states and politics’ (Lamrani, this issue). My article builds on contributions by Karen Strassler (2020), and Konstantinos Kalantzis (2019) which have sought to examine visual practices situating them anthropologically by relation to the greater cultural, political, and social spheres.

I argue that image-making practices and aesthetic procedures, such as those observed during the 2018 protests in Nicaragua, contribute to shaping new political imaginaries, articulating political demands, while supporting symbolically reparative actions, in advance of the state. In the following two sections of the article I first provide context around the 2018 protests, then suggest various analytical frameworks through which these gestures and manifestations, whether graphic, sonic, or embodied, might be considered ethnographically. In the third and final section I discuss parallels with Chilean protests from 2019 and ongoing feminist protests in Mexico, where similar interventions and procedures were observed in public space, online and offline, activating enduring imaginaries of resistance through affective, multisensorial, aesthetic engagements.

## The rebellion

In mid-April 2018, anti-governmental protests erupted in Nicaragua’s capital Managua. Led by the city’s student population, what were at first small *plantones* (sit-ins) and *piquetes* (pickets) propagated rapidly, gathering critical mass, across broad sectors of the general public. Under #SOSIndioMaíz, students had first organised to condemn the government’s lack of accountability and slow response to a massive fire that had engulfed the Indio Maíz Biological Reserve—one of the largest in Central America. The outrage was thus even greater when, only a few days later, the government announced a controversial reform meant to salvage an insolvable National Social Security fund as part of the *Instituto Nicaragüense de Seguridad Social* (Nicaraguan Social Security Institute or INSS)—the rallying call

switched to #SOSINSS.<sup>2</sup> At a gathering on April 18, protesters were threatened and beaten by government supporters under the watchful eyes of the police. Journalists were attacked, and photographers had their cameras and AV recording equipment stolen or destroyed. That same evening, demonstrators gathered in front of the *Universidad Centroamericana* (Central American University or UCA), a location where several protests had been staged during previous days. Students were surrounded by anti-riot police and attacked by government supporters, so-called *grupos de choque* (shock groups), who pushed to break through the university's gates and onto campus grounds. These actions were recorded on mobile phones and uploaded on social media, serving as a catalyst for future developments. The breach of the university grounds at UCA was a key element in escalating the imminent crisis. Student movements had been at the core of the struggle for democracy in the country, going back to the earliest attempts to organise against the Somoza family dictatorship (1937–1979), and university autonomy has been protected by law since 1958.

Immediately thereafter, students and civic action groups amplified efforts to organise, and a self-denominated movement of *autoconvocados* (self-assembled or self-organised) began to take shape (Rocha 2019). Several sit-ins and protests were staged at universities within Managua, although by then dissent had spread to various cities and localities throughout the country. Police and anti-riot troops responded first with teargas and rubber bullets, then lethal force, killing two civilians on the 19th of April and twenty the next day, severely injuring hundreds, while numerous arrests were made. An undeclared state of emergency loomed over the city as the number of dead and wounded increased at alarming rates in the following days. Usage of social media sites, primarily Facebook and Twitter, YouTube, and the messaging service WhatsApp surged (GIEI 2018).<sup>3</sup> Under the #SOSINSS and #SOSNicaragua, everyday citizens continued to share images and videos documenting confrontations between peaceful protesters and anti-riot police.

Within only a few days the political crisis had escalated to levels unseen since the Sandinista revolution and the end of Nicaragua's decade long Contra War. There was talk of insurrection, summoning memories of 1978–1979. While students occupied several of the city's main universities, city dwellers set up barricades within neighbourhoods and *tranques* (road blocks) along main traffic routes; solidarity marches were held, amassing tens of thousands of protesters from Managua and elsewhere. From their homes people joined in on *cacerolazos* (casseroles), noisily banging on pots and pans—a widely-known type of 'domestic' protest common in Nicaragua and within the Latin American region, going back to anti-authoritarian movements from the Cold War period. Networks of families, friends, and everyday citizens organised the collection of food and medical supplies to be delivered to the occupied campuses. There were calls to boycott government-owned businesses and calls for strikes. Vigils were held at key sites thorough the city, while memorials were set up in public squares. Civil disobedience actions ranged from the painting of graffiti and *pintas* (tags) to the defacement and taking down of propaganda posters and public monuments. Visual manifestations were accompanied by an

often overbearing sonic presence, notably chants, songs, and noise (car horns and vuvuzelas), highlighting once more the multisensorial and embodied aspects of the protests. This feature is far from unique to the Nicaraguan context, and similar dimensions have been explored by Kalantzis in relation to anti-austerity protests in Greece (2012) and by Lina Khatib with regards to Egypt and the Arab Spring (2013).

The contrast was striking, since during daytime most activities appeared to resume unperturbed—slightly more apace—while at night, the rhythm of life in the city was entirely disrupted. On days when marches were scheduled, however, everything stopped. Progressively, as the numbers of victims mounted, the accumulated tension and fatigue shifted the mood of the city from celebratory, anxious, and alert to solemn and weary yet resolute. Occupied universities such as *Universidad Politécnica de Nicaragua* (Polytechnics University of Nicaragua or UPoli) and the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua* (National Autonomous University of Nicaragua or UNAN) remained under a state of siege for one and two months, respectively, receiving constant attacks from the police and paramilitary forces. Within this war-like scenario, terrified students posted live updates on social media from behind barricades and improvised emergency rooms. Such blurry videos, showing graphic scenes of confrontations and their aftermath, taken while hiding or on the run, went ‘viral’ almost instantly and were shared thousands of times. This type of action, on behalf of the viewing public, became characteristic of the rebellion. Those who were not out on the streets were glued to their screens at home. While TV channels were censored, witness reports poured in through every available channel, fuelling a twenty-four-seven barrage of news. Significantly, members of the student movement singled out social media as their ‘weapon’ of choice.

During the three months of unrest, police and paramilitary violence only increased, culminating with the so-called *operación limpieza*—a campaign initiated on July 15 to eradicate all pockets of resistance in advance of the thirty-ninth anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution on July 19.<sup>4</sup> This phase of the repression chillingly reminded Nicaraguans of Somoza’s infamous National Guard, which, during campaigns named thus, had pursued and brutally repressed all dissenters, most prominently Sandinistas while the Front was underground. Such parallels became increasingly common during those days of unrest. Everyday citizens spoke about the extent to which the situation resembled the years of resistance, reminiscing about the general fear, lack of civil liberties, and poor conditions of life under the Somoza regime. Some expressed disbelief as to how the current regime could have become equally oppressive, while chants from the marches rang: ‘¡Ortega y Somoza son la misma cosa!’ (Ortega and Somoza are the same) unequivocally declaiming the return of a dictatorial regime.

## **Vandalism**

From the very beginning of the 2018 protests, the Ortega-Murillo government sought to discredit the student movement and their allies, via official channels and

by mobilising the institutional and bureaucratic resources of the state. During her daily address to the nation, Vice-President Murillo disqualified the protesters as *vandálicos* (vandals) *delincuentes* (delinquents), later as *terroristas* (terrorists) and *golpistas* (coup makers), in an attempt to delegitimise opposition.<sup>5</sup> As the repression increased, speeches shifted towards an emphasis on terrorism—which, to many Nicaraguans served yet again as a reminder of historic struggles for sovereignty due to the Somoza regime's identical characterisation of Sandinista opposers during the 1970s. Furthermore, the term *golpistas* played on deep-seated traumas from the Contra War, with the regime purporting that an internationally supported right-wing coup was threatening the revolution once more.

From her earliest communiqués Murillo described her opponents as '*Seres pequeñitos, mezquinos, mediocres, esos Seres llenos de odio*' (tiny Beings, petty, mediocre, Beings full of hatred) and *vampiros* (vampires) (Consejo 2018). Despite its absurdity, the vice-president's divisive discourse ultimately created an atmosphere of extreme animosity, leading to violent exchanges between Nicaraguans opposing the regime and those who supported the FSLN—many of whom had participated in the revolution or fought in the Contra War. According to the GIEI, the regime's 'inflammatory discourse' and 'derogatory remarks' not only stigmatised protesters but also aimed 'at denying their full citizenship and their ability to autonomously decide to participate in social protests' (GIEI 2018).

The term *vandálicos* (vandals) first appeared in the vice-president's speeches and press releases in May 2018.<sup>6</sup> It was immediately claimed by protesters and their supporters, who outspokenly branded themselves as such through social media (Regidor 2019). It proliferated amongst a flurry of hashtags such as *#vivanicaragualibre* (long live free Nicaragua). Even some of the mothers of victims of the repression took on the adverb '*madre vandálica*' (vandal mother), a phrase that was reworked into a song titled '*Madre vandálica nicaragüense*' (Nicaraguan vandal mother) by renowned singer Luis Enrique Mejía Godoy. A part of the *nueva canción* movement that accompanied anti-authoritarian struggles throughout Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s, brothers Luis Enrique and Carlos Mejía Godoy had written the most popular songs of the Sandinista revolution, practically its soundtrack. Even in 2018, at all gatherings, marches, and vigils, anthem-like songs such as '*Nicaragua Nicaragüita*' resonated through speakers amongst the cacophony of sounds. Likewise, the song '*Me gustan los estudiantes*' also known as '*Que vivan los estudiantes*' written by Chilean composer Violeta Parra in 1967 and interpreted by a great number of musicians from the *nueva canción* generation, including Mercedes Sosa and Venezuelan group Los Guaraguao, accompanied the protests, played on repeat.

From the onset of the protests in Managua, displays of anger were directed at the icons and symbols of the regime. Significantly, it was images of the presidential couple, billboards especially, that were first defaced, torn off of their supports, ripped apart, and paraded throughout cities and towns. Secondly, the crowd directed itself at some rather unusual public monuments, known as '*Árboles de la Vida*' (Trees of Life). These 140 metal structures had been installed along Managua's

main thoroughfares during and in the aftermath of the thirty-fourth anniversary of the Sandinista revolution in 2013. Designed by first lady Rosario Murillo in the form of abstracted trees, the structures are seventeen and twenty-one metres tall and can be seen from the air, alight in rainbow colours at night. This urban renewal campaign had been a contentious issue from the very start, perceived as invasive, exorbitant, and also as an affront, given the government's infamous disregard of environmental issues. Protesters targeted the trees from the very beginning of the uprising, bringing them down as part of what became public spectacles that city dwellers would come to witness at night, on the streets, and online through the ubiquitous lens of the phone camera (González 2018). Thousands of videos were shared on social media documenting their fall, showing ecstatic crowds rushing in immediately thereafter, trampling the structure. The atmosphere was nothing short of carnivalesque. Later, as the crowd retreated, people collected small light bulbs from the wreck as souvenirs.

Such gestures were last seen towards the end of the 1978–1979 insurrection, when the victorious FSLN returned to Managua, and troops as well as civilians entered government buildings. Photographers and reporters rushed in to record 'classic' scenes of plunder and joy. The toppling of Anastasio Somoza García's equestrian statue remains one of the signature moments from the struggle, his torn bust dragged throughout the streets and ending up in a trash dump, while the remnants of his horse were installed as permanent exhibit at the *Museo de la Revolución* (Museum of the Revolution) in Managua, now defunct.

During the 2018 protests, spectacular acts notwithstanding, the emphasis was placed on gestural, everyday interventions, such as graffiti. At the start of the rebellion, hashtags and slogans appeared hastily spray-painted throughout Managua overnight, only to be painted over by city hall employees the next day. Yet protesters returned, insistently, to the same spots, scribbling even more tags and slogans, laying out stencils alongside. Government buildings were particularly targeted, although areas of high-visibility along the city's main traffic routes were likewise of interest. The only areas avoided were government-supported barrios and the historic centre of Managua, where the main governmental institutions such as the *Asamblea Nacional* (National Assembly) are located, and which is heavily guarded at all times.

Over the course of several days I observed the area around one of Managua's busiest commercial and transportation hubs, *Metrocentro*. This is also where the *Consejo Supremo Electoral* (Supreme Electoral Council) and the national police headquarters are located across the road from one another, in *Plaza del Sol*. Despite the presence of guards, protesters had cunningly managed to tag these precincts' walls. The brick fence surrounding the police grounds had been painted with friendly, generally optimistic murals, presenting the force as imbued with a sense of civic responsibility. Overnight, accusatory phrases such as '*Policia Asesina*' (Police Assassins) '*abajo la dictadura*' (down with the dictatorship) and '*fuera Daniel*' (oust Daniel) appeared smeared over the same masonry walls. By morning, they would be already painted over, leaving patches of fresh paint visibly overlaid on top of

the defaced sections of the murals. Later on, as a march passed by, protesters would scribble further accusations such as ‘*Daniel Asesino Roba Elecciones*’ (Assassin Daniel Steals Elections) under the cover of the crowd. Eventually, the murals were painted over entirely, although the area maintained that patched over appearance for a long time.

Such interventions may have seemed haphazard at the time, yet they were strategic, meant to signal the growth of the uprising. While oppositional media outlets were censored, graffiti offered an outlet, inserting speech into the texture of everyday urban space. The use of graffiti as a form of protest is a tactic that Nicaraguans have been familiar with since the Somoza dictatorship. A few signs were enough to indicate one’s allegiance, most recognisably, Sandino’s silhouette (Ramírez et al. 1984). In a similar manner in 2018, scribbles and patches of paint accumulated, one over another, as an iconography of protest was beginning to emerge. Yet this iconography, and the slogans and chants, reflected upon and re-appropriated revolutionary tropes. ‘*Patria Libre y Vivir*’ (Free Country and Live) for instance, was amongst the most frequently used, turning the militant revolutionary *consigna* (slogan) ‘*Patria Libre o Morir*’ (Free Country or Death) on its head. Indeed, despite their appeal to the historic memory of the revolution, the student movement’s emphasis on peaceful resistance marked a clear break, discursive and symbolic, with the militant past. ‘*Esta es una insurrección pacífica*’ (This is a pacifist insurrection) student leader Madelaine Caracas would reiterate (Rocha 2019: 96).

In terms of the ‘upcycling’ of tropes and forms, it is important to note that graffiti and muralism have become widespread means (tools) for protest in various Latin American contexts, and the literature on the subject is substantial. While ties with historic struggles against state oppression and authoritarianism are certainly present, new forms of denunciatory street art and writing continue to emerge (Ryan 2016). The problematics of how such expressions might be legitimately considered ‘art’, that is, as having intrinsic aesthetic value, despite their dismissal (even illegalisation) as vandalism, has been thoroughly investigated by Schacter, who concludes that graffiti’s ‘distinct *agency* and *corporeality*’ and its assumed ephemerality is ultimately what grants it power by relation to both the sympathetic public and the policing authorities (Schacter 2008: 43).

The terms vandal and vandalism trace their origin to the French Revolution and were used by defenders of the art and architecture of the *Ancien Régime* to describe the destructive actions of angry individuals or the crowd. Furthermore, as Dario Gamboni explains, ‘the idea of heritage and the general condemnation of “vandalism” tended to strip iconoclastic actions, as well as their authors and motives, of legitimacy’ (1997: 50). This relationship comes to bear upon the 2018 Nicaraguan protests in that the term *vandálicos* was instrumentally used to delegitimise the protest movement and later to justify the public persecution and criminalisation of perceived offenders. In this regard, one of the strongest slogans to emerge within the first weeks of the protests was ‘*No eran delincuentes, eran estudiantes*’ (they were not delinquents, they were students) with reference to the students massacred by the police.



## NO ERAN DELINCUENTES ERAN ESTUDIANTES

**Figure 1:** Gabriel Benavente @gabobenad, *No eran delincuentes, eran estudiantes*, 2018.

It is telling that an oft-shared meme (Figure 1) showed students seated within the classroom, taking notes, while dressed in what became recognisable as the rebellion's 'uniform': T-shirts repurposed as face and head coverings, used to disguise and protect one's identity. The folding was made so as to leave only a person's eyes exposed, through the neck of the shirt. This need was furthered by an awareness of the constant presence of cameras within the visual-experiential realm. Here, the image is perturbed by splashes of blood-red marking the masked figures. The artist posted the meme to Instagram to respond to a report published by *Confidencial*, an independently run newspaper from Managua. Expert analysis of forensic evidence established that a majority of the fatal injuries of protesters were a result of direct shots to the head, neck, and thorax (Miranda Aburto 2018).

Gamboni draws a distinction between iconoclasm and vandalism, arguing that 'iconoclasm played a role at every stage of the Revolutionary process—to foster it, to incite conviction or fear, and to make the change appear and become irreversible' (1997: 41). Indeed, as per Bruno Latour et al.'s thesis (2002), iconoclastic gestures or actions, incentivise the production of new symbols, and meanings, or so-to-say aesthetic constructs. 'Creative destruction' becomes particularly relevant in terms of the articulation of new publics and new imaginaries in the context of modern revolutionary movements—many of which, ranging from 1789 France to 1959 Cuba, from the televised Romanian revolution of 1989 to the *social mediatised* Arab Spring, were accompanied by a flurry of visual manifestations, a 'visual rush' (Khatib 2013), a flood, or 'cascade of images' (Latour et al. 2002), inaugurating new iconographic regimes. Ultimately, these examples fit the rubric of 'iconoclasm', since

we do not know, at least not at the moment of action, whether they will ultimately be ‘destructive or constructive’ (Latour et al. 2002). ‘Art destruction is art making in reverse; but it has the same basic conceptual structure. Iconoclasts exercise a type of “artistic agency”’, Alfred Gell argued, drawing upon the famous case of suffragette Mary Richardson who defaced Diego Velázquez’s painting *Rokeby Venus* at the National Gallery in London, with a kitchen knife, to protest the government’s treatment of fellow-suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst (Gell 1998).

The ‘vandalic’ interventions staged during the 2018 Nicaraguan protests, I argue, enact precisely this type of artistic agency. By defacing the symbols of the regime, by pushing them off the pedestal so-to-say, they seek to reverse the hierarchy of power. These are participatory acts through which the crowd interjects, upending the seamless narrative of the ruling regime. Given the punitive actions of the regime, and its continuous attempts to erase and whitewash these interventions, the challenge resides in how such acts and actions, or their remnants and traces, might be preserved, even if only as documentation. Indeed, this is where their symbolically reparative potential resides, if supported through memorial practices (e.g., commemorative image-sharing on social media).

### Symbolic reparations

First Quito and Port-au-Prince, then La Paz, Tegucigalpa, and Santiago: in October 2019 revolutionary chants and the sound of *cacerolazos* filled the air. In Ecuador, the *detonante* (trigger) was the imposition of an austerity package, which included a raise in the cost of fuel, as part of a government deal with the International Monetary Fund; whereas in Bolivia it was perceived irregularities during the electoral process, and then the announcement of the re-election of Evo Morales for a fourth presidential term. In Uruguay, on the 22nd of October, fifty-five thousand people joined a march to protest the ‘*Reforma vivir sin miedo*’ (Live without fear reform) in the centre of Montevideo. The reform was to increase the military’s role in the country’s internal affairs, an ominous prospect given the history of the military dictatorship that lasted from 1973 to 1985.

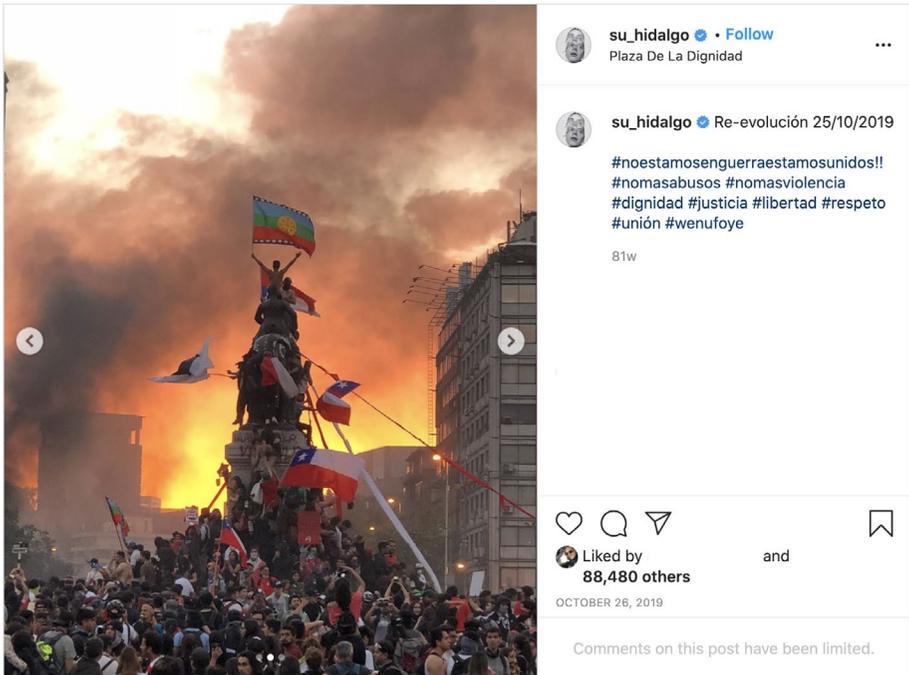
That same evening, Chile remained under a state of emergency, with curfews imposed on October 19, the weekend before. High-school and university students had staged various protest actions, following the announcement of rising subway fares in Santiago. Starting on October 16 they began evading fares en masse via so-called *evasiones masivas*, rallying under #*EvasionTodoElDia* (evade all day), while on the 18th, *carabineros* were ordered to forcefully intervene. Footage of these incidents flooded online platforms in a viral sweep. Despite the curfew, crowds of protesters continued to amass under banners announcing that Chile had awakened, ‘¡Chile despertó!’. While the fare rise may have seemed minimal to outsiders, protesters claimed it was enough to turn the tide; ‘¡No son treinta pesos, son treinta años!’ (It’s not thirty pesos, it’s thirty years) they chanted, commenting on the number of years passed since Chile’s much-admired yet imperfect return to democracy in 1990.

One might speculate that the ‘Nicaraguan Spring’ somehow catalysed the arrival of this wave of protests. Although in truth, Latin American solidarity failed to coalesce around the Nicaraguan crisis, where the protest movement was considered problematic mostly because it went against the grain of inherited notions of social justice and the Left, especially as perceived from the West. By contrast, as pointed out by numerous Nicaraguan interlocutors, the 2019 Chilean protest movement received immediate international support and was identified as a cause to sympathise with. Conflicting economies of affect might be at play (Ahmed 2004), influenced by the ways in which revolutionary and/or progressive political movements from Latin America have been historicised and are remembered to date.

For the purposes of this article, however, a series of overlapping elements from the 2018 and 2019 protest movements in Nicaragua and Chile appear significant to reflect upon. Social media took on a significant role in both cases, leading to an explosion of visual content primarily produced by everyday citizens that participated in marches and demonstrations. Some patterns can be clearly drawn out in terms of how these public gatherings were documented, the types of images that have emerged, and also by relation to the signs—understood in a Saussurean sense—through which each movement developed. These would include banners, graffiti, stencils, clothing, and accessories (face coverings, masks, ‘Joker’ bandanas, bike/skate helmets) which paralleled each other given that as ‘millennials’, the protagonists in both cases were generationally alike.

Significantly, in the Chilean context as well, leaps within the past were made almost immediately, as image collages compared the violence of the 1973 Chilean coup d’état and the government’s response to the 2019 protests. ‘*Estamos en guerra contra un enemigo poderoso, implacable, que no respeta a nada ni a nadie y que está dispuesto a usar la violencia y la delincuencia sin ningún límite*’ (We are at war against a powerful, implacable enemy, which does not respect anything and anyone and is determined to use violence and delinquency without limits), President Sebastián Piñera famously declared. Similar to the Nicaraguan case, disqualifying the protests as ‘delinquent’ and their actions as ‘vandalism’ served to justify disproportionate use of force. The past returned through chants and songs from the years of resistance to the Pinochet regime, and through visual quotation strategies as well, with tags, graffiti, stencils, and posters proliferating on walls throughout Santiago, but especially in areas that were occupied daily by protesters, and around Plaza Italia which became a focal point of gathering. Recognisable tropes, images of public figures such as Gabriela Mistral and Víctor Jara, who was martyred by the Pinochet regime, from the post-1973 period resurfaced, often adapted and brought to date.

Most striking by relation to Nicaragua is a viral image taken in Plaza Italia by Chilean actress Susana Hidalgo, that shows a large crowd gathered around its central monument (the statue of General Baquedano), people escalating it with flags, banners, and posters, against clouds of smoke and a bright orange sunset (Figure 2). The shot captures one of the protesters as they reach the top of the monument, waving the Mapuche Nation’s flag. This heroic, Romantic image reminds



**Figure 2:** Susana Hidalgo, *Re-evolución 25/10/2019* (Re-evolution). Screenshot of original Instagram post.

the viewer of iconic pictures, paintings instead of photographs, such as Eugène Delacroix's 'Liberty Leading the People' (1830) and Théodore Géricault's 'Raft of the Medusa' (1818–1819). The crowd moulds itself along the contours of the equestrian sculpture and the plinth, forming a pyramidal structure, crowned by a succession of flags (of Chile, of the Mapuche Nation, even of soccer clubs), a nod to the different allegiances expressed from down below. That structural device was chosen deliberately by both painters due to its immersive visual effect and persuasive rhetorical power. Here it presents a perfect photo opportunity, one that was identified as such by the crowd itself. Nicaraguans recognised within the image an immediate parallel with a similar visual construction that was witnessed by thousands of people during a march held on May 9, 2018 (Figure 3).

On that occasion, protesters had gathered in the centre of Managua and marched for an entire afternoon along four of the city's main traffic routes. Arriving at *Plaza las Victorias* (Victory Square), several young men began to climb and effectively occupy the monumental statue of Alexis Argüello. They carried the Nicaraguan flag, banners, posters, and portraits of students and fellow protesters killed by police forces during previous weeks. Argüello, a famous boxer, politician, and former mayor of Managua, died under circumstances that remain mysterious to date. Public opinion holds that he was killed by the regime, so in this case, the choice



**Figure 3:** Screenshot of Facebook post comparing the protests in Nicaragua and in Chile, 2019.

of monument was anything but accidental. Furthermore, I would argue that the type of gesture seen here—interpreted by the people as an expression of freedom, while labelled as vandalism and delinquent by the government—constitutes a type of public intervention that opens up civic space, enabling, rather provoking the reconstitution of the public sphere. The gesture carries with it the symbolism of past struggles, which it nonetheless revises, shifts, and repurposes. Whether seen as appropriative or not, such strategies are iconoclastic at root and are meant to be seen. They might emerge instinctually, in reaction to the situation at hand, yet are nonetheless embedded within an all-encompassing multisensory environment shaped by social media.

Interventions upon public monuments such as those described in this article did not occur in isolation, rather within a context of interconnected movements, many of which were grounded upon historic struggles for justice. Another case was the graffitiing of the *Ángel de la Independencia* ('Angel' of Independence) monument in Mexico City in 2019. On August 12, a crowd of around three hundred assembled to protest violence against women and governmental indifference towards increasing cases of femicide in Mexico. The action was spurred by a recent case concerning the rape of a teenage girl by four policemen in the town of Azcapotzalco, on the outskirts of the capital. Under *#NoNosCuidanNosViolan* (they do not protect us, they rape us), protesters marched from the headquarters of the *Secretaría de Seguridad Ciudadana* to the *Procuraduría*, carrying banners, chanting, and staging street

performances to declaim police violence and governmental indifference. Women covered their faces with purple and green *pañuelos* (bandanas), signalling their solidarity with the broader transregional and transnational feminist movement. The green bandana has become a global symbol of feminist indignation due to international pro-choice campaigns that have recently gained enormous public visibility in Latin America, Spain, and most recently Ireland, spurred by a so-called *ola verde* (green wave) of protest. Most importantly, however, the bandanas paid homage to white scarves worn by the emblematic Madres of the Plaza de Mayo, who since 1977 have gathered week after week in Buenos Aires' central square, demanding justice for relatives disappeared during the Dirty War.<sup>7</sup>

The August 12 protest escalated after participants graffitied the *Procuraduría*, finally breaking through the front doors of the building. City Mayor Claudia Sheinbaum qualified the incident as a 'provocation', asserting nonetheless the government's non-retaliatory stance (Pantoja 2019). Another march was summoned for August 16 under *#ExigirJusticiaNoEsProvocación* (asking for justice is not a provocation). A crowd of about 1,500 gathered around the *Glorieta de Insurgentes*. Pictures and videos of crowds of women carrying placards, shouting, and scribbling messages and graffiti started populating social media feeds. Later in the day, as tensions augmented, protesters set (small) fires and continued to paint graffiti and *pintas*. The evening culminated with the temporary 'occupation' of one of the city's landmarks nearby, the *Ángel de la Independencia* which was clad in purple light and scribbled with declamatory messages. As pointed out by many participants and observers, the media focused on these actions, qualifying them as vandalism or '*actos vandálicos contra inmuebles públicos*' (acts of vandalism against public buildings) which ultimately spectacularised the protests (Milenio 2019). Furthermore, images of *encapuchadas*, young women with covered faces, clad in pink smoke and glitter were made into a trope.

Heated debates continued during the following days, centring around the authorities and the general public's alarm at the damage suffered by the iconic monument and the apparent forgetting of the primary purpose of the protest. Defiantly, a group of conservators and professionals identifying as workers in the patrimony sector, *Restauradoras con Glitter* (Glitter Conservators) issued a number of letters and communiqués indicating that the remnants of what some saw as vandalism constituted important memory work and should thus be granted attention and preserved. While they stated that by no means do they condone the defacement of public monuments, they nonetheless considered it important that these gestures and claims be properly recorded (Restauradoras 2019).

The occupation of the *Ángel de la Independencia* in Mexico City, and the public interventions that were staged around monuments and key sites in Managua in 2018 and Chile in 2019, while labelled as acts of vandalism by the respective local and national authorities, are nonetheless imbued with 'artistic agency' (Gell 1998) and constitute important acts of memorialisation, substantially understood as *in process* rather than static. The 'invasion' of public space might appear chaotic and might entail elements of chance, yet it is anything but accidental or confused; rather,

it serves to articulate citizen demands. Symbolic reparations involve memorialisation practices, which, at state level, have often translated into the construction of public memorials and monuments. As Greeley et al. argue, within the conventional paradigm of a memorial being a 'stereotypical bronze statue of a hero (or here, a victim) on a pedestal', the 'viewer is detrimentally positioned as a *passive* spectator rather than an *active* agent and co-creator of meaning.' Furthermore, 'this passivity is...compounded by a tendency to conceive of memorialisation as producing fixed, inanimate *objects*, rather than initiating dynamic *processes* generated through the unique experiences that art engenders' (Greeley et al. 2020: 168). Monuments are there to seal the national narrative, setting it into stone. Contestations are prohibited, and any breach is immediately interpreted as a destructive act.

For the protesters, however, marking out public space with graffiti and tags, intervening upon a monument, altering it in any way, means claiming it. A demand is placed over a commons, marking a shift within public perception. As Jorge Saavedra Utman has argued, by relation to the 2011 student protests in Chile, 'the commons is not given but created, and that is not only a space but also a relationship to be continuously activated' (2019). Seen in this light, symbolic reparations are inter-linked with broader processes aimed at strengthening community, and fostering change. 'Vandalism' becomes a means for the crowd, understood as representative of the people, to reclaim and enact in public space that which they have been deprived of: the sense of justice, equitable representation, freedom of speech, and so forth. This claim appears especially strong in post-dictatorial and post-revolutionary contexts, such as Nicaragua, Chile, and Mexico, given authorities' continued attempts to divorce everyday citizens from the exercise and articulation of power and to maintain control over the nation's symbolic armature.

Image-making practices, such as photography and video, evidenciate how these transformative processes might come into play. Furthermore, they recognise the performative aspects at hand, anticipating the movements and actions of the crowd (Taylor 2003). Political gestures such as those described in this article may unfold in front of the camera, however fleetingly, even clandestinely, and may be captured serendipitously, occasionally causing a viral image to rise high above the social media feed. Undoubtedly, however, they are created with a photographic event in mind, even when only as a possibility. Therefore, any documentary trace references its visual legacy in advance, that is, its future is intrinsic to its coming into being. The image event, or what Ariella Azoulay calls the 'event of photography' (Azoulay 2008) has been theorised by Strassler as 'political happening[s] in which images become the material ground of generative struggles to bring a collectivity into view and give shape to its future' (2020).

The intervened upon monument is only one element within a greater constellation of reconfigured symbols and icons articulated in public space, yet one which requires, and is co-extensive with, its recordability. Therein, future memorialisation, maintaining the form *in process* is essential. In the case of Nicaragua, while the social contract is broken, there can be no guarantees for a 'never again'. As the *Restauradoras* indicate, the intervened monument or square, the intervened city, must

be preserved as such to signal the ongoing-ness of demands for justice and may later serve to memorialise this concerted effort.<sup>8</sup> It cannot be entirely 'stabilised', turned into a fixed form, unless it is to become simply a vessel, invested with state symbolism, a means for its ongoing legitimisation. In Chile the public insistently returned to the streets, culminating with the 2020 plebiscite, while in Nicaragua strict policing has made such actions exceptional and mostly clandestine. Nonetheless, faint traces of 2018 are still visible, embedded within the surface of the streets, maintaining the spark of rebellion alight.

## Acknowledgements

My article draws upon materials and analyses that have come to light as part of the European Research Council supported research project 'Citizens of Photography: The Camera and the Political Imagination' (grant no 695283). I would like to thank Christopher Pinney (PI), Naluwembe Binaisa, Vindhya Buthpitiya, Konstantinos Kalantzis, and Sokphea Young for their friendship and support.

**Ileana L. Selejan** is research fellow with the Decolonising Arts Institute and Associate Lecturer at the University of the Arts London. Previously based in the Department of Anthropology at University College London, where she is now honorary research fellow, she participates in the European Research Council (ERC) funded project, 'Citizens of Photography: The Camera and the Political Imagination'. She was the Linda Wyatt Gruber '66 Curatorial Fellow in Photography at The Davis Museum at Wellesley College and received her PhD in art history from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. Email: i.selejan@ucl.ac.uk

## Notes

1. Ortega was a member of the *Junta de Gobierno de Reconstrucción* (Junta of National Reconstruction) that governed Nicaragua in the aftermath of 1979. He was president of the Republic from 1984 until 1990.
2. Presidential Decree 3-2018, was published on the 18th of April 2018, as an amendment to the *Reglamento de la Ley de Seguridad Social* (Social Security Law) establishing the increase of employers and employees' monthly contributions and a 5% cut in pensions.
3. The Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI) operates under the mandate of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Organization of American States (OAS).
4. According to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, between April and July 2018, 327 citizens were assassinated and thousands injured (CIDH 2019), while the UNHCR estimated over sixty thousand went into exile (UNHCR 2018).
5. During this crucial moment, direct orders from Murillo were issued to all state institutions to counter the protests and demonstrations by using all means necessary: '*vamos con todo*' (we're going all in) (Salinas 2018).
6. In an initial press communiqué, by reference to a series of offences allegedly committed by protesters, she described their actions as '*unos actos de vandalismo incomprensible en nuestra Nicaragua*' (acts of vandalism that are incomprehensible in our Nicaragua) (*El 19* 2018).

7. The item was first used in 2003 by the Argentinian *Campaña Nacional por el Derecho al Aborto Legal Seguro y Gratuito*, in short *Campaña Nacional por el Derecho al Aborto*, although many *pañuelazo* protest actions have been staged since, and around the world.
8. '*Ama y no olvida*—Museum of Memory against Impunity', a virtual museum, was founded in 2019 by the *Asociación Madres de Abril* (AMA).

## References

- Ahmed, S. (2004), 'Affective economies', *Social Text* 22: 121–139.
- Azoulay, A. (2008), *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books).
- Benjamin, W. (2008), *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, M. W. Jennings, B. Doherty and T. Y. Levin (eds) (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Oxford University Press).
- Cherstich, I., M. Holbraad and N. Tassi (eds) (2020), *Anthropologies of Revolution. Forging Time, People, and Worlds* (Oakland: University of California Press).
- Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (CIDH) (2019), 'Mecanismo especial de seguimiento para Nicaragua: Balance preliminar de resultados', 24 June. <http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/prensa/comunicados/2019/160A.pdf>.
- Consejo de Comunicación y Ciudadanía (2018), 'Rosario en multinoticias edición especial', 19 April. <https://www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/titulo:76084-rosario-en-multinoticias-edicion-especial-19-de-abril-del-2018>.
- Craven, D. (2002), *Art and Revolution in Latin America 1910-1990* (New Haven: Yale University Press).
- El 19 Digital* (2018), 'Rosario condena ataques de odio contra las familias nicaragüenses'. 28 May. <https://www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/titulo:77528-rosario-condena-ataques-de-odio-contra-las-familias-nicaraguenses->
- Gamboni, D. (1997), *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (London: Reaktion Books).
- Gell, A. (1998), *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- GIEI Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (2018), 'Nicaragua, Report on the violent events that took place between April 18th and May 30th, 2018'. <https://gieinicaragua.org/en/#section00>.
- González, A. C. (2018). 'Así se vive la caída de un "árbol de la vida" en Managua', *La Prensa*. 20 May. <https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2018/05/20/suplemento/la-prensa-domingo/2422094-asi-se-vive-la-caida-de-un-arbol-de-la-vida-en-managua>.
- Greeley, R. A., M. R. Orwicz, J. L. Falconi, A. M. Reyes, F. J. Rosenberg, L. J. Laplante (2020), 'Repairing symbolic reparations: Assessing the effectiveness of memorialization in the inter-American system of human rights', *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 14, no. 1: 165–192. <https://doi-org.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/10.1093/ijtj/ijaa002>.
- Hobsbawm, E. (1996), *The Age of Revolution 1789–1848* (New York: Vintage Books).
- Kalantzis, K. (2012), 'Crete as warriorhood: Visual explorations of social imaginaries in "crisis"', *Anthropology Today* 28, no. 3: 7–11.
- Kalantzis, K. (2019), *Tradition in the Frame: Photography, Power, and Imagination in Sfakia, Crete* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).

- Khatib, L. (2013), *Image Politics in the Middle East: The Role of the Visual in Political Struggle* (London: I.B. Tauris).
- Latour, B. et al. (eds) (2002), *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and the Arts* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press).
- Longoni, A. 2010. 'Photographs and silhouettes: Visual politics in the human rights movement of Argentina', *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 25: 5–17.
- Macaya, D. A. (2020), *The Insubordination of Photography: Reframing Media, Technology, and Culture in Latin/o America* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press).
- McGarry, A., I. Erhart, H. Eslen-Ziya, O. Jenzen, U. Korkut (2020), *The Aesthetics of Global Protest. Visual Culture and Communication* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press).
- Milenio Digital (2019), 'Encapuchados realizaron pintas en el Ángel de la Independencia', 16 August. <https://www.milenio.com/policia/deja-marcha-feminista-pintas-angel-independencia-paseo-reforma>.
- Miranda Aburto, W. (2018), "'¡Disparaban con precisión: a matar!'" *Confidencial*. 1 June. <https://confidencial.com.ni/42701-2disparaban-con-precision-a-matar/>.
- Pantoja, S. (2019), 'Acto en PGJ-CDMX no fue una manifestación, sino una provocación: Sheinbaum', *Proceso*. 12 August. <https://www.proceso.com.mx/595674/acto-en-pgj-cdmx-no-fue-una-manifestacion-sino-una-provocacion-sheinbaum>.
- Pinney, C. (2004), *'Photos of the Gods' The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion Books).
- Ramírez, S., O. Cabezas, and D. M. Téllez (1984), *La insurrección de las paredes, pintas y grafiti de Nicaragua* (Managua: Editorial Nueva Nicaragua).
- Regidor, C. (2019), 'El discurso del odio en un país de "comejenos" y "sapos"', *El Confidencial*. 4 November. <https://confidencial.com.ni/el-discurso-del-odio-en-un-pais-de-comejenos-y-sapos/>.
- Restauradoras con Glitter @RGlittermx (2019), 'Pronunciamento ante las pintas de la manifestación y marcha feminista del pasado 16 de agosto'. 22 August. <https://twitter.com/RGlittermx/status/1164360509459709952>.
- Rocha, J. L. (2019), *Autoconvocados y conectados. Los universitarios en la revuelta de abril en Nicaragua* (Managua: IHNCA-UCA).
- Rovisco, M., and A. Veneti (2017), 'Special issue: Picturing Protest – Visuality, Visibility and the Public Sphere', *Visual Communication* 16, no. 3: 271–277.
- Ryan, H. E. (2016), *Political Street Art: Communication, Culture and Resistance in Latin America* (New York: Routledge).
- Salinas, C. (2018), 'La vicepresidenta de Nicaragua lideró la respuesta a las protestas contra Ortega', *El País*. 23 November. [https://elpais.com/internacional/2018/11/23/america/1542931388\\_980748.html](https://elpais.com/internacional/2018/11/23/america/1542931388_980748.html).
- Saavedra Utman, J. (2019), *The Media Commons and Social Movements: Grassroots Mediations Against Neoliberal Politics* (New York: Routledge).
- Schacter, R. (2008). 'An ethnography of iconoclasm: An investigation into the production, consumption and destruction of street-art in London', *Journal of Material Culture* 13, no. 1.
- Strassler, K. (2020), *Demanding Images: Democracy, Mediation, and the Image-Event in Indonesia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).
- Taylor, D. (2003), *The Archive and the Repertoire Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

- Taylor, D. (2020), *Presente! The Politics of Presence* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).
- United Nations Human Rights Commission (2018), 'Nicaragua situation fact sheet'.  
16 November. <https://reliefweb.int/report/nicaragua/unhcr-nicaragua-situation-fact-sheet-november-2018>.
- Werbner, P., M. Webb and K. Spellman-Poots (2014), *The Political Aesthetics of Global Protest. The Arab Spring and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).