

Against Whitening by Dispossession: A History and the Present of Tenants Rebellion in Mexico

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Learning from struggles for home in Abya-Yala
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Against whitening by dispossession: A history and the present of tenants rebellion in Mexico

Pablo Gaytan Santiago *aka* **Hombre de Humo**

Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Xochimilco and
Metropolitan Culture + 40

in conversation with

Ana Vilenica

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Abstract

In this conversation we delved into discussions with Pablo Gaytan Santiago, *aka* Hombre de Humo, urban sociologist, activist, and filmmaker about the historic tenants' strike organized by sex workers a century ago in Veracruz. We also explored the struggles for the right to housing and ongoing process of whitening and whitewashing in Mexico City. Our conversation encompassed Pablo's engagement with local communities as a documentary filmmaker and their use of film as a tool in Indigenous peoples struggles and urban movements.

Keywords

Tenants' strike, Mexico, whitening by dispossession, indigenous struggles

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I first learned about Pablo's work through his involvement with the group [06600] - Plataforma Vecinal y Observatorio de la Colonia Juarez, which successfully halted the Cultural Corridor Chapultepec project in 2015. In 2019, I read his thought-provoking piece titled "Blanqueamiento por Despojo", where he proposed an alternative to the academic notion of gentrification—"whitening by dispossession"—used by people in resistance of the Juarez neighborhood. Upon arriving in Mexico, I learned from fellow *compañeros* that Pablo

had recently published *Rebelar la Memoria: 100 años del Sindicato Revolucionario de Inquilinos*, a book commemorating an important anniversary that had been largely ignored in official memory politics. I had the opportunity to meet Pablo together with Pedro Montes de Oca, who joined us to help translate, at a coffee shop near the UNAM in Mexico City, where we delved into discussions about the historic tenets' strike organized by sex workers a century ago in Veracruz. We also explored the ongoing struggles for the right to housing and ongoing process of whitening and whitewashing in Mexico City. Our conversation encompassed Pablo's engagement with local communities as a documentary filmmaker and their use of film as a tool in Indigenous peoples' struggles and urban movements.

Ana: You recently published *Rebelar la Memoria: 100 años del Sindicato Revolucionario de Inquilinos*. This publication marks the 100th anniversary of this important struggle of Tenant Unions in Mexico. Can you tell us something about this struggle and the problems that people experienced at that time?

Hombre de Humo: Let me first provide an overview of the socio-historical context during that period. In 1922, just five years after the Mexican Revolution, a pro-capitalist ideological and political wing emerged triumphant in Mexico. Álvaro Obregón, a general from the Sonora group, which was victorious in the revolution, led the government at that time. This era was marked by significant political, social, and cultural activity.

During the Revolution, between 1912 and 1917, various communist, socialist, and anarchist organizations formed, including the Casa del Obrero Mundial. In 1917, following the triumph of the Mexican Revolution, a division arose within the Casa del Obrero Mundial between communists and anarchists. The communists aligned themselves with the State, while the anarchists promoted a rupture with the State. Anarchist activism was particularly intense during this period, with many well-known anarchist publications being circulated internationally.

Between 1919 and 1922, there was a series of struggles and rebellions led by anarchist groups, especially in the southern region of Mexico. Veracruz, known as the Mexican Manchester due to its textile industry in the Orizaba valley, played a significant role. Anarchists had a strong presence there, establishing schools and publishing newspapers. Simultaneously, a movement was taking place in the state of Hidalgo, on the opposite side of the country. A young anarchist named Herón Proal, who had mixed French and Hidalgoan heritage, migrated to Mexico City and later settled in Pachuca, where he worked as a tailor. He became involved in anarchism, particularly through his interactions with members of the Casa del Obrero Mundial. Eventually, in 1916 or 1917, he arrived in the port of Veracruz.

In Veracruz, Proal met Manuel Diaz, an anarchist teacher and a member of the International Workers of the World, a global organization of anarchist workers in the late 19th and 20th centuries. Diaz had established a rationalist school in the port of Veracruz, which attracted workers and activists. They participated in several general strikes

organized by the workers of Veracruz, achieving success in a significant strike in 1919. This created a wave of excitement, leading them to establish a newspaper called *Antorcha Libertaria* (Libertarian Torch). During this time, they studied the works of thinkers such as Bakunin and Luis San Michelle, engaging in international discussions. The influx of Spanish anarchist immigrants in Veracruz also played a crucial role, as they brought newspapers containing the latest information. Despite the high illiteracy rates among the working class, the militants and anarchist activists would read the newspapers aloud, allowing the workers to access and engage with these ideas.

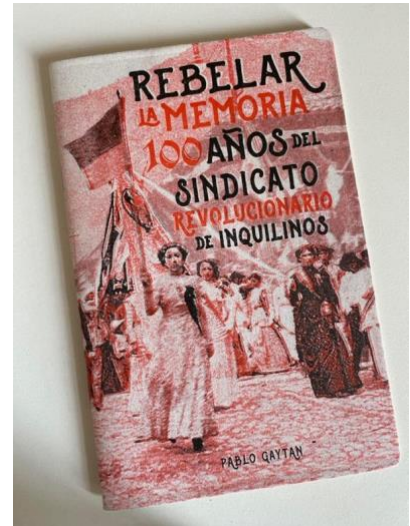


Figure 1

Cover of the publication *Rebelar la Memoria: 100 años del Sindicato Revolucionario de Inquilinos*

In 1921, various anarchist groups from across the country came together to form the General Confederation of Workers (CGT). Proal attended the founding meeting of the CGT in Veracruz. Interestingly, this coincided with a traffic accident at a central intersection, in which one of the drivers died. The surviving bus driver happened to be my father. He attended the congress and there he crossed paths with Herón Proal. On December 21, my father returned to Veracruz, bringing with him a newspaper called *Verbo Rojo*, the CGT's official newspaper, and began building a new revolutionary union.

Ana: And how does all of this relate to the struggles of the tenants?

Hombre de Humo: I'll explain. Herón Proal had his office and living quarters in a tenement courtyard, a type of housing complex consisting of multiple barracks. Each barrack served as a dwelling unit, creating a neighbourhood-like setting within the city. This kind of spatial organization dates back to the 16th century, where large areas were divided into 30 or more barracks. In one of these barracks, there were prostitutes who lived and worked. In early 1922, the city government announced a tax increase, which the landlords (*casatenientes*) passed on to the tenants as a rent hike. This caused significant discontent among the tenants, and it was the sex workers who took the lead in organizing a radical movement. Between February 21 and 22, they initiated a protest by taking the mattresses from their rooms and setting them on fire in the streets. This action served as a powerful form of protest. As a result, it drew the attention and support of various anarchist and communist groups, leading to the call for an assembly of tenants from that very night.

Ana: Was it a woman-led movement?

Figure 2

Proal in one of the neighbourhoods in 1922. Illustration in the publication *Rebelar la Memoria: 100 años del Sindicato Revolucionario de Inquilinos*



Hombre de Humo: There was an influential woman named María Luisa Marín who played a crucial leadership role. She was both a partner and comrade of Herón. María Luisa had connections not only with other women but also with anarchist groups and newspapers. It's important to note that this action did not arise spontaneously; it was the culmination of five years of dedicated work. The groundwork had been laid through previous events, such as a longshoremen's strike five years earlier, the establishment of a functioning school, the presence of a newspaper, and the formation of a union with an anarchist theatre.

Ana: There was a history of agitation leading up to this event.

Hombre de Humo: Yes. I would like to make a theoretical digression on this matter now by quoting philosopher Franco Diego Cornelis Castoriadis. He mentioned in one of his essays that many communists disapproved of anarchist or autonomist spontaneism. Castoriadis explained that the original meaning of the word "spontaneismo" derives from "fonte," meaning the source. This is because the source of what is referred to as spontaneity is rooted in the experiences and daily work of organizing. To truly comprehend the tenants' movement, we must recognize that there was already ongoing organizing among the working class. The working-class men were also clients of the sex workers, establishing a pre-existing relationship. Unlike communists, anarchists have learned to exist on the periphery. Therefore, it was relatively "easy" for them to connect with the sex workers and engage with them in direct action.

Ana: People consider it a commune, right?

Hombre de Humo: Many referred to it as a commune. Over the course of six months, from February to July, they demonstrated an impressive machine-like capacity for self-organization within the commune. They successfully obtained a sizable printing press and used it to produce a newspaper specifically for the tenants. In addition, they organized

educational events and social gatherings to disseminate ideas. These activities encompassed artistic and cultural endeavors, including plays, music, and even a Danzón group.

Pedro: A danzonera, you mean music from Cuba?

Hombre de Humo: Yes, they had a band and organized parties. In fact, on 1 May 1922, they made an attempt to establish an anarchist colony.

Pedro: Is the photo on the cover of the publication from that time?

Hombre de Humo: Yes, the events began on 1 May. In June 1922, it was these women who led the occupation of empty houses. They identified vacant houses and started occupying them as a form of protest. They developed their own communication system using whistles to alert one another if the police attempted to evict them. Among the numerous rallies and marches they organized to protest the tax increase and demand lower rents; one particular demonstration was aimed at rescuing Herón Proal from jail. He had been arrested due to his political activities, and these women successfully managed to rescue him. This provides a general outline of the events that took place.

Ana: Why did you decided to write about these events?

Hombre de Humo: I revisited the tenants' union because it was not receiving the attention it deserved, perhaps overshadowed by the anniversary of the assassination of Ricardo Flores Magón, a figure officially recognized by the Mexican State. It was precisely for this reason that I wanted to emphasize and bring forth the story that has been overlooked in historical narratives. This is why I chose the title "*Rebelar la memoria*" as a play on words, referring to both revealing through photography and revealing the memory of these events. It is crucial to tell these stories because they have been forgotten. In Spanish, we have the verb "*revelar*," spelled with a "v," which means to reveal. And we also have the verb "*rebelar*," spelled with a "b," which means to rebel. It's a play on words, both revealing and rebelling at the same time. This story also holds personal significance for me as it intersects with my father's life story. Another motivation behind sharing this history is the pressing need for a new tenant movement in Mexico City that has been evident for at least a decade.

Ana: How did the strike ultimately conclude?

Hombre de Humo: It culminated in a massacre where more than 100 people lost their lives. This tragic event took place on either 22 or 23 June. In an attempt to provide some form of reparation, the government of the State of Veracruz implemented a tenant law to safeguard certain rights of the tenants. However, this law has since vanished and is no longer in effect. There were also efforts to expand the strike to other cities such as Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Tampico, but the level of organizing necessary for such widespread action was not achieved. Regrettably, this marked the end of the entire cycle of the tenant movement in Veracruz.

Ana: What is the current situation in Mexico City? As you mentioned, there is a need for a new tenant movement. Could you elaborate on the reasons behind this necessity?

Hombre de Humo: Approximately 20 years ago, in 2004, I published a book titled *Social Apartheid in the City of Zero Hope* (*Apartheid Social en la Ciudad de la Esperanza Cero*). The research I conducted during that time revealed that what is now known as gentrification began in 1997, coinciding with the left-wing political shift in Mexico City. I symbolically emphasized a specific event: the construction of Torre Mayor in 1997. This was the first major gentrification project in the city, marking the start of a process that has spanned 25 years.

In discussions with neighbourhood collectives and organizations that have opposed gentrification, we have conceptualized it as “whitening by dispossession” (*blanqueamiento por despojo*). This term, which carries multiple meanings, is used by a group of inhabitants from the Juarez neighbourhood. Throughout this century, I have been collaborating with organizations and working to develop my own theories outside the academic realm. In fact, I was fired from the academia.

Pedro: Why were you fired?

Hombre de Humo: It happened five years ago. I had always been employed as a temporary teacher, but suddenly they chose not to renew my contract.

Ana: But you continued doing the work outside of the academia?

Hombre de Humo: Over the years, our focus has been on monitoring the construction of urban infrastructure, which has prioritized automobiles and centralized real estate projects. This has resulted in the disappearance of traditional neighbourhoods, forced displacement, and the dispossession of hundreds of families due to the indifference of the ruling party. The new urban society is now divided into three main classes.

At the top, we have the Metapolitical Class, comprising the money owners and real estate developers. They are the representatives of the “Real Estate Cartel” (*Cartel Inmobiliario*), since they employ similar strategies and urban violence like drug traffickers. These individuals engage in speculative practices with urban land, prioritizing profit over life and human rights of the city's inhabitants, known as *Urbanitas*. They operate in complicity with the political class of various ideologies and political parties. I refer to this sector as the “*Estado Inmobiliario*” (Real Estate State) because they collude with the Real Estate Cartel, promoting Real Estate Corruption by violating urban laws and land use regulations. They reside in privileged areas on the outskirts of the city, surrounded by forests. The road systems are designed to connect these areas with centres of power, typically accessible by car or even helicopter.

In the middle, we have the Metropolitan Class, consisting of service workers who commute daily throughout the city using cars or the Metrobus. Gentrification, for them, means residing in central areas and eliminating the need to travel from the periphery to the city centre. They aspire to live in the city's core. This class, with guaranteed purchasing power, includes state employees, university students, and postgraduates. They have access to theme parks, shows, consumption spaces, and shopping centres.

Lastly, we have the Sub-Metropolitan Class, which exists throughout the city and is not limited to specific centre-periphery divisions. They reside in rundown neighbourhoods in the city centre, suburban municipalities like Condesa, or municipalities such as Ixtapalapa, and Indigenous towns and villages in the south. The Sub-Metropolitan Class often coincides with living spaces with Indigenous populations. Between 1997 and the present day, people were displaced from central neighborhoods such as Condesa, Roma, Juarez, Guerrero, Santa María La Rivera, and the Historic Center, with the impact intensifying during the pandemic. This displacement led to the emergence of a new metropolitan class—we also call them the creative classes or the hipsters. The middle-class residents who were already settled in these areas faced significant challenges due to earthquakes and the pandemic, resulting in their eviction and displacement. Ironically, those who were once the bulldozer of gentrification have now become displaced themselves, as they are replaced by the so-called digital nomads. It is a somewhat ironic turn of events, don't you think?

Ana: Yep.

Hombre de Humo: In the context of the creation and alignment of laws with the newly established constitution of Mexico City, several organizations since 2015-16 have advocated for the inclusion of Article 60 as a right in the *Constitutional Law of Human Rights and its Guarantees of Mexico City* (Ley Constitucional De Derechos Humanos y sus Garantías de la Ciudad de México). This article aims to protect the rights of tenants in cases of forced displacement. Additionally, there have been instances of occupations led by young people, particularly young artists. However, these occupations have usually been short-lived, lasting no more than one or two years.

On the other hand, there are also occupations carried out by what we refer to as “*vivienderos*.” Who are these *vivienderos*? They are individuals who engage in promoting occupations as a means of pressuring the government to provide loans and legalize these

Figure 3

March against the Chapultepec Commercial Corridor, Juarez neighborhood, Mexico City (2015).
Image: Archive [06600] Neighborhood Platform and Observatory of the Juarez neighborhood



occupations. Many of these *vivienderos* are militants of the ruling political party. They use occupations as a way to gain loans and legalize this property. They assist people in obtaining homes, but in return, they require party membership. It is important to note that I am not disputing the illegality of these occupations, but rather highlighting how the party in power becomes involved in this process. Unfortunately, this approach often lacks any form of meaningful politicization. Instead, it serves as a means of depoliticizing workers who are in need of housing.

Ana: Are there any other methods or approaches through which people are organizing to assert their right to home?

Hombre de Humo: It is incredibly challenging for tenants to organize due to various factors. Many middle-class individuals, including civil servants and public institution workers, have acquired multiple housing loans. Numerous homeowners are renting out their properties, often owning four or five houses. Among these homeowners, there are union representatives, neighborhood representatives, and a significant number of researchers. This situation has become a lucrative business, and naturally, they oppose any tenant initiatives, defending the existing laws. However, despite these obstacles, there have been instances where initiatives such as the passing of Article 60 have been successful.

Pedro: Article 60 of the Constitution?

Hombre de Humo: No, Article 60 of the Constitutional Law of Human Rights and its Guarantees of Mexico City was initially established to protect certain rights of tenants, ensuring they would not be subjected to violent evictions without any legal protections. However, after only about five months, the ruling party, backed by a majority of deputies in Congress, made significant amendments to Article 60. This led to a legal challenge of unconstitutionality being filed in the Nation's Supreme Court of Justice, seeking to restore it to its original state. It is essential to note that rights are meant to be progressive, not regressive, but the reforms imposed by MORENA¹ and their allies have resulted in a regressive approach. Various groups with financial interests strongly opposed this law and organized efforts to undermine it, using the argument of safeguarding private property rights. Given these circumstances, I hold a high level of skepticism regarding the likelihood of successful tenant organization in the current context.

Ana: What are the groups that you have been organising with?

Hombre de Humo: In the last eight years, I have had the opportunity to collaborate with several groups. One of the organizations I have been working with is [06600] - Plataforma Vecinal y Observatorio de la Colonia Juarez in the Alcaldía Cuauhtémoc district, located in the heart of Mexico City. Additionally, I have also been involved with the organizing of the Santo Domingo neighbourhoods in the southern part of the city. This group has been actively opposing the appropriation of water by real estate companies in the area.

¹ MORENA is a Mexican political party that stands for Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (National Regeneration Movement). It is a left-wing political party that was founded in 2011 by Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who is currently serving as the President of Mexico.

Figure 4

Protest by the Asamblea General de Pueblos, Barrios, Colonias y Pedregales de Coyoacán, in Santo Domingo neighborhood, Mexico City (2016). Image: Guadalupe Ochoa



After a decade-long struggle, they recently achieved a significant victory. They now have control over a water reservoir, ensuring the prioritized distribution of water to the local community.

Ana: You are also a documentary filmmaker?

Hombre de Humo: In 1996-97, during that time, I had the opportunity to work with various organizations representing Indigenous communities. We conducted workshops and created a documentary highlighting their successful efforts in halting the construction of the second ring road around Mexico City.

In 2015, we were actively involved in the movement to stop the Chapultepec commercial corridor project, which was a significant real estate endeavor. It was a great experience as we managed to successfully stop the project with the participation of multiple organizations from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, we worked in Ostotepec and Milpalta, supporting local community members in their efforts to protect the forests. All these documentary projects were undertaken in collaboration with my partner, Guadalupe Ochoa, under our collective known as Interneta. One noteworthy documentary we produced was called *The Rotten Decade*, created in the 1980s in partnership with punk collectives. It remains the only documentary made from within the Punk movement. You can find out more about our activist work on YouTube through our page called Metropolitan Cultures. We have also engaged with women from Indigenous communities. You have probably seen women selling dolls on the streets of Mexico City?

Pedro: Lele dolls.

Hombre de Humo: Anthropologists and the official culture refer to them as Otomi, but in their own language, they identify themselves as *Ñañús*. We had the opportunity to collaborate with them on a film project, where we employed workshops as a method to engage and create films together. Our focus has always been on the processes involved,

Figure 5

Meeting of community organizations in defense of the territory Xochicuautla, State of Mexico (2016). Image: Guadalupe Ochoa



rather than emphasizing the author’s individual brilliance. What truly matters to us is what is behind that.

For instance, the videos we produced through workshops with the women served as a catalyst for reorganizing and reconstituting their community and organization. These video documents became valuable resources for the community itself. They proved highly beneficial for women in the state of Querétaro, enabling them to secure support, access training opportunities, and establish new connections.

Ana: I found it a bit confusing with regards to your names. On some occasions, you signed your work as Pablo Gaytan, while in other instances, you were referred to as Hombre de Humo.

Hombre de Humo: Hombre de Humo, or “Man of Smoke,” is my indigenous name. My parents were Mixtecs, originating from the Mixteca Alta region spanning Oaxaca, Veracruz, and Puebla. In their native language, they were called “*y usavi*,” which translates to “people of the rain.” My mother served as a healer and a judge, while my father embraced a wild anarchist spirit. They migrated to the city in the 1950s, a time when there was a strong pressure for rural peasants and indigenous individuals to assimilate and abandon their languages. Speaking your native language was forbidden and being different in appearance required constant vigilance. Consequently, an entire generation of indigenous migrants stopped speaking their languages.

In 1994, with the emergence of the EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation) movement, there was a small resurgence in reclaiming indigenous identities. It was during this time that I encountered many individuals with names rooted in their respective ancestral lands and crops. This led me to ponder my own identity and name. I questioned, “Who am I? Everyone has a name. What about me?”

Figure 6

Pablo Gaytan documents gentrification on Isabel la Católica Street, Historic Center of Mexico City (2008)
Foto: Guadalupe Ochoa



Reflecting on the city and its production, I realized that smoke was a significant element. If we delve into the accounts of the early people who arrived in the city, they described seeing smoke due to the abundance of water and humidity. Although the presence of smoke has diminished over time, I found solace in adopting the name *Hombre de Humo*. In the punk movement having a unique name was not an unusual thing. My friends had names like Rebel and Chomski, and now I had one of my own.

Ana: Thank you very much for sharing these stories with us and all the important and inspiring work that you have been doing over time. Thanks also to you Pedro for your help with translation and taking part in this conversation.

Hombre de Humo: Thank you for listening and I hope our paths cross again.

Pedro: Thank you both.

About this Conversation's participants

Pablo Gaytan Santiago is a professor-researcher in the Department of Social Relations and the Communication and Politics Area at Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Xochimilco (UAM-X). He holds a PhD in Sociology from UAM-X. He has directed and produced 79 films, encompassing documentaries, fiction, experimental works, video installations, and music videos. Currently, he is engaged in the Metropolitan Culture + 40 project, which serves as a virtual platform dedicated to urban cultures in the Mexico City megalopolis. Since 2008, he has been a contributor to *Metapolitical* magazine.

Pedro Montes de Oca Quiroz is a postgraduate student at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in the Latin-American Literature Program and works at the National Audio Library of Mexico. He teaches Spanish as a second language.

Ana Vilenica is a feminist, no border and urban activist and organiser from Serbia currently living in Italy. She is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow with the ERC project *Inhabiting Radical Housing* at the Polytechnic of Turin's Inter-university Department of Regional & Urban Studies and Planning (DIST) and a core member of Beyond Inhabitation Lab. Ana is a member of the *Radical Housing Journal* Editorial collective and the Feminist Autonomous Centre for research (FAC research).

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