

Memory Written on the Streets: Graffiti and Pixação as Knowledge Production in Rio de Janeiro

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ABSTRACT In this paper the author introduces graffiti in Rio de Janeiro as a method for creative activism, drawing on scholarly work and her experience since 2015 as a graffiti writer. Combining these elements, the author demystifies graffiti and untangles the multiple prejudices attached to this peripheral artistic culture. Locating graffiti within its roots in Hip Hop culture and drawing upon the memories and experiences of seven graffiti artists she introduces theories of memory and knowledge production to analyze the role of graffiti in constructing and deconstructing the city and its culture. The artists in this paper recount stories of how gender, race, and class have structured Brazilian graffiti and the reactions that it provokes, constructing a storyline stretching from the 1990s until today, a registry of knowledges about the culture of the city which have been constructed through an art which is always and already a form of activism from the periphery.

INTRODUCTION

Rio de Janeiro is one of Brazil's best-known cities, famous in positive terms for its beaches and weather, and negatively for its high levels of violence. By walking the streets, one can read the history through the historical monuments of the city that was the second capital of the country. Today's landscape is a mixture of colonial memory and capitalist modernity, which are confused among pedestrians, in the details of the historic downtown buildings and in the name of the neighborhoods. The background to this scenario is the urban inscriptions, which cluster on all possible surfaces and take different forms: whether in large murals or small cracks, the colors, symbols and writings which present representations that can be seen by all, but read by the few. With its own rules, articulations and language, the graffiti movement in Rio de Janeiro took its first steps as a form of protest against the Military Dictatorship in the 1970s and evolved over time to become an artistic and commercial phenomenon. Modelling and shaping the landscape, graffiti competes for space with *pixação*¹, the advertisements of companies in billboards, signs advertising spiritual and psychic services, and material of urban chaos itself. Among these articulations with different aesthetics and purposes, graffiti emerges as an alternative for a peripheral and marginalized population which, by not having access to bourgeois cultural instruments, produces its own form of culture.

This paper proceeds from my curiosity as a graffiti writer who searches for common points

within the various stories that I hear from my graffiti forebears and seeks then to analyze the predominant oral and collective memory in graffiti in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Fundamental to this analysis will be the valuation of the culture of the city's periphery and the recording of the stories that form the memory of the streets. It is necessary to clarify, therefore, that in order to do justice to the perspective of graffiti this research is concerned not only with the 'art' of graffiti, but also that which is beyond paint, the immaterial elements and the affective base which enable and give strength to this movement. This includes foregrounding the culture of Hip Hop, from which several key factors in graffiti are inherited. In this way the interviews conducted with seven graffiti writers² from Rio de Janeiro are combined with academic sources and are brought together to explore the ways in which graffiti weaves the fabric of the history of the city itself.

GRAFFITI, ORALITY AND MEMORY

Graffiti as an urban movement is intrinsically linked to orality, a constant and primordial factor through its birth, evolution and maintenance. Its emergence is linked to the urban periphery and the difficulties encountered by the inhabitants of these marginalized regions in order to survive in the midst of poverty, hunger and lack of resources. It serves both as a means of self-protection for marginalized and oppressed communities and as a means of imagining alternatives to lives which otherwise can appear predestined to be short and

difficult. In everyday life in the city of Rio it is impossible to spend a day without seeing graffiti or *pixação*. These sometimes take the form of gigantic murals, sometimes bombers³, sometimes messages and beyond this an incredible variety of other ways in which these artists express their creativity on the city street. All this visibility on the streets has attracted the attention of the media, which has sought to domesticate graffiti for a young, modern audience, but they manage only to scratch the surface of graffiti culture, and inevitably fail to capture the affective and historical stories which are known only to those who actually paint and write.

Historically and contemporaneously graffiti as a practice does not exist only within the context of Hip Hop, it comes in many forms. However, it was with the emergence of Hip Hop in the 1970s that the basis for what is now commonly recognised as graffiti was laid, and in order to understand this culture an appreciation of oral culture and roots in the urban periphery are fundamental, and as researchers this requires us to pay close attention to oral memory as a form of knowledge transmission. Frochtengarten (2005: 367), in quoting Halbwachs, stresses that central to this oral memory are affective groupings which act as regulators and producers of memories.

In Schmidt and Mahfoud (1993: 288), Halbwachs recalls that an individual is always inserted within, and inhabits, 'reference groups'. One of the conditions for the construction of memory is the meaning of what Halbwachs calls reference groups, the affective groups mentioned above. As he explains, the seed of a memory can remain abstract or become a living memory, depending on the absence or presence of these groups:

"The reference group is a group of which the individual has already been a part and has established a community of thoughts, identified himself, and confused his past. The group is present to the individual, not necessarily, or even fundamentally, by his physical presence, but by the individual's possibility of resuming the group's modes of thought and common experience. The vitality of the group's social relations gives vitality to the images that constitute the memory. Therefore, the memory is always the result of a collective process and is always inserted in a precise social context" (Halbwachs cited in Schmidt and Mahfoud 1993: 290).

An example of this is found in the story of RdoisÓ, a graffiti writer and break dancer from the group Atari Funkerz, when he recounts how his life is intrinsically merged with Hip Hop:

"Ah, man, I think it became something, I started with a passion, I believe, and it matured until it became a concrete love, right? I think I created a relationship with graffiti and that today is kind of hard to disengage, I think there will come a time when graffiti will be more present in my life than without. I think I'm almost there already, I think I started there, I don't know, at about 13, now I'm at 28, so, I don't know. I think at some point graffiti and hip hop will be a big part of my life, and that will generate a snowball, right? You get to know people and that doesn't stop, you get to infiltrate more and more, for example, today my best friends are all b-boys, you know? Not something I chose, but it happened. They weren't before, but today it is. So like that, even if I say to you 'Oh, I'll stop dancing break', I don't know if there's any way. Why, man, my friends all do it, you know? And graffiti is always there. I always go to an event with my friends that will have some graffiti writer that I know.

*And I also met my wife inside breaking, she was not a b-girl, but I met her and my best friends are very good friends of hers and like I said, it's a snowball, it will suck you in until you get totally surrounded by it. So graffiti these days is just graffiti, it's not 'I'm going to do graffiti', you know? It's like, oh man, I'm going there to do graffiti. It's like 'I'm going there to buy bread', it's already natural, there's no way I can take it from myself, even though I want to. I may stop for a while, but this time, I don't think so. I think this all keeps me doing. I'm always bumping into it, I'm in the middle, there's no way, it's a lifestyle even though I've been absorbed by it."*⁴

For Halbwachs (in Schmidt and Mahfoud 1993: 289), the memories are the result of a collective process, which depends on an affective community based on entertaining internally with people, characteristic in the reference groups. This community built around affect allows the individual to identify with the mentality of a group, sharing habits and feeling oneself a member of these groups. This affect then serves as an amalgam that gives consistency to memories. He also concludes that detachment is linked to forgetting, and explains that "forgetting a period of your life

is losing contact with those around you". This loss of contact, however, cannot be restored even with detailed accounts of what happened, since in detachment the images remain abstract data, there is no recognition or remembrance. Memories are therefore formed of recognition and reconstruction, and depend on the existence of the reference group, since memories are not remembered from empty and isolated feelings, but from the social relations and sharing of experiences. Memory is the joint work of recognizing and reconstructing, allowing the articulation between memories.

The 'other' is important because her testimony supports, complements and evokes memories, making the work of memory more accurate. The process of this work (Halbwachs cited in Schmidt and Mahfoud 1993: 290) is based on our testimonies, which, when confronted with the memories of others, take shape, and in this sharing the experience is lived not only by one person, but various. Memories become stronger when constructed from various points of view, when details are remembered, different aspects highlighted, and locations evoked. These memories, however, are being remembered in the present, and may also be evoked in the future, where the dialogues will be resumed in a new context again: "The work of memory is therefore also the presentification of that set of testimonies in the context of a broader and more current dialogue" (Halbwachs cited in Schmidt and Mahfoud 1993: 290).

Frochtengarten clarifies the terms "rooting" and "uprooting" that have been incorporated into everyday language through a passage by Simone Weil (in Frochtengarten 2005: 368):

"Rooting is perhaps the most important and most unknown need of the human soul. It is one of the hardest to define. The human being has a root for his real, active and natural participation in the existence of a collectivity that keeps alive certain treasures of the past and certain forebodings of the future."

This rooting is a direct result of the association with these reference groups, who transmit their inheritance through the words of the most experienced, either in the form of a teaching, a practical suggestion or a norm (Frochtengarten 2005: 368), and may also be received as material goods: the landscape of the city, the stories of migration to the big city, objects that relive memories (the memory places conceptualized by Nora, which I present later). Participation

in these groups can come from birth, from the neighborhood, from work, in the streets of the city. It is ultimately based on the environments where the individual has the moral, intellectual and spiritual references that will shape their existence, and it is here that we can find the feeling of belonging to an affective group.

Graffiti Crews as Affective Groups

Bringing these observations closer to graffiti, we find graffiti crews as specific reference groups, with Hip Hop forming a larger reference group. However, in Rio de Janeiro the story begins earlier, before the emergence of graffiti crews, when there were groups known as "*bondes*" which were linked to the funk movement and *pixação*. Although there are several differences between *graffiti* and "*pichação*", they share a common origin. During the military dictatorship in Brazil, messages of protest appeared in various places. As Lima (2018: 77) argues, in the 1970s and 1980s many of the youth in Brazil's cities were full of rebelliousness and creativity, while free from artistic and moral obligations, and dared to act on the streets and challenge the system, as political groups linked to the university student movement tagged slogans like "Down with the dictatorship." The messages had a considerable impact and were written with agility as a way of circumventing strong military repression. Considered illegal and subversive, graffiti then became configured as a crime. These messages were written with tar and pitch (*piche*), and it is from this material basis that they became known as "*pichação*". This then evolved to become a practice of repeating indefinitely inscriptions on different surfaces around the city, aiming to achieve as much visibility as possible. In the beginning, in a context of effervescent political tension, Lassala (2010: 47) stresses that at first they aimed to be completely readable to all. The purpose of these inscriptions was to be as clear and objective as possible in order to convey a claim to democracy and freedom to the average citizen and the authorities. The emergence of spray paint then facilitated the exponential reproduction of these inscriptions, given the practicality of using, transporting and handling them.

In the late 1970's in São Paulo, the inscription '*Dog Fila Km 26*' began to appear on streets across

the metropolis and permeated the imagination of many people for years. Numerous failed attempts were then made to discover the meaning of 'Dog Fila Km 26'. Eventually it was revealed in a report in *Veja* magazine in July 1977 to be what Lassala (2010: 48) describes as a graphic strategy used as a kind of amateur advertising for a kennel of the Fila dog breed near kilometre 26 of one of the main roads that cut through the city. In Rio, a similarly cryptic phrase 'Celacanto causes earthquake!' emerged at this time, since attributed to the journalist Carlos Alberto Teixeira (Souza 2007: 23), and having no deeper meaning. While visual demonstrations during the dictatorship were usually loaded with subversive content, the emergence of repeated messages about dog kennels or Celacanto's activities were part of no movement or political context. They were a new form of interpreting and using urban space.

The 1980s were marked by profound political, economic and social transformations. With the end of the military dictatorship in 1985, Brazil plunged into a serious economic crisis, largely due to international loans and other debts incurred by the military during the period. During this period there was a strong political alienation in some parts of society as the economic recession increased unemployment, public services were cut, and educational and cultural activities for the masses were scarce (Ventura 2009). Concomitantly, a rise in birthrates and the large rural to urban migration rapidly increased the number of inhabitants in cities, leading to increases in informal housing construction in hard-to-reach areas with little or no basic structure, and further fueling the crisis of impoverishment and unemployment of the population. These conditions are closely linked to the wave of violence, to which the government responded with more police repression, especially in the areas considered at risk, the outskirts and favelas of the large cities of Brazil (Ventura 2009). Taking advantage of the lack of security in these places with poor infrastructure, drug trafficking factions began to take over peripheral areas of Brazil's cities, leading to Brazil becoming an important route in international narcotics trafficking. As the favelas became dominated by drug trafficking gangs, which turned them into points of drug consumption and retail sales, increasing numbers of young men came to see membership in the gangs as a route to quick

profits and increased status in their environment, which otherwise seemed to offer no prospect of a promising future (Ventura 2009). This in turn led to the areas in and around these favelas seeing an increase in police actions which were invariably coercive, abusive, and racist in nature - a tendency towards trivializing and devaluing black and poor lives that continues today.

In this context of violence and little access to cultural instruments, *pixação* emerged as a form of entertainment and fun at the periphery. Gustavo Lassala (2010: 21) points out that the writers of *pixação* came to develop and adopt new fonts for the letters, transforming a previously deliberately legible activity into one that for outsiders is largely indecipherable, a code that only other *pixo* writers can understand. He elucidates:

"Due to the lack of highlighted studies and the peculiarity of the text, it is necessary to explain and conceptualize the use of the term "pixação". By spelling the term with "x", it is understood that we refer notably to the typical urban graphic intervention performed by the paulistanos [someone born in the city of São Paulo] - known as the straight tag-, unlike the term "pichação", used to refer to any writings indiscriminately, that spoil the urban landscape." (Lassala 2010:21)

In Rio de Janeiro *cariocas* [someone born in the city of Rio de Janeiro] refer to *pixação* as "*Xarpi*", a word coming from the urban language of TTK, a popular code developed in the 1980s by *pixo* writers in the neighborhood of Catete in the south Rio de Janeiro. Created to circumvent understanding by police and other repressive state agents, in this language the syllables of words are spoken backwards. Thus, TTK is KTT (Catete), and "*Xarpi*", the very act of *pixar*. In the context of the rise to popularity of funk music balls in Rio in the 1990s, *pixação* began to develop a relationship with urban musical forms. Pandro and Poder, brothers who were born and lived all their lives in Penha, a suburb of Rio de Janeiro, stressed to me the close relationship between funk and *pixação*, as the funk balls gave rise to local reference groups, wherein neighbors and family members a few years older became inspirational role models for local children. Areas in the north of Rio de Janeiro such as Penha are permeated by violence and far from the mainstream media spotlight, but were also at the forefront of the development of artistic and musical movements

which developed through these kinds of reference groups. As Poder recounts

“We will talk a little before graffiti because here in Rio de Janeiro we started with pixação. We live in Penha and there has always been a strong culture of pixação. So since we were very young we had crayons pixando in school, bathroom, and this was always very strong, along with the funk balls we went to, and in clubs we tagged because it was a place that had a lot of visibility. And only from the end of the 90’s and when some graffiti started to appear on the walls, we understood that there was this possibility too, that it was a different thing, but we could send our message on the walls. (...)

(The funk ball) was something else that was very latent there, right, and since I was very young, 8 or 9 years old I already saw the older people going and I already knew that I would. It was something that caught my attention. And there was this fight business, right, aisle ball, rivalry, which was often a rivalry that I did not even identify, that was [connected to drug] factions, organized crowd. I was really going for fun, right, we fought more for sport, and this thing of belonging, of you, you were from a gang, you were from a gang, you know? Our people were very peculiar, that we, most people were athletes, we were basketball athletes, some were fighting, we wanted to work out in the square, get down at the ball, fight, go, put our names there, that we could get in with pilot load [Permanent pen carrying container] and leave our acronyms. So everything was well interconnected, but it had some consequences. There are people who say ‘oh, why don’t you tag anymore?’, Because you couldn’t go to other neighborhoods. There was a neighborhood I couldn’t go to because if I went, in relation to the funk ball, the guys would want to fight me.”

His point was also reiterated by his brother, Pandro, who adds:

“Nowadays business has calmed down a lot, like, my brother he will not, does not circulate in certain places, I already circle more because I took it, I went to funk ball but I was not so active because I was younger, and such, but it was my relationship was always more with the street, I fought a lot in the street and such. It came from that culture also, to defend the area, had a, like, culture, to defend our area, defend like a flag, like a gang itself, like he said, like, the tram 630^s (half thirty), which was our streetcar from IAPI,

we represented that, so we had to, like, ‘oh, who’s Pablo from half-30, who’s Pandro?’ , so it was all the time doing something related to another. Until then, when this crew thing started to appear here, we didn’t know, what is crew? The crew bid, we already had the “bondes”.”

The funk balls the brothers refer to are the well-known ‘fight balls’ or ‘aisle balls’ where young people would gather to exchange punches and kicks to the sound of funk. Popular in the 1990s, the dances brought together hundreds of young people who split into Side A x Side B, as a division of the city’s localities. As the brothers recount, *pixação* was present in their lives (even if in the imagination of their own futures) since childhood. In this context, *pixação* changes its initial intention to deliver clear messages with political context and took on a more territorial perspective, where what mattered was the recognition of the group itself, the *pixo* writers, a relationship similar to graffiti in the Bronx in New York.

GRAFFITI AND SOCIAL AND CREATIVE ACTIVISM

In the ‘formal’ world of art at this time in the 1980s in São Paulo different artistic movements emerged in defense of an affirmation of freedom of expression. Political activism in favor of the redemocratization of the country began to influence several artists and artistic movements such as Alex Vallauri, Carlos Matuck and the Tupi-não-dá group. These artists gradually established themselves in the art market of galleries and storefronts, making their art a salable product. Since then, they have increased their penetration of the art universe, promoting events and exhibitions in important galleries, such as Thomas Cohn and Cândido Mendes, in Rio de Janeiro, and the São Paulo Museum of Image and Sound, where the I Paulista Exhibition of Graffiti took place in 1992 (Gitahy 1999; Knauss 2001).

Also significant was the political and cultural activism developed by members of the hip-hop movement, which in the 1990s gained great prominence, especially through social activism in the outskirts of cities such as São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. If, on one hand, the artists from São Paulo had a penetration in the art galleries, on the other hand these actions of social movements played a relevant role in the popularization of graffiti in the

communities and favelas of the outskirts of these and other cities. (Tartaglia 2008: 32). Rio de Janeiro's neighboring city of São Gonçalo was the birthplace of the Hip Hop scene in Brazil and was especially influential for graffiti. In an interview with Gal, a graffiti writer born and raised in São Gonçalo, he talked about the beginnings of the scene.

"Rio graffiti (...) begins in São Gonçalo, around 96, 97, through Fábio Ema. From there begins what I call the first generation or first graffiti school, which includes me and a lot of graffiti writers from that period there, who started graffiti. And São Gonçalo was a power; I say it was because today is no longer so strong, São Gonçalo was such a power in graffiti, that people from other states and even the city of Rio de Janeiro, crossed the bridge to come here and know what graffiti was, because graffiti had not yet come there in full force."

He observed this development firsthand in his neighborhood:

"Because I already drew, since about 8 years old, around the age of 15 I started to note that here in the neighborhood, the Trindade neighborhood in São Gonçalo, there were some drawings made with spray, and as I saw the pixação, I began to realize that there was a similarity in the supplies used and I found that the person who did those was Fábio Ema, who had not yet considered graffiti, his drawings were made with spray, and those who helped him to paint were pixo writers from the 90s.

(...) I started to search even if in a precarious way, information about the graffiti, but São Gonçalo did not exactly have this information, because Fábio Ema, he made these drawings but he himself did not consider it as graffiti. He made only contoured and scribbled drawings, were not filled, shaded, with all the technique we have today, had none of that. So there was a lot of difficulties getting information for those who wanted to know about it, but those who already had access to spray through pixação, those who already had the practice of grabbing the city by the horns, they did it very well."

The scenario changed with the popularization of Hip Hop and the emergence of NGOs related to the urban arts, which began workshops related to Hip Hop's four pillars⁶. In 2000 Fábio Ema started the 'Sobrado' project in São Gonçalo, which was a course in graffiti methods and techniques, and Ventura (2009: 630) also highlights the

participation of emerging graffiti crews across Rio de Janeiro:

"Urban Artists, a group from the neighborhood of Penha, teach at Complexo do Alemão for a group of more than fifty students. In Rio de Janeiro, unlike in São Paulo, public and private participation in graffiti projects are insignificant, with scarce resources directed to other projects. Carioca graffiti writers have developed technical skills for drawing and making large panels with representation of everyday scenes in the favela. The emphasis on design results in part from the lack of resources for cans of spray. Rio's favelas concentrate the plastic expression of graffiti as a means of urban revitalization. Groups from all over the city are invited to participate in public meetings in the communities where they hold panels and public workshops of graffiti. In Rio de Janeiro the identity of graffiti is fully articulated with the daily life of the favela."

In the interview collected with RdoisÓ, graffiti writer and b-boy from Maré, he recounts how such classes were held in nearby places in the north of Rio, and due to the proximity, he could participate in graffiti and also develop as a break-dancer. Hip Hop became a fundamental part of his life, one where most of his affective circle developed. This was true of other graffiti artists, for example Poder. He remembers that in the 1990s the government began to see graffiti as a tool to be used to counter *pixação*, which was seen as ugly and linked to criminality, and that this led to funding for, and increased availability of, graffiti workshops. Graffiti culture however resisted cooptation, and graffiti and "xarpi" writers and groups tend live in a close and peaceful way. Indeed, Hip Hop related events brought friends together and were an important part of their social life and remain alive in the memory of some interviewees:

"Poder: At that time, Hutuz, was so cool too, a week-long festival that we lived for, even my mother knew. We spent the day doing graffiti there on Av. Brasil where there was Hutuz for everyone to see, because at that time there was no internet or anything, so that was it, we would go and do some bombers

Pandro: And at that time that was the truth, to know who's on the "role", you had to be too. I had to ride the bus and I had to go places, because otherwise, like, nowadays it's easy, we do graffiti in the backyard and put it on Instagram and that's

it. Not then, it was like, damn, I had to be on the street, stop, arrive, I remember one time I was traveling in Cabo Frio, then I told Pablo, hey, you can get my paints there. Then I would arrive, I would get down on the... when I would get down on the Rio-Niterói bridge I could see, fuck, brother was 'beating up' [to paint several times in a row], I was vibrating with that, damn it. And there was no 'advertising' bid yet, so it lasted a lot longer."

The advertisements to which Pandro refers advertise spiritual and psychic services, offer tree pruning and car buying services, and share the urban landscape with *pixação* and graffiti today. The dispute over walls with greater visibility is now also extended to the painters of these advertisements, which cover *pixação* and graffiti indiscriminately, causing conflicts. Poder notes, however, that these actions also contribute to the renewal of paintings in the city.

As Tartaglia recalls (2008: 21),

"In Brazil, graffiti is repeatedly confused with pixação. This misconception is supported by Brazilian law itself when it fits its practitioners in the same category, considering them criminals. According to Law 9.605 / 98, the graffiti and the pixação are characterized as environmental crimes, due to the degradation they cause to public and private property, especially those located in urban areas."

In 2014, the then mayor of Rio de Janeiro Eduardo Paes issued what is known as the 'graffiti decree', decree no. 38307⁸ of February 2018. This decree makes relevant observations about the scene itself, when considering aspects such as the growth in the quantity and quality of graffiti writers in recent years and the importance of street art in urban centers. It established the creation of an institution called EixoRio, which is responsible for mediating the interests of both the City Hall and the graffiti writers, with 11 councilors, and allows the practice in specific places in public spaces, "such as posts, columns, gray walls (as long as they are not considered historical heritage), blind walls (no doors, windows or other opening), skate parks and construction sidings". It also covers the walls of Line Two of the subway and the walls surrounding the over ground train lines around the city.

This has created a dynamic that is clearly evident to observers in the streets, as graffiti styles change depending on the region of the city. In the affluent southern region and downtown, with the

exception of contracted and licensed panels, it is difficult to find murals by lesser-known artists: the landscape boils down to quickly sprayed bombs, as it is a highly visible area, has more policing, and is predominantly historical and/or illegal places for painting. At these points the time for painting is short, so must be done quickly.

Alongside subway line two or suburban neighborhoods, especially within the favelas, it is more common to find murals made by artists either painting individually or in crews or other collective efforts⁹. One virtual constant is that the less affluent the place, the better the reception the graffiti receives. When working in *favelas*, it is normal for some residents to be portrayed on the walls, making the wall a small tourist attraction and having an even greater affective value for the current participants. However, the risk of oppression by police is increased, as while in the richer areas of the city police actions would not go unnoticed and would arouse much attention, "*rodar*"¹⁰ in suburbs and slums can be riskier as there would probably be less likely to be witnesses who might react to the situation.

The Gendering of Graffiti's Creative Activism

From the memories I collected in the course of this research, I noticed the similarity in the testimonies relating to how Hip Hop or graffiti had saved the lives of the characters who told me their stories. The testimonies show art as an alternative to the often violent reality present in the daily lives of the interviewees, and it also appears as a form of liberation. Since Fábio Ema's Sobrado project, several social organizations have used graffiti as a platform to reach young people and divert them from a path that would often lead to death or imprisonment. I would like particularly here to highlight the NGO Rede Nami¹¹, which was responsible for giving myself and many other young women in Rio de Janeiro our first training and supplies for graffiti practice. Founded by Panmela Castro in 2011, the NGO is a "women's network that uses the arts to promote our rights"¹². Panmela, a former *pixo* writer known as Anarkia Boladona, created the organization after suffering a string of violence from her partner at the time. She turned trauma into a tool for enhancing her art, brought to the streets by graffiti. In 2015, Brazilian Graffiti artist and women's rights activist,

Rede Nami, promoted the first edition of the AfroGrafitteiras course¹³, aimed at black women from different regions of Rio. The course extended in similar formats until the year of publication of this document, having received over 500 women to date. Famously, the course has encouraged more women to get their first spray strokes, and although not all of them continue, I have seen the number of women increasing since my early days. This growth in female participation was noted by all interviewees, who see it as a positive and necessary change. At the beginning of the carioca graffiti scene, there was Aila Ailita, from São Gonçalo, and the first female crew, TPM Crew, which included as members Prima Dona, Om, Si, Ira and Negra Rê, who is also a Hip-Hop MC. More recently, Xana's were created, consisting of Camiz (interviewed), Vinil, Ana Paula (also interviewed) and Nait, and also the PPKREW, of which I am a member alongside Lolly (also interviewed), Amora, Bordô, Klein, Lara, and Esos.

Although there have always been women actively participating in the Hip Hop scene, whether as b-girls, MCs, graffiti artists or DJs, they have always been outnumbered by men, and are too often relegated to the role of men's companions, rather than as protagonists or bearers of their own voice. Matias-Rodrigues (2014: 706) observes how women's participation in Hip Hop impels them to live more on the streets, breaking the association of public space as male:

"It turns out that breaking the public / private barrier is a challenge in itself. In general, the entry into an eminently masculine street movement is hampered by the family itself, which does not welcome the insertion of the young woman in this cultural context. House and street grammar marks uniquely the territoriality of the feminine, and street are associated with street women, that is, they are seen as available for sexual approaches. We cannot fail to consider that the presence on the streets of big cities, marked by violence, in fact, threatens women even more because of the culture of sexual rape on female bodies." The issue of physical fragility and sexual vulnerability feeds these responses, and again Matias-Rodrigues lists some of the difficulties encountered by women in entering street culture: in addition to the aforementioned association with 'street women', it is difficult to find women performers in the same

proportion as men participating in events, such as women as leader projects, in addition to the

"hegemony of male honor codes exercising control over the entry and exit of young women, as well as control over their bodies, devaluation of their cultural production and sometimes establishment of bargaining chips (sexual favors) for transmission of elemental techniques" (Matias-Rodrigues 2014: 706).

Other forms of devaluation, such as simply indicating or associating with male graffiti writers, are recurrent in the everyday life of the scene. I also noticed the similarity in the speech of Gal and the brothers Poder and Pandro in citing the transfer of concern from their mothers to their mates, setting another relationship of women in graffiti, indirectly. Another point observed by Gal and RdoisÓ is the proportion of more women in graffiti than in the other pillars.

Lolly of PPKrew, realizes the barriers cited by Matias-Rodrigues (2014: 706) earlier, in approaches and experiences in a female body:

"Many, many women, many girls come to talk to me that when they see my things on the street they get inspired, because they always wanted to do something, but then we are full of locks, because we are created to do nothing. In an implied way, but it is. Nothing like that, out of the ordinary, like going out and painting the someone's wall. Then I realize that I always drew, I always produced zine, illustration, but from the moment the drawing went to the street there was a 'ppuuff' sensation, it was a very crazy expansion, because if before I thought I knew a lot of people from going to fairs, going to an illustration event, now I know that I know a lot of people who don't even know it's me who makes the art she sees every day, you know? And that's a very strong thing to achieve, I realize that when people find out it's a woman who does what I do, because there are a lot of people who think it's from a guy, my cat graffiti, and then when they find out she is a woman, a lot of people are like 'ooh, wow', they didn't even know, or even imagined. And I really like it, because I don't want it to be like, 'oh, that's a woman's job'. I think I like to cause this confusion for people to see that women are not just the ones who do things with female stereotypes, you know. And this is very important."

She says that, when approached by interviewers, the questions turn out to be repetitive and insistent

on the subject of harassment, which, although recurrent, should not be the focus of interest. The interviewers question the differences in approaches by assuming the male version as normal, inferring a feminist response. Similarly, I have noticed the same kind of interviewer approach, and I believe this kind of action undervalues our work as artists, as well as minimizing all the rest of the experiences we are composed of, on the assumption that we exist only when conditioned by oppression. This change in the female presence in graffiti is directly related to the recent feminist movement and has been felt on all sides. Pandro told me how important the statement was in the 'rolé', a point echoed by Poder when he spoke to me about the first female graffiti writers (TPM Crew).

Graffiti as Oral Activism

Although they are writers, ironically the memory of graffiti does not have many records written beyond the letters in multicolored drawings. The stories are mainly spoken orally, in conversations usually set in the streets, spread in rhymes, rap or in environments where Hip Hop culture predominates, across generations. Regarding the collective character of memory, Cardini (1993: 324) clarifies that

"no "collective memory" exists as compact, unitary, static data, but as a proposal for a complex and dynamic network of lines and reference points: not as an oil slick but as a réseau, not as a main road, but as a set of trails."

In a literal analogy to the set of trails mentioned by Cardini, it is possible to perceive the paths taken by graffiti while traveling through the city. Observing the landscape, it is possible to notice the itineraries taken by individuals, the groups that repeat themselves and, in the interactions, find hidden clues, differentiate a new work from an old one by the same artist. Turning their memory trails into paths that cross the city, the writers interweave stories and experiences, practiced by people of all races and social classes, the memory of a group on the city walls. The memory work to which Halbwachs refers takes place in interpreting these inscriptions, reviving different memories according to the viewer, but always interacting as the scenario of Rio's urban imaginary. These writings, inscribed in the landscape, are scattered throughout all urban centers, reflect the history of

an entire population, where we see their beauties and their criticism in the messages scattered across the walls.

Arévalo (2004: 3), presents us with Piere Nora's view that

"Memory is taken as a defining tradition, bearer of a heritage that gives meaning and form, is alive and dynamic. Nora goes so far as to affirm that it is "dictatorial and unaware of itself, organizer and almighty, spontaneously actualized, a memory without a past that eternally leads back the inheritance, leading the ancient ancestors back to the undifferentiated time of heroes, origins and myths", it is as if it, as a narrative, tends to fulfill the role that myth has in traditional societies, that is to base and organize."

Conversely, written history

"as a unifying narrative it separates and selects the facts. Petrifies, freezes and, above all, kills the moments of memory, because it puts the past as something distant and mysterious, bearer of an aura that must always be analyzed, criticized and reviewed. History creates a universal identity that needs to be absorbed against the various fragmented identities, each with its own specific memory (...) memory is rooted in concrete, in space, in gesture, in image, in object. History is only linked to temporal continuities, evolutions, and the relations of things. Memory is the absolute and history is the relative" (Arévalo 2004: 3)

The oral characteristic of the Hip Hop universe is one of the factors that demands the constant presence of individuals into coexistent circles. One of the most popular forms of meeting was (and still is) reunions, which often took place at the same time and place. In the case of graffiti meetings, in addition to exchanges about what was happening in each one's actions, information is also exchanged about techniques, peaks¹⁴ available, the work of each writer, their evolution and the exchange of drawings. Each writer has their own collection, a notebook or album where signatures of local writers are collected, recording these meetings. As Skeme emphasizes in the documentary *Style Wars* (Silver 1983) and Tartaglia (2008: 157), writers with more names are better known in the middle, and signatures of these writers are considered more valuable.

This practice is still alive and it is common to find writers with notebooks full of signatures, and when they recognize them, stories are

retold more or less vigorously, depending on the circumstances in which they are remembered. The meetings are filled with stories where details are added, intonations convey the emotion of the moment, memories are relived and multiplied, and soon the story is passed on. Frochtengarten (2005: 368), in his paper 'Oral Memory in the World', emphasizes the collective character of memory by remembering Halbwachs:

"its social support is donated by past and present groups, especially under conditions that promote a rooted participation of men in the collective environment. These are circumstances in which a man's past can be most vividly lived as the group's past."

These notebooks work in this sense, as one of the movement's places of memory, the reference group cited earlier by Halbwachs, which revives the stories when revisited. As Arévalo (2004: 4) explains:

"Nora presents his category of "Places of Memory" in response to this need for identification of the contemporary individual. It is in the "regional" groups, that is, sexual, ethnic, behavioral, generational, gender and others, that one seeks to have access to a living and present day-to-day memory. Nora will conceptualize the places of memory as, first and foremost, a mixture of history and memory, hybrid moments, because there is no way to have only memory, there is a need to identify an origin, a birth, something that relegates memory to the past, fossilizing it again (...) Places of memory are born and live from the feeling that there is no spontaneous memory, that we need to create archives, organize celebrations, keep birthdays, pronounce funeral compliments, note minutes, because these operations are not natural."

As an object that revives stories, in the context of graffiti, signature books act as a gateway to the memory of the community itself; through fondly kept memories, memory is revisited every time pages are opened.

CONCLUSION

Just as RdoisÓ described his relationship with graffiti as a maturing passion into love, as I inserted myself more and more into the culture, I fell in love with the elements, people, music and never stopped. Just as the graffiti writer and b-boy described it, I found myself absorbed by the new values I found

in graffiti. It turns out that graffiti is increasingly popular today, seen as art and especially: accessible art. During my time as a graffiti writer, I had the opportunity to tour my city in a whole new way, meet places I probably would never get to know, and was (almost) always greeted with a smile and presented with a 'thank you' after the wall mural was ready. From a workshop in a luxury hotel in Mexico City to the Gramacho landfill, I met people everywhere interested in the graffiti universe and whenever possible made a point of sharing my insights. Between conversation circles in colleges, workshops on artistic projects and 'rolés' in the street, the curiosity for production was always present.

Because it is increasingly becoming the object of popular attention, intellectual production on graffiti has been growing, observed and analyzed from different perspectives. During the process of my research, it was almost constant that the authors of these productions were not from the graffiti scene themselves, which sometimes produced a superficial image of what is the graffiti movement in Rio de Janeiro and what it involves. The graffiti scene in Rio de Janeiro is plural and artists are hardly left only in sprays: From workshops, sticker sales, drawing lessons, t-shirt making, handbags and more recently, as tattoo artists, they unfold on platforms and media as a way of life of art. To understand their stories is to re-signify the unfolding of the carioca scene: It is to leave the place of object of study to be producers of our own history, producing culture and knowledge. And since the cycle of knowledge is only complete when one makes use of information, I hope this work will serve all peripheries with the deserved respect and quench the curiosity of anyone who wants to know the memory written on the streets.

NOTES

- 1 *Pixação* is a typical Brazilian phenomenon similar to graffiti, since it revolves around the practice of writing of the surfaces of the city. It is differentiated mainly by aesthetics, as *pixação* focuses on signatures with one color and graffiti works with colors, figures, and representations.
- 2 Interviews with:
 - Gal, graffiti writer and art educator member of crew Mafia 44, resident of São Gonçalo, in Niterói - Rio Metropolitan Zone. Collected on Oct 13, 2018.
 - Lolly, graffiti writer, fashion designer and illustrator, member of PPKREW crew and resident of Piedade, in the Northern Zone Rio. Collected on Feb. 10, 2019.

- Brothers Poder and Pandro, founders of crew Urban Artists and residents of Penha, in the Northern Zone. Collected on Jun 16, 2019.
- RdoisÓ, graffiti and b-boy crew of Atari Funkerz and resident of Maré, one of the largest slums in Rio. Collected on Apr 14, 2019.
- 3 'Bomb' is the term used to describe the simplified signatures or tags. Despite there being several places where graffiti is permitted in Rio the majority of walls are prohibited, and on these walls you are more likely to encounter illegal bombing.
- 4 This and all subsequent interview extracts are the author's own translations from the original Portuguese into English.
- 5 630 is the bus line that makes the route Penha (lapi) x Saens Peña. "Bondes" were recognized according to the bus lines of their home neighborhoods.
- 6 Hip Hop is made up of four art pillars: DJ, MC, break dance and graffiti, and is joined by the fifth pillar, knowledge (Costa 2005: 92; Santos 2017: 76).
- 7 Graffiti related encounters, such as collective effort paintings at favelas, in small or large groups. It can also be used to refer to a locality, to graffiti itself as a movement, and to someone's experience of graffiti writing.
- 8 RIO de Janeiro. Decree - law nº. 38307 de 18 fev. 2014. no Diário Oficial do Rio de Janeiro. Prefeitura da Cidade do Rio de Janeiro, 18 fev. 2014. Seção 1. From: <<https://www.jusbrasil.com.br/diarios/83447446/dom-rj-normal-19-02-2014-pg-3>> (Retrieved on 28 august. 2019).
- 9 The collective efforts are collective paintings usually organized inside favelas, where graffiti writers paint the homes and businesses of residents and are popular in the city.
- 10 Suffer some repressive approach to action.
- 11 Nami, in the language of TTK, is 'Mina', an abbreviation of girl common in Rio slang. The Network is then a Girls Network.
- 12 Taken from the 'About Us' section of the NGO Rede Nami's website. From <<https://www.redenami.com/quem-somos>>. (Retrieved on 15 June 2019).
- 13 Institution's website. Rede Nami: Afrografiteiras. From: <<https://www.redenami.com/afrografiteiras>> (Retrieved on 28 April 2019).
- 14 'Peaks' are the supports where painting occurs (a wall, a plaque, a billboard in the heights, etc.), and is a more characteristic term of São Paulo. In Rio, it is also known as 'vision'.
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