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GABRIELA LEAL
CICS.NOVA – Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences

Urban knowledge regime: Considerations about practices, cartographies and knowledge forged by São Paulo's graffiti writers

ABSTRACT

Graffiti writers not only acquire skills and techniques for painting but also engage in a reading activity that allows them to perceive and understand the city in specific ways. Through this activity, they observe the rhythms of urban spaces, identify police presence, choose surfaces, recognize peers and interpret the messages conveyed on walls. Based on these observations, they create maps that dissent from conventional cartographies, incorporating epistemological, ethical, political and emotional layers. These maps serve as guides, recording memories, sharing stories and fostering relationships. Additionally, these maps indicate the existence of particular knowledge about urban spaces, derived from experiences in street painting and shared through narratives. In essence, the cartographies produced by graffiti writers challenge the dominant knowledge regime that seeks to define and impose specific ways of thinking, imagining and existing within cities. This article explores various dimensions of the knowledge regime shaped by writers from São Paulo, Brazil, drawing on ethnographic research conducted by the author since 2016 and 2021.

KEYWORDS

epistemic justice
urban epistemologies
street art
hip hop
Latin America
urban anthropology
urban studies
Brazil

SETTING THE SCENE[1]

The year is 2016. We are in São Paulo, Brazil. Three situations make up the scene.

May. I hitched a ride with VERACIDADE to attend a graffiti workshop he was hosting. At that time, we lived in the same neighbourhood and used to go to the *rolês* together.[2] He took parallel streets instead of the fastest route through the expressways. Gradually I understood his choice. To him, traversing the city entailed more than mere transportation from one destination to another; the path and the scenery held equal importance in this move. Sometimes, he decelerated and leaned over the steering wheel to immerse himself in the surroundings. At one point, he nearly halted the car to contemplate a wall of an abandoned building that already had some *throw-ups*. We ceased our conversation as he fixated on that surface, thinking of a million possibilities. Along the way, he read the environment like the streets and walls were pages of a communal narrative. If we did not have a schedule to keep, he undoubtedly would have paused several times to paint.

July. On a Monday, ODÉ FRASÃO informed me of his plans to paint the following day. We arranged to meet at the eastbound platform of Sé subway station, located in the heart of São Paulo's central zone. Accompanied by NEM, whom I had not yet met but would also participate in the painting, ODÉ FRASÃO arrived punctually. As we engaged in introductions, the subway train arrived. Boarding it, we embarked on a short journey before disembarking at

Figure 1: VERACIDADE arranged the painting materials near the wall at the workshop location. Upon the teenagers' arrival, he commenced the session by demonstrating the process of blending latex paint and dye to achieve specific colours. Photography by Gabriela Leal, May 2016.

1. I would like to express my gratitude to the mentioned writers for their teachings and for reviewing the initial version of this article. They granted permission to use their street names in the text.
2. *Rolê*: A category used by São Paulo writers to denote the type of painting and their mobility across the city. This term is not exclusive to the graffiti scene. It is a common slang in São Paulo and is also used in other urban practices such as skateboarding and pixação (Machado 2011; Pereira 2018).

Belém station, where we caught a bus towards our destination. During the commute, they engaged in casual conversation, primarily focusing on the walls they had mapped out and hoped to paint together. Meanwhile, they did not lose sight of the window, occasionally pausing the conversation when spotting a new wall, identifying someone through an inscription, recalling a story, or admiring the impressive piece of a writer or pixador.

September. I was with VERACIDADE at an art and activism festival in the city's central zone. While waiting for the closing concerts, he said he wanted to paint. He started mapping the surroundings to select a surface and assess the presence of law enforcement. Eventually, he decided to paint right where we stood – on the sidewalk – taking advantage of the flow of people as spectators and a tactic element (Certeau 1988) to integrate his action into the festival. He separated the spray cans, affixed the *fat cap*,[3] expelled excess air from one of the cans, and initiated the painting process. Body, paint and asphalt seamlessly merged into a singular motion. As he painted, two other writers arrived on the scene – TIM and APCE. Upon completing his artwork, VERACIDADE invited them to paint on a nearby wall owned by São Paulo's Metropolitan Train Company (CPTM). This particular wall was one he frequently painted, though he was erased at the same pace. Initially hesitant, the other writers gradually embraced the proposal. With everything set, they asked me to take pictures and we started walking together to the location. The wall was on a small island amidst a bustling avenue. The gray surface was peeling and had

3. Graffiti spray cans have removable caps that control the paint flow. Different cap models affect factors like paint volume and line thickness. The fat cap, for example, expels a large amount of paint and is primarily used for filling large areas quickly.

Figure 2: We encountered NICK, the third writer who would join the painting, near the wall. Right away, latex paint and spray cans took over the sidewalk and part of the street, temporarily transforming the space. Photography by Gabriela Leal, July 2016.

some pixos. A group of people were camping on the opposite end, and one of them approached us, offering greetings and curiosity for our undertaking. The three writers started painting fast, influencing their aesthetic choices. They remained attentive to the wall while keeping a watchful eye on passing vehicles. The spectre of potential repression loomed, and abruptly, the sound of a police car reached our ears. Instantly, everyone stopped painting. We started to walk, pretending to be pedestrians crossing the street. As soon as the police car disappeared from our view, we returned to the wall. It was time to finish the action.

In these situations, like others I have joined the graffiti writers over the years, it became apparent that their perception of São Paulo differed from my own experience.[4] Their engagements with the city were interwoven with intricate forms of interpreting urban spaces. It quickly became evident that the inscriptions on walls held significance beyond mere paintings – they served as an index of events, experiences, memories, moral codes and connections with fellow writers. It was commonplace to hear writers recount stories while deciphering the messages on the walls. Additionally, these inscriptions aided them in navigating São Paulo, akin to road signs indicating directions and pointing them towards other writers they could encounter along the way. They introduced me to a particular knowledge about the city. In this article, more than analysing the content of this silent production of graffiti, I am interested in reflecting on *how* they produce this knowledge, *how* their ways of using the city influence this elaboration, and *how* they share such knowledge with their peers.

4. In this article, 'graffiti' refers to unauthorized and non-commissioned paintings. Therefore, I am not discussing related phenomena such as street art, urban art and graffiti fine art. It is also worth noting the existence of the term *grafite* in São Paulo, which has a different meaning from 'graffiti'. For a more in-depth discussion on this lexicon, see Leal (2023).

Figure 3: One of the writers in action on the avenue where the rolê vandal *took place. Photography by Gabriela Leal, September 2016.*

This piece consists of six sections. Firstly, I introduce methodological elements to the reader. Secondly, I delve into the ways of narrating and recounting the story of São Paulo, paying particular attention to the evolving concept of the *periphery*. Then, I depict the emergence of graffiti in São Paulo while maintaining a connection to the preceding discussion. Fourthly, I examine various facets of the relationship between writers and the urban space, emphasizing their specific reading activity. Next, I reflect on knowledge production issues engaged with the notion of knowledge regimes. Finally, I conclude the piece by outlining potential contributions stemming from this approach.

THE RESEARCH MAP

Although some of the following reflections stem from my accumulated learning through diverse graffiti-related research, the centrality lies in the ethnographic work I conducted during my master's degree in social anthropology at the University of São Paulo. This fieldwork took place between 2016 and 2017 (Leal 2023).[5] The driving question that propelled this research journey – who designs in the city, designs the city? – reveals its primary focus: to explore the street uses of graffiti practices in São Paulo and the possibilities that arise from this interaction with the city. This approach necessitated two epistemological manoeuvres proposed by Michel Agier: firstly, 'shifting the point of view from the city to the city dwellers', and secondly, 'transferring the problem itself from the object to the subject, from questioning what the city is […] to inquiring about what constitutes the city' (2011: 38, translation added). As a result, graffiti practices assumed a dual role in ethnography: serving as both the subject of analysis and a window to access and reflect on broader aspects of urban life.

This approach guided me to designate street painting situations as central to my ethnography, as they provided a unique opportunity to engage with dynamics exclusive to such occasions. However, I swiftly realized that this decision presented challenges: participation in these events required invitations since they were mobile and not widely publicized – painting without permission is deemed illegal by local authorities. In other words, establishing trust-based relationships with graffiti writers became essential. Social media and exhibition openings were key role in initiating conversations and facilitating my entry into the fieldwork. Throughout this journey, I fostered bonds of affinity and friendship with various writers, to whom I express my gratitude for their warmth, the invaluable lessons I learned, their trust, and our collaborations. These connections also played a vital role in shaping the research's framework. I made a deliberate choice to work with writers representing the two primary schools of São Paulo's graffiti scene: the old school, comprising the pioneers and the new school, consisting of the subsequent generation of writers. Together, they encompass individuals who commenced their graffiti endeavours between the 1980s and the early 2000s (Franco 2009).

In addition to the invitation predicament, street painting situations posed further challenges to my ethnographic practices. To a certain extent, it was necessary to integrate myself into the dynamics that took place on these occasions and elaborate ways of doing ethnography consistent with different painting processes. Also, adapting an approach that resonated with the graffiti scene was crucial for maintaining the flow of invitations. These challenges, coupled with my prior experiments in photography, influenced my decision

5. See Campos et al. (2021), Leal (2019) and Leal et al. (2022).

to acquire a semi-professional camera and commence capturing images.[6] This choice marked a significant turning point in my research journey.

The camera put me in motion during the painting process, transforming my senses and unlocking new possibilities of perception. The photographs embodied conceptual and perceptual knowledge, encompassing not only the writers but also the 'body behind the camera and its connections with the world' (MacDougall 2009: 63). Moreover, the camera also impacted my relationships with the writers as it positioned me within an existing role in the scene – the historic partnership between writers and photographers.[7] Additionally, the photographs made it possible to return the invitations, establishing more reciprocal relationships. Over time, the camera gradually shaped my identity within the community of writers.

The anthropologist-photographer identity played a vital role in addressing the unequal gender dynamics within the graffiti scene. In São Paulo, as in other contexts, graffiti is predominantly male-dominated, with women writers remaining a minority. Despite the challenges posed by such a masculine environment, my ethnographic focus centred on male graffiti practices. Consequently, the male articles, pronouns and adjectives are embodied in what follows. That is, they concern procedures and experiences of men graffiti writers – mostly non-white, coming from contexts of economic precariousness and from peripheral territories – described and analysed from the point of view of a woman researcher – white, coming from a context of economic stability and a central and wealthy territory. In other words, it represents a partial perspective and situated knowledge (Haraway 1988).

These subsequent decisions set the ethnography in motion across São Paulo, assuming a related and dynamic nature with unforeseen trajectories. It became multi-sited (Marcus 1995, 2010). Building upon George Marcus's perspective, the multi-sited approach

> entails constructing fieldwork as a social symbolic imaginary with certain posited relations among things, people, events, places and cultural artifacts, and a literally multi-sited itinerary as a field of movement emerges in the construction of such an imaginary. Literal fieldwork operates within this imaginary, bringing into juxtaposition sites that demonstrate certain connections or relations.
>
> (Marcus 2010: 268)

Throughout this research journey, I have gathered a diverse range of empirical materials (including flyers, zines, videos, magazines, books and photographs), contributing to developing a nuanced and heterogeneous understanding of São Paulo's graffiti scene. However, it is the records and descriptions of the painting processes (the *rolês*) that provoke crosses and create crossroads[8] in different dimensions of this ethnography and its understandings – fieldwork and writing.[9] This prominence underscores the adoption of situational analysis as a guiding principle for elaborating interpretations and understandings in the research. Drawing on J. Van Velsen's (2010) insight, the situations and photographs should not be seen as mere illustrations but as integral components of the analysis. They prompt a shift in perspective, aiming to acknowledge the significance of the practice dimension, which holds a similar importance to the aesthetic dimension commonly attributed to graffiti. This approach enables the recognition of an *art of making*, encompassing a 'way of thinking invested in a way of

6. This decision also considers the significance of photographs in the graffiti scene, documented by researchers in various contexts (Campos 2017; Ferro 2016; Snyder 2009). For additional photographs from this research, visit https://www.gabsleal.com.

7. See Cooper and Chalfant (2016).

8. I engage with Luiz Rufino's (2019) crossroad epistemology to use the terms *cross* and *crossroads*. Hence, I do not treat the concept of crossroads as a mere metaphor, but as an indication of loophole wisdom (*sabedorias de fresta*) – undisciplined and resilient – which opens alternative paths beyond the binary spatial imagination that constrains knowledge.

9. See Fabian (2014) and Strathern (2014).

acting, an art of combination which cannot be dissociate from an art of using' (Certeau 1988: n.pag.) city's spaces.

PERIPHERIE(S): FROM THE STIGMA TO THE IDENTITY (AND EPISTEME)

Daria um filme
It would make a movie
Uma negra e uma criança nos braços
A black woman with a child in her arms
Solitária na floresta de concreto e aço
Lonely in the concrete jungle
Veja, olha outra vez o rosto na multidão
See, look again at the face in the crowd
A multidão é um monstro sem rosto e coração
The crowd is a faceless and heartless monster
Hei, São Paulo, terra de arranha-céu
Hey, São Paulo, land of skyscrapers
A garoa rasga a carne, é a Torre de Babel
The drizzle rips the flesh, it's the Tower of Babel
Família brasileira, dois contra o mundo
Brazilian family, two against the world
Mãe solteira de um promissor vagabundo
Single mother of a promising bum

(*Negro Drama*, Racionais MC's [2018])

Transformations in São Paulo during the second half of the twentieth century significantly shaped its current arrangements (Caldeira 2000; Feltran 2011; Frúgoli Jr. 2000; Marques 2015; Telles et al. 2006). From the 1960s to the 1970s, the city experienced rapid industrialization and an influx of migrants from various parts of Brazil. These migrants, often limited to precarious employment, were forced to live far from the city centre (Bonduki et al. 1982; Feltran 2018; Kowarick 1979; Pereira 2018). The combination of population growth, socio-economic inequalities, and the influence of real-estate interests led to urbanization policies characterized by peripheral expansion and residential segregation (Bonduki et al. 1982; Feltran 2018; Kowarick et al. 1994; Marques 2015; Pereira 2018). In the 1990s and early 2000s, São Paulo underwent another wave of transformations driven by neoliberalism, the financialization of the economy, and technological advancements. Insecure employment and diversification of cultural, symbolic and consumer goods permeated the urban fabric, resulting in a more diverse range of social actors in the peripheries (Feltran 2011, 2018; Telles 2006; Telles et al. 2006). Additionally, the demographic profile of the periphery shifted, as the first generation of individuals born in these areas coexisted with the migrant generation (Feltran 2011, 2018; Telles et al. 2006).

A growing academic production in the social sciences followed these transformations. Studies from the 1970s–80s focused on understanding processes like peripheralization, self-construction of housing, and labour exploitation (Feltran 2011; Marques 2015; Pereira 2018; Telles 2006). In this corpus, there was a notable attempt to conceptualize the periphery as a category on par with the idea of the ghetto (Wirth 1956). Consequently, the periphery emerged as a category closely associated with its opposite corresponding – the centre

– fostering a binary interpretation of the city. The centre was portrayed as a place with ample services, public facilities and affluent social groups, while the periphery was associated with precariousness, multiple inequalities and a working-class population (Feltran 2011; Marques 2015; Pereira 2018; Telles 2006). Marxist perspectives and the narrative of industrialization heavily influenced these ways of thinking and narrating the story of São Paulo. However, as Stella Paterniani (2019) argues in a recent study, these approaches had alarming consequences, as they subsumed racial relations into class relations and adopted the State lexicon – linked dimensions since racism and the whiteness of the State organized (and still organize) São Paulos's urban life. Thus, these ways of thinking and narrating involve epistemicides (Carneiro 2005) and mobilize specific ontologies.

The categories and narratives found in these studies transcended academic boundaries and permeated various social spheres. In this transit, the category periphery penetrated the lexicon of hierarchical cartography from a stereotyped and stigmatizing conception. This updated the terms of structural and institutional racism within urban politics, reinforcing representations based on the centre–periphery dichotomy. These representations contributed to constructing an urban social imaginary that portrayed certain areas of the city through the absence – of order, purity, the State and the city itself. This political and epistemological operation solidified a dominant norm for organizing the city and created a homogenized fiction concerning everything beyond its boundaries. According to this world-view, the periphery was a problem to be either solved or avoided.

However, this was not the only path taken by the periphery category outside academia (D'Andrea 2020; Pereira 2018). In the 1980s, peripheral social movements adopted the term, drawing from different experiences and perspectives (D'Andrea 2020). In the subsequent decade, the term gained wider usage, fuelled by artistic and cultural practices that transformed the periphery into more than just a category – it became 'a shared way of being in the world, a political stance' (D'Andrea 2020: 45, translation added). Hip Hop Culture,[10] in general, and the rap element, in particular, assumed a leading role in this process of (re)invention and affirmation of the peripheries as an idea and episteme. The album *Sobrevivendo no Inferno* (1997) by the group Racionais MC's is considered a milestone in this regard (D'Andrea 2020; Macedo 2016). Rap resonated representations of different peripheral subjects and communities without ignoring the challenges and ambivalences of these territories. By diverging from narratives of scarcity, Hip Hop Culture and rap music contributed to the emergence of alternative ways of thinking and narrating the city of São Paulo, challenging the hegemony of stigmatizing discourses surrounding peripheral territories, bodies and ways of life.

10. When I write the term Hip Hop Culture, I follow the spelling of local hip hop artists in São Paulo.

GRAFFITI IN SÃO PAULO: THE CITY AND THE EPISTEMOLOGIES

Graffiti emerged in São Paulo during the 1980s, influenced by the vibrant Hip Hop Culture and graffiti scene of New York City. During this period, films, books and magazines arrived in the city, sharing a visual feast and a plethora of lexicons, symbols, methodologies, ethics and representations. These cultural influences were reinterpreted and reinvented according to local realities. Films and books like *Wild Style* (1982), *Style Wars* (1983), *Subway Art* (1984) and *Spraycan Art* (1987) feature in the foundation myth of São Paulo's

graffiti and are mentioned by many writers as important milestones in their paths.

However, spray cans and caps did not make their way to São Paulo as quickly as the visual records did. When they finally did arrive, they were out of reach for most writers due to their high prices – and shoplifting did not cope with their painting needs. Indeed, some caps models came first with American writers, like Barry McGee, the TWIST, in the 1990s. The São Paulo writers then began to study the different caps to adapt the only model in the national market. They had to be creative. The scarcity of spray cans also impacted the aesthetic tradition of São Paulo's graffiti scene. Notably, the use of latex paint, dyes and paint rollers became prevalent and continues to be utilized, even with the easy accessibility of spray cans and caps. Additionally, the prominence of characters holds great aesthetic importance, both as standalone features and as backgrounds for throw-ups and murals.

In addition to the New York City scene, three other influences are inescapable in understanding the dynamics of São Paulo's graffiti. Firstly, the relationship between writers and the art world started in the streets (and not in galleries) in the 1980s. In the 1970s and 1980s, artistic collectives actively engaged in street interventions in São Paulo, serving as both a means of protesting against the military regime and sparking discussions about public art beyond institutional boundaries. These collectives primarily consisted of white, middle-class and educated artists, with Alex Vallauri standing out as a key figure who occupied a place in-between graffiti and the art world. The interactions between pioneering writers and these collectives fostered exchanges and partnerships that would later influence aesthetic developments and the writers' engagement with the art world (Campos et al. 2021; Franco 2009; Leal 2023; Medeiros 2013).

The second influence can be traced to pixação, an urban and expressive practice that emerged in São Paulo in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Franco 2009; Lassala 2010; Pereira 2018). The pixos, characterized by long, oblique and monochromatic typography, are as ubiquitous in the city as graffiti, and the relationship between these practices leaves a lasting impact. Collaborating and engaging with writers from São Paulo has made it evident that understanding certain dynamics and values of the graffiti scene requires delving into aspects of pixação. It was evident that writers and pixadores interacted in multiple domains. Stories of writers who started painting on the street through pixação were common, and some individuals continue to navigate between both practices to this day. It was also common to find out about pixadores and writers who studied at the same school or lived in the same neighbourhood, revealing common bonds and networks of relationships. Writers and pixadores also share experiences related to the urban space, including police abuse and the challenges of painting specific walls. These shared experiences foster political alliances and the exchange of negotiation tactics, climbing techniques and strategies for conquering surfaces. Proximity, coupled with occasional conflicts known as *tretas*, has led to the development of shared moralities and rules. Thus, while disputes arise due to the competition for surfaces, there is a prevailing emphasis on respect and the pursuit of coexistence in São Paulo.

Alliances between writers and pixadores primarily originate in the peripheries, which brings us to the last unavoidable context of influence: the configurations of São Paulo. It is crucial to underscore that, similar to New York and other contexts, Hip Hop Culture and the graffiti scene in São Paulo emerged as black and peripheral practices, fostering extensive networks of exchange and

sociability among writers from different peripheries. The spatial segregation and verticality of the city played a significant role in shaping a regime of prestige that organized the functions and meanings of territories within the graffiti scene. The central zone, for instance, became a privileged space for encounters and rivalries between writers from various regions. Conversely, the peripheries became havens conducive to mural painting and graffiti gatherings. Since its inception, the graffiti scene has maintained a dynamic and dialectical relationship with the urban space. In this sense, one can draw parallels to Tricia Rose's (1994) observations on New York's Hip Hop Culture: for many writers, graffiti is a means to reimagine the daily life of the peripheries (and of São Paulo) and to face the social isolation, lack of opportunity, material deprivation and oppression.

Additionally, to comprehend the ethics of confrontation and insurgent reflexivity within São Paulo's graffiti scene, one must acknowledge the profound influence of the periphery as an idea, episteme and identity. It is crucial not to overlook that many pioneering writers belonged to the first-generation born in the peripheries of São Paulo, contributing to the developments discussed in the preceding section. The periphery, as an idea, plays a significant role in the genesis of local graffiti practices and profoundly shapes how writers engage with territories and reflect upon their experiences. While rap engenders alternative narratives of the city, graffiti fosters dissident modes of reflecting on urban life based on writers' street experiences. This ethics of confrontation and insurgent reflexivity produce, as I have been advocating, knowledge about broader aspects of urban life.

POLYRHYTHMIC CARTOGRAPHY AND THE WAYS OF READING THE CITY

The graffiti writers I collaborated with typically began their journey into graffiti between the ages of 12 and 15. During the initiation, they not only needed to acquire street painting techniques and learn to handle various tools but also started to develop a multifaceted identity. This dimension plays a pivotal role in the dynamics of graffiti as writers recognize each other by the fusion of two key elements: their *street name*, that is, the name they sign, and their *mark*, which means what they paint in the street. The inscriptions result from this combination and assume different attributes depending on the style and modality each writer adopts.[11] The creation of these elements unfolds over time, influenced by both personal inclinations and collective factors, as they strive to stand out in the urban landscape. Over time, they refine their inscriptions as they expand their visual repertoires, improve techniques and access new tools. Throughout this process of crafting their inscriptions, they reinvent themselves.

At first, initiation into graffiti is confined to a certain territory, typically the streets and alleys within the writer's hood. However, it does not take long for the practice to expand across the entire city, which is then taken as a context. Swiftly, the knowledge about the urban fabric and the different tactics of moving through it become constituent dimensions of their practice. As graffiti writers increase their mobility throughout the city, they forge connections and interact within a diverse array of social spaces associated with the graffiti scene. Through these interactions, they have contact with a lexicon and a moral regime that organize and structure the graffiti in São Paulo, referred to by writers as *game rules* or *the system*. The most paradigmatic transgression

11. During the ethnography, I noticed the prominence of *tags*, signatures in the cursive handwriting style, done with spray or permanent markers; *throw-ups* or *bombs*, large, rounded letters, usually made with one or two colours – their consecutive repetition configures *bombing*; *wild style*, complex typographic stylization often readable only by those initiated in graffiti; *characters*, figurative drawings of animals or people; and geometric compositions.

of these tacit agreements is the *atropelo*, which consists in crossing over an inscription on the wall, representing a significant act of disrespect among street artists and often leading to disputes.[12] For those versed in *the system*, inscriptions indicate individuals, alliances, histories, circumstances and ways of doing. Thus, while writers may not physically remain present by the walls after painting, a symbolic permanence persists, recognized by those who can read it.

The writer's journey is immersed in a continuous learning process driven by the competitive nature of the graffiti scene, which fuels an ongoing quest for improving techniques and style. Alongside individual research paths, the collective painting processes, in their different configurations, play a significant role in this dynamic. These situations create learning spaces where knowledge about graffiti and the city is shared through techniques, painting, tools and stories. Such interactions also facilitate exchanges between different generations of writers. Throughout the ethnography, it was common to observe a respectful attitude towards those with extensive *street experience*, often called *masters*. Therefore, the ties established between writers are entangled in a regime of exchanges of different orders and constitute an important channel for transmitting knowledge, opinion, judgement and learning. In São Paulo, as Janice Rahn (2002) aptly observed in a different context, there exists a model of knowledge construction rooted in perception, experience and critical reflection fostered among peers in a non-institutionalized everyday learning structure.

The writer's relationship networks put in circulation a multiplicity of things, knowledge and affections. Through these connections, invitations to paint arise, with the potential to initiate a series of services and counter-services – to borrow to this context the classic terms coined by Marcel Mauss (1950). The wider and more heterogeneous the writer's network, the greater the scope and diversity of his links and, consequently, the greater the number of services and counter-services he will be involved. These relationships and invitations continuously facilitate the exchange and reciprocation of walls across different territories, keeping the writers in constant motion throughout the city. This mobility will assume different paths and characteristics depending on the type of *rolê* (painting process) and the writer's role as a guest or organizer. Factors such as the chosen location and the type of painting influence the quantity of spray cans required, the need for ladders and other equipment, the number of writers involved, the mode of transportation, as well as the level of planning required. Although these decisions are collective, the organizer will have greater responsibility for such choices and their implications.

While navigating through São Paulo, writers closely observe the urban landscape. They read the stories embedded within it, identify the works of other writers and pixadores, and scout for suitable walls to paint. The selection of surfaces involves the application of various criteria, depending on the type of inscription they are planning to make. Writers employ a specific lexicon to name, classify and differentiate these locations. For instance, the term *pico* ('spot') typically denotes spaces for unauthorized painting, while *espaços disponíveis* ('available spaces') indicates surfaces suitable for mural painting, which may require negotiation with local agents. However, the act of painting does not necessarily coincide with the mapping and selection of space since. Before making these decisions, writers must assess a series of contextual rhythms. After all, graffiti practices are considered illegal in São Paulo

12. I chose to retain the term *atropelo* used by São Paulo graffiti writers to avoid a false equivalence in translation. While moral regimes and backgrounding practices exist in various contexts (Austin 2001; Castleman 1982; Ferro 2016; Snyder 2009), they are not necessarily the same. In this regard, the interlocutors emphasized the importance of understanding the rules of the game in each city, as FIKO warned: 'each city has its system'.

and suffer massive repression. As proposed by Henri Lefebvre (2004), the concept of rhythm encompasses multiple elements such as the time of day, seasons, lighting conditions and the movement of vehicles and pedestrians. As Lefebvre points out, the sensitive assumes primacy in recognizing such rhythms and changes the perception of space. For writers, developing this sensory awareness is intertwined with painting in the streets and moving around the city. As Mark Halsey and Alison Young (2006) demonstrate in the Australian context, graffiti not only shapes and transforms the subjectivity of writers but also establishes a unique connection between them and the city. This embodied connection makes them sensitive to the reactions of the city (and other agents present in it) to their practices.

Perceiving the rhythms of the city becomes particularly crucial when engaging in unauthorized paintings (*rolê vandal*). The diverse characteristics of different territories influence the multifaceted rhythm of space. This sensory perception reveals a rhythmic cartography that helps writers identify the best occasion to paint. It is a practical knowledge that expands with street experience – painting on the streets and navigating the city – resulting in a broader repertoire and heightened sensitivity towards these aspects. As a result, their cartography becomes more intricate and nuanced. This knowledge comes into play when considering factors such as whether to leverage or avoid the flow of people during the painting process. This cartography will also help to consider the economy of time of the action, that is, the duration and the period of the day of the painting. In certain areas of São Paulo, painting during daylight hours provides a sense of security, especially regarding police abuse. However, it may be safer to paint at night or dawn in other regions.

The interplay between rhythms and locations also helps gauge the potential police abuse and its degree of violence. Writers develop this perception through personal experiences and the shared narratives of their peers. Stories of physical aggression, gunshots and even murders are not uncommon. The vulnerability of their bodies is unequal in racial terms, and they are aware of this. Bodies perceived as white often face milder aggression or are spared from them. However, it is important to acknowledge that violent encounters are not limited to the interactions between writers and the police. As Teresa Caldeira (2000) highlighted, violent practices are deeply ingrained in the modus operandi of the Brazilian police, who view the body as a prime site for asserting authority and inflicting punishment. Research coordinated by Jacqueline Sinhoretto et al. (2014), in turn, further underscores the pervasive institutional racism and racial profiling within the practices of the Brazilian police. For Stella Parteniani (2019), these dynamics lead to a broader pattern: the State perpetuates racialized exclusion in everyday life by systematically banning (and punishing) the presence, ways of life, and bodies of Black individuals in various urban spaces. In essence, it is a form of necropolitics (Mbembe 2019) that seeks to establish white territorialities by determining who should live (or die) and how they should live (or die).

In addition to the rhythms associated with the risks of painting on the street, graffiti writers are particularly attuned to another rhythm: graffiti removal. Their experiences of *being erased* – as they call those episodes – shape their perception of the frequency of removals. In São Paulo, the public service responsible for graffiti removal operates under the guidance of the city's 32 district city halls (*subprefeituras*) and the agenda of the current

mayor. The removals are often arbitrary and selective, lacking transparency about the adopted criteria. Consequently, it is not unusual to come across surfaces where only certain inscriptions have been removed. The documentary *Cidade Cinza* (2013) illustrates this problem and reveals a well-known reality among graffiti writers to the wider public. However, erasures do not necessarily inhibit writers from painting on these surfaces, especially when they are located in areas highly valued within the regime prestige of the graffiti scene. This is not to suggest that graffiti writers completely disregard these dynamics; on the contrary, they are acutely aware of the practical implications of removals, such as wasted time and paint. Instead, what happens is a constant rearrangement of their ways of doing and tactics, a strategic manoeuvring to play with the fluctuating criteria of removals trying to delay or avoid *being erased*. They turn it into a game.

Sensory perception of city spaces and the cartography created by writers encompasses more than just rhythms and painting processes. They bring together varied knowledge and information that influence how they represent and relate to the territories. Thus, it becomes apparent that the use of spaces and the ways of reading the city are inseparable. This reading activity became particularly evident when I accompanied them in moving around the urban fabric, whether on foot, by bicycle, by public transport, or by car. On these occasions, it was common to hear stories deciphered from the walls, which inserted legends into the landscape. These narratives stitch together fragments of lived cities, forming cohesive wholes that only they know how to navigate. This unique way of reading the city emphasizes a crucial relational aspect. Despite their geographical separation, the walls and surfaces remain symbolically linked through memories and experiences that resist the erasure of inscriptions.

Writers' reading activity articulates knowledge and creates dissident and polyrhythmic cartography. It is a silent, microbial and plural production, to use Michel de Certeau's terminology (1988), which evokes other journeys within the established order. From this dense environment reading, writers discern spaces to paint, determine the most opportune moments for action, strategize their tactics and interpret their own memories and stories. In doing so, they introduce a playful element that challenges the foundations of power embedded in the urban fabric, which constantly imposes symbolic boundaries to control their practices, ideas and movements within the city. The interplay of knowledge, time and space forms the basis of a practice that temporarily disrupts the city's spaces without completely overtaking them; it subverts their underlying logic without permanently altering them. Through this reversal of forces, knowledge and street experience, invisible to the uninitiated, escape the visible control of the management of uses, bodies and spaces in the city.

KNOWLEDGE REGIMES ABOUT THE CITY

'Graffiti is existence before resistance' was the call ENIVO gave me. This call guided me to deepen certain understandings and warned me about the pitfalls of adopting an explanatory key based exclusively on resistance. Doing graffiti is not just about painting; the dimensions beyond the walls are equally important. Graffiti ways of being and doing inform the writers' world-views and shape the relationships they establish with each other and with the territories (and other agents present there). Doing graffiti also means creating forms

of confrontation to ensure alternative ways of existing in the city. By painting in the streets, graffiti writers sign their existence as authors of themselves, inscriptions and territories; they draw on surfaces at the same time as they symbolically and aesthetically redesign the city's spaces. There is a subjectivity invested in the action, from which a way of being *in the world* and, above all, *in the city* emerges. Following Michel Agier (2011), it can be said that graffiti practices create a *form of urbanity*.

As we have seen, this form of urbanity produces cartographies with epistemological, moral, aesthetic, political and rhythmic dimensions that register knowledge and create worlds. In other words, these maps denote specific ways of comprehending and engaging with the city, revealing a distinct knowledge regime (Carneiro da Cunha 2017) about urban life. Such recognition yields two significant implications. Firstly, it underscores the epistemological status of the theories and analyses developed by graffiti writers. Secondly, it prompts critical contemplation of other knowledge regimes' production, circulation and function – as many forms of urbanity exist. These two premises provide valuable insights for examining the moral enterprises (Becker 1966) directed against graffiti, which transpire in various cities globally, including São Paulo (Austin 2001; Castleman 1982; Ferrell 1996; Ferro 2016; Halsey et al. 2006; Leal 2023; Snyder 2009). In the context under discussion, it is crucial not to lose sight of the ideas I developed earlier about hegemonic and dissident ways of narrating São Paulo, as well as the emergence of the periphery as an idea, identity and episteme. This debate furnishes contextual nuances that deepen the comprehension of the subsequent formulations.

Throughout the ethnography, I closely followed one of these moral enterprises. In January 2017, the newly elected mayor of a centre-right party launched the Cidade Linda Project (Beautiful City Project).[13] Within a short period, graffiti and pixação became the project's primary targets, resulting in increased police repression and turning it into a prominent topic in the city's mainstream media. The mayor's speeches were marked by a violent tone and militaristic language, generating a tense and hazardous atmosphere for writers and pixadores. Over time, it became evident that the underlying issue extended far beyond a mere contestation of the city's aesthetics. The inscriptions served as analogies through which the mayor expressed, through contrast, his vision of urban and social order. Another regime of knowledge was in motion, corresponding to this world-view, responsible for organizing the perception of the city through binary notions – such as order and disorder, danger and purity, public and private. Anything outside its symbolic and moral boundaries was classified as deviant (or criminal).

Moral enterprises against graffiti, such as the one I have followed, are embedded in complex systems of power and privilege that organize and discipline lives, bodies and urban spaces (Carneiro 2005; Collins 2002; Gonzalez 2020; hooks 1984). Throughout the mayor's enterprise, it became clear that the target extended beyond the surfaces of São Paulo – it aimed to erase not only the inscriptions made by writers and pixadores but also their entire way of life, black and peripheral. A strategy was unfolding, seeking to uphold a fiction of whiteness – of spaces and people – sustained by narratives, actions and imaginations that promoted a limited conception of the city (Alves 2014; Paterniani 2016, 2019). Dialogue found no space within this framework, as observed in the public hearing held to discuss the matter – the legitimacy of the writers' and pixadores' voices and knowledge was constantly challenged. In that space, they were labelled as vandals or

13. This period was characterized by a series of complex and controversial events. I analyse in detail the Cidade Linda Project and the mayor's moral enterprise in other works (Leal 2022, 2023).

criminals, excluded from the category of the 'general population'. What transpired was an arena of unequal power dynamics rooted in epistemic imbalance. Within the clashes between the writers/pixadores and the authorities, another form of erasure was taking place – epistemicide – a concept drawn from the teachings of Sueli Carneiro (2005). Epistemicide denotes a deliberate procedure aimed at nullifying the knowledge produced by marginalized groups and discrediting those who generate it, thereby obstructing their path to legitimacy. The ontological and epistemological dimensions of state necropolitics were at play.

Over the years, I witnessed and participated in various negotiations and conflicts between writers and public authorities in diverse settings. Reflecting on these experiences, I am reminded of Gayatri Spivak's (2010) key question: 'Can the subaltern speak?'. Spivak's inquiry goes beyond the act of speaking itself; it relates to ontological and epistemological realms. Even if subalterns do speak, they are often unheard, confined to a realm of illegitimacy and silence – an epstemicide place, as Sueli Carneiro (2005) would put it. From this perspective, the answer is categorical: no, subordinates cannot speak. The writers, in their way, also signalled this reality. In interactions with the most varied instances of the State, they were acutely aware that their voices would seldom be understood or heeded, yet they persisted in debating and sharing their ideas and standpoints. They were aware they were facing other representation structures and a different regime of knowledge, leaving little room for dialogue and negotiation. These were worlds divergent from their own, and they had to navigate them with considerable difficulty. This aspect invites deep reflection on the impact of epistemic asymmetry on the dissemination of knowledge beyond subaltern groups, underscoring the imperative for a radical rupture with the existing order.

The itinerary of recognition (Roy 2011) of the writers' ways of being and epistemologies, which I have endeavoured to outline here, encourages us to break free from essentialist frameworks, especially those that seek to disqualify and reduce graffiti (and its protagonists) to private property-based notions – such as vandalism. The writers draw crossroads from their practices, cartography and theories, challenging epistemological and ontological categories that order São Paulo. Like their inscriptions, their epistemologies are constant targets of erasure attempts. However, this knowledge, like their inscriptions, continues to evolve discreetly and diversely, creating vanishing points in the daily dimension of urban life and making it possible to live in spaces shaped by dominant knowledge regimes. María Elvira Díaz-Benítez's formulation encapsulates a crucial aspect of the discussion woven here: 'I perceive all this radicalism as enduring acts of escape, as constant refusals to subjugation, akin to black techniques in which the secrets for survival are reproduced' (2021: 25, translation added). I believe this is also the case for the writers and the technologies of existence they produce through their painting and street experiences.

ENIVO's call makes a new intervention –'Graffiti is existence before resistance' – warning the risks associated with reducing writers' ways of life and practices solely to conflicts with the State. By juxtaposing these two concepts – existence and resistance – ENIVO urges us to perceive graffiti and writers beyond the confines of necropolitics and white city fiction. It is not a question of denying the importance and effects of these conflicts on the writers' lives but of signalling that their existence and practices cannot be reduced to them. This call signals that we are navigating through contested worlds. Furthermore,

this call deepened my understanding of how writers read, use and imagine the city (or cities). The marks they leave on surfaces – index of black and peripheral ways of life, bodies and existences – are themselves exercises in creating a fiction of a city entirely occupied by dissident bodies and existences. The power of this exercise lies precisely in its potential. As Jota Mombaça reminds us, we cannot build what we cannot imagine, 'everything that is constructed must first be imagined. And therein lies the power of fictions' (2021: 46, translation added).

FINAL THOUGHTS

> Sylvia Winter taught me that radical theory-making takes place outside existing systems of knowledge and that this place, outside (demonic grounds), is inhabited by those who are brilliantly and intimately aware of and connected to existing systems of knowledge (as self-replicating) and that this awareness provides theoretical insights and projections of humanity that imagine a totally new way of being that observes how our present mode of being functions unjustly and cannot sustain itself ethically.
>
> (McKittrick 2021: 24)

When walking with TIM and VERACIDADE through the streets of Grajaú, in the extreme south of São Paulo, I heard another call: 'this is where the city begins, not where it ends'. I believe that something that derives from this learning is on the horizon of critical intervention articulated by the idea of knowledge regimes. I hope the itinerary of recognition of the epistemologies produced by the writers' ways of existence contributes to collective reflection on the production of knowledge, narratives and representations about urban life. The writers' elaborations evoke potential ruptures and displacements in the actual order. They are rooted in spaces that, in São Paulo, not long ago, were characterized in opposition to a certain notion of the city. The starting (and ending) point of the reflections I have presented here could not be more opposed to this notion. In my view, it is on the peripheries that alternative possibilities for the city truly emerge. São Paulo starts in the peripheries.

According to Bianca Freire-Medeiros and Leo Name (2019) and their *epistemology of the laje* (favela rooftop),[14] the peripheries are spaces for city-making and theory-making – the writers' knowledge regime about the city points out in the same direction. Similar to the case of the *lajes*, their understanding of the city reinforces the peripheries as sites of radical and sophisticated epistemological production. In this regard, Grada Kilomba's (2019) dialogue with bell hooks's (1989) ideas could find some correspondence here. Kilomba, drawing from hooks's arguments, highlights an often overlooked perspective: the complex standpoint of those inhabiting the margins, where extreme oppression coexists with creative and critical vitality. Being on the margins means simultaneously occupying an inside and outside place, which produces a singular way of seeing the world and intervening in it – something that I also argued based on the case of graffiti writers from São Paulo. It is not about idealizing spaces of oppression but rather acknowledging the intricate perspective of those who reside in them and recognizing their potential contributions to reimagining urban life.

14. From the *laje* (favela rooftop), a material and symbolic element of the favelas, Bianca Freire-Medeiros and Leo Name (2019) present epistemic displacements that stress the dualisms present in the urban imaginary and the hegemonic architectural paradigm. According to them, the epistemology of the *laje* relevance lies in its ability to reveal non-hegemonic ways of inhabiting.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Gabriela Leal is an anthropologist from São Paulo, Brazil, based in Lisbon, Portugal. She is a Ph.D. candidate in urban studies (NOVA FCSH & Iscte) and a member of CICS.NOVA – Interdisciplinary Center for Social Sciences, where she develops her research with a Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) grant (https://doi.org/10.54499/UI/BD/151393/2021). Leal is also a collaborator of the Study Group of Anthropology of the City (GEAC-USP, São Paulo) and a co-founder of the Urban Anthropology Collective (CAU, Lisbon). She has an MA in social anthropology and a BA in social sciences, both from the University of São Paulo, and a post-graduation in theories and practices of communication, from the Casper Líbero College. Her main research topics relate to the uses of urban spaces, urban epistemologies, peripheries, activism, hip hop and urban aesthetic practices. In addition to her solid academic career, she has more than ten years of experience in market research and innovation, having worked for important research companies and having participated as a consultant in different projects. Finally, Gabriela Leal develops independent visual art projects, having collaborated with different art/activist collectives and been contemplated in public funds on culture promotion in São Paulo.

Contact: CICS.NOVA, Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences, NOVA FCSH, Campus de Campolide, 3rd floor, Room 333, 1070-312 Lisbon, Portugal.
E-mail: gabrielaleal@fcsh.unl.pt

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9435-4712