

# Our Voice Echoes: Graffiti from the Perspective of Black Brazilian Women

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## Abstract

This research seeks to discuss Graffiti as a historical-social and artistic movement through paintings by Afro-Brazilian graffiti artists, reflects on the representations of images of black women in the light of black feminist theorists. It understands that the female and black experience in Brazilian Art was historically omitted with its cultures and singularities denied and subjugated, almost not being produced by these bodies. The qualitative research involves works produced by six graffiti artists, from five Brazilian states, the use of interviews and photographs. It uses elements of the life history methodology and seeks to understand their training processes as artists/women/black people, especially when Graffiti culture crosses them, and how their discourses are given through their artistic productions.

**Keywords:** Graffiti; Black Women; Black Feminism; Brazilian Art; Visual arts.

## Leave me for the street

Female Outburst,  
here is present this reality,  
it's not time away,  
Raise your head, fight and grow,  
That we will tell it with enough dexterity!

Yabas MCs, *Female Outburst* (Recife, 2011)

This research discusses graffiti as a historical-social and artistic movement, marks the presence of black women in this space, presents training processes as artists of six black Brazilian graffiti artists and how the discourses are given through their productions.

Thus, I was born a woman, black, poor and a resident of Housing Complex (Cohab) in the suburbs of Jaboatão dos Guararapes, in the metropolitan area of Recife. For these reasons, for many years I was ashamed and uncomfortable, I blamed myself and brothers and sisters for my ills and those of the world. But time, the beings and places that passed through my adolescence made me, this girl who spent the day drawing while her mother worked sewing. There, with her, I sewed my dolls and their clothes, created wild tales and, mainly, it was where I wove my story.

When I entered the Liceu de Artes e Ofícios, a giant public school, I left the bubble of my suburb to be a skinny dot in the metropolis full of its (a)diversities. Peripheral youth movements, swingueira, pagode and hip hop from the 2000s completed me and racism and sexism took me off the axis.

I always identified myself as yellow/brown or defective white, until I entered the technical course at the Federal Institute of Pernambuco (IFPE) and started to get involved with the student movement in 2012 that developed political discussions and the youth's thirst for change.

I don't remember when I started identifying as a feminist, but I do remember teaching my younger sister about and going to rallies. At that time, I couldn't take it anymore (and I didn't have any more money) to have to straighten my hair. So, I started wearing braids for almost two years. After charges, I was curious to know what my hair was like in reality, I never really knew about the texture, length, shape, how to take care of it. I cut it myself. A mixture of freedom and belonging. Who knew that through my hair I would remake my story, go after my roots and even decide what I wanted for the future!

I joined black, female and periphery social movements, my mother saw me on TV for the first time. People started to see me as a mirror. I learned to be proud of being black and peripheral. Another big change was when, following this career of technical courses and exact sciences, I decided to do a Bachelor's Degree in Information Systems at the Federal Rural University of Pernambuco (UFRPE). Passed! Second in the family, on the mother's and father's side, to enter the University.

I worked as an Axé street vendor at street parties, doing handicrafts, doing extra playing in maracatu and coco groups. Until in 2014, before going to the University Restaurant, I met a fellow graffiti artist from where I lived and picked up a spray can for the first time. It was magical! What power I had in my hands! But, I jumped in when I met the graffiti artist from Paraíba Witch and Jouse Barata, coordinator of the NGO Cores do Amanhã, where I was a student of the graffiti workshop. I found myself running away from this path of the Arts my whole life, but I have supported myself with it ever since. Graffiti<sup>1</sup> literally saved my life. I dropped out of the

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<sup>1</sup> All images in this text were previously authorized for this research.

Systems course in November and passed the Visual Arts Degree course at UFPE in January. Finally, I would feel more included!



Image 1: First graffiti made by the author, one in 2014 at UFRPE and the next in 2015 as a student of the graffiti workshop at the NGO Cores do Amanhã. Personal archive.

When I entered the course, what I thought ended up being statistically proven: there is almost no record of black artists, even less black women, there is hardly any talk about the history and culture of African and Afro-diasporic art and a large part of everything I learned was produced by male artists, white, wealthy and western gringos. It is important to highlight and consider here that this finding reflects how much colonizing thought was established and ingrained in the educational background of the Brazilian people. However, reflections on other looks and perspectives, very slowly, begin to expand. This refers not only to African and Afro-Diasporic culture, but also to indigenous and other Latin American and Asian contexts and cultures.

In an Art History course, it was suggested that we produce an article about art in the 19th century. Then, I found the works of the painter of the French Artistic Mission of 1816, Jean Baptiste Debret, which I had already known in the school's history books.

I realized that all these stories, representations of everyday life and unique moments of black men and women in America depended on the hands and eyes of others, that is, they were under the control of male artists, white and foreign, whose visual records discussed ethnic-racial issues and popular. But, in the view of people who did not come from those social spaces, they are treated as objects of study and not as subjects. We know that these images are often absorbed as representations of reality, without any kind of problematization, making

it difficult to break the ideological reign based on colonization and overcome the difficulties imposed in the search for humanization and citizenship equity for those who are at the mercy machismo and racism, such as women and black people, for example. So, I asked myself: what if black women had recorded history from their perspective, what would Brazil be like?

I felt the need to expand the universe of studies on this topic, and connect it with graffiti, which was already included, which resulted in the research of the Institutional Program of Scientific Initiation Scholarships (Pibic-AF/UFPE/CNPq) of 2018 -2019.

From that research came the need to expand the study that resulted in reflection on the productions of six black Brazilian graffiti artists, including my own production. Today it is possible to see that this research has been developed since the first haircut, since the first march, since the first painting on the wall. It is a record of my memory, for my narrative and for my ancestry.

With that in mind, I used elements of the Life History methodology, a qualitative methodology (Silva, 2007) that begins by reflecting my social location as a starting point for the research, allowing me to know how the processes of construction and affirmation of our identities take place, in biographical reports and productions of our arts, and thus, tracing bridges between the artistic and social and the individual and collective trajectories with graffiti. I also interviewed other black women graffiti artists, having broader access to different realities that surpass me.

The main objective was to reflect on Graffiti culture and ethnic-racial and gender issues in the productions of six black Brazilian women graffiti artists. Mostly research of black men and women are part of the theoretical foundation of this research. I used Black Feminism as a basis to discuss the representations of black women throughout the history of Brazil and, thus, identify in the paintings of Afro-Brazilian graffiti artists how these representations are given. It is a challenge to explore the formation of Graffiti as a cultural movement and artistic expression and to understand how it crosses these women.

This text intends to give a little more visibility and legitimacy to the productions of black women graffiti artists and to graffiti as an expression of Art, since this subject has always been little addressed within feminist movements and academic art in general. Due to so many historical processes of maintenance of racism and machismo in Brazil, and in other countries, why, for example, according to the Guerrilha Girls collective, in Modern Art, only 5% of women artists are in the collection of Museums, but 85 % of works depict female nudes? (Estadão, 2017).

Another justification for the development of this research also involves the personal, social and academic spheres. Guys, because I include myself in this dialogue, as a black woman. Social, for understanding that art with diversity needs to echo. Academic, for perceiving, more and more, the space of the Academy as a field of intersectional reflections on the city, urban art, race and gender.

## Black women making history

History reveals to us that the cruelty of the European slavery process began with the transport of African men and women to Brazil, in the holds of slave ships, which were legalized until 1830, but which existed until 1850. It is known that women stimulated rebellions (Tavares, 2011). People – who were seen as animals – who survived this route were sold, using as some of the criteria to stipulate purchase quality, the body, sexual organs and teeth.

Social movements have existed for centuries, reporting historical moments of oppression, being essential to claim rights and restore denied humanities. But, only around the 70s of the century. XX began to be searched. It is possible to perceive this after readings by Valdenice Raimundo (2006) and Djamila Ribeiro (2017) who discuss the formation of the feminist movement and the black movement within the definition that I deal with in the sequence about it.

In 1978, the Unified Black Movement was born, linking various groups to combat racism that had existed for centuries, such as neighborhood associations, axé peoples, carnival associations, NGOs and other Afro-descendant cultural manifestations. But, like most mixed popular organizations, women are rarely seen, always taking second voice in agenda decisions, and the male participants often reproduced machismo to a lesser or greater degree of violence, making them invisible.

Already the history of the feminist movement, has the three famous big waves. The first takes place at the end of the 19th century, the suffragist movement, in the fight for women's suffrage and for basic democratic rights (such as divorce, complete education, work etc.). The second, at the end of the 60s – in Brazil, 70s – for sexual liberation, and the third, at the end of the 70s – in Brazil, 90s – a union and labor struggle, with predominance in Latin America. Topics such as racism and class differences were highlighted, along with studies on women in peripheral societies.

It is known that in the third wave came the questioning about this universal idea of being a woman, raising analyzes considered unsatisfactory or incomplete for other groups of women. These, in turn, claimed that specific characteristics of their identities were also contemplated, understanding that the existing differences between women (class, race/ethnicity and sexuality, for example), although contingent, were decisive and constitutive of their identities, of their experiences and their oppression.

Angela Davis (2006) drew attention when she pointed out that black women were already making claims all over the world, well before the defined third wave, but without visibility. Lélia Gonzalez (1984) criticized this hierarchization of visibilities and knowledge as a result of the racial classification of the population, that is, those who have social privilege have epistemic privilege. Gonzalez also defended an Afro-Latin American feminism, proposing to decolonize

knowledge and refute a neutrality in scientific knowledge because each story told needs a reflection on its cultural and social location, because no one is neutral, everyone starts from a place. Otherwise, this language, being dominant, depending on how it is used, can be a barrier to understanding. Create more spaces of power, rather than sharing; in addition to being an impediment to a critical and liberating education, it favors the holding of power. Whoever owns it can tell the story and choose how to tell it, reflecting on education and textbooks, just as I learned about slavery and the history of black people in Brazil at school, but in all unequal formations in the world.

The history of Brazil seen through its artistic production is an example of this, since the original peoples always produced their works well before colonization, but were violently disregarded for the European model, linked to the Old World, was represented by itself and, consequently, implanted in the “new worlds” that they colonized and looted. Everything was built at his command, although we know that almost everything was produced by the black man, who already mastered wood carving and metallurgy much earlier, in Africa. Something rarely portrayed in our books. There, our ancestors already had technology and knowledge, so much so that the Baroque began to differ from the European model when black and mixed-race artists, such as artisans, brought a unique brand developed here, such as Mestre Ataíde (1762-1830) and Aleijadinho (1738-1814), for example, who were recognized for their work, but whose ethno-racial identities are often silenced. Only in the 19th century, in Realism and Romanticism, did artists begin to explore the sublime, exotic and documentary tone of minorities as objects of foreign curiosity, for export, mainly with the construction of the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts, in 1816, which came to integrate, standardize and orient painting to the French model.

Women only came to enter the Academy in 1893, with the Proclamation of the Republic. In Costa's (2002) research, the first female artists are all white and wealthy, having introduced themselves to the arts as a dowry for marriage or a hobby, being “gifted misses”, and upon arrival at the Academy, they would have to sign with pseudonyms or dedicate themselves to genre painting, which was considered of lesser value. But, black woman, then, who would never become a *sinhá*, where would she be in this situation? Doesn't she have the right to be an artist?

Even Modernism, which guides national independence, with an aesthetic discourse of valuing the Brazilian black population for the process of nationalization and construction of our culture, colonial values recurred (Santos, 2019). Searching for them in a Brazilian-style idea of democracy and representing, on several occasions, stereotypes built on racism and sexism against the bodies of black men and women who are still a burden (Bamonte, 2018).

If the fate of women in Brazil was always in the hands of masters, that of black women was even worse. We see in Brazilian works of art, especially from that period, proof that they were exploited in multiple ways: on plantations, in domestic services, as wet nurses, as street vendors, or sexual entertainment, whether in urban centers, in mill houses or brothels. The

opportunity to speak in defense of these women was never given, on the contrary, the colonizing man himself was in charge of designing us. It was he who established the contours, colors and archetypes of the black female body, always based on negating and reinforcing the stereotype, reinforced by the intention of racism to inferiorize in order to subdue.

It is in this scenario and thinking about these questions that black feminism grows as an independent movement, because when black feminists rely on material, empirical and historical analyzes to explain their oppression, they also strengthen themselves in the search for ancestry, precisely for the purpose of strengthening of the black identity itself, and, more specifically, of the black woman.

Bringing Grada Kilomba (2020) into the dialogue, I try to bring to light the reality of daily racism told by black women based on their subjectivities and own perceptions.

Rosana Paulino, one of the most prominent black artist-researchers today, on her website says about her process:

in my case, I was always touched by questions related to my condition as a woman and black. Looking in the mirror and locating myself in a world that is often prejudiced and hostile is a daily challenge. Accepting the rules imposed by a standard of beauty or behavior that brings a lot of prejudice, veiled or not, or discussing these standards, that is the question. Within this thinking, it is part of my artistic practice to appropriate everyday objects or undervalued elements to produce my work (Paulino, 2009).

Using contemporary expressions such as Graffiti where black women have more access to production, opens doors to freedom and the rescue of their humanity, in addition to introducing the repositioning of imagery conceptions and political postures, which collaborated so much for the mostly non-white Brazilian population how the State rethinks the importance of protagonism in building a more democratic society. Therefore, we will discuss a little more about this artistic manifestation below.

### **But what is Graffiti?**

In contemporary times, especially since the turbulent 1960s, more individuals who shared oppression have come together to resist and fight for public policies of inclusion and legitimize themselves in different social spaces. And Art can be used to open these spaces, being an accomplice for the expression of these people who have no place.

Graffiti is one of those contemporary manifestations of Art, which according to bibliographical research, and throughout my journey included in it, I understood graffiti as an artistic and sociopolitical movement and one of the five elements of the Hip Hop Movement – in addition to Rap (rhythm and poetry), Breakdance (dance), DJ (sound) and what unites them all, knowledge. It was born from youth within the Afro-American ghettos and Latino immigrants in the neighborhoods of Brooklyn and Bronx, in New York, in the 60s and 70s. 2013). Initially,

the elements were used as instruments of dispute between local gangs, until social agents such as Afrika Bambaataa, integrated the movement as a culture of peace, fun and the search for rights. In the 1980s, it arrived with everything in the Brazilian peripheries, but adapting and encompassing regional characteristics (Barreto, 2004). In its history, it has always been concerned not only with aesthetic expression, but mainly as a political-ideological movement, fighting for social equity.

The origin of graffiti is beyond those produced today. According to Moura (2014) and Garraffoni (2005), since the first records of prehistoric man, cave paintings on cave walls with charcoal, clay and plant pigments were already forms of expression and communication, the beginnings in the history of humanity. Art and graffiti. But, the origin of the name of the movement comes from the walls of Pompeii, city of the Roman Empire, as inscriptions of the cheering of gladiators, being a very important public act to mark, in a popular way, dissatisfactions, jokes, declarations of love, denunciations and disclosures, since the beginning of the formation of cities.

Movements in poor neighborhoods in the USA for the formation of Hip Hop, happened at the same time in what would later become graffiti as we know it today. In Paris and Brazil, 1968 presents its first historical records of the use of spray by student movements to compose protest graffiti phrases, such as the famous “Down with the Dictatorship”, demonstrating that the use of the can would be unforgettable on a worldwide scale.

After readings and conversations with graffiti artists and pixadores, the difference between graffiti and pixação<sup>2</sup> is only due to aesthetic and technical issues. However, graffiti is more accepted by society because it is more colorful and less aggressive compared to pixo. But, on several occasions, graffiti is also seen as marginal and illegal if it comes mainly from peripheral authors, and pixo has been considered Art by several curators, gradually entering the art market.

According to Gitahy (2011), despite their differences, both use the same support, the city, and the same material, ink. The two interfere in space. Graffiti born from informal writing and graffiti from artistic techniques. In some countries there is no distinction between tag and pixação, just as there is no distinction between graffiti and pixação. But, most of the time I write about graffiti, when I think of its artistic and historical importance, I also place pixação on the same level.

About this urban art, there is a variety of “styles” with their own denominations, but of those that appear in the images of the artists, I highlight tag, bomb, piece and persona. In the letter area we have the tag, the graffiti artist’s signature, usually a nickname he/she chooses to be recognized. Bomb and piece, are the most popular lettering styles in graffiti, one normally uses three to four colors and the other more than four, respectively, differentiating fill color,

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<sup>2</sup> After reading and experiencing it, I understood that pixação with ‘ch’, refers to the term in a broader way, including poetic and protest phrases, as applied in the paragraphs above, and with ‘x’, which deviates from the formal standards of the cultured language, refers to the pixo subculture, as the pixadores themselves prefer to call it.

contour and sometimes shadow and brightness. There are people who say that bomb are letters or characters made quickly due to the lack of authorization from the owner, usually with little variation in ink, being in the literal translation, bombing the city. The most complex type of letter, the wildstyle or translating, wild style, when the graffiti artist develops the structure of the letter so much that he plays with the shuffling of them in a way that it is almost impossible for a layperson to understand the subject. Persona, in the case of characters, is the other modality besides the letters, ranging from simple drawings, which can also be represented together with the pixador tags or more cartoonish (in which I identify myself), it depends on the choice and construction of the artist. Sometimes, these styles talk well, and a large panel can be produced uniting all the modalities or, on several occasions, there is a dispute for space, where one goes over the other, which in the street rule is something absurd and subject to fights. The relationship is not always harmonious.

Below is an image of a slide that I use for my graffiti workshops, to exemplify the styles described above, all done by black Brazilian women.

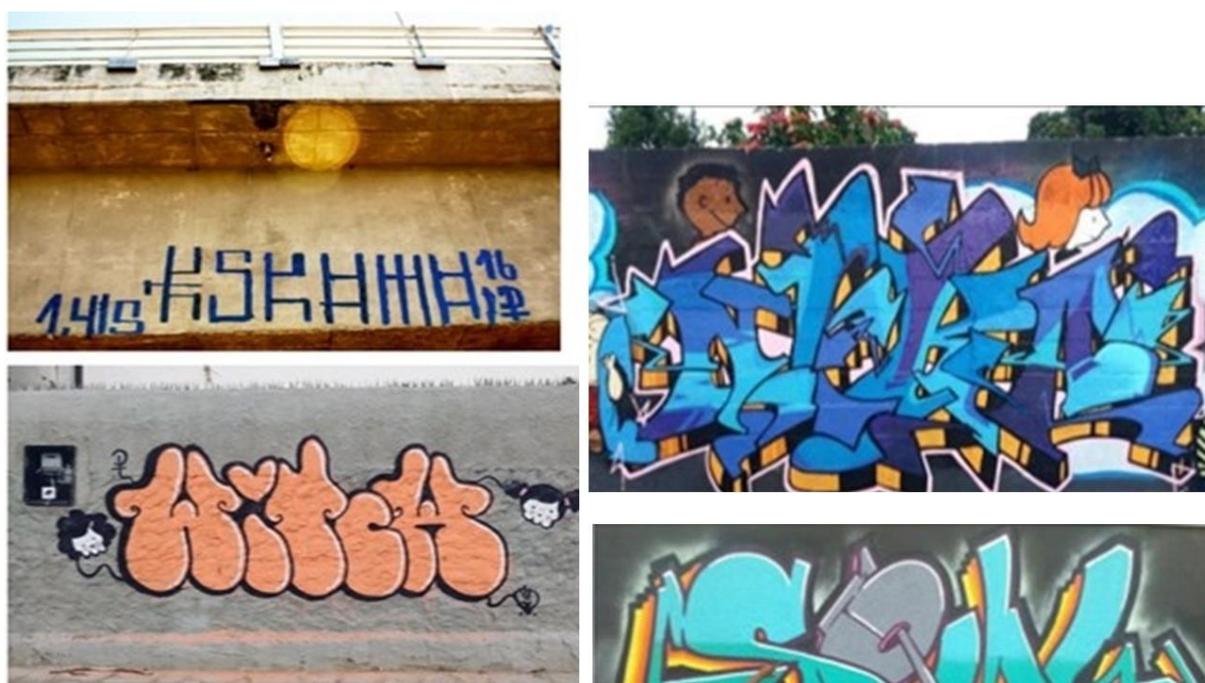


Image 2: From left to right: Pixo – Eskama (PE); Wildstyle – Nica (MG); Bomb – Witch (PB); Piece – TinaSoul (MG), 2017. Personal Archive.

Today's graffiti artists and pixadores work in the same way, the handwritings are seen by many as indecipherable symbols, but those who belong to the movement understand them and thus compete for a dispute over who puts more name on the street, bringing local recognition to the artist, through their impressions left on urban supports (Gitahy, 2011). The great differential of these productions, which are supported by the urban environment, is that:

Through art, the city becomes the place for reflection on “being in the world” and, often, artistic work displaces common sense in relation to art itself. This is because works of art in the city can become imperceptible in view of the urban dimensions and proportions, sometimes not being identified as art because they are immersed in a different communicational environment. Ephemeral or lasting, they depend on the surrounding structures and can dissolve, get lost, leaving only records, experiences or reports (Campbell, 2015, p. 20-21).

According to the IBGE, 96% of the Brazilian population does not go to museums and 93% have never been to an art exhibition<sup>3</sup>. You don't have to go to a museum to consume graffiti. It's one of the things I love most about it, is thinking that any passer-by, regardless of their class, origin and identity, can see the message on the walls, varying in their way of interpreting and reading. It is democratic, and it is considered Art because:

One can understand art, in its different languages, as the expression of the thoughts of individuals, societies and times, as well as specific social segments, contextualized in a determined moment and place. In this sense, art is also part of the daily life of the city and a means of interaction for man with himself, with others and with his surroundings. As for the urban environment, the individual constructs and transforms it continuously, having as mediators, among others, culture, art and language (Prosser, 2006, p.4).

Graffiti artists paint the walls of residents of the outskirts or in large urban centers, usually in commercial centers, authorized or not. In this process of making the wall an art space, the street is transformed, a place that contains dangers and that one should not stay in for too long. It is resignified and made the main point and not a supporting point, an open-air museum, without necessarily needing a museum to coexist.

Hip Hop and Graffiti have been configured as a lifestyle that expresses positions in relation to reality, which most of the time is related to social problems such as violence, drugs, lack of perspectives for the future, also generated by associated social inequalities. the abandonment of public power and the dominance of private power. The State for Campbell (2015) imposes on urban collective life in a hierarchical and centralizing way, preventing transgressive actions, generating gentrification, cleaning of cultures and marginalized and peripheral people, consequently, mostly black, in the name of maintaining power.

Hip Hop, along with its five elements, is considered a social movement, as well as Feminism, because it allows members to use it as a tool to build their identities and be protagonists in the political struggle, using this culture to conquer rights and thus exercise their citizenships (Freire, 2010, p. 2). The whole world already knows about the movement resulting from the diaspora, which is why several public and private institutions and hegemonic groups get involved. Researcher Jamila Gomes (2017) is concerned with the convenient appropriation

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<sup>3</sup> Brasil, o país da cultura, *Jornal do Comércio*. 2009. Retrieved from <https://www.jornaldocomercio.com/site/noticia.php?codn=9302>. Accessed on 18 Mar. 2021.

of his aesthetics, creating a hyper-valuation to attract another public and more capital, generating critical-political emptying and whitening him, because while he was only black and poor, he was always marginalized and stigmatized, just like samba, rock, capoeira, etc.

So, is graffiti, within these terms, an African Art produced in the Americas? Munanga (2000) states that black people in the diaspora do not bring anything from Africa to the Americas, so there is no way we can produce African art. But, in any case, recalling memories, throughout the various eras of Art in Brazil and in other places that black men and women have been, they will remake Afro-Brazilian art, being an art that is undoubtedly religious, functional and utilitarian. The original (African) functions were added to the new (Afro-Brazilian) functions, such as contestation, revolt and liberation from the condition of enslavement and what this enslavement generates in us until today.

Finally, one can observe in events promoted and on walls around the city, an invisible participation of women, as there are several situations of empowerment, but also of exclusion. Even during the bibliographical research, I identified the record of researchers Costa, Menezes and Samico (2013) who recorded the first graffiti joint effort articulated by women in Pernambuco, the Trincheira Tinta, only in 2009. The text states that the men of the movement made it difficult the construction process, uttering verbal aggressions, attempts to demobilize and boycott the women organizers and the event. For these and other reasons, the need to expand the universe of studies on this topic has intensified.

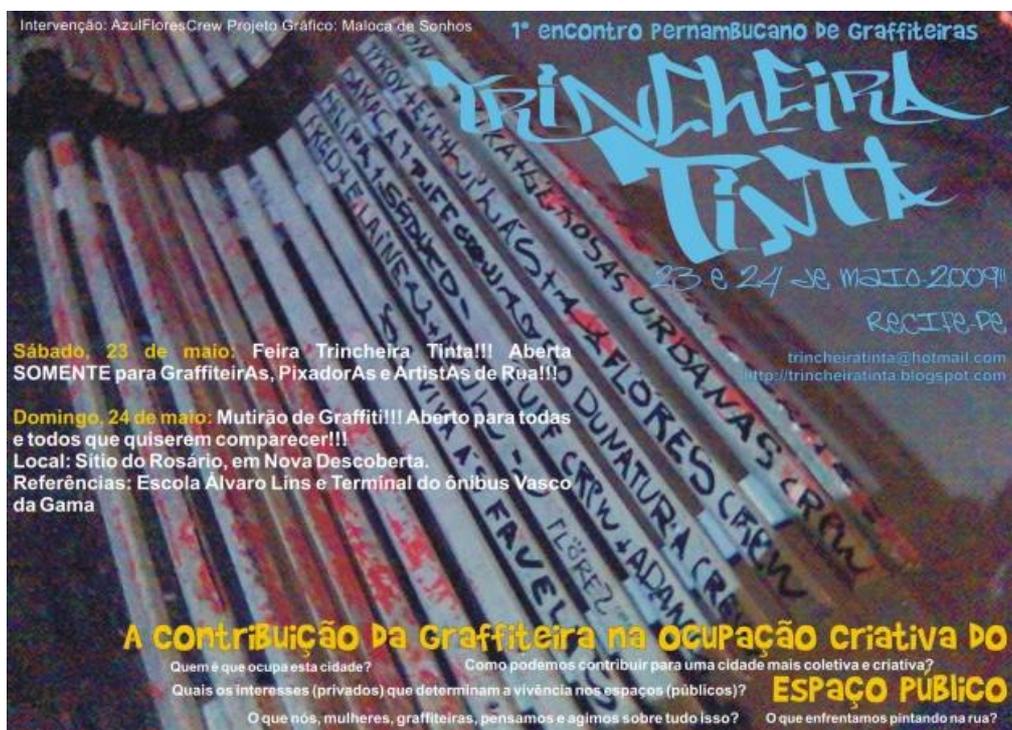


Image 3: Poster advertising Trincheira Tinta. 2009. Retrieved from: <https://pinguinha.wordpress.com/2009/05/14/trincheira-tinta-i-encontro-de-grafiteiras-de-pernambuco/> Accessed on 1 Jan. 2021

The analyzes of works and interviews of the graffiti artists for this research were divided into four themes that involve being a woman and being black, which can be associated and discussed with the questions raised by black feminist theorists. They are: Aesthetics; Relationship with Work; Objectification of the Body; Religion. This is what will be discussed later on.

### **Us for us: analysis of works by graffiti artists**

From this topic we will deal, especially, with the collaborating graffiti artists of our research. We will present each one of them, images produced and reflections woven by them about their stories and their image creation processes.

In Brazil, several Graffiti Festivals take place, organized by local graffiti artists and partnerships, with little or no government support. In national/international events, there is an advance registration and the artists, if selected, receive material for painting, food and accommodation to paint the venues of the host city, having to pay for the transfer to the event and extra costs. Normally, these events are not funded by large notices and public cultural policies. As a member of the movement, I participated in some of these events during the research and talked to several artists, formed partnerships and ties, and following the chosen methodology that is concerned with the bond between researcher and researched, I collected interviews from five of them.

It was extremely rare to find women, white or not, at the events, as protagonists, as artists or curators. On the other hand, there were many serving and feeding, behind the curtains in the organization, as girlfriends and companions of the male artists. Despite showing advances in relation to the last 10 years, in which women were only 5% of the participants (Samico, 2013). Today there are even events that have been updated and it is mandatory to have between 40% and 50% of selected female artists, such as Bahia de Toda as Cores (BA) and Pão e Tinta (PE), although there are some silences and micro – violence at the time of production. I've observed women painting the less targeted walls and men painting the larger, more desired walls, or them making a small came on the panel for their male partner.

All the graffiti artists who responded to the interview stated that they had already experienced some type of violence because they were women, black and even as graffiti artists, such as silencing and erasure, not having a valued job or hired because they were women, cursing in the street or by another graffiti artist. Even harassment, theft of materials and reports of attempted rape. Machismo and veiled racism are also present, as when Nenesurreal participated in the 4th International Graffiti Biennial, in SP, observing the giant contrast. Thus, she told us: "There are more than 80 artists, less than a third of women and one black woman. And it's not because there isn't. Even today I have to hear that 'I don't think women', 'I don't think black women'. They are here!" (Testimonial by NeneSurreal, 2018).

Four of the six interviewees stated that they entered the movement through former partners and male friends, but what makes them continue is precisely the union between friends of groups that participate, fighting and protecting themselves from the aforementioned violence. Nenesurreal says in an interview “I understand that my breathing is the colors, shapes in graffiti due to suffering various violence, I start to vomit, I use that as a cure.”

Before we continue, I present the six artists interviewed in this research, including name, tag, city and state that were authorized for this study, respectively. They are: Alexsandra Ribeiro (Dinha), Jaboatão, PE/Fortaleza/CE; Andressa Monique Simão (Monique), Salvador/BA; Ester Anedino (Esa), Rio Branco/AC; Irenilda Lopes (Nenesurreal), Diadema/SP; Larissa Lopes (Oyá), Aracaju/SE; Nathália Ferreira (Nathê), Recife/PE.

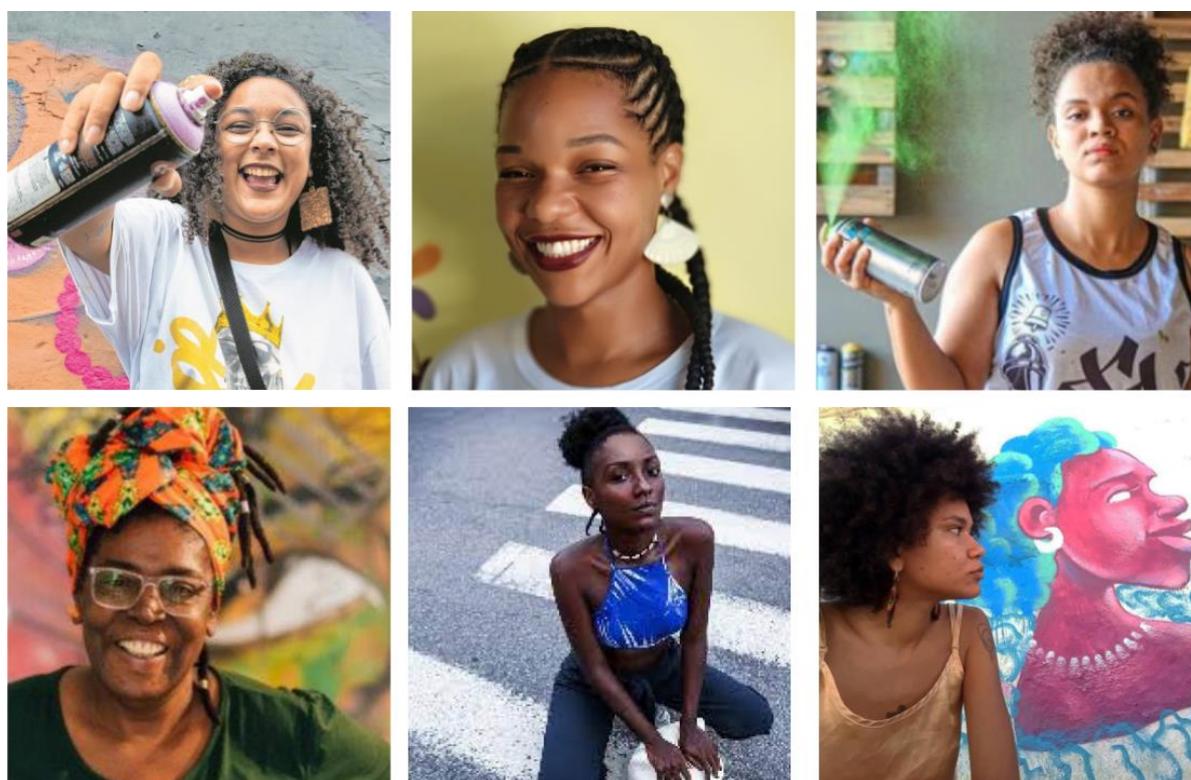


Image 4: Profile photos of the interviewed artists, following the presentation order of the paragraph above. 2019. Personal Archive.

Why these women? Each one relates to me affectively throughout my career as an artist, during the places I've been, some as a fan, others as an “idol”, meeting us at the Graffiti Festivals in Brazil that I went to during my graduation. In addition, they cover diversity in relation to age group (from 21 to 52 years old), location (one from the Southeast, one from the North and four from the Northeast), sexual orientation (straight, bisexual and lesbian) and with variations in skin tones black, from the lightest to the darkest, and may also recognize themselves with indigenous ancestry.

In the answers to the question about their first contacts with the arts, they affirm that it was through their families that they were inserted in the context of crafts/popular art. Black lace makers, artisans and seamstresses. They had very little contact with Arts at School, being put more generically or through reproduction and copying, not working critically, nor learning artistic techniques. In adolescence, graffiti soon presented itself as a rich possibility for the production of art and expression, which opened up multiple and interesting channels for these artists.

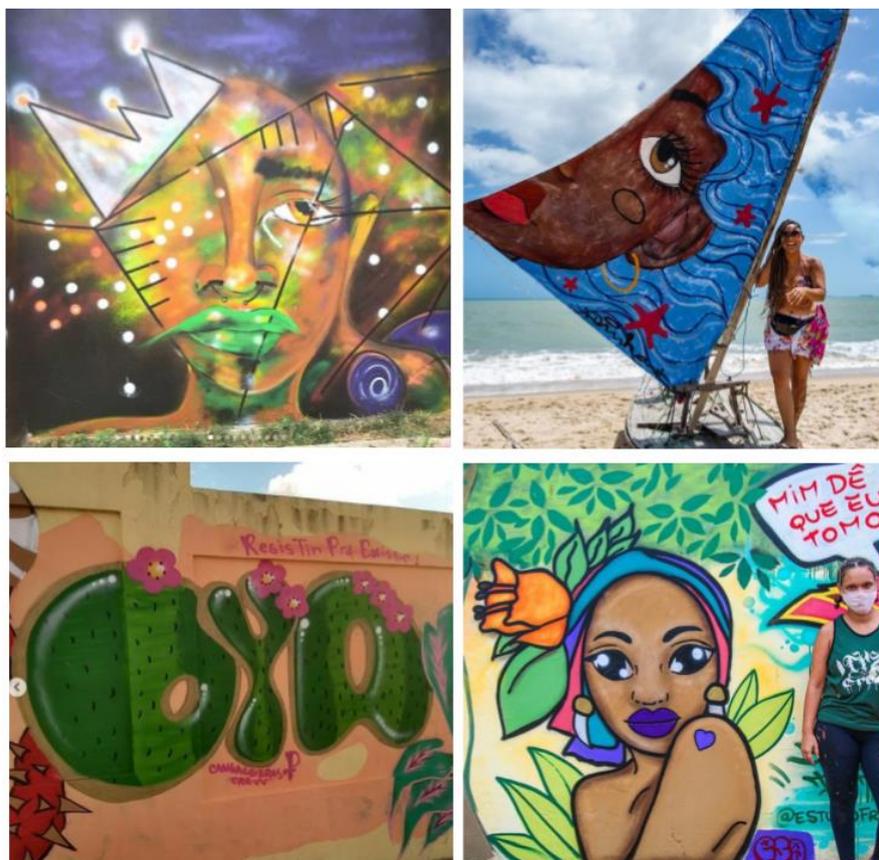


Image 5: Photos of work by some of the artists interviewed (in reading order, NeneSurreal, Dinha, Oyá and Esa), 2019. Personal Archive.

In place of the pseudoneutrality of the Schools, we went for something opposite: dirty, noisy, confused, the street seems more stimulating. For this and other reasons, mainly financial, three of them stopped studying while still in elementary school, exchanging them for underemployment, until, when they discovered graffiti, they resumed their studies. Two of them have even managed to graduate, appropriating academic techniques to express their arts on the streets, thus enabling formality and legitimacy in this manifestation. Once again, graffiti presents itself as an instrument for accessing information and encouraging learning and knowledge! Women have been standing out in their actions, presented to the world through this universe, bringing up their political positions: the intention goes beyond coloring places; they have ideals to pass on.



Image 6: Graffiti by Dinha (PE/CE) producing a banner for the Marcha das Vadias Recife, honoring murdered former councilwoman Marielle Franco, 2019. Personal Archive.

### Being black is being ugly?



Image 7: Photo of graffiti made by Monique. Salvador, 2019. Personal Archive.

The artist, Andressa Monique Primeira Oliveira Simão, or just Monique, as she signs in her works, is 27 years old, born on the outskirts of Beiru, in Tancredo Neves, in the city of Salvador, Bahia. Graduated in Architecture and Urbanism, she is an urban artist, working mainly with graffiti, whose main motto is the reconnection with her ancestry through the representation of black women and the deities of Afro-Brazilian religions. Thinking about this protagonism and this new look of a woman, black and candomblé artist talks about her own universe.

In this work, we see the image of the face of a black woman with an orange glow on her face, the background color and curly hair cut in a geometric shape, surrounded by two leaves of Espada-de-Santa-Bárbara and a branch of a plant that seems to be Arruda, crossing her throat and coming out through the mouth of the character's slight smile. What stands out in the mural is that this woman's nose is cut away from her face. About this purposeful separation, the artist states in an interview:

Among our physical characteristics, skin color, hair and etc., the size of the nose has always been something that bothered us as a black woman and man, who never wished to have a thinner nose or put on that peg to hang clothes thinking that the same would fine-tune it a bit, I already did that a lot in my teens. Accepting our characteristics as a black people means going through a long and hard process of withdrawing from this Eurocentrism as a reference, with centuries of denial of our own imagine, starting to love and find beautiful what we see in front of the mirror as a black woman/man( o) is a path that, once discovered by us, has no turning back. Our roots are too precious. Our leaves heal the soul (Testimonial by Monique, 2019).

This cut, both on the neck and on the nose, is not represented with blood, as if it were a disgusting and painful cut, but with reddish tones that are harmonious with each other, as if the cut that the artist made was not violent, but rather trying to tell a story. story of how she once wanted to take it off, the cut like a wound to be healed. Monique highlights the nose, a characteristic part of the black body, one of the deep marks that slavery left in our history, in our subjectivities and the racism that daily violates our people in our ways of living, feeling, loving, seeing ourselves, to have faith.

It was in this way that Brazil developed, denying black bodies conditions of sociability or interactions with the processes of civilization in equal opportunities between blacks and whites. But, the black presences became permanent: their thick hair, wide lips, rounded and flat noses conflicted until today.

Over time, different discourses around beauty were constructed, which resulted in the delimitation of aesthetic models to be pursued and even imposed. I also learned from black feminists that, without realizing it, we are strongly influenced by such standards. Racism has internalized a feeling of inferiority.

According to Umberto Eco (2007), the models or standards of beauty were woven over time having as an (almost indispensable) component the physical and/or social discrimination of what does not fit the intended standards. From there, we noticed that beauty was indicated

as a synonym of vigor, health, and even of respectable moral values, which resulted in the social exclusion of important parts of societies, for not fitting the prevailing standard of beauty.

We saw that the idea of “ugly” was often created with the aim of indicating the “other”, that is, people from different cultures, considered ugly and undesirable just because they were not “equal”, therefore, outside the established standards, in a strategy of demonization and dehumanization. Furthermore, nowadays, monetary power is still associated with “beauty”, the antithesis of “ugly”. That is, when members of the “upper” classes always found the tastes of the “lower” classes unpleasant or ridiculous, for example. We could say, of course, that economic factors have always weighed in on these discriminations. But often the discriminating factor was not economic but cultural. It is a common experience to highlight the vulgarity of the nouveau riche who, in order to flaunt their wealth, go beyond the limits that the dominant aesthetic sensibility establishes for “good taste” (Eco, 2007, p. 394). The dominant and colonizer dictating what is and is not.

Already in the introduction of his book, Eco himself states that the definitions of beautiful and ugly vary according to the time and place in which they are inserted, but noting that he uses terms already revered in the western world and treats other cultures (African, Indian, Chinese, for example), as not similar to “ours.”: “We consider black Ethiopians ugly, but among them, the blackest is considered beautiful” (Eco, 2007, p. 10).

As we know, Art History is a reflection of the society that produced knowledge and historically instituted colonial powers and that violently produced a pattern of continued power in contemporary coloniality. Like Monique herself, many black artists and others who follow decolonial thoughts are in the struggle for the recognition and geopolitical reconfiguration of other knowledge, other knowledge and other practices, distancing themselves from those taken for a long time as unique and true.

The artist talks about how much she and other black men and women submitted themselves to an aesthetic framework, which must be as close to the ideal of whiteness as possible to be socially accepted. The insurgency of a black character with frizzy hair blowing in the wind and her other highlighted negroid traits brings a new construction of esteem and belonging. To be black in Brazil is to be condemned to a value judgment in which skin color and culture classify the degree of discrimination.

Anyway, this discussion reverberates and fits into all the discussions throughout this work, which I will break down better by analyzing the other productions of the other graffiti artists.

Another point that draws attention is the end of Monique’s testimony talking about the graffiti she produced, making a metaphor between the roots of a tree, the roots of her curly hair and the ancestral roots she carries. Both the Swords-of-Santa-Bárbara and the Arruda are plants widely used in religions of African origin, for cleaning baths and protection of the home, etc., alluding to the sacred character that the tree and plants, in general, have in the system

religion of candomblé, in which it is customary to say that “without a leaf, there is no orixá”. The forest is par excellence the natural space of several specific entities. In addition, trees are associated with ancestors and are used as metaphors in societies that see continuity between past generations (those of ancestors represented by roots) and future generations (those of descendants represented by branches, fruits or leaves).

### They talking about their parent’s religion

Monique’s statement about the work that speaks of her nose, discussed earlier, brings the metaphor between the roots of a tree, the roots of her curly hair and the ancestral roots she carries. Both the Swords-of-Santa-Bárbara (which appear present in the previous image) and the Arruda, are plants widely used in African matrix religions, as discussed earlier. I also produced a work based on the saying “without leaves, there is no orixá”, which can be seen below.



Image 8: Graffiti made by the author in the graffiti campaign in Maranguape 2. Paulista, 2019. Personal Archive.

It was in Candomblé that Monique was inserted since she was a little girl (and I, since adolescence). We learn about our ancestry and recognition of our blackness, but we find in graffiti a way to express and affirm what we learn.

Munanga (2000) considers that in Candomblé and, possibly, other religions of that diaspora, the functions of art and its creative processes obey the precepts of African tradition, which guide techniques and technologies of artistic making to reframe the ancestral heritage of Africa. Black sacred visual art is composed of sculptures, clothing, architecture, among other objects that aim to exalt the sacred, visually reinforcing an identity. The preservation of an African mythology was a way of keeping its own origins alive. These religions contributed significantly to the maintenance of Africanness for the black people in Brazil and for the graffiti artists, inserted or not in these religions. They proudly paint the Orixás they worship and, mainly, the Yabás (female Orixás), such as Monique's Oxum below, Goddess of fresh water, gold, beauty and fertility, whose symbols are detectable in the image (the mirror, the colors used and the environment in which it was portrayed); and Oyá herself, who chose to use the name of her Orixá upside down to paint on the street.



Image 9: Monique's graffiti portraying the Orisha Oxum. Salvador, 2019. Personal Archive.



Image 10: Graffiti of Oyá with her tag and the writing “If you are with a black woman, it was for you to give glory”. Moreno, EP. 2018. Personal Archive.

These annulments that made black men and women move away from these beliefs to the point of also demonizing him/her, is part of identity annulment.

A political project also includes the first obligatory substitutions of African names for the names of Catholic saints upon arrival in Brazil. We don't know the name because they were all renamed Josephs, Johns and Marys. Even the last name we carry wasn't even the same. But, little by little, this process of renaming himself is resumed in the terreiros themselves, when during the initiation process, Yaô receives his African name. Being renamed with another name also happens in capoeira and graffiti! Yes, because when artists enter Hip Hop, they earn or choose their own names, just like Oyá did.

Finally, this process of demonization, whose negative effects are felt by each believer and in all terreiros, which are being destroyed daily, contributes to acts of religious intolerance becoming even more common. Not only the physical destruction, but this happens even in situations where axé people are not hired for jobs or are normally included in society. Today, it is known that these religions contributed to the maintenance of knowledge in the diaspora, contributing to public health, education, so-called Brazilian cultures, in addition to being spaces for socialization, places of coexistence, protection, exchange of knowledge and experiences, also produced by black and indigenous women.

What is contrary to the Western conceptions of Christian morality built by the so-called “civilized” Western societies, which painted us as passive and subservient, because we don't need to go very far to know that in traditional communities, such as quilombos and terreiros, women occupy leadership positions, thus dealing with matrix organizations based on matriarchy.

## Black women and relationships with work

It is known that the West brought the hierarchical gender division of work, pushing women away and making them dependent on men, since they would be in the role of financial provider. This implantation carried here the female oppression and the removal of the work naturalized by the colonizers. Thus, white women lived in relative seclusion, in town houses and in large country houses. They went out only on religious festivities and accompanied, mainly, in the colonial period. They could not do any activity other than dedicating themselves to their future or present marriages and families, encouraging a culture of a fragile and demure woman, bringing up the hierarchical discussion between the public (the power of access to work, to the street, to the political, traditionally aimed at men) and private (domestic sphere, linking women, maternity and home). The break with this idea of fragility also came to the fore with feminism, so that women could have access to the job market, autonomy and choice for loving relationships. But, did it work the same way with all women?

It is important to emphasize, first of all, that these interactions between black women are historically about strengthening and protecting each other. Since the first records of women on the streets of the cities of the Empire of Brazil, they have always gone out together for any activity, with their compulsorily public bodies to work, whether in street commerce, in rivers to wash clothes or in the fields, some being able to save money for his manumission, always using the street as a space of sociability, and of struggle for occupation of space.

This dialogues a lot with images found on the social networks of the interviewed graffiti artists, in which, at different times, they highlight the dialogue and the presence of other black women to continue with their trajectories in the artistic area.

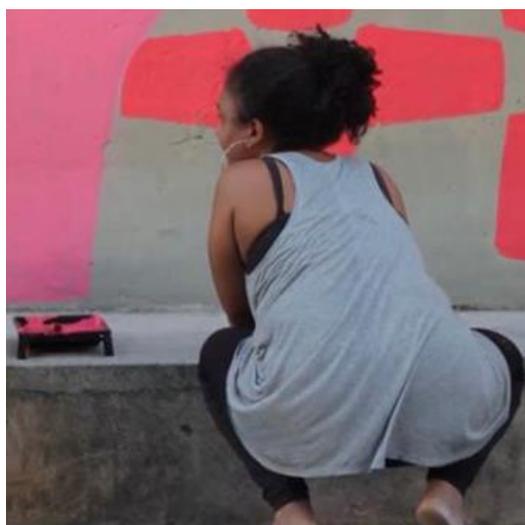


Image 11: Dinha (PE/CE) painting in the community where she lives, 2019. Personal archive.

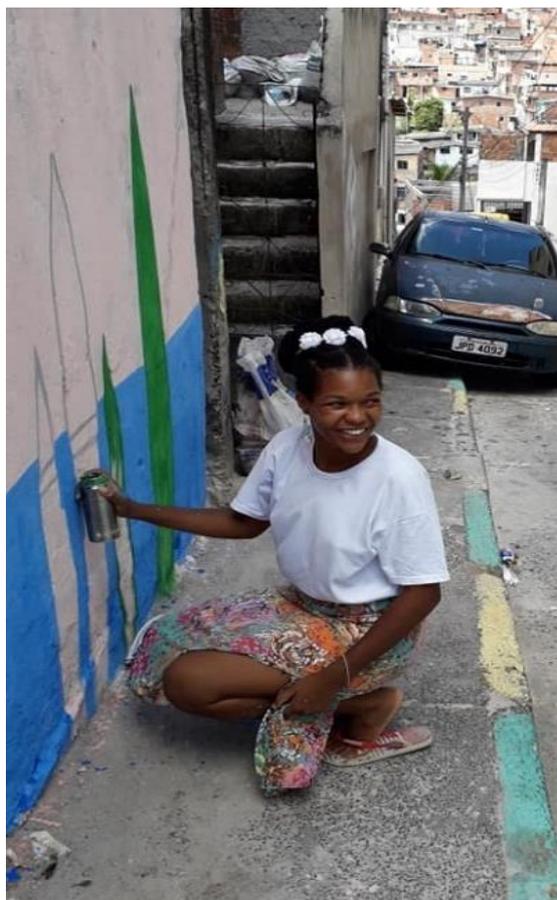


Image 12: Monique (BA) painting in the community where she lives, 2019. Personal archive.

Sueli Carneiro (2003) points out that, while white women were encouraged to be inert, black women were already destined to work and be exploited from a young age, due to the processes of slavery. For the white woman to have greater freedom, it was the black woman who replaced this function of household duties, such as maids, wet nurses, and with modern times, updated to maids and nannies, abdicating their lives and the care of their own children to take care of others. These subordinate positions are still held by the majority of the black population, due to lack of access to education and inclusive and restorative public policies.

According to research developed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Security in partnership with the Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA)<sup>4</sup>, white women earn 30% less than white men. Black men earn less than white women and black women earn less than everyone else. In 2016, 39.6% of black women were inserted in precarious work relationships, followed by black men (31.6%), white women (26.9%) and white men (20.6%). And in the survey, black women were the largest contingent of unemployed people and in domestic work. With this it is thought that:

<sup>4</sup> *Mulheres e trabalho: breve análise do período 2004-2014.*

Retrieved from <http://repositorio.ipea.gov.br/handle/11058/6524>. Accessed on 08.09.2019.

from the marked places, from the social groups, they manage to be closer to reality and generate demands for public policies. This is because when this homogeneous vision of men and women is still insisted on, black men and black women are implicit and end up not being beneficiaries of important policies and, being even further apart, from being those who think such policies (Ribeiro, 2017, p. 25).

Graffiti artists also feel this impact in the origins of family social classes and when selling their work. Nenesurreal claims that selling her work saved her life and that of her daughter, given that in the community where she lives in São Paulo, drug trafficking is the biggest employer of young black people. Which is a victory in the scene, since it is very rare to live only from graffiti and related areas, so much so that many other members work in other parallel activities to get the minimum support. In an interview, Dinha also talks about issues of access to the art market, as the hegemonic standard also prevents black women from accessing it, and she also feels the lack of producers and sponsors who look to marginalized individuals.

Valladares (apud Mattos 2019, p. 27-28) tells that black people are only considered part of the Brazilian identity when they are portrayed by non-black modernist artists, and confirms that only then did Afro-Brazilian art begin to circulate in the market, becoming institutionalized, “but not with black artists as authors of works, while their production was considered naive, popular or primitive in galleries” (which would not be a problem, since many artists appropriate and are proud of the denomination. is that because they are black, their works were also categorized in this way, in the sense of lesser value). Result: this artist could not enter the system without the support of a white producer/curator, specialist in that type of art.

Everyone’s dream is still to live financially from graffiti, but they end up working in other areas to supplement their income, but which are still linked to the Arts.



Image 13: Photo of NeneSurreal (SP) wearing clothing made and printed by her with her graffiti in the background, 2017. Personal Archive.

Dinha says in an interview that “graffiti has to take you to places you never imagined being able to go”, as she even went to the University of Arizona in the USA to present her work, even without having finished higher education. All of them have already traveled to other states and/or some countries and continents, as in the case of Dinha and Monique, who visited the African continent, in Mozambique.

Nenesurreal produces plus size clothes and transforms the fabric into an identity affirmation project, which reminds us of the speech of the Angolan Sandra Quiala<sup>5</sup> where Africa should also be known for its enormous textile production, whose fabrics carry a rich symbology, serving as a brand of power and prosperity, in addition to carrying texts, talking about the social and religious identity of that individual, something that was lost in colonization.

### **Objectification of our body: a case of life and death**

During the violent process of colonization and catechization of Europeans over Africans and Brazilians, linking their religions to evil and to most African and indigenous cultures, for example, sexual organs were always exhibited without any problem. The colonizer, together with the Christian missionaries, who had the objective of “Christianizing the wild world”, with their strong sense of modesty and their own value judgments, associated our bodies and genitalia with obscenity and sin, repressing us.

Everything was naturalized over time, producing on the national scene the image of the mulatto girl who dances half-naked at Carnival as a symbol of the country, who sells sex tourism to foreigners, for example. Theoretician Ângela Gilliam states (apud Carneiro, 2003, p.1) that “The role of black women is denied in the formation of national culture; inequality between men and women is eroticized; and sexual violence against black women was converted into a novel”.

Romanticism was the euphemism for absurd violence, naturalized and masked as a crime of passion, and only now is it legally treated as femicide. Our death is romanticized, when we observe, for example, the 2015<sup>6</sup> Map of Violence, where the murder of black women increased by 54.8%, whereas white women decreased by 9.6%. This absurd increase speaks of the lack of an ethnic-racial focus when thinking about policies against violence against women, since they do not reach non-white women (Ribeiro, 2017).

As for the graffiti artists, little by little they became – as in Hip Hop in general, they had to masculinize themselves and hide their bodies to “get respect” in the movement – more aware of the violence suffered by women over the years, they come to claim freedom to come and go. In order to no longer be conditioned to the fate of so many women, including their own families,

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<sup>5</sup> Mwana Áfrika, *Tecidos Africanos*. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/278RBMssIY4>. Accessed 10 Aug. 2019.

<sup>6</sup> *Mapa da Violência 2015: Homicídio de Mulheres no Brasil* (2015). Retrieved from <http://flacso.org.br/?p=13485>. Accessed 8 Sept. 2019.

denouncing cases of domestic violence and femicide whether at feminist and women's events where they gather, whether by their own will on the walls they find, as in the case of paintings below, made by graffiti artist Esa from Acre, with stencil (hollow mold technique) and my work.



Image 14: Graffiti photo of Esa (AC). Rio Branco, 2017. Personal Archive.



Image 15: Photo of the author's graffiti at the Festival Agora é a Vera. Aracaju. 2018. Personal Archive.

Grada Kilomba, who has debated the issue of aggression carried out by the black female body, points out in an interview available on the web:

Sexuality, which is extremely denied in this society, is projected onto other bodies, as they become dirty, obscene, marginal, sexual, dangerous, criminal, aggressive and abusive. All these metaphors and ghosts are projected onto these bodies. We are like a repository of everything that patriarchal white society does not want to be. But we are not. It's a forced role that doesn't fit us. It is a role of profound alienation and one that we recognize in many different isms, such as racism and homophobia (Depoimento de Kilomba, 2017).

The graffiti of Esa, a woman from Acre, who goes through several difficulties as an artist in the North of Brazil, in this work, talks about places we want to be and conquer, but we are not.

My work, produced at the *Agora é à vera graffiti festival*, whose event theme was the Black Youth Genocide, was held on the outskirts of Santa Maria in the Sergipe capital, and was also my theme. I made it at the same time as the two-year anniversary of the murder of Mário Andrade, a 14-year-old boy from Ibura, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Recife, by military police officer Luiz Fernando Borges, while he was playing with his bicycle. I met his mother Joelma at the time because of the movements for justice. Using the image of this mother with the bloodstained school uniform, I also reflected on the story of Bruna Silva, another black mother of a boy murdered by the police, Marcos Vinícius, aged 14, in Favela da Maré (RJ) in 2019. Bruna took the blood-soaked uniform he wore to all the protests.

The 2020 Atlas of Violence points out that the risk of being a victim of homicide in Brazil is 74% higher for black men, especially young men<sup>7</sup>. That is, when it's not us who are murdered, it's our children, brothers, husbands. What if it was my mother?

I approach a place where we don't want to be, but are placed at any moment, at the entrance to a street, at the exit of a supermarket. Esa and I spoke at the same time of Life and Death.

## Considerations

In this work, in the relationships outlined, the differences are significant when we observe who is in the space of power and builds discourses. Brazilian Art and History have produced images of the black female body, which is often passive, generalized and romanticized, contributing to these ideals still being rooted in Brazilian society, such as false racial democracy, the myth of cordial miscegenation and scientific and scientific racism. It shows that

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<sup>7</sup> VASCONCELOS, Caê. Atlas da Violência 2020: Número de homicídios de pessoas negras cresce 11,5% em onze anos; o dos demais cai 13% (Atlas of Violence 2020: Number of homicides of black people grows 11.5% in eleven years; that of the others drops 13%), *El País*, 2020. Retrieved from <https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2020-08-27/numero-de-homicidios-de-pessoas-negras-cresce-115-em-onze-anos-o-dos-demais-cai-13.html>. Accessed on 30 Feb. 2021

there are still marks, still continued after the period of enslavement and colonization of black people, in a country that does not admit itself to be racist.

Discussing graffiti as a historical-social and artistic movement, we, as black graffiti artists, refute the hegemonic instituted power, bringing through our experiences and interactions with people from similar or dystopian social places, powerful discourses constructed outside of those imposed by the dominant regime. Thus, we challenge the validation process of political, artistic and epistemic knowledge that, as Patrícia Collins (1986) says, results in colonially stereotyped images produced by authentic and self-defined images of black women. It is not about affirming individual experiences, but understanding that the social place we occupy, as women and blacks, is always pushed towards marginalization and narrows opportunities. When diversity of experiences is aimed at, there will be a consequent breakdown of a universal vision of what it is to be, for example, a woman, sometimes preached by a predominantly white and elitist feminism.

Seeking to understand the training processes as artists/women/black women and how discourses are given through their productions, within the themes addressed, the graffiti artists always paint haughty black women, capable of having power and voice, denouncing and exposing injustices. After having access to these discussions and narratives when they entered the culture of Graffiti and the Hip Hop movement, they contribute to strengthen our identities, even if sometimes these movements reproduce sexist oppression.

These paths result, both for them and for me, in returning to schooling and the right to earn money from our own jobs. In addition to producing art on the walls, which also express the need to talk about religious freedom, question discourses about our bodies, our affective relationships and fight against the various imposed violence.

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