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Religion and the *Artification* of Graffiti in the Olympic City: a Look at the Walls of Rio de Janeiro

Christina Vital da Cunha

Abstract

This article aims to discuss the formation of a motivational landscape by looking at paintings; stencils; and religious and nonreligious graffiti in the city of Rio de Janeiro in the context of the 2016 Olympics. The process of *artification* at work in various expressions of so-called street arts is key for understanding the use that different social actors (young evangelicals or not, City Council, NGOs) make of this artistic expression. In this sense, the artistic interventions emerge as mediators of a citizen message, and/or an aesthetic one, and/or a religious one. Therefore, the purpose of the article is to present some advances in the analysis of speeches, images, and legislation regarding art and street interventions, in the city's specific socio-political context. The empirical data that supports these analyzes are currently being undertaken in the survey "Street Art and Religion: A Study on Citizenship Productions and City Projects Through Graffiti in Rio de Janeiro," and were structured by conducting interviews with graffiti artists and City Council representatives and drawing a map of artistic interventions, mainly in the South Zone of Rio de Janeiro. This is justified by the importance that the South Zone has in the imaginary formation of what it means to be "*Carioca*"—a resident of Rio—today, and in the external projection that the "spirit of the city" has gained since Rio won the rights to host the 2016 Olympics.

Introduction

In various media, including official sites of the city and tourism agencies, Rio de Janeiro is called “the Marvelous City,” a reference to its beautiful natural landscapes. On July 1st, 2012, the city became a World Heritage Site with the name “Rio de Janeiro: *Carioca* Landscape between the Mountain and the Sea.” Indeed, “The City of Rio,” as its residents call it, is the main tourist destination in Brazil. Among its main attractions are the beaches, parks, gardens, and natural reserves—Parque Lage, Jardim Botânico, Horto, Vista Chinesa, Pedra Bonita, Floresta da Tijuca, Sugar Loaf, Corcovado—in addition to Maracanã stadium, Arcos da Lapa, and Theatro Municipal. Culturally, the city is a matrix for important artistic and musical movements, such as Samba and Bossa Nova, along with other expressions such as Baile Charme, Funk, Hip Hop, etc. Rio de Janeiro is the capital of the homonymous State, but it was once also the capital of the Portuguese Empire (1822) as well as capital of the United States of Brazil (1889-1968), until the country’s seat of power was transferred to Brasilia. According to the 2010 census data of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), Rio has a population of over 6 million people in an area of over 1,000 square km. It is the 6th largest metropolis in Latin America and the 35th in the world.

Here I discuss the formation of a “motivational landscape” through graffiti located in some of Rio’s South Zone neighborhoods and in the Centro—an area subject to requalification projects since the 1990s (Pinto), and currently undergoing important changes in the context of the 2016 Olympics. Graffiti, just like other images that carry authorship, time, and agency, suggest models and conceptions of what it means (or should mean) to be a *Carioca*—a Rio resident. Maria Inez Turazzi reminds us that the “power of information and capacity to assert the role of the State in implementing public works” that images possess can be “measured,” by the “increasing demand in photographic services by the agents of these interventions,” and “the direct hiring of photographers for various public and private institutions” (64). Graffiti is a curious phenomenon in that sense: it is an urban art form that underwent a further process of *artification* (Shapiro): it was adopted by public managers and religious leaders, who were previously opposed to it.

Images have always been instrumental in the production of identity. Turazzi and Schwarcz claim that photography, in particular, has been crucial in the creation and dissemination of both regional and national identity, respectively. Rio’s graffiti play a similar role: they shape and propagate a *Carioca* identity but under new aesthetic references: with forms, colors, and text messages, from which the naturally beautiful, romantically imaginative, cheerful, hospitable, relaxed, smart, and loving spirit of the *Carioca* emerges with force. The process is complex as it merges the forged *Carioca* identity with the graffiti artist’s daily observations and experiences, to produce an image, which can serve as a personal and communal identifier.

My research “Street Art and Religion: A Study of The Production of Citizenship and City Design Through Graffiti in Rio de Janeiro” informs this

analysis and explains my methodological choice of exploring the graffiti on the walls of Rio's South Zone (made up of 16 neighborhoods over 43 km², with a population of 600 000 (IBGE 2010 census)—a relatively small area with a relatively small portion of residents compared to the rest of the city—which has nevertheless come to represent the city and serve as the source of the “*Carioca* spirit” formulation, and, most recently, its positive and official political elaboration—“*Carioquice*” (“*Carioca-ness*”).

Street Art in Rio de Janeiro

The walls in Rio's South Zone are covered in scribbles, stencils, graffiti, and collages, displaying various aesthetics and messages, often paying homage to international graffiti artists: here are the graffiti exhibiting large rats by industrial design artist Meton Joffily, who has worked as a graffiti artist for over 10 years (Fig. 1); and the stencils showing monkeys dressed in suits by various artists in the Nata Collective (<http://noo.com.br/>), formed almost a decade ago by young local residents of the Laranjeiras neighborhood.



Fig. 1. Meton Joffily, *Rat*, Graffiti, Rio de Janeiro, 2014. Photo credit: Christina Vital da Cunha.

In streets with lower traffic, we find stencils criticizing the management of the City Council and Rio State government, mobilizing the image of Christ the Redeemer (Fig. 2), both a religious icon and a symbol for Rio, also crucial in the construction of national identity (Giumbelli).



Fig. 2. Unknown artist. *Christ the Redeemer, threatened by mayor of Rio de Janeiro Eduardo Paes, and State governor Sérgio Cabral*, Stencil, 2014. Photo credit: Christina Vital da Cunha.

In streets with high visibility, we encounter this motivational landscape inspiring by its form and color, aimed at provoking a state of calm, cheerfulness, and “lovingness” (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4).



Fig. 3. Visual Arts Workshop students from the Centro de Referência da Juventude. Panel at the entrance of the CIEP (Integrated Center of Public Education) at Morro do Cantagalo, Ipanema, Rio de Janeiro, 2011. Photo credit: Christina Vital da Cunha.



Fig. 4. Pezão. *Inviting everyone to love one another* (“Ame o próximo”), Graffiti, 2014.
Photo credit: Christina Vital da Cunha.

These graffiti are produced by various artists with different motivations and references. There are graffiti artists who have their names associated with fine notebooks collections, that are in the arts market, while having at the same time a significant production out in *the street* (a notion that refers to the urban space, the city, as a whole: its streets, walls, squares). One such artist is Marcelo Ment (b. 1977), “a Carioca from Vila da Penha,” who “has used the streets of Brazil and the world as the main support for his art” since 1998 (Fig. 5). Ment, “one of the most important graffiti names today” is in fact, “a self-taught art educator and member of the first generation of graffiti artists in Rio de Janeiro,” whose work “can be seen in major publications, exhibitions, trademarks, and mainly on the walls, from where he would never want to leave.” Ment describes his graffiti work in this way: “The protagonists of my works are the situations, the architectural elements of the places I’ve been, the human material and behavior. Not just art for art” (<http://marceloment.com.br>).



Fig. 5. Ment and Bigo. *Portrait of a girl made of positive words like peace, love, truth, confidence, Graffiti, 2014.* Photo credit: Christina Vital da Cunha.

Some have years of work in the street and have already been linked to City initiatives. One such artist is graphic designer Eduardo Denne (b. 1972), native of São Paulo but resident of Rio de Janeiro. With a Bachelor of Arts in Industrial Design from UniverCidade (2005), Denne is a self-taught plastic artist, who coordinates the project *CDR*. He occupies his time with street art, painting, illustration, stencil, graphic design and calligraphy (Fig. 6 and Fig 7). He gives lectures and workshops on Stencil, Urban Intervention, and Street Art, and produces the *Parede, International Poster Art Festival of Rio de Janeiro*” (<http://www.denne.com.br/#/bio>).



Fig. 6. Denne. *Tribute to Rio's most famous street poet, Profeta Gentileza*. Graffiti, 2014, Photo credit: Christina Vital da Cunha.



Fig. 7. Denne. *Hand with a Heart*. The fingers are pointing to the sky, towards God. Graffiti, 2015. Photo credit: Christina Vital da Cunha.

Others make graffiti in the street and act concurrently in social projects with NGOs in the formation of young people through graffiti (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8. Preas. *Colored Heart*, Graffiti, 2014. Photo credit: Christina Vital da Cunha.

Others are only beginning, but have managed to make a mark with their work. They are part of an evangelical youth who take the graffiti as a means to access other young people and also as a way to perform a Christian message of love and happiness in the city (Fig. 9 and Fig. 10). Regarding these images, one could read the following explanation in an article published in *Revista O Globo* in April 20, 2014, and widely circulated in the social networks:

With the Head in Place. Who is the artist behind Angatu, the face with an open grin that can be seen in graffiti around the Rio?’ The text praises the production of evangelical artist Rafael Hiran and presents some of the traits of the character created in 1998 during a religious conference on happiness: ‘The Angatu is a character made of a head. Strict and broad sense. His figure is nothing more than a guy with colored hair, a prominent nose, a wide open smile showing eight teeth, and a look that sometimes seems naive, sometimes sly. The smiling expression is intriguing. Is he nervous? Or is he just so relaxed? Angatu is a word from the Tupi-Guarani and means good soul, wellness, happiness” (Vital da Cunha 14).



Fig. 9. Rafael Hiran. *Angatu character*, Graffiti, 2014. Photo credit: Christina Vital da Cunha.



Fig. 10. Bala Machine and Killyacking. Wall painting for cultural and artistic event Encontro de Favelas, 2014. Photo credit: Christina Vital da Cunha.

There are young women and men, evangelical or not. What matters in this exploratory analysis is the connection between the production that these young artists are doing in the city, and the way that this production conforms with the staging of Rio de Janeiro—both traditionally and in its updated version in the context of the Olympics—as beautiful, lush, harmonious city, full of “lovingness.” The initiatives funded by the City Council and the State of Rio de Janeiro, as well as many who are not the result of public resources shape, produce, and give visibility to the idea of what it means to be a *Carioca* citizen—a state of mind that characterizes the city dwellers, also contagious for the visitors. In other words, the arts that help shape this “motivational” landscape also helps producing and designing *Carioca-ness*.

“Carioca Spirit,” “Carioca-ness”

There are many controversies surrounding the shaping of a *Carioca* identity, “Rio’s spirit,” or “*Carioca-ness*” (see Freire and Goldenberg). In March of 2013, the media circulated sayings that “Cariocas are beautiful, cool and mutant” and further that “Behind the stereotypes, *Cariocas* and city households, according to experts, are plural”

(<http://oglobo.globo.com/rio/cariocas-sao-bonitos-bacanas-mutantes-7706190>).

However, various resources including music have largely contributing in forging and disseminating the “spirit of Rio,” in Brazil and abroad. The song “Girl from Ipanema,” composed in 1962 by Vinícius de Moraes and Tom Jobim, was one of the first hits to evoke this “*Carioca* way of being”: beautiful, sensual, and relaxed. In addition to the composers themselves, the music was interpreted by

Frank Sinatra, Cher, Madonna, Mariza, Sepultura, and Amy Winehouse, among others. Decades later, the “Rio 40 Graus,” a song from Fernanda Abreu, Fausto Fawcett, and Laufer, recorded in 1992, and “Cariocas are beautiful,” by Adriana Calcanhotto, recorded in 1994, were hits that also documented the “*Carioca way*” and life in the city, their lyrics highlighting its inherent ambiguities.

The context of this decade in Rio de Janeiro was the explosion of “urban violence” (See Soares (1996), Milk (2001), Machado da Silva (2008), among others). Concomitant to the actions of State governments in an attempt to appease the violence in the State of Rio de Janeiro, and especially in the city, the City Council joined an international plan in which several Latin American cities participated, designing the “redevelopment and urban regeneration projects within the framework of the so-called Catalan strategic planning model” (Pinto 517). This regeneration involved an improvement of infrastructure, and also the accentuation of the positive features that marked the representation (“understood here as a process and relationship, including in its scope political culture, system of exchange and transfer values, imaginary utopian and pragmatic realities,” see Mitchell apud Schwarcz 393). the way of being, the spirit of Rio. If roguery (*malandragem*), violence, and sexual liberation among the *Cariocas* was a negative reference to “*Carioca-ness*,” a stigma for the local population, the local governments have successively acted in its fight, since Mayor César Maia.

In its place they invested in the production of adjusted citizens to what was being shaped as a new “spirit of Rio.” For example, the *Favela-Bairro* Program, initiated by Rio’s City Council in 1994, was intended to transform the *favelas* into “normal” neighborhoods, and its population into integrated citizens within the city by “integrating the *favela* into the city.” Furthermore, “coordinated by the Municipal Department of Housing and funded by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the Program implements urban infrastructure, services, public facilities and social policies in the beneficiary communities.” In Expo 2000 in Hanover, Germany—the largest international event at the end of the millennium, the *Favela-Bairro* was “chosen among the world’s best programs,” an award that allowed the *Favela-Bairro* to use the logo of the event—Expo 2000 Hanover, Registered Project of the World Exposition Germany—a kind of seal of quality and international recognition.” In the 2006/2007 Cities World Report of the UN, the program was nominated “as an example to be followed by other countries” (http://www.rio.rj.gov.br/habitacao/favela_bairro.htm; See also Cavalcanti and Randolph).

In 2000, the Mayor Luiz Paulo Conde classified the 56 panels painted by Profeta Gentileza a landmark of the city of Rio. A true urban narrative informing and encouraging a kinder, pleasant, and respectful form of life between the city dwellers, Gentileza’s panels initiated a process of valorization of urban art as a form of “expression of the city” and re-signification of the *Carioca’s* identity references. It was the coming of age of an understanding of the political importance of street art. In an international context, this strategic relationship with graffiti and other forms of artistic intervention was developed especially in the city of Berlin whose investment in the integration of young migrants’

descendents was undertaken with the participation of this youth in social projects funded by the government (Eckert & Rocha, 2014; 2015). It is worth noting that the work of Gentileza underwent forms of appropriations by the government and the market, with the creation of the brand "*Gentileza Gera Gentileza*" ("Gentleness Generates Gentleness"). To learn more about the work of Profeta Gentileza, see Guelman.

Two recent decrees of the City Council shape important milestones in this process of re-signification, affirmation and dissemination of the city's identity and the promotion of urban art by the government. It is the Decree no. 39797 of March 1, 2015, and the Decree no. 38307 of February 18, 2014. The first, popularly called "Decree of *Carioca-ness*", was published in the City Council's Official Gazette in its commemorative issue for the 450 years of history of Rio. In it, Mayor Eduardo Paes declares the "*Carioca condition*," "*Carioca-ness*" as Intangible Cultural Heritage for the City of Rio de Janeiro, considering that "in this place, the City of Rio de Janeiro, was born a civilization seeking to invent new habits, customs, knowledge, techniques, beliefs and values, inspired by the rare and harmonious relationship between nature and human settlement, and that in this place rested for a long time the blessing and the burden of being a symbol for the Brazilian nation." The decree emphasizes the beauty, the relationship with nature, harmony, fraternity, happiness, joy and plurality, the appreciation of difference as the components of this "spirit of Rio." It also considers that this "spirit" is an existential condition that may be shared by others who so wish: "Rio's condition is a mental, spiritual, physical, gestural, and linguistic state, before just the gentile of those born in the County of Rio de Janeiro, allowing anyone to *convert* himself into a *Carioca*, if he wishes." The advertising around the re-foundation of the city is so great that it emerges as featured on the newspaper *O Globo*: "Another decree published in this issue determines that subsequent normative and non-normative decrees shall include, before its official number, the word RIO as the landmark for a new cycle of the city of Rio de Janeiro, from the day when it completes 450 years of foundation": (<http://www.rio.rj.gov.br/web/guest/exibeconteudo?id=5224009>).

The Decree no. 38307 was popularly known as the "Graffiti Decree." It is an important milestone in the process of *artification* of graffiti in the city, formalizing the possibility of its usage by the government, among other regulations announced in the decree as the guarantee of the preservation of works with recognized artistic and cultural value that contribute to the image of the city. These graffiti should not threaten the public and historical heritage, nor should they consist in advertising, pornographic, or racist content, or any form of prejudice otherwise, and no illegal apology or religious offense. The decree caused great controversy among graffiti artists in the city, and beyond.

We note, in the process of *artification* of graffiti and its recent use as a form of government publicity, the convergence of interests, grammars and religious symbols, with those who are more secular. In an interview with Bboy Rafael, evangelical graffiti artist related to the *Bola de Neve* church, was highlighted his participation in some City Council initiatives, among other religious graffiti artists. He was commissioned by municipal officials from the *EixoRio* Institute, to create large panels for city events. The commissioned

painting was then intended to highlight the city of Rio, the “*Carioca* spirit”, its natural landscapes (between sea and mountain), and some city landmarks like the *Arcos da Lapa*. The *EixoRio* Institute is:

a joint platform created by the City Government of Rio de Janeiro to enhance the city’s urban scene. Although its main area is culture, the Institute works transversally in partnership with other departments and public and private agencies. His projects are focused on a proposal to merge art and urban recuperation, stimulating urban reordering and conservation, in order to generate cultural and economic vitality and improve the quality of life of the *Cariocas*.

<http://www.rio.rj.gov.br/web/eixorio>

In the projects of the *EixoRio* Institute, evangelical artists are and have been involved in social projects, informed by the notion that art restores and promotes citizenship, honoring the great icons of a message of love and peace, as Profeta Gentileza himself. An example is Eduardo Denne, founder of *CDR—Coletivo de Rua* (Street Collective)—an artist who has been involved in urban interventions for almost 20 years. Recognized for the high quality of his work and social activities, Denne is responsible for the preparation of a project that exhibited large murals across the city, with topics ranging from religion to politics). The government of the State of Rio de Janeiro, in tune with these ideas when the city was gaining important international projection, funded social projects that use graffiti as a tool for citizenship and financial return for youth living in the *favelas* covered by the program, as well as vulnerable populations in other countries. This was the case of graffiti artist Preas whom, in an informal conversation with me during the course of one of his works in 2015 (the colorful heart shown in a photography below), spoke enthusiastically about the workshops offered by the *Afroreggae* NGO, and their trip to Cape Verde with young participants of the NGO in a social and artistic project called *UPP—Universo Pictórico Particular* (Particular Pictorial Universe)—a name that raises attention in Rio’s context, due to the initials that refer to the most recent and mediatized public security policy of the State Department of Public Safety, having as its main focus the occupation of *favelas* in Rio (about this policy, see Machado da Silva (2015); Rocha; Vital da Cunha (2015)).

Young evangelical graffiti artists, associated or not with the government, are interventions that, although not exactly shaping a form of evangelization through art since they are not reproducing biblical texts, use graffiti to promote a possible way of life in the city. A bet on a shared life project based on love and happiness (as in Rafael Hiran’s *Angatu* shown in photograph above), on the vigilant and smart attitude (as in evangelical graffiti artist Marcus’ eyes). And in this city project we see acting—sometimes together, sometimes concurrently—public managers, graffiti artists, and religious Christians.

Conclusion

The *Carioca* landscape has always been the object of production and presentation for Brazil, nationally and internationally. This goes back to the photographs dating from the Empire period, meant to produce a specific representation of the city and its residents (Turazzi; Schwarcz, among others). In that period, especially in the Second Empire, Dom Pedro II intended to

implement a romantic national project, much guided in visual resources and material: first, through large screens created by the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts, and then — or alongside from the second half of the 19th Century — the encouragement and dissemination of photography. (Schwarcz 396)

The authors argue that, not only were the natural landscapes pleasing to the taste of governments and nationals that accessed the beauty of the images being produced, but it also passed on to shape an “essence” of its people: strong, broad, harmonious, beautiful. The highlighted landscape, framed and, in this sense, performed, comes to embody the representation of its people. Nature, wild and also human, gains outlines of a directed construction, as “identity traits – cement to the discourse of nationality – is always a social and political construction.” (Schwarcz 395).

In the current context, the city of Rio de Janeiro has hosted major international events like the Pan-American Games (2007), The 5th CISM Military World Games (2011), the Confederations’ Cup (2013), the World Youth Day (2013), the World Cup (2014), and this year, the Olympics (about Rio de Janeiro as a mega-events city, see Leite, among others) landscape formation appears again as an important public resource for the presentation of the city, for the promotion of the *Carioca* way of being, of the identity of the resident of the city, and even the national identity (given the place that Rio holds in the formation of Brazil’s representation within the country and abroad). Despite the variety of references and aesthetics at play in street art in the city today, and the variety of artists’ profiles performing them, despite even several of them presenting themselves as deviants, to use the term of Becker (1977) referring to one of the social types that make up the social world of arts, the process of *ratification*, of legitimization of graffiti and urban interventions as art occupying galleries in Brazil and the world, enabled exchanges and uses never imagined before by the State and by religion, in their projects of power, and social and spiritual transformation of Rio’s citizens and the world. In this sense, graffiti gravitate between an expressive social practice of “popular culture” in the terms of Stuart Hall, as it inspires and reflects “experiences, pleasures, memories and traditions of the people. It has links with the local hopes and aspirations, tragedies and local scenarios that are daily practices and experiences of ordinary people” (Hall 340), and an art designed to transform individuals and societies (Gell).

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