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GRAFFITI AS POLITICAL RESISTANCE:

A SÃO PAULO CASE STUDY

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THE “BORBA GATO” STANDS TALL in the Santo Amaro avenue, overlooking the cars going to and from work everyday. The statue is a distinct and striking part of São Paulo, Brazil, serving both as a touristic landmark and reference point for directions. To the dismay of many, its presence is ingrained in the city; a constant. That dismay is made obvious by the instances where the statue was used as an artistic vessel. In the last ten years, people have placed skulls around the statue, spray-painted it with the words, “killer” and “ruralist,” and eventually ignited it.

One of these instances was not isolated to just the statue of Borba Gato. On an otherwise normal Friday morning in September of 2016, corporate São Paulo would soon wake up to unexpected messages. The surprise didn’t come until after. After people brushed their teeth, after they got dressed, after they ate their breakfasts. The surprise didn’t come until people were mid-way on their drive to work, that’s when the cars slowed down and the necks started turning. There, located in some of the busiest streets of the city, were two prominent statues with red, green, and yellow graffiti splattered all over them.

The first is *The Statue of Borba Gato*. It is a 13-meter tall structure made from stone and marble located in an essential financial centre and transportation hub. It was inaugurated in 1963 to celebrate Manoel de Borba Gato, a judge and bandeirante known for his discovery of emerald and gold mines in Minas Gerais. The second is *Monumento às Bandeiras*, an 8-meter long sculpture composed of

240 blocks of granite, located in front of the iconic, urban Ibirapuera Park. It was created in 1954 to celebrate the bandeirantes, explorers of the interior of Brazil who searched for precious metals and Indigenous people to capture and enslave during Brazil’s colonial period, a group that Borba Gato was a part of as well.

São Paulo and graffiti are interconnected. Not even a five-minute drive in the city is possible without seeing spray-painted walls, some depicting moments as innocent as riding a bike¹, some criticizing the government through political mantras written in bold lettering². But, graffiti was not always well-received in Brazil. In the 1980s, while Brazil was under a dictatorship and freedom of speech was destroyed by the military, graffiti was considered a crime³. It was not until 2011 that graffiti was decriminalized and started being seen as street art, rather than a sole act of vandalism⁴.

But this decriminalization is far from being a complete acceptance of graffiti, mainly because the Brazilian government drew a distinction between graffiti and pichação, street art made without the consent of the property owner. This distinction has become as cultural as it is legal. The street art typically labeled as graffiti are those that do not oppose the government as well as general societal norms. Graffiti is usually composed of paintings and images while pichação is known for its bold calligraphy and bright colors. The comparison of the amount of words in graffiti versus pichação translates into the expression that is allowed in each of these categories.

Most representative of the significance of pichação in the city are the aforementioned sculptures. On that Friday morning, both of the statues were splashed in red, green, and yellow. This act was categorized as pichação because the authors completely lacked consent of the public authorities to spray paint the monuments; whether or not the act was coincidental or strategic remains unknown.

At first, the red spray paint seems to represent blood, criticizing the number of Indigenous people who were enslaved in the hands of the bandeirantes. The green and yellow could be representative of the Brazilian flag, criticizing the hypocrisy of honoring the very people that killed the first inhabitants of the land—the first “Brazilians.” This message, however, is not fully clear since the green comes off as turquoise, and therefore does not resemble the green in the Brazilian flag. The turquoise could be because of a lack of materials or indicative of the pichação being unplanned, instead, a result of heightened emotions from the sheer disdain of the monuments themselves. Both theories still show how graffiti is a cheap way to express criticism—an accessible format for political resistance.

The lack of news coverage on the event makes it so all these theories remain tentative, with the exception of the root of the criticism which, given the extensive controversy of the statues, can be attributed to criticizing the idolization of figures who enslaved and killed hundreds of Indigenous people in the colonial period. The event in 2016 was far from the first of its kind. In 2012, artists drew donkey ears on the horses of the *Monumento às Bandeiras*. In 2015, a group spray painted the words, “bandeirante, ruralist and assassin,” on the *Borba Gato*.

These two monuments are just two examples of how a city uses graffiti as a form of political expression. The criminalization of pichação in 2011, as opposed to limiting artists from street art, has turned the message all-the-more powerful. Although São Paulo is particularly well-known for graffiti being used as a form of political resistance, it is definitely not the only city to do so. The Berlin Wall is infamously known for being a site for graffiti, with artists repeatedly writing speeches against authoritarianism⁵. Similarly, the Israeli West Bank barrier is covered with graffiti addressing anti-occupation slogans and calling for freedom with phrases such

as, “to exist is to resist.” on the wall⁶.

In São Paulo, pichação is known for being done in a matter of seconds, in an attempt to escape legal accountability. Both the limited time and the accessibility of the materials are representative of the art they can ultimately make from these scarce resources—a cruel representation of the difficulty artists face to make their voices heard. The scant resources and possibility of facing criminal charges does not stop them, showing not only the passion behind their message, but their boldness and drive.

In the urban combative socio-economic separation of classes, graffiti is seen in different ways. Although some in middle and high-income society might look and judge, dismissing graffiti as destructive, others in peripheral communities can resonate, feeling heard through the attention-demanding medium of graffiti.

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