

The Art of Creative Compromise: Feminist Street Art Collective Rede Nami's Comprehensive Approach to Empowering Women

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ABSTRACT

Brazil is internationally known for its street art, which often used as a vehicle for social change as it allows relatively powerless members of society to claim their voices in a visual and unapologetically public way. In particular, encouraging women to assert their agency, Rede Nami, a feminist street art collective, uses street art to promote women's rights. Rede Nami operates as an NGO with traditional leadership hierarchies, funds their projects through the support of international organizations, and disseminates information regarding legislation in their murals. Although Rede Nami hopes to enact social change, they function entirely within dominant systems of power. It may be tempting to dismiss the work of Rede Nami as ineffective, potentially limited by their ties with the dominant culture they seek to challenge and the tensions between their proposed goals and the means they use to get there. However, my paper lays out the ways in which Rede Nami utilizes an innovative and effective approach to reaching their core goal of promoting women's rights. Rede Nami's multifaceted method of using urban arts to promote women's rights through theoretical education on black feminism, practical artistic skills, and synthesizing that theoretical and practical knowledge into socially aware murals defines Brazilian women and their role in society as bold and active creators and educators. In so doing the group navigates the tension between their official status as an NGO and affiliations with funding sources and the need to challenge the patriarchy and its normalization and danger in their daily lives. Through visual analyses of murals created by the group and evaluating interviews of women involved with the collective as found on YouTube and personally conducted over Skype, I contend that Rede Nami's efficacy lies in their power to unleash individual potential and inform women on the intersection between the personal and the political, which in turn has rippled out to positively transform society from the bottom up.

INTRODUCING REDE NAMI

After experiencing domestic violence at the hands of her now ex-husband, Panmela Castro was disturbed to find that she had no legal recourse in her situation, as no laws prohibiting domestic violence existed in Brazil at the time. In 2006, Brazil finally passed Law 11.340/06, commonly known as the Maria da Penha law to criminalize domestic violence.¹ As an artist, Castro's creative instincts took over, and helped her transform a potentially traumatic situation into a catalyst for social change by spreading the word about the law through the publicly accessible medium of street art.² Making street art had always empowered Castro, and she thought she could share this sense of empowerment while simultaneously disseminating information about the Maria da Penha law. Castro founded the Rede Nami in 2010 as a decidedly feminist cultural organization that uses "urban arts to promote women's rights."³ In this group, the promotion of women's rights takes the form of disseminating information regarding the Maria da Penha law and related rights, educating women about feminism, and empowering women to feel confident in creating art in a public space.

¹ Daniel Cerqueria et al., "Atlas da Violência 2017" (Rio de Janeiro: Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública and Ipea, June 2017), http://www.ipea.gov.br/portal/images/170609_atlas_da_violencia_2017.pdf. Maria da Penha law considers psychological, physical and sexual violence and provides protection in the form of a buffer (restraining order) between the victim and abuser to prevent fatalities. The ease of accessing this protection is debated.

Maria da Penha was shot in her sleep by her husband and left paraplegic. Soon after her return from the hospital, he tried to electrocute her. Da Penha took her case to court and only after two decades of fighting was he convicted. The landmark case offers protection to women at risk of domestic violence and harsher sentences for those who commit it.

All translations from Portuguese to English are made by the author unless otherwise noted.

² I use the term "street art" throughout this paper. Although other sources use the term "graffiti," I avoid it due to its negative connotations and ties with illegality in the English language.

³ *Rede Nami: Artes urbanas para promover os direitos das mulheres*, www.redenami.com
The organization became an official NGO in 2012

Rede Nami has spread its influence and now runs several initiatives ranging from an outdoor street art museum, workshops for school-aged children, and a series of workshops exclusively for women that synthesize theoretical information with practical artistic skills. As a testament to the apparent success of Rede Nami, Castro herself has been awarded several international accolades such the Vital Voices Global Leadership Award, the Diane Von Furstenberg Award, and made Newsweek magazine's list of "150 Fearless Women" for her role in starting the organization.⁴ Despite this ostensible success, the methods that Rede Nami uses to enact social change are ultimately tied up with the very hegemonic power structures they seek to change. As a feminist organization they are challenging the patriarchy, and as a cultural organization promoting women's rights they are disputing the socio-political contexts that have allowed the patriarchy to flourish in Brazil. Particularly, Rede Nami's usage of government-sanctioned street art, the base of spreading information about legislation, the organization's status as a nongovernmental organization (NGO) as of 2012, and their reliance on funding from international organization can all be considered implements dependent on authority. On account of these incriminating ties, it may be tempting to dismiss the work of Rede Nami as ineffective, potentially limited by their ties with the dominant culture they seek to change, and the tensions between their proposed goals and the means they use to achieve those goals. I argue, however, that Rede Nami's multifaceted approach of using urban arts to promote women's rights through theoretical education on black feminism, practical artistic skills, and synthesizing that theoretical and practical knowledge into socially aware murals defines Brazilian women and their

⁴ Gabriella Brown, "The Gender Justice of Graffiti Artist Panmela Castro," *Bitch Magazine: Feminist Response to Pop Culture*, Fall 2012.

role in society as bold and active creators. In so doing, the group creatively navigates the tensions between their official NGO status and potentially limiting methods with the need to challenge the normalization of the patriarchy and the danger that manifests in women's daily lives.

I adopt an interdisciplinary approach to support my claim of interpreting Rede Nami as creatively making compromises between the hegemonic power structures and the needs of the oppressed actors. I start by invoking the work of other scholars in order to problematize the actions of the Rede Nami as potentially ineffective due to their deep dependency on the dominant society that they attempt to challenge. Throughout this section, I continue to introduce more information about Rede Nami as an organization and the context under which they work. Through further consideration of scholarship relating to cultural organizations as actors of social change, as well as topically relevant scholarship about feminism's role in enacting social change for Rede Nami, I will have set the premise from which to analyze Rede Nami's accomplishments and deficiencies as a group using my own primary evidence. I ultimately argue that Rede Nami is indeed effective in reaching their core goal of promoting women's rights through urban art, and as evidence for this claim, I will visually analyze several murals made by the group and interpret the content of YouTube interviews and a personally conducted Skype interview with Rede Nami's communications director. The artworks and interviews serve to illustrate the group's power in enacting social change in a public and unambiguous way, which ultimately works from the bottom up and ripples out.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS TO DISMISS REDE NAMI'S CAPACITY FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

By considering Rede Nami's approach under certain theoretical frameworks, the impediments that the organization faces in reaching genuine social change become apparent. The

prominent civil rights activist, feminist, and writer Audre Lorde asserted that, “The Master’s Tools will never dismantle the Master’s house.”⁵ In the case of Rede Nami, we consider the Master’s house as the patriarchy upheld in Brazil by the government and civil society. The Master’s tools are the ways in which Rede Nami works by using street art, promoting official legislation, running as an NGO with traditional leadership structures and international donors. Conceptualizing Rede Nami as falling into the model that Lorde criticizes poses the question of whether the organization’s approach should be entirely dismissed as incompetent, or if their effect can be interpreted in a more nuanced way to ultimately recognize Rede Nami as a producer of social change.

Despite popular connotations of intrinsic radicality and subversiveness of street art, its legality, public acceptance, and commodification in Brazil has transformed it into a mainstream art form. Street art does have strong roots as a nontraditional, anti-establishment form of art and political expression that amplified during the oppressive military dictatorship of the 1960s.⁶ Once the dictatorship ended, street art continued, and Brazil eventually embraced the movement as a point of cultural pride. Through its expansion and greater mainstream acceptance, the art form has attracted formally trained artists who often travel internationally and create commissioned pieces.⁷ In 2009 Brazil legalized street art, and cities like São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro have especially vibrant street art scenes that attract tourists. While pieces are often still used for socially conscious

⁵ Charles R. Hale, “Activist Research v. Cultural Critique: Indigenous Land Rights and the Contradictions of Politically Engaged Anthropology,” *Cultural Anthropology* 21, no. 1 (February 2006): 111.

Hale references Lorde’s well known dictum in his essay while considering his own role as an activist researcher.

⁶ The military dictatorship censured traditional visual art forms, literature, and journalism. Street art served as an opportunity to express critical views of the regime in an anonymous, yet public manner.

⁷ Rede Nami’s founder, Pamela Castro, is one of these formally trained artists who has created street art internationally.

ends, it is important to consider how the change from an illegal art form intended to contradict the government to a legal and often encouraged and commodified artform can affect the process and final product of the street art. The originally inherently subversive nature of street art is tainted by the state sanctioning it. Therefore, we cannot accept Rede Nami's work as inherently radical because of its usage of an art form that is no longer subversive. The organization's foundational tool in fighting the oppressive patriarchy is an art form that has historically been controlled by men and is contemporarily owned by the government.

In addition to the principal tool of social change being co-opted from the dominant culture, the reason Rede Nami was founded and their continued main strategy of promoting women's rights involves disseminating information about legislation that encourages women to claim their empowerment through the state. This dependency on a law to secure women's rights is treacherous terrain, as many other aspects of the government seek to undermine women. Additionally, laws like the Maria da Penha law never serve as panaceas for social issues; women in Brazil continue to face alarming rates of domestic violence and femicides. In 2015, 4,621 women were killed in Brazil, a rate that grew 7.3% between 2005 and 2015 despite the passage of the Maria da Penha law in 2006 intended to protect women from the extremely destructive form of gender-based violence, femicide.⁸ Additionally, women without financial resources often are limited in their access to the Maria da Penha law. Relying on legislation to ensure social justice and preventing domestic may not be a sustainable departure point for Rede Nami.

Rede Nami's main method and principal issue of promotion of women's rights are precariously inhibited by their dependence on the dominant culture. The final facet of Rede

⁸ Daniel Cerqueria et al., "Atlas da Violência 2017" (Rio de Janeiro: Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública and Ipea, June 2017), http://www.ipea.gov.br/portal/images/170609_atlas_da_violencia_2017.pdf.

Nami's potential of limitation that I consider relates to its organizational identity. Rede Nami became an official NGO in 2012, and with that officialization comes several considerations relating to restricting the organization's efficacy, such as reframing issues for a dominant audience, rather than answering first and exclusively to civil society. Additionally, the very structure of Rede Nami is reminiscent of hegemonic power structures, as they employ traditional leadership hierarchies including a board of directors and interns. As an NGO, they rely heavily on international organizations to fund their projects.

As an NGO that uses cultural forms of enacting social justice, they occupy a unique space of mediating between civil society and institutional facets of society. Through using the Master's tools, the dominant culture sees their work as legitimate, and is therefore more likely to welcome their message. This acceptance also gives the group unprecedented visibility locally and internationally, which attracts donors to fund their projects. As Castro herself has been recognized on global platforms, international organizations like the Ford Foundation and Vital Voices have provided much of Rede Nami's funding. Contrary to popular perceptions that imagine street art as an inexpensive alternative to traditional artforms, the rise in popularity of street art has correlated to a rise in prices of the spray paint needed to complete projects.⁹ Additionally, as Rede Nami has expanded as an organization, they have accrued fees related to office space, locations to run their workshops, and hiring additional staff. While funding is integral to running any organization, the dependence on international organizations could lead Rede Nami to adjust their values in order to secure funding, or to use funding from sources that actively oppress facets of Brazilian society.

⁹ J.Lo Borges (communications director of Rede Nami), interviewed by author, New Orleans, US/Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, November 2017.

Deciphering Rede Nami's work as using the Master's tools complicates their mission of promoting women's rights. Building on Lorde's theoretical framework, scholar Chela Sandoval elaborates on Lorde's assertion and envisions the struggles of the oppressed as destined to reinforce or even reproduce the oppressive structures they aim to resist.¹⁰ Following this logic, Rede Nami would not be considered effective in reaching their social justice based goals, and could even be interpreted as strengthening the Master's house. Any organization that seeks to serve disadvantaged populations through the tools of the oppressors face limitations, and must compromise with the oppressors in ways that are advantageous to the population the organization targets to serve.

SCHOLARS WHO CONSIDER POTENTIAL OF EFFICACY THROUGH CREATIVE COMPROMISE

Despite the popularity of Lorde's dictum, and the hesitancy of many to associate cultural organizations and the dominant society, several scholars consider the possibility of effective compromise that serves as a positive influence for social change. For example, Charles Hale, an activist scholar grapples with similar doubts regarding constrained competence in fighting hegemonic powers with Master's tools. He considers the reality that "Oppressed peoples, in the vast majority of cases, have no alternative but to wage struggles for rights and redress using the language, the legal and political tools, and even funding of their oppressors," and recognizes the "formidable constraints" that exist for oppressed actors.¹¹ However tempting it may be to dismiss Rede Nami as limited in impact because of its ties with oppressors, I argue that they work

¹⁰ Charles R. Hale, "Activist Research v. Cultural Critique: Indigenous Land Rights and the Contradictions of Politically Engaged Anthropology," *Cultural Anthropology* 21, no. 1 (February 2006): 111. Hale summarizing Sandoval's assertions.

¹¹ Ibid.

creatively within the formidable constraints and transform them into meaningful and effective means of promoting women's rights.

In line with my own interpretation that ties to the dominant culture does not doom Rede Nami to inefficacy, or worse, reproduction of oppressive structures, scholars like Hale argue oppressed actors can maintain their agency. Hale cites Gregoria Flores's affirmation that "we are using the system to fight the system."¹² This appropriation of the Master's tools is strategic and powerful in enacting social change from the bottom up. Hale suggests that "Ultimately, there may be no other way to begin casting off the Master's tools of our trade, except by putting them to use in radically alternative ways."¹³ Although I consider street art as a Master's tool in contemporary Brazil, Rede Nami as a collective comprised of all women is a radical alternative to the traditional iterations of street art in Brazil.

Scholar George Yúdice, who studies cultural groups, also claims that oppressed actors can maintain their agency through the process of mediating cultural actions with hegemonic powers. Yúdice understands culture to be the "slippery terrain where change is sought."¹⁴ It is difficult to define and assign a definitive value to culture, making it a "slippery" method for seeking change. However, Yúdice ultimately argues that cultural NGO groups have unique power to mediate between the diverse agendas of civil society and the hegemonic powers. To generate sustainable success, groups must be firm in standing up for their values. Yúdice also stresses the importance

¹² Charles R. Hale, "Activist Research v. Cultural Critique: Indigenous Land Rights and the Contradictions of Politically Engaged Anthropology," *Cultural Anthropology* 21, no. 1 (February 2006): 111. Hale is quoting part of a lecture he attended by Flores.

¹³ Charles R. Hale, "Activist Research v. Cultural Critique: Indigenous Land Rights and the Contradictions of Politically Engaged Anthropology," *Cultural Anthropology* 21, no. 1 (February 2006): 112.

¹⁴ George Yúdice, "Parlaying Culture into Social Justice," *Social Text* 19, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 63.

of engaging with multiple partners as to not become overly dependent on the funding or influenced by the values of any one source.

Rede Nami does appropriate the Master's tools, yet synthesizes them in a way that powerfully connects the personal experiences of women with more global and political ends. The cultural focus of street art encourages creative approaches to enacting social change. Ultimately using the Master's tools grants the organization legitimacy in the eyes of the dominant society, and provides the cause with more visibility and potential support. In many cases, there are no effective alternative solutions that exist outside the influence of hegemonic powers, and using those tools for the benefit of oppressed peoples is in fact subversive.

FEMINISM AS THE CORNERSTONE OF REDE NAMI

Rede Nami prominently defines themselves as a feminist organization, a label that guides their identity and actions. However, "feminism" has a plethora of definitions, connotations and understandings, making it necessary to describe Rede Nami's specific take on feminism. The organization uses black feminism as their theoretical foundation, specifically when teaching about feminism in their workshops. Proponents of black feminists recognize the intersectional nature of women's experiences and acknowledges the additional struggles that people with various oppressed identities face. In addition to subjugation based on gender, many women also face oppression based on their racial and ethnic identities, geographic location, and socioeconomic class status. In the group in general, but particularly in their AfroGrafiteiras workshop series, Rede Nami directly integrates black feminism into the lessons as a core point of departure.¹⁵ In these workshops black feminism is taught in a theoretical capacity, and the women then have the

¹⁵ AfroGrafiteiras is a multisession workshop offered by Rede Nami to women that takes place in different underserved communities in Rio de Janeiro.

opportunity to apply it to their personal experiences. This personal application provides a rich synthesis between the personal and the political, encourages women to assert their political agency as an act of personal significance.

Rede Nami's approach of creating street art as women is inherently feminist, as it reclaims the male dominated artform. Following in suit with many counterculture movements and the traditional art world, street art has traditionally been a male dominated scene, and many artists valued the individuality and clandestine nature of their work. Women artists have often cited feeling unwelcome or unsafe in the hyper-masculine spaces. In response to this experience, all-women collectives like Rede Nami have formed so that women can create art in a group setting. Women often take additional measures of protection such as working primarily during the daytime and taking advantage of pre-prepared methods like stencils or posters that can be assembled in domestic spaces beforehand as to avoid harassment by fellow street artists or passerbys on the street.¹⁶ Women involved in street art have transformed the process of creating the art, the final product, and therefore the very essence of the artform. The women of Rede Nami who create street art carry feminism past the theoretical realm and perform feminist acts by reclaiming public space, creating relatable artwork, and building community.

Art historian Jessica Pabón focuses her research on women street artists in Latin America, and conducted a participant observation with the organization following its inception. She ultimately considers the power that Rede Nami has in enacting social change to be inextricably tied to the feminist roots of the group. Pabón comments that street art and its creation in the public sphere and generally public accessibility provides Rede Nami participants with “not only the time,

¹⁶ Jessica N. Pabón, “Ways of Being Seen: Gender and the Writing on the Wall” (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 79.

space, and materials needed for these women and girls to feel like and become agents in making Rio de Janeiro more beautiful, but also confidence needed to feel like and become valuable culture makers resisting patriarchal juridical, social, and political systems that restrict their safety and civil liberties.”¹⁷ This sense of confidence is integral in women claiming agency in their actions, occupying public space, and spreading what they have learned throughout their communities and even the wider world.

Pabón frames Rede Nami as an intensely feminist organization and recognizes that identity as the crux of their impact. Although some participants do not consider themselves to be feminists, the group still acts in a decidedly feminist way in their creation process of and reclaiming public space that has so long been considered the men’s counterpart to women’s domestic space. By generating content that exemplifies feminist concepts and aims to promote women’s rights, the feminist actions of creating street art are compounded in radicality. Rede Nami spreads feminism through theoretical education, but more significantly, by giving women the support they need to claim their own confidence and agency and perform feminist actions.

ANALYZING REDE NAMI’S IMPACT IN RIO THROUGH VISUAL ANALYSES OF MURALS

As street art is the foundation of Rede Nami’s approach, I analyze some of their murals since they are integral in the process of understanding the group’s values and image they put into the community. I consider three murals made by different subsets of Rede Nami that each establish distinct content and messages. Each mural has a different level of artistic development, but the importance of the images lies in the reasoning behind the specific imagery and the effect the images have in the community on the creators and on uninvolved passersby. Despite the

¹⁷ Jessica N. Pabón, “Be About It: Graffiti Performing Feminist Community,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 57, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 112.

differences in the murals, they all feature images of women who are presented in a non-sexualized way, contrary to the common portrayal of women in art and the media.



(Figure 1)¹⁸

Rede Nami created this piece, *Where There is Respect, There is Peace* mural to commemorate the eighth anniversary of the Maria da Penha law. The title of the piece is written in Portuguese in orange lettering in the upper right-hand corner of the piece. Most of Rede Nami's work includes images of women that are not overly sexualized, but rather have many layers of thin paint, perhaps to demonstrate their complexity as full humans. This representation contrasts with how traditional art forms and other media portray women, often as objects of consumption. The way Rede Nami created this woman is no exception; her dominant features include deep, piercing

¹⁸ Rede Nami, *Onde há respeito, há paz/Where There is Respect, There is Peace*. August 2014, Mural. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. From: www.riotimesonline.com/brazil-news/rio-entertainment/giant-graffiti-mural-in-rio-celebrates-womens-rights/

eyes and long entangling hair. Although she is pictured shirtless, her breasts or sexuality are not the main focus. Very few of Rede Nami's pieces include the male figure, but this mural features a figure that lies under the woman in the opposite direction and is presumably male. The hair is short, and the figure is also pictured shirtless and the torso looks almost identical to that of the female figure. The androgynous nature of the figure speaks to Rede Nami's commitment to representing a diversity of people and relationships in their work. It also speaks to the reality that domestic violence can be inflicted by a member of any gender and in any type of relationship. There is a arrow with a heart at the end that extends from the lower figure and pierces through the flesh of the woman's torso. The lower figure's eyes are red, contrasting with the bright blue of the woman's.

This mural successfully depicts the potential experience of domestic violence, without sensationalizing it. On one hand, the figures appear extremely peaceful, connecting to the title "Where there is respect, there is peace." Therefore the peaceful expressions could suggest that respect does exist in this particular relationship. However, the heart arrow that pierces the woman's skin, and the lower figure's red eyes suggest potential strife within the relationship. Rede Nami does not depict overt violence in their pieces, in part to honor the sensibilities of the many viewers. Additionally, Rede Nami educates its members and the general public that domestic violence does not always take dramatic and physical forms as psychological abuse is damaging in and of itself, and is often a precursor to more physical violence.¹⁹ The ambiguity of the message of this mural is typical of street art, and encourages viewers to interpret it based on their own experiences with relationships and respect.

¹⁹ The Maria da Penha law reflects this reality and considers psychological abuse when granting protection.

This work shows the original way in which Rede Nami operated before their workshop model became so popular. Panmela Castro is the figurehead for the project, yet other members of Rede Nami who were also skilled artists aided in the creation of this mural. The effects this mural has on the community as a whole include the artists' experiences, passerbys that observe the creation process, and anybody who sees the mural upon its completion and subsequently forms an opinion or has a discussion about it. As with most street art in publicly accessible and busy places, the target audience does not have any limits. Therefore, any reaction the general public has to this mural is considered an effect to potentially enact social change in the form of spreading information about the Maria da Penha law or more general discussions regarding individual opinions on the mural.



(Figure 2) ²⁰

²⁰ Rede Nami, *Feminismo não é egoísmo/Feminism isn't Selfishness*. January 2017, Mural. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. From: www.instagram.com/p/BPAmSkLFMwa/

Figure 2, titled *Feminism isn't selfishness* was created through Rede Nami's XoMachismo initiative, in which they travel to local schools and youth groups to create murals with young boys and girls. This particular image was made by eighth graders at Santa Teresa public school, and included both males and females in the creation process. The rationale behind including both genders in the creation process is that openly addressing issues like domestic violence at a young age provides a chance for the younger generation to actively stop cycles of domestic violence. These workshops include an relatively brief and simple explanation on issues such as domestic violence and the Maria da Penha law and how black feminism can be applicable to their lives. Through discussion of these themes, all participants brainstorm on imagery to include in the mural, and then actually create the mural.

This piece includes the text "Feminism isn't selfishness" and "A woman has power, she is who she wants to be!" A black woman flying over the city takes the central and prominent focus in this mural. She is wearing a superhero outfit with an "M" on the shirt, which presumably stands for "Mulher Maravilha" the Portuguese translation of "Wonder Woman." Portraying Mulher Maravilha as a black woman provides representation of a body mainstream art and mass media so often ignores. By choosing to depict Mulher Maravilha as black, the children who created this mural employed their own agency in their envisionment of a superhero that reflects their own reality.

Through the XoMachismo initiative that exposes children and young adults to street art, the women of Rede Nami serve as positive role models of strong and creative women, that the younger generation can actively emulate. Including young boys in the process encourages both genders to imagine and take responsibility for a more just and equitable future. It also educates young boys

that feminism has implications for a better future for everybody. For example, feminism rejects enforcing gender stereotypes for both men and women, therefore freeing men of the concepts like that they should not express emotion. The message that “feminism isn’t selfishness” eloquently describes the negative perception that many have of feminism as selfish versus the true beneficial effects that feminism can actually incite for all members of society.



(Figure 3)²¹

²¹ Rede Nami, *Untitled*. August 2017. Mural. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. From: www.instagram.com/p/BX3oA50ndkR/?taken-by=redenami

This piece is a section of a larger mural made by one of the AfroGrafitteiras workshops. Panmela Castro started the AfroGrafitteiras initiative in 2015, as she was disappointed by the lack of representation of women on streetartrio.com, a digital catalog of street art in Rio. She said that of over 700 artists, the website featured only thirty women, and of those thirty women, Castro herself was the only black woman. The AfroGrafitteiras workshops are only open to women, and especially seeks enrollment of black women. In line with the black feminist theoretical portion of the workshops, the text on the side of this mural roughly translates to “a black woman and a white woman arm in arm, solidarity in the forest of concrete and steel.” The image features three women’s faces that emerge like stacking dolls from the top of another. The skin tones become darker towards the top of the image, and each woman has a natural hairstyle, featuring the beauty of all hair types. The artists chose bright colors in this piece, to represent the hopefulness and positivity that solidarity between women can generate.

The image and text of this mural visually represent the importance of solidarity between all women. In black feminist theory, the intersections between different facets of identity and their whole lived experience is a key concept. Additionally, women who have less disadvantaged identities must recognize the privilege they maintain in their experience as a woman.²² Past simply recognizing privilege, true feminists must apply that privilege in the service of assisting other women. For example, as a black woman, Panmela Castro holds the privilege of a higher education in art. Creating Rede Nami was her personal contribution to the community and using her privilege to serve a larger purpose. The specificities of the text, referring to the “forest of concrete and steel” connects with the physical space and roots the image in Rio de Janeiro as it is

²² A “less disadvantaged” woman might be an educated wealthy white woman. While she still bears the disadvantage of being a woman, she holds privilege through her race, education level and socioeconomic class.

commonly conceptualized as a typical grey urban center set in the natural beauty of the Brazilian coast.

Each of the murals discussed represents a different manifestation of Rede Nami's mission through their various initiatives. Not pictured in these murals are the direct promotion of the Maria da Penha law or text that says "Ligue 180," which is the number to call to report domestic violence that appears in many of Rede Nami's murals. Analyzing these murals gives insight into how the group operates, and a visual analysis provides discernible evidence of the key concepts that Rede Nami introduces into the collective consciousness of Rio de Janeiro.

ANALYZING INTERVIEWS AS PRIMARY SOURCES OF EVIDENCE FOR REDE NAMI'S IMPACT

In addition to documenting their work through their website, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, Rede Nami has a YouTube channel that includes Panmela Castro's interviews with news sources, promotional videos to explain the group's initiatives, and interviews with past AfroGrafitteiras participants who now lead workshops. These interviews, along with an interview I conducted over Skype with Rede Nami's communications director provide immense insight to the affect the organization has had on the lives of the women involved. A recurrent theme in the interviews is the insight that the Afrografiteiras workshops have given these women to recontextualize their experience as black women in Brazil by rooting it in historical conditions and contemporary social realities.

Many women cite the theoretical portion of the AfroGrafitteiras workshops as a turning point in understanding their own identities and personalities. For example, previous to her involvement with Rede Nami, Myllena Assumpção identified herself as shy, and despite being an artist had never attempted street art because of that shyness. Myllena participated in the Brazilian

show, “Love and Sex” (“Amor e Sexo”) on a national television network speaking about her experience as a black woman street artist.²³ J.Lo Borges, the communications director of the organization, also reflects on how she had always felt shy growing up, but that “during AfroGrafitteiras I understood that what I was feeling that impeded me in the world was not shyness, but rather was a reflection of the racism that had been imposed on me.”²⁴ This realization did not come through J.Lo’s formal education or through her university degree in history, but rather only surfaced by learning specifically about black feminism and the topics that the theoretical portion of AfroGrafitteiras introduced her to. AfroGrafitteiras empowered both Myllena and J.Lo with the confidence they needed to reject their shyness and reach a higher personal potential.

As a current leader of AfroGrafitteiras workshops and communications director of Rede Nami, J.Lo breaks down the rationale behind Rede Nami’s inclusion of black feminist theory in their workshop by connecting the theoretical portion with more practical applications. She states that “there is a practical question, of perceiving how each woman is bringing it [education on black feminism] to her life, and an even more practical question yet, which is to see how these women end up becoming professionals and working directly with these issues, as well as multipliers within the project itself as artists and activists.”²⁵ In this statement, J.Lo speaks to the empowerment that Rede Nami encourages on an individual level. In her personal case, the organization has officially employed her and given her a chance to practice art in a professional capacity. The next section of J.Lo’s statement speaks to Rede Nami’s power to engage social change from the bottom up, and in

²³ “#AfroGrafitteiras [Episódio 3: Myllena Assumpção],” Youtube video, 02:34, posted by “Rede Nami,” July 26, 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=LcNOJK55YhA

²⁴ “#AfroGrafitteiras [Episódio 2: J.Lo Borges],” YouTube video, 00:38, posted by “Rede Nami,” July 19, 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q9i4rmbjjK8

²⁵ “#AfroGrafitteiras [Episódio 2: J.Lo Borges],” YouTube video, 02:41, posted by “Rede Nami,” July 19, 2017, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=Q9i4rmbjjK8>

a manner that will ripple out. By identifying as an activist, Rede Nami participants strive to connect the personal and political aspects of their lives, recognizing that these issues cannot be separated.

In my Skype interview with J.Lo, she elaborated on the effect Rede Nami has had on her life and answered my technical questions regarding the structure of the workshops. Through participating in the organization, J.Lo has gained the objective benefits of a job and opportunity to practice art, but has also profited in less objectively measurable ways such as through increased confidence, and the skillset to start her own series of free community workshops for lesbian women. She also explained to me how her own definition of feminism is based more on understanding the structural limitations that women face, whereas Rede Nami's definition of feminism focuses more on the empowerment factor and ambition that women can do whatever they please.²⁶ J.Lo serves as the perfect example of Rede Nami's social change rippling out to affect the community in a wider capacity than solely through direct contact with the cohorts of participants.

The interviews with the leaders of Rede Nami's AfroGrafiteiras workshops demonstrate firsthand the effect Rede Nami has had on women involved, and in the community in general. I see the most significant effect as the empowerment women feel, which affects them in a wider capacity than just in street art or their place in the organization. The theoretical portion educating on black feminism paired with the practical artistic training encourages the women to better understand their place and potential within Rio de Janeiro, as well as their effect as feminist actors.

²⁶ J.Lo Borges (communications director of Rede Nami), interviewed by author, New Orleans, US/Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, November 2017.

Another integral effect of the group involves the positivity and potential rippling out to affect people who are not directly involved with Rede Nami.

CONCLUSIONS: THE ART OF CREATIVE COMPROMISE

Although the approaches that Rede Nami uses to fight for women's rights appear completely subversive at first glance, through further inspection, they can be designated as Master's tools or methods of the oppressors. By defining the group's actions as working within hegemonic power structures, it is entirely possible to argue that the group is not autonomous to achieve their proposed goals, not effective in their methods of seeking social change, and generally too associated with their oppressors to be genuine or competent in promoting social change. However, by applying scholarly understandings of cultural organizations using the Master's tools to Rede Nami's case and by examining the artwork and thoughts of those involved with Rede Nami, we can interpret the group as effectively appropriating the oppressor's tools to confront their oppression through the patriarchy.

My research has focused on specifically on feminist street art collective Rede Nami's impact in their community. By applying a similar methodology of considering the contexts under which a group is working, analyzing their approaches, and measuring their influence through firsthand accounts of those involved with the organization could be used to assess the impact of any cultural group. Cultural groups that operate as NGOs occupy an important space that encourages communication with the hegemonic powers that so often serve to oppress disadvantaged peoples. However, formal ties with cultural groups encourages the hegemonic powers to follow through on their commitment to serving civil society, especially the disadvantaged facets. Compromising with these hegemonic powers does not necessarily imply a

compromise of values pers. So long as a cultural group stands their ground, the support from the dominant society aids the group in gaining visibility, spreading their message, and ultimately serving disadvantaged citizens.

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