

The Writing on the Wall

By Pedro Peterson

“Disjunctive democracy” and its spatial manifestations form the overarching themes in anthropologist Teresa Caldeira’s work. In her talk, Professor Caldeira outlined three separate “narratives” that describe ways in which urban space — particularly public space — is produced, organized and contested in São Paulo.

The first narrative is one of self-segregation by elites (and increasingly, the middle class), who live, shop and work in fortified enclaves with walls that separate them from the rest of the city. The next two narratives both come from São Paulo’s hip-hop movement and re-appropriate the walls built by the elites as a vehicle for self-expression and contestation. Graffiti adorns the city’s walls with sophisticated artwork, while *pichação* tags São Paulo’s buildings with elaborate calligraphy.

The first narrative described by Caldeira is one that she developed at length in her seminal book *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo*. The city’s elites have increasingly segregated themselves by building enclosed residential and commercial spaces, protected by walls, armed guards, and state-of-the-art security systems. The author argues that these fortified areas reproduce the inequality and violence that precipitated them. In fact, inequality is a distinct value used to market such enclaves to an ever more frightened population.

The segregation of the elites has occurred alongside two other phenomena, the democratization of Brazil and a sharp increase in the incidence of urban violence. As traditional forms of social organization, such as labor unions, have decreased in their importance, other vehicles for fighting social inequalities have emerged, such as NGOs and cultural and artistic movements. Professor Caldeira’s more recent research deals with São Paulo’s hip-hop movement and the ways in which young, mostly black males have asserted their identities as peripheral members of society. In São Paulo, hip-hop is an agglomeration of different cultural

expressions such as rap, break dancing, graffiti and *pichação*.

Rap groups such as Racionais MC’s offer a devastating class-based critique of Brazilian society. In the song “Fim de Semana no Parque” (“Weekend in the Park”), for example, a poor black boy can only dream of the life inside the walls where upper class children enjoy their heated swimming pools and go-karts. Caldeira notes, however, that rappers such as Racionais MC’s Mano Brown do not try to negotiate social inclusion, but rather locate their identities in the *periferia* (periphery), in a realm wholly distinct from that of the denizens of elite neighborhoods and gated condominiums.

In contrast, graffiti and *pichação* do venture outside the *periferia* and usurp the ultimate symbols of segregation and exclusion: São Paulo’s walls. In Caldeira’s words, they appropriate “whatever surface that is turned outwards as public.” Graffiti art, with its colorfully surrealist designs, has turned large portions of walls and buildings into murals. The complexity and beauty of the designs have even attracted the attention of the municipal government, which, under control of the Workers Party (PT), began to sponsor graffiti artists as a way to revitalize certain public spaces. Graffiti has been further mainstreamed and commoditized by corporate sponsorships, as in the example of BankBoston, which created a glossy coffee table book of graffiti art for its VIP clients as an example of its socially responsible practices.

Pichação, on the other hand, has remained a clandestine movement. Its practitioners, known as *pichadores*, have developed their cultural expression as an urban sport akin to skateboarding. Those who practice this “sport,” mostly young males, are often related to other groups such as organized soccer fan gangs. They outdo each other with ever more difficult feats, placing their *pichações* on the highest parts of tall buildings. They use their signatures as a way of asserting their “brand” upon the city. Caldeira described their elaborate, vertically



Photo courtesy of Teresa Caldeira.

oriented markings as reflections of the city's tall skyline. Like skateboarders, *pichadores* read the city's architecture in their own ways and appropriate public and private spaces for their own uses.

Professor Caldeira finished her talk with a gender analysis of these three narratives that contest public spaces in São Paulo. One prominent feature of the city's enclave architecture is the use of walls for placing advertisements which often depicting women in highly sexualized contexts. Likewise, the hip-hop contestation of the walls tends to be male-dominated and — particularly with rap lyrics — tends to either ignore or antagonize women. Thus, Caldeira argued, while these narratives contest class inequalities, they frequently reinforce gender inequalities.

Fittingly, Caldeira's discussion of the competing interpretations of public space in São Paulo came on the day after Brazil's presidential elections.

Corruption scandals aside, the transparency and efficiency of the electoral process was celebrated by national and foreign media as a further step in solidifying democracy in Brazil. As Caldeira showed, however, the deep social cleavages in Brazilian society have profound effects on the production of urban space in cities like São Paulo, where elites continue to undermine the public nature of the city at the same time that peripheral voices such as those in the hip-hop movement open new spaces of participation in public life.

Teresa Caldeira is Professor of Anthropology at UC Irvine. She gave a talk entitled "A Contested Public: Walls, Graffiti, and Pichações in São Paulo" on October 2, 2006.

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São Paulo graffiti.