Participatory Graffiti as Invitational Rhetoric: The Case of O Machismo

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This article engages the Brazilian O Machismo graffiti project as an example of invitational visual rhetoric. Although most understandings of graffiti as communication consider it to be a persuasive artistic form, O Machismo invites viewers to respond to its invitation to help complete the art project and collectively share in co-creating its message. Through an examination of the responses to the invitation that emerge to resist machismo and promote non-patriarchal understandings, the article offers some ideas about how an invitational visual rhetoric expands our previous understandings of graffiti.

Keywords: Brazil; Graffiti; Invitational Rhetoric; Machismo; Rio de Janeiro

In March 2009, the Brazilian government passed Law 706/07, a law decriminalizing graffiti if the owner of a building consented to their property becoming decorated. In Sao Paolo and Rio de Janeiro, street artists capitalized on this opportunity to present their work without being accused of vandalism (Walters, 2012). Although street art has been present in Brazil as a way to deal with long-lasting challenges of poverty, narcotics, and misgovernment, Law 706/07 also allowed a shift from furtive tagging to a recognized and productive form of art in the country (Ganz, 2009; Lost Art, Manco, & Neelon, 2005).

In making this shift, the government of Brazil also created a clear delineation between vandalism and street art, a division commonly remarked upon in studies of graffiti. As described by Cluver (2011; see also Carrington, 2009), this division of graffiti into either vandalism or street art recognizes that, although they share materials and techniques, vandalism primarily exists to draw attention to the creator...
and the creator’s tags, while street art primarily exists to draw attention to the immediate message of the art itself.

This article examines a particular instance of Brazilian graffiti: O Machismo. Unlike previous studies of graffiti, which assume that the artists’ message is contained in the initial graffito, O Machismo creates an invitational visual rhetoric. That is, I argue that this graffiti project invites viewers to participate in completing the art project and collectively share in co-creating its message. I begin by outlining previous understandings of graffiti as visual communication. I then offer themes that emerge in O Machismo when viewers participate in the construction of this visual rhetoric. Finally, I offer some ideas about how an invitational visual rhetoric expands our previous understandings of graffiti.

Graffiti as Invitation Rhetoric

Graffiti have been a communication channel deployed by those without access to traditional public communication media. For example, Miladi (2015) argued that graffiti became an alternative channel during the Arab Spring in Tunisia. Although the government asserted control over traditional and social media, the “graffiti writings and political slogans painted on street walls, doors, and sometimes on pavements and grounds of public spaces became significant means of effective communication” (Miladi, p. 134).

Graffiti’s transformation of urban space into a medium for resistance is well documented. Graffiti artists in Greece protested against policies of austerity (Zaimakis, 2015), while those in South Africa have used graffiti to protest Apartheid and, more recently, against government inactions on corruption, poverty, and the spread of HIV/AIDS (Bodunrin, 2014). Other uses of graffiti include marking the public square in old East Berlin, Germany during a period of gentrification (Papen, 2012); at historically Black colleges in the United States from the 1970s to the 1990s (Rodriguez & Clair, 1999); on the wall separating Jerusalem from the Occupied Territories to the west by both Israelis and Palestinians (Hanauer, 2011); in Gezi Park, Istanbul, Turkey during the heyday of the Occupy movement (Tas & Tas, 2014); and in Egypt during the Arab Spring (Abaza, 2013; de Ruiter, 2015).

Specifically in Brazil, Iddings, McCafferty, and Da Silva’s (2011) examination of graffiti in Vila Madalena, a neighborhood of Sao Paolo, argued that graffiti artists attempted to create “conscientização” in their neighborhood. That is, graffiti were a form of consciousness-raising in which the artist’s message would be recognized by community members and lead them to agitate for social change. Alternatively, de Carvalho Oliveira and Salgueiro Marques (2014) claimed that the graffiti in Sao Paolo during a national celebration of the arts called on viewers to delegitimize state and institutionally controlled art museums in Brazil in favor of street art.

In these studies of graffiti, the general conclusion has been that graffiti are a resistant and an interactive form of communication. It is, however, a particular kind
of interactivity. The posting of a graffito seizes the public square from authoritative control and creates a space where discussion is welcome (Miladi, 2015). Implicitly these studies posit that the artist creates a graffito and places it on a wall where the viewer then decodes the message in the graffito and responds accordingly. O Machismo art does not assume this linear transmission.

O Machismo does not ask viewers to congregate and interact with one another as they attempt to decode the artwork, the approach examined in previous studies; O Machismo asks viewers to complete an unfinished piece of artwork. Specifically, O Machismo offers the beginning of a sentence—“O machismo não me cala porque …” (Machismo doesn’t silence me because…)—and allows the viewer to write in, literally, the reason that they are not silenced by machismo. The completions of the sentence—the interactivity of this graffiti—demonstrate responses to this invitation. As such, O Machismo may be a form of invitational rhetoric. At a practical level, invitational rhetoric is performed when a rhetor offers her perspective and then creates “external conditions that allow and encourage others to present their perspectives” (Foss, 2009, p. 570).

As described by Foss and Griffin (1995), there are three main features emphasized in an invitational rhetoric that distinguish it from a traditional rhetoric: equality, respect for the immanent value of all living beings, and appreciation for self-determination. In allowing equality, an invitational rhetor seeks not to impose their perspective on another but to invite the audience to enter the rhetor’s world and to see it as the rhetor does” (p. 5). That is, the invitational rhetor recognizes that their view is one perspective among many, and that a successful rhetoric does not deny the legitimacy of other views. By embracing immanent value, the invitational rhetor also offers the opportunities for “rhetor and audience alike [to] contribute to the thinking about an issue so that everyone involved gains a greater understanding of its subtlety, richness, and complexity” (p. 5). In this move, the rhetor does not open herself to counter-persuasion, rather, she enters into conversation where she can learn from and begin to appreciate perspectives of others who engage with the issues. Finally, the invitational rhetor allows self-determination. The transformation in speaker and audience are not a violent victory of one idea resulting in feelings of “guilt, embarrassment or angry submission” that accompany traditional persuasion; instead, the transformation engenders “an appreciation for new perspectives gained and gratitude for the assistance provided by others in thinking about an issue” (p. 6).

Although invitational rhetoric offers an alternative approach to traditional rhetoric, it has been criticized at both the theoretical level and the practical level. As reviewed, and responded to, by Bone, Griffin, and Scholz (2008), opponents of invitation rhetoric claim a variety of inconsistencies in how invitational rhetoric has been theorized: that invitational rhetoric is a masked form of persuasion but also posits, incorrectly, that all persuasion is violent; that invitation rhetoric claims to be appropriate in all rhetorical situations but is also gender-specific and essentialized to being able to be used by women speakers only; and, that it denies agency to speakers while claiming to allow agency. As noted by Bone and her colleagues, these tensions also are found in theorizations of non-invitational rhetoric that do not lead to the dismissal of
these non-invitational theorizations. Moreover, the existence of these tensions reveals
the utility of an invitational approach that allows the richness of complexity of these
tensions to emerge and be acknowledged in theorization of rhetoric.

The second critique of invitational rhetoric is that, at a practical level, it is too
cumbersome, time-consuming, and utopian to be useful in the real world (Bone et al.,
2008). Although acts of invitational rhetoric may be less common than acts of
traditional rhetoric, there have been several explorations of real-world written and
spoken discourse using this lens. Explorations of invitational rhetoric in practice
include Kirtley’s (2014) examination of composition pedagogy, DeLaure’s (2008)
and Carey’s (2014) investigation of Ella Baker’s speaking style, Talyor, Durant, and
Boje’s (2007) and Greiner and Singhal’s (2009) considerations of health and safety
communication, and Bone et al.’s (2008) considerations of spoken and written
dialogue in Jimmy Carter’s listening tour during the energy crisis and the World
Trade Center site’s post 9–11 dialogue. There have also been efforts to extend
invitational rhetorical principles into our classroom teaching (Mallin & Anderson,
2000; Novak & Bonine, 2009) and interactive web technologies (Harrison & Barthel,
2009). Closer to the present project, Bone et al. (2008) discussed how the AIDS quilt
allowed viewers to enter into dialogue, encounter panels that had shareable world-
views, and to contribute their own panels in response to these invitations. The
invitational possibilities that have been explored are largely textual, and they are
largely formal. O Machismo, because of its illicit but not illegal format and its visual
form, may allow us to explore whether a visual invitational rhetoric is possible.
Because O Machismo is painted in the form of an invitation, we might ask, then,
how do Brazilians respond to this invitational graffiti?

O Machismo

Graffiti in Rio de Janeiro is fleeting. Although the supply of graffiti in Rio appears
to be infinite, this examination focuses on the O Machismo graffiti posted along
Travessa do Comércio in the old center of Rio (see Figure 1 for an example). This
alleyway is popular among graffiti artists because of its proximity to commercial
and government buildings, both of which allow many viewers to encounter it, but
also because the walls of the alley are regularly repainted in white or beige to cover
the graffiti posted there. The walls become, in Derrida’s (1980) and Barthes’ (1985)
terms, a form of palimpsest wherein the combination of high potential viewership
and potential blank canvases invites many temporary installations of graffiti. The
graffiti I photographed represent all completions of the O Machismo invitation
present along Travessa do Comércio on May 26, 2016. I did this because the
photograph’s “essence is to ratify what it represents” (Barthes, 1981, p. 85), to
show that the thing being discussed had an existence, however fleeting it may be.
None of the graffiti were present three days earlier, and the wall was repainted,
destroying all of these graffiti, within one week. Indeed, some of the graffiti
recorded had already been partially painted over by new artists, even as the O Machismo graffiti was, itself, painted over other pieces.

Using stencils and red paint, the artists emblazoned the wall repeatedly with “O machismo não me cala” (Machismo doesn’t silence me). Among the red slogans, other stenciled works painted in orange offered the same phrase, followed by “porque” and a blank line. The red paint makes a statement about machismo not silencing the individual who paints, while the orange paint invites the viewer to give the reasons for not being silenced. Scattered on the ground were markers of various colors—red, blue, green—that the viewer could pick up and use to complete the statement.

Many viewers responded to this invitation. Because the work is not signed, it is not possible to follow up with the viewers to ask them what their responses intended. These additional graffiti, posted in response to and in completion of the original graffito, become part of the public statement and part of the dialogue. To examine these responses, a thematic analysis of the completions of the invitation was performed (see Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, pp. 211–228 for a review). The viewers responded to the invitation in three ways: statements of solidarity, direct expressions of the problems with machismo, and comparisons between machismo and an implied feminisma.

The first way that viewers responded to the invitation was to make statements of solidarity. This response emerges when viewers state that machismo does not silence them because the viewer has identified common interests with others resisting machismo. Example completions of regarding solidarity include viewers who wrote, “O machismo não me cala porque juntas somos fortes” (Machismo doesn’t silence me because together we are stronger), “… juntas somos mais” (together we are more), and “… somos mais fortes” (we are stronger). Complementing these statements that focus on “somos” (we) are viewers that focus on “eu” (I). These include statement like “… eu
sou uma mulher mobilizada” (I am a mobilized woman), “… sei que as mulheres são mais fortes do que ele” (I know women are stronger than him,” and “[eu] sou mais mulher” (I’m more woman). The inclusion of the self in mobilization or in becoming more woman contributes to the shared strength of those who would not need machismo in Brazilian society. These statements, and their sharing in a “somos” (we), may enact forms of identification similar to those named by Cheney as the “assumed ‘we’” (1983, p. 154; see also; Burke, 1950) when he argues that this blending of the interests of the collective with the interests of the individuals gives priority to their shared interests. In this case, and unlike in Cheney’s work, because the “we” is deployed by the respondent to the invitation rather than by the collective, her completion of the statement is what may engender identification with other opponents of machismo who have completed the statement alongside and with her. In short, the expression of solidarity may be an enactment of invitational rhetoric’s focus on equality between speakers and audience.

The second way that viewers responded to the invitations was to make statements that directly express the problems with machismo. Some statements about the need to not be silenced by machismo articulate the impact that machismo can have on women in Brazilian society. For example, one woman wrote, “O machismo não me cala porque cansei de ter medo” (I’m tired of being afraid). The exact fear felt by this woman is difficult to place: It could be the threat of violence, of displacement from the home, of unequal employment and social opportunities, or more. This polyvalent statement, and its emphasis on the exhaustion that comes from being on edge in a macho society, may call on women to speak against that society and the fear it engagers. This fear underlying this contribution may become concrete when another viewer writes, “… o machismo mata” (machismo kills). Other statements complement the need to not be silent by explicitly emphasizing the power of women’s voice. For instance, one writer stated the machismo did not silence her because “minha voz fala mais alto que o preconceito” (my voice speaks louder than prejudice). Although this writer may also feel fear pressures from a macho society, she also indicated that objecting to macho patterns of thinking, communication, and behavior could be path to overcome machismo. Problems with machismo were felt not only by women but also by men. Although statements of solidarity allowed a gender neutral “we” coupled with a feminine “I” to emerge, naming problems with machismo allow both men and women to contribute. For example, one man completed the statement by writing “… sou homem e me recuso a viver com o mal e sigualdade tão primitiva” (I’m a man and I refuse to live with evil and such primitive inequality). By expressing that he was male, yet did not need machismo, this author may allow other men to see a place for themselves in this O Machismo graffiti. Moreover, by making clear that machismo can be rejected by men as well as women, this male contributor, in conversation with female contributors, may allow perspectives on the role of machismo and gendered oppression to emerge that complement woman-centered perspectives (for a review, see Smith, 2001). Moreover, this type of response echoes invitational rhetoric’s respect for the immanent value of all human beings.
The final way that viewers respond to the invitation are statements comparing machismo to an implied feminismo. These responses emerge when viewers articulate that machismo does not silence them because they can rely on principles stated in various feminist approaches. Unlike the previous category, the implied viewers/co-constructors of the graffiti are women. For example, viewers who wrote things like “O machismo não me cala porque o corpo me” (my body) or “… my pussy e poder” (my pussy and power) state that machismo is not silencing because the viewer has the right to bodily integrity and autonomy. The first statement speaks to the general body, but the second goes further to state directly that women’s sexuality, positioned in the body, grants power against machismo. These readings may allow further claims, such as machismo not silencing because “… sou forte que do homem” (I am stronger than man). This comparative statement may, similar to the distinction that Poirot (2009) drew between domesticated feminism and radical feminism, indicate that some viewers may see a need to replace machismo with a superior, more woman-centered way of organizing society. Indeed, this call is enacted when one viewer writes that machismo does not silence her because “vc veio do meu utero eu vim da sua costela” (U came from my womb and I came from his rib). Instead of the Biblical ordering of creation, where woman was made from man’s rib, the macho man is remade into the product of woman. That is, while the implied author of this statement is a woman created by God from man’s rib, the individual who relies on machismo is the creation of a mother through childbearing (compare to Colaner, 2009). In this case, and in extension of the distinctions made by Poirot, a non-macho ordering of society better reflects the strength and creative power of the female body. Moreover, in doing so, these responses emphasize invitational rhetoric’s focus on self-determination, particularly for women.

Interpretation and Implications

These three responses to O Machismo’s invitation—statements of solidarity, direct expressions of the problems with machismo, and comparisons between machismo and an implied feminism—come together to create a collective invitational rhetoric expressed mutually by the initial artist and the viewers. In both the form of the invitation and its content, O Machismo creates an invitational rhetoric. As described by Foss and Griffin (1995), an invitational rhetoric seeks not to persuade individuals into accepting or rejecting a point of view but to create spaces for understanding that allow both the initial speaker and her audience to contribute perspectives.

As an explicitly invitational rhetoric, O Machismo does not present its messages—a critique of machismo—as a thing to be accepted or rejected. Instead, the beginning fragment, “Machismo does not silence me because…”, allows the viewer to decide whether they want to enter into the perspective and lifeworld of the message and supply their own conclusion. Rather than the hierarchical and patriarchal presentation of persuasion via graffiti emphasized by others, O Machismo invites viewers to become graffiti artists; it engages them as equal others of immanent value who can
determine, for themselves, whether to assist in the co-construction of a world that is not silenced by machismo. Each of the three responses offers a way to complete O Machismo’s statements collectively.

Simultaneously, because O Machismo offers participation in this co-construction via graffiti, it operates in a way that creates the external conditions for participating in the invitational rhetoric. Participation by original artists and viewers can be anonymous; the works are unsigned and posted under cover of darkness. So too are the contributions the viewer makes. Moreover, because the viewer is left free to participate by repeating already posted messages or offering her own unique moment of participation—because she has the freedom to choose whether to be addressed, to respond, and how, if at all—the invitation offers maximum recognition of the immanent value of each potential addressee and interlocutor.

O Machismo, thus, encourages us to reconsider and expand the conclusions offered by Miladi (2015) and others. Graffiti is interactive and creates a public square, but projects like O Machismo also transform graffiti from one-way persuasive communication to mutual co-construction through an invitational rhetoric.

References


