

FRESH PAINT: PHOTOETHNOGRAPHY BETWEEN GRAFFITI, POETRY, AND TRANSCULTURATED VISUAL NARRATIVE

TINTA FRESCA: FOTOETNOGRAFIA ENTRE O GRAFFITI, A POESIA E A NARRATIVA VISUAL TRANSCULTURADAS

PINTURA FRESCA: FOTOETNOGRAFÍA ENTRE EL GRAFFITI, LA POESÍA Y LA NARRATIVA VISUAL TRANSCULTURADA



<https://doi.org/10.56238/sevened2026.008-166>

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ABSTRACT

This work emphasizes a synoptic visual dimension of the city and urban art that are displayed on graffiti-covered walls, at street events, and cultural occupations that reshape the imagery of Manaus, the capital of the state of Amazonas. The aim is to expand the understanding of research with images using the technique of Photoethnography. We mainly demonstrate how the act of photographing, editing, and organizing visual series is also the work of producing theories about the city and its problems, deep contradictions, and possible solutions. The research work also aims at analyzing how street art and graffiti in the city of Manaus constitute forms of occupation and re-signification of urban space, articulating aesthetic practices in order to combat cultural erasures. We use the approach of Photoethnography to capture digital images of murals and artistic interventions spread throughout the city. A city which we perceive as organic, polyphonic, polysemantic, and full of urban art.

Keywords: Manaus. Visual Arts. Photoethnography. Poetry. Transculturality.

RESUMO

Este trabalho enfatiza uma sinódica dimensão visual da cidade e da arte urbana que estão expostas em muros grafitados, em eventos de rua e ocupações culturais que reconfiguram o imaginário sobre Manaus, capital do estado Amazonas com o objetivo de ampliar o entendimento da pesquisa com imagens, utilizando a técnica da Fotoetnografia. Demonstramos principalmente como o ato de fotografar, editar e organizar séries visuais é também o trabalho de produção de teorias sobre a cidade e seus problemas, contradições profundas e possíveis soluções. O trabalho de pesquisa também se propõe a analisar como a arte de rua e o grafitti na cidade de Manaus constituem formas de ocupação e ressignificação do espaço urbano, articulando práticas estéticas para o combate aos apagamentos culturais. Partimos da abordagem da Fotoetnografia para registrar imagens digitais dos murais e intervenções artísticas espalhadas pela cidade, que percebemos como orgânica, polifônica, polissêmica em suas vivas manifestações artísticas urbanas.

Palavras-chave: Manaus. Artes Visuais. Fotoetnografia. Poesia. Transculturalidade.

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RESUMEN

Este trabajo enfatiza una dimensión visual sinódica de la ciudad y del arte urbano presentes en muros grafitados, eventos callejeros y ocupaciones culturales que reconfiguran el imaginario sobre Manaus, capital del estado de Amazonas, con el objetivo de ampliar la comprensión de la investigación mediante imágenes, utilizando la técnica de la fotoetnografía. Se demuestra principalmente cómo el acto de fotografiar, editar y organizar series visuales constituye también un proceso de producción teórica sobre la ciudad, sus problemas, profundas contradicciones y posibles soluciones. El trabajo de investigación también propone analizar cómo el arte urbano y el graffiti en la ciudad de Manaus constituyen formas de ocupación y resignificación del espacio urbano, articulando prácticas estéticas para combatir los borramientos culturales. A partir del enfoque de la fotoetnografía, se registraron imágenes digitales de murales e intervenciones artísticas distribuidas por la ciudad, comprendida como orgánica, polifónica y polisémica en sus vivas manifestaciones artísticas urbanas.

Palabras clave: Manaus. Artes Visuales. Fotoetnografía. Poesía. Transculturalidad.

1 INTRODUCTION

Photography is not just the act of pressing a button or swiping on a smartphone screen. In our research work, the act of photographing is seen as a way of recording and giving meanings to the urban world.

It is undeniable that photography today is in people's routine because of the availability of cell phones with cameras and a considerable number of social networks. The word photography comes from the junction of two Greek terms: Phos (light) and Graphé (to write), that is, photography means to write or draw with light. This research work and photographic essay reveals the role of subjectivity in the making and reading of graffiti art in the city of Manaus.

In this way, we consider photoethnography a powerful methodological tool in the field of visual anthropology and the so-called anthropology of the image (MATHIAS, 2016). In our field observations, we immersed ourselves in the art of graffiti, which we consider a true urban language in which graffiti artists start to act as street writers. We document here these city images, which transculture the patterns associated with Amazonian mottos, reinventing them in the places where they are made available and in different forms, allowing them to be transformed, spaces and forms, in city circuits into a kind of open-air art gallery.

We chose this theme because of our proximity to Hip Hop Culture since the 1990s. In other words, the work has a scientific and militant character in Hip Hop (AGUIAR, 2021) revisited here in the reflection on memory spaces, collections, and museums.

For Ribeiro, "urban studies allowed the observer and the object of study to be brought closer together and paved the way, in parallel with the criticisms and questions that anthropology had been facing, to the development of works that were increasingly closer to the researcher's universe (2016, p. 98).

The street is our laboratory and deep down, "Photography is subversive, not when it terrifies, disturbs or even stigmatizes, but when it is *thoughtful*" (BARTHES, 2022, p. 18).

Hip Hop is an urban culture that originated in the Bronx neighborhood of New York City, in the United States of America, approximately in the 1970s. It arises from street parties, mainly with the events organized by DJ Kool Herc in 1973. Hip Hop Culture is made up of four artistic elements: Deejay, Rap, Breakdance, and Graffiti (AGUIAR, 2022). Hip Hop quickly spreads through the African-American and Latino communities as a form of artistic expression in the fight against racism, prejudice, social inequalities and marginality in the peripheries. The term Hip Hop was coined by the former street gang leader, Afrika Bambaataa, which means "to let go of the hips", in this way the disputes of the streets would be resolved through music, dance and a lot of art.

The four basic elements of Hip Hop Culture have been called by us as the four heads of the Urban Hydra (AGUIAR, 2011, 2018, 2022).

In the history of humanity itself, the act of drawing, painting and writing on walls and caves is already observed in the spaces covered by the so-called rock art (JUSTAMAND et al., 2025). In this way, the act of making paintings using cans of spray paint is called graffiti. Graffiti began with tags (signatures) on the surfaces of New York's subways in the early 1970s, by artists such as Taki 183 (GITAHY, 1999, p. 40) and, over time, it achieved success and was absorbed by the media and large art galleries (GITAHY, 1999, p. 39).

For this reason and for the opportunity to review socio-ethnographic documents, graffiti in the city of Manaus is the main object of our research. We make available here a considerable album of images made by artists who still deserve greater recognition in order to rethink the spaces for the distribution of art, culture and the continuation of memory.

2 SOME NOTES ON PHOTOETHNOGRAPHY

The thesis *FOUR HEADS OF AN URBAN HYDRA: IMAGES AND SOUNDS OF HIP HOP CULTURE IN THE CITY OF MANAUS – AM*, produced within the scope of the Graduate Program Society and Culture in the Amazon (PPGSCA) of the Federal University of Amazonas (UFAM) summons an imagetic and sound panorama of Hip Hop Culture in the city of Manaus, capital of the state of Amazonas. Through the lenses of cell phone cameras, images extracted from social networks, music, sounds, illustrations, two-dimensional barcodes (QR codes), audiovisual and graphic productions, we present the four artistic elements of Hip Hop Culture (Deejay, Rap, Breakdance and Graffiti) in their historical instances and different interactions, processes of resistance, actions, contradictions and conflicts in the urban spaces of the municipality in focus. From the first moment, we opted for interdisciplinarity. Essences extracted from history, sociology, literature, social communication, anthropology, architecture and graphic design to make the X-ray of a street culture that for almost four decades has influenced the behavior of a part of the youth of Manaus. As well as the mythological being who has the ability to recover from Hercules' advances. Hip Hop over five decades has been going through processes of hybridization (CANCLINI, 2015) with new rhythms, sounds, instruments, technologies, in this way, these young people appropriate and distribute art, dance and music in the peripheries of the whole world.

In fact, the pandemic period required new behaviors, making the traffic of people through cities decrease and the use of masks enter the routine of many, among other habits.

Thus, this work considered the direct and indirect effects of the pandemic on the unfolding of artistic making and its distribution, functioning as a prolegomenon on Hip Hop in Manaus.

Even so, it is an introductory text, although basic on the theme, with gaps to be filled throughout the next trails such as the one proposed here, considering the absences detected not deliberately or on purpose, but because we know that much information, characters, places, images and sounds would not be present during the writing process to the final product.

In this way, we decided to continue photoethnography as an approach to anthropological and interdisciplinary scientific research that aims to go beyond the university walls, and to suggest that the academic dialogue with society works as a response to the many concerns to do with identity, belonging, artistic making, distribution of art in the context of Manaus.

3 ABOUT THE FIELDWORK

The use of photography and audiovisual products in research contexts in the Social Sciences and Humanities is nothing unprecedented. There is a diversity of academic works that open up methodological possibilities and research objects. Despite this, presentations in verbal and written forms continue to have a higher level in the scope of academies, however we have been investing for some time in new forms of narratives and that have been giving results in the form of photographic exhibitions and academic publications (AGUIAR, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025). We then focus on the use of photography in the studies of urban cultures, specifically, the photoethnography of Hip Hop culture in Manaus (AGUIAR, 2022) expanding the feat to the aforementioned thesis, and opening the opportunity to think about how the layers of culture are arranged and rearranged cross-culturally, depending on the circumstances of time and space.

Photoethnography combines photography with anthropological fieldwork to record images of graffiti productions. The method involved extensive fieldwork, using smartphone cameras in several areas of the city of Manaus. These images formed the narrative core, allowing detailed interpretations of cultural resistance, urban and Amazonian identity, from the graffiti scattered throughout the geographical zones of Manaus.

In addition to this exercise of readings and analysis of a specialized bibliography focused on the theme, we will also produce a photoethnography with the images of urban art known as graffiti. Making it clear that photoethnography is a composition of images that form a visual narrative.

Understanding that photoethnographic work and its production,

(...) must have a professional who guarantees quality in the image registration. The concern with capturing the image is an important prerequisite for those who will generate the photographic material, whether it is carried out by a photography professional, an ethnologist or a researcher who follows anthropological precepts (BONI; MORESCHI, 2007, p. 140).

Achutti defends the use of Photoethnography and its methodology. For the author:

If, from the beginning of the fieldwork, the researcher-photographer does not have in mind the final pagination (or assembly of the photographic exhibition, as the case may be), the result of his work will suffer from this lack of planning, because a long process of construction, the construction of a visual description. The photographs in the final result should form a whole. For this reason, a work that uses photography should be constructed with method, in the same way as a film, a text or a dissertation. Photographs obtained in a random and disorganized way will become, in the best of cases, a source of information that will perhaps one day find its place in some photo library, but which will not be able to become a complete work, a photoethnographic narrative (2004, p. 3-4).

In this same interview, Luiz Eduardo Achutti, the person responsible for drafting the nomenclature of the term, points out that technologies facilitate the practice of photographing, including using cell phones (ALVES, 2021, p. 446). In this way, we made use of smartphones in the collection of images and in the production of audiovisual materials. The recording, sound and image applications available are tools widely used by artists and researchers today.

It is worth noting that this type of activity has already been put into practice by us on other occasions (AGUIAR, 2021, 2022, 2025).

"A Photoethnography in the city of São Gabriel da Cachoeira - AM" (AGUIAR, 2025) is an educational and cultural immersion in this region. São Gabriel da Cachoeira is a city located in the extreme northwest of the state of Amazonas and borders Colombia and Venezuela. This locality is bathed by the Rio Negro and has considerable linguistic pluralism. In addition to the Portuguese language, three other indigenous languages are also spoken: Nheengatu, Baniwa and Tukano officially.

We were in São Gabriel da Cachoeira on two occasions (2019 and 2022), to teach in the Bachelor's Degree in Archaeology at the University of the State of Amazonas (UEA). In these odd moments, we use the camera of cell phones to capture images. Walking down the street and photographing incessantly.

In the contemporary world, new information and communication technologies open up a range of tools for the production of videos, music and photographs. We can say that creating an audiovisual product for free is possible and available using smartphones, iPads, tablets,

cameras and modern photographic lenses. The alliance between theory and practice should encourage the viewer to become a director of their own audiovisual works (MOLETTA, 2014). Furthermore, we emphasize that in the arts, the technological issue, historically, is of paramount importance (ZAMBONI, 2001, p. 41).

Luiz Achutti treats photoethnography as a "photographic writing" that does not clash with written and/or verbal language, they complement each other (ACHUTTI, 2004).

In "Capão Pecado": images of the south zone of the city of São Paulo – SP (AGUIAR, 2022) we present a visual narrative of our passage as researchers of Hip Hop culture and its artistic elements in the aforementioned region of São Paulo – SP. The title of the photo essay is in honor of the book *Capão Pecado* (2016) by the writer Ferréz. We tried to present a brief ethnographic circuit with interviews, filming, visits, readings, poetry, music, street food, prosaic conversations and especially the use of photographs collected by the cell phone camera.

In this way, we understand "photography and videos mainly as tools in the work process and field research. (...) that images and photographs are visual documents for interpretations full of validity in certain realities or cultures, even if they are loaded with subjectivities and polysemy" (AGUIAR, 2022, p. 90).

In fact, even for this reason: it is in the intersection of times, spaces, and perceptions that the various meanings and semantics are born from the gaze of a "single" object. We can look at a series of images, for example, from different angles, in different times and spaces, and this plurality of places of observation will allow polysemy, which is the encounter of subjectivity with the concreteness of and in the world.

4 IMAGES OF A TREMBLING WORLD

Borrowing the title of one of John Milton's books (2014), this section alludes to the equally subjective and plural effects of images, objects of this ethnography, in the context of thought and reflection on important themes for the peoples of the Manaus region, such as identity, belonging, artistic expression, distribution of the arts and social visibility.

The authorial images that we deal with here were produced and treated as visual narratives that critically point to the dispute for visibility in the public space and, before that, the subjective translations made by observers from different places, including those outside the city, and from the state of Amazonas. And in this sense, we remember that graffiti as a writing of the streets tends to expand the possibilities of reading this visual art as an aesthetic experience spread in living spaces. It is the circulation of images that affect its passers-by/observers, becoming part of those who occupy themselves with the gaze.

The list of images about graffiti quantitatively exceeded two hundred, and we tried to use natural light from smartphone cameras. On many occasions, we came across the arts through our daily paths and immediately parked the car to register. At other times we had to enter on foot, especially inside overpasses with cars in motion. We emphasize that a large part of these arts is in the outskirts of the city and, in this way, transiting through these "quebradas" becomes an activity that requires caution. However, there were no incidents and there was always someone for a quick and enlightening conversation about our work.

Some time later, we united the idea of visual narratives with the time before them, the proposal of photoethnography as poetry, as an expression of the various possible subjectivities achieved in the acts of photographing the instant of the quasi-permanent that is graffiti, and of describing reality as the subjectivity of the gaze, before it becomes part of the visual narrative initially thought of as an anthropological critique that reveals a dispute for visibility, affirmation of identity and, of course, attention to the hegemonic forms of public space planning. From one variant to the other, that is, from the poetry of the artistic and spectator gaze to the visual narrative propagated by anthropologically sharp reading, the proposal reaches forms of resignification of the spaces of circulation of people, things, objects, beings more than human (a new reference to the other animals on the planet, in a non-hierarchical way).

The results indicate that graffiti and other urban inscriptions operate as street writings that tension boundaries between art and illegality, center and periphery, memory and oblivion, converting streets and facades into an open-air museum and expanding the population's access to aesthetic experiences in the city where they live, in the same way that they transculture belongings linked to socioeconomic axes. And they go further, they remain there in the open spaces temporarily, extinguishing with the weather, rain, excessive sun. And in people's memories? How much do they remain and transform, transculturating experiences?

In this way, photoethnography, by making visible both the processes of creation and social circulation of images, enhances the understanding of urban art in Manaus as a practice of symbolic resistance and the production of new narratives about the city and its subjects, providing innovations in the way we perceive ourselves as human beings and experience our surroundings reified by the many objects of the urbis, and by the presence of beings more than human (traditionally, alluded to by the term "animals").

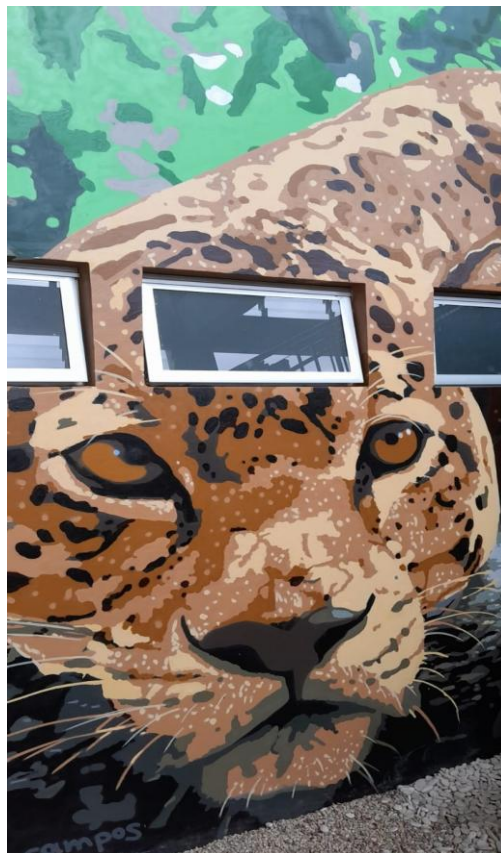
At the intersection of artistic and academic motivations, we open a horizon in which theories to do with anthropology, translation and the arts coexist, enabling us to go beyond

the limits of one and the other, uniting them kaleidoscopically, in favor of possibilities of existence(s).

Next, we present a series of ten imagery clippings (of more than two hundred) accompanied by bilingual poetic creations that translate them in order to compose texts beyond visual narratives, compositions open to varied subjectivities and to provoke reflections on places, belongings, identities from Manaus and their transculturated experiences to other times and spaces. And in our translation, to another language(s)...

Figure 1

Jaguar, 2024



Between the gaps of windows and buildings
There is a leopard
whose gaze is composed of fears and deviations...

Between the spaces of windows and towers, a leopard moves—its gaze woven from
fear and sidelong paths...

Figure 2

Doll and ink, 2021



In the small world of disposal
The immense universe of luxury – recycled
in prayer-doll face

DOLL AND INK, 2021

Within the small discarded world an endless splendor gleams—reborn in the hush of
a doll's prayerful face

Figure 3

Macaw, 2024



In the sound of the silent sky
 green unison (im)planted
 a macaw (re)exists...

In the hush of the sky's sound a green unison (un)planted a macaw (re)exists...

Figure 4

Mural, 2025



The gray wall shines colorful senseless
 Passing away daydreams, sculpting prejudices
 ink, paper and fantasy of having no end...

The gray wall shines colourful-less-ly
 deceasing dreams, curving prejudices
 -paper, ink and infinite prejudices

Figure 5*Curumin, 2021*

The country boy
Lost in the verdant blue
On the almost black urban wall

CURUMIN, 2021
The boy from the woods
Got lost in blue green-ness
Of the almost black urban wall

Figure 6*Iara, 2024*

Far away... Nearby
The Indian is still flaunted in a painting
Who only watches the photographer
avid for portrait(s)...

Up close and personal
an indian man flaunts his presence
watching the photographer, avid for a snapshot...

Figure 7*India, 2025*

Iracema prays imposingly
in front of the handicraft fair
He commands respect from those who greet him.

Iracema prays imponent
before the craft fair
making her presence abundant to those who salute her

Figure 8*Graphics, 2025*

River routes
trails on the skin
kill (a)inside – your feet, in mine.

GRAPHISM, 2025
River routes
skin paths
enter(ing) forest – your feet in mine.

Figure 9

Birds, 2024



The mural was low, colorful, and unsettling.
If it were enough for the owl to watch over all the elderly,
no macaw hung wings.

BIRDS, 2024

The wall was short, colourful and restless
Enough for an owl to zeal for the elderly
Then, no bird would overstretch its wing.

Figure 10

Cardume, 2025



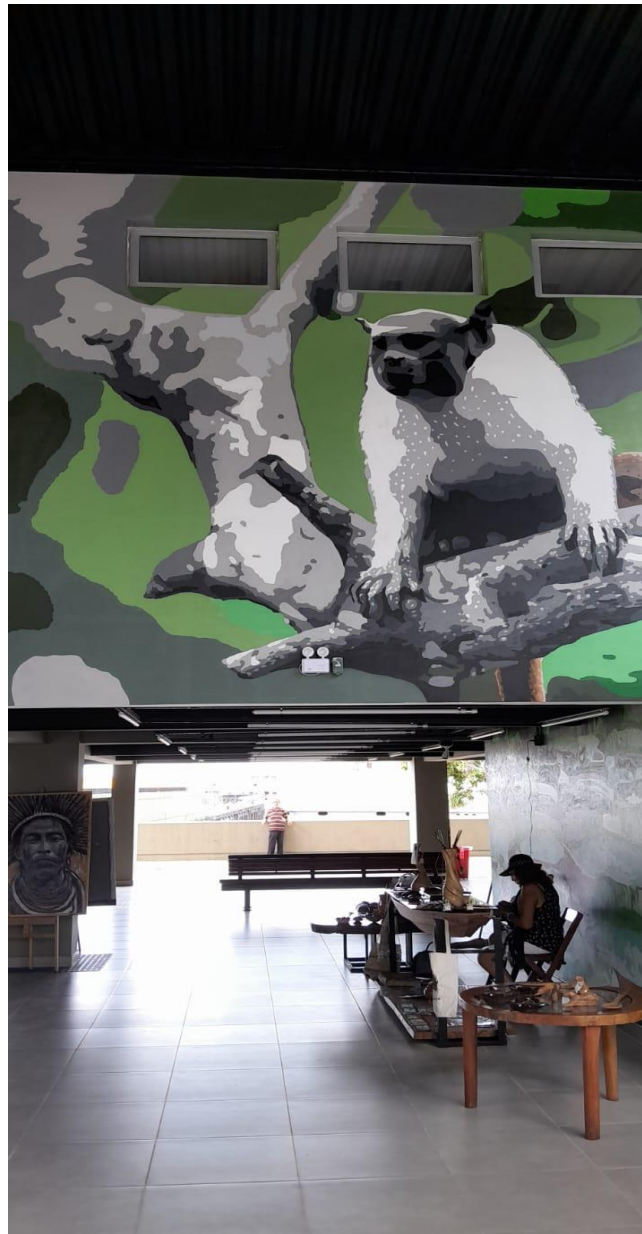
The Indian became man
In the look drawn on the concrete, where the sky was blue
and the boy's feet met the entire Amazonian shoal...

SHOAL, 2025

The indian boy became man
Upon the look overdrawn in the concrete, where the sky was blue
and the boy's feet found all the amazonian shoal...

Figure 11

Primate, 2024



In the woods of this fictional zoo
 lie all the animals
 including the monkey, with human features...

PRIMATE, 2024

In the woods of this fictional zoo
 Lie all animals
 the monkey, with human features, included...

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