

Contemporary Afrographies in São Paulo: From Samba to Slam

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Abstract

Spanning from mid-twentieth-century samba to contemporary slam poetry, this visual essay traces a genealogy of Afro-Brazilian urban cultural expressions in São Paulo's Zona Leste, examining how bodies, voices and places operate as spatialised diasporic archives. Grounded in Leda Maria Martins's concepts of 'afrographies of memory', 'oraliture', and '*encruzilhada*' (crossroads), the essay investigates how performance and orality materialise Afro-diasporic knowledge within the context of peripheral urbanism. Through the case studies of the samba school Nenê de Vila Matilde and the spoken-word movement Slam da Guilhermina, the article demonstrates how minor literatures and embodied practices inscribe memory onto urban space, producing alternative cultural geographies that resist racialised marginalisation. By foregrounding the continuity and transformation of Afro-Brazilian expressive forms across generations, the essay argues that samba

and slam constitute interconnected modes of cultural transmission that reterritorialise the city, revealing Afro-Brazilian urban culture as an ongoing process of diasporic negotiation, resistance and re-signification.

Keywords

Afro-Brazilian urban culture, afrographies of memory, oraliture and minor literatures, *encruzilhada* (crossroads), performance and orality, diaspora- and peripheral urbanism

One sentence summary

This genealogy reads Afro-Brazilian cultural expressions as diasporic archives, from mid-twentieth-century samba to contemporary slam poetry, as diasporic archives shaped by *afrography*, *oraliture*, and *encruzilhada* in São Paulo's Zona Leste.

In her remarkable book *Afrografias da memória* (afrographies of memory), Brazilian poet and essayist Leda Maria Martins offers an important contribution to the study of Black culture and memory. Martins creates concepts such as afrography (graphic marks of memory on Black bodies) and oraliture (oral literature) to describe the specific manifestations of afro-diasporic culture that have crossed the Atlantic and which have materialised in the plurality of expressions across the Americas. She is particularly interested in unearthing theoretical instruments to interpret the prolific production of Black subjects in Brazil (the most African country outside of Africa) and the complex cultural formation of diaspora.

Martins argues that ‘the history of Black people in the Americas is written in narratives of migration and crossing’ – a legacy carried from Africa across the Atlantic.¹ Black memory is thus a wellspring of complex cultural

signs: it is fundamental to Black people’s alterity and culture, ethnic and linguistic diversity, civilisation and history, elements that resisted both colonisation and forced migration. Martins seeks ‘to highlight the reach of the rhizomes that reterritorialise and re-create African cultures within the cartography of the Brazilian nation’.² The nation’s African roots are understood as ‘one of the constitutive signifiers of Brazilian textuality and cultural production as a whole – a dialogical and foundational matrix for the subjects who enact it and who are, simultaneously, shaped by it’.³

Thus, Afro-diasporic memory coalesces into afrographies – recompositions of the cultural elements diasporic subjects carried with them, actively deployed in the creation and translation of knowledge in the new continent. These afrographies of memory function as devices for updating and re-signifying ancestral cultures, traditions, codes and symbolic systems in territories of arrival.

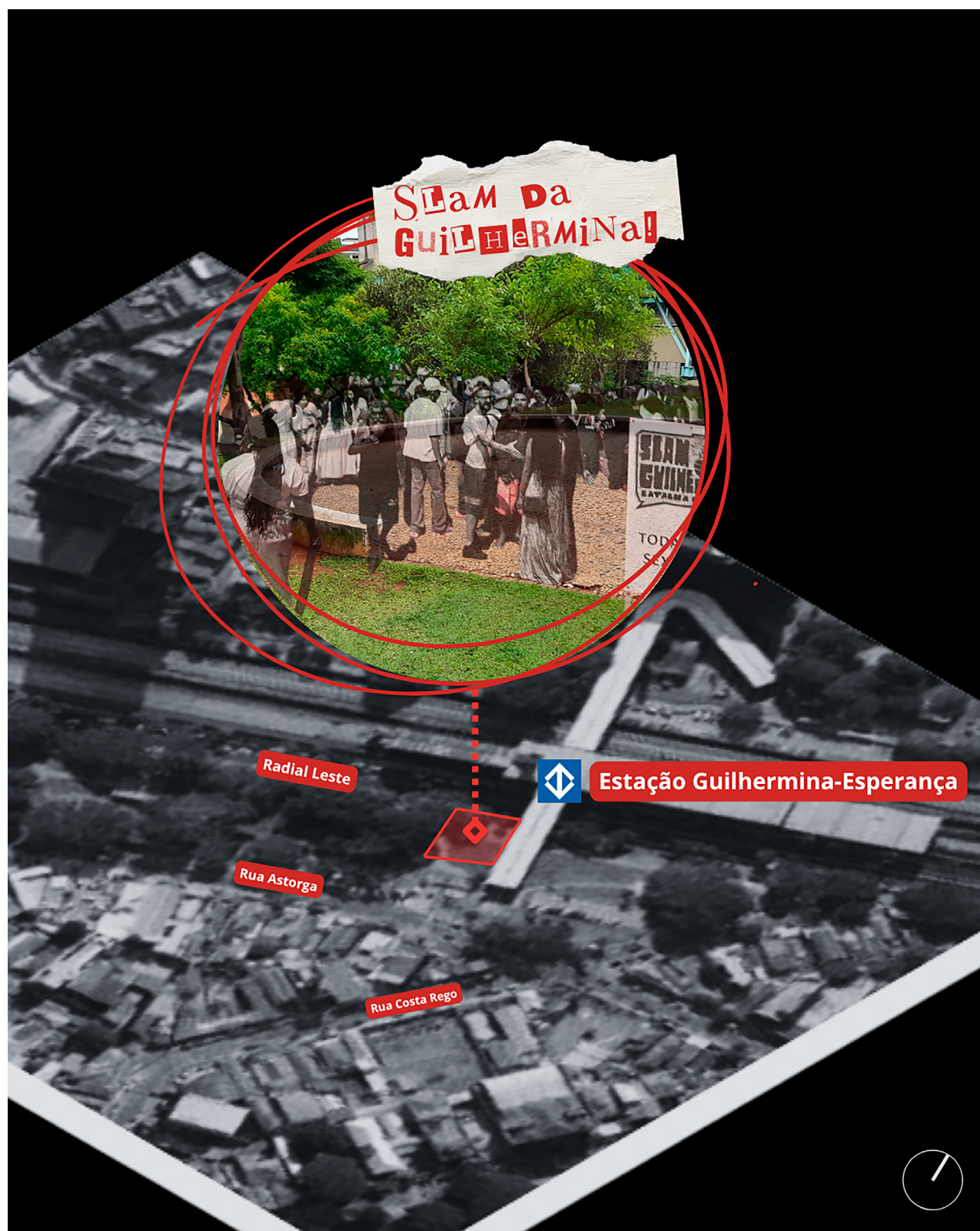


In many cases, these memories emerge through orality, the privileged medium for transmitting African cultural tradition, which Martins considers fundamental to the re-territorialisation of displaced peoples and actualisation of their culture – just as vital as written form of cultural transmission. To address this oral-cultural dimension, Martins proposes the concept of oraliture. Finally, Martins also employs the idea of the *encruzilhada* (crossroad) as a symbolic and metonymic operator for afrographies: a system of collective representations, a space of intersection and interpretation of knowledge, a means to weave new inter- and trans-cultural identities.

In other words, for Martins, the meaning-making of afro-diasporic subjects arises from intertextuality, the connection between truth and understanding, and the reinterpretation of senses produced in hybrid, intercultural contexts elaborated upon in postcolonial critique. Thereby, her interpretation aligns with thinkers like Stuart Hall and

Homi Bhabha, for whom there is no ‘pure’ culture.⁴ Culture is instead a constantly evolving field, shaped by encounters between subjects bearing distinct repertoires, whose crossings engender new meanings and manifestations.

In this visual essay, we propose to apply the concepts of afrography, oraliture, and *encruzilhada* to urban space, to examine the persistence of afro-diasporic cultural expressions across generations in Vila Matilde, Vila Esperança and Vila Guilhermina, neighbourhoods near each other, located at the Zona Leste (far east zone of the city) of the largest Brazilian city, São Paulo. In the Zona Leste, peripheral and middle-class communities settle around train and subway lines, combining diversity with inequality, and producing a vibrant cultural scene where samba, rap and street art tell the history of one of the most popular areas of the metropolis. Focusing on two key manifestations of afro-diasporic culture – the Nenê de Vila Matilde Samba School (one of the most traditional samba schools

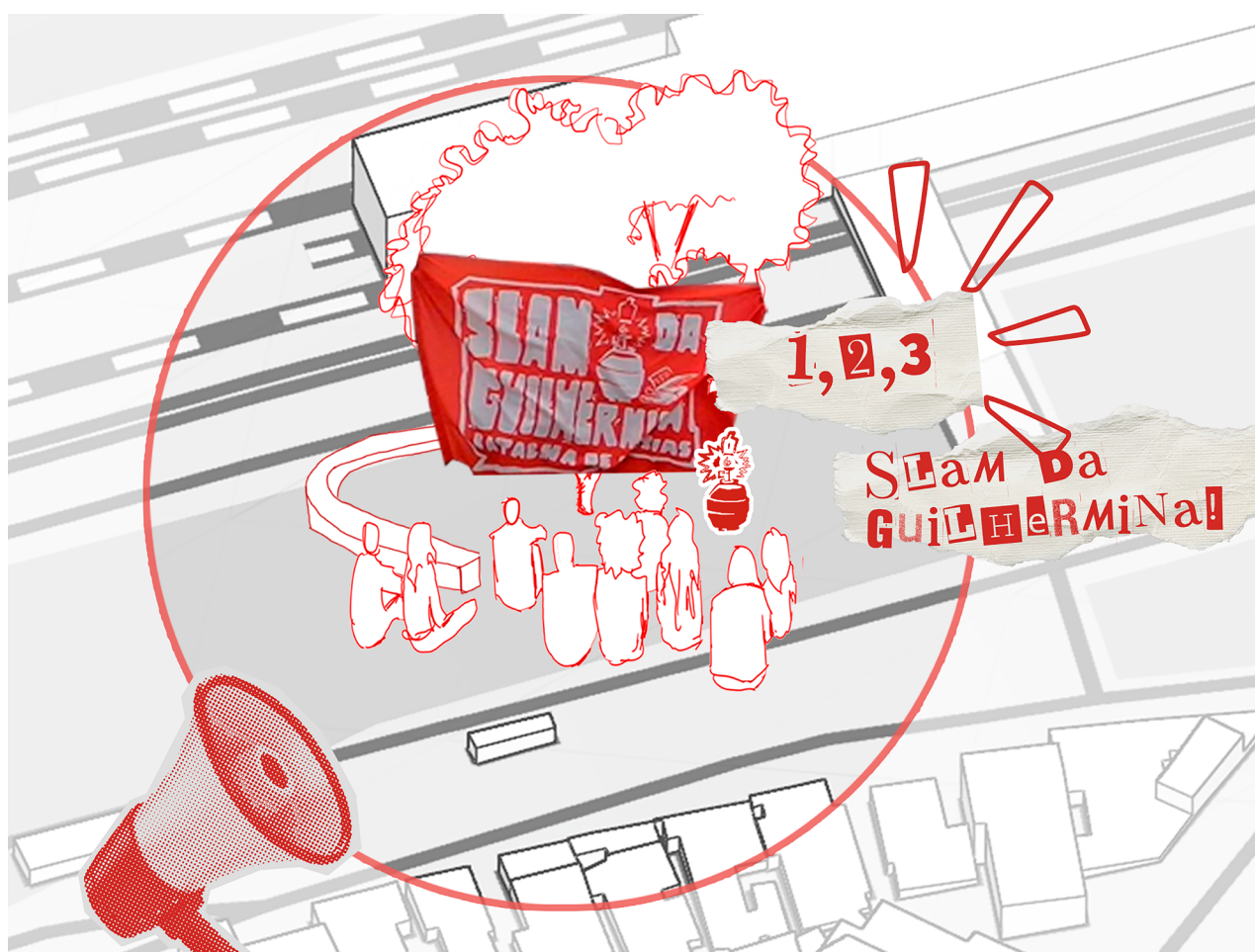


in São Paulo) and Slam da Guilhermina (a poetry competition in Vila Guilhermina neighbourhood, showcasing spoken-word performances by disenfranchised voices, often addressing social inequality, race and urban violence) – we aim to demonstrate how afrographies of memory can be recognised not only on bodies but also in urban places that record knowledge systems transmitted through generations. Afrographies graph the ground, imprint the terrain and leave their traces, reshaping the whole city. The Black expressiveness in Zona Leste gave rise to creative cultural forms that transcend the locality, resonating across the metropolis and generating significant intersubjective and social impact.

Escola de Samba Nenê de Vila Matilde

In the early 1930s, when Alberto Alves da Silva (1921–2010) – known by the stage name of Seu Nenê da Vila Matilde – arrived in São Paulo from the countryside of Minas Gerais

at just six or seven years old, the carnival celebrations in Vila Esperança were a vibrant mix of street parties and ballroom dances where Black and white residents mingled freely. At the time, Vila Esperança was a popular neighbourhood on the outskirts of São Paulo, connected to the city centre by suburban railway. Migrants from poor regions of the country, deprived by drought and famine, and European immigrants escaping war inhabited the region. The festivities were spearheaded by a family of Spanish immigrant musicians who, in 1932, founded a carnival *bloco* (group of people dancing and following a samba band through the streets) called Clube 5 de Julho. In a 1988 interview with the municipal Department of Historical Heritage (DPH), Seu Nenê recalled how the club hosted parties that began a month before carnival, drawing revellers from neighbouring districts like Brás and Bom Retiro, all aligned along the suburban railway and formed by people coming from outside the city, whether from the poor parts of Brazil or abroad.



By his early twenties, Seu Nenê was a regular at the Paulistano da Glória club, where he played tambourine and danced. Though an amateur musician, he earned small fees – until 1947, when a promoter swindled him out of his payment. Frustrated, he declared: ‘You know what happened? Now I’ll play at Largo do Peixe just for joy!’.⁵ He shifted his focus to Largo do Peixe – a bustling crossroads near a train station, where Black vendors sold fish and other goods. There, amid the rhythm of *pandeiros* and *cuícas* (Afro-brazilian frame and friction drums, respectively), he and fellow *sambistas* began holding weekend gatherings that fused *batuques*, *samba*, and *tiririca* (a traditional game). These informal circles laid the groundwork

for what, in 1949, would become the legendary Nenê de Vila Matilde Samba School.

From a musical perspective, Seu Nenê played a key role in bridging the rhythm of São Paulo’s samba with that of Rio de Janeiro, characterised by the two-beat *surdo* (large, deep-toned bass drum) pattern. From Rio’s carnival, he also incorporated other elements into his samba school, such as the *baianas* section (a traditional part of the carnival parade, with old ladies dressed in large skirts, turbans and layered necklaces), the flag-bearing couple of *mestre-sala* and *porta-bandeira* (the male master of ceremonies and the female official school flag bearer), and the narrative-driven *samba-enredo*.



During the 1950s, the samba school helped shape the identity of São Paulo's carnival. Until 1952, the school's activities were limited to the streets of Vila Esperança. Its first competitive carnival was in 1953. Three years later, it became champion of São Paulo's carnival, dethroning Lavapés, which was the city's first samba school, founded in 1937 by female *sambista* Eunice Madre. 1968 was a landmark year when São Paulo's carnival was officially recognised and Nenê de Vila Matilde became the first samba school in the city to have its own rehearsal hall. Until then, rehearsals took place in the streets near the home of its founder. The school went on to win São Paulo's carnival championship eleven times.

Slam da Guilhermina: spoken-word competitions as cultural movement

Sixty-three years after the foundation of Nenê de Vila Matilde Samba School, a slam competition was initiated

in a nearby public square at Guilhermina-Esperança subway station, located on the Red Line, which serves Zona Leste, giving access to people from other neighbourhoods. Slams are spoken-word competitions that bring together young poets from marginalised communities, often attracting over 150 participants, including audience members, performers, organisers and passersby who stop to watch the competition.⁶ This cultural expression can be understood as a way of using the body and voice through performances that push the boundaries between literature, poetry, music, life, art and activism. Rooted artistically in hip-hop aesthetics (particularly rap), slams showcase poetic forms associated with so-called minor literature.⁷ In other words, following Martins's terminology, slams are a manifestation of orality.

Slam poetry originated as an artistic expression in the United States in the 1980s, particularly in Chicago. However, its global spread has led to diverse local



manifestations and histories. In São Paulo, the slam movement gained momentum in the early 2000s, influenced by the city's established hip-hop culture and poetry scene.⁸ Slam provides a platform for young urban poets and artists to express their voices with raw intensity, often addressing social, political and personal issues.

A landmark in São Paulo's slam history was the creation of Slam da Guilhermina in 2012. Founded by Emerson Alcalde, known as 'Esopo', the event helped to popularise the slam format in the city by offering an inclusive space for emerging artists. Over time, the movement expanded to other areas of São Paulo, regularly taking place in various venues such as bars, cultural centres and festivals. Events like Slam da Ponta (Itaquera, Zona Leste, 2014), and Slam Resistência (Roosevelt Square, central area,

2014) exemplify how the movement has diversified and become rooted in São Paulo's street culture.

Beyond providing a space for artistic expression, slams in São Paulo have built a community of poets and artists who share experiences, develop skills, and promote cultural exchange. Over the next decade, it played a central role in creating space for the emergence of an urban youth identity, while also leaving a mark on the urban fabric. The city's slam scene continues to evolve other art forms and social movements. It emerges as a new mode of cultural expression within a site previously shaped by the local samba tradition, constituting a new layer of afrography.



Oralitures

In Nenê de Vila Matilde's samba-enredo 'The Poet Has Spoken (We Are the Zona Leste)', urban spaces connected to samba are celebrated. Right in the first verses, Largo do Peixe and Sapucaí are referenced as spatial landmarks that map the afrography of Nenê's carnival: 'It's all there/For you to enjoy/From Largo do Peixe/To Sapucaí'.⁹ Simultaneously, the samba lyric echoes Pastinha's saying 'We are the Zona Leste/Fighting with dignity',¹⁰ transforming the social meaning of the region's identity discourse by associating it with lyricism and poetry itself, yet without abandoning the melancholic sentiment of urban belonging that shakes along with the train: 'And there at Central/ The suburbanite comes/ Shaking off sadness/ To the rhythm of the train'.¹¹ Thus, the song is constructed through an afrographic awareness that marks urban space, drawing on

old carnivals – the confetti battles, costume parades, drum circles and tiririca fights of Vila Esperança and Vila Matilde – a bygone era that somehow persists in the present, creating a circular narrative: 'Vila Esperança/ How we miss the old carnivals .../ Vila Matilde/ Of the immortal batuquadas/ Of the tiririca/ Beloved old guard/ New guard/ It's the triumphant finale'.¹²

Almost three decades later, slammer Emerson Alcalde also evoked the region's landmarks to talk about his urban experience, now permeated by violence: 'Here in the "Lost" Zone, people disappear/like during the dictatorship ... A man is a man/And the homis are the homis/The wall was broken/the fourth wall was shattered/Yet we're still discriminated against for living in this area'.¹³



In Alcalde's poem, the difference between a *man* and a *homi* (slang for cop) lies in the armour of violence. A man ceases to be a man, becoming a *homi* – someone who left their *humanity* behind, and, echoing Frantz Fanon, dehumanises others.¹⁴ However, when the poet announces the breaking of the fourth wall, he speaks of dismantling segregation, as slam poetry transcends neighbourhood boundaries, city limits and even national borders, through its appearance in competitions worldwide. 'This is Jardim Romano/ground for Indians, Blacks, the poor, Northeasterners/We're isolated in this swamp – the Extermination Zone'.¹⁵ Yet, they are still discriminated against for living in this demarcated area, where the railroad celebrated by Seu Nenê decades earlier is now the Red Line subway – the symbolic colour for violence: 'Have you ever wondered/why our subway line/is the Red one? .../Our Nenê resists in the quilombo/ formed by the wings/ with Samara, Matilde, Dalila, Penha, Helena, Mara/ She

will be violated, massacred for trying to change the status quo/ She'll get shocked, framed, racism, bullets'.¹⁶ Identities are defined by race, ethnicity, colour and class: Indigenous and Black people, the poor, Northeasterners, all social markers of isolation and hostility.

Poetic language blends contemporary philosophy and crime headlines by linking locality names (like Jardim Pantanal, in the far east of the city) to Agamben's 'space of extermination'.¹⁷ Samara, Matilde, Dalila, Penha, Helena, Mara (local villages) personify violated mothers searching for their missing children and nurturing survivors, the same young slammers challenging the established order through verse: the shock, the criminalisation, the racism, the *homi*'s gunshots. In this narrative, the poet introduces the very idea we seek to defend – that slam poetry and samba schools, resisting in Nenê's contemporary *quilombo* (organised settlements of escaped enslaved people in colonial times, located in hard-to reach places for strategic



defence against militias and troops), become afrographies, living inscriptions of memory that reclaim urban space and dignity across successive generations.

In the 'Manifesto of Guilhermina Slam', slam takes over the square, inhabits the city, and claims it as its own. In an ode to place, we see once again the awareness of afrography: 'Guilhermina is *Esperança*'; one place spills into the other, becomes another, crafting identities beyond those imposed by administrative boundaries.¹⁸ *Esperança* means hope, a goal for these young poets. At the same time, the poet jokes with the distance between his place and the city centre, and its occupation by hip-hop culture: 'from Guilhermina to São Bento is just a matter of time'.¹⁹ São Bento (the Red Line station anchoring downtown) is the very birthplace of São Paulo's hip-hop scene in the 1980s. The subway ride takes an hour, but art and culture spill beyond the periphery, spill over the segregating borders of racial hegemony, touching other spaces and infiltrating the centre. To conquer the entire city and become the metropolis's burning desire? Just a matter of time.

Afrographies in urban space

Luis Rufalo Rodrigues posits the crossroads as a conflicting intersection of internal and external realities: 'The crossroads, the navel and mouth of the world, tells us that nothing is finished. We are at war'.²⁰ In a chapter on the spatial dimension of racial relations, Renato Emerson dos Santos proposes breaking the hegemonic silence of racism through two premises: the spatial organisation of racial relations, producing what he calls geo-graphies:

Racial relations inscribe space, establishing temporary "geo-graphies" (such as territorialities of groups defined by cultural traits linked to racial belonging, like hip-hop "spots"), enduring ones (such as racialised segregation patterns), or near-permanent ones (like quilombola territories or toponyms tied to legacies of racial relations).²¹



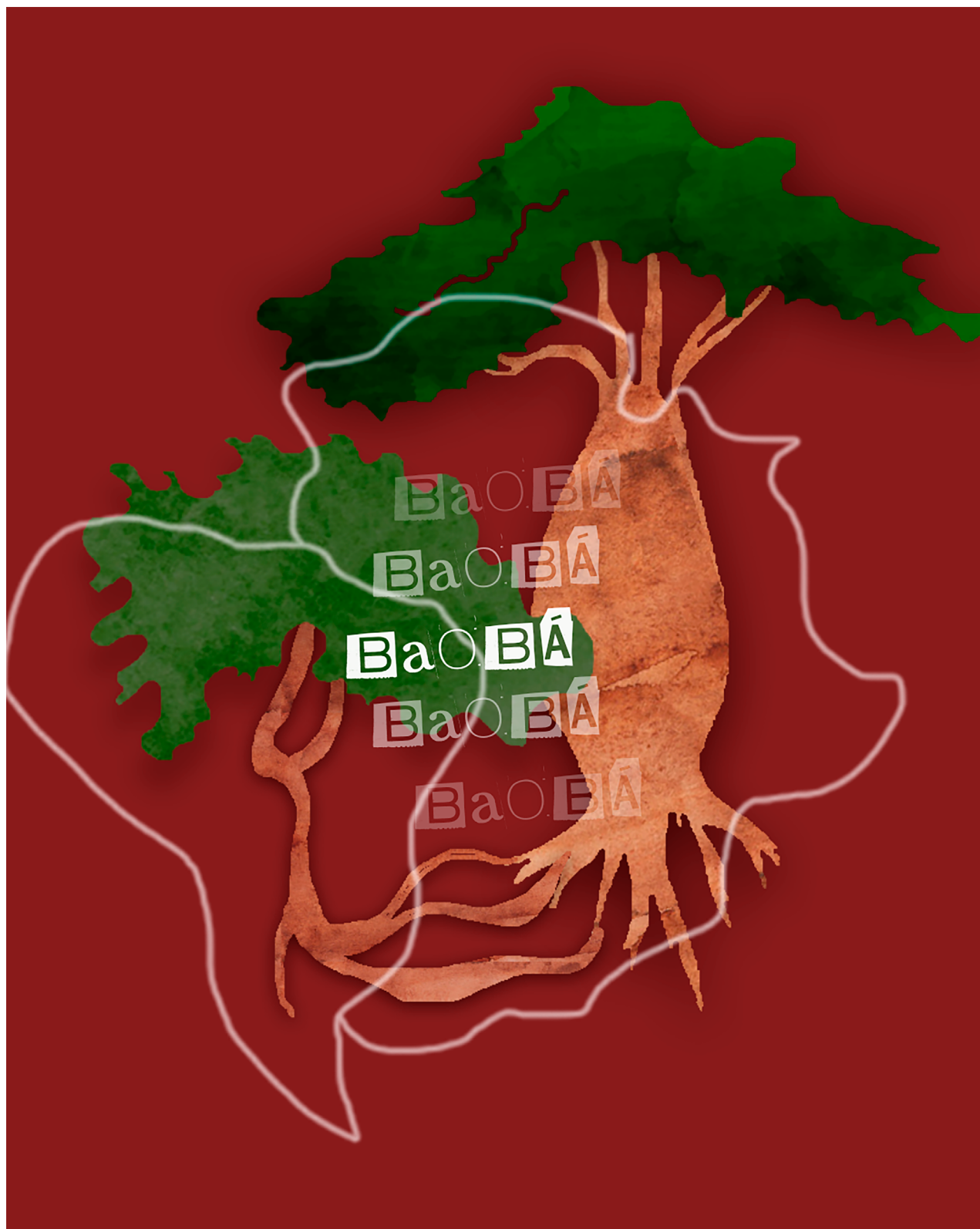
Santos's concept directly echoes Martins's afroographies – manifestations etched into physical space.

Racial relations, in their multiple dimensions (corporeality, religion, culture, etc.), with their manifestations of attributes and classificatory systems, constitute their own spatializations. Likewise, anti-racist struggles, resistance to oppression, and the Black Movement also produce their own spatializations.²²

For Martins, borders are erected to conceal territorial ambiguities and ambivalent identities, defining what is or isn't acceptable as standard behaviour. This creates a false perception of the metropolis as hegemonic, singular and cohesive by obfuscating differences, contradictions and conflicts, while dictating the terms that underpin the social pact, order and belonging in urban space. In this context, afroographies become sites of physical and symbolic

struggle. Minoritarian identities grounded in past experiences and ancestral knowledge materialise in space and become layered over time, to ensure permanence, perpetuation and re-signification.

Thus, there is a connection between samba and slam inscribed in the urban space of past and present, Brazil and Africa, traversing space and time through successive generations in the diaspora. These cultural forms embody the fight to reclaim space and lives lost to state violence, amid the militarisation of public power and the escalating disregard for Black life. Though each cultural expression/form adopts strategies shaped by its historical moment resulting in vastly different forms of expression and content, their emergence in the same urban space reveals a genealogy of ancestral, generational, and spatial connections, each speaking to their contemporaries.



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Notes

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Biography

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