Be About It

Graffiteras Performing Feminist Community

Jessica N. Pabón
“Crah-zis Crew,” Naska corrected my mispronunciation, “not Crazys Crew! Although we are loca!” Surrounded by the bohemian vibe and décor of Galindo restaurant in Santiago’s breathtaking Bellavista neighborhood, graffiteras (female graffiti writers) Naska and Shape punctuate their explanation of their crew name with fits of laughter, the kind born of a private joke between friends. Founded in 2000 as Chile’s first all-female1 graffiti crew, in 2010 Crazis Crew included Naska, DanaPink, Shape, Bisy, Cinemas, Eney, and Adri. The original Crazis, Naska and DanaPink, began painting together because they shared both the experience of isolation as women writers among men and the unrelenting desire to “write their voices on the walls of the city” (Crazis Crew 2011).2 Crazis Crew prioritizes collective projects; their works are “marked by very feminine characteristics” and painted to convey an attitude of personal and collective expression, to both integrate and distinguish the different styles of each graffitera. The crew’s group productions1 have a light, cartoonish quality, with rotund characters and highly stylized organic beings such as insects, plants, animals, young and old people in native clothing—all part of a pleasurable surrealistic natural landscape.

Despite a common root in US hip hop graffiti aesthetics, Latin American graffiti productions generally differ from the North American or European productions that most often are perceived as representative examples of graffiti subculture. North American and European graffiti art tends to emphasize photorealistic imagery with an aggressive composition and less immediately legible letters, producing a more “menacing” impact. This style is characterized as authentic or “real” graffiti and anything else is considered street art or a mural. It is less approachable and less pleasurable to non-graffiti writing spectators who have been conditioned to associate graffiti (in contrast to murals) with a reduced quality of life and urban decay. In Santiago (and in Rio de Janeiro), the public generally perceives multicolored graffiti art as a beautification of the cityscape. Graffiti art functions as a “utopian performative” that when produced and received can uplift a community—the artists who produce the work, as well as the passersby who are affected by it (Dolan 2005). Graffiti art is simply not criminalized to the same degree as it is in the US and parts of Europe—sometimes due to differences in social definitions and aesthetic distinctions. One crucial distinction in Brazil is the form of writing called pixação that, like hip hop graffiti art in the US, is always considered vandalism. If you are caught writing pixação (thin, monochromatic, illegible, hieroglyphic-type letters painted in the most difficult to access—and thus dangerous—public spaces) you can be shot on-site by paramilitary troops, with no questions asked. In contrast, if caught drawing characters and multicolored

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1. "Female" signifies woman-identified women and is not meant to signal a simplistic generalization reducing the research participants to their biological determinations. The multitude of differences between women, and in the category of “woman” itself, is held in tension with the common denominator—their plight as individuals who are marked as “women/female” and are participating in a subculture overwhelmingly understood to be the natural territory for “men/males.”

2. I translated all interviews and emails.

3. Murals are called “productions” in graffiti vernacular.

Figure 1. (facing page) A muñeca by DanaPink of Crazis Crew, Santiago, Chile, 2010. (Courtesy of DanaPink)

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letters, which are considered art, you may be reprimanded, but you can go home unharmed. Aside from pixação, Chilean and Brazilian graffiti artists perform in a kind of gray space of legality: they may be fined, given community service, or applauded for their creations.

The graffiteras of Crazis Crew, in addition to painting for pleasure—whether it is done illegally or legally—persistently cultivate the means to make a living from their graffiti art. When we met in August 2010, they expressed the hope that one day they would be able to support themselves collectively through their art for public and private monies. Little by little they’re accomplishing this goal. In April 2011, the Ruth Cardoso Youth Center in São Paulo, Brazil, commissioned Crazis Crew to design a production as part of the exhibition Art Alameda da Rua (Alameda Street Art). And in November 2012, the members of Crazis Crew produced Polanco Graffestival, the first Chilean festival of graffiti murals in Valparaiso.

As I learned through my fieldwork, Chilean and Brazilian graffiteras have been building all-female crews and collectives for more than a decade. This in spite of the fact that, no matter the locale, the internal social dynamics of hip hop graffiti culture have long been, and continue to be, overwhelmingly characterized by a sometimes tacit, sometimes outright heterosexist ideology. The sexualization, tokenization, and marginalization of female graffiti writers breeds a culture of misogyny that, though veiled by bravado, is frequently internalized by female writers and affects how these women relate to one another. Many of the writers I have interviewed express their fear of being associated with weaker writers (read: other women and “toys”), their distaste for women rumored to be writing graffiti solely to gain sexual attention from male peers, and their disdain for women who exploit their minority status for “instant” fame. For these reasons and more, women who form or join all-female crews jeopardize the respect and reputation they have earned from their peers—male and female. Actively rejecting that misogynistic dynamic, these graffiteras are instead offering a positive space where peer support, constructive artistic critique, and friendship are expected.

My initial thoughts on all-female crews were heavily influenced by my locale in the US, specifically New York City, where the complicated subcultural dynamics of ownership, history, illegality, trust, and competition seem to affect writers to a greater degree: female writers in the US generally do not form all-female crews. I thought all-female crews were specific to Latin American graffiti subculture; perhaps the quasi-criminal, quasi-legal status of graffiti art in some Latin American countries had something to do with the dynamics. As it turns out, however, all-female crews are now an international phenomenon. Through their actions, all-female crews like Crazis are effecting an extraordinary surge in the transnational presence of women in this male-dominated subculture.

Surprisingly, the Chilean and Brazilian all-female crews are composed of, and in some cases founded by, women who do not identify as feminists—a tendency they share with their US

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4. Polanco Graffestival was the first mural festival in Chile and brought together 79 artists from multiple Latin American cities to paint murals on the façades of 30 historic sites in Valparaiso. Bisy was the main organizer of the festival (for more information, see http://polancograffestival.cl/sitio).

5. “Toy” is subcultural vernacular meaning an inexperienced writer; one who is “toying” with the form; one whose commitment and mastery has yet to be established.

6. The only exceptions I know of are PMS, a NYC-based crew founded in the late ’90s by Miss17 and ClawMoney that recently added MRS; and the Few and Far Collective based in California, founded in 2011, that includes women who paint graffiti art, street art, and skateboard (see http://fewandfarwomen.com).

7. For examples of international crews in relation to the shifts in graffiti culture as it goes online, see Pabón (2013).

8. Combating liberal North American white feminist discourse, Sternbach et al. argue that “the once prevalent notion in the United States that Latin American women do not consider themselves feminists [...] has been reinforced recently by texts that fall within the domain of ‘testimonial’ literature and by research focusing on women’s participation in grassroots movements and in national liberation struggles, rather than on feminism” (1992:393).
peers. And yet, they participate in all-female groupings that provide a physical and mental space where each artist can be respected and challenged, and can rise to subcultural expectations regarding stylistic innovation, and can be supported by peers not only artistically but also personally. The seeming disparity between their political identity (or lack thereof) and their everyday actions motivated me to start thinking more carefully about something New York City graffiti writer ClawMoney once told me in reference to the fact that many graffiti-writing women do not claim feminist identities: being a feminist graffiti writer means “just being about it.”

The label “feminist” has come to signify a variety of stifling, stigmatized, and incendiary stereotypes that alienate young women and fuel the rhetoric of failure and deadness on a transnational level; under these conditions, the future of feminist movement appears bleak. Feminist movement seems to be, quite frankly, stuck. In relation to the progress of feminism as an ideology and feminist movement, Gloria Anzaldúa asserts, “We either move or petrify. Change requires great heat. We must turn the heat on our own selves, the first site of working toward social justice and transformation” (in Moraga and Anzaldúa 2002:xxxiv). The petrification of what feminism is can only be resisted and altered by paying close attention to what feminism is doing. What I perceive as feminist community exists for most graffiteras through actions performed without or against a named feminist identity: feminism is what they do, not how they identify. What if we think through the disjunction between identity and action from a hip hop perspective? One of the most frequently cited aesthetic requisites for inclusion in hip hop culture is reinvention. Be they rappers, dancers, DJs, or graffiti writers, cultural producers must innovate with attention paid to tradition. The expectation is that new styles will be grounded in the foundational principals defining the genre, even as they advance the form by offering something new. Graffiteras are affected by, and subsequently enact, the foundational principles of feminist movement (equality, collectivity, and empowerment), but because their feminist performance goes unannounced, the changes they are making in their subcultural space have gone unnoticed.

These graffiteras are rendered invisible as participants in, or leaders of, feminist movement because of their difference as disidentified feminist activists, third world women, and subcultural (sometimes criminal) actors (see Muñoz 1999). In Against the Romance of Community, Miranda Joseph approaches the dynamics of community by shifting the conversation from questions of sameness and difference to considerations of social processes. She argues that scholars interested in identity-based communities (or in this case, crews) must not erase the performativity of individual labor practices—the forms of production and consumption—that construct those communities. The “it” in “being about it” is a direct reference to the physical and emotional labor required to achieve subcultural, social, and political equality. Graffiteras perform feminist acts on the stage of everyday life when they take public space, exceed gendered expectations, raise each other’s consciousness, and support one another’s artistry. The acts of production and consumption that develop these crews are performed in ways that challenge the traditional invocation of community by identity-based movements and thus can profoundly alter the end results (Joseph 2002:viii). Their crews are feminist communities produced regardless of feminist identity, regardless of individual subjectivity, and in contrast to the ways in which some graffiti communities function. By being about it, these graffiteras model a kind of being through

By stating that these graffiteras do not identify as feminist, I do not intend to participate in the misleading characterization of Latin American women as unconcerned with feminist politics (a particularly popular sentiment in the late 1980s and ’90s), but rather quite the opposite: to demonstrate how feminism is part of the performance of their everyday lives despite not being their mode of self-identification.

9. In her 2000 text Feminism Is for Everybody, bell hooks does not use articles (definite or indefinite) when referring to “feminist movement.” I understand, and employ, this subtle move as a linguistic strategy for signifying action. Feminist movement is a verb, something one does—something we do to dismantle the “mainstream white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (5).
doing that disrupts static hegemonic representations of what feminist movement “is” and what a feminist “looks like”; they provoke one another to perform the kind of subcultural space they desire. For these graffiteras, feminism exists in the doing and the doing produces a performative being that enables their participation in graffiti subculture. Passionately produced against static hegemonic feminist identity, the crews these graffiteras create exemplify the future of feminist movement.

I found three active contemporary feminist communities in two major metropolitan centers in Latin America: in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the grassroots collective Rede Nami; and in Santiago, Chile, both the Turronas Crew and the Crazis Crew. These graffiteras embody feminist ideologies in their all-female crew-making and community-building efforts. Keeping in mind Janet Jakobsen’s argument that “Social movement, if effective in making change, must also (repeatedly) change itself” (1998:146), what can be learned about contemporary strategies of collectivity from analyzing the failure of feminism to attract the allegiance of women who actively participate in “feminist” endeavors? By unpacking the complex relationship these graffiteras have with feminism and feminist movement I have tried to gauge their affective, embodied associations with feminist ideologies. Their disidentification with a feminist identity and their strategic negotiations with dominant Western liberal feminist ideologies suggests that feminism is not dead despite being disowned in name, but rather exists as a “failed” politic that is kept quite alive through performances of feminism by graffiteras.

From their subcultural vantage point and through their artistic ways of doing and being, graffiteras are not only changing the internal dynamics of graffiti subculture; they are also changing feminist movement in such a way as to more effectively address the contemporary sociopolitical landscape on a transnational scale.

Crazis Crew

With respect to feminism, we value our gender difference as it provides an opportunity to paint with more freedom because we take advantage of [the sexist perceptions] which position us as less suspicious than a male graffiti writer on the street. At the same time, our perspective and intention is to grow together [as women] through mutual respect and appreciation, generating even more powerful ideas to enrich our graffiti. (Crazis Crew 2011)

In their collective statement, the Crazis writers explained to me that while they do not identify as feminists, either individually or as a crew, they acknowledge that they are perceived that way because of the gender composition of the group and because of their expressed intent to demonstrate that they “do not need to have the mind of a man” to paint graffiti with style and innovation. They distance themselves from a feminist identity while simultaneously articulating their awareness of sexist stereotypes about graffiti writers. Rather than dwell on the detrimental effects of gender difference that play into that stereotype, they redefine the terms of engagement into a means of proliferation. As an all-female crew, they use sexism against itself to further their means of production. Naska elaborates: “the importance of taking part of an all-female crew is not just about coming together and going out to paint graffiti in the street, it is something that leads to organization, an exchange of ideas, opinions, projects, etc.” (Naska 2010). The potential offered by an all-female crew lies in its function as a meeting ground, a contemporary space akin to the consciousness-raising efforts of feminists in the late 1960s, ’70s, and early ’80s. For the members of these female crews, having a network, a working relationship with peers, and access to mentors is critical. Whether specifically tied to feminist ideology or not, the value of building and sustaining this kind of all-female peer collective is clear, particularly if you trace the development of Crazis from a two-person team to a group of seven.

When Naska began painting at 16 in 1999, there were no other graffiteras in her circle, so she painted with her male friends. Yet she says she wished for a female friend, “a partner,” to...
paint with. She met DanaPink, a graffitera who shared Naska’s skill set and level of development with the spray can. DanaPink and Naska became partners in crime, literally and figuratively, a partnership Naska identifies as truly beneficial for their artistic and personal growth. Not only did they grow as graffiteras, but they also matured together as women on the fringes of acceptable social behavior. Realizing the benefits of being in a peer mentorship/friendship with another female writer, the two women decided to form Crazis Crew to foster deep personal connections and encourage open artistic exchange. Explaining how this exchange functions, Naska described a “chain” of learning and mentorship: Naska said she learned from Bisy who in turn learned from Naska who taught Dana who then taught Shape who also learned from Naska, and so on. Crazis built their own support network.

For women artists, often minorities in any medium, the importance of maintaining a network of peers, a community, cannot be over-emphasized. Around the time that Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, leaders of the feminist art movement in the US, founded Womanhouse, art historian Linda Nochlin theorized the relationship between social context and the possibility of artistic production. In her 1971 article “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” Nochlin gets to the root of the gender disparity in art history’s canon:

[A]rt is not a free autonomous activity of a super-endowed individual [...T]he total situation of art making, both in terms of the development of the art maker and in the nature and quality of the work of art itself, occur in a social situation, are integral elements of this social structure, and are mediated and determined by specific and definable social institutions. (1988:158)

The “total situation” of graffiti culture inevitably includes the formation of crews, which function as miniature communities that are represented as a point of pride. The difference worth noting here is the concerted effort by Naska and Dana to find a common ground based on gendered life experiences from which to build this network. Generally, when people enter graffiti subculture they hang out with more experienced mentors, perhaps an older brother or friend, who then mentors their stylistic and cultural development. Entrance into the culture is often different for women. Experienced writers may not want to “waste” their time mentoring a
woman for fear she won’t be truly committed. In addition, if a graffitera’s male peers do offer to train her, there is also always the risk that, due to heterosexist assumptions, the work she produces will be contested by the subcultural rumor mill: “she didn’t do it,” “she had sex with him,” “she just copies his style,” etc. Regardless of the fact that Naska felt no direct sexism, sexualization, or marginalization among the group of friends who taught her, I gathered from her tone and phrasing that being the sole female in a crew of men was extremely isolating.

Like most graffiteras, Naska began by experimenting with letters, but has since become more focused on her passion for developing new styles in figurative work (fig. 3). She describes her style as feminine and intends for her graffiti to communicate a message that is not confrontational, but rather soft, fluid, and suave; the overwhelmingly pastel color palette combined with the animals and environments she chooses to depict realize her objective. Her signature big-eyed birds and fish are never grounded—they fly and float freely through rose-colored skies and apple-green waters. Naska’s dreamlike worlds make visual her affective experience of being a graffitera:

When I paint, I feel better. It feels good. It is a relief. I feel calm because it is like a moment in the day when I can concentrate and take it easy. Taking time for graffiti is very important. The feeling that graffiti, and painting with Crazis, gives me is sentimental.

(Naska 2010)

Naska found her artistry in the joyous, dreamlike visuals she paints. In a subculture where notions of authenticity are rooted in aggressive imagery and handstyle, her stylistic choices may not have been fostered or given the space to develop without DanaPink’s support—without a writer who shares, and perhaps more importantly, values Naska’s aesthetic decisions.

Throughout my interview with her, Naska advocated for gender equality and emphasized how empowering Crazis had been for her and for the others. However, when I asked if she identified as a feminist she said without hesitation,

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10. Handstyle simply refers to the handwriting style of the graffiti writer.
I am not a feminist. I am a graffitera. Here in Chile the woman feminist is a protester, she is passionate about equality. I started an all-girl crew to empower the women through graffiti. I am not a feminist, but the part of feminism I like is to empower women in work. It is not about women’s power, it is the power of women. (Naska 2010)

Naska makes an intriguing distinction: “I am not a feminist. I am a graffitera.” Her striking non-feminist feminism is located specifically within the realm of artistic labor, which for her is different from what feminists do—protest. The kind of work Naska does with Crazis is a form of unmarked social protest that takes place in her everyday life and is a valuable contribution to the attainment of gender equality particularly because the methods and means utilized are specific to graffiti’s subcultural framework. By doing the work of a graffitera among graffiteras, Naska produces and instigates feminist action—with every line sprayed on the wall she protests her invisibility, claims space in a subculture where the walls “belong” to men.

During the course of our conversation, I discovered that Naska’s translator was Shape Mima P—another graffitera. Shape started writing graffiti after going to a hip hop party with Dana, Naska, and Adri in 2002. After the party, the girls went out tagging and that was it for Shape, who started out tagging “Kary.” Shape was in college studying painting and training to be a contemporary dancer when she started getting invitations to go out and paint and to join Bisy’s break dancing crew. Her modes of artistic expression transitioned “from the studio to the street”:

Graffiti is more urban, less formal...and that is what I love. I love the urban; it is on the street. Let’s go to the street and paint! [...] Getting out of the studio and onto the street, you have more experiences. (Shape 2010)

Shape joined Naska and Bisy on their graffiti missions and began experimenting with street art tile mosaics, but ultimately she succumbed to her attraction to spray paint and adopted it as her primary medium. As her tag name implies, she describes her style as a continual process of investigating shapes that are “psychedelic, feminine, and colorful” (fig. 4). Shape’s experience with graffiti and breakdancing differs from most hip hop practitioners—male or female. Due to the ratio of male to female hip hop artists, and the lack of representation and notoriety for females, it is unique for anyone to be brought into hip hop culture by an experienced female practitioner. Shape recognizes that her experience is atypical, and her introduction to hip hop through the influence of strong, like-minded women informs her take on feminism:

I am not a feminist, but I hate machismo, I am the opposite of machismo! I believe that women and men should walk together; men should not step all over women. We [her

Figure 4. The psychedelic, feminine work of Naska and Shape. Santiago, Chile, 2012. (Courtesy of the artists)
and Naska] think of feminism as having an active part in politics, activities, and protests. I don’t go to the feminist activities. It makes me happy that they are doing it and I feel secure because of the progress women have made, but I don’t participate in it. (Shape 2010)

Like Naska, Shape indicates that the activities she engages in do not count as feminist because they are not the typical “politics, activities, and protests.” Shape’s self-empowerment comes from painting with an all-girl crew, an activity that provides her with “an opportunity to represent female writers in Chile, to grow and advance as a woman doing what you love […] and to make] friends [who] form a bond that goes beyond graffiti”—it provides her with a powerful community to tap into personally and professionally.

After almost a decade of painting and breakdancing, Shape became pregnant. She continued painting at the beginning of her pregnancy—wearing a facemask—but her activity decreased once the baby was born. Shape spent a good portion of our interview explaining why having a child changes everything, even when you have a partner who shares parenting responsibilities. Since graffiti is traditionally framed as a male-centered youth culture, the topic of parenting (never mind of mothering) is one that has yet to be investigated and included as part of this subculture’s story. When I began this work it was a concern I had not considered; now it affects many of the women I work with (Abby, Claw, and Lady Diva to name a few) and informs their stories significantly. These women do not neglect their parental responsibilities to focus on their artistic careers, or vice versa, but rather spend a great deal of energy balancing the responsibilities of both roles—like most working women who are primary caretakers. For Shape, if too much time passes between getting out to paint with her crew, she feels that something integral to her quality of life is missing. At the time of our interview, her daughter Carmen (named after a Crazis member) was almost two years old and had already been to quite a few Crazis productions. Shape intends to continue bringing Carmen with her—not only to expose her to new ideas, people, and places but also to teach her how to paint—an alteration to the “average” subcultural initiation rituals. At the wall, Shape always has help from the other Crazis, who care for the little girl as if she were their own. Aside from childcare there is the larger issue of finances—when you have to buy food and clothing for your child, buying paint is a luxury expense. To supplement the family income and perhaps buy paint for the next Crazis production, Shape spends her time at home fashioning various artesana goods to vend.

Since August 2010, DanaPink, cofounder of Crazis, has also been balancing motherhood with her commitment to graffiti making. DanaPink’s son Clemente was born the day we were supposed to meet for an interview, and while she obviously did not make it, she managed to orchestrate my meeting with Naska and Shape from the hospital. While Dana enjoys painting with both her husband and her crew, she also cherishes the temporary disconnect from everyday

Figure 5. One of Shape’s shoe designs. January 2012. (Courtesy of Shape)
responsibilities that painting alone provides; she uses this alone time to “release her energy” on the wall. For Dana,

Graffiti is life, it is love. I paint graffiti because it is a part of my life that makes me feel special. I like being able to give my work to people. I love to paint graffiti as much as I can, but now with motherhood I do not have as much time to paint graffiti on the streets. So I settle for drawing and continue painting at home until I can return to the streets. (DanaPink 2011)

Like Shape’s artesana, DanaPink transfers her graffiti aesthetic to canvas and fabric, painting on premade textiles like jean skirts and jackets, and hand sewing pillows and dolls; both women use the artistic skills they developed as graffiti artists to earn extra money.

Dana started painting in 1999, watching and practicing with her brother and friends. Admitting to the poor quality of her initial work, Dana shared that in Chile there is a colloquialism that says you can’t learn without failing, so she soldiered through those bad first attempts and came out a highly skilled visual artist whose work is “soft and feminine with a focus on children, flowers, and animals.” Sharing a bit of herself each time she presses down on the spray paint cap, Dana paints a kind of self-portrait with each of her wide-eyed muñecas (little doll-like girls; fig. 6). If her muñecas are reflections of herself, then this is a woman who has her eyes wide open to the workings of the world. Her muñecas are not hyperstylized in their bodies, but in the adornment of their dress, their environments, and in the attention to the scale and color of their eyes. The large-scale eyes at first read as “cute,” lighthearted, and warm, but they also gaze directly at you, calling for your undivided attention. Dana primarily uses pinks with female characters to “note the difference [...] that it was made by a woman.” Knowing full well that what “marks” graffiti as made by a woman is both specific and arbitrary, Dana qualified that in graffiti art, gender difference is never absolute:

Figure 6. DanaPink describes her muñecas as “soft and feminine.” Valparaiso, Chile, 2009. (Courtesy of DanaPink)
In Chile there are many women who paint [in a style] that has nothing to do with envying a masculine style. You can walk down the street and see wildstyle or a throw-up that looks like a man did it by its aggression, but it will be done by a woman. (2011)11

Dana navigates her place in this subculture by consciously marking the gender of the artist producing the graffiti. I asked if she considered that to be a political statement and she responded rather tentatively: “maybe subconsciously.” Subconsciously or not, Dana’s ideology regarding graffiti, as an “art [that] connects you to the community; as a gift of life to a polluted city, at no cost, with just a little color,” resonates with a kind of anti-industrial, pro-community hip hop ethic that, when combined with the deliberate marking of her gender difference, makes a political statement out of the least likely aesthetic: cuteness. Dana does not immediately identify with hip hop culture, but she does recognize the “original connection,” stating that “in the beginning graffiti was a branch of hip hop, but nowadays it is not necessary to be in the world of hip hop to do graffiti” (2011). While plenty of writers use “soft” imagery like Dana’s prepubescent girl characters, with Dana (as with Naska) the style is not immediately recognizable as, or intended to convey, a hip hop attitude. And yet, the influence of hip hop in Dana’s work is evident, especially in her lettering (despite not being wildstyle).

When I asked Dana if she felt any hindrance being a woman in a male-dominated subculture, she replied, “not really.” Through her participation in Crazis Crew, Dana feels secure, empowered, and at home as a graffitera. The momentum with which women are gaining artistic, social, and political respect against a history of “continual and massive discouragement,” can and should be partially attributed to this shift toward all-female crews (Russ [1983] 1989:87). In How to Suppress Women’s Writing, Joanna Russ argues that women “writers” (of a different sort in her text) need “models [...] as assurances that they can produce art without inevitably being second-rate” (87). As should be clear by now, the struggles graffiteras face are in many ways parallel to those of women artists in most genres—in their struggles and in their successes. For Dana, the sociopolitical advances women have made in Chile in general have made it possible for her to participate in graffiti culture. Similarly, Dana added that all-girl crews are gaining in strength and power and have earned the respect they deserve as writers. However, Dana continues to guard herself against the threat of displacement or disrespect by signifying her gen-

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11. Wildstyle is the genre of graffiti art most readily associated with hip hop; it is illegible to most, and characterized by a simultaneous deconstruction and reconstruction of letters—“wild” letters. A throw-up is a type of graffiti mark that exists somewhere between a tag (which takes about 5 seconds) and a piece (which can take 30 minutes or longer); throw-ups are generally two colors—one used for the outline and one for a simple fill in—and designed to be “thrown up” on the wall in a minute or two.
nder difference on the wall—a reminder that it is always necessary to mark her presence lest she become invisible.

Joining in 2011, the newest addition to Crazis Crew is 26-year-old Eney. She chose her tag name as a way to “keep a part” of herself, creating something that was legible, “friendly, female, and curvy” when written freehand (Eney 2011). She describes her free forms, which are often flying through the air (or floating in water, similar to Naska’s), and her Latina figures who are “very rounded and outside the stereotype, with small breasts” as a stylistic preference “linked to nature” and expressive of her mestizo roots and Mapuche culture (fig. 8). In order to create texture in her pieces, she waters down the paint, which makes it drip freely and act more as a translucent ground layer that she then contours with definite spray lines and volumizing effects. Eney finds inspiration in her urban surroundings: “Temuco is a very gray city [...] surrounded by nature and culture.” At first she wanted to capture the natural elements and paint them in unexpected places to disrupt the monotonous cityscape, “like a gift,” but when she discovered the impact of those images she expanded her repertoire to embrace an ideology, using messages of “girl power” for example. Eney started altering public space with stickers and wheat pasting in 2005; shortly thereafter she was introduced to aerosol—a medium that opened an entirely new window of possibility and inspired her to “capture the streets.” The same year that she was introduced to spray paint, she learned about Crazis Crew.

When I asked how painting made her feel, she replied: “a diluted paint and a fine line...in a single word make me orgasm.” The orgasmic pleasure in graffiti writing for Eney comes from the feeling of unity with her crews, the connection to and communication with her city, and from belonging to a larger (hip hop) family “on which [she] can always rely.” In her elaborations on the power of the erotic, Audre Lorde famously claims that the erotic is the “assertion of the lifeforce of women,” “creative energy empowered,” and “is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing” (1984:54, 55). Eney’s claim reminded me of a statement in The Art of Getting Over by Stephen Powers, where male writer Crayone also makes use of the erotic to define his relationship to graffiti (albeit in regards to the debate regarding gallery vs. street graffiti art): “Some graffiti artists think that hitting canvasses is like jacking off and wiping their cum with a napkin; putting their art on a napkin. Why not get off on a wall? Why not fuck the real bitch?” (in Powers 1999:6).

Figure 8. Eney of Crazis Crew paints Latina figures that are expressive of her mestizo roots and Mapuche culture. Santiago, Chile, September 2011. (Courtesy of Eney)
The misogynistic language used here in relation to the orgasmic and the erotic, is quite different in tone, intention, and effect than Eney’s use of a similar metaphor and illustrates the extent to which the wall, the streets, and the act of painting are gendered. For a graffitera to unapologetically claim the erotic in describing the affective component in painting, as Eney did, is striking. When Eney asserts the pleasure she takes in deviant, public self-expression, she redefines the hypersexualized and problematically gendered dynamics within graffiti subculture. In each of the Crazis’ testimonies it is obvious that they all feel a kind of personal and collective pleasure in public painting that is not accessible through other aspects of their lives.

**Turronas Crew**

In 2006, graffiteras Antisa (Los Ángeles, Chile), Gigi (Villa Alemana), and Mona (Santiago) founded the all-female Turronas Crew after meeting one another at Conce Graff, an annual graffiti event hosted by El Departamento de Jóvenes del Municipalidad Concepción (the city of Concepción’s youth department) in Chile. Over time, Dninja (Belo Horizonte, Brazil), and Pau (Cologne, Germany), joined, making Turronas a transnational crew rooted in Chile.

Antisa was the only member of Turronas Crew I met in person. I spoke with her at La Chimba Hostel in Bellavista on the last day of my visit to Santiago. Antisa is, in a phrase, a “hip hop head.” Over the course of our interview, she must have repeated that statement a hundred times. She emphasized her ties and commitments to the kind of hip hop that has a “conscious” relationship to community and the people while distancing herself from the corporate “bling bling” hip hop everyone loves to hate. For Antisa, hip hop is “un estilo de vida” (a lifestyle) that she does not consciously enact—in her words: “I just am it.”

A painter since she was a child, Antisa recalled with some humor how her father always encouraged her to paint because that was the only way to keep her peaceful. She traces her love for graffiti back to the ’90s and her instant affection for hip hop music and culture in high school, where graffiti writing was taught as part of the arts and culture curriculum to promote appreciation and proliferation of mural work. Already active in the hip hop scene as an emcee,

12. All correspondence with Antisa comes from an interview on 19 August 2010 and subsequent email and Google Chat conversations. I translated each interview and email. As of August 2011 Mona has stepped away from the crew.
around 2000 she began doing tags and throw-ups with her first crew, Taxi. She was the only woman. During that time, she noted, she wasn’t cognizant of graffiti culture or of its history, she “didn’t know any graffiteras” and simply “did it because it was hip hop.” In 2003, she stopped emceeing and focused her creative energies on her graffiti—developing one of the most virtuosic styles of wildstyle lettering I have seen among the women in my study (fig. 10). As I’ve noted with Naska’s pastel surrealism and Dana’s cute pink muñecas, the choice of style itself is loaded with gendered implications. Not many women paint wildstyle graffiti, so Antisa’s style preference is uncommon. When asked to describe her style she said:

I am a graffiti purist. I only use spray paint. I listen to hip hop. I think if I claim to be a graffitera, I need to be able to do a tag, a throw-up, a piece... Anything else is street art. I like the challenge that wildstyle brings. You have to control the pressure, technique, and style. I love letters! (2010)

Antisa’s relationship with wildstyle and her identification with hip hop go hand in hand; compared to most other forms of graffiti, wildstyle is the hallmark of hip hop—a solidified relationship that can be partially attributed to the success and notoriety of the 1983 hip hop film of the same name (Wild Style), produced by Charlie Ahearn, which is now a cult classic among graffití lovers. Antisa uses the raw energy and often-illegal nature of graffiti as an outlet; by day she works as a graphic designer creating “acceptable images.” Since she is restrained in her work life to the literal, the legible, and the socially acceptable, in her graffiti she expresses her outlaw energy through complicated, illegible, and aggressive power lines. Despite the vigorous, seemingly unreserved kinetic characteristics of her style, now as before, when Antisa is painting she is “quiet, calm, focused, and relaxed.”

Antisa began her graffiti career as the sole woman in a sea of many men limited in their graffiti expression to tags and throw-ups. Now, she is part of Turronas, a crew of women who go beyond the tag to challenge the boundaries of the Roman letter, of the human figure, and of the natural world with spray paint. Painting graffiti with her friends is a state of being that she described as “delicious.” In contrast to Naska’s experience of isolation among all male friends or Dana’s certainty that Crazis assisted in her creative development, for Antisa, painting in a crew with all women does not provide anything different or better for her physical or emotional experience in graffiti culture. “When I started, I never felt different. They came to get me to go paint. I jumped walls, I climbed the fences. I did everything they did to make tags. They were my friends.” Retelling a story in which she can point directly to a moment when that kind

Figure 10. Antisa of Turronas Crew painted the callout “Yo! Antisa!” next to this wildstyle piece, both a greeting—Yo!—and an assertion of self: “I AM ANTISA!” Santiago, Chile, July 2012. (Courtesy of Antisa)
of deliciousness was abated, she refers back to the only moment in her history in which she was “put in her place” or reminded that she was in fact a woman, and realized that gender identity had consequences.

When my friend came to visit, I said let’s go paint the [concrete walls of the open-air drainage channels on the] river. And he said, no you are a woman, you can’t do it! It is dangerous; there are drug addicts and it’s dark and bad people go down there. And I said to him, you are the first person to say this to me in my life! I have plans to go there with Solitas of XIIBrillos Crew. (2010)

Antisa rebelled against her male friend’s restrictions by recruiting her friend Solitas from a different crew in Chile to paint the river with her on a different day. Wondering how Antisa made sense of her male friend’s outright rejection of her idea, I asked her what she thought about gender equality and feminism. “Feminism is extreme. Just like machismo is extreme. Both with closed minds. I am not a feminist. I believe in equality. I have never felt discriminated against. Only the one time, and one time as a graffitera is nothing.” While it’s true that having only the one experience where her gender took precedence over artistry is extraordinary, I could sense that the “one time” affected her deeply. She didn’t go to the river when her male friend told her not to, but she did choose to go on her own terms, with Solitas, another female writer.

Figure 11. Gigi of Turronas Crew describes her graffiti style as a mixture of pre-Columbian and religious carnivalesque imagery. Santiago, Chile, September 2012. (Courtesy of Antisa)

Gigi, a founding member of Turronas, turned her childhood nickname into her tag name. Twenty-nine years old at the time of our email conversation, she teaches and produces visual art for a living. She is also a member of the Viei, Wdr, and BBC crews (Gigi 2011). She began writing in 2003 under the mentor/friendship of the acclaimed writer ACB, who was in her early twenties in 2006 when she died of stomach cancer. Eight years later, Gigi describes her graffiti style as a mixture of pre-Columbian and religious carnivalesque imagery meant to celebrate her Latin American culture and identity (fig. 11). Her multicolored, voluptuous female figures are often lounging in an atmosphere replete with flowers, trees, and small animals. When asked how graffiti affects her, she responded that in doing what she loves—“painting her opinion in the streets,” making herself “appear”—she feels “free, happy and in touch with the city, people, and landscapes.” Being a graffitera makes her “feel alive, awake, and free”; it is part of her “dream lifestyle.”

13. To read my interview with Solitas, and see some of her graffiti art, visit: http://artofgettingovaries.wordpress.com/2012/08/15/digging-through-my-archives-solitas.

14. ACB from Valparaiso, Chile, worked with young people and artists throughout her country, Brazil, France, and the US on productions that promoted social justice and communal self-determination. Her death deeply affected the graffiti community transnationally. For examples of her work, see Catfight (2008:10–11).
Gigi attributes her growth as a writer, in both skill and knowledge, to her relationships with other female writers — painting with friends made her “a better artist.” In a “female-friendly crew” she has the space to create in a competitive but friendly atmosphere, an atmosphere where her opinions and feelings are respected. She thinks of Turronas as her family, a chosen family of friends in which communication is paramount. Despite the geographic distance between some of them, they “stay in touch all the time about work, troubles, art, and life.” Like Antisa, Gigi does not identify as a feminist “at all.” Interestingly, she qualifies her rejection by using the language of feminism. She believes that women and men are equally capable of “art, science, politics” and is grateful when her work is approached and appreciated without a gender bias, or a preoccupation with whether it was made by a man or woman. “Being girls doesn’t mean our work is less important or bad; we have the same skills [as men do] if we work hard for it.” Judging by my interaction with them, and the way in which they perform their public face, the other Turronas share Gigi’s sentiment. On their crew’s Flickr page, in the space underneath photos that is designated for a description, the Turronas almost always include the phrasing “Turroneando en Chile” (roughly translated as doing Turronas in Chile). Turning the proper noun, the identity, of the crew into a verb, these writers affirm that Turronas is not just who you are, it is what you do.

The work produced by Turronas Crew and Crazis Crew is different, but both crews successfully exhibit the stylistic innovations specific to each member while creating joint productions with consistent colors, textures, and themes. The proliferation of collectively produced murals on city streets is certainly attributable to the rich and distinct role of mural-making in Latin American culture, but these productions do something else. They articulate a continuity dependent upon virtuosic singularity: each graffitera must contribute her best for the production to be successful. In *Crimes of Style*, Jeff Ferrell comments on the relationship between building community and doing graffiti: “As they add pieces to a new wall of fame, or tag their way down a dark alley, [writers] not only alter the face of the larger community, but develop an aesthetic community among themselves” (1996:53). What Ferrell does not consider is how gender affects one’s capacity to participate. Both Crazis and Turronas are crews made up solely of self-identified non-feminist women. Throughout their testimonials, these women clearly communicate a shared, collective ideology grounded in the value of equality and the necessity of doing the work. The “work” here is not defined by the “direct” feminist action traditionally associated with feminist movement, but instead activates the ideologies of feminism through visual and lingual discourse, through ways of being — both personal and collective — that foster empowerment, pleasure, and supportive relationships. They perform a feminism that is rooted in friendship. This dynamic reverses one mode of feminist collectivity whereby individuals gather to address an immediate yet external social concern, like reproductive rights, and then form friendships based on that group identity. These crews flourish through their camaraderie, which in turn informs the structure of the crew in ways that
promote pleasure, give individuals the freedom to imagine, and create a space for taking personal time to mature as people and as artists.

**Rede Nami: Feminist Urban Arts Collective**

“You must come to Brazil, I will show you.” Anarkia Boladona was adamant. In the brief but informative hours when we first met face-to-face, at the Diane von Furstenberg Studios in New York, I realized her tenacity was fueled by a desire to share what she called “her work”—her graffiti, and the girls and women whom she passionately mentors and trains to paint and think as feminists (Anarkia Boladona 2010a). Later that year, I was in Rio de Janeiro. From the moment we embraced at the airport, Anarkia began detailing my itinerary. I was going to see “parts of Rio tourists do not see” and know everything there was to know about Rede Nami—the feminist urban arts collective she had founded several months earlier. Nami, a grassroots collective of 30 to 50 women and girls directed by Anarkia and a “board of directors,” utilizes the appeal, passion, and inspiration of urban artmaking to promote women’s rights specifically, and social justice generally. Although founded as a grassroots collective (and an official NGO as of August 2012), Nami is run “like a feminist business,” where hierarchy is utilized for organizational purposes (Anarkia Boladona 2010b). There are two directors per working group: capacity building (organizing lectures and other outreach), brand management and product development, media and public relations, transnational liaisons, and events and activities. While they train the next generation of graffiteras, Rede Nami is not a crew, it is a collective: Transnational feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty delineates a collective as a community imagined “away from essentialist notions of Third World feminist struggles, suggesting political rather than biological or cultural bases for alliance” (2003:46). Rede Nami builds their feminist political community upon an aesthetic base.

At the time of my visit, Nami “proper” was a mere three months young, but Anarkia had been actively engaged in social justice work through urban arts for approximately three years. She indicated that Nami is the next generation of feminist graffiti activism in Rio, begun in 2001 by semiretired writer Prima Donna, member/founder of Rio’s first all-female crew, TPM. Graffiti culture, as it exists today, exploded in Rio de Janeiro around the turn of the millennium and was preceded by the specifically Brazilian pixação. Active participants from the very beginning, writers like Prima have become models and mentors. After meeting and working with Prima, Anarkia began to see the oppression around her—on both personal and social/institutional levels. She began to think about the domestic abuse she had survived and how her motivation to “just keep painting” earned her status as a respected graffitera, not just in Brazil but also around the world. When she explained this to me, she stopped, looked me directly in the eyes, and spoke with an air of sincerity that struck my core:

How can we sleep at night when women all over are being beat to death every day? I thought that, with my visibility and status, I could help the other girls fight against discrimination and make society more equal. When they start with Nami, a lot of the girls don’t know what feminism is, but over time they start to think about what feminism is, they remember what they have done and experienced, and then they come to believe, they come to feminism on their own. (Anarkia Boladona 2010b)

During my interview with Injah, one of the original Nami members and codirector of the brand management and product development committee, she complimented Anarkia for her commitment (Injah 2010). A graffitera activist since 2005, Injah’s tag name reflects her spiritual beliefs in jab—in God. Injah identifies unequivocally as a feminist artist. Her definition of feminism is grounded in a recognition of the ways her everyday life is affected by gender difference. “I live in society as a woman and that is different than living as a man; [...] I try to think about what I can do to live better, and how can other women in the society I live in, live better too? How can we make it better for us?” She made a point to give an example of one of the
ways in which gender difference affects her graffiti making—the physical danger involved in the act of painting itself. She navigates her fear of lingering in dark alleys or dangerous places alone by preparing stickers and posters at home ahead of time. Interestingly, the imagery on these stickers and posters (and in her aerosol work) is very sexual, very sensual; a direct reflection of her aggressive interest in empowering women in regards to their sexuality. When I asked her to elaborate, wondering if maybe this would be a chance to talk about lesbianism or bisexuality in graffiti subculture, she replied nonchalantly, “I think of the way a woman feels. The object of her desire is not specific in my work, it is what she is feeling about her sexuality that I am trying to convey.” Injah’s nude female figures, whether painted on walls, canvas, or made into stickers provoke women to “liberate” their sexuality from social and moral restraints; legs spread, breasts uneven and exaggerated, Injah’s women return the gaze while they defiantly touch themselves (fig. 13).

Participating in Nami gives her the chance to act as a kind of mentor to the newer members, working together with other graffiteras to improve women’s lives while reinvesting feminism with a contemporary meaning suitable for “women in the community.”

It’s very difficult. Many of our girls are afraid of this label “feminism.” I think because of the history of it; in the beginning it had a need to be that kind of revolution—dress like a man, be tough, break all the patterns. And today we don’t want that anymore. We are at a different stage, but it doesn’t make the feminists of the past wrong. The girls just think back to that time, with the burning of the bras...and they say it will hurt if I don’t use the bra. (Injah 2010)

Injah is adamant about the importance of providing a space in which women, no matter their stance on feminism, can come together and “talk to other women about being women”; for her this is the most beneficial and crucial service Nami provides.

When I spoke with Kitty, at the time 17 and one of the youngest active members of Nami, she expressed that in contrast to her non-Nami friends (who consider her to be very outspoken and a little “crazy”), the network of friends she has made in Nami makes her feel normal (Kitty 2010). She spent years of her childhood in drawing courses that were focused on “landscapes, flowers, and fruit”—which for her was “so boring.” Wanting to find a different way to express herself, Kitty researched Anarkia online and then enrolled in the next graffiti art course she offered. An avid reader of philosophy, Kitty considers herself a political person and, prior to her involvement in Nami, worked with children in various arts organizations. Kitty claims her feminism, but qualifies it by saying, “I don’t want a woman’s world, I want equality.”
Nami’s role as a space for “crazy girls,” a descriptor many graffiteras use to identify themselves, is part of the countercultural force that attracted N30 (N30 2010). N30 was an editor of an arts magazine and an aspiring graffitera when she joined Nami, quickly becoming a codirector of the communications committee. She talks about feminism in a way similar to Injah: it is a way of living that fosters a consciousness “about being a woman in society.” She does not “suffer prejudice because of [her] color,” or class, but because of her gender presentation. While N30 has a long way to go in terms of her skills as a graffitera, she has the motivation, the desire to change society, and the determination to fight against poverty, racism, and women’s rights that makes her a welcome addition to the organizing team of directors. Nami is open to varying levels of politicization and artistry, taking in women and girls no matter their current mindset or skill set. 15

Jups is one of Nami’s most dedicated members. She came to the group in 2010 with three years of graffiti writing under her belt. Anarkia and I met with Jups at her home, where her mother, aunt, and grandmother and a buffet of delicious Brazilian cuisine greeted us warmly (Jups 2010). While we ate, I commented on the matriarchal structure of her family—noting at least three generations of women present—and asked her to explain her views on feminism. Echoing bell hooks’s sentiment, in Feminism is for Everybody, that “[f]eminists are made, not born. […] one becomes a believer in feminist politics through choice and action” (2000:7), Jups pondered her response as she spoke:

I am a feminist because I am part of Nami’s capacity-building group. I am still learning; I am in process. Before Nami I did not know what [feminism] was, but I come from a long line of strong women. I was one, I just didn’t name it. To be feminist is to know that men have to respect women. 16 (Jups 2010)

Like many of the Nami women, Jups was learning through participation how to articulate those intuitive thoughts and feelings that she knew to be true—that men and women are equal. Part of Jups’s feminism is also rooted in her need for autonomy and personal power; as a silversmith she makes jewelry, purses, and accessories for a living and requires that kind of agency to thrive. Having had some experience with arts-related social justice activism, Jups has found in Nami the freedom to paint the imagery she desires and the agency as a valued member of the collective to propose ideas and see them through to production. I had met Jups the day before our interview. When I asked about the “little monsters” she painted, she corrected me saying that they are not monsters, but her “ghosts” (fig. 14). She went on to explain that women usually paint, and are expected to paint, flowers and “feminine” things, but she was more interested in transferring the “ghosts” in her life onto the wall, to exorcise them from her body and mind. The ghost that caught my eye was a rather lighthearted one—it had a big goofy smile that exposed misshapen teeth. The ghosts she exorcises are not always meant to communicate a dark message, she noted with a big smile: “that day I was happy!”

We were all happy that day: painting, laughing, and chatting in Lapa—the central neighborhood in Rio, known for Friday night parties that shut down the traffic on surrounding streets. Anarkia had organized and scheduled this event as part of my itinerary so that I could gather as many interviews as possible in one day. The wall was situated on a street that ended at the Escadaria Selarón, an impressive multilevel staircase made of one-of-a-kind handcrafted mosaic tiles. When Anarkia and I arrived around 1:00 PM, people who had heard of the production planned for the day were already waiting. The audience arrived before the actors—an audi-

15. N30 has since left the group and returned to school to earn her master’s degree in art history.

16. This was a definition that was on my mind that evening when we went to a “baile funk” party. In this space, it is customary for men to grab women by the neck and kiss them without asking. My hyper-vigilance and outright rejection of such advances stood in stark contrast to the actions of both Anarkia and Jups, who both seemed to just go with the flow.
ence comprised of friends, family, photographers, journalists, fellow graffiteras, pixadors, and passersby who would increase in number steadily throughout the 10-hour event.

Sitting on the curb, Anarkia and I spoke to Si Caramujo. A graffitera since she was 15 (in 2004), she started painting alone, primarily doing throw-ups on the trains (Si Caramujo 2010). Si has always styled her graffiti imagery to mark her gender; her clothing however, is chosen specifically to avoid attention. Her tag name reflects her independent character and Zen nature as it directly references the simple, slow, self-sufficient life of a *caramujo* (snail). “Yes I am a feminist, but only in the streets. When I go home I am a traditional mother. I take care of everybody.” Curious about this split, I asked her to talk about being a mother. In her explanation, the break she articulated between feminism and motherhood, between private life and public life became more nuanced, revealing that the split was perhaps more like a braid. She told me that she makes it a point to share caregiving responsibilities with her mother, her in-laws, and her husband (a graffitiro) saying that “it is not healthy for a baby to always be with the mother and it is important for the mother to have her own life, her own time to do things she enjoys.” Despite her “traditional mother” self-identity, Si’s opinions on caregiving, motherhood, pregnancy, work, fun, and alone time are patently egalitarian. In “taking care of everybody” she still makes time to take care of herself, and this includes her participation with Nami.

That day in Lapa brought a few graffiteras out of “retirement” (including Prix, Aila, and Cuca) and into this collective event with women who are actively involved in the urban art movement in Rio (N30, Jups, Anarkia), as well as women just finding their place within the culture (Gabi, Kitty, TMB, KR, Si, and Alexia). After three years of painting alone, 17-year-old KR met the women of Nami (KR 2010). She started out painting pixação, and now as a member of Nami as of 2010 paints what she characterizes as “crazy,” cartoon-like characters that are specifically “not feminine” despite sometimes being adorned with bows (fig. 15). While she believes women have to fight for equality, she was adamant about her position regarding feminism: “I am not a feminist. I am a woman.” An independent person from a very early age, determined to do what she wanted when she wanted with whom she wanted, KR had experienced quite a bit of turmoil in her personal life. Her aggressive confidence and guarded vulnerability, born out of the challenges of being judged for acting “differently” than a girl should, is evident in her personal interactions with people and her aesthetic choices. Unlike other artists, KR did not mention anything about her graffiti purposefully reflecting her persona. And yet, KR’s
Frankensteinian characters, reminiscent of Jups’s ghosts, illustrate the effects and complexity of feeling different. The character she painted that day was an unsmiling, red-faced figure complete with a forehead scar, purple hair, and a dainty blue bow—a motley amalgamation of parts and pieces that come together in a figure that ultimately looks uncomfortable. I wondered if this monster was uncomfortable with the bow (signifying femininity and youth), the visible scarring (signifying potential weakness or past injuries), or both. KR says that women make graffiti for the same reasons men do: “it makes me feel calm, it is pleasurable.” When I asked why she participates in Nami, she said that it is because she “simply wants to paint.” In my estimation, KR’s membership in Nami is anything but simple. Nami not only provides her with a physical space (the wall) to express herself aesthetically, but also embraces her rebellious character and in doing so offers her a community of other women who also feel crazy or different without expecting that difference to collapse into sameness.

Once a majority of the women had arrived, the group began casually dividing the wall space in order to have a general sense of who would be stationed where. Huddled in a tight circle, sketches in hand, N30, TMB, Jups, KR, Si, Anarkia, Gabi, Alexia, Prix, and Kitty delegated background roller painting duties, plotted the space, and talked through how best to use the single ladder. Most of these graffiteras were still learning how to wield a spray can, and how to work together to create a single image. Si spray-painted a larger than life goddess adorned with a starfish-shaped crown (which she embellished with actual seashells) and a powdery blue gown darkened with hints of sea foam green towards the bottom where she inscribed “earth mother forgive these people” in Portuguese (fig. 16). She completed the picture with her tag: the letters “S” and “I,” and the snail the rest of her name signifies. Taking up a mostly horizontal position on the wall, Prix stenciled layers of a female form designed after the “woman” symbol used for restrooms but altered so that one of the figure’s arms extends into a loop with a heart shape at the end (fig. 17). Kitty painted a woman’s head that took up half the wall, the entirety of which, aside from the blonde hair, was filled in with solid black, with negative white space for the eyes, nose, and mouth. N30 was experimenting with layers of quasi-geometric lines and ended up with a multicolored half-human figure that resembled a densely woven doll. Jups painted a dark, cloudy blue, off-kilter ghost head (with no body), diamond-shaped eyes, an exaggerated nose, and misshapen teeth (fig. 18). Alexia and Gabi painted together, using stencils, spray paint, and a bit of acrylic to produce what might best be described as a psychedelic tree.
Figure 16. Si’s goddess in Lapa, Brazil, 14 August 2010. The bottom reads “earth mother forgive these people.” (Photo by Jessica N. Pabón)
TMB used a mixture of acrylics with a brush and spray paint to design a hypnotic eye with curvy, candy-red entrails that connected to the tree. Towards the very end of the production, when all the other women were done, Anarkia—at the strong request of the group—painted her beautiful, seductive, and serious eyes at the top of the composition, as if they would watch over all of the other images.

While this was not the most impressive image I had ever seen in terms of group cohesion, hand-style, color palette, use of space, or overall composition, the production process itself was fascinating. For a well-known graffitera like Anarkia to put her work next to writers who would, in any other context, be considered “toys” is remarkable. When I mentioned this to Anarkia, she stated quite frankly that in Rio’s graffiti culture “we do not call people toys when they start painting because we do not know who they will become.” The relinquishing of ego and reputation in favor of experimentation, support, and encouragement produced an overwhelming sense of, dare I say...community. Indeed, as Joseph notes, “despite [...] persistent scholarly critiques, a celebratory discourse of community relentlessly returns” (2002:viii). Witnessing the empowering effect Nami has on women and girls and the construction of a temporary community formed around their graffiti making, reawakened my “communal” feminist sensibilities and further validated my unwavering belief in the revolutionary potential of graffiti art.

After the Lapa production was complete and everyone was hanging around chatting, I was joined by eight-year-old Luna and her mother Gisella. Gisella is not a graffitera but participates as a lecturer in Nami’s seminars (Gisella and Nalu 2010). She brings Luna to Nami’s productions to paint with the other girls. Luna was clever enough to notice that “Nami” is a reversal of the syllables taken from the street slang word mina (meaning woman); she took the same liberties with her given name to create her tag name: Nalu. Nalu joyously painted a heart and “made friends with the adults.” When I asked about the heart she painted, she pouted, explaining that “it was so small,” but her expression changed instantly when she added “Anarkia promised me more space next time!” The first time Gisella brought Nalu to a Nami event, she painted her name, the name of her school, and a “much bigger” heart on the wall so that, as she proclaimed: “if someone that knows me passes by the wall, they will know that it was me that painted it.” A true graffitera in the making, Nalu wants recognition for her work, is confident enough to boast about her efforts, and even made a point to represent her school. Feeling like “an artist painting with other artists,” Nalu sees her artistic future as clearly as an eight-year-old can. She asserted, “the older girls are better than me, but one day I will be like them!” Nalu is but one of the children of Nami. A daughter of one of Nami’s directors, she is probably one of the most consistent students, but there are many more children who witness or participate in Nami’s events.

The day after the Lapa event, Anarkia and I met with another budding graffitera, Ale, who lives in Rocinha, Rio’s largest favela. After the interview and an exhilarating (and frightening) “taxi” motorcycle ride to the uppermost area of the favela for a birthday party in one of the
casitas, we went back to Ale’s studio so she and Anarkia could paint. While they painted in the rain, a young girl named Jennifer wandered over and was invited to join them. Ale, who was just learning how to control a spray can herself, experimented with figurative lettering as she taught Jennifer how to hold the can and helped her press with all her might on the cap (fig. 19).

Anarkia had translated a good majority of the 20 interviews I completed during my eight-day visit, and in the final interview with her she said that although it was exhausting, she gained a lot of knowledge about Nami’s growth and place in the member’s lives:

Nami recruits by word of mouth. We don’t want to work with all girls, but girls with whom we can see potential...the potential to be a feminist. Even the girl who wants to just paint—we just need time to transform this kind of girl. Like KR, she said she is not a feminist, but she doesn’t know what it is. She doesn’t think about it. She said she just wants to paint but I know she is a feminist. One day she will be a feminist. I believe that we can transform the girls. Especially the young girls. (2010b)

When Anarkia came to visit me in New York in March 2012, she told me that indeed KR was now calling herself a feminist. Once KR realized that she was in charge of, and responsible to, what feminism meant for her, she was happy to claim a feminism defined by her actions.

Through the consistent performance of feminism in her self, her discourse, and her graffiti, Anarkia’s passion for her work is now akin to what Augusto Boal calls an “enacted” faculty, a faculty that [has become] a concrete act” (1985:12). The production in Lapa and the smaller work in Rocinha depend on some of the tactics outlined in Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, practices that Nami often employs in their capacity-building activities. Taking graffiti making out from under the cover of anonymity and the dark of night allows the experienced and aspiring writers of Nami to develop a participatory audience that is conscious of the feminist concerns of the collective. The “audience” that gathers on the street as they paint is almost always invited...
to join in and to attend the next lecture or activity. Anarkia purposefully structured Nami, with the help of the director’s team, to “change the ways the girls think about feminism by showing them how to do it themselves.” Performing feminist community in this way produces a moment that Jill Dolan describes as a utopian performative—a kind of performative exemplified when, for the duration of an action, the “audience” is lifted “slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense” (2005:5). The moment and site of this “temporarily lifted” community repeats itself with each action Nami produces—the audience comes back to reexperience this moment, this space, which has profound implications for the social justice work Nami is trying to accomplish, whether those spectators officially join Nami or not. “The utopian performative, by its very nature, can’t translate into a program for social action, because it’s most effective as a feeling” (2005:19). But that feeling, that affect, can translate into social action if the stage is set by everyday people and not actors, if the stage of everyday life is altered by the participation of everyday people. A utopian performative is called forth by aesthetics, by performances of identity that are not your own but which allow you to play with the potential of making a space that is your own in a collective. With every project Nami brings to Rio de Janeiro’s streets, the women perform their artistic identities and the girls practice the adult identities they desire—“one day I will be like them.” As N30 explained, “It is important for people living in the slums, the favelas, to have [a medium] like graffiti that communicates quickly and can be political. We want to use graffiti to claim the streets, our neighborhoods and to inspire others to do it too” (N30 2010). Taking place in the public sphere, accessible and welcoming to onlookers and passersby, Nami provides not only the time, space, and materials needed for these women and girls to feel like and become valuable culture makers resisting patriarchal juridical, social, and political systems that restrict their safety and civil liberties.17

17. Part of Nami’s programming consistently involves teaching women in favelas about Brazil’s Maria de Penha law, legislation enacted to reduce violence against women (see Oliveira 2012). Nami also actively responds to reproductive rights restrictions, fighting for progress: at the time of this writing the Brazilian Senate is debating reform, right now a woman has the right to an abortion only in cases “of rape, abnormal brain development or when the mother’s life is at risk,” otherwise she has committed a crime (see BBC 2013).
Affectively Mapping Failure, Envisioning Feminist Futures

There is shit among us we need to sift through. Who knows, there may be some fertilizer in it.

— Gloria Anzaldúa (1990:146)

Writing about the future of feminist movement, and the place of feminists of color in it, in her oft-cited anthology *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras*, Gloria Anzaldúa offers an unusual metaphor for hope— finding something useful in the “shit” produced by the “failures” of feminists. Faced with the often-depressing fact that feminism has come to mean the worst of its homophobic, US imperialist, racist history, I find Anzaldúa’s words of hope particularly salient for thinking about the all-female crews I’ve come to know through this study. Tracing the complicated fashion in which the graffiteras of Crazis Crew, Turronas Crew, and Rede Nami negotiate their desire for equality with a feminist identity has fortified my refusal to accept the classification of feminism as a “failure” in the absolute negative sense—a judgment that is politically paralyzing, depressing, and altogether misleading. These women have made tremendous strides toward gender equality in graffiti subculture. What if instead of being paralyzed by our depression over feminist failures to build community, we were to rethink what we do with our failures, our shit? Our feminist failures can be repurposed as fertilizer; utilizing the knowledge we gain from analyzing our shit just might allow alternative strategies for the performance and production of feminist community.

In *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism*, Jonathan Flatley explores various conceptualizations of melancholia from Aristotle to Lacan, arguing that melancholizing is a performative affect that provides information and an orientation, a direction toward something lost. Similar to Dolan’s utopian performative, but different in the affect produced (sad, not happy), melancholizing does not figure as a depressive (immobilizing) affect, but rather as a performative antidepressant (2008:2–4). Melancholizing over our feminist failures to connect, to build, to name, to recruit, to empower, to defeat social inequality is one way to affectively map how our vastly different experiences and feelings can also be shared experiences and feelings (3). Affective mapping requires that we hold on to our losses so that they become objects we can analyze—that is the muscle behind melancholizing. Hanging out with these women—who I believe demonstrate the best of what feminism can do—and knowing they reject that affiliation, has allowed me to hold failure close enough to be affected by it, but far enough to never fully incorporate it. I allowed myself to be affectively moved by the work these women are doing—not despite but because these graffiteras fail to be legible within a feminist discourse dependent on a clear or outright declaration of feminist solidarity. The multitude of so-called failures that supposedly signal the “death of feminism” and have supposedly hindered the development of transnational feminist movement, are here reread as performative pedagogical tools, as productive resources for envisioning future feminist praxis—that is actually happening in the subcultural now.18

When I looked at how many women nominally rejected feminism, I analyzed why we (feminists) have failed—and I realized we hadn’t. Repurposing the failures of identification and affiliation as starting points for understanding enabled me to draw an affective map without borders, one that demonstrates, as Mohanty suggests, “how differences allow us to explain the connections [...] and how specifying difference allows us to theorize universal concerns more fully” (2003:226). The concerns relating to place in public spaces, equality in work and at home, support and encouragement, and artistic respect are just some of the issues that these crews actively

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18. For a different approach to the performativity of failure in building feminist alliances, particularly in the academy, see Carrillo Rowe (2008).
address through their performances of everyday life. Are these not feminist concerns? What we haven’t done is make room for truly alternative performances of feminism, despite years of scholarship and activism demanding that very thing.

Affectively mapping the failure of feminism to appeal to people who embody feminist ideologies, the failure of individuals to identity their acts as feminist, and perhaps most importantly, the failure of self-identified feminists to claim a connection to and theorize non-feminist feminist movement allows us to see what has thus far been obfuscated in the construction of our “we”: contemporary feminism “lives” in embodied acts that are inherently feminist acts.

The writers of Crazis, Turronas, and Nami perform a feminist community aesthetic among themselves within the larger aesthetic community that is graffiti culture. To grasp the value of action deemed non-feminist for the future of feminism (without succumbing to the seduction of “post-feminist” rhetoric) requires that we let go of identity-based feminist politics and make way for the praxis developed by a new generation of individuals who enact the principles differently.

Performing feminism through mentorship, taking public space, promoting pleasure, and the collective imagining of something better: these are all forms of resistance in the everyday struggles of the oppressed. If recognized as such, these acts have the power to render moot the limiting stereotypes of feminist behavior depicted and exploited by contemporary media. One does not have to already be a feminist to join Rede Nami; in fact, the non-feminist members who participate assist in what Butler calls the “more insidious and effective strategy” of rendering categorizations “permanently problematic,” of fostering the kind of feminism that is “located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition” ([1990] 1999:163, 185). The non-feminist participants provide a constant challenge to the structure of Nami; as an open collective, it cannot settle into a static feminist form lest it push potential participants away. The feminist leaders of Nami embody, perform, and thus produce a kind of stylized feminism that is then transferred through the repertoire to the members, the spectators, and the onlookers who experience their events.

An unfortunate benefactor of the US imperialist project, feminism is defined by Anglo Western liberal feminist politics; this is the “feminism” these graffiteras reject, a “feminism” with borders. The point is not that they do not know what feminism is, but rather that they are not aligning their ideas and actions, developed in response to the sexist, racist, and classist conditions under which they live, with a “feminism” that is part of those conditions. Cognizant of and sensitive to these dynamics while insisting that “feminism is for everybody,” bell hooks notes that “We lose sight of the positive when all we hear about feminism is negative” (2000:x). We have lost sight because the power of the word — claiming and naming a self and an act as feminist — trumps the invisible, individual feminist acts happening everyday by a generation of women raised by, or at least privy to, feminist ideals. Instead of seeing the various modes of feminism being performed differently as a hindrance, and instead of seeing the failure of feminism to attract a unilateral following, with the example set by Crazis, Turronas, and Nami we can reinvest these terms with the dynamism of movement. Perhaps amidst efforts to define who we are, and what we “look like,” feminist movement has forgotten to keep moving.

19. I continue to direct all conversations about “post-feminism” to my favorite colloquialism: “I’ll be post-feminist in the post-patriarchy.”
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