



# Ocupação Sapatão in Salvador: A Decolonial Counter-Narrative on the Geographic Urban Space and its Restrictions of the Right to the City<sup>1</sup>

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Source for Images: *Ocupação Sapatão*'s organization archive.

## Abstract

This work aims to analyse the socio-spatial invisibilities of Black *sapatonas* in the cultural dimension of the centre of Salvador. It seeks to provoke and debate the occupation of urban spaces from the perspective of entertainment not only for Black *sapatonas*, but also for bisexual and trans women (LBT), who have their existence erased due to institutional racism and LGBT-phobia. In this sense, *Ocupação Sapatão Bahia* is a cultural activity in response to the hegemonic and cis-heteronormative spaces of public and private entertainment. By boosting the presence of Black and female bodies in Salvador's centre, the event seeks to promote the visibility of the Black LBT women's community. The main goal of the party is to claim the right to the city by materially and symbolically subverting the spatial delimitations imposed to these women, taking into consideration that the geographical space produced/reproduced under the norms of the colonizing and capitalist processes impose the dehumanization of Black and female bodies. *Ocupação Sapatão* is constituted by seven Black women, *sapatonas* and bisexual, residents of the outskirts of Salvador. The actions developed in the last three editions of the event gathered a significant number of women from different neighbourhoods in the city, especially the peripheral ones.<sup>2</sup> The women occupied a bar owned by the Black *sapatonas* couple Ray and Lucy. In the following we discuss the results of these events, highlighting the potential of Black women who have their existence denied every day when it comes to access to urban spaces.

**Keywords:** Black; *Sapatão*; Salvador; women; territory

### How to cite

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## **Introduction**

The night was about to start when three – out of a group of seven – young Black *sapatonas*, holding two cans of spray paint and a piece of white fabric, got together on Dois de Julho Square, in a historical neighbourhood in Salvador. Among laughter caused by jokes and high expectations, they were painting the banners that would be used in the first lesbian and bisexual meeting for visibility named “*Ocupação Sapatão*” (*Occupy Sapatão*). The meeting, which gathered approximately a hundred women, took place at a bar owned by two Black *sapatonas*, Champagne Bar, also known as Ray and Lucy’s rooftop. The banners would represent, until the end of that night, a strong existential and territorial delimitation of this political minority group and its existential specificities, which directly collide with the imposing hegemonic culture, based on the racist, cis-hetero, sexist, misogynistic and capitalist supremacies. Cheryl Clarke (1998) reflects that no matter how the *sapatão* lives out her lesbian-ness, she has rebelled against her female heterosexual and male-dependent condition, and this rebellion is dangerous business in patriarchy.

The public and private spaces within a patriarchal society constitute a real war arena for all dissident identities that will be constantly restrained and erased in their most basic rights, such as entertainment for example. In this regard, *Ocupação Sapatão*, with all its gender, race and sex specificities, has been thought to be, in its essence, a cultural activity promoted, organised, built and managed by and for Black women, *sapatonas* who have been building a counter-narrative of existence in the cis-heteronormative entertainment field of Salvador.

According to the demographic data from the 2010 census released by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (*Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* – IBGE), about 80% of Salvador’s population is Black (*pardos* + *pretos*).<sup>3</sup> Considering this ratio, one can say that Salvador is a Black city. In absolute numbers, Bahia’s capital has approximately three million inhabitants – out of which two million four hundred thousand are Black, this population being

mostly agglomerated in the outskirts of the city and having no access to the urban apparatus of leisure and entertainment.

### **Territorializing an Ancestral Decoloniality**

The feminist geographer Doreen Massey (2000) stresses that it is not only capitalism that determines our understanding and experience of the space; relations of gender and race are also present and determinant for our perceptions. The denial of these social identities' existence in urban spaces is a reality that reassembles the socio-historical construction of Brazil. Salvador-Bahia is the first and therefore the founding capital of Brazil. Having been founded in the sixteenth century, the city's pillars are intertwined at the intersections of gender, class, race and space.

Historically, as the urban environment in Salvador developed, the spatial complexity and intersectional bundles of oppressions that affect Black men and women – kidnapped from Africa or born in Brazil – become more evident. One of the highlights of these intersectional bundles is the interrelationship among women, race and urban spaces. This relation begins in the end of the eighteenth and in the beginning of the nineteenth centuries with the *ganhadeiras*, enslaved women who worked in the '*sistema de ganho*', a system in which Black people, mostly women (enslaved or liberated), were forced to trade small products – such as vegetables, homemade typical foods, meat, fruit, fabric, small goods and many other things – in urban areas and bring back the money they made for the enslaving masters. These women were usually around Salvador's urban centre carrying baskets, trays or troughs on their heads. They occupied the streets and squares, which were designated to the public and free markets. Soares points out:

The activities performed by the *ganhadeiras*, although important to the distribution of essential goods to urban life, concerned the authorities. Their work was itinerant or settled in strategic spots of the

city, serving as integrational elements among a population considered dangerous by the elite. This political factor, added to the state's effort to organise and control urban life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, would lead to many struggles between the *ganhadeiras* and the military authorities (Soares 1996, 65).

These Black women occupied and experienced the city not only as personifications of the profit in the enslavement system, but also as elements who challenged the Western colonizing system. They reaffirmed the existence of their Black female bodies in the urban space by affecting the usual flow of European colonisation, territorialising their practices and experiences. The connection and intersection made between Black women *ganhadeiras* from the nineteenth century and Black *sapatonas* from the *Ocupação Sapatão* have nothing to do with their sexuality, but rather to the way these two groups, although chronologically separated by more than one hundred years, were able to spatially share the particularities of Salvador tracing out occupying strategies and narratives.

Through their bodies, the *ganhadeiras* taught us the importance of territorialising, occupying and experiencing the urban environment by performing different economic, religious and cultural activities in order to guarantee not only their own subsistence and survival, but also their communities' survival. With their black bodies, they were able to turn their claim for the right to the city into "flesh and blood."

Considering that *ganhadeiras* were a dissident group in the colonial past, *Ocupação Sapatão*, in the twenty-first century, exercises its dissidence by claiming their right to the city by seeking to re-exist in an urban geographic space that is not produced/reproduced for Black *sapatonas* who do not fit in heteropatriarchal standards.

In this regard, the space chosen to hold *Ocupação Sapatão* was 'Champagne Bar', located on Carlos Gomes Street, in the upper part of the city. The bar is a meeting point among the older *sapatonas* from the city, being a space of resistance for them. Its owners are a couple of *sapatonas* who had always been employees in entertainment clubs around Carlos Gomes Street. After working for some years in the field, they decided to open their own establishment, which was the only one owned and managed by two Black *sapatonas* in that place at that time – which was unprecedented, since the field had been dominated by white, straight and cisgender men until then.

Carlos Gomes Street has approximately 14 entertainment clubs that cater to the cis-hetero people, and two that cater to the LGBTQI+ community.<sup>4</sup> Flávia Nascimento, a former member of *Ocupação Sapatão*'s organization, helps us to reflect upon what we will call here local/territory:

“Ray and Lucy’s bar is extremely relevant for us to think about lesbians and *sapatonas* in Salvador [...]. The cultural scene and the lesbian activism in Salvador over the years tell us a lot about Ray and Lucy’s bar, for it has once been a meeting point for activists who were interested in cultural empowerment, political mobilization and *sapatão* love. But which was rendered invisible in the cultural centre of Salvador until the time *Ocupação Sapatão* was being built. The fact that their bar was one of the few ones managed by two women who identified as *sapatonas* says a lot about this process.” (Flavia Nascimento)

The celebration of the lesbian and bisexual visibility month in 2017 was one of the main reasons for holding the first *Ocupação Sapatão* party, exclusively for LBT women, on Carlos Gomes Street. It was a way of promoting the presence of LBT women in that public space as customers, as well as creating, even if temporarily, a territory of welcoming and belonging. The second edition, in 2018,

took place in an outdoor space in the Rio Vermelho neighbourhood on February 2nd, when a traditional party happens in the city.<sup>5</sup>

*Ocupação Sapatão* in Salvador is an invitation to territorialise experiences and specificities when it comes to the entertainment of LBT women, especially Black *sapatonas*. During the whole process of building *Ocupação Sapatão*, black women's autonomy was exercised. The lesbian continuum is a concept coined by Adrienne Rich (1980) and refers to a sociability in which all women experiences, practices, affections and ways of living are for women and by women. It could be observed and experienced on every stage of the event's production. The actions carried out brought, at their core, a discussion about LBT women and the limits that the patriarchal urban environment promotes in terms of black *sapatonas* access to entertainment, considering that compulsory heterosexuality selects which bodies will access certain spaces, as well as what kind of access certain bodies will and will not have to certain geographic areas. This process produces/reproduces the geographic space.

### **The Black *Sapatão*'s Spatial Counter-Narrative**

When a group of Black women, composed of *sapatonas* and bisexuals, having fat or thin bodies, belonging to religions of African matrices or with no defined religion – all of them part of historically silenced groups in a society that builds itself and moves forward through gender, race and class oppression – decide to organise a party named “*Ocupação Sapatão*” exclusive for women like them in a bar owned by two Black *sapatonas*, a counter-narrative of existence and experience is written. This counter-narrative does not fit the colonial/modern standards imposed on the urban space, for they are a group of Black women with diverse sexualities freely experiencing the urban space among themselves, without the need for the authorization or the presence of men.

Thus, there is a fight against the restriction of the right to the city, and it started since its colonial foundation. Being in the streets and urban spaces as female

and Black is not only an invitation to share experiences, but also a way of living in resistance and re-existence. Once the violence that comes from several LGBT-phobic situations coerces the presence of LBT women, specially the *sapatonas* who do not perform femininity, they are exposed to a lot of psychological and physical violence that arises from the attempt to erase the lesbian existence.

The more than one hundred black women who took part in the event were moved by the desire of living moments of happiness, pleasure and belonging among their peers. The happiness and feeling of belonging among women who have relationships with other women are considered dangerous for the maintenance of a society based on heteropatriarchy. In this sense, Monique Wittig states:

For what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man, a relation that we have previously called servitude, a relation which implies personal and physical obligation as well as economic obligation... a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become or to stay heterosexual...[our survival] can be only accomplished by the destruction of heterosexuality as a social system which is based on the oppression of women by men and which produces the doctrine of the difference between sexes only to justify oppression (Wittig 1993, 108 quoted in Saunders 2017, 107).

In a way that, by collectively reuniting – mostly – Black *sapatonas* singers, poets, DJs, masters of ceremony, artists, organisers, among other activities/attractions, *Ocupação Sapatão* challenged not only the cis-heteronormativity of the public space in which the party took place – since the quantitative presence of these women attracted curious bystanders who were trying to grasp what was happening in that place – but also the masculinity and the privileges of white and black gay men, who resented or accused the organisers and participants of being segregationists once they learned that men – regardless of their place in the sexuality spectrum – were not allowed there. All of that puts in evidence



**Aline P. do Nascimento & Sheyla dos S. Trindade: *Ocupação Sapatão in Salvador: A Decolonial Counter-Narrative on the Geographic Urban Space and its Restrictions of the Right to the City***

how the colonial mind can turn political allies into *atrasalados*<sup>6</sup> or enemies in the women's fight for the right to public space.

**Pictures of the first edition of *Ocupação Sapatão* at Ray and Lucy's bar.**



Source: *Ocupação Sapatão*'s organization archive.



Source: Ocupação Sapatão's organization archive.



Source: *Ocupação Sapatão's* organization archive.





Source: Ocupação Sapatão's organization archive.

## Final Thoughts

The building process of *Ocupação Sapatão* happened through the community of LBT women. Therefore, for us, the authors of this article, it makes no sense to have a final conclusion defined only by us. We will consider the voices of some Black *sapatonas* who were part of the process, either participating in the activities, or sharing the event on their social networks and contributing to the positive energy to make that territory of LBT- belonging happen.

“As a Black *sapatona*, I felt very comfortable in the event and I think it is very important that this one, as well as other events I hope will come up in the future – keep happening, because it is a political space for resistance where we can relate to and identify with each other. In the current moment, more than ever, we need meetings like these.” (Crislane Rosa)

“*Ocupação Sapatão* comes to revitalise the memory, to remind this city that erases us that we can be art, culture, that we can build a historic process – even if it is denied to us. But, mainly, to remind us that, when we are among ourselves, we are a celebration. Our existence is the most political act that we can perform, and yes, together we discuss political reforms, but we also empower ourselves by caring for each other, in *rebuçeteio* and in *sapatão* love.<sup>7</sup> Every place becomes political when *sapatonas* occupy them.” (Flavia Nascimento)

“*Ocupação Sapatão* has an itinerant characteristic which makes it able to shape itself to the space it occupies. We occupied Yemanjá's festivities on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February, in Rio Vermelho, having as the main objective to welcome, exchange affection and celebrate the life of Black *sapatonas* in the city of Salvador. (Ani Ganzala).

“The space was very welcoming and at the same time intimidating, because the actions were profound and intimate and they made me reflect on the need to talk about our sexuality. *Ocupação Sapatão* made me realise this need that was erased by a sexist, racist and homophobic society. At the same time, it was a space to put out our anguishes, pain and silenced feelings, that is, it was also a space for healing. (Lidia Duque)

During the construction of *Ocupação Sapatão*, one of the biggest concerns was the well-being of the women taking part in the event. The organisers wanted to make sure every guest would be welcomed and feel they were part of an alive community that recognised them as powerful and capable for keeping and caring for their love relationships with other women despite society's violent reaction against them. That is why seeing happy faces, smiles and kind hugs during the party as well as listening to the testimonies of some of the interviewees, as presented above, made us realise that the party has succeeded in reaching its main goals: to create, even for a short period of time, a space of counter-narrative productions, fostering thus a feeling of belonging and political tensioning of the institutionalised invisibility imposed on LBT women in the public space.

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<sup>1</sup> T. N.: *Sapatão/sapatona* is preferably used in this article rather than 'lesbian' or 'dyke' in order to differentiate the lesbian experiences in Brazil from those in other national contexts. Similar to 'dyke', *sapatão/sapatona* used to be a derogatory term to refer to lesbians; however, it has gone through a historical resignification in the lesbian community and is now used as a term of pride and self-definition.

<sup>2</sup> T.N.: In Salvador – as well as in other Brazilian cities – there is a social-spatial relationship that pushes the poor to the peripheral areas of the city. That is why "periphery" is usually used to refer to disadvantaged neighbourhoods

<sup>3</sup> T.N.: According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), the Black population (*população negra*) in Brazil is formed by people who self-define themselves as *preta/o* (literally "black," usually used by those who are dark-skinned) or as *parda/o*. The term *parda* is used by IBGE to refer to mixed-race people. Historically, the idea of *parda* as an ethnic group emerged in Brazil during the colonial period.

<sup>4</sup> The acronym LGBTQ+ (lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender, queer, + other identities) is used as one of the diverse possibilities of the sexuality spectrum.

<sup>5</sup> T.N.: On February 2nd, Yemanjá's party is traditionally celebrated in Salvador. It is a religious festivity that happens annually in the neighbourhood of Rio Vermelho. People deliver presents such as flowers and perfume to the Orisha known as "the queen of the sea."

<sup>6</sup> Linguistic expression of Salvador's vernacular vocabulary commonly used to define a person who tries to bother or hinder someone's success.

<sup>7</sup> T.N.: *Rebuceteio* is the act of engaging in relationships with different women from the same social circle. It is popularly known in the lesbian and *sapatona* communities in Brazil.