
Hip-hop Graffiti and Space

*I was, after the fashion of humanity, in love with my name, and, as young educated people commonly do, I wrote it everywhere.*

-Goethe

Graffiti represents forms of text that directly challenge presumptions of private ownership and corporate power, that draw our attention to the materiality and spatiality of the city, and that act to create what Giddens, Beck et al. and Beck have called narratives of the self. The article suggests that graffiti has much to tell us about the ways in which broader global contexts impact on how we use textual practices to construct narratives about ourselves and our communities in everyday local sites.

-Victoria Carrington

*Every story is a travel story—a spatial practice.*

-Michel de Certeau

Ancient Space

Richard Schechner notes that the circulatory movements of early nomadic peoples often produced temporary collective spaces as paths of various groups periodically intersected (*Performance* 153). This fluid practice of following the migratory patterns of game, which followed other seasonal and geographical patterns, brought people together in a temporary dialogic space where a burgeoning notion of humanity emerged. Nomadic life became temporarily sedentary as it was expressed through a relationship with space.
Cave inscriptions mark these places as unique, as ancient temporary everyday spaces that continue to frame interactions within to this day. He describes nomadic humans as not living in one spot, but also not wandering aimlessly as groups followed specific routes or circuits. The places where these routes intersected became important communal locations (and continue to do so today). Schechner states that at these sites the cultural level was very high, evidenced by carvings and painting on cave walls, rocks, trees, and ground. While there are many examples of these sites, he specifically describes the caves of Lascaux, Altamira stating in brief, “humans occupied an ecological niche that kept bands on the move in regular, repetitious patterns, following game, adjusting to the seasons, creating art/ritual” (Performance 170-71). Indeed, ways of moving through and inhabiting space have long been evaluated and resisted as a nomadic existence has often been appropriated by a more sedentary style of living. Turning ceremonial caves as roaming intersections into more permanent dwellings. Are we nomadic or sedentary in our current condition?

Because nomadic circuits intersected early human social spaces resulted in some of the first conventional places. They sprouted up when humans simply crossed paths with other humans. Movement and the space in which various movements intersected became an early call for social behavior in relation to the space in which it occurred resulting in the socio-political carving out of the first places, the first spiritual sites, the first political locations, the first ceremonial arenas, homes, institutions, towns, cities, universities, classrooms, etc. A mark was left on these spaces that can literally be referred to as graffiti, yet it was more significant than the modern term suggests. It was temporal human life made visible through the marking of the more durable physical space. It was a way to bind time through space thus making space both social and physical. Like the early intersecting of these routes, space becomes the drifting position of social identity, effectively turning the geographical place into a cultural space through social inscription and practices.

For example, Michele de Certeau notes that a city street already marked as a place is transformed from a “place” into a “space” by practicing “walkers” or performing walking (117). Early social events occurred when place was transformed into space through the temporary sedentarization of nomadic movement, illustrating a shift from an
everyday (natural) place to a situational space. Richard Schechner states that, “it is a cliché of interpretations of Paleolithic cave art that some kind of [serious] ‘ritual’ generated the art” (Performance 154). While, in some cases this might be true, he adds that we should not forget aspects of celebration and merriment, “the passing of time in play and fun” in the active social creation of art through site-specific behavior (Performance 154).

This behavior manifests itself as graffiti effectively separating the mark from the mound. The sites of these behaviors created places that are ideologically conceived and enforced environments carved out of a geographical location through gesture. Space is the contested social construction of psychological and physical locales due to multiple interactions with place. As future performances occurred within these ancient places, spaces evolved, diminished, and returned. The implication can be considered as a movement from a natural geographical location, which has largely disappeared (Lefebvre, Production 37), to a culturally and politically conceived place, and ultimately to a contested dialogic space of cultural tension. We join this discussion of spatial discourse by recognizing the viewpoints of the two latter perspectives, disregarding the primal conception of space as a natural geometric container, what Maurice Merleau-Ponty refers to as geometric space (17). In an effort to clarify, we will leave out the distinction of primal space and instead concentrate on the distinction between place, already ideologically constructed and space, socially considered and ideologically contested.

Contemporary Space

The cave graffiti still observed today reflects the power of such intersecting sites to continue to frame future interactions. Viewing identity and discourse as constructed by historical and cultural forces that are materialized within a subject-space dialog, the way one interacts with and within space is partially constructed by the directorial elements of the space itself. Our natural habitat, our shared space no longer exists as empty, neutral, and unmarked containers what Merleau-Ponty considered geographical space declared Henri Lefebvre in, The Social Production of Space in 1947 (37). From deep underwater
at the North Pole to earth’s highest mountain peak, geographical places have become social and political spaces. As we view it, space has an inherent social connotation, while place suggests forces of conventional usage; ultimately, all space is ideological in some way. Managing to get oneself to either of the aforementioned sites, one would see a submerged Russian flag and be required to obtain a Nepalese visa respectively. Movement within socially produced and politically informed space is a constant negotiation of cultural, historical, and political forces that not only construct spaces but the identities of individuals as well. It is a social discourse, an on-going dialog that we enter into and comment on everyday. In May 1968, as the streets of Paris filled with a student/worker protest largely surrounding the temporary occupation of instructional and public places, popular Situationist International (a political-artistic avant-garde group that included Guy Debord and Henri Lefebvre) slogans were persistently inscribed on the walls (Plant 104).

This is a profound slogan that the everyday practitioner (the pedestrian, the graffiti artist, the loiterer, the politician, city planner, student, etc.) can relate to at one time or another as underneath the rigid ideology of the concrete streets lays the abstract sands of the undetermined beach. This piece of Situationist International graffiti insinuated that the potential subversive, creative, and leisurely use of institutional locales and urban spaces existed in the streets themselves. It also rhetorically urged protesters to seize these sites for their own leisure, an act indicative of the rationale behind contemporary tagging. It was only a matter of perspective mentally and of usage physically. Indeed, pleasures, risks, and considerations underneath the banalities of the everyday subsist all around us.

Contested Space

The space in which interaction occurs partly shapes the nature of the interactions. How are your interactions being shaped by the dictates of the place right now? How will they be directed outside the building, on the road, at the park, in the library, or at the bar? Running, for example, in a recreational park or affluent suburban neighborhood might signal exercise; however, the same activity conducted in an urban, neglected, or highly
contested area might signal danger or criminal activity and be cause for suspicion or arrest. Lefebvre notes that, “The spatial practice of a society secretes that society’s space” (*Production* 38). The recreational park for example, set aside as a place for recreation, like the adjacent road, becomes an extension of economic and social production and secretes the binary distinctions between work and leisure through preconceived places. It also sets aside perceived nature in relation to culture and creates a vicious binary between the two (exposed by Derrida). de Certeau notes that pedestrians “make use of spaces that cannot be seen” they drift between self and spatial construction by following with their bodies “the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read” (93). Engaging in differing practices within various places such as the aforementioned contextual running, enables us to view a fragmented subjectivity based on places and practices. What other seemingly innocent binaries can you observe that are deployed spatially? How can we work to disrupt these spatial binaries in small ways?

![Anti-Nuclear Peace Vigil across from the White House in Washington D.C. (Longest continuous peace vigil in the United States)](image)

Graffiti Discourse

Public space creates an opportunity to enter into an on-going discourse through movement and gesture, which even if invisible always leaves a mark, which even if
material is always temporary. Graffiti is a temporary act an expressive gesture much like skateboarding, social gatherings, leisurely strolls, daily commutes, and space itself. Graffiti temporarily re/symbolizes space through symbolic and iconic language only to have the messages covered or buffed in favor of a blank colorless and perceived neutral space; likewise street skateboarding unlike the skateboard park, ramp, or even appropriated site-skating, works against a fixed, durable, and rational conception of spatial usage. Indeed, these are not the only practices that engage in transgressive motility while responding to spatial utterances; however, they are the ones we explore throughout this section on spatial discourse, as they are interesting examples due to their popularity, removal, and menacing depiction within popular discourse.

Within the complete culture of hip-hop, graffiti holds an outlying place as both the least significant practice and potentially the most noteworthy. Graffiti is marginalized in most texts on hip-hop, as these texts tend to concentrate on the music as the central cultural theme. Thus referring to the emcee as central and backed-up by the DJ, which enables dancing to manifest itself. All three elements are contingent upon one another and are intrinsically linked by not only the presence of music but a particular type of sound described as hip-hop or rap. On the other hand, graffiti is not contingent on sound, music, or rap in any way. Graffiti artists are unified through visual elements, usage of space, and an entirely different conception of voice. What is your voice? How do you deploy this voice? Who hears it?

Graffiti and Hip-Hop

While graffiti is inextricably linked to hip-hop in other ways such as site-specificity, marginalized voice, and expressive identity (the primary features of hip-hop culture) it arose long before, is the first to take the culture out of its site-specific origins, and ultimately transcends the culture as a distinctly human phenomenon. Indeed, most learned of hip-hop culture first by reading the walls and trains as a faint vision of an underground culture appeared in the form of a verbal non-oral discourse even before the practitioners did. A marginalized artistic culture united by a lack of resources and representation was bubbling underground throughout the 70s and early 80s; however,
graffiti had been making its mark as a spatial rhetoric of the disenfranchised for quiet some time. The Situationist International deployment of graffiti as a tactic of social protest is an example as well as the ancient markings of the Lascaux Caves. It can be argued that hip-hop culture appropriated graffiti culture as its own advertising arm, as its own propaganda machine in an effort to be heard, in an effort transcend place. To produce graffiti is to advertise and it is not surprising that today most encounter hip-hop similarly by watching commercials and reading billboards that utilize a similar atheistic and approach to spatial discourse, appearing and bombing anywhere and everywhere. As much as contemporary advertising strategies have borrowed from the aesthetic appeal of hip-hop centric graffiti (mostly to exemplify a quasi-urban-site-specific-street-credibility) these strategies have in a much larger way re-appropriated the “bombing” mentality of graffiti tactics within everyday space. Ask yourself where one finds graffiti and where one finds advertising and the answer will be very similar, almost everywhere.

The mentality of graffiti is one of addiction and it is a pervasive form of relentless self-promotion. It is everywhere and done all the time in an effort to connect our separated identities through the detourning of our collective landscape; however, graffiti is also an anti-social act produced by individuals that do not wish to be seen, only heard. The toil and relentless commitment to stepping outside of the mainstream unites underground practitioners (I reluctantly use the term artist as most are propelled by different motivations and are treated much differently than street artists) that work in obscurity and admire their efforts in silence.

Within the unifying themes that connect the disparate elements of hip-hop’ culture (site-specificity, marginalized voice, and expressive identity) graffiti is often the first way to express yourself and comment on your own surrounding in an effort to both connect with others and establish your own individuality. In this regard it is often one’s first love, first outlet, first addiction, and in turn one’s first heartbreak. Give a child a pen and they will most likely first draw on the wall (love). Then they will most likely be reprimanded for it (heartbreak). For many others it is viewed similarly as a phase juveniles go through, as a fad, something to do and then cease doing at some point in favor of more permanent pursuits. Graffiti is based on the ephemeral it is temporary. Even the most prolific writers see their works buffed over time. Many attempt to mark
highly visible locations for short lived exposure and at other times mark hard-to-reach locations that will potentially last a long time known as landmarks. Their work is done quickly and under intense pressure. The work itself is marked as a violation and any amount of time it survives is seen as a success. Up quickly down quickly in graffiti nothing lives forever, a sensibility our temporary environment that attempts constantly to instill the durable can learn a lot from.

The attitude and approach to spatial discourse is every much an integral aspect to the practice of graffiti as the hip-hop aesthetic it is associated with. Graffiti is not necessarily bubble letters, intricate wild-style pieces, or alias tags (although these are traditional markers of the practice) it is an individually expressive approach to built form that is inherently dialogic. The where in graffiti is just as important as the what, as the major dialog that is created through graffiti is not between people, but between spaces. The desire to comment on space and make places better reflect our identities is what links graffiti to hip-hop culture as well as what separates it. Craig Watkins notes that

Over the course of its career hip-hop has developed a notorious and even self-perpetuating reputation as a spectacular cultural movement committed to defying the cultural and political mainstream. But as the borders of the hip-hop nation continue to expand, its biggest and most important battle is shaping up to be the one it is having with itself. (5)

More than any other element in hip-hop culture graffiti has always existed both inside and outside of the culture. While continuing to represent the core values of the culture it also has continued to separate itself from the genre. From its pre-hip-hop roots to its early forays into uptown galleries to its contemporary manifestation as high avant-garde and political street-art (a recent recipient of the prestigious McArthur Genius Grant is a street-artist working primarily in the medium of wheat-paste photography) graffiti has been based on transcendence. Initially transcending space, the practice has come to also transcend voice, style, and its own genre. In this regard, graffiti is a practice that like hip-hop itself is also based on outside and inside competition.

As far back as the pioneering days in the Bronx, battles between aspiring MCs, DJs, graffiti writers, and break-dancers were how reputations, respect and even rewards were earned. The rugged culture of battling
produced a Darwinian-like world in hip-hop, a place where the “illest” survive. (Watkins 98)

While competition within and outside of the culture has created an ethos of progression the major shared elements of hip-hop culture as I previously mentioned are site-specific, marginalized voice/perspective, and expressive identity. The dialog that is created through an interaction with built form is largely what shapes the practice. There is a tension in this practice that is initially experienced between constructed environments and one’s ability to comment on them. The major opponents of graffiti practitioners are police officers, politicians, city planners, vigilante citizens, gangsters, and every once in a while other graffiti artists. Quiet often there is a 1 placed at the end of a writer’s name as there can only be one, indicated in rapper KRS-1’s name, which is drawn from his graffiti roots. Many people within the hip-hop culture grew up with graffiti; however, not all graffiti artists grew up with rap culture. Jeff Chang describes graffiti culture in relation to hip-hop culture

Elder graffiti writers like Sandra “LADY PINK” Fabara object to their art being grouped with rap. “I don’t think graffiti is hip-hop,” she says.
BLADE, SEEN and IZ THE WIZ say their musical tastes were closer to jazz, doo-wop, and rock. The Rolling Thunder Writers, says graf historian Andrew “ZEPHYR” Witten, were influenced by the prog-rock album covers and posters of Roger Dean and Rick Griffin, and the music of Hot Tuna and The Grateful Dead. “Frankly I grew up with disco music,” says PINK. “There’s a long background of graffiti as an entity unto itself.

(111)

With minuet differences deployed the connections with hip-hop culture are undeniable as overall the culture is about a blatant form of expression. Chang continues that the practitioners of hip-hop “were about unleashing youth style as an expression of the soul, unmediated by corporate money, unauthorized by the powerful, protected and enclosed by almost monastic rites, codes, and orders” (111). This definition points directly at the core values promoted through graffiti. He goes on to state that they were also invisible, which is another indelible aspect of graffiti culture. This invisibility allowed practitioners to take the art form into previously uncharted territories.
It put you on a relentless quest to prove to them that you were bigger, wilder, and bolder than circumstances dictated you should ever be, to try to generate something from nothing, something no one else had, until every one around you had to admit that you had something they might never have, something that might even make other people—big, important people—stand up and take notice themselves, offer you money, give you power, or try to crush your very soul. (Chang 111)

This new form of cultural capital evolved out of a previous invisibility. What you knew, practiced, and originated became power and out of invisibility grew public identity. What forms of cultural capital do you possess?

In its manifestation as a practice within hip-hop, graffiti often traces its roots to one person who called himself Cornbread. Growing up in Philadelphia and spending time in juvenile correctional facilities Cornbread longed to be heard and to be known. He also literally wanted cornbread with his incarcerated meals so he began writing or tagging cornbread wherever he could. From this inception graffiti arose as an awareness raising campaign, a protest for better more substantial institutional meals. Later Cornbread would become prolific on the streets of Philly, relentlessly bombing his signature everywhere. In a drastic attempt to bomb everywhere he once hoped a fence at the Philadelphia Zoo and threw up his tag on both sides of an enclosed elephant a stunt that landed him in jail; however, this audacious mindset would relatively quickly spread the culture around the world.

First arriving in New York City the culture would be taken up by numerous practitioners of all genders and backgrounds. One such practitioner was TAKI 183 who bombed his name and his 183rd block all across the city. Seen downtown, uptown, and in every borough his name transcended his place while recognizing his origins. It was a way for his name to transcend his area it was social motility and his name was his currency. In 1971 he became the major subject of a New York Times article and afterward the culture would never look back. The newspaper representing mainstream media acted as a counterpart to the wall, the media of the disenfranchised. The key to graffiti was to commit on and approach space with a relentless desire to transform it. Shortly after in 1972 STONEY a female graffiti artist hit the landmark site of the Statue
of Liberty raising the bar even further. Chang writes that “because it had overrun sociographic cages, the graffiti movement was surprisingly desegregated. First practiced largely by inner-city youths of color, by the mid-'70s the second generation of writers was more integrated than the army” (119). Fab Five Freddy would do surrealist ten car pieces in 1976 and then promote the culture through corporate media outlets. PINK another female artist would create purely abstract pieces and there was even KASE 2 a prolific one-armed graffiti artist. The mindset was universal yet the styles and identities behind the mentality were as diverse as the messages. “Graffiti writers had claimed a modern symbol of efficiency and progress and made it into a moving violation. As their mini-riots spilled all-city all day every day, authorities took their work as a guerilla war on civility. They were right.” (122) The uniting style of graffiti was confrontation.

The uniting space of hip-hop was the public space of the city streets. Graffiti like hip-hop has always been site-specific. Murray Forman writes that in “a literal sense, the street has been a consistent site for emergent hip-hop practices: block parties, break-dancing, and graffiti are strongly associated with forms of expression that occur in outdoor or unsanctioned public spaces” (83). As you look around, everything you see is infused with ideology it is spatial in the social Lefebvrean sense of the word. Graffiti is anti-social, but spatially dialogic done in private and consumed in public. The practice turns one-sided utterances into a dialog of tension, turning public places into civic spaces. It is about getting the images of the spectacle out of your mind. It is about entering into conversation with a mass media that does not listen, does not ask to speak. It is about combating an ideological assault that occurs daily. It is a performance of an absent body that splits the public/private dichotomy and makes all that see it aware of the people behind the scene. Interestingly, most writers note that the private is off limits and adhere to this rule. Therefore, it is there for all of us and above all it is developed out of and promoting of a different way of viewing the world. A world filled with the tag, piece, placa, throw-up, landmark, wheat-paste, top-to-bottom, end-to-end, stencil, object, sticker, character, and the disrupt ----- ______________ ________ _______ ---- ------ ---.