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Introduction

Historically, American Indians rely on art to “express their connection with the sacred earth and the plants and animals with which they share it” (Zimmerman, 2008: 70). To draw this analogy into the present, we find American Indians using graffiti to illustrate their connection with society (Berkhofer, 2011; Rader, 2011). For many American Indian artists, their art creates a forum to discuss contemporary indigenous social problems. With the use of vibrant colors and indigenous cultural symbols, American Indian graffiti also emerges as a form of resistance to historical trauma and cultural oppression, which is traced to the legacy of colonialism (Snipp, 1992; Blades, 2011). Despite the positive influence of graffiti in promoting indigenous advocacy, American Indians also engage in graffiti, which has been linked to gangs operating Indian Country (Major et al., 2004; Hailer, 2008; Smith, 2012). Given the criminal element found in gang-related graffiti, many tribal communities view this type of graffiti as having a destructive influence on their tribal culture (Hailer, 2008). As a result, many tribal governments have established programs to address gang-related activities that lead to graffiti within these communities.

Although the native and nonnative public perceives most graffiti as a type of vandalism, scholars suggest that the appearance of graffiti creates “arenas of contest in which they [are] a vehicle or an agent of power” (Peteet, 1996: 140). Contemporary research on graffiti asserts that this art form provides individuals with a sense of empowerment. As Ferrell (1995: 77) argues, “kids (and others) employ particular forms of graffiti as a means of resisting particular constellations of legal, political, and religious authority.” Perhaps this line of thought can explain the American Indian use of graffiti. Historically, the United States government adopted a paternalistic approach to handling American Indian affairs. Given that American Indians (as a collective group) lack political clout (Henson, 2008), their social problems are largely ignored and often fall on deaf ears. For some American Indians, the use of graffiti provides a platform to educate the general population about their marginalization within society. Indeed, American Indians view art as a source of empowerment and advocacy (Miheusah, 2003; Berkhofer, 2011; Rader, 2011). Although some American Indians engage in graffiti, the scholarship on this topic is severely limited, and as a result, much of the information on this type of art emerges from social media sites and the news media. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a broad overview about American Indian graffiti, which is found in both Indian reservations and urban areas. Before discussing the dynamics behind the creation of American Indian graffiti, it is important to acknowledge the socio-historical legacy of American Indians as it is related to this type of art form.
Historical background

Early precursors to American Indians graffiti can be traced to early indigenous cave paintings (pictographs) and carvings (petroglyphs), which were used to record their history (Waldman, 2006; Zimmerman, 2008; O’Brien, 2009). Aside from recording their tribal history, these individuals also painted and carved illustrations that represented their culture and religion. In fact, archeologists have found depictions of mythical creatures (i.e. thunderbirds and serpents) associated with various indigenous groups in cave dwellings scattered across the United States (Zimmerman, 2008; O’Brien, 2009). Referring back to the early use of art to chronicle early indigenous history, archeologists found petroglyphs from the sixteenth century in Canyon de Chelly in Arizona, which documented the first encounter between Spanish conquistadors and the local indigenous population (Zimmerman, 2008). Colonialism greatly changed the social dynamics among American Indians. For example, the colonists and the indigenous population had two distinct views on land ownership. The colonists believed in private property and landownership, whereas the indigenous population did not believe in these concepts and felt that the land was a shared commodity. With the colonization of the Americas, early indigenous culture and art underwent great changes as American Indians were forced to assimilate into the dominant Anglo culture. For example, early Spanish colonists forced southwestern indigenous groups to destroy art that was related to their religion. In response to colonialism, American Indian art grew into a hybrid medium containing elements of indigenous and European art (Thomas, 1999). Therefore, a discussion pertaining to the social ills of colonialism is needed as it relates to contemporary American Indian graffiti.

Colonialism

Colonialism devastated the American Indian population in the United States. Generally, colonialism is defined as “nations [that] incorporate new territories or peoples through processes that are essentially involuntary, such as war, conquest, capture, and other forms of manipulation” (Blauner, 1972: 53). Colonialism also shifts the cultural and structural status of indigenous groups as European colonists establish a caste-like system, which allows them to be economically and politically superior over the indigenous population. After being relegated to a lower class status, the indigenous population is forced to adhere to the dominant group’s culture, norms, rules, and religion. As a result, colonialism also negatively impacted the indigenous population. Before the European colonization of the Americas, an estimated 15 million indigenous individuals inhabited North America (Sale, 1990); however, by the late 1890s, the American Indian population was substantially reduced to 250,000 (Healey, 2003). This substantial decline in the American Indian population was due to a wide array of causes ranging from genocide to forced relocation (Snipp, 1992; Salisbury, 1996; Smith, 2005). As Zimmerman (2008: 126) notes, “the disruption wrought by Europeans and their American successors was violent, far-reaching and often very sudden . . . within less than a generation, people’s way of life could change radically.” More important, colonialism is widely recognized to be a source for many contemporary American Indian social problems.

Current status

Official data suggest that there are over 5 million American Indians in the United States, which comprises about 1.7 percent of the general population (Norris et al., 2012). Nearly half of these individuals live within a tribal community located in Indian Country. Many individuals living on Indian reservations are plagued with social problems, such as high rates of poverty (United
States Department of Commerce, 2009), lack of employment opportunities (Sandefur, 1989; Henson, 2008), suicide (Garrote 
et al., 2003; Vigil, 2006; Indian Health Service, 2008; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011), substance abuse (Howard 
et al., 1999; National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2003; Wahab and Olson, 2004; National Congress of American Indians, 2006; United States Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2006; Yuan et al., 2006; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2010), and high rates of crime and victimization (Greenfeld and Smith, 1999; Perry, 2004). Given these harsh realities, some American Indians turn to graffiti as both a coping mechanism and to provide a public outlet to educate individuals about indigenous social problems.

**Indigenous advocacy through graffiti**

Although American Indians experience a myriad of social problems, most of the general population remains unaware about these issues (Perry, 2009). As a consequence of this ignorance, there appears to be a lack of discourse pertaining to American Indians in society (Smith, 2005; Henson, 2008; Perry, 2009). In rare instances when a discussion on American Indians occurs, it is often distorted by negative stereotypes (Churchill, 1997; Henson, 2008). For example, the general population “question about whether all Indians are getting rich on gambling or whether it is ‘really Indian’ to run businesses or governments” (Henson, 2008: 2). Taken together, the ignorance about indigenous social problems and misrepresentations about these individuals has propelled many American Indians to “set the record straight” about their existence within society. With that being said, many American Indians turn to address these problems and to overcome negative stereotypes.

Scholars assert that graffiti is often used to address a range of issues ranging from promoting a social movement to supporting gang activities (Castleman, 1984; Ferrell, 1993; Austin, 2001; Macdonald, 2001; Rahn, 2001; Sanders, 2005; Halsey & Young, 2006; Chmielewska, 2007; Iveson, 2007, 2010; Dickens, 2008; Schacter, 2008; Brighenti, 2010; Nierhoff, 2014). With respects to American Indian advocacy graffiti, the focus tends to be on responding to historical trauma and cultural oppression that is traced to the effects of colonialism. For many tribal communities, they continue to experience mistreatment and oppression, which obstructs their ability to maintain their cultural heritage. That is to say, American Indian advocacy graffiti serves a two-fold purpose: preserve the indigenous culture and expose the general population to the social injustices that are experienced among American Indians. With respects to preserving the cultural identity, American Indian art is “rooted in history, tradition, experience, yet often incorporate new messages” (Henson, 2008: 299). Drawing upon cultural symbols and motifs, American Indian artists create innovative methods to draw attention to indigenous social problems. With that being said, such cultural images and symbols were used during an American Indian social movement to protest the mistreatment of the indigenous population in San Francisco, California.

**Alcatraz occupation graffiti**

On November 20, 1969, a group of American Indians formed the Indians of All Tribes organization (IAT), which sought to raise awareness about indigenous problems by occupying the abandoned federal penitentiary on Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay (Johnson and Fixico, 2008; Zimmerman, 2008; O’Brien, 2011). The organization cited a clause in the 1868 Treaty of Laramie, which stated that abandoned federal land should be returned to American Indians (Johnson & Fixico, 2008; Zimmerman, 2008). With regard to the penitentiary, the federal
government considered the property as a federal surplus shortly after the facility closed on March 21, 1963. Therefore, the IAT argued that the abandoned island should be returned to the American Indian community. During the two-year occupation, “hundreds of Indians traveled back and forth to Alcatraz . . . which empowered them with a sense of accomplishment and the desire to make conditions better for Indian people throughout the country” (O’Brien, 2011: 213). From the island, the IAT issued the Alcatraz proclamation, which listed a series of grievances and the mistreatment of American Indians by the federal government. Believing that their actions were symbolic, the IAT felt that their occupation would achieve social justice for American Indians.

In addition to the proclamation, the IAT members also relied on pro-indigenous rights graffiti to express their frustration about the oppression of American Indians. In fact, several of the historic buildings on the island were vandalized with pro-Indian messages. For example, members wrote “yata hey,” which is a Navajo greeting on one of the buildings (Johnson, 1996; Johnson & Fixico, 2008). The protestors spray-painted other sayings throughout the island such as “peace and freedom,” and “this is Indian Land.” The protestors also made reference to the ill-fated attack by George Custer in the Black Hills in the late 1890s, by painting the words “Custer had it coming” (Johnson & Fixico, 2008). The occupation of Alcatraz Island garnered considerable media attention as several celebrities, including Jane Fonda and Marlon Brando, visited the protestors to lend their support in the movement (Johnson, 1996). Although the occupation was initially successful in raising awareness about American Indian social problems, the occupation experienced a series of setbacks, which resulted in the protesters vacating the island in 1971. Despite the controversy surrounding the occupation, the movement is generally viewed as being successful in educating the public about indigenous social problems (Johnson, 1997; Johnson & Fixico, 2008) and empowering American Indians (Johnson, 1996).

Realizing the historical significance of the occupation, the federal government has allocated resources to protect and maintain the pro-American Indian graffiti on the island. One of the most visible signs of the occupation is the graffiti on the ten-storied water tank with the words, “Peace and freedom welcome home of the free Indian land” (Nolte, 2013: 1). Over the decades since the occupation, the graffiti and the water tower had deteriorated to the point where the words were barely legible (Sankin, 2012: 1). With guidance from the American Indian Movement and the Indian Treaty Council, the National Park Service initiated a $1.5 million project to restore the water tower and the graffiti to its original state during the protest action on the island (Wollan, 2012). According to the National Park Service, the restoration project is seeking to honor the legacy of the occupation as it promoted the advancement of indigenous rights. As David Dusterhoff, a project manager for the restoration states, “we all agreed we were doing the right thing. We were honoring an important part of the island’s history” (Pfeiffer, 2013: 1). To further educate the public about the occupation and the pro-Indian graffiti, the National Park Service also established a display chronicling the events surrounding the occupation. For many visitors to Alcatraz Island, they are largely unaware of the graffiti that is associated with the occupation. As revealed by Marcus Koenen, the site supervisor for Alcatraz Island, “it is not something that people expect to see . . . when you see this graffiti when you walk off the boat, it opens your eyes to the Indian story of the island” (Nolte, 2013: 1). Indeed, the occupation of Alcatraz ushered a new sense of American Indian empowerment, which pressured the United States government to enact the Indian Self-Determination Act of 1975 (Johnson, 1996; Johnson & Fixico, 2008). The use of graffiti to advocate indigenous rights extends beyond Alcatraz Island to other areas of the country. Although graffiti is used to advocate indigenous rights, many Indian gangs operating in Indian Country are also relying on graffiti for communication purposes.
Gang-related graffiti

Although research is limited, the available scholarship on American Indian graffiti tends to associate this type of art with gangs. With regard to gangs in Indian Country, many tribal communities have become greatly concerned about their presence. Perhaps this is for good reason considering that tribal communities experience a high rate of gang-related activity (Hailer and Hart, 1999; Joseph and Taylor, 2003; Pridemore, 2004). As Carmen Smith, the Warm Springs Tribal Police Chief suggests, “these criminal organizations are growing in Indian country at an alarming rate” (Millman, 2009). Official rates substantiate her claims as there are over 400 gangs with over 4,500 members operating in or in close vicinity of tribal communities (Pridemore, 2004).

Unfortunately, the presence of gangs in Indian Country also impacts the rates of crime and violence within these communities. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, “anecdotal reports and official records from juvenile justice officials (i.e. tribal courts and probation and/or law enforcement officers) in a number of Indian country communities indicate increased levels of crime associated with youth gangs” (Major, et al., 2004). Similarly, over 20 percent of American Indians claim that their community experience gang-related property crimes such as vandalism and graffiti (Major et al., 2004). More importantly, “gang members most often were said to be juvenile, male, and involved in property crimes such as vandalism and graffiti” (Flores, 2004: 14). With that being said, graffiti appears to be strongly associated with gangs operating in Indian Country. Interestingly, these gangs emulate images and attitudes from gangs found in urban areas. As Grant (2013: 17) notes,

When gangs form in tribal communities, it is not unusual for the individuals involved to identify by a unique, localized name (i.e., Odd Squad, The Boyz, Red Nation Klique, etc.). However, the usual trend in most tribal communities involves the gang identifying with, and adopting the names and symbols of, major urban gangs (i.e. Native Gangster Bloods, Native Gangster Crips, Native Gangster Disciples, Native Latin King).

Indeed, Indian gangs are largely influenced by urban gangs. Similar to urban gangs, Indian gangs also rely on graffiti to communicate their organization’s activities and goals (Hutchison and Kyle, 1993; Klein, 1995; Weisel, 2004). Gang-related graffiti often serve as symbols to “mark claimed gang territory, list gang members, show the colors and images with which the gang identifies, and challenge rival gangs and law enforcement personnel” (Armstrong et al., 2002: 34). Additionally, gang graffiti has also been used to “insult or taunt rival gangs” (Short, 1996: 7). In conjunction with urban gang symbols, many Indian gangs also draw upon their own tribal symbols to communicate the gang’s activities. Irrespective of the meanings associated with Indian gang-related graffiti, there have been several reports of tribal buildings and homes being defaced by this type of vandalism.

Gang–related graffiti and vandalism appears to be an everyday occurrence for tribal members living on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. Local authorities have recognized several Indian gangs that are responsible for graffiti and tagging tribal buildings and homes with their gangs’ insignia (Eckholm, 2009; Smith, 2012). For example, the Indian gang “Wild Boyz,” which is comprised of Lakota Indians, have been responsible for tagging buildings with a symbol of a bear claw with “Wild Boyz forever” alongside the illustration (Hailer, 2008; Eckholm, 2009). In some cases, buildings have been found with the letters “WBZ” spray painted, which serves as an acronym for the gang’s name (Hailer, 2008). In a recent report, researchers found that a significant portion of police calls-for-service was related to graffiti and vandalism within the
tribal community (Eckholm, 2009; Smith, 2012). Indian gang graffiti extends beyond Pine Ridge Indian Reservation to other tribal communities.

Local authorities in Coville Indian Reservation in Washington found that graffiti and vandalism was being traced to both Indian and non-Indian gangs. Recent gang trends suggest that urban gangs are increasingly conducting their organization’s business within the confines of Indian reservations. Due to the disjunction between federal and tribal court systems, many gangs realize that there is little risk of punishment. As a result, “reservations from Arizona to Idaho have watched gang activity evolve from graffiti to assaults to drive-by shootings, as gangs spread from their traditional urban confines into rural Indian Country” (Ogburn, 2006). With respects to the Coville Indian Reservation, local law enforcement found graffiti connected to gangs such as Native Gangster Bloods, Barrios Los Padrinos, and East Side Bloods (Thomas, 2009). Given the high volume of gang activity on the reservation, many residents reported a wide array of gang insignia and symbols spray painted throughout the community. For example, law enforcement found spray painted “187,” which represents the California penal code for murder along a road barrier within the reservation (Rodriguez, 2010). Similarly, the Ute Mountain Ute Indian Reservation in Colorado, has experienced tagging from two outside gangs such as Sureño 13 and the Crip Killing Society (Thomas, 2009). Unfortunately, tribal governments have also reported gang-related graffiti and vandalism on indigenous cultural and historical landmarks in Indian Country.

Within the past several years, indigenous cultural sites have been defaced by gang-related symbols and slang. For example, gangs have been responsible for defacing the Petroglyph National Monument in New Mexico by spray painting graffiti on boulders that lead to the entrance of the park (Associated Press, 2007). Park authorities reported that the tagging on the boulder read “TSK,” which is an abbreviation to “Too Sick Krew.” The tagging was believed to be part of an inter-gang turf-war among several local gangs in the area (Associated Press, 2007). Non-gang affiliated graffiti has also been found on other indigenous ancestral sites. For instance, Jamestown S’Klallam authorities found that someone painted “I (heart) Miranda” on Tamanowas Rock, which has a sacred meaning for the local tribal community (Smillie, 2014). The site has long been used among the Salish Indians for ceremonial rituals (Associated Press, 2014). Although gang-related graffiti appears in Indian Country, there have been several reports of anti-Native graffiti within tribal communities.

Hate crime graffiti

American Indians frequently find themselves as victims of hate crimes. According to the Department of Justice, “American Indians are more likely than people of other races to experience violence at the hands of someone of a different race” (Perry, 2004: iii). In fact, nearly 70 percent American Indian victims reported that their perpetrator was a non-American Indian (Perry, 2004). Given these realities, many hate crimes against American Indians occur within reservation communities. As Raymond Foxworth, an administrator for the American Indian College Fund observes, “just as some areas of the South remain hotbeds of racism because of the history of slavery and discrimination, the same can be said of areas where there are large Indian populations” (Buchanan, 2006: 1). Hate crimes can be defined as “acts of violence and intimidation that are not always technically criminal in nature, and that are usually directed towards already stigmatized and marginalized groups” (Perry, 2008: 11). In her research on hate crimes against American Indians, Perry (2008: 80) suggests that “regardless of the region, or town, or tribal community, there was a very strong sense among the people interviewed that
racial violence – hate crime – is endemic.” Additionally, she also argues that hate crimes serve as “a mechanism of power, intended to reaffirm the precarious hierarchies that characterize a given social order. It simultaneously recreates the hegemony of the perpetrator’s group and the subordination of the victim’s group” (Perry, 2008: 11). For many American Indians, they are subjected to intimidation through racially charged graffiti that is often found in tribal communities. For example, tribal members living in Coeur d’Alene Tribe in Idaho experience anti-Native graffiti on tribal buildings and property. In one particular incident, local authorities found the words “white power” on an historical marker. Additionally, “die . . . Indians” and swastikas were also found painted on the sign. The vandalism is likely to be connected to the hate group “Lone Wolves,” which is headquartered within proximity to the reservation (Mischke, 2014). Indeed, several hate groups have been responsible for spreading intimidation and fear through the use of graffiti throughout Indian Country. Irrespective of the type of graffiti found in Indian Country, there are community programs designed to remove this type of vandalism.

Community response to graffiti

To address unwanted graffiti and vandalism in Indian Country, many tribal communities have enacted programs and policies to reduce the appearance of graffiti, especially gang-related graffiti. For some tribal police departments, failure to remove gang-related graffiti will exacerbate violence and crime within the tribal community. For example, the Puyallop Tribe of Indians Police Department strongly encourages tribal members to report and document any instances of graffiti. According to their website, “Graffiti should be removed to reduce the likelihood of continued violence. Gang graffiti left unchecked can be dangerous. Remember it can communicate an outright threat against an opposing gang or person.” (www.puyallup-tribe.com/law-enforcement).

In response to the threat associated with gang-related graffiti, some tribal communities have created specialized task forces to remove graffiti. For instance, the Western Navajo-Hopi Meth Task Force and the Coconino County District Attorney’s office collaborated to eradicate graffiti from tribal buildings and property. David Rozema, the county attorney, asserts that “graffiti is vandalism and it harms the heart of the community. We started our graffiti removal efforts two years ago and we are committed to fighting against it” (Navajo-Hopi Observer, 2011). Indeed, several tribal communities recognize graffiti as having a negative influence among tribal members. As a result, some tribes have offered monetary rewards to assist in apprehending individuals who are responsible for graffiti. In 2011, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina offered a $1,000 reward for tips that will lead to the arrest of an individual who has been tagging various tribal buildings on the reservation (McKie, 2011). Other tribal communities have implemented programs to address some of the social problems that may facilitate graffiti. Recognizing the need to address Native youth involvement in Indian gangs, the Navajo Nation has implemented programs to create opportunities for at-risk youth to deter them from participating in gangs and reduce their involvement in graffiti. Navajo Nation leaders created a series of community service projects, which had the juveniles repairing buildings and assisting the elderly within the reservation (Armstrong et al., 2002). The leaders believed that these projects allowed the juveniles to develop a sense of community pride which would prevent them from participating in gang-related activities such as graffiti.
Conclusion

In closing, this chapter provides a broad overview on American Indian graffiti. Although there has been a lack of scholarly attention to this subject, the limited research has shown that American Indian graffiti is used to advocate the rights of American Indians and raises awareness about their social problems, which may serve to educate the general population. For some American Indian artists, it also offers them the ability to achieve social justice. As Jaque Fraque states,

From now on when people pass this wall they will understand that we as Indigenous beings are still here and that we are actively decolonizing the culture, the art, and the community. We will not tolerate violence, injustice, nor division any longer. Please help us to bridge the gaps and push towards the peace we all seek.

(www.fragua.com)

In doing so, it also reclaims their cultural identity by expressing their thoughts through their own cultural legacy. While graffiti is viewed as promoting the American Indian community, it (more specifically gang-related graffiti) is considered harmful to those living in tribal communities. As a result to this threat, many tribal communities have enacted policies and programs to eradicate gang-related graffiti from their communities. Unfortunately, this type of art will continue to appear in Indian Country if the structural conditions remain unchanged.

Notes

1 The author wishes to thank Alese Wooditch from George Mason University for her helpful comments on earlier drafts.
2 Although American Indians engage in graffiti and street art, the literature on American Indian street art is extremely limited. With that being said, the focus of this chapter is American Indian graffiti.
3 Indian Country refers to land held in trust by the federal government for American Indian use.
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References


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