"Boost or blight?" Graffiti writing and street art in the "new" New Orleans

Doreen Piano

Introduction

Pulled toward the economic drive to revitalize its urban center in the years after the levees breached during Hurricane Katrina in 2005, city officials in New Orleans are not only taking extreme measures to eliminate its criminal elements, but also addressing “quality of life” issues. Complaints made by citizens are often legitimate, especially in neighborhoods struggling with excessive blight, illegal dumping, and crime, but the adverse effects have been harsher penalties and stricter regulation of urban cultural practices such as graffiti and street art, music and performance.3

As these social and economic shifts occur, particularly within a post-Katrina environment, activists, artists, scholars, and long-term residents are raising questions about who gets to occupy, reside, and claim “the right to the city” (Mitchell, 2003). The adoption of the city’s Master Plan (www.nola.gov/city-planning/master-plan) by City Council in 2010 along with a surge of “new arrivals” post-Katrina have contributed to social and economic changes described by Klein (2007) as “disaster politics.”4 The scale of flooding across the New Orleans’ region that resulted in loss of life, a widespread diaspora, and overwhelming property loss also severely compromised the city’s infrastructure, leading to diminished law enforcement, the disruption of city services, and the closing of most businesses, city offices and services, and educational institutions for an extended period of time. The storm, as locals call it, cleaved the city’s historical timeline into a pre- and post-Katrina New Orleans.5

Before the storm, responses to graffiti writing and street art were typical of other urban environments where it was viewed as being “out of place” (Keith, 2005), “a spectacle of filth” (Conquergood, 2004), involving what Ferrell (1993: p. 37) describes as a “war of the walls.” David (2007) describes the political aspects of street art in New Orleans as “visual resistance” (p. 233), a term that captures relations of power among graffiti producers, their products, and the effects of their actions (p. 233). Since the late 1990s, anti-graffiti vigilante Fred Radtke (aka the Gray Ghost) and his non-profit 501(c) corporation Operation Clean Sweep (www.operationcleansweepnola.com) with the endorsement of the City of New Orleans and neighborhood
and business associations have attempted to enforce a “zero tolerance policy” (David, 2005: p. 225). Since 2009, more punitive laws have been passed at the state level, one specifically directed at the defacement of historic buildings. Radtke’s imprint—buffed grey, pink, and blue walls— are found all over the city; some of his buffing of Katrina-related street art and commissioned murals were controversial and covered by local media. However, attempts to eliminate graffiti and street art by enforcing stricter penalties, encouraging neighborhood anti-graffiti abatement programs and sanctioning the actions of Radtke have been largely unsuccessful and graffiti writing remains not just active but growing throughout the city.

With the flow of young so called “new arrivals” into the city, street art such as stencils, wheat paste posters, tags, and stickers is commonly found in areas where they reside. Additionally, street artist Banksy’s high-profile visit to New Orleans in 2008 initiated a stream of national and international street artists into the city. Moreover, neighborhoods still recovering from Katrina’s floodwaters are prime spots, especially interiors. Despite the city’s commitment to eliminate blight, graffiti crews, well-known street artists, and local and travelling writers all have made creative use of, what one graffiti crew, the Charles Gang, hashtags on Instagram as “floodwaste.”

Graffiti writing and street art in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina

The aftermath of Katrina changed the urban landscape of the city psychically and physically. Financial obstacles, mold-infested houses, and the challenges of rebuilding prevented the return of many locals. Aspects of urban life that had been taken for granted – accessibility, convenience, mobility – were replaced with a looming question: when would things return to normal? During a time when officials were debating whether or not to celebrate the 2006 carnival season due to the loss of lives, displaced citizens, and a shortage of law enforcement personnel, hurricane graffiti highlighted the storm’s remnants and refuse, recasting private and commercial property as a canvas in which to represent an overwhelming and incommensurable collective loss.

In their analysis of images during the 2004–2005 Gulf Coast storm season, Alderman and Ward (2008) categorized hurricane graffiti into seven overarching themes that include historicizing the storm by writing on plywood, thus providing “a historical archive” of survival and resilience; expressing defiance, particularly personifying hurricanes; marking territory and imposing order through anti-looting messages; using humor as a form of escape and stress relief; incorporating prayer, both before a storm and afterwards, and deploying political commentary. These same themes were documented in photographs of graffiti that I took in New Orleans after Katrina. Many thousands more exist online and in photography books (Varisco, 2005; Misrach, 2010). According to Saul (2008), while humor was noticeably absent in the national media during the crisis, within the city, “static displays,” revealed a humorous viewpoint. One in particular, written in diary form, the narrative, hand-painted on three plywood boards nailed into the façade of a carpet store on Lower St. Charles Avenue in the Garden District with its references to New Orleans cuisine, aggressive humor, and Mardi Gras illustrated a fierce regionalism as well as a survivor’s resilience (See Figure 18.1).

Hurricane graffiti is not stylized nor is it implicitly illegal; often it is found on personal property, or in the case of New Orleans, on flooded houses and abandoned vehicles that became part of a post-Katrina landscape. Personal messages were directed at neighbors, insurance companies, and the hurricane (Donnie and I R OK, I Knew We Should’ve Moved to Denver, and I Survived Betsy but Katrina was a Bitch), angry and defiant messages directed at government (Screw You, Nagin, We Made our own Plan), and messages directed at and about the city (Viva New Orleans,
New Orleans, America’s No. 1 City) were prevalent during this time. Many responded to ongoing local events such as Mayor Ray Nagin’s “Chocolate City” speech on MLK Day in 2007 that caused an outcry.6

During the recovery, controversies surrounding street art and graffiti became part of larger debates about the future of the city. In late September 2005, Mayor Nagin established the Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB) commission that would play a significant role in envisioning a new New Orleans. By early 2006 with the recommendations of the Urban Land Institute to shrink the city’s footprint, (meaning heavily flooded areas or those with “green dots” would be converted into green space unless a neighborhood could make a good case for its viability) (Campanella, 2008: p. 346), residents living in these areas were enraged and eventually the map was tabled. Although not directly related, street artists fight for self-expression on the street (See Ehrenfeucht, 2014) paralleled civic debates over urban space, especially in relation to thousands of still displaced residents trying to return and rebuild. At this time, graffiti writers such as Harsh, Grubs, and Old Crow were active in desolate neighborhoods. Local writer Harsh often wrote on the back of billboards that advertised services to help with the recovery.

In an interview with Times-Picayune art critic Doug MacCash (2009), artist Skylar Fein claimed that Harsh’s tag accurately depicted the “spectacular destruction” after the storm by commenting on the current climate in the city. He describes this period as “the golden age of HARSH.” Other New Orleans’ taggers’ names (EVAK, RISK, and SANK) also reflected the city’s post-Katrina vulnerability and destruction. In more populated neighborhoods, artist Rex Dingler’s signs that conveyed upbeat messages to residents were targeted by Radtke, whose inability to discern legal from illegal street art led to his arrest for painting over a commissioned mural in 2008.7 A few years later, Radtke would be accused of buffing a mural used in a rap video and destroying a commissioned mural (MacCash, 2011b).8

Radtke’s vigilantism inspired Banksy to depict a grey-haired white man holding a paint roller in several of his New Orleans’ stencils (www.banksystreetart.tumblr.com/tagged/new%20orleans).

Figure 18.1 Hurricane graffiti in New Orleans, 2005 © Doreen Piano
In one, a man is painting over sunflowers, a possible reference to Dingler’s optimistic signs or to the sunflowers that had blossomed in the months after the storm. Ostensibly, Banksy’s visit on the third anniversary of Hurricane Katrina intended “to make a comment on the state of the clean-up operation” (quoted in Gill, 2008). His stencils elicited numerous articles, opinions, and discovery maps in local media for weeks afterwards. The positive reception to his stencils may have been due to his status as an international street artist and his understanding of the city’s continuing struggles to rebuild. Many stencils critiqued government’s lack of response and the broken levee system while also incorporating the city’s iconography (a boy playing a trumpet, a brass band, a refrigerator). In the *Times-Picayune*, MacCash pleaded with Radtke to “let these particular pieces survive” (2008b) while his anti-graffiti colleague, James Gill, conceded, “it is certainly of much higher quality than the graffiti that Radtke has been blotting out” (2008). Locating Banksy stencils that had not been stolen or painted over gave residents an opportunity to see how devastated some neighborhoods such as the Ninth Ward still were. Stencil art, as Truman (2010) points out, is capable of reflecting local concerns at the same time it connects “with broader cultural notions of resistance and change” (pp. 6–7). According to many residents, journalists, and cultural commentators, Banksy’s stencils effectively communicated the disastrous effects of the flooding within a global context.

**Graffiti and street art in and beyond the French Quarter**

By 2010, New Orleans had re-established itself as a primary tourist destination, its high rating in travel magazines illustrating that the city was recovering, at least in the city’s central tourist districts. Historic neighborhoods along the Mississippi were revitalized by a surge of new residents, many of them artists. Homeless and subcultural youth such as modern hobos, crusties, and Quarter rats also flocked to the city after Katrina, finding the lack of regulation and high density of blighted housing amenable for squatting. In early 2010, a devastating fire in an empty warehouse that killed eight young people exposed this relatively hidden demographic. While difficult to tell whether these new populations have contributed to graffiti culture, tags, slaps, and wheat paste posters appear in areas near popular bars, clubs, and restaurants where young people hang out.

In the French Quarter, tags and stickers appearing on doorways, trash cans, street signs, sidewalks, and an occasional wall, most of it described as “aesthetically low-grade,” (Nolan, 2011) is buffed quickly. More elaborate pieces and burners are found in “cutty” areas (sites that are isolated, sometimes dangerous) where there is less pedestrian or vehicular traffic, typically in industrial areas and neighborhoods in the north and east of the city still devastated by the floodwaters. Closer to the central areas of town, graffiti is found near railways, drainage canals, and underneath bridges. One writer known as Paws describes New Orleans as a small enough city for writers to be “all city” rather than certain crews being confined to specific areas (www.tumblr.com/tagged/paws-graffiti). Many crews and writers work the same terrain that also include permission or free walls, and interiors of empty high rises, and the upper stories of commercial buildings, abandoned hospitals and schools.

Compared to the vigilant anti-graffiti campaigns in and around the French Quarter, many low-income, predominantly African-American neighborhoods are not as heavily policed. Many of these neighborhoods are lacking amenities such as functioning street lights and nicely paved roads, have high concentrations of blighted properties, and in many cases are impaired by violent crime, raising a question about the city’s uneven distribution of safety and quality-of-life issues. The high visibility of graffiti in these neighborhoods can either reinforce the negative implications associated with these neighborhoods or they can act to beautify desolate urban areas, calling attention to the city’s neglect.
The high percentage of blighted properties after Katrina has led many graffiti writers to use interiors. Interiors grant writers more time to create complex pieces, deflecting accusations of graffiti as “visual pollution” (Keith, 2005). Interiors also counter a prevailing notion that graffiti offers writers an avenue for “asserting their place in the city” (Austin, 1998: p. 243). They challenge this concept by providing more intimate audiences. As street artist MRSA (borrowing his tag from the flesh-eating bacteria) observes, “The only people who see them are other graffiti writers and they stay there a really long time” (Fein, 2011). Additionally, with the rise of social media apps used by graffiti writers, urban explorers, and graffiti chasers (i.e. photographers), artists and writers gain prestige through the circulation of images that have broader, intersecting audiences. The appropriation of interior spaces can be hazardous in New Orleans where many houses and buildings haven’t been touched since floodwaters made them uninhabitable. Many are termite-ridden, rotted, and covered in hazardous materials. However, despite these dangers, they offer relative seclusion from law enforcement and buffing vigilantes. Interior locations or attractive spots in desolate neighborhoods are found through informal social media networks that allow travelling writers and crews to work alongside local ones, creating complex collaborations.

Another outlet for graffiti writers and street artists to display their work is on legal walls. In his research, Kramer (2010) observes that in New York City some graffiti writers do not perceive their relationship to society as “one marked by discordance” (p. 240). In fact, a substantial group of graffiti writers view their work as community oriented (Kramer, 2010: p. 249). Local businesses
often hire writers for larger pieces on their businesses. Additionally, because New Orleans has a history of custom lettered signage (Woodward, 2014), street artists who move between legal and illegal spots are not that extraordinary. While some may see permission walls as co-opting the cultural form through appeasement, as Kramer’s research suggests, permission walls offer opportunities for participation in society (p. 240) and dispel fears of incarceration or fines. Permission walls also offer collaboration among artists. As graffiti writer Paws notes, “writers get along really well and have fun together on various commissions and free walls” (www.tumblr.com/tagged/paws-graffiti). Unfortunately, even when writers are given permission, their work can be destroyed. Operation Clean Sweep has been held responsible for buffing several commissioned works.

In a thought-provoking online discussion about Brandan Odums’ mural-like portraits of African-American artists, intellectuals, and activists, MacCash (2014c) poses the question: “If graffiti helps lend the grit that implies authenticity, could graffiti play an ironic role in boosting property value?” For some graffiti advocates, permission walls or legal graffiti diminish the political effects of the form while others view it as a positive force for economic development in urban areas. For example, while restoring the defunct Rice Mills Lofts in Bywater, developer Sean Cummings retained graffiti on exposed walls in some units and collaborated with artist Skylar Fein to create a permission wall of shipping containers on the perimeter of the site. In an interview (MacCash, 2012), Cummings and Fein discuss how they view the wall as a perfect fit for the Bywater neighborhood while also re-directing the public’s attention about graffiti’s outlaw status toward its legitimacy. Admitting that his buildings have been tagged illegally, Cummings dispels the oddity of “being in cahoots with graffiti artists” (MacCash, 2012) by claiming these kinds of projects can appease those ostensible antagonisms.

In a similar vein, developer Lex Kelso opened a recently acquired warehouse for a one-night exhibit titled “Bombthreat,” organized by Skylar Fein, representing graffiti artists from all over the city. In November 2014, after discovering Odums was utilizing the property illegally, developer Bill Thomason provided the space of an abandoned low-income high rise known as the Woodlands in Algiers for Exhibit Be, the international biennial art show known as Prospect.3, a one-day event that showcased numerous local and international artists (http://brandanodums.com/be). All of the artists involved, including local, national, and travelling writers, were encouraged to create their best work, which became part of the Prospect.3 International Art Show. As a testament to Odums’ work and street art in general, over 2500 people attended the exhibit on its opening day. While these recent moves may not diffuse tensions among graffiti writers, property owners, and city officials, they create “the spaces required to develop the aesthetic possibilities of graffiti” (Kramer, 2010: p. 251).

**Major writers and crews**

It is difficult to grasp the number of writers/street artists/taggers working in New Orleans. In an interview with Skylar Fein (2011), MRSA notes that the number of tags has increased exponentially since 2009. Writing about graffiti before the storm, David (2007) focuses on the political aspects of street art in residential and tourist areas and the debate over public space inspired by Radtke’s vigilantism. His ethnographic work mainly focused on cartoon-like images. However writers such as Old Crow, TARD (known more recently as Fat Kids from Outer Space), MRSA, and members of TM (Top Mob) such as Harsh, Meek, Bugs, Sank, and Evak were writing before the storm hit. In fact, a recent downtown event celebrated Top Mob’s thirtieth year of being a crew in New Orleans. In 2008, Banksy and Swoon visited the city, placing their work around the city. Many of them were destroyed, some were stolen, and
a few still remain. Other high profile visits by internationally recognized street artists such as Rone, MTO and Reader have brought more media attention to the street art scene.

At the time of writing, several graffiti crews are active in New Orleans: TM (Top Mob), VRS (Very Real Shit), QNA (Quest N Adventure), DTB (Doing Things Better), 2F (Too Funky), and Hip Kids. The Bay Area, Charles Gang (aka Charles Mafia, Charles Cartel), who stayed in the city for six months in 2014, left behind a treasure trove of elaborate pieces, raising the bar for local writers. The crew members, especially Uter, Meck, and Dvove often collaborated with local writers during their stay. Sharing walls regardless of crew affiliation is common, perhaps because the scene is quite small and locations are accessible. Other writers and crews who have come for short stays include OYE (Open Your Eyes), a small crew whose high profile member Reader (also tags as Boans and Bonafide) painted “rollers” spelling out READ on abandoned businesses around the city starting in 2009. Reader also uses tags, icons of an open book often with skulls, and X’s, along with stickers saying “Read More Books”. His work is often seen with Reverend and You Go, Girl (known for his decrepit looking hand and a woman’s face with cat’s eye glasses and a large nose) and is reportedly well received by more than graffiti advocates according to Brian Knowles, who claims that his work “runs for longer because of the positive message” (www.juxtapoz.com/graffiti/read-more-books-238472346235). The controversial tagger Gay for Pay whose tag on private property as well as dumpsters and street signs was condemned by many for its perceived homophobia (see Fein, 2013a); additionally the Bourghog Guild whose RIP tags acknowledged dead artists also created a stir by intentionally tagging over a Banksy.

Many New Orleans’ writers remain letter-based such as members of TM, some combine lettering with images such as Old Crow and You Go, Girl and others (Tard, MRSA, Paws) create elaborate, often fantastical, brightly colored figures. Elsie, Freya, and Yenta have each constructed distinctive women’s faces. Elsie’s figures are particularly haunting and ethereal while Freya relies on an anime aesthetic with a face that constantly changes moods, often frowning or glaring. In 2014, Wrdsmith’s stencils of positive messages on top of an old school typewriter, San Francisco stencil artist Jeremy Novy’s playful queer and koi fish stencils and Wren’s animal wheat paste posters have appeared in downtown neighborhoods.

In recent years, more women appear to be involved in graffiti (Freya, Elsie, Yenta, Flea, Wren, Swoon), some are artists using the street as a public space for displaying their work. Others involved in graffiti are men in their twenties to late thirties of varied racial/ethnic backgrounds. The preponderance of young white men in graffiti culture explored by Monto et al. (2012) certainly holds true in New Orleans with many writers identifying with an “outlaw masculinity” that “values willingness to offend, rebelliousness, and risk-taking” (Monto et al., 2012: p. 273). However, even among Anglo writers, varied forms of masculinity should be viewed as existing on a spectrum. For example, Tard, a member of Fat Kids from Outer Space, describes the crew name as “part of the whole retard thing, special needs, weirdness . . .” (Minksy, 2014). Writers/artists of color are also present in New Orleans, particularly African American artist Brandan Odums whose work in abandoned housing projects (the original Project Be) garnered local attention (Fein 2013b; MacCash 2013b).

Many graffiti and street artists move between the gallery and the street. In New Orleans, MRSA had a one-man show at Antenna Gallery, Ken Nahan, a street artist has stickered one-way street signs and exhibited his work in galleries, and visiting artists Caledonia “Swoon” Curry constructed a sculpture at New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA) and also displayed her elaborate paste-ups around town and at the Dithyrambalina (www.dithyrambalina.com) an experimental music box now closed that was located in the Bywater in 2011. Odums participates in several
New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Fests as artist-in-residence and conducts workshops at universities and schools throughout the city. Odums sees his role as a street artist in terms of a collaborative one that involves the surrounding community. When interviewed about his “illegal” work, Odums has said: “I noticed after Katrina so much blight and physical signs of indifference in communities, and I had the responsibility as an artist to use my art to transform the space” (Hasselle).

The politics of preservation: local responses to graffiti culture

While nicknames for New Orleans such as the Big Easy and the City that Care Forgot may convey a permissive, carefree attitude, local authorities, neighborhood associations, historic preservationist groups, business organizations, and law enforcement all work in tandem to safeguard the city’s historical uniqueness which include determining what kinds of cultural forms and practices can exist, or as the director of the Vieux Carre Commission (VCC) says: it’s “not about keeping things looking pretty but addressing what’s appropriate to character and quality” (Foster, 2011). Since the 1920s when elite white women campaigned to preserve a small section of the French Quarter (Stanonis, 2006), New Orleans’ tourist economy has rested on a notion of its timelessness. When graffiti appears in the French Quarter, it is scorned by many. For example, in 2012, extinguisher graffiti by Erase North discovered on two abandoned buildings known to jazz aficionados as having significant historical value (“four of them are listed on the National Register of Historic Places”) (Eggler, 2012) raised an outcry. Many condemned not just the graffiti writer but blamed the city for leaving the building in a state of disrepair so as to be “threatened with demolition” (Eggler, 2012). In a “stranger than fiction” New Orleans’ twist, the graffiti was removed with a particular kind of paste designed to minimize damage to bricks, accompanied by a Voodoo Priestess’s chanting, and music by the Treme Brass Band (Eggler, 2012).

Predictably, news media reports and op-eds about graffiti invoke the “broken windows” theory (Nolan, 2011; Hourglade, 2012). After a Bourbon Street shoot-out on Halloween night in 2011 that resulted in fatalities, the Times-Picayune reported the NOPD were cracking down on graffiti writers despite an attempt by the police superintendent to reduce minor arrests (Nolan, 2011). Tourists interviewed by local media reveal alarm or dismay when seeing graffiti in the French Quarter.

Typically, graffiti abatement programs have been handled (in co-ordination with the city government) by the private sector such as Radtke’s Operation Clean Sweep or neighborhood associations, but in a post-Katrina climate, the city has hosted beautification days focused on eliminating graffiti and harsher penalties have been imposed. Additionally, bars and street musicians have been subjected to fines for violating noise ordinances. These actions are similar to the containment of illegal activities (graffiti included) that occurred in New York City as public spaces became privatized during the Giuliani era (Dickinson, 2008). Working in tandem with law enforcement are neighborhood associations (See Hourcade, 2012; MacCash, 2014b) and well-known residents who see graffiti as marring the city’s “authentic” qualities: Chris Rose, author of One Dead in Attic (the title refers to a famous X-code), upbraided graffiti writers as “petulant, post-adolescents” (2011) and temporary resident/professor at Johns Hopkins, S. Frederick Starr has called for the city to designate a graffiti czar (2014). Additionally, NOLA Ready, a digital communication service that sends emails of criminal activities, often includes videos of graffiti writing suspects posted on YouTube. Some street artists and performers are also hostile toward graffiti placed in the French Quarter as their economic well-being is yoked to the perception of an unchanging city. In 2010, several throw-ups discovered close to Café...
Du Monde prompted this response from a performer: “To lose it all (history) because of something like this? It detracts from it [the French Quarter] tremendously” (OCSNO, 2010).

In local media, Times-Picayune art critic Doug MacCash views graffiti as an urban art form that reflects the city’s complex history. In a column written five years after Banksy’s visit, MacCash tracks down the surviving stencils, commenting on what he finds along the way. “If you wander 2013 New Orleans searching for Banksy’s, you’ll find a landscape in flux.”14 Even though MacCash describes himself as “ambivalent” toward traditional tagging, claiming it is “more antisocial than artistic” (2009), he dedicates frequent columns to debates surrounding illegal art and to visiting and local street artists. He has written effusively about Swoon’s stencils, Reader’s graffiti signage, and the Love signs nailed to telephone poles around the city in 2014. On the other hand, MacCash makes his preferences clear. For example, he has referred to Harsh’s tags as boring and also distinguishes street art from tagging: “Tagging pristine property for grins seems mindlessly mean” (MacCash, 2013b). When street art is a “prank,” it justifies the illegality of the act) Guzzled signs (www.guzzled.org) posted after the Gulf Oil spill.

As an art critic, MacCash reads street art within an aesthetic/intentionality distinction instead of a legal/illegal binary. Not content to review art relegated to conventional spaces, he often uses his columns to create a dialogue about the creative uses of public space, some of it illegal. He allows for multiple points of view that include detractors, proponents, citizens, and artists, utilizing the comments’ section on the online version of his columns or Twitter to pose questions and RT readers’ responses. Often he hosts live chats for residents and artists to discussing street art and graffiti. For example, after writing about Odums’ work, MacCash (2013b) pleaded for the space to be cleaned up and opened for the Prospect.3 international art show in 2014 (2013b). Even though he admitted to the work’s illegality, he observes that “no one was harmed and no property was damaged” (2013b). And in fact through coincidence or wish fulfillment, Odums and other street artists had their work displayed during Prospect.3.

In addition to MacCash’s columns, artist Skylar Fein writes about graffiti culture for NOLA Defender (www.noladefender.com), often interviewing graffiti writers and unabashedly promoting graffiti as a significant art movement. In his online manifesto Why We Write, Fein challenges the Gray Ghost (Fred Radtke) claiming that he is also involved in illegal activities: “The question is not who is right – the question is who will win?” For his 2009 solo art show “Youth Manifesto,” at the NOMA, Fein set up a figurative duel between Harsh and the Grey Ghost by juxtaposing a very large, blinking HARSH tag in front of a window on the second floor of the museum with a much smaller installation of a Gray Ghost tag, the T awkwardly lying on the ground. The opposing tags were set up as super heroes, thus, blurring the distinction between what was legal and illegal.

Further research

While site-specific case studies of graffiti and street art are able to capture the particulars of a city’s location, local writers, proponents and detractors, as Appadurai (1996) argues, the global cultural economy must be viewed in terms of its “disjunctures,” made up of varying flows that are overlapping and unpredictable. The documentary Bomb It (2007) revealed that graffiti is a global phenomenon that functions on a very local level. In recent years, photo-sharing and micro-blogging sites such as Flickr, Tumblr, and Instagram have played a role in facilitating graffiti and street art cultures. Lewisohn observes that the Internet makes street art more accessible (2008: p. 143). Sites such as ArtCrimes (www.graffiti.org), Endless Canvas (www.endlesscanvas.com), The Wooster Collective (www.woostercollective.com), and FatCap (www.fatcap.com) offer digital spaces for discussions, posting photographs, and learning about graffiti culture. During
the initial recovery period, New Orleans had a steady flow of visiting street artists such as Banksy and Swoon who entered local debates about property claims, public space, and disaster (Ehrenfeucht, 2014). During the storm, images of hurricane graffiti circulated through numerous photo-sharing and news media sites providing an alternate view of the crisis. Even before the storm, David (2007) argues that the Internet held potential for political street art to be “a possible recruitment tool” (248) in New Orleans.

Given the number of street artists and graffiti crews visiting the city since the storm, future research may focus on how graffiti writers use social media to exhibit their work and attract a following. For some artists, writers, and crews, “knowing their place” (Austin, 1998) may be less about their right to a particular geographic locale and more about accessing and exchanging information with other writers and graffiti aficionados. Street artist, Wrdsmth has been using the hashtag #wrdsmthinnola to make his location known and to foster a treasure hunt for those interested in seeing his work. Following specific hashtags on Instagram can lead to finding burners and pieces done in interiors that might be inaccessible or in unknown locations. The use of Instagram to promote one’s work to larger audiences fosters informal networks among street artists, photographers, graffiti writers, and urban explorers. It also has become an essential tool for researching subcultures that demand secrecy and anonymity. Social media apps generate networks of circulation for images that can act as a substitute for the subway system’s “alternative economy of recognition and prestige” (Austin, 1998). Tied to other fluid subcultures such as modern hobos and urban explorers, graffiti crews, and writers utilize digital communication to exhibit their work and make connections with others in addition to leaving visual traces that mark their journeys.

Notes

1 This phrase is taken from the title of a live chat hosted by Doug MacCash (2013c).
2 The author is indebted to Laura Carroll, Lisa Costello, Renia Ehrenfeucht, Skylar Fein, Erin Henley, Gerard Hauser, Doug MacCash, and Jeffrey Ian Ross for their feedback during the writing of this chapter. All inaccuracies are the responsibility of the author.
3 Harsher penalties for graffiti writing passed through state legislation in 2008 with maximum fines up to $10,000 and up to ten years in prison. In 2010, a law passed that punished people caught defacing historic buildings. Additionally, citations related to sound ordinances have increased under Mayor Landrieu’s administration.
4 In The Shock Doctrine, Klein defines this term as “orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events” (4).
5 See Jed Horne (2006) and Jordan Flaherty (2010) for reliable accounts of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina written by local journalists. See Fussell (2007) for an assessment of population changes within New Orleans Parish one year after the storm. Her analysis points to a substantial reduction of African-American residents and a growing Latino population. This trend was confirmed in the 2010 US Census findings analyzed by The Data Center (Plyer, 2010).
6 Former Mayor Ray Nagin’s comment that New Orleans should return to being a ‘chocolate city’ inspired outrage by mostly white residents who perceived it as critical of an increased white population.
7 See Ehrenfeucht (2014) for an in-depth discussion of the controversy surrounding Dingler’s street signs.
8 See Winkler-Schmit (2009) for questions regarding there being more than one Gray Ghost. Radtke himself has claimed that some of the gray-painted blocks haven’t gone far enough.
10 See Morton (2012) who provides an in-depth look at this tragedy, focusing on several of the victims.
11 Since Mayor Landrieu took office in 2010, his administration has launched a Fight against Blight Initiative. See The Data Center’s Benchmarks for Blight for an analysis of blighted properties that range from habitable without occupancy to inhabitable based on USPS information collected in 2010. Available at www.datacenterresearch.org/reports_analysis/benchmarks-for-blight/
12 The author wishes to acknowledge Skylar Fein whose understanding of local graffiti culture contributed to this section’s accuracy.
13 The City of New Orleans relies on Operation Clean Sweep, neighborhood associations, and property owners (who have thirty days to remove graffiti after its appearance before being cited) to eliminate graffiti.
14 An attempt to chisel off “Girl with Umbrella,” was thwarted by neighboring residences of the property who reported suspicious activity at the stencil’s site (NoDefStaff, 2014). Ironically, the police were involved in apprehending the vandals.
15 Initial observations about Instagram as preferential to Flickr or other photo-sharing sites may have to do with its more private interface.

References


