Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art

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Challenging the defense of graffiti, in defense of graffiti

Publication details
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315761664.ch33
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Published online on: 08 Mar 2016

How to cite :- Stefano Bloch. 08 Mar 2016, Challenging the defense of graffiti, in defense of graffiti from: Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art Routledge
Accessed on: 18 Aug 2023
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315761664.ch33

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Challenging the defense of graffiti, in defense of graffiti

Stefano Bloch

Introduction

In my decade long career as an active graffiti writer in Los Angeles during the 1990s, I witnessed some of the most rampant criminalization and disproportionate violence ever committed against writers in the United States. Beginning in 1991 with the first well-publicized arrest of Chaka, the notorious tagger (Anima, 1991; Sahagun, 1991), followed by local news coverage of the “graffiti scourge” and the hugely popular Fox’s “Front Page” undercover exposé on so-called “tag-bangers” (combination of “tagger” and “gang banger”) in 1993, everyday citizens across the city were made acutely aware of the supposed violence committed by graffiti writers that accompanied writing on walls. As a result of the conflation between vandalism and violence, politicians and law enforcement called for increased abatement and far stricter penalties for graffiti writers.

Writing one’s name on surfaces around the city, which was once treated by law enforcement as an infraction, or misdemeanor charge at worst, began in the 1990s to be treated as a felony-level assault on the city.1 Whereas New York City politicians and police officials beginning in the 1980s argued that graffiti was a “quality of life” issue, in Los Angeles graffiti went from being identified as “indigenist glyphs” (Latorre, 2008) and “barrio calligraphy” (Sanchez-Tranquilino, 1995; Chastanet, 2009) beginning in the 1940s, to being seen by some as a matter of life and death.

In 1992 the homicide rate in Los Angeles rose to an all-time high, with over 1,200 murders citywide, including 53 killings directly related to the L.A. Riots. Gang membership was also at its peak, as was the proliferation in the number of graffiti writers and “tagging crews.” The justified fear and rampant paranoia people felt during this violent era, which even among graffiti writers is known as the “Dark Days,”2 contributed to the idea that all forms of graffiti, particularly when done illegally and lacking in colorful imagery, legible lettering, and apparent artistry, was evidence of a brutal demarcation of property.

Whereas gang members have in fact traditionally used graffiti in addition to violence to lay claim to territory, writers use graffiti (or non-gang related “tagging”) to gain personal fame, challenge abstract notions of authority, and nonviolently assert their fleeting presence over a wide geographical area.
The easy conflation of the two distinct street-based subcultures could not be more distorted. For gangs – a group for whom territorial demarcation is part of their raison d’être – tagging presents a vivid existential challenge. So threatening was non-gang graffiti to turf integrity in the gang-ridden streets of Los Angeles during the early 1990s, the Mexican Mafia purportedly issued a “green light” on taggers (Phillips, 1999). The edict allowing for the killing of taggers regardless of their race was passed down from the veteranos in the California State prisons to the “pee-wees” on the streets that were responsible for violently maintaining the integrity of the barrio and its drug trade. Like members of aggressive home owners’ associations, real estate agencies, and chambers of commerce, especially in economically fragmented places like Los Angeles (Davis, 1990), gang members are highly aware of the challenge that graffiti presents to territorial control and declared authority over place identity.

By the 1990s, violence committed by gang members against graffiti writers became all too personal as it began to take the lives of some of my best friends and writing partners. Skesk was beaten to death and Cycle was shot and killed by members of the infamous Mara Salvatrucha (MS) gang. My closest friend and first writing partner with whom I would go “all-city” during the first years of the decade was Efren “Tolse” Barbosa. He was shot at close range by a member of the Pacoima 13 gang. In none of these cases was the victim “mistaken for a gang member” as local media accounts would have it (Miller and Ha, 1999). In each case he was killed because he was a graffiti writer.

But it was the killing of a writer by a vigilante in 1995 that attracted the most news media attention due in part to the added component of “victim-precipitated” inter-race violence. Cesar Rene “Insta” Arce was shot in the back as he ran away after having written his name on a freeway underpass in the San Fernando Valley. His killer, William Masters, was celebrated and congratulated by members of the local community and law enforcement as a “hero,” “do-gooder,” an “observant neighbor” and a “white knight” (Riccardi & Tamaki, 1995; Phillips, 1999), for combating graffiti and the “Mexican skinheads” who did it (Carrillo, 1995). Masters was not criminally changed for Insta’s death, but was sentenced to thirty days of community service, removing graffiti, for a misdemeanor conviction for carrying a concealed and loaded firearm in public (Hernandez, 1995).

Insta’s killing marks a significant turning point in L.A.’s most violent era. By the end of the decade a gang truce had been brokered between the notorious Bloods and Crips gangs, and the green light on taggers had been rescinded. Homicide rates would begin their steepest and longest plummet in city history, and by 1997 the district attorney could no longer aggregate individual misdemeanor offenses to form a felony charge. The period also marks the very beginning of a cultural change in the way Angelenos appear to have begun viewing graffiti as more of a quality of life infraction than a violent crime akin to drive-by shootings, thereby relocating it into the more acceptable realm of low-level urban offenses. This change in perception may have been spurred by an increased use of graffiti in mainstream marketing, media, and in the production of local creative capital by the turn of the century (Baudrillard, 1993; see also Alvelos, 2004). Just as it had once been associated with hip-hop culture in New York, it was becoming seen as part of hipster culture in L.A.

In neighborhoods like Echo Park – a traditionally Chicano/a and bohemian district in Los Angeles (Hurewitz, 2007) – graffiti, which was once seen as evidence of a strong gang presence, began to be seen as indicative of artsy lifestyles and fashionably transgressive sensibilities (Bloch, 2012a). Part of this shift is the result of graffiti increasingly being understood as produced by white, art-school educated, middle-class, suburban, men and women possessing high degrees of distinctive social, economic, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986; Lasley, 1995). The turn away from conflating graffiti with gang activity also resulted in a name change.
Graffiti in some of its more acceptable forms began to be called “street art,” a less portentous term than “post-graffiti,” which had been in use in academic circles since the efforts to gallerize graffiti in New York City in 1983 (Janis, 1983; Dickens, 2008). Both terms, however, speak to the fact that graffiti, which is typically seen as a cryptic form of text produced with spray paint and markers, was being included with stenciling, stickering, and wheatpasting, which the general public could more easily decipher and interpret as an elevated form of creative industry and focused talent, which, as street artist Shepard Fairey puts it, is no-less “integrated with the texture of the street” (Manco, 2002: p. 103; see also Dickens, 2010; McAuliffe, 2012).

By 2004 in Echo Park, where the Los Angeles Police Department’s militarized CRASH (Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums) units once patrolled and often brutalized suspected taggers and gang members alike, “art openings” for graffiti writers and street artists were becoming common. In fact, Banksy, the world’s most well-known street artist (Banksy, 2006; Young, 2014), had his first U.S. show in a space I had been criminally charged for writing on less than ten years earlier. On the night of his opening, formerly suburban residents who had once feared the likes of urban graffiti writers were mingling with them, even asking for “autographs” and taking pictures. For those of us in the graffiti community nothing had changed except for how we were being received in such spaces and social situations. The performative and street-based practice of doing graffiti was just as perilous as it had always been, especially given the difficulty in accessing and marking infrastructure (Austin, 2001), but the superficial aesthetic of graffiti was being displaced and warmly embraced. The newfound acceptance and increased celebrity did not sit well with me. Only when contested and unrestrained did I feel that graffiti had something to say.

Deeply superficial perspectives

At 6 am on December 31, 1996, just before the California State Legislature’s prohibition on aggregating vandalism misdemeanors to form a felony charge would go into effect, Detective Jerry Beck and the Los Angeles Police Department’s “Community Tagger Task Force” raided my family’s North Hollywood apartment. My ailing mother, 13-year-old brother, and 6-year-old sister with her tight curls and flower-patterned night gown were ordered at gun point by Detective Beck to lay on the living room floor as a dozen heavily armed and armored officers and accompanying civilian volunteers tore through every room. They left once they had collected what they considered incriminating evidence sufficient to charge me with a felony by linking me to a string of misdemeanor vandalism offenses: as itemized in the complaint, a set of colored pencils, a school folder with “various markings adorning it,” and a shoe box with “graffiti monikers scrawled across it.” I pled guilty to individual misdemeanor charges to avoid an enhanced 2-year prison sentence being offered by the District Attorney.

In the years preceding my arrest I had faced less-coordinated challenges to my tenure as a graffiti writer, though from the perspective of a generally timid teenager each confrontation with anti-graffiti “heroes,” vigilantes, gang members, and cops alike was equally as frightening as well as validating of graffiti’s import.

What each type of anti-graffiti zealot has in common with those they pursue, arrest, and sometimes kill is a deep respect for and understanding of the potentially transformative power of graffiti. To be preoccupied with the seemingly superficial appearance and personal demarcation of the built environment relies on the type of spatial consciousness and action that Lefebvre (2003) understood as revolutionary. It may be those who are morally panicked and outraged by its presence who recognize that graffiti is a form of transgression and contestation that forces us to outright question, or at least consciously think about, moral geographies (Cresswell, 1996;
McAuliffe, 2012) and what Edensor (2005) calls “authoritative spatialization” – or the normative spatial codes and dominant ideological structures that are manifested in and on public space. So challenging is graffiti to the dominant sense of order, as Iveson (2007) points out, municipalities have even gone so far as to wage wars on graffiti that rely on the type of rhetoric and militarization of police and public space typically reserved for anti-terrorist campaigns.

Part of the reason graffiti is understood as a challenge to authoritative spatialization is due to how it reveals the contradiction of urban space seen and treated as a commodity with exchange value as well as a collective resource with myriad use values. For Lefebvre (1991) and others (Harvey, 2001), this contradiction is inherent in the capitalist production of space. However, to use Foucault’s (1986) terminology, the continued production of a more “heterotopic,” or diverse and mutually contestative, space is possible, but only through what constitute “deviant,” “anti-social,” and “criminal” acts committed against existing spatial manifestations of power.

The resulting disorderly and anarchic system of producing space engenders another kind of order for Lefebvre (1991, 2003). That is, a logic and order arising from a non-hierarchical, unplanned, and practiced city, which lends itself to the fight for spatial justice (Soja, 1996, 2010). For Lefebvre, refiguring the dominant organization of space must be accomplished in the street, materially, with the use of “bulldozers and Molotov cocktails” (1991: p. 56), or symbolically whereby the street becomes a place for talk, given over as much to the exchange of words and signs as it is to the exchange of things. A place where speech becomes writing. A place where speech can become ‘savage’ and, by escaping rules and institutions, inscribe itself on walls. (2003: p. 19)

While far from constituting terrorist acts or engendering an immediate or recognizable overthrow of the capitalistic, hierarchical, and planned city system, from a spatial perspective graffiti is after all, and should be, illegal. It is the act of illegally occupying and writing on infrastructure that defines graffiti as such. Graffiti signifies the presence of a person acting “out of place” by making a personalized claim for space, which rebukes conventions for private property, the rule of law, standards regarding the appropriate appearance of infrastructure, and mores regarding acceptable public behavior (Bloch, 2012b). To accost, hunt down, and even violently attack those who illegally paint on walls is to preserve a system whereby only those who legally own, oversee, or pay may lawfully enter, alter, or personalize the seemingly superficial appearance of the city.

Concurring with those who adhere to the philosophy of the Broken Windows theory (Kelling & Wilson, 1982), graffiti is in fact transformative. If allowed to “stay up,” the unsanctioned graffiti mark provides evidence of a community that is oblivious to, ambivalent about, permissive, or even encouraging of socio-spatial transgression wrought against the status-quo of law, order, and ownership. While graffiti is certainly superficial in what it is literally and materially appending to surfaces, its perceived effect on moral, normative constructions of space is deeply profound. To defend graffiti as not being worthy of such extrapolation would be to render the power of authoritative spatialization moot. Such a move would have consequences for critical understandings of hegemonic power and ideological structures (Althusser, 1971; Gramsci, [1971] 1996).

Below I provide examples of how it is, perhaps counter intuitively, the defense of graffiti that may be most effective at abating graffiti and rendering it meaningless as a potentially transformative socio-spatial act. It is not those who aggressively confront graffiti who lack an
understanding of its potential to challenge dominant socio-spatial forms of order and control, but rather, I argue, it is those who celebrate graffiti as an “art form” and advocate for “permission walls” without regard for its spatial context who may be unwittingly diluting its strength. As Iveson (2007: p. 135) puts it, “legal graffiti projects reinscribe a respect for private property relations, and the consequent control by owners over the appearance of public space in which they are located.”

Within the large literature on graffiti that recognizes it as a systematic, stylized, and personalized form of illegal wall writing by members of a geographically dispersed, though socially cohesive subculture (e.g. Kurlansky et al., 1974; Castleman, 1982; Ferrell, 1996; Macdonald, 2001; Young, 2014), there have in fact been those who focus more explicitly on the spatiality of this modern urban phenomenon.

In one of the first accounts of graffiti as distinct from overtly political, personal, or gang-affiliated wall writing, Ley and Cybriwsky (1974) distinguish “loner” graffiti writing from other forms of wall writing by mapping its spatial diffusion across Philadelphia and pointing to local “graffiti king” Corn Bread’s disregard for bounded territoriality. For Ley and Cybriwsky, modern graffiti is distinct from earlier forms of wall writing because of its placement and prolificacy more than its aesthetic aims or the personal motivations behind its production.

Cultural criminologist Jeff Ferrell (1996) understands graffiti as a visual expression of anarchic action taken against and engendered by the spatial controls and physical partitioning of activities put upon urban inhabitants by policy makers, property owners, law enforcement, and other dominant communities. Graffiti writers need not be conscious of the socio-spatial or political transgression taking place since it is the prohibition and reaction it precipitates that, according to Bataille (Foucault, 1977; see also Suleiman, 1990: p. 75), is revealing of and challenging to normative socio-spatial boundaries. It is here, in considering writers’ intentionality, that graffiti as transgression is clearly distinct from graffiti as deliberate, overtly politically motivated, or articulable contestation (Ferrell, 1996, 2001, 2012).

Continuing with his project to spatialize graffiti, in his article with Weide (Ferrell & Weide, 2010), Ferrell investigates in deep ethnographic fashion the physical placement of graffiti, providing situated spatial analysis of graffiti’s engagement with the urban environment through the categorization of the “spots” that writers access and select to showcase their work (see also Austin, 2001). Each category – “audiences and visibility,” “longevity and durability,” “availability and competition,” and “seriality and accumulation” – focuses on the importance of placement above all else. As in Borden’s (2001) work on skateboarding, innovative “spot” selection is crucial to an actor’s identity and status within a spatially-conscious subculture, which is often glossed over in traditional subcultural studies that understate the deep intricacies of space (Hall & Jefferson, (1976) 1993).

But it has been Cresswell (1996) who has developed the clearest link between the illegality of graffiti and its physical placement. He asserts that graffiti is criminalized for its transgression against moral landscapes, thereby signaling “inappropriate geographical behavior.” The source of graffiti’s criminality, he argues, “lies in its being seen . . . and in the subversion of the authority or urban space” (p. 58). For Cresswell, and recently for Young (2014), the almost universal anxiety, disgust for, and rampant criminalization of graffiti reveals the complex “common sense” workings of the form, function, and appearance of the urban environment. As Young (2014: p. 145) puts it, unauthorized wall writing and street art “makes its own space, not as a partitioned, permitted, semi-tolerated activity, but as an emergent, auto-poietic practice, a de-territorializing tactic that exposes the multiple boundaries and boarders of the propertied cityscape.”

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Informed by these and other writings in addition to my own practice and spatial perspective as an active graffiti writer for over a decade, I now introduce cursory challenges to four widely articulated defenses of and supportive rhetorical approaches to graffiti that appear in everyday discourse, popular writings, and within the academic literature. I initiate this argument in an effort to provoke conversation and to identify graffiti’s most powerful attribute as a marker and producer of alternative urban spatialities. I do so not to romanticize or justify graffiti as a countermoralizing act or service consciously performed in the interest of forwarding social or spatial justice, but to argue that regardless of writers’ intentions, graffiti reveals the otherwise unseen geographical boundaries and deeply-held aesthetic sensibilities that most people take for granted and sometimes actively and even violently defend.

There should be legal spaces for graffiti

By advocating for legal walls and sanctioned spaces, supporters are contributing to the confinement of graffiti, thereby reducing it to an aesthetic product rather than a productive aspect of public urbanism.

Legal and semi-legal walls and “yards” have long been important to graffiti writers looking for a place to meet and practice their styles. But suggesting that legal walls would be an appropriate substitute for existing expanses of city space, or that legal spaces would help reduce unwanted graffiti elsewhere, is uninformed from a writers’ perspective. Even when afforded sanctioned public spaces, such as the Art Wall in Venice, California, or any number of tacitly tolerated yards such as the recently redeveloped Five Points in New York City and Belmont Tunnel in the Westlake District of Los Angeles, graffiti writers do not shirk at the opportunity to simultaneously produce graffiti elsewhere. The notion that legal or semi-legal spaces help to reduce less desirable graffiti has not been sufficiently supported by anecdotal or statistical evidence (Shobe & Banis, 2014).

Legal spaces also force graffiti writers to engage with and be beholden to local government and property owners – two groups to whom writers have traditionally been antagonistic. Furthermore, such a relationship robs graffiti of its autonomy and subcultural legitimacy. Asking for permission is a deathblow to a subculture bent on the improvisational, aggressive, and individualistic marking of space.

While, as Halsey and Young (2002), Snyder (2009), Kramer (2010a), McAuliffe (2013), and others show, there exists a subset of graffiti “artists” who transition into legal, municipally sanctioned, “subcultural careers” and primarily paint legal walls, the argument that legal walls succeed in satisfying graffiti writers’ artistic desires minimizes the complexity and importance of what it means to pursue a politically and spatially transgressive graffiti career in the first place. Such a focus on “career opportunities,” the “professional path,” and the use of the problematic concept of the “life course” (Snyder, 2009) posit the desire to maturely and gainfully create art as a predominant motivator for doing graffiti over the concerted desire to occupy and demarcate space for a variety of less practical and profit-oriented reasons. McAuliffe and Iveson (2011) and MacDiarmid and Downing (2012) are correct to problematize the strict legal/illegal binary and emphasize how graffiti writers who do seek out and rely on legal spaces actually drift between legal and illegal involvement, which challenges the notion that the “professional path” out of the graffiti subculture is smooth and unidirectional, even when desired.
There should be art programs for graffiti writers

Similar to the culturally enervating effects of spatial confinement, government financing and private support for arts programs weaken graffiti through economic legitimization and conservative frameworks for expression. Advocating for confined, funded, and bureaucratically structured art programs neglects the fact that graffiti is more than a visual art. Graffiti is a performative art practiced by those who are not merely frustrated artists looking for “creative outlets,” but as Halsey and Young (2006: pp. 276–277) put it, it is “an affective process that does things to writers’ bodies (and the bodies of onlookers) as much as to the bodies of metal, concrete and plastic, which typically compose the surfaces of urban worlds” (emphasis in original). Such a perspective is, indeed, in need or further attention and elaboration (Campbell, 2012).

Within the context of the cultural economy of cities, securing proper – i.e. legal – spaces for graffiti may in fact help package it for easy and profitable consumption in exactly the way so-called neoliberal place makers and profiteers desire. Such a fear of the loss of legitimacy for graffiti through its relocation and cooption was common in New York City during the late 1970s and early 1980s. In his criticism of the gallerization and rebranding of graffiti as “Post-Graffiti” (Janis, 1983), Lachmann (1988) drew a distinction between what was being painted on the subways and streets at the time and what was being brought into the space of the gallery. He advocated for unsanctioned and spontaneous graffiti, and against the market sterilization of graffiti, which was accompanied by the destruction of “writers’ benches” and the “value of pursuing artistic, deviant, or any activity with others” (p. 249). Further, despite support for municipal art programs, many graffiti writers insist that “graffiti and the art world have incompatible and irreconcilable ideological strategies, and that they should exist as separate spheres” (Dickens, 2008: p. 7).

Scholars have also argued that legal spaces and arts programs provide more time and resources for composition, thus allowing graffiti writers to paint to their full potential, thereby making it more aesthetically appealing. As with spatial confinement, arts program-based graffiti is often that which is easily consumed and superficially celebrated as “authentic,” despite the objective loss of context. Furthermore, the notion that arts education contributes to an aesthetically superior form of graffiti often relies on metaphors that suggest that graffiti writers “evolve” from producing simplistic tags to painting sophisticated pieces under supportive conditions. While such assumptions are supported by the fact that some graffiti writers do transition into careers in arts-related professions based on their subcultural status and fostered talents (Snyder, 2009), the fact is graffiti writers actually showcase expanded repertoires as they develop their skill set on the street. As legendary graffiti writer and artist Mear One put it,

I might blow you away with a mural that takes me all day to paint, but on my way home I’m still gonna catch tags the whole way. You might even hire me to come paint a ‘beautiful’ mural over that ‘ugly tagging’ that ‘somebody’ ‘scribbled’ on your wall.6

Graffiti is art

Evoking graffiti’s artistic appeal posits “ugly” graffiti – i.e. illegible, monochromatic, out of place – as less desirable than colorful, legible, “beautiful,” and properly placed graffiti based on subjective criteria, and therefore positions some types of graffiti as less worthy of occupying space. Such binary reductionism justifies the hatred of some graffiti, which, by extension, is used as justification for the hatred of “some types” of graffiti writers based on age, class, level of educational attainment, race, and ethnicity.
Graffiti is not a crime

Positing that graffiti is not a crime differs slightly from the unrealistic argument that graffiti should be legal. While the former argument appeals to graffiti as, perhaps, a decontextualized art form, the latter speaks to forms of graffiti that, due to their placement, fall under the category of vandalism, but apparently should not. While it is true that some incarnations of graffiti are in fact not a crime, graffiti as vandalism is.

In general, however, proponents of the legalization of graffiti are employing an unrealistic normative framework that is, to use Estlund’s (2014: p. 118) playful concept, “hopelessly aspirational.” But instead of challenging the argument for legalization on the grounds that it is unrealistic, I ask that we shift our attention from that “utopian project” to ask to what degree graffiti, as an act of transgression or contestation, is effective at challenging people’s conceptualization of existing moral geographies.

Regardless of how effective graffiti is at forcing people to acknowledge the presence and power of moral geographies, the unsanctioned mark does reveal the occurrence of a trespass in both normative spatial and social terms (Young, 2014). The conflation of the spatial and the social in determining low-level crime is frequent even when law enforcement is dealing with “victimless” offenses, or what criminologist call “public-order crimes” in which participants consensually take part and for which there is no immediate or direct threat to potential victims. Trespassing and most forms of vandalism, loitering, disorderly conduct, and other spatially-conceived crimes are generally non-violent, but nevertheless may elicit high-levels of social ostracism, physical banishment, aggressive policing strategies, and occasionally incarceration, thereby limiting individuals’ right to the city. Controlling behavior through the imposition of moral geographies in and across a bounded territory or neighborhood is a prevalent law enforcement tactic. So-called “place-based policing” (Weisburd et al., 2008), which derives in part from the logic of the Broken Windows theory, understands quality of life crimes as clustering in particular deviant and disorderly spaces and committed by “disreputable, obstreperous, and disorderly people” (Harcourt, 2009: p. 31; see also Kelling & Wilson, 1982).

Regardless of the hotly contested issue of spatial policing within the social sciences (Herbert, 1997; Mitchell, 1997; Herbert & Brown, 2006; Crawford, 2010), the presence of graffiti still suggests that someone has acted out in a way that does not jibe with socio-spatial norms and conventions for appropriate behavior. Graffiti in this way is in fact disorderly as it challenges top-down notions of orderly behavior.

Conclusion

Most convincingly challenging my position that graffiti should not be defended are the graffiti writers themselves who are often quoted in academic texts and popular media outlets advocating for legal spaces, decriminalization, and increased arts education. The profusion of such opinions in scholarly writings is the result of how some academics and journalists in the field access particular types of entrenched graffiti writers who may be aligned with non-profit arts organizations or are part of, or firmly on a career path toward, the legitimate private arts sector.

In major centers of graffiti activity – Los Angeles, New York, London, Paris, Berlin, Rome, São Paulo, Buenos Aires, and Melbourne for example – there appear oft-quoted unofficial spokespersons speaking for the cohesive though loose-knit global graffiti community. Many of these de facto spokespeople contend with harsh criticisms coming from the general public, law enforcement, members of the business community, property owners, mural organizations, and “urban arts” educational non-profits. To counter myriad existential challenges to graffiti/street
art, or merely to advocate for their own vested interest in seeing greater tolerance for and nuance in the definition of graffiti (McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011; MacDiarmid & Downing, 2012), these spokespersons adhere to a narrow perspective that consists of calls for decriminalization, legitimacy, permission, and ultimately legality.

While some call for increased tolerance as part of a desire for social justice and respect for diversity, in many cases such advocacy works in the interest of the promotion of privately owned graffiti apparel and “artist spray paint” shops, “how-to” graffiti art and mural classes, private mainstream art careers, and “urban art” galleries that cater to presumably law abiding consumers of a safe graffiti aesthetic.

Those who rely on entrenched writers as respondents may be at pains to include a diversity of opinions given the difficulty that “outsiders” face in accessing the more prolific or radical members of an elusive criminal subculture (Adler & Adler, 1987). Whereas in popular media the focus often falls on internationally known graffiti “artists” who have “made it,” or presumably “made it out” – Keith Haring, Basquiat, Barry Mcgee, and others – in the academic literature the focus often falls all too easily on those who actively network and legally self-promote.

Finding and accessing respondents in the field has ranged from “asking art dealers and collectors for the names of ‘graffiti artists’ ” (Lachmann, 1988: p. 233) and making contact at an art opening with “‘writers’ who were organized into a marketing agency” (Rahn, 1999: p. 22), to “simply call[ing] the number” graffiti writers had written on the legal murals they had painted (Kramer, 2010a, p. 241) and approaching graffiti writers at “legal writing events” (MacDiarmid & Downing, 2012: p. 610). In his “rewriting of subcultural resistance” and ethnography of graffiti writers’ successful “career paths,” Snyder (2009: p. 22) admits that he gained access to the graffiti community, or “got in,” in part by dressing in “the latest hip hop fashions.”

While each of these pooling examples appears appropriate given the difficulty in making contact as an outsider-researcher, what is missing from the data is the perspective on the legality/illegality of graffiti belonging to those writers who are more guarded or even hostile to the notion of discussing and justifying their illicit practice. Furthermore, in addition to being more likely to advocate for legal spaces for doing graffiti “art,” the community of entrenched graffiti writers tend to be disproportionately affluent, formally educated, white, male, and as Brewer (1992) puts it, “nature,” which provides a minority of writers with the privilege of speaking on behalf of the majority. As Brewer (1992: p. 189) bluntly explains, when making contact he distinguishes between taggers and “elite writers,” or those who “tend to be older and more experienced as writers, possess more maturity for systematic interviewing tasks, and have greater awareness of traditional and alternative strategies to control illegal graffiti.”

While some graffiti writers may articulate a well-rehearsed position for the legalization or decriminalization of doing graffiti for a variety of personal reasons that range from their political standpoint to self-preservation, outsiders who do the same may be inadvertently arguing for the demise of a practice, performance, and aesthetic for which they may otherwise advocate. Mainstreaming graffiti by bringing it under the banner of legitimacy removes one of the most visibly transgressive and contestative acts from the public sphere. Such an act further relegates subversive, creative, and bottom-up uses of space to the margins, as those with identifiable “skill,” “talent,” proper motivation, and legal spatial literacy contribute to the reinforcement of socio-spatial parameters issued from the top-down.

Notes

1 While several high profile graffiti writers have faced long prison sentences for vandalism, these individuals were most often also facing other charges for weapons and drug violations and typically had prior arrest records. While I do not want to downplay the disproportionate criminalization and
incarceration of graffiti writers that has in fact occurred, I also think it would be dishonest to suggest that long jail sentences issued for vandalism alone have been the norm. In fact, in the face of moral panics, overzealous policing, and impetuous district attorneys (Kramer, 2010b), judges have been slow if not reluctant to issue harsh sentences for graffiti vandalism. As Halsey and Young (2006: p. 290) point out in their study, “an important distinction needs to be made here between crimes committed in order to write illegally, as against other crimes committed by those who happen, at certain times, to write illegally.”

2 Personal interview, Wisk, July 4, 2013.
4 In some cases, victims are seen as a major contributor to a criminal act (Wolfgang, 1957) and are believed to have contributed to their own victimization as a result of direct provocation, a failure to reasonably protect themselves, or as result of their appearance or membership in a group that could reasonably be seen as placing them in harm’s way. Criminologists refer to this as “Victim Precipitated Homicide,” which has often been used to justify the killing of taggers or to suggest that such an action was a matter of self-defense on the part of the perpetrator.
5 I borrow the term “deeply superficial” from political street artist Robbie Conal and his description of the importance placed on and extracted from outward appearances in Los Angeles.
6 Personal interview, Mear One, April 24, 2014.
7 For applicable discussions on “edgework,” or ethnographic field work among dangerous and marginal populations, the homeless, sex workers, drug dealers, graffiti writers, and gang members, see Ferrell and Hamm (1998).

References

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