Going 'All City':
The Spatial Politics of Graffiti

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Abstract:

This essay examines the spatial politics of graffiti, primarily focusing on the development of the art in New York City from the late 1960s and early 1970s onwards. Heeding Murray Forman's observation that "there has been little attention granted to the implications of hip hop's spatial logics," this work follows in the footsteps of scholarship which has incorporated a spatial analysis of graffiti, such as Tricia Rose's book *Black Noise*, by arguing space is central to the politics and subversive force of graffiti as an art form. In particular, I contend that the spatial politics of graffiti must be understood within the contexts of, and as a response to, the construction of the ghetto as a space of confinement. After a brief overview of the history of the built environment of the ghetto, I posit that graffiti resists and undermines the invisibility and confinement imposed by inner city space on individuals of color in three distinct but overlapping ways. The first is through the inscription of inner city youth identity on the very streetscapes that seek to render those identities invisible. The second is through graffiti's symbolic and literal reclaiming/destruction of the metropolitan spatial arrangement which keeps black and Hispanic residents of the ghetto impoverished and exploited. Finally, the "bombing" of trains with graffiti tags and "pieces" resists the hegemonic spatial constructions of the urban landscape by giving mobility to the inner city youth identities the ghetto is designed to confine. This essay ends with thoughts on the way graffiti forces us to rethink and reexamine our current urban spatiality and what lessons graffiti's resistance to spatial constructs provides about how to more equitably structure our society.

Keywords

graffiti, space, New York City, identity

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The statement was uttered at a neighborhood party typical of suburban Rhode Island: predominantly white and middle to upper class. The subject of New York City had come up, and an older man present at the party, who had grown up in the metro-New York area, commented on how the city has "improved" vastly over the last twenty or so years. According to him, the "broken windows" theory,[1] including the clampdown on graffiti, was largely responsible for this turnaround. This thought about the "broken windows" theory and graffiti's role in the policy was not new to me, but the way he phrased the theory and defined graffiti struck me. He said, "I'm not talking about graffiti art, which is done on canvas, but the vandalism on the trains, which is just graffiti." Just graffiti. Not art, presumably because it doesn't have the word "art" after it.

To me, this statement encapsulates the dominant view of graffiti: that it can be art just as long as it is in the right space (i.e. doesn't destroy my property). This view of graffiti is held even by those who would no doubt consider themselves "open-minded." For example, a local business owner in downtown Phoenix, Arizona who allows the walls of his store to be painted by graffiti artists stated "It's not always vandalism…in some cases it is, but in other cases, it's art work."[2] Such a conception of graffiti enforces a binary that automatically precludes any graffiti that is "vandalism" from being artwork. Behind this mutually exclusive definition of graffiti and art lies a clear valuing of property and ownership, one that causes both of the above individuals to arbitrarily and dogmatically deny the subjective and inclusive category of art to graffiti in certain spaces. The remarks therefore highlight the importance of space to the politics of graffiti, as for these individuals the destruction of private or city property is the lone determinant in removing graffiti from the realm of "art" and placing it in the category of "crime" or "blight."

This essay argues that such a view fundamentally misunderstands the nature and goal of graffiti as an art form, and seeks to shed light on the spatial logics of graffiti underlying both of the above comments. The bottom line is that white, middle-class property owners are not supposed to like graffiti. Throughout this essay, I hope to show that as a form, graffiti is an art of resistance, and that space is the central mode through which this resistance is made manifest. In doing so, I suggest the need for a radical rethinking of not only the dominant view of

graffiti, but of the current spatial arrangements which graffiti subverts. Recognizing that graffiti is designed to bother and rupture the status quo and all those invested in that order is the first step to moving beyond the reductive, binary thought that automatically criminalizes and dismisses graffiti (and its message) in spaces not acceptable to the dominant order. Further, by understanding the spatial politics behind graffiti, one can come to a fuller appreciation for the culture as an art form and build connections with the artists that can be a catalyst for rethinking social and spatial structures.

Primarily focusing on the development of the art in New York City from the 1970s onwards, this work attempts to address Murray Forman's observation that "there has been little attention granted to the implications of hip hop's spatial logics."[3] In bringing space to the forefront of graffiti, it follows in the footsteps of scholarship like Tricia Rose's *Black Noise* (1994), which Forman himself cites as "introducing a spatial analysis" which stresses "the importance of the 'post-industrial city' as the central urban influence"[4] on hip-hop. Rose's work situates all four of hip-hop's cultural forms (DJing, rap, break dancing, and graffiti)[5] within the contexts of inner-city space and shows in particular how residents of the ghetto face "social isolation, economic fragility, truncated communication media, and shrinking social service organizations."[6] She astutely notes that "hip hop emerges from the deindustrialization meltdown where social alienation, prophetic imagination, and yearning intersect" and in particular observes that "graffiti artists spray painted murals and (name) 'tags' on trains, trucks, and playgrounds, claiming territories and inscribing their otherwise contained identities on public property."[7] However, while these insights privilege space in their analysis, the role of containment to which Rose alludes here must be expanded upon and moved to the fore in thinking critically about graffiti. Indeed, in addition to positing space as the primary apparatus of graffiti's subversive force, I further contend that the spatial politics of graffiti must be understood within the contexts of, and as a direct response to, the construction of the ghetto as a space of confinement for black and brown youth.[8]

In making this claim, I wish to be clear that I am not advancing any essentialist argument that reads the black and brown inner city populations as a cultural monolith, as has so often been done in sociological scholarship.[9] Rather, I mark a key step in critical engagement in recognizing that, like any other art form or cultural practice, graffiti develops from specific

historical contexts and that the meaning and intention brought to it by artists differs both within racial boundaries and across racial boundaries. Not all black and brown youth who write do so with a consciousness about urban spatial relations. Nonetheless, graffiti as an art form and practice has material spatial implications that have developed out of specific historical contexts and can be analyzed concretely. Additionally, although graffiti was the first of the four hip-hop forms to become popular with white youths in significant numbers, this doesn't change the fact that it was "first practiced largely by inner-city youths of color,"[10] nor does it alter the social and spatial worldview that sits at its core. Art historian—and arguably the foremost graffiti historian—Jack Stewart, situates graffiti as one of "the unique and remarkable events that were unfolding in that volatile segment of the New York population that had been a social problem for over twenty years: the ghetto youths."[11] Understanding graffiti as a black and brown cultural formation does not deny the important contributions and developments to the art made by the many white youths who wrote. However, to deny that graffiti is rooted in black and Hispanic spaces and was first largely practiced by youths of colour is at best historically inaccurate, and at worst tantamount to cultural imperialism.[12] Instead (and this is one of the prime and most vital contentions of this paper), graffiti must be read with a nuanced understanding of the historical and spatial contexts from which it arose: the black and brown ghetto of the post-industrial city.

That graffiti is at its core concerned with the confinement of the ghetto is demonstrated in the art's spatial means and modes of resisting and undermining that confinement, which it accomplishes in three distinct, but overlapping ways. The first is through the inscription of inner-city youth identity on the very streetscapes that seek to render those identities invisible. The second is through graffiti's symbolic and literal reclaiming/destruction of space and spatial codes which keep black and Hispanic residents of the ghetto impoverished and exploited. Finally, the "bombing" of trains with graffiti tags and "pieces" resists the hegemonic spatial constructions of the urban landscape by giving mobility to the inner city-youth identities the ghetto is designed to confine.

To properly explore and contextualize graffiti's spatial politics, the development of the ghetto as a space of containment and the forces which organize space along racial lines must be recounted. The New York City ghetto in which graffiti finds its roots during the late 1960s and early 1970s

differs markedly from the ghetto of prior decades. Two intertwined social-historical processes drove this change: suburbanization and deindustrialization. In the post-war years, white flight from cities across the nation occurred at remarkable rates, as the perceived "disorder" of the urban environment was abandoned for the control and homogeneity of racially exclusive suburban towns and districts. This spatial reconfiguration left inner cities populated predominantly by people of colour and of lower income, who were prevented from accessing and living in suburban spaces by racially established financial disadvantages, discriminatory real estate practices and white violence. Further, capital also followed a similar trajectory to that of white flight as technological advancements, government subsidies and improvement of roads and highways, and the lure of suburban town-government tax incentives for businesses encouraged the relocation of businesses (and thus jobs) to suburban space. This mobility of capital also occurred on a transnational scale, as the globalization of corporations shifted many manufacturing jobs to third world countries that had fewer restrictions on labour and thus offered greater opportunities for profit.

These two socio-spatial shifts disproportionately affected inner-city residents of colour, drastically increasing the unemployment rates of black and Hispanic communities as well as turning once stable, blue-collar, working-class neighborhoods into economically derelict and poverty-stricken areas as high-wage manufacturing jobs disappeared. Across the country, city economies saw a growth in low-wage, unskilled service-sector jobs that failed to provide a livable income, while at the same time government services and jobs were also cut back, increasing the economic and social abandonment of ghetto populations.[13]

New York City was no exception to such changes. The South Bronx alone "lost 600,000 manufacturing jobs" and "by the mid-seventies, average per capita income [of the South Bronx] dropped to $2,430, just half of the New York City average and 40 percent of the nationwide average. The official youth unemployment rate hit 60 percent."[14] As John Mollenkopf states, "during the 1970s…New York led other old, industrial metropolitan areas into population and employment decline."[15] This drastic reduction in jobs and income was coupled with "a housing crisis that continued well into the 1980s"[16] and continued to concentrate and reconcentrate poor racial minorities. In the years 1978 to 1986 "30 percent of New York's Hispanic households (40 percent for Puerto Ricans) and 25

percent of black households lived at or below the poverty line. Since this period, low-income housing has continued to disappear and blacks and Hispanics are still much more likely to live in overcrowded, dilapidated, and seriously undermaintained spaces."[17] The shrinking of not only economic opportunity, but also the very spaces available for impoverished inner-city residents colluded to create the ghetto as a space of containment. The decline of both social and spatial mobility for people of color goes hand in hand. As Massey and Denton point out,

> extensive research demonstrates that blacks face strong barriers to spatial assimilation within American society. Compared with other minority groups, they are markedly less able to convert their socioeconomic attainments into residential contact with whites, and because of this fact they are unable to gain access to crucial resources and benefits that are distributed through housing markets.[18]

The construction of urban space along racial lines thus not only establishes segregation but perpetuates it. In an economically coercive cycle, ghetto spaces are hemmed in and isolated from the rest of mainstream society.

For example, Massey and Denton discuss the work of Sophie Pedder, who found that "poor blacks had extremely narrow geographic horizons. Many of her informants, who lived on Chicago's South Side, had never been into the Loop (the city's center), and a large number had never left the immediate confines of their neighborhood."[19] Both physically and psychologically, "residents of hypersegregated neighborhoods necessarily live within a very circumscribed and limited social world."[20] Excluded from the economic power base, ghetto residents become confined to a site which "serves the *negative economic function of storage of a surplus population* devoid of market utility."[21] The corollary to this isolation and containment is the invisibility of inner-city minorities' identities, voices, and very bodies, as segregation wipes them from the national consciousness through spatial and social exclusion.

Resisting this oppressive socio-spatial arrangement, graffiti in turn operates through space. This resistance, this creation of counter-spaces, gives graffiti its true artistic and emotional force. As graffiti writer LADY PINK says, works of graffiti "in galleries cease to be graffiti because they have been removed from the cultural context that gives graffiti the reason for being, a voice of the ghetto."[22] Here LADY PINK explicitly

reveals the connections between graffiti and space, and the way in which graffiti uses the built environment of the city to accomplish and convey its artistic politics. If not performed on the public and private landscape, graffiti loses its meaning; its meaning is in fact anchored to spatial contexts. LADY PINK's statement also shows the function of graffiti as means to give "voice" to the ghetto. For her, graffiti's spatial presence lifts the conceptual ghetto and the identities of its inhabitants from their invisibility, reaffirming the existence of the "silenced" ghetto residents by making their voices physical and concrete on the urban landscape.

This function of creating visibility lies at the heart of graffiti from its very beginnings. Jeff Chang cites graffiti as originally developing in Philadelphia in the mid-1960s, before it jumped to New York City at the end of the decade, where it exploded in popularity in 1971 due to a *New York Times* article on the writer TAKI 183, who had achieved notoriety by placing his "tag" (simply the writing of TAKI 183) all over the five boroughs.[23] While TAKI 183 is credited with popularizing the art form, a Puerto Rican youth named JULIO 204 is most often credited within the popular lexicon of writers themselves as the first graffiti artist to begin tagging in New York. As one unnamed graffiti artist in the film *Style Wars* states, "JULIO 204 started before [TAKI 183], but he [TAKI 183] was the one that made it famous."[24] On the other hand, graffiti scholar Joe Austin, although noting JULIO 204's reputation in popular histories of the art, cites "a Puerto Rican boy, Johnny," as the first individual in the city to tag his name, JOHNNY OF 93, back in 1967.[25] Although the answer to who first wrote their tag in New York is clearly a murky and disputed one, it is significant that in each case, these early artists were not only tagging their self-fashioned nicknames on public facades, but also the spaces they inhabited, as TAKI and JULIO hailed from 183rd street and 204th street, respectively, and JOHNNY OF 93 was quite explicit about living on 93rd street in Spanish Harlem. This inclusion of one's residency, or neighborhood signifier, was ubiquitous. Writers that followed TAKI 183 include "LEE 163d!...CLIFF 159, JUNIOR 161, CAY 161, CHE 159, and BARBARA and EVA 62,"[26] all proudly displaying not only a chosen moniker for their graffiti identity, but also the space from which they came. In this way, graffiti not only gives "voice" to ghetto individuals, but also to invisible ghetto spaces themselves.

These confined and excluded spaces are symbolically and conceptually remapped onto the urban terrain, breaking

from their confinement through tagging all over the city. The need for graffiti writers to make visible not only their individual identities, but also their lived spaces, demonstrates the linkages between spatial confinement, social mobility and identity. In order for the writer's identity to escape from the invisibility of social exclusion, the space the writer occupies must also be transformed, as it is essential in constituting that identity. Graffiti artists thus point to the fact that "space is permeated with social relations; it is not only supported by social relations, but it also is producing and produced by social relations."[27] In creating counter-spaces offering a new set of socio-spatial relations, graffiti resists and disrupts the hegemonic organization of space which entrenches the ghetto's function of containment. To Joe Austin's point that by "extending the circulation of the name beyond the local arena of face-to-face social connections in the streets, [graffiti writers] scattered the renamed self throughout the shared public spaces of the anonymous city,"[28] making "recognition throughout New York City…a possibility for the sons and daughters of adults whose names were rarely mentioned outside the block where they lived"[29] must be added that graffiti served as a means of securing recognition for the block itself, broadcasting the artist's mutually constitutive, place-based identity.

As graffiti developed through the years, tags acquired new, bold styles, and more elaborate "pieces" (short for masterpieces) became widespread. Through all these new styles, graffiti conceptually remaps urban space through a physical inscription of identity on the very landscape designed to pen in inner-city residents. It offers "aggressive public displays of counter-presence and voice," with the goal "to inscribe one's identity on an environment that seemed Teflon resistant to its young people of color; an environment that made legitimate avenues for material and social participation inaccessible."[30] And while graffiti as a practice does not always explicitly represent this spatial politics, nonetheless this critique of space lies at the conceptual heart of the form. For minority youth to simultaneously create and build on their identity, and see that identity rooted in space, affirms and makes real the imaginative self. Graffiti therefore turns the environment that before spoke only to ghetto youth's disposability and marginalization into the entity that broadcasts their existence, agency and self-defined identity. As writer SHY 147 says, graffiti is the way to "paint my ghetto name…for my people of the state of NYC to see and wonder on the art of the ghettos and backstreets of our time."[31]

For SHY 147, graffiti injects his "ghetto name," and the art that helps define that name, into the public consciousness, doing so over and through an urban terrain that normally does the opposite.

Closely tied to graffiti's resistance of the ghetto's exclusion and invisibility through inscription of self-identity onto the landscape is graffiti's politics of reclaiming and destroying space and spatial customs. Writing and painting graffiti on the urban environment not only undermines the ownership of space that contributes to inner-city youth's oppression but also conversely remarks those spaces as "belonging" to inner-city youth. This includes the battle over "public" space and who is and isn't represented in those spaces. In "violat[ing] one of the central pillars of our economic system by rejecting the hegemonic codes behind the ownership and respect for private property,"[32] graffiti pushes for a different vision of space and spatial control. It actively resists the spatial ideologies upholding the status quo by violating them, at once destroying property and symbolically claiming it for the dispossessed. Graffiti also contests the representation and ownership of "public" space, which is really property owned by the state, from whose framework those confined in the ghetto are excluded. As Adilifu Nama observes, before the crackdown on graffiti came in the mid to late Eighties, the youth of the post-industrial city "were concerned with audaciously claiming public space, not with freedom songs, picket signs, and closed fists aimed toward the sky but with boom boxes, cardboard dance floors, and colossal graffiti murals scrawled across public facades."[33] Although the larger graffiti "pieces" on subway cars are increasingly rare, graffiti works on different surfaces accomplish the same effect, reclaiming public space by rooting minority identity and expression of selfhood to those spaces. When graffiti advocate Hugo Martinez states "'graffiti writing is a way of gaining status in a society where to own property is to have identity,'"[34] he points to the symbolic understanding of graffiti as claiming space and marking ownership. Graffiti's use of space designated as "off-limits" fundamentally appropriates that space, and allows writers to "continuously acquire new space by labeling it with their name."[35]

In two ways, this act serves as a direct response to a spatial order that contains black and brown bodies in the boundaries of the ghetto. Firstly, it recognizes ghetto space as not owned by the people of colour living there and as a component of the spatial system of wealth contributing to the

impoverishment of minority residents, one that thus needs to be reclaimed itself. Charlie Ahearn, who directed the hip-hop movie *Wild Style*, speaks to this awareness in graffiti when he talks about a photograph he took of "an army recruitment billboard on a Bronx street corner hit with a graffiti piece by Blade, like a dignified 'fuck you' to the government's only visible option offered to people hustling in the projects."[36] Rather than an invasion into ghetto space, the army billboard in fact represents the way in which the ghetto restricts and abandons those living there, leaving them only with a choice between scrambling to make a living in the extra-legal markets of the streets or entering into the also dangerous and similarly controlled space of the military. BLADE's piece not only acts as a political critique, as Ahearn points out, but also actually remakes and reuses the space of the billboard, transforming it into the Bronx inhabitants' possession and spatial agent. It thus resists the mutually constitutive social and spatial exclusion inherent in the advertisement by transferring the control, and altering the narrative, of that space.

The second way this destruction of private property/appropriation of space pushes back against the ghetto's function of control and confinement is by remapping of territory outside of impoverished neighborhoods. Critic and author Greg Tate's characterization of graffiti as "'reverse colonization'"[37] is helpful in illuminating this aspect of spatial opposition. With the urban spatial arrangement controlled and dictated by capital and the white-owned state, and with minorities in contained zones of exploitation, colonization works as an apt metaphor for the standing order. By destroying and asserting ownership of spaces outside ghetto confines, Graffiti inverts this hierarchical control of space, positing black and brown youth as the aggressors, fighting to conquer city terrain previously denied to them.

Graffiti on the New York City subway exemplifies this "reverse colonization." As graffiti writer Lee Quinones explains, "'subways are corporate America's way of getting its people to work. It's used as an object of transporting corporate clones. And the trains were clones themselves, they were all supposed to be silver blue, a form of imperialism and control, and we took that and completely changed it.'"[38] According to Quinones, the train operates as a vital component of the larger socio-spatial order of "imperialism," which graffiti subverts and alters by disrupting the uniformity and homogeneity of the subway system, as well as by marking it as a space "belonging" to the

black and brown poor. As Jeff Chang states, "graffiti writers had claimed a modern symbol of efficiency and progress and made it into a moving violation,"[39] turning a space not only symbolically representative of, but also actively contributing to their oppression into a form of empowerment and resistance.

Further showing the discursive connotations of graffiti as "reverse colonialism," the *New York Magazine*, in presenting "Taki Awards" in its March 26th, 1973 issue to various graffiti artists, described "the emergence of grand design pieces a 'grand graffiti conquest of the subways.'"[40] The use of the word "conquest" speaks to the spatial politics of occupation and possession behind graffiti, as well as further delineating the art as a contest over space in the public consciousness. Linked to the overturning of black and brown individuals' invisibility, this conquest and claiming of space upsets the place-based identities of white and middle-upper class individuals founded on a sense of control over "public" and private space. Indeed, it is graffiti's politics of ownership that most clearly reveal the political and economic role of identity in American society, as well as the fact that these identities not only inform, but are informed by space. Access, control, and ownership of space are fundamental to power in society, and graffiti, with the confinement of the ghetto as its basic lens, directly resists the current, racially organized, spatial arrangement and its attendant inequalities.

The topic of the New York City subway system serves as a good transition to my final point concerning graffiti's spatial logics. As a symbol of mobility, the subway in many ways stands as the antithesis to the containment and confinement of black life in the ghetto. As such, the "bombing" of trains with graffiti tags and "pieces" resists the hegemonic spatial constructions of the urban landscape by giving mobility to the inner-city youth identities the ghetto is designed to confine. Graffiti on the subway system achieves this mobility both symbolically in the spatial imaginary and also physically, as the trains daily traverse the entire city. Concerning graffiti on the subway, Rose writes that "out of a broader discursive climate in which the perspectives and experiences of younger Hispanic, Afro-Caribbeans and African-American had been provided little social space, hip hop developed as part of a cross-cultural communication network. Trains carried graffiti tags through the five boroughs,"[41] underscoring the physical movement trains gave to graffiti across city space. This aspect of constant movement granted to "pieces" and tags on trains frees the artists' identity conceptually from their corporeal restriction to

local neighborhoods and projects, not only responding to their "little social space" as Rose notes, but also to their literal "little lived space."

The conceptual and imaginary spatial freedom subway graffiti gives to the artist's identity through their tags and "body" of work sits in line with the African-American historical trope of mobility as freedom. In particular, "the railroad…[has long been] a symbol of freedom in the African-American oral tradition,"[42] especially in the Blues. As Hazel Carby states, in Blues songs "the train…symbolised freedom and mobility,"[43] highlighting the basic connection between the ability to move as a freedom itself and mobility as allowing escape from oppression. I contend that graffiti on subway systems in the post-industrial city is the updated version of the Blues' symbol of the train as "freedom and mobility." For example, that inner-city black and brown youth "realized that the pride they felt in seeing their name up in the neighborhood could expand a hundredfold if it traveled beyond the narrow confines of the block,"[44] illustrates that mobility across city space, the act of transcending the "confines of the block," is the agent increasing the writer's "pride" (positive sense of self). In this way, graffiti on the subway acts as a response to the psychological effects of confinement in ghetto spaces, pushing back against the emotional strain of containment by opening up representational counter-spaces that give agency to urban minorities creating their self-identity.

Testifying to the importance of the mobility as freedom trope that runs through graffiti is the designation of "All City" within the subculture. As graffiti artist SKEME explains, "it's a matter of getting a tag on each line, and each division…it's called going 'All City.' People see your tags in Queens, Uptown, Downtown, all over."[45] A primary goal for writers, "going 'All City'" and successfully tagging a subway car from each line of the MTA system spreads one's graffiti identity throughout the entire five boroughs of New York City, as SKEME stresses. And it is exactly this spatial omnipresence which makes "going 'All City'" a noteworthy and laudatory achievement. Among dominant middle and upper-class understandings where freedom to traverse space is taken as a given, this accomplishment may seem trivial. However, for youths of colour trapped in impoverished neighborhoods the mobility symbolized through one's tag on subway cars carries profound weight. Indeed, graffiti on the subway embodies Jay-Z's line "lock my body, can't trap my mind."

The mobility of one's graffiti work supports self-affirmation, as SKEME makes abundantly clear, declaring "it's not a matter of so [people] know who I am…it's a matter of 'bombing,' knowing that I can do it…every time I get in a train, almost every day I see my name, I say yeah, you know it, I was there, I bombed it…it's for me, it's not for nobody else to see, I don't care about nobody else seeing it, or the fact if they can read it or not. It's for me and other graffiti writers, that we can read it. All these other people who don't write, they're excluded, I don't care about them, you know. They don't matter. It's for us."[46] For SKEME, graffiti operates as a means of not only affirmation of self through marking his identity on the physical cityscape ("I bombed it"), but also as a way to reaffirm that he can and has broken down the spatial barriers surrounding his lived space ("I was there"). By circulating their creations throughout New York via the MTA, black and Hispanic graffiti writers exceed their "narrow geographic horizons" and resist the negative impacts of spatial confinement on identity-formation and self-worth. And although the graffiti on the subway system in New York City has been largely reduced through the MTA's constant anti-graffiti campaigns, graffiti continues to appear and thrive on other surfaces (for example, trucks continue to constitute prime targets for writers trying to circulate their name throughout the urban streets), and graffiti remains a vibrant, visible and persistent culture in urban spaces.

Recognizing that resistance to current urban spatial arrangements lies at the core of graffiti's politics and messages is vital to comprehending the art's full meaning. Even though graffiti is not necessarily practiced by those confined to poor, inner-city areas, approaching the form of graffiti with awareness of its critiques and alternate views of how we as Americans construct and order city space can help us move beyond dismissive mindsets that shut down discourse and close off avenues towards social change and equality. Accepting that yes, if you own property and someone paints graffiti on it without your permission, you will probably be upset, is the first step towards this more informed approach. The next step is not letting personal anger (or, far more difficult, investment in the standing order) cloud a critical and broader reading of graffiti as a form of artistic commentary and what it tells us about power relations in society at large. Understanding that graffiti stems from a context and position of powerlessness inflicted on minorities trapped in the cages of the ghettoes in New York City and around the nation, and acknowledging the messages it conveys about the

links between spatial confinement and social exclusion, must be prioritized. And this means not seeing graffiti as an indicator of urban "blight," or as a symptom of a "culture of poverty." As scholar Eddie S. Glaude Jr. writes, "[African American] lives are often reduced to sociology…the difficulties of the city, the devastation of drug economy, and so on. Every gesture, artistic or otherwise, becomes a window to that reality, and we become flat, one-dimensional characters in a sordid tale about social misery. What gets lost in all of this is the creative role *we* play in living our lives and in creating art that makes our lives, if just for a moment, enjoyable. Instead, we are reduced to a ghastly environment represented by our very presence in the world."[47] We cannot fall into this schema with graffiti. It must be conjointly recognized as a work of agency and beautiful self-creation, as well as a form of resistance to spatial constructs providing lessons about how to more equitably structure our society.

Through its resistance, graffiti lifts from the fringe knowledge of how the spatiality of the American metropolis functions to keep bodies of colour contained within certain spaces and excluded from the political economy, and places it directly on the cityscape for all to confront. The underlying spatial politics of graffiti call for a reorganization of space and the elimination of the socio-spatial forces which corral poor minorities in the ghettoes of our cities. They point to the need for spaces which are more representational of the urban population at large, not only symbolically, but concretely in terms of control. The links between place-based identity and racial and class exclusion must destroyed, so that "public" property can indeed be public. The connection between segregation and social and financial wealth that graffiti unveils has to be interrogated further, until the commonly held misperception that all Americans are free to move across the space of this country as they please becomes truth. And, perhaps most importantly, graffiti teaches that, despite its sometimes cryptic nature and aura of stealth, we must try to alter our lens on urban life and city space to understand from where this voice of the ghetto emanates.

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Endnotes

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[1] The "Broken Windows" Theory is an outgrowth of New York City Mayor Rudi Giuliani and Police Commissioner William J. Bratton's *Police Strategy No. 5*, which emphasized "reclaiming the public spaces of New York" and claimed that "signs of disorder" in the urban environment were directly responsible for increased crime. It called for a strict zero-tolerance policy to combat any deterioration in the city environment, including graffiti writing. See Neil Smith, "Which New Urbanism? The Revanchist '90s," *Perspecta*, 30 (Nov. 1999), 98-105.

[2] "Graffiti brightens Phoenix residents' spirits, walls," *Arizona State Press*, October 27, 2011.
http://www.statepress.com/2011/10/27/graffiti-brightens-phoenix-residents%E2%80%99-spirits-walls

[3] Murray Forman, "'Represent': Race, Space, and Place in Rap Music," in *That's the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* 2nd ed., Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal eds., Routledge: New York, 2004, 248.

[4] Ibid, 248.

[5] The categorization of graffiti as one of the cultural forms of hip-hop merits elaboration. Graffiti, in its most broad definition, has existed for thousands of years. It "appeared all over the ancient world…from Rome to the Egyptian desert to the Syrian Euphrates." (J.A. Baird and Claire Taylor, "Preface," in *Ancient Graffiti in Context*, edited by J.A. Baird and Claire Taylor, New York: Routledge, 2011, xv) For an excellent summary of graffiti's long history, see chapters 2-4 in Jack Stewart, "Subway Graffiti: An Aesthetic Study of Graffiti on the Subway System of New

York City, 1970-1978," Ph.D. Diss., New York University, 1989, 15-147. For the purposes of this paper, I use the term "graffiti" to refer to the tagging and stylized writing that developed in New York and has proliferated throughout the nation's urban centers since the late 1960s and early 1970s. This is in keeping with the common understanding of the term "graffiti" in today's society, as is demonstrated by the anecdote that opens this paper and by the remarks of the Phoenix shop owner above. My characterization of graffiti as a part of "hip-hop" is also in keeping with much of the scholarship written on both graffiti and hip-hop at large. This definition, however, is not uniformly adopted in writing on graffiti, nor among graffiti artists themselves. I am aware of the arguments made by many graffiti scholars and artists that graffiti is an autonomous cultural formation, one not only independent of hip hop, but also one that "predates hip-hop." (Gregory J. Snyder, *Graffiti Lives: Beyond the Tag in New York's Urban Underground*, New York University Press: New York, 2009, 29) I find this argument unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. First of all, it confuses and conflates hip-hop with rapping and DJ-ing. Graffiti cannot predate hip-hop if it *is* hip-hop. Hip-hop is and always has been an umbrella term that was applied retroactively to the cultural developments occurring in the inner-cities during the 1970s and 80s, and is not itself an organically and self-determined identifier. And while I sympathize with and can appreciate the argument that due to "the lack of a common hip-hop formation before the early to mid-1980s…writing has more than a decade of history before rap broke onto the popular music scene, and their later development, while connected, is by no means determining," (Joe Austin, *Taking the Train: How Graffiti Art Became an Urban Crisis in New York City*, Columbia University Press: New York, 2001, 206), I find the argument for "a hip-hop formation, of which writing might be seen as the initial manifestation," (ibid, 204) far more convincing. Here I follow scholarship that understands that "street, 'hip hop' or subcultural graffiti…has evolved synergistically with hip hop's dance and music cultures," (Nancy Macdonald, *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity and Identity in London and New York*, Palgrave: New York, 2001) and accounts for "the connective lines of artistic collaboration" (Murray Forman, "'Hip-Hop Ya Don't Stop': Hip-Hop History and Historiography," in *That's the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* 2nd ed., Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal eds., Routledge: New York, 2004, 10) that unite hip-hop as a practice.

Further, I agree with Tricia Rose's insight that "stylistic continuities between breaking, graffiti style, rapping and musical construction seem to center around three concepts: *flow, layering,* and *ruptures in line,*" (Rose, 34. Emphasis in the original), not to mention the "in-built element of competition" (Forman, "'Represent': Race, Space, and Place in Rap Music," 250) that is common to all four forms. Conceptually, locating graffiti within hip-hop best matches the art form's historical contexts, allowing us to see that, as none other than graffiti expert Jack Stewart writes, "subway graffiti is the written language, rapping is the spoken language, and break dancing is the body language of these [ghetto] youths." (Stewart, 500)

[6] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*, Wesleyan University Press: Middletown, 1994, 33-34.

[7] Ibid, 21-22.

[8] I use the term "ghetto" in this essay to refer the socio-spatial occurrence that Loic J.D. Wacquant and William Julius Wilson identify as the "hyperghetto" in their article "The Cost of Racial and Class Exclusion in the Inner City," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 501, (Jan., 1989), 8-25. The "hyperghetto" is characterized by exclusively low-income, minority residents, and is distinct from the organization of the racially exclusive, but class-inclusive "ghetto" that came before it. However, in common understanding this distinction is not generally known, so I continue to use the descriptor "ghetto" to match with the blanket understanding of the phrase today. My inherent claim here that graffiti is a black and Latino form is addressed and substantiated later in this paper, where I also openly acknowledge that many white youths have practiced graffiti. My thesis about space and graffiti relies on a spatial analysis that understands and accounts for space as *racially informed*. This differs from an analysis such as Ilse Scheepers' "Graffiti and Urban Space," which does not take into account the fact that space is racialized. For example, Scheepers states "so if graffiti writers can be from any social class, and are not more heavily represented in one race or another, what is the unifying factor that draws this subculture together? It is a factor which has been neglected in the majority of studies in graffiti, and indeed, is only finding currency within historical and sociological practices fairly recently. It is the forgotten factor of space." (Ilse Scheepers, "Graffiti and Urban Space," Honours thesis, University of Sydney, 2004) Such a framework for examining graffiti obscures what I argue are the true black and Hispanic

roots of graffiti, as well as the fact that space is permeated with racial meaning and is organized along racial lines. Similarly, my paper adopts a different spatial focus from the work of Jeff Ferrell, who, while correctly pointing to graffiti's direct role in the contest over public space being waged between city officials/capital and marginalized populations, is less concerned with the formative moments of graffiti. See Jeff Ferrell, *Tearing Down the Streets: Adventures in Urban Anarchy*, New York: Palgrave, 2001. Furthermore, where Ferrell hones in on the exclusion and displacement of marginal populations from public space, my paper, while also concerned with this spatial practice, understands this exclusion as part of the broader process of racial segregation/containment inherent to ghettoization and, as stated above, places this spatial containment at the heart of early graffiti culture.

[9] Robin D.G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*, Beacon Press: Boston, 1997, 15-43.

[10] Chang, 119.

[11] Stewart, 495.

[12] Even though, as scholar Joe Austin notes, graffiti drew from the (largely white) hippie and psychedelic movements in addition to African and Latino influences, (Austin 44-45) and "although the police frequently reported that writers were a broad-based population of all classes and ethnicities, those observers closer to the community describe it as being comprised mostly of African Americans and Latinos from poor or working-class families…This changed over the course of the decade (the 1970s) as more whites and youths from well-to-do families became involved; however, African Americans and Latinos continued to be the largest presence in writing throughout the decade." (Austin, 58) This remains the most crucial point. Furthermore, to claim that graffiti as a practice is not structured by race, or that it was not originally transformed into its modern aesthetical style by black and brown youths is to obscure the very testaments of so many artists who clearly articulate graffiti as a practice serving and embodying the visions of the racialized, inner city poor. For further evidence of graffiti's black and brown roots, see "Chapter 1: A Tale of Two Cities" in Austin, *Taking the Train*, 9-37, and Juan Flores, "Puerto Rican And Proud, Boyee!: Rap, Roots and Amnesia," in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture*, eds. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose, Routledge: New York, 1994, 89-98, 89-93.

[13] See Loic J.D. Wacquant and William Julius Wilson, "The Cost of Racial and Class Exclusion in the Inner City," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 501, (Jan., 1989), 8-25. Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey, 1996, 125-152. Robin D.G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!*, Beacon Press: Boston, 1997, 46-47. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, The New Press: New York, 2010, 50. Rose, *Black Noise*, 27-30. For an excellent history on the construction of the ghetto since the turn of the century, as well as an analysis of deindustrialization and suburbanization, see Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993.

[14] Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, St. Martin's Press: New York, 2005, 13.

[15] Quoted in Rose, 28.

[16] Rose, 28.

[17] Ibid, 28.

[18] Massey and Denton, 151.

[19] Ibid, 161.

[20] Ibid, 161.

[21] Loic Wacquant, "Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh" *Punishment & Society* Vol. 3(1), 2001, 103. Emphasis in the original.

[22] Kelley, 63.

[23] Chang, 74.

[24] *Style Wars,* Tony Silver, director. Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant, producers. 1983. Graffiti expert Jack Stewart also corroborates this view. See Stewart, 163-166.

[25] Austin, 42.

[26] Chang, 74. Even a cursory glance at any photo-documentary of graffiti from the 1970s onwards shows that this practice of including one's street in their chosen graffiti name was pervasive. See especially Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, *Subway Art*, London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd, 1984. Furthermore, for an extensive list of early graffiti monikers featuring this inclusion of one's street/address see Stewart, 179, 227.

[27] Henri Lefebvre, "Space: Social Product and Use Value." *Critical Sociology: European Perspectives*, New York: Irvington Publishers, Inc., 1979, 286.

[28] Austin, 47.

[29] Ibid, 47.

[30] Rose, 59-60.

[31] Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, *Subway Art*, London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd, 1984, 39.

[32] C. Noble, "City Space: A Semiotic and Visual Exploration of Graffiti and Public Space in Vancouver," http://www.graffiti.org/faq/noble_semiotic_warfare2004.html, 2004.

[33] Adilifu Nama, "It Was Signified: The Genesis," in *Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas's Illmatic*, eds. Michael Eric Dyson and Sohail Daulatzai, New York: Basic *Civitas* Books, 2010, 26.

[34] Quoted in Chang, 118.

[35] Stewart, 153.

[36] Charlie Ahearn, "'Genesis': In the Hall of Mirrors," in *Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas's Illmatic*, eds. Michael Eric Dyson and Sohail Daulatzai, New York: Basic *Civitas* Books, 2010, 263.

[37] Quoted in Chang, 74.

[38] Quoted in ibid, 122.

[39] Ibid, 122.

[40] Craig Castleman, *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York*, The MIT Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1982, 141.

[41] Rose, 60.

[42] Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Who Set You Flowin': The African-American Migration Narrative*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, 19.

[43] Hazel Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," *Radical America* 20, No. 4, 1987, 9-24, 15. Griffin references Carby's article as well, observing that Carby states the train was a traditionally male symbol of freedom in the Blues, and most often represented for women "a mournful signal of imminent desertion and future loneliness" (Carby 15). However, she does not discuss Carby's main point that many women Blues singers also actively "reclaimed" (Carby 15) the train as a symbol of mobility and freedom.

[44] Cooper and Chalfant, 14.

[45] *Style Wars*, 1983.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Eddie S. Glaude Jr., "'Represent,' Queensbridge, and the Art of Living," in *Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas's Illmatic*, eds.

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