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The crucial ‘where’ of graffiti: a geographical analysis of reactions to graffiti in New York

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Abstract. This paper is an examination of the reactions to graffiti in New York during the early 1970s. It is argued that the reactions of the media and government present a discourse of disorder, a discourse in which graffiti is presented as a symptom of disorder and thus a threat to the image of New York City and civilization itself. Simultaneously the art establishment reacts to graffiti by (dis)placing it in Manhattan galleries and describing it as creative, ‘primitive’, and valuable. These discourses play an important role in the formation and maintenance of the meaning of a place. Simultaneously the place—New York, the subway, the gallery—plays a role in affecting the nature of the discourses and judgements of the value of graffiti. This case study is framed in the context of a wider discussion of the relation between place and ideology in which it is suggested that each plays a role in structuring the other.

In this paper I develop a perspective concerning the way reactions to transgressions are implicated in the creation and reproduction of places. In addition, I argue that moral judgments of particular actions are heavily influenced by assumed, common-sense, taken-for-granted, ‘natural’ attributes of place. To illustrate my argument I will discuss reactions to graffiti in New York in the early part of the 1970s. I argue that the words used by the media and the ‘authorities’ to describe graffiti represent a discourse of disorder—a set of descriptive terms which imply that graffiti is out of place and suggest how it might be put back in place. Simultaneously the art establishment redescribes graffiti as art, as the product of the inspired, unfettered creative mind. One reaction calls graffiti out of place whereas the other puts it in its place. Before discussing graffiti, though, I would like to make some general points.

Place and ideology

The central concern of this paper is how claims related to space and place are used to structure an ideological landscape—how ideas about what is right, just, and appropriate are transmitted through space and place. Something may be appropriate here but not there (Therborn, 1980).

A major theme in geography is the creation of places, the construction of subjective meaning in an objective material spatial context. Place, however, cannot be successfully reduced to an objective location or a subjective ‘sense of place’; place exists in a state of ‘betweenness’ (Enrikin, 1991; see also Agnew, 1987; Sack, 1988). Daniels (1990) makes a similar point when he refers to the ‘duplicity of landscape’. Landscape (like place) is duplicitous because it occupies a kind of liminal zone between material fact and pure ideology and cannot be reduced to either.

Cultural geography, most notably, in its superorganic form (Duncan, 1980) has looked at the creation of place from the inside out, concentrating on the way in which places are constructed, moral worlds created, and edifices established (Wagner and Mikesell, 1963; Zelinsky, 1973). Recent authors have noted the multiplicity and indeterminacy of the meaning of place (Duncan and Duncan, 1988; Jackson, 1989). The meaning of place has been replaced with the ‘meanings’ of place, cultural geography has been replaced by ‘culture’s geographies’ (Gregory and Ley, 1988).
Culture is no longer assumed to be unitary, but multiplicitous and contested; thus the terms conflict, struggle, and resistance have become commonplace (Cosgrove and Jackson, 1987; Daniels, 1990; Jackson, 1989; Pred, 1990). As places are not 'natural' but historical products, conflict over the meaning of a place is inherently ideological insofar as a dominant meaning will get to define what counts as appropriate and inappropriate behavior in that place.

The effect of spatial structures on what is deemed appropriate is dealt with in some depth by Bourdieu (1977) in his study of the Kabyle of Algeria. He shows how certain orderings of space provide a structure for experience and help to tell us who we are in society. He introduces the concept of doxa, a structure of commonsense which directs our everyday actions. This structure of commonsense, he argues, is particularly effective because it remains unquestioned, assumed, apparently natural. Space and time play key roles in structuring the realm of doxa. Clearly, different groups of people have different ideas about what is and is not appropriate and these different ideas get translated into different moral geographies. It is when different spatial ideologies come into conflict that they are taken out of the role of 'commonsense' and stated as 'the right way' — the 'orthodoxy'. Transgressive acts (such as graffiti) which upset people's expectations prompt reactions which reveal that which was considered natural and commonsense. It is at this point, when different cultural values clash, that normative geographies get defined, maintained, and reproduced by those with the power to do so. But just as dominated groups are not a homogeneous and unified body, the dominant are multiplicitous — different parts of the establishment have different reactions to graffiti.

In the first section of my study I briefly introduce some different perspectives on graffiti and the issue of graffiti in New York City. Then I describe reactions to graffiti in New York between 1970 and 1975, showing how graffiti(1) is criticized in terms which signify an inappropriateness of place (dirt, obscenity, disease, and madness) and terms which suggest that graffiti belongs elsewhere (the Third World). After this I discuss the absorption of graffiti into the art world and the transformations of meanings which accompanied it. In the final section I return to the more theoretical questions of place, discourse, and ideology with reference to the discussion of graffiti.

Introducing graffiti

There are, of course, many types of graffiti—from scatological lavatory humor, through political slogans, to highly elaborate murals. Here I concentrate on a particular subset of graffiti—the stylized logos and names of individuals and small groups in New York City which have decorated the urban landscape and subway system since the late 1960s. I am particularly indebted to the work of Castleman (1982) who has left a valuable record of insights into the world of graffiti. Much of the work on graffiti, however, concentrates on the sociology of graffiti—the intentions of the graffiti artist, the ethnic and class dimensions of graffiti, the internal hierarchies of graffiti gangs, and the meaning of graffiti (see Hagopian, 1987; Lachmann, 1988).

A well-known analysis of graffiti as a geographical phenomenon is given by Ley (1974; see also Cybriwsky and Ley, 1974). Drawing on the Chicago School tradition of ethnography (see Thrasher, 1963) he discussed the use of graffiti by gangs in the inner city of Philadelphia to express territoriality. Ley explored this idea in

(1) In this paper I use the term 'graffiti' as if it were singular. In fact the singular of graffiti is graffito. Graffiti is commonly used to describe both single instances and multiple instances of the same thing. To avoid awkwardness I follow the common usage.
the wider context of "space as language," meaning, as he puts it, that "space and environment have an ascribed meaning and contain cues prescribing appropriate forms of behavior" (Ley, 1974, page 211). Ley described how gang graffiti gives space meaning by conveying a message of assertiveness. He observed a proliferation of 'aggressive' wall markings at the edge of a turf, usually insults directed against another gang or a member of another gang. Ley also observed 'assertive' messages—messages celebrating gangs and individuals—in the heartland of gang territory. Ley interpreted these observations as the language of space for a particular gang culture. He concluded that space is most highly contested where territories meet—promoting aggressive behavior—and that the 'language' changes as we approach the center of a territory to a language of assertiveness. He shows how graffiti is used to create territory and place by Philadelphia gangs.

Like Ley, I argue that our environment contains 'cues' which tell us whether or not particular kinds of act are appropriate. My approach differs from Ley's in that his fieldwork involved interpretation of the actions of gangs and their attempt to create places with their meanings. I would like, for now, to bracket out these issues and emphasize the other side of the equation, the reaction to graffiti—the perception of it as inappropriate and the attempt to reproduce established (nongang) meanings in the landscape by the media and the art establishment.

Background
The issue of graffiti indisputably has some significance in New York City. Graffiti became a public issue in the early 1970s when stylized names and street numbers began to proliferate in New York City (as well as Philadelphia). It did not take long to catch the attention of the New York Times and the city government.

In July 1971 the New York Times published an article about a young Greek boy named Demetrius who had been spraying his pseudonym—TAKI 183—all over New York. He was already attracting a group of young admirers of his exploits. After receiving media attention Taki soon became a folk hero among young inner-city residents. The spread of graffiti increased rapidly. At first it was small-scale pseudonyms and street numbers marked onto public property with broad-tipped pens. These early types of graffiti were referred to as 'tags' or 'throw-ups'. By 1972 spray paint had become the favorite device of the graffitiist. A 1973 New York Times (NYT 26 January 1973, page 39) article refers to the fact that 'throw-ups' were levelling off in frequency and that a more 'irksome' form of graffiti was becoming common—whole subway cars painted in graphic multicolor designs still based around a single name such as TOMCAT or KOOK.

Throughout the early and mid 1970s, when New York was facing bankruptcy, Mayor Lindsay made the fight against graffiti a priority issue on his political agenda and millions were spent in vain attempts to deal with the 'epidemic'. Guard dogs were placed in station yards, new types of graffiti-resistant paint were tried out, laws were passed forbidding the possession of spray paint in public places, special antigraffiti forces were created, a monthly antigraffiti day was instituted in which boy and girl scouts cleaned up defaced subway trains and public buildings. Ten million dollars were spent in 1972 on attempts to clean up graffiti (NYT 28 March 1973, page 51). In 1973, 1562 people were arrested on graffiti charges (NYT 14 January 1973, page 14).

Attempts to halt the spread of graffiti were a failure. The New York Times of 28 March 1973 reported that 63% of subway cars, 46% of buses, and 50% of public housing projects were marked. Mayor Lindsay admitted that, despite all the efforts, no dent had been made in the graffiti output (NYT 28 March 1975, page 51). By 1975 it was estimated that 6700 trains had been marked and the
Metropolitan Transit Authority said that the removal of graffiti was no longer a priority and the New York Times (7 August 1975, page 29) was writing editorials suggesting that spending millions on graffiti was a waste of time when there were more serious problems to deal with. The problem reemerged as an issue in the early 1980s when Mayor Koch made it a political issue once more. I concentrate here on the early 1970s.

The discourse of disorder
What follows is an examination of the responses to graffiti in New York City. The value and meaning of any space or place are not inherent, but must be invoked (see Harvey, 1989; Moore, 1986). One influential way they are invoked is through the discourses of media images and representations (see Burgess, 1990; Burgess and Gold, 1985). I argue that the pages of the New York Times and other New York media, particularly in the 1970s, presented a discourse of disorder. In reaction to a perceived transgression, the language and rhetoric of the press, its readers, and government officials convey a deep fear of disorder in the landscape, prompted by the appearance in public spaces of people's names and pseudonyms. I argue that, by looking at these reactions, in addition to the actions of the authorities, we can discover the existence of a normative geography—a landscape of virtue in which particular settings are linked to particular actions and their interpreted meanings.

The discourse of disorder is a language which links order to the landscape and suggests that graffiti, as a symptom of disorder, is out of place, and, if we are to return order and thus civilisation itself to New York City we must get rid of graffiti. I will show how reaction to graffiti describes it as a threat to order—as out of place—in two main ways: (1) by suggesting through a mass of metaphors and descriptive terms that graffiti does not belong in New York's public places and (2) by associating it with other places—other contexts—where either the order is different and more amenable to graffiti or disorder is more prevalent. In each case the geographical implications are powerful. Throughout the 1970s graffiti is referred to variously as garbage, pollution, obscenity, an epidemic, a disease, a blight, a form of violence, dangerous, a product of the mad, the ghetto, and the barbarian. Let me explore some of these reactions.

Dirt, garbage, pollution
One of the most prevalent terms used to describe graffiti is one form or another of dirt. A letter in the New York Times reads “No civilized metropolis (Montreal, Mexico City, Moscow) would endure such garbage and its continuing proliferation in New York shocks many visitors and repulses untold numbers of local travellers” (30 June 1975, page 28). The city council president, Mr Garelick, is quoted in the New York Times of 21 May 1972 as saying “Graffiti pollutes the eye and mind and may be one of the worst forms of pollution we have to combat” (page 66). Castelman in his book Getting Up (1982) quotes Metropolitan Transit Authority chairman, Rich Ravitch, as saying “The subways in general are a mess, and the public sees graffiti as a form of defacement like garbage, noise, dirt, and broken doors” (page 177).

Dirt is something in the wrong place or wrong time. Dirt disgusts us because it is where it should not be—on the kitchen floor or under the bed. The very same objects (dust and grime) do not constitute dirt if they are in a different place. The meaning of dirt is dependent on its location. Because dirt is where it should not be, it lies at the bottom of a hierarchical scale of values—dirt is valued by very few people. It annoys us in its persistence, in its audacity to keep turning up in places we thought were clean, pure, pristine.
Douglas, in her book *Purity and Danger* (1966), examines the concept of dirt and pollution. She connects the dread of dirt to a fear of disorder; removing dirt, however, is part of the establishment of an ordered environment. We make the environment conform to an idea, a sense of order. Dirt, she says, is 'matter out of place', a definition which suggests simultaneously some form of order and a contravention of that order. Dirt, then, by its very definition depends on the preexistence of a system, a mode of classification. Douglas makes this point well: "Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing, similarly, bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing lying on chairs; out-door things in-doors; upstairs things downstairs; under clothing appearing where over-clothing should be, and so on" (1966, page 36).

Dirt, then, is a mismatch of meanings—meanings which are erroneously positioned in relation to other things. Things which transgress become dirt—they are in the wrong place. If there was no 'wrong place', there could be no transgression (see also Williamson, 1986). Another way of putting it is that transgression represents a questioning of boundaries (see Stallybrass and White, 1986). Here we are not talking about the boundaries of a territory—no enforcement of access is implied. We are talking of symbolic boundaries. But still we return to geography as these symbolic boundaries not only vary with place but are constituted by place.

A related reaction to graffiti is to label it obscene. A New York government committee on graffiti suggested "the defacing of property and the use of foul language in many of the writings is harmful to the general public" (NYT 15 September 1972, page 41). The vast majority of graffiti in public places, particularly on the subway system, is essentially meaningless—it is a single word like Hurk or Sony. The New York Times itself frequently refers to the fact that graffiti is rarely obscene in content. For instance, a large article of 30 June 1974 remarks that graffiti covering neighborhood walls is usually multicolored designs of simple names with few obscenities. Still public officials and the New York Times call graffiti obscene. What is obscene about a made-up name?

Stewart (1987) suggests criticism of graffiti as obscene is linked to the crucial *where* of appropriateness. She writes, "All display is a form of exposure and just as the spaces of reproduction in society are maintained through regulation, by means of taboo and legitimation, of places and times of sexuality, so, in this case, do writing and figuration in the wrong place and time fall into the category of 'obscenity'" (page 169).

Dirt and obscenity are linked by the importance of place in their very definition—they represent things out of order, in particular out of place. Just as dirt is supposed to represent more than just a spoiling of the surface, but is a problem that lies much deeper (in terms of hygiene for instance), graffiti as dirt is seen as a permanent despoiling of whole sets of meanings—neighborliness, order, property, etc. Graffiti is linked to the dirty, animalistic, uncivilized, and profane. Obscenity simply refers to an 'utterance out of place'—dirt.

*Disease, epidemic, contagion*

Less obviously connected to the idea of dirt is the idea that graffiti is linked to disease—graffiti as an epidemic or contagion. The New York Times 26 November 1972 refers to the "general graffiti epidemic" (section VIII, page 1). A review of a graffiti art exhibition in 1973 notes that it will probably do little to "diffuse the graffiti epidemic" (NYT 16 September 1973). The more poetic *New York Daily News* headlines a 1973 article with "The Great Graffiti Plague" (6 May 1973, page 33).
An August 1974 headline from the same newspaper reads “The Trouble with Graffiti, it’s a Catching Disease” (New York Daily News 18 August 1974, page 3). Elsewhere there are references to the recent ‘rash’ of graffiti—a visible surface symptom of a deeper malaise. Disease has been connected to dirt; it has been seen as pollution of the body. Diseases are also referred to as disorders; the results of intrusions by alien objects which do not belong in a particular place—the body. The implication of course is that the body of the city is ill. Tuan (1979) notes that the city has served as a symbol of order and harmony, a visible symbol of a cosmic order—a stable society. Disease is one of the roots of fear—lepers are separated from society. A disease in the city is a threat to order.

Implicit in the use of disease terms in the antigraffiti rhetoric is the idea of separation and confinement. The causes of disease need to be isolated, carriers need to be quarantined. Like dirt, a disease is a disorder with spatial implications. In the modern imagination, it seems, there is still a connection between environment and health. Driver (1988) has described the relation between Victorian social science and environmentalism. Social science, he argues, was the “mapping of types of behavior to types of environment” (page 277). The distribution of health, and by implication, virtue, was said to depend on the influence of the moral and physical environment. Sanitary science in particular “examined the urban geography of disease, its relationship with local environmental conditions and the location, distribution and migration of the population” (page 278). Hence Foucault called doctors the ‘specialists of space’. The theoretical structure behind this environmentalism was the idea of miasmas—invisible atmospheric substances created by the putrefaction of organic matter and the human body itself. The prime problem was then accumulation of filth. Moral conditions were linked to physical conditions. Crime was described as a “subtle, unseen but sure poison in the moral atmosphere of the neighborhood, as dangerous as is deadly miasma to the physical health” (Driver, 1988, page 279; see also Anderson, 1988; Ward, 1989).

Although social science and medicine may have progressed since the 19th century, the rhetoric of journalists and politicians still links the moral, physical, and sanitary environments in similar ways. The use of metaphors of disease and contagion implies disorder—the spread of pollution which causes the disease and also the moral disorder of people out of place. The moral geography of 19th-century sanitary science is replicated in the moral geography portrayed in the New York media. To use the term disease is to imply spatial transgressions and the possibility of spatial solutions to these problems.

*Madness, insanity, disorder*

A particular type of medical metaphor which is frequently used is that of madness. This form of illness is singled out as apt for the description of graffiti and its writers. As Foucault (1967) has eloquently shown, madness is civilization’s disturbing other—the ultimate disorder. No less a figure than Mayor Lindsay is reported to have said that it was “the Lindsay Theory that the rash of graffiti madness was related to mental health problems”. For added effect he went on to say that graffitiists were “insecure cowards” (NYT 29 August 1972, page 66). The metaphorical use of madness is backed up with the suggestion that graffitiists are, in fact, insane. The critic Roger Rosenblatt also linked graffiti to madness:

“Most of the graffiti on the subways nowadays is indecipherable, which either means that the attack artist is an illiterate—frightening in itself—or that he is using some unknown cuneiform language or the jagged symbols of the mad” (quoted in Hagopian, 1987, page 105).
In his book *The Faith of Graffiti* (1974), Norman Mailer discusses the horror felt by the “civilized office worker” when confronted with the inescapable image of graffiti. The office worker felt that, if he or she were to write on public walls, all manner of filth would burst out all over. He writes, “my god, the feces to spread and the blood to spray, yes the good voting citizen of New York would know that the violent world of Bellevue was opening its door to him” (Mailer quoted in Hagopian, 1987, page 106). Here Mailer uses the images of dirt and insanity and suggests the link between them and graffiti. The compulsion to spread dirt and the potential to be placed in an asylum are a spatial action and a spatial reaction. Behavior out-of-place demands to be corrected by putting the perpetrator in his or her place. As Tuan (1979) has argued, society is fearful of the insane, the disordered; and it copes with them by confining them, separating them from the sane. Madness causes fear because it is associated with disorder.

*Graffiti and the place of the other*

Graffiti flagrantly disturbs notions of order. It represents a disregard for order and, it seems to those who see it, a love of disorder—of anarchy, of things out of place. In the journal *Public Interest* in 1979, one writer remarks, the commuter “is assaulted continuously, not only by the evidence that every subway car has been vandalized, but by the inescapable knowledge that the environment he must endure for an hour or more a day is controlled and uncontrollable, and that anyone can invade it to do whatever damage and mischief the mind suggests” (Glazer, 1979, page 4).

Reactions to graffiti convey the link between graffiti and rampant anarchy by using other places—other contexts as examples of where graffiti may be in-place. Most frequently the places chosen are from the Third World. One well-known positive reaction to graffiti uses this device. The pop artist Claes Oldenburg wrote “You’re standing there in the station, everything is grey and gloomy and all of a sudden one of those graffiti trains slides in and brightens up the place like a big bouquet from Latin America” (quoted in Castleman, 1982, page 142). Favorable and critical reviews of graffiti alike frequently refer to Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and even Russia. Along with the assumption that graffiti writers are probably from some distant place (some other context where graffiti is more appropriate), there is a heavy political question evident in seemingly ‘pure aesthetic judgments’. ‘Pink’, a graffiti artist, was referred to by one critic as a “paint smeared Sandinista” despite the fact that Pink was from Ecuador, which suggests that graffiti might be more appropriate ‘elsewhere’ in a setting associated with violence and terrorism.

One particular example of this kind of comment deserves special attention. ‘Taki 183’, the seventeen-year old Greek immigrant I discussed earlier, is widely accredited as the grandfather of US metropolitan graffiti. His marks on subways were widely publicized and criticized in the early 1970s through the pages of the *New York Times*. At first the coverage was positive, painting a picture of a folk hero with an interesting and creative hobby. This was in 1971. A year later Taki was a vandal and public nuisance and graffiti had become “one of the worst forms of pollution we have to combat” (*NYT* 21 May 1972, page 66). Taki the folk hero became Taki the vandal. A Greek immigrant in New York became the central symbol of filth and disorder.

The 19th-century revolutionary poet Lord Byron scratched his name on the Temple of Poseidon in Greece. Rosenblatt—Taki’s fiercest critic—found this quite acceptable:

“Even Lord Byron wrote his name on the Temple of Poseidon at Sounion in Greece—technically defacing a house of worship, but enhancing it too. Run your fingers
along his signature now and you are touched by him who wrote: 'The hand that
kindles cannot quench the flame'" (quoted in Hagopian, 1987, page 109).
To Rosenblatt, Byron's graffiti (although he does not use this term) is an enhancement
of a beautiful Greek temple. Taki's inscriptions on the decaying urban environment
are sacrilege. The markings of the immigrant in 'our city' are 'defacements' (and sites
of contestation within the contemporary dominant world power). Our inscriptions
in other worlds (the signature of an author who rests squarely within the established
'canon') are the inscriptions of a former dominant imperialist world power on the
place of the dominated. This story of a poor Greek immigrant and an established
figure of world literature tells us of the role of geography in judgments of culture
and aesthetics—in the interpretation of meaning.

Another context in which graffiti is frequently placed is that of the European
communist world. Recently the New York Times featured a picture of the Berlin
wall as it was symbolically falling down. The picture included some bright, new
graffiti. The punch line was that this was the east side of the wall—another sign of
new-found freedom springing up next to McDonald's and the polling booth. The
implication of course is that graffiti, in this case, represents desired disorder—
disorder in a context which we are used to thinking of as overly authoritarian and
orderly.

In this context, graffiti is associated with freedom and democracy—the Westernization
of Eastern Europe and, inevitably, the end of communism. In one context, graffiti
is seen as a symptom of the end of civilization, of anarchy and decaying moral
values and in another it is a sign of a free spirit closing the curtain on the stifling
bureaucracy of communist authoritarianism. It is clear then that the question of
whose world is being written over—the crucial 'where' of appropriateness—is never
a pure aesthetic judgment. The question of geographic hegemony—the taken-for-
ganted moral order—inevitably imposes itself on the politics of aesthetic and
moral evaluation.

The image of the city
The reactions of government figures and the media to graffiti point overwhelmingly
to one fact. It is only superficially the material defacement of public property that
is at stake; the real issue is the image of New York City. It is not that spray paint
has been applied to the side of a subway train, but that the act of graffiti creates
an illusion of disorder. This notion of disorder is tightly woven into a set of ideas
about 'proper places'. The use of terms like dirt, madness, and disease underlines
a fear of spatial disorder and the implication that graffiti belongs in other places
(in the Third World) suggests a fear of anarchy in New York City.

When we say the fight against graffiti is a fight against all perceived forces of
disorder [as has been suggested in reports of New York's antigraffiti drives
(Stewart, 1987)] we are saying there is a conflict over the proper place to one's
meaning. To a figure such as Mayor Lindsay graffiti is permanent soiling of the
environment. It is not seen simply as the mark of an individual but as a massive
and continuing defacement destroying the proper significance (meanings) of the
carefully controlled facades of the urban environment. New York itself is threatened.
Mayor Lindsay, when opening the Prospect Park Boathouse in 1972, remarked on
the graffiti that was bound to appear on it and pleaded "for heaven's sake New
 Yorkers, come to the aid of your great city—defend it, support it and protect it"
(NYT 25 August 1972, page 30). I would suggest that it is not the material culture—
the buildings of New York—that the Mayor was worried about, but New York as a
symbol of control, order, and harmony.
It is not surprising then, that in one analysis of graffiti (Atlanta and Alexander, 1988) it is argued that in some senses graffiti is the ideal crime for a marginalized culture. Its criminality lies in its refusal to comply with its context; it does not respect the laws of place which tell us what is and what is not appropriate. Graffiti is a crime because it subverts the authority of urban space and asserts the triumph (however fleeting) of the individual over the monuments of authority, “the name over the nameless.” (Atlanta and Alexander, 1988, page 166).

In de Certeau’s (1984) terms, graffiti can be described as a ‘tactic’ of the dispossessed—a mobile and temporary set of meanings which insert themselves into the interstices of the formal spatial structure (roads, doors, walls, subways, etc) of the city (see also Foster, 1985).

Although it has been argued that graffiti is a form of existential self-affirmation to the graffiti writer, it also seems plausible that graffiti means something very different from the perspective of the unsympathetic viewer. Indeed, graffiti seems to threaten the existence of those who do not relate to this popular idiom. Rosenblatt suggests this view:

“graffiti makes you scared [because] we do not ever see who writes HURK and SONY. The artist is a sneak thief, and just as he attacks his canvas suddenly, his work attacks you ... these names (scary in their very loudness) are yelling to you in public places, where you wish to preserve your own name” (quoted in Hagopian, 1987, page 105).

Rosenblatt suggests in this passage a complexed connection between wishing to remain private in public and the idea that graffiti represents a symbolically violent attack on an equally symbolic category of property. The graffiti writer is a ‘thief’. This view of graffiti is underlined by other voices of authority who clearly see graffiti as a threat to considerably more than the surface it is written on. The Philadelphia city ordinance banning the sale of spray paint to juniors stated that “graffiti contributes to the blight and degradation of neighborhoods and even discourages the formation of business” (Stewart, 1987, page 168, my emphasis). Similarly in Los Angeles a leading police official stated that “graffiti decreases property value” and signed buildings on block after block convey the impression that the city government has lost control, that the neighborhood is sliding towards anarchy” (quoted in Stewart, 1987, page 168, my emphasis). Here we see how graffiti is seen in relation to a context which includes property values and local business in its perception of order but not the spray-painted mark of an individual who lies outside of the property and business relations which get to define that context.

Graffiti has also been reevaluated as art (Foster, 1985; Stewart, 1987). The very same characteristics of graffiti which make it repugnant to Mayor Lindsay make it appealing to segments of the art world—crime becomes creativity, madness becomes insight, dirt becomes something to hang over the fireplace. The meanings of a particular act are not natural but created within particular discourses. The next section of this illustration is a discussion of this transformation of graffiti from crime to art.

**Graffiti as art**

From 1973 onwards the New York Times featured a series of letters and opinion pieces which debated the question of whether or not graffiti can be thought of (or should be thought of) as a kind of folk art. One letter writer called graffiti “subway calligraphy”:

“Instead of thundering against this outpouring of artistic ingenuity ... scrutinize the colored tendrils which embroider our subway cars, the mystic emblems applied with alacrity to rolling steel. BOBSPIN and TOPCAT, words made flesh
in noise catacombs and stretched high and wide in piercing color ribbons, tantalize
the unprejudiced strip-hanger. This ... bold and limber 'arrangement of forms
and colors on a flat surface' will excite our curiosity and respect long after tidy
citizens have scrubbed the cars back to ... impeccability” *(NYT 11 April 1973,
page 46).*

The writer of another letter *(NYT 8 August 1974, page 3)* calls graffiti a “new
form of calligraphy” and argues that the talented graffitists need more encouragement.
He adds that graffiti is usually more pleasing than the paid ads on the subway.

As early as 1972 the *New York Times* was reviewing an exhibition of graffiti art
held by an organization called United Graffiti Artists (UGA). It featured
interviews with several graffiti artists who spoke of the difference between graffiti
on the street and graffiti in the gallery. Super Kool boasted “I have put my name
all over the place—there ain’t nowhere I go I can’t see it”. Hugo Martinez described
the ugly neighborhood he and other artists lived in. He suggested that such an
environment damages the ego and the poor kids who live in them want people to know
who they are. Such an ego might, he explains, be better served by displaying his name
in an art gallery than on the streets. “Maybe if people see graffiti on walls inside
buildings instead of on walls outside buildings, they will think it is art” *(NYT
8 December 1972, page 49).* In another report on a graffiti art exhibition *(NYT
13 March 1976, page 29)* the artists are not so happy with the implications of
producing sanctioned art. One artist explained, “When you have it on canvas, you
don’t risk getting written over. But somehow I just can’t come to grips with seeing
my identity on a wall. It just looks better on the side of a train.” It did not take
long for the UGA to attract the attention of the *New York Times 8 December
1972, page 49* and soon after that the group received $600 to perform in a ballet
entitled “Deuce Coupe”. This performance was reviewed in the *Wall Street Journal:
While the dancers performed to pop music, Co-Co and his friends [the UGA
artists] sprayed their names and other embellishments to create a flamboyant and
fascinating backdrop. As the graffiti writers took their bows, waving their cans
of spray paint, the trendy, avant-garde Joffrey audience responded with loud
applause and numerous enthusiastic braves. ‘They’re so real!’ one young
spectator exclaimed to his date” *(quoted in Castleman, 1982, page 119).*

Eventually the UGA received a loft studio in Manhattan with rent set at $1 per
year. More exhibitions followed including one in SoHo on 15 September 1973.
Several paintings priced at over a thousand dollars sold. Press reports were
generally positive. The *New York Times* review, titled “Graffiti Goes Legit”, told
the story of the strange transformation of graffiti from crime to art:

“The first time I saw the new graffiti—the stylishly calligraphed and ornamented
signatures of spray-can and marking pen vandals—was three years ago in
Philadelphia. I was dismayed by the near total saturation of urban surfaces;
it made a whole city look as if it was slated for demolition. But I was also
impressed by its artfulness and odd chasteness: there wasn’t a dirty word or
even a ‘John loves Mary’ in sight. It was all pure primitive estheticism and
self-advertisement” *(NYT 16 September 1973, page 27).*

The author then goes on to review the emergence of graffiti in New York City,
describing its “raffish disdain for property rights”. He says

“The graffitist is a latter-day burlesque avatar of the myth of the individualistic,
alienated modern artist. By the simple act of using his own nickname as the
subject matter, he alludes the essentially anonymous character of primitive,
popular art.”

The graffitists, the reviewer remarks, seemed to have a problem with small pictures
which tended “to look like something bigger rather than whole compositions”.
He describes the highlight of the show:
“...The show’s main attraction is a 30-foot collaborative mural bearing the artful scrawls of more than a dozen graffiti all-stars ... It’s a glory, a cleaner, more brilliant version of a lovingly worked-over subway car.”

The review finishes with a thought about the rebellious nature of graffiti as art:
“...it would be well to keep in mind that there has often been something mildly anti-social in the practice of art and society has almost invariably profited from it in the long run. Well, that is for those of you who can’t simply relax and enjoy the visual bonus that comes these days with the purchase of a subway token.”

Eventually UGA disbanded as the graffitists grew up and got involved in school and work. Of the twelve members, eight went to college and four to art school. Two members became professional artists.

Some individual graffiti writers began to reach a level of fame even the UGA could not have imagined. The major figures in graffiti art were Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. Basquiat had been ‘Samo’ the street artist before he was ‘discovered’ and introduced to the world of the art establishment. Keith Haring had taken chalk and drawn on ‘blacked’ empty ad hoardings in the subway stations around major art centers in Manhattan. Soon his work was in the centers rather than outside them. Eventually Keith Haring’s work appeared on a huge sign atop Times Square flashing out across the city. It is also possible in 1991 to go into most poster shops and buy Keith Haring posters to complement your RENOIRS, PICASSOS, and DALIS.

The paradox of graffiti and the role of place
Paradoxically, at the same time as graffiti is depicted as a wild anarchic threat to society by one dominant group (the ‘authorities’) it is taken off the streets and placed in galleries by another dominant group (official culture).

“The movement of graffiti to canvas and gallery space continues the process of substitution by which historical contingency is mythologized; mediating figures such as art students become the new graffiti artists ... social workers and photographers become spokespersons and publicists for graffiti writers; acceptable, readable and apprehensible in scale, graffiti painting is enclosed within a proper space and time and delimited for consumption as a singular artifact” (Stewart, 1987, page 173)

As Hagopian (1987) has commented, the entry of graffiti into the gallery and the affirmation of the ‘status’ of graffiti as an art vitiated the lawlessness on which its ‘appeal’ was based.

Most of the attributes of graffiti which make it appealing as crime are nullified by the act of placing it in the gallery; making it into art. In effect the art world has “domesticated a formerly feral animal” (Hagopian, 1987, page 107). In other words, the meaning of graffiti on the streets has been changed to the meaning of graffiti as art—a commodity. As Atlanta and Alexander (1989) have argued:
“The art-world promised a way out of the ghetto only to confine the work of the graffiti painters to the more restricted code of the art-world ...

In the process of gallery consumption little of the specific meaning of the graffiti art was communicated, or even survived the threshold of the gallery itself” (pages 163–164).

As graffiti underwent its metamorphosis from crime to art it suffered a displacement from the street to the gallery. Graffiti in the gallery is graffiti in its ‘proper’ place. It is no longer the tactic of the marginalized but part of the strategy of the establishment, conforming to the codes of the ‘proper place’.
As graffiti was displaced, the meaning of graffiti was subsumed within a lineage defined by art critics and gallery owners. Whereas graffitiists take their inspiration from the signs and styles of advertising, the art world begins to place graffiti in a different tradition of 'pop-art' and the 'primitive'. Art show catalogues read "urban-bred, the graffiti artist continues the tradition of pop-art which he admires" (quoted in Stewart, 1977, page 172). This particular exhibition was titled "Post-Graffiti" announcing the death of 'real' graffiti and the rebirth of the pop-art tradition.

Long 'histories' of the graffiti tradition were invoked, ranging from cave-paintings to Arabic traditions of place-marking. Graffiti, as Stewart (1987, page 172) puts it, is "detailed onto the track of art history, specifically the history of painting as institutionally canonized—that is, as a progression of individual artifacts worked by individual masters". Foster (1985, page 49) makes a similar point:

"Only some graffiti is appropriated by the art world, and this valuation entailed a whole protocol of art-historical initiation: an ancient precedent (cave painting), a modern lineage (abstract expressionism and art brut; or as Rene Ricard gushes: 'If Cy Twombly and Jean Dubuffet had a baby and gave it up for adoption, it would be Jean-Michel'), even a stylistic history (e.g. from abstract-expressionist graffiti, 'the classic stage', to pop-psychedelic')."

The movement of graffiti from the street to the gallery involved a simultaneous insertion of graffiti into a tradition, a history which it had previously existed outside of. Graffiti was now legitimated by its place inside the gallery and by its place in the history of art.

The appellation 'primitive' was one which was frequently applied to graffiti as art. The appeal of graffiti to the art world was its apparent wildness and spontaneity (which was at least partly a result of its refusal to obey the rules of place). Graffiti was romanticized as a folk art. The assumptions that graffiti is somehow primitive is linked to the frequent assertion that graffitiists are from 'the jungle' in the form of Latin America or Africa. Oldenburg's description of the subway car from 'Latin America' and Mailer's description of graffiti as "the impulse of the jungle" (quoted in Stewart, 1987, page 173) reflect the assumed primitive and 'natural' aspects of graffiti. There is clearly a question of race in the assumptions of the promoters of graffiti. Graffiti writers are almost always assumed to be of Afro-American or Latin descent, whereas ethnography shows that graffiti groups include members from many ethnic backgrounds including Scottish and Albanian (Cooper and Chalfant, 1984). I have already suggested that this assumption of the ethnic status of graffitiists often appears in media accounts of street graffiti in negative ways. In the art world these Third World associations are given a positive twist and associated with unimpressed creativity. The association of graffiti with nature, the primitive, and the crazy is applauded in its new context.

So, as graffiti is reconstituted as art, desecration becomes a matter of taste and consumption. Graffiti as crime (and dirt) was often painted on a subway car sixty feet long and twelve feet high which moved through the city with all its delineated territories. The graffiti would remain only a few days before being scrubbed off by the 'buffer'—a machine which removed graffiti with various acids. Graffiti was mobile and temporary. The graffiti writer, working in the train yard would never see the whole thing until the train moved out of the yard. The whole process was quick and fluid allowing no possibility of perspective and a far view:

"The transience of the painting means that the cultural meaning is involved with the process of doing, of pulling it off. The scale and speed of the transformation is an important part of appreciation of the painting." (Atlanta and Alexander, 1989, page 166).
In the gallery, graffiti is a product of contemplation and permanence. The artist can remove himself or herself from the artwork and look at it, contemplate it from afar, and revise it. The almost constant motion and ephemerality of graffiti are transformed into a static and 'permanent' object.

By the secular magic of displacement graffiti is transformed from the wild, criminal, reviled, and despised product of the insane and deviant into the creative, inspired, aesthetically pleasing product of the artist. In the process of the movement from the street and subway to the SoHo gallery the 'meaning' of graffiti and the moral judgment of it are changed dramatically. It is surely paradoxical that the same act (painting a stylized logo) can be at once reviled and admired, removed and preserved. In one area money is spent to remove graffiti and in the other it is spent to buy it and add daring and 'local color' to some wealthy patron's living room. At the same time as Michael Stewart, a young graffiti artist, died by strangulation at the hands of twelve transit cops, graffiti art was selling for thousands in Manhattan galleries.

The space of the art gallery is clearly a specialized space (see Bonnett, 1992) in the culture of New York, a space separated from all those 'everyday' spaces outside. It is a space associated with high culture, with the mind rather than the body, with patrons high in economic, cultural, and social capital. It is a central part of the geocultural construction of 'high'. The world of the inner city and the subway, of 'everyday' space is a bodily space, a space of action, a space with unspecialized and 'commonplace' activities. Remember that graffiti was also continually represented in terms of the Third World. These spaces, even if imaginary, are also constituted as 'low' in the established discourses; peopled by the ubiquitous 'man-on-the-street (sic)'. They are spaces of unreason, lacking rationality and order. An area of deviance and dirt, remarkably like the slums described in Stallybrass and White (1987) and the Orient in Said (1979), is constructed out of the description of graffiti and its place.

The relationship between dominant groups and graffiti flips between the designations of deviance and its appropriation into 'art'. We can think of this as the rarified spaces of high culture including the low within it as an "eroticized constituent of its own fantasy life" (Stallybrass and White, 1987, page 5). By incorporating graffiti into its own spaces the high turns graffiti into a tamed representation of the more fascinating elements of the low. Graffiti serves as a metonym for the wild, chaotic, everyday space outside. In a sense, graffiti as art is a representation of itself outside, just as a stuffed animal in a museum is a representation of itself in the wild. Seen this way it is quite understandable that dominant socioeconomic groups can both revile and preserve graffiti as an example, a symbol of the non-high, of the geographical, social, and cultural other. While graffiti and its writers are excluded at the social level, while the forces of the media, law, and politics are levelled against the 'great graffiti plague' graffiti remains symbolically central in the identification of the high and the proper. The 'civilized' has to negotiate its position in relation to the 'primitive'. Established powers can simultaneously call for an end to graffiti and sell it, at high prices, to the residents of SoHo and Greenwich Village. Linking the description of graffiti as dirt and crime and the valuation of graffiti as art is the figure of Mayor Lindsay. As I have shown, Lindsay was the central figure in the campaigns against graffiti in the street. Lindsay, as Zukin (1982) has shown, was also involved in the promotion of art in SoHo and elsewhere. Lindsay believed he had an 'arts constituency' and significantly increased the state's involvement in art funding—particularly in the 'bohemian' art world of SoHo, the art world that so enthusiastically accepted graffiti as a new form of 'primitive' art.
The displacement of graffiti from the everyday space to the specialized ‘art’ space is one reaction to graffiti which tells us something about the power of place in relation to ideological values. It is a reaction which seeks to insert graffiti into a ‘proper place’ and rob it of its denaturalizing powers. It is ‘natural’ after all for art to be in galleries; if it is not in a gallery it is not ‘art’. In addition, by absorbing graffiti, the art world assured it an economic value—it could be bought. Graffiti in the streets was associated with devaluing—with increasing property values. The ordination of graffiti as art, consciously or not, subverted the subversive. But this would never be complete as the space for such absorption is limited, and the space of graffiti’s criminality is limited only by the graffitist’s imagination.

Conclusion
In the case of reactions to New York graffiti we have seen a determined effort to express a spatial ordering of types of behavior and the moral implications thereof in the language of commonsense. The landscape of New York can be seen as a normative landscape of ‘proper’ places—that is to say experienced contexts in which people behave themselves. People act according to expectations which are, in part, spatially distributed and determined: art belongs in art school, the streets are for driving, etc.

The two sets of reactions I have discussed attempt to reinstate ‘normality’ by restructuring the geography of normality. The media labelled the graffiti ‘out-of-place’ and argued for its removal while the art establishment subverted graffiti as crime by putting it ‘in-place’, by inserting it into the spaces of high culture and the tradition of art history.

In media reactions to graffiti in the street the graffiti and the graffitists were metaphorically associated with dirt, obscenity, disease, and insanity, all of which imply spatial inappropriateness. In addition the media associated graffiti with the Third World, suggesting that graffiti might be more appropriate in such a context. The reaction of the art establishment was to displace graffiti into the gallery and reconfigure it as creativity and art. Again the context of the Third World was used in the description of graffiti. In this case, however, the context of the ‘jungle’ implies spontaneity, color, and a lack of inhibition.

There is a certain obviousness about statements which argue that painting does not belong on subways but in art galleries and art school. One purpose of critical inquiry, including critical cultural geography, is to problematize the obvious. The act of graffiti is an example of a transgression which upsets the obvious and taken for granted—the prevailing geographical doxa. This transgression upset expectations and prompted reactions. Two sets of reactions have been interpreted here. The reactions utilize the assumed, ‘obvious’ nature of geographical spaces. Graffiti on the streets is ‘obviously’ out of place, whereas graffiti in the gallery is ‘obviously’ art. The very existence of graffiti, however, shows us that such rules are not obvious or commonsense for the group of people who are involved in graffiti. The types of obviousness and commonsense utilized by the New York Times are those of some powerful people and not other, subordinated, people.

New York graffiti upset dominant notions of the ‘obvious’ and related expectations about behavior in particular places. In doing this it forced the guardians of doxic geography to reestablish their claims, consciously and unconsciously, through government action, media reporting, and the sanctioning of graffiti as art in SoHo. Reactions to graffiti were heavily determined by notions about place and appropriateness. Underlying this story has been the idea that graffiti on the street and the subway takes on the meaning of dirt, disease, and insanity, whereas in the gallery it ‘means’ creativity and insight. Put more simply: in one place it is bad...
and in another it is good. On the street it is ‘deviant’ and in the gallery it is ‘exceptional’.

In conclusion we can abstract from the story of graffiti in New York City a set of relationships between transgression, reactions to transgression, commonsense, and the meaning of place. The object of the discourses interpreted here (that which is being interpreted) is an alleged transgression—an activity which is deemed ‘out of place’. Along with this transgression is an alleged transformation (or threatened transformation) of the meaning of a place (New York). Put another way the transgression threatens to bring about a meaning for place which is not favored by those involved in creating the discourse of reaction. The claims made by the discourse in reaction to perceived transgression seem to be as follows:

(a) Something is out-of-place.
(b) Some act is out-of-place.
(c) Some act is incompatible with the proper meaning of place.

The implications of these changes are as follows:

(a) If the transgression continues, the meaning of the place will change.
(b) If the meaning of the place changes, the place itself will change.
(c) The new meaning will be their meaning (the meaning of the other).
(d) The place in question will become their place (the place of the other).

The two simultaneous sets of reactions to graffiti described here underline the fragmented nature of the dominant groups in society. Although the media and the art establishment are both powerful arbiters of cultural taste, they can have seemingly opposite reactions to the same phenomenon. If we look closely, however, it is possible to see that the reactions of the media and the art establishment both work to reestablish a geography of normality to New York City. Through such an analysis of reactions to a transgression such as graffiti it is possible to outline some of the ways in which places are implicated in the contested creation of meaning.

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