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URBAN GRAFFITI: CRIME, CONTROL, AND RESISTANCE

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Drawing on 4 years of fieldwork inside the Denver, Colorado, graffiti underground and on research in other American and European cities, Ferrell explores the various ways in which graffiti writers attempt to resist the controls of the legal and political authorities. Ferrell, after careful examination of hip hop graffiti, concludes that when youthful writers resist authority, their graffiti becomes confrontational in nature and they counterattack, which transforms pressure from official authorities to that of illegal pleasure through their writings.

Over the past two decades, a new form of youthful graffiti—graffiti “writing,” as its young practitioners call it—has spread from its origins in New York City to cities throughout the United States, Europe, and other world regions. This article examines this emerging form of graffiti and explores the moments of resistance embedded in it. Specifically, it investigates the lived dynamics of graffiti writing and the lives of youthful graffiti writers in the context of legal and political power, social control, and writers’ resistance to them. This examination aims not at reducing the complex processes of graffiti writing, social control, and resistance to a neat grid of cause and effect, but instead at tracing the many moments in which they intersect and interweave. It also aims to reveal the various ways in

which youthful activities like graffiti writing not only shape resistance to existing arrangements but construct alternative arrangements as well.

The methodological framework for this examination of contemporary graffiti writing incorporates both intensive field research inside a particular urban graffiti subculture and comparative field and document research in various other urban settings. Certainly, the foundation for this study is the 4 years (1990–1993) that I conducted ongoing field research and participant observation inside the Denver, Colorado graffiti underground. This research process began, as might be expected, with a trial period during which contacts with the underground were made and expanded, and I was subjected to a series of informal tests, primarily as to my willingness to place myself in the same

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situations of risk as those encountered by the writers. This preliminary research blossomed into active participant observation inside the underground, involving not only participation in various informal gatherings, parties, and paint-buying trips, but also innumerable graffiti-writing forays in Denver's railyards and alleys (see Ferrell, 1993a). The research culminated, so to speak, in my arrest and trial on charges of "graffiti vandalism."

To develop a comparative perspective on this intensive field research, interviews were also conducted with legal agents, political officials, and others in Denver; and sites of graffiti activity were visited in cities throughout the United States and Europe. Although these visits did not, of course, produce the intensity of information generated in the Denver case, they did provide opportunities for extensive observation, and in some cases, interviews with local writers and those that oppose them. This comparative information was in turn supplemented by newspaper searches and other forms of document research in various U.S. cities.

FORMS OF GRAFFITI AND FORMS OF RESISTANCE

In a remarkable variety of world settings, kids (and others) employ particular forms of graffiti as a means of resisting particular constellations of legal, political, and religious authority. Through an array of painted images, for example, young artists quite thoroughly transformed the political meaning of the Berlin Wall by the time of its destruction (Waldenburg, 1990); and in the former Soviet Union, the graffiti of urban youth cultures emerged as a channel of resistance essential to the undermining of Soviet authority (Bushnell, 1990). In London, feminists, animal rights activists, and others aggressively alter offensive billboards (Posener, 1982); in Northern Ireland, young Catholics paint wall murals that memorialize (and encourage) resistance to British rule, and Protestants and the British military counter-attack through the same medium (Rolston, 1991). Similarly, Nicaraguan youth groups have for years painted street images of Sandino as a form of political resistance and dialogue; post-Sandinista officials

now respond with "mural death squads" (Kunzle, 1993; Sheesley & Bragg, 1991). Toronto street artists develop works that attack colonialism and urge political resistance (Kummel, 1991); and, denied access to radio or newspaper, young Palestinian militants in the occupied lands employ wall painting as their primary form of communication and resistance to Israeli authority (Hedges, 1994; see Ferrell, 1993b).

A particular form of graffiti writing has, during the past 20 years, also emerged out of the economic, political, and ethnic inequalities endemic to the United States. "Hip hop" graffiti—the focus of this study—grew out of the Black neighborhood cultures of New York City in the early and mid-1970s as part of a larger, homegrown, alternative youth culture that included new forms of music (rap, sampling, scratching) and dancing (Brewer & Miller, 1990; Castleman, 1982; Chalfant & Prigoff, 1987; Cooper & Chalfant, 1984; Ferrell, 1993a; Hager, 1984; Lachmann, 1988; Miller, 1994; Stewart, 1987). This highly stylized form of nongang graffiti writing—which includes the "tagging" of subcultural nicknames on city walls and the creation of large illegal murals ("piecing") by "crews" of writers—has today fanned out into large and small cities across the United States and to Europe, Mexico, Central America, and elsewhere (Brett, 1991; Chalfant & Prigoff, 1987; Riding, 1992; Rodriguez, 1994; Rotella, 1994). Its remarkable growth also increasingly incorporates kids from outside the ethnic and economic frameworks of its originators. In Denver, for example, youths from the suburbs and from small towns regularly seek out the urban hip hop graffiti underground; and in Boston, a substantial portion of the city's hip hop graffiti is in fact now produced by crews made up of young Anglo males and based in the suburbs (Jacobs, 1993, p. 1). In southern California, the participation of young people of all sorts in graffiti writing is such that the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department lists some 800 known graffiti crews; the Los Angeles Rapid Transit District alone spends \$13 million a year on clean-up, and the California Department of Transportation budgets up to \$5 million for 1994; and authorities now find hip hop (and gang) graffiti inside

Los Angeles City Hall, in abandoned World War II bunkers, and even in the San Gabriel Mountains (Haldane, 1993; Hudson, 1993; MacDuff & Valenzuela, 1993; Maxwell & Porter, 1993; Sahagun, 1992; Tobar, 1993). The members of a national anticrime organization thus recently named graffiti their biggest concern (Ching, 1991, p. A1).

What, though, is the larger cultural and political context in which this wildly popular style of graffiti writing proliferates? And precisely what forms of authority does this graffiti writing resist?

URBAN AUTHORITY, SOCIAL CONTROL, AND THE WRITING OF RESISTANCE

Contemporary graffiti writing occurs in an urban environment increasingly defined by the segregation and control of social space. As Schiller (1989), Soja (1989), M. Davis (1990, 1992a, 1992b), Sorkin (1992), S. Davis (1992), Guterson (1993) and others have shown, major U.S. cities today are systematically fractured by ethnic, class, and consumer segregation—segregation built into skyscrapers and skyways, freeways and transit routes, walled residential enclaves and secured shopping malls, private streets and parks. The caretakers of these physically segregated cities control (or destroy) public space and public communities through privatization and physical insulation, and they employ extensive public and private police power and sophisticated control technologies to enforce their spatial restrictions. Young people who wish to work or wander in these environments face, in addition to these spatial controls, an increasingly aggressive criminalization of their activities by local and state authorities. In recent years, city after city has enacted strict curfews and a multitude of ordinances against loud music, car cruising, and other youthful pleasures (Ferrell, 1993a; LeDue, 1992; Reuter, 1994b). In negotiating the contemporary city, kids are largely walled in and boxed out.

The writing of hip hop graffiti disrupts this orderly latticework of authority, reclaims public space for at least some of those systematically excluded from it, and thus resists the confinement of kids and others within structures of

social and spatial control. Hip hop graffiti writers work almost exclusively at night, and in so doing use the cover of darkness to evade curfew restrictions and urban surveillance. In that they gain subcultural status from tagging over as large an area as possible, they also wander widely throughout the city; mobility—and trespass—are essential. Because further status derives from the difficulty of a tag's placement, writers also regularly jump razor wire fences, climb freeway standards or skyscrapers ("tagging the heavens"), and otherwise violate the city's spatial sorting. And time and again, writers talk and tag in such a way as to make clear their resistance to urban control. In Los Angeles, 13-year-old tagger Creator (CRE8) reports that "most of the time I get up (tag) on stop signs and city-owned stuff" (Quintanilla, 1993, p. E6). In Denver, legendary graffiti "king" Rasta 68 likewise announces that, "Personally, I want to hit on city stuff, like bridges, rather than some other person's property. They build the boringest crap around, so why not beautify it?" (Will, 1994, January 2, p. 13). And in Boston, local writer Relm emphasizes in a newspaper interview that he doesn't bomb (tag) individuals, cars, or houses, but only large businesses, public buildings, and other urban symbols of the system he opposes (Jacobs, 1993, p. 28).

If, as alluded to earlier, authority and resistance dance together, the next moment in this tango of urban control and graffiti writing is not difficult to anticipate: The same legal structures, policing powers, and technological safeguards that regulate the city at large are in turn brought down on graffiti writers, and with a vengeance. The array of control technologies and techniques aligned against graffiti writing is itself impressive. Today, legal authorities and corporate sponsors in Los Angeles, San Bernardino, CA, New York, Denver, Las Vegas, Fort Worth, and other cities create police and citizen surveillance teams armed with two-way radios, home video cameras, remote control infrared video cameras, and night-vision goggles; send out antigraffiti helicopter patrols; secure freeway signs and bridges with razor wire and commercial buildings with special graffiti-resistant coatings; and arrange toll-free telephone hotlines for watchful residents and motorists with

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cellular phones (Bennet, 1992; Ching, 1991; Colvin, 1993b; Fried, 1992; Rainey, 1993; "2 teens," 1991; Valenzuela, 1993; "Writing on the Wall," 1993). They also use U.S. Marines in antigraffiti operations, deploy undercover transit and police officers in the guise of high school students and journalists, stake out popular graffiti-writing areas, and set up sophisticated sting operations to apprehend graffiti writers and stop those who sell spray paint to them ("Albuquerque Police," 1992; Baker, 1991; Carr, 1993; Henderson, 1994; "Lure of Fame," 1994; Molloy & Labahn, 1993; National Graffiti Information Network, 1990; "Sting," 1991; "Teaching Teen," 1994).

These sorts of physical control are backed by growing militancy among antigraffiti activists and by increasingly severe legal sanctions. New York's new police commissioner targets graffiti and other "quality of life" crimes; Los Angeles's mayor Richard Riordan campaigns aggressively against graffiti and now recommends boot camps as punishment for writers; another Los Angeles mayoral candidate suggests "chop[ping] a few fingers off" (Simon, 1993, July 9, p. B3); and Denver's mayor deflects a recall campaign with a vitriolic anti-graffiti campaign of his own (Ferrell, 1993a; "These Guys," 1994). A California assemblyman introduces a bill requiring that kids convicted of writing graffiti be publicly paddled; and in St. Louis, an alderman proposes public caning (Bailey, 1994; Gillam, 1994; Henderson, 1994). Other antigraffiti campaigners in Los Angeles and Denver cheer suggestions of lopping off hands, and speak of "hanging, shooting, and castrating" (Colvin, 1993a, p. B4) and publicly spray-painting writers' genitals (Kreck, 1993; Martin, 1992).

In this climate, southern California authorities arrest the parents and grandparents of alleged writers on charges of contributing to the delinquency of minors and sue or otherwise bill other parents for tens of thousands of dollars in damages (Goldman, 1993; Lozano, 1994; MacDuff & Valenzuela, 1993; Valenzuela, 1993). In Los Angeles, writers themselves now face multiple \$1,000 civil fines in addition to criminal penalties of \$50,000 and 1 year in jail (Simon, 1993, July 9). Business owners in cities around the country confront statutes that

regulate or ban the sale of spray paint and markers to minors and others and that force businesses to clean graffiti from their buildings ("Building Owners," 1994; Fong, 1992; Hanley, 1992; Hynes, 1993; Smith, 1994; Tobar, 1993). And in Denver, Los Angeles, and other cities, aggressively entrepreneurial vigilantes, high school "bounty hunters," and others now receive thousands of dollars in cash awards for turning in writers (Ferrell, 1993a; Reuter, 1994a; Schwada & Sahagun, 1992).

Graffiti writers, of course, counterpunch with new forms of resistance and increased militancy of their own. In the early years of hip hop graffiti, legendary New York City writer Lady Pink said, "Graffiti means 'I'm here.' . . . They want to snub us, but they can't" (Mizrahi, 1981, p. 20), and contemporary writers facing the full force of urban authority echo this sentiment. An 18-year-old Los Angeles tagger arrested six times says, "They want to wipe us out. But graffiti will never die" (Colvin, 1993a, p. B4); and a Compton tagger tells city officials, "You can lock me up, but you're not going to arrest all of us. How are you guys going to make us stop? You don't know how" (Tobar, 1993, p. B3). To prove their point, writers decorate, and desecrate, the very control structures in which they are caught. Kids involved in a city work program at Los Angeles City Hall reach for "the heavens" by tagging the top floor of the city hall tower (Sahagun, 1992). In response to the Denver mayor's antigraffiti campaign, Voodoo paints a "Recall" piece and poem along the bike path where the mayor jogs. A Boston writer on trial for graffiti affixes tagged stickers—an increasingly popular form of pre-fabricated tagging—throughout the courthouse and, remarkably, on the back of the prosecutor's legal pad (Jacobs, 1993). And Chaka—southern California's most notorious and prolific tagger—is arrested for tagging a courthouse elevator while visiting the probation officer supervising his previous conviction for tagging (MacDuff & Valenzuela, 1993; Martin, 1992).

To avoid later detection, writers in Las Vegas, Denver, and other cities also increasingly wear latex gloves when they tag or piece and take other practical measures to avoid apprehension. But for writers, the most remarkable and insidious form of resistance to

increased repression is not a practical measure but a pleasurable response. This is the adrenalin rush. Writers consistently report to me and to others that their experience of tagging and piecing is defined by the incandescent excitement, the adrenalin rush, that results from creating their art in a dangerous and illegal environment—and that heightened legal and police pressure therefore heightens this adrenalin rush as well. In Los Angeles, Creator says, “I bomb because I like the chase, the getting up [tagging] without getting caught. . . . Catch me if you can” (Quintanilla, 1993, p. E1); and in San Bernardino, an ex-tagger adds, “I miss the rush. It’s a rush because you’re taking a chance of getting caught. You do it to see if you can get away with it. It’s like an addiction—you can’t stop” (MacDuff & Valenzuela, 1993, p. A11). Well-known Denver writers like Z13, Rasta 68, Eoosh, and Voodoo also speak regularly of “that rush” one gets from graffiti, its links to illegality, and the ways in which increased police pressure means, for them, increased excitement; as Voodoo says, with regard to piecing, “Right before you hit the wall, you get that rush. And right when you hit the wall, you know that you’re breaking the law, and that gives that extra adrenalin flow” (Ferrell, 1993a, p. 82). A Denver street artist thus concludes, “Doing graffiti is a real adrenalin rush. That provides a lot of the pull and draw to the taggers. The city doesn’t understand that the more they publicize the crackdown, the more active the taggers will become” (Ferrell, 1993a, p. 148). A Las Vegas “hip hop shop” owner summarizes the situation succinctly: “The harder the city comes down on them, the more fun it is for them” (“Writing on the Wall,” 1993, p. 4C).

As the adrenalin rush shows, graffiti writers resist the pressure brought against them not only by fighting it, but by using it for their own purposes and by transforming political pressure into personal and collective pleasure. Here again we see the dance of authority and resistance and the strange steps that it follows—in this case, the authorities’ role in amplifying the meaning and intensity of the very activity they wish to suppress. In this ongoing interplay, we also begin to see the magnitude of the battle between graffiti writers and urban authorities. This battle is certainly, as headline writers are

went to put it, a “war of the walls”; in doing graffiti, writers challenge the “aesthetics of authority” (Ferrell, 1993a, pp. 178–186) that govern the city, invent new visual conventions, and give lie by their tags and pieces to the vision of a city under firm political control. But this war of the walls is, more profoundly, a war of the worlds. For graffiti writing not only confronts and resists an urban environment of fractured communities and segregated spaces; it actively constructs alternatives to these arrangements as well.

RESISTANCE, IDENTITY, AND ALTERNATIVE ARRANGEMENTS (GRAFFITO ERGO SUM)

The writing of graffiti is an inherently collective activity. Although writers tag and piece against the controls of the city, they also tag and piece for one another, and in so doing build alternative structures of meaning and status. Tagging goes on as a collective conversation among writers, a process of symbolic interaction by which writers challenge, cajole, and surprise one another. Like his counterparts in cities throughout the United States, Los Angeles writer Rival emphasizes that he tags for the respect of “other taggers. Who cares about adults?” (Glionna, 1993, p. B4). Writers also piece primarily for one another. Writers’ pieces are executed and evaluated within elaborate subcultural conventions of color, proportion, and design; and although writers may hope that their pieces will be seen by the public, they can be certain that they will be seen and judged by other writers. In this sense, tagging and piecing create an alternative system of public communication for kids who otherwise have little access to avenues of urban information. And in this sense, like their Palestinian counterparts across the Atlantic, U.S. graffiti writers paint a complex system of subterranean signs directly onto the walls of cities that otherwise would render them invisible.

In tagging and piecing for one another, writers also construct alternative systems of status and identity. Both for those kids increasingly shut out of traditional channels of achievement and for those who, through ethnicity or education, retain some modicum of choice, graffiti

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writing provides a powerful alternative process for shaping personal identity and gaining social status. Black, Latino, and Anglo boys in the southern California graffiti crew TIKs, for example, have quit high school chess teams and spurned advanced placement classes to devote as much time as possible to graffiti. The result is not only status among other writers, but invitations to parties and relationships with girls who also write; as one TIK says, “without graffiti, what do I got?” (Glionna, 1993, p. B4). A young female tagger from East L.A. likewise points out, “You know how rich people have their names on their houses or something? Well, tagging is like that. People see your name. . . . It makes people feel good” (Diaz, 1992, p. B5). The power of these alternative systems of status and identity can be seen in the intensity with which writers do graffiti. Rasta 68 claims that “I eat, sleep, and breathe graffiti” (Will, 1994, p. 12); Chaka not only tags the courthouse, but maps locations and tags for 7 hours each night; writers jump razor wire and climb billboards to earn status by “tagging the heavens”; and, in southern California, businesses are tagged, repainted, and tagged again four times in a day (MacDuff & Valenzuela, 1993; Quintanilla, 1993).

As graffiti writing shapes youthful identities, it also builds alternative communities. The crews to which writers belong not only tag and piece together, but form deep social bonds as their members share time and resources, construct collective artistic orientations, and defend one another from enemies real and imagined. In Los Angeles, Creator notes that, “It’s like a family to belong to a crew. They watch your back, you watch theirs. You kick it everyday with them. . . . You get friendship, love, supplies, everything” (Quintanilla, 1993, p. E1). Similarly, the 80 or so kids who belong to the FBI crew in southern California emphasize the “sense of family the crew has brought to taggers’ lives” (Nazario & Murphy, 1993, p. B1) and mourn the deaths of seven crew members in a car crash; as one tagger says, “It was family, love, tagging, everything” (Nazario & Murphy, 1993, p. B4). In Denver, crews like Syndicate hold regular “art sessions” to work on collective designs, share the “piecebooks” in which they draw their designs, and often pool their talents to work on large, elaborate pieces. As Rasta 68

says, Syndicate is “ten people with ten brains and twenty eyes to watch out for opposing authority or enemy and to get down with the brain waves thrown down on the wall” (Ferrell, 1993a, p. 36).

Significantly, the alternative communities that writers create often violate the city’s everyday ethnic segregation by incorporating kids of various ethnic backgrounds; as seen previously, southern California’s TIK crew is multiethnic, and Denver crews are often made up of both Anglo and Latino kids. These crews also provide an important, street-level alternative to gangs and gang membership. Writer after writer in Denver, Los Angeles, and elsewhere reports that graffiti writing and crew membership led him or her away from gang identity and activity. The members of Denver’s largely Latino NC (No Claims) crew emphasize that hip hop culture generally, and hip hop graffiti writing specifically, exist for them as lived alternatives to participation in Latino street gangs. And as the members of FBI say, “A lot of people want to gang-bang, but we focus on just being together as one, trying to keep out of trouble. . . . We aren’t hoodlums—these guys were like brothers. We all care for each other. Many of us don’t get any support from our parents” (Nazario & Murphy, 1993, pp. B1, B4; see Donnan & Alexander, 1992; Hubler, 1993; Martin, 1992).

These small communities of writers also contribute to the larger communities of which they are a part. In Denver, writers have painted pieces commenting on local politics, war, and AIDS, and have been commissioned to paint drug awareness and “stay in school” murals. And in New York City, drug dealers and others pay writers to paint large “Rest In Peaces”—murals that commemorate those who have died on the streets (Marriott, 1993; Sanchez, 1993). Clearly, graffiti writers and crews serve as the folk artists of urban communities; day-to-day chroniclers of urban life and death, they represent the worlds they help create. As Lady Pink says, in recalling the early years of hip hop graffiti, “We were like sixties radicals, rebelling against the system. I was dodging bullets in the service of folk art, bringing art to the people” (Siegel, 1993, p. 68).

As the “Rest in Peaces” begin to show, graffiti also contributes to alternative economic

arrangements and underground economies. Hip hop graffiti shops in Denver, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and elsewhere now sell magazines, videos, spray tips, markers—and lines of clothing designed and produced by writers (Sipchen, 1993; Will, 1994; “Writing on the Wall,” 1993). In New York, Los Angeles, and Denver, writers pass out business cards to those who admire their pieces, execute commissioned murals for home and shop owners, and even parlay exposure in antigraffiti mural painting programs into commissioned art work (Horovitz, 1992; Marriott, 1993; Pool, 1992). Increasingly, graffiti writing provides for top writers some hope of economic survival and economic self-determination in an environment that alternates unemployment with minimum wage work. It also creates for writers avenues of artistic development and entrepreneurship outside the restricted circles of gallery art (Ferrell, 1993a).

As they piece and tag, then, graffiti writers not only alter the look of the city and resist its structures of authority, but at the same time create elaborate urban alternatives. Engaging in what anarcho-syndicalists of the early 20th century called “direct action,” and punks of the later 20th century dubbed “D.I.Y.” (do it yourself), graffiti writers invent out of their own activities alternative systems of aesthetics, representation, identity, and meaning. In a world of dead-end jobs and declining career opportunities, they construct new channels for achieving status and earning money. In cities partitioned by ethnicity and social class, they assemble new lines of transurban communication and build new communities that bridge ethnic and class divisions. As they wander the city, they invent new forms of social organization inside the all-too-orderly rubble of the old.

YOUTH AND RESISTANCE

A careful examination of hip hop graffiti writing begins to reveal the many ways in which young graffiti writers resist the structures of authority under which they are placed. By the very nature of their activities and associations, youthful graffiti writers violate the sorts of spatial controls that constipate the contemporary

city and confine kids and others to prearranged patterns of social isolation. When these violations precipitate further controls, graffiti writers counterattack, not only with directly confrontational styles of writing but with a shared “adrenalin rush” that transforms legal pressure into illicit pleasure. And, as graffiti writers participate in this dance of urban control and resistance, they at the same time construct elegantly alternative arrangements that shape both individual identities and communities of support and meaning.

The various forms of resistance embedded in youthful graffiti writing in turn remind us of the sort of approach scholars might productively take toward larger issues of youth and resistance. Neither dreamy romanticism nor theoretical rigidity will suffice; both distance us from the subjects of our study, leave us dependent on secondhand stereotypes, and ultimately demean kids’ actions and identities. Carefully situating our research in young people’s daily lives, on the other hand, broadens our scope to include the many and varied manifestations of authority and resistance entangled there and pushes us to pay attention to the particular meanings of authority and resistance in the everyday, collective experience of youth. In employing this methodology of attentiveness, we are likely to find in kids’ lives forms of resistance far more remarkable than those that romanticism imagines or rigidity imposes—forms of resistance that both confront structures of authority and begin to build alternatives in and around them. And like graffiti writing, these various moments of youthful resistance—too often dismissed as mindlessly destructive—in fact merit our attention not only for undermining contemporary social arrangements but for imagining new ones as well. The words of the Russian anarchist Michael Bakunin echo in the everyday lives of young people, and off the graffiti-covered walls of the contemporary city: “The passion for destruction is a creative passion, too” (Lehning, 1974, p. 58).

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