

The Making of Space, Race and Place

New York City's War on Graffiti,
1970–the Present

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Abstract ■ This article examines New York City's war on graffiti from 1970 until the present and the ways in which the city's reaction to the popular youth practice was largely shaped by the neoliberal restructuring process occurring throughout the same period. It explores the racialization and criminalization of the youth who practiced graffiti, and the ways in which this process manifested itself as a contestation over the use of urban space. Finally, it explores the practice of graffiti and the role of cultural practices more generally in relation to an anti-racist discourse.

Keywords ■ criminalization ■ neoliberal restructuring ■ poverty ■ race ■ urban space ■ youth

Maybe if this art was not from a ghetto, there would be a different approach to the art from our society. If it wasn't just a bunch of kids who weren't expected to make anything with their lives anyway. (Phase 2, quoted in Miller, 2002: 14)

Phase 2's comments¹ cut to the heart of the debate over the practice of graffiti in New York City starting in the early 1970s and into the present. Graffiti speaks to the ways positionality – one's race, class, gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, etc. – can determine how one's creative labor is interpreted. This is not a new phenomenon. However, looking at the historical moment in which graffiti develops – New York City in a period of fiscal crisis and restructuring – does allow us to understand something of the specific contours of the racial formation of this place and time. That is, we can see the links between social structure and cultural representation (Omi and Winant, 2002). In this article, I intend to show the ways in which official policy toward graffiti drew on the same notions of race, youth and poverty that were employed in the effort to restructure New York City as a neoliberal capital. These concepts enabled the city, in close alliance with the business community, to criminalize both the practice and the practitioners. We can see here, then, the ways in which the construction of graffiti as a racialized, hyper-masculine project in the public imagination is intricately entwined with the hegemonic project of restructuring the city

being pursued by the business community at the same time. The emerging graffiti community was both rhetorically and materially shaped by the transition to a neoliberal economy. The same alliance between city government and the business community is the force behind the ongoing war on graffiti. I also intend to show that this was in no way inevitable. There were many possible responses to the emerging popularity of graffiti as a sophisticated artistic practice. I argue that the city's official response was, and continues to be, an unrelenting opposition to the practice because of the underlying economic project of restructuring the city to serve the needs of capital accumulation, even though graffiti has made significant inroads into the high art market, pop culture and advertising.

Graffiti as an emerging cultural practice

Cultural projects can be problematic for certain political and economic projects if they cannot be assimilated in some way. Graffiti, as a cultural practice that produces a commons and creates a shared, public, democratic visual space, is particularly troublesome for the project of neoliberalization, which is about radical privatization of the public sphere in the service of capital accumulation. Because graffiti culture and practice in public space remain problematic for the neoliberal vision of New York City, there is an ongoing battle against it, waged by political leaders who see their job as catering to the business community, not to the needs of the citizens of New York. Central to this project, historically, has been a battle over representation in which city officials have framed the practice in a way to win public support for a war most New Yorkers feel ambivalent about at best.

Graffiti emerged as a subculture in the late 1960s. By 1971 the ubiquitous presence of some of the more industrious practitioners' names, or tags, throughout the city began to pique the interest of New Yorkers outside of the subculture. The initial media coverage of the practice, most importantly an interview with Taki 183 in the *New York Times* in the summer of 1971, was sympathetic, portraying writers as young people with an interesting pastime. The article included long quotes by Taki explaining why he wrote his name everywhere he went, saying he 'did it for himself'. He also explained his position on the possible penalties that could be enforced on anyone over the age of 18 caught writing, saying, 'it [graffiti] doesn't harm anybody. I work, I pay taxes too. Why do they go after the little guy? Why not the campaign organizations that put stickers all over the subways at election time?' (Castleman, 1982: 135). This was virtually the last time that any graffiti writer would be given the opportunity to explain their practice on their own terms and at length in the media for at least the next two decades.

In 1971 there was no law against graffiti in New York City. The Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) had a rule, much like the rules against

eating and drinking on trains and buses. This was the extent of the city's official policy on graffiti. In May 1972 the *New York Times* printed an editorial praising city council president Sanford Garelik's public declaration of war against graffiti as a form of visual pollution (Castleman, 1982: 136). Not long afterward, Mayor Lindsay proposed his anti-graffiti legislation, defining graffiti as a crime subject to legal penalty. This law was ultimately passed by the Council on 11 October 1972 (Castleman, 1982: 138). Within a year the coalition against graffiti between city government, the media and the business community had been solidified. Henceforth, graffiti writers would be referred to as vandals, thugs and criminals in the mass media, and their own voices would be largely shut out. There were a few exceptions, like the articles in *New York Magazine* in March of 1973, which praised the writers' artistry and efforts and vilified the city administration for punishing such a harmless and potentially positive activity of young people. But the paradigm had been irreversibly set and articles like these simply fed into the rhetorical war between those who supported the vandals and those whose job it was to stop them.

Even with the law in place, few graffiti writers were convicted. Of 1562 arrests for graffiti in early 1973, only 462 resulted in convictions. Punishment was minimal, usually requiring writers to spend a day cleaning graffiti off trains. Mayor Lindsay acknowledged publicly that these efforts did not appear as if they would successfully eliminate graffiti entirely. However, he stated that: 'The cost of cleaning up graffiti, even to a partial extent, is sad testimony to the impact of the thoughtless behavior which lies behind . . . the demoralizing visual impact of graffiti.' He added: 'It's a dirty shame that we must spend money for this purpose in a time of austerity' (Castleman, 1982: 142). In order to understand this swift and uncompromising commitment to a war on graffiti that even the mayor acknowledged would probably not achieve its goals, one has to understand the broader context of New York City at this time.

New York City: the broader context

During this same period New York City was mired in financial difficulties. Unable to meet its financial obligations and being refused assistance from the federal government, New York appeared to be headed for financial ruin. While the fiscal crisis that the city faced in the mid-1970s was real, it also served as an opportunity for the business community to implement a panoply of policies that pushed poor and working-class people out of the city, or at least to the margins, and reduced the cost of local government in order to recreate the city as a corporate capital (Tabb, 1982). The municipal unions and the poor were framed as the cause of the city's ongoing financial woes. Images of greedy 'power brokers' in the unions and undeserving poor draining the city's coffers with their unreasonable

demands for welfare, tuition-free education and health services were crucial in this restructuring project. Corporate interests were touted as the saviors of the city, providing jobs and economic growth in exchange for tax breaks and other incentives (Tabb, 1982).

This restructuring had a profoundly spatial element as well. The dislocation of the poor from the urban center was helped along tremendously by fiscal policy that encouraged gentrification. There was a massive restructuring of the uses to which urban space was put. Instead of housing workers cheaply and centrally in order for industrial and manufacturing businesses to have a readily available labor force, the restructuring of the city into a corporate mecca required that the urban center cater to middle- and upper-class professionals. This process displaced many poor people to make room for wealthier white-collar workers. Organizations like the Central Business Committee (CBC) advocated for public spending on infrastructure that would cater to business professionals, like a Second Avenue subway line to better serve the wealthy Upper East Side of Manhattan (Shefter, 1987).

Graffiti called attention to a mass transit system that had fallen into utter disrepair and which the city had no possible means to fix. Many of the more skilled writers saw their creative efforts as attempts to beautify a neglected, ramshackle transit system that had been subject to years of disinvestment and deferred maintenance (Austin, 2001). The ability of young people to spontaneously initiate a project that completely saturated the insides and outsides of New York's massive network of subways with their names and images probably *was* demoralizing for a city administration that was virtually paralyzed by financial crisis. The solution to the fiscal crisis in 1974–5 was the imposition of austerity policies privately designed by a small group of business elites. Elected city officials lost control of the city's affairs (Tabb, 1982: 21). However, instead of ignoring the practice or drawing inspiration from the obvious vitality of these young people, the city decided to declare war on them as a way to assert control, at least symbolically, over this infrastructural system. At this point in the mid-1970s the Lindsay, and subsequently the Beame, administrations still saw their job, at least partially, as defending the needs of everyday New Yorkers. However, the hijacking of oversight of the city's finances by the business community meant that these administrations had very little latitude in their ability to successfully initiate any project. The war on graffiti proved to be an exception. Throughout this period there was capital available for research and implementation of various technological solutions to the 'problem' of graffiti.

Graffiti removal vs the third rail mail

In August of 1977 the MTA introduced a \$20 million automatic car wash that used chemical solvents to remove the writers' paint (Austin, 2001).

Referred to as 'the buff' by writers, this technology was mostly successful in opening up space on the trains for writers to do their work. In the unwritten rules of graffiti, writing on top of someone else's work was not acceptable. If someone did write over your work it was considered aggressive and was treated as a serious provocation. However, the buff also had the unfortunate effect of erasing the early writing history that lived on the outside of the trains. The buff was also ineffective in actually removing the writers' work. Typically, the paint that the writers used was of better quality than that on the outside of the trains so that these solvents either removed everything and required the MTA to repaint the cars, or they just smeared and faded the paint on the outside (Austin, 2001).

These buffed cars again exhibit the logic (or illogic) of the war on graffiti. Graffiti did pose some legitimate public safety concerns. Many letters to the editor in New York newspapers at this time addressed the inconvenience of paint-covered windows that made it difficult to see out and to know what stop the train was at. However, the city's response, which proved toxic, dangerous, expensive and corrosive to the subways themselves, went well beyond most riders' limited concerns with cleaning the windows. The disruption of these young people's activities was the motivation behind the investment in this technology, not aesthetic improvement or public safety. Smeared, faded facades were regarded as preferable to allowing young people's work to remain untouched and visible in this public space. The actual chemicals used were incredibly toxic and endangered the health of both transit employees and the children in a school near the car wash. They were also corrosive and over time began to eat away at the floors of the subway cars, damaging the very object they were meant to improve (Castleman, 1982). The cost of putting a single subway car through the wash was \$80 and the MTA planned on running all 7000 cars through the wash a minimum of three times per year (Castleman, 1982: 154). This was a huge, ongoing expense in a time of severe fiscal crisis for a program that utterly failed in achieving its stated goal: reducing the level of graffiti on the trains.

City officials' initial attacks on graffiti were successful in rhetorically forcing writers into an oppositional role that they did not necessarily want or intend to occupy. The rhetoric of war made it virtually impossible for graffiti writers to get across to a wider public the many positive aspects of the subculture. Their ability to communicate was limited to their work on the trains. However, this was a valuable mode of communication, exhibiting day in and day out the obvious artistic merit and skill of a lot of the work on the outside of the trains. But there were many other positive aspects that were silenced. Graffiti emerged as a message-oriented form. A writer would write someone's name whose style they admired with her own name next to it and he or she would write back. Young people called this 'third rail mail'. This communication system transformed writers' spatially segregated communities into a citywide community of practitioners. The

young people who practiced graffiti placed a high value on the openness of the community they were forming. As Crash says, 'Our art was multi-racial, multicultural, multilingual, multidimensional' (Miller, 2002: 32). This use of public infrastructure for the purposes of communication between spatially segregated neighborhoods was antithetical to the restructuring project initiated at the same time by business elites whose interest was in transforming the city as much as possible into an infrastructure to support corporations. Most writers were young, poor and from minority backgrounds. While the laws prohibited all New Yorkers from writing on the trains, these young people were the most impacted because their avenues for public expression were limited. Graffiti was a community open to whoever wanted to participate, and young people from many class, racial and ethnic backgrounds did, but the majority were poor youth of color. They were hardly the population to whom organizations like the CBC felt the city should be catering. In many ways they represented the surplus population many in the business community were interested in displacing.

In 1973 the MTA began to acknowledge what they called the 'grand design' problem (Castleman, 1982). In graffiti parlance, this referred to whole-car and top-to-bottom pieces. As the practice developed through the late 1960s and early 1970s, young people began to utilize the outside of the trains to maximum effect, filling the entire surface with their name, backgrounds and characters. This very public assertion of their presence, in Technicolor pieces as tall and wide as a subway car, was an unacceptable aesthetic incursion into the urban center by people who were being actively marginalized by the city's restructuring policies. Although Lindsay's campaign did little to actually reduce the level of graffiti on the trains, it did successfully criminalize the practice, which effectively shut the voices of the writers out of the media, and initiated a public debate that defined the practice and the writers as a problem for the city. Despite the diverse backgrounds of many young writers and the positive aspects of the subculture that encouraged communication, developing technical skill and a respect for other participants' work, this rhetorical war on graffiti framed them all as thugs. Their anonymity – the fact that they only existed as names on trains – further obscured these aspects of the subculture for the general public, who could only imagine what these vandals must look like and what their intentions must be.

Mayor Koch and the transformation of the city

While the graffiti removal efforts continued throughout the 1970s, the issue largely dropped out of the public debate between 1975 and 1981 (Castleman, 1982). This was mostly due to the abysmal success rate in reducing the amount of graffiti on the trains. Public officials were wary of calling attention to a failing program at a time of severe cutbacks for fear

of having to justify the expense. Mayor Koch was the public official who once again put the war on graffiti front and center in the early 1980s. Koch differed from his predecessors in that he was a pro-austerity mayor. He did not need the enforced oversight of the business community to ensure that he would continue the austerity program initiated in the mid-1970s. He was happy to continue to cut services and the pay of city employees (Tabb, 1982). Koch's popularity was largely with white ethnic communities. Their support grew out of racially divisive policies that gave the implicit message that black and Latino New Yorkers would suffer the most from these necessary cuts. For example, in 1980 Koch closed four public hospitals, all of which were in black and Latino neighborhoods, and none in white areas (Tabb, 1982). As the fiscal crisis wore on throughout the 1970s, the ability of working-class New Yorkers to fight this assault on their well-being eroded. By the late 1970s there was a growing sense of the inevitability and necessity of service cuts. The retreat of white working-class New Yorkers from the struggle against austerity in order to maintain their marginally preferable position resulted in increased racial tensions within the city (Tabb, 1982). Koch's reinvigorated war on graffiti capitalized on the racial polarization within the city to build public support for an expensive, difficult campaign to eliminate graffiti from New York's subways. This reinvigorated war on graffiti drew on earlier rhetorical strategies that established graffiti writers as criminals, positing them as the enemy in a war on the city's integrity. However, his tactics and rhetoric also created parallels between graffiti writers and the poor black and Latino communities that were portrayed as the cause of New York's social ills and urban decay. The innovative elements in the reinvigorated war on graffiti were the ways this rhetorical strategy was enforced by increasingly militarized tactics.

In 1974 MTA Chairman David Yunich had announced a \$10 million graffiti eradication program, a key part of which was the use of attack dogs in the train yards and lay-ups where writers painted (Castleman, 1982). The *New York Times* criticized both the expense – arguing that the money could be used for transit police to catch muggers, who posed a real threat – and the use of dogs as a disturbingly dangerous and brutal method for dealing with teenagers, even if they were breaking the law. In 1980, Koch revived the idea and began to publicly pressure the Transit Authority to put attack dogs and fences around the train yards (Austin, 2001). This time the *New York Times* put its support squarely behind the mayor, dogs and all, with an editorial touting the plan the day after the MTA finally agreed to test it out.

This change of heart reveals a shift in the way graffiti was perceived, at least as far as the *New York Times* editorial board was concerned, between the mid-1970s and the early 1980s. The levels of graffiti on the trains were more or less constant throughout this period, that is, full saturation of both the insides and outsides, with large, intricate, colorful pieces dominating the outsides. The styles had changed somewhat over time, but not dramatically. If anything, writers' technical skills at producing graphically complicated

and visually interesting pieces had improved. It was not that graffiti writers were doing something new in the early 1980s, it was that the city they were doing it in had undergone a radical transformation in which everyday New Yorkers were beginning to accept the restructuring of their city as inevitable and common sense. Graffiti could be framed as a menace to the health and well-being of the city in a way that had not been possible before this restructuring had taken place. A large group of presumably unemployed, poor, largely minority, youths advertising their presence with their tags all over subway trains that ran through the heart of the city day in and day out was deeply disruptive to the image of New York as an urban space populated by and catering to the needs of white-collar professionals.

It is important to keep in mind the scale of the project in which graffiti writers were engaged. In the early 1980s the MTA also began a massive repainting program of both the insides and the outsides of the trains. Like the buff, this program was mostly successful at freeing up space for writers to do new work. It was discontinued four months after it started when results came back that 85 percent of subway cars were completely covered with writing again within a week of being painted (Austin, 2001). The extreme popularity of the practice failed to give pause to city officials in their efforts to disrupt the practice. As Lee, a graffiti writer from the late 1970s and early 1980s, says:

Subways are corporate America's way of getting people to work. It's used as an object of transporting corporate clones. And the trains were clones themselves, they were supposed to be silver blue, a form of imperialist control. And we took that and completely changed it. We brought them to life. They came to life. (Miller, 2002: 109)

Writers' success in this transformative project only fueled the determination of city officials to eradicate it.

The brutality and intolerance with which Koch attacked graffiti writers was a small piece of a much larger attack on poor people of color at this time. The criminalization of young people of color – particularly young men – through the war on drugs at this moment in New York City history has been well documented (Mullings, 2003; Parenti, 1999; Sharff, 1996). The increasingly violent tactics of police in dealing with graffiti writers was part of a more general increase in violence against young black and Latino men within the city as a whole. The acceptability of these increasingly violent tactics as a way to stop graffiti writers can be linked to this more general phenomenon, which was justified through a portrayal of young men of color as violent drug-dealing thugs and young women of color as welfare queens. 'The driving ideological and cultural force that rationalizes and justifies mass incarceration is the white American public's stereotypical perceptions about race and crime' (Manning Marable, cited in Queeley, 2003).

The wars on graffiti defined the practice in a way that drew on existing popular representations of youth and race that were already in circulation.

In New York City in the mid-1970s one of the most powerful representations being contested in the public sphere was that of the unproductive, consumption-oriented poor as the cause of the city's financial difficulties (Tabb, 1982). This is why Koch's attacks on graffiti were able to garner the public and internal institutional support necessary to actually reduce the amount of graffiti on the trains for the first time in more than a decade. Linking graffiti, already defined as a crime under Lindsay's administration, to representations and stereotypes of poor black and Latino communities translated easily into the portrayal of graffiti as a real threat to the well-being of the city. One of the most suggestive examples of this rhetorical linking was Koch's anti-graffiti public awareness campaign, which used posters and pamphlets with the motto: 'Make your mark in society, not on society' (Silver, 2003). Implicit in this was an accusation that graffiti writers, much like welfare queens, were an urban social ill whose wanton consumption of public resources, either welfare checks or visual space, was to blame for bankrupting the city. This strategy exploited the very real reduction in services suffered by white ethnic communities through the 1970s by blaming them on communities of color, who had suffered even more. This was an especially effective strategy to divide and conquer the working classes in New York and to ensure that they did not unify in opposition to New York's restructuring. It was also effective in fueling increased hostility toward poor people of color and justifying more brutal treatment of these groups.

The increasingly violent tactics used by the police also affected the demographics of the writing community. When graffiti developed as a sophisticated practice and gained popularity in the late 1960s and early 1970s, women were very much at the forefront. Many stylistic and technical innovations can be traced back to female writers from this period (Miller, 2002). Koch's pressure on the MTA to restrict access to the train yards through fencing, razor wire and attack dogs meant that the risks involved in getting to the trains increased substantially. Writers began to work more often in smaller groups, or individually and in the middle of the night. Also, the threat of physical harassment and abuse became more common for writers confronted by a police officer in a dark train tunnel or yard (Silver, 2003). While young men were vulnerable to these attacks, women faced a double vulnerability to both physical and potential sexual assault. The on-the-ground response to writers reflected the city administration's position that ending graffiti at any cost was more important than any concern for the life and limbs of young people, which in turn marginalized women within the subculture. The result was an erasure of women from the history of graffiti. By the time high-profile documentation of the art form took place in the early 1980s, women had been largely sidelined. Two of the most important documents of writing culture from this period, the films *Style Wars* and *Wild Style*, include one female writer between them. The invisibility of women in the practice at this time had less to do with

graffiti being a masculine activity and more to do with the treatment of writers by city authorities. However, these attacks on graffiti helped to construct it in the popular imagination as a hyper-masculine activity, which further fed the image of graffiti writers as a serious threat to the city's well-being.

The military-style security introduced in the train yards, with more and more of them being enclosed with fences and razor wire, had another material effect on graffiti writing culture. Decreased access to trains translated as a lack of resources for the writers. As access to their preferred medium, the steel surface of subway cars, was restricted, writers from about 1983 to 1986 became extremely territorial and aggressive, claiming ownership to yards and lay-ups and enforcing these claims violently by beating up unwelcome writers and stealing their painting supplies (at149th street, n.d.). At this point, graffiti culture began to take on some of the negative characteristics popular portrayals had been ascribing to it for years. However, these negative aspects only became significant features as the city and the MTA's tactics began to achieve substantial success in eradicating graffiti from the trains for the first time. Mid-1986 is seen as the turning point at which the MTA finally gained the upper hand. After this, the violence that had characterized the practice during this brief period subsided, although some writers continued to work on the trains even after 1988 when they were declared graffiti free (www.at149.com).

Koch's war on graffiti proved successful in removing graffiti from running subway trains by 1988. The process was a long, expensive and contentious one, made possible by prevailing notions about criminality and young people of color, and the unwavering determination and support of the business community. Though these notions of who was writing on the trains did not account for the middle-class, non-minority participants who were also involved in the subculture, the criminalization of the practice enforced anonymity in a way that allowed politicians, the business community and the media to portray writers more or less how they pleased. Even if writers had had access to public forums to contest the negative images of their community, it is doubtful that very many would have, for fear of punishment.

Ultimately, the war on graffiti was fought on several fronts. First, there was an increase in physical threats, harassment and attacks on writers on the ground, which at the very least discouraged women from participating. Second, there was a technological component that included expensive, corrosive chemical washes for the trains in an attempt to remove writers' work, extensive repainting of the trains, and several attempts at finding a coating or surface that would prevent writers' paint from sticking to the trains. Finally, there was the privatization of semi-public spaces like the train yards, tunnels and lay-ups, which had been relatively open and accessible before Koch took office (Austin, 2001).

It is often argued that graffiti is a crime because it does damage to private property. However, writers throughout the 1970s and 1980s very much preferred the public space of trains and buses to privately owned spaces like homes and businesses. And yet, it was the graffiti that appeared on the shared public space of the trains that was attacked most vehemently. These attacks make sense in the context of a neoliberal restructuring in which infrastructure that had previously been understood as belonging to the public was being reframed as infrastructure that existed to serve the needs and interests of the business community. The reason the trains weren't abandoned to disrepair and decay was because New York as a corporate center benefited from this system. Implicit in that understanding was the notion that trains would also be made semi-private by ridding them of graffiti, the homeless and the poor (Susser, 1996).

Graffiti removal – beyond the trains

In the most recent incarnation of the war on graffiti, initiated by Mayor Giuliani in 1995, the focus has been on ridding the entire city of graffiti, including train tunnels, bridges, highway dividers and overpasses, and the industrial and semi-abandoned areas writers have been relegated to since the loss of the trains in the late 1980s. The initial efforts of the Giuliani administration centered on transforming areas like Times Square, which are symbolically important to the city, into capital-friendly areas. Again, this meant putting a huge emphasis on removing poor people from these areas so that they would seem 'safe' to middle- and upper-class patrons. As Leith Mullings makes clear, these 'economic transformations were accompanied by political interventions, above all aggressive policing, designed to create an environment in which the "global city" could flourish' (Mullings, 2003: 179). Giuliani stressed the broken-window effect of things like graffiti as an invitation to more serious street crimes, like mugging and pick-pocketing, because they communicated the lack of control law enforcement had on an area. This emphasis on 'quality of life' offenses shifts the blame for crime away from obvious factors like poverty and desperation caused by a lack of employment and social support services and onto the visual presence of a graffiti writer's tag in an area.

Giuliani blaming graffiti for street crime was part of the larger project of city government deflecting responsibility for the well-being of its citizens away from economic and social policy and onto poor minority communities as the cause of their own problems. In doing so, the effects of increased poverty were framed as social ills that are best dealt with through pushing the poor out of the city center and criminalizing their behavior. Giuliani employed the language of the previous wars on graffiti, capitalizing on the conflated images of crime, poor youth of color and

hyper-masculinity to argue that the practice gave the impression that the city was out of control and under threat. However, expanding Koch's efforts from the relatively contained space of the trains to the more ambitious space of the city as a whole is emblematic of Giuliani's more comprehensive vision of transforming the entire city into a structure to support capital accumulation and the business community. Eliminating graffiti from the trains, which occupied a limited and specific amount of space directly under the control of a government agency, was a project that took 15 years of sustained effort to complete. Eliminating graffiti from the city as a whole seems like an unimaginably difficult task, but not one that Giuliani or his successor, Mayor Bloomberg, have shied away from.

In 2002 the New York Police Department merged the Anti-graffiti/vandalism unit with the Transit Bureau's Vandal's unit to form the Citywide Vandal's Task Force, the staffing level of which was increased by one lieutenant, two sergeants and ten police officers. They have recently incorporated new technology into this effort, using digital cameras to monitor graffiti and to compile a database of writers that can be accessed by all precincts (Sclafini, 2005). An article in the *Daily News* on 14 November 2005 reported that arrests for graffiti had increased 93.2 percent over the previous year.

The recent publicity for these efforts has reiterated the official stance that graffiti writing, regardless of its quality or sophistication, is not art. Even though graffiti has been categorized as a crime for over 30 years, it seems one of the biggest challenges the city faces is the common perception by many New Yorkers that graffiti is harmless, or perhaps even valuable. According to the NYPD:

... before any discussion of graffiti vandalism can commence, one has to understand exactly what is being fought. Apparently there are some who look on graffiti as a type of avant-garde art, which has a place as an expression of social worth. But that view is not only puerile, it is misguided as well. (NYPD, n.d.)

Graffiti and/as art

This unrelenting attitude toward the practice by city officials seems a bit out of step, given the recent high-profile exhibitions of graffiti that have taken place in New York. The Brooklyn Museum's 2006 retrospective of five prominent graffiti writers 'explores how a genre that began as a form of subversive public communication has become legitimate – moving away from the street and into private collections and galleries' (Brooklyn Museum, 2006). While it is certainly true that some high-profile writers have been able to attain successful art careers, the vast majority of practitioners continue to be looked upon as illegitimate. Even among these successful artists there is considerable debate over how to think about graffiti that is shown in high art venues. Sandra Fabara, also known as Lady Pink, a writer who was featured in the Brooklyn Museum exhibit, argues:

The pieces in galleries cease to be graffiti because they have been removed from the cultural context that gives graffiti a reason for being, a voice from the ghetto. Authentic graffiti cannot exist in the sanctuary provided by the galleries and museums. (Miller, 2002: 159)

Divorced from the public context, these works take on a different meaning and valence. Meanwhile, the public spaces many writers prefer to work in are disappearing as they are more heavily policed and increasingly privatized.

Though graffiti writers have been able to gain cultural influence within art markets and in popular culture, this has not had an impact on the mayor and the police's unambiguous response to the practice. The official view continues to draw on the image of a pathological writing community interested only in the perpetration of their collective crime. According to Lt Steve Mona:

Vandals are not interested in artistic expression or social commentary, all they care about is getting their 'ups' all over the city. It is not for you or me to see, it is for those who exist in this world, where the more your tag is seen the bigger a celebrity you are. (NYPD, n.d.)

The devaluation of young people's efforts disregards their desire for legitimacy on their own terms, and short circuits any possibility for compromise or consensus between the city and these practitioners. As Smith and Sane, New York City graffiti writers who rose to prominence in the mid to late 1980s, have argued:

Not only would the MTA have been able to reap the benefits of having a beautiful subway system, had they accepted our art, but they also would have been able to contain it. What writer, if given the option of painting trains without fear of getting caught or buffed could refuse? (Austin, 2001: 268)

As cultural producers, writers desire space and a forum for presenting their work. Because their preferred forum is shared, public space, this practice is seen as intolerable, even criminal in the neoliberal city. While private property remains a powerful notion in the construction of graffiti as a crime, this argument overlooks the writing community's own preference for presenting work on shared, collective spaces. The practice illuminates the degree to which shared public space is increasingly privatized with the neoliberal economic restructuring of the city, largely through increased policing.

The privatized city

The privatization of space gained increased importance in post-fiscal crisis New York as the business elite consolidated hegemonic control over the city's politics to an ever-greater degree. They continue to support the police department in their efforts to eliminate graffiti from New York City's streets. New York's Economic Development Corporation (EDC) has instituted a

program called Graffiti Free NYC. The purpose of the program, according to EDC President Andrew Alper, a Bloomberg appointee, is 'to boost New York City's economy and create jobs'. He continues:

It's critical to create neighborhoods where people want to live and businesses want to locate and invest. We're very proud that through this important anti-graffiti initiative, EDC helped remove more than 10 million square feet of graffiti, which hurts neighborhoods both aesthetically and economically. (NYCEDC, n.d.)

The program employs several trucks that target specific neighborhoods in the city, power-washing and then repainting areas that have graffiti on them.

Even the practice of graffiti on privately owned property can be controversial, as City Councilman Peter Vallone's personal crusade against the practice has shown. He had a permit revoked for a promotional event planned by fashion designer Mark Ecko in August 2005 that featured 20 well-known graffiti artists painting replicas of 1970s-era subway cars. Ecko was forced to turn to the courts and argue that his first amendment rights were being challenged (Morris, 2005). Though Ecko's first amendment rights were upheld, Vallone's personal crusade against the practice has continued. He drafted and pushed through a law that prohibits anyone under the age of 21 from possessing wide-tip markers or aerosol paint. This law has been challenged in court and, while a decision is pending, enforcement has been suspended under court mandate.

What is clear from these ongoing battles in the war on graffiti is that in New York City the control of public space has been crucial to establishing neoliberal austerity as a common-sense notion. Aesthetic discipline around who is allowed to initiate projects in the public sphere and who is not, is tied to common conceptions of race, class, gender and youth. However, the incorporation of graffiti into high art markets, and as a marketing tool for everything from sodas to video games, also reveals the remarkable flexibility of neoliberalism to incorporate insurgent elements, even if only to a partial degree. New York City's war on graffiti communicates a strong message that some groups do not have a say in the aesthetics of the city in which they live, insofar as their efforts in public space are policed and criminalized. This spills over, even when these projects and aesthetic sensibilities begin to influence legitimate, capital-friendly forms. Their incorporation into the public space remains controversial, as a recent advertisement hung on Houston Street in Soho demonstrates. *Time* magazine commissioned Cope 2 to paint a large vinyl advertisement with their logo to be hung at Houston and Wooster asking: 'Post modernism? Neo expressionism? Just vandalism? *Time*. Know more.' The advertisement created a small firestorm of debate, prompting Peter Vallone to exhort: '*Time* magazine should have spent its money rewarding legitimate artists, not some punk who's been defacing our city.' Even *Time* magazine's president remained ambivalent, stating: 'We're

not necessarily endorsing it, we're just using it as a provocation' (Melago and McDonell, 2005).

Racism and the 'culture of poverty' thesis

This kind of discourse around cultural productions and the material circumstances it gives rise to can tell us a considerable amount about issues of structural racism. Faye Harrison, in her discussion of global apartheid in the neoliberal era, says: 'Although culturally variable, [race] encodes social differences often assumed to be hereditary – differences that, if not carefully managed and policed, are considered threats to a nation's social structure' (2002: 50). In the context of the post-Civil Rights United States the idea of race as an immutable biological difference lost currency in justifying the differential access to goods and services between black and white Americans. Similar to Stolke's ideas about neo-racism in the modern European context (Stolke, 1995), in which cultural essentialism serves as the new justification for inequality based on perceived difference, Oscar Lewis posited his 'culture of poverty' theory in the late 1960s. This was the idea that poor communities developed a significantly different culture from the dominant American culture as a response to hardship. Over several generations, this culture of poverty became so embedded in the community that it was essentially immutable. Lewis argued that children born into these communities were essentially pre-conditioned to take on the anti-social behavior patterns of this culture by the age of 7 (Lewis, 1966). This idea, replacing earlier notions of biological racial inferiority with a cultural inferiority that was widely ascribed to minority groups, proved fertile ground for justifying the neoliberal reform that began in the US with the urban fiscal crises, most notably in New York, in the 1970s and was consolidated on a national scale in the Reagan era. This neoliberal trajectory has not slowed, even under the Democratic leadership of Clinton who signed the welfare reform bill in 1996 and ruthlessly pursued free trade policies which benefit multinational corporations at the expense of workers and the poor worldwide. This culture of poverty notion has been the justification behind the intensified policing of poor, minority communities throughout the 1980s and up to the present day. Intensive policing has been accompanied by a massive explosion in the prison population (Parenti, 1999).

The culture of poverty paradigm has also significantly shaped social science practices, in which the behavior of urban poor and working-class people of color is often assumed to be either pathological or a reaction to oppression and inequality (Kelley, 1997). This leaves very little room for agency on the part of the urban working poor, or for understanding their activities through the lens of pleasure and desire, the things which make us fully human. 'One of the fundamental criticisms of the sociology of race

and ethnic relations is that it has too often focused on the victims rather than the perpetrators of racism' (Solomos and Back, 1986). In this article I have purposely avoided analyzing the sociological meaning of graffiti for the practitioners. Too much ink has been spilt on speculations as to what motivates young people to take up the practice. Instead, I attempted to explore the reaction to the practice on the part of city officials, demonstrating how and why racialized constructions are employed and how this, in turn, has affected the practitioners' ability to represent themselves and their practice, and to argue for its validity and worth. However, in order to draw some conclusions, I would like to explore briefly the relationship between cultural practice, racial constructions and underlying structures, and to expose the insidious ways in which the culture of poverty argument has shaped the war on graffiti and attacks on poor, urban communities more generally.

Co-workers in the kingdom of culture

In his essay, 'Toward an Effective Anti-racism', Nikhil Pal Singh quotes W.E.B. Dubois, stating: 'Dubois . . . asked that the nation and the world recognize the freedman as a "co-worker in the kingdom of culture"' (Singh, 2000: 31). Exploring the ways in which graffiti, as an indigenous cultural practice emerging in New York City in the late 1960s, has been framed by the state and the media in the popular imagination and attacked throughout its brief existence is a clear case study in how far we are from realizing Dubois's ideal. Singh also makes an argument against a premature universalism that professes color-blindness. He argues that this kind of universalism obscures the structural reality of American society, in which white privilege results in black underprivilege. This is not a hopeless view. It is an honest assessment of the contemporary landscape and a recognition that social constructions like race need to be understood historically and processually. Key, however, is the understanding that this relationship of privilege and underprivilege is not natural or inevitable. It is pursued and achieved through the efforts of interested parties.

In order to justify the expensive and ineffective wars on graffiti the practice had to be linked to a racial discourse of criminality. 'The symbolic location of black crime connects with associated racial discourses that construct black communities as being incompatible with [our] way of life. "Black youth" are thus constructed as a social problem' (Solomos and Back, 1996: 182). The construction of graffiti as a problem has significant parallels to urban poor people being constructed as a problem more generally. These contested representations effectively shut these cultural productions out of public space and defined them as invalid, or, in the words of the NYPD, not art. Although the efforts of these young people over the course of the last 35 years have gained some legitimacy, their stylistic

innovations and aesthetic projects remain controversial. As *Time* magazine claims, it is this controversy that is often employed in legitimate incorporations of the practice into commercial or artistic endeavors, not the merits of the work itself on its own terms.

This brings up another important point. We must avoid the opposite tendency, to *praise* the artistic, cultural productions of the internally oppressed in a way that essentializes both the product and the producer. This is what Cabral calls the 'absurd linking of artistic creations, whether good or not, with supposed racial characteristics' (1973: 51). It is just as absurd to argue that all graffiti has artistic merit and worth as it is to argue that none of it does.

However, where and by whom the criteria for judgment are determined is of critical importance. Debates over the merit of different kinds of work were taking place within the New York City writing community in the early 1980s and are well documented in the film *Style Wars*. These debates continue on websites and other Internet forums today. The city's steadfast refusal to pursue a more nuanced policy, taking seriously the internal standards of quality generated by the writing community itself, is emblematic of the refusal to acknowledge this practice as anything but an urban blight. While art gallery appraisals are tolerated, this has had very little impact on the official state response to the practice more generally in New York City. That is, the work that is in shared public space, on abandoned buildings, in train tunnels and on bridges, is not better tolerated even though it has gained influence in certain elite, private venues. In fact, it has been subject to increased policing. While the practice of graffiti has gained some legitimacy as a community-building or democracy-building practice in some cities, particularly in the European context, this has not happened in New York in any official capacity. This may be related to the fact that no other city has been so significantly aesthetically transformed by the practice as New York and its subway system were. In the early 1980s, tourists were coming to New York to see what they considered a New York landmark, the painted trains. Insofar as I looked to graffiti to better understand the racial formation of the city at a particular moment, it would be useful to study the practice in other contexts to see how it and the official response to it might differ. This kind of comparative study could tell us something both about the potential of this practice and the differing attitudes to this form of cultural production.

Dubois's demand was not that all cultural productions emanating from African American sources be automatically praised. Instead, his was an appeal to a substantive equality that would extend beyond political and economic rights and into the realm of culture. A truly anti-racist discourse must understand the ways in which political and economic structures relate to cultural representations. Uncovering these linkages by looking at specific practices that are anchored in physical space and historical time may be important in constructing 'a new language of human emancipation that has

the capacity to project a new vision of an alternative global social order in which “difference” does not inevitably convey the reality of structural inequality’ (Mullings, 2004: 8). Cabral (1973) argues that cultural resistance is the indestructible seed of political, economic and armed resistance. The determination of New York City’s graffiti writers to pursue their work in the face of increasing and ongoing penalization, resistance and constant disruption speaks to the deep roots of desire that fuel the practice and may provide us with an insight into the ways in which current regimes of domination and marginalization might begin to be addressed.

Note

- 1 Phase 2 is a prominent New York graffiti writer.

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