

Writ Large: Graffiti and Praxis in Pedagogical Third Spaces

Jessica Lee Hochman
Teachers College, Columbia University

Journalist Lee Smith admits that he dabbled in graffiti in the late 1970s. He relished writing with the MOB crew in the 1/9 train yard in Riverdale, New York; the smell of a Pilot marker and spray paint mingling as an intoxicating ether of adolescent artistry. His inspiration was more than just the thrill of committing a minor crime, or so Smith suggests:

This was a culture composed of teenagers who'd been handed the legacy of the civil Rights Movement and managed to make something out of it together. Our neighborhoods were hard[ly near]by each other's and we all met on the subway...race relations were both strained and vital. There were legendary, and maybe just rumored, incidents between the mostly white GO Club and the mostly black Pearls, but there were also scores of white kids listening to Parliament and Sly Stone, and black kids, like EZE 1, digging Zeppelin and Sabbath.¹

The young people who decorated the subway cars with graffiti in the 1970s and 80s were doing more than merely writing their names on the trains.² They were not singularly creating art, as gallerists and graffiti enthusiasts came to believe, nor were they merely seeking recognition through an act of transgressing the law. The act of "getting up" or placing one's name or "tag" on the subway was certainly about self-expression, getting recognition, and the thrill of breaking the law, but it was also about engaging with the city and the creation of a culture. And, as Smith notes in his essay, young people came from all over New York's five boroughs to create graffiti together, and in the process they had to negotiate the rocky terrain of race relations in the city.

During this era, graffiti was a form of praxis that occurred in the in-between, or Third Spaces, both physically and dialectically.³ It was physically created within a Third Space that belonged singularly to youth: a space that is neither school nor home, and I will argue that its creation within this unique space allows youth control over its pedagogical elements. I will further argue that graffiti creates its own unique and important dialectical Third Space for education: between a writer and a viewer, between young people and the city of New York. The combination of these two conceptions of the Third Space constitute a fertile ground for educational projects and initiatives, particularly those that educate around issues of difference.

Thus, through both deliberate and incidental means, graffiti writing led to the emergence of a pedagogical space, and this essay will explore it as a case study for other forms of youth-styled pedagogical spaces, as it begs an important set of educational questions: Can expressions that begin within youth cultures become institutionalized without becoming completely codified and co-opted? How can they be used as an educational medium within a structured context without being stripped of their power, their message, and their appeal to youth? Can these youth-produced media serve as a starting point to meaningful dialogues about difference; and, if so, can they become pedagogical in nature without being rendered devoid of meaning or severely skewed from their initial intentions? In this essay, I hope to

address these questions, using graffiti as a case study that will lead to discussion of whether and how youth-styled expressions are constitutive of useful pedagogical spaces through which to discuss difference.⁴

BEYOND SCHOOL SPACES

Much of the work on pedagogical traits of hip-hop culture focuses on the performative aspects of its elements: graffiti, breakdancing, MC'ing (or rapping), and DJ'ing. Scholars have argued that, by participating in the physical dialogue of a break-dance competition, the dialectic of MC'ing to a crowd, or the process of risking life and limb to put your tag on a train, young people express identity and earn recognition, both within the hip-hop subculture and from those from the dominant culture who encounter their work.⁵ While the performative aspects of graffiti as an element of hip-hop culture cannot be understated, this brief essay is concerned with the spaces that graffiti helps young people to forge. The spatial dynamics of graffiti broaden the scope of the educational environments that I may consider as potential spaces *where* young people can create physically and *how* they may create, as subjects seeking agency through dialectical engagement with others, rather than being the objects of this project.

In her book *Subtractive Schooling*, Angela Valenzuela asserts that, for many Mexican-American youth, the process of schooling is subtractive: "It divests these youth of important social and cultural resources, leaving them progressively vulnerable to academic failure."⁶ Previously, social scientists concluded that Mexican-American youth were disinterested in school for a number of reasons relating to their cultural background, their socio-economic status, and their family's tenure in the United States. To the contrary, Valenzuela found that it was the institution of school that Mexican-American students opposed, rather than the process of *education*. She learned that students sought agency in environments other than school in order to learn, create community, and find opportunities for success in the future.⁷

Implicit in Valenzuela's analysis is the notion of schools as a space where learning and education *may* take place; however, education is not limited to this space. School is a particular type of space that addresses students in a particular manner, and the responses that they make to this address often suggest that they are not being received as an invitation to learning. By exploring the *space* created by graffiti, rather than explicitly the work itself, the process of writing it, the messages it contains, or the aesthetic dimensions of graffiti (though some of these elements will enter this discussion), I posit that alternative spaces — Third Spaces — are possible, if not in fact necessary, in addressing certain types of teaching and learning that schools may not presently be equipped to manage. The physical space of graffiti — the subways and streets of New York — were, like schools, also addressing young people in particular ways, and the call and response that develops between them is one that is quite different from those of schools, yet educative in the sense that Valenzuela suggests.

The second sense of space, a dialectical one, requires that examining graffiti to learn whether and how youth-styled expressions are constitutive of pedagogical spaces demands a look at the praxis that occurs through graffiti. Paulo Freire, who

passionately advocates a dialogical mode of liberatory education, cautions against objectifying those toward whom educational projects are aimed at liberating.⁸ “[T]he object of the investigation is not persons (as if they were anatomical fragments), but rather the thought-language with which men and women refer to reality, the levels at which they perceive that reality, and their view of the world, in which their generative themes are found.”⁹ Accordingly, my exploration of graffiti as praxis relies on the themes that graffiti of a particular historical era provoke and the space that it provides in which to consider them. These themes placed in a particular historical context are significant when regarded as part of the palimpsest of history.

Freire notes that, because we exist as acting selves within a historical context, “for people, ‘here’ signifies not merely a physical space, but also a historical space,”¹⁰ that we create with our ideas, but that we also depend upon to nurture and sustain ourselves as thoughtful beings in pursuit of knowledge about ourselves and our relationship to our historical space. This historical space allows the possibility of dialogue, an element crucial to Freire for liberatory education, since it calls upon consciousness, something essential to our humanity, and if repressed, a grave danger to our freedom. The historical nature of space allows us to conceive, not only this space, but also our ideas in a protean manner. Since our ideas are in a state of constant movement, or consideration, and never without the implication of their opposites, this interplay creates epochal units that carry the themes of that time. These epochal units, spanning history and themes, overlap to create the thematic universe.¹¹

Grffiti is a form of asynchronous communication rather than a strict dialogue in the sense that Freire calls for in his liberatory pedagogy. I thus refer to graffiti as a dialectic, since it does engage people in the exchange of arguments, of positions, and their opposites. The constant change and interdependence of themes is critical to Freire, as they are “always interacting dialectically with their opposites.”¹² If graffiti is not a dialogue, this will also have consequences for graffiti’s relationship to the consciousness with which we attend to it and the degree to which it allows the relationship of a thing and its opposite to be maintained. Therefore, it is important to consider briefly its general form, the written word, and how its dialectical and asynchronous nature might play a role in the creation of Third Spaces.

THE DIALECTICAL THIRD SPACE

In the seminal study of graffiti, “Getting Up,” Craig Castleman notes that, although a writer’s style won acclaim in the graffiti community, it was the ability to “get up” or “get over” often — in other words, to have a prolific body of work traveling through the city on subway train cars — that ultimately earned renown.¹³ Getting up, the simple fact that graffiti was writing in a public place, enables it to create a pedagogical space. Most apparently, the act of getting up by a writer served as a form of praxis, and it is significant that the written word constituted the action of creating graffiti as writers “tagged” their names on trains.

Getting up is the “hail” that gives graffiti the reflective quality that praxis requires, the engagement between student and teacher, for Freire, or writer and reader, in the case of graffiti. Reading the name, or tag, of a writer placed any viewer

in a subject position, since they were reading messages from a cultural group. Through thoughts of disdain, confusion, or aesthetic appreciation, readers of graffiti inhabited the subject position, that in Althusser's view, they always-already inhabited: in having a particular response to graffiti, they inhabited a particular role.¹⁴ Whether this role is one of a fellow writer, an annoyed city official or a curious subway commuter, the viewer occupies *that* subjectivity for *that* historical moment. Graffiti pushed its readers to recognize a part of who they were in reference to it, which made it a form of praxis. Through this praxis, graffiti created a pedagogical space between a writer and the city dwellers, some who merely viewed graffiti, and some who engaged with it as readers. In both cases, however, city dwellers attended to graffiti's hail since it was unavoidable for sighted persons at that time, and an attempt to ignore graffiti was still a choice made in the form of denial.

The reading and writing of graffiti were acts linked through the written word; the writer sends an address and the reader responds to this hail. Homi Bhabha suggests that our interpretation of political writing often indulges a "myth of transparency of the human agent," which allows us to believe that through the interpretation of an expression of another's belief we have understood that person as a subject.¹⁵ To the contrary, he notes that, in the moment during which we issue a political statement in writing, "the agent of the discourse becomes, in the same time of utterance, the inverted, projected object of the argument."¹⁶ Particularly in conversations between cultures and among social groups in which difference is being discussed, there is a certain irony in the fact that, in the same moment that a political expression is made declaring oneself a subject, the interpretation of that statement leads to the objectification of its author. Particularly in the writing of political theory, which Bhabha defends as an act of activism, this irony is acute and he refers to this issue as a problematic of address.

In order to enable political writing to remain potent, to be a medium where differences can be discussed instead of flattened, Bhabha posits the importance of a Third Space of enunciation. This space is one through which the subject addressing and the subject addressed must pass in order to make meaning that allows for the ambivalence of interpretation to stand as a legitimate part of their dialectic. Rather than relying on our often unconscious employment of a concept of a thing and its opposite, which Freire asserts are inevitably linked in our minds, Third Space offers an alternative mediation. Rather than refracting someone's description of their signs, symbols, and situations through the mirror of our own lives, Bhabha advocates a splitting of two subjects who meet in the ambivalent Third Space. Without this ambivalence, the complexities and nuance of ideas are flattened.

The act of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implications of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot "in itself" be conscious. What this unconscious relation introduces is an ambivalence in the act of interpretation.¹⁷

Bhabha suggests here that within the Third Space we might have the most genuine encounters with others, since it places each subject *as* a subject and does not

homogenize their interpretations, nor their subject presences into one idea. Further, Bhabha's Third Space of writing accommodates the dialectic of difference that a dialogue often cannot. First, interpretation does not rely on the notion of a thing and its opposite, but rather, can engage in a more textured view of two subjects, each different in their own right. Further, the asynchronous nature of writing allows a delay in its interpretation; there is time to pass through this Third Space as a reader and the fact that graffiti is a part of the landscape makes this sort of unconscious or ambivalent reading of it seem particularly plausible. Unlike the deliberate way in which we read a textbook or even a magazine, reading graffiti might be as fluid for a city dweller as noticing a street sign.

The spaces that emerge through varying degrees of exposure to the cultural production of graffiti recall Freire's notion of concentric circles that are created around generative themes.¹⁸ There is a small community of those who have an "insider's understanding" of the significance of a given type of piece, or the identity of the writer behind a tag. This group might occupy the smallest circle, in which Freire asserts the particular limit situations of an epoch and a given group are most acutely evident. As Smith notes, writers of graffiti in the late 1970s and early 1980s had varying limit situations: some were living in housing projects in the Bronx while others lived in the middle-class suburban homes of Riverdale. Like the unconscious relation of the dialectical Third Space, often these limits were unarticulated yet present in circumstances or gestures, such as access to resources, and the subject matter of their work.

In widening circles around this innermost group were New Yorkers, who lived in the same city, and some perhaps under identical or similar conditions and experienced some of the same themes to varying degrees. These New Yorkers did not respond by writing graffiti, but encountered it daily as they commuted on the trains. This group, too, dealt with the themes of their epoch, but responded in a different manner. In an even larger encompassing circle lay the citizens of the United States who experienced these same themes, but in even more diverse manifestations. In all of these cases, a response to graffiti necessitated a Third Space.

Bhabha's notion of the ambivalent space between graffiti writers and those who read graffiti seems like important ground. For, although there are themes that they share, each one is addressed differently by graffiti. Those who read graffiti as writers themselves may have a particular response to the work. For example, Smith writes, "watching a Blade [a well-known writer] 'burner' that had subsumed an entire subway car roll into a station was one of the first aesthetic experiences that didn't have to be explained to me."¹⁹ The writing hailed Smith in a particular way that moved him to become part of the graffiti culture himself.

The response of those city dwellers who merely read graffiti, who did not have the visceral experience that Smith and other writers may have had were still hailed by graffiti, and this further highlights Bhabha's *problem of address*. For example, a twenty-five-year-old white nursing student who lived on the Upper East Side may have seen graffiti every day on her commute to work, and yet, these encounters do

not allow her access to the *who* of graffiti or authors, but rather *how* it interplays with the culture of the city *writ large*. Bhabha's problematic of address suggests that, when we are addressed by writing, we enter a space of negotiation and questioning, of back and forth, between the subject of the writing as it is read and as it was intended. This traverse crosses through the dialectic Third Space in ambivalent interpretation. In the case of graffiti, this dialectic literally moved back and forth through physical space across the city on the side of subway cars as it moved between New Yorkers and writers.

GETTING UP AND GOING: PHYSICAL AND DIALECTICAL THIRD SPACES

The physical Third Space — that space that is not school or work nor is it home — in the case of graffiti was New York City's subway trains, streets, and elevated platforms. In the 1982 documentary film *Style Wars* one can actually view the praxis described of the dialectical Third Space occurring in the physical one to create a pedagogical space. The scene, "A Beautiful Wall" begins with an image of a train curving across a bridge of the high line in the Bronx and the voices of two presumably white men.²⁰ One asks the other what he is filming. The shot pans down and we see the inquirer, an older white man with a necktie and glasses. The man behind the camera tells him that they are making a film about graffiti writers and one of the masters of the form lives in the area who writes the tag "Seen." The older, questioning man asks if this is the writer's name or a *nom de plume*, to which the man behind the camera replies that it is indeed a pen name. "You wouldn't tell me his real name?" asks the older man. "Why not? Would he get in trouble, or wouldn't he be glorified by it?"

The questioning man's questions suggest a curiosity that is greater than the identity of the writers. His question refers more to *how* graffiti interacts with the dominant culture of New York City, and is an acknowledgement that there is a level of graffiti to which he does not have access. Although he sees the tag "Seen," there is a person behind this image, and he will probably never have access to this individual. Nor will he ever have access to the complete dialogue that the graffiti writers are having with each other. The elusiveness of the individual within the writing of graffiti helps to create the Third Space as a space of questioning, where the performance of both the writing and interpretation can meet without necessarily merging.

Only in this space can the dialectic between writer and viewer contain both their subjectivities. However, the fact that the questioning man is faced with graffiti daily and now knows that he is in the presence of aficionados places him in that ambivalent interpretive Third Space. He has attended to the hail that graffiti offers and meets it with questions that might never be answered. As the soundtrack of this scene — Dion's "The Wanderer" — suggests, although no one knows the real names of the writers tagging subway cars, they are still stimulating a curiosity in residents of the New York City. This engagement recalls the concept of education posited earlier, particularly the invitations issued by educational spaces to particular students or learners. The Third Space created by graffiti allowed the community of graffiti writers to communicate with the larger community of the city without being

subsumed by it. Writers issue an invitation to a space created by that space. They maintain difference throughout the dialectic.

As Smith himself contends, the appeal of the work brought him together with youth he might never have met otherwise, and forced them into dialogue about issues that centered around graffiti, but ultimately spiraled into much bigger concentric circles containing generative themes of their historical era. In a sense, Smith's response contains the essence of "getting up": being a subject expressing subjectivity, history, beliefs, and emotions in an ambivalent enunciative space. For it is the getting up that leads graffiti to the larger stage of the city where it signifies to just a few. One of the pioneers of graffiti, Taki 183, famously quipped, "You don't do it for girls; they don't seem to care. You do it for yourself. You don't go after it to be elected president."²¹ As an act of writing in a public space that is done for oneself, graffiti may be the penultimate vehicle toward creating dialectical Third Spaces. Writers who got up got noticed, they were read; yet, as this quote suggests, they were writing toward self-knowledge, positioning themselves in the space that is their world, their city, their historical epoch.

GRAFFITI AS CASE STUDY: CAN SCHOOLING "GET UP?"

In 1972, mayor Lindsay formed the graffiti task force to investigate the problem. A dialectic began in the Opinion section of the *New York Times* that later spurred the development of organizations to defend the rights of graffiti writers. The first rash of op-ed pieces were filled with suggestions on how to thwart writers until one submission praised them. P.R. Patterson suggested that the city endorse graffiti since it actually served to decorate the bleak subway cars and added an interesting aesthetic to the city's trains. He accused New Yorkers against graffiti as, "guilty of subduing the desire to mark up the subways as a protest against the indignities of the city bureaucracy."²²

That graffiti was being embraced by members of the population outside the community of writers suggests that graffiti finally got going. Patterson recognized that young people were putting out a message and, in his attempt to read it, he put out a message of his own. This seems to be the true spirit of graffiti: that it is provocative, and the provocation is a youth-generated dialectic "getting up" through elusive identities. Patterson's interpretation of graffiti was not based in a quest to know the *who* of graffiti; rather, he considered *how* it changed the city and questioned the responses of others. The interplay that graffiti allows, the back and forth through writing that ensued because of its public presence and its genesis as a transgressive form of youth expression created a pedagogical space somewhere between the unconscious and the streets of New York City.

As Bhabha suggests, we only pass through Third Spaces and we do not do it consciously. In considering ways in which education might manifest within physical Third Spaces such as after-school programs or youth-led educational experiences outside the four walls of the classroom, it seems important to consider this unconsciousness, this ambivalence. The asynchronous nature of written dialectic also seems worthy of more attention by educators concerned with generating rich discussions of difference. It seems clear that youth-created expressions can be the

catalyst for discussions of difference, but less clear are whether, and if so, how, these expressions can maintain their potency in a structured educational context. How we can harness this ambivalence? Might the only way to address difference in structured educational settings be in those in-between moments when we are actually unselfconsciously teaching and learning? Through further examinations of the interplay between physical and dialectical Third Spaces, we might move closer to such a project.

1. Lee Smith, "American Graffiti: Remembering New York City in the Age of Graffiti," *MSN Slate Magazine* (2003), <http://www.slate.com/id/2083992/>.

2. Throughout this essay, I will use the term "graffiti" as an umbrella term for the adornment of subway cars, walls, and MTA property by youth in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This is distinct from the Street Art that proliferated from that early graffiti, or the mural movement, on which much has been written about the community organizing effects of mural making.

3. Ray Oldenberg's concept in *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (New York: Marlow and Company, 1989) influenced my thinking about the physical Third Space and Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) influenced my concept of the dialectical Third Space.

4. I use the term "difference" throughout this essay as opposed to diversity. Bhabha (*The Location of Culture*, 32–35) suggests that the idea of difference does not focus on comparative aspects of culture, or a thing and its opposite, which he claims is the bedrock of cultural domination. Maintaining difference allows us to examine difference at moments when it is not perceived as a problem, which diversity cannot contain.

5. For a more complete discussion of the performative aspects of hip-hop cultural elements as constitutive of pedagogy, see Gregg Dimitriadis, *Performing Identity, Performing Culture: Hip Hop as Text, Pedagogy and Lived Practice* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

6. Angela Valenzuela, *Subtractive Schooling* (New York: SUNY Press, 1999), 5–6.

7. I am indebted to Rene Antrop-Gonzalez, who introduced me to this distinction. In his own work, Antrop-Gonzales gathered counter narratives of Puerto Rican students who found ways to succeed in school using sources from outside their school to motivate their performance. Rene Antrop-Gonzalez, "Student Voice: Listening to Adolescents Speak about Their Experience in Urban Schools" (paper presented at AERA, Montreal, Canada, April 2005).

8. This point is owed to Nicholas P. De Genova's discussion of Freire's influence of his anthropological method in his forthcoming work *Working the Boundaries: Race, Space and "Illegality" in Mexican Chicago*.

9. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum Press, 1970), 97.

10. *Ibid.*, 99.

11. *Ibid.*, 101.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Craig Castleman, *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), 19–21.

14. Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127–186.

15. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 24.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, 36.

18. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 103.

19. Smith, "American Graffiti."

20. *Style Wars*, film, directed and produced by Henry Chalfont and Tony Silver (Plexifilm, 1983).
21. "'Taki 183' Spawns Pen Pals," *New York Times*, July 21, 1971; quoted in Castleman, *Getting Up*, 134.
22. P.R. Patterson, "Letter to the Editor," *New York Times*, December 6, 1972: quoted in Castleman, *Getting Up*, 140.