

## Graffiti Through Space: A Historiography

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**Abstract:** *There is by now abundance of literature on urban space but it is primarily a 'postmodern' approach to the city, merged with social theory that serves my understanding of graffiti as a subversive spatial practice, capable of dismantling to some extent Modernist narratives supposedly writ large in urban planning and control. I have therefore chosen to ruminate in this paper, on those influential theories that tend to appeal for space as a mode of deconstruction.*

**Keywords:** Graffiti; Street; City; Urban Space; Historiography

### Introduction

*The great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history: with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis, and cycle, themes of the ever-accumulating past, with its preponderance of dead men ... the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. -- Foucault, "Of Other Spaces", 1986*

The choice to begin a study of graffiti's spatial implications with the above quote is rooted in the desire to clearly outline the preferences of my critical-methodological framework. There is by now abundance of literature on urban space but it is primarily a 'postmodern' approach to the city, merged with social theory that serves my understanding of graffiti as a subversive spatial practice, capable of dismantling to some extent Modernist narratives supposedly writ large in urban planning and control. I have therefore chosen to ruminate in this paper, on those influential theories that tend to appeal for space as a mode of deconstruction.

Before moving towards postmodern theories of space, it becomes necessary that the contributions of Michel Foucault to the development of critical geography be drawn out, even though his precursory spatial turn was hidden in works of historical insight. Even a casual glance at Foucault's substantive historical inquiries reveals a deep alertness to space, or, to be more precise, to the way in which spatial relations—the distribution and arrangement of people, activities, and buildings—are always deeply implicated in history. In *Madness and Civilization* (1967) he draws various conclusions about what he terms the 'geography of haunted places', for instance, whereas in *The Birth of The Clinic* (1976) he deals with the three different forms of 'spatialisation' involved in medical practice. Alternatively, in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) he explores the notion that "discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space" and also

describes in detail the physical and psychical control over individuals achieved through the manipulation of spatial relations in Bentham's 'Panopticon'. In all of these works, Foucault demonstrates through empirical detail the role played by spatial relations in the complex workings of discourse, knowledge and (crucially) power, and it is thereby revealing that in one well-known interview he speculates that 'the history of powers' would amount to a history 'written of spaces'. For Foucault, space, knowledge and power were necessarily related, as he stated, "it is somewhat arbitrary to try to dissociate the effective practice of freedom by people, the practice of social relations, and the spatial distributions in which they find themselves". In many places in Foucault's works then, spatiality occurs as a significant part of a bigger concern; it seems to be for him a tool of analysis rather than merely an object of it, and it is this analytical viewpoint that I intend to suggest in my paper.

Poststructuralist and postmodernist urbanists, in general, argue for the study of cities as the product and site of difference, identity, contingency, and processes with multiple and even contradictory causes and consequences. They reject what they see as a flawed effort to build grand theories of cities or urban processes, and are deeply wary of attempts to generalize from one city to another, given the complexity of individual standpoints, discourses, interpretations, and meanings. Two key figures in postmodern urbanism are Michael Dear and Edward Soja, the latter being elementally contributive to my critical understanding. Appreciating the utopic position that writers like Soja, Lefebvre, even de Certeau give to situational interaction between spaces of the city and the individual, it becomes possible to envision an appropriative role for graffiti art—taken here to be part of those urban practices that do not always follow the "norms" of urban existence (notwithstanding the fact that a case can be made about the re-appropriation of graffiti in the

mainstream, at some point, but that stands only to confirm the overturning potential of such individual acts as graffiti).

While the visually catchy idiom of graffiti art explains any viewer's (in general) and my own (in particular) attraction towards it, its highly ambiguous discursive status manages well enough to warrant a full-fledged critical engagement with it. Conventional approaches have often associated it with vandalism, foreclosing the possibility of other types of reading and analysis for it. However, there are many authors who defend the artistic merit of graffiti despite its illegality, and discuss its place in an art-historical lineage. The majority of sociological, ethnological, criminological and anthropological accounts of graffiti engage with the question of who writes graffiti, and why they do it. It has been linked to youthful rebellion (Austin 2001) and the construction of subcultural identities (Macdonald 2001; Iveson 2007; Castleman 1984; Rahn 2002). Some have considered it in terms of the territoriality of urban youth gangs where it functions primarily as communication between gangs and gang members (Ley & Cybriwsky 1974) and some others have used the theory of affect and desire to explain graffiti (Halsey and Young, 2006). However, studies approaching graffiti as primarily the result of urban discontent looking to usurp space in its own particular manner in a localized context are scarce, though not non-existent. Keeping in mind the need to underline the (subversive) spatiality of the art form, I will locate in this paper the critical apparatus that fortifies my study of graffiti art in New Delhi, India as the product of the (always politically charged) interaction between urban space, local place and the artist/writer-citizen. This essay attempts thus to frame a theoretical reading of graffiti that underscores the relation between place and ideology where each plays a role in structuring the other.

#### **“Thinking Space”: Theorizing the urban as ideology**

*A theory is therefore called for, one which would transcend representational space on the one hand and representations of space on the other, and which would be able properly to articulate contradictions (and in the first place the contradiction between two aspects of representation). Socio-political contradictions are realized spatially. The contradictions of space thus make the contradictions 'express' conflicts between socio-political interests and forces; it is only in space that such conflicts come effectively into play, and in so doing they become contradictions of space. --Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space, 1974*

Even though urbanization had begun to be carefully charted from the perspectives of regional studies, behaviorism and geographical statistics by early 20th century, the field of critical urban studies

was consolidated in the late 1960s and early 1970s through the pioneering interventions of radical scholars such as Henri Lefebvre, Manuel Castells, and David Harvey among others. Despite their theoretical, methodological, and political differences, these authors shared a common concern to understand the ways in which, under capitalism, cities operate as strategic sites for commodification processes. Cities, they argued, are major basing points for the production, circulation, and consumption of commodities, and their evolving internal socio-spatial organization and governance systems must be understood in relation to this role. Space, as David Harvey would have it, internalizes the contradictions of modern capitalism; capitalist contradictions are contradictions of space. Most often such Marxist interpretations of urban space prove relevant even to approaches that come later, although their concerns are much wider and look to destabilise singularizing narratives.

**Henri Lefebvre:** The publishing of Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1974) acted as a major catalyst in the announcement of the critical treatment of space as an ideological (capitalist) construct. The central task of the book is to understand the relationships between physical, mental and social spaces; and it makes an important contribution not only to urban theory but to theory more generally.

The key words of the title accurately characterize Lefebvre's analytic intentions: “production” and “space” are saturated with meanings that the book tries throughout to explicate through examples. At the “production” end of the title, Lefebvre means that humans create the space in which they live; it is a project shaped by varied interests of classes, experts, the grass-roots, and other contending forces. Space is produced and reproduced through human intentions, even if unanticipated consequences also develop, and even as space constrains and influences those producing it. “Production” also implies a staunch Marxist viewpoint that space be considered analogous to other economic goods since it makes up an important part of economies. While theorists and empirical investigators have given much attention to the social nature of the production of manufactured goods, they have not treated space as itself a product that plays a crucial role in keeping economies going and distributing wealth.

Just as Lefebvre expands the meaning of production, he expands the meaning of “space”. Space contains more than we ordinarily appreciate and its various divergent elements appear to congeal in a more or less coherent way. A space is thus an inter-linkage of geographic form, built environment, symbolic meanings, and routines of life. Lefebvre illustrates, through historic and hypothetical examples (which may vary in their

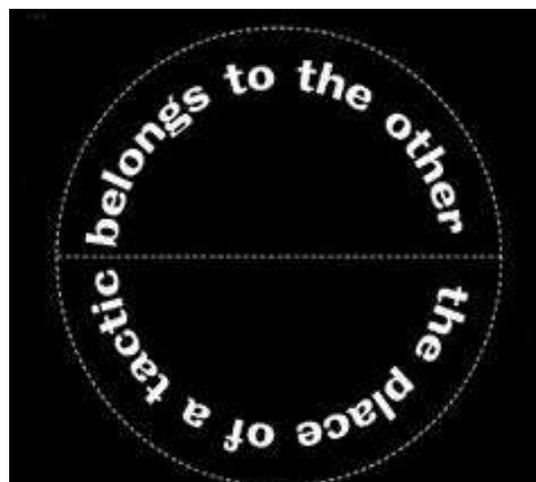
efficacy), how competition over the production of space operates. A major distinction is between those who produce a space for domination versus those who produce space as an appropriation to serve human needs. In domination, space is put to the service of some abstract purpose (hence, Lefebvre's phrase "abstract space"). For him, the apparatus of official city planning represents the mobilization of expertise on behalf of such abstract space, one that "pulverizes" the body, the spirit, the social urge, and like any tool of abstraction, "is inherently violent" (1974).

His emphasis on everyday life leads him to the claim that any revolutionary program must have the creation of space at its core: Lefebvre calls for "a counter-gaze" to "insert itself into spatial reality", so as to *demytificate* (emphasis mine) not only the physical arrangements of the city, but all institutions that those arrangements sanctify, support and naturalize. According to him, "we need a 'critique of space' at least equal to the more established critical traditions in art and literature" (1974). Thinking globally, Lefebvre pushes for revolutionary action from the perspective of the body itself and it is this utopic, and grassroots, vision of space that appeals to my tendency towards using space as a theoretical tool of understanding power structures.

**Edward Soja:** Heavily influenced by Foucault's works, Soja becomes important in this discussion because much of his body of work is an elaboration of the project to "spatialise" the conceptions of history, knowledge and power. In his *Postmodern Geographies: The Re-assertion of Space in Critical Theory* (1989), he writes of a relationship between physical space (concrete geography, "innocent" spatiality) and political space (capitalist regimes, relations of power). In order to understand the nature of Soja's undertaking, it is important to remember that the investigation of this relationship is the bedrock of urban theory. Lashing out at what Michel Foucault called the "pious descendants of time" (qtd. in Soja, 1989) who give hegemony to historicism in the study of society, Soja attempts to weave together threads of a new critical theory by embracing a "socio-spatial dialectic" (1989) that brings human geography to the fore.

What he sees occurring in his time is a reconstruction of human geography that incorporates Henri Lefebvre's theme of the social production of space. Soja begins by recounting the death of modern geography through the subordination of space by historicism and through the isolation of geography from critical social theory. Consequently, he brings attention to the fact that concepts of spatiality have been omitted from theory construction since early in the twentieth century. Soja demonstrates both the refusal of spatiality, especially evident in the persistent historicism embodied in classical Marxist critical theory, and the recent reappearance of spatiality in

the French tradition which can be said to become inspirational for him. Thus Soja outlines early in the text the roots, critiques, and inversions of Western Marxism and its passage to postmodernity in the reconstruction of a critical human geography. By integrating concepts of Lefebvre, Foucault, John Berger, and Ernest Mandel, he attempts to present the "realization that it is now space more than time that hides things from us, that the demystification of spatiality and its veiled instrumentality of power are the key to making practical, political and theoretical sense of the contemporary era" (1989). The book is a compendium of highly theoretical essays, followed by two empirical case studies, in which Soja tests his postmodern conceptualization of a human geography informed by a "socio-spatial dialectic". Despite the critique leveled on him for making of space an essentialised abstraction, Soja's tendency towards a theory through/of space proves crucial for the field of urban studies. **Michel de Certeau:** The new bent of the field towards human geography, mentioned above, gains deeper ground with a discussion of this theorist, whose discussion of everyday practices has lately become a small-scale mantra in geographical writings. As Meaghan Morris has commented, the theoretical reflections concentrated around Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), particularly those concerned with walking as an act of enunciation (in his chapter on 'Walking in the City') and his closely related 'strategies'/'tactics' distinction have in different guises 'been one of the most influential models for cultural studies in recent years' (qtd. in Morris, 2004). "Walking in the City", a rather utopian essay, offers an interesting theoretical framework to read into the temporal and spatial dimensions of popular culture, especially in terms of practices of the citizen. One of the key contributions made by de Certeau to cultural studies results from his formulation of everyday life as constituted of a complex sets of practices and, in particular, his notion of praxis as a form of enunciation. De Certeau's central argument in terms of the enunciative nature of praxis is that space and place are not merely inert or neutral



i "The space of a tactic belongs to the Other" -Michel de Certeau

features of the built environment; instead, they must be activated by the 'rhetorical' practices of users and passers-by. For him, "tactical" appropriations of space like this are an instance of "resistance" to an official order. In this work, de Certeau focuses on how the city is a system of structures and how individuals understand themselves in relation to these organizational constructions, rejecting the view that individuals passively follow these established systems and rules (and instead suggesting that they negotiate and maneuver through institutional structures in ways that are not intended in their production). To illustrate the relationship between the institutional structures and individuals, de Certeau uses two categories: "strategies" and "tactics." According to de Certeau, strategies and tactics operate within a power dynamic. "Strategies are structures which operate from the position of power and attempt to force certain patterns on individuals" (1988, p. 38, p. 30). "Tactics, on the other hand, are actions from those without power who use and negotiate these spaces differently than intended" (1988, pp. 29-30). Ultimately, "the space of a tactic is the space of the other" and "an art of the weak" (1988, p. 37). He is interested in the relationships of place as a fixed position and space as a realm of practices. All these invocations suggest work that insists on paying attention to the spatial aspects of practices of people in a city.

Having carefully drawn out my theoretical background and preferences, I move to an analysis of graffiti art through the rare lens of spatial politics.

#### **Art of/for appropriation: Theorizing graffiti's spatial importance**

*"Graffiti is about conquering space." – Ninguém (Graffiti artist, São Paulo)*

Graffiti, in its contemporary and urban form, began to take shape in the late 1960s in New York City and developed through the 70s, 80s and 90s into more elaborate forms. This type of urban art started with simple 'tagging': the practice of writing one's pseudonym, or 'tag' on subway cars, abandoned buildings and anywhere else it was likely to be seen by other graffiti writers. This was a means by which young and primarily African-American and Latino writers could effectively reclaim the urban spaces they inhabited. These inscriptions of identity acted as "rhizomes" (seemingly random artistic emergences that continually reappear across the city) that define and employ the city as home to an ever-changing visual culture.

The study of graffiti is decades old. For example, books by authors such as J. Lindsay (1966) and Allen Walker Read (1935) marked the publication of two of the most initial scholarly studies of graffiti. But as a subject demanding attention of art historians and visual culture critics, it acquired new meaning in the post-industrial cityscapes of the late twentieth century. Since the advent of mainstream graffiti publishing in 1980s and the international success of Subway Art (1984) and Spray Can Art (1987), the following decades have seen a proliferation of sub-cultural and popular publications about the many forms of graffiti. In the past, psychologists, sociologists, linguistics, law enforcement, anthropologists, and geographers have studied graffiti. However, writings that develop critical and conceptual responses to graffiti as an essentially spatial activity are less common.

Graffiti art, at its very core, is illegal in its nature, and so, a visual act of defiance. Though the messages may not be directed at authority figures or political ideals, the fact remains that behind each piece of graffiti lies public space. Tim Cresswell's "The Crucial Where of Graffiti: A Geographical Analysis of Reactions to Graffiti in New York" (1992) is an examination of the reactions to graffiti in New York during the early 1970s. It is argued in the essay that the reactions of the media and government present a discourse in which graffiti is presented as a symptom of disorder and thus a threat to the image of New York City and civilization itself. Simultaneously the art establishment reacts to graffiti by "(dis)placing it in Manhattan galleries and describing it as creative, 'primitive', and valuable" (1992). These discourses play an important role in the formation and maintenance of the meaning of a place. Simultaneously the place -- New York, the subway, the gallery -- plays a role in affecting the nature of the discourses and judgments about the value of graffiti.



ii A framed photograph by Henry Chalfant of the train graffiti of NY City, in an art gallery.

There is a substantial academic literature which deals with the vandalism-versus-art question. Without entering deeply into this debate, it is worth noting that vandalism and art are defined as opposites (destruction versus creation), yet both can also be seen as different forms of transgression. Cresswell picks up on this theme to argue that the spatial context of graffiti is vital in understanding how it will be received and defined. He compares the reception of graffiti exhibited in New York art galleries with that on the streets and trains, sometimes created by the same artists - the place of exhibition defines graffiti's status as art or vandalism.

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

It should be noted that for the purposes of this paper, I use the term "graffiti" to refer to the tagging and stylized writing that developed in New York and has proliferated throughout the nation's urban centers since the late 1960's and early 1970's. Here I follow scholarship that understands that "street, 'hip hop' or subcultural graffiti...has evolved synergistically with Hip Hop's dance and music cultures," (Macdonald, 2001) and accounts for "the connective lines of artistic collaboration" (Forman, 2004) that unite Hip-Hop as a sub-cultural practice. Conceptually, locating graffiti within Hip-Hop, best matches the art form's historical contexts.

Primarily focusing on the development of the art in New York City from the 1970's onwards, I seek to address Murray Forman's observation that "there has been little attention granted to the implications of Hip Hop's spatial logics." (2004) In bringing space to the forefront of graffiti, he follows in the footsteps of scholarship like Tricia Rose's *Black Noise* (1994), which Forman himself cites as "introducing a spatial analysis" that stresses "the importance of the 'post-industrial city' as the central urban influence" on Hip Hop. Rose's work situates all four of Hip-Hop's cultural forms (DJing, rap, break dancing, and graffiti) within the contexts of inner-city space. She notes that "Hip Hop emerges from the deindustrialization meltdown where social alienation, prophetic imagination, and yearning intersect" and in particular observes that "graffiti artists spray painted murals and (name) 'tags' on trains, trucks, and playgrounds, claiming territories and inscribing

their otherwise contained identities on public property." (qtd. in Forman, 2004). [While these insights privilege space in their analysis, the role of containment to which Rose alludes to, must be expanded upon and moved to the fore in thinking critically about graffiti]. Although graffiti was the first of the four Hip-Hop forms to become popular with white youths in significant numbers, this doesn't change the fact that it was "first practiced largely by inner-city youths of color," nor does it alter the social and spatial worldview that sits at its core. Thus it must be read with a nuanced understanding of the historical and spatial contexts from which it arose: the black and brown ghetto of the post-industrial city.

The need for graffiti writers to make visible not only their individual identities, but also their lived spaces, demonstrates the linkages between spatial confinement, social mobility and identity. Graffiti artists in attempting to transform space, point to the fact that space is not only supported by social relations, but it also is producing of and produced by social relations; and while graffiti as a practice does not always explicitly represent this spatial politics, nonetheless this critique of space lies at the conceptual heart of the form.

This includes the battle over "public" space and over who is and isn't represented in those spaces. In "violating one of the central pillars of our economic system by rejecting the hegemonic codes behind the ownership and respect for private property" (Noble, 2004), graffiti pushes for a different vision of spatial control. It resists the spatial ideologies upholding the status quo by violating them, at once destroying property and symbolically claiming it for the 'have-nots'. Graffiti also contests the representation and ownership of 'public space', which is really property owned by the state. Recognizing its resistance to current urban spatial arrangements is vital to comprehending the art's full meaning.

Joe Austin in his seminal book *Riding the Train* (2012), while primarily detailing a history of the American graffiti movement builds upon a foundational theory that describes the ways in which, for the average pedestrian, the city is a text to be read based on its appearance. Following postmodern analysis, the author briefly touches on the ways in which there can be different interpretations of the city based on who is reading and what performative elements constitute the city's aesthetic. In this sense, the city can be understood as a postmodern text, one that can be differently interpreted by different readers, via the things with which each reader, in navigating the spatial text, comes in contact, and by the unique existential analysis that the reader, or pedestrian, brings into her interpretation. An example, then, of a tactic from individuals who may not be in the

position of power and of how they find a method to negotiate within a powerful structure, graffiti functions to make visible the structures which have become part of the “dominant expectations of visual order” (Austin, 2012).

Similarly, Alastair Pennycook in his rather interesting essay “Spatial narrations: Graffscapes and city souls” (2010) makes a case for understanding graffiti as part of an essential urban landscape and analogizes graffiti to de Certeau’s idea of walking or reading as enunciation, to show how graffiti becomes “one of the ways in which cities are brought to life and space is narrated” (2010). Graffiti, as both a product of artists moving through an urban landscape and as art viewed in motion, is part of the articulation of the cityscape. Rather than accepting a predefinition of ‘the authorised’ and ‘the transgressive’ that many authors take, he finds it useful to take up Conquergood’s (1997) understanding of graffiti writing as a “counter-literacy” that challenges, to some extent mimics, and carnivalizes the relations between text, private ownership, and the control of public space.

Boldly introducing a new dimension to the analysis, Pennycook states that this struggle over urban space is as much about class as it is about crime, justifying that “not intended to be interpretable by people outside the subculture of Hip hop/ graff writers, graffiti are about style and identity” (Pennycook, 2010). Graffiti writing, he cites Conquergood again, “performatively constitutes middleclass and public spaces into contested zones of contact, site-specific theaters of defiance where excluded others re-present themselves” (qtd. in Pennycook, 2010). To treat graffiti only in terms of dirt or vandalism and to present a brushed up cityscape, is to stamp middle-class sensibilities on the urban landscape. The importance of movement, of interactive spaces, brings a focus on place as being dynamic, on city landscapes as processual.

. Situational interaction, as a form of moving along, constantly modifies and reshapes the significance, impact, and *meaning of walls* (emphasis mine) in the urban space. As observed by Lorenzo Tripodi, the contemporary city is increasingly dominated by “spaces of exposure” (2008): attention qua visibility is what really makes the commercial worth of certain urban surfaces such that surfaces become more valuable than the very architectural support.

Discussing the liminality of surfaces, Andrea Brighenti in his essay “At the Wall: Graffiti Writers, Urban Territoriality, and the Public Domain” (2010) foregrounds that “boundaries are specifically conceptualized as thresholds introduced in the field of visibility, and economies of visibility are interpreted as economies of public attention” (2010). Referring to graffiti as “writing” he inscribes the art form within a politics of



iii Banksy, world renowned graffiti writer explains the significance of walls in a famous quote.

authorship that regards urban space and architecture not as things but as a set of affordances. In showing the interstitial nature of graffiti, vis-à-vis art, crime, political action, subculture, research, bodily skill, personal satisfaction, and even psychotic obsession that is underscored by the interplay of various factors in the urban setting, he sets off a crucial discourse on the idea of fixity and permissibility of boundaries in their own right.

Highlighting the politics of control through boundary-making, Brighenti brings to the fore the ideological significance of surfaces like walls, which are among primary boundary-creating objects in the city. “In parallel to the modern history of governmentality, which has diffused, “capillarized,” and infiltrated power devices at each social scale, it is possible to diagnose a concurrent multiplication of walls and wall-like artifacts: it is the passage from the encompassing boundaries of the walled medieval city to the dispersed, articulated, and selective boundaries granted by the complex functioning of walls and zonings within the modern city,” writes Brighenti (2010). Where on the one hand walls offer perceptual limitations, on the other hand they also tend to become part of the unquestioned “innocent” background of a particular urban environment. They are perceived as stable boundaries and are introduced as strategic but, to borrow the classical distinction from Michel de Certeau, they are always subject to tactical uses, too. Both strategies and tactics can be regarded as territorial endeavors.



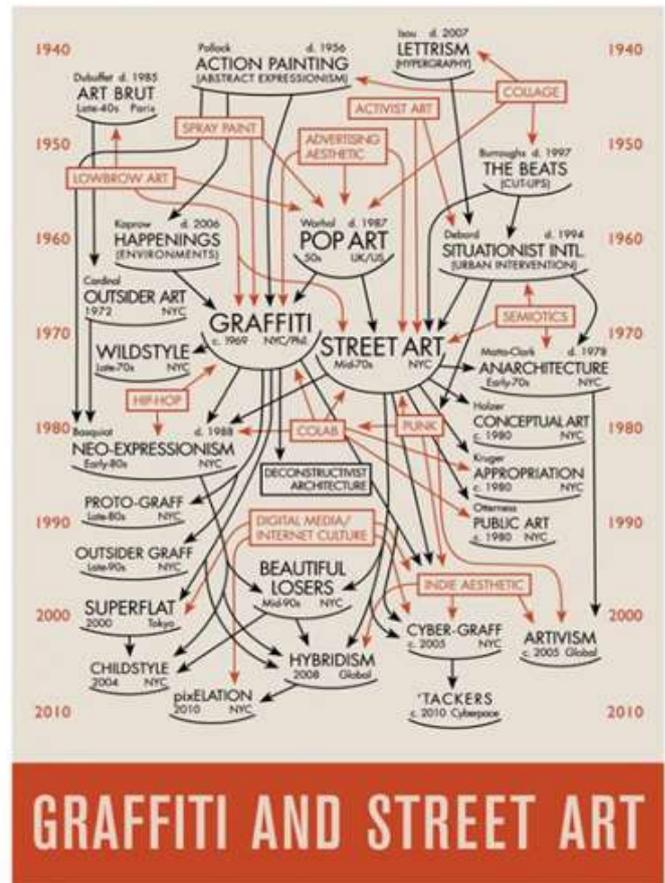
iv. The Berlin Wall: An example of strategic and tactical use of boundaries. Also a bold statement on how tactics are appropriated by structures of control, graffiti is legal on the Berlin Wall, art that is here highly political and yet insignificant.

A territorological analysis of graffiti tries to bring to light the very convergence of the material and the immaterial in creation and consolidation of urban zones. What is most interesting for a reflection on public space is the fact that boundaries act like thresholds produced in the field of visibility. The value of different positions in the field of visibility runs parallel to an economy of public attention. Street-based images elicit spectatorial responses just as gallery works do; however, such illicit images are often viewed through a perspective which foregrounds the artwork's spatial illegitimacy and its associated threat to the law's valorisation of property ownership and authorship. As a countercultural art form, graffiti plays with the notions of seen and unseen; art should be seen and recognized, but in the case of graffiti the artist should remain unseen. While the purpose of graffiti is to disrupt the public visual sphere and draw our attention to the ways in which public space is constructed and controlled, the graffiti artists themselves remain largely unseen.

Graffiti is an important cultural site for negotiating local identity; and Hip-Hop graffiti is a particularly potent form for exploration, if only because of the omnipresence of its idiom in the contemporary perception. We encounter graffiti not only in physical urban spaces, but in the images (and sounds) that saturate everyday culture: in fashion, music, advertising, newspapers and magazines, visual arts, and even in and around scholarship (book covers for instance).

Brassai writes, "The global reach of the term forces the immensely varied phenomenon of wall writing into a field of equivalence circumscribed by hip-hop aesthetics" (2002). Cedar Lewisohn also argues in *Street Art: The Graffiti*

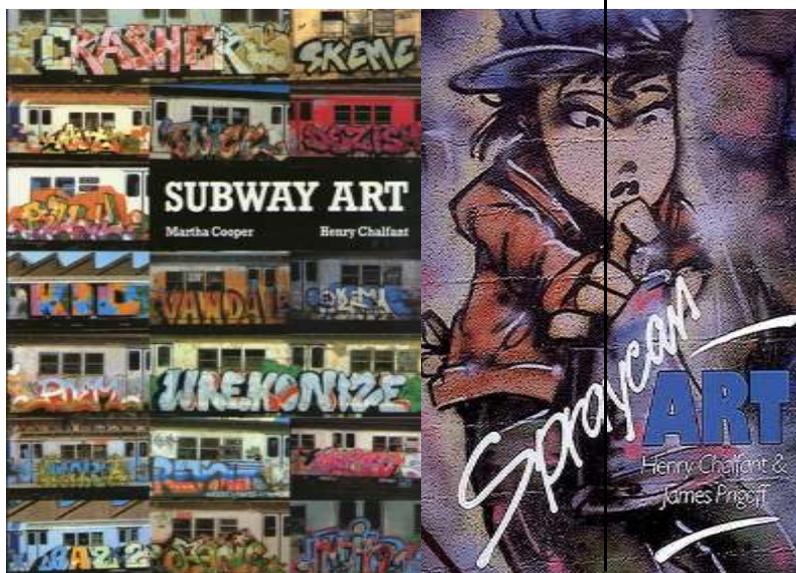
Revolution that "graffiti is a code constructed out of a global universal language which is also, at other times, reflective of local concerns" (2008). It might be possible, with such a conception in mind, to analyse the recently developed graffiti culture in New Delhi, and the special ways in which it has localized the universally appealing Hip-Hop graffiti to suit its own spatial politics.



**Reclaiming (epistemic) space: Postcolonial theories of the city**

*"(In the journal Urban Geography)... one can find articles on urban transformations around the world... The list goes on and on, speaking to the rich tapestry of the field as it has been woven throughout its recent history, nourished by the quantitative revolution, the rise of Marxian and humanistic geographies, and the effervescence of feminist, postmodern, and post-Colonial thought."* - Jennifer R. Wolch, "Radical Openness as Method in Urban Geography".

With this quote on the new 'radicality' of thought that seems to characterize developments in the field of urban geography, one



can emphasize the importance of a revisionist claim (no more, no less) to the study of the post-colonial (in this case, Indian) city. Due to the paucity of work relating to urban space in the non-Western academia, it can be assured that any theorization of urban space tends to be developed from a critical understanding rooted in Western urban theory. Where I do fully acknowledge and appreciate the groundbreaking works of Western scholars in the field, I do unequivocally want to emphasise the importance of critique from a scholar's (always peculiar) position. A scholar must always be aware of the theoretical implications of participating in and contributing from his/her position to a field of study that was not only initiated in what has been called the "center" but also makes claims of universality while expanding to include studies about the "periphery". The center-periphery model does not hold any longer, and postmodern urbanism by its very nature tries to cut loose from such models. Still, as Williams and Chrisman note, "the much-debated relationship between post-colonialism and postmodernism still requires lengthy and careful delineation" (1993). This nexus is especially relevant to my approach which focuses not only on the colonial past but also on an urban present which is so often read as an indicative site of the "condition of postmodernity" (for example, Harvey 1989; Soja 1989).

One must not forget that the city is also an important component in the spatiality of imperialism. It is true that many urban transformations—gentrification, mega-developments, heritage designations, etc.—are widely understood as hallmarks of postmodernity. If such urban change does indicate a postmodernity, it is a postmodernity with histories that have not been forgotten and visible "geographies of imperialism". This awareness gives an interesting lens for viewing the spatial configurations of and within the city of New Delhi, holding the potential to provide important insights into how power is distributed not just within the city but also among cities of the world, where the power radiates from and what the actual implications of the term "global city" are.

Ananya Roy in her essay "The 21st-century Metropolis: New Geographies of Theory" (2009) urges for 'new geographies' of imagination and epistemology in the production of urban and regional theory. She argues that the dominant theorizations of global city-regions are rooted in the Euro-American experience and are thus unable to analyse multiple forms of "metropolitan modernities" (2009). Citing Robinson's work, she argues for the need for a "recalibration of the geographies of authoritative knowledge" (qtd. in Roy, 2009). She shows that while there have been critical efforts to challenge the asymmetry and parochialism inherent in Euro-American theory, the corpus of work on South Asian cities is still limited.

Even though recently there has been what Gyan Prakash has referred to as an "urban turn" (2002) in Indian scholarship, Roy thinks that "(South Asian) scholarship is mostly shaped by the traditions of postcolonial theory, and particularly that South Asian variant of postcolonial analysis: Subaltern Studies" (2011).

The Third World literature on "informal practices" is replete with conceptual work on the 'grassroots' of the city, and is thus able to expand considerably the analysis of 'urban politics' or 'metropolitics'. For example, Roy shows that Bayat, writing in the context of Middle East cities, describes the repertoire of tactics through which urban "informals" appropriate and claim space (the influence of de Certeau is obvious). Such "quiet encroachment of the ordinary" (qtd. in Roy, 2009) by groups that do not hold power in conventional urban contexts, can be compared to Partha Chatterjee's revision of 'tactics', the ways of the Indian squatter, which contribute to creating a 'street politics' that shapes the city in fundamental ways. Partha Chatterjee (2006), writing about Indian cities, makes a distinction between 'civil' and 'political' societies. For him, civil society groups make claims as fully enfranchised citizens, giving way to a "bourgeois governmentality" (2006). Political society, on the other hand can be referred to as the claims of the marginalized, in Arjun Appadurai's phraseology "governmentality from below" (2002).

It is in this sense that Robinson (2003) calls for the application of such postcolonial perspectives to the study of cities and territories. Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2000) path-breaking work *Provincialising Europe* stands as a major milestone in urban literature, attempting to question the theoretical and analytical concepts which frame Western and international scholarship from a postcolonial perspective. Theories reeking of assumed universalism within the discipline are developed, as Chakrabarty would have it, in "ignorance" (2000) of different social contexts to which they claim to apply. Many of the central theoretical concepts of social science, and of geography, can be subjected to a potential postcolonial critique. Indeed, work on many of these concepts has already been published and they tend to provide an effective starting point for an urban scholar looking to problematize the natural "spaces" of the cities of India. Indeed, "there have developed diverse spatialities of difference that have been associated with fostering "postcolonial" sensitivities indicating a range of strategies for tactically insisting on the provincial nature of hegemonic knowledges and for operationalising a series of dis/locating investigations" (Roy, 2009).

Indeed, a study of such comparative critiques of Western urban theory could lead to newer understandings of the idea of cities and cityness. The demand to learn attentively from the

diversity of urban experiences around the world, which this generation of scholars are trying to embark upon, seems to have been dissuaded by the canons of urban theory, thereby making it all the more important to understand the spatiality,

urbanity and the importance of “contextual distinctiveness” (Chatterjee, 1993) in the post-colonial city through forms of culture that bespeak localized appropriation.



## Conclusion

In delineating the critical treatment of urban space and of graffiti art in various disciplines, this essay can be interpreted as an explanatory theoretical defense of my interest in the spatial approach to graffiti art. If I have drawn

In the first section titled ‘Thinking Space’ I have charted contributions of selected theorists whose work proved seminal to my assessment of urban space as a concretization of social relations. While there have been numerous publications in the general field of urban geography and urban studies, and my project is also indebted to them, I have nevertheless only kept focus on authors (and specific works) that pronounce the inflection of urban studies with social science. These include Henri Lefebvre (a socialist urbanist), Edward Soja (a postmodern human geographer) and Michel de Certeau (sociologist historian).

The second section titled ‘Art of/for Appropriation’ has reviewed critical works that tend towards a spatial and territorological study of graffiti art. In doing so, I have tried to establish a position for graffiti art in Delhi, suggesting a

only from Western critics to do so, it is not only because of the theoretical significance of the insights these authors provide and because graffiti in itself is an art form that developed in the ghetto suburbs of post-war America, but also because of the novelty of the subject to the Indian context.

special sustenance of focus on the historical context of graffiti art in the Hip-Hop movement of America of the 1970’s.

The third and the last section is an attempt at providing a post-colonial perspective to the study of urban space and by extension of graffiti art. To do so, the section titled ‘Reclaiming (epistemic) space’ enlists a number of important post-colonial critics writing about the city, suggesting how their works might prove as strategies for a non-Western scholar of urban space.

The three sections of this paper could thus be interpreted as the threefold necessity of dealing with an appropriated and appropriative art form in a city in which the distribution of space has been/is the material shape of imperial/ modernizing/ globalizing ideologies.

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