

Art in Action: An Analysis of Political Graffiti in Washington D.C.

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Abstract

This study examines how graffiti, both the symbolic artifact itself and the act of producing graffiti, is used as a means of navigating power dynamics via counter-hegemonic political expression. Because social phenomena may only be understood in relation to the historic materialistic context in which it occurs, this study will focus on graffiti specifically within the city of Washington D.C. Sixteen randomly selected D.C. neighborhoods located in Wards 1, 2 and 8 were surveyed for graffiti deemed to be political. Once documented and coded, a content analysis was conducted to detect themes in how graffiti operates politically, focusing on both the content of the graffiti as well as the social context in which it existed. With a sample size of over 800, the sheer prevalence of political graffiti supports the assertion that graffiti does function in this capacity. By conducting such a study as this, graffiti was shown to be a highly complex social phenomenon; one that plays a central role in the placemaking process of the public sphere, issues of criminality and political legitimacy, and the autonomy of a community to express itself politically. These results are discussed in terms of how they adhere to a Marxian theoretical framework set forth by the work of Antonio Gramsci ([1935] 1989), Walter Benjamin (1936), Louis Althusser (1971), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1990; 1993).

Keywords

Graffiti, Subaltern, Discourse, Hegemony, Public Placemaking

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Introduction

The social position of graffiti is ambiguous at best; shifting depending on the actors, placement, and message. While the production of graffiti is illegal, subject to harsh penalties, its impact on urban culture has meant its widespread commodification. Said commodification comes in the form of glorification of particular graffiti writers (the term used for those that produce graffiti) (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 91-93; Salib, 2015: 2293), the auctioning of graffiti-inspired art for millions (Pogrebin and Reyburn, 2017), and the incorporation of graffiti-inspired decor for its aesthetic value (Sammond and Creadick, 2014). While graffiti is characterized as a crime that infringes on the bourgeois ideal of private property rights, in certain contexts, it may be framed as a symbol of liberation in the face of oppression. One must take the time to appreciate the irony that the graffitied Berlin Wall is portrayed as a powerful symbol of political freedom while its existence in the West would be criminalized; what were brave political freedom fighters in one context suddenly become dangerous criminals and radicals in another. This, and the lack of empirical work on the subject, is what motivated me to pursue research that examines the politicalness of graffiti.

This study will examine how graffiti, both the symbolic artifact itself and the act of producing graffiti, is used as a means of navigating power dynamics via counter-hegemonic political expression. For the purposes of this study, graffiti (i.e. the unit: a piece of graffiti) was defined as publicly accessible symbolic artifacts placed without prior authorization. Thus, vandalism that functions as a means of protest *and* that results in the production of something visual and symbolic may be seen as producing graffiti that is political in nature; something that would not be gained from simply observing it superficially. This is to say that the context graffiti exists within is understood to play a large role in how it comes to be political. While the content of graffiti may at first appear apolitical, its placement, relation to historic events, and relation to other graffiti may reveal a deeper political meaning.

By using this definition of graffiti, the importance of materialistic context already begins to surface. When conducting research such as this, it is imperative to remember that there exists an intrinsic relation between a social phenomenon and its material environment: a dialectic where one simultaneously shapes and is shaped by the other. Thus, the assertions made in this paper will be done specifically in reference to how graffiti exists as political within the city of Washington D.C. By conducting this study, it will be possible to gain insight into political protest, the use of symbolism and property in political expression, and how counter-hegemonic forces are utilized by the subaltern. This knowledge will help inform the strategies of those organizing towards activism and the opinions/beliefs of those who, despite not taking part directly, remain engaged via their observations and reactions.

1. Literature and theory

The public and criminal nature of graffiti means that how it operates socially is directly influenced by systems of power, and that any analysis of graffiti as political must take into account the power relations in which it is engaged. The ways graffiti has seen partial and uneven legitimization also demonstrates how power relations work on the social operation, and perception of graffiti. While research on the political nature of graffiti is limited, the power dynamics at play in the production

and policing of graffiti are still implicit in said work. This includes studies of graffiti that take up a sociological, criminological, historical, and even aesthetic perspectives.

One aspect of graffiti that is often discussed is its role in the public placemaking process. Using the definitions put forward by Lawrence-Zungia and Low (2003), space is defined as the physical geographic characteristics which are intelligible to the senses; it is quantifiable and measurable to some degree. Place, then, is a space imbued with social meaning. Thus, physical space and social place work to form each other in tandem and are integral to the operation of the other. The placemaking process can then be understood to be the process by which spaces, here public spaces, are made into places. By altering public space via the creation of symbolic artifacts (i.e. painting, writing, posters), graffiti creates a place influenced by the symbolism it evokes.

An understanding of the political nature of placemaking, and graffiti's capacity to function in this way, is present from both the perspective of graffiti writers and anti-graffiti actors. Writers will often be selective in their placement of graffiti, choosing locations based on a personal moral imperative. This is seen in writers avoiding personal property, wanting to beautify monotonous buildings, or using graffiti as a form of protest (Ferrell, 1995). This indicates that graffiti enables the creation of places that facilitate public expression. In other words, graffiti is a means by which social actors who feel excluded from mainstream political discourse may still take part in said discourse via forced placemaking (i.e. despite legal restrictions).

Additionally, much of the policies implemented to curb graffiti have targeted its role in public placemaking, mainly in the form of the erasure and relocation of graffiti. The erasure of graffiti has generally involved its physical removal from the public sphere: painting over graffiti, the use of paint-proof surfaces, and violent persecution of writers (Moreau and Alderman, 2011; Snyder, 2011). The relocation of graffiti, however, works in a way that is more insidious, due to a guise of legitimization. As graffiti came to sociocultural prominence, art galleries began to introduce graffiti-inspired art. While this may appear beneficial, privatization effectively sterilized graffiti by restricting what it may depict and who may have access to it (Barnett, 1994). The fact that political sterilization coincides with a change in location is noteworthy as it demonstrates the link in graffiti's politicalness to placemaking.

The rhetoric used to justify the criminalization of graffiti also alludes to its placemaking nature. Snyder (2011) uses the terms "cool" and "crime" places to categorize the types of places graffiti is perceived to make. Anti-graffiti legislation and "quality of life policing" is commonly justified using the idea of "crime places," most often in the form of broken windows theory of policing rhetoric. This refers to the theory put forward by James Wilson and George Kelling that visible signs of crime normalize crime, thus encouraging it. In practice, this has done little to reduce crime and has instead targeted marginalized groups: "... black and brown kids, who are more likely to be detained, more likely to be given harsher treatment, and more likely to be arrested than their white counterparts" (49). Despite being empirically ungrounded, with graffiti tending to reflect the cultural significance of an area rather than crime rates (47-53), this laid the groundwork for a legal understanding of graffiti that continues to remain in effect.

By analyzing the relation of placemaking to policy creation and implementation, the political nature of graffiti may be examined through the legal discourse surrounding it. Because this legal

discourse operates within a capitalist socioeconomic model, the way graffiti comes to be understood economically cannot be seen as separable from how it is understood politically or legally. This is seen in the selective policing of graffiti, where areas with higher prevalence of graffiti are not targeted because of its value as a commodity (Snyder, 2011: 50-53). This, in turn, is tied to the legitimization of “graffiti” that has accompanied privatization, causing the criminality of graffiti to fluctuate.

Following a public moral panic in the late 1980s, anti-graffiti policies were strictly enforced with the intent of eradicating graffiti from the public sphere. The result was a notable strain placed on the graffiti community that forced some to try to find legal alternatives. The 1990s and 2000s saw a wave of writers turned artist, who produced work with the intent of receiving monetary compensation (Barnett, 1994; Kramer, 2010). This resulted in the formation of organizations such as the United Graffiti Artists (UGA) and the Nation of Graffiti Artists (NOGA). Since much of graffiti-inspired art deviated from conventional understandings of how to value art in terms of the market, early graffiti-inspired art drew value from the commodification of the idea that graffiti is the art of uneducated, impoverished, and non-white criminals (Lachmann, 1988). Graffiti Hurts, an international anti-graffiti activist organization, works to remove graffiti from the public sphere and promote legitimized “graffiti” through introducing it into the market in the form of commissioned pieces. However, this means that said organizations essentially function in a way that conflates the legitimization with commodification (Moreau and Alderman, 2011). This example illustrates the distinctive ways in which power dynamics are created, reproduced, and navigated via the criminalization of graffiti. In suppressing public expression via the eradication of graffiti, and by restricting legitimacy to the private sector, the application of criminality can be seen to hold a direct relation to how graffiti is socially understood. This is to say that criminality and legitimacy are shown to reflect graffiti’s relation to the established political status quo: whether it is being eradicated or integrated.

The non-legitimate characterization of graffiti, when it exists opposite the dominant political paradigms (i.e. in accordance to private property rights, as a commodity within the market, etc.), then must be understood to frame how it exists politically. The political existence of graffiti is largely shaped through it occupying what may be seen as a counter-hegemonic position. In Marxian terms, hegemony (or cultural hegemony) refers to the ideological rationalization of the material mode of existence (i.e. socioeconomic status quo) via a dominant and ubiquitous set of norms and values. This rationalization enforces social structures through a sort of naturalization process, whereas the material mode of existence is conceptualized as inherent due to its direct ties to established ideological/cultural paradigms (Althusser, 1971; Gramsci, [1935] 1989; Ramos, 1982). It is for this exact reason that hegemonic forces can be difficult to detect as they are often framed as normality. Yet in the discussion of graffiti thus far, hegemonic forces have already surfaced (i.e. legitimacy, criminality, etc.). The way graffiti is understood as a social artifact is dictated by and negotiated around its relation to hegemony. When attempts are made to reconcile the contradictions of graffiti and hegemony, graffiti must first be drastically altered in social functionality to the extent that it scarcely remains graffiti.

The subaltern can be considered that which is excluded from mainstream hegemonic discourse. Here it is defined as a populace that is marginalized by the dominant hegemony of a society. Said exclusion and marginalization can happen for a number of reasons (i.e. being barred from

institutions that participate in hegemonic discourse, being politically disenfranchised, etc.), but share the similarity of occupying a subordinate position within a power dynamic (Spivak, 1993; Gramsci, 1989; Varghese, 2009: 117). The subaltern, then, is often legitimized as subaltern by the dominant hegemony via a rationalization of their placement (Said, 1978: 12-14). This may take the form of being inherently inferior and, thus, unfit to take part in hegemonic discourse. Or, perhaps more fitting for this study, is seen a politically illegitimate and potentially dangerous. The graffiti subculture, based on an illegal and oft considered illegitimate form of public expression, fits this definition nicely. The Egypt Crisis that occurred between 2011-2014 is just one example that illustrates the political potential of graffiti. Large graffiti murals depicting political figures, famed martyrs of the revolution, and revolutionary slogans became emblematic of the movement. These were made to commemorate the struggle that occurred during the crisis and to build morale among the people that saw themselves as agents of progress and democracy (Sharaf 2015). These pieces of graffiti demonstrate how symbolism is integral to political movements counter to the established hegemony. The use of symbolism by the subaltern creates a sociocultural paradigm that exists outside of the established status quo. Thus, the subaltern may utilize cultural expression in a similar way to how hegemony operates.

The way that counter-hegemonic forces function may also directly draw upon the rationale of the established hegemony. Political/cultural values such as the idea that laws are written by the public's will or "*el papel lo resiste todo*" (paper resists anything) may be turned inward on the hegemonic status quo. Indeed, it is because hegemonic forces justify the socioeconomic order that they may be used to denote existing contradictions: "written law, because it is written, becomes a subject that requires obedience and imposes domination" (Benavides-Vanegas, 2005: 46-47). When hegemonic justification becomes viewed as contradictory, graffiti proves to be an ideal means by which these contradictions may be exposed publically. It is because of this that when analyzing instances of political graffiti that it is essential to understand graffiti to exist within a context that is intrinsically linked to hegemony.

Thus far, graffiti has been presented as a complex social artifact; one that exists at an intersection of various social institutions, norms, and structures. It is precisely because of this that research on the subject is warranted, as it provides an entry point to discussing a wide range of social issues. This is epitomized by the amount of interdisciplinary work present on the subject. Yet despite various disciplinary differences, research on the topic of graffiti is understood to be relevant insofar as it holds the potential to be practically applied. As demonstrated by the literature reviewed, this has included critiquing the policing of graffiti (Snyder, 2011), assessing the effects that legitimizing "graffiti" has on the communities that use it as a means of discourse (Barnett, 1994; Moreau and Alderman, 2011), or examining its use within political movements (Benavides-Vanegas, 2005; Sharaf, 2015). Even if entirely involuntary, the creation of knowledge is, itself, a social phenomenon that exists within the web of interrelated phenomena. As such, my own research takes this fact into consideration when constructing the research question and design.

While this study did not operate with a working hypothesis, as one would not be entirely appropriate, it is impossible and arguably unhelpful to have no expectations, as they are the natural byproduct of having an informed opinion. In addition to the empirical data presented by other researchers, a theoretical framework provides a foundation for understanding the rationale of social phenomena. Operating under a Marxian perspective, graffiti is understood to hold a role in

ideological discourse that either critiques the status quo of how society operates or maintains it via justifying its existence. In either capacity, class interests will be mapped onto graffiti as it is used to navigate power dynamics to either encourage or prevent change. Because graffiti is relegated to that of the illegitimate, it may be expected to represent interests of those excluded from mainstream discourse (the subaltern); that the results of this study will describe the way in which graffiti proves useful to those disenfranchised, thus forced to rely on alternative means of political expression.

2. Methodology

The research design of this study was a content analysis of political graffiti observed within the sampling frame that was sixteen neighborhoods. Graffiti was critically examined to assess how it exists within the social milieu, including the nuances at play in what may otherwise appear mundane and unremarkable. This involved exploring the ways in which graffiti is imbued with political significance, unraveling the complexities of the networks of meanings encoded within the artifact itself and its dialectical relation to its context. By doing so, it is possible to detect the patterns involved in how graffiti conveys meaning, engages in placemaking, and functions as counter-hegemonic.

Additionally, ethical implications had to be taken into consideration. While content analysis is non-intrusive, this does not mean that data collection occurred in social isolation. As I surveyed neighborhoods, I noted that people were aware that I was doing something abnormal: pacing by the same blocks, erratically turning into alleyways, and photographing seemingly random objects. While some bystanders ignored my antics, others were curious enough to approach me. However, no matter how suspicious my actions may have seemed, I was not once received with any hint of hostility. While these interactions had a minimal impact on the data collection process, I cannot help but reflect upon how my role as a researcher is inherently linked to the work I produced. I wonder if I would be able to conduct the work I did, as smoothly as I did, if I did not belong to a privileged race/ethnicity; if I would have received the same hospitality as a young Black man, wearing a black hoodie, walking through predominantly white neighborhoods acting in a way that could be construed as suspicious.

2.1. Data

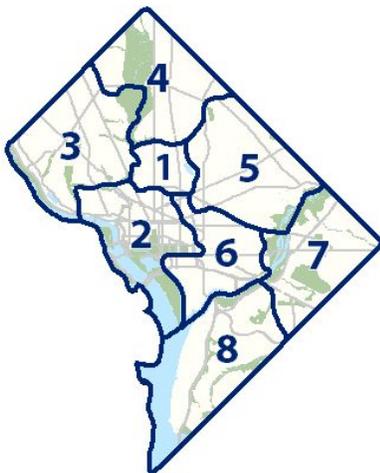


Figure 1: Map of Washington D.C. with Wards

The sample for this study consisted of the political graffiti observed within sixteen randomly selected neighborhoods located in D.C.'s wards 1, 2, and 8 (see Figures 1 on left. Also see Figures 2, 3, and 4). Wards function as political entities used in governance and indications of historic/social divisions. As such, they were useful in dividing the city into manageable portions that hold sociological relevance. The wards selected for this study were chosen purposely to ensure a representative sample. This included commercial districts, residential areas, and historic/cultural centers; neighborhoods frequented by tourists and those populated primarily by residents; some of D.C.'s most affluent neighborhoods to those that have suffered economic deprivation and sociopolitical disenfranchisement (DC Office of Planning).

The neighborhoods surveyed were selected via a random number generator program so that fifty percent of the neighborhoods in each ward were included. By using a random selection of neighborhoods, the sampling frame was not unduly biased by preconceived ideas of D.C. and/or graffiti. (See Figures 2, 3, and 4 below.) This is imperative as previous literature has demonstrated that ideas of graffiti locality (i.e. in relation to crime) have been falsified (Snyder, 2011).

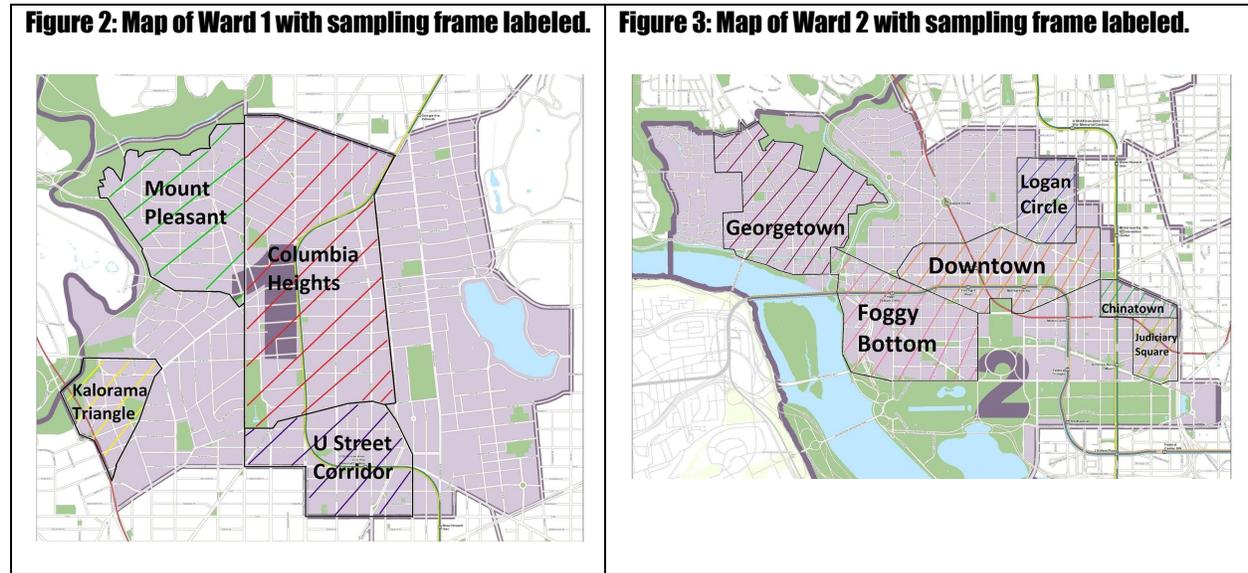
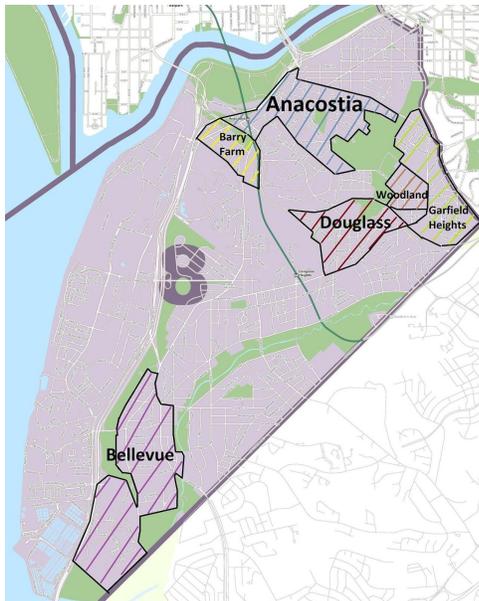


Figure 4: Map of Ward 8 with sampling frame labeled.



Data was collected following a semi-structured, block-oriented route used to ensure a thorough surveying of each neighborhood. Publicly accessible surfaces (i.e. lampposts, trashcans, etc.) were searched for any signs of graffiti. Potentially political graffiti found was photographed and cataloged. Graffiti documented that later could not be said to be definitively political were excluded from the final sample. An example of this being a sticker that featured an Iron Cross (a symbol associated with neo-Nazism) with the phrase “HATED AND PROUD” in fraktur script. This sticker was later found to be for a soccer club. This process was repeated until all neighborhoods had been surveyed.

Due to the nature of content analysis, there exists the risk of misinterpretation. As graffiti often uses stylized calligraphy, the risk of overlooking a piece of graffiti due to the inability of interpreting it was unavoidable.

Therefore, all graffiti that had any hint of politicalness was documented and then omitted if it could not be definitively confirmed as political, reducing the risk of including non-political graffiti and overlooking political graffiti. One example being a stencil that at first appeared to be non-political: two crossed penises and the letters “PLP”, found in Kalorama Triangle (Ward 1). This symbolism, upon further review, was found in the work of writer Jbones that critiqued Vice President Mike

Pence's stance on LGBTQIA+ issues ("PLP" being an acronym for a phrase used by Jbones: "Pence Loves Penis").

2.2. Coding procedures

Documented graffiti were organized using a set of codes that noted content, descriptive characteristics, and context (see Appendix A). The use of thick description ensured a holistic approach to analysis that included aspects that may initially seem less relevant to politicalness, such as size or medium. While the research instrument was piloted via test observations, this cannot be said to have predicted all potential discrepancies. One example of a code that had to be adapted was "graffiti medium" (GRFTMDM) to distinguish handmade stickers/posters from those printed.

The content of graffiti (GRFT CNT), such as use of symbolism and representations of groups, was analyzed to understand its social meaning which is integral to functionality. Additionally the use of right-wing/left-wing symbolism (WING) was analyzed to detect themes in who used graffiti. Graffiti lacking definitive ideological characteristics were noted as being centrist (i.e. 'Third-Wayism') or simply indiscernible. The way the graffiti is produced (GRFT MDM, METH) was used to detect themes in how graffiti is practically used, such as sacrificing efficiency for the sake of producing unique and personalized graffiti. This was also used to detect signs indicating the organized production of graffiti. Finally, context was used to indicate if graffiti was political and to detect trends in how graffiti was distributed within D.C. As writers are noted for their selective placement of graffiti (Ferrell 1995), disparities in levels of graffiti may indicate how location influences the use of graffiti politically or if politically motivated writers tend to use property a specific way, such as targeting public or private property. This was analyzed via explicit coding of context (NGH WRD 1, NGH WRD 2, NGH WRD 3, GRFT PLCMNT) as well as analyzing field notes (VRB DESC) taken during the data collection process.

Context was also used to confirm the validity of the measurement strategies implemented. Because graffiti's politicalness is discernible from its context and content rather than just the knowledge that graffiti holds this potential, politicalness cannot be *solely* externally ascribed, but must make itself readable. All graffiti documented was coded using the same categories/measurements to ensure internal validity was maintained. The coding procedure was designed to be as exhaustive as possible, intended to record all elements of graffiti that could potentially indicate how said graffiti was meant to be interpreted. The exhaustiveness of the coding procedure also worked to strengthen internal validity as it provided as much evidence as possible to support the posited politicalness of the graffiti in question.

2.3. Analytic approach

Valid data was organized via SPSS to allow for themes to emerge from descriptive statistics. These themes were then used in tandem with a thick description of the graffiti itself and the social context it existed within to provide a holistic approach to exploring how graffiti operated politically. The use of thick description, as described by Geertz (1973), was purposely chosen as a means of supplementing the previously outlined coding procedure. The result being a qualitative analytical approach that contained elements reminiscent of quantitative analysis. For example, the frequency

of political ideologies was analyzed to detect if graffiti tended toward either end of the political spectrum. This analysis was, in turn, compared to characteristics of the political atmosphere of D.C. These two themes were then analyzed in reference to each other, allowing for the interrelation of theme (i.e. location and political ideology of graffiti) to be noted as a significant factor in how graffiti functioned as political. Another example was an analysis of how the frequency of neighborhoods found to have political graffiti was distributed. This was used to analyze the role of space/place in how graffiti was used politically.

However, it should be made known that at this point the methodological approach encounters a complication. While a relation was found between the prevalence of graffiti and a neighborhood's sociocultural, political, and economic history, a correlation could not be technically made between the two. While the prevalence of graffiti is a quantifiable ordinal statistic, a neighborhood's history and cultural significance is not. I cannot objectively rate a neighborhood as having a social history more/less significant than another. While neighborhoods such as the U Street Corridor and Anacostia have long and distinguished histories, I cannot quantify their significance. Instead, when discussing the results, I offer a contextualization of the graffiti found so to make the parallels between the prevalence of graffiti and a neighborhood's social existence as apparent as possible.

3. Results

3.1. Prevalence

There were 804 instances of political graffiti observed and documented; with every neighborhood noted as having some level of political graffiti. The neighborhood with the lowest prevalence, Judiciary Square (with only one example: two stickers posted together promoting stricter firearm regulations), was distinctly in the minority and may be attributed to numerous reasons such as the neighborhood being composed primarily of highly monitored and maintained federal buildings. Neighborhoods averaged 50.25 instances of political graffiti, with a median score of 36 (Logan Circle/Chinatown). The two neighborhoods with the most graffiti were U Street Corridor and Foggy Bottom (121 and 97 respectfully). The way graffiti was distributed, within neighborhoods and when comparing different neighborhoods, will be noted as an important factor in understanding how graffiti relates to placemaking.

The prevalence of political graffiti is important in answering the question this study is predicated upon: *is* graffiti being used politically. With a sample size of 804, it was made obvious that graffiti does function in this capacity. The prevalence also supports the claim that graffiti is known by the public to be a method of expressing political agency. Indeed, one of the reasons why graffiti is such an effective means of political expression is that it may reach a state of public accessibility and visual ubiquity. Because graffiti is not required to abide by the regulations that restrict where public discourse may occur, it holds the advantage of production autonomy.

3.2. Scale of Politics

The term "scale" was used to analyze the geopolitical range and specificity of topics discussed by graffiti. This refers to the locality of the graffiti's topic (spanning from localized to D.C. to global) and the specificity of the issues discussed (either vague/ambiguous concepts or specific persons or

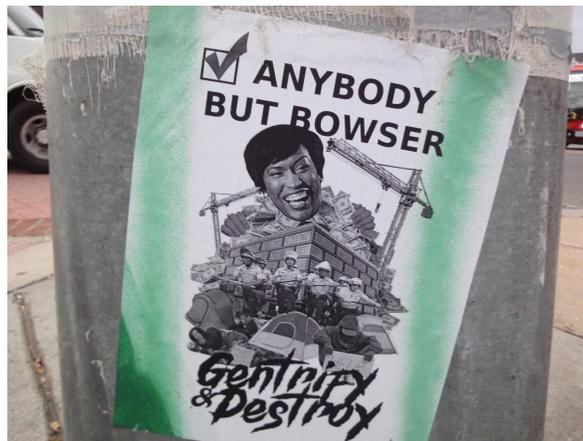
organizations). Both analytic perspectives explore the ways in which individuals use graffiti to engage with political issues.

The scale of graffiti in terms of locality was noted as being very diverse. Multiple instances of graffiti were noted as directly critiquing the local D.C. government. These examples often critiqued the perceived corruption of the local government (see Figure 5) and their complicity in furthering local issues such as gentrification, displacement, and police brutality (see Figure 6).

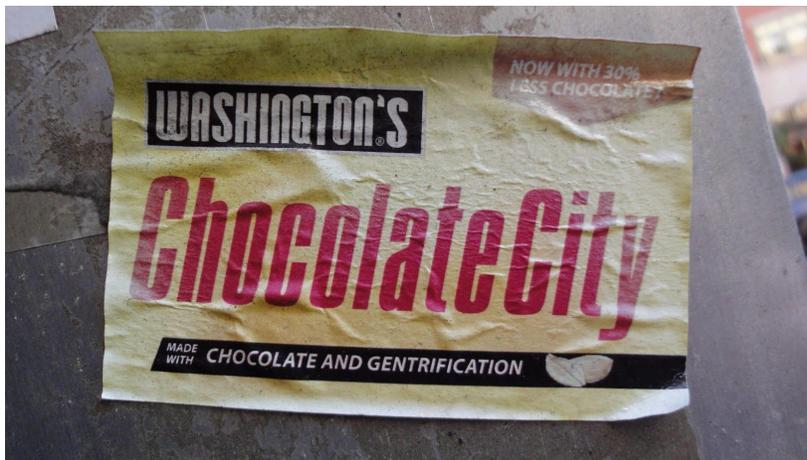
Figure 5: Graffiti by writer AbsurdlyWell condemning the perceived corruption of DC City Council members. Found in Anacostia, Ward 8.



Figure 6: Graffiti criticizing Mayor Muriel Bowser for her complicity in the gentrification of D.C. and police brutality. Found in Barry Farm, Ward 8.



While these are not issues specific to only D.C., graffiti engaged with these issues as they related to the specific context of D.C. One piece of graffiti documented noted the cultural erasure caused by the demographic shifts accompanying gentrification by noting how the nickname “The



Chocolate City,” derived from D.C.’s prominent role in Black history and culture, has increasingly lost its applicability as mass amounts of D.C. natives are forced to leave neighborhoods they have occupied for decades (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Sticker critiquing the cultural erasure and displacement caused by gentrification. Found in U Street Corridor, Ward 1.

Another, four posters arranged in a grid formation, critiqued the appointment of Peter Newsham as Chief of the Metropolitan Police Department, noting the mass (and perceived unjust) arrests of protesters, journalists, and bystanders during the 2002 World Bank protests in Pershing Park (see Figure 8 at right).

Other instances of graffiti discussed sociopolitical topics taking place thousands of miles away. Graffiti was observed referencing the notion that the creation and expansion of Israel is illegitimate and a form of settler colonialism that is to the detriment of the indigenous Palestinian people (see Figure 9). Another (and extraordinarily still visible) example was a “Kony 2012” sticker, the slogan of the keyboard-activist “Stop Kony” movement centered around the Ugandan militant leader Joseph Kony. A timelier example were posters that called for the reuniting of “border families” (see Figure 10), critiquing the U.S.'s policy of separating undocumented families found crossing the US-Mexican border. Multiple examples of graffiti were also found that critiqued a perceived relation between President Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin (see Figure 11), including critiquing the relationship as quasi-romantic and promoting both far-right and far-left ideologies.

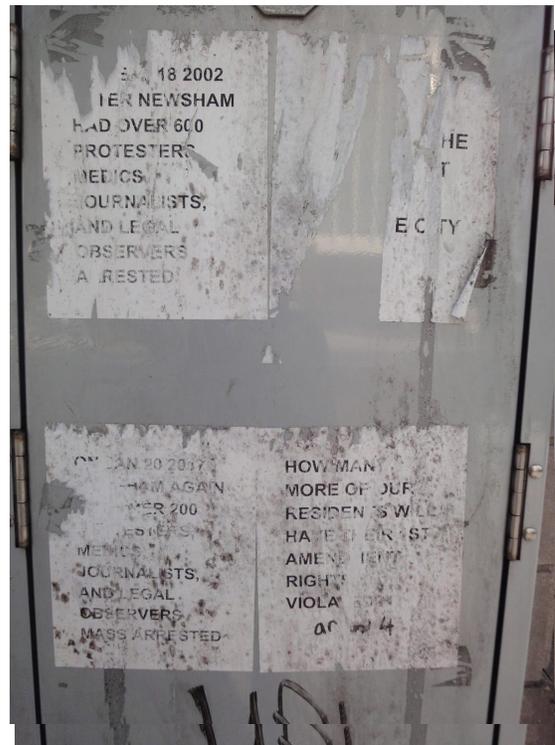


Figure 8: Grid of four posters critiquing the perceived wrongful arrests of protestors, journalists, and bystanders by Chief of D.C. Metropolitan Police Peter Newsham. Found in Downtown, Ward 2.

Figure 9: Tag stating “FREE GAZA,” a pro-Palestinian slogan. Found in Georgetown, Ward 2.



Figure 10: Poster by writer AbsurdlyWell calling for the reunion of undocumented families separated at the US-Mexico border. Found in U Street Corridor, Ward 1.



Figure 11: Two adjacent stickers that critique a perceived relation between President Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin. Found in Foggy Bottom, Ward 2.



Additionally, the specificity of the topics discussed varied. Many instances of graffiti critiqued specific individuals, from local politicians like Mayor Bowser to heads of state such as President Trump and Putin. However, other examples of graffiti discussed abstract concepts and ideologies that are more ambiguous. Graffiti observed was found to utilize iconography and abstract symbolism, including political/ideological symbols (see Figure 12 below), political slogans (see Figure 13 below), and critiques of America's history (see Figure 14 below). Thus, rather than targeting specific examples of social issues, graffiti was observed to evoke the ideological bases of said issues. For example, the slogan "ACAB" ("All Cops Are Bastards") critiques the current way in which the institution of law enforcement in America functions: not as a result of individualized "bad" members of said institution, but because the institution itself is a means of violently enforcing an oppressive/exploitative socioeconomic system. As such, specific instances of police brutality found in other graffiti is posited as the natural results of the generalized principles of the current institution of law enforcement.

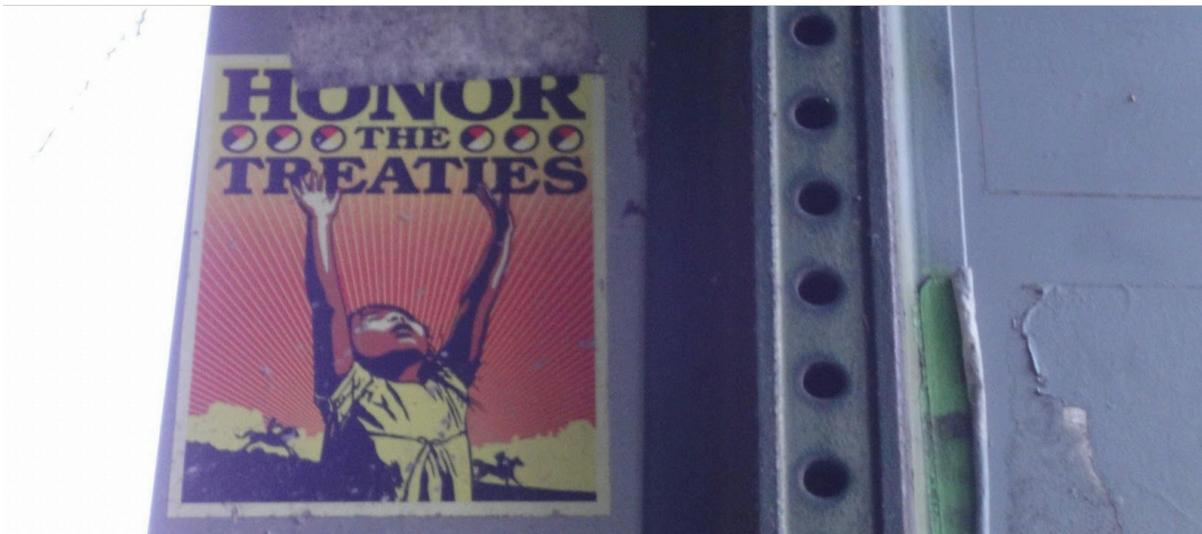
Figure 12: Circle-A and hammer/sickle, symbols representing Anarcho-Communism. Found in Columbia Heights, Ward 1.



Figure 13: “ACAB” or “All Cops Are Bastards” -- an anti-police slogan. Found in Anacostia, Ward 8.



Figure 14: “Honor the Treaties,” a slogan used to promote decolonization and critique the U.S.’s history of genocidal practices towards indigenous peoples. Found in Columbia Heights, Ward 1.



3.3. Political inclinations

Washington D.C. is a rather progressive city in terms of local electoral politics. As of 2018, all major political positions are held by Democrats or Democrat-turned-Independents (District of Columbia Board of Elections 2018). Over 90% of D.C. voters voted for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 Presidential Election (Federal Election Commission 2017). Thus, as one may expect, to say that the graffiti found in D.C. was overwhelmingly left-inclined would be an understatement. Over 95% was noted as being center-left to far-left in nature (with 3.7% being right-wing, ~1% centrist, and 0.4% as indiscernible). Large amounts of graffiti were documented praising leftist political leaders and anti-capitalist/Marxist ideologies, while critiquing gentrification, institutional racism,

political disenfranchisement, socioeconomic inequalities, and right-wing politicians (see Figures 15, 16, 17, & 18). However, the most common form of leftist graffiti was that which critiqued right-wing ideology and fascism.

Figure 15: Sticker depicting Kathleen Cleaver, black panther party leader and African American leftist revolutionary. Found in U Street Corridor, Ward 8.



FIGURE 16: A poster critiquing gentrification, comparing displacement and cultural erasure caused by it to American settler colonialism and the related acts of genocide. Found in Anacostia, Ward 8.



Figure 17: Sticker promoting anti-capitalist, anarchist ideologies and the destruction of private property as a form of protest. Found in Mount Pleasant, Ward 1.

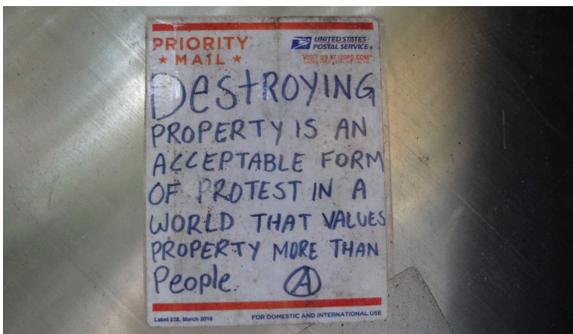


Figure 18: Poster critiquing Brett Kavanaugh: a right-wing Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. Found in Columbia Heights, Ward 1.



Figure 19: Sticker portraying the logo of anti-fascist action: now commonly associated with anti-fascist political theory/activism. Located in Columbia Heights, Ward 1.



Before discussing antifascist graffiti, it is important to note that while the abbreviation “antifa” is often incorrectly said to be an organization or set of groups, in actuality, “antifa” refers to the application of political theories (i.e. praxis) that assert that fascism must be opposed via direct action on the part of local communities. While organizations may utilize the imagery and methods associated with antifascist activism, there is no single group or collective of groups that one can definitively point to as “Antifa.” Thus, when discussing antifascist graffiti and the use of “antifa” imagery (see Figure 19 above), it is important to keep in mind that this does not refer to graffiti produced by any specific group, but rather numerous sociopolitical actors that consider themselves to be working in opposition to fascism. As such, other political theories and activists have appropriate imagery associated with antifascism. One example being a sticker with the caption “ANTI-HOMOPHOBIC AKTION” that borrows its symbolism from the *Antifaschistische Aktion* movement of 1930s Germany; the graffiti is not the product of an organization named “Antihomophobe Aktion” but rather is a declaration by members of the community to oppose homophobia/homophobic groups.

FIGURE 20: Sticker declaring “HASTA LA VISTA ANTIFASCISTA,” a slogan promoting anti-fascist activism with symbolism associated with the musical genre Rock Against Communism (RAC). Located in Foggy Bottom, Ward 2.



In addition to antifascist graffiti, “anti-antifa” graffiti was the most common form of right-wing graffiti (~66%). “Anti-antifa” graffiti (see Figure 20) was coded as examples of far-right graffiti that opposed the idea of antifascist activism. Some may object to this, claiming that this graffiti critiques the perceived violent suppression of political dissidence exhibited by “members of Antifa,” rather than support for far-right politics. However, this is falsified by establishing that

the “Antifa” organization in question is nonexistent. At most, anti-antifa graffiti critiques a fabricated straw-man to justify opposition/restrictions of antifascist activism; at worst, it intentionally misleads individuals about what anti-fascism is to justify the negation of the negation: fascism. Additionally, much of the anti-antifa graffiti documented contained imagery borrowed

from the hardcore punk subculture known as “Rock Against Communism”: typified by its racist, ultra-nationalistic, and far-right themes (similar to White Power Rock and National Socialist Black Metal). Furthermore, this graffiti was located near all other documented cases of overtly far-right/white-supremacist graffiti observed (see Figure 21). In addition to the discourse found between left- and right-wing graffiti, there existed conflict between leftist tendencies.

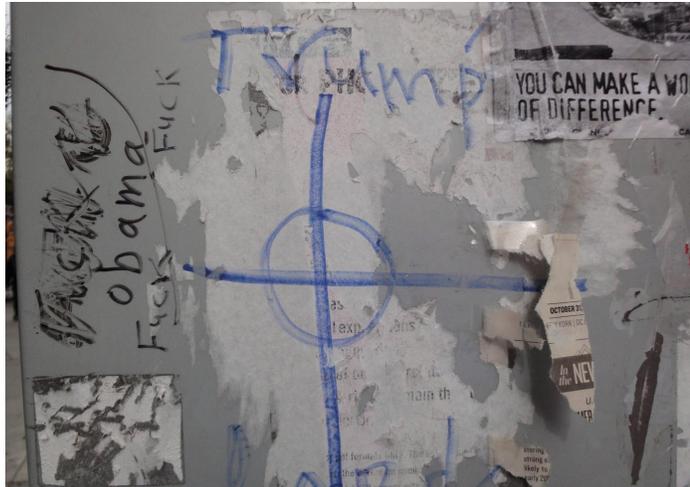


Figure 21: Graffiti portraying a variant of the Celtic Cross used by white supremacists/fascists. Around the cross reads “Trump lords”. Found on George Washington University campus in Foggy Bottom, Ward 2.

FIGURE 22: Anti-Trump graffiti covered by a Dream Defenders sticker so as to obscure an arguably homophobic remark. Found in Foggy Bottom, Ward 2.



The political ideologies that fall within the “left” are diverse, including liberals, socialists, and anarchists. As some of these ideologies are contradictory, graffiti categorized as “left” was at times found to conflict. A sticker that read “Trump’s mouth smells like Putin’s penis” had been partially covered by a “Dream Defenders” sticker –a prison abolitionist group– so that only the first half of the statement was visible (see Figure 22). While it is impossible to know definitively, it is likely that an individual saw the sticker as homophobic and wished to cover it.

3.4. Sticker Art

While one may think of brightly colored murals or iconic stylized tags when discussing graffiti, only 19.5% of the 804 instances of graffiti documented fit this description. The remaining 80.5% were stickers or posters, including those created free-hand (graffiti drawn/written by hand), printed (mechanically reproduced), and those not produced with the intent of creating graffiti but became graffiti once they entered the public sphere. Additionally, not all stickers/posters documented were entirely illegal. D.C. laws allows the posting of fliers/posters if kept under a certain quantity, are not obscene, and do not damage the surface they are placed upon (District Department of Transportation 2018). Thus, a gray area exists where political posters often teetered on the edge of illegality, either narrowly avoiding it or falling within it by slim margins. Yet all posters documented fit the definition of graffiti as public, symbolic-based social artifacts.

Stickers/posters often used pop-culture, political tropes, and slogans (see Figures 23 & 24). Many functioned as calls to action, encouraging communities to rally around certain issues such as “Copwatch trainings” (training on how to respond to police brutality) or disseminating information about the counter-protests for the second “Unite the Right” rally (see Figure 25). Others were more

ambiguous, such as a sticker that compared the *Washington Post* to the Soviet-era newspaper *Pravda*, a critique used by conservatives critiquing a perceived left-wing bias and liberals critiquing a perceived right-wing, Russian influence.

Figure 23: Graffiti by writer AbsurdlyWell depicting musician and actor Donald Glover (AKA Childish Gambino) from the music video for his song "This Is America", a song/video that achieved critical acclaim for its sociopolitical commentary and deep symbolism. Found in Anacostia, Ward 8.



Figure 24: Sticker art by writer Jbone. A play on the movie title "The Empire Strikes Back," this sticker depicts various famous African Americans while also calling for anti-Trump activism. Found in Kalorama Triangle, Ward 1.



FIGURE 25: A sticker stating, "GOOD NIGHT ALT-RIGHT," encouraging individuals to "shut it down" - it being the Unite the Right 2 rally. This phrasing was used in response to rumors that the rally's attendees would be transported to the rally via private metro cars, something that sparked outrage from both D.C. residents and the D.C. Metro's union. Located in Columbia Heights, Ward 1.

The prevalence of stickers/posters is of interest in exploring how graffiti functions politically. While content analysis cannot provide conclusive evidence for *why* they were prevalent, there is still room for speculation. Pragmatically, stickers/posters are quicker and easier to produce. Posting a sticker takes mere seconds and the writer may produce graffiti in a safe location as opposed to on-site. As the graffiti is not illegal until it is posted, the risk associated with producing graffiti is greatly reduced, especially for more time-consuming pieces. Stickers also allow for an individual or group to mass produce a consistent message, aiding efficiency and preventing discrepancies/errors (see Figure 26). Finally, stickers facilitate what I term the “one writer, many scribes” effect. This refers to a distinction between designing and reproducing graffiti, with the “scribes” (those reproducing the writer’s design) being able to propagate a writer’s message. The writer then carries far less risk in claiming the design, as it is the scribes that commit the illegal act. Thus, the work of writers like AbsurdlyWell and Jbones are prominent features of the graffiti landscape without either having to necessarily commit a crime. It should be noted that writers have achieved prominence using traditional forms of graffiti. Writer DirtyKnucklez has work throughout D.C. (see Figures 27 & 28) and has received notoriety as a political graffiti writer (Waldron, 2018).

Figure 26: Multiple cases of similar yellow center-left stickers, due to their design/font it is evident that they were made by the same person/group. This demonstrates how stickers/posters are wildly effective at spreading a mass-produced message via graffiti. Found in Downtown, Chinatown, Logan Circle, Georgetown, Foggy Bottom, Mount Pleasant, Kalorama Triangle, and U Street Corridor, Wards 1 and 2.



Figure 27: Example of a tag by DirtyKnucklez. Located in U Street Corridor, Ward 1.



Figure 28: Example of a "FUCK TRUMP!" tag by Dirty Knucklez. Located in Bellevue, Ward 8.

3.5. Public place

The distribution of graffiti was in no way even and tended to cluster around areas of sociocultural or historic significance. This meant that areas of wildly different racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds were found to have similar levels of graffiti present. While commercial areas were found to have higher amounts of graffiti in some neighborhoods, others were found to have higher levels of graffiti in residential areas. A little less than 90% political graffiti found in Anacostia was located within the central commercial district of the neighborhood (centered around Martin Luther King Jr Avenue SE and Good Hope Road SE), compared to Columbia Heights where some 72% of graffiti documented was found in residential areas. As such, by discussing some of the areas that had the highest density of graffiti documented, it is possible to explore how these areas function politically.

Fifteen percent of the graffiti documented in this study was found in the U Street Corridor neighborhood. Proudly hailed as “Black Broadway,” the neighborhood is known as a cultural center (home of Duke Ellington, site of prominent jazz clubs, breathtaking murals, etc.). It was also the site of much of the violence that occurred during the 1968 race rebellion that followed the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Thus, the prevalence of political graffiti in this neighborhood supports Snyder's (2011) claim that graffiti tends to gravitate not towards “crime places” but rather “cool places.” Though not considered an example of political graffiti, one mural summarizes the relation between U Street Corridor and graffiti (see Figure 33).

The neighborhood with the second highest prevalence of graffiti, Foggy Bottom, is home to trendy urban townhouses, a bustling commercial district, and George Washington University (GW) where over half the graffiti documented in Foggy Bottom (60.9%) was located. Foggy Bottom was one of two neighborhoods found to have right-wing graffiti (the other being a sticker in Kalorama Triangle that was originally anti-Republican/GOP but had been altered to reverse the meaning). Although only 30.9% of graffiti in Foggy Bottom was right-wing, the fact that it was almost entirely absent in the other fifteen neighborhoods makes its presence significant. While it is, at this point, impossible to know the connection of GW to right-wing graffiti, the university as a social institution is of interest. Because a university will host students from a wide geographic area, the students that attend GW will not necessarily reflect local political trends. Universities are also key to the production of knowledge, making them attractive to those that have vested interests in this process. One example of a piece of right-wing graffiti documented was a sticker advertising a conservative think tank (see Figure 29). Finally, because universities are sites of rapid learning and growth, political discourse is inevitable. Political discourse may then manifest via the interactions of graffiti (see Figure 30).



FIGURE 29: A sticker for the right-wing public policy think tank the Heritage Foundation. Located on George Washington University campus in Foggy Bottom, Ward 2.

Figure 30: Example of the discourse observed between right-wing and left-wing graffiti. Here, a piece of far-right graffiti is partially covering a piece of center-left graffiti. Located on George Washington University campus in Foggy Bottom, Ward 2.



Additionally, graffiti was found to document locations of historic events. On August 12, 2018, a second rally was set to take place on the anniversary of the Unite the Right rally and the far-right terrorist attack. A great deal of graffiti noted in multiple neighborhoods mention this and encouraged people to join the counter-protests. Counter-protesters congregated at various locations and eventually made their way to Lafayette Square to oppose the rally attendees. Graffiti promoting antifascist activism was found to cluster in these areas of south Downtown (see Figure

31), demonstrating how graffiti can be used as a means of locating sites of sociopolitical significance, such as areas where major protests have occurred.



Figure 31: Example of left-wing graffiti found near the location of the Unite the Right 2 counter protest. Here, a sticker is seen from the specifically anti-Trump/Pence organization called Refuse Fascism Located near Lafayette Square in Downtown, Ward 2.

Finally, as graffiti operates within the public sphere, the public sphere itself is understood to influence how graffiti exists. Public spaces where graffiti was observed were found to be in a state of constant change. There were multiple examples documented where signs of graffiti were present, but the graffiti had been removed, painted over, or made illegible. This characteristic of the public sphere was described using the term *liminal*. Liminality here can be understood to indicate a state of instability and transition. As a great deal of graffiti is illegally produced, it is under constant threat of being removed by law enforcement and those that maintain property. Graffiti's role in placemaking also makes it a target for those that wish to influence this process. One of the few cases of right-wing graffiti was graffiti that had its meaning altered: the graffitiing of graffiti. Other examples show similar looking graffiti being reposted when the original was made illegible (see Figure 32). Thus, the graffiti was observed is to be in a process of assertion, erasure, then re-assertion.



Figure 32: A sticker that was made illegible was replaced by a new sticker, demonstrating the reassertion process of graffiti. Located in Downtown, Ward 2.

4. Discussion

There is a great deal of value in analyzing the way in which graffiti operates politically. This analysis contributes to the field of sociology by furthering knowledge on the various social phenomena that intersect at the nexus that is graffiti. This may then be practically applied by exploring the implication of public policy and the accessibility of the public sphere. Additionally, the findings have confirmed and critiqued the initial understanding of graffiti as inherently counter-hegemonic. While this may seem contradictory, this should instead be understood as a testament to graffiti's complexity. That the political use of graffiti calls into question the very meaning of 'counter-hegemonic' and if this cannot, in itself, support the hegemonic status quo. Yet, despite the disparities in how graffiti functions specifically, all examples demonstrate the significance of the public sphere in expressing political agency via autonomous expression by individuals and communities.

4.1. Criminality

As graffiti is often understood in terms of criminality, and a great deal of sociological work on the topic explores this relation, perhaps it is the most fitting place to begin. By doing so the results of this study hold the potential to, once contextualized, add to the ongoing discourse on issues of public policy and legality. Because graffiti is often produced illegally, there exists an inherent correlation to an increase in crime as its existence is itself a crime. While this relation is circular in nature, it remains a popular justification for the enforcement of anti-graffiti legislation. Thus, a great deal of research about graffiti has worked to dispel the "broken windows theory" policing rhetoric that supports the persecution of graffiti (Ferrell, 1995; Moreau and Alderman, 2011; Snyder, 2011). When comparing the results of this study to D.C. crime statistics, it becomes apparent that this study affirms critiques of "broken windows theory."

Areas within the sample that have comparable amounts of graffiti have distinctly different rates of violent crime. The amount of graffiti in the neighborhoods of Georgetown (76) and Columbia Heights (74) are relatively similar, yet from 2013 to 2018 Columbia Heights had three-times the number of assaults and five-times the homicides of Georgetown (Metropolitan Police Department, 2018). From the data collected via this study, the prevalence of graffiti cannot be said to reflect the prevalence of violent crimes. This means that the broken windows theory is effectively falsified as it cannot be asserted that graffiti is indicative of a higher amount of criminal activity. One may object that political graffiti is not representative of the relation of graffiti and criminality because different types of graffiti (i.e. political slogans versus gang tags) are not comparable. Yet, this objection supports the claim that graffiti holds greater significance than a mere indication of crime, despite the fact that both remain equally illegal. Thus, broken windows theory is still shown as failing to appreciate the nuance represented within the empirical data.

Furthermore, the issue of criminality begs the question of the legitimacy of alternative forms of political expression. This is to say that if political graffiti is illegal, the violent persecution of writers and the erasure of graffiti caused by the enforcement of anti-graffiti legislation is seen as legitimate (Barnett, 1994; Ferrell, 1995; Moreau and Alderman, 2011). This carries with it the judgment that graffiti as a form of political expression is unfit to exist within the public sphere.

Thus, the process of assertion, erasure, and reassertion observed is, in part, a result of the criminalization of graffiti.

4.2. Graffiti and the subaltern

By discussing criminality and notions of legitimacy, one may begin to see the connection of graffiti to the analysis/critique of hegemony and the subaltern. Political graffiti, by being labeled as illegitimate, holds a relation to the hegemonic that lends itself to being counter-hegemonic: a form of sociocultural expression that is opposed by the norms and values of the hegemonic. By being illegal/illegitimate, graffiti is not only persecuted but is disenfranchised: forcefully excluded from mainstream political discourse. This distinction of persecution and disenfranchisement is imperative in discussing the analysis of hegemony, specifically in reference to the subaltern.

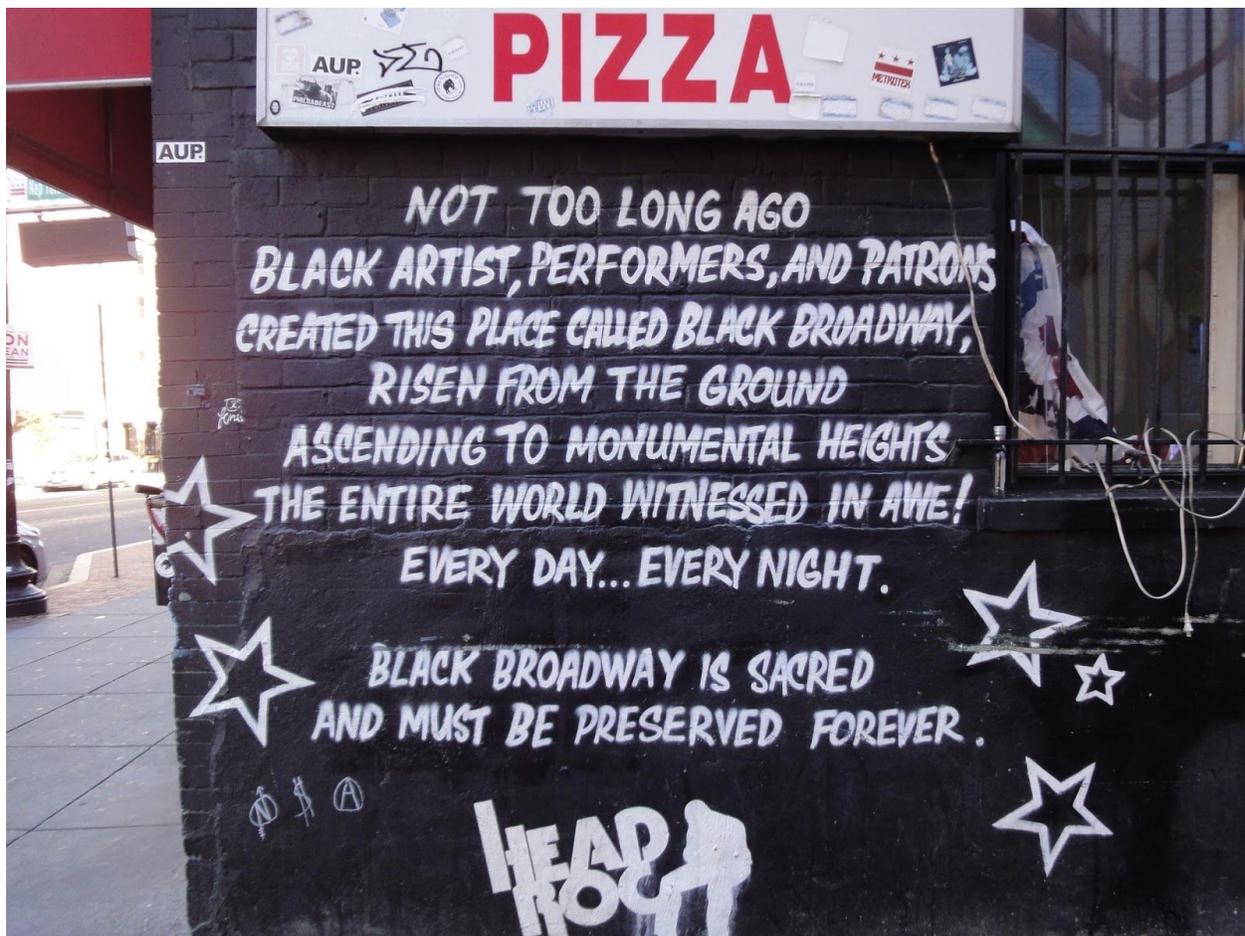
The term ‘subaltern’ can be rather contentious, specifically regarding its applicability. A great deal of work produced within the field of postcolonial studies and critical theory have taken up this task, with the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak being premier. One example, an essay entitled “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1993) is of particular importance. As indicated by the title, this work discusses *if* the subaltern holds the ability to “speak,” that is the ability to express itself within society. This is not only an analysis of the subaltern, but also a critique of how the term has been applied. Spivak understands the term to be improperly used, too often being equated with “oppressed.” Spivak argues that this confusion has, in part, stemmed from the work of Gramsci, where the term ‘proletariat’ was substituted with ‘subaltern’ to avoid censorship. Spivak ultimately concludes her essay by asserting that the subaltern is unable to speak. That, “If the subaltern can speak then, thank God, the subaltern is not a subaltern anymore” (Spivak and Harasym 1990: 158). This is to say that the definition of subaltern means that its existence is predicated upon its disenfranchisement; that what quintessentially defines the subaltern is its dialectical relation as existing outside mainstream hegemonic discourse. To enfranchise the subaltern is to, in effect, end its existence as subaltern.

I do not disagree with Spivak’s definition of the subaltern, nor her critique of its improper application, I believe the results of this study conform to her assertions. What I wish to critique, however, is her conclusion that the subaltern cannot speak. While the subaltern may be denied a place within mainstream political discourse, there still exists political discourse independent from the mainstream; a discourse embodied by the ways in which graffiti functions politically. Here, I urge that being disenfranchised be distinguished from being muted. To say that the subaltern cannot speak is to risk denying the agency of those who continually work to make themselves heard in an effort to achieve sociopolitical autonomy and eventual social wellbeing. By examining the political role of graffiti, it can be made apparent that the subaltern is doing a great deal of speaking. While it is not recognized by the dominant hegemony as holding political legitimacy, relegated to that of simple criminality, graffiti still exists as social artifacts that hold significance within public political discourse.

Graffiti is not unlike other social artifacts that serve as a means of social communication for those excluded from mainstream hegemonic discourse (see Figure 33). Forms of cultural expression, from music genres like jazz and hip-hop to non-traditional/non-western literature, have often been used by disenfranchised communities. Despite being framed as illegitimate by some, these have

still been instrumental in mobilizing communities to work toward effecting sociopolitical change. Thus, while the subaltern may be forever destined to a fate of being ignored by mainstream culture as anything other than illegitimate and/or criminal, the analysis of political graffiti provides evidence that the subaltern still actively engages in discourse that remains legible to those willing to listen.

Figure 33: A mural found explaining the origins of the U Street Corridor's cultural history and its ties to the subaltern in the form of cultural/artistic expression. Additionally, graffiti of these symbols are found at the bottom left corner. These are the international squatters' symbol, a circle-A, and a dollar sign. Located in U Street Corridor, Ward 1.



4.3. Ideological state apparatuses and organic intellectuals

The highly localized nature of right-wing graffiti may prove useful in understanding how the ideology which underpins society is produced/reproduced. Here, keeping in mind the notion of hegemony, ideology may be recognized as how the material basis of society is made socially coherent.

‘Ideology’ can designate anything from a contemplative attitude that misrecognizes its dependence on social reality to an action-orientated set of beliefs, from the indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relations to a social structure to false ideas which legitimate a dominant political power. It seems to pop up precisely when we attempt to avoid it, while it fails to appear where one would clearly expect it to dwell (Zizek, 1994: 3-4).

Questioning where ideology “dwells” is useful when discussing graffiti that supports the dominant hegemonic order instead of opposing. Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) are social institutions that take part in hegemonic discourse through affecting paradigms set by those that hold positions of authority such as religious leaders, policymakers, and intellectuals (Althusser, 1971). In relation to the societal “infrastructure” that is the material socioeconomic mode of existence, ISAs produce the “superstructure” social reality that is hegemonic (141-147). For the purposes of this study, the ISAs that revolve around intellectuals are of interest. While it is premature to state that there is a causal relation, a connection between the two would fit into the theoretical framework proposed by individuals such as Althusser and Gramsci.

GW clearly fits the definition of an ISA: knowledge produced via this institution carries with it the weight of either affirming or critiquing the ways in which society is structured. Thus, the knowledge produced via this institution is inherently tied to ideology. As this institution is part of what creates the status quo, it attracts those that wish to maintain or change it. While not all members of this institution will act in any singular way, the presence of right-wing think tanks (see Figure 29) means that GW does function, at least in part, in this capacity. Intellectuals that uphold the interests of their hegemonic class via the production/reproduction of academic work are termed “organic intellectuals” (Gramsci, [1935] 1989; Ramos, 1982). While this is almost exclusively discussed in terms of legitimized avenues of political expression, the fact that these views are also found in graffiti located near an ISA is of interest.

This is to say that despite graffiti often functioning in a counter-hegemonic fashion, this study found evidence of graffiti that promotes the maintenance of the current hegemonic order. This may explain why the few instances of graffiti that affirm and wish to conserve the hegemonic order were in close proximity to the ISA that is GW and the organic intellectuals that populate and regulate it. This includes graffiti that upholds capitalism, bourgeois democracy (i.e. the dictatorship of capital), current officials elected to office (i.e. President Trump), and apologism for systemic racial injustices. Indeed, some have found a similar phenomenon to occur in relation to right-wing tendencies.

4.4. Graffiti and the “gramscian right”

Initially, graffiti, due to its relation to the political subaltern, was expected to function in a way that represented the interests of those most marginalized by the dominant Euro-American, patriarchal, capitalist hegemonic order; that graffiti would be a tool used by the subaltern to use the public sphere as the means by which its contribution to political discourse could be made heard. While the data still demonstrates that graffiti has been used in this fashion, the presence of graffiti that reproduces aspects of the dominant ideology is curious. What might drive someone to pursue

graffiti as a means of political expression when they already see themselves and their ideals represented in mainstream politics and have access to legitimate avenues of engaging in hegemonic discourse.

Angela Nagle's *To Kill All Normies* (2017) discusses an on-going culture war that has raged between the political right and left drawing back to the 1960s with a particular emphasis on the rise of the New Left (specifically within the context of the U.S. and France, sites of radical sociopolitical change). It was this culture war that revolutionized how the right understood itself to fit within the cultural hegemonic paradigm. This "New Right" or "Gramscian Right," as Nagle puts it, broke with traditional understandings of how to engage in hegemonic discourse, turning its attention to the rising popularity of counter-culture (42-42). Within the contemporary American context, this may be best understood by examining the rise of internet culture, the alt-right, and those that stand as its most prominent proponents, including among their ranks: political commentator Milo Yiannopoulos, founder of *Vice* magazine and far-right group the Proud Boys Gavin McInnes, and activist Lauren Southern (45-47). More recently, individuals such as Charles Kirk, Ben Shapiro, Paul Joseph Watson, and Dr. Jordan Peterson have taken up the banner of defending western civilization from a supposed "cultural Marxist" cabal. For the sake of focus and brevity, I will not offer an entire analysis of *what* the alt-right is, instead urging that future research examine how this phenomenon indicates a major shift in how the western political right understands itself to exist in relation to notions of hegemony. Instead, I will simply point to graffiti as an example of a social artifact that, through this study, has shown itself to follow this trend. That despite the fact that these individuals defend the current hegemonic forces (Euro-centric, patriarchal, capitalist culture), they position themselves as part of a rebellious counter-culture.

Within the context of this study, while graffiti is deemed an illegitimate means of engaging in public political discourse by the hegemonic forces, those that present themselves as representing this hegemony still utilize graffiti as a means of propagating their ideology. Following the events of the Unite the Right rally of 2017, legislation was introduced to the house that specifically targets anti-fascist activists (H.R.6054: Unmasking Antifa Act of 2018). Additionally, law enforcement has been found to work with far-right groups to target anti-fascist activists (Papenfuss, 2018; Levin, 2018b; Armstrong, 2018) and has disproportionately arrested anti-fascist activist, even when said activists were the victims of violence (Levin, 2018a). Yet, despite this, to support such a position, a position upheld by the state, is framed by the alt-right as counter-hegemonic and was found to be represented in the graffiti observed during this study (see Figure 20). Thus, further studies on graffiti may prove useful in building off the documented evidence, provided by this study, of a shift in how "counter-hegemonic" methods may be co-opted and used to maintain the sociopolitical status quo.

4.5. Aesthetics and aura

Lastly, I wish to offer a brief analysis of the role of reproduction in relation to aesthetics which may explain the prevalence of stickers/posters. Walter Benjamin posits that the advent of image reproduction challenged the concept of "aura". The aura of an object is, in a sense, its authenticity: what distinguishes an original from a reproduction. In Benjamin's own words, "...even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: Its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (1936). While technology has advanced to

the point where a technically perfect reproduction can be made, it remains impossible to reproduce aura.

There have been those that have applied such concepts as aura to the topic of graffiti, determining that the ability to reproduce graffiti, and thus remove it from the public sphere, is detrimental. Because graffiti gains much of its political potential from being a "site-specific art" (the public sphere), the ability to relocate graffiti strips it of its aura, resulting in graffiti being robbed of graffiti-ness (Akın and Kıpçak, 2016: 153-157). However, the data collected through this study does not entirely support this claim. While other literature has discussed the commodification and "death of graffiti" (Lachmann, 1988; Barnett, 1994; Kramer, 2010; Moreau and Alderman, 2011), the reproduction of graffiti observed through this study, while technically removing its aura, aided its political functionality. A large portion of the sticker art observed via this study were print-based. Even those that were hand-made were done en masse with no intent of there being an original copy. One may even question if the graffiti observed had an aura to begin with. As the graffiti produced was done so with the explicit purpose of it working as a totality of graffiti, and not as any singular graffiti, it arguably exists beyond the concept of originality. This may lead some to conclude that the sticker graffiti observed are examples of what may be termed 'post-aura': that which, due to existing in an age of image reproduction, lacks an expectation of originality. Yet, instead, perhaps it would be more proper to not think of the graffiti as acting as any singular unit, but as a mosaic.

Because reproduced graffiti was able to become widespread, the stickers/posters observed became an essential part of the landscape. The effect being, arguably, the creation of a different aura, not one tied to the graffiti in terms of any single unit, but through the coordinated effort of the totality. The primary difference between this example and that discussed in the previously described literature is that this example of reproduction changes how the graffiti engages in the public placemaking process, rather than removing it.

This fits critiques of attempts to remove graffiti from the public sphere in an effort to 'legitimize' it. The result being the creation of what has been termed here 'graffiti-inspired art', as being in the public sphere is a defining characteristic of graffiti (Barnett, 1994; Kramer, 2010; Moreau and Alderman, 2011). If the sticker graffiti observed during this study was removed from the public sphere, it too would fail to keep its social function. The purpose of discussing this aspect of graffiti is to acknowledge the central role public accessibility plays and how image reproduction technology can have wildly different sociological effects. In regard to graffiti specifically, this both affirms the link between politicalness and the public placemaking process as well as puts into perspective how technological advancements have impacted the production and use of graffiti.

Conclusion

This study set forth to explore the political role of graffiti within Washington D.C. Initially, it was presumed that the data collected would explain how those excluded from institutional methods of political expression used the public sphere as a means of achieving representation; that because this representation was achieved through 'illegitimate' means, it would critique the established paradigm of mainstream politics. While I still believe that this was done, and that the data can attest to this, the data also acts independently from my own presumptions. Questions of

shifting political tides, aesthetics, image reproduction, and the specific social context of D.C., while relevant to the central research question, only emerged once the data was collected and analyzed. Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the research process is allowing for the social phenomenon to speak for itself. That, as a researcher, my role is to translate it so that it is comprehensible to academics and the general public alike.

Embodied by the liminality of the public sphere, social phenomena are in a constant dialectical process of being created, recreated, and thus altered. Even as of writing this, the graffiti documented here may have already been erased and replaced with the next wave of political discourse; the verses that makeup the next chapter that is the social narrative. Additionally, the methodology of this study relied entirely upon content analysis, which is limited by the type of data it collects. This limitation is not unnoticed, and future research is planned to strengthen the validity of the claims made in this paper via interviews with graffiti writers, community leaders, and political activists.

This research presents an interesting challenge when discussing the issue of reliability. Graffiti, by being illegal and publicly accessible, has a high likelihood of being removed, altered, or made illegible. As such, the data collected is at risk of being permanently erased. In order to overcome this challenge, a great deal of photographs were taken to document the graffiti's existence. Notable pictures are presented in this paper for the sake of transparency and to assert the reliability of the coding method used. By providing pictures of the graffiti observed, the data is made available without being overly influenced by any potential biases on the part of the researcher, thus strengthening the justification of how graffiti was coded.

In addition to limitations, the study's internal and external validity must be acknowledged. Internal validity was ensured by using a single coding criterion that worked to be as exhaustive as possible in its characterization of graffiti, so that the analysis conducted was performed uniformly and to the furthest extent possible. External validity, that being the generalizability of this study's findings, is limited by the fact that graffiti is defined by its context. How graffiti existed during this study may differ drastically from other times and places. As such, a longitudinal study or one that explores how graffiti exists in other cities may prove useful. Because of these limitations of generalizability, the application of a Marxian theoretical perspective proved useful, as it situated the findings of this study in larger historical processes. While the results of this study are inherently linked to the social conditions that produced them, the application of theory enabled me to detect the way in which the

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graffiti observed represented grander sociological trends that are then filtered through the social lens that is context.

Despite these limitations, this study still holds a great deal of value. To those within academia, this study provides a nuanced description of a social phenomenon that is too often overlooked and underestimated, largely due to its association with criminality. To those outside academia, this study provides evidence that the role of graffiti extends far beyond a matter of criminality. As such, laws/policies that understand it from such a superficial perspective are doomed to fail to reduce crime as well as having additional consequences, such as: political disenfranchisement of

marginalized communities, the continuation of systemic inequalities resulting from ineffective/unequal policing, and the denial of a community's right to political autonomy. If done inadvertently, these additional consequences may be viewed as attesting to the danger of ignorance even when done with the best of intentions; if done deliberately, it only proves to support the assertion of graffiti's significance. Thus, this paper is both an addition to the entirety of sociological knowledge as well as a call to action.

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