

SUBVERTING OWNERSHIP: GRAFFITI AS A RECLAMATION OF COLLECTIVE PROPERTY

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In December of 2018, Paris' famous monument, the Arc De Triomphe, was tagged with graffiti that read "Les Gilet Jaunes Triompherant." Coming in the wake of protests by the Gilet Jaunes movement¹ it translates to "The Yellow Jackets Will Triumph." Its placement on the Arc De Triomphe was highly symbolic as it came at a time when French president, Emmanuel Macron was supposed to tour the city.² The use of graffiti is now widespread across the globe, but it also occupies a crucial role as one of the five elements of hip hop.³ Graffiti represents the visual aspect of hip hop, showing how the genre interacts with its environment in different ways; furthermore, as an element of hip hop, graffiti also indicates that hip hop is a broader artistic movement and not simply another genre of music. Graffiti is still considered a form of vandalism under the U.S legal system, thus criminalising the artistic and political expression that results from its practice. This essay will argue that graffiti operates as a way to subvert notions of property through its democratisation of space. In order to do this, I will be exploring how the state, freedom

¹ Aurélie Dianara, "We're With the Rebels," *Jacobin*, November 30, 2018, <https://jacobinmag.com/2018/11/yellow-vests-france-gilets-jaunes-fuel-macron>. "The *gilets jaunes* came together to protest against the increase in fuel prices [...] the fuel price issue is something of a "straw that broke the camel's back" [...] the result of years of fiscal and social policies that have gradually strangled the low and middle classes, including in terms of the tax take."

² Sylvie Corbet, "Emmanuel Macron Tours Damaged Arc De Triomphe after Paris Riots," *USA Today*, December 02, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/12/02/riot-paris-emmanuel-macron-tours-damaged-arc-de-triomphe/2183540002/>.

³ Muce305, "5 Elements of Hip Hop," MUCE, accessed April 09, 2019, <http://muce305.org/5-elements-of-hip-hop/>. The other four elements are DJing, MCing, Breakdancing and Knowledge.

and property interact in the context of graffiti in hip hop by engaging with modern and premodern political theorists of property with a focus on anarchist conceptions of property.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, graffiti is defined as “usually unauthorized writing or drawing on a public surface.”⁴ This definition is how many understand graffiti: it has been used to describe everything from scribbles and scratches on bathroom doors and bus windows. Graffiti in the hip hop sense, however, involves ornate tags, throw-ups, and pieces.⁵ Graffiti caught public attention when artists began marking NYC subway trains in the 1970s. Craig Castleman discusses the politics surrounding the graffiti in ‘70s New York City. In his essay “The Politics of Graffiti,” he goes over the role New York’s newspapers played in shaping public perception of graffiti and graffiti artists. According to Castleman, “the appearance of the mysterious message ‘Taki 183’ had sufficiently aroused the curiosity of New Yorkers to lead the *New York Times* to send one of its reporters to determine its meaning.”⁶ Taki 183, it turned out, was a “17-year-old recent high school graduate” who adopted the name ‘Taki,’ a “diminutive for Demetrius, his real first name,” and went around the city writing “his name and his street number everywhere he [went].”⁷ The article in the *Times* created an image of Taki as an engaging character, leading him to become a folk hero inspiring even more artists.⁸

As the ranks of graffiti artists swelled, writing became even more elaborate. The creation of a work takes an immense amount of time, planning, and risk. As Tricia Rose explains in *Black Noise*, “no longer a

⁴ “Graffiti,” Merriam-Webster, accessed April 09, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/graffiti>.

⁵ Matt Randal, “10 Graffiti Terms and Their Meaning,” Widewalls, 2014, <https://www.widewalls.ch/10-graffiti-terms/>; “Graffiti: What Is Graffiti Art?” Hip Hop Area, 2008, <http://www.hiphoparea.com/graffiti/what-is-graffiti-art.html>. A tag is an extremely stylized signature of the artists’ moniker, throw-ups are similar to tags but are predominantly bubble letters designed to be quickly executed, pieces are large works of graffiti that are complex and require large amounts of time. They are also quite labour-intensive and often created by groups of highly skilled artists.

⁶ Craig Castleman, “The Politics Of Graffiti,” in *That’s The Joint!: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (NY: Routledge, 2004), 21.

⁷ “‘Taki 183,’” *The New York Times*, July 21, 1971, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/07/21/archives/taki-183-spawns-pen-pals.html>.

⁸ “Taki 183.”

matter of simple tagging, graffiti began to develop elaborate styles, themes, formats and techniques, most of which were designed to increase visibility, individual identity and status.”⁹ This, of course, did not sit well with authorities: another article in the *Times* was released in spring 1972, this time to declare war on graffiti artists. In this one, the *Times* advised the city to ban the sale of spray paint to minors, thus addressing the root cause of the graffiti “problem.”¹⁰ After this, public animosity towards graffiti and graffiti artists began to increase, resulting in further criminalisation of the art form. As graffiti became political, the young writers were “demonized, pathologized, and criminalized.”¹¹ Black and Hispanic youths were defensively positioned against state power and, as graffiti evolved, were increasingly under police surveillance and constraint.¹² In 1973 it was reported that 1,562 young people had been arrested for “defacing subways and other public places with graffiti.”¹³

Graffiti has long been integrated as a practice of space and a struggle over it.¹⁴ That is to say, graffiti amplifies spatialised distributions of meaning as it permits and reifies “localized practices of self.”¹⁵ However, space, and, in particular, urban space, is already political; for meaning to be achieved via the aforementioned localised practices, a struggle has to take place. The question then becomes which sides are struggling and what the stakes are in the struggle. This was understood by P.R. Patterson who, in their letter to the *Times*, criticised most people for “subduing the desire to mark up subways as a protest against the indignities of city bureaucracies.”¹⁶ They understood that the context in which graffiti emerged was a product of structural failings by the government of NYC. Graffiti made it possible for individuals who had been disenfranchised and ignored by the socio-economic and political system to claim their identity in

⁹ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994), 42.

¹⁰ Castleman, “Politics Of Graffiti,” 22.

¹¹ Murray Forman, “Hip-Hop Ya Don’t Stop: Hip-Hop History and Historiography,” in *That’s The Joint!: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (NY: Routledge, 2004), 10.

¹² Forman, “Hip-Hop Ya Don’t Stop,” 10.

¹³ Castleman, “Politics of Graffiti,” 24.

¹⁴ Forman, “Hip-Hop Ya Don’t Stop,” 155.

¹⁵ Forman, 155.

¹⁶ Castleman, “Politics of Graffiti,” 24.

spaces *owned* by the system. By operating in this vein, graffiti serves as a mechanism to further carry hip hop's ideals of resistance.¹⁷

In *The Republic*, Plato argues that collective ownership was necessary to promote a shared pursuit of the common interest as well as prevent a situation where "some grieve exceedingly and others rejoice at the same happenings."¹⁸ Looking at the situation in New York leading up to and intensifying in the 1970s, however, we can see that it was indeed the case that some grieved exceedingly while others rejoiced. Hip hop was born out of a New York City undergoing a brutal process of community destruction and relocation. It was a period of immense social, political and economic repression in neighbourhoods which were then deemed slums. The Black and Hispanic residents who were relocated were structurally denied city resources and political power.¹⁹ Returning to the definition of graffiti provided earlier,²⁰ I would like to draw attention to "unauthorised" and "public." In this definition, there is an implicit assumption about who makes up the public and who is doing the authorising: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant's normative political philosophy argues that property must be based on consent—the consent of everyone affected by decisions about the use and control of a given set of resources.²¹ In the case of graffiti's emergence, the actors with the power to make decisions were not those that would have been affected by them. Graffiti and hip hop emerged as responses to this lack of consent, the breach of the social contract by a racist city government²². Given the exclusion of poor (and predominantly Black and Hispanic) communities in the understanding of who comprises the public, the notion of property utilised in this definition of graffiti can be viewed as private to those in the power structure.²³ It is in the

¹⁷ Bonuscut, "The Power of Graffiti and Hip-Hop Culture," *Bonus Cut*, June 19, 2013, <https://bonuscut.com/2013/06/19/the-power-of-graffiti-and-hip-hop-culture/>.

¹⁸ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 462b-c.

¹⁹ Rose, *Black Noise*, 33.

²⁰ As a reminder, the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines graffiti as "usually unauthorized writing or drawing on a public surface."

²¹ Jeremy Waldron, "Property and Ownership," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, September 06, 2004, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/property/#3>.

²² Rose, *Black Noise*, 34.

²³ Emma Goldman, *Red Emma Speaks: The Selected Speeches and Writings of the Anarchist and Feminist Emma Goldman*, comp. Alix Shulman (London: Wildwood

light of the resulting exclusion that Pierre-Joseph Proudhon examines property: he says “property... violates equality by the rights of exclusion and increase, and freedom by despotism...[and has] perfect identity with robbery.”²⁴ He asserts that (private) property is a source of coercive, hierarchical authority that leads to exploitation and reproduces privilege and inequality. In the context of ‘70s and ‘80s New York, this is evident in how the mobilisation against graffiti took place. Take the case of one of the transit policemen, Steven Schwartz, who in August of 1972 received commendation from Mayor Lindsay. Craig Castleman describes the event as such:

Mayor Lindsay held a ceremony in his office at which he officially commended one of Dr. Ronan’s transit policemen, patrolman Steven Schwartz, for his “personal crusade” against graffiti. Schwartz alone had apprehended thirteen writers in the previous six months, a record for graffiti arrests unmatched in the department. The mayor followed up the ceremony with a statement that it was the “Lindsay theory” that graffiti writing “is related to mental health problems.” He described the writers as “insecure cowards” seeking recognition.²⁵

Here we see how maintenance of state power is rewarded and, additionally, how through coercive state power Mayor Lindsay criminalised not only the act of writing graffiti but the mental state of those who participate in it. As a result of there being “a possessing and non-possessing group of human beings,” the state becomes “indispensable to the possessing minority for the protection for its privileges.”²⁶ That is to say, because the alignments of power are so closely tied to property ownership, when the owners of property constitute a minority they are still able to exert a disproportionate amount of power on the non-possessing populace. In order to maintain this power, the instruments of coercion available to the state become integrated into the constellation of instruments the

House, 1979), 406-407. On state property, Emma Goldman says “it belongs to the state; this is, the government has control of it and can dispose of it according to its wishes and views,” as opposed to property being public in that sense that it “belong[s] to the people, to be settled and used by individuals or groups according to their needs” based on “free access.”

²⁴ Pierre Joseph Proudhon, *What Is Property? An Inquiry into the Principle of Right and of Government*, trans. Benjamin Ricketson Tucker (London: Reeves, 1898), 251.

²⁵ Castleman, “Politics Of Graffiti,” 22.

²⁶ Rudolf Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism* (New York: Gordon Press, 1972), 11.

possessing minority utilises; what Rocker asserts in this statement is that, in fact, the state becomes *the* primary instrument for the possessing few. This power and its ability to suppress identity is what hip hop (and, as an extension, graffiti) exists in opposition to.

How then does graffiti act as a subversive mechanism? As Greg Tate says, "the advent of hip hop can be said to have contributed...radical acts of counterinsurgency, turning a community of passive pop consumers into one of creative...producers."²⁷ The post-industrial city was crucial in shaping the cultural terrain of early artists. For graffiti artists, the urban transit system was their artistic medium, their canvas.²⁸ It required them to have mastery of its routes and plan intensely how a piece would fit together. This can be interpreted in the frame of what W.E.B Du Bois called the "second sight": that process by which the "minority" knows the majority not only better than the obverse but often better than the "majority."²⁹ In the case of graffiti, writers gain an understanding of the urban systems that far out measure the knowledge of the authorities. By doing this they are able to engage with urban space more genuinely and productively than the dominant group of property owners and not simply as consumers of urban space. Graffiti artists kept putting up tags and throw-ups even as the campaign against them intensified. This resistance to state coercion echoes Mikhail Bakunin's call for the "absolute rejection of every authority including that which sacrifices freedom for the convenience of the state."³⁰ He goes on to write that:

Primitive society had no conception of freedom; and as society evolved, before the full awakening of human rationality and freedom, it passed through a stage controlled by human and divine authority. The political and economic structure of society must now be reorganized on the basis of freedom. Henceforth, order in society must result from the greatest possible realization of individual liberty, as well as of liberty on all levels of social organization.³¹

²⁷ Andrew Bartlett, "Airshafts, Loudspeakers and the Hip Hop Sample: Contexts and African American Musical Aesthetics," in *That's The Joint!: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (NY: Routledge, 2004), 393.

²⁸ Rose, *Black Noise*, 34.

²⁹ Bartlett, "Airshafts, Loudspeakers and the Hip Hop Sample," 393.

³⁰ Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin, *Bakunin on Anarchy: Selected Works by the Activist-Founder of World Anarchism*, trans. Sam Dolgoff (New York: Knopf, 1971), 76.

³¹ Bakunin, *Bakunin on Anarchy*, 76.

As Taki 183 explained “you do it for yourself.” Graffiti artists are engaged in constant opposition to state authority in order to establish their freedom and identity on the spaces they engage with but do not “own” due to the confines of property. Taki also made an astute observation when he said “why do they go after the little guy? Why not the campaign organizations that put stickers all over the subways at election time?”³² This demonstrates the way in which the power structure is set up to further underprivilege the underprivileged to protect the privileges of those at the top of the hierarchy— property owners. Furthermore, in having authors be ambiguous, graffiti changes the way creation is understood. By virtue of leaving their work on the street cryptically named,³³ graffiti artists inspire a different kind of imagination from the individualistic, neoliberal conception of creation.³⁴ By disseminating their work this way, graffiti artists create a democratic communal knowledge in the places their works are located.³⁵

Furthermore, graffiti challenges much of the neoliberal ethos that shaped the ‘70s and ‘80s and is still pervasive today. As Wendy Brown details in *Undoing the Demos*, neoliberalism has created an emasculated version of “the public.” The art of graffiti, however, overturns this ideology by claiming public space as the domain of the community and using it as a place where individuals can assert their identity within a communal whole. Putting works in spaces where members of the community can see and engage with the work also sends a message about what public spaces *ought* to be. It breaks away from the elitism in contemporary art by having a “commons” where community members can interact with the pieces. In doing this, graffiti challenges the dominant understanding of ownership and “signifies and theorizes communality.”³⁶ The notion of communal

³² Castleman, “Politics Of Graffiti,” 21.

³³ “Language and Rules of Graffiti Artists,” Graffiti vs. Street Art Discourse Groups, December 02, 2012, <https://iwillnotbeconsumed.wordpress.com/language-and-rules-of-graffiti-artists/>. Graffiti writers “tag” their works. A tag is a writer’s logo and personally stylised signature. Tags are never real names but rather aliases guaranteeing the anonymity of the creators.

³⁴ Max Harris, “Graffiti Politics: On Street Art, Space, and Public Democracy,” *Codex Press*, September 25, 2017, <https://thedial.co/articles/graffiti-politics-on-street-art-space-and-public-democracy>.

³⁵ Bartlett, “Airshafts, Loudspeakers and the Hip Hop Sample,” 403.

³⁶ Bartlett, 404.

theorisation echoes even further in how writers “belong to and work in crews.”³⁷ Bakunin is quoted as saying “[n]o individual can recognise his own humanity, and consequently realise it in his lifetime, if not by recognising it in others and co-operating in its realisation for others.”³⁸ For graffiti crews, “group identity and individual development are equally central.”³⁹ This reflects Bakunin’s assertion, made in reference to the political movement of anarchism. From this, we can see how graffiti embodies the essence of anarchism; an anti-authoritarian ethos that seeks to create conditions for the individual to flourish through the collective.

What is more, graffiti is subversive in how it transforms items from their original purpose and creates new meaning from use. In particular, spray paint cans and their technological improvement in nozzles, adhesion and paint texture, led to a wider range of expression in graffiti writing.⁴⁰ This alters understandings of ownership in a way that again emphasises the importance of public *use*. The ways members of a non-emasculated public engage and interact with materials, spaces and possessions are radically different from the conceptions those with property would have. Hip hop beat production also has a history of repurposing sounds that have property rights conferred upon them.⁴¹ This parallel of taking things that are owned and transforming them into new, vibrant, shared experiences is indicative of the way hip hop functions as a means of constantly changing what constitutes knowledge in a certain space— something graffiti achieves as well.

For the Gilet Jaunes, graffiti is only one of the many weapons in their arsenal in their fight against the French establishment. However, their use of it is symbolic of what graffiti has come to represent. Graffiti has come to exemplify a counter-culture and a method of subversion for many across the globe. It reflects hip hop’s struggle against the dominant culture of the powerful, through its approach to ownership, property, authority and its engagement with the *demos*.

³⁷ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*, 43.

³⁸ Errico Malatesta, *Anarchy*, trans. Vernon Richards (London: Freedom Press, 2009), 30.

³⁹ Rose, *Black Noise*, 43.

⁴⁰ Rose, 42.

⁴¹ Thomas G. Schumacher, “‘This Is a Sampling Sport’: Digital Sampling, Rap Music, and the Law in Cultural Production,” in *That’s The Joint!: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (NY: Routledge, 2004).

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