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REFLECTIONS

"GRAFFITI TAUGHT ME EVERYTHING I KNOW ABOUT SPACE": URBAN FRONTS AND BORDERS

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Borders

This essay on the image of the frontier ought to begin with a picture. But that is the last thing I learned about space from the visual site I wish to witness verbally: there is really such a thing as "too late." Too late to make a photo or stall the vanishing of the transitory; there is something called the last minute, we don't know when it's coming, and then it is too late. One writes afterwords, not to make an enduring monument, but simply to map out part of the space of memory for those others who are before us.[1]

I first saw this site from the ground. I had gotten off the Chicago El train at the wrong stop and found myself in what is called a borderline area: that is, a neighborhood that forms an in between the good and the bad, the proper and the improper, the right side and the wrong, the familiar/homey and the dangerous/strange. A frontier area in the dictionary sense of "a region just beyond or at the edge of" the safely settled. I decided to walk quickly through this area, trying not to make eye contact—but in the process of not looking left, I was forced to face a wall that formed a visual border to my right. It was a very tall wall and I could not see the other side; I thought it might be the wall of a schoolyard, since large block letters proclaimed it had been painted by students at Walt Disney Elementary School. The wall had been divided into segments about five feet wide, each of which had clearly been designed as the small art project of a child

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and executed with the help of someone who could reach up high. I passed several charming segments before I came to the one that arrested me: this square was painted gray, over which, in carefully correct cursive letters, someone had written "Graffiti Taught Me Everything I Know about Space." The rest of the square was decorated with multicolored prints of children's hands.

Already I was rather confounded, full of pressing questions. What does a child learn about space from graffiti? What, in turn, could this child teach me? I was a child in Colorado and learned about space from the Rocky Mountains—a persistent figure for the romance of the frontier in the American imagination. To see mountains on the horizon provides a formative experience of space as expansive and exhilarating; the horizon is a beyond that invites one to venture into gigantic places that dwarf the human and render absurd the verb "to claim," though we with our pathetic fences try. This mountain frontier entices one into the activity of crossing, without necessarily reaching another side; it is a frontier that puts the concept of the border into question, having no ends or edges that one can reach or touch. But the eye meets a very different type of horizon amidst the built environments of many urban spaces. Chicago, in particular, is a city both flat and vertiginously vertical; from the ground, the visual limit is always a wall. And yet these walls are not simple horizonal borderlines dividing up space; they are vertical planes that, through inscription, can be transformed into unexplored and multidimensional spaces, becoming frontiers in the dictionary sense of "undeveloped areas or fields for discovery or research," frontiers that, like the mountains, can beckon with a sense of limitless possibilities. Unlike the mountains, however, these frontiers engage one not in the activity of crossing, but in the activity of faces, in facings. This is the first conceptual series of the frontiers represented by the walls of urban spaces: the series, "faces": to make or save faces, to efface, to deface . . . which involves a second series as well, the series, "front and back": front-ier, confront, the back that becomes the front, or a front, as well as the question of what takes place behind the back.

In any event, the first spatial tier that occurred to me when confronted with "Graffiti Taught Me Everything I Know about Space" was the space of writing—no doubt because this is a space in which I can feel intellectually at home. Taking writing quite concretely, how does graffiti map or remap the formal space of inscription? Ordinarily, we write on pages, using the equivalent of a typewriter—a machine originally invented for the blind. The printed page is a space with a logic that is literally prescribed. Machines map it out for us, and it is mapped in about the same way in the bulk of material I read. In contrast to the page's rigid spatial stratification, the wall offers what Deleuze and Guattari would call a rhizomatic space: inscriptions can begin and end anywhere, can proceed unpredictably in any direction, can form surprising juxtapositions, layerings, and diagonal relations. Even a canvas is already gridded by the

entire history of art; graffiti, perpetually erased, has no such history and reinvents itself in each gesture, with each generation. In this sense, graffiti can teach us about the free space of the margin in which the significance of form—and the ways in which form can be made to signify—can be discovered, experimented, explored. At its best, graffiti plays on the material remainders of writing: the shape of a letter, its nonneutral angles, curves, and colors. This formal or typographical dimension that is the affect of words, the face of a page, is exploited with great skill by graffiti artists, who use the shapes of language to make faces at and on the backs of proper urban spaces. From this angle, graffiti might teach a child something about spatial potential, about the ways a margin can become a frontier.

About two weeks after coming to this reassuring conclusion, I caught a glimpse of "Graffiti Taught Me Everything I Know about Space" from the window of an elevated train. From this height I saw with no small shock that it was not a schoolyard wall at all, but the wall of a large city cemetery. At the top of the wall, angled in so it could not be seen from the street, a triple strand of barbed wire was designed to prevent climbing over; as an additional precaution, a mattress of barbed wire on the other side stopped anyone from jumping into the cemetery. Also of course from making a way out.

Suddenly the potential of the margins seemed minuscule, the freehand graffiti faces mocked by the austere violence of the barbed wire border. Moreover, it was difficult not to see an almost cinematic progression in the hand print, the text, the cemetery that, despite the barbed wire, would probably be reached too soon by the child who learned about space from graffiti. Children growing up on the wrong sides of urban borderlines are at risk in so many ways; on the edge of everything, they are almost doomed. Here they are already playing precariously on the border of death, making small colorful hand prints on a cemetery wall. On the outside of an Outside space, home of the dead, the hand prints now seemed a tragically transitory mark over against the solidity of headstones. The cemetery is a strange space, as is the space of the grave; these are not spaces we claim, but they claim us. An estranged or inverse image of the frontier no one can either face or cross.

Over the next several weeks I was condemned to watch from the window of the El as "Graffiti Taught Me Everything I Know about Space" began to decay. A totally exposed and fragile surface, as vulnerable as an upturned face or an outstretched hand, it was susceptible to the harsh Chicago weather that started to wear it away. I was distressed by this erosion, which seemed almost sacrilegious; particularly in that the more the site was defaced, the more alive it seemed to become. Defacement tampers with the borders between signifier, signified, and referent: it can mysteriously particularize, mortalize, even impassion a signifier, giving to representation the status of a sensible body, as if it worked the same magic a

child's imagination works on objects to make them become *real*. But then in the midst of becoming a body, the wall stopped and became, instead, a theater, a stage for another kind of performance.

Until the paint began to flake away, neighborhood gangs had left the wall alone. But as decay progressed and blank spaces opened up, cryptic gang signs began to appear, constructing other borders, defining a different frontier, and provoking for me a less aesthetic, more political confrontation with the question of what this child might have learned about space.

Graffiti takes many forms and serves many functions, but perhaps the most prevalent and certainly the best publicized function of urban scrawl is to stake out gang territory, to lay claim to an alley, a corner, a roof, or an entire area symbolically fenced off by gang signatures.[2] In an amazing and wholly audacious gesture, these urban gangs redraw all the lines of the city, simply overwriting proper legal and political boundaries in a double war waged on two uneven fronts. On the one hand, gang graffiti violates the proper owner, challenging the authority of the systems that exclude these illicit claimants and forcibly invading spaces to which access through socially accepted channels is blocked. And yet this is a hopeless and long-lost war. We on the inside see the writing on the outer wall, the curiously foreign script we cannot read; it makes us vaguely uneasy or angry perhaps, but that is all. Gang territory can only really be claimed against other gangs, in a violent game of colonization and territory that precisely mirrors the ethics and practices of property that have literally defined America. The legal game takes place on the insides of city spaces and history books, the illegal game on the outsides, but the rules and goals are much the same. It is not at all the case that gang members have not learned American values; they have learned them extremely well. The desire for possessions, for belonging, for a public name, for property and protection; the formation of powerful organized hierarchies, the use of force to stake out spaces and a blind disregard for the claims of others; the very concept of space as something that can be conquered, taken over, defended as one's own: all this is played out on both sides of the wall. If we are terrified of the image of the American gang, it is in part because this image reflects back to us in brutal form the mores and values America teaches its children—the ones it owns, recognizes, invites in, as well as those it silently excludes while vehemently denying any exclusion and vilifying those who cannot get what we tell them to want, who have no access and no egress in the dominant symbolic order, those who mark its margins.

Between and within the double wars waged daily by urban gangs, children get caught—particularly the children who learn about space from graffiti. Children are accidentally or intentionally shot by gang members or by police; they are routinely crushed between the inside and the outside as they play out their own horribly serious pantomimes of staking a claim.

It is difficult to imagine a sense in which these children experience frontier as a space of expanding possibilities, the free space of the unexplored, a beyond to the old where one might create the new. The use of the space of a cemetery wall for a frontier seems heroic and tragic and terrible at the same time: born into a world of blank walls that enclose an outside, where there is no door, not even a locked one, perhaps a teenaged child draws a door on the wall. No one has Harold's magic purple crayon; it is not a door that will open, but perhaps it lets you imagine it is you who are on the inside. You who invent symbols of your own and order them in a bloody and enraged counter-imperialist performance played out on the borders, under highways and train tracks, in subway stations, empty lots, behind the backs and on the blind sides of buildings, in all the waste spaces of urban America. At the dead end of an alley that has become the only frontier.

And yet in the act of word-processing I wonder whether this situation is not shifting, as are our images of space itself. The explosive growth of telecommunications is rapidly altering the aesthetics and politics of space and property, rendering the tactics of urban gangs oddly archaic even as they reach their height. Is the violent description and defense of physical borders now being quietly overshadowed by new forms of spatial spectralization? If graffiti had taught me everything I know about space, where would I find myself in the world of the virtual? Where would I find the world, who would it belong to, and who could have a space in it?

Oddly enough, the poetics of the virtual—the aesthetics of writing hyperspace—intersect with those of graffiti precisely at the point where the image of the frontier is transformed. No longer a deep, extended space one ventures into or crosses, this frontier is formed from a series of surfaces or facings that can be sculpted, designed, mapped, layered, connected in web-like fashion; effaced, defaced. Like graffiti, virtual space is woven between outsides, by putting one plane or face into communication with another; it is not concentric, moving from an inner core toward an outer ring, but eccentric, engaged in a travelling. And yet the two kinds of writing radically diverge at the point of embodiment: graffiti is intimately entwined with bodies, with the traveling of a hand that holds a can of spray paint or an El train along the tracks, with knowing that a body has been there, in this space where it was not supposed to be.

Graffiti is invasive; it is a physical invasion of proper or public space. Played out in real time amidst real bricks and bones, it keeps alive a certain politics of space, claiming territories by marking out physical borderlines that violate the law, marking by marring in spectacularly visible acts of desecration. Such dynamics are quite unlike the new kinds of violations, colonizations, and territorializations enabled by the electronic erasure of borders, the penetration of all boundaries by the invisible intrusion of the sourceless intangible. Graffiti forces us to witness something. On the back of social structures, it creates a facing: a moment of visual

confrontation with what is on the outside. Meanwhile, behind the back, that is, on the inside, private space is in many ways becoming open space, public space. At what point does the spectacular visibility of gang graffiti become, unwittingly, a "front"—reassuring us that we can still picture property and its defacement in the old ways, blinding us to the ambivalent erosion of spatial integrity effected by the virtual? Is this erosion a sinister demolition of privacy, or can it transform the social in positive ways, distending space to include those who are dispossessed by America's imperialist heritage? Like the mythic American west, the virtual frontier promises limitless potential, equality and inclusiveness, the chance to forge new identities and found new kinds of communities. And yet the proverbial World Wide Web is only accessible to an exclusive few. What kinds of collisions and collusions between physical and virtual spaces are we creating on the verge, we who are beginning to experience the problematic superimposition of these spaces in our lives today? Even as the replacement of the commute by the computer blinds us to the writing on the cemetery wall, another is killed by gangs defending the territories they have carved upon the outsides, from the frontiers of proper urban spaces that admit to them only a grave.

For a moment, the last moment, as it turned out, "Graffiti Taught Me Everything I Know about Space" was still just legible beneath the fresh paint of the new graffiti, though I could not have read it if I hadn't known what it said, could not have made sense from the vestiges of a child's hand. The next morning it had all disappeared. The sandblasted wall, returned to itself, presented only a silence: a silence that, deep down, had never stopped waiting, the underlying silence of stone that everything human faces or perhaps defaces, and on the other side the graves.

Notes

1. This essay has been influenced by the work of Hélène Cixous, particularly her seminar at Northwestern University, "Is It a Tragedy?" (Fall 1997); Michael Taussig; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, particularly *A Thousand Plateaus* (trans. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987); Alphonso Lingis's *Deathbound Subjectivity* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989); Michel Foucault's essay "Maurice Blanchot: The Thought of the Outside" (*Foucault/Blanchot*, trans. Brian Massumi, New York: Zone Books, 1987); Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York: Routledge, 1994); and John Sallis's *Stone* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994).

   An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual conference of the Society for the Interdisciplinary Study of Social Imagery, "The Image of the Frontier in Literature, the Media, and Society," Colorado Springs, Colorado, 14 Mar. 1997, and appears in the conference proceedings. I wish to thank the other panelists and audience members, particularly my sister Wendy Nandrea, for their helpful questions and comments.

2. For a carefully researched sociological account of inner-city gang graffiti, suburban "tagging," and the differences between them, see Wayne S. Wooden's book *Renegade Kids, Suburban Outlaws: From Youth Culture to Delinquency* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1995), especially pages 115–128.