Community Literacy Journal

Volume 18 | Issue 2 Article 10

October 2024

Review of The Writing of Where: Graffiti and the Production of Writing Spaces

Rosanne Carlo

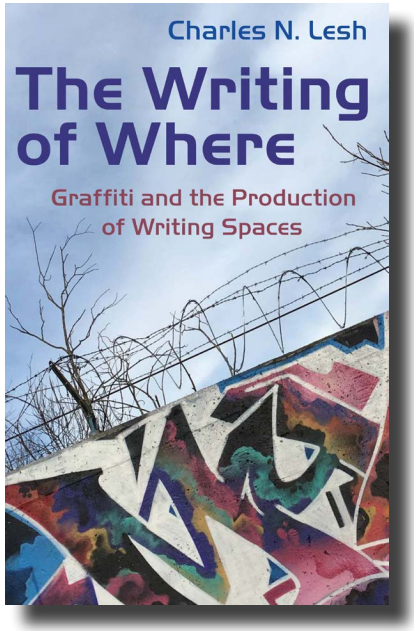
Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy

Recommended Citation
Carlo, Rosanne (2024) "Review of The Writing of Where: Graffiti and the Production of Writing Spaces," *Community Literacy Journal*: Vol. 18: Iss. 2, Article 10.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy/vol18/iss2/10

This work is brought to you for free and open access by FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Community Literacy Journal by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.

The Writing of Where: Graffiti and the Production of Writing Spaces

Charles N. Lesh
Syracuse University P, 2022, 304 pp.



Reviewed by Rosanne Carlo
College of Staten Island (CUNY)

Charles Lesh's book, *The Writing of Where: Graffiti and The Production of Writing Spaces,* challenges mainstream notions in the field of writing studies, such as the definition of public writing, what "counts" as writing, and who is a writer. His ethnographic method, interviewing graffiti writers in Boston and participating in the creation of writing spaces with them, offers a model for community-based research that centers reciprocity. Lesh claims the book as a space that "calls forth a public and a consequent set of values in relation to the ethos of community partnerships in rhetoric and composition" (25). To me, this is why the book is an important read and contribution to community writing.

Lesh focuses on the importance of place and writing, specifically on the city of Boston, documenting its history of hostility to graffiti, and its writers, as a way of analyzing a counterpublic that is thriving and working to rewrite the city's normative script. He discusses Boston's conservatism through tracing narratives of its Puritanical founding and its obsession in memorializing its own history as well as its development today into a gentrified, neoliberal city. "Boston is like your old grandmother that you're just waiting to croak because she just won't give up those old ways" (80), graffiti writer TENSE observes. Perhaps, too, writing studies is like your old grandmother—dictating to scholar-teachers what methods we should use, what counts as writing or publics or community, and what aims we should strive for in our scholarly work. Disciplinarity can be an inscribed circle of naming what we know. Though Lesh's book does value classical rhetorical concepts at the center of writing studies, such as invention, style, delivery (à la circulation), and ethos, he also pushes readers forward to imagine writing outside traditional institutional spaces and genres.

The "wheres" of writing is explicitly tied to invention, and graffiti writers are on the cutting edge of that process of production: "Graffiti writers make space, sure, in a general sense. But, what's more, they make *spots*, they make *bibles*, they make *trains.*

They make new publics and new *wheres* of public writing" (20). Through analyzing the practices, products, and circulation of graffiti writers' work, Lesh argues that writing studies can learn a thing or two about how to produce itself in a more capacious and inclusive way.

Lesh helps readers understand the art of graffiti—that it is a form of writing and that the artists identify as writers—in this sense, he identifies a gap in our disciplinary understandings of what counts as "writing," which overlooks graffiti. As a New Yorker, graffiti is everywhere in my life—on the rooftops of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway (BQE), on the railroad trellises and underpasses of the Metro North line, on the skate park ramps in my South Brooklyn neighborhood, on the trains in the freight yard by the Owls Head Wastewater Treatment Plant, in the bathroom stalls in the ladies' room at College of Staten Island (CSI). After I read Lesh's book, the graffiti that was always there became more visible, more meaningful to me. I started to think about the writers and why they wrote. I could better "read" graffiti, understand the labor and processes of its writers, and also see it as an art and as a way of remaking—or speaking back to—the official discourses of a city. But, graffiti isn't just for us city folk. It's also for people far and wide. Its circulation, particularly via freight trains, allows us to view graffiti as it moves across the country, even in Lesh's new "where" of Opelika, Alabama (229).

The introduction, and the "Community Interludes" sections, feature the voices of the graffiti writers Lesh created with; they offer insights into their identities as writers and their writing practices. The reputation of a graffiti writer is built up over time and place, practicing their developing styles on blackbooks (also called bibles) and walls as well as in the circulation of their pieces. A graffiti writer has an ethos. This idea of ethos hit home for me when I read LIFE's words: " . . . Something about me feels proud when I say I am a writer. Because I am writing mostly based in letters. It all came from writing your name. This is who I am and I am going to say it. I just think of a writer as fucking someone who really knows their shit. They know their history. They know the writers before them. They know their city's history. They know the ropes. They know the etiquette" (28). Immediately, this reflection from LIFE reminded me of Michael Halloran's definition of ethos, which is a concept not only meant in personal terms but also in a community and place-based way. You don't just write for yourself, you write to show and reflect your membership in a community. Halloran expands: "The most concrete meaning given for the term in the Greek lexicon is 'a habitual gathering place,' and I suspect that it is upon this image of people gathering together in a public place, sharing experiences and ideas, that its meaning as character rests. To have ethos is to manifest the virtues most valued by the culture to and for which one speaks" (60). In other words, to have ethos is to know your shit and your history and your city.

Lesh is concerned about ethos because he wants to be seen as part of the public of graffiti writers and not just academically analyzing them. This is essential in developing the spatial concept of reciprocity Lesh models in the book (223). So, Lesh participates in the Boston culture of graffiti by frequenting places of significance, such as the Kulturez writing space and The Lab, as well as indexing his work in a black-

book (or bible). Additionally, Lesh serves as someone who participates in the actual production of graffiti, in the legal space of the warehouse in Quincy, MA, but also illegal places. Lesh describes being out on walks with other artists returning to or creating new spots for graffiti. On one such trip, he is assisting writer NIRO: "I clear beer bottles and other highway trash and sit in a position where I can see the wall, the highway, and the parking lot. My role tonight is lookout. As NIRO fills in the R, a state trooper drives by. "'Yo, down,' I whisper, and we both get low" (89). In this description, the "where" of graffiti is featured. The writers are distinctive individuals in this, Lesh being among them, but they are building and reflecting a culture and a history; they are a public.

In chapter one, "Boston(s)," Lesh indexes the ways Boston outlaws difference, and graffiti writers, through its culture and laws. He indexes "the dominant literacy landscapes" of Boston to contrast these with the potential new scripts the writers create on this old text (Lesh 34). Lesh ties Boston to the idea of the Melting Pot, or a belief in assimilation and eradication of difference; to its role as The Athens of America, in being a place with many universities and a highly, traditionally educated citizenry; to its preservation of history as a Cradle of Liberty, evidenced by its many monuments and sacred spaces—a version of "product not process" (52); and, finally, its present, gentrifying state, New Boston, where graffiti needs to be buffed to make way for neoliberal visions of grayness and profit. The important concept to take away from this chapter is how the practice of graffiti, and the bodies of the writers themselves, are othered and criminalized in Boston. The writers are of someplace else, not part of the official writing of the city. Lesh argues that this is all the more reason to understand and read graffiti writing, because ". . . it is in this very place-less-ness that allows us to uncover something about the rhetorical politics of the city more generally: what writing is welcome, what writers are welcome, and how identities of the city are constantly being produced and reinforced through writing" (65). Through studying graffiti writers and their practices, we are looking into the "wheres" outside of dominant spaces and discourses.

In chapter two, "Spot," Lesh defines the public places of graffiti as "spatial ecologies" that are created by the graffiti-writing public and serve as "writing spaces" to communicate and develop community practice (87). Spots are created through attunement to the city, through walking, through understanding the politics of where, through seeing spots where your writing can exist and be seen by others. Spots, both legal and illegal, are spaces where graffiti writing can exist and change the city script. Graffiti writers use sensemaking in their practice (96). One graffiti writer, VISE, explains this ability to see spots everywhere as he became further enmeshed in his craft: "[Graffiti] made me look at my environment differently and to find opportunities to express myself creatively in everything. Every thing, every space, has potential for creativity, to be changed" (Lesh 76). Additionally, the development of "chill" spots, where multiple writers add their pieces, tags, and throwups, creates spaces for a kind of pedagogical "reading" of the style and encourages imitation and invention. This is a form of genre theory, as writers learn the expectations and histories of their community: "That is, writers themselves, in pedagogical spaces of their own making,

construct and learn systems of uptake that organize texts hierarchically and meticulously, in ways that deviate dramatically from the rules that govern the naming of space in New Boston" (Lesh 110).

In chapter three, "Bible," Lesh talks about the graffiti writer's practice of keeping a blackbook in which they practice their lettering and style as well as exchange them with others. The blackbook, or bible as they call it in Boston, is viewed as talismanic (135) and imbued with a quality that is at once private and public writing (131), but additionally, not the kind of production that is meant for sale or consumption in a marketplace (161). In this way, bibles are a community and pedagogical space, where writing circulates and travels across pages, space, and time. Graffiti writers TENSE and HATE both equate the bible to a place where the style of the writer is developed; it is a record of their evolving style (135, 139). Lesh further discusses the blackbook in pedagogical terms. Writer MYND gives Lesh some feedback on how to write the "CH" lettering in his name, telling him he can "run with it." Lesh reflects on this experience as being not far from the practices of feedback and assessment in writing studies: "Hanging out at the shop, flipping through bibles, critiquing and revising texts were the most common activities of this study. It's also a scene that feels familiar to me as a teacher of writing. . . A first draft, a collaborative workshop, a revision. There's writing pedagogy here in this community space" (137).

In chapter four, "Trains," Lesh discusses how graffiti on trains is related to writing circulation and its ability to be seen: "Trains give writers a stable infrastructure for circulation to audiences near and far, affiliated and unaffiliated, interested and hostile" (178). Lesh's discussion of trains goes back to the NYC subways of the 70s and 80s and how the visual ways messages were carried throughout the city and worked to go against the normative, neoliberal script of the city—the aesthetics of Walter Hill's film *The Warriors* (1979) comes to mind here. The graffiti culture of NYC trains inspired Boston writers as LIFE describes going to NYC as a "tour" where the trains provided, "nuggets of inspiration, these nuggets of how to do it, where to do it, and who is doing it" (201). The idea of the train is at once nostalgic, tied to graffiti's roots (TEMP 211), and also future-oriented as graffiti writers envision their writings existing in other locales and times beyond the moment of creation (BEAN 212). Finally, this chapter and the following interlude define an important concept of graffiti, *benching*, where writers sit and observe trains to learn more about style—again, very relevant to the idea of the pedagogy of graffiti writing. Graffiti writer TEMP best describes this practice of benching on his trip to NYC: "Man, that's all I did when I went there. My friend got bored with me. I just wanted to absorb style. I went to the Grand Concourse station and sat on those benches. That is where you could go see style. That was like a museum for graffiti style, on and around those trains" (209).

In the final chapter five, "Warehouse," Lesh discusses his methodology for the book and his hopes for what it might provide for the field of community writing. Lesh identifies this wing of the field as being the "most explicitly dedicated to rhetorical spaciousness, to cultivating robust rhetorical landscapes within and beyond the academy, and to pushing the boundary of where writing (studies) is and what

writing (studies) can do" (233). Lesh's book on Boston graffiti examines a public that is creating new "wheres" of writing, and therefore, rewriting the script of Boston to be ". . . a more dynamic and equitable city, one where more voices are present and different orientation to city life are announced" (220). We can learn from the graffiti writers' practices and try to envision writing studies as having a different orientation to knowledge and writing, one that is more dynamic and equitable.

Works Cited

Halloran, Michael S. "Aristotle's Concept of Ethos, or If Not His Somebody Else's." *Rhetoric Review.* vol. 1, no. 1, 1982, 58–63.