Writing Boston: Graffiti Bombing as Community Publishing

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Mission

Around 12:00pm. My phone vibrates with a text from NIRO, a graffiti writer. "Down for tonight?" A few seconds later, a second text: "Big plans."

Around 1:00am. As we leave NIRO's apartment, we ditch all identification: school IDs, drivers' licenses, etc. "It's just more questions the cops can ask us if we get caught," he explains. We look suspicious: NIRO, openly carrying a five-gallon jug of reddish-pink paint, markers rattling in his pockets; me, with a smaller jug of dark red paint in my messenger bag, two paint rollers jutting out.

On the porch, NIRO pulls out his phone: "OK, so this spot isn't on Google Maps, but here is where we're going." He points to a beige area on the map, a cartographic margin. "Let's stay off major roads," he says.

We discuss escape routes, just in case: *One, exit the way we came in, and run. Two, exit through a second hole, farther down the fence, and run. Three, run along the tracks, through the train yard, and hide.*

We crouch behind an abandoned truck for five minutes, making sure no one has seen us enter the parking lot. Better to get spotted now, before the writing starts. With his black hat pulled low over his face, NIRO turns to me and whispers, "Ok, let's do it." We cut through a small hole in a second fence and emerge alongside the Massachusetts Turnpike, a highway humming with 2:00am Boston life. Ducked low to obscure my presence from the traffic, I look left and see the reason for our mission: a wall.

My role tonight is lookout. NIRO immediately gets to work, composing the outline of a roller, a large representation of a writer's name, completed with wall

paint and roller brushes. The letters NIRO crafts are easily twelve feet high and, in total, thirty feet long.

As NIRO fills in the R, a state trooper drives by. "Yo, down," I whisper, and we both get low. The car whizzes by. I'm not certain he hasn't seen us. NIRO keeps writing.

When he finishes the last piece of the fill, he steps back and admires his work. "This thing is f****** huge, man" he says to me, laughing. We quickly pack up the materials, cut back through the fence, and make our way back into the dark Boston streets.

Introduction

Working as an ethnographer with graffiti writers in Boston, I collected a range of materials, and experiences.[1] Looking back over the field notes, photographs or "flicks," interviews, and other community artifacts, I am reminded just how much of this research involved the type of *kairos* evident in this late-night scene, tactically identifying a time and place for a particular, and notably risky, rhetorical act. More so, what I see operating here is the production of a different city, a different articulation of urban space that affords the circulation of alternative community texts. Indeed, in working with graffiti writers—community members that Kurt Iveson calls "urban geographers *par excellence*" ("Introduction" 26)—I began to see Boston not as a single writing space to be divvied up, but rather as a palimpsest of competing cartographies: multiple spaces of writing in constant states of reproduction, dialectically coalescing, coexisting, or conflicting in the generation of urban meaning.

Graffiti writing is a patently spatial practice, and existing scholarship across disciplines has emphasized this situated relationship between graffiti and the production of, and resistance to, contemporary, neoliberal spaces.[2] While I pull on this important scholarship throughout this article, here I want to think about graffiti in a specific way: as a form of community publishing. Or, put differently, I want to consider what writing events like the one represented above can teach us about community publishing. Despite the myriad forms it takes, community publishing is, at its core, about making the tools of publishing accessible to, and controlled by, authors. In this way, it seeks to facilitate a publication environment in which texts that intervene in public space are produced in conditions different than the traditional and exclusionary mainstream press. Based on this understanding, graffiti seems an almost exemplary community-publishing project. As sociologist Gregory Snyder notes, "Anyone who can get large quantities of paint, is able to fight, and is willing to break the law can become a graffiti writer" (5). What Snyder articulates here is not just a path to subcultural membership, but also a path to publication, a path to public writing different than many of us are used to.

Still, graffiti writing might seem decidedly outside of the ways that Writing Studies has engaged in community publishing.[3] Paula Mathieu, Steve Parks, and Tiffany Rousculp have argued that an attention to medium is one way we have defined a community publication. "Traditionally," they write,

"community publications have appeared in the form of small chapbooks, zines, broadsides, and newspapers—mostly depending on the resources and the reach of those involved" (2). Despite the proliferation of internet technologies and digital writing, "'ink on paper' has remained the dominant form" (2). I want to argue here that there might be some value in exploding this rubric for community publishing to include a wider range of texts, rhetorical strategies, and communities not only outside of the disciplinary mainstream, but historically unrecognizable to it. This more expansive framework must be capacious enough to include important "ink on paper" genres *and* other genres of community writing, including the "paint on walls" version that I consider here.

This more expansive rendering of community publishing directs our attention to the interrelationship between the *form* of community texts and the channels of textual circulation they employ or, as I argue here, invent. Locating effective methods of circulation has been of central concern to community-publishing work, a concern that is often contrasted with those other public texts that can rely on stable circulatory channels. As Paula Mathieu and Diana George note, "The politically connected and wealthy can exercise strategic control over space and thus have more reliable access to networks of circulation" (144). This is no doubt true. Yet Mathieu and George's call for tactical public writing that finds circulatory velocity through "networks of relationships, in alliances between those in power and those without, through moments of serendipity" (144) is difficult to square with graffiti writing. Indeed, graffiti writing is a community literacy not only devalued by the larger spatial politics in Boston, but is also explicitly written out of its literacy landscape through a sort of *anxiety of circulation*. By this I mean that the circulation of graffiti writing is not only excluded from these more stable networks, like other forms of community publishing; it is also positioned as a threat to them, and to the city more generally.

Attending to more tactical, DIY, on-the-spot genres of community writing—such as graffiti *bombing*, my particular focus here—demonstrates a more complex, enmeshed, and potentially inventive relationship between community publishing and textual circulation. I argue here that graffiti bombing does not merely exist within the larger spatial conditions of Boston, leveraging, however tactically, its circulatory affordances, but also engages combatively with those sanctioned urban texts and their circulation, destabilizing the rhetorical space to the point of rupture. Following Roxanne Mountford, rhetorical space here denotes the "geography of a communicative event, and like all landscapes, may include both the cultural and material arrangements, whether intended or fortuitous, of space" (42).[4] As Boston is destabilized, new channels and patterns of circulation emerge, including writing spaces—or "spots"—organized around different, community-generated points of access, mobility, value, and uptake. As Iveson has written in his work on graffiti writing in Sydney, as graffiti moves through the city, it circulates both "the particular *content*" of the message and also "graffiti itself as a *form* of public address" (*Publics* 112). This heightened attention to medium in community publishing offers us a framework for thinking through how writers engage in particular, non-normative

rhetorical strategies in order to make space for their participation in the collaborative, if often contested, spatial authorship of place.

Boston

As we stand around the counter at Kulturez—a now defunct hip-hop and culture shop—WERD discusses the challenges faced by graffiti writers in Boston: "There are a lot of kids out here who, because of how things are set up, they burn really bright for a short amount of time, and then you just never see them again." Why? "Boston hates graffiti." In my time in the field, this phrase—"Boston hates graffiti"—was a regular refrain, a mantra among writers, repeated to one another as if to remind themselves of the risks of their work. In this phrase, writers identify a local, asymmetric antagonism between themselves and "Boston."[5] As Frank Farmer notes in his work on anarchist zines, counterpublics "do not exist prior to or outside of the various contexts in which they emerge" (21), and so to understand the productive and subversive circulation of bombing, we must first understand what it opposes, what dominant "cultural horizon" it sets itself apart from (Warner 119; see also: Chmielewska; Iveson, *Publics*).

Dylan Dryer's work on public genre systems and critical spatial theory offers a framework for identifying this horizon, for understanding the ways that spatial politics are discursively constructed. Drawing on Anne Freadman's work on "uptake," or the "bidirectional relation that holds between" pairs of genres (40), Dryer argues that entrenched public genre systems—such as zoning codes in Milwaukee, his example—crystallize spatial conditions by routinizing and enforcing rigid patterns of uptake. That is, by limiting the potential range of responses, municipal zoning codes produce the socio-material conditions in a city, the "genres of neighborhoods that reflect and produce forms of urban life" (508). As dominant public genres grow increasingly entrenched, they further stabilize the material conditions they enact, a cyclical process that forestalls change and naturalizes existing spaces (522). Even for urban residents who possess the "specialized literacies required to navigate" the code, it remains "impossible to take up without reinscribing its deeply problematic assumptions about cities" (509). Dryer's work alerts us to the need to identify the material-spatial work that entrenched texts do as they produce and sustain the existing order of things.

While Dryer focuses on one system of genres, we might extend his framework of spatially productive public writing to include texts that belong to seemingly discrete systems. The "Boston" in "Boston hates graffiti" refers not to a single system of texts, but rather to a range of seemingly discrete genres that produce a series of dispositions toward, and limitations on, graffiti writing. In other words, they produce what Alison Young calls the "legislated city," a disciplined urban space "in which a particular kind of experience is encapsulated and produced through the regulation of space, temporalities, and behaviours" (41). The legislated city also regulates the circulation of texts, and in Boston, limitations on circulation are in part accomplished through an emphasis on visually and materially distinct lines of neighborhood segregation. While this emphasis on neighborhood culture is part of a much larger

history of Boston and its urban identity, here, in thinking through graffiti as a form of community publishing, it is important to focus on how these public texts cultivate an *anxiety of circulation* around graffiti writing: an urban condition that not only devalues graffiti, but also positions it as a threat to the sanctioned ways that texts—and bodies—traditionally circulate through the city.

Because graffiti is a name-driven writing practice, it is useful to start with the Boston Planning and Development Agency, which provides an exhaustive series of guidelines for adding a new sign or replacing an existing one. For example, the guidelines for Downtown Crossing, a shopping and business district, include a range of charts, graphs, maps, and lengthy sections of technical language in order to "clarify the effectiveness of sign advertising for individual concerns and also improve the visual quality of the Downtown Crossing neighborhood" (7). This emphasis on "visual quality" is significant here; as Jeff Ferrell has argued, when authorities make appeals to desirable style, they inject an "aesthetics of authority" into urban space, a "sense of beauty grounded not only in control of property and space, but in the carefully coordinated control of image and design, in the smoothed-out textures of clean environments" (180). As individuals produce texts within the parameters delineated by these guidelines, they participate in, and perpetuate, the production of a material cityscape that visualizes discipline and limits the potential range of public texts available to urban dwellers.

Significantly, in Boston, these guidelines do more than simply maintain an ordered cityscape. Digging deeper, an individual interested in naming space learns that each neighborhood has unique guidelines in order to "ensure that storefronts and signage complement the surrounding neighborhood while still allowing business owners to express their individuality and promote their goods and services" ("Storefront"). That is to say, not only do the signage guidelines enact a control over urban naming—how (neatly), why (commerce), and who (business owners)—they also enact a rhetorical differential, a visual means of establishing divisions between neighborhoods. Neighborhood identity is a crucial element in the lived experience of Boston, and this means of establishing rhetorical differentiation corresponds to an entrenched history of racial segregation, a history of unequal distribution of resources, a history punctuated by the busing and school desegregation events of the 1970s and 1980s. In visually signaling difference, genres like the signage guidelines further naturalize specious distinctions between neighborhoods, an urban segregation that is immediately connected to the mobility of individuals, groups, and texts. As the guidelines produce a cityscape with neighborhood difference written into it, they in turn produce a hostility towards unsanctioned inter-neighborhood circulation.

PROBLAK: I already have a problem walking around black. The police are f****** with me anyways…I can't go out bombing because when I'm in certain parts of Boston, I've learned, you know, 'What are you doing here?' I don't know how to answer that question. 'Wait up, I thought that this was

> a city. I thought I could just walk around and do what I want.' Even though my intentions were different and I was trying to be slick, I learned that I just wasn't supposed to be in places like South Boston or the North End.

Of course, the guidelines can do little to prevent the circulation of writing or writers that would challenge these entrenchments. As Tosh Tachino has argued, a "genre cannot account for all the variables—all the participants, all the intertextual threads in both diachronic and synchronic planes, the material conditions, the political and cultural contexts, and so forth—at this particular node in the intertextual network" (183). In moments of rupture or transgression (Cresswell), when writing does not coincide with the desired production of space or fall within established rhetorical parameters, how is the normative geography of Boston reinstated?

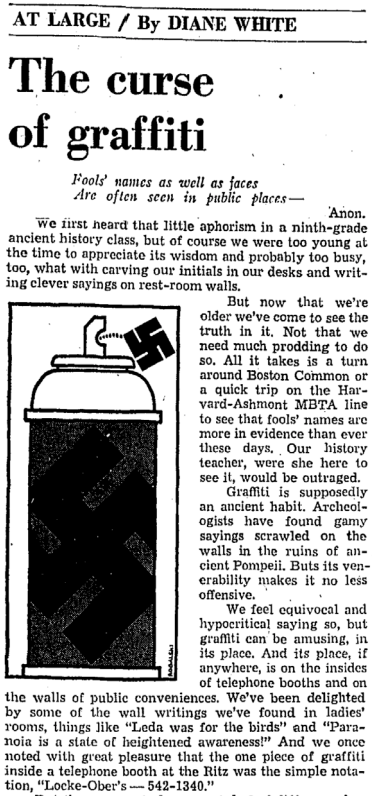
In PROBLAK's example, this is in part accomplished by the police. Boston has strict graffiti laws, one of which, Part IV, Title I, Chapter 266, Section 126B of the General Laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, offers a definition of a "tagger" as an individual who "sprays or applies paint or places a sticker upon a building, wall, fence, sign, tablet, gravestone, monument or other object or thing on a public way or adjoined to it, or in public view, or on private property." Notably broad, this action-based definition collapses a vast array of different rhetorical acts under a common legal code, and thus expands its applicability. Further, it contains a notable absence: "A police officer may arrest any person for commission of the offenses prohibited by this section without a warrant if said police officer has probable cause to believe that said person has committed the offenses prohibited by this section." By removing the warrant, the law allows police officers to more flexibly enforce a policy to eliminate graffiti and preserve the fractured rhetorical space articulated in the signage guidelines. And, as in PROBLAK's example, the suspicion of being a graffiti writer—an identity cultivated, as we will see, by popular representations of graffiti—allows urban authorities to further enforce neighborhood identity and the (im)mobility of particular citizens and texts. Upon conviction for writing graffiti, one form of punishment further seeks to immobilize the community: "Upon conviction for said offense the individual's drivers license shall be suspended for one year." It is not so much the graffiti writing itself here that is criminalized, but rather the *circulation* of graffiti and the bodies of writers, a construction of rhetorical space that immediately restricts publishing opportunities.

This spatial production is supported by a mass-media cultivation of a "moral panic" (Kramer) that positions writers and writing as a deviant threat to urban order. Unlike more traditional forms of community publishing, what faces graffiti in Boston is not just a limited or potentially indifferent readership, or one unreachable due to material constraints, but also a hostile one. In cultivating this hostility, representations of graffiti in Boston resemble what Tim Cresswell finds in his work on graffiti in New York City. Graffiti is often positioned as

> a threat to order—as out of place—in two main ways: (1) by suggesting through a mass of metaphors and descriptive terms that graffiti does not

> belong in New York's public places and (2) by associating it with other places—other contexts—where either the order is different and more amenable to graffiti or disorder is more prevalent" (37).

Both of these rhetorical moves point to the desire for limits on circulation: graffiti does not belong *here*, and therefore must, and should, belong *somewhere else*. Importantly, like the graffiti community itself, these attitudes are not fixed in a particular moment, but rather morph over time. Graffiti bombing is a longstanding but constantly evolving form of community publishing in Boston, one that has challenged public space in highly visible and bold ways for decades. It has also, since its inception, been bound up in a broadening of who gets to write the city and the ways that marginalized writers move through urban space. It is worth exploring, then, how the rise of graffiti writing in Boston was met with public condemnation in ways that speak to, and inform, the contemporary anxiety of circulation that I have been mapping here. Take a 1973 *Boston Globe* article, "The Curse of Graffiti," a very early representation of graffiti writing in the city's most circulated newspaper. The article is notable not only for bemoaning the acceleration of graffiti writing in the city, but also for its accompanying image.



AT LARGE / By DIANE WHITE

The curse of graffiti

Fools' names as well as faces
Are often seen in public places—
Anon.

We first heard that little aphorism in a ninth-grade ancient history class, but of course we were too young at the time to appreciate its wisdom and probably too busy, too, what with carving our initials in our desks and writing clever sayings on rest-room walls.

But now that we're older we've come to see the truth in it. Not that we need much prodding to do so. All it takes is a turn around Boston Common or a quick trip on the Harvard-Ashmont MBTA line to see that fools' names are more in evidence than ever these days. Our history teacher, were she here to see it, would be outraged.

Graffiti is supposedly an ancient habit. Archeologists have found gamy sayings scrawled on the walls in the ruins of ancient Pompeii. Buts its venerability makes it no less offensive.

We feel equivocal and hypocritical saying so, but graffiti can be amusing, in its place. And its place, if anywhere, is on the insides of telephone booths and on the walls of public conveniences. We've been delighted by some of the wall writings we've found in ladies' rooms, things like "Leda was for the birds" and "Paranoia is a state of heightened awareness!" And we once noted with great pleasure that the one piece of graffiti inside a telephone booth at the Ritz was the simple notation, "Locke-Ober's — 542-1340."

Figure 1. "The Curse of Graffiti" (White, with permission)

Similar to the legal code above, the double swastika—both on the can and on the wall—works to collapse discrete types of graffiti in a singular threat to order (Ferrell 5). While the article's image clearly depicts a racist form of public writing, the article's blanket condemnation of *all* graffiti further generates public consensus on the need for control over writing opportunities. The swastika, then, represents a consistent Othering technique in these representations, with the bodies of writers—now including both Neo-Nazis and the assumed racialized bodies of hip-hop graffiti—positioned as deviant in particular spaces. As Cresswell notes, hip-hop graffiti is not just considered "out-of-place because it is misplaced figuration; its 'otherness' is also connected to its assumed source, the ethnic minorities of urban New York" (43). In this way, the assumed body in the above image—in which no body is represented—is profoundly present, a presence that

signals an upheaval of urban-spatial arrangements. At risk here is not simply the perceived cleanliness of the city, but also the very identity of Boston itself, an identity inextricably linked with racial and textual segregation. Graffiti "can be amusing," the article's author notes, so long as it is "in its place."

Its place is an eternal elsewhere, as other cities—New York and Philadelphia, the birthplaces of American graffiti—appear in these early representations as warnings if Boston does not remain fortified against the circulation of graffiti. A 1985 *Boston Globe* article notes that while there has been a notable uptick in "N-Y style graffiti" in Boston, the problem "is still a far cry from New York, where subway cars are festooned with brilliant colors and ornate designs, and no wall seems safe from a furtive squirt of paint" (Kindleberger). This Othering does not stop with appeals to other cities. In a memorable Ann Lander's column published in the *Globe*, Curious in Upper Derby writes, "The graffiti in and around the city seems to be the work of someone from another *planet*," to which Landers replies that she, "too, [has] wondered who the graffiti freaks are and how they manage to 'decorate' the city unobserved" (Landers, emphasis added). In these early representations of graffiti, an anxiety surrounding its circulation is cultivated, one that sustains anti-graffiti attitudes and policies today.

These (and many other) entrenched public texts position the circulation of graffiti writing, and its assumed authors, as a direct threat to the larger spatial politics of the city. Spatial politics are literacy politics, and when individuals adhere uncritically to the discursively constructed norms of place, they further perpetuate exclusionary channels of circulation. And yet, surely, this is not the only Boston that exists. The urban singularity produced here is illusory, a process of concealment intended to obfuscate the contradictions and multiplicities inherent in the urban form (Lefebvre; Massey). There are always *other spaces* "enfolded within the legislated city" (Young 52), and in the remainder of this article, I consider how graffiti writers challenge the literacy landscape imagined by dominant public genres by publishing particular texts that antagonize existing channels of circulation and cultivate new ones.

Bombing

In her work on a post-Habermasian multiplicity of publics, Nancy Fraser identifies what I believe is the animating tension in counterpublic theory:

> On the one hand, [counterpublics] function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics. It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides. (124)

Fraser is thinking of counterpublics more generally, as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs"

(123). Yet this dialectical potential between agitation and invention signals, to my mind, a potential hermeneutic for reading texts circulated by communities of writers written out of larger literacy landscapes. While Iveson (*Publics*) has written persuasively that graffiti writing constitutes a counterpublic, here I want to think through how the texts themselves, through a variety of rhetorical strategies, challenge larger spatial politics and entrenched patterns of circulation by revealing a condition of spatial multiplicity necessary for broader, if still targeted, public participation. That is, graffiti *writing* produces counter-geographies, not only by the "*tactical avoidance* of governance strategies" that Iveson describes (143), but also by a sustained, subversive rhetorical engagement.

This attention to form helps us position the circulation of community publishing less as the employment of static-but-interested channels, and more as an inventive rhetorical-material process by which networks are produced, sustained, or challenged by the specific genres of writing that move through them. John Trimbur draws on a Marxian interrelated framework of production to articulate a view of circulation as a deeply political, material, and economic practice, one that does not linearly follow the production of text, but is rather cohered in the contradictory social relations of the commodity form. This more integrated view of circulation leads Trimbur to argue that

> delivery can no longer be thought of simply as a technical aspect of public discourse. It must be seen also as ethical and political—a democratic aspiration to devise delivery systems that circulate ideas, information, opinions, and knowledges and thereby expand the public forums in which people can deliberate on issues of the day (190).[6]

Here, I want to examine how devising such alternative delivery systems for community publishing can sometimes rely on the production of alternative, non-normative textual forms that break from the modes of production of more traditional texts. As Iveson notes, "The wars on graffiti are certainly asymmetric, but they are not one-sided" ("Wars" 127), and as scholars in Writing Studies invested in expanding publishing opportunities for community writers, we can lend a closer eye to how these texts cultivate a rhetorical and inventive resistance to entrenched patterns of circulation.

While graffiti writing is comprised of a vast ecology of genres, the strategy that most directly confronts dominant space is bombing, a form of rhetorical disruption to existing modes of discourse. Bombing denotes the act of rapidly writing your name in as many spaces as possible, a foundational genre of graffiti writing that privileges repetition and speed over stylistic complexity.

> Charlie: Why is it called bombing?
>
> SPIN: I don't know. That's traditionally what they called it in New York.

> When they talk about some fancy-pants mural, you wouldn't really call that bombing. But if you were going to tear sh** up and...
>
> MYND: Destroy
>
> SPIN: Yeah, like put up a bunch of tags on Blue Hill Ave. [an avenue that stretches from Dorchester to Mattapan] or go do, like we did, those monster f****** roller pieces. I'd call that bombing. I wouldn't call that piecing… Bombing is quicker, usually a lot hotter. Like you bomb a spot you wouldn't want to stand at for hours and hours and do a painstaking, mad tedious piece [short for masterpiece] that would take a long time.

Bombing is less a stabilized and discernible text and more an orientation toward urban life, and in calling it a genre, I am drawing on Catherine Schryer's work on genres "as trajectory entities or flexible constellations of improvisational yet regulated strategies that agents enact within fields…" (95). Bombing represents one such improvisational strategy, taking many forms depending on the chronotropic conditions of its production: from tags (simple representations of a writer's name, often done with paint or ink markers) to throw-ups (bubbly representation of a writer's name often with two colors of spray paint) to, as we have seen, rollers. Bombing encapsulates all of these textual forms, providing community members with more flexible, tactical texts than those imagined in traditional community-publishing projects.

> NIRO: Same exact thing with tags. I've physically changed tags or done different styles of tags just to fit into this little strip area or to fill this huge type of mailbox. I would do a different tag to fill a whole mailbox than I would to do something next to a piece or someplace down a fire hydrant. There's a different purpose to filling the thing or to having some type of other location...I kind of think of it as an interaction with the environment, instead of like, taking it over.

Figure 2. Boston Tags (photo by author)

Fundamentally, bombing subverts dominant space in Boston through an emphasis on excess: writing your name in as many spaces as possible without permission. Jennifer Edbauer connects this drive to "get up" with the rhetorical act of overwhelming the sensory, affective experience of place. Edbauer notes that ethos for graffiti writers "depends upon the feeling of *too much* or *more than normal*, or an experience of something *got around*" (144). In this way, bombing replicates and repurposes corporate writing's emphasis on rhetorical repetition (Stewart 214). LIFE tells me that the ultimate goal of bombing is to become "a household name," when the writer's "tag has such a refined look to it that it almost becomes a symbol, like a stamp." MYND, too, argues that bombing is "like a logo…When I put up an MD, you what know it is. You've seen it a bunch times, and it's always the same, more or less." SPIN offers an extreme example of this rhetorical effulgence, recounting the bombing patterns of a writer called ALONE:

> SPIN: ALONE was definitely official…He had mad tags and simple pieces and throw-ups and sh**. He used to *bomb*, so we always knew ALONE. That sh** was almost subliminal. He had so many tags back in the day. He was so up. It just seemed like it was supposed to be there, kind of like took it for granted.

ALONE overloads the rhetorical space of the city to the point when his own writing gets woven into the urban fabric; in doing so, the writer subverts the underlying assumptions and claims to space within the legislated city. In this excess, graffiti bombing interrupts the fragmented public space of Boston, subverting its organization around distinct neighborhoods by extending itself across boundaries.

Figure 3. SPIN, throw-up, above in repetition (photo by author)

As writers mimic this emphasis on excess and repetition, they simultaneously threaten it by performing a sort of stylistic violence on the rhetorical geographies produced through standardized typography, such as that conditioned by the signage guidelines. As Ferrell notes, graffiti "breaks the hegemonic hold of corporate/governmental style over the urban environment and the situations of daily life" (176). Writers understand bombing—both the presence of these texts and the letters that constitute them—to be engaged in a militaristic encounter with existing urban texts and the structures of power that undergird them (Iveson, "Wars"). WERD tells me that writers in Boston, due to the intense police crackdown, have to be strategic about where to place their writing, likening throw-ups to "tanks"

and tags to "foot soldiers," all engaged in a conflict over the right to exist in space. While this militaristic framework is evident in the name "bombing" itself, it also seeps into the forms of writing.

> Charlie: What's your own style like?
>
> RELM: That's a hard question to answer. I don't know if I should write a whole long-winded paragraph on Style like Werner Herzog or a concise Lyrical snippet on Style like Raekwon the Chef. Style is what moves you. It's meant to invoke a particular emotion or bring you to a certain time and place. My style is Lynn Style. It's aggressive. It wants to fight. It packs a shank. It's ready to chase a bum down an alleyway for trying to beat me for $10. It wants to eat a pizza to the face...Walk in the party, kick a hole in the speaker. Pour out your beer. Break the bottle and use it as a weapon. I tell my style to chill out all the time. It don't listen. It roots for the villain in the movies and fights pit bulls.

Bombing, through its non-standard typographic patterns, cultivates a resistive rhetorical practice in relation to more standardized texts, and thus disrupts the way that urban space is mediated textually.[7] Through the production of tactically illegible texts, bombing produces what Dryer calls "disruptakes," or generic strategies that "that deliberately create inefficiencies, misfires, and occasions for second-guessing that could thwart the automaticity-based *uptake enactments*" ("Disambiguating" 70). This intentional resistance to broader readership pushes back on an underlying goal of community publishing as it is traditionally understood: as a means to reach both a targeted readership invested in community issues and a broader readership that might be persuaded to join the public. Yet, as Mathieu, Parks, and Rousculp note, assessing community publications within the frameworks of the traditional press fails to register how, despite limited resources and circulations, "dissident publications have been significant agents of social change in the United States and the world" (5). Graffiti pushes this further as it forces us to contend not only with limited readership or slow circulation, but with texts that intentionally obfuscate both authorship and intention. That is, graffiti works in a stylistic antagonism with legible urban texts, such as sanctioned signage, or even dissident newspapers, and through this antagonism, disrupts the conditions of urban textuality. This is what, in Michael Keith's terms, makes forms of writing such as graffiti "precious," in that "they transform the mainstream through writing over it, yet at the same time exclude the mainstream from their—the graffiti writers'—discourse (152; see also: Iveson *Publics* 145). In this highly visible articulation of audience multiplicity, bombing attacks the dialogue of Boston.

In this excess and stylistic disruption, there is a distinctly masculinist nature to bombing. Nancy Macdonald has written that it is not just the "physical and legal risks" of graffiti writing that contribute to its masculinist identity, but also the language of writing itself, terms like bombing "drenched in combative imagery, tone and meaning, and this, in turn, transforms the writer, his/her quest and, indeed, their

spray can into a symbolic weapon of war" (185). By engaging with the politics of a particular space, these community texts can replicate the power dynamics within that field of discourse, creating what Ralph Cintron might call a "shadow system" that "has the shape but is not equivalent to the system itself" (176; see also Oliver 69). It is important, then, to not treat these counterpublic forms of community writing as necessarily utopian, liberating, or egalitarian practices, and to recognize the ways in which gender, race, class, and other identity formations are articulated and implicated in form and style. As Iveson usefully reminds us, "Transgression of, or resistance against, the 'dominant' urban authorities is not necessarily democratic or just. It all depends on whether the alternative or 'local' authorities are founded on the equality of each with all" ("Graffiti 98).

Yet while Iveson is interested in steering these challenges against dominant authorities towards more "democratic" urban life, for my current purposes, I am interested in examining how these texts in Boston, specifically, lead to new rhetorical spaces, more participatory and multivocal sites of textual circulation outside-and-alongside a dominant space that expels graffiti from the collective authorship of the city. Young argues that street art—a related but different set of rhetorical practices—ultimately "*makes its own space*, not as a partitioned, permitted, semi-tolerated activity, but as an emergent, *auto-poietic* practice, a de-territorialising tactic that exposes the multiple boundaries and borders of the propertied cityscape" (145). Bombing functions similarly; by antagonizing legal forms of urban writing through form-based attacks, new spaces arise in which different community practices are possible.

Graffiti writers call these invented locations "spots," a term signifying a location produced by high frequencies of writing. Spots represent a new, geo-spatial framework for understanding collective community publishing, a means to account for the new public spaces arising through productive community partnerships. Like space more generally, spots are both the venue and outcome of our community-based work (Soja). According to Ferrell and Robert D. Weide, graffiti spots are "not simply static physical locations; they are moments in the social process through which the city and the world of graffiti develop in dialectic relationship" (50). The idea of spots—the emergent, sometimes ephemeral writing spaces that marginalized communities make for themselves through the sustained circulation of non-normative writing—compels us to attend to the larger politics of place in our formulation and execution of community-publishing projects.

Figure 4. NIRO, roller (photo by NIRO, with permission)

While each spot produced by bombing in Boston is unique—and a fuller account of this research will examine the specific locations in which this ethnography occurred—I want to argue here that they depart from dominant space in three main ways:

First, the lines of access to public writing are radically altered, challenging the seemingly commonsensical and transparent assumptions of who gets to write what *where*, a fundamental concern of community publishing. SWAT tells me that in circumventing the official public guidelines for writing in the city,

> graffiti levels the playing field. Anyone can put their name on anything if they pay enough money…You can put your name anywhere on anything. You can put it on TV. Movie posters. Everywhere. There is a broadcast of brands and names all over the city.

> And graffiti is the same thing, except for the individual. Without sanctions. Without dollars. In protest of that system.

While dominant space in Boston is enacted by, and designed to protect, moneyed interests, spots usher new voices and perspectives into the urban landscape.

Yet these voices do not enter the authorship of the city through established channels and methods of circulation. Instead, they invent new rules for textual uptake, organized around community-based determinations of textual value. RELM tells me that the fundamental rules of graffiti can be visualized simply:

> RELM: Some of the most important rules of the game are as follows.
>
> Throw-ups over Tags >Pieces over Throw-ups > Burners over Pieces.
>
> What that means is basically, if you go over someone, you better do something better than what they did or it's beef.

This is not a static rule that governs all graffiti uptakes, of course, as a host of other factors such as local history and chronotropic conditions influence how writers interact with existing texts. Yet what is significant here is that graffiti writers themselves, through the repeated production of particular and hierarchically organized texts, construct a system of uptake that deviates dramatically from the rules of engagement described in strategic public documents.

And finally, these spots produce different networks of mobility that afford different channels for the circulation of texts and writers. To accomplish excess on the transformative scale described here requires writers to move across the city and its neighborhoods in order to get their names to different audiences. This drive goes back to the earliest days of graffiti writing, when writers like TAKI 183 would write their names as they traveled across the different boroughs in New York City (Austin, *Taking*; Castleman; Gastman & Neelon). In Boston, writers practice a form of what Mathieu and George call "not going it alone" in a community-centered way, forming alliances or, sometimes, crews with writers from different neighborhoods in order to secure a mobility through space, reinventing the channels of circulation in order to distribute texts more broadly.

> PROBLAK: That was my passport. That spray can wasn't just twelve ounces of paint, where I can throw my name up a million times or get off the last stop and walk home. That can was my passport to other hoods that I could never get in to, you know what I'm saying? Blocks that you would only hear about.

Bombing, and the reputations writers cultivate, serve as a "passport," as a means to "break the mold" (HATE, interview) of entrenched patterns of (im)mobility and textual circulation. In this way, these spots restructure the city in ways outside of the anxiety of circulation structured through normative public texts.

As I note above, these emergent spots enacted through rhetorical deviation are not inherently more inclusive than those they protest; though, I do believe they have the potential to be so (Iveson, "Graffiti"; Keith). They do, however, indicate a certain multiplicity of the city and envision a more participatory form of urban life predicated on a different entré into authorship and the circulation of writing. It is within this spatial reproduction that we might assess bombing, not in terms of impact or effect on the broader public, but on the expansion of writing spaces available for publication. Recognizing the difficulty in gauging the impact of community-writing projects, Mathieu, Parks, and Rousculp suggest "that one possible criteria for assessment would be read within the protocols of the community publishing project itself—the artifact, that is, expresses its own interpretive framework through which it can be assessed" (7). To assess bombing is to read it closely, to situate it within larger spatial politics, and to consider how, in its enacted tension, new spots for the circulation of (counter)public writing are produced.

Conclusion

Towards the end of "Taking Up Space," Dryer outlines a framework for resistant readings of genre, a "*praxis* of idealism—a way to look outside the delimitation of the possible and to ask *how* the possible came to seem that way" (528). Dryer calls on researchers, when confronted by institutionally entrenched systems of genre, to "help fashion physical and discursive spaces" where people can come together to understand "how citizens are trained to read and write in ways that subordinate them" to dominant public genre systems (527). These types of readings are important for community work, as they help us outline the contours of the possible and imagine ways to enact change within it. Going a step further, attending to a wider range of texts can show us how this resistance is already underway, how community writers circulate particular texts to challenge the existing order of things and to, as Mathieu might put it, provide "glimpses of possible realities" (45). In the midst of a phone interview, BAST imagines one of these different worlds:

> BAST: To think about your big question about urban spaces: it's a performative act of defiance to say, 'My visual palette has been crowded out by commerce.' Why is it ok for the union candidates to throw their stickers all over poles and train stations, but I can't put my name up? Why is it legit that people can go wheat paste concert posters on the wall of buildings, with impunity, but if I want to put up a throw-up, then that somehow is denigrating to the lived reality of all people in the neighborhood. Why do I have to suffer these totally disturbing, giant, bright billboards on the highway, but if I want to put something beautiful and colorful up on an underpass, that's like treason? What is all that about? Why can't we have public spaces be dedicated to public comment for whoever wants to be a part of that? Why should the [Massachusetts Turn]pike just be miles and miles of grey walls, strictly enforced and censored? And these are public tax dollars that pay for this sh**, this grey paint. Why can't we just have free expression walls?...To say, why is

> the agora dominated only by moneyed interests and powerful interests, and not by the common man? Not by the kids, you know?

What BAST imagines here is not just a city in which community writing circulates in the margins, but a new kind of city organized fundamentally around different means of textual circulation. An attention to a broader range of community publications, and different, potentially unfamiliar, rhetorical means of circulation, helps us examine and puncture the seemingly transparent ways that cities and other spaces are organized, and to glimpse alternatives.

Christian Weisser makes a similar point: "As compositionists, it should be our responsibility to help students discover the various counterpublics where their public writing might have a receptive audience and, consequently, might result in significant outcomes" (107). This is not easy. Our access to counterpublics and the types of writing they circulate are often as limited as that of our students. But these worlds do exist, however fleetingly and emergently, and in a time when cities are increasingly privatized (Brenner, et al.; Mitchell; Welch) and even militarized (Iveson, "Wars"), it is important as researchers to partner with writers in new and sometimes risky ways as they work to make diverse and more participatory rhetorical spaces and channels of circulation. This will require us to develop new forms of community partnerships, ones that might look less like a writing group and more like looking out for cops at 2:00am on the side of a highway. But, if Susan Wells was right, that we as researchers and teachers of writing must take part in building the publics we wish to participate in, then we need to continue to seek out the different rhetorical strategies and texts that communities circulate and the multiple worlds they create. My guess is that we won't always find them on Google Maps.

Notes

1 Due to the illicit nature of graffiti and as a condition of IRB-approval (Northeastern IRB 14-09-27), all writers are referred to here by their tag names and, whenever necessary, I have obscured identifying characteristics. In the absence of being able to represent identity, it is important to note here that the participants in this study are an immensely diverse group of people, with ranges in race, class, education, age, and position in the graffiti community. Despite this, I did not encounter nearly the level of gender diversity that I hoped for. While female graffiti writers did participate in this study—and have played a central role in the culture since its earliest days—the graffiti writing community in Boston is overwhelmingly male. For work on this history and on changing demographics within the community, see especially: Macdonald; Pabón.

2 See especially: Austin "Rewriting"; Bloch; Brighenti; Chmielewska; Cresswell; Dickinson; Ferrell; Ferrell & Weide; Halsey & Young; Iveson, *Publics*; Keith; Pennycook; Snyder; Stewart; Wimsatt; Young. Many of the readings in this article are indebted to these writers.

3 In many ways, graffiti writing has seemed entirely outside of our disciplinary purview (see: Oliver). For example, while graffiti writing has garnered substantial interest across the academy (Avramidis & Tsilimpounidi, eds.; Ross, ed.; and Lovata & Olton, eds.), Writing Studies has produced little work that deals explicitly with hip-hop graffiti (Edbauer; Haynes-Burton), and no work that partners directly with writers. Indeed, it was only through my own personal involvement with graffiti—mainly as an admirer, but also as an occasional participant—that I was granted access to spaces that would have been off limits to other researchers. Still, the data in this article was collected over a three-year period and represents the slow development of trust and research ethos required to engage with writers on the fringes of public (and legal) conceptions of writing (Cintron).

4 Space has been of significant interest to researchers of public rhetoric. See especially: Ackerman; Burns; Endres & Senda-Cook; Fleming; Marback; Reynolds; Rivers; Welch.

5 For work on going public in situations of asymmetric power, see: Kuebrich.

6 For a more robust discussion of the study of circulation in Writing Studies, particularly as it relates to images and visual rhetoric, see: Gries.

7 For a similar argument about piecing, specifically wildstyle letters, see: Gopinath.

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