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The Story of Graffiti: The Infrapolitics of Cultural Practices Toward Political Imagination

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Political Science

by

Katelyn Marie Kelly

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Kevin Olson, Chair
Professor Daniel Brunstetter
Associate Professor Keith Topper
Professor John Lennon

2024

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# DEDICATION

To

Those I have found and those I have lost

"And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."

(Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*)

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# VITA

## Katelyn Marie Kelly

| | |
|---|---|
| 2017 | B.A. in Political Science, University of Colorado, Boulder |
| 2018-24 | Teaching Assistant, Graduate School of Social Science, University of California, Irvine |
| 2022-23 | Pedagogical Fellow, Division of Teaching Excellence and Innovation |
| 2023 | M.A. in Political Science, University of California, Irvine |
| 2024 | Educational Development Scholar Division of Teaching Excellence and Innovation |
| 2024 | Ph.D. in Political Science, University of California, Irvine |

FIELD OF STUDY

The intersection of Political Theory, Critical Theory, and Cultural Studies

# ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION


The Story of Graffiti: Cultural Practices as a Liminal Space for Political Imagination

by

Katelyn Marie Kelly

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

University of California, Irvine, 2024

Professor Kevin Olson, Chair

This study takes seriously the politics of overlooked world-building practices and liminal spaces that we engage with daily. Specifically, I will outline the political import of the action, object, and sign of graffiti in the United States during the 20th and 21st centuries. Now, graffiti is by no means new, nor is it new to academic discussion. There is a rising tide of exciting and provocative research on graffiti. However, much of the budding scholarship is descriptive without a critical distance and missing a theoretical discussion. With graffiti's increasing centrality to political discourse, there is a demand for more theoretical discussion. I am not to argue that this is the first-time graffiti is considered political; quite the contrary, one does not need to say much more than "graffiti is a form of political action" to get the response "I am persuaded." However, when asked why graffiti is political, the conversation falters, dissolving under the tension. Graffiti can be political due to its content, but it does not need to be political. Graffiti can be political due to its location, but it is also not necessary to be political. Graffiti can be political due to its material makeup; it does not need to be political. The mystery remains: why is graffiti intuitively political? I seek to fill the gap in understanding and assessing the political practice and symbolism of graffiti and how a political theory of graffiti helps to expand the current understanding of political practices in and out of moments of upheaval. As I progress through the project, I address how

graffiti seems intuitively political, moving through three periods throughout U.S. history in which graffiti held public attention. In doing so, graffiti allows us to watch the development of political practice from an infrapolitical resistance to infrapolitical refusal where different individuals for themselves and their own space.

# INTRODUCTION

"Before ever claiming to be *acts* or actions, uprisings surge forth from the human psyche as *gestures*, corporeal forms. They are forces that make us rise up, no doubt, but it is indeed *forms* that, anthropologically speaking, make them perceptible, convey them, direct them, implement them plastic or resistant…"[1]

"Graffiti in general 'is about fighting for your space. It's about going out there and fighting for yourself.'"[2]

My siblings and I were attuned to graffiti from as early as I could remember. Having grown up in a rural, train-centered city, we quickly became acquainted with various styles and practices. There was no shortage of tags, sometimes where I learned to spell my first curse words, throw-ups that ran different colors together, or sticker bombs that would engulf numerable signs and doors begging for one more sticker to be added. However, our favorite was always the stunning pieces on the side of freight trains that seemed to be on display for all of us stuck at the train tracks, getting a glimpse of people from all over the country. Throughout my childhood, I had friends who joined in the graffiti culture, either finding their tag style or finding their way into local mural programs. Either way, they found a means to shape our community—with varying levels of parental exasperation. Sometimes graffiti helped us communicate frustrations with the way our lives were going or the world around us and other times it was simply attempts to be seen or amuse ourselves. No matter what, even for those of us who kept graffiti at arm's length, it was part and parcel of our home and what it meant to live there.

[1] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Uprisings* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard & Jeu de Paume, 2016), 301.
[2] Susan A. Phillips, *The City Beneath: A Century of Los Angeles Graffiti*, Illustrated Edition (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019),182.

As I left my hometown, the lessons from graffiti stayed with me. Anytime I was somewhere new, I would prioritize getting out and looking around, taking note of the flashes and fragments of this new place. I found myself pulled into the names and images: the cries of grief, shouts of celebration, and demands for change, the frustrations and humor fused either at the expense of the writer, another, or the larger city. Graffiti always remained a way for me to connect to a community and remember my own. During this time, I became increasingly interested in how people sought to change the world amid social and political crises, though I had never connected graffiti and these interests. As leaders fell short, voting seemed to alienate the public, and deliberation appeared more likely to end in a fistfight (or self-congratulations), I searched for alternative politics or political imagination. In graduate school I was struck when asked how can we interpret "the world in better, more insightful, or illuminating ways… to better the human condition."[3] While still with an imprecise and idealistic attitude, I began to piece together how graffiti may offer a path towards an alternative politics.

In *The Story of Graffiti: Cultural Politics as a Liminal Space for Political Imagination,* I am looking at graffiti as a case study of how cultural practices open alternative spaces of politics and fuel an alternative political imaginary. This is particularly important in large and diverse societies, where the larger polis is comprised of entangled and interlinked subcommunities with differing access to political communication. My dissertation asks what political theory can learn from the growing literature on graffiti. Political science as my home department and political theory, more specifically, allowed me to investigate what it means to build a world as a collective. When coupled with cultural studies the world building project is expanded to ask, how do we give the world we build meaning. Here I do not use 'meaning' in the larger structural or rigid definitions

[3] Keith Topper, "Theories of Textual Interpretation," Winter 2019.

but 'meaning' in the way that individuals show up to the relationality that is humanity. While it may be trite, graffiti is one way of which humans have related to the world around them for almost as long as humans have been around. A myriad of scholars have noted this and sought to ask what we can learn from various graffiti practices throughout history. This includes but is not limited to folks studying ancient graffiti and the insights it gives us into ancient cultures (Baird & Taylor 2012), to recent studies of the global art movements by youth (Austin 1983) to contemporary claiming space and a voice in agnostic urban polities (Andron 2024). There have even been a handful of these scholars explicitly and actively engage with political theory (Bruce 2018; Lennon 2023). Given the insights on community, communication, and resistance from the rich literature on graffiti, there begs the question of why only some political theorists have seriously considered graffiti.

I argue throughout this project that not engaging cultural practices like graffiti obscures not only political theories understanding of everyday resistance, particularly in the face of hegemonic norms and knowledge production. While graffiti first drew my attention as a simple admirer, closer inspection as shown graffiti holds a productive, radical tension between being highly visible and opaque, pliable legibility. I tease out graffiti's tension between visibility and opacity to underscore the relationship between various sub-communities and the larger political systems that try to subsume them. I look at three contexts to enumerate different political aspects of graffiti, from assisting individual survival to showcasing community resistance to movements refusing historical erasure. While incredibly different, each context deepens the understanding of the political import of everyday practices. As I progress through my dissertation, I will weave together philosophy of political uprising with graffiti, highlighting how some of the most radical moments are the ones that are forced into the background. In this introduction, I begin by laying out the background

literature and theory, highlighting how graffiti scholars have used political theory. I will then define the terms and questions at stake in this dissertation, including my project's scope. I will end with a breakdown of the chapters.

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Graffiti is a collection of complicated and interstitial practices that almost everybody has encountered. My experience of exploring a new place and following graffiti trails is one example of what an encounter can look like. The form of graffiti is as varied as the meaning which is as varied as the ways folks can encounter it. Within a psychological framework, graffiti can denote deviance and delinquency, visible breakings of laws and order (Lomas 1970). Or, within a criminology framework, it can denote membership to various groups and the territory of the group (Phillips, 1999). Within an art framework, graffiti can be understood as the avant-garde of aesthetic appeal, drawing the viewer in as a surrealist painting does in a gallery (Schacter 2014). These are but a few examples of the innumerable means of interpretation and theoretical frameworks that graffiti can be understood through, and this is not to speak of the innumerable collections of graffiti that tries to give graffiti space without the need of a frame (or one could say parergon). While political theorists are slow to research graffiti, several graffiti scholars have turned to the political theory.

The first consistent way graffiti scholars turn to questions of politics is by focusing on graffiti in times of crisis and conflict. One such collection of research was the 2021 Book *Political Graffiti in Critical Times.* In this collection, various scholars, from anthropology to visual studies to criminology and more, look at different forms of contemporary crisis and how graffiti is

utilized.[4] The editors and contributors of this book work to reframe crisis as critical times. They specifically look at how graffiti is both a tool of propaganda and resistance in critical times, allowing individuals and structures to negotiate the meaning behind various spaces, whether in the United States led by President Donald Trump, gentrification in Greek cities, or post-revolution murals in Portugal. Another work that underlines the importance of graffiti in moments of crisis is John Lennon's *Conflict Graffiti,* in which he seeks to pull graffiti from its ostensibly ascribed position on walls and boundaries, especially in moments of crisis, to the forefront. He shows how graffiti can give voice to marginalized communities' experiences and needs in moments of crisis, from conflict to occupation to natural disasters. Lennon also flips this narrative to show how graffiti can also be used to obscure or erase marginalized experiences through gentrification and aesthetic distraction. Lennon's work helps readers cultivate a critical view of graffiti in spaces of crisis, what it means, and its role, especially when pulled out of context. Both these works help expand the conversation of political graffiti by looking at graffiti that explicitly responds to political and social crises and how this is often disconnected from the larger audience of graffiti.

The second way graffiti scholars assess the politics of graffiti is by looking at graffiti in moments outside of crisis. Two examples stand out in this literature: Caitlin Bruce's 2019 book *Painting Publics* and Sabina Andron's 2024 book *Urban Surfaces, Graffiti, and the Right to the City.* Bruce not only brings out the politics of graffiti outside times of crisis but also the political importance of a readily understudied subset of graffiti, legal graffiti. While murals are often deemed un-radical and anti-graffiti, Bruce shows how mural spaces, specifically in the festivals 'Meeting of Styles,' can be a venue for public performances and discourse between different parts

[4] It is important to note that a political scientist (Leonidas Oikonomakis) collaborates for one paper in this collection and a scholar from peace and conflict studies (Catherine E. Arthur).

of the political community. She puts illegal and legal graffiti in conversation, arguing that public art can help mediate conversations between different cultures and communities (including political institutions and citizens). Andron continues this conversation by critically assessing how individuals and institutions claim the space around them and how this is (or is not) considered legitimate. Going beyond the different actors' claims to the space, Andron pushes the reader to consider the agency of the different surfaces that materialize the claims. Andron calls on citizens to more critically engage the surfaces around them as they constitute the right to the city.

While political theory has been slow to engage graffiti, theorists have had an increasing engagement with cultural and visual studies at large (Carnes & Goren 2022; Johnston 2018; Bleiker 2018; Duong 2012; Reinhardt 2007). These studies have expanded the meaning of 'political,' and the spaces scholars look to investigate questions of world-building and relations of power. At first culturally attuned political scholarship drew attention to cultural or visual practices that either explicitly brought political concepts into cultural spaces (i.e. war films) or were concerned with spectacles of power (i.e. sci-fi film and literature). The literature in this theory subfield continues to expand as more scholars look at more "banal" and "quotidian" cultural practices (i.e. fashion). As scholars look at how individuals tactically take advantage of the world around them to make space for themselves or develop their own identity, we key into new political imaginaries. One concept from the field of subaltern studies that can be particularly useful in exploring banal politics is infrapolitics.

Infrapolitics is slowly but steadily growing within the social sciences and the humanities, providing scholars with a tool to home in on the subtle and often overlooked banal practices of unorganized resistance. Scholars from diverse disciplines have turned to infrapolitics to investigate the political implications of the quotidian activities within marginalized and minoritized

subcultures—both in and out of times of crisis (Scott 1990; Kelley 1996; Johnson 2013; Moreiras 2021). This growing body of scholars contends that infrapolitics fosters a necessary transdisciplinary exploration of political resistance and resilience, addressing shared concerns regarding the persistent erasure of marginalized subcultures and their practices. It provides a common language for investigating subjecthood, agency, and the construction of alternative worlds that conventional politic scholarship often obscures. Rather than seeking to broaden the scope of conventional political science to incorporate alternative forms of practice, infrapolitics shifts to center alternative practices outside the current understanding of politics. This shift challenges the status quo, encouraging reevaluating what is considered politically relevant and valid and valuable.

James Scott first used infrapolitics to study the resistant activity of individuals in circumstances of extreme power disparity—Malaysian agrarian farmers, enslaved people in the US, peasants in Feudal UK. Scott often focused on the cultural components of resistance arguing in his studies that individuals would find safer means to push their sense of agency forward. Infrapolitics allowed Scott to recognize both the reality of appropriation and exploitation people experienced and the small everyday responses to exploitation. Further Scott pushed that these smaller insurgent practices give scholars insight into any specific circumstance of appropriation and exploitation. Understanding the cultural factors of these historical moments helps give some insight into the politics of oft-ignored subcultures and how they fight for their place in the world even though their politics were in the spectrum of ‘infra’. Other scholars have taken up infrapolitics but usually in short form as footnotes in books or paper length projects (Kelley 1994; Marche 2012; Magaña 2020). Even though Scott coined the concept, he did not expand much on the term 'infrapolitics' outside of his literature on hidden transcripts.

One scholar that does take up infrapolitics at length is Alberto Moreiras who offers an alternative deconstructive conception of infrapolitics. He argues that infrapolitics has had slow take-up because it is inherently anti- “the political” and cannot be categorized or systematized through a rigorous study of politics. Explicitly conceptualizing infrapolitics as ‘anti-political’ he argues that infrapolitics should be understood as practices that transcend politics or are ‘in excess’ of politics, the unnarrativizable remainder of history. The challenge of Moreiras’s conception is the extremity of transcendence that he pushes, risking the loss of tangible relevance. *The Story of Graffiti* offers an alternative at length analysis of infrapolitics and the way that in helps to assess the importance of material practices throughout history, in this case graffiti. I work to extend the graffiti literature in a political genealogy of United States discourse around this varied and contentious practice.

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*The Story of Graffiti* expands political theory’s relationship with graffiti literature by working through a few of the different political roles it has played throughout history. I will lay out the political import of the action, object, and sign of graffiti in the United States during the $20^{th}$ and $21^{st}$ centuries. While political theory has yet to take graffiti up at length it does not take much to persuade folks that graffiti is political. One does not need to say much more than "graffiti is a form of political action" to get the response "I am persuaded." However, when asked why graffiti is political, the conversation falters, dissolving under the tension. Graffiti can be political due to its content, but this is not necessary for it to be political. Graffiti can be political due to its location, but it is also not necessary to be political. Graffiti can be political due to its material makeup; yet again, this is not necessary for it to be political. The mystery remains, why is graffiti intuitively political? I attempt to tackles this immense question by tracking the political

function of graffiti in three different drastically different contexts in United States history from turn of the 20th century railcars to late 20th century subways and alleys to contemporary monuments.

At the core of my dissertation is the preliminary argument that graffiti demonstrates how the relationship between politics and culture is always shifting. This relationship exists in liminal spaces where individuals and collectives negotiate the importance and meaning of different practices and their ability to build the world. As graffiti develops over time it seems to accumulate political potency to where graffiti can seem innately political to some. Infrapolitical practices experience a historical accumulation becoming ambiguously entangled within present politics. However indeterminate the meaning of a specific practice, cultural communication of values (whether implicit or explicit) has political importance in and out of times of tension. When asked about the purpose of graffiti, one of the interviewees of "Wild Side" responded, "It's for us!" This insurgent message, while simple, gets to the heart of the politics of graffiti. Graffiti as a political act encompasses space and practice-based politics, but it also highlights the individual impulse toward insurgent action. The message of "it's for us" lies at the heart of graffiti as gesture, space, and action and at the heart of my dissertation.

Graffiti has come to encompass several practices, and there is literature that runs the gamut of it all. This includes but is not limited to murals, wheat-pasting, sticker-bombing, yarn-bombing, pressure washing/algae, and more. On the most rudimentary level, graffiti can be considered a marking or scratch on the surface of a wall, coming from "The words *sgraffito* and *sgraffiti* [which] come from the Italian word *sgraffito* ("to scratch"), ultimately from the Greek *γρ?φειν* (gráphein),

meaning ‘to write.’”[5] For this dissertation, I limit my definition of graffiti to the written word and form. Borrowing from Ulrich Blanché’s definition, the graffiti centered in this project is “Self-authorized [writing], characters, and forms created in or applied to surfaces in urban spaces that intentionally seek communication with a larger circle of people… done in a performative and often site-specific, ephemeral and participatory way.”[6] I look at the self-authorized instead of illicit or illegal as some graffiti practices fall out of the scope of these two terms, particularly in the present. Caitlin Bruce calls scholars to push on their understanding of the different legal qualifications of graffiti and the political impact these forms can have.[7] Works that center on illegal or illicit graffiti alone often fetishize and misrepresent graffiti at large.

Even narrowing the scope to look at graffiti that could be defined as "writing" leaves a wide range of moments to understand so I further focus my research on three different eras in the United States graffiti history. All three eras are important moments where graffiti enters the public purview. I begin with hobo codes and monikers, at which point graffiti first entered a public discourse in different cities throughout the United States. Even with the increase in discourse, the graffiti itself had yet to come into the public view necessarily. I then jump forward to the 1970s in which graffiti explodes both within public view and discourse, propelling a graffiti revolution around the world. I end by looking at the contemporary political Black Lives Matter movement use of graffiti and the way in which graffiti comes to define both the time and the movement. Throughout these eras there is still a wide range of graffiti occurring, even if I narrow the type of graffiti to forms of writing. Therefore, I further narrow the scope of my project to look at different

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[5] Vasari, Georgio, “Art in Tuscany,” The Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy.
[6] Ulrich Blanché, “Street Art and related terms – discussion and working definition,” in *Street Art and Urban Creativity,* 2015 1(1), 33.
[7] Bruce Caitlin, *Painting Publics: Transnational Legal Graffiti Scenes as Spaces for Encounter* (Philadelphia PA: Temple University Press, 2019),10.

subcultural movements ranging from transient communities to inner city youth across the United States to political movements/protests of the 2020s.

Given the focus of my project, I want to explicitly highlight some components of the larger graffiti literature that I do not engage with but is immensely important. First, I do not cover any graffiti outside the temporal and spatial context specified above, even though graffiti is an international phenomenon. There is literature on graffiti within every continent addressing various concerns from political needs to austerity fallout to awareness campaigns.[8] While graffiti is incredibly contextual, it is also deeply tied by larger cultural and political trends becoming a complicated energy network. Second, I do not cover muralism and image-based graffiti, even though some of this work has self-authorized writing. This is because I needed more time or space to address the literature on aesthetics and political art appropriately. The last side of graffiti that I do not cover but wanted to call attention to is the diverse subcultures that take advantage of the graffiti. While I lightly introduce some in the different time frames, I do not dig into graffiti's different subcultural/counter-cultural aspects, though this is an important component. This would be a book project to draw out how subculture gravitates towards graffiti as a practice.[9]

Graffiti is a global practice and has taken many forms. Some scholars would go as far back as ancient cave paintings, think about the basic definition of graffiti from before. However, media depiction of graffiti has left the impression that graffiti was a uniquely American phenomenon that grew in popularity worldwide. In this project I focus on the United States, not to confirm or validate this impression. Instead, I seek to find what influenced the United States graffiti and what graffiti

[8] Jeffrey Ian Ross, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2016).
[9] A couple works that begin this is Susan Phillip's *Under the City,* Maurice Magaña's *Cartographies of Youth Resistance,* and Nancy Macdonald's *The Graffiti Subculture*

practices were unique to the United States, helping nuance the transdisciplinary practice. I center three specific moments in U.S. graffiti history, first when it first came into public attention at large during the turn of the 20th century. Then I focus on the cultural popularization of graffiti due to a myriad of forces including mass media and globalization in the 1970s. I will end with looking at the BLM movement and the use of graffiti to mark confederate monuments, coming to define a part of the visual memory of 2020.

This project was done primarily through electronic archival research, utilizing readily accessible platforms. This was partially due to the fact that a large chunk of this research was done throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also because graffiti has a general ephemeral nature, and it is commemorated or preserved by sharing photographs online on sites such as Instagram, graffiti blogs, and photograph collections.[10] Throughout this project, you will see the weaving together of theoretical literature with archival work to paint a genealogy of graffiti. Relatedly, the research for this project, which was done in person, was limited to the greater Los Angeles area. This includes some of the movement photographs included and the small in-person archival work that I have been able to achieve.

As most cultural practices, graffiti is an incredibly contextual one. Even regarding the explosion of aerosol-based graffiti worldwide, when a graffiti practice enters any specific space at any specific time, its role is unique to that circumstance. While my dissertation gives us important insights into the ways that infrapolitics develops over time and supports bringing graffiti literature into conversation with political theory, this is but a start. There is great work being done on the politics of graffiti, and there is even more work to be done.

[10] https://www.graffiti.org/index.html, https://ssoih.com/signs.html, and https://beyondthestreets.com.

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The first chapter focuses on the turn of the 20th century, in which various transient communities would use graffiti to garner fame and/or communicate with the larger transient community. Graffiti as a written practice in the United States is generally understood to have started within railyards; as the railroad industry expanded, railroad workers sought ways to communicate from one train yard to another. This need led to workers marking the trains with chalk and other material, as trains could also carry messages. As many railroad workers were transient workers, Hobos, we see coded railyard graffiti quickly spreading among the general transient community to mark a place one had been. Graffiti was particularly important in the hobo community, where the "hobo codes" of the late 1800s/early 1900s gained infamy. I evaluate how graffiti worked as a mode of infra-politics in hobo culture and helped propagate larger political myths surrounding the subculture. Popular societal opinion collapsed the difference between hobos, tramps, wobblies, and rail workers (just to name a few) as the fear of early communist politics and labor movements took hold of an expanding US. In this chapter, I ask what aspects of fear materialized in the coded graffiti? The media and established politicians fanned public fear and built upon the myths by pointing to the hobo codes and stickerettes as evidence of the danger (physical and political) that these subcultures posed. However, as I will point out, much of the mythology was disconnected from the reality of these subcultures' politics. The disconnection begs further questions about what the graffiti did for the subcultural community and why hobos leaned into the mythology? I will use the theories of James Scott to tease out the role graffiti played in political myth-making as opposed to its role in the reality of hobo culture and life, specifically as a form of infrapolitics.

In the second chapter, I assess the political significance of the surging popularity of graffiti during the 1970s, a phenomenon commonly referred to as style writing. Within this cultural era, graffiti, regardless of its origin, form, or creator, was perceived as a dynamic performance capable of reshaping spaces and impacting those who encountered these inscriptions. Those deeply influenced often used the same practice in their own spaces. Unlike the early 20th century graffiti, these practices largely shaped popular and avant garde culture, leading to the creation of popular documentaries and movies, from "Street Wars" to "Wild Style." The growing prevalence of graffiti bears three important implications. First, as graffiti gained popularity and recognition, it became an increasingly important mechanism of place-making, particularly for precarious and underprivileged communities. I draw insights from Iris Marion Young, Stuart Hall and Doreen Massey to illuminate these spatial aspects. Second, during this era, graffiti functions less as an infrapolitical practice and more an infrapolitical materiality, becoming a site of economic and racial class engagement. Graffiti transcends the boundaries of urban peripheries, existing within the liminal spaces between social classes. Third, we see the advance of a strong militarized response to suppress graffiti's quick expansion. Politicians and police alike distanced themselves from graffiti by reducing it to vandalism and dismissing it as incomprehensible. These three implications intertwine, showcasing how graffiti, as a political practice develops through diverse pathways, demanding an expansion of infrapolitics.

In the last core chapter, I continue to track graffiti's evolution into an explicit political practice, turning to 21st-century movements and graffiti within them. I focus on Occupy and the Black Lives Matter movements and the abundance of graffiti used to spread various phrases and images. At this stage, graffiti becomes an explicit practice of active refusal and a potentially vital component of insurgencies. Within the movements, graffiti is used to externalize internal socio-

political desires as gestures of refusal that connect with a larger collective. I argue that graffiti shows how political practices of refusal must incorporate "no" and "yes." Within the Occupy Movement, active refusal was seen in the slogan "We are the 99%," where there is a drawing of attention to the needs of the majority while saying no to the dominance of the 1%. In the Black Lives Matter Movement, the focus of chapter 3, the weaving of 'yes' and 'no' could be seen in the use of "BLM," where there is a yes to the lives and livelihood of black folks, and "ACAB," which is a 'no' to the continued police violence seen in the United States. When practices of active refusal are successful such practices act as connective tissue between uprisings and larger political movements. I turn to the work of Georges Didi-Huberman and Walter Benjamin to help deepen the understanding of cultural practices of resistance and how this applies to the contemporary practice of graffiti. While graffiti, nor refusal broadly, answers all questions of everyday political resistance, it leaves the viewer with the option to lean into systemic order or towards an alternative, possibly more emancipatory, future.

I conclude by looking at some shared trends in each of these different circumstances, such as how the politics of graffiti, whether illegal or legal, mere tags or more aesthetic pieces, draw the attention of viewers and media or are hidden in the daily environment that in one way or another that graffiti is a politics of order. I will take these insights to draw out the politics of order in infrapolitics. Beginning with Scott, part of what underlay the importance of infrapolitics was how it maintained and challenged any specific public order at any time. Graffiti allows us to draw out how infrapolitics evolves not only since Scott's first theorization but also how infrapolitics practices themselves evolve. Another thing that these different moments shared in common around graffiti is how each context hints are more egalitarian than depicted in media. I will draw out some early takeaways around the agonism of democracy in anarchic spaces.

# Chapter One

The Man, The Myth, The Legend

"I just came out of a home, where the old lady gave me a fine sit down. Right outside her gate I saw a fine 'snipe' (cigar snipe). I picked it up, and as is the custom of hoboes, I bit off the mouthpiece, and spit it out, then rubbed the burned end on the gate post to rub off the ashes. Put it in my mouth for a good chew. Just about that time the old Moll h'ists up the window and screams at me: 'RUB THEM MARKS OFF MY GATE POSTS! I CAN'T AFFORD TO FEED EVERY STRANGER IN THE COUNTRY.' To please the old gal I pretended to rub off the marks. I s'pose she'd bin reading in the papers that we hoboes leave marks and signs."[11]

Introduction:

At the turn of the 20th century—the United States Gilded Age—people were becoming increasingly disenchanted with the promises of industry. Part of the disenchanted few gravitated toward the growing transient subculture within the U.S. The transient subculture offered a different life, a life built out of a hyper-individualized, radical freedom. Although this subculture centered on values of individualism and self-survival, it held community interdependence in high esteem. Part of this paradoxical value system was due to transient folks' dependence on handouts and goodwill, an abstract and distant conception of community. Another part was how the transient community necessitated an informal network of communication. Ephemeral, abstract communication systems helped these precarious individuals navigate the world around them. One form of this communication that gained particular infamy was a practice of graffiti, known as hobo code. Graffiti helped foster a community for an anonymous assemblage while also protecting said assemblage behind the growing myth of a secret society. In this chapter, I theorize graffiti as an infrapolitical practice, demonstrated by the hobo code, that resisted the larger social and cultural

[11] Ex-Hobo, "Many Popular Myths about Hobos," *Boston Sunday Globe*, 1916.

force of industrial capitalism, offering both a sense of community and protection of this community.

As touched on in the introduction, scholarship studying the politics of graffiti regularly focuses on how graffiti can be a form of resistance *in* times of crisis. Cases of this are plentiful, such as wheatpaste posters in France during the 1960 protests, the continued protest of the occupation of Palestine, and student movements in Chile.[12] While explicit political messages in times of crisis are an essential configuration of graffiti, crisis politics does not encapsulate the wide range of politics embodied in graffiti. Graffiti outside of times of crisis, the quotidian moments, is just as important to study.[13] Investigating quotidian moments gives insight into the sinews of politics, the practices that maintain political imagination in the everyday. Graffiti practices, specifically hobo code and monikers, in the United States during the turn of the 20th century are one such moment.

In the late 1800s, the public started to develop a myth of a graffiti practice within a "secret society" of one of the lowest labor rungs in the U.S., the transient community, including hobos, tramps, bums, Wobblies, and more. The myth pointed to a governing structure and secret coded system in which the politics were ill-understood and implicit. The spreading graffitied symbols and surrounding myths bred fear and wonder. The media fanned public fear and built upon the myths (often for monetary gain) by pointing to the hobo codes as evidence of the parasitic danger these subcultures posed. Nevertheless, the lived reality of these subcultures was one of hard work,

[12] Rohan 1988; Julie Peteet, 2016; Javiera Manzi et. al, 2021
[13] I expand on this in chapter three, where I argue that graffiti has functioned in political movements as an infrapolitical refusal — a refusal of an established order while offering, at the minimum, hopes of an alternative order. Refusal is juxtaposed with infrapolitical resistance and looks to graffiti in the moments surrounding crisis.

independence, and mutual aid. I explore the liminal space between myth and reality, finding what an active absence of a group in a historical narrative can say about the politics of myth-making.

Hobo codes were not the first manifestation of graffiti in the United States. Graffiti has a long and extensive history in the Americas, predating the formation of the United States.[14] During the Revolutionary War, graffiti was an important practice in the history of the U.S. While not as common or well preserved, the National Trust for Historic Preservation has worked to preserve some of the first moments of graffiti, such as a portrait of a far-off lover painted in blood by a dying revolutionary soldier.[15] Even in the early moments, graffiti had myths surrounding it, which contemporary historians built out of imposed romantic narratives. Graffiti continued as an obscure practice in the U.S. with little attention or documentation. During the late-mid 1800s, first noted in the 1870s, the cultural practice of graffiti started to expand rapidly due to two different events. First, graffiti expanded quickly with the expansion of the railyard workforce, partially due to an influx of migrants from Europe who joined the railyard community. Rail workers who needed to communicate over linguistic and physical distances utilized simple communication on the side of railcars. Second, and more significantly, the practice of train hopping and the graffiti it entailed burst like wildfire with the Civil War and the expanded transient community across the United States.[16] It was not until after the reconstruction era, in a moment of reprieve from crisis and development, that graffiti started catching the public eye.[17] The new attention was driven by

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[14] It is important to note that some scholars would track graffiti as far back as hieroglyphs and indigenous wall art, asking similar questions: Who is the creator? Were they trying to communicate anything specific? If so, what? What is the value of this work (and not just economically)?
[15] Michael O'Reilly, "Liberty to Go See," NPR Whyy's Friday Arts, n.d., https://whyy.org/segments/liberty-to-go-to-see-4/.
[16] John Lennon, "Trains, Railroad Workers, and Illegal Riders: The Subcultural World of Hobo Code," in *Routledge Handb Ook of Graffiti and Steet Art*, ed. Jeffrey Ian Ross, Routledge (London: Routledge, 2016), 29.
[17] The earliest news article I have found is dated 1878 (St. Louis Dispatch), a year after the end of the Reconstruction Era, which is generally considered to have been finished.

newspapers, which sought a novel means of attracting readers. They weaved stories about the new insidious subculture of the United States, which consisted of tramps, hobos, and early Wobblies.[18]

The turn of the 20th century was a period of paradigm-shifting events (reconstruction, WWI, and more) that beg some to question the value of looking to the everyday, especially something intangible like the hobo code. However, we can learn much about ourselves by looking at our shadows and 'parasites.' Tracing out the graffiti practices of hobos and tramps sheds light on the distinct resistance from the underbelly of early capitalism and industrialization in the United States. Throughout the rest of the chapter, I will examine the hobo code and the larger subculture that allows this parasitic insight. First, hobo codes and monikers exemplify infrapolitics, a form of tactical use of the every day for resistance, where individuals working early railyards took advantage of their station and tools to resist a repressive and dangerous industry. Second, hobos and tramps lived in the expanding liminal space of early capitalism, where a hidden but growing tension within society's body grew.[19] Third, the ephemeral nature of graffiti meant that the transient practitioners of graffiti could hope for a fleeting interaction with the viewers of their work. These three aspects combine to paint a picture of graffiti as resistance by a growing remainder of the U.S. industrialization and the American dream.

After quickly introducing hobo culture and graffiti practices, I outline the role graffiti played for both the hobo population and the larger United States population. The significance of the hobo graffiti practices lay in their ability to communicate across a scattered community and garner fame by living an alternative "American Dream." I turn to James Scott and his concept of

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[18] It is important to note that this was likely drive by deeply racialized fear, particularly in the face of reconstruction and its backlash.

[19] Theo Kindynis also describes the space in which graffiti developed in society as spatial glitches where continual spatial reconfiguration forms "intervening spaces—holes (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) or *Bubbles* (Sloterdijik)…" (Kindynis, 2019). While he was disgusting urban architecture, we see a similar pattern growing out of U.S. industrialism.

infrapolitics to draw out the importance of graffiti in fostering an alternative to the dominant political imagination. Graffiti, understood as an infrapolitical practice, highlights the potency and power of the myth surrounding hobo culture. Mass media fanned public fear of an unseen other, building upon growing myths that the hobo codes and monikers were evidence of the parasitic danger these subcultures posed. However, as I will point out, the infrapolitical pulse of hobo code and monikers came from the disconnection between the myth and the reality of these subcultures and their politics.

In the last sections of this chapter, I illustrate how the mythology around hobo graffiti practices, understood as an infrapolitical practice, challenges traditional understandings of political resistance. Hobo's code exemplifies what Benjamin calls dialectical images, a visual resistance politics, highlighting the growing debasement of the world. Holding an image of a radically broken dream next to our lived catastrophe, we get a new kind of critical and radical leverage on the world, leverage that lies outside the currently visible range of politics and worldbuilding. James Scott's infrapolitics helps provide a framework to understand how to grapple with the myth surrounding the hobo code and its implications for U.S. society at the start of the 20$^{th}$ century.

Public Versus Private Narratives of Hobo Culture:

The stories about the hobo population are as wide as they are varied. The sheer diversity of myths and stories highlights transient individuals' diverse and often tenuous existence. In the following section, I will put the public narratives of hobos (the parasitic myth and the lone star myth) in conversation with the private narrative to tease out the role graffiti played in this relationship. These paradoxical myths are entangled sides of a phantasmagoric coin — fantasy and fear. The myths around hobos and hobo codes demeaned the hobo subculture, reinforcing the idealization of a masculine conception of violence and independence while posing poverty as the

consequence of individual moral failure. By teasing out these myths, I show how graffiti functions as a mode of infrapolitics hidden in quotidian practices. Specifically, I center the practice of hobo code, a graffiti practice that hobos were supposed to have used to communicate. While this assessment fails to capture the reality of the hobo life, it does capture a prominent political myth that has carried through generations in the U.S.

As famously described by Mark Twain, the United States was in a gilded age during the turn of the twentieth century. Twain utilized the 'gilded' concept to critique the polished exterior of a fast-expanding, industrial society that he found to be rotten within, infested with corruption and inequity. This industrialization included the expansion of factories and railroads, connecting and inflating the United States as never before. Corporations quickly grew from increased resources and markets, ultimately defining the advancement of the U.S. The quick economic expansion of industry demanded a quickly expanding labor force consuming people in mass. Individuals worked to death for the promise of a stable and wealthy life, often finding death before the fulfilled promise. Not only was this early period of industrialism established by literal backbreaking work, it also depended on the precarity of the employed, where any individual was to be flexible in their time and place of work, never guaranteed employment.[20] The public narrative hid these darker aspects, painting an image of fast-paced industrialization sweeping through the nation, allowing individuals from all backgrounds the chance of an "American Dream" — granted according to 'ability' and 'achievement.' In *Domination and the Art of Resistance,* James Scott explains, "The public transcript is… the *self*-portrait of dominant elites as they would have themselves seen… highly partisan and partial narrative. It is designed to be impressive, to affirm

[20] Immanuel Wallerstein explains why capitalist expansion would result in long periods of high unemployment and precarious work conditions in his piece "The Ideological Tensions of Capitalism."

and naturalize the power of dominate elites, and to conceal or euphemize the dirty linen of their rule."[21] The public narrative of the late 1800s perpetuated American exceptionalism built on the back of the working class, where everyone could feel they had a hand in the exceptionalism. Even given the power of the public narrative, the exploitation and expropriation of the time were well understood by the larger population and fostered many responses.

One response to the Gilded Age was labor armies, large collectives of men who explicitly demanded the federal government address corruption and the precarity of poverty. These armies sought a stable and secure livelihood, often attached to more significant movements or organizations, such as the Industrial Workers of the World. The various armies marched on Washington to petition for better working environments, considering themselves "Petition in boots" or train cars. By traveling across the United States in painfully visible ways, these armies hoped to force the federal government to act.[22] The labor armies were one of the most vocal and visible subcultures of the working class at the time, working through the political structures in their own way. Their resistance depended on visibility as they aimed to change the shape of the United States and labor conditions. Labor armies openly challenged the public narrative hiding the exploitation, arguing that the workers deserved more given their contributions to the U.S. and the world.

Another core, though marginalized, subculture of the working class—who also turned to the roads and rails—was the Hobo/Tramp subculture.[23] The hobo subculture, like Mark Twain, was

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[21] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990),18.
[22] John Lennon, *Boxcar Politics: The Hobo in U.S. Culture and Literature, 1869-1956* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 64.
[23] Going forward, I will generally be referencing this subculture as hobos, as the hobo codes are the focus of this chapter. However, I want to recognize that there are other groups that are often collapsed into this community. Tramps, Bums, and Wobblies are all important examples. Usually, the larger population and media did not care to distinguish these groups as they found them all parasitic to society. Within the subculture, they were often careful.

completely disillusioned with economic promises and searching for alternative ways of being in the world. They did not seek to alter the world or the public narrative itself. As the graffiti scholar John Lennon states in his book *Boxcar Politics*, the hobo labor class “became both a critical part of early twentieth-century revolutionary working-class politics as well as its foil.”[24] The revolutionary aspect of the hobo subculture was more muted and humble. It was a culture that "gets you back to more of a true humanity," as John T. Davis describes a radically understanding but nonchalant community.[25] The foil lay in the fact that while hobos worked in opposition to the expropriation and exploitation of industrialism, they did so in an inconspicuous and ephemeral way, reliant on being obscure. They did not seek to change the system but to build a life off its potential.

This subculture challenged the ideals of sacrifice for future promises. Instead, it built on concepts of radical freedom and hyper-individualization, clinging to a promise of the present moment (sometimes working, sometimes not, but never being held in place by employment). The reality of the subculture was an amalgamation of working-class individuals from all walks of life finding an existence where they would not be questioned by their colleagues, for better or for worse, and could go where they saw fit. While this was grounded in an extreme individual orientation that sometimes turned violent, the community was held in high esteem. Part of this paradoxical value system was due to transient folks’ reliance on handouts and goodwill. Another part was the ephemeral, abstract fraternity that helped these precarious individuals navigate the

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However, slippery distinctions include whether one was willing to work, whether one traveled or stayed in one place living unhoused, and whether they were politically active (and with whom they politically identified).

[24] John Lennon, "Can a Hobo Share a Boxcar? Jack London, the Industrial Army, and the Politics of (In)Vsibility,” *American Studies* 48, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 9.

[25] *Hobo*, Documentary (DBA Television; British Broadcasting Corporation(BBC), 1992), 00:01:08.

world around them. The communication system hobo code helped cultivate a community for an anonymous assemblage while protecting the subculture behind myths of intrigue and fear.

The heterogeneous group that was "hobos" resulted from the collision of several different subcultures. One subgroup came from the end of the Civil War, where newly freed enslaved people and soldiers sought to find a livelihood in the post-reconstruction United States. While many of these individuals turned to factory work, reaching for the promise of the American Dream, many turned instead to a life of transience, enjoying the freedom and liberty a life on the tracks allowed. Second was individuals migrating to the United States from Europe in search of better opportunities in the New World, hoping the U.S. brand of capitalism offered them more opportunities in the less crowded country.[26] As many migrants were alone and without community, they took advantage of the expansive railroad system to access the country. Third were working-class individuals who were being hit hard by the depression and found relief in mobility. While many would seasonally travel to their preferred jobs, they also utilized the hobo lifestyle for communal support. The last subgroup, and one of the largely perplexing groups, were individuals who had been born into the growing empires yet were called to a life not tied to the obligations of capitalism. These individuals highlighted how the industrialism of the time consumed all, as they ran from the demands of their family expectations. The prime example was Leon Ray Livingston, better known as A-No.1, one of the most infamous hobos in U.S. history. The opening chapter of one of his biographies, A-No.1, outlines how he was born to parents who were "respected and well-to-do residents" and "owned a pretty home."[27]

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[26] Christine Postinos, "The Figure of the Tramp in Gidled Age Success Narratives," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40, no. 6 (2007): 1005.
[27] A-No. 1, *Life and Adventures of A-No. 1: America's Most Celebrated Tramp*, Nineth (Cambridge Springs: The A-No. 1 Publishing Co., 1910), https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/101708704, 5.

The hobo subculture quickly became rooted in the railyard community, where these various subgroups sought both short-term employment and quick transportation. Life on the rails was often driven by systemic failings and a quickly changing economy, though some found freedom in following what they felt was the best employment offer. [28] The infrapolitical impulse of hobo code and culture necessitates an understanding of the exploitation and oppression built into the background landscape.[29] In times of rampant unemployment, the hobo subculture found strength in flexibility, never defining themselves by a job or home (as opposed to folks who sought establishment). However, as Lennon explains, hobos' flexibility often slid into exploitation as they functioned as a "floating surplus-population".[30] It was being able to leave and pick up work as the more extensive system needed and following where the demand for workers took them.[31] What many transient folks felt was a flight to freedom from the violence of industry became a path to alternative victimhood by capitalism. The public narrative erased this experience, defining hobos and tramps as lazy and dangerous.[32] Hobos also faced violence from the state, which heavily policed the subculture with militaristic and draconian policies. Criminologist Susan Phillips tracks the history of police and hobo relations to the rise of the carceral state in California, Los Angeles specifically.[33]

Life on the rails introduced hobos to radical, though precarious freedom, allowing chaotic agency in the face of totalizing capitalism. It also fostered the graffiti practices of the hobo subculture, which became an infrapolitical tool for the community. At first, graffiti messages

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[28] Lennon, *Boxcar Politics: The Hobo in U.S. Culture and Literature, 1869-1956*,15.
[29] James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 48.
[30] Lennon, *Boxcar Politics: The Hobo in U.S. Culture and Literature, 1869-1956*, 21.
[31] Wallerstein "Flexible in Time, Space, and Cheap as possible."
[32] Christine Photinos, "The Figure of the Tramp in Gilded Age Success Narratives," 995.
[33] Susan A. Phillips, *The City Beneath: A Century of Los Angeles Graffiti* (Yale University Press, 2019), 19.

resulted from railyard workers taking advantage of the ready means to communicate, writing on trains to signal important information from one railyard to another or to combat boredom on slow days.[34] This early graffiti and evolving hobo train hopping can be understood through a Certeauian framework of marginalized communities' tactical practices (one could say infrapolitical practices) in two separate ways. Certeau defines the strategic as creating control and order in space. Order in the railyard was fostered and built into the norms, laws, and regulations around the management and use of the trains. The tactical is when an individual or community interfaces with the strategic use of space and then changes it to be their own. [35] The tactic is a use of space by "the weak," or those on the margins, as it allows those excluded from active roles in the use of space to turn the forces around them to their means and ends. The first way hobo culture is exemplified tactically is as Lennon points to how hobos bucked the structure of train riding: tickets, seats, designated spaces for smoking/relieving oneself/eating, and a controlled internal environment.[36] When hobos hopped on a free ride in whatever space they could, they broke down the boundary between the inside place of the train and the outside environment. The second tactic that was present in hobo cultures was through graffiti itself. In the space of the railyard, graffiti was a tactical use of boxcars, water tanks, and other quotidian surfaces as a canvas for boredom breaking and communication. The writing for personal reasons broke the rules of the railyards and sanctioned communication.

Hobos quickly took to graffiti as a practice in two distinct ways. First, hobos learning from the railyard workers used train cars and nearby structures(such as water tanks, bridges, and so on) for their messaging to garner fame for their exploration of the United States, often competing with fellow travelers. This graffiti moniker included a date, an arrow, a basic coordinate system to

[34] Lennon, "Trains, Railroad Workers, and Illegal Riders: The Subcultural World of Hobo Code."
[35] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1984), xix.
[36] Lennon, *Boxcar Politics: The Hobo in U.S. Culture and Literature, 1869-1956*, 38.

indicate the direction of travel, and a nickname that allowed individuals anonymous infamy for their escapades. These moniker nicknames developed out various aspects of individuals' identities ranging from folks' professions (Chi Plumber), race (Chi Whitey), location (Denver Kid), or physical traits (Grape Vine Slim).[37] Jack London, born in San Francisco, took several monikers, including Frisco Kid and Sailor Jack.[38] While most Monikers have faded with time, societies such as The Historic Graffiti Society or scholars such as Susan Phillips work to preserve the ones found today.[39]

Monikers played a few different roles for hoboes. As already hinted above, the first was to seek for a usually anonymous fame in and out of the hobo subculture. A-No.1 gained his infamy by actively seeking fame as one of the most traveled hoboes. He actively published articles and monographs, utilizing his monikers as free publicity. Individuals like A-No.1 found pleasure in drawing attention to their alternative lifestyle, though this often fueled fear and anger in the larger public, as hobos, were considered a pathology of the society. Monikers also allowed for a sense of connection among hobos, where they could give chase to each other, trying to meet up or surpass one another in a sort of game of leapfrog. Phillips describes how monikers helped hobos and others "to remain connected despite the unpredictability of clandestine railroad travel, a lack of telecommunication, and frequent incarceration."[40] Jack London recalls in his autobiography chasing a fellow hobo across the U.S. and Canada, swelling with pride when he was able to overtake his competitor. [41] Monikers rarely, if ever, explicitly called to politics and societal

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[37] *If you Do not Know What Tramps' Signs Mean Read this Article it Explains the Bo's Hieroglyphs*
[38] Susan A. Phillips, "Following the Moniker Trail: Hobo Graffiti and the Strange Tale of Jack London, Skysail, and A-No.1," *Boom California (University of California Press)*, October 17, 2019.
[39] Phillips, *The City Beneath: A Century of Los Angeles Graffiti*, 19.
[40] Phillips, "Following the Moniker Trail: Hobo Graffiti and the Strange Tale of Jack London, Skysail, and A-No.1."
[41] Jack London, *The Road* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1907), https://archive.org/details/cu31924095660472/page/n331/mode/2up.122.

structures. However, their very existence chafed at the United States, publicized the existence of individuals who siphoned off resources for their gain.

Graffiti ensured this marginalized community's survival and an anonymous communal culture and knowledge.[42] An alternative life and sense of what it meant to live were being proposed, one that infuriated and scared others. The mixture of fear and fascination propelled myths about individual people and the lifestyle of hoboing, attracting others who craved an unrestricted life with a depthless wanderlust.

The second graffiti practice that took hold within the hobo subculture is hobo code, a largely secret coded system through which hobos could share knowledge about the trains, cities, and roads they utilized and/or passed through. There is little written on exactly when this coded system would have started to take shape. However, by the late 1800s, newspapers were increasingly publishing about the potential for readers to have unknown symbols written around their houses, attracting unwanted guests. The earliest mention I have found is Gettysburg Star and Sentinel in August 1877. These symbols could be as simple as a diamond (signifying abundance) or a circle (signifying no use trying).[43] However, the symbols could be a more intricate combination of images, such as a grid and a crudely drawn animal, to signify an infested jail.[44] One article published in the Ohio Perrysburg Journal in 1909 deciphered a range from a simple circle denoting "no use" to a 4-legged line in a box denoting "dog in garden."[45] It took this budding practice to increase viewership by weaving together a fear and fascination of a secret society, which has fascinated humans for as long as structured urban communities have existed.

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[42] Phillips, "Following the Moniker Trail: Hobo Graffiti and the Strange Tale of Jack London, Skysail, and A-No.1."
[43] "Secret Sign of Hobos," *The Hutchinson News*, 1902.
[44] A-No. 1, *Hobo-Camp-Hire-Tales*, ninth (Cambridge Springs: The A-No. 1 Publishing Co., 1911), https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31210006369670&seq=9.
[45] "Code of Trampdom: Hieroglyphs Used by Tramps and Hobos," *Perrysburg Journal*, April 30, 1990.

As the awareness of the hobos' coded practice grew, there were increased attempts to decode these mysterious systems. Part of the attempts were due to a human drive to create meaning in the things around them, particularly things made by other humans. There seemed to be a wanting in on the joke or being on the "up and up" of the folkloric material/special knowledge that was seen (and increasingly projected) into the hobo codes and monikers. As soon as newspapers could bring attention to these symbols, layman and hobo alike came forth with codes for these ciphered conversations, seeking monetary compensation or fame.[46] It was not uncommon to see news titles like "Mr. Sands [a sort of laymen anthropologist of hoboes] has found that there really is, as has been so often declared, a tramp cipher, a kind of hieroglyphic language which these wanderers write upon the walls of house for guidance of those who follow them."[47] or "Hobo King explains Secret Code."[48]These news articles often included sample symbols drawn/described and a key explaining the meaning of each so that laymen could be more likely to catch sight of these notorious drawings.

One response to the increased awareness was increased fear at the idea of an unseen societal underbelly of the United States. The hobo life of train hopping was dangerous; to survive required an unobtrusive presence, and they had to be able to disappear from view at a moment's notice. This spectral behavior led to people assuming the worst, particularly when paired with the idea that they would either steal their jobs or mooch off them. In the late 1800s issues of race and class intensified people's fear of hobo codes and monikers. First, the economic recession of the 1870s led to increased activity in labor movements, such as the Industrial World Workers, commonly referred to as Wobblies, during a period when the American people were called to guard the

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[46] "Monakers' On Handcar House Recall Memories of a Type of American Tramp That is Fast Passing," The Indianapolis News, In. 1910.
[47] "Secret Sign of Hobos," The Hutchinson News, KS 1902
[48] "Hobo King Explains Secret Code." Bismarck Tribune, ND, 1922.

financial honor of the U.S.[49] The growing tension between industrial growth and workers' rights was coupled with the second defining aspect, which was a deep racialization as emancipated people and newly immigrated southern Europeans joined this constricted workforce.[50] Newspapers capitalized on the public's fear, releasing articles such as "The Tramp Trust—a Million in It. Vagabondia is now fully organized with departments, codes, 'camps,' and secret symbols—the most versatile criminals at the head, just like other 'predatory corporations.'[51] The media made hobo codes out to be a communicative system from a highly structured organization, as one would assume from more secretive fraternity societies, such as Skull and Bones, except with one crucial difference. Hobos were made out to be a secret organization of poor, racialized non-Americans led at the behest of evil millionaires that thrived off expropriating wealth from hardworking Americans. Such narratives are reminiscent of myths today about unhoused begging while secretly hoarding riches.[52]

As this fear festered, few thought about the difficulty of developing a complex structured subculture with a complete system of symbols to communicate secret messages. The meanings of symbols would shift over time and from one place to the next, straining a national community by local coded customs. Some of this shifting would have been due to laypeople's use of symbols, including fascinated youth or police, trying to scare hobos from their towns.[53] Once this system was decoded and used out of the 'proper' context, it would become an unreliable means of communication for hobos themselves. Shifting meaning from one context to the next, individuals

[49] William McKinley, "Four More Years of Full Dinner Pail" (Presidential Speech, Speech Accepting the Republican Nomination, Canton, OH, July 12, 1900), https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/july-12-1900-speech-accepting-republican-nomination.
[50] Position, "The Figure of the Tramp in Gidled Age Success Narratives," 1005.
[51] "The Tramp Trust - A Million in It," *Spokane Press*, 1910.
[52] Christine Shanes, "Homelessness Myth #20: They Make Millions," *Canadian Observatory on Homelessness*.
[53] "Cops Paint Hobo Signs." The St. Louis Star and Times, MO 1912

just joining the hobo subculture and incorrectly utilizing hobo codes, or seasoned hobos having to become acquainted and constantly needing to acclimate to any localized language would lead hobos not to trust the symbols they did come upon fully. There were often contradictions even within newspapers' "decoding" of hobo code. For example, in 1914, an article was published in newspapers across the United States claiming, "…a circle crossed by two arrows pointing to the right means 'get out of this town as quickly as possible.'"[54] Fast-forward to 1931, and the article "What I Found Out About Hobos" claimed that a circle with two arrows through it meant that two men had left the town with each other, going where the arrows pointed.[55] The contradicting public-given meanings of the symbols were all the more reason that hobo codes would not have been a very effective means of communication. The more effective and trusted means of communication would have been word of mouth when two hobos happened to hop on the same train or share a meal or night in a 'hobo jungle.'

While hobo codes were not the most effective means of communication, they would have been a mode of artistic expression, boredom relief, and garnering fame. Simplistic in style, hobo codes revealed a clear yet abstract relationship between hobos and the world around them. As one newspaper article crudely said, "The tramp is very much of an animal. His languages deals only with animal, material things. Men, women, food, dogs night, money and drinks are the subjects that absorb his mind. And in his own language, which is unintelligible to the outside world…"[56] Hobo codes told a story of a growing manifold illegal subculture that people either idealized as radically free or demonized as violent vagrancy. The truth is a mixture of these two and more, only partially captured. Hobo codes were the traces of a diverse, anonymous amalgamation of

[54] The Pocatello Tribune, Fort Wayne News, East Oregonian
[55] "What I found out about Hoboes." San Francisco Examiner, CA 1931.
[56] "Secret Signs of Hoboes." The Hutchinson News, KS, 1902

individuals who found a rough community in their transient existence. Lennon describes hobo culture and storytelling as a "subcultural world [that] could never be fully revealed because it was also a ruse: language, full of puns and made-up words, hid as much as they revealed."[57] While the larger public created multiple narratives of complex communication systems out of the graffiti left behind, they were more likely attempts to alleviate boredom. In railyards, where not only the birth of hobo graffiti but also some of the most prolific graffiti could be found, it helped to break up the monotony of long shifts or to claim time from their employers.[58] Boredom relief also applied to hobos who were often stuck in towns or train cars with little to do beyond thinking and drawing. Lastly, hobo codes also allowed individuals to garner notoriety, particularly "deciphering" the codes to newspapers, where both the paper and the individual could monetarily gain from it. Some key individuals that exemplified this were Leon Ray Livingston(A-No.1), Jack London, and Bozo Texino.

In retrospect, scholars are less and less persuaded that hobo codes were such a communicative structure. While newspapers published widely on the subject, maintaining the idea that hobos plagued communities due to hidden symbols that beckoned them, there is little to no evidence to support this. What evidence has been found by historians and historical societies does not support the myth of a usable coded system. The Historical Graffiti Society explains that the only spaces where they discovered hobo symbols were inaccessible to the public. Therefore, hobos would most likely not have made these marks nor used them.[59] The more likely culprits would have been private citizens and children who were fascinated by the hobo subculture and trying to participate in their own ways. This fascination has continued over the century. In a 1953

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[57] Lennon, "Trains, Railroad Workers, and Illegal Riders: The Subcultural World of Hobo Code." 28.
[58] Bill Daniel, *Mostly True: The Story of Bozo Texino* (Microcosm Publishing, 2008).
[59] *If you Don't Know What Tramps' Signs Mean, Read this Article. It explains Bo's hieroglyphs* and provides general conclusions.

advertisement, Erie Railroad capitalized on the prolific stories of hobo codes and the close relationship to trains, coopting a symbol they claim signified, "this place is doing well."[60] Thomas Pynchon centers on a secret graffiti-coded system, fashioned after hobo codes, in his novel *The Crying of Lot 49*, utilizing the indeterminate reality of such coded structures. Even today, popular media references hobo codes and the complex imaginary of hobo subculture. In the 1960s period drama "Mad Men," the protagonist, Don Draper, reflects on a formative childhood experience with hobo code, wherein he watched a hobo mark his house for Don's father's cruel dishonesty. While the hobo code fostered a deep fear of the potential (though mostly imagined) threat that this transient subculture posed, it also fostered a deep fascination and love for the generations to come.

Infrapolitics and Graffiti:

The popular narrative around hobo codes, a fusion of different myths galvanized by media depictions, sparked the imagination of all generations after. Individuals who tried to disentangle myth from reality became quickly caught up in the story themselves. In this final section, I ask two questions about hobo codes to help elucidate the politics of the myth that comes out of this practice. The answer lies in conceptualizing graffiti as a form of infrapolitics, working through the concept as James Scott outlines. However, as I theorize, the hobo code goes beyond Scott’s infrapolitics. The mythology that grew around hobo codes and the hobo subculture became unintentionally infrapolitical, which hobos found themselves taking advantage of. In other words, while the myths were the larger society’s fears and fascinations projected on the hobo community, often with

[60] “Know What That Sign Means?” The Mansfield Advertiser, PA 1953.

violent consequences, hobos found a means to survive off them by leaning into the myths, obscuring the complex, mundane reality beneath them.[61]

The field of infrapolitics is quickly growing within the social sciences and the humanities, homing in on the subtle and often overlooked banal practices of unorganized resistance, such as graffiti. However, as stated in the introduction, many scholars are hesitant about the growth of this concept, fearing it to be too broad and over-emphasizing the intent of individuals in their everyday lives. Even further, scholars are resistant to a politics of culture (let alone a politics of graffiti), finding it more productive to look to formal political structures and actors. Even when scholars accept that informal political practices and actors can be political, they are inclined to look for acts and utterances that draw more explicitly from the language of politics, such as war propaganda in popular culture. I am not arguing against the importance of studying formal political institutions, actors, or actions in and out of cultural representations. Studying the politics of graffiti and similar cultural practices helps to draw out the more complex reality of politics. A reality in which the texture of politics is part of the politics of the unintentionally political and when ignored, prevents us from imagining other political possibilities for moving forward.

Infrapolitics gives insight into this texture, highlighting liminal spaces of political action. Notably, the politics hidden in the banal activities of marginalized subcultures even outside times of crisis—including the hobo subculture. James Scott first introduced the concept of infrapolitics in his monograph *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* as a "wide variety of low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name.”[62] He found this new concept necessary to grasp the resistance in exploited groups, from the peasantry of English Victorian society to chattel

[61]Intermixing presence and disguise align with the argument of Alberto Morieras, who theorizes infrapolitics as a Derridean deconstruction. In his own words, infrapolitics is a presence built out of non-presence.
[62] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 19.

slavery in the United States to agrarian communities of Malaysia.[63] He utilized the concept of infrapolitics to underscore and interpret political actions that fell out of the visible spectrum of traditional politics or political science. Scott argued that looking at infrapolitical and other cultural components of resistance is necessary to understand how a person's positionality forms appropriation and exploitation within a system of power. The small everyday responses to exploitation give scholars the specific conditions in which a case of appropriation and exploitation happens and how exploited communities respond. The turn of the 20th century was defined by capitalist exploitation and violence to gild the growing United States. Examining hobo code and their place in the U.S. public narrative illustrates the power of infrapolitics in the face of domination.

This illustration comes from the interrelationship between the public and the hidden transcript of the 20th century. In his books, Scott worked to outline the cultural structures and practices that uphold systems of exploitation and domination. He began with the broader actions and discourse that underpin power relations and disparities, as well as public transcripts. The public transcript comprises individuals' verbal and nonverbal performances and practices on both sides of power asymmetries in any society. In other words, the public transcript is the official relationship between dominant and subordinate groups, the official narrative of power relations. These public transcripts are dominated by ordering and controlling the movement of the impoverished.[64] The counterforce to the public transcript is the hidden transcript, the discourse, and practices that allow for everyday resistance. Hidden transcripts empower the disempowered behind the scenes, avoiding the attention of those in dominant positions. The public and hidden transcripts depend on each other,

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[63] The seeds of his theorization of infrapolitics can first be found in *Weapons of the Weak*, specifically chapter seven, where he argues that exploited and oppressed communities' resistance often goes overlooked due to the context specificity and plasticity of resistance.

[64] Lennon, *Boxcar Politics: The Hobo in U.S. Culture and Literature, 1869-1956,* 47.

as in Michel de Certeau's work, where there is an interplay between tactical and strategic practices. Scott states, "The inventiveness and originality of these fantasies lie in the artfulness with which they reverse and negate a particular domination."[65] Here lies the hidden transcript's core, the imaginative negation of the public transcript: tales, practices, and beliefs born in subcultures countering the dominant narrative and/or transcript. While individuals in the subculture cannot escape the consequences of power dynamics or the story told about these power dynamics, the hidden transcript allows them to act despite these consequences, challenging the public narratives and presenting an alternative.

The relationship hobos had with the public transcript hinted at the complicated imbrication between the public and the hidden transcript. Part of the hobo subculture developed out of the needs of the industrial economy. The United States economy was in flux after the Civil War and the growth of factory systems. The influx and resulting precarity were intensified with the 1870s depression, in which unemployment reached as high as 25% and large parts of the population experienced homelessness.[66] Hobos fulfilled the need for a mobile workforce, moving where they felt and getting employment as needed. They often moved back and forth between the East and West as they chased seasonal jobs.[67] The reality of the collective national pain and the lived experiences of hobos were glossed over in media and popular myths. The public transcript capitalized on the media's portrayal of hobos as immoral parasites in society. They blamed hobos and other transient communities for exacerbating societal collapse. In already trying times, hobos were seen as leeching off individuals and corporations by begging for food and drink or hopping an unpaid ride. Recall the news headline from earlier, "the tramp trust – a million in it. Vagabondia

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[65] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 43-44.
[66] Lennon, *Boxcar Politics: The Hobo in U.S. Culture and Literature, 1869-1956.,* 62.
[67] John Lennon, "Train, railroad workers, and illegal riders: the subcultural world of hobo graffiti," *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art,* 29.

now fully organized with departments, codes, 'camps', and secret symbols – the most versatile criminals at the head, just like other 'predatory corporations."[68] In Scott's assessment of the power of the public transcript, he specifically examines how the public stigmatizes groups that may challenge it: "Rebels or revolutionaries are labeled bandits, criminals, hooligans in a way that attempts to divert attention from their political claims."[69] The power of the public narrative led folks to shift the blame of their pain from systemic causes to individuals they found to be lazy and morally failing. However necessary hobos were for a capitalist system, this subculture was seen as a blight of the era, as opposed to hardworking factory, home-living men. Hobos' mere physical presences were stigmatized as contagious impoverishment and immorality, driving fear and distaste.[70] With increasing infamy, hobo codes embodied this, leaving traces of a threatening, often unseen other.

This public transcript held within its hidden transcript(s), giving power to the infrapolitical practice of hobo codes. As hobo codes became an engrossing myth of an insidious secret society, it also became an ephemeral statement of real hobos' existence. Phillips states that graffiti works on an external and internal level; externally, it's a personification of survival; internally, it fosters a sense of self-identity.[71] Both external and internal existence were thrust forward as newspapers and popular media mythologized a large communication structure. Laymen and authorities alike gave power to the myths spotlighting hobos in attempts to "decode" and use this symbolic communication. The myth and those seeking to find the *truth* of it obfuscated more than it clarified, fostering infrapolitics. Hobo codes are practices of resistance that do not "speak in their own name"

[68] "The Tramp Trust – A Million In It." Spokane Press, p. 16, 1910 Spokane, Washington.
[69] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance,* 50.
[70] Lennon, *Boxcar Politics: The Hobo in U.S. Culture and Literature, 1869-1956,* 44.
[71] Susan Phillips, "Following the Moniker Trail: Hobo Graffiti and the Strange Tale of Jack London, Skysail, and A-No.1"

but instead speak in a way that conceals.[72] As many tried to unravel the meaning of these coded symbols, the mystery grew with contradictory tales. Also, beyond the few infamous hobos, these coded symbols were drawn by the mass of hobos when no one watched and were therefore hidden in plain sight, as even the knowledgeable would have to search for them. Hobo codes allowed a population that was denigrated and marginalized to use both visible ephemerality and anonymity to their advantage. While unlikely to communicate important details on surviving any specific city or area, the slipperiness of the truth allowed hobos to live in liminal spaces – leaning on obscuring the meaning of the everyday.

The opaque intangibility of hobo codes undercut different authorities' attempts to appropriate hobo culture and the practice itself. For example, hobo codes propelled a second myth alongside the insidious parasite: the "lone star." Lennon describes how, as hobo culture grew in infamy, it got caught up in a hypermasculine discourse that romanticized hobos and other transient folks as "industrial cowboys."[73] Throughout history, laymen have idolized the figure of a lone man rebelling against the exploitative world that surrounded him with his own violence and vulgarity. This myth is personified through the character and actions of Jack London, who took to the tracks at the young age of 16.[74] The 'lone star' myth could take multiple forms, either as the lonely industrial cowboy seeking companionship in a Hobbesian world (Phillips, 2019) or as a hyper-masculine competition against all other travelers. Either way, this secondary myth was entangled within the first weaving public narrative with hidden narrative fostering space for infrapolitics.

[72] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance,* 19.
[73] Lennon, *Boxcar Politics: The Hobo in U.S. Culture and Literature, 1869-1956,* 38.
[74] Lennon, *Boxcar Politics: The Hobo in U.S. Culture and Literature, 1869-1956,* 64.

Resistance within the transient community took the form of traditional political discourse and actions *and/or* cultural and banal practices.[75] The visuality of the hidden transcript, the cultural or banal practices, is that of invisibility, the visual of infra-below or beyond the visual. The hidden discourse is not limited to the linguistic but becomes material in practice.[76] Infrapolitical practices like hobo codes are the embodiment of the hidden transcript. Materially accessing hidden transcripts was especially important for the exploited and marginalized, where outright resistance can have dire consequences. Scott is not arguing that exploited classes of people do not resist or that all their resistance is a hidden form of practice/action. Instead, He argues that "resistance, like domination, fights a war on two fronts. The hidden transcript is not just behind the scenes griping and grumbling; it is enacted in a host of down-to-earth, low-profile stratagems designed to minimize appropriation."[77] These small and often overlooked actions disappear into the minutiae of the everyday and can never be interpreted as having a clear intentionality. Two examples of infrapolitical practices that hobos use in the space fostered by these myths were "dragging your feet" and storytelling. A worker may be tired due to a long week or extracting as much pay for as little labor as possible. A colleague may be venting, but nonetheless, they feed the imagination of those around them about the day when the workers can usurp the power for themselves. Again, the strength of these practices lies within their slipperiness.

The first example of the infrapolitics of hobo subculture is built into their lifestyle and use of time. 'Dragging your feet at work" is commonly construed as doing the least out of laziness, so employers do not expect more from the worker for the same pay. Hobos would as soon hit the road

[75] *And/or* here is as conceived by Cynthia Weber, following a Barthesian pluralism. In this case, it would look at actions as political and cultural but also recognize the fact that cultural practices are often othered in political science discourse so some practices are political or cultural.
[76] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance,* 187.
[77] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance,* 188. My emphasis.

and abandon an employer as stay by a job that demanded too much of them. Hobos and railyard workers alike would also take advantage of killing paid time by graffitiing. There is a general satisfaction of knowing that, even though it may be in small increments, anyone can claim something of the company or bosses as their own, such as time. One railyard writer explicitly calls out how the boss does not get to have all his time, explaining how he turns to graffiti to take ownership of his own time.[78] The hobo codes and monikers transition from a means of breaking boredom at the moment when those employed in the railyards find the ability to reclaim their time from a system that told them time was not theirs.

The unintentional mythologization itself became an infrapolitical practice. Hobo codes inspired hopes of an alternative reality (and often still do). Scott references the specific storytelling technique of the folktales' tricksters. This character "makes his successful way through a treacherous environment of enemies out to defeat him – or eat him – not by his strength but his wit and cunning… Occasionally the fool and trickster figures are combined, and the guile of the underdog may consist in playing dumb or in being so clever in the use of words that his enemy is misled."[79] The witty fool conjures up images of a politically inclined puck-like character. A character that the subculture conjures to test the boundaries of the dominant group's superiority in the face of a trickster. Throughout history hobo subculture, hobo code left a trail of crumbs for folks to follow, the remainder of tricks played on society at large, gain, think of the writings and tales of Jack London or even A-No. 1. In *Hobo-Camp-Fire-Tales* A-No.1 recounts a moment when he tricks a bunch of 'innocent youngsters' (who in turn become the Mercer County bar keep, sheriff, judge, and jailer) into letting him tattoo his moniker on their hand.[80] While A-No.1's

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[78] *Style Wars*, Documentary (United States: Public Art Films, 1984).
[79] James Scott, *Domination and The Arts of Resistance,* 162.
[80] A-No. 1, "The Tramp Who Tattooed His Moniker into Officials," in *Hobo-Camp-Fires-Tales* (Pennsylvania: The A-No. 1 Publishing Co., 1911), 94–99.

penchant for telling tall tales of his adventures has prompted many to read his account warily, storytelling of this sort could be seen as fostering the imagination of the hobo subculture of tricking the system that regularly threatened them (sheriff, judge, and jailer), when seen from the perspective of Scott's concept of infrapolitics.

Hobo Codes and monikers were an essential practice of infrapolitics as a visible negation of the values that upheld the contemporaneous capitalist system. The United States was touting its strong but fledgling industrialism, pushing the slogan that every man was an opportunity. People were pulled into a growing factory system with the promise of wealth, which was held in the highest esteem. While this tale wove itself in the American psyche, maligning other lifestyles and values, hobo codes presented an alternative. They whispered of a radically individual and free existence, rejecting the hopes of wealth, ownership, and stability. While the public transcript tried to weaponize the image hobo codes presented, these symbols presented as a negation of the public transcript accepting infamy with idolized fame. The assumed messages behind the codes described how to escape the law and gain the minimum to survive. The monikers simultaneously bragged of a constant life on the move, in no need of home or possession, *and* a broad claim on public space and property. Through symbol and moniker, Hobos were claiming the space and objects around them, claiming abstract ownership of the world that broke with the mainstream value placed on private ownership.

The most potent aspect of hobo codes as a practice of infrapolitics was the infrapolitical imagination they fostered (and continue to foster). One clear example is how the "Lone Star" myth overlaps political understandings through beat culture and contemporary libertarian movements. For generations, people have clung to the idea of a subculture of free individuals that depended on an alternative concept of community, not that of a planted community but of an individualized

collective. In an article in 1990, an anonymous hobo looks upon the then fully developed culture as the way forward: "Getting America back on track is not as complicated as it would seem. What's needed is for all of us to adopt the Hobo philosophy of work hard, thrift, environmental awareness, and sharing… Sharing is an attribute of train-barnacles have always adhered to knowing life is cyclical."[81] The image beside the writing displayed a train with a caption boasting that hobos were not dependent on foreign oil or electronics. The idea of a highly individual, self-dependent United States continues to propel the political imagination of many. Even after reducing the romanticized components of this lineage, hobo codes offered a complication to the understanding of working-class politics.

In summary, hobo codes, whether a structured symbol practice or not, allowed a disenfranchised subculture to find the light of day creatively and artistically, publicizing their use of "the system" without necessarily publicizing themselves. It allowed their individualistic self-survival to become almost a game of cat-and-mouse with society and the bulls who guarded the margins (ready to pitch them off moving trains happily). The only snag in this theorization of hobo codes is the assumed and almost romanticized intentionality. Infrapolitics for Scott is "to be sure, real politics. In many respects, it is conducted in more earnest for higher stakes and against greater odds than [traditional] political life in liberal democracies."[82] As scholars continue to seek to understand why and how people engage with a shared world and help to build towards a future that gives them hope, they will find themselves increasingly looking to the margins of society and practices.

Conclusion:

[81] "Hobo Philosophy Can Save America," *Hobo Times 4*, December 1990, 1 edition.
[82] James Scott, *Domination and The Arts of Resistance,* 200.

Looking back in history, we find ourselves tied to the myths and tales we pass from generation to generation. Hobo code is one such myth and tale. The significance of it lay in the way that it highlighted the ephemeral subculture of hobos and in the way that it helped to feed the political imagination of those during the Industrial Revolution. The creation of the hobo subculture illuminates the texture of the exploitative narratives of industry. United States. In this chapter, I quickly introduce a couple of larger narratives about the hobo subculture through an amalgamation of newspapers and autobiographies. This tale was a weaving of fear and fascination with what living outside of a newly minted capitalist industrialism looked like. More importantly, I show how this tale was tinder for the political imagination of generations to come.

This political imagination is the heat of infrapolitics. Hobo codes and monikers were a collection of practices and discourses that found a way to challenge the public narrative and hide the hobo subculture in plain sight, avoiding appropriation. Alberto Moreiras, a scholar working to illuminate the infrapolitical thrust within Latin American literature, argues that infrapolitics is the future of politics. Scholars critique infrapolitics as being a blob of a concept, simultaneously consuming all in its path and distracting from necessary/critical "political" scholarship. However, as Moreiras states, infrapolitics "is not to be taken as a flight from politics, but rather as an attempt to determine, even to thematize, the conditions under which an alternative conception of the political could perhaps become manifest."[83] While infrapolitical practices transcend the standard conceptions of politics, they allow us to start to theorize an alternative political existence and practice. Hobo codes and monikers as an infrapolitical practice give us a glimpse of how hoboes and tramps lived outside the growing capitalist industrialism of the Gilded Age. Further, it showed how transient communities took advantage of the residual and liminal spaces of the turn of the 20th

[83] Alberto Moreiras, *Infrapolitics: A Handbook* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 69.

century to survive. Hobo code and monikers appeared to be an infrapolitical art underbelly to the growing socialist and communist politics that sought to combat the ever-consuming capitalist system. Hoboes, tramps, bums, and Wobblies refused to be defined by the larger economic or political narratives around hobo codes; if anything, these subcultures manipulated the imposed definitions and narratives to avoid capture.

Looking back on the hobo subculture, the infrapolitical mystery that envelops the hobo code opens space for finding politics at the margins, a politics of the obscured or whispered. The conspiratorial enigma is the unique situation of graffiti exemplified in the hobo codes of the turn of the $20^{th}$ century. However, going forward, it becomes clear that the concept of infrapolitics strains when a practice evolves to be more visible, directed, and less anonymous. As graffiti gained popularity in the United States and became an entanglement of tags (the evolution of monikers) and style writing, the practices of infrapolitics became a part of the material world around us. In the next chapter, I turn to the spatial consequences of infrapolitical practices found in the explosion of style writing during the 1970s, which some argue is quintessential graffiti. As I work through graffiti and its capacity as a space-making practice, I concurrently ask what it means to spatialize infrapolitics and what other desires may underlie it.

## Chapter Two

From Space to Place: Graffiti as a Form of Place-Making Politics

"… fleeting images, yellowish-green and metallic blue calligraphies that howl without raising their voices and emblazon on the subterranean passages of the city, "embroideries" composed of letters and numbers, perfect gestures of violence painted with a pistol, Shivas made of written characters dancing graphics whose fleeting apparitions are accompanied by the rumble of subway trains; New York graffiti."[84]

Introduction:

Early February of 2024, images of the Oceanwide Plaza—three skyscrapers, the tallest a 53-story building—embroidered with dozens of graffiti writers' names in a rainbow of colors and styles flooded Los Angeles news and social media. As the news broke, it became an unofficial call to writers far and wide; the floodgates gave as graffiti writers from all over the country came to contribute their style to this growing urban tapestry. It drew the attention of writers and laypeople and the growing scholastic community that works to account for the cultural project of graffiti. Cultural anthropologist and graffiti expert Susan Phillips stated that it was "perhaps the most legendary roll call in the history of Los Angeles."[85] Stefano Bloch, retired graffiti writer and professor of cultural geography, stated in the L.A. Times: "It's graffiti writers who find value in these spaces and enliven them…that's not to romanticize it as art or to demonize the crime. Someone was making use of this building, and it wasn't the builder or occupants."[86] These three

[84] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1984), 102.
[85] Kelsey Ables, "Inside the Graffiti-Covered L.A. Skyscrapers That Drew Global Attention," *The Washington Post*, February 8, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/art/2024/02/08/los-angeles-graffiti-building/.
[86] Summer Lin, "Two Men Arrested in Connection with Tagging Graffiti Covered L.A. Skyscraper Across the Street from Grammys," n.d., https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2024-02-02/two-men-arrested-in-connection-with-tagging-graffiti-covered-l-a-skyscraper-across-the-street-from-grammys.

monuments to American graffiti did not just revitalize questions about the use of public space in mainstream news and media; they also called attention to the United States graffiti scene, where 60 years earlier, the place-making practice of style writing started to take shape.

In the last chapter, I drew out the infrapolitical implications of graffiti, focusing on how the graffiti utilized by transient communities at the turn of the 20th century, hobo codes and monikers, fostered alternative political imaginations. As capitalist industrialism spread through the United States, some turned to a transient lifestyle, finding a freedom built on precarity and ephemerality. Survival on the road and tracks demanded that individuals be able to move in and out of public visibility as needed. Through tall tales and myths, graffiti created a smoke screen for the transient community, taking advantage of larger narratives of fear and fantasy the state and media propagated. In the late 1800s, graffiti's infrapolitics was defined by its ability to foster stories and myths of lifestyles outside the public narrative of life in the budding industrial United States. As time passed and the practice of graffiti involved, graffiti writers no longer needed graffiti to function as a smoke screen.

Graffiti entered popular mass culture in the late 1960s, finding a more central national and international spot. Some of those enthralled by graffiti, working to decipher the infamous coded secrets, turned to join the multitude of writers claiming the space for themselves. While holding the roots,[87] finding the spotlight as style writing gained traction in U.S. (and quickly global) countercultures. The emergence of graffiti was partly due to the circulation of American culture through the growth of Hollywood and the deployment of soldiers worldwide. As more and more public spaces were marked with graffiti, it became clear that graffiti is an essential form of place-

[87] Susan A. Phillips, "Following the Moniker Trail: Hobo Graffiti and the Strange Tale of Jack London, Skysail, and A-No.1," *Boom California (University of California Press)*, October 17, 2019.

making that individuals can engage in no matter their race, gender, or class. In this chapter, I formulate the material consequences of infrapolitical graffiti as a means of *infrapolitical place-making*.

The emergence of style writing in the United States and the global scene was not explosive, nor did it occur overnight. Graffiti evolved, warped, and shifted from the turn of the 20th century to the development of style writing in the 1970s. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, graffiti's popularity had peaked, defining many of the urban centers of the United States. Further, writing accumulated over time by many writers began to define U.S. urban subcultures from hip-hop to punk to skater/surfer and more. Graffiti's transformation over this century followed the rise and fall of industrialization in the U.S. from the point of view of the street. After WWII, the United States pivoted towards global markets, driving the deindustrialization of its economy.[88] To accommodate this pivot, the government pushed resources toward other industries, such as service and technology, taking resources from already marginalized and under-supported communities with little to no means to advocate for themselves. These communities experienced increased spatial alienation and precarity due to amplified globalization and deindustrialization. Populations that were in many ways erased and abandoned grasped for any means to assert their presence in public spaces, to make a place of their own

Graffiti became one way in which individuals could take back agency in the space of their everyday lives. People fostered relationships with the places they were in, finding themselves and their community in small, everyday practices that allowed them to construct their world. Given that each city was impacted differently by the shift in the economy and the communities in each

[8888] Robert Rowthorn and Ramana Ramaswamy, "Deindustrialization-Its Causes and Implications," *International Monetary Fund Economic Issues* 10 (September 1997).

city were a unique collection of people, any piece of graffiti was unique to the voice of the writer using it. Each city contributed new voices, styles of speaking, and ways of listening to the larger graffiti subculture. Specifically, three spaces stand out in this history: New York City, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles. In the 1970s and '80s, all three competed for the title of graffiti capital of the U.S. by branding their unique style writing. Graffiti became a means of place-making for individuals outside formal channels of urban development or city image-making (policy-making, advertisement, and architecture, to name a few); in other words, what I theorize as infrapolitical place-making.

Infrapolitical place-making encompasses the subtle, everyday relationships and practices through which marginalized groups and individuals assert their presence and identity *in* public spaces. In this chapter, I illustrate infrapolitical place-making through the case of style writing in graffiti that began in the early 1970s. Graffiti stands out amongst other practices ( i.e., loitering, flower bombing, eating, shopping, festivals, events, and so on) through its tactical engagement with the materiality of the space. Sabina Andron states, whether consciously or not, "…we situate the formation of meaning *between* surfaces and inscriptions in the protected yet reclaimed space of the city surface, which delimits private from public and hard from fluid."[89] The meaning of our lives, actions, and the spaces we inhabit are pressed upon us by the world's materiality. Whatever meaning the physical world gives is bolstered or challenged through the material we inscribe upon it. What it means for a yard to be "private" versus a park to be "public" is signified through different surfaces (the front gate or BBQ shelters) and inscriptions ('No Soliciting' or 'Please Reserve').

[89] Sabina Andron, *Urban Surfaces, Graffiti, and the Right to the City*, Space, Materiality, and the Normative (Oxon and New York: Routledge; GlassHouse book, 2024), 15.

Individuals in these spaces can choose to subtly redefine/refine the meaning of spaces through practices such as graffiti.

Another component of infrapolitics assessed in this chapter is how political structures and organizations respond to infrapolitics. James Scott argued that part of the strength and inventiveness of infrapolitics is due to the interplay, reversal, and negation between dominant and hidden narratives.[90] The interplay denotes a continual, agnostic dialogue between the political and the infrapolitical. As graffiti and the larger social/economic cultures transformed over the 20th century, so did public spaces' architectural and visual values. Andron notes, "The architectures of the modern 20th century come with several lessons about disciplining and valorizing surfaces… tailored to actively present ambitions of cleanliness, order, and morality."[91] We find that disciplining order is found in urban planning, and policies are developed separately and in response to the growth of graffiti. Again, infrapolitics fosters a dialectic between the larger structure and the marginalized. In this dialectic, graffiti scratches at the disciplining order, calling into question the underlying values. As graffiti consumed city surfaces across the U.S., states attempted to reinforce their order and control. However, due to graffiti's plastic nature, the state's response had to take multiple forms, none particularly successful. The state response successfully pulled the greater public into conversations about who had a claim to the city, or at least who had the right to make claims to the city.

After clarifying what place and place-making mean, I draw out how infrapolitical practices allow individuals access to place-making by informal means. During the 1970s, alternative access

[90] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 43 –44.

[91] Andron, *Urban Surfaces, Graffiti, and the Right to the City*, 29

points to place-making were essential. I present three cases that exemplify how individuals and groups in cities across the U.S. utilized graffiti to reclaim agency in the face of urban abandonment. I begin with New York City, which is often assumed to be the birth ground of style writing and hip hop. However, the development of style writing in Philadelphia and Los Angeles challenges these assumptions. They concurrently developed complex, thick cultures around style writing specific to their landscape. I illustrate that while each of the three cases is unique in their development of style writing, they are also entangled with each other and the infrapolitics of place-making. In the third section, I tease out one aspect of the entanglement: the attempted disciplining and punishing of subcultures that utilized graffiti as state and society collaborated to claim the city's image, fostering a specific urban order. The shared techniques of ordering and the anxiety-fueled responses on the part of the larger city and state that New York City, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles experienced accentuate the importance of infrapolitical place-making such as graffiti. The expanded understanding of infrapolitics recognizes the dynamic and multi-scalar process that not only shapes individual identities but also contributes to broader social and political transformations. It acknowledges the power of seemingly small, everyday actions in challenging and reshaping the spatial order of public spaces.

Infrapolitics and Place-Making

In the opening of Joe Austin's book *Taking the Train*, he lays out two anecdotes of New York City Graffiti in the 1970s and '80s. The first is about three graffiti writers, CAINE, MAD 103, and FLAME ONE, who spent the eve of the Fourth of July spray painting an awe-inspiring piece of U.S. flags on train cars that were "ten feet high and longer than two football fields."[92]

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[92] Joe Austin, *Taking the Train: How Graffiti Art Became An Urban Crisis in New York City*, Popular Cultures, Everyday Lives (New York City: Columbia University Press, 1983), 1-2.

While the writers were excited to showcase their contribution to the city celebrations, the New York City Transit Authorities pulled the train out of service the following morning as the graffiti was unauthorized and deemed illicit. Besides the transit authorities, no one ever saw the work before the three writers were arrested. The second anecdote Austin shares is a visit from 400 international hotel managers to New York City in the 1980s in which city officials whitewashed the transit these visitors rode to dinner at Window on the World. The agency that arranged the visit was trying to showcase the economic strength and 'improved' charm of New York through the refurbished train and views befit a king from the 106th floor of the World Trade Center. However, many visitors felt robbed of truly experiencing New York City, its streets, and its colorful graffiti.[93] Austin opens with these anecdotes to stress the strain between what he calls "the most important art movement of the late twentieth century" and authorities deeming graffiti as New York City's foremost "Urban Crisis."[94] Throughout the rest of *Taking the Train,* he focuses on how graffiti was defined in New York City in the late twentieth century, asking about the power of qualifying different practices as illegal. I further this discussion by flipping the question: in what ways did graffiti define New York City—as well as Philadelphia and Los Angeles—during this time? I show how, beyond starting an art movement, graffiti became a mode of place-making for urban youth in post-industrial city centers. To begin, I will define the web of concepts framing my analysis before moving on and looking at the three cases and their graffiti scenes.

Broadly considered, infrapolitics is the overlooked or misunderstood everyday practices of resistance responding to exploitation. Such practices can spark the collective imagination of politics beyond the status quo, highlighting the conditions necessary for an alternative concept of

[93]Austin, *Taking the Train*, 3-4.
[94] Austin, *Taking the Train*, 6.

political community to emerge. James Scott summarizes infrapolitics as "a politics that 'dare not speak its name,' a diagonal politics, a careful and evasive politics that avoided dangerous risks."[95] Hobo codes and monikers allowed transient communities and individuals to evade and avoid danger through the creation of a smokescreen, distracting laypeople and legal figures alike. The myths and stories of graffiti also reversed and negated the larger narratives of what life should look like in the early industrial United States—combatting the budding noble myth of the American dream. This negating smokescreen is one example of how power structures and systems of order fail to fully grasp how infrapolitics undercuts order and relations of power. Another means that infrapolitics undercuts order is creating alternative meanings for any one space and/or place. The remaking of places is partially because infrapolitics and other hidden transcripts are found in the least patrolled sites of society, allowing resistance to gain a collective force before the state is pressed to respond.[96] By the late 1970s, graffiti was synonymous with the subway system in New York City, as graffiti writers found refuge in the subway system and train yards. At first, these spaces were a 'safer' space for young people to play, as they were not as patrolled as the public streets or their homes. However, as Austin explains, it was not too long before these individuals and graffiti 're-formed' trains, subways, and railyards, fostering a whole new meaning to these spaces.[97]

Infrapolitical practices not only carve out intangible spaces for minoritized and oppressed populations, as seen in chapter one. They also allow individuals and communities to carve out tangible spaces for themselves through place-making, as seen in Austin's description. Scott argues

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[95] James C. Scott, "Infrapolitics and Mobilizations: A Response by James C. Scott," *Revue Française d'études Américaines*, Infrapolitics and Mobilizations, 131 (2012): 112–17,113.
[96] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance,* 120.
[97] Austin, *Taking the Train,* 66.

in his assessment of sites of resistance that "if we are to understand the process by which resistance is developed and codified, the analysis of the creation of these offstage social spaces becomes a vital task."[98] Scott's conception of offstage social spaces is more abstract, focusing more on the sociological aspects of space.[99] Here, I offer a more material assessment of infrapolitics, assessing how the physical sites of resistance become *defined by* the practices of resistance. I sharpen offstage social spaces by looking at localized *places* and the identity of a physical space. I conceptualize *place* as productively holding the tension between political (those by larger systems of power) and infrapolitical practices (those by individuals and communities disempowered). To assist me in conceptualizing this, I wed the spatial theory of Doreen Massey and Iris Marion Young's 'ideal city.' These scholars' fluid and multi-dimensional conception of spatial politics illuminates the force of quotidian actions and practices in allowing individuals agency in world-building. Utilizing their spatial framework to study style writing specifically explains that while original writers did not understand what they were doing, these movements came to imprint themselves on the identity of U.S. cities.

The relationship between infrapolitics and space is co-constitutive. To truly understand an infrapolitical practice, you must contextualize it in the local, and infrapolitics is a practice of place-making that comes to construct the local. Even in his earlier monograph, *Weapons of the Weak*, Scott argues that to understand resistance, one must understand the contours of the landscape (local and global), as the features of any specific landscape create both limits and opportunities for resistant behavior.[100] Due to the way that infrapolitics either goes ignored or misunderstood, the evidence of infrapolitics will not be in the archives as everyday resistance is often not recorded in

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[98] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance,* 118
[99] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance,* 134.
[100] James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 49.

the archives, and what is in the archives needs to be recognized. Instead, resistance can be found in the landscape and everyday choices, such as theft or arson or in our case graffiti, that marks it. Austin speaks to how, in New York City's graffiti history, there are no moments of apparent success *or* truly being defeated.[101] Instead, history was woven into the landscape. As the hotel manager visitors expressed, graffiti never let go of its grip on New York City. New York City and other urban centers around the U.S. became *place*s of graffiti.

Now, place is a complicated concept often reduced to a shallow, one-dimensional description of a specific spot in space. Understanding space as a singular dimension place becomes antithetical to the larger context. Places are minimized to be singular, frozen moments in the face of world history, decontextualized snapshots. While place is an essential aspect of political science, few scholars take the time to consider these spaces in themselves and how they came to be outside larger systems of power and politics. Scholars study places to the extent that politically important events or actions occur within certain spaces. That is to say that political science—social science at large—studies space as a container of events. Less commonly studied is the actual conception of *space* or *place* and how places are deeply bonded with the occurrences within them.[102] For example, Iris Marion Young explains how social scientists give any specific place meaning from "its location in the hierarchy of a network whose control and rhythm will escape from each place and, even more, from the people in each space." [103] The politics of space, as practiced so far, erases the individuals within it. These studies often take a bird's-eye view, as was offered to the hotel managers at the Windows of the World. Young critiques the trend of defining places by large global networks of power, such as New York City, as the center of global politics and economic

[101] Austin, *Taking the Train,* 167.
[102] For an extended assessment of graffiti and spatial studies, please look to Sabrina Andron's book *Urban Surfaces, graffiti and the Right to the City: Space, Materiality, and the Normative.*
[103] Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 244.

markets. Michel de Certeau labels this alienated and empowered city as the concept-city, "the creation of a *universal* and anonymous *subject* which is the city itself…"[104] Pushing against the concept-city trend, Young argues for the "ideal city," a conception of urban space that is radically inclusive and co-constituted by larger trends and local communities. Young argues that the 'ideal city' has four specific traits: (1) difference flourishes, (2) social spaces have multiuse, (3) the colors and lights are aesthetically titillating, and (4) the force of public demonstrations is embraced. Here, places are entangled in complicated local and global processes, a true materialization of the glocal. They are more than their hierarchical status; the events that occur within them or even the communities are subsumed by them. Instead, the place should be understood as a precise but inclusive concept born at the interconnection of infinite processes and connections at any specific time in space. Throughout this chapter (and the more extensive dissertation), the place is further defined and assessed through Doreen Massey's definition of space, reinforcing Young's ideal city.

Massey's reconceptualization of space has four discrete but interwoven parts. First, scholars must transition from a 2-D/3-D notion of reality to a 4-D/n-D notion.[105] Massey's second requirement is to understand that "space [is] constructed out of interrelations, as simultaneous coexistence of social interrelations and interactions at all spatial scales, from the most local level to the most global."[106] In other words, "place" or "space" do not have one identity, a nation-state does not have one identity, a city does not have one identity, or a local neighborhood has one identity. Space is socially constituted by the individuals that make up these various scales, but their social relations are also spatially constituted. One does not have to

[104] Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* 94.
[105] In my paper *Situating Space Between the Social and the Political: The Space of Judith Butler's Performativity in Context, I explore the implications of space-time for social science research, particularly theoretical or interpretive work.*
[106] Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 264.

look far for an example in the 1970s, as the subway system highlighted the constitutive relation between the social and space. Writers and style writing would not be what it is without subways, but subways have also come to be defined by style writing, and then further, what it means to ride the subways is informed by both writer, writing, and subway.

The third requirement of Massey's notion of space is that both elements of order and chaos exist in all spaces (and even using this duality/dichotomy is reductive).[107] The order enters because the spatial location of phenomena is caused and therefore explainable, as is the set of spatial phenomena that constitute a system (moving train cars from one depot to the next or any university system or even international trade networks). Elements of chaos enter when the location of two phenomena (or set of) by happenchance are next to each other. Chaos and order can be seen in Theo Kindynis's description of architectural glitches in the urban landscape, "where, as the city is continually retrofitted, renovated and reconfigured, the stacked superimposition of successive (infra)structural elements traps the intervening space… between the rigidly rectilinear places of late capitalism."[108] As Certeau's concept city continually reconstitutes and reappropriates itself in the name of order, it folds in elements of chaos, fostering a city more akin to Young's ideal city.

The last requirement of Massey's framework is that social science and humanities scholars take seriously the notion of "space-time" that physics has stumbled upon. Massey states this is particularly important to research: "spatial form can alter the future course of the very histories which have produced it."[109] Space and time are separate, self-contained systems, and any argument

[107] Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 265.
[108] Theo Kindynis, "Excavating Ghosts: Urban Exploration as Graffiti Archaeology," *Crime, Media, Culture* 15, no. 1 (2019): 24–45, https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659017730435, 27.
[109] Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 268.

that they can be understood as such is ignorant of the world's complexity. The producers of knowledge perpetuating simplistic dimensions of order make the politics of everyday practice unthinkable. However, as Scott points out the everyday practices, infrapolitics transform the world around them and the meaning of any one place:

> The *social site* may convey the wrong impression if we take it to mean only a sequestered physical location… they might also conspire to transform a site that was not intrinsically safe by actively sealing it off from surveillance… the creation of a secure site for the hidden transcript might, however, not require any physical distance from the dominant so long as linguistic codes, dialects, and gesture—opaque to the master and mistresses—were deployed.[110]

The place of the social site is a complicated collection of practices, processes, and relations. Scott, while speaking about the antebellum south, found that space was more than just left up to the systems of power on the plantation. Various enslaved individuals not only found spaces of resistance but also were able to transform spaces through ambiguous practices, i.e., codes, dialects, or meaningless symbols. Scott both recognizances the extremity and uniqueness of chattel slavery but finds the spatial agency necessary to all resistance in the face of exploitation, even in modern capitalist workplaces.[111]

In summary, Massey's expansive conception of space informed how she conceptualized specific places. Space is not a unidimensional component of our lived experience, a container in which we exist. Instead, space is space-time, the multi-dimensional concept that envelops all past, present, and future existence. Any specific place does not dissolve in the face of space; quite the

[110] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance,* 121.
[111] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance,* 112.

contrary, specific places give value and meaning to space. However, in our conception of place, it is necessary to understand the ephemeral and entangled nature of any place identity. Holding space-time at the heart of her research, Massey summarizes the concept of place as "…particular moments in such intersecting social relations, nets of which have over time been constructed, laid down, interacted with one another, decayed and renewed."[112] The identity of any one place is not subsumed under the more extensive power networks. However, it is instead the constantly shifting relationships in *and* out of these power processes, constructing and deconstructing over time. Understanding this convoluted nature of place entails what it means to place-make, which is constantly shifting. Place-making is not just an analysis of physical actions that construct a specific place (policy-making, architecture, and utilization of spaces) or an analysis of subjects/agents who utilize a place. Such an interpretation would be more in line with traditional ways of incorporating space into the study of politics. Instead, place-making is an amalgamation of subjects, practices, relationships, and overlapping engagement with the material world. While it is true that power allows for more expanded place-making capabilities, place-making also includes the minute, everyday actions of all individuals, leaving it open to be influenced by the banal.

The fact that place-making is not limited to the larger networks, institutions, or processes of power but also contingent on the small everyday practices demands more attention be paid to the local space in which infrapolitics manifests. Local is not used here in a pejorative sense where it becomes the "other" of more prominent, removed, and objective theories. Local is not to be taken as privileging face-to-face interactions or physically embodied relations. These two understandings of local need to grasp the spatial and temporal depth of the local experience and

[112] Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*,120.

how the local and global are enmeshed.[113] To focus on the local is to focus on presence and embodiment, both broadly considered.[114] When thinking through place-making, presence and embodiment form a constantly rippling texture of any analysis. This is to say that the local is the skeleton on which place-making is contingent, and the local is constantly shifting relations.

It may feel impossible to grapple with the shifting relations of any specific context *and* then to put the localized context within the larger context. Massey intensifies this sense by arguing that "…localities are not internally introspective bounded unities. They have to be constructed through sets of social relations which bind them inextricably to a wider arena, and other places."[115] A study of place-making must be grounded in the reality that the local is not *internally introspectively bounded*. When looking at the popularization of graffiti while defining the places of New York City, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles, it is not foreclosed by any of these urban centers. Place-making is an amalgamation of global-local(*glocal*) relations and trends as well as the discrete things happening locally and globally. Within each city, we find the specifics of the community, their relation to each other, and the larger advanced globalization that permeates the defining graffiti cultures. Studying place-making at the local level through everyday practices is not to overvalue it over the larger political context or constraints on any specific community. One must be aware of both sides of place-making. Scott ends his assessment of sites of resistance by pressing the reader to recognize that "…the social spaces, where the hidden transcript grows are themselves an achievement of resistance; they are won and defended in the teeth of power."[116] It

[113] The concept of *glocal* is particularly fruitful for understanding critiques of reductive conceptions of the local.
[114] Presence is how people are with each other through their physical body, the physical things they buy and exchange from others (and others' labor), the physical markings left behind, and the norms, values, or vibes that someone leaves in space. You can consider how when a loved one passes, their presence is still embodied in spaces they were a part of. Embodiment is how ideas, qualities, or feelings are tangibly part of a person and their environment.
[115] Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 142.
[116] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance,* 119.

is in the battle between power and disempowerment that resistance gains its strength. In the next section, I have focused on three different contexts of 'local' to clarify how place-making occurs in the banal, which is often aligned with practices of resistance. In the final section, I will show how place-making is as much a practice of fostering order as fostering resistance. Place-making lies in the tension between the strategic and tactical, between the public and hidden narratives.

Place-Making and Graffiti in the United States

In the opening scene of the 1983 film *Wild Style*, a large graffiti piece consumes the field of view. Bright orange and yellow paint spell out graffiti, drawing the viewer into the fiery letters nestled on an elaborate background. A fence just visible in the foreground removes the viewer from the wall. Suddenly, a rope appears as a young man scales down the wall, giving no mind to the scuff of his shoes on the face of the piece. Once he has found the ground, he quickly scales the fence, joining the viewer, though clearly on watch for an unseen threat, as the rumble of railcars builds. This scene encapsulated the graffiti culture of the late 20th century United States, a cultural scene that was the foil of the "stone gray and earth color… labyrinths of monolithic structures."[117] of the U.S. urban landscape. Graffiti is a striking illustration of infrapolitical place-making, which defined different U.S. cities during the 1970s.

While graffiti was, and continues to be a global practice, something stood out about the specific practice of graffiti in the U.S. during the late 20th century. In cities all over the United States, young folks started a cultural trend that no one could predict would envelop all cities, small and large. Looking back, the early writers say they had no conception of starting a movement; they simply engaged the place they called home, adding themselves to the visual field of the space around

[117] Austin, *Taking the Train,* 1

them.[118] As new writers increasingly adopted simple tags, they developed their own style, moving from tags to throw-ups and, ultimately, masterpieces/pieces. These three different practices of paint-based graffiti can be subsumed under the title's style writing.

While the origin of style writing is hotly debated, evidence points to its concurrent development in multiple cities across the U.S., with roots in various older practices, such as hobo monikers.[119] No matter where you start, the origin of style writing and the ensuing movement are clear, and this practice partly makes all cities touched by graffiti. Within large urban centers around the United States, graffiti became a means of place-making for the marginalized, exploited, and abandoned. In this section, I explore three key *places*—New York City, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles. I draw out what is unique about each city and its form of style writing (often why each claim to be the graffiti capital of the U.S.), showing how this practice of graffiti came to be definitional of each city and the U.S. at large. After working through each case, I quickly highlighted what they shared: an infrapolitical practice of claiming space that fostered competition and community, collectively defining the United States' urban identity.

*New York and Getting Your Name Up*

New York City is often regarded as the king city of graffiti in the United States, heralding a new era of graffiti-style writing that dovetailed into an art movement of the people. One must recall movies like *Style Wars* and *Wild Style*, which centralize NYC as a graffiti scene. Part of this may have been due to the enlarged position of New York on the global theater in both politics and economics. Stuart Hall points out that hegemonic culture comes from locations considered to hold power commercially and politically. While graffiti's development in Philadelphia and Los Angeles

[118] Gastman and Caleb Neelon, *The History of American Graffiti* (Harper Design, 2010), 17.
[119] Gastman and Neelon, *The History of American Graffiti,* 34.

counters the narrative that New York City was the capital of graffiti (especially Philadelphia), what can be said about NYC is that it brought graffiti unmatched attention through exhibits, books, movies, zines, and more.

The local public attention to graffiti began far before Hollywood took up this subculture. While people watched a steady increase in tags and throw-ups grow, it was not until the 1971 New York Times article "'Taki 183' Spawns Pen Pals" that individuals in and out of the communities gave graffiti serious contemplation. Taki 183 was a young graffiti writer from Manhattan who used the diminutive for his Greek name, Demetrius. He included the 183 as a nod to his address. He spoke of seeing other tags by the writer JULIO 204 with his friends and being inspired to put his name up. [120] However, Taki 183 was a delivery boy who started to get his name up all over the city (what was ultimately considered going all over the city). Taki 183 proclaimed a need to get his name up all over the city beyond just demarcating his territory—not for fame or money, just driven to engage with the city space.[121] This young man's actions can be considered a form of place-making as he is loudly announcing his presence and the larger presence of his historically immigrant community. However, to understand the latter aspect, readers must understand the notion behind his name and neighborhood address.

People across the United States read this article and felt either inspired to similarly insert themselves into the space around them and/or frustrated at the loss of order. Those inspired to become writers in New York City also mimicked the combination of shortened names that often hinted at the writer's address, whether through reference to a street or house number. The entanglement of writers and the place around them was evident in the entitlement to the space.

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[120] Austin, *Taking the Train,* 42.
[121] Taki 183, "'Taki 183' Spawns Pen Pals," *The New York Times*, July 21, 1971, https://www.nytimes.com/1971/07/21/archives/taki-183-spawns-pen-pals.html.

What started as an individual act became a community in discourse on the material surface around them. There were two different narratives about the consequences of this small, though quickly growing, infrapolitical practice. Those fearful of the loss of order in cities viewed graffiti writers as a contagious sickness *and* crime.[122] Even the language 'Taki 183 spawned the movement' leaves readers with the impression that the graffiti pandemic must be combatted at all costs. This contagion narrative lays the groundwork for draconian city policy (as laid out later in this chapter).

The second narrative around the growing practice of graffiti in the 1970s was one of empowered youth to participate in the public sphere with everyone else. In interviews, Taki 183 consistently stated that he did not understand what gave corporations or politicians more of a right to claim the city where he lived. He even gave these authorized urban markings as part of his inspiration, stating that "Part of the influence was all the electioneering, that they could get away with sticking things all over the place: Nixon stickers, McGovern stickers. They're putting it everywhere, so why shouldn't I?"[123] Here, Taki 183 explicitly compares politicians' strategic practices and his more tactical practice of contributing to the social space in New York City. He also expressed frustration with the inequitable responses to similar practices, "'Why do they go after the little guy? Why not the campaign organizations that put stickers all over the subways at election time?'[124] Thinking about how place-making is a process of larger political and hyper-local banal processes clarifies the deep connection to space Taki 183 expresses here. This connection to space and demand to be present in social space and public discourse rippled forward.

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[122] Elinor Light, "Aesthetic Ruptures: Viewing Graffiti as the Emplaced Vernacular," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 15, no. 2 (March 2018): 179–95, https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2018.1454970, 187.
[123] Gastman and Neelon, *The History of American Graffiti*, 56.
[124] Taki 183, "'Taki 183' Spawns Pen Pals."

As Taki 183 propelled a new generation of graffiti, the graffiti practice quickly developed. First, graffiti took the form of simple tags, possibly with a twist on the calligraphy, but the focus was on being able to repeat the simple names all over the city. Tags gave way to throw-ups where individuals could take a few minutes to complete their writing. The writer would add flare to this by utilizing multiple colors (though often limited to two); throw-ups were bigger, allowing for more flare on the lettering itself. The culmination in style writing was 'pieces' in which writers would spend multiple hours creating an intertwined landscape and lettering masterpiece—these championed size and complexity. They relied on collaboration and allyship while proclaiming a single writer's title. Starting in the early 1970s, style writing of all styles was generally relegated to train cars and subways. However, with increasing competition for space and the evolution of train car cleaning, writers started to work towards going *citywide*. "To some, the graffiti threatened to overwhelm the visual order of this shared public space—the public sphere—by exceeding the budgeted capacity of city workers to keep it 'clean.'"[125]

With the evolution of location and complexity, writers have been pushed to be increasingly creative with their specific lettering/print. Even before graffiti started to be taken up in hip-hop, writers formed crews and would compete for the title of king of a specific style. As de Certeau described New York City, graffiti howled into the city streets without raised voices, and apparitions followed subway cars. New York City's early graffiti scene is part and parcel of what Iris Marion Young described as the erotic aesthetics of the ideal city, “the bright and colored lights, the grandeur of its buildings, the juxtaposition of architecture of different times, styles, and purposes.”[126] While New York City came to dominate the public imagination of graffiti, this was

[125] Austin, *Taking the Train*, 80.
[126] Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 240.

actually due to how graffiti dominated, and continues to dominate, the public imagination of New York City. A place is a constantly moving ocean of different people, processes, relationships, and more. Folks first gather this complex ecosystem from the material makeup of any space. Toni Morrison aptly describes here New York City and how graffiti was part of what defined it, “like blazing jewels, the subway cars burst from the tunnels to the platforms shining with the recognizable artifacts of childhood: fantasy, magic, ego, energy, humor and paint.”[127] Morrison demonstrates that New York City youth were visibly etching themselves into the city surface, defining New York and what it meant to live there.

Another vital way graffiti came to define New York City was by fostering a diverse community that depended on collaboration. No matter who someone was, where they came from, or the color of their skin, youth across NYC could reinvent themselves as they wanted. In their interview with writers from the 1980s, Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant were told, "A youngster starting out finds a new community, focused on the subway, which brings kids from all over the city. He gets a name and a new identity in a group which has its own values and rules."[128] Again, cities across the United States were in a crisis as state governments pivoted their attention and resources elsewhere due to economic and social demands. This meant inner city populations were being increasingly forced into concentrated housing projects. Graffiti combatted this and helped to define New York City and its children not as those abandoned but as a community of diverse folks who would be resilient. “Whether conscious or not, the writers’ act of self-naming is a spiritual practice, an act of self-affirmation that allows writers to express facets of their personalities unrecognized

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[127] Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby*, Reprint Edition (New York: Vintage, 2004), 215.
[128] Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, *Subway Graffiti* (New York: Owl Books; Henry Holt and Company LLC, 1984), 23.

in everyday life."[129] Ivor Miller saw in the pictures of pieces from all over New York City that a community otherwise marginalized and denigrated in political and social discourses regained some agency in creating themselves and the world they shared with others. However, as it was through infrapolitical means, it continued to go unrecognized by the larger political systems and processes.

When faced with the various hardships of urban life in the 1970s, graffiti offered a place for young people to reinvent themselves and find a community around a beloved practice. Cooper and Chalfant found that graffiti allowed diversity to flourish, "Writers come from all ethnic and economic backgrounds; they may have grown up in South Bronx or East New York, in Soho or Park Avenue."[130] So, while cities across the United States struggled in this era of deindustrialization, graffiti helped New York City nurture diversity and comradery at the margins of its city streets, reflected in the identity of New York City today. In *Spider-Man Into the Spider-Verse,* Miles Morales loves his city. His love for the city is apparent in his role as Spiderman and his favorite pastime, graffiti. As Miles leaves a trail of stickers, tags, and pieces, the audience is left with a New York City in which the voice of youth is embroidered across its surface.[131]

*Philadelphia and Social Groups*

The second case at hand, Philadelphia, has as deep and rich a history around style writing as New York City and, as many claim, may have the "first" graffiti writer. While this history is generally known and recognized by graffiti writers and scholars alike, Philadelphia continues to be overlooked as one of the defining cities of the 1970s graffiti movement.[132] Therefore, graffiti

[129] Ivor L. Miller, *Aerosol Kingdom: Subway Painters of New York City* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 63.
[130] Cooper and Chalfant, *Subway Graffiti*, 41.
[131] I also have to shout out the moment in which the irony of Mile's ignored graffiti is compared with a spatial glitched street light that passersby credit Bansky with creating.
[132] Gastman and Neelon, *The History of American Graffiti*, 56.

is also overlooked in how it informs the identity of Philadelphia and its residents. In his study of Philadelphia's graffiti subculture, Tyson Mitman explains how graffiti "makes one feel connected to a community of writers and allows one to believe that, for a moment, they shrugged at the chains of urban structural oppression."[133] He continues to show the reader how graffiti allowed young folks to build alternative communities in a city defined by violence and inequality. He also poses an alternative claim to Philadelphia as the seed of the style writing movement. Even if, for a moment, graffiti writers could gain the sense that they were a visible part of the community and that they had as much authority to take up space as the larger processes that informed their daily lives.

The writer who prompted this practice in Philadelphia was Darryl McCray, better known as Cornbread. He started tagging in the early 1960s while in a youth center, usurping the tactics of gangs and a nickname he had been given. He asserted that it was not about destroying property but instead about the release the practice of graffiti gave him. This reflects Mitman's argument that graffiti was a practice that allowed youth to pull the chains of urban inequality that hung over them. As Cornbread left the youth center and returned home, he utilized his growing fame to attract the attention of a girl he liked at his high school. This fame and utility outpaced even Cornbread's highest hopes, as he is still declared the forefather of style writing. Cornbread and tagging gained quick infamy at the behest of an early news article from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, ironically the same year as the article on Taki 183 from the *New York Times*. Inspiring other graffiti writers in Philadelphia, other writers worked to get their name up around the city with a style flare unique to them.

[133] Tyson John Mitman, "Rebels, Artists, and the Reimagined City: An Ethnographic Examination of Graffiti Culture in Philadelphia" (Doctor of Philosophy, Drexel University, 2015).

Even given the similar start of style writing between Philadelphia and New York City, there were two significant differences between the two developments. First, as an alternative to New York City writers creating new names out of address, Philadelphia's writers utilized names based on given traits or nicknames. For example, Cornbread, who gained the nickname from a chef at the youth center, and Kool Klepto Kid, who came from West Philadelphia.[134] A secondary component of tag culture in Philadelphia focused on getting social groups' names up over personal tags (expanded below).

The second large difference in context between New York City's graffiti scene and Philadelphia was that the physical style of writing letters took on a very different look. Philly style took two forms. First, the 'tall hand' is defined by letters as tall as the physical environment would allow it. The graffiti would consume the whole visual field of walls, centering the different writers. The second style was a far more complex system of sharp corners and blended letters called wickeds or wickets. This writing could have been more impenetrable to the untrained writer and incomprehensible to laypeople.[135] When asked about it, writers would simply argue that the writing was for those initiated:

> In the simplest terms, wickets are like a local accent. You can study them, and you can even learn how to do them, but without living in the city of Philadelphia and starting from scratch, most likely, you'll never be able to duplicate one, and a local will be able to spot a fake or forced wicked from a mile away.[136]

Here, graffiti defines Philadelphia and the greater community by creating a physical symbol of participation. While graffiti in New York City was a practice that defined it for the world at large,

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[134] Mitman, "Rebels, Artists, and the Reimagined City," 11.
[135] Gregory J. Sydern, *Graffiti Lives: Beyond the Tag in New York's Urban Underground*, Alternative Criminology Series (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009),*105.*
[136] Nise and Liquid, "Philadelphia's Encrypted Script," *The Infamous*, 2014, 86.

graffiti in Philadelphia was more internally focused on its defining characteristics. This is not to argue that Philadelphia was isolated in its graffiti writing. Quite the opposite, New York City and Philadelphia writers would travel to the opposite city, trying to overlay their style into the new city and gain inspiration to transform their writing back home.

Philadelphia's writing style became a complex entanglement of discrete lettering history that became increasingly refined through structured 'social groups.' An ample inspiration for the graffiti subculture in Philadelphia was rooted in gang culture but was quite distinct. As individual young men and women appropriated tagging as a means of claiming the space around them, small social clubs were being formed as an alternative to gangs. These collectives became known as social groups and were roughly modeled of fraternities. They provided spaces for youth to get together creatively and invest in cultivating individual and collective identities away from both the violence in their neighborhoods or brought on by police. As these clubs grew in popularity, they started to pull graffiti artists into their communities, which became safer places for writers to find comradery in their writing practice.[137] While many bemoaned the expansion of graffiti in Philadelphia, parents often supported social groups (formally or informally) as they offered their children an alternative to joining gangs. While some of these social clubs faded over time, many stayed together or shifted to the writing crews of today.[138] What developed out of a spatial and social need became an important component of the community and continued to define the city in ways that the original graffiti writers could not have predicted.

Whether due to responding to structured gangs or the fraternity origins, social clubs were highly structured and increasingly challenging to join into the 1980s and later. This was opposed to the more loosely held together New York City crews focusing more on the individual writers.

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[137] Gastman and Neelon, *The History of American Graffiti*, 50.
[138] Mitman, “Rebels, Artists, and the Reimagined City,” 14.

Philadelphia writers were expected to not only express a deep understanding of the history (including wickets and tall hands) and rules of style writing (for example, you never wrote over another's throw-up/piece, and while you could gain inspiration from others' work you were never to steal their personalized style), but writers also had to show they had mastered all general style writing *and* foster a unique style for themselves. The social clubs created a cultural capital that was unique to Philadelphia and allowed writers to distinguish themselves as such. One such social group was 'Delta Phi Soul,' of which the most famous member was Cornbread. As these clubs became homes to writers, the city's tags were transformed, becoming ephemeral trails of the communities that called Philadelphia home.

Granted the increasingly guarded boundaries of these social clubs, they did share one crucial quality with New York City graffiti crews: radical diversity. Writers celebrated the graffiti social club's ability to create a shared space for folks across the city, particularly across racial lines. It did not matter where someone came from. As long as they had the skills and could express themselves, they understood the rules of the graffiti community, and clubs were available. Graffiti specifically was able to help Philadelphia become a place where individuals from opposite sides of the city found common ground to meet. CORNBREAD recalls that as the social clubs grew, "All the writers started coming out of the cracks in the walls, and we banded together…we got bigger and bigger and had members all around the city."[139] Graffiti allowed individuals whom larger economic processes had cast aside to recreate part of the Philadelphia collective identity and form a community from an aesthetic expression for others to see.

Ultimately, graffiti came to define Philadelphia in an unshakable way. While writers had formed social groups around comradery and avoidance of conflict, rivalry abounded, coming to

[139] Gastman and Neelon, *The History of American Graffiti*, 51.

leave the streaks from ephemeral sparks. Cornbread's attempt to reclaim the king of Philadelphia style title was one of the most infamous of these. He climbed into a zoo and ended up graffitiing the side of an elephant before getting arrested.[140] The second way Philadelphia was defined by graffiti was by giving young men and women access to the artistic world (whether advertisement, hip-hop, museums, or murals). This came to be championed through various mural projects, non-profits, and collectives.

*Los Angeles and Placas*

The last case of the three cities observed in this chapter is Los Angeles, whose style writing culture was the most distinct of the three. L.A. was distinct partially due to Los Angeles' spatial separation from the other cities and the subcultures being more alienated from each other. Another Los Angeles scene that may have differed is the fact the networks of power and deindustrialization had different influences on Los Angeles and its communities. Lastly, Los Angeles also has an incredibly long history of graffiti in the written sense.[141] This history informed the specific lettering that formed in the Los Angeles scene. While Taki 183 and CORNBREAD spoke of immediate influences, their Los Angeles contemporary, Chaz Boroquesz, "remembered his father talking about the shoeshine boys and their writing near downtown."[142] This left Los Angeles with a distinct graffiti subculture, furthering place-making practices that had existed for nearly a century.

Another unique aspect of Los Angeles graffiti was its deeper cleavages between different writing subcultures *within* Los Angeles. The writing of the 1970s reflected the racial and class divisions by using different styles and content. Graffiti writing on the west side of Los Angeles is

[140] *Sly Artistic City*, Documentary (Youtube, 2012), https://youtu.be/xIVuaS08C3c?si=0KpjXRki29p6I4-k.
[141] Susan Phillips's *The City Beneath: A Century of Los Angeles Graffiti* is the best source for a broad and deep history of Los Angeles graffiti.
[142] Susan A. Phillips, *The City Beneath: A Century of Los Angeles Graffiti*, Illustrated Edition (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019), 44.

more engaged with the larger national style writing culture due to the privilege of increased access to media (through television, traveling, magazines, and such).[143] While West Los Angeles graffiti was unique, coming from surfing and punk subcultures, the increased contact with New York City and Philadelphia graffiti meant that you could find hints of the influence. These hints shaped a complicated place-making practice in East Los Angeles made up of both anti-establishment rhetoric and styles that took inspiration from more prominent trends.

On the other hand, East Los Angeles engaged much less with the larger national style writing, developing a unique lettering rooted in *placa* culture. The low engagement with the larger style writing was partially due to the isolation of east Los Angeles as companies, organizations (especially unions), and community collectives refused racial integration.[144] Gastman and Neelon note that "as doors of mainstream American organizations closed in the faces of these immigrant populations, immigrants created their own informal neighborhood organization—early versions of gangs."[145] These neighborhood organizations were the home of *placa* culture. *Placa* is partially the unwavering membership and loyalty to specific organizations and/or gangs. While riddled with excessive violence, these organizations were important for vulnerable immigrant communities, providing some protection against political and economic exploitation. The meaning of *placa* within the graffiti subculture expanded to express loyalty to a writer's neighborhood (Lincoln Heights, Boyle Heights, East Los Angeles), where the community was grounded (as compared to the broader, diverse community of graffiti groups in Philadelphia and New York City).

Even with the expanded conception of *placa,* graffiti writers borrowed the graffiti style called "gang writing," which was heavily influenced by the Old English calligraphy of the catholic

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[143] Steve Grody, *Graffiti LA.: Street Styles and Art* (New York: Harry n Abrams, Inc., 2006), 21.
[144] Phillips, *The City Beneath*, 108.
[145] Gastman and Neelon, *The History of American Graffiti*, 208.

church. As this graffiti developed separately from its gang origins, it also developed sharper line work with large black trapezoidal letters with several beats per letter. When interacting with graffiti writers from New York City and Philadelphia, East Los Angeles writers explicitly worked to maintain the distinctions between West Coast and East Coast styles. Graffiti had become an essential part of the Los Angeles identity, and writers were resistant to the more extensive place-making processes, whether larger processes of power or grassroots.

One of L.A.'s original graffiti writers, Chaz Bojórquez, whose work was also gaining recognition at the end of the 1960s/early 1970s, spoke to the resistance and refusal to let me go of the place-making practices that generations had built over time in two interconnected but different ways. The first way Chaz spoke to place-making practices was how he found community identity and history through graffiti, "I feel that in my work, I only continued the tradition of my predecessors. I only add intent and purpose."[146] Here, Chaz expresses how L.A. graffiti communities—resonating with the expected historical knowledge of Philadelphia social groups—held a productive tension between tradition and innovation, always maintaining and connection and reverence for the cultural influences of the style writings predecessors. The second way Chaz spoke about place-making was by articulating the relationship between individual and community identity. Chaz recalls that as a young graffiti writer, "I was Mexican American, and East L.A. gangster graffiti was a language that spoke to me…I could use graff to broadcast in my own cultural language."[147] Note the complicated entanglement between place's identity and self, and, in turn, the agency of place-making to further develop self and speak to the community. In a different interview, Chaz tells Susan Phillips that when talking about graffiti, he spoke "of the

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[146] Gastman and Neelon, *The History of American Graffiti,* 208.
[147] Gastman and Neelon, *The History of American Graffiti,* 209.

social identity and also the condition of who we are and where we live and to how many deep, and it's about youth and identity."[148] While Taki 183 and other New York City writers compared their place-making roles with those of politicians, Chaz seems to be drawing a contrast between the place-making roles of graffiti writers and the larger political processes.

The last thing to draw out about the case of Los Angeles is the way in which graffiti writers took advantage of abandoned and disused spaces. In other words, graffiti writers utilized the surface of the material world around them and took up residence within the structures themselves. Within Philadelphia, the focus was on social clubs and the communities that developed out of those spaces, and within New York City, the focus was on the train yards and subway systems, the city's veins. Both cities defined the physical spaces in the proclamation of community and competition for fame. Los Angeles was no stranger to a public competition of graffiti writers—the infamous battle between HEX and SLICK being a prime example.[149] However, shared spaces out of the public eye allowed Los Angeles graffiti to grow, even combating some of the racial/class tension that persisted in the graffiti subculture. For example, the Radio Club Radiotron was a filming site for the movie *Breakin'*. The movie producers hired graffiti writers to produce film backgrounds who became acquainted with the possibilities of the space.[150] As Radiotron was ultimately abandoned after filming, writers across Los Angeles found it a safe place to share the love of style writing, becoming a mecca. This is reminiscent of how graffiti writers have taken advantage of the Oceanwide Plaza as a common ground to share and compare with each other. Sadly, as is likely the future of the Oceanwide Plaza, Radiotron was ultimately demolished, taking

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[148] Phillips, *The City Beneath*,180.
[149] *HEX VS. SLICK: LEVITZ!*, 1990, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vjgwWvnfhU.
[150] Gastman and Neelon, *The History of American Graffiti*, 212.

a home from writers and pushing them back into their originally *de facto* segregated neighborhoods, leading to injury and loss of life for several writers.[151]

While the graffiti of Los Angeles rarely comes into conversation with the birth of style writing, it was another site of graffiti's place-making capacities. One just has to walk down the streets of Los Angeles and come across a rich history blended into ever-evolving practices, connecting the viewer with the different eras of Los Angeles's history. This is true for all three of our cases. While graffiti is ephemeral, it is bright. It brings light to those living in the urban spaces and etches it into the surface. While those etches are covered, whitewashed, or simply faded, their ghost remains. As Chaz reminds viewers, "graffiti in general 'is about fighting for your space. It's about going out there and fighting for yourself.'"[152]

*The Global*

While each of the three cases shows the local place-making capacities of graffiti, all three (and the other cases not covered) exemplify how a small banal practice can have global place-making implications. What is clear when pivoting to the global scale is how infrapolitical and political are both in tension and fuel each other. I will draw this out very quickly in two ways: Military and Media imperialism. These two formal and informal power processes were washed across the globe at the same time as the rise of style writing in the United States, which deeply informed international graffiti practices. I am not arguing that the globalization of style writing undercuts the infrapolitical aspects of graffiti. Instead, I am merely drawing out how, as Scott reminds us, "dissident subculture invests the weak points in a chain of socialization."[153] Place-

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[151] Gastman and Neelon, *The History of American Graffiti*, 214.
[152] Phillips, *The City Beneath*,182.
[153] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance,* 123.

making is a constantly shifting mass of power and empowered individuals, practices, and processes. To truly understand the consequences of infrapolitical practices, it is necessary to take the larger view.

First, in the fallout of World War II, the subsequent Cold War, and the United States' increasing need to defend assets around the world, the United States quickly expanded the number of bases on all continents. As United States imperialism is dependent on exploiting poor black and brown bodies, there was the fact that urban youth were being deployed all around the world. Several of these young soldiers took their distinct style of graffiti and gave inspired style writing and graffiti around the world, a couple of examples being the Berlin Wall and T-Walls.[154] This allowed different communities all over the world to witness style writing in person, encouraging the expansion of this specific form of graffiti. It is also important to note that young graffiti writers would have been able to interact with local graffiti practices, allowing for the simultaneous development of the United States style writing.

Second, the aesthetic evolution of graffiti over the 1970s mirrored an evolution in media and popular culture, which was not lost on the media producers. Movies such as *Wild Style* and *Style Wars* drew in fascinated youth around the world, no matter where they lived. The popularization of subcultures like surfing/skating and hip-hop also drew more attention to graffiti, for better or worse. The collective whirlwind that made up graffiti's popularization during the latter part of the 20th century exemplified what Iris Marion Young described in the increasing linking of different cultures: "The richness, creativity, diversity, and potential of a society expand with

[154] A Colleague of mine shared several photos of graffiti that has shown up on a military basis, particularly in the Middle East, using the style of writing born in the 1970s: https://amymuse.me/2009/11/15/t-wall-barrier-art-in-kuwait/.

growth in the scope and means of its media, linking persons across time and distance."[155] The United States' 'richness, creativity, diversity, and potential' came to define graffiti and its future globally. The expansion of graffiti did involve explicit conversations of the politics of graffiti and urban spaces. Many individuals who encountered United States graffiti also encountered zines and videos overtly discussing the cultural politics of writing.[156] The United States graffiti subculture did not just evolve a particular aspect of graffiti but instead furthered the conversation of the deep imbrication of the global and local.

Power Reclaiming Place-Making

Ultimately, in each of these places, graffiti and graffiti writers have a fraught relationship with the larger cities. While many, this dissertation included, consider graffiti an essential form of spatial engagement, place-making, and agnostic deliberation, others view graffiti as a form of simple vandalism and disrespect committed by miscreants and criminals. Further, graffiti is often considered more than an eye sore; it is an existential threat to order projected in cities across the United States. As Massey points out, in the increasingly *recognized* globalized world, the city was "– a 'place' which is by nature its very nature open and in flux – has produced in many a feeling of fear; fear of disorder, the uncontrollable complexity, the chaos."[157] Graffiti came to embody the disorder, uncontrolled complexity, and chaos synonymous with physical and moral degradation for many. Laymen, news, and particularly politicians fed into this fear, proclaiming that graffiti was not only symptomatic of violence but was one of the first signs of more to come. Even artists and others who idolize thoroughly removed from the lived experience of graffiti writing perpetuated such viewpoints by describing graffiti as mere desecration. Recall the title of "Taki

[155] Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 233.
[156] Austin, *Taking the Train*, 228.
[157] Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 171.

183 Spawns Pen Pals" or one artist's description of graffiti as "a physical invasion of proper or public space… claiming territories by marking out physical borderlines that violate the law, marking by marring in a spectacularly visible acts of desecrations."[158] While the latter collection would claim that the invasion was a productive force to witness and the former would claim that the invasion was simply a violent overthrow, graffiti is seen to counter formal or structural place-making practices.

Part of what makes clear graffiti's role as a mode of infrapolitical place-making is the state and city responses muddled responses, which the three cases above shared. In this last section, I will examine how graffiti came to be viewed as an urban plague and the prescription championed by all city governments. An early 2000s ASU guide to graffiti roughly estimated that over $12 billion a year was spent to combat graffiti throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, charging writers alone for this large consumption of public funds.[159] The money spent to respond to graffiti was utilized in 1 of 3 strategies: punishment, discipline, or appropriation. As no one strategy was successful against what some would describe as the guerilla tactics of graffiti writers, cities had utilized a multi-prong response. These responses were all in the name of order, the central logic behind cities' work to place-make. As Andron shows in her book on surface semiotics, "A clean and orderly environment was taken to signify a well-controlled space in terms of both ownership of property and ownership of appearances."[160] Emphasizing property ownership and/or appearance, Andron encourages us to think about who has rights to the city and recall Taki 183's comparison of his actions to those of political posters.

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[158] G Andrea Lorri, "'Graffiti Taught Me Everything I Know About Space': Urban Fronts and Border," *Antipode* 31, no. 1 (2000): 110–16, 114.
[159] Deborah Lamm Weisel, "The Probelm of Graffiti" (ASU Center for Problem-Oriented Policing, 2002), https://popcenter.asu.edu/content/graffiti-0.
[160] Andron, *Urban Surfaces, Graffiti, and the Right to the City*, 77.

The first line of defense against graffiti was the most basic, simple punishment, the most clearly shared between the three cases. This first occurred through general threats, as graffiti was not a violation of law but of the Transportation Authority's rules and regulations. Cities tried to intercede by leveling monetary fees against writers who were caught. However, as graffiti continued to gain popularity and the evolution outpaced transportation authorities' response, laws and legislation were changed to criminalize writing and their writers. Writers could not be persecuted, jailed, and punished in proportion to the threat level the city deemed the writer (the more prolific, the more dangerous). Many U.S. cities also started to share "Zero Tolerance" policies in which they increased the policing of specific, incredibly racialized zones to proactively crack down on graffiti writers. The legal arm of zero policing is clear as most writers aged out of writing for fear of jail or mandatory military service.[161] Punishment culminated in urban centers becoming militarized zones portioned with barbwire and dog paroles, taking on an image of order that would have been more likely associated with East Germany of the 1980s.

The second response to graffiti writers throughout the 1970s-1990s was that of discipline. In contrast to the sharper and more apparent punishment, discipline strategies depended on shifting writers' general attitude and stance on an intrapersonal level. A space of overlap between punishment and discipline was when writers were sentenced to graffiti clean-up crews. After interviewing graffiti writers through New York City who had gone through this process, Norman Mailer described the internal conflict as proportional to the pain of "condemning Cézanne to wipe out the works of Van Gogh."[162] A more traditional example of punishment, away from explicit punishment, would be George Kelling and James Wilson's Broken Window theory, in which they

[161] Tyson John Mitman, *The Art of Defiance: Graffiti, Politics, and the Reimagined City in Philadelphia* (Intellect, 2018), 16.
[162] Norman Mailer and Jon Naar, *The Faith of Graffiti* (New York: It Books, 2009),11.

argued that graffiti was an early sign of community abandonment and degradation, inviting more severe forms of violence and crime. They encouraged cities to take on informal policing, where the mere increase of police foot traffic (not vehicle!) would help to give neighborhoods a sense of order and start to discipline the would-be graffiti writers. This is also reflected in Jane Jacob's 'Eyes on the City/Street' community structure, which encourages fellow community members to police each other's actions.

Beyond community morale and value construction, disciplining also included 1. technological improvement to create what Andron names "unfriendly surfaces" and advance removal processes (highly pressurized, corrosive chemical washes); and 2. Increased regulation of materials that could be utilized for graffiti (including but not limited to spray paint materials, permanent markers, and shoe polish). Academia and academics also played their role in disciplining graffiti and graffiti writers during this era by researching the motivation and drive of graffiti writers, who often offered reductive conceptions of incentive.[163]

Closely tied to the strategy of discipline was that of appropriation, the last primary strategy against graffiti writing. As Andron argues, the punishment and disciplining of graffiti opened the way for appropriation as these two methods "shaped graffiti into an offensive, unattractive and undesirable type and have given way for its seductive counterpart, street art, to be identified and managed separately as a welcome contributor to the creative economies of cities."[164] Cities started adopting the attitude of 'if you can't beat them, join them,' finding this the most effective means of combating graffiti writing. Part of this was because murals would overdetermine city streets and

[163] Reducing the graffiti writers to deviance and basic incentives began with one of the first serious engagements of graffiti by Harvey Lomas and Gerson Weltman.
[164] Andron, *Urban Surfaces, Graffiti, and the Right to the City*, 79.

deactivate more grassroots engagement.[165] The economic opportunity of this strategy also drove the appropriation framework. Jane Golden, the head of the Philadelphia Murals Program, spoke about her experience getting graffiti artists involved in muralism instead of graffiti writing. While generally good intentions, she grounded her reasoning in an extractive framework. Working with graffiti artists and writers, she developed an appreciation of the structure and complex culture of Philadelphia social groups. With this information, she was excited to "permeate the graffiti world and mine the talent."[166] Golden was not alone here and more reasonably tried to support graffiti writers in joining a high art community. More nationality has led to an explosion of muralism that has often been defined by hyper-aestheticized and de-politicized singular artists' work. A simple walk down the street of any major city presses this: New York City, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Denver, Sacramento, Chicago, and many more.

Collectively, cities' responses were a means of fostering a specific type of order in the cities. While part of the logic was due to the larger sense of fear, something cities themselves helped breed; it also had more instrumental purposes. Place-making was a struggle of power relations and competing claims of public space. As both Massey and Hall point out, the identity of a place was highly political and, therefore, highly controlled. In his discussion of global v. local cultures, Hall explicitly argues that national culture became increasingly important and publicized, dependent on a "nation's position as a leading commercial world power."[167] As graffiti was developing as a form of infrapolitical place-making for marginalized and minoritized populations, the U.S. globally was trying to maintain its hegemonic hold on culture, demanding a well-ordered

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[165] Julia Tulke *at a public talk about urban surfaces, graffiti, and the rights to the city*.
[166] *Sly Artistic City*.
[167] Stuart Hall, "The Local and The Global: Globalization and Ethnicity," in *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, Third Printing (Minneapolis MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 1.

appearance. Andron also makes a similar argument in her book *Urban Surfaces, Graffiit and Rights to the City,* "Marketing cities efficiently becomes an imperative in globalized culture of urban rankings."[168] Rather than stopping at concerns of culture, Andron illustrates that an ordered and marketable city culture had concerning consequences for public democratic discourse. We are left with a multi-prong and scaled strategy of order dependent on the need to market a city to a globalized audience. At first, this may appear concerning, particularly for those of us who find graffiti writing a necessary practice in the social space and graffiti itself to be as much a part of urban centers as political posters and advertisements. Even when order is weaponized and almost omnipresent, history has shown that hope is not lost, and graffiti is just as omnipresent in this struggle.

Stuart Hall describes when talking about hegemonic culture and representation, stating, "[Global mass culture] is a homogenizing form of cultural representation, enormously absorptive of things, as it were, but the homogenization is never absolutely complete, and it does not work for completeness."[169] While place-making is a process of power, those with the larger, limiting, and constricting power never fully control how a place is constituted. Even the most homogenized cities, determined by a dominating order, are influenced by small, everyday practices. The impact of the banal is particularly clear when we remember that, like individuals' identities, cities have a fixed identity and are constantly in flux. Place-making is a forever-occurring process; places always become a space of tension between disciplining/order and resistance. The study of graffiti's role in the United States during the 1970s is centered around this concept of place, spaces ever becoming through a dynamic interplay and connection of different individuals, norms, and

[168] Andron, *Urban Surfaces, Graffiti, and the Right to the City*, 103.
[169] Hall, "Culture, Globalization, and the World-System," 6.

networks. While any specific place has imposed limits due to relations of power, it is crucial to understand that place-making is never fully ordered. A myriad of everyday practices, particularly infrapolitical practices, embroider the places we are in. It is up to us to cultivate our ability to witness these embroideries and the messages they shout, even if that is a simple message of membership.

# Chapter Three

From solitary to solidarity: Residual Infrapolitical Refusal[170]

Introduction:

The cover of National Geographic's special edition *2020 in Pictures* exemplified the pain, fear, and danger that came to define 2020. The statue of General E. Lee looms large and foreboding not for its emblematic violence but because it became a stage for the silent monologue of a George Floyd Projection. The base of the monument was wrapped in a blanket of graffitied phrases, from "ACAB" to "$20 A Reason to Kill" to "BLM" and everything in between.[171] While COVID-19 and hyper-isolation defined the early 2020s, many other pains and traumas stand out beyond the pandemic. The nation witnessed the breakdown of international alliances, continued sanctioning of police violence against black and brown bodies, and a U.S. presidential election signifying the shift in political values towards violence and disconcerting claims of fact and truth. The public responded to these ills with an amalgamation of diverse, interweaving political actions of refusal and resistance, from traditional actions (marches, protests, voting) to less traditional actions (K-pop fans trolling former President Donald Trump, "The 1619 project" highlighting the role of race in the United States' national narrative, graffiti, and more). As seen in the previous chapters, graffiti specifically is a ubiquitous and multifaceted practice that often slams into politics as a harbinger of societal distress.

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[170] Kris Graves, *George Floyd Projection*, January 2021, Photography, 6 7/8" x 10", January 2021, National Geographic Special Edition 2020 in Photos.

[171]ACAB = All Cops are Bastards; $20 A Reason to Kill is about the fact that the lethal interaction between George Floyd and the Minneapolis police started over a counterfeit $20, and BLM is about the greater message "Black Lives Matter" of which Floyd's death has become yet another symbol for what is at stake in the calls by this movement.

Graffiti is a practice that has been introduced within the United States and has been familiar to academic discussions. What is new to this discussion is the increasing recognition of graffiti's centrality to political discourse, which demands more serious engagement by scholars of politics. I have responded to this demand by presenting a genealogy of different moments of graffiti and its political effects. In chapter one, I investigated the politics of graffiti as an infrapolitical practice focusing on the use of graffiti by hobos and other transient communities during the turn of the 20th century. In this context, graffiti was a mechanism of myth-making that created a smoke screen for a precarious community. While drawing the attention of the larger population, graffiti helped shroud the reality of hobo existence, an existence that challenged the narrative of the budding capitalist industry of the U.S. In the second chapter, I jumped forward to the late-mid 20th century when graffiti quickly grew in the larger discourse with the explosion of style writing. I dug into the materiality of graffiti in major urban centers around the United States that were often abandoned in the face of globalization and de-industrialization. Style writing emphasized the material consequences of infrapolitical practices in place-making starting as early as the 1960s and continuing until today. In this final chapter, I offer an alternative theorization of infrapolitics, that of refusal, as glimpsed in the 2020 BLM protests.

Kris Graves' photograph project, *Privileged Mediocrity*, exemplifies the multifaceted characteristics of graffiti. Part of what Graves traces is the residue of resistance that is part and parcel of infrapolitical practices. However, he also traces the residue of refusal. Focusing on refusal rather than resistance allows a nuanced understanding of the different ways infrapolitics function in contemporary movements. Graves' images capture multiple instantiations of graffiti from the summer of 2020 and the greater context in and out of the political protest. Within these images, graffiti is not just a tool of infrapolitical resistance, as described in previous chapters, but

simultaneously a tool of infrapolitical refusal that refuses the naturalization of latent racism in the United States historical narrative and public space. I am not arguing that the protests of 2020 did not enact resistance or that the graffiti itself did not express resistance. I argue that the graffiti in these images transcends mere infrapolitical resistance. It serves the critical function of infrapolitical refusal, actively refusing the naturalized power and order. This function hinges on a secondary refusal: the refusal to fade away and be forgotten.

In the following chapter, I thicken James Scott's concept of infrapolitics to encapsulate refusal. The analysis is centered on several photos from the project *Privileged Mediocrity* by Kris Graves,[172] In which he captured the political potency of graffiti in the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests. In the first section, I thoroughly work through the different sections of Graves's project to lay the context of my theorization of refusal. Refusal is not civil disobedience or resistance but is in productive tension with these concepts and an essential part of political uprising. It allows for understanding how a solitary desire for change comes to be externalized, helping to connect the solitary to solidarity. In the second section, I show how graffiti, specifically in Kris Graves' project, exemplifies infrapolitical refusal and its role in political movements. In the final section, I use Walter Benjamin's theories of cultural-political transformation to hone the image of graffiti as a tool of infrapolitical refusal, which is especially critical in refusing a naturalized historical narrative. Graves' depiction of graffiti illustrates how infrapolitical refusal is found in everyday practices and spaces. In this instance, graffiti is a potent tool of epistemic refusal, forming the connective tissue between uprisings and larger political movements, cultivating alternative knowledge production.[173] While graffiti, nor refusal broadly, answers all questions of everyday

[172] Kris Graves, *Privileged Mediocrity* (Italy: Hatje Cantz and Monolith Editions, 2023).

[173] Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, First, Transgressing Boundaries: Studies in Black Politics and Black Communities (Oxford University Press, 2010), x

political demands, it leaves the viewer with an everyday choice to lean into the systemic order or to disrupt it where necessary.

2020 Protest Graffiti:

One evening in January 2021, I took a break from cooking, sitting at the dining room table with a glass of wine and the daily mail. I was over a year into my research on the politics of graffiti and overwhelmed by the flood of countless examples that goaded me to continue the study. I was looking for an example of political graffiti to help surmise my thoughts and feelings about the subject, but everything failed. I was struck by one piece of mail as I tried to push these thoughts to the side and flipped through mostly junk: National Geographic's special issue "The Year in Pictures: 2020." Under the title was the phrase, "71 Photographs from an Unforgettable Year."[174] As introduced above, the cover itself was of what appeared to me to be a non-descript statue that was the canvas for George Floyd's face with BLM projected above it. The affect of Floyd's image was amplified by the multitude of voices that enveloped him. As I sat back with the issue in hand, I was struck by how much was captured in this image, in the projection, in the graffiti. What was latent in this projection of George Floyd? What was latent in the graffiti that screamed with the voices of many? What role did the graffiti play in this picture, in the moment the picture was taken, in the protests of 2020? These questions pushed me past the one paper I was writing into this dissertation.

While the cover of National Geographic's *2020 in Photos* may have drawn more attention to Kris Graves and his work and prompted my original analysis, it by no means encompasses the prolific and pensive artist. From his earliest work to today, Graves draws attention to urban life

[174] Graves, *George Floyd Projection*.

and social problems around race, capitalism, and environmentalism. He actively blurs the lines between culture and politics as he draws awareness to issues of representation for people of color and the world they live within. Graves' unique lens of the world illuminates how inequality and power asymmetry are built into individuals' everyday lives. As Thomas Chatterton Williams states in the introduction of Graves' 2012 *Permanence* project, "[Graves] creates a strict 'ecology of images,' discards the ancillary, mutes the noise."[175] In this chapter's project, Graves helps the reader see both the tale of American exceptionalism and its brutal support beams. He brings together the past, present, and future that collided in the summer of 2020.

While Graves begins by problematizing the founding and development of the United States, it is important to clarify the specific moment at which this project was born: the Black Lives Matter movement's resurgence in 2020. In February of 2012, Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by George Zimmerman on his way back home from a snack run to 7-11. While there was immediate outrage at the murder of Martin, Zimmerman's acquittal and the murder of Mike Brown fueled several movements against the state/state-sanctioned violence against black and brown bodies. After Patricia Cullors posted the #Blacklivesmatter, Patricia Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi organized the Black Lives Matter Movement, which has grown over the years to become an international organization and movement.[176] That said, the phrase Black Lives Matter(BLM) has grown beyond this movement, becoming an accessible signal for folks to use in support of these various movements.

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[175] Kris Graves, *Permanence*, Limited First Edition, 2012.

[176] It is important to note that while one of the largest movements responding to state-supported violence against black folk, BLM is by no means the only movement. This includes the Advancement Project, Color of Change, Live Free USA, NAACP, and the American Civil Liberties Union, to name a few.

The BLM movement gained renewed energy when, in the spring of 2020, George Floyd, a Minneapolis resident, was murdered by police officer Derek Chauvin for a counterfeit $20. While Floyd's murder is but one of a long history of police violence against black bodies (Kelling and Moore, 1998), the video and image of him gasping for breath, telling the officer kneeling on his neck he couldn't breathe, struck U.S. citizens (and folks around the globe) of all creeds, colors, and backgrounds. In the context of the growing anxiety of the deadly COVID pandemic and social distancing, George Floyd's death (among the hundreds of others) seemed to break the floodgates, triggering global protests of state-sanctioned violence against black individuals. By July 2020, the BLM movement became one of the largest in U.S. history.[177] Throughout the history of protests, this monumental movement left behind a monumental residue of graffiti, leaving traces of what I theorize as an epistemic refusal.

This is the moment in which Graves brings us into his project, *Privileged Mediocrity.* He expressly aims to preserve the political tensions and uprisings of the 2020 summer and the history of colonial racism in the narrative of American exceptionalism that allowed it to come to our present. Graves not only preserves this *historical* moment of the uprising but highlights the role of graffiti during times of political insurgency. Starting from the title of his project, "Privileged Mediocrity," acts as a foil for the conception of "American exceptionalism." While the naturalized narrative is of destiny-driven discovery and development, Graves wants us to attune to the fact that the United States has been built and dependent on a system of exploitation and domination for the benefit of the few. This system of exploitation started with chattel slavery and settler colonialism,

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[177] Larry Buchanan, Quoctrung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel, "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History," *The New York Times*, July 3, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html.

stripping individuals of their humanity, livelihood, and lives.[178] As the system changed and adapted through time, it continued to foster a loss of life and livelihood for people of color, building a system of multi-generational loss.

Graves' project begins with the view of an ocean, a starting point in the United States, as the sky melds from deep blue to vibrant orange just above the horizon. The ocean's surface appears calm, inviting us into the ecosystem of images. Graves then moves through a photo montage of colonizers' first contact with an Indigenous community to modern monuments and symbols of the U.S. discovery, revolution, and development. He picks up speed to include contemporary images of a slave market, a lone professor in his office, and a group of soldiers juxtaposed against a neighborhood bordering a power plant. Then, buildings, urban landscapes, corridors, spaces of death, whether sights of murder or final resting spots, individuals, families, and strangers. Then suddenly, a black page that reads 'A Southern Horror." Graves lays before us the dominant narrative of American exceptionalism that is gilded mediocre privilege constructed on exploitation and oppression. For example, the third photo plate of Columbus's feet is placed upon a base in which the heads of various chiefs are displayed on each corner. Columbus stands atop a throne labeled "Discoverer of America." A discoverer whose primary tools included exploitation, oppression, and genocide of indigenous communities throughout the Americas. The violence and exploitation that Columbus's father manifested in formal and informal exclusion and erasure of the exploited and dominated from the United States history, public sphere, and democratic system. As Graves moves from the first section of his project into the insidious violence of U.S. history, he

[178] These systems of racialization lay the groundwork for further exploitation and repression, such as what exists in capitalism.

draws out the exclusion and erasure in the sheer quantity of memorializing and monumentalizing of defenders of ‘American Exceptionalism.’

As Graves works into 'A Southern Horror,' he sheds a harsher, honest light on the monumentalized history of U.S. History as the stabilization of power. Each page consists of several black-and-white photographs with captions. He moves state by state through the south pointing to monuments, old slave markets, markers, and monumentalized places such as schools, streets, and parks. While a large collection, Graves shows a small part of the greater trend to call upon the name and legacy of Confederate soldiers from General E. Lee to Stonewall Jackson to Albert Pike and many more. In a presentation on this project and other photos of monuments, Graves explained that there were about 3,000 Confederate monument statues in the South. Power’s presence in the naturalized history is explicit when Graves explains that black individuals who live in this dense celebration of the confederacy every day usually grow numb to it and take on the attitude of "it just is…" for the sake of mental sanity.[179] Power also imbues political reasoning into history, allowing history to become a tool to maintain power. “The Myth of the Lost Cause” Graves draws out exemplifies how power and history are in co-constitutive relationship defining our background knowledge when it is built into the everyday. In his description of Graves’ work, John Edwin Mason states that what is particularly concerning about Graves images is the way it shows how “Americans, especially white Americans, [are] reluctant to face their history, preferring myths to facts.”[180] However, Graves' story is not one of exclusion and repression. He tells a story of the strength of refusal in the face of exclusion and repression. This refusal culminates in the graffiti in the final section of his project as a residue of individuals refusing to disappear and refusing the

[179] Kris Graves, Art Break: Re-envisioning American Monuments, interview by Leroon Brooks, September 22, 2021, Getty Museum.

[180] John Edwin Mason, *Privileged Mediocrity* (Italy: Hatje Cantz and Monolith Editions, 2023).

naturalized narrative of American exceptionalism. The graffiti across monuments and buildings is a shout of 'no' and demands to dismantle and destroy the history that has privileged whiteness. It concurrently screams ‘yes’ to the individuals’ existence and pain.

The first image in the last section, ‘The Revolution is Genocide,' is of a Columbus monument torn down and graffiti with "NDNs NEVER DIE."[181] among a myriad of other phrases. It immediately juxtaposes the first image of a Columbus monument at the start of the project. Graves then continues to take us through the summer of 2020, focusing predominately on images of graffiti, interspersing images of moments of peace that include monuments, individuals lounging, and schools in the process of being renamed. While Graves does not include any photos of the protests or marches, the images he does leave the viewer with a sense of the residue of the protests. Specifically, graffiti here shows how the protesters throughout the South refuse the naturalized narrative of the United States built from hard work for everyone. The graffiti throughout the image tears at the "myth of the lost cause."

One such image is of a J.E.B. Stuart monument. Stuart sits atop a horse poised to charge towards the future as Stuart looks at those around him, ready to pull all forward towards the vision he defends. On the base, where previously his accolades would have drawn attention, graffiti stands out against a bright red light. It explicitly calls for a revolution—the end of racism—through phrases such as “THE REVOLUTION IS HERE,” “YOU DON’T SILENCE US,” and “END RACISM.” Above Stuart's body and his steed, red paint appears as splattered blood, latent with meaning. Does it call upon the blood spilled from the historical violence against black and brown folk? Does it call for the blood spilled in the current revolution against racism? The graffiti pulls

[181] “Native Indians Never Die”

the viewer into the centuries-long war that has been waged between dominator and dominated. Southern monuments are meant to leave viewers with the impression of great warriors defending individual and state rights in the face of federal power and abuse. Doused in graffiti, the statues of Confederate heroes instead leave viewers with the protestor's desire for a world that works against racism. A refusal of the public narrative physically and visually erupts. This call for revolution is bolstered by the surrounding image that put forth similar demands and the slow seed of change seen in the retitled social spaces and removed monuments.

As *Privileged Mediocrity* starts to come to a close, Graves turns back to the moment that captured the pain and trauma of 2020, the Statue of General E. Lee projected with George Floyd wrapped in the words of community members demanding more from their nation. The blanket that wraps Floyd is a collection of varying cries of frustrations, demands for change, and utter refusal of a narrative that has structured the United States' history. It reflects those impacted by the moment, a diverse group of different backgrounds and needs in search of an alternative future. While National Geographic chose the one photo of George Floyd as the cover, Graves captures other black individuals who had lost their lives in the past few years to state-sanctioned violence: Breonna Taylor, Deborah Danner, Christopher DeAndre Mitchell, Oscar Grant, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, and George Floyd. In all these images, the clouds overhead have an orange hue, bringing a sense of ominous prophecy with latent meaning.

While not the focus, an important component of the images that Kris Graves captures of Monument Avenue in the wake of protests and marches are the individuals milling about the bottom of the monument investigating the different spray-painted messages weaved together.[182] In

[182] Kris Graves, *Privileged Mediocrity* (Italy: Hatje Cantz and Monolith Editions, 2023).

one photo, George Floyd's projection shows a parent and child squatting at the monument's base, closely exploring the graffiti. Here, the refusal fosters the child's imagination of an alternative future. In the photo of Breonna Taylor's projection, two young folks sit at her feet, immersed in their phones, taking a respite in the light of the projection. In other photos, masses of individuals take photos or rest with friends on the base of the monument. There are numerous flâneurs, a collective of isolated individuals who are idle around messages of refusal and participate in the larger movement. It is important to look at the emergence of a larger collective, particularly in the face of systems of power, without assuming the collective is monolithic. John Lennon emphasizes a similar feature in Egyptian graffiti from 2011. He explicitly states that "while the thousands of bodies crammed together in Tahrir square purported to share a unified message when we examine the graffiti left behind, we can see nuances in their thought."[183] In Graves' photos, individuals gather at the location where an earlier protest imbued Monument Avenue with the energy of resistance through gestures of refusal, such as the graffiti these individuals observe. Individuals affirm the collective when they move towards the works of graffiti to allow the messages of graffiti to fill their visual sensory system, but they are not subsumed under any one graffiti message and do not indicate specifically their own reasoning for looking to this bricolage of refusal.

Graffiti is ever-moving and shifting in the photo plates of Graves' *Privileged Mediocrity* project. Communicating different sentiments, from the basic 'no' to a larger, multifaceted 'yes.' Individuals communicate their desire for change without having to monumentalize these desires. While below, I will explain how graffiti here has functioned as an epistemic refusal. It can also be seen as a refusal to monumentalize. Graffiti is ephemeral and always in an antagonistic discourse.

[183] John Lennon, *Conflict Graffiti: From Revolution to Gentrification* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 63.

Writers must assume their work will be erased, tagged over, or the graffitied object completely removed.[184] Graves explained some of the impetus behind his *Privileged Mediocrity* project was to record the different sentiments towards monuments. He finds all monuments problematic, as it concerned him to put anyone on a pedestal. In the photo plates, there is an extension of the protests that raged during the summer of 2020 to the monuments that the protests were against. As the collective anger and frustration abate and take shelter in the individuals in attendance, the graffiti is left behind as an extension and reminder of the erased and marginalized narrative and history. Part of the impact of graffiti being left behind is the way in which it is reiterated by others through further graffiti or photography. This residual effect allows every viewer to bring their background to the context of the utterance and then reiterate it in new contexts. There is a slow, possibly unnoticeable, butterfly effect that ripples out from the graffiti and its message—a message of refusal of the presuppositions of the use of public space and the *power* within it.

Those who claim space that is public but not meant for them show "to disobey would be refusal in action, and altogether, the affirmation of a desire as something irreducible."[185] The desire to refuse the naturalized narrative, to pull into question the every day, is so overwhelming that it demands expression but not an expression in the voice of the dominant or even necessarily legible to the dominant. While graffiti is a refusal of the public narrative, it is not simply a negation. Georges Didi-Huberman states, "It does not suffice to disobey. It is critical, also, that disobedience -the refusal, the call for insubordination – be transmitted to others in the public space."[186] To be transmitted to others is to say 'yes' to a collective—the more encompassing the collective, the more

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[184] Whittney Evans and David Streever, "Virginia's Massive Robert E. Lee Statue Has Been Removed," *National Public Radio*, September 8, 2021.

[185] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Uprisings* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard & Jeu de Paume, 2016)," 360.

[186] Didi-Huberman, *Uprisings*, 370.

potential for imagining a different future. James Scott puts forth a similar argument that infrapolitical practices are looked at "at the level of tactics and strategy, it is a powerful straw in the wind…" Like butterflies that take flight on gusts of wind and trust the universe to take it where it needs. Scott continues, "…at the level of political beliefs, anger, and dreams [infrapolitics] is a social explosion."[187] In the next section of this chapter, I show how graffiti in the graves project is a continuation of infrapolitical practices, as seen in the previous two chapters. However, I explain that graffiti transcends the concept of infrapolitical refusal and, instead, must also be understood as a form of infrapolitical refusal. The transmission of an infrapolitical refusal is deeply tied to building a collective and the collectives' political potency.

The Residue of Refusal left in the wake of Protests:

One of the first images in Graves' project is of a black man dressed in colonial garb in Boston. There is little to know about the context or the reasoning behind dressing as such. Is he part of a role-play convention or a performer in a show? The viewer is left with their question about the conflicting imagery before stepping into the rest of Graves' images. James Scott can help provide us with one understanding of this image. He was deeply aware of the history and legacy of chattel slavery and other colonial capitalist practices in his works on hidden transcripts and infrapolitics. Scott even begins his book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* with the case of enslaved folks public behavior as the first concrete case of the importance of listening to the hidden transcripts of individuals taken as deferential to systems of domination.[188] He argues that what is taken to be acceptance of one's positionality is instead a performance for survival, as the cost of outright rebellion and resistance could be a person's life. Is the young man in Graves'

[187] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 227.
[188] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, *3-5.*

image taking a literal interpretation of performing the dominant narrative? What is the hidden transcript that we cannot see in this one image? Graves continues arguing that the practice of domination not only fosters a performance of action in this way but also creates hidden transcripts, a collection of gestures, speech, and practices in reaction to the public transcript, fostering specific subcultures.[189] In this section, I theorize the graffiti in Graves' images as one such practice of hidden transcripts, specifically infrapolitics. However, in this theorization, graffiti is not fully captured by Scott's focus on resistance. Instead, I offer the alternative of infrapolitical refusal. Turning to refusal allows us to tune into the ways in which graffiti and the unseen writers behind it are refusing the dominant narrative and, more importantly, refusing to be erased from the history that has come out of this narrative.

Infrapolitics was first coined and popularized by James Scott in earlier works describing the ways in which individuals responded to different systems of exploitation and repression. In the monograph *Weapons of the Weak*, Scott describes early understandings of infrapolitics as "…forms of resistance that reflect the conditions and constraints under which they are generated."[190] At this time, the specific case he assessed at length was the resistance he found among Malaysian farmers in the face of an increasingly exploitative colonial capitalism. He argued that the forms of resistance these farmers took, what he later describes as infrapolitics, were small and banal actions following the pattern of piecemeal shifts that were occurring in the larger economic system. These actions were built upon an alternative narrative that was not purveyed to those outside the positionality of the farmers. That is to say that the exploitation and repression felt by farmers were especially felt in the day-to-day, and this is where resistance also

[189] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 3-5.
[190] James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 242.

took place. Some may wonder about the difference in threat to the subordinated communities from Scott's example to the ones at hand in this study. However, Scott, grounding his study in a Marxist analysis, was not unaware of the presence, though transformed, of infrapolitics in the contemporary world. Further, Graves calls attention to the continued violence against black and brown folk in the United States, not only in the literal killing of women and men but also in the material make-up of the everyday environment.

Given the complex and multifaceted nature of hidden transcripts, the specific form or mechanism of resistance changes from person to person as it is constrained by a complex and overlapping class structure, and the interests of any one individual were not easily discerned due to different cleavages and alliances that cut across different classes and groups.[191] Guillaume Marche, who studies LBGTQ+ movements in the United States, sums up infrapolitical mechanisms as "Subaltern forms of resistance produce "hidden transcripts," that is to say critiques of power that escape the notice of the dominant and contrast with the "public transcripts" of power relations, which may contain no record of opposition."[192] While infrapolitical resistance is instructive in the ways that graffiti can be a tool of protests and uprising, it fails to capture the exact moments in Graves' photographs. Graffiti extends beyond this initial practice of resistance, embodying a host of other insurgent principles: parody, disruption, resilience, denigration, and refusal.

The banality of refusal gives it strength as it responds to the way in which power defines the banal, naturalizing systems of domination in the everyday. Elliot Prasse-Freeman, a scholar looking at Burmese refusal in grassroots movements, draws out the distinction between

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[191] Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 243

[192] Guillaume Marche, "Introduction: Why Infrapolitics Matters," *Revue Française d'études Américaines*, Infrapolitics and Mobilizations, 131 (2012): 6.

resistance and refusal as "where resistance describes opposition to direct domination (sovereign modes of power, following Foucault's schema), refusal marks the disavowals, rejections, and maneuverings with and away from diffuse indirect forms of power (governmentality)."[193] Black Lives Matter and other graffitied messages respond to racism present in both direct and indirect forms of power. It is the unspoken ideology and history of “white lives matter” that the graffiti is refusing. The fusion of the direct and indirect power necessitates a fusion of forms of responses. Graffiti on Confederate monuments and surfaces illuminates the way that infrapolitics is an epistemic refusal. This refusal does not negate, overshadow, or erase the resistance present in the summer 2020 protests or graffiti. Instead, the epistemic refusal is in productive tension with resistance, giving graffiti the necessary plasticity to meet contextual needs. Phillipe Bourbeau and Caitlin Ryan follow a similar line of argument, stating *resilience* and resistance are competitive and mutually exclusive in their relationship, creating complex and entangled responses to oppression and exploitation.[194]

Infrapolitical refusal transcends the moment of infrapolitical resistance, refusing the naturalization of power and order in any specific context. When graffiti writers take to graffiti a building of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, they leave both notions of resistance and refusal. The graffiti shouts "ACAB" and "FUCK 12," aligning with the larger protests and gestures of resistance. However, there are also moments of sheer refusal seen in the graffiti that shouts "One Love" complemented by "LOVE" spelled out with fallen tree branches. Here, Graves shows the complicated entanglement of desires that graffiti allowed for expression. Infrapolitical Refusal, as Scott theorizes it, misses the way in which the graffiti is not only refusing the power structure but

[193] Elliott Prasse-Freeman, “Resistance/Refusal: Politics of Maneuver under Diffuse Regimes of Governmentality,” *Anthropological Theory* 22, no. 1 (2022): 104, https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499620940218.
[194] Philippe Bourbeau, “Resilience, Resistance, Infrapolitics and Enmeshment,” *European Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 1 (2018): 221–39, https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661, 227.

the whole logic behind it. Infrapolitical resistance performs two specific feats of imagination. First, it allows subordinated populations to imagine "a total the reversal of the existing distribution of status and rewards." Second, it allows for the popular imagination to "negate the existing social order." Together, these two ideals are what propels action on desperate and rare occasions.[195] While recognizing a negation of the existing 'naturalized' social order, Scott undercuts this with the suggestion of imagining the reversal, a world and social order where those who have been subordinated get to in turn dominate the dominating.[196] Scott's infrapolitical resistance may capture some part of the desire behind graffiti seen in these images but it reduces the larger story to one of reversing dominance. Infrapolitical refusal thickens the understanding of these moments, showing how graffiti writers not only are refusing the social order but also refusing to be erased, not taking over the role of dominator, but to be present in their own way.

The entangled relationship between resistance and refusal has gained increasing attention, especially after Audra Simpson's *Mohawk Interruptus* in which Simpson traces refusal seen in the complex interactions between state and indigenous sovereignty and power. She traces a history in which Mohawks, whom Canada and the United States have attempted to erase and enfold, labor to main their political sovereignty and life. Simpson describes this labor as "the labor of living in the face of an expectant and *foretold* cultural and political death.[197] If taking Scott's earlier argument of resistance to interpret the labor present here, one would assume the reversal of this cultural and political death of those in positions of power. However, that is not what is built into the political movements and practices of the Mohawks. Instead, these are practices of refusal. Simpson goes on to say that the refusal she finds in the everyday life and practice of the Mohawk

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[195] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 81.
[196] It is important that this is antithetical to the mass of literature around movements like Black Lives Matter.
[197] Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Duke University Press, 2014), 3.

community is a "…refusal is simply to disappear, a refusal to be on the other end of Patrick Wolfe's critical, comparative history—to be 'eliminated.'"[198] In the refusal to be eliminated, Simpson finds a truly radical implication, the precariousness of settler identity, calling into question the history of triumphs, agreements, and the public sphere/order.

The popularized image of George Floyd expresses a similar refusal. The now recognizable silhouette of Floyd's face draws the viewers' gaze to the cover of National Geographic. While the original selfie that circulated the internet seemed to be tinged with unseen hopes, it now seemed to be weighed down with the labor of a community that refused to be eliminated. Floyd's mouth is in a neutral expression, leaving Floyd's own feelings out of reach and private. Most individuals in the United States have come to view this exact image either in the news, on social media, or on the streets of their everyday lives. Floyd's death was understood to be a great loss to his family as a father, brother, son, and lover. While the personal loss was mourned by many, it was the fact that Floyd's death was not inevitable and, quite the contrary, the result of a system of racism where state power manifests in violence against black and brown people. Floyd's death (as well as the other deaths) in Graves' *Privileged Mediocrity* became a synecdoche of the multi-generational loss experienced by BIPOC that was, and continues to be, erased from historical narratives.[199] The constraints of latent racism within the United States killed these individuals, among thousands of others. John Lennon tracks the same refusal of naturalized violence in the phrase "Fuck the Police" from its popularization by NWA's 1988 track of the same title.[200]

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[198] Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, 22.
[199] While we see the conversations more readily in the news, the growing backlash against CRT can be understood as a continued erasure and redaction of systemic violence against black and brown communities.
[200] John Lennon, *Conflict Graffiti,* 14.

The refusal seen throughout the images Graves captures of the 2020 summer protests has two parts: 1) a deconstructive and affective "no" to a specific order and narrative and 2) a constructive and active "yes" to an alternative order and one’s historical experience. Another example is seen in Angela Davis’s *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism,* where jazz refuses to be constrained by musical norms rampant with systemic racism and sexism. Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday all put forth music that was deeply rooted in the *actual* history of the United States, calling forth both the pain and joy that black women felt. While there is a negation in jazz’s refusal, refusal is also active and creative here. Jazz, the Mohawk politics, and Graves’ project expressly refuse a naturalized history and order that has exploited and subjugated a myriad of communities. These epistemic refusals also refuse the erasure of self, or in other words; the refusal puts forth a “yes” to oneself and historical experience.

It is important to see both the ‘yes’ *and* ‘no’ present in graffiti throughout the images in *Privileged Mediocrity*. Graffiti is a hyper-visual practice of infrapolitical refusal, and being an epistemic refusal requires both the destruction and construction of knowledge. While negating the object it marks (including its context and meaning), the graffiti leaves latent but meaningful marks on the object.[201] The power of these marks is their building of a collective. Graffiti takes the individual affective response to repression and oppression and connects it to others, fostering collective action. The sheer power of Graves' images and the myriads of folks that were present at the moment give but a fraction of those impacted by the graffiti of 2020 and the predecessors to this use of graffiti. Returning to the example of JEB Stuart's monument, graffiti negates the champion solider narrative that the physical construction of the monument leaves. It leaves Stuart

[201] Meaningful is simply to say that graffiti by at least one person has some meaning, i.e., initials, symbols, words, or drawings. The graffiti does not hold meaning to all, and it may be intentionally obscured. I will have some brief comments on content that is different from the subject of this specific paper.

soaked in the blood of those he and the U.S. continue to trample on to achieve the status of exceptionalism. The assemblage of voices puts forth a different narrative, the narrative of the subjugated whose history has been marginalized. To draw this out more, I will explain both components of refusal in more detail.

Graffiti as the refusal is partially a "no" of a sustained experience, state of being, or specific order, i.e., BIPOC experiencing sustained underlying racism or the larger U.S. military-industrial complex.[202] The space in which individuals live reinforces the experience, state of being, or order of their everyday life through work and school, social activities, family and friends, advertisement and media, material buildings and structures, and open space. Graves depicts the everydayness of the racial order through the monuments and schools named after Confederate soldiers and leaders, as well as through the depiction of inequal abandonment and degradation of neighborhoods. The anger and/or pain of these experiences builds within an individual (or group) demanding expression. An individual uses the tools accessible to them to raise their arms and mark the world with their emotions and experiences. Given that the tools are readably accessible every day, they vary greatly from one context to the next.[203] As Scott has shown, these are done through actions that are often incomprehensible by the system and often mislabeled.

Graffiti exemplifies the use of various objects that exist in these different spaces (from bathroom stalls to walls to monuments) and uses them as a platform to say "no" to the experience or the order that allows the experience in a way that is hyper-visible to others in that space.

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[202] Guillaume Marche, "Expressionism and Resistance: Graffiti as an Infrapolitical Form of Protest against the War on Terror," *Revue Française d'études Américaines*, Infrapolitics and Mobilizations, 131 (2012): 86, https://doi.org/10.3917/rfea.131.0112.

[203] Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* is an excellent example of the many manifestations that tactical practices can take from the everyday environment.

Guillaume Marche analyzes a train car in which graffiti writer Servo Alamo has written 'TORTURE' in stylized writing next to the simple tag of "Outsourced Atrocities" on the side of a freight train. Following in the steps of writers before them, Servo Alamo utilizes the banal and oft-ignored space of the side of a freight train to shout 'no' to the violence the U.S. commits abroad. The example also exemplifies how diverse the audience can be due to the use of public spaces. Sometimes, the audience is simply bystanders (someone else who happens to use the same bathroom or sitting at a railway crossing), or these others are individuals who have traveled to the graffiti (the graffitied monument of Lee or the Oceanwide Plaza in L.A.). Either way, the hyper-visual refusal, at a minimum, creates awareness and, at most, creates solidarity for a cause. The "no" communicated through graffiti can then be engaged by both the dominant and dominated/precarious. What is powerful about the visual "no" of graffiti is how it entangles the refused and the refusal to make those who see it at least question their own everyday experience.

Graffiti as a refusal is partially a "yes" in two different ways. First, graffiti writers say "yes" to themselves in the face of the systemic silencing they experience. The 'yes' here is reflective of how Simpson argues Mohawks "refuse to *let go of [their historical] knowledge*." Instead, they actively held *their* knowledge in their everyday lives seen in marriage, political, and everyday practices.[204] Graffiti is similarly constructive, though in a more infrapolitical/misrecognized way, by presenting a history of violence that various mechanisms have systemically erased or obscured. Continuing our example from Marche, he explains how graffiti brings the images of graffiti in his paper bring the experience of torture into the public view, explicitly drawing out an experience that is explicitly redacted from history.[205] The second way graffiti can be an active "yes" is through

[204] Simpson, *Mohawk interruptus,* 2.
[205] One only has to think about Daniel J. Jones investigation into the CIA's use of torture that was hidden from any public or official view.

the actual content of its marks. As opposed to solely drawing attention to an issue or experience, graffiti's content can also offer alternatives.

It offers complications, disruptions, or replacements to the meaning of what the graffiti artist refuses. Sometimes, the content is an overt phrase, such as "BLM" or "EAT THE RICH," where the graffiti artist offers some semblance of how they would like reality to look. Alternatively, the meaning of the content/symbolism can be vague, such as Banksy's Rats or Naji al-Ali's Handala.[206] It is important to note here that the meaning of graffiti is often unclear and can have multiple interpretations, depending on whether the content is overt or covert. This is due both to the context and the people that engage with graffiti. While the graffiti writer puts their message up at a particular time and place, graffiti outlives that moment and often gets detached from the original intent.[207] Further, graffiti scholars must consider what history the audience is bringing with them before engaging their writing, which can imbue a single piece of graffiti with several meanings. This active aspect is an entanglement of the symbolism of the refused object (Robert E. Lee as the leading Confederate soldier) and the object/message of graffiti (The undervaluing of black lives and violent repression throughout U.S. history).

Scott's infrapolitical framework is incredibly helpful as a starting framework for understanding the politics that are seen in Graves' images. He begins by clearly outlining the dominant narrative and the subtle spaces that it structures around us. While the beginning of these relations of powers was overt and depended on publicized violence, they shifted and changed over

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[206] In regards to Banksy's rats, I always think of Delillo's use of rats in his novel *Cosmopolis,* where the rat simultaneously symbolizes anti-capitalism and the cruel and brutal effects of capitalism on the precarious. al-Ali's Handala is understood to symbolize the resistance and resilience of the Palestinian people in the face of war and oppression.

[207] This is particularly true for folks who take photos of graffiti, whether for themselves or for social media. Graffiti that has already started to lose temporal touch with the original moment becomes spatially out of touch and disembodied.

time to take a more insidious banal form. Graffiti gives glimpses of contemporary hidden transcripts; the imagination of an alternative public space build on subcultural tales, practices, and beliefs in. images transcends mere infrapolitical resistance. However, as stated earlier, the instances of graffiti Graves show us that they are not encapsulated by infrapolitics when they are wholly rooted in resistance. He shows us how graffiti serves the critical function of infrapolitical refusal, actively refusing the naturalized power and order. This function hinges on a secondary refusal: the refusal to fade away and be forgotten. To further elaborate on graffiti as a form of infrapolitical refusal, I turn to art historian Georges Didi-Huberman and his gestural refusal. Didi-Huberman seeks to expand individuals' understandings of how they can influence the world without turning to violence or hatred. At the core of his theory is the concept of refusal, which captures the deconstructive "no" necessary to call out the current structure and the constructive "yes" necessary to move towards a different future. When put in conversation with the infrapolitical refusal in *Privileged Mediocrity*, we can thicken our understanding of what political transformation is made up of beyond resistance and revolution.

Didi-Huberman starts his essay “By the Desires” with the human need to rise up and communicate grief and anger, particularly due to loss. He recounts the tale of two young girls who, after having recently lost their mother, reenact the deceased lying under a blanket. What is somber and, at moments, scary for them, is also filled with energy and gesture. The moment culminates with them both rising up and finding comfort and joy in each other's presence and laughter. While seemingly banal, Didi-Huberman is pressing us to recognize the power of expressing overwhelming loss and the connection that such expression fosters. The reader may wonder how refusing pictures are used in this child’s play. Is it not childish and self-deceptive to attempt to refuse the inevitability of a loved one’s death? Or, taking the point of view of Freud, when refusal

is present for such a personal loss, is that not just a practice of contrition with no action?[208] Freud is correct, granting the individuals in mourning to live in a system in which death is generally inevitable and not the result of a systematic failure or injustice.[209] Instead, it is necessary to start by asking if there is an incongruency between the public narrative and the hidden narrative of a loss, especially if it is a collective loss. Graffiti in the images in question spotlights the ways in which the narratives of the deaths of these young men and women were discussed in radically different ways. Didi-Huberman pushes Freud's argument, "Freud did not yet imagine, in his text, that the 'struggle', when faced with loss, might *create* a new reality… We cannot bring back someone's dead mother. But we can, perhaps, rebel against some of the constraints of the world that killed her."[210] When Didi-Huberman clarifies how the desires that come from loss, grief, and anger can vitalize a gesture of refusal, he is not just looking at the banal experiences of loss but at the ways in which what seems banal losses result from a systemic failure and when refused can trigger a political uprising. This is reminiscent of the power that comes when a hidden transcript is made public, particularly in the face of authority.

With a shared, cursory but shared all same understanding of the sort of loss that is the heart of refusal, the next step is to draw the differences between what Didi-Huberman labels *power* and what he labels *unpower*. For Didi-Huberman, these are the two different sides in the struggle over narrative; one seeks to foster control and order, while the other seeks to allow a natural flow of

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[208] Sigmond Freud, "Morning and Melancholia," in *A General Selection from the Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. Joan Riviere (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957), 3.

[209] This is a critique/question that I have gotten on multiple occasions when presenting this work. Folks ask if they are to accept the political expression that graffiti allows is this not just a cathartic practice? Scott also responds to this critique that folks who argue this start with an assumption that that those who are subordinated develop some internal pressure that can be safety-valved away. He ends by arguing that this line of argumentation does not have the social-psychological evidence to support it(Scott 1990, 187).

[210] Didi-Huberman, *Uprisings*, 295.

force. *Power* encompasses two different traits: 1) How history stabilizes during any epoch and 2) the political reason through which this history has been stabilized. *Power* in the United States is a system in which the success of white people was and is dependent on the exploitation of BIPOC, resulting in multi-generational loss of livelihood and life. Infrapolitical refusal responds to the dominant narrative, Didi-Huberman's concept of embodied *power*. The public narrative of American exceptionalism embodies the colonial, capitalist power that tries to hide the exploitation of people of color. To flesh out this hidden reality demands the perspective center, not those privileged by *power* but those, as Didi-Huberman describes them, in positions of *power*.

To be clear, the situation of *unpower* is not defined as being powerless but alternatively as having potency. Refusal allows individuals to lean into this potency and, in turn, lean into a greater collective. In other words, infrapolitical refusals take a solitary 'no' and transform it into solidarity by saying 'yes.' Didi-Huberman states, "potency (*puissance*) relates to the resource and the source, as though it indicated the way in which a torrent creates by its intrinsic force, the form that the riverbed will take…"[211] Potency is apparent in infrapolitical refusal. While this refusal is an epistemic refusal of the naturalized history, it is not positing a singular, alternative history. It refuses the established history *and* the way it was constructed. During the summer of 2020, graffiti writers who took up paint and pen against monuments did not seek to cement their view of history. Instead, it was to force a discourse between the different individuals throughout history. Scott argues that the social cohesion of hidden transcripts relies not necessarily on a specific goal in which the collective is moving but instead on the shared experience of cohesive domination that

[211] Didi-Huberman, *Uprisings*, 311.

is being responded to. Infrapolitics does not hold together the collective through promises of unknown futures as much as relief from immediate concerns and pain.

The challenge of *unpower* is shaping the force fostered in the wake of infrapolitical refusal. What does it mean to speak in the face of structural power when recognition is not only a goal but often part of what is being refused?[212] A critical component of infrapolitics is the 'infra,' "offstage speeches, gesture, and practices."[213] Simpson also expresses this in her assessment of Mohawk's refusal: "There is a political alternative to 'recognition' the much sought-after and presumed 'good' of multicultural politics. This alternative is 'refusal,'…"[214] The hidden transcript, the space of infrapolitical refusal, exists outside the scope of recognition and continues to escape recognition, particularly by the state. Didi-Huberman adds a layer to the discussion as he argues that recognition is an important part of relationality but asks, "what *is* recognition when unilateral positions of domination persist?"[215] Here, he argues that recognition is contingent on being able to express oneself in a way pre-defined by those in positions of power. Judith Butler makes a similar argument in their book *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, stating that "forms of recognition are extended, the region of the unrecognizable is preserved and expanded accordingly." Again, Butler is not arguing here that the attempt to expand recognition should stop or for naught. All three scholars are pushing that bringing people within the lines of demarcation fails to critically assess the boundaries of recognition and the power that creates this. Then what does recognition amount to when it is systems of such blatant power asymmetry*?* Recognition fails to encompass

[212] George Didi-Huberman, "HOW TRY TELL? A Short Journey in the Papers of Warsaw Ghetto" (Lecture, Wellek Lecture Series, University of California Irvine, Ma 2019).

[213] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 4.
[214] Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, 11.
[215] Didi-Huberman, *Uprisings*, 336. My own emphasis.

the desire to express the loss as seen in the summer of 2020, or 2012, or 1991, or 1955. Against all forms of participation, the United States political system still fails to recognize the historical and continued violence against black and brown bodies from its founding. The moments that stand out against the backdrop of incessant violence and exploitation are those in which, instead of aiming for recognition, individuals refuse the system. In other words, how do we speak of an experience of pain that transforms the nature of relation and reality? We lean into that transformation and refuse the nature of relations and reality that created this pain.

When individuals engage in epistemic refusal, they refuse the labor to recognize and instead put this energy into the development of self and community. Individuals engaged in epistemic refusal pull their political expression into the everyday: the commutes to work, the walks through the city, and the books and the movies they share with those around them. They find the most effective means to express themselves to get across the systemic boundaries around them. Didi-Huberman recognizes that this is a process; individuals must work to shape their refusal. They must come to "know how to *work [their] shout*, to give it shape, and to labor over it, long and patiently."[216] Graffiti has become this shout for many, as it allows for anonymity and pulls the larger public into conversation with their hyper-visual refusal. It allows for fluidity, change, and growth. Remember the example of regularly utilized graffiti phrases, '1312' or 'fuck12'. Another is 'fuck the police,' which at first glance seems to be more of a full-throated rebuke of police violence, but, as Lennon showed us, is given some allowance for the way it is built into rap subculture.[217] As individuals elucidate their shout of 'no,' their mediums must be pliable to work with their specific, individual desires.

[216] Didi-Huberman, *Uprisings*, 345.

[217] Lennon, *Conflict Graffiti*, 14.

Didi-Huberman elaborates, "When the shout is worked out in this way, the act of *refusing* consists of *fusing together* new images, new thoughts, or new possibilities of action in the public consciousness, which receives it in this form."[218] This dissertation shows that graffiti throughout history has been an exemplar of individuals using their everyday environment, from train cars to walls to elephants. Protest spaces demonstrate this in a unique way in which graffiti writers and artists take advantage of walls, monuments, and, most of all, the boarded-up windows of businesses during protests. While Graves' did not focus on the urban centers of protests, I wanted to highlight how boarded windows, a signal of fear of vandalism and violence, became a space of political imagination and expression. Writers and artists balk against this fear by still getting a similar gesture by graffitiing the temporary protection itself, not vandalizing the business. If you joined any of the downtown protests, you would find yourself walking by dozens of large pieces and murals that had a similar residue to the protests as seen in Graves' images.

Refusal, not just resistance, is at the heart of political transformation. It allows individuals to take on both a destructive and constructive agency within a moment. The case at hand is when graffiti refuses the thing that it marks and the thing's symbolic meaning. This is to say graffiti, as seen throughout this chapter, is a form of epistemic refusal, where graffiti refuses the current naturalized narrative, and graffiti writers refuse to disappear. Scott states that part of the power of infrapolitics is "the artfulness with which they reverse and negate a particular domination."[219] Graffiti is more public-facing and visual than Scott's original conception of infrapolitics; graffiti's anonymity and latent meaning offer another form of infrapolitics. For example, when thinking of graffiti that addresses the historical police violence and is visible in Graves' project, there are

[218] Didi-Huberman, *Uprisings*, 345.

[219] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 43-44.

obscured ones such as "1312" and "Fuck12." Where what is being said is buried in a mixed understanding that the numbers represent letters: 1=A, 3=C, 2=B, 12=L, and that those letters represent specific words in phrases, "All Cops are Bastards" and "Fuck the Law." There is a utilization of the public narrative of the meaninglessness of graffiti, thoughtless tags that are vandalism with the obscured message systems. Kris Graves's *Privileged Mediocrity* draws forth the history that is present in the everyday that becomes the excuse behind the physical violence enacted on black and brown individuals. He then shows how this history is refused, overturned, and used against itself as monuments become platforms for antithetical claims; Lee comes to signify abhorrent police violence, Stuart comes to signify a coming revolution of love and equality, and Columbus comes to signify the strength of indigenous communities. In the final section, I will draw out this dialectical relationship between graffiti and monumental surfaces, illuminating that history is never fully cemented into place.

The Dialectic Between Monuments and Graffiti

Throughout Graves' project, he moves fluidly from past, present, future, and back again. Through photography, he leaves the viewer with a notion of how deeply imbricated and entangled the different temporalities are in our everyday lives and sense of self. Several images in the first part are of individuals stopped in a contemplative moment. Clarence Sr sits in his office surrounded by thousands of books, staring straight ahead, seemingly lost in his thoughts. A mom in a room overlooking Times Square is standing at the window with her hands on her hips, also deep in her thoughts. A child sits on top of a washer machine in a laundry mat in Ithaca daydreaming. These individuals are part of the collective that Graves subtly argues to express the deception of American exceptionalism. This deception is held in place through the monuments, place-making, and history glimpsed in his other photos. The individuals Graves shows call into question the

public narrative of American progress and the images that build this narrative. This contextualizes and grounds the later images of graffiti that work as an infrapolitical refusal, epistemically refusing the public narrative.

In this section, I turn to Walter Benjamin and his theories of political art (both written and visual) to further clarify the potency of graffiti and the way it functions as a refusal in Kris Graves' photos. Benjamin moved beyond traditional Marxism by looking at the revolutionary potential of culture in its production, content, and reception. While Marx focused on the economic base for the possibility of overturning exploitation and inequality, Benjamin looked to the superstructure, specifically culture.[220] He found it important to counter the use of culture by the dominant class through politicizing cultural practices, allowing the proletariat and revolutionaries also to use it. This politicization occurred in two different ways. First, art and other forms of culture had to be relieved of their ritualistic character and democratized through mass production. Photography was one of the most important inventions that allowed this.[221] I argue that graffiti writing can also challenge the aura of art by being an art foil or antithesis. Second, and relatedly, dialectic imagery is "the use of archaic images to identify what is historically new about the "nature" of commodities."[222] Individuals in the present use images of history to reflect the potential of the future. While Benjamin used the method of literary montage, making use of the refuse and rags,[223] we can find a similar dialectic in graffiti to theorize the dialectic image.

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[220] Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, paperback edition (MIT Press, 1991),124.
[221] Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*,131.
[222] Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 67.
[223] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedmann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Paperback edition 2002, vol. German Volume (Cambridge: First Harvard University Press, 1999), 460.

Benjamin encourages scholars to recognize culture as a source of *potency*; a force rages forth from culture, carving a path toward future possibilities. For example, Benjamin argues that the bourgeois use of culture depends on the idea of authenticity and the ritual of originality. High culture is often fabricated out of a fetishization of history toward a utopic future. Bourgeois use of culture depends on power, which allows the end products to be "useful and easier to master."[224] Benjamin contended that when freed from power, cultural products could be used as gestures of refusal. In his own words, *"as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being found on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics.*"[225] The artistic (un)authenticity of graffiti writing is harder to see in most of Graves' photos as they are visually striking and pull in multiple artistic mediums. Recall the image of the Stonewall Jackson monument, exemplifying the tension between graffiti writing and aesthetics. Among various roughly written tags is written the phrase "Fuck this Statue." The simple vulgar phrase "fuck…" holds a depth of different meanings for different viewers. However, viewers often overlook or denigrate the quick, messy writing of a vulgar phrase as nonsense and vandalism; they just do not get it. The power of graffiti writing is sharpened by its complete lack of need to be aesthetically attractive and, therefore, imbued with value. Furthering this is the use of photography, as Graves has now replicated this moment, at least in theory, infinitely. That is not to even consider if others took similar photos, say possibly for social media.

[224] Didi-Huberman, *Uprisings*, 311.

[225] Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Selected Writings Vol. 2 Part 2. 1931-1934*, ed. Michael W Jennings, vol. 2, 4 vols. (Cambridge Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 1999), 777.

Benjamin's second call for art to be politicized, what he labels the dialectical image, further sharpens the understanding of graffiti as politically potent in its refusal of dominant narratives, naturalized history. Benjamin was clearly at odds with what was assumed as natural during his life, such as Social Darwinism or the inevitability of catastrophe.[226] Part of his concern was due to the uncritical sense of progressing towards the future, that history was a building arch to an unavoidable end. Benjamin challenged historical linearity through literary montage. His montage of quotes exemplified how a fragment, quotation, or possibly graffiti "interrupts the context into which it is inserted."[227] The interruption can then be used to foment critical thinking and a revolution. A material example of naturalizing historical progress is the monuments in Graves' images. In the first part, we begin with a mural of the imagined discovery of the Americas, quickly followed by Christopher Columbus and Indigenous sites before the image of a colonial man. Graves continues to draw out the symbols of this history—slave market, monuments, graves of Confederate soldiers—forward to the present. This is amplified by the second section, in which he explicitly details the various monuments and schools that reinforce the narrative of American progress. While Graves was correct in his larger critique of monuments, the potency of the graffiti he captures is contingent on the monuments as the basis of their epistemic refusal, as graffiti has a dialectic relationship to the monument. Benjamin argues that "this dialectic has developed *not* by 'burying' the dead past, but by revitalizing it."[228] Recall the image that Graves third and final section begins with a partially toppled Columbus monument that is graffitied with "NDNS NEVER DIE." Removal of the monument would help pull Columbus from his pedestal as the discoverer of the Americas. Alternatively, Graves captures how graffiti refuses this history by putting forth a

[226] Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing,* 59, 79.
[227] Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing,* 77.
[228] Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing,* 124.

claim of a community that refuses to be erased. This dialectic image takes an archaic image of the birth of American exceptionalism to put forth a new claim about this historical moment and how it imbues both the present and the future. The graffiti not only evokes and refuses the cultural memory that the monument embodies but also evokes the cultural memory of what was redacted to celebrate Columbus as a leader.

In sum, graffiti exemplifies the expression of a collective imagination and politicization of culture in the refusal of the public narrative. Revolutions are made of a collection of different ideologies, resilience, resistance, and refusal. Georges Didi-Huberman describes a gesture of refusal that begins a political movement as "nothing other than a gesture capable of *creating by overturning* or of *overturning by creating*."[229] The challenge of refusal is that the creator must let go of the impulse to define or direct what they create, as the full strength of refusal is not one to be so specifically directed. Benjamin further pushes the theoretical understanding of how and who creates or controls objects of refusal. Suppose an artist/writer must overturn the present condition to create the relationship between them and their work. Alternatively, as Benjamin asks, "What is the attitude of the work to relations of production?"[230] The graffiti in Graves' images exists in a realm of illicit mass production in a dialectic relationship to the monuments they mark. Graffiti exists outside the recognizable political and monetary systems of today. It is for mass consumption, generally free, and consumption that does not reduce the potential for others to consume. The graffiti writer can create and then allow their refusal to continue the epistemic revolution independently.

[229] Didi-Huberman, *Uprisings*, 321.

[230] Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," 771.

Conclusion:

I return once more to the image that drew me to Kris Graves' project, *Privileged Mediocrity*. In a broad view of the Monument of Robert E. Lee, clouds hang heavy and somber overhead. While it is a monument centered on National Geographic, George Floyd takes up the visual space. Red paint is splattered on his forehead, and "ACAB" is graffitied on the middle of his face. "BLM" stands out against the dark statue on which it is projected. The cover speaks of a collective gathered to mourn the loss of friends and families to the racial inequities that General Lee defended. The loss sparks a refusal of the “good old days” that some demand to return to. The refusal puts for an alternative demand, a demand to change the knowledge of history and how it defines the present. This epistemic refusal is shouted through the multicolored graffiti that streaks the base supporting George Floyd.

The graffiti in Graves' work is a refusal of the violence faced by Black Americans. From the blood-red revolution sprawled over the monument of J.E.B. Stuart to the unmasking of Matthew Maury as a fascist clown, the graffiti tears at the monumentalizing of systems of power dependent on exploitation and violent repression. This is most poignantly demonstrated in the repeated graffiti phrase “BLM”—Black Lives Matter. It is projected clearly upon the body of Lee, now a canvas for a greater message speaking to the refusal to accept state violence against BIPOC individuals. The simple refusal to be pushed aside and marginalized pulls together the loose strands of Graves’ project: it weaves together the grief and loss of multi-generational oppression, the hope and demand for a society that truly protects and listens to *all* its members, and how the reality of Black experiences is entangled in the country’s present, past, and future.

In my theorization of the graffiti in Graves’ project, graffiti is a practice of infrapolitical refusal by individuals and communities who have suffered at the hands of state-sanctioned

violence. It is the political modality to refuse the epistemic basis of the current political structure of the U.S. Scholars from many fields recognize graffiti's gaining popularity as a form of communication (Lennon, 2022; Magaña, 2020; Phillips, 2019; Bruce, 2019; Moreau and Alderman, 2011) yet remains largely unrecognized within political theory or political science. As graffiti increasingly appears in moments of political contestation, political theorists need to ask what graffiti can teach about different modes of political engagement. While political science has improved in fostering more inclusive politics, it is often limited in privileging systemic modes of political action, such as voting and marches. Marginalized individuals are not just living outside the dominant political structures but are also engaging in, as Judith Butler argues, "specific forms of political agency and resistance."[231] In other words, political theory and political science are about something other than the form of political engagement academics would like to see deployed but about expanding and changing what is considered politics. Graffiti is so important in this regard because it "ignores the boundaries of body politic."[232] It engages politics without being told or dictating what is and is not political. It lives between and connects other political practices such as voting, rallying, protesting, etc. Graffiti connected the different BLM protests and marches throughout the 2020 summer, transforming politics and political frustration into an interstitial and joint practice.

Graves' *Privileged Mediocrity* project shows us how graffiti is a gesture of refusal and how what is at stake in recognizing or ignoring political graffiti is the possibility for a truly equitable and representative public sphere and shared history. Graffiti extended the frustration of those who

[231] Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Reprint Edition (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018), 78.

[232] Carlo McCormick, *Trespass: A History of Uncommissioned Urban Art*, ed. Ethel Seno (Taschen America Llc, 2015), 50.

protested and shouted into the everyday lives of other citizens around them. Protesters aimed to alert other citizens to the discrepancy of criminal retribution as it concerns white-on-black crime. However, as Graves shows, graffiti's importance goes further in giving potency to an alternative reality. The demands of the 2020 protests culminated in the sentencing of Derrick Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd. While one example of the reality that graffiti aims for is its refusal to let victims of historical violence be erased, it stands out as unique among most police killings, among other crimes, and does not result in criminal charges.[233] Even given Chauvin's sentencing, the larger system of violence and exploitation that graffiti refuses still carries on. The United States stands on a precipice of restructuring or restrengthening the system that has been dependent on the logic of racial and economic exploitation. However, as Scott warns us, infrapolitics first declaration holds an immense amount of potential potency, "That first declaration speaks for countless others, it shouts what has historically had to be whispered, controlled, choked back, stifled and suppressed."[234] Infrapolitical refusal gives us a framework to understand some of these first shouts before they become resistance or revolution. It is up to the larger population to try to listen.

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[233] Philip Matthew Stinson et al., "Police Integrity Lost: A Study of Law Enforcement Officers Arrested," Final Technical Report (Bowling Green Ohio: National Institute of Justice, January 26).

[234] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance,* 227.

# Chapter Four

## Conclusion

At the heart of graffiti is connection. The reasons folks reach for graffiti as a mode of connection are as varied as the graffiti writers and artists themselves. How others interpret and connect with graffiti is just as varied. Nevertheless, there is a core truth of connection in the myriad of reasons and interpretations behind graffiti. I am reminded of this every time I present—discussants and audience members alike are excited to share a memory of graffiti they still hold close to heart. One time that stands out to me was when a colleague told me that their number one experience and love of graffiti is sitting at train tracks with their children and looking at the pieces go by. While they live in a town of 12,000 in a state with some of the least railroad tracks, this colleague spoke of their kids' excitement to see graffiti from other places around the United States. Struck by the resonance with my own introduction to graffiti, part of the political importance of graffiti broadly clicked. Graffiti is innately political in the way it allows connection. While this is still superficial scratching the surface, it is valid for all graffiti. Whether that is two transient individuals connecting in a competition of railway leapfrog, a teenager in downtown Los Angeles connecting to the material city around him, or a protestor connecting to a more significant movement, something in each individual finds a bond through graffiti.

I began this study thinking that the reason graffiti was innately political was an unseen and understudied mode of resistance. That graffiti accumulated power as it pulled into question notions of order and control. I first explained how hobo codes and monikers exemplified how graffiti could be an infrapolitical practice. It was a tool to obscure the reality of a precarious community as it simultaneously created a smoke screen for these transient communities to hide behind while also projecting their alternative lifestyle into the imagination of generations to come. As graffiti

developed and evolved, youth across the country took up similar practices of monikers, tagging cities with new names and styles. As each person reached to stand out amongst the growing collection of tags, they added color and lettering that broke the mold of previous graffiti but still held a connection to its roots. In political movements today, graffiti is a readily used tool due to its ability to connect to the past and call into question the history that we monumentalize today.

As I studied these cases and the various forms of connection, I found that they brought to light some of the complexities of infrapolitics. The first chapter describes Scott's basic concept of infrapolitics as "dealing with an unobtrusive realm of political struggle." Infrapolitics, a term coined by James C. Scott, refers to the subtle, often unnoticed, forms of political resistance that occur in everyday life.[235] They have helped to elucidate some of the political imports of graffiti used by hobos, tramps, and other transient communities. However, there is a crucial aspect his basic theorization misses. Scott described infrapolitics as politics that dare not speak their name, but this obscures when actors utilized various cultural practices specifically to say their name publicly but were still ignored or villainized for doing such politics explicitly. We are left with the material consequences of individuals' naming practices and find that they even grew to such an extent that the practices went beyond individual identity formation to more extensive place identity formation. Guillaume Marche's expansion that infrapolitical practices go either unrecognized, in line with Scott's argument, *or* misrecognized helps to address this incongruency. However, as contemporary political movements reveal, Marche's expansion still needs to encompass the various modes in which infrapolitics functions. While different infrapolitical practices are either unrecognized and/or misrecognized, their internal impulse of them can change as well.

[235] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance,* 183.

Scott and Marche assume that the internal desire of infrapolitics is one grounded in resistance. While this is true in many infrapolitical practices, it is not always the case. Other desires were built into graffiti in the tags, throw-ups, pieces, and murals that emerged from the 2020 protests. One such desire was to resist and foster insurgency against an unjust and inequitable system, as Scott helped elucidate. However, as I delve into in the third chapter, another desire that runs just as deep is the desire to refuse—communities' refusal to let history erase or ignore us. In future work, I aim to investigate the other desires that can swell within infrapolitical practices, including the desire to resile in the face of devastation and seeming dystopic future promises. In this vein, I plan to continue expanding the infrapolitics concepts that Caitlin Ryan and Phillipe Bourbeau started in 2018. Part of what Ryan and Bourbeau question is the ways in which international movements transcend the concept of infrapolitics in the global fields. Scott's understanding of infrapolitics cannot constrain graffiti as an international movement. However, the lens of infrapolitics allows scholars to critically examine practices that challenge the boundaries of political imaginaries.

Throughout *'The Story of Graffiti '*, I use the concept of infrapolitics to frame the discussion of graffiti in three distinct eras. The politics of graffiti has often been overlooked or misunderstood. After exploring some of the political implications of graffiti, a rich tapestry of themes emerges. First and foremost, various graffiti-based communities, whether social clubs, crews, or even hobo jungles, form a warp of egalitarian politics at the intersection of democratic and anarchic values. In future works, I aim to specifically highlight this radical freedom that fosters a sense of skill-based egalitarian communities. A clear example, not covered in the current work, is the case of post-Katrina New Orleans, where writers were granted greater fluidity regardless of their race in a

city experiencing growing segregation.[236] Writers in the 1970s and hobos at the turn of the 20th century speak to similar experiences. My preliminary research would suggest that egalitarian politics is rooted in the nexus of democracy and anarchy and the entanglement of two seemingly contradictory ideals. First is the idealization of a radical individual fighting against the world and a radically close-knit community for survival. In other words, as I move forward, I ask what picture of society different graffiti cultures give us. *The Story of Graffiti* starts by sketching three foundations for this question: the community, which represents the social structure within which graffiti is created; the place of community, which refers to the physical and cultural environment that influences graffiti; and the actions of the community, which encompass the individual and collective behaviors that shape the practice of graffiti.

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[236] Lennon, *Conflict Graffiti,* 146.

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