

Signatures on Stone: Conditions of Naming in Subway Graffiti Culture

Randy Bowley

Northwestern University

'Making a name for yourself,' 'Getting your name around,' 'having it slandered,' 'taken in vain,' or even 'dragged through the mud,' are expressions that indicate the many metaphors we use for naming. But, I want to describe conditions in which these metaphors are given literal form: in contemporary urban graffiti. Since graffiti is not something usually thought of as cultural or social, let alone "cross-cultural" or "socio-linguistic," some explanation of its background and relevance is necessary before I compare one form of graffiti—subway or 'tag'— to other practices of name-giving.

One of the premises of this conference is that in human social behavior there are limits and standards of acceptability that change from culture to culture. This is useful in defining the position in culture of graffiti at large, not just the particular form of graffiti I will discuss. Most of papers read thus far, except for those on the panel "Mis-Communication Across Cultures", address when and how we successfully negotiate cultural differences. But graffiti subcultures, and to some degree all subcultures, create an alternative to any cultural practice in which conventions, laws or customs, such as those governing how names are given, is something one receives through political representation or a bureaucratic hierarchy. The conventions of some forms of graffiti are made and negotiated directly between all writers of graffiti. However tacit these conventions are, they can be effectively changed at one stroke if the circumstances warrant.

The particular alternative chosen by graffiti writers requires, of course, that they willfully break the law; and the frequency with which one class of writers—'taggers'— has done so is cited by sociologists (Abel and Buckley 1982) and psychiatrists (Lomas 1973) as evidence for their inability or refusal to adopt the standards of behavior held by the rest of society: in short, graffiti is "anti-social". These are their specific arguments. Habitual writers of graffiti usually come from socio-economic classes that can seldom afford to own private property. Graffiti writers or taggers are said to respond to this

condition by deliberately signing their names or affixing tags to space that is not theirs, as if in the act of writing, the space symbolically or provisionally becomes their own. (Abel and Buckley 1982) However, no demographic studies of graffiti writers are cited to support such a claim, and the graffiti writers interviewed and quoted in other sources come from a variety of ethnic groups and classes. (Mailer 1973; Gablik 1982; Moufarrege 1982; Hager 1984) Also, most of the known taggers are not yet at an age where ownership of land would be an issue, though one could perhaps argue that writing graffiti in public is one way that some adolescents or teenagers manifest ambitions beyond the home.

Psychoanalytically, graffiti is described as stemming from one phase during infancy in which an infant, curious about the physical nature and appearance of its own stool, plays with it by smearing it on the nearest surface. Failure to satisfy this curiosity in some infants is what causes some adults or adolescents later to play at writing graffiti, and thus to confront later in life the public censure that some infants received from their parents. This theory is more difficult to prove or disprove. But, what neither the sociological or psychoanalytic model explains is why graffiti takes so many different forms, nor, which is more important, why there is a high degree of conformity, of stylistic convention, between writers of the same form—tags. The conformity between those who leave tags or names on public walls reveals that some of them are organized as groups and have definite ideas about their audiences.

The challenges or threats that tag writers make are often directly stated, and many of them address the very institutions that most adamantly uphold the laws against graffiti. One individual in Chicago, for instance, spoke for a group of other graffiti writers and spray painted a message to the Chicago Transit Authority in the North and Clyborne subway station: "CTA: We're Back!" Some graffiti writers in Chicago have banded together under the names 'C T Bomberz', for Chicago Transit Bombers, or 'NBC' short for Never Been Caught. In New York, groups of writers have called themselves 'CIA' for Crazy Inside Artists, or 'OTB,' for Out Ta Bomb. These messages might appear to support the theories described above: that one graffiti sub-culture at least defines itself explicitly and only in opposition to the laws that would prevail against it, whatever the form the graffiti may take. Yet, there still has to be something inherently more to writing on a wall than the satisfaction of breaking the laws against writing on a wall, or it would seem that individual writers before long would grow tired of an activity which carried with it no financial reward.

I am interested, here, not only in the effects of this graffiti, but in its origin. Graffiti has a long history, and since it takes many different forms even in the present era, it might seem obvious that tag graffiti developed out of other kinds of graffiti. Approached in this way, the closest thing to a tag would probably be the practice of carving one's initials or name into stone or wood, in that both tagging and carving initials are confined

to the writing of a name or a mark that stands for a name or identity. But, there are a number of important differences as well.

A name carved into a school desk, on a tree or in stone is usually intended to commemorate significant moments or places in the maker's experience, but the same tags, presumably by the same taggers, are written in hundreds or thousands of different places in a city over a short period. Such a wide, and seemingly indiscriminate, distribution suggests there is nothing to commemorate in each act of tagging, but something important in the act of tagging itself over and above the circumstances surrounding it. Further, a tag is written usually in response to the presence of other tags: in ways that distinguish it stylistically from these other tags, and according to certain tacit rules that govern when and how tags are marked over or beside others. A tagger, then, is conscious of belonging to a community of other taggers, each one aware and respectful of the distinctive style of the others, and each one more or less cognizant of the rules of tagging. Even though carved messages, such as 'Jack + Jill' or 'Harry was Here,' may be written around many other carvings, there do not appear to be any conventions for carving names specifically in relation to other carved names. Rather, each carved name remains a private representation, though done in public, for the makers are seldom known to one another. Finally, and most conspicuously, the forms of the letters in a tag become a basis for experiment and artistic design, and colors and calligraphic flourishes are added to the letters, to make them unique to particular tags.

The comparisons just cited between tags and generic graffiti are intended to introduce the major features of tagging relevant to practices of name-giving, and not to define it solely in relation to earlier forms of graffiti. Insofar as writing tags involves a much greater amount of time, energy and risk than the writing of other graffiti, tagging may answer to very different needs, both perceived and unconscious, of the makers. I take these needs to be, in the main, social and developmental, however antisocial or developmentally stunted the writing of this graffiti may appear by the standards of other cultures.

Some histories of urban graffiti place the origins of tagging much closer to the present day. The circumstances surrounding the production of the first 'tags' should suggest the distinctions and arguments I want to make. 'TAKI 183,' of New York City, was the first tag to receive any publicity, even though it was not the first tag to appear. According to a 1971 interview with the graffitist, he was inspired to write graffiti after hearing how New York street gangs initiated new members by hanging them by their ankles from highway overpasses so they could write their names. (New York Times 1971) The original idea might have come from gang graffiti, but Taki was more interested in seeing his own name written everywhere and in having it seen than in qualifying for membership in any social group. Most gang graffiti reinforces the identity of a group by means of an emblem or a name which stands for all members of that gang. (Ley and

Cybriwski 1974) Graffiti became, for Taki, a way of inventing and asserting his individuality, a persona, apart from the social circles that already gave him a name—Demetrius—and apart from social groups as such. Subsequent tag graffiti was motivated for many of the same reasons, but the demands of creating new tags became even higher.

Not long after the article on Taki appeared in the New York Times, others were inspired to write similar graffiti: JOE 136, BARBARA 162, EEL 159, YANQUI 135, LEO 136, *et al.* Unlike some of the tags written before Taki 183, these later tags were not confined to the individual neighborhoods of the writers. They joined Taki in writing on the trains themselves that ran to other boroughs, and they wrote their tags beside or over others partly as a way of reaching the same audiences as Taki had done and to be seen in relation to one another. Tagging began, then, as a group of individuals who communicated at first nothing other than their own tags, and their loose affiliation to an as yet ill-defined social group. But, it appears that their own tags and the style of tagging as such was enough to answer certain needs. That the earliest tags in New York were always names with numbers marked those who wrote them as belonging to a social group, (around Taki). And, that the names are different and often written or painted in a highly personal style marks the individuals as individuals. Thus, in a simple way, graffiti may meet two fundamental yet exclusive needs "to be different" and "to belong" (in a community of other taggers).

Why tags began as proper nouns at all may not even seem a problem until we consider why they did not take any of other possible forms. Insofar as any marks made in public space without the sanction of a state or municipal license are no more or less illegal under the law than any other mark, individuals are free to make any sort of mark they wish. Yet, thousands of individuals in New York City have chosen to emulate Taki's first marks and begun to write tags in the form of names plus numbers instead of inventing their own codes of graffiti. Tags very similar to those written in New York or Chicago have also appeared in cities further west—San Antonio, Texas; Portland, Oregon; and Vancouver, British Columbia—even though there is no condition imposed on individuals in those cities to write the same sort of graffiti, except that this is the way some graffiti had already been written before. That thousands of persons have imitated this system of marking in several different cities suggests that they conform to what they perceive as others conforming to very specific conventions of tagging: names plus numbers (in New York) or other features. But why these conventions? Why did Taki, one of the earliest taggers, write a word at all, in particular his own name, rather than something else: a political message, an obscenity or a picture, perhaps a self-portrait?

Thus far, I have spoken of tags as if they were names in a straightforward sense, because this is how the taggers themselves have spoken of them. (Mailer 1973; Hager 1984) Yet, conditions peculiar to tags seem to limit their usefulness as names. A name, to cite a preliminary definition, "is a device to introduce order into the mass of human

relationships, a means of distinguishing you from me." (Adler 1978: 93) Tagging accomplishes this because each tagger adopts a different tag and never writes someone else's. But, the earliest tags did not do much more than this.

The tags created shortly before and after 'Taki 183' were simply names plus street numbers, written in a very generic block script. Yet, to quote Hager, "At first there were only a handful of writers in each neighborhood, and it didn't matter what a tag looked like. But after hundreds of writers appeared on the scene, it was necessary to embellish the tags to make them stand out." (1984: 18) Thus, specifically linguistic differences, which distinguish traditional names, were no longer seen as sufficient to mark identity. Color and calligraphic forms derived from advertising, cartoons, and comic books were incorporated to distinguish their tags pictorially as well as semantically. 'Lee' or ' of New York was one such tag that imitated logos in order to be individual and original as a tag. Others distinguished not only themselves, but their neighborhoods by developing regional styles, such as 'manhattan elegant' – long, thin lettering. But, most of the emphasis in tagging is still on distinguishing the individual personality within the confines of a specific social group, and not, as traditional names do, in maintaining the semantic order within some larger population group, the registered voters within New York City, for instance. If the self-aggrandizement peculiar to tags still accomplishes much the same thing as traditional names, it is done for different reasons.

Tags, or any kind of name, would scarcely qualify as "personal" if they did nothing more than denote a particular person. Names carry connotations as well, and for this reason they can become a matter of contention when bestowed by someone else: one may have to 'live up to one's name,' 'live it down' or change it. Tags, of course, already bear the connotation of vandalism just by being graffiti. Some writers have enhanced this image further by taking as their tags words that seem to evoke the act: 'Smear,' 'Kreep' or 'Scribe'. The stake that each tagger has in evolving not only a new name, but a style that connotes his assumed personality, his persona, is a reason that tags are not, like other names, given by one to another, but personally chosen. So, taggers think of themselves as literally "making a name" for themselves. The tag represents an opportunity of taking whatever name, and affecting whatever characteristics one wishes, and in a population group one chooses, as opposed to the social groups one is born or bussed into.

It may appear that I have concentrated on features that distinguish tagging as an individual practice and not a social or cultural practice. What makes it 'social' is simply that all individuals who write tags invent personas and styles by agreeing on and using a finite set of conventions for doing so. No status accrues to a tagger as a member of that social group, or paradoxically, as a unique individual within that group, if his tag does not adhere to the same general stylistic conventions of other tags: in the first place, a tag has to be seen at all, which is why taggers choose highly visible public spaces—train

stations, for example; and they have to be seen in spatial relation to other tags, so tags seldom appear isolated from other tags, but around or on top of others. As already mentioned, tags are stylistically related when each tag is the result of a consciously fashioned style, and not written in a generic manner, as earlier forms of name graffiti.

The conventions of tags are determined in part by the mnemonic and optical problems they have to solve. Taggers want their marks remembered as well as seen, and the color and distinctive forms given their letters allow them to be processed and stored in memory iconically as well as linguistically. It is no longer necessary, then, or even possible to read some tags, because they become blurs of color and form seen quickly as a train passes or at a distance. Separating them in the visual field becomes problematic when each tag on a surface is underneath, over or adjacent to dozens of other tags, so the letters of tags are forced to become almost abstract in design. Yet, if taggers are intent on promoting their individual identities, why do they even place their tags in a position that occasionally makes them difficult to see? In some ways, this is inevitable, since they have to share some of the same properties as other tags to be seen as tags, and since each tagger could not even adequately compete with other writers over space or frequency if his tag did not directly answer the challenge of others by being placed where others marked. To compete on these terms requires that tags sometimes take highly abbreviated forms. Thus, 'Teasel' becomes at times 'T'sel,' and other tags are simply like initials, some written cursorily: 'CV', 'TM', ' ', ' ', ' ', or ' '. Yet, no matter how illegible, unpronounceable, or minimal such tags appear, by being repeatedly associated with the same taggers, they perform functions at least analogous to a name; that is, they represent that person and that person alone.

It remains to be shown, though, in what fundamental ways tags differ from names, regardless of the features they may share. Ironically, it is on this basis that tags literalize some of the very metaphors we have for names. Tags are not simply written like other names, they are limited to the dimensions of written discourse. The style, and thus the identity of taggers, is communicable only through visible means, thus the rich and long pictorial evolution of some tags, phase 2 for instance. But some tags are confined to writing in other ways. When a tag is illegible as a word, it cannot be resolved back into the letters that make it up and thus sounded out. Other tags, though their individual letters remain legible, do not spell things out that could even be pronounced: 'ey,' 'yt,' are not simply written as initials with periods between the letters. Still other tags are derived by intentionally misspelling words: 'Kreep,' (creep), 'Smeer,' (smear), 'Freze,' (freeze), 'Swayde' (suede, or swayed), 'Ct Bomberz' (CT Bombers), or 'Out Ta Bomb' (Out to Bomb). Such misspellings make sense of course only when they are written out.

There are a number of disadvantages and advantages in being only written, and written only by the owner of the tag. Though most taggers abide by the rule of not copying other tags, it often happens that tags, and reputations as taggers, are subverted

or negated by being appropriated and written intentionally wrongly, upside or backwards: 'C'VEE,' for example, has been written ' ' , and the original C'VEE has responded by writing 'C'VEE is Back!'. When tags are not threatened by direct appropriation, they are often simply written over by other tags, (even though there may be room on a surface for both), or simply crossed out. Tags are sometimes, then, literally, "taken in vain" and soiled. It is evident, however, that taggers remember where they have placed their tags, and that they monitor their "condition" because they often return and re-impose a new mark over a tag or mark that has been superimposed over their earlier mark, thus, physically "clearing their name" by clearing away a space for it.

If tags are, as I have suggested, pronouns distinct from yet related to traditional names, it should be possible and intelligible to read in a string or layer of tags, a syntactical as well as pictorial logic. When written by the owner, the tag stands for him/her semantically in the same way a first person pronoun does: 'I,' 'Me,' (or even 'Mine,' in that a tag occupies and owns a space). When used by another, however, the first-person (C'VEE or 'I') is made into a second person (' ' or 'You'). Layers of tags, then, may form simple grammatical units: 'I' (or ' ') dismiss, or challenge 'You' (or C'VEE). It is doubtful the messages get any more complex than that, because there are no symbols or parts of speech used other than the pronouns: we have to infer the types of verbs they would use on the basis of how the pronoun tags are written.

What advantages tags have in being solely written is implicit in the conditions I have described above. Taggers are beholden to no other person to give them their name or define their personality or persona. And, in as much as taggers normally restrict themselves to writing their own tags, the reputation of each tagger among his/her social group (or among interested bystanders who simply watch how the patterns of tagging fall), stands or falls solely on the strength of his/her own efforts to "get their tags around."

References

- Abel, Charles and Barbara Buckley
 1982 *The Handwriting on the Wall: Toward a Sociology of Graffiti*. New Haven: The Greenwood Press.
- Gablik, Suzi
 1982 "Report from New York: the Graffiti Question." *Art in America*, 70. 33-7.
- Hager, Stephan

Bowley

1984 *Hip Hop: An Illustrated History of Break Dancing, Rap Music and Graffiti*. New York: St Martin's Press.

Ley, David and Roman Cybriwski

1974 "Urban Graffiti as Territorial Markers." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 64 .491-505.

Lomas, Harvey D

1973 "Graffiti: Some Observations and Speculations." *Psychoanalytic Review*, Spring, pp. 71-89.

Mailer, Norman

1973 *The Faith of Graffiti*. New York: Praeger Publishers.

Moufarrege, Nicolas A.

1982 "Lightning Strikes Not Once but Twice: an Interview with Graffiti Artists of New York. " *Arts*, 57. 87-93 .

