Graffiti in Motion
Modes of Trespass in New York City’s Subway System

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In the 1970s and early 1980s, a continuous wallpaper of graffiti enveloped the surfaces of New York City. Pioneering graffiti writers privileged the exteriors of subway trains to write their brief, disjointed, and colorful names. Illegal works of graffiti rushed through the city in blurry sequences of encrypted words, pausing briefly at station platforms only to dissolve once more into a blitz of splotches and streaks. It was on the sides of subway trains that the heyday of hip-hop graffiti, sometimes called “American” or subway graffiti, took place. It was there that the social and aesthetic values of this writing subculture were realized in a frenzy of names that would vanish just as quickly as they appeared.

So what did these early subway graffiti writers achieve through their illegal endeavors if their names could not be read, much less meditated upon or sold? Why does it matter to think about subway graffiti in terms of trespass at all? While the individual motivations for and perceptions of graffiti writing are diffuse and often undocumented, research into the social and sensorial effects of urban life may help us understand the impact of subway graffiti writing.¹ With the rising power of mass media in the twentieth century,
namely newspapers and television, there was a growing awareness of the many forms of mediation that shape daily life. In 1967, Marshall McLuhan articulated the totalizing effects of mass media on the individual, stating,

“All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. . . . Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments.”

For McLuhan, the medium of interest was electric technology, which he asserted actively restructured patterns of social and personal life. McLuhan’s understanding of media as an environment brings attention to a new set of forces that molded the urban experience of various populations, as I shall demonstrate in this paper. Subway trains, powered by 650 volts of electricity via a third rail, can thus be considered modern media objects that intimately connected New Yorkers with the unstable postwar urban landscape.

I argue that the appearance of graffiti on subway trains acted as a visible and immediate counterpoint to the abstract, regulatory forces of the New York City subway system. In other words, graffiti writing on subways was not a futile or useless activity, but served as a means to create what McLuhan terms “anti-environments” or “countersituations.” McLuhan explains, “Environments are not passive wrappings, but are rather active processes which are invisible. The ground rules, pervasive structure, and overall patterns of environments elude easy perception. Anti-environments, or countersituations made by artists provide means of direct attention and enable us to see and understand more clearly.”

By no means do all graffiti writers (then or now) identify as artists, but the majority of pioneering graffiti writers during the 1970s and early 1980s were inner-city youths from working-class backgrounds who endured the brunt of social inequalities and economic hardships. These neglected inner-city populations were often made invisible in the public domain. Their words, images, and symbols grafted onto the facades of moving trains, however, transformed a seemingly passive conduit for human transport into a dynamic filmstrip of and by the people of New York City. It was a filmstrip that New
Yorkers watched, entered into, and actively changed on the tracks and in train yards. Thus, graffiti writers and bystanders witnessed and, to varying degrees, participated in the subway system’s ability to shape personal, social, and economic practices.
Understanding graffiti writing as a mode of trespass is crucial for understanding how subway “countersituations” emerge. This paper addresses how subway graffiti writing transgressed three abstract, but interrelated, boundaries: the personal space of individuals, the public space where individuals engage in social interactions, and the work spaces of employed and unemployed populations. By disrupting the powerful yet invisible boundaries that define appropriate access to and use of the subway system, graffiti helped amplify passengers’ awareness of their changing urban environment. As a defining aspect of the subway media environment, graffiti writing demanded all bystanders to confront the vibrant yet volatile contours of personal spaces, public spaces, and workspaces in New York City during this transformative decade.

The sources I draw upon in this exploration of subway writing are eclectic...
and selective. While I do not mean to ignore or diminish the voices of actual graffiti writers, I ground my analysis of the 1970s New York City subway graffiti scene in the firsthand observations of American journalist Norman Mailer and British novelist Paul Theroux, as well as in the recent sociological research of Joe Austin. Mailer and Theroux investigated the scene firsthand and interviewed graffiti writers, politicians, and transit police in an attempt to contextualize the subway graffiti phenomenon at its height during the 1970s and early 1980s. While their interpretations of graffiti differ, both authors describe graffiti’s intrusion into personal sensory boundaries of urbanites in sensorial ways. On the other hand, Austin’s 2001 study of 1970s subway graffiti writing relies heavily on other media forms like newspapers, television, film, zines, and monographs of the period to analyze subway graffiti’s relation to postwar urban crises. These so-called “outsiders” provide a wide range of perspectives and responses to the collective appropriation of subway exteriors by graffiti writers within the context of postwar changes in New York City.

Graffiti may take a visual form, but when grafted to the trains it became a multi-sensorial experience that was integrated with the barrage of noise, wind, heat, and vibrations of the subway system. The moving trains augmented the visual impact of graffiti by adding mobility and velocity to its colors, forms, and letters. Often invading a person’s visual field and bodily domain, subway graffiti triggered individuals’ involuntary reflexes—such as rapid eye movement, muscle tension, and other bodily movements like head turning—in their attempts to decipher (or shield oneself from) the visual onslaught of the train. Instead of reinforcing socially constructed boundaries of personal space, subway graffiti barraged the nervous system like a shock of electricity, provoking synaesthetic experiences that triggered multiple bodily senses.4

In The Faith of Graffiti (1974), Norman Mailer describes how spray-painted names and figures combine with “the zoom, the aghr, and the ahhr, of screeching rails, the fast motion of subways roaring into stations, [to make] the comic strip come to life.”5 The thrill and excitement of experiencing the graffiti-covered trains in motion was visceral and resulted from the physical, aural, and visual sensation of hurtling metal and vibrant colors. The graphic design magazine Print noted how the subway trains’ “movement adds an unexpected dimension: streaking past the stations along upper Broadway is a
bit like being showered with confetti.” American sculptor Claes Oldenburg, who is a well-known figure in established art institutions, famously remarked: “You’re standing there in the station, everything is gray and gloomy, and, all of a sudden, one of those graffiti trains slides in and brightens the place like a bouquet from Latin America.” For some, graffiti was experienced as a vibrant, even festive, sojourn from the city’s monotonous facades of gray concrete and steel.

In total contrast, Paul Theroux states in his 1982 New York Times Magazine article, titled “Subway Odyssey,” that, “the graffiti are [sic] bad, violent, and destructive; they are anti-art, and the people who praise them are either malicious or lazy-minded.” While he acknowledges a difference between perception and reality, Theroux argues that the first instances of subway crime came with the appearance of graffiti in 1970. For Theroux and other passengers, “the whiff of criminality, the atmosphere of viciousness” emitted by graffiti was so strong that the sense of imminent crime was thought to exceed the actual number of criminal acts. In Theroux’s account, jumbled and illegible scrawls serve as a visual counterpart to the dampness, stench, and noise of the trains and stations. Similarly, New York artist Mark Lancaster associates graffiti with physical assault in a comment also made in 1982. Lancaster explains, “I can’t separate it [graffiti] from fear, from someone pulling a knife on you and robbing you in a public place.” Lancaster’s assertion conflates graffiti with social anxieties about being in public spaces.

In the stations and trains of the New York subway, people of different racial and economic backgrounds shared the same space with the homeless and other marginalized populations. A stranger’s hands could just as plausibly hold a can of spray paint as it could a knife, and this atmosphere of uncertainty often induced commuters to cringe, shudder, or grimace in defense against the unpredictable and potentially “dangerous” crowds. Far from static markings on a passive surface, subway graffiti catalyzed bodily, synaesthetic experiences and accentuated the power of the subway system as a media environment by fusing with electrical apparatuses of the subway system itself. Tearing passengers waiting on the platforms from their private thoughts and emotions, subway graffiti signified either a riotous celebration or an offensive assault to urban dwellers during the 1970s.

Subway graffiti’s second mode of trespass undermined notions of a unified social body that the New York subway media environment in part defined
through the architecture of its stations and its public signage. Similar to the way in which it barraged the sensorial and bodily boundaries of individual New Yorkers, subway graffiti barreled through an urban landscape that was rapidly becoming stratified according to class, occupation, race, employment and housing inequalities. After the Second World War, New York City underwent a set of geographical and economic changes as part of its post-industrial transformation. This transformation involved the decline and relocation of manufacturing and distribution sectors outside of urban centers and the increase of the financial, real estate, and service sectors in urban economies. Joe Austin points out that an unusual shift occurred during this period in that waves of poor and unskilled workers did not continue to move to New York City; instead, their job prospects were run out of town. The postwar city faced aging infrastructures, housing shortages, and an exodus of white middle-class populations to the suburbs. The Cross Bronx Expressway and other postwar urban renewal projects meant that subway maintenance and urban housing became lower priorities on city officials’ agendas. Municipal funds were used to support new interstate highways, suburban tract developments, and high-rise offices in New York City’s business districts —such projects did little to help the less affluent secure jobs or housing.

In the midst of all this, graffiti appeared on every subway line and on the surfaces of every station stop, disrupting the discreet visual coding of station architecture while making visible the fractured social landscape. The design of subway stations projected certain images of neighborhoods, ranging from the charming Forest Hills station to the cage-like Livonia Avenue station. Moving from borough to borough, the trains’ graffiti-clad sides were momentarily judged by passengers against each stop’s architectural style. Clashing with some neighborhood station aesthetics and blending in with others, subway graffiti staged a daily comparison of neighborhood conditions.

With the populace further splitting between city inhabitants and suburban commuters, public signage served to homogenize those traveling within New York City by subjecting all commuters the Transit Authority (T.A.). Yet graffiti also exposed the social reality that not all train passengers were equal. Typically, station plaques and maps replaced personal interactions with T.A. representatives, transforming the T.A. further into a faceless, symbolic presence. Clearly printed and legible plaques, laminated pamphlets, and
company logos codified the T.A.’s jurisdiction over New York City’s subway system. In contrast, graffiti writers hand painted tags over the T.A.’s signs, thus challenging in part the authority’s symbolic control of the system through their distinctive use of style and their strategic placement graffiti writing. Graffiti tags on T.A. signs also challenged passengers to think on their feet at all times. Without legible signs to direct public flow, commuters had to rely on their street smarts, past experiences, or other passengers to successfully navigate the maze-like subway system. In his 1982 article, Theroux describes one sign that, like a Mad-Lib, read: “The subway tracks are very dangerous. If the train should stop, do not _’ the rest is black and unreadable.” Passengers thus had to improvise in lieu of following the “correct” instructions outlined by the T.A. and had to rely on the system’s other forms of communication, like the electronically-mediated voices of train announcers or token vendors. In more substantial ways, subway graffiti circulated as visual evidence that mass transportation was a leading conduit for vandalism and other “crimes.” New York City’s subway system provided citywide access to all neighborhoods, both rich and poor. For example, the South Bronx was a notorious high-risk neighborhood, but seven subway lines passed through it. The interconnected lines of the subway transported commuters, police officers, and supposed criminals alike throughout the city. Frequently had to stop and ask strangers or transit officers for directions. Graffiti on the trains made travel an active experience and forced commuters to engage in imaginative interpretive strategies and to develop a heightened social awareness while traveling through this media environment.

Graffiti circulated as visual evidence that mass transportation was a leading conduit for vandalism and other crimes. New York’s subway system provided citywide access to all neighborhoods, rich and poor. For example, the South Bronx was a notorious high-risk neighborhood, but seven subway lines passed through it. The interconnected lines of the subway transported commuters, police officers, and criminals alike throughout the city. Graffiti advertised the fact that inner city youths would neither conform to architectural prescriptions nor remain within boundaries of certain neighborhoods. Graffiti writers tagged wherever they had access to, and the New York City subways exponentially increased their mobility and, subsequently, their visibility. The very presence of graffiti produced by inner-city youths challenged the efforts of New York City officials who sought to render poor populations and people of color “invisible” in order to allocate
more funds to urban renewal and suburban development projects during the 1970s. Subway graffiti advertised the fact that inner-city youths would neither conform to architectural prescriptions nor remain within boundaries of certain neighborhoods. nightly and covert operations, graffiti writers questioned capitalist notions of productive labor.

The third mode of trespass exposes the subway media environment’s role in defining of work and workspaces. Through their nightly covert operations, graffiti writers questioned capitalist notions of productive labor. capitalist notions of production: what is work? According to whom and under what conditions? Inner-city youths channeled their productive energy and creativity into graffiti writing—an act that which required illegal entry into the city’s train yards and layups. The nightly hiatus of the trains provided an opportunity for graffiti writers to produce their personal works for public viewing. They gathered and worked in the train yards illegally without supervision or sponsorship. The production of graffiti was not driven by occupational expectations or economic rewards, at least initially. Sneaking into the train yards required a great deal of time, stealth, and knowledge of the train yards’ entry and exit points. Graffiti writers took pride in their determination, focus, and teamwork in order to spray paint their names in elaborate styles in the dark of night. Subway graffiti publicized a group of motivated and hardworking adolescents, even though their creative process was covert and informal and their workspaces were illegally accessed.

Furthermore, graffiti writers seized the city’s symbol of efficiency, mass mobility, and public access and exposed its limits by revealing the trains’ immobility and inefficiency. Graffiti writers reminded city officials and daytime commuters that even channels of transportation and capital flow must succumb to inertia. Graffiti production thrived despite, or perhaps because of, the city’s financial neglect, Transit Authority’s maintenance delays, and the trains’ “out of service” schedules. Graffiti materialized the system’s invisible and untimely hiccups. Trespassing on production standards and the progressive narrative of endless capital expansion, graffiti writing on subway trains represented the dangers (and inevitability) of financial stagnation. In this way, graffiti signaled that the economy, like the New York City subway system, was susceptible to stagnation, misuse, and crashes.
While poor and “unskilled” populations faced the greatest financial, social, and political burdens, it would be wrong to say that white suburbanites were unscathed by the radical changes that accompanied urban transformations during the 1970s and early 1980s. Mailer sardonically suggests that graffiti writers and office workers share similar psychological states and asserts that perhaps commuters condemn graffiti from fear of “the insane graffiti writer in the self [—] for what filth would burst out of every civilized office worker in New York if ever they started to write on moving public walls?” Mailer posits that commuters choose not to look closely at the graffiti on train interiors because it could lead them to reflect on their own behaviors and social constraints. For Mailer and others, graffiti provoked feelings of helplessness—at first because it could not be prevented, but also because it could not be avoided. Facing new social and economic pressures within their own class, many postwar suburbanites were forced to endure such mind-numbing, graffiti-plagued commutes between their home in the suburbs and their workplace in the city. Together, creators and spectators of graffiti-covered trains revealed the invisible terrain of access and trespass and of progress and collapse within New York City’s decaying subway system during the 1970s and early 1980s.

To conclude, graffiti-covered trains overwhelmed the “appropriate” boundaries of personal, public, and workspaces that were often taken for granted by subway commuters and city officials. Its brazen appearance and proliferation forced New Yorkers to grapple with competing patterns of thinking, acting, and experiencing postwar transformations in urban space. Mailer, Theroux, and Austin explore many, sometimes conflicting, perspectives in their attempts to understand how graffiti brought to the foreground psychological, social, and economic tensions within New York City’s subway ecology. By comparing these writers’ accounts and insights on graffiti writing, we can see how New York City’s subways acted as a media environment, and how subway graffiti both influenced and reflected the tensions between individual actions, social norms, and capitalist ideology.

Despite its ephemeral nature and mixed reception, some subway graffiti persists to this day, and gestures to the subway’s enduring capacity to stageas subtle “countersituations.” Subway graffiti has the uncanny ability to trespass or sneak into interconnected media environments that engulf the entire city. In the 1970s, graffiti writers were producing, circulating, and transmitting
Graffiti in Motion

their names among multiple media without the Transit Authority’s permission and sometimes without the conscious cooperation of the news and film industries. Graffiti writers deliberately tagged their name in areas of the city that they expected would be photographed, videotaped, or filmed, even if these appearances were in the background of photos or footage intended for other purposes. At the start of the 1970s, graffiti writers produced, circulated, and transmitted their names among multiple media outlets without the Transit Authority’s permission, sometimes without even the conscious cooperation of established media industries. A classic example is the graffiti work by SUPER KOOL 223 that was captured in a scene of *The Exorcist* (dir. William Friedkin, US, 1973). Graffiti writers’ intuitive awareness of and encroachment on media is an unsettling reminder that those in charge of media environments a film production to public infrastructure, never have firm control or full knowledge of the interrelation of their respective systems. With a keen awareness of how media environments operate, graffiti writers have been able to slip their names in and out of public sight and have their names often unwittingly reproduced in other mediums. Subway graffiti writing transformed the trains into a living filmstrip of the city; its reappearance and re-animation in other media environments preserves its potent effects to this day.

Notes


3  McLuhan, 68.

4  What I mean by a “synesthetic experience” is a multi-sensory response in which one sensory pathway is triggered and often leads involuntarily to another sensory pathway. For example, the sight of graffiti is frequently coupled with the scent of mold or urine present in subway stations. Rather than an inherent neurological condition, my usage of synesthesia is meant
to emphasize how perception of our surroundings is largely learned, packaged, and naturalized.


7 Mailer, 23.


9 Theroux, 71.


11 Austin, 19.

12 Theroux, 22.

13 Mailer, 25.

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