Comment / Commentaire

Confessions of an Ethnographer: Reflections on Fieldwork with Graffiti Writers in Montreal[1]

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Tonight, I jumped over a fence dividing city from federally owned Canadian National railway property. It took me longer than it would have any writer. They're used to it. I'm not. Still, I managed to pull myself over the 6-foot steel fence, complete with barbed wire and positioned slightly at an angle that made it difficult for me to rest my feet and lower body on the fence while I pulled myself up with my arms. I had to rely on my upper-body strength—of which I don't have much—and haul myself over to reach the other side. Not an easy job. I imagined for a moment what it could be like trying to run from the cops. I walked on and along the railroad tracks with my guide, a local writer, who mindfully pointed out sections of various freight trains stationed along the strip that showed graffiti. I saw trains punctuated with *tags*, others with *throw-ups*, still others with beautifully executed *pieces*.[2] As usual, the graffiti on the freights all listed from where they came: Santa Fe, Chicago, Vancouver, Montreal. After taking snapshots and discussing a few of the most stylistically meaningful pieces, we slowly made our way out of the site. It was then that my guide suddenly said: "I don't believe I jumped a fence with Louise Gauthier tonight." He had first seen me on CBC television's *City Beat* in the role of "graffiti expert." He saw me as an authority on graffiti and respected me for it. I respected him because, being a writer, he knew more about the practice of graffiti than I did.

As with the other writers I came to know, issues of gender, age, education and class worked themselves through our relations with one another. I sometimes had the sense of being perceived as the matriarch of graffiti—given my age, sex and educational background. I ended up studying the activities of young men, who were very different from me. Nevertheless, they let me in and I felt privileged that they allowed me to be a temporary "insider." When I could do something to help them out, I did: reclaim a camera from a police station which had been kept following a graffiti-related arrest; work out

some of the logistics needed to successfully put on graffiti events; share photographs of graffiti I had taken during trips to other cities; discuss with them what it means to write.

Figure 1

Train Yard, No. 2 1998. General view of train yard from St. Catherine Street overpass east of Frontenac Street, Montreal.
Photo by Todd Stewart

In the field, I slowly developed relationships with writers. I worked particularly closely with a small number of them. This helped me develop a better understanding of who they are, and at the same time made me see more clearly who I am. While many would have felt threatened by some of these young men most people see as deviants, criminals, or "freaks," I felt safe and accepted. And this despite the fact that some (and therefore most likely all) knew about my personal life: queer. Some of them followed me through my separation with my partner of five years, though they never pried into the matter or asked questions. I walked and talked with the writers both alone and in groups, visited desolate places with them both during the day and late at night, and wandered in areas most people try to avoid. Some of them knew my former partner and during our relationship included her in activities and conversations, and treated her with respect. Despite my queerness, or maybe because of it, we were able to develop warm relationships, devoid of sexual tension, and in some cases discussed gender roles, love and commitments. In this respect, I became one of the boys.

During a recent press conference at Montreal City Hall that served to officially launch the city's new zero-tolerance plan with regard to the practice and presence of graffiti in the metropolitan area, I recall being both upset and unsure about the kind of impact this plan would have on the writing community. I was already witnessing fragmentation within the community and feared that this kind of effort would dismantle whatever bond had been created among writers, and between writers and myself. Most everyone in the community was puzzled about the plan, not knowing how to position themselves in relation to it.[3] Some writers were highly critical of those who were willing to collaborate with the city while those who were willing to do so could not understand why others were unwilling to do the same. I myself was torn between agreeing to work with city officials and distancing myself from their zero-tolerance plan: On the one hand, it might be an appropriate professional choice for me to pursue a collaboration with the municipal government; on the other hand, the quasi war-like position the city chose to adopt and the official political rhetoric it upheld (i.e., that graffiti writing is a gang-based phenomenon, that it is overall a destructive and filthy practice, and that the people who produce it are vandals and should be treated as criminals) made it very difficult for me to create an alliance.

On the evening following the press conference, I called a writer and asked him if he would be willing to meet with me to talk. He accepted and picked me up a few hours later. As soon as I got in the car, I confessed that I did not know what to do.[4] He asked me where I wanted to go. I recall saying something like: "I don't know. All I know is that I need to get off the island for a while . . . I need some distance. I need to see the city from the outside. Just take me away for a while. Go over the bridge to the South Shore. There we can see the reflection of the city in the water. Maybe that'll help." Unused to witnessing uncertainty on my part, he graciously acknowledged my wish and we drove off. "I'm really sorry" I went on to say "but I might cry. Not many people see me weep." Though I finally did not cry, the

very act of warning him became a clear indication to me—and I think to him as well—that I was reaching out to him as a friend. Recognizing and accepting this gesture, he simply responded "no problem" then took me on a tour of various industrial sites in the city he particularly liked. We drove over a small bridge on which I had never been. There, I saw the city from an angle I had never before seen. We followed the winding road that leads to the Montreal Casino. We drove over the Victoria Bridge—my favourite—to the south shore. He brought me to a parking lot of a small shopping mall located by a freight train yard off of Highway 116. We went into a *dépanneur* and he bought a bag of popcorn and two Cokes. Despite all the things that marked us apart, two things bound us together: graffiti and Coca Cola. We then sat in the car for an hour or so in the parking lot, with the dashboard light on looking at photographs of graffiti he had recently received from fellow writers in Toronto. We looked at and talked about graffiti. Silently acknowledging that we somehow understood and accepted each other, we talked about styles of writing—who's "biting" (copying another writer); who's producing "clean" work (steady outlines and even fills), who's come up with original and vibrant colour combinations and good "pull" (3-D) effects; who's "getting up" (turning out good quality work in great quantity); who's working on trains more often than on the street; who's a "toy" (inexperienced writer who has an unsteady hand and a poor understanding of the structure of interlocking letters and/or who does not understand the geographic do's and don'ts of the practice); who's "gone legit" (turned to legal work). We drove back, stopping in various locations on the Plateau Mont-Royal looking at recent graffiti. He drove me home, I thanked him, and we said goodnight.

Gender, age, sexual orientation, education and class are among the prevailing factors that distinguish and divide people and groups of people from one another. Yet various personal experiences, such as this one, confirmed to me—and I believe to some of those with whom I developed close bonds—that these social constructions can also sometimes create unique bonds among people through an awareness and acceptance of difference.

Throughout the study, I made it very clear to myself and to the writers that my role was not that of a writer—or rather a graffiti writer. I did not take on the practice of spray painting—indeed I declined to do so even when asked—though I did feel the urge to take up the can of paint on more than a few occasions. I claimed an appropriate distance throughout and maintained it in an effort to affirm my role as an observer. To this day, I have not "gone native" in this respect. Yet, my fieldwork has permeated and affected my life and I do believe that my presence among the writers has also affected theirs. I often caught myself spending more time with the writers than would ordinarily be required of a researcher. I thought about some of the problems and issues they were facing or about to confront. In this sense, I felt I became part of the community. By recording, writing and talking about graffiti, I progressively became aware that I too was participating in shaping the discourse on graffiti.

The social scientist side of me still feels as though I did not conduct my work in an objective fashion. As a person, I feel a sense of fulfillment because I was able to contribute what I could to the development of an urban street movement that began to have some impact. In this respect, how much of an observer—and how little of a participant—could I really claim to have been? I gradually moved from being an outsider to an insider and with this saw my role change from observer to participant. Yet, because of the nature of my work—I was writing about graffiti but was not a graffiti writer—I was a particular kind of participant and constantly had to confront the reality that I could never completely be a true insider. While writers would make a point of keeping me up to date on where they went and what they did, they were just as aware as I was that I ultimately could not fully know what it was like to be a graffiti writer. Despite the fact that many writers trusted me and that I did observe them write on walls in tunnels, underpasses, and on the street, I never did go to a train yard (i.e., on federal property), for the purpose of observing them paint freights. My sense is that they were protecting me, just as I was protecting myself.

As I was packing my bags the night before I left Montreal, one writer with whom I had developed a close relationship called to say goodbye. We had seen each other earlier that week and had spoken over the phone several times since then. "We're gonna miss you," he said. "Things won't be the same without you. You realize that you're the only one in the crew who's not a graffiti writer or a DJ or a skateboarder." This was the first I had heard about being a crew member. Catching me off guard, I asked him what he meant. "You're a TA girl. Didn't you know that? You're one of us." It was only after we said our final farewell that I realized this was his way to show appreciation and give thanks. Though I never was and will never be completely part of their world, we nevertheless developed mutual respect. As I now strive to complete my work, I remember the lesson I learned: Unless we are willing to leap over those fences that divide us, we will never be able know what lies beyond them.

Notes

1 This is part of a larger study on the practice of graffiti in Montreal. In 1998, I earned a doctoral degree in Sociology from the Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science of the New School for Social Research (New York) for my work entitled *Writing on the Run: The History and Transformation of Street Graffiti in Montreal in the 1990s*. Between 1991 and 1998, I documented the practice both visually by way of photography and video and through the spoken word by way of structured interviews and informal conversations with graffiti writers. I wrote this reflection as I was on the point of completing a second year-long period of fieldwork in Montreal in August 1996. Following the completion of my degree, I continued to document the practice until 2000. I would like to thank Sally Cole for her support and for encouraging me to publish this excerpt.

2 Like other cultures, the graffiti-writing world has its own language, structure and social hierarchy. Within this world, a "graffiti writer" or plainly a "writer" is someone who produces a specific kind of graffiti; the kind that originated in some of the ghettos of New York City in the mid to late 1960s. For the purposes of my research, I have called this form of visual representation "signature graffiti" in order to distinguish it from other types, particularly political graffiti, which was the most widespread form of graffiti in Montreal until the early 1990s. Like other forms of graffiti, including political graffiti, signature graffiti is a mode of communication and a form of public culture. However, unlike political graffiti which usually consist of legible, stylistically simple, and anonymous inscriptions that most often thematically refer to large-scale collective identity issues, signature graffiti is first and foremost a practice based on the representation of the self in the public environment. In fact, it is because the name constitutes the central theme or idea of the practice that I called this type of inscription "signature graffiti." Although "characters" (cartoon-like figures) and a variety of symbols (stars, crowns, arrows, exclamation and quotation marks) are sometimes also depicted, most of the work produced in the public space is conveyed through the written word, specifically the "tag" (the nickname), and is usually undecipherable to the untrained eye. Individually, these inscriptions are self-identifying declarations. Combined, they create a visual continuum that shapes and defines a social world. Tags, throw-ups, and pieces constitute the three basic types of signature graffiti. Tags are quickly produced stylized monochromatic inscriptions representing the nickname of the individual who produces them. This is the most common form of signature graffiti. Throw-ups are blown-up versions of tags. Usually written in big bubbled-up letters with an outline and a fill, they require more time to make and, depending on where they are produced, represent a riskier type of activity. Pieces are colourful large-scale compositions. Again most often name-based, these works are composed of interlocking letters and exaggerated 3-D effects. Pieces sometimes include characters, symbols, and references to the urban environment. When done illegally, piecing is the riskiest activity a graffiti writer can engage in. Interestingly, pieces are also the type most people usually refer to as "graffiti art," whether they are produced legally or illegally. Though some people outside the signature graffiti writing community and some writers themselves use the term "graffiti artist" (or "vandal," depending on one's ideological position) to refer to those who practice this type of visual language and "graffiti art" (or "trash," again depending on one's belief and value system) to refer to the language itself, specifically pieces, most of those who practise signature graffiti refer to themselves (especially among themselves) as "writers" and to what they do as "writing."

3 During the press conference, Mayor Pierre Bourque along with other city officials, including the Chief of Police, explained that the newly-developed plan to eliminate graffiti consisted in distributing $200,000 to five community organizations in particularly "hard hit" areas of the city. The purpose of allocating the funds to these organizations was to provide them with the financial means to set up and run anti-graffiti programs and hire youth to clean up graffiti-riddled walls in their respective neighborhoods. Of the $200,000 allocated in 1996, $25,000 served to sponsor the production of five murals. Some of the graffiti writers who attended the press conference saw this as an opportunity to have access to a source of income for their visual work. Others saw it as a sell out and a trap. Since the City at the time saw signature graffiti (i.e., tags, throw-ups, pieces) as being *de facto* the core of the graffiti problem, by the end of the summer none of the municipally funded murals embodied the graffiti writing aesthetic.

4 Today, graffiti writers (both in Canada and elsewhere in industrialized countries) come from heterogeneous backgrounds. No longer only the language of the disenfranchised, it has expanded from an inner-city practice to an inter-city and international one adopted and accepted by many people. However, while the practice has become in great part multiracial, multiethnic, cross-class, and transnational, it nevertheless still is an overwhelmingly male activity where gender hierarchies are generally sustained and reproduced.