GRAFFITI: CONTESTING VISUAL NARRATIVES OF WASTE IN
DON DELILLO’S AMERICA

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Rebecca Crescenti
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ABSTRACT

GRAFFITI: CONTESTING VISUAL NARRATIVES OF WASTE IN DON DELILLO’S AMERICA

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What I would like to challenge is this notion that graffiti has to be eradicated because it causes damage and that it is nothing more than vandalism, waste, and destruction. Rather, I claim that graffiti is a representation of an alternative visual narrative to the dominant forces of the city, and as such, contests what it means to live in the urban environment. I argue that all graffiti acts are personal accounts, though, not all are politically motivated. I employ the use of fictional characters from Don Delillo’s Underworld, Moonman 157 and Klara Sax, in order to illustrate graffiti as a visual narrative (Delillo 1997). These characters felt an intense drive to tell the world about their experiences with people, places, and things that had passed through the world unnoticed, which is described as the urge to write graffiti. Their passion and natural propensity for writing untold narratives, in untraditional ways, is what drove them. I
claim that the graffiti instinct contests the urge to give in to accepted norms, which are often heavily dictated through media as well as the ordered urban environment. Thus, the graffiti instinct, I claim, is the missing element in current academic scholarship on graffiti as a visual narrative. I will be using narrative theory in order to argue that graffiti, as a visual narrative, has the ability to make positive contributions to scholarship. I will begin with a brief summation of graffiti’s background and history, as well as its criminal reputation in the United States. I will then give examples as to how Delillo’s novel illustrates the use of narrative theory and its impact on how history is recorded and perceptions of graffiti, as a problem, and how this has been perpetuated in the media. In other words, I will show how his words seek to disrupt order, much like the graffiti writer who seeks to both disrupt and create. By using this methodology, it is my hope to bring new perspectives into the complex, provocative, and controversial world of graffiti as a worthy subject of study that continues to thrive and evolve well into the twenty-first century.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Graffiti: Contesting Visual Narratives of Waste in Don Delillo’s America

There is no doubt graffiti has a history. In the United States, I argue that its history has changed the way we look at the word itself. Once considered a primitive method of communication in the ancient world, it now carries a significant amount of cultural and political baggage in any city around the world. Often confused by civic leaders as gang tags, its baggage is plentiful and often undeserved. To some in densely populated urban areas, graffiti is a celebration of truth as subversion—juxtaposition against the fictional world of advertising. To many, though, graffiti is vandalism without merit and deserves severe criminal punishment. It is something that should be erased; it is waste and destruction. What I would like to challenge is this notion that graffiti has to be eradicated because it causes damage and that it is nothing more than vandalism, waste, and destruction. Rather, I claim that graffiti is a representation of an alternative visual narrative to the dominant forces of the city, and as such, contests what it means to live in the urban environment.

This narrative is not so much a heroic maneuver as it is an instinctual drive that materializes in the form of colorful lettering, illustrations, or even memorials. These depictions tell stories of identity, experience, strife, joy, frustration, and anger for the
writer: how he sees the world around him. I argue that all graffiti acts are personal accounts, though, not all are politically motivated. I will be examining Don Delillo’s *Underworld* in order to bring into focus the urge to make graffiti as the, “graffiti instinct,” which materializes as the desire to “find an element of felt life” as seen through the eyes of his characters, Ismael Munoz, or, Moonman 157, and Klara Sax (Delillo 77). Moonman 157 is a graffiti writer from the South Bronx who lives with his graffiti crew in a burned out tenement building, and Klara Sax is an avant-garde artist who develops the graffiti instinct. The graffiti instinct inspires both characters to paint trains, planes, walls, and junk, with colorful words and illustrations, in order to tell a story that is not seen in history books. Like many graffiti writers from the boroughs, a mid-thirty year old Moonman 157 painted trains for fame and acknowledgment, as well as empathy, for most of his life. This was his way of feeling connected, benevolent. For Klara, graffiti was a refuge she found later in her life. Timothy L. Parrish refers to Klara as a, “junk artist,” who employs “available technologies in order to write narratives that express their particular sensibilities” (Parrish 91). For her, working with junk meant splashing retired B-52 bombers in the desert with color in order to bring recognition to the men who flew the planes, and who were supposed to drop the bomb during World War II, as well as the nose painters.

In addition, Moonman 157 painted memorials for his adopted family of orphans as a way to acknowledge them, in both life and death, those who had been abandoned by their parents and society. Klara, who, “had been marked at times by her methods of transforming and absorbing junk” took, “junk and saved it for art,” which became the precursor for her graffiti work in the desert (Delillo 102, 393). She developed
the instinct for working with color, after having been inspired by the unwritten history of the B-52 bombers in the desert. Moonman 157 and Klara Sax felt an intense drive to tell the world about their experiences with people, places, and things that had passed through the world unnoticed, which is described as the element of felt life. This passion and natural propensity for writing untold narratives, in untraditional ways, is what drove them. I claim that the graffiti instinct contests the urge to give in to accepted norms, which are often heavily dictated through media. Thus, the graffiti instinct, I claim, is the missing element in current academic scholarship on graffiti as a visual narrative. I will be using narrative theory in order to argue that graffiti, as a visual narrative, has the ability to make positive contributions to scholarship. I will begin with a brief summation of graffiti’s background and history, as well as its criminal reputation in the United States.

Background and Methodology

I will be addressing graffiti in this thesis, contrary to what Nick Lynn and Susan J. Lea refer to as, “racist graffiti ...that is regarded as threatening and oppressive -- imbued with hatred and prejudice (Lynn, Lea 40). In order to achieve this, I will focus on graffiti as visual narrative portrayed in *Underworld*, through Moonman 157, and his connection with Klara Sax. I will be using Marc Schuster’s book, *Don Delillo, Jean Baudrillard, and the Consumer Conundrum* in conjunction with Delillo’s novel, as a way to lend insight into the underlying meaning of the graffiti instinct, as it relates to Moonman 157, Klara Sax, and Don Delillo as graffiti writers.

In order to analyze the claim that graffiti contests the visual narrative of the urban environment, I will work with Don Delillo’s *Underworld* as a literary example of
how Americans perceive the “problem” of graffiti. I will show how Delillo’s novel illustrates the use of narrative theory and its impact on how history is recorded and perceptions of graffiti, as a problem, and how this has been perpetuated in the media. In other words, I claim contemporary graffiti is a phenomenon that re-emerged as the result of living in the systematized, urban environment: specifically, the city, as it was developed to bring order to the citizens, where graffiti works against this order.

I will also be using Jeff Ferrell’s, *Urban Graffiti: Crime, Control, and Resistance*, in order to illustrate how graffiti is seen as a means of resistance, working against its misnomer as criminal vandalism in my chapters regarding graffiti as it relates to the following: its history, crime, aesthetics, and the academy. Specifically, in my chapter regarding graffiti and the academy, I will employ Doreen Piano’s *Graffiti as Trash Rhetoric: Debating the Future of New Orleans through its Public Space* as well as *Writing the Ruins: Rhetorics of Crisis and Uplift after the Flood*, as examples of the potency of twenty-first century graffiti, as a visual narrative and how graffiti generates public discourse about the conditions of the city (Piano).

And, finally, I will specifically address Don Delillo as the graffiti writer in *Underworld*, who uses his instinct for words as a way to illustrate the intricacies of language as narrative. I will be using Marc Schuster’s chapter, *To Vandalize Their Eyeballs: Underworld’s Graffiti Instinct*, to show how the graffiti instinct works through Don Delillo’s writing: how he insists on using a manual typewriter in order to feel the words transferring to paper (Passaro 1991). I will show how his words seek to disrupt order, much like the graffiti writer who seeks to both disrupt and create. By using this methodology, it is my hope to bring new perspectives into the complex, provocative, and
controversial world of graffiti as a worthy subject of study, that continues to thrive and evolve well into the twenty-first century.
CHAPTER II

GRAFFITI HISTORY

There continues to be confusion as to what modern graffiti is and why “they” are doing it. This confusion is somewhat hinged on the historical ambiguity as to when modern graffiti was actually referred to as such. Some contend that graffiti -- at least in the United States -- started in Los Angeles in the late 1940s, some say the 1950s, when Charlie “Bird” Parker died, and was memorialized through the famous graffito, “Bird Lives” (NPR 2007). And, some say graffiti started the mid to late 1960s in New York City, with the advent of aerosol spray cans. It may never be possible to pinpoint the exact date these visual narratives began to surface, though widespread appearance of this phenomenon can be traced, at least in the United States, to the east coast some time in the mid-1960s. Specifically, New York City and Philadelphia claim title of U.S. birthplace of graffiti.

The most well-known early graffiti visual narrative was that of Taki 183 in New York City. The rumor grew that he wrote his tag all around the city in order to catch a girl’s eye, though in a New York Times interview in July, 1971, Taki 183 states, “you don’t do it for girls; they don’t seem to care. You do it for yourself” (NYT 1971). However, he added, “that his passion for graffiti was not normal” and in fact, he still carried a small Magic Marker around with him as an adult (NYT). He actually began tagging when he saw another, lesser known graffiti writer’s tag around his neighborhood,
and his passion for it grew. I claim that this passion for graffiti writing is as normal as the need for any other narrative. This need, as I refer in the introduction, goes by the tag, “graffiti instinct,” in Don Delillo’s, Underworld, and I use the term to mean the passion for graffiti throughout this thesis (Delillo 77).

In Underworld, Moonman 157 first decided he felt the graffiti instinct when he saw a tag in the tunnel memorializing Charlie “Bird” Parker’s death, with “Bird Lives” (435). Two words from the underworld told a story that was so moving for him that he instantly connected to the simple words that formed a powerful counter-narrative to newspaper headlines announcing Bird’s death. These visual narratives, I suggest, are one of the most powerful ways to study the way people inhabit the city. One of the most overlooked methods of learning how the city is interconnected is through the visual narratives of graffiti.

More, graffiti in the urban environment usually denotes crime and violence in the less desirable areas of the city. I argue that, in order to dispel these myths, it is important to look at the narratives that are created through graffiti. The narratives that outsiders see, is stereotype, similar to stereotypes of race, gender, and economics. In order to fully embrace the narrative that graffiti offers, it is essential to shed this baggage. Though, first one must be able to understand the intricacies of fame in graffiti writing, which is unlike gang tags. One of the primary differences are the hierarchies and rules associated with each. Hierarchies and rules are somewhat consistent with graffiti crews, though they are not necessarily referred to as such. In other words, many writers avoid the word, “rule,” because their work is based on breaking free from the dominant constraints inherent with rules. As with any group that has lasting power, such as graffiti
writing, rules and hierarchies are essential. Graffiti writers’ rules and hierarchies are based on one fundamental concept, which is respect and fame as the end goal.

The hierarchies and rules are intricate and difficult for any aspiring graffiti writer. For example, a writer must work his way up to “bombing” and “throw-ups” by first becoming a “toy.” Bombing and throw-ups are more intricate and require more skills than a tag, which is literally a writer’s signature. A toy is a beginner. Beginners learn to respect more experienced writers who gain fame by doing exceptional work and especially work that requires risk. Exceptional work requires skill and diligence, which takes time to develop. More, exceptional writers respect the hierarchy. Experienced writers know not to paint over another writer’s work. These are just a few of the unwritten rules and hierarchies of graffiti, and there are continual changes as the genre evolves.

To recap, authentic graffiti is usually associated with fame, respect, and identity while gang tags are primarily associated with territorial marking and violence. It is not my intention to conclude that gang tags are illegitimate, though my focus remains on graffiti writing as a medium: specifically tags, throw-ups, and bombing as a visual narrative.

Graffiti as Crime

The graffiti writer’s narrative is disguised by its reputation of criminality. In 1982, The “Broken Windows Theory” suggested the concept of activities such as graffiti as the reason for fear and crime in neighborhoods. James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling devised the theory that when broken windows are present in a neighborhood --
and, remain unrepaired, crime such as graffiti begins to appear (Wilson, Kelling 1982). They go as far as stating that the presence of graffiti on the train instills fear in the subway rider. For example, according to the Broken Windows Theory, the mere presence of graffiti promotes a dangerous environment by invoking fear in the city, so much so that citizens stop calling the police (Wilson, Kelling 1982). Wilson and Kelling emphasize that it is not so much crime that instills fear, but the incivility that does the most harm. Incivility, according to them, is, “a place where young persons gathered to drink and play music,” as well as the fear involved in confronting an “obstreperous teenager” who they feel is not behaving properly (Wilson, Kelling). Stereotypes are problematic for obvious reasons, and as outdated and ridiculous as the wording sounds it currently serves as the basis for many police department policies.

Police departments rely on theories such as Broken Windows because of its hypothesis of deterrence. In practice, the propensity to scapegoat graffiti writers by police departments is more of a power struggle. In this scenario, the graffiti writer works to destroy the peaceful aesthetic that keeps the neighborhood calm and obedient while the civil police officer works to keep him in line. By way of this theory, the graffiti writer belongs out of sight because he instills fear in law-abiding citizens.

This theory, at best, speaks from a delusionary position of superiority. This distance is a safe perch somewhere up above the crowd, where instilling fear works best from a position of authority, not from the underground. After all, it is a popular assumption to see young people as scapegoats for the crime and disorder of a city, though it is seldom based in fact. The paradox, of course, is that the policies themselves instill more fear than the appearance of graffiti in a city. Ask any New York City subway
commuter if crime seems less of an issue, now that the graffiti is mostly absent on the trains. While crime appears to be down today in New York City, the fear of crime that is associated with the presence of graffiti remains. I suggest that its reputation as a crime, as opposed to seeing it as a visual narrative, is the reason for this fear.

Delillo seems to be saying, through Moonman 157, that the visual narrative of graffiti, is avoided by people who do not understand what it is and who is doing it. The writing is on the wall, though there is no face with which to associate the work. The tags, the pieces, the murals are only identified by a pseudonym, so this causes distance between the writer and the reader. In terms of graffiti as a criminal offense, penalties and serving time has had little effect in curbing writers’ persistence. Thus, the hypothesis of deterrence has been relatively useless. I argue that this hypothesis functions much like Douglas Keesey’s example of the detective in Wilkie Collins’s Moonstone, who works “unself-consciously within hegemonic norms to identify and contain any threat to the social order” (Keesey 45). In short, graffiti is perceived as nothing more than a crime of vandalism, though, it offers an abundance of narrative and history beyond this reputation.

What better way to maintain social norms than to cast blame when the ideal is threatened? However, what ends up causing the most disruption is the pressure to maintain the status quo. In the case of graffiti, it is the compulsion to maintain monochromatic aesthetic that causes anger and resentment among those casting blame. Using the example of the graffiti writer as a scapegoat, he works behind the scenes, the underground, and the place where opposition is an expected practice, though his presence is unwelcome where “decent folk” gather (Wilson, Kelling). In other words, these so-called decent folk are aware that things are not ideal in the city, but it is only a matter of
time in their minds, before those who are breaking the rules will be stopped completely. Even though they know this will never happen, as is evidenced by graffiti’s persistence, so-called decent folk continue to pretend as if it will. Thus, this kind of thinking unwittingly strengthens the graffiti writer narrative by working against it. The use of generalizing remarks such as, “serious street crime flourishes in areas in which disorderly behavior goes unchecked,” (Wilson, Kelling) weakens Wilson and Kelling’s argument. Another problem with this assertion is that there is no way, other than the subjective, to look at behavior. Without the ability to question latitude of authority, what basis is there for true civility and respect in the urban environment? I claim that those in a position of weakness suffer, such as graffiti writers, who are targeted as criminals.

Consider current policies like the “Terry Stop” or “Stop-and-Frisk” (Keenan, Thomas 2014) as proven examples of this abuse. Delillo’s graffiti writer, Moonman 157, works from the position of weakness because he lives and works from an economically disadvantaged place. I claim that theories like Broken Windows are based on nostalgic prejudice, which is the inability to incorporate alternative narratives into the ideal. This prejudice is based on the fantasy of returning to an ideal time that never existed. The graffiti writer works against this fantasy of the ideal by persistently inserting his narrative into the urban environment. He knows, by doing this, though, that his work remains illegitimate in the eyes of the laws, which are, in large part, based in this theory.

For Broken Windows devotees, there is only space for one narrative in New York City, which is the fictitious American dream. This is a city that represents the American ideal for most of the world. It is where commercial campaigns are created, products that are designed to sell a way of life, not just the latest fashion, or a leather
chair, but a dream, an identity: in short, the longing for the *longing* that is never fully satisfied by the illusion that perpetuates consumerism. Graffiti works against this, which is one of the reasons it produces disgust. It looks messy because it transforms the homogenous, palatable, and the predictable surfaces of the urban landscape. The city is the place where capital and politics rule with unyielding power and dreams are not necessarily made, though they can be bought. Power and money transform perspectives and graffiti contests this thinking. Graffiti writers tell a different story of powerlessness. Frustration and exclusion create outlets such as graffiti, in the city, and writers achieve a version of fame for their efforts, though along with the cost of contestation, is its reputation as vandalism and crime.

Much of this reputation began in the subways of New York City. Graffiti writing, on the commuter trains in New York City, formed some of the earliest modern graffiti narratives and continued well into the 1980s, as we see with Moonman 157. Graffiti was, at one time, the scourge of the city for countless mayors who vowed to win the war against the writers who tagged the trains. Because the trains of New York City now appear to be graffiti-free, for the most part in comparison to its start, many in the city believe the war has been won. Mayors of New York City referred to graffiti as vandalism that inevitably accompanied serious crimes like mugging and murder, which falls under a Class E felony in New York State (ypdcrime.com). The National Bureau of Economic Research cited former mayor of New York City, Rudolph Giuliani, as stating that, according to the Broken Windows Theory, murder and graffiti are “part of the same continuum, and a climate that tolerates one is more likely to tolerate the other” (Corman, Mocan, 2002). As a result of this misleading and often damaging cultural and political
baggage, I argue that graffiti is a medium whose history and narrative is in need of further academic study. I believe graffiti has been misunderstood and misrepresented as a result of these damaging stereotypes.
CHAPTER III

GRAFFITI AND AESTHETICS

This chapter discusses the connections between aesthetics and the city, and how graffiti challenges the urban planning norms that seek to eradicate graffiti. If this sounds exaggerated, urban planning guides ranging from Burlington, Vermont to Tacoma, Washington, focus on graffiti eradication as a measure of maintaining the high quality of life in their cities (Vermont 2002, Tacoma 2013). There is no doubt planners have specific goals for the city that are not compatible with all who live in the urban environment, even today. Though, in order to understand why urban planners ignore graffiti as a viable narrative of the city, it is important to look at the city from a different perspective: that is, how urban dwellers actually live in the planned environment as opposed to how they are expected to live. Graffiti exists for many reasons and will continue to evolve as a narrative of those who live in the city. As a result, it is important to see its connections to urban planning and the contemporary city as it exists today. One of the most important questions to ask is: How has graffiti positively affected the urban environment? This question seeks to demystify the socio-cultural myth that graffiti does not belong in the city and that it does not reflect the lives of its citizens.

The study of graffiti has had a profound impact on how perspective works when looking at the city, living in the city, and being part of the schema -- as opposed to outside of it. I suggest that youth and graffiti have an impact in the city as positive, as
opposed to negative, because of their ability to disrupt the status quo. This is crucial to understanding how people think and behave in the city because it dares to confront the narrative we have been handed instead of the actual narrative. As an example, the way the buildings and streets are designed, with miles of asphalt and walls of gray concrete, not only push us to submit to the idea of exclusion, they have an overbearing effect on the behavior of the urban population. And this exclusion is something graffiti opposes.

The structured grid of the cities instilled an unrealistic concept of what it meant to inhabit the city. The streets, buildings, walls, and housing were designed to separate people by way of economics. This is problematic because the way in which many of the cities and buildings were designed still stand today, and continue to create a mythic world of order that continues to work against what postmodern scholar Jean Baudrillard states is the “abstraction’s charm” (Baudrillard 1937). That is, urban planners designed cities with concepts of progress in mind, where the ordinary citizen was expected to conform. As a result, this perpetuated the mythic city of exclusion for anyone who did not fit within the precepts of the ordered model. This does not account for the diversity commonly associated with urban environments. Thus, subcultures, such as graffiti writing, developed which caused unwanted and unwelcomed disruption and chaos to so-called systems of order.

Graffiti, in the contemporary context, emerged as a counter-narrative at the height of transition into a postmodern world, somewhere between the mid to late 1960s. Architects, such as Charles Jencks, are “credited for popularizing the term postmodernism,” and suggest that its shift from modernism symbolically ended on “July 15, 1972” (Haddad 2009). The shift into postmodernism is difficult to define in terms of
specific dates and times, and depending on the academic discipline, its meaning remains elusive and ambiguous, though what Jencks emphasizes is that,

Post-Modernism is a wide cultural movement (since the 1960s) which has its ...variants in every field (including science, dance). It is a plural movement which defined itself to defend the local, regional and minority cultures of the globe against the hegemony of Modernism (largely a western and late-capitalist formation. Post-Modern philosophers often don’t agree about definitions, but they typically support a “war on totality” that Jean Francois Lyotard proclaimed in 1979. (Jencks 2012)

In this conversation with Lyotard, Jencks takes the idea a step further by arguing that the meta-narrative has not ended, as Lyotard suggests, but it has proliferated (Jencks). He states, “the universe’s story (that science is unearthing, the narrative of 13.7 billion years) provides the general picture” (Jencks). What is important with urban planning’s connection to graffiti is that visual narratives are part of this general picture that began to capture media attention during the second half of the 1960s. This places graffiti in-between both movements. Thus, from Jenck’s perspective, contemporary graffiti is part of the plural movement and it stands in defense of its culture, through its visual narrative.

The graffiti narrative, having emerged during the Cold War years, made statements about the political and the personal throughout the city. As a result, the academy began to take notice of graffiti writings during this time, though it struggled with graffiti’s reputation as vandalism. There were scholars who were asking the question as to whether graffiti was art or vandalism, such as Norman Mailer, who began writing about graffiti in the early 1970s. Mailer was a well-known political activist who became interested in the work of graffiti writers in New York City in 1973. His work, The Faith of Graffiti, coupled with Jon Naar’s photographic depictions of early, contemporary graffiti in the urban environment during that year, was one of the first of its kind to
explore the city from the graffiti writers’ perspectives (Mailer, Naar 1974). He was heavily criticized for concluding that, “our response should be acceptance” and that “civic authorities were wrong to wage war on graffiti” (Beardsley 1975). In May, 1974, the Philadelphia *Bulletin* responded by stating, 

> Despite what some advanced thinkers suggest is a new art form, graffiti in its mindless scrawls on city walls is ugly, ugly, ugly ...All sorts of excuses can be advanced by the goo-gushers for graffiti spraying as a means of self-expression. The real fact, though, is that graffiti’s idiotic and sleazy scrawls are criminal and have to be treated as such. (Beardsley)

It was Mailer’s contention that the city no longer represented the people that lived in it. He saw walls of “monotonous iron-gray and dull brown brick” and he felt this needed to change (Beardsley). The walls of the city were there to remind its citizens who belongs and who does not belong, which continues to cause fierce debates among civic leaders and many urban dwellers. While urban planners use walls as division points, graffiti writers see them as canvas. The debate regarding graffiti as art or vandalism was a valid one at the time, though it has become more complex in the last four decades.

**Graffiti and Hybridizations**

Scholars such as Martin Irvine avoid the word, graffiti, when describing writers of these visual narratives. He considers any art that takes place in the city, on the city walls, and surfaces, a “paradigm of hybridity in global visual culture, a postmodern genre being defined more by real-time practice than by any sense of unified theory, movement, or message” (Irvine 2012). Irvine is an “art and media theorist,” with Georgetown University, as well as “an owner of a contemporary gallery” who believes that street art is part of a network of inevitable affiliations that include museum space
(29). In fact, he calls those who use the city as their canvas, “artists” (1). Irvine’s 2012 study focuses on this “community of practice” that has its “own learned codes, rules, hierarchies of prestige and means of communication” (1). He also stresses that it has “become a major part of visual space in many cities,” and that it is a “recognized art movement crossing over into the museum and gallery system” (1). In the graffiti community, there is wide disagreement on the authenticity of street art that crosses over into the sometimes pretentious world of gallery and museum space. No matter its evolution as a movement and its name, this visual medium continues to thrive on resistance from the mainstream. Graffiti that often expresses beliefs, values, love, frustration, and bias is not consistent with the consumerist model of identity. In this sense, it challenges our perspectives, which is precisely the reason it remains so controversial.

In recent scholarship written on graffiti, I suggest that graffiti writing has usually been studied from a problematic point of view. Ivor Miller states, “scholars studying graffiti in New York have tended primarily to approach the phenomenon as a symptom of some urban ‘problem,’ whether psychological, sociological, or political in nature” (Fraser, Spalding 32). This so-called urban problem has been the outlet of many a frustrated youth throughout the city. What is problematic for these young urbanites, is the diminishing public space and privatization of what little is left. Not only this, the city is often littered with a plethora of large billboards advertising everything from cigarettes and cars, to underwear and expensive Italian shoes, leaving little room for anything else. The voice of the average citizen is drowned out and defeated by the almighty dollar.
As Alan Mansbach states in reference to New York City, “In a city that incubated the most important popular art movement of the 20th century, the message is clear: public space can be yours, if you pay for it” (Mansbach 2013). The graffiti writer takes incredible risks in order to resist this economic and political certainty. Fraser and Spalding take it a step further and state, “it has taken a second generation of criticism for a more objective eye and ear to be brought to bear on graffiti and New York and for the writers’ own voices to be heard” (Fraser, Spalding 32). It is important, however, not to romanticize the struggle of these writers, and instead work to understand how this writing has affected perspectives. Jeff Ferrell urges us to:

pay attention to the particular meanings of authority and resistance in the everyday, collective experience of youth. In employing this methodology of attentiveness, we are likely the find in kids’ lives forms of resistance far more remarkable than those that romanticism imagines or rigidity imposes -- forms of resistance that both confront structures of authority and begin to build alternatives in and around them...like graffiti writing, these various moments of youthful resistance -- too often dismissed as mindlessly destructive -- in fact merit our attention not only for undermining contemporary social arrangements but for imagining new ones. (Ferrell 39)

The idea that graffiti writers are often associated with destructive, aimless -- and even felonious behavior that warrants nothing but disgust and anger -- refuses to accept that one, this art form is here to stay in one form or another, and two, that it bears respect. At minimum it has managed to confront aspects of legal and political hypocrisy that have, in the past, resisted being openly challenged by the average citizen. Irvine argues that,

street art was the ghost in the urban machine becoming self-aware and projecting its repressed dreams and fantasies onto walls and vertical architecture, as if the visible city were the skin or exoskeleton of something experienced like a life form in need of aesthetic CPR. (Irvine 1, 2)
In the 21st century, as graffiti is becoming hybridized with other art forms, Irvine suggests that this will eventually help writers display their work legally, make money, and earn prestige and respect from the the fine art institutions (16). His idea is that a divisional line is not necessary between what he calls “extramural” and “intramural,” meaning public space versus museum space (4, 7). In other words, graffiti can exist in the street as well as the museum. This is exciting for some, because as Irvine suggests, the resistance behind “street art,” has paid off (2). Their moment has finally arrived, where recognition and credibility as a viable visual narrative is no longer a hurdle. While he makes good points regarding the legitimacy of street art, he revisits the ongoing debate with graffiti as a precursor to crime (5, 6) that was reinforced by Wilson and Kelling’s, “Broken Windows” theory (Wilson, Kelling 1982). Taking graffiti writers into the mainstream galleries and spaces may seem like a cogent solution for those who oppose graffiti writing on public walls, though, by changing its public placement to the museum space removes its purpose as resistance, which delegitimizes graffiti as a narrative. So, while the city that Irvine sees is very different from the one urban planners designed to bring order to the city, legitimizing graffiti does not mean much for the average citizen who sees graffiti and still thinks of it as the antecedent to criminal behavior and vandalism.

Irvine agrees that “street art began as an underground, anarchic, in-your-face appropriation of public visual surfaces,” though he continues this thought by adding that it is now part of the exclusionary network of gallery art (Irvine 1). He cites Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Jenny Holzer, Shepard Fairey, and Barbara Kruger as successful examples of street artists who crossed over into the museum space (17). Irvine goes as far
as suggesting that street art is comparable to pop art of the immediate post second world war time, in that it is, “significant, permanent, and irreversible” (2). However, the very definition of pop art, according to Andreas Gartus, is that “objects became artworks when put in the context of a museum or an art gallery,” therefore, context would significantly alter graffiti’s intention through co-option, which reduces it as a contesting narrative of the city, creating the opposite effect as that of pop art (Gartus 1, Introduction). Graffiti is significant, permanent, and irreversible, as Irvine suggests, though it remains at its most potent on the streets and walls, not in hybridized form or in the museum. It is a means of making a public statement: a mark, such as leaving a signature -- as much as it was in Pompeii or Berlin.

Graffiti displayed in a museum is bound to affect its observers much less poignantly than when it is seen at the street level. Placed on the street, it maintains the ability to reflect the idea that people are inherently different. Seen in a museum, one may wonder what the graffiti writer intended to illustrate with his piece and, perhaps, whether or not he was instructed to work with particular colors, and/or if he was paid for his work. The narrative, in this case, no longer reflects the “underground, anarchic, in-your-face appropriation,” of self-expression for the writer, when it becomes translated into a product to be bartered or traded (Irvine 1). Graffiti in the streets and on the walls is not part of a truly compatible system. Therefore, intramural and extramural spaces may represent the inevitable hybridization for graffiti, though I argue that this is an inaccurate conclusion. Graffiti as a visual narrative, written on walls and other public spaces, makes a specific statement about what it means to live in the city. The urban environment depends on a level of order and control, though the writer offers a diverse opinion
through his narrative that is significantly altered in the intramural space. Graffiti writing developed as a reaction to the perception of social control and as a result, its evolution has become, as Jeff Ferrell refers to it, an alternative arrangement based on its insistence to shape resistance (Ferrell 33). As with many subcultures, dominant ideology does not tolerate them so this either results in absorption or vilification of these alternative ways of expression and identification. When referring to graffiti’s vilification, one need look no further than current criminal statistics. Graffiti, in the urban environment, remains as serious as drug crimes, and even murder, based on the fact that in many states it is a felony punishable by several years in prison (ypdcrime.com). Graffiti that is written, sprayed, or drawn on the walls of the city is often in protest to the decreasing sense of public space left and the resistance to urban planning, so placing graffiti in the museum diminishes this quality.

Graffiti Exploited in Advertising

Graffiti writers choose the urban environment with which to practice their craft, so the assumption is that serious criminal behavior is present where graffiti can be seen. Another byproduct of this assumption is that graffiti is rarely understood by the mainstream, and therefore, dismissed as deviant behavior – that this, itself, is an attractive reason for youth to engage in this practice. And oftentimes, marketers aggressively pursue subcultures, like graffiti, in hopes of exploiting and taming them for money. Exploiting graffiti for marketing purposes seems anomalous, considering its criminal baggage. However, scholars of cultural criminology, such as Heitor Alvelos, have studied the exploitation of its miscreant reputation in order to understand the “practices… [of the]
American inner-city ghettos” (Ferrell 128). He refers to “graffiti” as having “fulfilled its original vocation,” which is and was its “desire for social and cultural change” (Ferrell, Alvelos 185). He considers graffiti’s original intent as a present but fading “socio-cultural myth” that is slowly and aggressively being pursued by companies interested in selling “goods or services” (Alvelos 182). Graffiti, as a visual narrative, appears to be fading because it seems to have been absorbed by popular culture, and is highly visible in the marketplace as a way to sell products. Though, as Jeff Ferrell states, “those who claim [to] present the unmediated truth about crime, are mostly marketing delusion, diversion, or ideology” (Ferrell 196). What seems to be missing, he adds, is “meaning and representation…looking instead to discover perspectives less noticed or less understood” (197). Crime and capital go hand in hand, and in fact, as Ferrell adds,

as the illicit visual marker of urban hipness, graffiti is now incorporated into everything from corporate theme parks and Broadway musicals to clothing lines, automobile adverts, and video games. When it comes to the politics of illicit resistance, death by diffusion – dare we say, impotence by incorporation – remains always a real possibility. (19)

However, graffiti has retained a strong presence in the cities because it has successfully resisted, for the most part, corporate advertising appropriation. Graffiti as an art form, has managed to preserve its subcultural qualities of self-expression, rebelliousness, and outlaw reputation in the streets, and it is careless to convey otherwise. While Alvelos sees it as fading in its original purpose, he also emphasizes that the use of graffiti in advertising emptied it of any purpose (186). This is based on the fact that it has lost its ability for protest the minute it becomes used as advertising for money. The cyclical nature of media, that often misconstrues the meaning that graffiti represents, depicting it as deviant behavior, leaves it open for corporate advertisers who use this as a means for
exploitation. Therefore, the potential cultural contributions that graffiti offers seem lost, though this is far from truth.
CHAPTER IV

THE ACADEMY AND GRAFFITI

In order to illustrate the benefits of studying graffiti as a visual narrative, I will be addressing the academy. Because of the method with which some graffiti writers choose to achieve a balance, between working within the constraints of the museum or writing as an unsanctioned practice, the tendency within the academy has been to focus on whether or not graffiti can be considered art and/or its hybridization of street art, within the walls of the museum. In other words, does it belong on the interior walls of the museum? Or, should it remain in the public space? There has been more recent scholarship on graffiti’s changing identity as a socio-cultural practice, as well as discourse on decriminalizing graffiti. However, with regard to graffiti as a visual narrative, there has been very little. This is important because, if we study graffiti as a visual narrative, its tenacity for resistance of co-option by corporate advertisers is clarified. Thus, graffiti’s positive cultural contributions become more visible when identified as a narrative, via the graffiti instinct.

Scholars such as Kara-Jane Lombard, suggest that, “U.S. Governments resisted referring to ...graffiti as art” (258) in its early days, though, she proposes that graffiti benefits from neo-liberal, political approaches to governance, in order to keep it contained. She continues by reiterating the need for alternative approaches to the
governance of graffiti as vandalism, and as she explains, one of these is through co-option. She states,

Once characterized as a public menace or plague of epidemic proportions...has become an increasing part of the mainstream. Thus, what were once signifiers of resistance have been coopted and now routinely appear in advertising product labels, art and museum exhibitions, political campaigns, mainstream fashion, and heritage tours, and taught in government-sponsored youth programs and events, as well as school and university curricula. (256-57)

I have argued that co-opting graffiti into the museum or as a part of mainstream popular culture, negates its ability for narrative expression. In addition, I contend that it is not in need of governance or containment as a solution, for what many people think they understand, as an animal that needs taming. Furthermore, the graffiti instinct is the foundation of its narrative expression, and is by no means fully co-opted by the mainstream or any institution. For instance, there are scholars such as, Doreen Piano, who have studied graffiti as a positive expression of crisis, such as New Orleans in 2005, after Katrina hit. In her essay, *Graffiti as Trash Rhetoric: Debating the Future of New Orleans through its Public Space*, she calls attention to how graffiti played a role “in the renewal of public culture during the initial post-Katrina recovery period” in New Orleans through its visual narrative (Piano Abstract). According to her review of this project, Dr. Piano, was hired by the University of New Orleans in August 2005, just a few weeks before Katrina struck (Piano, Kotterman). The university was shut down for close to a year because of the hurricane, and in November, 2005, she began documenting “graffiti of residents and artists” along with “the detritus and devastation of the storm in many of New Orleans’ neighborhoods” in order to let people know what was really going on in the city (Piano, Kottermann). She felt that the graffiti writing was astonishingly powerful
as a narrative, and that it had been misrepresented by civic authorities as the cause for, “yoking all of New Orleans’ ills -- crime, blight, vandalism, and violence,” because of “its pervasive presence” (Piano, Kottermann).

Piano was responding to skewed newspaper headlines and editorials that New Orleans was the place to be, if you wanted to make a dystopian, apocalyptic movie or if you enjoyed the idea of unrestrained, American anarchic chaos (Piano, Kottermann). She wanted to let the world know that the graffiti she photographed after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, was in fact, a positive reminder of how resilient the residents were in this city. It was so powerful that she dedicated years of work toward educating the public on this powerful, visual narrative through her work. The same can be said for Moonman 157 who, like the graffiti writers of New Orleans, saw the ruins of the South Bronx as, “the contestation of public space ...in the aftermath of disaster” (Piano, Kottermann). To think of graffiti writers as vandals, who perpetuated devastation and blight, has become such a popular line of thought because it is familiar and legitimate in that, for many, it ruins the aesthetic of a city. After all, it looks messy, is disruptive and disorganized, and in many minds, mars the cleanliness of public spaces. However, this line of thought omits the dialogue that takes place among the ruins, like New Orleans after Katrina or the South Bronx, with graffiti.

In an additional essay, Writing the Ruins: Rhetorics of Crisis and Uplift after the Flood, she writes about the way residents, “generate public discourse about the conditions of the city, its political climate, its inability to return to the past nor to figure out a future” (Piano 2006). She states,
Spontaneous memorials, spraypainted messages, and found object tableau have contributed to a narrative of New Orleans life post-Katrina that cannot be contained in books, photographs, or even oral testimonials; these demonstrative acts involve re-writing Katrina through display and performance, qualities of New Orleans’ life that have always played a major role in the city’s culture. Abandoned cars, curbside refrigerators, sides of houses and businesses, doors and sidewalks, even trees have all become canvases for people to express joy and love, sadness, solidarity, anger, violence, [and] hostility. While graffiti writers often identify themselves through their tags, this writing is less about style and more about communicating. (Piano)

Like Moonman 157, he showed resilience by working under the conditions of his city, its political climate, and his ability for expression through his graffiti. For example, when he rode the train he,

studied the platform people at every stop,“ to see how, “they reacted to the train” when “their heads went wow ...shocked looks too, they’re seeing hell on wheels but mostly the eyes go yes and the faces open up ...it made him think he was an unknown hero of the line ...revealing himself in a cartoon glow. (434)

As graffiti is studied through literature as a medium, I maintain that a change of perspective is possible for those who experience anger and disgust at the sight of graffiti’s visual narratives. For instance, in writing Underworld, Don Delillo considers the idea that history itself is a narrative, usually seen as fact. He achieves this by using historical and fictional events and characters alongside one another in the novel, such as Charlie Parker’s memorial in the tunnel where Moonman 157 first discovered the power of graffiti writing. “Bird Lives” is told through perspective of a young, orphaned preteen who had never heard of jazz, though, was so dazzled by the message that he wanted to try graffiti writing (Delillo 77, 435). He remembers,

that’s where he saw a spray-paint scrawl, maybe five years ago, down under Eighth avenue. Bird Lives. It made him wonder about graffiti, about who took the trouble and risk to walk down this tunnel and throw a piece across the wall, and how many years have gone by since then, and who is Bird, and why does he live? ...When he walked the tunnels as a kid he used to ask about Bird and he found out this was
Charlie Parker. A jazz giant ...and suddenly there it is, Moonman riding the sky in the heart of the Bronx, over the whole burnt and rusted country, and this is the art of the backstreets talking, all the way from Bird, and you can't not see us anymore, you can’t not know who we are... (434-5, 440)

By interweaving historical and fictional events and characters, Delillo illustrates how interpretations can be life altering as well as open to interpretation. Thus, he shows that an unbending approach toward graffiti also becomes problematic for the graffiti writer, who is blamed and dismissed for his method of expression. His perspective is not level with academic opinions that rely on credibility. However, along with his unique position of authority on his experience, there is no better way of exploring this culture than through his narrative. The academic can, at best, speculate about the motives of the graffiti writers, and as scholarship has demonstrated, there is not much consistency or agreement on how this culture functions. So, while the graffiti writer lacks the academic credentials, and thus, credibility, to produce reliable evidence of, “the graffiti instinct,” and “an element of felt life,” as tangible and reliable evidence of graffiti as a visual narrative, ultimately he writes because this is what he knows (Delillo 77). Essentially academic scholarship benefits by studying graffiti as an alternative visual narrative, relying on the writer’s perspective as his cultural experience.

Element of Felt Life Amid the Rubble

My interpretation of Delillo’s finding that “element of felt life” (Delillo 77) is that all writers, and especially graffiti writers, write to make us stop and think about things, otherwise unnoticed. As an example from Underworld, Sister Edgar initially dismisses Moonman 157 and his crew because they do graffiti and live among the filth of the South Bronx. Her life, on the other hand, is classified as normal, obedient, and
structured. She thinks of herself as living an exemplary life as a nun who tries to bring order to the streets. Deep down, she knows that she is, “the fraidy child who must face the real terror of the time under the brave and crazy wall of Ismael Munoz,” dressed as the authoritative nun in her, “regimental black-and-whites” (Delillo 246, 248). She tries not to think about what kinds of diseases there must be floating around his living space in the abandoned tenement when she puts on several layers of latex gloves as, “protection against the spurt of blood or pus and the viral entities hidden within” (241). He and his crew have a lifestyle that is peculiar to her, so it makes her uncomfortable when she sees him. While Moonman 157’s life is very much in order for him, Sister Edgar’s life is masked by order and planning, right down to her death, which is described as, “just an extended version of Ash Wednesday,” which for her, is a stolid reminder of her mortality (245). In comparison, Moonman 157 expresses his perception of life, which is messy, fraught with disruption, and is often considered aesthetically unpleasing. And, through his ability for finding that element of felt life, he manages to show Sister Edgar how perspectives can be changed.

As we see with Sister Edgar, Moonman 157’s graffiti causes her distress because she sees it as waste and destruction in an already desolate environment. She is eventually captivated by Esmeralda’s image on the billboard (822). So much that, “she feels something break upon her” at the fleeting sight of the little, lost orphan of the South Bronx, memorialized by her adopted family of graffiti writers (822). This feeling is different for her because it works against what she knows and usually attempts to avoid, which is feeling vulnerable and hopeful. She prefers having a “raven’s heart, small and obdurate” (249). However, because she experiences this break, she gains the ability to see
worth as more than its masked, ordered, exterior facade. She experiences this break when she is drawn into the crowd of spectators viewing Esmeralda’s silhouetted memorial on the blank, white billboard. Summed up, she experiences,

An Angelus of clearest joy. She embraces Sister Grace. She yanks off her gloves and shakes hands, pumps hands with the great-bodied women who roll their eyes to heaven. The women do great two-handed pump shakes, fabricated words jumping out of their mouths, trance-utterance -- they’re singing of things outside the known deliriums. Edgar pumps a man’s chest with her fists. She finds Ismael and embraces him. She looks into his face and breathes the air he breathes and enfolds him in her laundered cloth. Everything feels near at hand, breaking upon her, sadness and loss and glory and an old mother’s bleak pity and a force at some deep level of lament that makes her feel inseparable from the shakers and mourners, the awestruck who stand in tidal traffic -- she is nameless for a moment, lost to the details of personal history, a disembodied fact in liquid form, pouring into the crowd. (822-3)

She has an unexpected appreciation for the perspectives outside of her focus, as a result. The power of the graffiti instinct is the feeling of unpredicted respect for Esmeralda’s story, her narrative. Sister Edgar felt connected with the crowd at that moment, which can best be summed up as the element of felt life among the rubble of the South Bronx. This is the power of Moonman 157’s graffiti. He begs us to avoid the tendency to dismiss its emotional value and instead imagine you are in his shoes, looking at a piece through the writer’s imagination, experiencing his need for expression. This is how I suggest graffiti can produce a change in perspective. This change hinges on the instinct of the writers, evident in its narrative.

To address the reasons graffiti has been overlooked in academia until recently, I argue, is that it has been difficult to classify in any academic discipline. Mark Halsey and Alison Young state that one of the reasons for this is because of “the hidden aspects of graffiti culture …[which include] the complex of motivations for graffiti writing” (Halsey, Young 276). Thus far, I have argued that graffiti is motivated by rebelliousness
and disrespect; though that its cultural presence, via the visual narrative, is one of its primary motivations. As Alison Young states, “Graffiti should not be considered ...a unitary, homogeneous category” (Young 51). No narrative is unitary or homogenous, which is why it is even more important to take it seriously. Often seen in places associated with despair, I argue that one of graffiti’s intentions stem from a medium of passion, liberation and sources of frustration, associated with the oppression often seen in areas of the United States that have generally been associated with poverty and decay, like the South Bronx in New York. However, the speculation that poor kids who paint public walls do not care about their environments is simply wrong. This hypothesis is sustained through cultural and political stereotypes and scapegoating. Moonman 157 cared very deeply about his surroundings, which is evidenced by his altruism and compassion. This is evidenced by Sister Edgar’s observation when she sees Moonman 157 as an affirmative force in the South Bronx, “earning money with his salvage business, using it more or less altruistically, teaching his crew of stray kids, abandoned some of them, pregnant one or two, runaways, throwaways -- giving them a sense of responsibility and self-worth ...and doesn’t he help the nuns feed the hungry?” (813). The war on graffiti and other media campaigns designed to wipe it off the face of the map fail to recognize its key strength, which is the graffiti instinct, as Don Delillo suggests in Underworld through additional characters such as, Klara Sax (Delillo 77). Klara’s perspective of waste and destruction help to transform a B-52 long-range bomber into a work of art in the desert, “where debris is buried,” post Cold War (70-1). She feels the drive to force the visual narrative, of waste and destruction, into a new direction. She accomplishes this by retelling the story of war, through her eyes. Graffiti became her way
of reinscribing history for World War II bomber pilots that had become eulogized in the bottomless “pit of nostalgia” (77). For her, the graffiti instinct meant, getting at, the ordinary thing, the ordinary life behind the thing, because that’s the heart of soul of what we’re doing here ...we’re painting, hand-painting ...putting our puny hands to great weapons systems, to systems that came out of the factories and assembly halls as near alike as possible ...and we’re trying to unrepeat, to find an element of felt life ...to trespass and declare ourselves, show who we are. (76)

The primary difference between Moonman 157 and Klara Sax is the credibility of these narratives -- one is illegal while the other is not. One can say that this component either invalidates or validates the narrative.

Police campaigns intended to drive graffiti back to the underground have failed, not because they have not tried, but because they underestimate the graffiti instinct, which is what drives the writers to persist. The fact that cities such as New York and its boroughs are media-saturated hubs actually works to make them prime spots for expression in the form of graffiti. Those who perform graffiti in cities like New York live in the shadow of some of the wealthiest citizens in the world, which enhances the necessity of an alternative narrative to that of the place where the illusion of dreams are produced. Along with wealth comes power, and this includes influence over how one is to view the city, and this has not included graffiti writers. It is important when considering its validity as a narrative by looking at who, what, and where this began taking place, to some extent. Though, like graffiti as the subject of academic study, it is tempting to focus on purely ethnographic data in order to more succinctly categorize this medium. However, we learn most effectively through the eyes of the writer how cultures, such as graffiti, function: why they do what they do, who they are, and how they communicate. In defense of recent scholarship on graffiti, it is a challenging area of study
because it is difficult to classify as a genre. The instinct to leave one’s mark is at stake here, and without regard to any classification, this has proven difficult because it is rarely understood and often misinterpreted.

Classifications

Classifications to date are that graffiti is considered popular culture, low art, and often assumed to be performed by untrained writers with the sole intention to vandalize. However, the beauty of studying graffiti is that it has been absorbed by popular culture, is often performed by untrained writers, and one of its intentions is to use systems of rebellion in order to disrupt the social and economic system. However, it is also beautiful to look at, study, and figure out what writers are saying. Thus, these assumptions do not come close to accurately describing what it is and who is doing it -- and, most importantly, why. The presence of graffiti writing in the urban environment conjures up feelings of satisfaction for writers and observers because it openly contests and mocks the insulting and often ironic advertisements littering the city. Its motivations need to be at the heart of academic inquiry.

Graffiti is much more than unsanctioned public writing. It is communication between crews as well as the general public. It is a public proclamation about a writer’s life, philosophy, desire, humor, and hope. In short, it is a narrative that is not sanctioned by any corporation or public interest. Similar to love proclamations carved into trees or war stories written onto walls, it is a narrative written in the form of letters, slogans, and drawings, usually with paint or markers. Even though it provokes anger, disgust,
disappointment, it also invokes pride, because it defies the rules of society and its norms, by where it is placed.

Joe Austin uses the term, “framing stories” as a way to illustrate the way graffiti emerged as a social transgression during the late 1960s (Austin, 11) The narrative of graffiti as a social transgression actually worked in its favor toward resistance through these stories. Framing stories, he adds, became a way for us to simplify the human complexity of the city in order to maintain a level of prediction in daily life (10). Framing stories are synthetically produced narratives, easily digested by the public, and in contest with visual narratives such as graffiti. The predictability inherent with framing stories provided safety and freedom from the chaos usually associated with the city life in the 1960s. He states, “New Yorkers at this time were being encouraged by newspaper articles and editorials to see the writing on the walls simply in terms of disruptive and dangerous youths, fears of impending social collapse, and the urban crisis” (71). This narrative, painted graffiti as a connection between decay and hopelessness associated with youth and crime in the city.

Even today, youth and crime are still associated with the decay and hopelessness of the city. I suggest that Austin’s framing stories were proliferated by the media and continue today. In fact, he sees framing stories as “mass-mediated” and which have the ability to “alter and reflect concrete reality” and that are often “unconscious” (11). Like any aesthetic, graffiti became unfairly attached to these fears of crime and youth. Thus, whenever we see tags under a bridge or on a train, memories shift back to this narrative of fear and decay. Much of what preceded graffiti’s current image were these framing stories that continue to be built upon today. Even though they are often
misrepresented in the media, as I have suggested, this has worked in its favor to some extent, in that it has generated a strengthening resistance for graffiti. Hence, as often happens with narratives, the complexity deepens, as it has with graffiti.

Framing stories, Austin believes, that are a product of the “communications and entertainment industries” have become more sophisticated over the years (10). The fact that they continue to be partially constructed based on perception of how one is to view the city remains problematic because those who perform graffiti have historically been left out of the equation. This has changed significantly in the last twenty years. What was different before was that many of those who participated in graffiti writing, in the early days of its recognition, were not interested in defending their motives. Today, as I have said, this is changing though it still continues to be true, to some extent, based on the fact that, in its authentic form, it remains illegal. Graffiti writers face even more significant penalties than they did in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, if caught.

Another method of looking at graffiti writing as visual narrative is through what Stephen Little refers to as an, “artist-defined movement” or “ADM” (Gottlieb 49). As Lisa Gottlieb explains, Little uses this classification to refer to a 20th century movement where artists, as a self-contained group, are not necessarily descendants of the avant-garde movements, though they share characteristics of iconography with other art movements (49). While Gottlieb maintains the need for classification for all art forms, both she and Little fail to grasp the bigger picture that graffiti writers represent. That is, although classifications can indeed help “information officials” interested in, “iconographical analysis,” understand graffiti styles more accurately, they can also work against it (8). Like many people in the art world, this is one of the major blind spots when
it comes to understanding graffiti writing. While its styles and methods can easily be classified, its motives reach far beyond achieving wealth, status, or prestige in the fine art world; it has its own set of rules of hierarchy that resist the traditional consumerist model. There are a variety of motives that graffiti writers ascribe to, including selling their work; however, this negates it as graffiti.

Instead, writers work independently from associations in the fine art realm and adhere to their own codes and hierarchies, which breaks from the tendency to romanticize this art form (49-52). When graffiti writing is described in terms of comparisons to abstract expressionism or other movements, its original purpose is diminished and diluted. It no longer works as a resistance. Although Gottlieb insists that graffiti needs classification, she adds that, making comparisons between graffiti and other art genres disregards “the role of culture and tradition” in its production, and instead works to, “pigeonhole graffiti according to norms and precepts” (50). Either way, she misses the whole point of graffiti as a narrative, which goes well beyond composition and style. It is admirable that, like Little, she suggests that it would be good to understand what the writers are attempting to communicate, although I maintain that its narrative is not confined to its colorful lettering, but its cultural significance of resistance.

Finally, I argue graffiti’s ability for protest, either intentional or unintentional. That is, graffiti writers are motivated by different things, though what is important to think about here is the idea that, graffiti in its extramural context automatically classifies it as an unsanctioned -- or, unauthorized -- visual narrative of protest. As with poetry graffiti is often up to the reader to interpret its meaning. John Balaban quoted W.H. Auden with regard to poetry and protest when he stated, “poetry makes nothing happen,
but sometimes it can” (Balaban 496). He was heavily involved in protest as a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War, though what is striking about Baliban’s quote is not simply its straightforward audacity, it is that something as simple as poetry can affect change. Like poetry, which is historically textured, the graffiti narrative reflects the thoughts and feelings of the writer’s lived experience.

Baliban became known for taping oral poetry in the Vietnamese countryside, in order to translate it (Baliban). It became a powerful tool, for him, as a way to understand this culture we only knew from television, radio, and newspaper reports, which were always grim and vilified. He believed that by learning this new language – the language of human beings, one to another, would help “change Americans’ attitudes toward the war” and the people (Baliban). Like graffiti, which is the language of human beings, Balaban studied Vietnamese poetry in order to understand what they were thinking during the United States’ bombings in their country.

He believed that to know another culture is to know our own, and that to know our own is to “not repeat the errors that drove the country uncomprehendingly to war” (Baliban). It was his intention then to “translate ‘all its humane beauty,’” which produces complexity into an otherwise subjugated population (Baliban). This idea was as simple as humanizing a culture. Similarly the culture -- or subculture, of graffiti, it is often misunderstood and vilified -- even now. Like poetry, graffiti is better understood through the lens of its cultural significance, which also humanizes it. And, like poetry, those who took part in its twentieth century inception were also expressing ideas, thoughts, frustrations, and love, and marginality. Since its re-emergence as a literary device in the 1960s graffiti has become an extremely valuable tool for study with regard to its unique
language and complexities that are often dismissed by those who fail to understand its significance.

Graffiti in Literature

Delillo’s *Underworld* takes great pains to work with language and its association to aesthetics in a broader sense. In other words, Delillo describes words and their meanings – though, most of all, their incredibly undervalued power. Much like the undervalued and often misunderstood medium of graffiti writing, words are the graffiti writer’s swords -- their vehicles, and often the one dominant force in their lives with which to speak. In his novel, Delillo gives us ‘high art’ and ‘low art,’ and graffiti in the streets of New York City as standing in opposition to each other: Klara, as the elite, trained artist who shuns the poor, untrained graffiti writer, and Moonman 157, who fears any interest from the museums in his work. In fact, she pities him as an living among “otherness” in the ruins (395). Despite the fact that, as Irvine suggests, fine art elitism is changing today, with inevitable hybridized forms of street art, graffiti continues to stand on the fringes. Graffiti writers have been willing to showcase their work in museums, though, this art form remains controversial and illegal and its name continues to denote antisocial deviance. Delillo shows us that graffiti contests not only the obsession to consume, but the way we see historical events and truth. This is why Delillo’s novel, *Underworld*, continues to be considered provocative and unsettling for many readers. Like the public declarations of graffiti, *Underworld* pushes past the boundaries of hegemonically based accounts of life during the Cold War by showing us the proverbial body, the evidence. Delillo is like the graffiti writer who dares to strip the euphemisms
away so that historical events are reduced to accounts, stories, and narratives. For instance, it is common knowledge nuclear bomb tests were conducted on American soil for many years, though the results of these tests are not common knowledge, as Nick Shay’s brother, Matt finds out while preparing a camping trip in the desert. He worked with government accident statistics and had read about the,

thing that fell to earth on Albuquerque in 1957, a thermonuclear bomb of jumbo tonnage mistakenly released from a B-36 -- nobody’s perfect, okay -- and landing in a field within the city limits. The conventional explosives detonated, the nuclear package did not. The incident remained a secret to this day, seventeen years later, as Matty sat in his cubicle reading a camping guide. (401)

Delillo explores areas of American life through the eyes of both those in power and those who are powerless, through stories of secrecy, waste, fame, and destroyed space. Similar to Moonman 157’s life in the South Bronx, there are countless horror stories that most of us would rather not hear or see. Delillo throws these images right on the page, without hesitation. His deadpan delivery introduces us to Moonman 157, a guy who is trying to make the best of his circumstances, while enlisting the aid of the Catholic charity workers. Delillo introduces us to Moonman’s crew of young, hopeful children and young adults who navigate the streets where heroin junkies, pedophiles, drug dealers, and street hustlers are as common as arson fires. He also serves up characters like Nick, who grew up in the Bronx as well, though he managed to escape the oppression he felt from the city by working as a manager of hazardous waste. The comparisons between characters may seem vast, though what they share are their narratives: Moonman 157, through his graffiti, Klara, with her lifelong desire for fame, and Nick, with his ability for introspection.
Like all narratives, graffiti writing is complex and rarely understood by those who see the medium of graffiti as purely waste. To begin, in order to study graffiti it is necessary to remain objective, which means to resist the urge to rigidly classify graffiti writing as art or vandalism, and instead, begin to look at it as a method that shares alternative perspectives. For example, instead of noticing the graffiti-lettered railway cars as the product of bored, poverty-stricken youth, pay attention to the intricacies of the work. Along with this, it is important to acknowledge the persistence of writers who work for years in order to reach master status, and to remain objective about their quest for fame. The fact that many writers are drawn to graffiti as a medium for fame should not dismiss it as a valid narrative.

In fact, Delillo interjects fame throughout his novel with historical figures, such as J. Edgar Hoover, as a way of reminding us that we are all fascinated by fame in one way or another. He casts Hoover’s thoughts on fame as being at the “high and low ends of some fascination,” as a “static crackle of some libidinous thing in the world” (Delillo 17). As we see with Moonman 157, this is his graffiti instinct. He contests the depictions of youth of the South Bronx as waste and destructiveness by finding better, more effective ways of communicating what he knows. He is aware of the dominant perspectives of those in power who oppose him and what he does, though, this knowledge does not bring about anger or shame for him. Graffiti writing is his way of speaking for them and himself.

Moonman 157 knows that respect is earned, and writing is how he achieves this; it is his graffiti instinct that drives him to push past the economic barriers that force him to live without running water, heat, and dignity. His graffiti produces that feeling of
pride for him, while those who oppose it, do so because they do not understand it. Graffiti evokes anger, confusion, and disgust by those who oppose it. This feeling of disgust materializes with Sister Edgar, who, upon entering the abandoned building of “indigents” and “graffiti, illiteracy, and petty theft,” imagines how destructive and hopeless these people are that she sees (241, 243). This is where Moonman 157 lives with his crew, and among the drug addicts, prostitutes, and indigents. Sister Edgar sees disorder and assumes the worst, which is that she sees the people before her as believing they have no worth. She believes, because they are not formally educated, that they scrawl illegibly on walls as a way to say they do not care about their surroundings. This is one of the most profound misperceptions about graffiti writers. Therefore, the assumption is that the graffiti writer’s narrative is skewed, flawed, worthless, because it is not grounded in pedagogy or institutional thought or research. So, he and the people that he lives with are automatically dismissed.

Delillo applies the proof that the graffiti narrative is thriving through his characters, Moonman 157 and Klara Sax, because they represent two artists on each end of that defined spectrum of low and high art. Klara, in her later years, recognizes that she, herself, has the graffiti instinct when she sees the Watts Towers outside of Los Angeles. She imagines, “a thing so rucked in the vernacular” that it had “an epic quality” (491). Afterward, she,

felt a static, a depth of spirit, she felt delectation that took the form of near helplessness. Like laughing helplessly as a girl, collapsing against the shoulder of your best friend. She was weak with sensation, weak with seeing and feeling. She touched and pressed. She looked up through the struts of tallest tower. Such a splendid independence this man was gifted with, or likely fought for, and now she wanted to leave ...buzzing. (492)
Similarly Moonman 157 reinscribes the narrative of his neighborhood and its landscape by adding the “digits” of the “street where he lives” (439). In this novel, Delillo describes Moonman 157 as one of many displaced AIDS orphans who discovered hope and identity through his graffiti murals. His messages brought new life to what appeared to be a desolate and decaying South Bronx during the 1980s. His messages became the narrative of those who lived in this space. Graffiti was instrumental in providing that narrative for those who were hidden, shunned, or discarded from society.

Both artists see the aura of garbage, landfill, and the discarded, though each exists in entirely different worlds. What they have in common is the graffiti instinct, which includes the vision, and hence, the ability to make us question our perceptions of discarded and dismissed ideas. That is, how, where, and who is applying the paint is driven to write, create, and illustrate his or her narrative of living in the city. These narratives provoke questions about our perceptions of power and powerlessness in the city. Moonman 157 and Klara have two distinctly privileged views of that city, one from the tunnels in the South Bronx and the other, from the skyscrapers in upper Manhattan. Both characters have a unique position on what constitutes waste and destruction, which provokes us to rethink human labels themselves as a destructive force. Delillo brings us into both worlds intermittently throughout the novel, though these two figures never meet. They come close, though their meeting is unimportant because what we learn is that they are both very much alike, in story, which increases the desire to learn what drives them.

Graffiti is often omitted from textual history as a visual narrative in the United States because it represents ideas that are considered insignificant vulgar vandalism, like
Moonman 157’s. The proof of this is in Sister Edgar’s fellow nun, Gracie, who also expresses disgust and disapproval of Moonman 157’s desire to memorialize his neighborhood comrades who have died from “TB, AIDS, beatings, drive-by shootings, measles, asthma, and, abandonment at birth” (239). The narrative of many of their journeys to the South Bronx describe them as, “left in dumpster, forgot in car, left in Glad Bag stormy night” (239). These words are actually inscribed on “The Wall” by Moonman 157’s crew so that they are not forgotten. This is the narrative that is often oversimplified by those who see it as purely nuisance and waste. More, because it is written, painted or drawn on public property, it is dismissed altogether and eventually buffed by the city or the building owner so that the walls are blank once more. In the context of nuisance for the city, the narrative of graffiti is avoided and ignored, which is often fuel for the writer who is driven by this instinctual need to drive home his point. This volley is then met with more scapegoating, and in some cases it becomes fuel for hot-button mayoral campaigns, when convenient. In Moonman 157’s case, graffiti was used as a headstone or memorial for these hidden, shunned, and discarded youth of the South Bronx.

An outsider’s view of Moonman 157’s work, as we see with Klara Sax in her early days, is that of contempt and usually dismissed as unnecessary and amateur vandalism. Like many, her belief was that Moonman 157’s graffiti meant nothing because he was nothing -- at least, not in her perception of what constituted authentic art. Klara’s view of real art was captured in Acey Greene’s “somber eye of a cinquecentist” (394). By comparison, Moonman 157 knows nothing about the formal use of color and technique. He is motivated strictly by his instinct for color and style. Klara initially dismisses his use of color because of its boldness. For example, when she and Esther
Winship are traveling on the Dyre Avenue Line through the North Bronx, looking for Moonman 157, Klara thinks of the graffiti on the train as, “depressing,” and that it was just “poor kids playing out a fantasy” in the pursuit of fame (394). She is unable to connect this pursuit of fame with her own pursuit of the same thing. In fact, she thinks there is no comparison. The instincts that drive a cinquecentist are far superior to that of a graffiti writer who, in Klara’s eyes, paints for fun.

In Moonman 157’s view, via his pseudonym was that, “the whole point of [his] tag was how the letters and numbers told a story of backstreet life” (434). This was his life, as he knew it, where violence, disease, and waste were part of his narrative. It is his world. Early in Klara’s career, her initial reaction to Moonman 157’s work was tainted by the fact that he did his work, “under the water mains and waste pipes,” (432) and she, in a home studio. In other words, graffiti writing was not art, nor was it a legitimate narrative, because it stood outside of the norm.
CHAPTER V

DELILLO AS GRAFFITI WRITER

Don Delillo’s masterful wording in *Underworld* is engrossing, despite the fact that his chapters are not chronologically synced. There is no real plot and even though it is difficult to connect graffiti with baseball, waste, and serial killers, as well as the Military Industrial Complex, he reveals a side of history that is rarely seen. The title of the novel itself suggests that there is an entire world that is not visible in our daily lives, which is the history that has not been adequately recorded because it is not of this world. It is figuratively underneath the world. It is not visible, though, he manages to rewrite portions of history in order to bring attention to the untold narrative. He achieves this by provoking the reader to pay attention to our perceptions of the ways in which much of what is considered invisible in our daily lives is actually quite visible, and with we choose not to acknowledge them. I argue Delillo is very much like the graffiti writer in that, through his writing, he exposes indifference and apathy as ambivalence rather than ignorance.

Delillo then gives numerous examples of perceptions of waste as the subject of ambivalence, such as: nuclear waste, “dangerous waste in subterranean salt beds,” waste as a “religious thing” that was entombed “with a sense of reverence and dread,” household waste, recycled waste, and humans that have been treated as waste, such as those, who were unwilling nuclear test subjects in the 1950s, some memorialized or studied in the “Museum
of Misshapens” (Delillo 87, 799). Through his polysemous journey of waste, he hands us characters, such as Klara Sax, as navigators of ambivalence toward subcultures such as graffiti writers, who in her early opinion, produced nothing more than waste. She thinks of their work as, “marked-up trains -- defaced, ugly, like mobile dumpsters,” but then she thought to herself, “it should have been her who defended the graffitists, daredevil kids who put color and spunk into the seismic blur of a rush-hour Monday” (477). Through Klara’s internal dialogue, Delillo exposes the ways in which we have been groomed to view graffiti as nuisance, existing in areas, “adrift from the social order” (239). For example, theories such as Broken Windows, would be absurd for someone such as Klara Sax, who once lived in the Bronx in order to work free from the constraints of production, as an artist. She thrived in the mayhem of the streets and the collection of junk for art, because it helped her see the details in everyday objects more clearly (Delillo 393). By seeing value and worth in discarded objects, her perspective was shifted inward from her early days as a frustrated painter. Moonman 157 boldly made his point by painting trains, and Klara admitted this when she saw his work, and thought to herself, “this particular kid knew how to make an impact” (394). She was surprised by this thought because, although he did not garner the same respect that Klara wished to receive from her peers, Moonman 157 made an impact. And he did this, in spite of his status as a graffiti writer from the South Bronx.

As the novel progresses backwards in time it is evident that what Delillo is attempting to do is to interweave lower, middle, and upper-class worlds, in order to show that all of us see the world in terms of class. For example, his character, Moonman 157, the graffiti writer, has an ongoing working relationship with Sister Edgar and Brother
Mike, his colleagues from the Catholic Church. They work together, as colleagues, in the fight against AIDS and hunger in the unseen part of the city called, “the Wall” that sits in the South Bronx (239). They do this by working together to salvage and sell abandoned cars for scrap. The money is then used to buy clothing and food for the hungry and desolate “sleeping under highways in refrigerator boxes,” as well as to provide medicine and care for the ill (240). What connects them is not necessarily just the work they do together, it is the Wall that connects them. The Wall is a place in the South Bronx that houses Moonman 157’s crew, made up of orphaned, ill, and discarded children and young adults. For them, this place of graffiti, disorder, and decay represented hope and good will.

This is an area that had become closed off to New York City by way of Robert Moses’ urban renewal project called the “Cross Bronx Expressway” (Caro 1998). This project literally displaced and divided an entire community from the rest of New York City. As a result many people fled and few remained as the area fell into deep economic and social decline. Delillo captures a picture of this area in the late 70s and 80s when AIDS began to emerge in the United States, through Moonman and the people with whom he lives, as examples of what many New Yorkers saw as the product of decay in and around the South Bronx during these two decades. Delillo explores ideology and cultural layering in most of his work in Underworld with graffiti writers representing the subject capable of altering perspectives. Marc Schuster cites this capability as Delillo’s belief that the “subject has the capacity to alter the ideological framework of society” (Schuster Intro). Delillo’s words seek to disrupt the order, much like the graffiti writer who seeks to both disrupt and create.
Michiko Kakutani points to (Kakutani 1997) Delillo’s exploration into the “subterranean world of private emotions, in which individuals are connected by a secret calculus of hope and loss” as an alternative narrative to that which is dominant (Kakutani). The symbolically subterranean space where graffiti has conveyed a plethora of meaning has existed for many years, though it has been buffed and dismissed. Much of what has been written on the walls and the trains has been removed over the years, and this continues today. Delillo imagines the world that could exist for Moonman 157 as a place of substance and hope. The graffiti writer, as he sees him, is no longer a defiant punk who has nothing to say. He belongs to a member of a specific discourse community where creative ideas, frustrations, and memories are displayed on public surfaces, for a public audience. Jean Baudrillard emphasizes that when art becomes a product of marketing or is mass-produced it loses its ability “to stand opposed, as works and as semantic substance -- as open significations -- to other finite objects” (Schuster 2008). Delillo’s novel approaches the subculture of graffiti in a way that seeks to understand its motivations as a work of visual artistry that achieves independence from Baudrillard’s assertions. His does this by striking the perfect balance between Moonman 157 and the more traditional artist, Klara Sax, juxtaposing these worlds.

Comparisons Between Moonman 157 and Klara Sax

The discarded space where Moonman 157 and his crew live is a six-story squatters’ tenement reminds Sister Edgar of life in “another century” because of its decay and disorder (Delillo 811). According to Sister Edgar, Moonman 157 undoubtedly has AIDS because she suspects that he is gay, which she believes further alienates him from
the rest of the world around him. However, graffiti writing works to unite him with his adopted family of orphaned and forgotten youth, because he uses this narrative as a means for compassion, dignity, and respect. What is poignant here about Moonman 157’s relationship with his adopted family and Sister Edgar’s world is the fact that there is a considerable amount of respect and admiration, despite her feelings of disgust at his living conditions. Moonman 157 and his crew dare to bring life and hope to The Wall by taking care of those who live and die in this neighborhood. He works to help restore their humanity and dignity through his graffiti memorials for those who die unnoticed by the world. Those who die are eulogized with either pink or blue angels on the graffiti wall that Moonman 157, and his crew, work to conscientiously maintain. Delillo makes Moonman 157 human and empathetic, despite his environment. His narrative is powerful in that, on the outside it resembles disorder and decay and on the inside, it defies hatred and judgment by those who see them as human refuse.

Delillo places Klara in a position of being mostly participant and observer, eventually crossing paths with the grittier world of disregarded cityscapes, abandoned military aircraft, and graffiti. She is a struggling artist in her youth and continues to struggle well into her fifties, which is evidenced by her continual confusion and ambivalence about her craft. In one example, she expresses her feeling that it is better to pull color out of her work, as if to say things look better in black and white (Delillo 376). Color, for Klara, is powerful because it imbues life and passion, as we see with her later work in the desert. She works hard as a painter in her young, married days with Albert Bronzini, who insists that she continue to paint, despite her insistence that she has lost the desire. He tells her to, “give it time...do it for the day-to-day satisfaction. For the way it
fills out the day” (747). At this point she is ready to abandon painting altogether. These interactions with her first husband, Albert, accentuate her feelings of being out of touch with her instincts. She continually doubts her abilities as an artist so much that she also loses the desire for emotional intimacy with her husband. This is reflected in her insistence to paint things in black and white in her early years as an artist.

Later in her life, we see her as an unmarried woman in the desert using so much color she refers to herself as, “being drunk on color” (70). She abandons the world of expectation and instead gives into her graffiti instinct to paint. The bombers, that have been put out to pasture, are revived with the color she religiously works in her hands. This confident, and less ambivalent artist in her seventies, has finally become “a woman going mad with color” who is not afraid of visibility (70). By contrast, the younger Klara accompanied by one lover or another thinks of herself as having a, “small voice...going more or less invisible” (396). Added to this she believes that she is a woman with no passion, even growing smaller, physically, than everyone else. At one point she is in a restaurant with one her lovers, Miles Lightman, and she thinks to herself, “if Miles were not here, how long would it take the waiter to wait on her?” (396) She feels invisible next to everyone in her life, including him. He is a part-time film producer, who is obsessed with obscure events and people, and completely out of touch with the things of everyday life, so much so that he does not even notice her diminishing esteem. At this point in her life, she is confined by her denial of her instinct to create and express these feelings.

While Klara notices the everyday structures, like the “grooved staves bound with metal hoops” on the water tanks in the foreground of the “twin towers in the distance,” Miles was “trying to put together financing for a documentary about a woman
who contracted the illnesses and diseases of celebrities” (378). In comparison, Klara and Miles are black and white, polar opposites in how they observe and make meaning with the things and people around them. Klara eventually understands this, and in fact, chooses to distance herself from Miles, as we see in the chapter, “Cocksucker Blues,” which takes place in the summer of 1974 (370). She has the steady company of lovers and friends, though she lacks the ability to believe in her mantra to her first and only husband, Albert, that he should, “see things differently” (214). Despite this ability, she is insecure and often expresses envy when compared to her friends – which, she herself does quite often. While she is artistically astute while her friends were dabbling in “postpainterly” abstraction (393). \footnote{Delillo’s use of the term implies that postpainterly abstraction is for the less talented, a term coined by Clement Greenberg, (Guggenheim).} Even though her friend, Acey Greene, is making money and a name as an artist, Klara seems to think there is something forced about Acey’s work. While Klara was chided for finding something philosophical about old factory window glass and burlap sacking, Acey was using “color-mapping guides” to replicate the sullen moods of gangs with swagger (392-3). The summer of 1974 was a year where Klara spent much of her time on the rooftop with art aficionados and red wine drinkers, although she knows that she does this because she is avoiding the urge to paint, unrestrained. At one point, she finds herself thinking about her first sexual experience, while in the company of people she hardly knew at one of these gatherings – things that were not pretentious or related to the “laughter of a dozen people sounding small” (371). She thinks about going back to work after a bout with depression, back pain, and insomnia with clarity and hope. Here, Delillo makes a remarkable comparison between
Klara’s sense of human invisibility and her ability to visualize what many people seem to ignore. She wondered about the anonymous artists “who had worked the stones” and that “they must have been immigrants, Italian stone carvers probably, unremembered” (373). Klara was uncomfortable being recognized and she did not mind that “men gave her generic status at best,” though, she was “wary of ego, hero, heights, and size” (373-4). Perhaps the world of high art brought this out of her, this wariness, though as we see in her later years this changes. She is more at ease with her abilities as an artist.

The anonymous artists who had worked the stones as Klara thinks, “try to find an element of felt life…a graffiti instinct – to trespass and declare ourselves, show who we are” are where the organized art world and the marginalized graffiti writer differ (77). This was the same Klara who “did not like the idea of tagging trains” in her earlier days (394). She felt that it was “the romance of the ego, poor kids playing out a fantasy of meretricious fame” (394). Klara almost crosses paths with the real conceptualists when she travels around the seedier sides of New York with her friend, Esther, in order to find the “kid who does graffiti [on] trains…whole trains” (377). When she saw his art on the trains she was not impressed. She felt that his “letters and numbers exploded in your face” like “pop-eyed cartoon humanoids…metallic silver and blue and cherry-bomb red and a number of neon greens” (395). This gives the sense that she was intimidated by his use of such bold colors, something she avoided using in her early work.

In this example, Delillo brings us into the inner circle of Moonman 157, who painted subway cars at night and had sex with men in the tunnels, but was considered a “goddamn master” through Esther, bosslady art expert, Winship’s eyes (377). She wanted to “give him a wall,” as if she had that authority (377). What she does not understand,
and refuses to see, is that Moonman 157 already understood the complexities of visibility and fame. He also does not rely on the museum curators or agents to validate what he already knows as the respect that most artists long for. His crew of “writers of the future” hand him spray cans of paint and snacks when they rack “for the master” (437). Compared with Klara’s envy of her colleague, Acey Greene, who had a “casually ravishing way” of laying down paint, Moonman 157’s colleagues share handshakes and “ceremonial respect,” as a way of acknowledging greatness as unique (394, 438). Klara did not appreciate the way Acey slighted her work when she talked about the way Klara took junk and made it into a “philosophical” piece of art because it stood out amongst the “museum with white walls and classical paintings” (393). Moonman 157 was not worried about how he was perceived by the world because he saw his work differently. He thought of his artistic life as a world that was full of risk and temporality. He knew the risks were worth the brief moments his burners survived on those trains, before the buff, because he was getting noticed (440). Art and writing, was for him, a given. He felt that “Nobody could take him down” because “He knew he was getting fame” (433). He thought of it as:

bright and rhyming poems ...the art that can’t stand still, it climbs across your eyeballs night and day, the flickery jumping art of the slums and dumpsters, flashing those colors in your face ...to get inside people’s heads and vandalize their eyeballs.” (435, 440)

Slight and envy was something Moonman 157 understood, too, though graffiti writers never kept it to themselves, like Klara. When someone decided to paint over your work, a writer, acting on the knowledge that it was a sign of disrespect, did not let it go unnoticed. And, fame has different meanings for most Americans. For Delillo, respect
and fame are explored through his Klara as something to be sought, something to be exploited, and something out of reach. Moonman 157 and Klara are affected by reputation in one way or another. For example, we see how Klara passively waits for acknowledgement in her early years, by trying to stand out as unique, and we see how Moonman 157 aggressively pursues fame by creating better and more challenging train pieces than his rivals.

Bent and Distorted

Ruth Helyer uses the words, “bent and distorted” in reference to language and graffiti in order to refer to its ability to question meaning, “as a potential tactic for rupturing the connection between language and value, as is the ambiguity of metaphor and the power of wordlessness” in Schuster’s work (Schuster 2008). This is an accurate description of Underworld, because much like Moonman’s “pop-eyed cartoon humanoids, winding in and out of each other,” Delillo’s language is similar (Delillo 395). Like the graffiti writer, Delillo sees value in contesting historical narratives.

Through Klara Sax’s thought processes, Delillo notices the “novelty of basic sensation in the grinding life of the city” (379). He describes every movement, thought, and expectation that surrounds his characters. He makes it possible for us to feel as if we are present in these moments, witnessing these movements – tasting the cotton candy and peanuts, at the game that changed everything. His comparison to the atomic blast that took place on this same day makes this game seem ludicrous when thinking about the potential for changing history. However, Delillo not only places both events as simultaneous, he pulls various narratives along as well, such as Cotter Martin, Jackie
Gleason, J. Edgar Hoover, and Bobby Thomson. Like the baseball game, Delillo takes us deeply underneath the world of waste, fame, fear, shock, ignored and forgotten spaces in less than one-hundred pages. He shows us the intersecting spaces between baseball, nuclear annihilation, and garbage, by describing seemingly random characters at a baseball game, the first nationally televised baseball game of the 20th Century (Goldstein 2010). By working with simultaneous events and characters, he is asking us to pay attention to the world around us. He accomplishes this through his writing.

Delillo’s words are his art form and he wants us to see the world that is not written in history books. In this sense he is the painter, the sculptor, the writer in one who displays his craft in order to shed new perspectives. He accomplishes this through his use of incredibly rich, diverse language that is unique to each group of characters he gives us. Klara and Moonman 157 embody the personalities and gifts of perception necessary to creating art that is provocative, art that pushes boundaries; Klara, with her gutsy use of color and canvas (retired bombers in the desert) and Moonman 157, his trains and walls. Delillo revisits these characters from time to time throughout the novel, though he begins by introducing new, seemingly unrelated characters, one after the other, each with one thing in common, the desire for leave behind a mark of some sort. In some cases, their motivation is their quest for fame.

More, it is never clear if we will be witness to character development with each of these people, though this is also part of the draw. He throws us from place to place, time to time, back and forth, but what remains consistent is his focus on the aesthetics of each new scene. Some we meet only once and others are weaved throughout the minor stories. At one point, he brings in the Texas highway killer (we do not know
who he is until he admits shooting someone well into the chapter) right after Nick Shay’s wife has just finished smoking heroine with her lover, Brian Glassic. Oh, and Brian is Nick’s co-worker.

Delillo’s style is not common and to some, frustrating, because he jumps from year to year, decade to decade, never in any sensible order. *Underworld* is chronologically reversed, so there is some confusion in the order. He keeps us on our toes, as readers, with his precise language and repetitive shifts in narrative. He slips in details that you could only catch if you were paying attention, which is good news for literature buffs who are trained close readers. For example, when he brought in the Texas highway killer it was not clear where this was or who this was until he mentioned an unfamiliar name thus far, Richard, and that he was driving on a Texas highway to meet his friend, Bud. These two characters were only mentioned briefly, and it becomes clear that Delillo is throwing in hyperrealist scenes in order to serve us a jolt. Up to this point all of the characters have been less sociopathic and mostly troubled. So when he describes Richard’s thought process of the time he shot the man in the car, in front of the young videographer, there was absolutely no feeling attached. Delillo does not make it easy for the reader. He insists on leading us into the proverbial dark alley of uncertainty as to what we are supposed to remember -- names, details -- and often these lead to dead ends. At some point it becomes necessary to simply read without expectation and this is obvious when we learn nothing more about the sociopathic highway killer than where he lives and who he knows.

There are obvious parallels to Delillo’s fascination with the JFK assassination (Nov 1963) and the Texas highway killer, as television stations repeatedly broadcast
looped recordings of both events. Delillo lets us see how moments of recorded history shape our perceptions of the world around us, which sometimes incite fear and often paranoia in the view. He calls these moments – or the taping of them, “superreal...or…underreal” because they “give things a shape and a destiny” (Delillo 157). These moments give us televised, edited versions of history through the eyes of the media, which can often dictate what we envision as the entire story. Delillo seems to be saying that this, itself, is a reaction to the way history is chronologically read. He incorporates both Moonman 157 and Klara Sax as working against the tendency for one interpretation of events.

Delillo’s unflattering use of historical events in American history, has caused political pundits like George Will enough grief to refer to Delillo as a, “literary vandal” (Will 1988). Nonetheless, Delillo gets his point across – like the graffiti writer, always the object of patriotic apathy shaming. He works with the concept of patriotism in his dialogue between Nick and Klara in the desert in their later years, using it to refer to the history, the past, and loyalty – all of those feelings associated with it. When Nick tells Klara that he felt he “owed us this visit” (72). She responds by saying, “I know what it means. You feel a loyalty. The past brings out our patriotism, you know? We want to feel an allegiance. It’s the one undivided allegiance, to all those people and things. And it gets stronger” (72). Her allegiance and patriotism are for her, a voluntary response to how she chooses to see the entire picture of the bombers in the desert. She thinks about the men on board when the bombs were to be dropped, and she wonders about the nose painters.

The dialogue, between characters, is so shocking at times that it is difficult to maintain context. One particular example is a series of Lenny Bruce’s standup routines
where he repeatedly yells to the audience: “We’re all gonna die!” (506). Most of dialogue is loaded with offensive, politically incorrect epithets, which refer to the Cuban missile crisis. As Marc Schuster states, “Bruce indicates to his beatnik audience that he is hip to their scene... by placing the bomb at the center of his act” (Schuster 2008). Like Delillo, “what motivates the comic is his interest in the ‘loaded words’ of his culture” (Schuster). While the dialogue between characters is chopped and split into fragments, this non-linear narrative reminds us that his focus is not so much on the people but the times in which they exist. This makes it difficult to follow because he introduces so many characters at once, though it is important to not become engrossed in the specifics of their lives as much as it is to see through their eyes and imagine their worlds. One of the ways he accomplishes this is through incomplete inner and outer dialogue with his characters. He illuminates the fact that we often come equipped with expectations that are not spoken and often not realized.

Much like real life, Delillo wants us to know that much of our communication in the world is not direct. In other words we speak at each other, and this is how the dialogue unfolds. We use language in order to connect to each other, though as we see with these characters, their lives intersect in ways they do not even understand. It is suspenseful, wondering how this all connects.

He brings in fictional semblances of J. Edgar Hoover, Jackie Gleason, Frank Sinatra, and Toots Shor just for added flavor, though he is clear to let us know he will be focusing on the moments rather than these larger-than-life figures. Characters with real names who actually attended this event, like Jackie Gleason, are not as important to the novel as these lesser-known individuals. Figures such as J. Edgar Hoover are used to
anchor what we know about the Cold War and what we have come to learn, over the years. More, Delillo is interested in helping us to understand how, as Mark Olsteen states, is Delillo’s incorporation of our counterhistory between weapons and waste (Olsteen 217). He states, “Underworld embodies how fiction can generate a ‘version of the past that escapes the coils of established history” (217). As the novel progresses past the initial setting it becomes evident that there is more at stake than a baseball game. There are moments in history that are not recorded in the history texts. In order to highlight this phenomenon he uses two historical events to juxtapose entertainment and hysteria, like Bobby Thomson’s famous home run hit referred to as, “the shot heard ‘round the world,” and the Soviet Union’s atomic bomb test, in order to get our attention (Delillo 528).

Even though we know these two events occurred few people were aware that they took place in the same moment. Delillo uses the title, The Triumph of Death, in the novel because it seems that a lot of the focus is on J. Edgar Hoover and Pieter Bruegel’s painting with the same name, as opposed to the baseball game. This particular portion of the novel was so compelling to many people as a short piece written five years earlier and published in Harper’s Magazine titled, “Pafko at the Wall,” with the subtitle, “The Shot Heard Round the World,” that Delillo used it as the prologue for Underworld (Harper’s 1992).

The voice that we are reading is not Pafko, however. The first words are, “He speaks in your voice, American, and there’s a shine in his eye that’s halfway hopeful” (Delillo 11). It is the second-person narrator describing the young Cotter Martin, who has cut school and jumped the turnstiles in order to take part in this spectacle. He is invisible to everyone around him and he takes advantage of this. His mother works all day while
his father drinks, gambles, and schemes. This unnoticed young boy changes everything for people he has never met, people he would likely never come in contact with – and he does this by grabbing the infamous ball that met Bobby Thomson’s bat from Ralph Branca’s pitch. He is one of the characters that we get to know, through his slow-motion gate crashing debacle, he never meets Nick Shay, and we never see him again – only the ball. The narrator continues with,

Longing on a large scale is what makes history. This is just a kid with a local yearning but he is part of an assembling crowd, anonymous thousands off the buses and trains, people in narrow columns tramping over the swing bridge above the river, and even if they are not a migration or a revolution, some vast shaking of the soul, they bring with them the body heat of a great city and their own small reveries and desperations, the unseen something that haunts the day – men in fedoras and sailors on shore leave, the stray tumble of their thoughts, going to a game. (11)

As the ball changes hands, from Cotter’s father – who stole it in order to make fast money – to Charlie Wainwright, an advertising account supervisor, it becomes the center of the novel without being the focus. As the ball travels from hand to hand another character is introduced. This fits nicely into the texture of the art world because Delillo was able to weave the infamous baseball, which changed everything, into a representation of both as American commodities. The baseball becomes the elusive object of desire throughout the entire novel. At one point it is even compared to the size of the actual coil in the atomic bomb (172).

As J. Edgar Hoover stands unimpressed at this moment in baseball history the pages of a magazine fall into his lap. It just so happens to be a “color reproduction of a painting crowded with medieval figures who are dying or dead – a landscape of visionary havoc and ruin” (41). Not completely unlikely, though this is where the novel becomes really interesting. He is able to look up for a brief moment in order to notice, “those who
are happy and dazed. Those who run around the bases calling out the score. The ones who are so excited they won’t sleep tonight. Those whose team has lost. The ones who taunt the losers...[and] the fans having fistfights on the subway going home” (51). On first reading this scene becomes connected to atomic catastrophe and death, and we think of Hoover as an arm of the government that propagates this kind of mayhem. He compares this chaos with Pieter Bruegel’s *The Triumph of Death* as he imagines:

> A lonely tower standing on the Kazakh Test Site, the tower armed with the bomb, and he can almost hear the wind blowing across the Central Asian steppes, out where the enemy lives in long coats and fur caps, speaking that old weighted language of theirs, liturgical and grave. (50)

Hoover’s fascination with the painting began with random scraps of paper being thrown in the stands, in the middle of the baseball triumph, and grew the more he studied it. He made vivid comparisons to the atomic test in the Soviet Union that day. He is aware that the actual tests take place in Kazakhstan, bordering both the Middle-East and China, and he sees the death of thousands of people as justified because in his mind they are the enemy. His job as the director of the FBI is fitting because of his beliefs about who has the right to keep secrets and who does not. He, himself, is exempt from this rule. He takes comfort in the possibility of annihilation, as long as it takes out the enemy. He shares no love of Bruegel’s work – in fact, he did not even know who was responsible for this piece in the magazine until it literally hit his face in the baseball stands. What he shared in common with this violent depiction of war was the power and strength it evoked in him. He knows there are links and connections to underground networks that he feels must be uncovered and revealed. He takes comfort in war and hatred, almost as much as the Giants and the Dodgers or any other competition. In his eyes,
It’s not enough to hate your enemy. You have to understand how the two of you bring each other to deep completion—the old dead fucking the new. The dead raising coffins from the earth. The hillside dead tolling the old rugged bells that clang for the sins of the world.” (51)

Marc Schuster argues “Delillo sees art—unlike terror—as a truly radical force with the potential to reshape, if not entirely subvert, that culture” (Schuster 2008). Like Moonman 157, Delillo is in love with words and language. Darragh McManus writes,

Delillo is…enraptured by the pleasure and potential of the simple process of putting words with words…He often stresses the importance of the shape of letters—black curls and lines hammered onto white paper—the aesthetic architecture of them. He likes internal rhymes with sentences, reversals and flips, aural motifs echoing through the stories. Consequently, virtually every line in every Delillo book is wonderful. Each sings to the eye and ear, like poetry. Each stands alone as a sublime melody while contributing to the symphonic whole. (Guardian 2010)

McManus continues by talking about Delillo’s artistic sincerity, which is what makes him a great writer. When he gives interviews he often talks about his compulsion to use a manual typewriter so that he can see the abstract visual of the words as they are being typed. Perhaps this is one of the reasons for his in-depth exploration into the world of art on the streets and art in the museums. This is not different to Ismael Munoz’s language regarding his graffiti under his tagline, Moonman 157:

The whole point of Moonman’s tag was how the letters and numbers told a story of backstreet life…[where] the colors lock and bleed and the letters connect and it’s all live jive, it jumps and shouts—even the drips are intentional, painted supersharp to express how the letters sweat, how they live and breathe and eat and sleep, they dance and play the sax. (Delillo 433-34)

Schuster emphasizes Delillo’s implication that art presents a form of violence that is capable of wreaking more than superficial damage on consumer culture (Schuster 2008). He believes that artists are sensitive to cultural nuances, which makes them more susceptible to exploitation. However, graffiti writers who fit this genre of artist, like
Moonman 157l, felt this desire to learn more about graffiti, which began when he walked through the tunnels and during the times when he “felt sorry for himself” (Delillo 434). He learned about the world and himself in those tunnels, and he also learned that he was not safe from sexual abuse there as well. These were the moments when he knew he was on his own, alone, and he made choices that would affect him and the other orphaned children around him – that was, to leave a mark, a sign that he existed. This art form helped him understand the need to leave a signature behind, to make your mark in the world, just to let the world know that you were once here. He wrote messages on the walls and the trains as Moonman 157 because he saw himself as part of the city. He took ownership, unlike Klara, of his writing and art. Kristina Milnor describes the authorial intent of graffiti as one that seeks “no one’s permission and are imagined to speak to no one’s interests but the author’s” (Milnor 4).

Delillo understood the graffiti instinct. He wrote about it through the eyes of Moonman 157 when he talked about knowing the feeling of a writer gets from the “heart of the Bronx …”the whole burnt and rusted country” where his “art of the backstreets talking, all the way from Bird” (44). His use of haunting descriptions are thorough and riveting to read, though it is as if he writes this in order to show how much of what we are, in the world, is connected by networks such as the commuter train that runs throughout the city and its boroughs. This is the underside that we often make attempts to avoid. Even though his characters are purely fictional or historically based in fiction, his objective and style make their point. John A. McClure considers Delillo’s work, “fictions out of forms of popular romance” (Lentricchia 99). He also considers Delillo’s style “playful,” though he is clear to state that there is ”logic to the transitions he orchestrates”
(Lentricchia, McClure 99). In other words, Delillo writes about the last frontier, much like “the imperial adventure novel” or the “western” (McClure 99). Though, instead of using typical western imagery, he writes about places in the United States that we rarely hear about, or even know exist at this level. The South Bronx is one of these, a place that, at one point in history, was known for housing primarily indigents, drug addicts, and the mentally ill. At another point he takes us into “a white space on the map…totally closed to the public” in Jornada de Muerto, New Mexico (99). The mysterious white spaces on the map that are not viewable to the public, and in fact, make his main character, Nick Shay, very curious. Nick is a waste manager who often talks about his work, with sarcasm, even though he seems to enjoy what he does. He disposes hazardous waste into areas of the world that will accept it for the right price. Delillo is using the more palatable waste from Nick’s work in comparison to perceptions of waste generated in the South Bronx to illustrate his point that waste and decay have many uses and meanings. Nick sees comparison between his present life of dumping waste and his married lover back in the Bronx, Klara Sax, as having “been marked ...by her methods of transforming and absorbing junk,” when he impulsively stops by her B-52 work site in the desert (Delillo 65, 102).

Imagery of garbage and waste is something that Delillo heavily emphasizes throughout the novel in reference to many things such as the Nevada and New Mexico deserts, where nuclear tests were conducted. Waste was something that had many meanings for all of his characters, and Nick’s thought process seems to be fascinated by it, from a distance. At one point, Nick states that waste had a “solemn aura,” along with “an aspect of untouchability” while Klara sees waste as having the ability to restore
discarded pieces of history. Moonman 157 sees waste as something that can be sold in
order to help the suffering (88). Delillo makes vivid comparisons to people as perceived
waste when he introduces J. Edgar Hoover. He also describes garbage in the restaurant
alleys as having to be caged at night, otherwise people will try to eat it (283). However,
when Delillo introduces waste as a product of high art, as in Klara’s case, all we see is a
woman who struggles to be unique. So, she uses garbage as a way to stand out among her
more successful artist friends. Klara was referred to as the “bag lady” at one point in her
art career who saw junk as having an aural effect (393). Despite her desire to be noticed
and appreciated by the art curators for reusing refuse in her early years, in her later years
this kind of validation is not as important for her.

The unseen and misrecognized is given focus throughout the novel and as
much air time as the well-known, such as baseball and high profile figures. It is as if
Delillo is portraying a perspective often not considered when passersby on the subway,
for example, avoid acknowledging unkempt strangers and surroundings. These areas of
life are something that most people choose to ignore. This is one of the hallmarks of
Delillo’s style, in that he works to successfully portray alternative perspectives through,
not only Moonman 157, but Nick Shay and Klara Sax, as well. Sometimes Delillo is
literal and sometimes his playful associations within the novel are easy to spy. He places
Moonman 157 right in the middle of the debate on graffiti and its competing messages. In
this sense, it is Delillo who is contesting the dominant narrative. Either way, he is
difficult to classify into a genre because he transcends the literary world through his use
of intensely descriptive language. Behind every word, every sentence is, “the power of an
extraordinary commitment” (Passaro 1991). Much like the graffiti writer, who writes
with precision and purpose, Delillo is an artist of words who takes pleasure in “the construction of sentences and the juxtaposition of words – not just how they sound or what they mean, but even what they look like” (Passaro). Delillo’s writing makes the reader work to understand, for example, his repeated use of words such as, waste, wall, and destruction.

Also, much like the graffiti writer who works under a pseudonym, not just to avoid punishment, but to have his work be the focus, Delillo avoids biography. He prefers his solitude -- or, exile, as he puts it -- and considers his work to be cunning (Passaro). This is what make Moonman 157 and Klara work well as representations of the unknown and known of the art world. Delillo breaks these representational narratives into connecting pieces that would not necessarily be seen as crossing paths. The art world in Underworld is Delillo’s way of making light of the hypocrisy and pretension in the world of high art, as we see through Klara, the often misunderstood artist.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The study of graffiti as a contesting visual narrative in the urban landscape is crucial because of the richness of its polyphonic characteristics. It is a culture with many voices and perspectives, with the graffiti instinct as the common thread. It disrupts the simplicity of the city and the predictability that has become part of the illusion of control and safety. Graffiti demands attention, unlike a digital billboard or a super sign in Times Square. It demands to be acknowledged and is free to the willing eye, and as Jeff Ferrell states as not being based on, “a set of aesthetic assumptions and legal controls that define the beauty and desirability of "decent" public art, "clean" cities, and "appropriate personal style,"” (Ferrell 130). Graffiti defies norms. It exists in places where it will be noticed and in places hard to reach.

Further, graffiti in urban spaces is often overlooked as a narrative that is rife with growth and liberation because there is so much confusion and rhetoric still very much attached to graffiti writing as a crime of deviance. It has been unfairly overlooked because of this assumption. By contrast, graffiti writing offers freedom from what Anthony Raynsford described as a shift in focus from “the social and historical meaning of the city to a focus on the personal and subjective meaning of the city,” free from the constraints of hyperdominant spaces such as New York City set against its boroughs (Raynsford 45). Raynsford was elaborating on, “Lynch’s work [which] suggested a way
in which a pluralistic urban society, characterized by multiplicity and difference, might nevertheless share a common urban space” (Raynsford Abstract). Kevin Lynch was known for working with urban design that reflected the lives of its citizens as opposed to a rigidly, modernistic, and historical city that reflected universal ideas of “modern man” (Raynsford). Instead, the multiplicity and difference that Raynford refers to encompasses visual narratives such as graffiti and its ability to evolve, in the urban environment, despite its media-generated reputation as that of violence, criminal, and being gang-related. Its complexity is one of the reasons the academy benefits from the study of graffiti as a visual narrative. Graffiti’s evolution as a powerful medium has forced opened the possibility of asking new questions about what we see as art and its motivation. There may never be a way to answer these questions definitively, though, the end goal should focus on open discourse, suggesting that visual narratives be studied from the perspective of them as a benefit to the urban environment rather than a problem.

Graffiti is complex and its writers are unique, much like a signature. In order to understand why graffiti, has never been eradicated by any metropolis, one needs to look at the drive behind the writer. Some writers have found a more creative way of showing off their work today. This creativity has evolved considerably over the past two decades because of the Internet, though it remains illegal as a practice. Ironically, its illegality has also enhanced its marketability. Some of this is due to the fact that its narrative has captured the eyes of one of the largest consumer markets in the world, its youth. Successful attempts to absorb graffiti into commercial industry, adds to the complexity of its narrative in that, in its consumable form, it loses its potency. As a result,
graffiti remains largely complex and misunderstood. And, as I conclude, for the most part graffiti continues to resist even commercial absorption.

It is necessary to see graffiti writers as possessing the ability to speak through this medium, and as a result, this specified language has the potential to challenge notions of powerlessness. As it is, common perceptions only perpetuate the controversies associated with graffiti writing. Academic study of graffiti benefits in understanding its complexities, and if there is one thing that can be accomplished, it is that graffiti can be distinguished as pushing its way into areas of the modern city because there was something to say, something that needed to be noticed by those who inhabit the city. Graffiti writers encompass a variety of opinions of those living in the city, which is my reason for integrating cross-disciplinary opinions, such as: literature, art, the philosophical areas of aesthetics, and history. However, my primary focus is literature, and how graffiti is a visual narrative. As an example in literature, Delillo placed his characters, Moonman 157 and Klara Sax, into these areas of our urban history in order to shed light on rarely understood narratives and how all writers, and especially graffiti writers, write to make us stop and think about things, otherwise unnoticed.

I have illustrated how the graffiti visual narrative contests hypocrisy and denial through narrative, which is one of the reasons it has had such a sobering effect on how we see history through this narrative. So, while the graffiti writer lacks the academic credentials, and thus, credibility, to produce reliable evidence of, “the graffiti instinct,” and “an element of felt life,” as tangible and reliable evidence of graffiti as a visual narrative, ultimately he writes because this is what he knows (Delillo 77). It is my
conclusion that academic scholarship benefits by studying graffiti as an alternative visual narrative, relying on the writer’s perspective as his cultural experience.
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