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Graffiti as art(e)fact: A contemporary archaeology

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Graffiti as art(e)fact: a contemporary archaeology

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Either write something worth reading or do something worth writing.
Ben Franklin 1706

We no longer believe that language and reality 'match up' so congruently – indeed, we probably think that words give birth to things as much as things give birth to words.

Julian Barnes 1985:90-91

Abstract

Place and personhood are topics that dominate contemporary discourse in southern Africa and which are pithily materialised as 'graffiti'. Superficially defined as a modern language of the poor and peripheral, a more grounded analysis shows it to continue and extend an ancient tradition of politically-engaged place-ma(r)king. Inherently feral and unstable, graffiti has been studied from many perspectives – anthropological, artistic, psychological, and sociological to name a few. But seldom has an archaeological sensibility been used to situate graffiti as emplaced artefacts with surprisingly long-lived genealogies as well as specific ethnographies. This approach reveals a very different definition of graffiti that ranges from 19th-century 'San' rock paintings made to counter European and Bantu-speaker's claims on a custodial landscape, to a Calitzdorp resident's 'outing' of festering small town issues. In a post-colonial context, graffiti is a powerful medium for bringing, indeed forcing, counter-discourses on, among other issues, ethnonomy, politics and evolution to the attention of a wide audience. Oscillating between crime, art, corporate co-option, and historic witness, graffiti is a multi-sensorial artefact that closely indexes and calibrates history as she unfolds and is imagined and helps us better to situate and deploy academic enquiry in post-Apartheid South Africa..

An inscribed landscape

How can it be explained that the continent of Africa might have been said to have no kind of writing, of literature, of history, of culture? Africa, being the cradle of Humanity is the continent where language and inscribed meaning first emerged.

Simon Battestini 2000

Southern Africa is a landscape on which past and future possibilities of personhood intertwine and are inscribed. Identity as concept and practice has received wide and thoughtful coverage from thinkers in disciplines ranging from the arts to socio-biology (e.g., Nuttall and Coetzee 2000, Mbembe 2001). But to restrict such thinking to the Academy would attenuate a debate that is pervasive, embodied and emplaced. In the quest for understanding our place(s) in the

world, the boundary between what is 'academic' and what is 'popular' blurs in productive ways (e.g., Hebdige 1988; Gupta and Ferguson 1997). For example, Southern African Archaeology is ideally placed at the intersection of past and present; material culture and social action; between individuals and larger social formations and fragments, to make a real contribution to identity studies. This it has done with some success but archaeological discourse remains only partially intelligible to a broad public (but see Schrire 1995; Buchli and Lucas 2001; Hall 1995) – a problematic condition for a post-colonial science. Yet Archaeology is adept at locating, recording and even translating artefacts – it is, after all, an amalgam of surveillance techniques (mapping, photography, participant observation etc - see Dubow 1995; Shepherd 2002) well-suited to recognising and recording cultural residues and situating them in a *longue durée*. Most of this translation is contextual and relies primarily on a conversation between artefact and place (Deacon 1988; Bender and Winer 2001). Time, surprisingly, is less of a contextual discriminant thanks to the fiction of the 'present' and to the 'past' being constantly in production (see Holtorf and Schadla-Hall 1999; Lucas 2001). De-centering time helps dissolve the hard distinction between the past and the present, and draws Archaeology closer to the realm of contemporary socio-political action and popular culture. Though modern material culture is not typically thought part of archaeology (but see Gould and Schiffer 1981; Buchli and Lucas 2001; Holtorf 2005), I argue that graffiti is an artefact well-suited to archaeological analysis. Indeed, such analysis may provide critical ballast and historical perspective to an artefact that is in danger of becoming so loosely defined as to lose its core, revolutionary nature. There is much debate on what 'true' graffiti is and isn't. Susan Phillips, working on LA gang graffiti, provides a useful overview:

Graffiti. Term applied to an arrangement of institutionally illicit marks in which there has been an attempt to establish some sort of coherent composition: such marks are made by an individual or individuals (not generally professional artists) upon a wall or other surface that is usually visually accessible to the public. The term "graffiti" derives from the Greek *graphein* ("to write"). Graffiti (s. *graffito*), meaning a drawing or scribbling on a flat surface, originally referred to those marks found on ancient Roman architecture. Although examples of graffiti have been found at such sites as Pompeii, the Domus Aurea of Emperor Nero (AD 54-68) in Rome, Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli and the Maya site of Tikal in Mesoamerica, they are usually associated with 20th-century urban environments. Motives for the production of such marks may include a desire for recognition that is public in nature, and/or the need to appropriate public space or someone else's private space for group or individual purposes. Illegitimate counterparts to the paid, legal advertisements on billboards or signs, graffiti utilize the wall of garages, public rest rooms, and jail cells for their clandestine messages. This illegal expression constitutes vandalism to the larger society. Communities that produce graffiti (as opposed to the individual "scribbler") may target cryptic messages toward their own closed community, producing a seemingly confusing and unreadable product. This type of graffiti is geared toward people who already understand the

messages and may act to enhance group solidarity. If a community's ideological focus is geared toward the larger society or the politics of the larger state, graffiti messages usually lack cryptic symbolism, make use of the national language, and retain a more straightforward aesthetic style. An example of this cross-culturally prevalent genre of graffiti, political graffiti may combine with other artistic and expressive forms, such as poster and comic book production, mural painting, newspaper and pamphlet production, and political art exhibitions. The marks may represent the work of unrecognized or underground political groups, radical student movements, or simply dissatisfied individuals. Political graffiti may also arise from sudden emergency situations (e.g. riots) or in response to political legislation and party politics (Phillips 1990: 20, 1999).

Graffiti is thus an artefact with surprising antiquity (also Reisner 1971). It includes the images and words inscribed in faith and resistance by early Christians hiding in the catacombs from their Roman persecutors almost 2000 years ago. Significantly, these graffiti were first studied over 400 years ago (Bosio 1632 [1593]). Slightly older are the myriad inscriptions on Pompeii's walls. Most of these inscriptions are advertisements (brothels, wine merchants and such), while others like "*oh wall, I would collapse if I were you from the weight of scribblings upon you*" (Garrucci 1856) allude to everyday provocations in public spaces inscribed by invisible agents. These archaeological examples help counter the popular notion that graffiti developed out of late 1970s Philadelphia and New York as a mark of alienated youth. Hip hop is an important part of graffiti, but a comparatively recent instantiation that I barely touch on. Similarly, I do not include most 'murals', which tend to be community-based and officially sanctioned (Marschall 2002:6-9 for a useful South African distinction; though Sluka 1992 for political murals in Northern Ireland). I exclude advertisements, though these can be just as unauthorised as graffiti (Twitchell 1996; Kataras 2006). I also exclude tattooing, which share a penumbra with graffiti, because marking the body can be significantly different from marking a place or moment (Scarry 1995; Caplan 2000). Instead, I take a semantic, political, sensorial and above all, material, analysis of graffiti.

Semantically, as Phillips and others explain, 'graffiti' derives from the innocuous Italian *sgraffiare* (to scratch) and the Greek *graphein* (to write), but has acquired a legal definition - "*Term applied to an arrangement of institutionally illicit marks. This illegal expression constitutes vandalism to the larger society*" (Phillips 1996). How does a word shift from the technical and semantic to the legal and punitive? The answer lies in the relationships between graffiti producers, how, where and when they make their marks and who their audiences intended and accidental are. But above all, this shift in meaning exposes the nature of graffiti as a transgressive act and artefact; manifest at moments and places of peril. Sue Williamson suggests that "*The appeal of graffiti is its directness. It is a message sent at personal risk*" (Williamson 1989:97). Thought of multi-

sensorially, this 'message', composed of words and images, is better conceptualised as a form of aurality – especially 'noise' that disrupts the harmonic elevator music. Southern Africa is inscribed and indeed scarred by a complex set of intersecting processes in which violence, resistance and fragmentation have all left their mark – especially over the past four centuries. Evidence of this contestation is everywhere visible, though not necessarily readily intelligible to outside observers. One material residue of these battles is graffiti.

Graffiti has been studied by many academics (see Reisner 1971; Phillips 1999 for overviews) but seldom by archaeologists other than in niche studies (e.g., Kosloski-Ostrow 1986) that seldom touch on issues of the present. This lacuna is somewhat surprising because Archaeology has a long history of studying everyday objects including visual forms like rock art and has, borrowing from structural linguistics, sometimes considered material culture as 'text' (e.g., Tilley 1991; but see Buchli 1995; Olsen 2003). This latter notion situates artefacts as elements of a syntax' or 'code' that constitutes the archaeological 'record' (Lucas 2001), that can be cracked and meaning read off or out of the artefacts. But this approach stresses an ascriptive stance that does not adequately reference the object's originator community, temporality or geography. Or indeed, the nature of the text and associated literacy at hand. Learning from this cultural imperialism, I consider graffiti not so much material culture as text, but as a text that is primarily material culture; in other words, a 'artefact'. I return to a fuller, more post-colonially applicable definition of 'graffiti' at this paper's conclusion. Until then, I use Phillips' notion of 'illegality' and Williamson's identification of 'risk' as foundational elements of graffiti (also Scott 1990; hooks 1994; Rose 2002). In terms of agency, graffiti tends to be a statement by a group/person that is or perceived to be at a societal margin or periphery. Their resistance materialises at moments of crisis and on literal and figurative borderlands of place and identity. To support this analysis I use eight southern African case studies to suggest a wide topographic and temporal distribution of southern African graffiti (fig 1). These examples range from San rock art¹; as painted and painted upon; to European-authored rock engravings from the South African War (1899-1902) and WWII (1939-1945); inscribed eco-terrorism from the Apartheid 'bush' war (1966-1989) in Namibia and Botswana; into a post-colonial era where three painted walls mark the unfolding of extractive neo-liberal economics. These case studies don't correspond to a typical imaginary of what graffiti is or was. I argue that each case study

¹ I do not argue that all 'rock art' is graffiti or that graffiti evolved out of rock art. Rather, graffiti occurs in a wide variety of forms, sites and contexts - including certain rock arts.

embodies an iconoclasm, radicality and – above all - resistance that marks it ‘graffiti’ rather than ‘rock art’, ‘vandalism’, ‘slogan’. These case studies are presented in chronological order before revisiting orthodox definitions of graffiti and considering the role of word, image and scholarly deed in post-apartheid southern Africa.

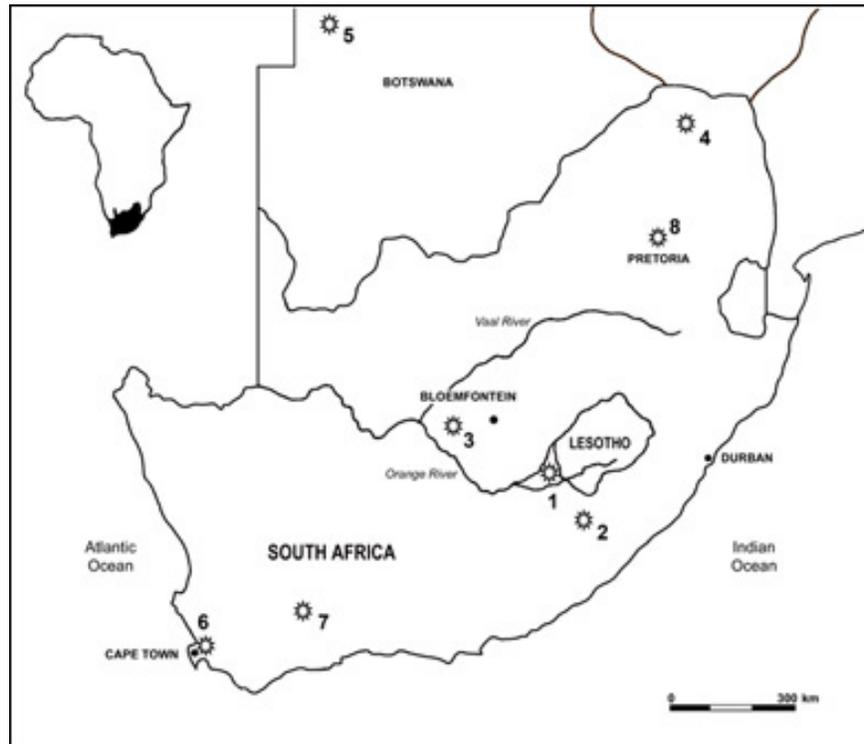


Figure 1: ‘God-trick’ view of research sites.

- | | | | |
|---------------|-------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Smithfield | 2. Baines | 3. Man against Empire | 4. Swastika |
| 5. SWAPO | 6. ‘Hotnot’ | 7. Calitzdorp | 8. UP ‘graffiti’ wall |

Resisting and reversing a gaze

The paintings found in the Bushman caves of the mountains proclaimed the rights and title deeds of the aborigines.

George William Stow 1905:171

Southern African rock art is one of our most visible archaeologies. This landscape is inscribed by, *inter alia*, the initiation-centric initiation art of Khoekhoen herders (Smith and Ouzman 2005); the occult art of multi-ethnic Korana raiders (Ouzman 2005); the initiation and resistance arts of Bantu-speakers (Lewis-Williams 2006:344-346) and quotidian inscriptions of European settlers.

This is an unfolding list constructed as researchers better distinguish indigenous markings - there is considerable overlap between categories. Perhaps most famous is 'San' rock art that is indelibly religious and symbolic (Lewis-Williams 1995). This rock art attracted the attention and usually opprobrium of European colonists, who dismissed it as either as an imported exotic or as 'idle daubing', until a 19th-century Cape liberal tradition clique established its research potential:

It gives at once to Bushman art a higher character, and teaches us to look upon its products not as the mere daubing of figures for idle pastime, but as an attempt, however imperfect, at a truly artistic conception of the ideas which most deeply moved the Bushman mind, and filled it with religious feelings. (Bleek 1874:13)

Wilhelm Bleek's insight waned as British imperialism waxed and rock art became the province of mostly speculative avocational work until the 1980s when academia reclaimed control of this artefact via ethnographically contextualised research (Lewis-Williams 1995:67-82). Since the late 1990s, rock art has become contested terrain with various interests asserting rights – indigenous groups, academics, authors, film-makers, advertising moguls and almost anyone looking for an indigenous 'flavour' (cf. Buntman and Bester 1989). Though we would today not describe San rock art as 'graffiti', there are a few dozen historically-specific iterations that satisfy a definition of graffiti as visual signifier of resistance. One such iteration is contained in a small rock shelter above the Little Caledon River in the 18th and 19th century San enclave between the !Garib and Caledon Rivers near Smithfield (fig. 1; Ouzman 2003; also Schrire 1996). The shelter is 1.6 m high and 8 m long. 87 rock paintings cluster within a 1.6 m x 1.1 m area (fig. 2).



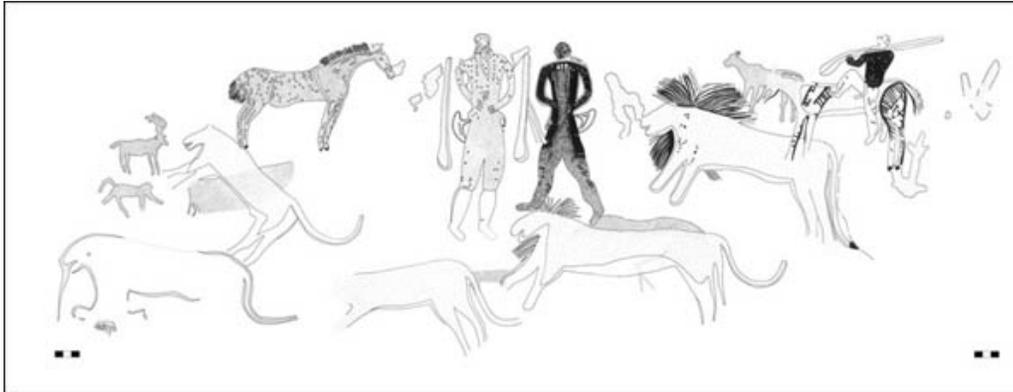


Figure 2: San-authored imag(in)ing of European colonists. Redrawing by Jannie Loubser and Johan Nortje, National Museum, Bloemfontein. Scale bar 30 mm.

At the centre of this image cluster are two large human figures in European dress, with hands placed on hips. Each human figure has a rifle and powder horn. Horses, one with many white dots, flank these two human figures while a third human figure has similar attire and armament and dismounts a horse. Below, five lions and lionesses are painted - two with bristling manes. Interpretive caution is vital because European clothing does not necessarily denote 'European' as San wore European clothes (Crass and Sampson 1993). Rather, it is the contextual information, body posture, associated imagery, pigment use and landscape that enable (cf. Wylie 2002:161-167) to suggest that this is a San imagining of an interloping 'them' rather than a San 'us.' The images go beyond narrative observation and operate on at least five levels.

First, Human Ethology – the study of universal human gesture – classifies the 'arms akimbo' posture as 'possessive-aggressive', denoting exclusive ownership (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1989; also Eich 2002). The guns and powder horns support this generally aggressive message. Of all the postures and associated European material culture that the San could depict, they selected for a characterisation that indexes latent violence. The hand-on-hips posture is found in other 'contact' period rock arts, such as Northern Sotho protest rock art in which European men have hand-on-hips. Indigenous rock arts in Australia and North America also single out this posture as a visual shorthand to signify aggressive and possessive European colonists.

Secondly, the horse with fine white dots is a politicised reworking of a San visual convention. Appaloosa horses have speckles but these are large and seldom white. In addition, Appaloosas were only brought to southern Africa in 1915 and we know that this painting existed by 1842 when Smithfield magistrate Charles Sirr Orpen visited it (Loubser 1993:6). The horse is, based

on body shape and size, most likely a Roan or Barb; introduced in 1689. Neither roan nor barb are dappled (Thornton n.d.). Rather than 'realistically' depicting colouring, a more adequate explanation for the fine white dots is that they represent a tangible supernatural essence, called */num* by the !Kung San, that shamans harvest in order to perform the shamanic labours like healing, rain-making, fighting evil, promoting social harmony and so forth (Dowson 1989). But supernatural potency is very powerful and only experienced shamans can control it. The white dots on the horse are too numerous to represent a safe concentration and function as a warning. The horse, a European possession and a vehicle for hunting San, has been marked as 'dangerous'. Similarly, the central human figures' white dots mark them as violent beings.

Thirdly, the pride of lions and lionesses is not accidental juxtapositioning but adds a level of aversive denotation. Felines were associated with the anti-social and with malevolent shamans, who assumed a feline form and marauded the landscape harming people (Marshall 1999:238). Spatially associating this traditional metaphor with the Europeans, horses, guns and overload of potency dots, the artist(s) created a multi-layered statement on the nature of colonial being.

The fourth resistance is the paint, which is local hydrous ferrous oxide ($2\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3 \cdot 3\text{H}_2\text{O}$) rather than more prized exotic ferric oxide (Fe_2O_3 - 'haematite'). This may be because San networks were disrupted by colonial land grabs. But the surrounding area is rugged, and movement to the ochre-bearing mountains 10-50 km distant would have been possible. Rather, it seems the artists consciously broke with 'tradition' and chose to mark, in bright, local pigment, a new phase – one of political resistance and ownership – in which they boldly marked their homes with their 'title deeds.' Alas, it was an inscription the colonists could and would not read or acknowledge. Evidence of the European misreading is provided by a watercolour copy (fig. 3) made in 1876 by Conolly Orpen, one of Charles Sirr Orpen's seven brothers. As with any copy, Connolly Orpen was selective and chose to depict only the three European figures, the two horses, and the guns. He painted what was familiar to him, filtering out the rest. He annotated his copy: "*The whites when they encroached upon bushmanband [sic] little dreamed that there were chiels [archaic ~ young man/boy] about taking notes and painting them.*" Orpen's text was right about the San 'taking notes' - they were surveilling - but he did not have the insider's knowledge to translate these 'notes' so visibly inscribed into the landscape.



Figure 3: Connolly Orpen's copy of Smithfield San rock paintings. Original in National Museum, Bloemfontein.

It is this landscape and its resources that are the fifth level at which this 'reverse gaze' on European colonialism comments. For these San painting was not a passive rendering of events – these 'images' were dwell points for collective San thought and action via more forcefully constructing an own ethnicity in reaction to non-San identities and claims. The Smithfield images are part of a theme within San contact period rock art, with half-a-dozen nearby examples (e.g., fig. 4; Stow and Bleek 1930: 8, 15, 22, Anon 1947) as well as other eruptions at nodes of conflict such as in the Cederberg, Sneeuberg and so on. The stakes were the highest – survival. This political resistance art was followed by a final, eschatonic phase (Ouzman and Loubser 2000).



Figure 4: 'Voortrekkers' painted 45 km from figure 2. Redrawing courtesy Rock Art Research Institute, University of the Witwatersrand. Original in MuseumAfrika, Johannesburg. Removed 1946 by Walter Battiss on behalf of the national Monuments Commission.

Most archaeological research concerns itself with how 'we' imag(in)e 'them' – to use a crude but applicable binary (see Jules-Rosetta 1984, Buntman and Bester 1999 for the role of photography and tourism). This imagining usually takes the form of an appropriative gaze

where: “to gaze implies more than to look at - it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze” (Schroeder 1998:208; also Eagleton 1990; Olin 1992; Elkins 1997). The possessor of the gaze is usually white and male (Berger 1972:64). The directionality of this gaze is from ‘us’ to ‘them’, though there can also be internal maskings. But the colonial gaze was not hegemonic and all-seeing; it was chaotic and punctuated by unintended consequences (Pratt 1992). Critically, imagery such as figures 3 and 4 provide counter perspectives on this colonial process that resist hegemony. Instructively, figure 5 is the product of northern Zambian Lungu villagers who portrayed the archaeologists for whom they worked on an exterior house wall (Clark 1974: frontispiece). The dominant hands-on-hips figure and three other slightly too purposeful archaeologists at work are in poses uncomfortably close to the 19th century European colonists as imagined by San resistors a century or so earlier.



Figure 5: Lungu portrait of European archaeologists, Zambia, 1956-1966.

These ‘quirky’ images appeal to us and we must ask “*Maybe, in our vanity, we are drawn to and charmed by our recognition of our own appearance in an art with such an ancient legacy*” (Bass, in press), thus ignoring the critique and pain encapsulated by ‘reverse gaze’ graffiti. These are theoretically informed, ethnographically and historically contextualised, landscape embedded, and politically marked iterations of how ‘they’ saw ‘us’ (for the Americas, see Klassen 1998; Mullins and Paynter 2000; for indigenous reversal of gaze see Lips 1966; Burland 1969; Scott 1990; Scarry 1994 for meta-treatments of resisting outside representation).

A poet and a painter

I am simply an artist telling what I have seen as truthfully as I know it.

Thomas Baines c. 1870

But what happens when graffiti's politics are not so clearly inscribed and, indeed, not recognised? Such maskings – and occasional revelations – are contained in European textual and visual portrayals of San rock art. Perhaps the most interesting example is the sketch and subsequent oil painting of a San rock art site in Baviaans Krans, Eastern Cape (fig. 6) made by the traveler and artist John Thomas Baines² (27 November 1820 – 8 May 1875). Baines was an interesting observer who mixed naïveté and shrewd observation, producing over 4000 sketches, watercolours and oil paintings of scenery, people, scientific specimens and events (Carruthers and Arnold 1995:176). Of this oeuvre, less than a dozen images and diary entries relate to southern Africa's 'San'. Baines was a product of expansionist colonial times (Hartrick 2004) and 'debased' San rock art did not appeal to him, apart from a quixotic desire to find a 'unicorn' painting. But his few portrayals of San and their rock art provides an insight into 19th century European notions of indigeneity, identity and place. "*Bushman's Krantz*" is especially so - a visual pause for reflection on multiple inscriptions on the Eastern Cape. This was probably Baines' first exposure to San rock art. Ironically, it was not this art he was interested in – but the words left there by his hero, the poet Thomas Pringle³ (5 January 1789 – 5 December 1834).

² John Thomas Baines landed in Cape Town from England on November 22nd 1842, age 21. He decorated wagons before becoming a full-time artist. He moved to Grahamstown in 1848. He undertook a dozen misadventurous expeditions to Australia, Namibia, South Africa, United Kingdom and Zimbabwe.

³ Thomas Pringle, the "Father of South African poetry in English", was born in Scotland and went to Cape Town in 1820, where his reformist publications were suppressed. He left for London in 1826 to continue antislavery work.



Figure 6: Bushman's Krantz Baviaans River Animals painted on the rock by the Bushman [sic]. Much visited by the Poet Pringle'. Sketch made January 26th 1849, Oil 19 3/4 inches x 24 3/4 inches, signed 'T. Baines Grahamstown March 12 1849'. MuseumAfrica collection: AM 1215. Pringle inscription top, left of centre.

The archaeology of this painting is fascinating and consists of multiple inscriptions – San and Khoenken rock art, Pringle's 'graffito', Baines' diary entry, sketch and oil painting (into which he inserts himself), and the over 200 graffiti that have accumulated at the site since Baines and Pringle marked it. To begin, the indigenous imagery marks this topographically unremarkable spot as node for transition. This transition was in the form of San healers – 'shamans' traveling to the spirit world beyond the rock face as well as the transition of Khoekhoen youths to adulthood. Produced at multiple dates these paintings are interrupted in 1825 by Thomas Pringle painting his initial, surname and '1825' above and left of this rock art. He probably used sheep dip. Why would an otherwise politically active poet vandalise this site? Especially since Baviaans Krantz is credited inspiring his radical and resistive poem 'The Bushman':

The Bushman

The Bushman sleeps within his black-browed den,
In the lone wilderness. Around him lie
His wife and little ones unfearingly --
For they are far away from 'Christian Men.'
No herds, loud lowing, call him down the glen:

He fears no foe but famine; and may try
To wear away the hot noon slumberingly;
Then rise to search for roots -- and dance again.
But he shall dance no more! His secret lair,
Surrounded, echoes to the thundering gun,
And the wild shriek of anguish and despair!
He dies -- yet, ere life's ebbing sands are run,
Leaves to his sons a curse, should they be friends
With the proud 'Christian-Men' -- for they are fiends!

Thomas Pringle. 1834 [1827]. *African Sketches*. London: Edward Moxon

But Pringle's marking is just that – it is not graffiti in that it seeks neither to deface the indigenous markings, nor does it make a polemic statement. Rather it is an homage to the spirit of the painters previous. But it's enmeshment in Baines' memorialisation aids an idealisation of which Pringle would probably have disapproved. Baines' diary entries are worth reproducing to highlight how his visit to this site was heavily prefigured by Pringle's poetry and his own lively imagination. In late 1848 Baines:

had the pleasure of becoming acquainted with Mr. Robert Pringle, a near relative [nephew] of the Scottish immigrant whose poetry, long ere I left my native country, had rendered the names of the valleys and streams of Africa 'familiar in my mouth as household words, and of receiving an invitation to visit him on his farm Eildon on the Baviaans River and spend a few weeks with him and his neighbouring relatives and friends (Kennedy 1961:113).

Baines took up nephew Pringle's offer in January 1849, and describes his travel from Grahamstown to Eildon about 120 km to the north west as he: "*rode up the romantic valley, now passing through open glades sprinkled with golden blossomed mimosa, loaded the air with its rich and almost overpowering fragrance, and anon beetling cliffs overgrown with aloe and euphorbia, and tenanted by the timid coney*" (Kennedy 1961:114). This idyllic pastoral – in a landscape notorious for its frontier wars (Baines visited between the 7th and 8th Frontier Wars) – becomes hagiographical by the next day. "*Next morning many of the spots hallowed by the poetry of the British emigrant's earliest and sweetest bard were pointed out to me*" (Kennedy 1961:115). Then follows an extended passage that even breaks into poetry:

After breakfast, mounting a horse lent me by Mr. Pringle to spare my own, I rode with him up the valley.

Where the young river, from its wild ravine,
Winds pleasantly through Eildon's pastures green, -

With fair acacias waving on its banks,
An willows waving o'er in graceful ranks,

To a sequestered spot where his sheep, as the farm of Mr. Stokes, were being washed beneath a couple of spouts projecting from a ledge of rock that stretched across the river; and a little farther on dismounted to rest. And on the upper part of which, far beyond the reach of Bushman's pencil, appeared legibly written in white letters 'T Pringle 1825'. The works of the aboriginal artists, which covered the face of the cliff to an average height of five feet above the ground, comprised rude but recognisable delineations of the rhinoceros, hartebeest, giraffe, eland, koodoo, the domestic ox and other animals, with grotesque representations of men engaged in chase or war, as well as many in which it was impossible to trace a resemblance to any living creature whatever. The pigments appeared to consist of red, yellow and white earths and charcoal, mixed, as an old Hottentot informed me, with fat, which indinated by the scorching sun, rendered them indelible; and laid on without the slightest attempt at shadow, blending, or perspective, with feathers of different sizes." (ibid: 116).

Baines, chose not to continue in image the final half-dozen lines of Pringle's *The Bushman* but transferred the idyllic, pastoral tone of his writing in his sketch and oil painting (fig 6). The visual strategies Baines employed include the use of muted earth tones and the insertion of a pensive Baines sketching next to his unnamed somnolent companion. This image is entirely at odds with the historical context in which he dwelt. At the time the Baviaans River area was plagued by Xhosa and 'wild' Bushmen' raiders – any of whom would most likely have killed Baines had they encountered him at the site. Baines' art extends European dominance over a landscape and its indigenous inhabitant's cultural products, which he considers an afterthought. But his words and image do not match up perfectly – his diary records the Baviaans Krans visit as being on January 25th, but his annotation on the canvas cites January 26th as the day of the sketch. This small slippage, coupled with an interest in artist's use of indigenous imagery led me to visit the site in 2004. Several dozen inscriptions placed there by Xhosa youths, white picnickers, and shepherds had accreted and somewhat obscured the 'original' paintings, though these remained 'indelible' (fig. 7). Not so Thomas Pringle's marking, which was placed on the visually dominant but also most exposed part of the shelter and had fared considerably less well than the work of the "*Bushman's pencil*". Sun and water have rendered all but the '25' legible, with very faint traces of the other numbers and letters struggling against obscurity. But for Baines' memorialisation, Pringle's words would be all but invisible.



Figure 7. Photograph of the Baviaans River site in 2004 with a) arrow showing area of Pringle's inscription, b) Pringle's marking in close up and c) stone-scratched graffiti.

But neither Baines' work nor Pringle's mark are here the graffiti. The elements of resistance are contained in Pringle's poem (which is rooted in this place) and some of the dozens of inscriptions that chart the site's shift from sanctuary to commonage to contested property. The simple, transgressive act of trespassing onto another's property and scratching one's name into rock goes beyond vandalism. The frontier wars have not ended as land and resources remain arenas of inequality and conflict. Previously the words of the poet, painter and academic framed this conflict – but with graffiti we have an additional lexicon to describe the war of words.

War of words

Insofar as it was supported by an institution, text represented institutional authority; it stood outside the passage of actual time and shunned the circumstantial improvisations possible in performance, imposing instead a narrative, purpose-oriented logic. It was principally a way of appropriating the text and cannibalising authority
Jewsiewicki 1993:135

Just as Baviaans River's graffiti is part of the site's 'life' (Hoskins 1998), so other rock art sites contain signatures that speak of conflicts over ideology, race and belonging. Some signatures are considered a distracting noise from a purist's study of a defined people or era. But this noise can become too insistent to ignore as it protests the compartmentalisation of the past.

A man against an Empire

For example, there are dozens of sites at which the texts of soldiers who fought in the South African War (1899-1902) are overprinted on San engravings (Ouzman 1999). These soldier's marks consist of personal and regiment names/numbers, dates, depictions of martial material

culture (pipes, horses, guns, people) - and remarkably little sloganeering, insulting or pornography. These overlooked 'images' are a valuable source of primary evidence on the habitus of the soldier. Heterodox to sanitised and censored official accounts of the Anglo-Boer War provided by officers and generals far removed from the front-line, these marks often do not accord with official versions of how battles were won (or lost) and where regiments were and were not supposed to be. A good example is the 'Man against the Empire' stone (fig. 8); an Afrikaner-authored 'reverse gaze' of the war, marking a notable internal colonial rupture. Originally sited in a remote stone-scrub location in the western Free State near Fauresmith, this rock engraving was moved to the National Museum in 1978 to protect it from an irrigation canal feeding into the P.K. le Roux Dam (Oberholzer 1979). Engraved on the dolerite boulder is a mixture of Afrikaans and Dutch words that cluster into three groups and combine with the images of (dis)armed men, horses and a white flag:



Figure 8: 'Man against the empire' stone, central South Africa. Now in National Museum, Bloemfontein. Redrawing 450 mm long.

Group 1

IK P.J. v.d. Byl LAMPRECHTS
 28.3.1907

Group 2

PLEES SIR
 L ROBBERT

Group 3

MET OUW SEM
KOE KA KAKIE HENTS OP BOKKOR OF IK SCHIET

The words in Group 1 introduce a human figure holding and perhaps firing a rifle, backed up by a branded horse. The words translate as: '*IK* [archaic Afrikaans for personal pronoun 'I'] *P.J. v.d. Byl LAMPRECHTS*' [initials and surname of Mr. Pieter Johan van der Byl Lamprechts, 1879–1962] followed by the date '*28. 3. 1907*' (perhaps '1902', but Mr. van der Byl Lamprechts lived on the nearby farm *Vaalpan* from 1907 and microscopic analysis of the engraving suggests a '7' rather than a '2' as the foot of the '2' is part of a separate underscoring line). Next are the words

'*MET OUW SEM*' ['with old Sem' – probably Afrikaans for 'Sam'], Below this inscription is a self-portrait of Mr. van der Byl Lamprechts marked by his initial 'PL' and firing his rifle; a Mauser as indicated by the 'M.M' or 'Mod Mauser' maker's mark ('DW' mark unknown). Behind him is his horse marked with '*SEM*' on its hindquarters and bearing 'PL's initials. In front of Mr. van der Byl Lamprechts at least a dozen British soldiers are either dead or surrendering with one soldier pleading '*PLEES SIR*' and waving the white flag (the redrawing inverts the photograph's colour/contrast) further reminding us of Mr. van der Byl Lamprecht's real or imagined marksmanship. The corpulent Lord Roberts, Commander of the British Forces, has become '*L. ROBBER*', ending with what may be an incomplete 'T'.

Mr. van der Byl Lamprechts produced a 'punchline' at the base of his vignette: "*KOE KA KAKIE HENTS OP BOKKOR OF IK SCHIET*". The KOEKA is either a mimic of the sound the Lee Metford rifle makes when fired and thus intended to mean something like "Bang!" or it is derived from the North Sotho "*Kuka*" or "Pick up" in the sense of "hands up". This declarative is followed by the common mocking Boer term for a British soldier 'Khaki' (based on the Khaki clothing the British adopted after they realised that redcoats worn in the first Anglo-Boer War made them good targets even if the uniforms did hide one's blood). The next six words translate as the command: "Hands up bugger or I shoot". Mr. Van der Byl Lamprecht's son J.J. reports that this was a favourite saying of his father; part of a *volkslied* or folk doggerel sung to the tune of 'Daisy' ("*Koeka khaki, so jy wil die Vrystaat hê?*" - "Koeka khaki, so you want [to annex] the Free State?"). Amusing? Definitely not. What prompted Mr. van der Byl Lamprechts to spend time engraving on a rock far from human habitation five years after the South African War ended? The central South African landscape was violently altered by Lord Roberts' 'scorched earth' policy where farmhouses, crops and stock were destroyed and women, children and farm workers were put into concentration camps where over 40 000 died of brutality, influenza, malnutrition, typhoid and the like (Spies 1977:26). The ideal of independent Boer Republics was shattered. This engraving speaks powerfully of one man's attempt to reconcile his scorched psyche with his *jamais vous* - the feeling of unfamiliarity in once-familiar surroundings. Mr. Lamprechts became a politician in the Cape Province known for his virulently anti-British sentiments, which he espoused until his death in 1962. His engraving is immensely powerful because it has a pathos and attempted catharsis that has grown out of a particular person's and place's experience. Above all, it embodies and proclaims a spirit of undying resistance and propaganda. A telling annotation here is that people seem discomfited when these soldiers

'marks' are termed 'rock art' instead of 'graffiti'. Is this because 'rock art' is perceived to reside unthreateningly in the past and 'graffiti' is an easy to ignore pollutant?

Robey Leibbrandt's swastika

Just as the 'Man Against the Empire' stone resisted British imperialism, a simple and sinister symbol engraved in the Soutpansberg resisted a liberal South Africa (Eastwood and Eastwood 2006:33-36). Perhaps because it is so at unexpected and at odds with its topographic context, this swastika stops potential interlocutors in their tracks, at an initial loss for words (fig. 9).



Figure 9: Robey Leibbrandt's swastika, Soutpansberg. Scale 50 mm. Arrow shows swastika's position.

This swastika is engraved into a poacher's shelter high on the western Soutpansberg and was re-discovered in 1998. No other markings occur on the shelter walls. The farm belongs to the van der Walt family, who have owned it for over 80 years. During the Second World War, they were *Ossewabrandwag*⁴ sympathisers and agreed to hide Robey Leibbrandt⁵ (1913-1966), the

⁴ Founded in 1938 to celebrate the Great Trek centenary, *Ossewabrandwag* was an Afrikaner cultural organisation whose paramilitary wing used sabotage against the Allied-allied South African United Party during WWII. The OB had over 350 000 members during the war and was banned in 1944.

Afrikaner boxing champion and Nazi agent, from Jan Smuts' United Party. Leibbrandt hid out here for several months – mostly in a small rondavel (where artefacts include a garter belt) - about 800m from the poacher's shelter. In a supreme act of defiance, this farm is immediately adjacent to Jan Smuts' holiday farm. Here Leibbrandt or a fellow pro-Nazi sympathiser marked and even defiled a landscape; their comment based on the crude and indelible message and its proximity to Smuts 'sacred' retreat – an act of private resistance and even of witchcraft⁶.

SAWPO's baobab

In a similar fashion and with similar intent, the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO)⁷ - marked the herms of the land for which it was fighting at the most contested of locations – a baobab tree next to a South African Defense Force military base (fig. 10). Here, on Impalila Island near the confluence of the Zambezi and the Chobe rivers in the Caprivi Strip, is carved SWAPO OF NAMIBIA. Interestingly, this mark was made within a rectangle of cut out baobab bark. This may have been done to 'frame' the text or it may be an earlier instance where people removed bark to make twine or for medicinal purposes. Similar 'signatures of terror' were generated in other liberation struggles in Papua New Guinea (Ballard 2002), the Middle East (Peteet 1996) and Northern Ireland (Sluka 1992) where contested terrain needs to be claimed. This is done by either siting the mark in areas that are contested, areas beyond an authority's control, or areas in the heart of the overlord's domain (Ferrel 1996; David and Wilson 2002 for post-colonial and archaeological instances). In this case a SWAPO soldier or sympathiser chose both to place their mark next to an enemy base (and would have been killed for doing so if caught); and they did so on an island - a terrain that embodies contestation and blurring of borders.

⁵ Robey Leibbrandt was part of South Africa's 1936 boxing team for the Munich Olympic Games (he finished fourth). Leibbrandt studies in Germany in 1938. A year later he joined the German army and was sent to destabilise the South African government.

⁶ Interestingly, 1942, in the Free State's Biddulphsberg, OB fugitive Jan Richter painted the OB emblem on a rock face, which was restored in 1982 - <http://www.biddulphsberg.com/english/ossewabrandwag.html>.

⁷ SWAPO was previously a terrorist/freedom fighter organisation that became the elected government when South West Africa became Namibia in 1989.



Figure 10: South West Africa Peoples Organisation marking of a baobab in Northern Namibia.
Photograph courtesy Iain Cochrane.

These wartime markings are themselves contested, as some people may not accept them as instantiations of 'graffiti', especially because they establish a long, local tradition of resistance 'written' on a landscape. This problematises notions about graffiti's modernity - especially in Africa. It helps better situate notions of agency and cultural appropriation in African contexts:

An important prejudice lies in the denial that Africa's creativity could absorb and digest the colonial shock. The division of culture into two parts – modernity and tradition, separated by the colonial context – sidesteps the problem of appropriation – of Africa's cultural and intellectual cannibalization of the west. (Jewsiewicki 1993:139)

Pushing Bogumil Jewsiewicki's observation further leads to the realisations that in order to 'cannibalise' there must be an existing structure/ practice into which the cannibalised parts are fitted – this is not simply a reactive dismantling of 'master's house' with 'master's tools' (Lorde 1984) – but a selection of external elements that add to existing traditions (ie. Hobsbawn and Ranger's 'invention' of tradition) Such cannibalisation takes its peripheral and contested locations seriously. Indeed, contrary to graffiti as an urban phenomenon⁸, these examples indicate that the conditions of possibility for the creation of graffiti rest not in central, urban loci, but are distributed across the borderlands of time, place and being.

⁸ I don't consider graffiti 'street art' (cf. Chafee 1993) because of the restrictions this term places on location and artefact, though much graffiti does occur on the 'street' and may sometimes be considered 'art'.

Marginalia at the borderlands of being

What harm cause not those huge draughts or pictures which wanton youth with chalk or coals draw in each passage, wall or stairs of our great houses, whence a cruel contempt of our natural store is bred in them?

Michel Eyquen de Montaigne (1533-1592)

And it is in these physical and conceptual borderlands that graffiti thrives and makes its most cogent comment. In southern Africa land and identity are among the most contested terrains. Colonialism and Apartheid were remarkably successful in synchronically ossifying and essentialising the identities of perhaps 60 million people distributed across ~ 2 million km². Though most people contested this grand exercise in exonymy, we still use terms like 'black', 'white', 'Sotho', 'Zulu', 'English', and such in uncritical ways (see the current government's description of the South African demographic at <http://www.gcis.org.za>). People who realise the valence and violence of these words continue to question ethnic essentialism. Thus, a 'borderline' people like South Africa's 'coloureds' who speak the language and practice many of the customs of their erstwhile Afrikaner oppressors (Goldin 1987), vent their frustration at previously not being 'white' enough under Apartheid and not being 'black' enough in democratic times. Their dilemma is encapsulated in the ethonym 'coloured' – a term suggesting a people created by miscegenation between prior 'black' and 'white' people (Reddy 2001). But 'coloured' roots extend at least 2000 years back to the arrival of Khoe-speaking herder peoples (Mitchell 2002:227-258). Claiming this deeper history requires a new framing of identity via the compound ethonym 'Khoisan' - a term invented by the Academy⁹ but adopted to convey the reach of one Indigenous identity and heritage (Morris 1997 for biological treatment; also Bank 1998).

This is not a new 'invention.' Coloureds occupied an ambiguous position in the Apartheid racial imaginary (Giliomee 2003). Then 'coloureds' were considered quasi-white Afrikaners and were kept on the general voter's roll until 1951 in a display of paternalistic racism. When the end days of Apartheid were formally 'discussed' in the 1992 referendum – an event at which coloureds had no vote, they made their mark in public, urban space. For example, in Muizenberg, Cape

⁹ 'Khoisan' was coined in 1928 by anatomist Leonard Schultze. Recently, the nuanced 'KhoiSan' was adopted as ethonym of preference by the African Human Genome Initiative (Gordon 2002).

town, the words *BLY HOTNOT STEM NP* ('Stay [a] Hotnot¹⁰ - vote National Party') appeared on Main Road (fig. 11). These words – in a more familiar graffiti style - constitute a very rational proposition – if you want to retain a status quo and allow yourself to be named and controlled from outside, then vote for / support the reigning political power. The identity of this graffiti's author is not known, but the language and sentiment would strongly suggest a 'coloured', who has gone so far as to use a term today considered hate speech to goad the complacent into action (Blake 1981 for Hawai'iian example). The power of figure 11's proposition comes not in its cynical humour, but in its unsaid implications – what if you do not wish to maintain the status quo? Revolutionary stuff. At the same time – the late 1980s - allied graffiti included: *SUBVERSION OR THEIR VERSION* and *PW [PW Botha, Apartheid Prime Minister] YOU ANC NOTHING YET*, which Sue Williamson farmed thus: "*The walls of the cities have become the noticeboards of the people. They are read for trenchant, sometimes subversive comment on the news of the day, or to gain knowledge of popular demands*" (Williamson 1989:96-97)



Figure 11. *Stay a Hottentot Vote NP*. Muizenberg, Cape Town. Image courtesy Penny Berens.

But is graffiti just about a persistent resistance; a set of popular and political demands? Many people savvy to popular visual culture have moved beyond these 'in your face' declarations that are easily ignored or marginalised, to more carefully positioned commentary (Gonos et al 1976). This commentary remains resistive but is not over-determined by large socio-political concerns. Instead, this commentary is responsive to the subtle and often personal dynamics between

¹⁰ 'Hotnot' is a derogatory term for a 'coloured' and is today considered hate speech but was used in the past as a means of subjugation (Smith 1983) as well as having a long colonial pedigree.

people and places (cf. Becker 1963). One such commentary is situated at a literal and figurative borderland in Calitzdorp. This town is the sweet wines capital of South Africa located in the Klein Karoo. Superficially bucolic, unemployment, alcoholism, violence and discrimination are never far from the surface but are seldom spoken about publicly. Confounding notions that rural, towns are intellectually stagnant is a remarkable graffiti wall at an intersection at the town's outskirts, where the 'white' centre meets the previously segregated 'coloured' periphery (fig. 12). In 2001, the wall bore five graffiti painted in bright blue Afrikaans words – a literal blueprint (Afrikaans – *bloudruk*, with 'druk' also meaning pressure) that breaks the silence by addressing topics ranging from spousal abuse to metaphysics to an alternative understanding of evolution.

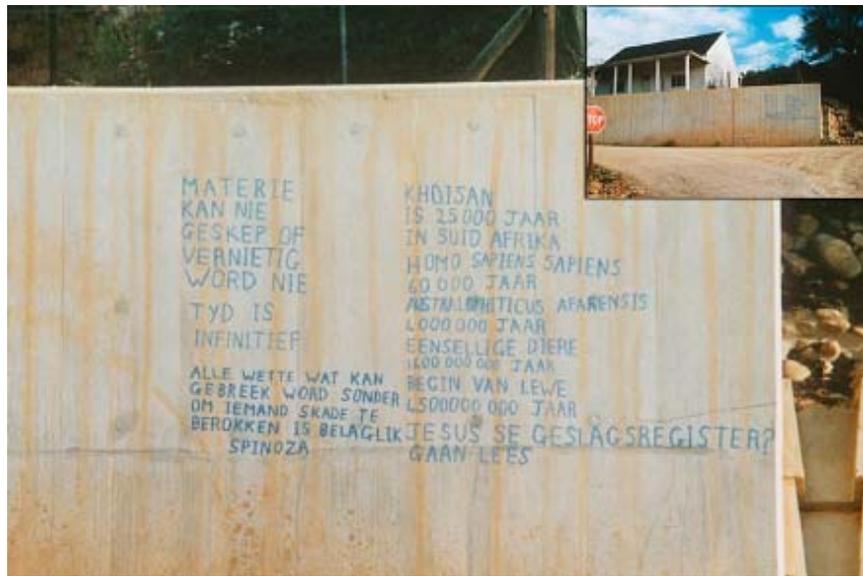


Figure 12: The Calitzdorp graffiti wall. December 2001.

The first *bloudruk* reads: “*Materie kan nie geskep of vernietig word nie*” (Matter cannot be created or destroyed). The second *bloudruk* continues this philosophical bent with: “*Tyd is infinitief*” (Time is infinite) –here one imagines a sleepy afternoon on the front verandah after rather too good a liquid lunch. This comfortable caricature of homespun country philosophy is disturbed by the third *bloudruk*: “*Alle wette wat kan gebreek word sonder om iemand skade te berokken is belaglik*” (All laws that can be broken without causing damage to someone are ridiculous). An aimless rant? No - the words are authored to source – “*Spinoza*”. The full passage reads:

Laws which can be broken without any wrong to one's neighbor are a laughing-stock; and such laws, instead of restraining the appetites and lusts of mankind, serve rather to heighten them. *Nitimur in vetitum semper, cupimusque negata* [we always resist prohibitions, and yearn for what is denied us] ... The less control the state has over the mind, the better for both the citizen and the state (Spinoza 1989 [1670])

How does someone in a town without a library and small and largely conservative 'intelligentsia', get to read the radically anti-establishment works of 17th-century Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza? And then distil a key passage for public consumption? This political and legal commentary is grounded locally in the fourth *bloudruk* (not shown – to the left of the words shown in fig. 11) that reads "*Slaan jy jou vrou*" (Do you beat your wife [?]). This reference to high levels of alcohol-related domestic violence in rural South Africa, incidentally raises questions about the gendered nature of graffiti production and consumption¹¹. But it is the fifth *bloudruk*, in the form of a sequential genealogy that speaks best to an evolution of identity:

Khoisan is 25 000 jaar in Suid-Afrika
Homo sapiens sapiens 60 000 jaar
Australopithecus afarensis 4 000 000 jaar
Eensellige diere 1 600 000 000 jaar
Begin van lewe 4500000 000 jaar
God se geslagsregister?
Gaan lees

Khoisan are 25 000 years in South Africa
Homo sapiens sapiens 60 000 years
Australopithecus afarensis 4 000 000 years
Uni-cellular animals 1 600 000 000 years
Beginning of life 4500000 000 years
God's family tree?)
Go read

Thus, in a community with 40% unemployment (in 2001, the figure remains comparable today) and having basic schooling and facilities, someone has studied in detail the nature of human being and experience. A 'reading' of *bloudruk* 5 could be:

Line 1: Khoekhoe ('Khoikhoi') ancestry in southern Africa goes back about 2000 years based on the unique presence of pottery and sheep bones signifying a herding way of life, distinct from the hunting and gathering lifestyle associated with 'San' (Boonzaier et al 1996). Appending 'San' to 'Khoi' adds an extra 23 000 years to 'coloured' ancestry, covering the academically-defined 'Later Stone Age' – (Mitchell 2002:161-190). This compounding has not, however, gone unchallenged by San (WIMSA 2001)

Line 2: The correct nomenclature of our species (doubling 'sapiens') and a date around which archaeologists agree modern human behaviour is visible (Mitchell 2002:71).

¹¹ Most graffiti seems 'male'-authored. albeit with increasing 'female' participation. The 'lack' of female-authorship privileges graffiti as a finished product rather than a material residue of wider performative practice involving multiple participants. Graffiti is but one form of civil resistance (Walker 1982). Interestingly, many graffiti interlocutors are female – Sandra Klopper (2000), Sue Williamson (also bell hooks 1994, Susan Phillips 1996).

Line 3: Showing some difficulty spelling this (hey, you try spell 'Australopethicus'), the date accurately reflects this hominin ancestor's time on earth (ibid:40)

Line 4: Unicellular animals – the ur progenitor of all earthly life is here given a date less than half as old as is currently thought (McCarthy and Rubidge 2005).

Line 5: Start of life on earth – date is consonant with current thinking on the earth's age, though perhaps some confusion with Line 4, as unicellular organisms are considered the first life-form. (ibid).

Up until this point we have a pretty accurate summary of an evolutionary process tracking Khoisan ancestry. The final two lines break decisively with this trajectory and encourage the reader to do their own research via a question and a suggestion. The question is:

Line 6: the best reading is here obtained by inserting an initial 'is this' ['this' referring to the five lines above] God's family tree/genealogy/register? This introduces an altogether different generative agency to creation – the Christian god. This line's hanging question is then answered:

Line 7: Again, the best reading requires an interpolation – an initial 'no' and a final 'the bible' – thus 'No, go and read the bible'. In the tradition of a good storyteller who credits her audience with the ability to fill in the unwritten and unvoiced words, these two lines introduce allow for multivocality and, critically, individual agency in unmasking what is here considered an incorrect and even dangerous set of thoughts (evolution).

This message at Calitzdorp speaks not only of a tension between different knowledge systems; it speaks of racial tensions. The author –freethinker Gustav Roller (Maart 2007; figure 13) is an *agent provocateur*, constantly adding to the wall in paint, charcoal, suffering his words literally being whitewashed and being thrown with mud, and still adding phrases like KAN WERKSMENSE DIE TOILET GEBRUIK? (Can workers use the toilet – alluding to the practice of not allowing 'non-whites' to use the house's toilet); followed by JY IS N DROL (You are a shit); MEESTER SLAAF 1994 (Master Slave 1994 – an allusion to South Africa's first democratic election leading to a feudal system); EK HOU NIE VAN MENSE (I don't like people) and so forth. The passage of time, mud splatter and whitewashing has rendered many of phrases unintelligible but the surveilling capacities of archaeology can resurrect the letters.



Figure 13: Gustav Roller at work. © Derek McKenzie from www.derekmckenzie.co.za

Compare this graffiti wall – eclectic, iconoclastic, provocative and illegal (the wall is municipal property) with the ‘graffiti wall’ on the University of Pretoria’s Hatfield campus (figure 14). Though so named, the latter is not a graffiti wall at all, but a sanitised space to contain and control dissident student¹² opinion (graffiti anywhere else on campus is a crime). UP graffiti wall manifests a corporate co-option of a counter-cultural voice. For example, the night before the university’s annual ‘Open Day’¹³ where parents bring their children and chequebooks to campus, the graffiti wall is whitewashed by security guards in the black of night. No hard to swallow ‘Gay and Lesbian’ slogans, or adverts for hostel drinking parties - just a blank that ‘bleeds’ slightly at the edges and onto the pavement underneath, marking on campus’ oldest building (Old Chemistry, 1910-1911). This wall is not available for spontaneous comment – permission has to be obtained from the student administration and may be referred to the Dean of Students.

¹² UP does not have ‘students’, it has ‘clients.’ The university runs on business principles in which branding and corporate image are sacrosanct. In May 2008, the university offered a certificate course costing R900 on how to align your personal brand with the university’s corporate image.

¹³ Open Day introduces the campus and its courses to prospective students and costs over R5-million to host.



Figure 14: University of Pretoria 'graffiti' wall', 2008

Prose has its cons

When ideas fail, words come in very handy
Johann Wolfgang van Goethe

The University of Pretoria's graffiti wall offers a simulacrum of edgy student life but is in reality a suppression of any subversive opinion that would threaten the university's brand integrity. Brandalism instead of vandalism. Ironically, of the eight examples I have presented, this is the only one self-labeled 'graffiti'. Yet this is a false signifier and alerts us to the by now common practice of the mainstream appropriating counter-cultural forms (cf. Hebdige 1988). We need thus always to establish through multiple perspectives and contexts what the nature of a thing is, both at specific moments and throughout the life of an artefact. For example, is that 'tag' made by a gang member marking and defending a territory; is it the signature of a graffiti 'writer'; or is it a marketing device in subaltern guise? Similarly, many graffiti have migrated from ghetto to gallery¹⁴ in a move analogous to 'ethnographic' artefacts becoming *object d'art* – a move Sally

¹⁴ Examples include Jean-Michel Basquiat's (1960-1988) 1970s SAMO ('Same Old') movement and Keith Haring's subway markings. Today, art with a graffiti 'look' is ubiquitous in fine art settings and the wider commercial world.

Price calls 'primitive art in civilised places' (Price 1989; also hooks 1994). This move is not restricted to the 'street' but also traverses the corridors of power. Norman Foster's 2002 re-design of Germany's Reichstag ensured that Cyrillic graffiti left by invading Russian forces in 1945 and which had been covered up by boards, was incorporated into the buildings design language to acknowledge Germany's turbulent past (Baker 2002). The commodification of graffiti, the blurring of boundaries between the popular, political, academic and corporate is, I suggest, more useful than debilitating because it brings to view, even if temporarily, a margin, seam or line of distinction and aptly 'illustrates' Donna Haraway's insights on partial perspective:

So, not perversely, objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment, and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility. The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision ... There is a premium on establishing the capacity to see from the peripheries and the depths. But here lies a serious danger of romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions. To see from below is neither easily learned nor unproblematic, even if 'we' 'naturally' inhabit the great underground terrain of subjugated knowledges ... The standpoints of the subjugated are not 'innocent' positions. On the contrary, they are preferred because in principle they are least likely to allow denial of the critical and interpretive core of all knowledge. They are savvy to modes of denial through repression, forgetting, and disappearing acts – ways of being nowhere while claiming to see comprehensively is an argument for situated and embodied knowledges and against various forms of unlocateable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims. Irresponsible means unable to be called into account. The subjugated have a decent chance to be on to the god-trick and all its dazzling – and, therefore, blinding – illuminations. 'Subjugated' standpoints are preferred because they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective transforming accounts of the world. But *how* to see from below is a problem requiring at least as much skill with bodies and language, with the mediations of vision, as the 'highest' techno-scientific visualisations (Haraway 1991:190-191).

Being on to this all-seeing, all-knowing 'god-trick' is standard practice in any critical endeavour – but Haraway's challenge is *how* we operationalise and ground-truth an insight. Perhaps the easiest way is to seek out 'inconvenient' subjects and to discuss our methods – the 'how' of our work in more public fora, and our complicitness in larger intellectual, political systems. Imperfections like graffiti can function as a 'punctum' or point of rupture that permits a wider, 'underneath of things' understanding of hegemonic visual regimes (Eagleton 1990, Elkins 1997).

But these regimes include the researcher. No theoretical work on graffiti (or any other artefact) is removed or objective – Haraway's 'innocent' position. Most graffiti - and even some corporate 'graffiti' branding (Copeland 2001) - is a crime; primarily against property and thus one of

capitalism's cornerstones¹⁵. Indeed, the war on graffiti is "*not merely a war on vandalism and social chaos fought along strict legal boundaries as its agents often claim, but part of a war against all messages legal or otherwise that distract from the dominant presentation*" (Weinberg 2003:7). Penalties for being caught 'writing' include fines and incarceration – up to 2 years for making anti-Apartheid graffiti (Williamson 1989:97 - a picture could be worth a thousand days) - in judgments that can be civil or criminal. Graffiti can also be a political crime. In 1981 at least 18 Iraqi high school students were hanged for writing anti Ba'athist graffiti (Finn 2003; also Peteet 1996) and in Barbados a student was stabbed to death for 'defacing' a graffiti (Best 2003:835). Graffiti diverts funds and skills away from more worthy projects. For example, the USA spends \$10-12 *billion* per year just on removing graffiti (Weinberg 2003). Aspirant spraycan writers are also seldom unaware of this practice's health risks such as the dreaded 'drip' – kidney failure caused by spraypaint chemical inhalation. Graffiti is not only a crime and a hazard, researching it is ethically burdensome. For example, may researchers trespass in order to document graffiti sites. In interviewing subjects, researchers become subjects of interest to law enforcement, who often want the researcher to divulge confidential information that will lead to punitive action against an 'informant'. The researcher's database and its products are subject to questions about how the information will be stored, transmitted, and accessed. What happens to material benefits from graffiti research and who controls the intellectual property on an image s? Is graffiti research complicit in criminal activity and does it glamourise criminal acts? Psychologically, graffiti's contrariness can cause the intended harm to the 'establishment', but it also has a wider fallout as being a strident and even violent medium that adds to rather than diminishes an already violent context. Jane Alexander observes that "*Violence imposes itself easily. The public is drawn to violence. It intensifies reality, disrupts mundane daily existence and perhaps creates a sense of worth*" (Williamson 1989:43). It is thus important that the consequences of the intended violence are understood. Noted London-based 'writer' Banksy points out:

The key to good graffiti is economy. A simple splash of paint in the right place at the right time is all it takes. An old lady with a pencil can bring down a government by drawing an X on a ballot. And scribbles from a spraycan can convert a slum into an art gallery. But then you would ask yourself - How fucking useful is that exactly? (www.banksy.co.uk/4stencil.html)

¹⁵ Despite practitioners' claims to the contrary, graffiti is often supportive of capitalism through creating an industry in terms of law enforcement, products and so on. However, graffiti as 'eyesore' is effective against gentrification.

Tellingly, Banksy was permitted – from the Palestinian side of the Separation Wall - to produce his brand of graffiti without threat to life or liberty but to great anger from Israeli authorities (Lubaba 2007). Others are not so lucky. In South Africa – as elsewhere - there is an informing sub-culture of prison graffiti. These guests of the governments are often ‘illiterate’ (South Africa has a 24% formal illiteracy rate) – but they know the words, laws, arguments, judgments and statements of the state have led to their incarceration. They realise language’s normativity:

[Language is] of all social institutions, the least amenable to initiative. It blends with the life of society, and the latter, inert by nature, is a prime conservative force. (de Saussure 1974:42).

The response of people at society’s margins is to take orthodox language and ‘cannibalise’ it (cf. Jewsiewski 1993:135, 139). Prison graffiti, gang tags, throw-ups all typically use conventional letters and language in unconventional ways – omitting vowels, radically altering the form of letters, and using images – so as to render ‘words’ unintelligible to an otherwise text-literate audience. This move empowers the marginal and greatly frustrates the overlords who, because of their learning, cannot ‘read’ the writing on the walls, pavements and other inconvenient locations in ‘their’ space. This frustration and misrecognition of graffiti as a ‘text’ rather than an artefact and practice, leads some scholars in misguided attempts to ‘break’ the graffiti code. So, Daniel and Timothy Gross attempted a stadial, lexical evolution of graffiti in 3 stages (Gross and Gross 1993). Their first ‘imitative’ phase consisted of images, which change into words during the second ‘transition’ phase that consists only of words. The final ‘apocryphal’ phase consists of words ‘in disguise’, which then have to be deciphered. These phases are time-sensitive and correspond to stages in human cognitive evolution. This reductionist approach ends up not only failing to say anything interesting, but it creates the impression graffiti is under control, we can read, categorised, understood. A much more sophisticated approach would recognize the unstable relationship between words and things:

It is as if speech having withdrawn from the image to become founding act, the image for its part raised the foundations of space, the ‘strata’ those silent powers of before or after speech before or after man. The visual image becomes *archaeological, stratigraphic, tectonic* (Deleuze 1989: 243).

As artefact, graffiti has a temporality, a context and a worth that it does not have as a word or transgression. Tweaking Derrida’s margin-centre model (Derrida 1982) is here useful to conceptualise societal and epistemic ‘margins’ as freer of the strictures of polite society and thus

more creative and questioning. These margins are where graffiti in unalloyed form lurk – but remain capable of oscillating even to the centre as, for example, it is mimicked by corporate branding, architectural design, lifestyle apparel and so on. This oscillation often incenses ‘true’ graffiti ‘writers’ and hip-theorists of sub cultures. But their outrage manifests a misrecognition of the essential nature of the artefact – graffiti is a feral and transgressive beast that serves her mistresses capriciously. Indeed, to categorise something as a ‘sub’ or ‘youth’ culture makes it easy to ignore, marginalise and act against (cf. Hall and Jefferson 1975). The instability of the artefact can often map underlying social instabilities; that appear in moments of crisis. It is in these moments of crisis that graffiti makes its comment – and when it is most vulnerable to appropriation. For example, days after the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre a graffiti shrine appeared in New York (fig. 15). Later, on the steel fencework around the World Trade centre memorial site, people wrote their names onto the steel in black marker pen in often moving messages such as “*mourn the dead, honour the living*”.



Figure 15: Graffiti’ memorial to 2001 World Trade Centre dead. Notice candles in the foreground.

A similar strategy of graffiti as catharsis was sanctioned at Kent State University after the 1970 killing of four students who were protesting the Vietnam War. The university set up a room in East Hall which students marked the walls with graffiti – including upside-down US flags – in order to transfer their angst – at least until the late 1970s when this room was destroyed during modernising. Closer to home, Carolyn Nordstrom and Joel Chiziane’s words and photographs

combine to tell the story of Mozambican children who use poems and graffiti to express their horrors of civil war (Nordstrom and Chiziane 1998).

Conclusion

A comparison of the speech act will allow us to go further and not limit ourselves to the critique of graphic representations alone, looking from the shores of legibility to an inaccessible beyond
Michel de Certeau 1984

In Southern Africa, material resources and critical archaeological skills are too few to allow for theorising without application and advocacy. In the current milieu of trans-nationalism or 'globalisation' in which notions of self and nation are eroded, modified and even strengthened at a dizzying rate (Mamdani 1996), knowledge of the landscape and people from which one comes is a potential point of anchorage. These anchorages are no small thing, but their firmament is not always stable. For example, xenophobic violence makes one question seemingly foundational 'facts' such as the existence of a common nationhood and ask just what, exactly, a 'Rainbow nation' is meant to be. In South Africa citizens are under enormous pressure to conform to an idealised nationhood and to respect multi-cultural diversity (cf. Wilmsen and McAllister 1996) But this expedient masking does not conceal growing global inequality and the fracturing of human groups into ever more localised and networked groups:

At least in the foreseeable future, the global trend toward affirming a seamless, homogenised cultural identity, controlled by, and for the benefit of, the already powerful, is probably here to stay. However, since it is predicated on a refusal to accept and celebrate the contested nature of public space, this trend is also unlikely to triumph for marginalised (subaltern) communities – like the urban destitute and economically disadvantaged youths – repeatedly challenge attempts to erase signs of their presence, like spraycan tags and supermarket trolleys, from the urban landscape. (Klopper 2003:238)

Artefacts like graffiti allow us to explore borderlands in which alternative possibilities of place and personhood are imagined and often, realised (cf. Schmidt and Patterson 1996). But there is a powerful lobby that eschews the value of the past and its artefacts. And indeed the burden of daily life and the present can be onerous enough without adding to it the baggage of the past. Yet this 'baggage' also represents a vast fund of information, practice, tradition, innovation and so forth that allows us to do more than just 'cope' with the present and larger, unseen 'occult economies' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999) governing our lives. This entanglement of the

personal, academic and circumstantial is an oft-cited positionality for the post-colonial academic. Antonio Gramsci's notion of 'organic' and 'informal' intellectuals (Gramsci 1971)¹⁶ is a useful lodestar for graffiti research where: "*the mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence ... but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organiser, 'permanent persuader' and not just a simple orator* (Gramsci 1971:10). By stressing the educative and revolutionary potential of all people – intellectuals and proletariat – sites of learning and reception become multiple and heterodox. This is not a consensus approach, but one of on-going struggle in which agents are not located in fixed locales but intersect with various trajectories:

A node of conflict is created when converging trajectories of research, personal interests and socio-political trends come into conjunction in such a way that research, successfully or unsuccessfully, contests deeply held, unquestioned political or religious convictions of the public at large, not just of the research community (Lewis-Williams 1995:66)

In post-colonial Africa the marking of public space is especially contested and powerful (e.g., Landau and Kaspin 2002 for essays on political processes, photographs, copies and museum displays; Chaffee 1993 for 'street art' analogues in South America, the Caribbean, Spain's Basque country¹⁷). The division between 'past' and 'present'; 'us' and 'them' and the many contested locales physical and conceptual over which we struggle, may better be approached through a willingness to extend and rupture disciplinary boundaries and what may normally be considered appropriate academic conduct (Mbembe 2002). As a landscape inscribed frequently and over a long time, southern Africa offers a material and social context that allows for the revisitation of seemingly moribund research topics and reinvigorates them by playing with scales of time, place and personhood that are nonetheless in conversation with an unfolding present.

¹⁶ It is interesting to speculate whether Gramsci's prison notebooks constitute 'graffiti'. They were produced during crisis – Gramsci's fatal incarceration – expressed revolutionary, resistive thoughts, and were smuggled out.

¹⁷ Rather than the usual USA, European and Australian analogues, it would be more productive to use examples from places like Asia, Meso and South America, eastern Europe with analogous post-colonial experiences.

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