WRITING ON THE WALL: HISTORIES OF GRAFFITI IN THE AMERICAS

Brandeis University, Spring 2017
Professor: Greg Childs
M & W: 2:00-3:30pm

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COURSE DESCRIPTION
Since the early 70s graffiti and other forms of writing on walls have been synonymous with underground hip-hop movements and punk rock culture in the United States. Yet Graffiti has existed for millennia in venues and locations that have no direct relation to either of these forms of music. Furthermore, graffiti has also been employed for a host of reasons, from social protest, to leisure art, to economic advertisement. How, then, did graffiti become associated so closely with hip-hop music? What are the historical antecedents of graffiti culture in the US and how did the experiences of Caribbean and other immigrants inform the development of graffiti culture in the US?

These are some of the questions that will guide our inquiry into the histories of graffiti in the Americas. Throughout the semester we will examine topics ranging from Cuban wall paintings by people of African descent in the nineteenth century, to immigration and artistic patterns emanating from the construction of the Panama Canal in the early twentieth century, to the impact that youth disillusionment with the Civil Rights movement and concomitant economic recessions in the 1970s had on the development of graffiti as an art form. The arc of the course will thus begin with a focus on the history of Caribbean art movements in the late 1800s, but will end with a focus on US urban history after 1960.

COURSE OBJECTIVES (1-3) AND LEARNING GOALS (4-5)

1) To introduce students to the fundamental elements of graffiti (different styles of painting, mediums, etc) and how these styles have shifted over time and space
2) To understand how early twentieth century Caribbean migration patterns later informed and African American cultural formation in post 1960s America
3) To contemplate how economic history and disciplines like criminology have informed popular understandings of graffiti and wall writing
4) Students will become familiar with graffiti not just as a mode of artistic expression but as a field of critical studies
5) Students will strengthen their writing and understanding of historical argumentation
COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADE BREAKDOWN

Your grade will be based on the following requirements and performance. Please note that success in this four-credit course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week outside of class meeting times (readings, papers, discussion sections, preparation for exams, etc.).

1) Discussion and Class Participation: 15%
2) Sketchbook and Crew Work: 15%
3) Two Critical Film Reviews: 20%
4) One Midterm Project: 20%
5) One Final Essay: 25%

Critical Essay: For this assignment, students will be asked to produce an essay that critically reviews and compares Nancy MacDonald’s *The Graffiti Subculture* with Gregory Snyder’s *Graffiti Lives*. Essays must demonstrate a clear understanding of each author’s core arguments and how each author treats questions about graffiti, race, crime, gender, or urban policy. Papers must be 6-8 pages in length, typed and double spaced, and using 12-point font with 1-inch margins. More details will be provided several weeks prior to the essay due date. Any missed exam or paper will be counted as a zero towards your final grade. No late papers will be accepted without submission of notification (sickness, family emergency).

Papers must be written using standard Chicago Manual of Style (also known as Turabian) citation form. This form uses footnotes for references, not parenthesis. Any paper that does not follow standard citation guidelines will be returned to you without a grade. It must be corrected and resubmitted by the beginning of the following class meeting. Citation format is quite specific—even if you believe that you know how to construct your citations use this website <http://www.lib.duke.edu/libguide/citing.htm> as a starting point—go to “Turabian Footnotes” on the “citing sources within your paper” link.

Critical Film Reviews: We will watch and discuss three films over the course of the semester. You will be required to choose two of these films and write critical reviews of them. By critical review I do not mean a summary of the films but a reading of the films that brings critical scrutiny to topics that we are studying that appear in these films. You should thus think about the films relation to the texts that we are reading in each week that the film will be watched (you may also opt to read the films through the lens of other texts that we have read earlier in the semester). These papers must also use the Chicago Style citation format.

Discussion and Participation: In class question and discussion on each Wednesday, will form the core of your “class participation.” This is where we will discuss particular themes of interest raised or not raised in the readings. Students are thus required to complete all reading assignments prior to discussion and to
actively participate in our class discussions forum. You are encouraged to raise questions and observations about the readings that you find interesting, noteworthy, or that reflect and connect with other themes/readings that we will be covering this semester. **Note:** Coming to class prepared to discuss the readings means not only doing the reading before class, but coming to class with the reading material in hand. Excessive absences may result in a failing grade for the course.

**Sketchbook Work:** Each student must purchase a sketchbook and a set of pens for the course. This sketchbook will be used on “sketchbook” days, which are scheduled on the syllabus below. You will use this notebook to practice graffiti “writing,” focusing specifically on your letters, bringing style and personal touches to these exercises in order to create your own unique “Graffiti Alphabet.” The idea behind this semester long project is to bring us into a mode of “tactile study,” as opposed to simply studying graffiti through reading and discussing texts. We will also have days scheduled where we do not work in the sketchbooks but write directly onto surfaces such as brick, metal, etc. Once again, the idea is to make the study of graffiti a tactile practice.

**Midterm and Final Exams:** Both the midterm exam and the final exam for the course will be take home essays, with the midterm essay prompt related to texts and questions we will cover over the first half of the course and the final essay prompt related to texts and questions that we will cover in the second half of the course. I will provide more information on both the midterm and the final several weeks in advance of both exams.

**REQUIRED BOOKS**
There are no required books to purchase for this course. You must only purchase a quality sketchbook and a set of pens. All readings for the course will be uploaded to LATTE.

**FURTHER ACCOMMODATIONS**
Students who have special needs have a right to have them accommodated. If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see me immediately.

**ACADEMIC HONESTY**
Plagiarism in any form will not be tolerated. Academic integrity is central to the mission of educational excellence at Brandeis University. Each student is expected to turn in work completed independently, except when assignments specifically authorize collaborative effort. It is not acceptable to use the words or ideas of another person without proper acknowledgement. Violations of the university policies on academic integrity (see [http://www.brandeis.edu/studentlife/sdc/ai](http://www.brandeis.edu/studentlife/sdc/ai)) may result in failure of the course or on the assignment, and could end in
suspension from the university.

COMMUNICATIONS
Instructor will contact students through email about rescheduling class meetings due to snow days or any other circumstances that require class cancellation. Students should also make themselves familiar with the Latte page for the course. On the Latte page students will find some assigned readings for the semester (see course schedule below where those readings are indicated), email lists and contact information for other students in the course, as well as discussion forums.

COURSE SCHEDULE AND WEEKLY READINGS
The following is subject to change at instructor’s discretion or due to student input during the term.

I. HISTORICAL ROOTS AND ANTECEDENTS

WK 1: INTRODUCTION
Wed. (01/18)
• Graffiti as History and Archive

WK 2: LEGACIES DISAVOWED: CARIBBEAN SOUNDINGS
Mon. (01/23)
• Mixed Media Revolutions: The Aponte Rebellion of 1812
  ➢ Reading: Sibylle Fischer, “The Deadly Hermeneutics of the Trial of José Antonio Aponte,” in Modernity Disavowed, 41-56 [LATTE]

Wed. (01/25)
• From Notebooks to Wall Painting: 19th Century Caribbean
  ➢ Reading: Sibylle Fischer, Modernity Disavowed, 57-77 [LATTE]

WK 3: BORDER CROSSINGS: LATIN@ CONNEXSHUNS
Mon. (01/31)
• The Mexican Revolution and the Muralist Movement

Wed. (02/01)
• The Muralists Movement: From Mexico to NYC and Points Between
  ➢ Reading: Anna Indych-López, “Horrores,” in Muralism Without Walls: Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros in the United States, 1927-1940 [LATTE], 12-74

WK 4: DIASPORAS, SOJOURNS, AND BORDERLANDS
Mon. (02/06)
• African-Americans in Mexico, 1940s and 50s
  ➢ Reading: T.V. Reed, “Revolutionary Walls: Chicano/a Murals, Chicano/a Movements,” from The Art of Protest, 103-128 [LATTE]

Wed. (02/08)
• Migration and the Arts After the Mexican Revolution
  ➢ Reading: Sylvia Ann Grider, “Con Safos: Mexican-Americans, Names and Graffiti,” 132-142, [LATTE]

- Sketchbook WorkDay #1: Graffiti Alphabets

68pgs

II. GRAFFITI SUBCULTURE/COUNTERCULTURE

WK 5: ON THE NOTION OF “SUBCULTURE” AND GRAFFITI
Mon. (02/13)
• Watch WildStyle
  ➢ Reading: Nancy Macdonald, The Graffiti Subculture, 32-48

Wed. (02/15)
• Writing the “Underground” Sound: NYC Graffiti & the Subway
  ➢ Reading: Craig Castleman, Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York, 2-18 [LATTE]
  ➢ Reading: Juan Flores, From Bomba to Hip-Hop, 115-140 [Latte]

- Sketchbook WorkDay #2: Graffiti Alphabets (and Numbers)
- Film Response to Wild Style due in Class

60pgs

WK 6: No Class: Midterm Recess

WK 7: THE RITE OF WRITING: GENDER AND GRAFFITI
Mon. (02/27)
• A History of Writing in NYC, 1980s-90s
  ➢ Reading: Craig Castleman, Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York, 52-89 [LATTE]
  ➢ Reading: Gregory J. Snyder, “A Brief History of Graffiti Writing” in Graffiti Lives, (23-46) [LATTE]

Wed. (03/01)
“Introduction” and Selections from Nicolas Ganz (with Nancy Macdonald and Swoon), *Graffiti Women: Street Art from Five Continents* [LATTE]


- **Midterm Essay Due in Class**

**WK 8: MANLY PURSUITS AND THE ART OF MAKING SUBCULTURE**

Mon. (03/06)

- Graffiti and the Reconstruction of Youth Masculinity

Wed. (03/08)

- Gangs, Graffiti, and Organizations

- **Surface Work Day #1: (Pens and Markers) Tagging Walls and Stalls, Making Crews**

**WK 9: HIDDEN IN PLAIN VIEW: TO BE OR NOT TO BE (ANONYMOUS)**

Mon. (03/13)

- Anonymity and Graffiti Politics
  - Watch *Style Wars*

Wed. (03/15)

- Gender and the Problem of Anonymity

- **Sketchbook WorkDay #3: Graffiti Alphabets (and Numbers and Shapes)**
  - **Film Response to Style Wars due in Class**

**WK 10: ACROSS THE MAP**

Mon. (03/20)

- From the Heartland to the Left Coast: From Denver to LA and the Bay, 80s and 90s
  - Reading: Jeff Farrell, *Crimes of Style*, TBD [LATTE]
Wed. (03/22)

- Getting Up in Chicago
  ➢ Reading: TBD [LATTE]
  - Surface Work Day #2: (Markers and Mops) Messing With Brick, Panel, and Metal

III. GRAFFITI AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF CRIME

WK 11: DEVIANCY AND PUBLIC POLICY

Mon. (03/27)

- Erasing, Defacing, and Mirroring Graffiti: Vandal Squads and Graffiti Vigilantes, pt. 1
  ➢ Watch Infamy and discussion of film
  ➢ Reading: Craig Castleman, Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York, 149-179 [LATTE]

Wed. (03/29)

- Erasing, Defacing, and Mirroring Graffiti: Vandal Squads and Graffiti Vigilantes, pt. 2
  - Sketchbook WorkDay #4: Graffiti Alphabets (Sketching, Bombing, Piecing)
  - Film Response to Infamy due in Class

WK 12: FIXING BROKEN WINDOWS??

Mon. (04/03)

- The Broken Windows Theory of Crime Prevention in New York
  ➢ Reading: Gregory Snyder, Graffiti Lives, 47-58 [LATTE]

Wed. (04/05)

- Policies Analogous to Broken Windows: Denver and Bay Area
  ➢ Reading: Jeff Ferrell, Crimes of Style, TBD [LATTE]
  - Watch Piece by Piece
  - Sketchbook WorkDay #5: (Designing Projects) Working Up Crew “Battles”

WK 13: (NO CLASS: PASSOVER & SPRING RECESS)
IV. RACE, SPACE, PLACE AND GRAFFITI

WK 14: (NO CLASS: PASSOVER & SPRING RECESS Cont. on Mon (04/17) and BRANDEIS MONDAY on Wed (04/19)

WK 15: GEOGRAPHY & IMPERATIVES OF SPACE (GRAFFITI WEEK @ BRANDEIS)

Mon. (04/24)
- Is Graffiti In Place or Out of Place?
  ➢ Reading: Tim Creswell, “Heretical Geography 1: The Crucial “Where” of Graffiti,” from In Place/Out of Place, 31-61 [LATTE]
  ➢ Reading: Katherine McKittrick, Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle, 1-8 [LATTE]

Wed. (04/26)
- Working in Space
  - Surface Work Day #3: (Spray Paint) Spraying the Cube

WK 16: THE RETURN OF THE “UNDERGROUND”: ACROSS BORDERS (AGAIN)

Mon. (05/01)
- Derivation or Layering? Graffiti Brazil, Graffiti Cuba
  ➢ Reading: Caleb Neelon, Graffiti Brazil, 13-25 [LATTE]

Wed. (05/03)
- When it Goes Beyond Hip-Hop: Heavy Metal, Political Insurgency, and Brazilian Pichação
  ➢ Reading: Marcio Siwi, “Pichação: the Story Behind São Paulo’s ‘Angry’ Alternative to Graffiti,
  ➢ Reading: Caleb Neelon, Graffiti Brazil, 26-43[LATTE]
  - Surface Work Day # 4: (Material of Choice) Concluding Crew Battles

WEDNESDAY, MAY 11: FINAL EXAM DATE (TENTATIVE): Final Essay due at 11:59 PM, to be submitted electronically