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Analysis

The Graffiti Bridge, a derelict and hidden bridge spanning a creek on Southwestern University's property, has been used by students as a place to retreat, smoke, and leave graffiti for generations. With a new land development project threatening the life of the Graffiti Bridge and the practices that surround it, an analysis of the ways in which this space has been rhetorically constructed will not only provide a useful glimpse into the ways that student cultures operate, but will record this practice for future students who will not have the opportunity to experience the Bridge themselves. This analysis hinges on three research questions which seek to highlight the nature of the Graffiti Bridge and how it functions: first, what are the recurring patterns in the symbols and words used as graffiti on the Graffiti Bridge, and what is their rhetorical significance in the creation of a discursive space? Second, what are the collective subcultural practices surrounding the Graffiti Bridge, and how do they work with the graffiti itself to interpellate a specific public or counterpublic on Southwestern's campus? Lastly, how does the Graffiti Bridge serve as an example of resistive student-driven vernacular practices at Southwestern University, and how does it serve as an antithesis to institutionalized memory practices, such as the graffiti in Cullen tower? Through a rhetorical analysis of the individual pieces of graffiti left on the Bridge and how they both form and resist a dialogue with each other, as well as an analysis of this discourse itself as relayed by students, I argue that the Graffiti Bridge is representative of a subculture at Southwestern University created as a form of

resistance to dominant ideology, practices, and interventions, which is aware of both its own marginalized status and its transience at this university. This discourse and subculture is created constitutively on the Graffiti Bridge through several different types of graffiti, being place-making and space-claiming graffiti, political ideographs, symbols of youth culture, and non-specific or non-representative imagery. Each of these categories create patterns of meaning which reflect on the nature of Southwestern's resistive subculture, and are expounded upon by student's experiences as gathered through survey data. This survey received voluntary feedback from 23 participants, and asked questions about graduating year, awareness of the Graffiti Bridge, memories and practices associated with it, and meaning inscribed in it; the results, in concurrence with the actual graffiti at the bridge, help to identify the subculture associated with the Graffiti Bridge and the ways in which students interface with this place.

When I first encountered the Graffiti Bridge as a freshman, I was immediately struck not only by the secluded nature and potential for solitude, but also by the layered nature of the graffiti itself. At first glance, many of the words and symbols are not legible at all, and the concrete appears as a mass of spray paint without very clear distinctions between each piece of graffiti. When individual pieces of graffiti *are* clearly delineated, it is usually because they have been layered over another piece of graffiti, obscuring part or all of the previous message or image. This suggests multiple things about the nature of rhetoric represented at the Graffiti Bridge, each of which forms a foundational part of this analysis. The first is that the construction of meaning at this location is necessarily created by multiple people and over a period of time, although the exact extent of this is unclear. This evidence of continuing practice is indicated not only by the multilayered nature of the graffiti, but also by the multiple colors used in the spraypaint and different handwriting and art styles represented, all of which suggests multiple

rhetors. This feature of the bridge forms the basis of an argument for constitutive rhetoric, whereby the messages placed on the Graffiti Bridge are done so communally and can thus be extrapolated to draw conclusions about the nature of this community (White). In addition, the constitutive construction of the Graffiti Bridge as a community space necessarily places these “collective political subjects” within a larger social context, that of Southwestern University, and works to highlight the ideological discourses at play from both the greater culture and this constitutively created subculture (Charland).

The second thing that the layered nature of the graffiti indicates is that this space operates largely without the “rules” which so often dictate rhetorical behavior. For example, Cullen Tower on Southwestern’s campus is another similar community space that centers around the resistive practice of graffiti. However, there are several unspoken guidelines about leaving graffiti there, mainly that one cannot mark over another person’s graffiti and must choose an empty space to leave their own markings. At the Graffiti Bridge, there is not the same sanctity inherent in other peoples’ graffiti, and often, different rhetors will decide individually what they deem “important” enough to either leave untouched or build upon. The fact that Cullen operates under a set of rules, now sanctioned by the University as an institutional force, and the Graffiti Bridge does not further removes it from the larger culture at Southwestern, and situates those who use the Graffiti Bridge as a “counterpublic” moving in resistance to the dominant institutional ideology (Warner). Moreover, Cullen Tower is marked mostly with the names and graduating years of Southwestern students, and has been formally delineated as a public memory space specifically for this goal; the Graffiti Bridge, on the other hand, incorporates a wider range of words and images which are left organically by a specific group of students, suggesting a more nuanced, private community usage and identity.

The last element of significance in the layered nature of the Graffiti Bridge's markings lies in the dialogue created between items. Despite the fact that the graffiti does not often directly "reply" to other markings in a traditional sense, both the act of writing over *and* the decision to leave an existing marking indicates intentionality and awareness of other rhetors and their meaning making practices. In addition, the placement of graffiti on the bridge, when viewed on a global scale, functions to create a space which incorporates a wide variety of discourses and rhetorical actions. All of this works to create a constitutively created rhetoric whereby the symbols on the bridge as left by multiple rhetors build upon each other, forming and resisting a dialogue about what this space means to the people who inhabit it.

As stated above, most of the legible graffiti on the bridge falls into one of several categories, each of which functions to create a different aspect of meaning for this location. The first category is place-making graffiti, which ranges from more covert means of delineating space to more overt declarations of identity. Authors such as Yi-Fu Tuan and Pierce et al., explored in the above sections, distinguish between a mere space and a *place*, and identify a place as something which is "created and recreated" by the meaning-making rhetorical practices of the people that inhabit it (Pierce et al.; Yi-Fu Tuan). This is a foundationally important aspect of the Graffiti Bridge, whereby students have turned a derelict space into a place to gather and form communicative identities and meanings. While the practice of graffiti at all would work to solidify this location as a place, as shown later in this analysis, there are several items which make more overt rhetorical moves in their carving out of place.

The first is the leaving of names. At the Graffiti Bridge, there are three names written: "Lalla", "Evelyn", and "Charlotte", all in the same pink spray paint and marked over other items. Historically, graffiti has not been an anonymous practice, with gang-affiliated graffiti and

“tagging” being a common feature in urban spaces. At the Graffiti Bridge, however, there is not a single piece of graffiti that speaks to one specific person or group; even these names are not accompanied by any surname, leaving the identity of the rhetors protected. Despite this, the presence of these names indicates a carving out of personal identity in this space, delineating it as a place for each of these individuals. In addition, the fact that these particular words are all left in the same color paint and over other pieces suggests that they were likely left at the same time, by the same group of people. Thus, the Graffiti Bridge does not only mean something for each of these rhetors as individuals, it means something for them as a *group*, bringing an element of collective memory and identity into this place. This is also indicated by a piece of graffiti on the bridge reading “F + J ‘22” with a heart, written in black paint. While graffiti of this type is common in the world, it is the only one of its kind on the Graffiti Bridge, and works to immortalize an attachment which was created in a very specific, short-term context, that of a four-year university. In addition, this message locates this couple on the Graffiti Bridge in a specific moment in time, sharing a memory and creating a place.

The presence of names is a declaration of identity, and functions to create space for these individuals and groups. However, there are other methods of place-making present at the Graffiti Bridge, ones which function differently to delineate this as a place of meaning. One such item is found not on the bridge, but on the way: in orange paint, someone has marked out the phrase “Getting Closer...” This phrase not only outlines the Graffiti Bridge as a destination and a “place”, it also interpellates a specific group of people on Southwestern’s campus, one which is aware of the existence of the Graffiti Bridge and has perhaps been looking for it in response to a circulating discourse. This group of people, due to its identification with a hidden location and the resistive practices enacted here, comprises the aforementioned counterpublic in

Southwestern's community, one which stands in opposition to dominant institutional forces. This does not mean that each of the members of the counterpublic is particularly ostracized; rather, it means that the identity they assume while at the Graffiti Bridge or the practices they engage with while there are not otherwise possible in their day to day lives on campus. Despite the fact that there are many places on campus that serve as "student spaces" or have been claimed as such, the individuals who leave the graffiti on the bridge feel the need to retreat to the outer edges of campus to engage in these activities. This leads to the formation of this place-making rhetoric at the Graffiti Bridge, whereby these students use overt "claims" to their right to be in this space.

It is interesting to note that these claims are often exclusive, with students who are aware of the bridge appearing unwilling to share this knowledge with others. This was supported by survey data, where 62% of recipients who had been to the bridge said that they had never shown the location to anyone else. Several responses said that not telling others was a way of keeping the bridge "safe", or that finding the bridge one's own was an "adventure". This indicates that the counterpublic which is associated with the Graffiti Bridge is aware of the resistive nature of their practices, and fear the institutional backlash that might come with recognition. One student acknowledged that they had been caught smoking weed at the Graffiti Bridge before, and were threatened with being reported to the police. While it is obvious that the police or Southwestern becoming aware of the Graffiti Bridge would threaten the illegal practices of students, those who know about the bridge also seem hesitant to tell even other students about the Graffiti Bridge. When I mentioned this project in class, I had a sophomore express thinly-veiled anger at the fact that I had alerted other students to the existence of the bridge. This could be due to the nature of the Graffiti Bridge, which operates as a sort of "Public and Private" location that displays its rhetoric to only a select few individuals and must remain hidden from

dominant ideological forces (Burns). However, there is the element of “claiming” present in much of the space-making graffiti, which indicates a counterpublic that has carved out specific space for itself at this location and is hesitant to share this with anyone other than those which have been initiated into this community by virtue of their independent discovery of the bridge.

Perhaps the most significant instance of place-making graffiti at the bridge is a large and very recent piece of graffiti saying “MY SPOT”, with an arrow pointing to the words. This graffiti is done in bright red and blue paint, layered over other pieces of graffiti, and is situated at the edge of the bridge overlooking the river. This item is interesting because while it remains anonymous, and does not attribute this “spot” to any known individual, it is very clearly claiming a place for someone. In doing so, it interpellates the other visitors of the Graffiti Bridge, almost daring them to take up space which someone else has delineated as their own. In addition, this piece of graffiti as it covers up older items inscribes a sense of current belonging that supersedes that of past visitors. This is the nature of the Graffiti Bridge itself, with multilayered graffiti reflecting the transience of student life at Southwestern, where the experiences of students exist for the four years that they occupy Southwestern’s spaces and are then forgotten, covered up by the newest incoming class. Place-making graffiti at this location and elsewhere on campus is a way of not only delineating a space for students and their practices, but a method of telling the next generation “I was here, and I did something.” The discourse surrounding the Graffiti Bridge as collected in the survey indicates an awareness of the fleeting nature of student existence here, with one student saying: “The graffiti bridge is a symbol of the transient nature of students. Most of the students who marked there are long gone, and soon I will be too.” Thus, place-making graffiti operates not only in a spatial sense, but in a temporal sense, carving out a specific context whereby students can express themselves in their short time at Southwestern.

Another piece of place-making graffiti which functions to interpellate members of a specific counterpublic reads “smoke HERE”. While other instances of place-making graffiti function to claim space for a specific individual, this item operates in an invitational sense, calling upon other members of the subculture to participate in the resistive nature of the Graffiti Bridge. It creates a place not only for an individual, but for a collective, united in ideology and practice. The phrase itself is a recognition of the fact that the Graffiti Bridge is a well-known smoking spot, mostly for marijuana. In survey responses, even students who have never been to the Graffiti Bridge indicate an awareness of this practice: of the 14 people who said that they were aware of the bridge, 6 said that they had heard it in reference to smoking, one even saying it was “the spot to get high.” Alongside graffiti itself, smoking weed as an illegal practice is inherently resistive, and functions to create a counterpublic who has not only formed in rebellion against ideological forces, but real institutional rules. In addition, smoking weed has long been associated with young peoples’ rebellion against the values of older generations, something which is expanded upon in later sections.

Alongside place-making graffiti, several of the symbols at the bridge have ideological meanings which nod to greater political and cultural movements. These are instances of “ideographs”, which were introduced by author Michael McGee as a means of distilling ideology into one slogan or symbol (Mcgee). While these symbols on the Graffiti Bridge are fairly rare in comparison to other types of graffiti, they are significant because of the huge cultural weight they carry, and their indication of the ideological intent of the rhetors. In the context of the Graffiti Bridge, these items serve as a representation of the political ideologies present in the student body which are unable to be expressed for some reason or another. One such symbol is a pentagram, which is a five-pointed star placed inside of a circle. While this item has a wide

variety of historical meanings, in current popular culture, the pentagram most often stands as a symbol of witchcraft or, when viewed upside down, the Church of Satan. Both of these ideologies are widely condemned in modern culture, particularly in the white, Judeo-Christian context of the Southern United States. Whether or not the person who left this symbol ascribes to these ideologies is impossible to tell from the symbol itself; however, its very presence on the bridge indicates a sense of resistance to dominant ideologies and serves as a symbol of rebellion.

Perhaps more significant, however, is the presence of two other ideographs on the bridge: a blue Star of David on the far right side, and a red swastika on the far left side. Historically and culturally, these symbols are incredibly significant, standing for opposite and, in many senses, mutually exclusive ideologies. The Star of David has long been a symbol of Judaism and the Jewish community, and is used as a symbol of pride and connection to heritage. The swastika, in contrast, is a Hindu symbol which was co-opted and bastardized by the Nazi party of Germany in the early 20th century and during World War II. The Nazi party used the swastika as a symbol of their ideology, that of white supremacy and the anti-Semitism, and committed atrocities under this banner (Kasher). Specifically, the Nazi party was responsible for the Holocaust, which was the annihilation of millions European Jews in concentration camps. The presence of this symbol on the bridge indicates a lasting commitment to an ideology and a discourse which overwhelmingly represents hatred and oppression. While a symbol such as the Star of David represents pride in a heritage and a community, a symbol such as the swastika is an unequivocal invocation of past atrocities, and serves functionally to rally others of a similar ideology.

In recent years, particularly after Barack Obama's 2008 election and civil rights movements such as the protests of 2020, there has been a resurgence of neo-Nazi symbolism among alt-right groups, who use the swastika as a unifying symbol to incite like-minded people

to violence (Simi and Futrell). This symbol has appeared around Southwestern's campus multiple times while I have been a student; most often, these instances are accompanied by an email from the administration addressing the issue, and the symbol being covered up or removed. Supposedly, although this has not been confirmed, several swastikas and other hateful messages were graffitied on the road leading to the Graffiti Bridge, but were covered up by black paint. For some reason or another, perhaps because it is small and mostly hidden, the swastika on the Graffiti Bridge has been left, both by those who covered up the previous symbols and by other students who come to visit the bridge.

The presence of both the Star of David and the swastika shed an interesting light on the way that political ideology is represented at Southwestern. Obviously, the use of a hate symbol is outright condemned by the institution, and so those wishing to express this ideology are retreating from institutional eyes in order to make this sort of statement. However, the fact that these symbols have appeared on campus proper, written in the dust on cars and drawn on whiteboards, indicates that this ideology is perhaps more present than the university would like to admit. People are being emboldened to express their hate in more and more public ways, and the presence of the symbol of the Graffiti Bridge is just an indicator that an institutional force can only do so much to root out insidious hatred, and that simply covering up these symbols will not remove this ideology from the greater public of Southwestern's campus. In contrast, the presence of the Star of David on the Graffiti Bridge is an indicator that despite the university's supposed championing of diversity and inclusion, people of color and other minority groups still do not feel safe expressing their pride and heritage on campus, particularly *because* of the hate symbols and crimes that are also present. This is echoed in campus climate surveys, public forums, and conversations between students and faculty: Southwestern is not a place of

belonging for anyone other than those who ascribe to the dominant ideology, and so those who have been “othered” are moving away from institutionally recognized places to express their identity. While the swastika and the Star of David represent diametrically opposed ideologies, they both serve as examples of students at Southwestern expressing an identity they feel cannot be recognized on campus, albeit in markedly different ways. This indicates the presence of a counterpublic which is aware of its own marginalization on campus, and which is pursuing a space within which it can express itself without institutional intervention.

It is also interesting to note that the presence of both symbols, each on a different side of the bridge and in a different color, creates a discourse between them that was not the original intention of either person who left their respective symbol. Had either of the rhetors been aware of the other symbol, they might have placed their own closer so as to make a more direct statement about the contrasting ideology, either covering up the first symbol or including additional commentary. The symbols are placed far apart, however, and are either faded or partially hidden; this indicates that whoever came second was not aware of the first symbol, and left their own independently. Regardless of this, however, these symbols still function in a dialogue with each other. This is representative of the greater culture of Southwestern, which feels constantly engaged in conflict between minority groups struggling to make space for themselves and aggressive ideologies seeking to stamp this out. While neither ideology is particularly welcomed at Southwestern, the fact that swastikas have been graffitied elsewhere on campus and symbols representing marginalized groups have not indicates that ultra conservative, alt-right individuals feel emboldened to claim space in ways that other groups do not. This is representative of the greater ideological movements working both in culture at large and at Southwestern specifically.

Another category of graffiti found on the bridge are symbols and phrases which have been borrowed from pop culture and modern media sources, many of which are created for and circulated by much younger children. One such symbol is a drawing of Spongebob from the cult favorite Nickelodeon show from the early 2000s, references to which form a basis for many conversations and cultural innuendos among young people who grew up on the TV show. “Spongebob” the television show is known for its immature, innocent humor and social commentary, and has greatly impacted viewers throughout all of its fifteen-season run (Fuller). Another such image is that of an “Among Us” character. “Among Us” is a multiplayer video game released in 2018 that was very popular for several years, and it was common to find groups of students on campus playing the game together either in person or in the same online “room”. A third image which falls into this category is a black drawing of what is known as the “universal s” or the “cool s”. This symbol, made up of 14 interconnected lines, is a cultural touchstone for young children, and is recognized and circulated internationally; its origins are unknown, although it is thought to have been introduced as early as the 1960s (Morgans). This symbol is common in elementary and middle schools and is, in my experience, viewed as a sort of status symbol for those who are able to draw it. The presence of these symbols indicates that the subculture associated with the Graffiti Bridge is drawing back on childhood memories and experiences to inform their creation of identity and sense of belonging here at Southwestern University.

Other symbols and phrases found on the Graffiti Bridge reference current pop culture movements and media sources, ones which are associated more firmly with the age group attending Southwestern. One instance of this is a large white drawing of a squid, with the words “squid game” drawn underneath. “Squid Game” is a television show released on Netflix in late

2021, which showcases a fictional game show where impoverished people fight to the death for a monetary prize. This show is well-known for its intense depictions of hyper-violence and gore, and stills from “Squid Game” circulated widely on social media as part of a collective discourse on class and oppression. Another phrase on the Graffiti Bridge which references other aspects of an adolescent subculture is a blue and green phrase which reads “Gorilla Grip Slip-n-Slide Pussy”. This is in reference to a tweet by @longdickyumm which reads “Lately ive been needin to feel somebody not just anybody but somebody wit a fat gorilla grip slip n slide Pussy” (Yums). This reference to sex and use of profanity as presented on a popular social media platform is a key example of “youth culture”, which is seen as inherently “disruptive” and centers around a rebellion against adulthood and demands placed upon young people by older generations and those in positions of authority, such as parents and teachers (Heaven).

These images as present on the Graffiti Bridge reflect a subculture that is connected with and uses these references to create an identity centered around such youthfulness and rebellion. This could perhaps be in response to the intense pressures of adulthood as manifest in university rhetoric: as a student passes through Southwestern, they are constantly bombarded with messages about their future, about the necessities of adulthood, about resumes and graduate schools and growing up. This results in a sense of rebellion against the very process of becoming an adult and a clinging to childhood and adolescent habits, symbols, and media. Just as a student’s time at Southwestern is transient, they are constantly reminded that their childhood is, too. Thus, the subculture associated with the Graffiti Bridge has arranged itself into a counterpublic centered around this resistive claiming of youthfulness to connect back to a lost identity and in rebellion against dominant ideological forces. This is accomplished through the

constitutive creation of a discourse that foregrounds symbols and phrases from childhood and adolescence to construct a self-defined identity.

The final category of graffiti present at the bridge, which is non-specific or non-representative graffiti, forms the vast majority of markings left at the bridge. These include a drawing of a cat, a flower, a face, a diamond, a spiral, and several illegible and non-representative doodles such as spirals and circles. In contrast to the symbols explored earlier in this paper, these items do not in themselves have any specific meaning, and do not seek specifically to impart a message to other visitors on the bridge; rather, the very act of leaving them serves a rhetorical function in the creation of a counterpublic. This hearkens back to McLuhan's famous phrase "the medium is the message", meaning that the way in which someone chooses to represent something is equally if not more important than the thing that is being represented (McLuhan). These symbols, drawn in a notebook or viewed in other pieces of media, do not have the same rhetorical impact as when they are being graffitied, meaning that it is the act of graffiti- the "medium"- that is in itself the "message". This is due to the inherently resistive nature of graffiti, established by multiple scholars in the above lit review (Burns; Molloy; Stocker; Campos). Thus, regardless of what is being placed on the bridge, the very act of placing it functions as a resistive practice. This sense of resistance is expanded upon by Michel de Certeau in his idea of strategy vs. tactics, whereby a strategy is something enacted by an institutional force to maintain power, while a tactic is something that oppressed peoples must use creatively to resist these institutional forces (de Certeau). Because young people are considered to be subjugated in a sense by the institution of Southwestern University, they must resort to tactics such as graffiti to express their individualism and ideology. This is echoed in survey responses, which rightfully identify the Graffiti Bridge as "a place where students can

gather without the regular restrictions of campus organizations, outside the norms and boundaries of student life.” This sense of place-making, brought about by the inherently resistive practice of graffiti as much as the content of the graffiti itself, is a direct sense of rebellion against what feels to students as the “restrictions of campus.”

In this sense, the Graffiti Bridge serves as an example of a truly student-created place which actively resists the pressures of dominant ideology through the constitutive, community-driven creation of a counterpublic’s discourse. This stands in stark contrast to other spaces on Southwestern’s campus, specifically Cullen Tower. In the past, Cullen Tower served a similar purpose, where students retreated from the pressures of University life and made a place for themselves, marking out names, initials, and graduation years on the walls of an institutional space. When the administration became aware of this, however, they co-opted this resistive practice and folded it into the landscape of Southwestern’s dominant ideology; what was once a student practice became an institutional tradition, packaged and priced for graduating students. Whereas before, students created a place of their own accord, now they must pay to occupy a space that was supposed to be for them in the first place.

This is hugely representative of the culture of Southwestern as a whole: despite students paying huge sums of money to attend this university, there is a marked lack of student spaces and a sense of belonging amongst the greater campus community. As one student wrote in their response, the Graffiti Bridge “as a space... represents how students navigate establishing a place for themselves in an institution like Southwestern that is consistently trying to create spaces that foster community but is failing for a multitude of reasons.” This has led to the creation of student-driven practices and spaces such as the Graffiti Bridge, which interpellates a group of students that feels otherwise marginalized or ostracized from the greater culture of Southwestern.

Because Southwestern is failing to create spaces for students, they must create them themselves, creating a sense of protectiveness over such spaces- both from the institution, and from those who reap the benefits of belonging to the dominant culture and ideology. As one student states, “the GB [Graffiti Bridge] to me is a sign of student rebellion (for lack of a better word) against the school. Students who dont have a place to hang out on campus go to this bridge to disconnect.” This indicates that students themselves are aware of their marginalized status on campus and the need for student-created spaces where they can create their own discourse and identity.

Ultimately, the Graffiti Bridge stands as a reflection of a student discourse community on Southwestern’s campus, one located in a specific place and formed through a resistance to institutional ideologies and interventions. The rhetorical symbols and phrases on the bridge work to create a landscape whereby students can craft an individual identity and community, away from the dominant forces of Southwestern.

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