

Hannah Jury

Dr. Bednar

Capstone

2/1/2024

Context/Description Paper

My Capstone project will be a rhetorical and discursive analysis of the Graffiti Bridge, consisting of a site analysis of the bridge itself accompanied by interviews conducted on Southwestern students. This research object is a productive site of analysis to those who study communications because it functions as a microcosm of a university's student culture, particularly regarding those students who regularly engage in resistive practices and individually developed rhetoric. Specifically, the Graffiti Bridge is an example of how the changing landscape of an environment can foster organic memory spaces and collective practices; this differs from other memory spaces because of a lack of direction from one institutionalized entity, and serves as a look into the way that ungoverned communicative practices develop amongst this demographic. This paper will provide an overview on the history of the Graffiti Bridge, the practices that surround it, and similar places on Southwestern's campus.

Southwestern University is a private liberal arts college in Georgetown, Texas, and was established in 1870 as a combination of four root colleges, the oldest of which was chartered in 1840; this has led to Southwestern's claim as the "first institution of higher learning in Texas" ("University Profile"). During its 150-year existence, Southwestern has expanded greatly, piecing together smaller portions of land for about 70 years before expanding by over 500 acres in the mid-20th century (Jones 321). Currently, Southwestern sits on "701 beautiful Central Texas acres", only about 100 of which are actually developed into functional campus space as

composed of academic buildings, housing, parking, and student spaces (“University Profile”). Understandably, much of daily student life happens on this portion of campus, with most sanctioned university and social events taking place in the buildings or developed outdoor spaces. The rest of the land contiguous to campus is undeveloped, and does not serve a specific purpose in relation to Southwestern’s function as a university or the daily life of students.

Currently, this property is being surveyed for the end goal of being turned into an extension of Southwestern’s community space. While there are no specific plans in place, the university has released a “Land Development Value Statement”, which incorporates goals of economic sustainability, environmental preservation, and community creation through the transformation of this portion of land (“Land Development Value Statement”). In addition to these values, the Land Development statement presents a potential image of what the development will look like, with student and faculty housing, “partnerships with industry and commerce... especially in growing fields such as high-tech, data, medical, and alternative energy”, and a series of greenbelts and green spaces (“Land Development Value Statement”). These plans will most likely not be officially released for several years, and the actual construction will require decades of work which will long outlast myself or any students currently here at Southwestern.

It is on this back portion of Southwestern’s property where myself and many students find themselves wandering in between classes or after dark. Past the greenhouse and the observatories, there is a broken and derelict path that leads to the International Order of Odd Fellows Cemetery, which is the largest cemetery in Georgetown and holds the graves of prominent figures in Southwestern’s history, including founder Francis Asbury Mood (Jones). Students can choose to pass through the cemetery or walk around it; in doing so, they encounter

a road that continues back between several large fields, some of which are baled for hay periodically throughout the year. This road leads to a bridge that spans a small creek; it is this bridge that is known amongst Southwestern students as the Graffiti Bridge. In accordance with its name, the small bridge is covered with words and symbols spray-painted onto the concrete. This graffiti is often layered, with newer additions superimposing older messages. There are two posts on either side of the bridge, both of which are covered in graffiti as well; this graffiti is usually done with permanent marker instead of spray paint, and is accompanied by stickers. A tree grows up beside the bridge, and is covered in spray paint as well. In addition, there is litter on the banks of the creek, most notably empty bottles; this litter is not present on the rest of the path, although it is present on the banks of the creek in other places. These objects, words, and symbols placed at the bridge are most often done so intentionally, thus constructing an overarching rhetoric surrounding the place. The organic way in which this rhetoric has been created, with multiple rhetors over a long span of time operating without a singular guiding force, proves a useful look into the construction of memory spaces.

Of course, the Graffiti Bridge as it is now known has not always existed, and certainly did not always go by this name; it was once a functional bridge connected to a functional road. According to an older faculty member who was once a student at Southwestern, the road was once called Smith Creek Road, and the bridge likewise called Smith Creek Bridge. This road, due to its location on campus and apart from the normal traffic system of Georgetown, was the perfect place to smoke marijuana, and was called “one-joint road” by this faculty member because driving along this road provided the perfect amount of time to roll and smoke an entire joint. Whether or not this was common practice was unclear; however, it *is* clear that the road was used both for its intended purpose as a road in addition to serving as a place for the resistive

practices employed by students. Sometime in the last several decades, between the time that this faculty member was a student and the present day, Smith Creek, after which the road is named and over which the bridge crosses, flooded and destroyed the bridge. Rather than rebuild, Southwestern simply let the road and the bridge fall into disrepair. It is likely this lack of functionality that led to students adopting it as a private space and covering the bridge with graffiti. It is important to note that information relating to the older function of the road and the bridge is almost entirely lost; Southwestern does not have any records of this location in their online databases, and search engines such as google do not yield any results for “Smith Creek Road” or “Smith Creek Bridge” past locating it on a map or connecting it to the IOOF cemetery. While records undoubtedly exist, they have been made so inaccessible that the information they contain is completely irrelevant to the current life of the bridge. This means that its identity as a place is kept alive only through the community and memory practices of living people. Due to the ever-shifting nature of the student body, this identity is then constantly changing and morphing with the students that interact with it.

As stated above, the Graffiti Bridge and its current function as an organically constructed memory space, particularly one which does not exist on Southwestern campus proper and is instead situated on the edges of Southwestern’s land, is not recorded by Southwestern and operates entirely without institutional recognition. Southwestern University does not have any official statements regarding the Graffiti Bridge, and the term does not appear on any university rhetoric either online or in print. This includes both official documents and accessible student-led literature, such as the student newspaper, the Megaphone. As such, collective memory surrounding the bridge rests entirely with the student body and those few faculty members that are aware of its existence, and is passed via word of mouth and student interactions. Even despite

the robust gossip culture present at Southwestern University and interconnected nature of student groups, the Graffiti Bridge is still relatively unknown amongst the larger community. Upon asking my fellow classmates what they knew about the Graffiti Bridge, very few students (five in a group of twenty) indicated that they even knew about the bridge at all. These students were almost all seniors, meaning that in the four years that they have spent at Southwestern, the Graffiti Bridge has not been mentioned to them. This is a theme echoed throughout other conversations that I have had with students of various ages; in the majority of cases, people have either never heard of the Graffiti Bridge or have never been themselves. This indicates that the Graffiti Bridge exists, even amidst the greater Southwestern community, as a sort of secret, and remains as a private place for those students who know about it.

This hidden nature of the Graffiti Bridge has created a very specific set of practices associated with time spent there, most of which are generally frowned upon by Southwestern as an institution or Georgetown as a city. The most obvious of these is the practice of leaving graffiti; despite the fact that graffiti of any kind is prohibited in Georgetown according to Chapter 9.14 of the Georgetown Code of Ordinances, students have made this practice an important facet of time spent at the Graffiti Bridge (“Chapter 9.14: Graffiti”). It is interesting to note that the Southwestern student handbook does not mention graffiti at all, creating a sort of institutional ambiguity in regards to attitudes towards this practice; this is furthered by the highly private, derelict nature of the bridge, leaving students unsure as to whether or not Southwestern is even aware of the graffiti at all (“2023-24 Student Handbook”). As it stands, if the University has any strong feelings towards students leaving graffiti at this specific location, it has not made them clear, and has certainly not taken any steps to reduce the practice. One other common activity at the Graffiti Bridge is the recreational use of marijuana and other drugs; the

information provided by the faculty member indicates that this practice is clearly something that has been continuing for quite some time. This is, obviously, illegal in the state of Texas and specifically on Southwestern's campus, with clear legislation and policy existing in both cases. As such, the Graffiti Bridge offers a mostly private place for students to engage in this practice. It is interesting to note, however, that most students that I know who smoke recreationally simply do so in their rooms or on their balconies on campus; this adds an interesting facet to the use of the Graffiti Bridge, where students go there less so out of necessity and more so as a destination to enhance the experience.

It is also important to note that some members of the Georgetown community unconnected to Southwestern are aware of the Graffiti Bridge as well. There have been multiple instances where I was walking on the road or passing over the bridge when I encountered people that I knew were not Southwestern students or faculty walking dogs or hiking alone. More often than not, I avoided bumping into them by moving into one of the nearby fields or stepping off of the path into the woods. This is because my own personal experience with the Graffiti Bridge is as a place to retreat and be alone, and so I am not inclined to engage with others while walking here. I do the same thing with Southwestern students and faculty, regardless of whether or not I have a relationship with them or have encountered them on campus. In addition, I have heard stories from friends where older individuals encountered them smoking weed at the bridge and threatened to call the police. While this did not actually transpire and the students simply left the bridge without repercussions, the community knowledge of the bridge complicates its location as a Southwestern memory space, particularly as one where students go to engage in resistive practices.

It is these practices and this collective knowledge amongst students that I hope to explore through a series of interview questions. These questions are as follows:

1. What is your year?
2. Do you know what the Graffiti Bridge is?
3. What have you heard from other students about the Graffiti Bridge?
4. Have you been yourself? If so, how many times?
5. How did you encounter it: by yourself, or with someone else? Did someone show you, or did you come across it on your own?
6. Have you shown anyone else the Graffiti Bridge?
7. What do you do at the Graffiti Bridge?
8. Have you ever left graffiti/stickers/objects there? If so, what did you leave? Did you have a specific reason for leaving it?
9. What does the Graffiti Bridge mean to you?

The goal of these questions is to identify the specific memory practices that accompany the Graffiti Bridge, and how students are “inducted” into the group of people who know about this place. As it stands, my only base of knowledge for discussing community engagement with the Graffiti Bridge is derived from my own personal experiences and those of my close friends. I was shown the Graffiti Bridge my freshman year of college by two people to whom I no longer speak; since then, I have shown one other person the bridge, gone there with one other person who already knew about it, and discussed it with countless others. This had led me to believe that most students were aware, at least in some way, of the existence of the Graffiti Bridge and what students do when they go there. This was, as I mentioned before, disproved by other conversations with students, both those in younger grades and those in my own grade, indicating that I was actually part of a small group of people who are familiar with the bridge. It was interesting to me to find that, during these conversations, I am usually hesitant to tell students how to get to the Graffiti Bridge even as I tell them how cool it is and how much I enjoy being there. This is echoed by other students who are aware of the bridge and use it as a private place.

The Graffiti Bridge and the nature of cultural knowledge surrounding it provides interesting parallels, as well as contrasts, with other spaces of collective memory on Southwestern's campus. As with all universities, Southwestern is host to a multitude of memory spaces that students engage with in various ways. One such site is the Story Tree, an old live oak tree situated near the football fields. Similarly to the Graffiti Bridge, the Story Tree is set apart from daily life on campus and is held as a secret by students; it serves as a gathering place, where students of various backgrounds and groups come together to tell stories, host events, and retreat from daily life. As opposed to the Graffiti Bridge, Southwestern is very much aware of the Story Tree, and has recognized it in an official way: "In 2000, Story Tree was recognized by the institution through a plaque at the base of the tree, sanctifying the site as an institutionally-official place for "celebration, recreation, and education." (Teddy Hoffman '24). Hoffman describes the tension present between Southwestern as an institution and Southwestern as a student body in this recognition, where the identity of the place and its sense of belonging is complicated by conflicting ideas of 'ownership' (Teddy Hoffman '24). This is highly relevant to the Graffiti Bridge, as the Land Development Plan will soon bring this location to light and the practices and discourses that accompany it.

The most similar place on Southwestern's campus to the Graffiti Bridge is the Cullen Tower; this is due to its longstanding status as a student space and the use of graffiti to delineate identity and collective memory. Cullen as an academic building was completed in 1900 as the primary location for classes, and remains as the "oldest surviving structure on Southwestern's campus" (Rao). Almost since its creation, although the exact date is unclear, students have been sneaking into the top room of the Cullen Tower and signing their name and graduation date, with the first signature dating back to 1912 (Rao). This remained as a resistive practice for most of

Southwestern's history that "only a select few rebellious students ventured to do" (Rao). Starting in the early 2000s, however, Southwestern's administration created the Tower Society and began to allow graduating seniors to enter the tower to sign their name, year, and whatever else they felt so inclined to write (barring profanity and obscene imagery). This is a beloved tradition for Southwestern students, and is accompanied by great anticipation, conversation, and social media posts regarding this rite of passage. What most students don't know until their senior year, however, is that Southwestern requires a "donation" to enter the Tower Society, which is usually \$20 and whatever number of cents corresponds to the graduation year; for instance, if I wanted to be inducted into the Tower society and sign Cullen Tower, I would need to donate \$20.24 to Southwestern University. This is a concrete example of what happens when student practices become co-opted by institutional forces: the heart of the tradition as it has grown organically is placed behind barriers and becomes inaccessible for many students, or removed from its original meaning as a resistive practice. With the Land Development Plan underway, the life of the Graffiti Bridge as a private student place where young people can engage in resistive acts is similarly threatened.

In conclusion, the Graffiti Bridge as a hidden location operates specifically as a site of student memory at Southwestern, interpellating a specific public and fostering a unique discourse. The Graffiti Bridge as a research object is parallel to other communications research on memory spaces, graffiti, and student culture, particularly as these things are anchored in specific locations; this research will be explored in the Prospectus, with patterns and divergences outlined in this paper. Moving forward, I want to focus on how the specific rhetoric used in the graffiti itself constructs this memory space and the discursive practices that surround it.

Furthermore, I want to draw connections between the Graffiti Bridge and similar memory sites, both at Southwestern and other locations.

Works Cite:

“Chapter 9.14: Graffiti.” *Municode Library*, 2010,

library.municode.com/tx/georgetown/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=COOR_TIT9P_UPEMOWE_CH9.14GR_S9.14.090ABPACOOWIMLI.

Jones, William B. *To Survive and Excel: The Story of Southwestern University, 1840-2000*.

Southwestern University, 2006.

“Land Development Value Statement.” *Southwestern University*, 2022,

www.southwestern.edu/about-southwestern/university-profile/land-development-value-statement/.

Office of Student Life, “Student Handbook 2023-24”, *Southwestern University*, 2023,

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MALARood3IBNTw7vmMh6jYLDwcFteNf2AL2_99vn0zk/edit

Rao, Samantha. “A Brief History of the Cullen Building.” *Southwestern University*,

www.southwestern.edu, 28 Mar. 2019,

www.southwestern.edu/live/news/13231-a-brief-history-of-the-cullen-building.

Teddy Hoffman '24, “Story Tree,” *Placing Memory*, accessed January 30, 2024,

<https://placingmemory.southwestern.edu/items/show/21>.

“University Profile.” *Southwestern University*,

www.southwestern.edu/about-southwestern/university-profile/. Accessed 30 Jan. 2024.

