Hannah Jury

Dr. Bednar

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Resistive Rhetoric: Graffiti as Subcultural Tactic

Introduction

Graffiti, as a practice, is a pervasive force throughout history, and has thus been widely studied across multiple disciplines for decades. In the context of the field of communications, graffiti is often delineated as both inherently resistive and commonly associated with various youth subcultures (Burns; Molloy; Stocker; Campos). One example of graffiti which displays these characteristics and presents insight into the nature of resistance as connected to a specific subculture is the "Graffiti Bridge", a derelict and hidden bridge located on a university campus in the southern United States. The Graffiti Bridge 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 not only provides a useful glimpse into student subcultures, particularly regarding those students who regularly engage in resistive practices and subcultural rhetoric, but records this practice for future students who will not have the opportunity to experience the Bridge themselves. Specifically, the Graffiti Bridge is an example of how the changing landscape of an environment can serve to create a place for subcultural ideologies 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.

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 and collected through survey data, I argue that the Graffiti Bridge is representative of a subculture at Southwestern University created as a form of tactical resistance to dominant ideology, practices, and interventions, which as a subculture 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 icons, symbols of youth culture, and non-specific imagery. Each of these categories create patterns of meaning which reflect the distinct characteristics of Southwestern's resistive subculture, and which can be taken within the greater context of graffiti as a resistive practice to not only say something, but *do* something functionally within this subculture and Southwestern University as a whole.

1. **Location and Characteristics**

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 200 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 for years it has not served 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 that 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 road that continues back between several large fields. This road leads to a bridge that spans a small creek; it is this bridge that is known amongst most 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. 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 an institutional guiding force, proves a useful look into the construction of memory spaces. This “organic” rhetorical practice is defined in opposition to institutional rhetorical practices by nature of both its lack of singular direction and strategic power, as is expanded upon later in the essay.

2. History

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 just next to campus and apart from the normal traffic system of Georgetown and the dreaded Wilco Sheriff’s Patrol, 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. These records are highly inaccessible, and the exact date is unclear. Rather than rebuild, the city of Georgetown simply let the road and the bridge fall into disrepair. It is likely this lack of functionality, paired with decades-old practices of using the road for their own purposes, that led to students adopting it as a private space and covering the bridge with graffiti.

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 official or student-driven university rhetoric, either online or in print. 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. This indicates that the bridge's 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, resulting in a sense of fragility and transience.

3. Practices

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.

4. Survey

It is interesting to note that despite "Mouthwestern", 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 there 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. In order to identify widespread knowledge about the Graffiti bridge and student practices that exist amongst those who *are* aware of the bridge, I sent out an anonymous Google Survey that asked the following questions:

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 was 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. This survey received voluntary feedback from 24 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. Despite my previous assumption that the vast majority of Southwestern students were aware of the Graffiti Bridge, survey results and personal conversations showed this to be largely untrue: of the 24 students surveyed, just under half (45.8%) had never heard of the Graffiti Bridge before, and of the 15 people who responded to the question of "Have you been to the Graffiti Bridge before?," only 9 indicated that they had. While this is a fairly small sample size, it does suggest that the number of students who actually visit the Graffiti Bridge is small. This situates it solidly as a location associated with a subculture, which is expanded upon later in the essay.

5. Similar Locations

The Graffiti Bridge and the nature of cultural knowledge surrounding it provides interesting parallels, as well as contrasts, with other spaces of collective memory both on Southwestern's campus and in the surrounding area. While the Graffiti Bridge that I am studying is a communicative object specific to Southwestern, graffiti is a widespread phenomenon, and there are multiple "Graffiti Bridges" in the area. One such place is located in Austin, Texas, just south of Georgetown; this bridge stretches over Lady Bird Lake and is a highly public location due to its visibility from the highway. Over the years, it has become more and more popular and heavily photographed, with "inspirational" graffiti taking the place of regular tagging and other unsanctioned practices. This bridge is a meaningful example of what happens when graffiti becomes "institutionalized", whereby the practice is moved outside of the realm of resistance and into the widely accepted fabric of everyday life. It is interesting to note that when I discussed my

topic with others, many people thought that I was referring to this bridge instead of Southwestern's Graffiti Bridge; this offers an interesting contrast between public and private graffiti, and how these create meaning respectively.

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 1998, however, signing the Tower became a university sanctioned event, with seniors being "allowed" to enter the space and inscribe their name, graduation year, and anything else they felt so inclined to write (barring obscene images and profanity) (Shawn Maganda '24). This effectively changed the practice of graffiti from something private and transgressive to public and widely accepted, altering the role of the Cullen Tower as a community and memory space (Shawn Maganda '24).

Signing the Tower is now 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 plus 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 is 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.

Literature Review

1. Constitutive Rhetoric

Rhetoric is one of the most popular methods of analysis for communications scholars, and involves countless different approaches to the ways in which written and spoken language

operates in society. In regards to this particular research object, the most fruitful method of rhetorical analysis operates using the concept of constitutive rhetoric, originally outlined by author James Boyd White in his groundbreaking paper “Law as Rhetoric, Rhetoric as Law: the Arts of Cultural and Communal Life.” In it, White described how rhetoric “is always communal, both in the sense that it always takes place in a social context and in the sense that it is always constitutive of the community by which it works” (White, 691). This frames rhetoric as a collaborative process, created by members of a community and indicative of the ways in which that community functions. More specifically, he defined constitutive rhetoric as that which “includes all language activity that goes into the constitution of actual human cultures and communities” (White, 695).While White spoke specifically on rhetoric as it connected to his discipline of legal study, the concept of rhetoric functioning constitutively has been extensively utilized in other areas of scholarly discourse.

White’s study is explored most often by political and civil rights scholars, such as Leff and Utley in their analysis of works by Martin Luther King Jr. and Holmes’ analysis of the U.S. Constitution (Leff; Holmes). In the context of this project, however, constitutive rhetoric is most functionally expanded upon by philosopher and rhetorical scholar Maurice Charland, who wrote multiple pieces on the ways that constitutive rhetoric differs from more traditional forms of persuasive rhetoric and how it is connected to historical and cultural movements. In particular, Charland in his 1987 case study of the *peuple québécois* describes how constitutive rhetoric not only comprises and defines a community, but calls members of that community into being: “A theory of constitutive rhetoric, based on the principle of identification, can account for the constitution of subjects of this type. Such subjects, agents within ideological discourse, are interpellated or called into being through rhetorical narratives… [which] constitute collective

political subjects through a series of formal discursive effects." (Charland). This not only describes how these communities are built through rhetoric, but also connects constitutive rhetoric with the realm of discourse analysis, another important methodological framework in a study of the Graffiti Bridge. In addition, this process of interpellation highlights another important facet of constitutive rhetoric: while people do become subjects through the process of being "hailed" by rhetoric, they are ultimately defined by their *response* to such a call, which necessitates a kind of "moving forward" within the framework of rhetorical action. Ultimately, the concept of constitutive rhetoric provides a baseline position regarding the significance of the rhetoric Graffiti Bridge as indicative of a subculture of Southwestern students.

2. **Discourse Analysis**

A connected but disparate field of study regarding rhetoric is that of discourse analysis, mentioned above in conjunction with constitutive rhetoric. While constitutive rhetoric provides a means of studying language itself and how it works to create a community in the first place, discourse analysis provides an avenue by which scholars can approach the power relationships inherent in different communities' rhetoric. The basic idea of discourse analysis was conceived by Michel Foucault, a French historian and scholar, who published work in the 1970s regarding cultural systems rooted in specific historical contexts. These works, specifically "History, Discourse and Discontinuity" from 1972, describe the ideological underpinnings of systems of power and break them down into their various components. In Foucault's studies, this was largely rooted in broader political movements, and sought to answer questions of oppression and ideology as they manifest themselves in language and discourse amongst everyday people, especially in relation to how power circulates in and through the way discourse produces knowledge and creates power relations within and between particular discursive formations.

While the Graffiti Bridge is not an obvious example of overarching political discourse as it connects to broad movements, it does serve as a microcosm of student politics at Southwestern, and can be examined discursively.

Discourse analysis since its inception has lived many lives, and this is explored by Penny Powers, who gives a broad overview of its evolution and different methodologies. In particular, she provides a functional summary of the basic tenets of each school of thought, specifically as they are rooted in different ideologies and center on how those in power create systems of thought to oppress others (Powers). The most pertinent application of discourse analysis, explored by Powers, is an approach by author Lupton in her work "Discourse analysis: a new methodology for understanding the ideologies of health and illness." In it, Lupton provides a clearer and more applicable working definition than other scholars: "Discourse… is defined as a patterned system of texts, messages, talk, dialogue, or conversation which can both be identified in this communication and located in social structures. Discourse may be rule-bound and highly governed, or ad-hoc and context-bound…" (Lupton, 145). These patterns are highly present in the rhetoric presented on the Graffiti Bridge, and so serve as an indicator of the "social structure" she refers to. In addition, Lupton describes how discourse analysis can be used as a form of resistance through the creation of independent vernacular practices introduced by dominated people and groups (Lupton). This is particularly important for a discussion of the Graffiti Bridge, considering the discourse surrounding it has been created by a group which lacks institutional power in relation to the space being claimed here, i.e. Southwestern students.

3. Tactics vs. Strategies

This lack of institutional power held by a subculture at Southwestern is best explained by the work "The Practice of Everyday Life," by French priest and scholar Michel de Certeau. In

this book, de Certeau describes the politics of everyday rhetorical practices, particularly those employed as acts of resistance, and how people "use" culture in order to make it their own (de Certeau). This work is defined by de Certeau's definition of the terms "strategy" and "tactic", and the different ways in which these operate. A strategy is defined as "the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an 'environment.' A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as *proper (propre)* and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it." (de Certeau, 82). This situates strategy as something that is specifically used by institutional forces, defined by their use of "will and power", to enforce their dominant ideology (de Certeau, 82). In addition, the delineation of strategy as operating from "a place that can be circumscribed as *proper*" can be studied in terms of physical space as well as ideological space: dominant forces occupy places and assert their right to be there, as opposed to marginalized groups, which must operate on said margins of societal space. In contrast, "tactic" is defined by de Certeau as "a calculus which cannot count on a 'proper' (a spatial or institutional localization)… The place of a tactic belongs to the other." (de Certeau, 82). This places tactics within the realm of those who lack institutional power and who lack a place from which to draw this power; in the absence of *actual* influence, marginalized groups must employ tactics to claim space and assert independent ideologies and identities. This use of tactics is what delineates something as a "resistive practice," a term which is fundamental to an understanding of graffiti as a whole and more specifically in relation to the Graffiti Bridge.

de Certeau describes how tactics have been historically used in the everyday fabric of life, from cooking to reading to walking through a city (de Certeau, 82-83). In the context of the Graffiti Bridge, Southwestern as an institution very clearly has *strategic* power to enforce their

ideology, practices, and rules upon their student body. The spaces on campus are entirely owned and operated by Southwestern, and this institution exerts its tactical force upon all those who occupy these spaces on campus. Southwestern students are thus marginalized in the sense that they do not actually have power of their own, especially power as located in *spaces* of their own. Thus, in order to create identity for themselves, students must employ *tactics* against the overarching institution of Southwestern. This is done in accordance with de Certeau in the everyday actions of walking on campus and interacting with other students, but also in more intentional actions, such as the creation of student spaces away from institutional forces. This is critical to an understanding of how the Graffiti Bridge operates not only as a place for students to engage in illegal activities, but to functionally employ resistive tactics in claiming space away from dominant institutional structures and strategies.

4. Publics/Counterpublics

Another methodology which is incredibly important for the study of rhetorical spaces is that of publics and counterpublics. Originally introduced by Michael Warner in his 2002 book *Publics and Counterpublics*, a public is a group of otherwise disconnected individuals brought together through a shared experience of shared discourse (Warner). According to Warner, "To address a public or to think of oneself as belonging to a public is to be a certain kind of person, to inhabit a certain kind of social world, to have at one's disposal certain media and genres, to be motivated by a certain normative horizon, and to speak within a certain language ideology." (Warner, 10). This provides a means for people unalike in every other way to function as a group via a connecting practice or ideology. While this public can be created along any lines, it is sometimes done so as a method of resistance to dominant ideology or institutional control, and is then defined by its "tension with a larger public" (Warner, 56). When this is the case, this group

is referred to as a "counterpublic" by virtue of being able to "contravene the rules obtaining in the world at large, being structured by alternative dispositions or protocols, [or] making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying." (Warner, 56). Importantly, Warner defines these group members as subordinate to a dominant public and therefore a dominant culture, and locates them specifically with certain subcultures- most notably, youth cultures and queer cultures. This is highly connected to the Graffiti Bridge, and offers a means of defining it as a place which creates its own public, made up of students belonging to a youth subculture at Southwestern.

The concept of publics and counterpublics has been expanded upon extensively by scholars such as Griffiths and Barbour, Loehwing and Motter, and Travers; specifically, these authors engage with subalterns and governmental policies, indicating that this research is often situated more often in the political realm (Griffiths; Loehwing; Motter). In relation to this analysis of the Graffiti Bridge, however, author David Wittenberg introduces other important contributions to the idea of public vs. private, and more specifically, how publics can be anchored in place and space (Wittenberg). While White considers every public to be, by nature, discursive, Wittenberg connects this discourse to spatial locations, arguing that "spatial terms help the theorist to mark publics as specific, locatable phenomena within the built social and political environment, as well as to begin to describe the way in which publics distinguish and demarcate their own specific character within the wider realm of social relationships." (Wittenberg, 426). In addition, Wittenberg discusses what it means to be "out in public," and the threat of institutional recognition and enforcement of ideology that is present when counterpublics are noticed by the dominant public (Wittenberg, 429). This concept of visibility

and transgression related to the formation of publics connects to the Graffiti Bridge as a "private-public" memory space.

5. Place and Space

There are many scholars, similar to those mentioned above, who seek to understand the ways that place and space function, and more specifically, how they differ from each other. The foundation of this study rests in the field of geography, where author Fred Lukermann provides classical context for topographical discussion by tracing the words "space" and "place" back to their rhetorical roots as outlined by ancient philosophers, such as Aristotle and Ptolemy (Lukermann). This work as it exists in geographical scholarship is expanded upon by authors such as Robert Sack, who describes the power structures present in place and space, and how they are defined by the ways in which "people and objects interact in space" (Sack, 327). Similarly, Joseph Pierce et al. describe the process of "place-making," which is "the set of social, political and material processes by which people iteratively create and recreate the experienced geographies in which they live," and connect it to social networking and politics (Pierce, 54).

While these are useful approaches to this concept and offer a wide avenue for study, they lack the versatility of application required by a unique research object such as the Graffiti Bridge. In the 1970s, however, this field of scholarship was made more accessible to other fields by author Yi-Fu Tuan in his work *Space and Place: Humanistic Perspective*. Released in 1979, this book references Lukermann but more clearly presents how the terms "space" and "place" refer to different things, and thus have different rhetorical power: "Place, however, has more substance than the word location suggests: it is a unique entity, a 'special ensemble' (Lukerman, 1964, p. 70); it has a history and meaning. Place incarnates the incarnations and expectations of people. Place is not only a fact to be explained in the broader frame of space, but it is also a

reality to be clarified and understood from the perspective of the people who have given it meaning." (Tuan, 387). In saying so, Tuan gives a sort of "square and rectangle" scenario whereby every place is a space, but not every space is a place. His definition indicates that a place is something made out of space that is imbued with meaning and power by the people that occupy it. This is especially pertinent for the Graffiti Bridge as a site of analysis, and provides a framework for an argument of the construction of this as a "place" with its accompanying practices, ideologies, and associated counterpublic.

6. Graffiti

The above methodology and theoretical frameworks are all present in some sense in the study of graffiti itself as a cultural phenomenon, which stretches across multiple disciplines. While there is no one theorist who introduced an analysis of graffiti, its longstanding historical presence has made it a feature of many different scholarly works, each of which adds a unique insight. It is important to note that *every* source addressing graffiti specifically defines it as a transgressive practice by nature, showcasing a unity amongst theorists that is significant to this project. One interesting work which does not mention graffiti specifically but which uses the above theories is "'PublicandPrivate': The Trialectics of Public Writing on the Street, on Campus, and in Third Space" by author William Burns. In it, he describes how public writings are complex and must constantly be negotiated within the context of existing hegemonic forces, as well as situating their location in material space (Burns). More importantly, he introduces the concept of "PublicandPrivate", which "denotes spaces, identities, and discourses in which notions of public and private are so closely linked that to separate the terms and experiences would be to lose sight of the interconnectedness and reciprocity of these relationships (Burns, 31). This is pertinent to a study of the Graffiti Bridge not only because of its hidden status, but

also because graffiti is a largely anonymous public writing practice, maintaining a private identity of the rhetor while also subjecting their rhetoric to the visibility of others.

It is important to note that Burns' use of the word 'public' is the more commonly used form, as in public vs. private, and does not necessarily connect to Warner's definition; however, the two concepts are deeply intertwined, and both uses can be applied in the analysis. This concept of public yet private writings is also explored in Cathryn Molloy's work "'Curiosity Won't Kill Your Cat': A Meditation on Bathroom Graffiti as Underlife Public Writing", which presents bathroom graffiti writings as placing "the act of composition on a verge, a precipice, a liminality, a site of cleavage. Writings there are undeniably public, but also, by definition shadowy and rebellious; in the compositional moments, one might very well be engaged in a very private act." (Molloy, 19). This directly relates to the semi-public practice of graffiti as it is present in my research object.

Other approaches to graffiti focus more strongly on graffiti as a political and social force. One such work by authors Seloni and Sarfati takes a discourse analysis of protest graffiti in Turkey; this approach is useful not only because it utilizes a similar approach to my own analysis, but because it effectively presents graffiti as a transgressive force and a tool of resistance, albeit with a much more consequential topic. In addition, Seloni and Sarfani describe the importance of different modalities of written communication, linguistic as well as symbolic, and incorporate both forms into the concept of a "Linguistic Landscape", which "deals with written language in the public space and its social and political role in the lives of people who live in these spaces" (Seloni and Sarfati, 785). Considering the Graffiti Bridge is filled with mostly visual/material symbols and few actual words, this distinction between linguistic and visual/material graffiti is important. An approach to graffiti as a means of expressing "repressed

social attitudes" is also utilized by Terence Stocker et al. in their work "Social Analysis of Graffiti", which uses a quantitative approach to argue that "graffiti, as an aspect of culture, can be used as an unobtrusive measure to reveal patterns of customs and attitudes of a society. Observing graffiti will reveal changes in customs and attitudes" (Stocker, 356). This is foundational in an understanding of the Graffiti Bridge as a rhetorical touchstone of Southwestern's subcultures.

Perhaps the most pertinent source to this project is Ricardo Campos' work "Youth, Graffiti, and the Aestheticization of Transgression", released in 2015 and working with a case study of Lisbon, Portugal in the early 2000s. Campos presents an argument centered on graffiti as a transgressive youth practice, which is mentioned but not expanded upon by other sources; he describes graffiti as "vernacular creations that may be interpreted as discursive instruments forged in the context of symbolic struggles" (Campos). This visibility is situated uniquely amongst young people living in an increasingly technological and aestheticized environment, and serves as a method of symbolic resistance in public communicative exchange (Campos). Campos also employs Michel de Certeau's concept of tactic as a means by which young people respond to authority, describing tactic as "the creative ability of the common citizen to resist hegemonic logics and the domain of more powerful social actors." (Campos, 21). This is highly present in the practice of graffiti, whereby rhetors constituting a counterpublic create alternative discourse as a means of identity and ideological expression. Similarly to Molloy's work on the placement of graffiti in bathroom stalls, "Youth, Graffiti, and the Aestheticization of Transgression" stresses the importance of context in the study of graffiti: "the reading of a graffiti piece depends heavily on its setting. First, space bears a specific symbology, and the meaning of what is inscribed cannot be dissociated from the social significance of its specific surroundings…

Second, the space where an inscription is placed determines the level of exposure that the work will have and its potential audience. (Campos, 26). This is highly significant to the Graffiti Bridge due to its unique location, giving it particular significance in this context and for the Southwestern community.

Analysis

1. **Layered Graffiti: Constitutive Meaning-Making**

The significance of the Graffiti Bridge as a communicative object is highly complex and multifaceted. In many senses, the rhetorical meaning of the Graffiti Bridge is directly related to the markings themselves, with each individual piece of graffiti operating as a monument to the individual that left it. When taken in combination with each other piece of graffiti, patterns of meaning begin to emerge that work to delineate the distinct characteristics of the subculture that uses the Graffiti Bridge as a communicative space. Most significantly, however, the practice of leaving graffiti as a tactic for resisting institutional power functions to create an overarching impact of the space that far outweighs the individual rhetorical meaning of each item. Because the overall material, spatial, and visual impact of the Graffiti Bridge happens all at once, and not in pieces, the greatest impact lies not in the individual messages, but in the collective discourse of the space as a whole. This discourse is best understood in the light of the constitutive creation of the Graffiti Bridge as a vernacular place, which necessitates approaching the rhetorical meaning of graffiti in pieces before it can be examined as a whole.

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. 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 this as an example of constitutive rhetoric, whereby over time, with its layering of messages both indicating and inviting an interactive process, the bridge itself seems to call this behavior into being. The result is that the messages placed on the Graffiti Bridge are done so communally and can thus be extrapolated from 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 explicit "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. The nature of Cullen Tower as both an institutionally recognized memory space and a historical building has led to the implementation of several 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. These rules are enforced by a supervising staff member or appointed student; this surveilling force operates to limit what students will leave and the nature of their practice. At the Graffiti Bridge, there is no such surveillance, 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 institutional ideology performed within the dominant public (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 macro scale, functions to create a space which incorporates a wide variety of discourses, rhetorical actions, and temporalities in the same space. All of this works to manifest a constitutively created rhetoric of multivocality, 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. This is an indication that the Graffiti Bridge is more than just what the individual symbols say; rather, its meaning is derived *both* from the actual rhetorical impact of the graffiti, particularly as it creates a discourse within itself, *and* from the overarching resistive practice of graffiti as a whole.

2. **Place-Making Graffiti**

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 the subculture that

uses this location. The first category is place-making graffiti, which ranges from more covert means of delineating space to more overt declarations of identity that serve to claim place within unmarked space. Author Yi-Fu Tuan distinguishes between undifferentiated space and a *place*, identifying a place as something which is "created and recreated" by the meaning-making rhetorical practices of the people that inhabit it (Yi-Fu Tuan). This is a foundationally important aspect of the Graffiti Bridge: by students leaving graffiti that not only says something but *does* something, they 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 not only as a place for each of these individuals, but also as a place that identifies it as "their" place. 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 two other pieces of graffiti on the bridge, the

first reading “F + J ‘22” with a heart, written in black paint, and the second reading “J + C 10/23”, written in black, blue, and red paint. While graffiti of this type is common in the world, it is relatively uncommon 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, these messages locate these couples 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 places out of spaces 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 red 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. It is significant that the phrase “Getting Closer…” is oriented towards people walking to the Graffiti Bridge from Southwestern’s campus, and not the other way; this works according to Charland’s theory of constitutive rhetoric to not only interpellate a particular group of people, being Southwestern students specifically, but necessitates a response from them that then creates their identity as a collective group, that of students who claim the bridge as their own (Charland). 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 from the general public; 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.

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 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 either the institutional backlash or appropriation 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 a 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 "PublicandPrivate" 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 place-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. This carving out of space is not only place-making, as Tuan would argue; it is also, in accordance with de Certeau's theories, tactics of resistance, whereby individuals who feel marginalized by dominant ideologies make intentional moves in their daily lives to establish autonomy and identity. These Southwestern students, unable to *strategically* occupy institutionally defined spaces on campus, must *tactically* delineate "place" outside of the dominant institutional force. This adds a layer of nuance to the response of the sophomore: she was not just upset that I was alerting others of the presence of the Graffiti Bridge, she was also

upset that the professor in the room was also becoming aware of its presence, thus threatening the life of a tactically created student space.

Perhaps the most significant instance of place-making graffiti at the bridge is a large and 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 operates in a paradoxical sense by both claiming space for one person and, at the same time, leaving this space open for others to claim. While the term “My Spot” does not attribute this place to any specific individual with a name, it was left with the express intention to delineate place; through the use of a nonspecific pronoun, it invites any visitor to occupy the same space, with “my” serving as a stand-in for one’s own name. In doing so, this item of graffiti interpellates the other visitors of the Graffiti Bridge, inviting them to claim this place 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 interpellating the next generation, claiming that that “I was here, and I did something- and so should you.” 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. With the imminent destruction of the Graffiti Bridge itself, it is not only the graffiti that is transient, but the student space as a whole that is threatened: this is another example of the strategic power of the university superseding the tactical attempts of students to occupy space and 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 by literally doing something illegal there. 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, although this is currently shifting as marijuana is legalized in other states around the country, smoking weed has long been associated with young peoples' rebellion against the values of older generations, something which is expanded upon in later sections. It is interesting to note, however, that "Boomers," the generation that now comprises the majority of older individuals, were the first to popularize marijuana usage as a method of rebellion, and it has since become an accepted practice. Thus, the use of the Graffiti Bridge as a place to smoke weed is less due to fear of *individual* judgment from older generations, but *institutional* backlash and tangible legal consequences. This is another example of tactics used by Southwestern students: while it is very possible for students to simply smoke in their dorms, they must do so in fear of smoke alarms, random Resident Assistant checks, and the Southwestern University Police Department. Rather than operate within a system that is strategically enforcing its will upon students, this counterpublic within Southwestern university has chosen to move to a student-claimed, tactically occupied space to engage in illegal activities.

3. **Political icons**

Alongside place-making graffiti, several of the symbols at the bridge have ideological meanings which nod to greater political and cultural movements. I refer to these as political icons due to their longstanding and significant meaning to certain groups. While these symbols on the Graffiti Bridge are fairly rare in comparison to other types of graffiti, they are important 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, and the sense of tactical resistance that leaving these items at this location indicates. 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 manifestation of resistance to dominant ideologies and serves as a symbol of rebellion.

Perhaps more significant, however, is the presence of two other icons 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 could have been unaware 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 not only of the greater ideological movements working both in culture at large and at Southwestern specifically, but also the way that rhetorical representations of these ideologies actively function to create lived realities at this university. These items do not exist in a vacuum, and their representations here at the Graffiti Bridge work both to perpetuate this ideology *and* interpellate similarly-minded people to continue creating it.

4. Pop Culture and Youth Culture

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 is prevalent in both youth culture *and* graffiti culture 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 adolescents, 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 in my experience was common in elementary and middle schools, and was viewed as a sort of status symbol for those who were 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 broader use/pop cultural references to create a localized subcultural identity centered on 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 that propel college students into “responsible adulthood”. 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.

5. Non-Specific Graffiti

The final category of graffiti present at the bridge, which is non-specific or 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 transpersonal 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. While each symbol on the bridge exerts force in the creation of a communicative space, they do so in concert with a literal rhetorical meaning; in contrast, these other, seemingly random markings do not have a specific rhetorical meaning, and so do not attribute distinct characteristics to this subculture. Rather, the very fact of their existence is what gives them meaning. 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 (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. 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 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. When students do so, they also foster 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.

Conclusion

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. While scholarship mentioned above offers a look into graffiti as a resistive youth practice, situated in complex place-space environments with varying degrees of public visibility and private participation, none of them offer the sort of synthesis between these theories that the Graffiti Bridge provides. Through the use of rhetorically significant items, which function constitutively to manifest a student-driven tactical space, Southwestern's subculture is able to tactically occupy space, at least temporarily. Moving forward in the light of Southwestern's Land Development plan, student vernacular spaces are threatened by the strategic encroachment of institutional forces. Although the Graffiti bridge itself may be lost, tactical resistance employed by students is an ever-present force; while this generation may lose their places, the next generation will continue to create their own, taking advantage of the transience of student life to express fleeting identity in fleeting places.

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