

I Can't Hail a Cab, So I'll Hail Ya from the Subway: Addresses from a Third Space

Kal Alston
Syracuse University

I first want to thank Jessica Hochman for hailing me from a space that, because of a new job, seemed lost to my horizons. There are some powerful tools here that she has mobilized in some interesting ways, and I want to spend the majority of my time working with three of those. Before that, however, I want to bracket one concept that seems unfleshed to me in the essay (curses to the 4500 word limit!) just because this is also an interesting idea teased by the essay, and maybe in future work, we can work more fully with it. The graffiti writer/artists Hochman references were working in a racialized context, but in this essay I could not get from the demographics to what Hochman suggests in her introduction is “a discussion of whether and how youth-styled expressions are constitutive of useful pedagogical spaces through which to discuss difference.” And here my emphasized confusion is in regards to her use of *difference*. I hope we can come back to that.

More to the point, I want to play with some aspects of Hochman's invocation of the “Third Space.” Hochman claims that, in the 1970s, graffiti occupied a Third Space “both physically and dialectically.” By this she means to get us to think about youth created and mediated space. She asks whether these expressions of youth culture can “become institutionalized without being completely codified and co-opted?” The graffiti Hochman is taking up here has a generative side to it, and I will take that up in the next section, but here I want to challenge a bit the romantic idea of these transgressive expressions. Like break dancing, MC-ing, voguing, crumping, or other youth or outsider-mediated forms, graffiti communicates where communication has been suppressed. Unlike these other forms or even some of the expressive features of punk (not the heroin part), graffiti is a call-and-response as well as a crime against property that right up front can get you put in jail. So, I just want to remind us that efforts to decriminalize the activity may have specific neutralizing effects on both taggers and audience. To institutionalize it requires a move to keep the Hebdigian “refusal” discourse alive without simply turning it into art that can be easily consumed or commodified in the hegemonic reality. (No snark about art intended.) Graffiti gets legitimized by turning it into art or giving spaces for the resultant expressions that are necessarily stripped of any gang expressions or other features that would not fit into the authorized spaces allocated on community center walls or in art contests. I do want to suggest, however that providing this kind of space may not be all bad as it *is* potentially a response to part of the hail of graffiti from the Third Space. “Listen to me. See me.”

Protecting youth culture from the effects of commodification has usually proven to be a struggle. I have elsewhere argued that consumption/subsumption is precisely the prerogative of hegemony — that it can blunt the force of youth-full refusal and turn skulls into scarves and reclaim chains as the adornment of six

thousand dollar bags for celebutantes and starlets almost overnight. The opportunities that Hochman, I think rightly, identifies as the power of the unconscious and ambivalent contexts of the Third Space are fragile and fleeting — and are probably elided in the mainstream cultural conscription of graffiti. Graffitied trains become set dressing for “Welcome Back, Kotter” just as the failure of New York public schools becomes sanitized and the denizens of those schools are represented in comic and unthreatening shorthand.

The next area I want to probe is the pushback on the legitimation questions asked above. The image I carry most strongly from Hochman’s essay is probably the idea of the A Train or the 1 Train moving across tracks, across boroughs, hailing audiences in a space that would ordinarily not be traversed by either. Marking the trains, as opposed to walls or even the tracks themselves, does seem to signify more than the graffiti itself. Tracks are material barriers, even submerged or elevated, and the materiality of those obstacles should not be underestimated here. The tracks often mark the ghetto, the ones without (in both senses of that word). The other side of said tracks is where we would find the other if we cared to look. In Chicago, for example, kids who lived in Cabrini Green — despicable public housing on the near West side of the city — were kept out of the loop, and the Loop (inside of which was the heart of commerce, power, and privilege) by the tracks. In a study in the late 1980s, Jean Rhodes found that many of the teens living in Cabrini Green had never traversed the twenty blocks to the Miracle Mile or to the Public Library or the Art Institute, which were almost literally in their backyards.

So the powerful image in Hochman’s paper for me is not the hail of the graffiti itself, but the assertion of traveling, of refusing confinement, of moving across horizons that might not otherwise be available to the author him or herself. This is part of the “getting up and getting over” to which the taggers themselves allude. The movement of the train is a resistance to staying in one’s place that I think is very evocative both literally and figuratively. The train snaking across the city marks new territory, presents new opportunities for this mediated encounter across gulfs of all sorts. The trespass feature of the graffiti culture may be one way to move through or around the stultifying constraints of legitimation and commodification. Here and gone, the hail of the moving message is suggestive since, as Hochman argues, graffiti was not simply a competition or dialogue between taggers (although the transit assists there too), but also an opening of a dialectically inflected space for those who might not “get” that they have been hailed on a conscious level, but who might be pulled along into new terrain nevertheless. I hope Hochman or others might take up the idea of trespass and transit as generative further in some other forum.

The last area that I want to push back on in this meditation on the Third Space is how interpretative discourses get worked through here. I want to refer back to Hochman’s citation of Bhabha: “The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implications of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot ‘in itself’ be conscious.” Hochman takes this to free interpretation from a reliance on the “notion of a thing and its opposite,

but rather, can engage in a more textured view of two subjects, each different in their own right.” If I get the two of them at least partially right, this Third Space is neither here nor there; it is oriented neither to my way nor to your way. The Third Space is thus less confined temporally and communicatively than some other interpretive strategies. The effects on addresser or the addressed are mediated through this Third Space, which is quite alluring to my inner hermeneut. This is an opening that works particularly well with the kinds of public, mobile, and locational expressions that Hochman is considering here.

I will confess, however, to being somewhat at sea on the pedagogical turn. Hochman alludes to the pedagogical significance of the Third Space at the beginning of the paper and in her setting of the conditions for the expressive potentiality of graffiti as a site for youth (one that is not home or school). The opening of the Third Space and the reliance on an unconscious communication of sorts seems at the same time to register whatever change comes over the subjects as relatively unimportant. That is, intent or reliance on an explicit end would not seem to fare well in this Space — which is part of its power. Of course art or texts can work in the Third Space as educative expressions, although pedagogical purposefulness would seem to be problematic here/there. Ambiguity and uncertainty are familiars in educational discourse, but the ambivalent and deliberately unconscious needs more elucidation. I am not convinced that Hochman has been successful here in the translation of the figural power of the Third Space (that I find so intriguing) into a more literal force in educational contexts. In the last paragraph of the paper, Hochman raises these very issues, and because so much of the paper seems to me to be fecund, I look forward to more conversation about the possibilities and limits of deploying the Third Space into practices such as schooling that are somewhat *more* deliberative and somewhat *less* interpretive