

## In Search of SOL: Graffiti and the Formation of a Writing Identity

Evan Nave

Nave is confronted with the work of graffiti artist SOL and is compelled to relate the works he encounters with his own creative writing. As he does so, he asserts that writing is as much about establishing identity and existence as it is about executing craft and technique. In the end, he argues for a “graffiti consciousness” that enables all text producers to see themselves as writers, regardless of their scholarly or artistic credentials.



Figure 1: SOL Tag on a Trash Can Lid outside Hovey Hall

On the way to my Stevenson Hall office, SOL is everywhere. It smiles wide from the outside wall of the Bone Student Center hallway, its yellow spray-paint loops streaking in places where rain and wind have shown their strength. It peeks out from behind a radiator duct in the Milner library staircase, its small, self-conscious block letters contrasting against the outdated, rusted heat. It wraps itself around a light pole on the south side of the College Avenue crossing bridge. It posts up on an air conditioning unit outside Williams Hall. SOL, like the sunlight it translates to in Spanish, is everywhere. And SOL seems to follow me like sunlight, casting its own shadow on the multiple spaces it calls home. SOL is an illicit, spray-painted signature, a graffiti tag, playing tag with me, telling me I'm "It." Every time I see it, at each different location, in each different font and color and style, it tags my eyes and tells me it's my turn to write. SOL tells me my writing is a part of my identity.

Many would argue that graffiti has existed since the moment pre-historic human beings wrote on the walls of caves. But when it comes to modern day graffiti, most people think of the spray painted images (bubble-letter names, angular phrases, vast, multi-colored murals) they see tagged on building walls, subway tunnels, train cars, and any other public space where a person can write what's on their mind. Even this more specific idea of graffiti has a complicated history. Since graffiti is a highly personalized aesthetic form revolving around spreading one's art as widely as possible (and since graffiti has become a worldwide cultural phenomenon with millions of practicing disciples) everyone wants to claim their hometown, or region, or style, as the origin of all that graffiti has become. For our purposes, we'll focus on graffiti that comes out of the 1960's New York, pre-hip-hop tradition. This graffiti was largely name-based, that is, it was highly "author-centered," and consisted more of tagging one's name on a wall or mobile surface, and less about vast artistic portraiture (Chalfant and Cooper 14).

Before anyone can start a discussion of graffiti, it is important to confront its illegality. It goes without saying that graffiti has caught the majority of its flak from police officers and legal bodies trying to keep public space "clean." When used in this sense, "clean" means "in the same condition in which the space or building was constructed." The opposite of "clean" space is "dirty" space, that is, space that has been sullied by factors meant to diminish original beauty. But more important than the idea of beauty is the idea of order. A "clean" wall is assumed to be one that exists in the presence of an organized social order. A tagged wall is often seen as one that exists amidst chaos, in a world where no one is in charge and everyone can do anything they want (Lewisohn 127). Interestingly, as much as the Powers That Be try to keep graffiti from proliferating on public space, it seems to keep on living and, more dangerously in the eyes of the Law, keep replanting its addictive seeds. Graffiti is often considered a

battle of wills, where those with a passion for writing are in competition with those with a passion for erasing. But regardless of graffiti's social standing, it continues to present itself in the face of destruction (Chalfant and Cooper 99).

The beauty of graffiti lies in its ability to exist in and for itself. Regardless of the politics surrounding its legality, aesthetic qualities, or placement within the artistic community, it keeps popping up on abandoned walls, street signs, and any other high-traffic areas where bustling eyeballs linger for something to alight on. This nature of existence, this ability to produce and present texts in spite of vandalism laws and vats of gray primer-paint destined to cover up their work, demonstrates something crucial about the nature of the graffiti writer/artist. In the words of one Parisian graffiti writer featured in the street art documentary *Bomb It*, "I write, therefore I am." In the words of another writer, "I'm here world, I [expletive] exist." To these graffiti writers, graffiti is a signifier of being, of existing in a chaotic world intent on forgetting about them as individuals. These writers write to remind themselves, and anyone who sees their work,



Figure 2: SOL Tag on a Heater in the Milner Library Stairwell

that they were alive, had a story and history as a literate human being, if only for the few moments it took to spray paint their name on a wall.

The concept of "writing to exist" is one that's often overlooked by most academic and creative writers. We are usually so focused on the process of writing, or the product we are going to produce (or the grade or level of success that will be attached to the finished product), that we forget that our writing, regardless of its merits, is first and foremost an expression of our human existence. If we did not exist, we could not produce writing. Conversely, our written work proves that we are here, that we exist in a literate, writing community, that we had the courage and presence to put pen to paper (or finger to keyboard) and tell an ambiguous audience that what we have to communicate deserves the attention of space and time. This might seem like an obvious, simple realization, but it carries incredible consequences. Because if/when we write, we, like graffiti writers, are claiming a written identity that demands to be heard and recognized. We are asserting ourselves in a space that becomes uniquely our own and forcing those who may prefer for us to be silent to take notice of our presence and potential.

Essential to this idea of a writerly identity is what graffiti artists call a Name (capitalization mine): “The name is at the center of all graffiti. The writer usually drops his [sic] given name and adopts a new one—a new identity. He can make it up, inherit an established name from an old writer, [or] become part of a series” (Chalfant and Cooper 45). Graffiti writers might live their lives under a certain name, maybe the one found on their birth certificate, but when they write, they become someone new. This writerly identity has thoughts and concerns foreign to their everyday, non-writing, identity. The writerly identity is only interested in composing their work, making it a spectacle, and reaching/confronting an audience who probably would never know the writers existed if not for the written work.

Combined with the idea of a graffiti writer’s identity, or Name, is the collaboration of a single artist with other, like-minded writers. These graffiti collaboratives are called crews, and they serve several functions: “Crews are one of three things: a group of people down for each other, a group of people working together for the common goal of getting up, or a group of people unified through a certain style” (Powers 120). Regardless of the crew members’ connection, or the purpose they serve in the formation of each other’s art, it is obvious that graffiti is a social, rather than an individual, endeavor. While a viewer of graffiti may look at a tag and only see a single name, often multiple people had input in the tag’s placement, design, or style. It may be all about the Name, but many names, and the human beings attached to them, add to the creation and dissemination of the Name.



Figure 3: SOL on a Lamppost South of the College Avenue Bridge

So whether it is a single graffiti writer tagging their own Name or a crew of graffiti writers spreading their own individual and communal mixed messages, where do these writers see their work going? The answer is: lots of places. Part of graffiti's nature is its ability to be in many locations all at once. Originally, in the New York tradition of graffiti, tags were placed on subway or train cars so that a writer who couldn't get to the other side of the city could have her Name travel for her. In this way, even though she might not have the economic, political, or social means to be mobile, her Name could do her legwork for her (Chalfant and Cooper 20). But the text itself doesn't have to be on a mobile surface to go places. In the case of SOL, having a similar tag in multiple locations increases the chances that a viewer will feel like the tagger is following them. Similarly, if one sees multiple SOL texts throughout their day, they might be more inclined to tell someone about them, thus making graffiti a part of a mobile oral culture that cannot be underestimated.

When I'm surrounded by SOL, I recognize that writing (written, spray-painted, etched, typed, etc.) is writing, no matter who the author is. While texts vary in terms of authorship, rhetorical purposes, locations, genres, styles, and functions, when someone produces a text they exist, if only for a little while, as a writer. The implications of this writerly existence are huge. If people could understand that they are writers not when they publish their first article or short story, not when they get an A on a paper or pass a course in English, but when they actually begin to compose anything they imagine, how many more people would be encouraged to write? When the definition of becoming a writer is beginning to write (not excelling at writing as judged by an assessing body), how much liberty is given to the aspiring scribe? These liberated writers begin writing because they are alive, because not writing would be a type of literary death, because they are here now and want to leave words that could last forever.

I'm inspired by the idea that when I walk around the physical world I'm Evan Nave and people know me and interact with me and make me laugh and cry, and all of this is beautiful; but when I write, like the graffiti writer, I become someone else. My writerly identity has the same name as me, but he's much more intense. He's critical and clever, to-the-point but eloquent, sharp but sensitive, and wildly imaginative. He doesn't think about himself or his outside surroundings: only the text, only what the text can do and become and who it can reach and change. He cares about genre and genre conventions, but only in terms of how fulfilling them or breaking them can potentially move people to do big things with their thoughts and lives. Sometimes my writerly identity takes over even when I'm not writing, and then my everyday become hyper-critical, more artistic, and that's beautiful,

too. But what I like about a graffiti-eyed awareness of writing is that it places the focus on the text, whether it's a tag or a poem or a 25-page research paper. When what I'm writing becomes like a piece of graffiti (with the paper as the wall or subway train), it becomes a piece of my writing identity, and when the writing spreads to an audience, they're reading part of my identity, too.

I also like how taking on a graffiti consciousness can change our perception of authorship from singular, scholarly pursuit, to communal activity geared to inform the masses. When we think of graffiti crews, the support systems that help produce inventive, impassioned writing, they don't seem so far from the peer-review circle of college-level English classes. Sure, a paper might only have one name typed in the upper right hand corner, but we've already found out that there are always many people behind a single name. When our writing peers become people we care about, people we stand up for, people who we influence and whose styles influence us, we start holding our partners to much higher standards of work and revision. And higher standards always lead to higher quality work (if, at a time like this, we're even still worried about what constitutes concepts like "standards" and "quality" and "work"). What seems to be most important is that writers know other writers care about them, that they have support no matter what they choose to compose. We can save assessment for the Powers that assess. Assessment isn't the job of the writer or the crew member; their only job is motivation, production, and spreading the work and the Name as widely as possible.



Figure 4: SOL, in Sticker Form, on a Heating Unit outside Williams Hall

Which brings us to the final idea in graffiti: the mobility of the text. Writers rarely have the strength or endurance to write when they know their work isn't going anywhere they find important. But when the journeys of the texts are unknown and potentially filled with limitless possibilities, it tends to stir something in the author that motivates him or her to compose. When a writer understands that the trajectory of any given piece of writing is a mystery, that it could be seen by anyone, anywhere, at any time, the writer begins working on the powerful element of content that works to adapt to any audience. The writer starts to think about the text and the Name, but also where both of these can go and what they can be to other people. The individual, the composition, the revision, and the reviewers all combine to go where the text is needed most.

SOL is waiting for me when I get to Stevenson Hall. I knew it would be there; it's everywhere. What's changed is that now I know what to do with it. SOL calls me to write, to be a writer, to find a crew of like-minded writers, and to use my internal and community resources to produce texts that will go places and follow people. When I do this, no amount of primer-paint can cover my intentions. Nothing can erase my existence as a writer.

## Works Cited

*Bomb It*. Dir. Jon Reiss. DOCURAMA, 2007. Film.

Chalfant, Henry and Martha Cooper. *Subway Art*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1984. Print.

Lewisohn, Cedar. *Street Art: The Graffiti Revolution*. New York: Abrams, 2008. Print.

Powers, Stephen. *The Art of Getting Over: Graffiti at the Millennium*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. Print.



**Evan Nave** is a native son of Normal, Illinois. He represents Illinois State University as a 2010–2012 Sutherland Fellow in Creative Writing. He is a poet and hybrid genre writer but, most importantly, he is a Name.