Claiming/Re-claiming Space with Place-marking in Rural and Urban Landscapes

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Abstract - The marking of places with symbols, images, and/or script is a means of communication that reflects the dynamics of the socio-economic environment in both urban and rural settings. This paper explores the behavioral variability in (1) markings on non-portable surfaces conditioned by social competition in contemporary urban built environments, where other modes of communication such as language can amplify the efficiency of these non-vocal signals, and (2) the juxtaposition of prehistoric and proto-historic markings produced by indigenous populations with that of contemporary markings (e.g. "graffiti") in rural, less densely populated landscapes of South Dakota (U.S.). We suggest that the content and morphology of markings with their situational positioning on a landscape offers insight into an often noisy mix of symbolic communicative behavior conditioned by the dynamics of socio-economic competition at various scales.

Riassunto - La demarcazione di un luogo con simboli, immagini e/o scritte costituisce un mezzo di comunicazione che riflette le dinamiche dell'ambiente socio-economico in contesti sia urbani che rurali. L'intervento prende in analisi la variabilità di comportamento in (1) le demarcazioni di superfici non portatili condizionate dalla competizione sociale in ambienti edificati urbani contemporanei, dove altri modi di comunicazione come il linguaggio possono amplificare l'efficacia di tali segnali non vocali, e (2) il confronto di demarcazioni preistoriche e protostoriche prodotte da popolazioni indigene con quelle realizzate come demarcazioni contemporanee (per esempio i graffiti) in ambienti rurali e meno densamente popolati del South Dakota (Stati Uniti). Avanziamo l'ipotesi che il contenuto e la morfologia delle demarcazioni, insieme al loro posizionamento situazionale nel paesaggio, consentano la comprensione di un miscuglio spesso rumoroso di comportamento simbolicamente comunicativo condizionato dalle dinamiche socio-economiche di competizione a vari livelli.

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The extent to which marking places with symbols, images, and/or script on a landscape reflect the dynamics of the socio-economic environment continues to be a subject of interest in anthropology, sociology, and social psychology. Places become socio-culturally meaningful often because of the content of non-portable markings. In some contexts the information content of the markings reveal a perception of propriety in the landscape that elicits communication whereby cooperation between within-group individuals is favored when competition for land-use between groups characterizes the overall social environment. Urban environments, dense with human activities, are laden with markings both socio-politically sanctioned and those often considered intrusive spatially and contextually, e.g. graffiti. Rural, less densely populated landscapes are characterized by areas and places where markings produced in the past are signified socio-politically and often deemed worthy of maintenance and protection, e.g. indigenous rock-art. These places are, however, also subject to contemporary marking not socially sanctioned. This paper examines behavioral variability in marking places in urban landscapes in comparison to rural environments. The content, location and situational positioning of historic and contemporary intrusive markings in urban environments is compared to that of the juxtaposition of prehistoric and proto-historic rock-art and contemporary markings in the southern Black Hills of South Dakota (U.S.), a resource rich environment considered a sacred landscape by several Native American indigenous groups.

Humans, like most other species, cooperate in order to effectively compete at various scales ranging from that of kin-level to a broad non-kin social level that may, for example, enhance trade or engage in warfare. And, more than any other species, we rely heavily on social learning through imitation and analogical reasoning to facilitate cooperative relationships. Maintaining these relationships in varying domains requires mediums

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of communication that can, when necessary, minimize ambiguity. We are also highly skilled at creating non-vocal, low-cost signals that can be difficult to evaluate accurately. Our dependence on the visual mode for discriminating information does not discount the advantages of multi-modal signals (e.g. sound, smell) that we rely on, but the visual-spatial environment is one where abstract conceptualization is most prevalent (Kaplan and Kaplan 1982; Rowe 1999). Oftentimes the recipient of information absorbed from a signal is forced to make decisions about risk under an umbrella of uncertainty (Rode and Wang 2000; Bliege Bird and Smith 2005; Cronk 2005). In this environment of uncertainty the potential for manipulation with visual signals is high. A competitive social environment, conditioned by short-term goals of resource control or access, is one where non-portable imagery can be an effective means by which to influence behavior of those encountering the signal.

In dense, contemporary urban environments competition for limited space by varying groups often leads to social conflict. Some groups view material signals such as graffiti as a medium for communicating how they believe a space should be used and thereby exploit space to direct their discontent toward their competitors. While some graffiti content expresses concern for global issues other expressions of discord are focused on the local environment and the social relationships characterizing an urban setting. Whether a space for such marking is sanctioned socio-politically is dependent on factors such as the physical space, location within the built environment, and history of the place (e.g. Orengo and Robinson 2008).

Contemporary graffiti artists in affluent western urban settings are known to actively compete with commercial advertisers in their reaction to the widespread commodification of space. They attempt to subvert city signage and incorporate anti-branding and anti-corporate logos. Through the use of "tagging" or quickly rendered and repeated symbols or signatures, they insert their own version of market saturation and repetitive imagery to claim or re-claim space. The elaborate and repetitive display of signals in animal behavior has been argued to be akin to that of mass media advertising in that rarely is new information conveyed during repeated and redundant commercial advertising or even within different forms of media. Rather, repetitive exposure to the message is oriented toward eventually convincing one to buy the product or service in an environment where the consumer has choices. The products of graffiti artists can be viewed as a means of advertising skill, talent or daring (i.e. energetically costly activity). Benefits to graffiti artists who produce repeated imagery include ensuring that those encountering the graphic in an otherwise visually noisy environment interpret the intended information with some accuracy. In high density social environments the producer of the images is also likely undergoing competition from others in their social group and so in order to strive for or maintain the perks of influence and prestige must signal consistently to the community his or her status (Kaplan 1987; Bliege Bird and Smith 2005). A French graffiti artist, for example, who goes by the pseudonym " The Sheepest," and signs his work using dollar signs in place of each letter "s," protests human consumption of marketed goods through his repeated imagery of sheep. His sheep are positioned so as to observe the world like a camera. (Fig. 1) In the artist's view, sheep are submissive and followers, not unlike mass consumers. This graphic imagery is found on structures and walls in major cities across the world and multiplied further through social media technology.

While most city governments have at one time or another attempted to remove graffiti and criminalize graffiti activity, few have been successful in their efforts. Cleaning or buffing surfaces simply opens up space for graffiti writers to do their work. However, relentless anti-graffiti campaigns have eventually forced practitioners into oppositional roles. Because they prefer to use the collective public space as a forum, graffiti writers are viewed as criminals by powerful city officials who are unwilling to share the same space (Dickinson 2008). Some graffiti writers resist and react against controlled or "clean" space. In their efforts to "dirty" public space they attempt to reveal hypocrisy in the form of corruption and social inequality that hide behind an affluent built environment (Visconti, et al. 2010).

Exceptions to city intervention include those communities where graffiti and public murals express an overall consensual sentiment and serve as propaganda to further political messages against a larger force. In some communities political messages expressed through this means communicate resistance from people who remain defiant under the rule of an adverse government (e.g. Rolston 1987; Sluka 1992).

Publically owned rural settings in western North America, where prehistoric and proto-historic rock-art is often well documented, constitute environments that attract the activities of a diverse population. Behavior deemed inappropriate, sometimes manifested as "vandalism" at places assigned by a society as having some kind of public significance or value is often rooted in the socio-economics of an area and the psychological make-up of the individual(s) (Pitt and Zube 1987; Goldstein 1996).

Highly dissected ridges, valleys and deep canyons characterize the heavily forested Black Hills of western South Dakota and northeast Wyoming. The remains of prehistoric and historic Native American activities are found throughout the large valleys, on the tablelands, at rock-shelters, and in canyons near waterways.

These remains reflect indigenous occupation and activities for at least twelve thousand years. In 1874 Euro-Americans discovered gold in the Black Hills and consequently, in violation of the 1868 treaty with the Lakota Sioux at Fort Laramie, the U.S. Government took control of the region. Throughout the later half of the 19th century Euro-American mining, logging, and cattle ranching brought thousands of non-Native American people to the area. For well over a century various Native American groups have actively contested ownership of this landscape. The Lakota Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe continue to maintain the resource-rich Black Hills as a sacred landscape in which many places of petroglyphs and pictographs are signified and deemed worthy of protection from damage and desecration. In 1980 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the Black Hills were appropriated by the U.S. Government in violation of the 1868 treaty and a financial settlement was mandated. The land claim has yet to be resolved.

The U.S. Forest Service currently manages Craven Canyon and Stone Quarry Canyon in the southern Black Hills. The area is open to cattle grazing, hunting, Native American traditional activities, and during the 1950's and the 1970's, uranium exploration and mining. Stylistic analyses of the numerous indigenous rock-art in these canyons suggest that they range from at least the Middle Archaic (5000-2500 BP) through the post-contact era. Within these canyons and amongst the various places of rock-art are historic inscriptions, carved livestock brands, and graffiti both carved and painted (Sundstrom 2003; 2004).

The settings of Craven and Stone Quarry Canyons have attracted activities that are revealed in miscellaneous graffiti, inscriptions, and petroglyph and pictograph defacement. (Fig. 2) Many of these graphics and script reflect the conflicted ownership of space in an overall region of contestation. The incised "white man go home" exemplifies an attempt to define social borders and group identity that reinforces a cultural topography in the midst of conflicting claims to the landscape (Hartley and Vawser 2002). Some markings, including inscriptions and non-representational graphics, in these canyons reveal similarity to that in more dense urban settings where competition for the resources characteristic of a space is observed in imagery, script, and graphic symbolism on non-portable surfaces. For example, laying territorial claim to an urban tourist destination, a graffiti writer spray-painted the words "Fucking Tourist" in bold black letters on a wall along the heavily used walking trail that leads to the public Park Güell in the Gràcia district of Barcelona. The audience he/she was targeting could hardly miss the strategic placement of the baiting message. Graffiti that reveals the contesting of space is known cross-culturally to be a mechanism of behavior where socio-economic stress defines an environment (e.g. Ley and Cybriwsky 1974; Rolston 1987; Peteet 1996; Frederick 2000).

The inherently social behavior embedded in signaling with graphic or script on non-portable surfaces is an exercise in which the socio-economic setting oftentimes conditions the content and situational positioning of the information. Whether in a rural or urban setting, the enduring nature of carved, pecked and painted images on a landscape where competition at various scales is highly dynamic offers evidence of individual and group-level communicative behavior that, while not only effective, is little affected by increasingly rapid advances in communicative technology.

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Fig. 1. Graffiti art by The Sheepest, High Line, New York, City, 2012. Photo by Sharon Kennedy.

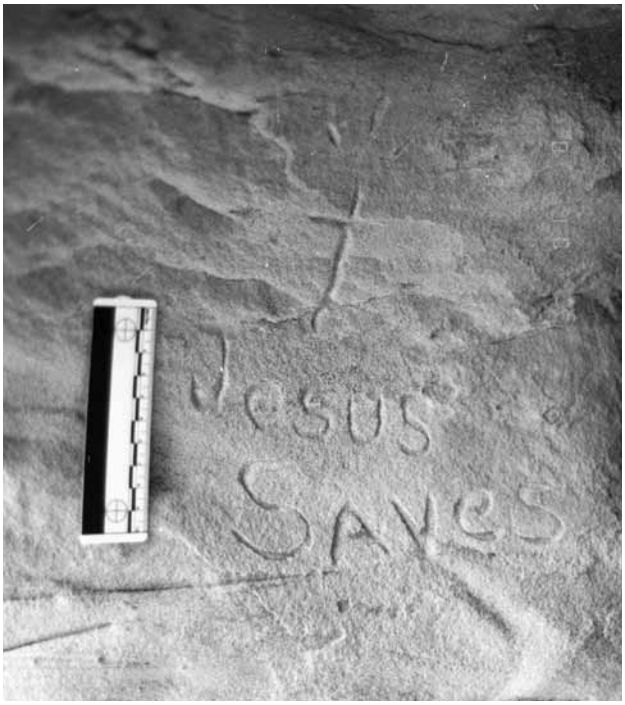

Fig. 2. Graffiti in a small rockshelter (39FA1010), Craven Canyon, 2001. Photo by Ralph Hartley