16 Communities of discourse

Contemporary graffiti at an abandoned Cold War radar station in Newfoundland

Peter Whitridge and James Williamson

1 Introduction

While the survival of ancient parietal art to the present implies that numerous individuals may have viewed it, much occurs in such concealed or difficult to access locations (caves, rockshelters, cliff faces) that it seems rather to have been addressed to a small and esoteric community. The frequent superimposition of images also hints at a closed community of viewers, in that only those who were ongoing participants in the discourse would be conversant with its earlier iterations. This is analogous to contemporary graffiti, which is often situated in inaccessible locations, employs esoteric conventions, and characteristically overwrites earlier panels. Although the motives for contemporary graffiti production (Adams and Winter 1997; Macdonald 2001; Dickinson 2008; Merrill 2015) seem far removed from those of ancient rock art, these resemblances suggest underlying practical, structural and—arguably—ontological commonalities among at least some of these disparate forms of parietal marking. We take "ontologies" here to refer to the culturally, socially and practically configured understandings of the world that informed the thoughts and actions of the communities of artists who produced parietal art (including graffiti). While there is of course no reason to suspect any inherent cultural commonality amongst them, we assert that the act of engaging in a socially targeted visual discourse (i.e., a common purpose) by applying tools or pigments to found surfaces (i.e., a common medium) in concealed and peripheral locations (i.e., a common setting) leads parietal artists to share real practical affordances and visual understandings that amount to seams of ontological resemblance and overlap amongst the historical networks defined by community-artist-pigment-surface-setting associations.

To illustrate this, we take up a body of contemporary graffiti at the abandoned Cold War military installation of Red Cliff, near St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, that began to emerge about a decade ago, and continues to evolve as new pieces obscure the old. This case reveals a number of interesting graffiti features, some of which are homologous with rock art. In the first place the graffiti instantiates a "community of discourse," or really numerous intersecting ontological communities that read and interpret the imagery based on a set of mutually understood discursive conventions, and

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engage with it by superimposing or counterposing their own images in meaningful ways. This constitutes a deliberately "conflictual discourse," since earlier works—substantial outlays of time, materials, and effort—are deliberately, and seemingly invariably, effaced by later ones, as with some traditional rock art. In the graffiti case this is often related to a self-conscious "performance of authorship," exemplified by the hermeneutically murky tag that signs large pieces or constitutes the entire instance of a simpler throw-up. All of this transpires within unusual "crypto-public" contexts, including marginal urban spaces such as alleyways, the semi-public backs of buildings, abandoned structures, and visible but inaccessible sites on elevated or secured walls, bridges, and other structures. The examples discussed here occur at an actively deteriorating mid-twentieth-century ruin, which because of the site's relative isolation is unpoliced and so receives only sporadic visitors attracted, often, by its very concealment, as well as by the spectacular graffiti that has accumulated there. This echoes the marginal situation of much surviving rock art, on cliff faces and in caves and overhangs. The repeated overlaying of graffiti on earlier examples, and on a still older built surface, produces a palpable temporal depth, stretching the graffiti site in time and enacting a "multitemporality."

What we argue here, already well-attested by an expanding archaeology of the contemporary world (Harrison and Schofield 2010; Graves-Brown et al. 2013; Harrison and Breithoff 2017; González-Ruibal 2019), is that contemporary phenomena such as graffiti are accessible not only by way of sociological or social theoretic hermeneutics, but also archaeological ones (e.g., Oliver and Neal 2010). Likewise, research on ancient rock art might more explicitly entertain insights from studies of recent parietal markings, because, ultimately, a straightforward graffiti/rock art distinction is impossible to sustain. In the next sections we consider the case for treating rock art, graffiti, and graffiti art as interpretively consonant, and review recent archaeological attention to ancient and contemporary graffiti. We then summarize the history of the Red Cliff site and outline the photogrammetric recording techniques that are currently being explored there to produce a durable and analytically useful document of an emergent graffiti archive. In a discussion section we take up the interpretive frames outlined above (community of discourse, conflictual discourse, performance of authorship, crypto-public context, multitemporality) to highlight some of the ontological commonalities amongst diverse parietal arts that the Red Cliff case suggests.

2 Graffiti and graffiti art

The notion that contemporary graffiti is commensurate in some fashion with rock art has long been a recognizable trope (Baird and Taylor 2011), for example in cartoons that play on the notion that both represent a form of vandalism. Working in a graffiti idiom himself, Banksy's depiction of a workman pressure washing a wall covered with obviously ancient rock art motifs (a Lascaux-like horse, a swarm of stylized hunters, a stenciled hand; Danielsson et al. 2012, 4)

directly evokes this affinity. It elicits sympathy for the modern graffiti writer whose works are routinely effaced as part of an ongoing sanitization of public space, even as it operates mainly at the level of a jokey image-play. But is graffiti like rock art? Part of the difficulty in drawing such a comparison is the muddiness of the lexicon used to name these things. The very phrase "rock art" already makes two problematic assertions: that it refers to signs produced on rock surfaces, and that these signs can be considered art. However, signs applied to other public canvases, such as trees (arborglyphs), seem more or less equivalent to those applied to rock surfaces, even if they are rarer archaeologically (Stryd 2001; Kobiałka 2019). And of course, whether any of these signs are art hinges on our definition of the term. In the case of rock markings, does it include simple acts of graphical communication (finger flutings, handprints, directional indicators), conventional ritual signs (witch marks, crosses), or stock ideograms (representations of genitals), any of which might normally be considered less semantically complex than art? And does rock art embrace text? These ambiguities constitute important slippages around the concept, but perhaps bridges to a nominally more prosaic graffiti.

Unlike rock art, graffiti—usually taken to consist of more or less unsanctioned representational markings of some sort in a more or less public location—evokes an authority, typically a state authority, capable of proscribing such public or quasi-public acts. Perhaps for this reason, as well as its textual bent, graffiti emerges as an archaeological topic alongside interest in early Mediterranean states (Baird and Taylor 2011; Keegan 2014). Indeed, the terms *graffito* (singular) and *graffiti* (plural), from an Italian word usually translated as "scratched," were borrowed into English precisely as descriptors for the abundant vernacular wall markings at Pompeii (Baird and Taylor 2011). Besides a variety of unsanctioned (but not always actively proscribed) textual or graphical inscriptions in public and private architectural settings, graffiti can also be taken to include similar markings in caves, ownership marks added to manufactured objects, and the widespread genre of folk depictions of ships (e.g., Tiboni 2017). The latter have extraordinary time depth, and sometimes occur as painted or incised designs on cave walls and other rock surfaces (e.g., Sukkham et al. 2017). Whether these are petroglyphs or graffiti seems impossible to disentangle.

What is here referred to as contemporary graffiti, graffiti art, or graffiti writing consists of a more or less coherent set of illegal practices that emerged in the later twentieth century as gangs, cliques, and unaffiliated youths began to explore the novel technology of aerosol paint (only patented in 1951 [Seymour 1951]), and eventually media that resemble spray-painted graffiti, such as markers, charcoal, and paper "wheatpastes," to produce increasingly elaborate panels of text and imagery in and on public places. Emerging in Philadelphia and Chicago in the 1960s (Ley and Cybriwsky 1974), a distinctive style of prolific public tagging had spread to New York City by 1970, where it was embraced as a complement of hip-hop subculture (Dickinson 2008; Wacławek 2011; Merrill 2015). In the early 1970s, the competitive and monomaniacal application of stylized pseudonyms underwent a striking transformation into a complex visual discourse that covered

public walls, subway cars, and buses, spurring increasingly frantic (and costly) municipal anti-graffiti efforts.

A sustained program of criminalizing artists, cleaning trains, and securing train yards led to the declaration that the New York subway had become graffiti-free by 1988, but graffiti continued to flourish on the tunnels, overpasses, and other peri-urban surfaces where it had begun (Dickinson 2008, 36–37), seeding similar, and ongoing, florescences around the world. By at least the late 1970s, graffiti writing had also branched out into parallel, and superficially almost identical, forms that are broadly labeled street art, including the work of such publicly lionized visual artists as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, and, latterly, Banksy (Wacławek 2011). In recent years street art, often on a monumental, multi-story scale, has become an enormously popular genre, and is increasingly commissioned by civic and corporate entities as instances of what is more generically referred to as public art (Wacławek 2011; Merrill 2015). Ambiguously, some practitioners (including some of the St. John's writers considered here) both engage in illicit graffiti writing and accept public commissions. While contemporary graffiti art is recognizably continuous with the political, social, humorous, and scatological graffiti of past centuries (which show no signs of subsiding), it represents a historically distinctive cooptation of the medium in light of new technologies, social formations, visual art traditions, and legal milieus. Like those earlier forms, it is legible within an archaeological frame.

Although contemporary graffiti, as an insurgent, subcultural, social art movement, is usually held apart from ancient and historical graffiti in academic discourse and popular consciousness, typically eliciting only the sorts of ironic comparisons with ancient and/or non-Western parietal art noted previously, the parallels with rock art are rather difficult to shake (Clegg 1993; Schofield 2010; Ralph 2014). In the first place, the formal resemblance of graffiti to parietal art is not incidental but essential. Both employ found canvases, in the form of more or less vertical walls that are physically accessible to a standing or lightly scaffolded artist. The scale of the effective canvas is variable, especially with access to modern equipment, but is usually constrained by the bodily stature of the artist, the materials available, and the time that can be devoted to the work's production. The likelihood that finished works will endure also varies, depending on the motivations of subsequent artists, authorities, and iconoclasts, the durability of the materials or medium, and the accessibility of the piece. While the skills and motivations of the artists differ, along with numerous facets of the social context and semantic content of the imagery, the materiality and corporeal performance that characterize the art's production are similar. Of course, archaeologists are often concerned precisely with that culturally idiosyncratic content, but sole attention to it comes at the expense of understanding underlying practical homologies, like the ones explored here, that are equally a part of its meaning. The growing archaeological literature on graffiti, especially contemporary graffiti writing, is reviewed in the next section.

3 Archaeologies of graffiti

Despite the precocious attention to Pompeii's vernacular wall markings, past archaeological interest in graffiti tended to be highly compartmentalized, focusing on specific cultural settings in which the surviving record is particularly profuse. This is the case at Pompeii, which remains perhaps the best documented graffiti setting from the ancient world (Milnor 2014). Keegan attributes its 4504 instances of graffiti (incised text and images) and dipinti (in which pigment is applied) to a shared set of memory practices that fixed momentary experiences to their respective locations (Keegan 2011). However, graffiti is widely attested from protodynastic (3200–3000 BCE) and later periods in Egypt, where it takes a surprisingly wide variety of forms: depictions and invocations of gods, astronomical notations, observations on royal circuits and military victories, erotic reveries, magical incantations (Keegan 2014). The volume and diversity of these intimately localized, but essentially public, documents are even greater during later periods in the ancient world (Baird and Taylor 2011; Keegan 2014; Lovata and Olton 2015).

The tendency of scholarship to focus on particular regions and periods creates the impression that graffiti practices are similarly regionalized and punctuated, but this is not the case. For example, graffiti have been ubiquitous in the Maya world for two millennia or more (Hutson 2011; Patrois 2013; Navarro-Castillo et al. 2018). Spontaneously incised designs depicting people, animals, deities, buildings, and ceremonies, or merely illegible scribbles, occur in both private, domestic settings and on exterior, public walls. Based on their relationship to accumulated fill, Patrois (2013) argues that they were produced both while structures were in use and after their abandonment. The quality of the graphical execution, and height above ground level, suggest that Maya graffiti were created by both children and adults, with children's motifs sometimes in apparent intersubjective dialogue with nearby adult ones (Hutson 2011, 422).

Similar clusters of scholarship have emerged around Medieval British church graffiti (Pritchard 2008; Champion 2015) and, increasingly, modern examples produced by soldiers (Merrill and Hack 2012), laborers (Giles and Giles 2014), prisoners (Agutter 2014), undocumented migrants (Soto 2016), and others, often embodying the transitory, unfinished quality of the "non-places" (Augé 1995) symptomatic of late/post-/supermodernity. Recent investigations of homelessness (Kiddey and Schofield 2011) and urban exploration (Kindynis 2019) have similarly foregrounded the sorts of abject and interstitial urban spaces that tend to be heavily tagged with graffiti of all kinds, and the people who sometimes produce it. An emerging archaeology of the contemporary era (Graves-Brown et al. 2013; González-Ruibal 2019), concerned as it is with the ruined and abandoned buildings and other systemic margins that tend to attract the extemporaneous commentaries of transient occupants, might be expected to take graffiti as a key problem area, though this has not always been the case.

While vernacular graffiti continues to be generated as the surreptitious discourse it has been for millennia, the graffiti art that radiated from the

northeastern US in the late twentieth century represents a novel iteration. Contemporary graffiti borrows some of the former's media and canvases, and even, sometimes, its social logic, but constitutes a sociologically and aesthetically distinct practice centered on local communities of artistic discourse. Sociologists (Macdonald 2001; Monto et al. 2012), anthropologists (Dickinson 2008; Stewart and Kortright 2015), geographers (Merrill 2015), and linguists (Adams and Winter 1997) have dissected the closely knit, place-based crews that generate much urban graffiti, while art historians have documented the graffiti itself (Wacławek 2011; Schacter 2014). In the context of expanding disciplinary attention to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, archaeologists have recently begun to contribute to this discussion.

A major impetus for this work comes from Australia, where a rich Aboriginal rock art record has fostered interest in parietal markings of all kinds. Clegg (1993) thoughtfully tackled a familiar assemblage of late twentieth-century roadside graffiti using a theoretical framework that Margaret Conkey had devised for analyzing Upper Paleolithic imagery, and found the former to be just as semiotically dense and analytically rewarding as the latter, while Winchester et al. (1996) read the gender and sexual politics of early twentieth-century Euro-Australian graffiti. Frederick (2009) deploys both conventional archaeological tropes and critical analyses of recurrent motifs in addressing contemporary graffiti from Perth and Melbourne. She sees the discord around the culturally appropriated Aboriginal "Wandjina" motif in particular, and the multiple discursive modes that operate simultaneously within contemporary graffiti more broadly ("play, protest, defacement, commemoration, response" [Frederick 2009, 231]), as illustrative of the kinds of conflictual discourses that likely circulated around the inherently multivalent rock art of the past. A themed number of *Australian Archaeology* documents the subsequent surge of interest in historical and contemporary graffiti production by, for example, Euro-Australian explorers and settlers (Fyfe and Brady 2014), prisoners (Agutter 2014), oppressed indigenous communities (Ralph and Smith 2014), and contemporary graffiti artists (Crisp et al. 2014). Frederick's (2014) own analysis of the material residues associated with a graffiti production site, especially hundreds of aerosol cans and the specialized nozzles that customized them, illustrates the utility of conventional archaeological heuristics. Edwards-Vandenhoek (2015) mapped out the performative "playscapes" in abandoned structures employed by street artists in Sydney, and indeed play seems to be a durable feature of graffiti, borne out in its humorous and scatological content, and in the playful dimensions of concealment and evasion of police and building owners.

There has been comparable literature growth in the U.K. and North America (e.g., Oliver and Neal 2010; Graves-Brown and Schofield 2011; Lovata and Olton 2015; Soto 2016; Hale et al. 2017). Hale et al. (2017) illustrate how innovative this research avenue has become, employing reflectance transformation imaging (RTI) and 3D photogrammetry (the results all archived for public access) in a "counter-archaeological" investigation of the Scottish heritage site of Dumbarton Rock, which has had its underside extensively tagged by the

community of rock climbers who have colonized it (and who collaboratively co-authored the paper). Historic England produced a manual for recording historical and contemporary graffiti that promotes the use of Structure from Motion (SfM) 3D photogrammetry, like that employed at Dumbarton Rock, as standard documentary procedure (Historic England 2015, 34). Graffiti has emerged as an archaeologically tractable vein of historical and contemporary material culture production that is consonant with a much longer global tradition of parietal marking. It often bears on the lives of subaltern groups, such as illegal migrants or the homeless, or a subaltern moment in the lifecourse, such as childhood or adolescence, and so provides archaeological access to fractions of society that are sometimes difficult to discern. Red Cliff, the graffitied-up detritus of a Cold War outpost in the northwest Atlantic, provides just such insight into a modern community of graffiti writers and their sophisticated visual grammar.

4 Red Cliff

St. John's, situated on the easternmost edge of the island of Newfoundland, was a principal staging point for the convoys that transported materièl and personnel from North America to Europe during World War II, and so by the end of the war was protected by a series of gun batteries: at the entrance to its harbor (Forts Amherst and Chain Rock), at Cape Spear to the south, and, from 1942, by an 8" gun emplacement at Red Cliff, 8 km north of the harbor and about 6 km north of the major American base at Fort Pepperell (Collins 2011). Red Cliff was decommissioned after the war and lay idle, until the growth of the Cold War spurred the American and Canadian governments to begin construction of trans-continental arrays of radar stations to detect incursions by Soviet aircraft (and later missiles). The first set to be constructed was the Pinetree Line, and Red Cliff was selected for the easternmost station (Fletcher 1990; Nicks et al. 1997; The Pinetree Line, n.d., Pinetreeline/homepage.html). Construction began in 1951 and the station became fully operational in 1954, staffed by up to a few hundred military and civilian personnel (Figure 16.1). Technological advances rapidly made Red Cliff obsolete, and in late 1961 the radars were shut down, the buildings stripped and the site abandoned. A series of photographs from mid-1966 (Pinetreeline/photos/photo37.html) show numerous bare building platforms and a small number of standing buildings, which were heavily scavenged in subsequent decades.

During the 1980s and '90s, Red Cliff was periodically used for Close Quarter Battle (CQB) and Fighting in Built-up Areas (FIBA) training by local Canadian Army forces and reserves, including the use of C4 plastic explosives "to blow man-sized holes through the reinforced concrete" (Peter Locke 1998, at Pinetreeline/other/other37/other37b.html). The building shells continue to be used by recreational paintballers for simulated combat and by young people as a site of concealment, and a local walking trail intersects the site, providing access for those attracted to the ruin and, increasingly, its graffiti. The site currently consists of three roofed buildings, at least 24 concrete building platforms, and an undetermined number of underground rooms and passages.

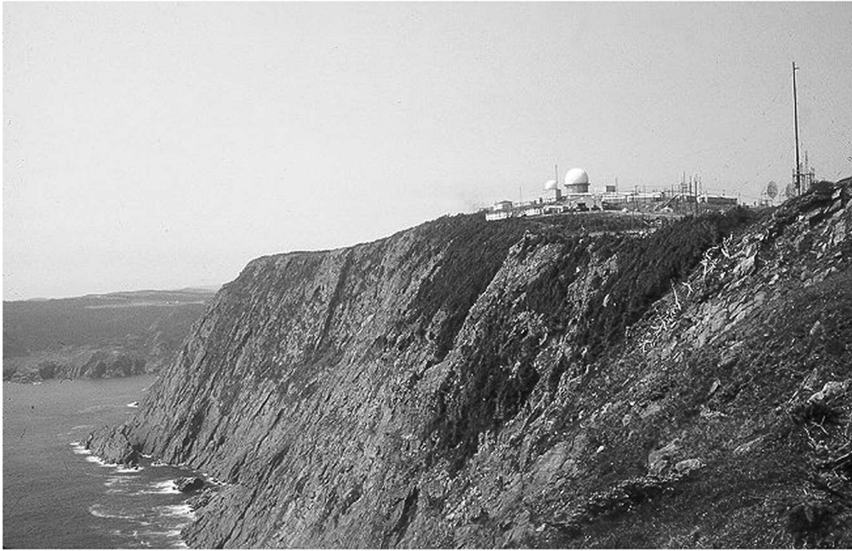

Figure 16.1 Red Cliff Radar Station, outside St. John's, Newfoundland, in June 1961, a few months before its decommissioning and abandonment.

Source: Photo by Robert Genge, courtesy of Military Communications and Electronics Museum, www.candemuseum.org.

Photographs from 1998 of the standing AN/CPS-6B radar building and adjoining operations building show mostly bare exterior walls and only occasional vernacular graffitied text and figures on the interiors (Pinetreeline/photos/p37-98a.html). In 2005, the building exteriors remained mostly bare, but some surfaces displayed small streetstyle monikers and simple images (Pinetreeline/photos/p37-05.html). A graffiti writer who produced a substantial body of work there (Tekar) suggested that the wider St. John's graffiti scene was starting up around this time (Matthew 2013). The city and local police eventually developed a Graffiti Management Plan (in 2007), identifying "60–80" downtown writers (Fitzpatrick 2010) and prosecuting the teenage Dr. West, one of the most prolific (Basha et al. 2007; Fitzpatrick 2010; The Telegram 2014). This seems to have only briefly suppressed the scene, as the city continues to battle downtown graffiti by buffing walls and commissioning public art (City of St. John's 2016), encouraging the public to report graffiti on a mobile app (ibid), prosecuting writers (Fitzpatrick 2010; Romaniuk 2012), and, as recently as fall 2019, re-convening an anti-graffiti task force (Mercer 2019). Red Cliff, meanwhile, beneath the civic radar, had emerged as a major canvas for graffiti writers by 2012, to judge by the earliest dates on interior and exterior pieces. Writers' skills vary widely, suggesting the involvement of accomplished artists (including self-designated kings), novices, or toys, and others using spray paint to produce vernacular (often scatological) graffiti outside the graffiti art idiom.

5 Photogrammetric methods

Inspired by Hale et al.'s (2017) approach to climbers' graffiti at Dumbarton, and by the beauty and complexity of the graffiti itself, a program of photogrammetric documentation was undertaken at Red Cliff. While the methodology is still being refined, it has so far entailed two primary techniques: (1) photogrammetry of interior spaces based on hand held digital photography and (2) exterior photogrammetry of the entire site using drones. It is also possible to fly small camera-equipped drones in parts of the high-ceilinged operations building (as tested using the pocket-sized DJI Mavic Mini), but dangling structural elements (rebar, cables, ductwork) makes flying hazardous and the thick concrete shell interferes with the aircraft's GPS. Exterior spaces can likewise be documented from ground level using handheld photogrammetry, avoiding the bureaucratic hassle of drone flights and yielding better images of building walls, but the 3D models would be fragmentary and time-consuming.

5.1 Interior handheld photogrammetry

In the last several years archaeologists have become increasingly familiar with the potential to document artifacts, features, standing architecture, and excavations three dimensionally with a handheld or drone-affixed digital camera (e.g., Porter et al. 2016; Hamilton 2017). A variety of commercial or free software employs SfM photogrammetry to align and assemble still images into computer models that stand as references, and can be exported to widely available viewing software (e.g., Adobe Acrobat), posted online (see, e.g., the vast assortment of archaeological objects at www.sketchfab.com), or materialized with a 3D printer. Although the graffiti of the architecturally unusual Red Cliff radar building, the interior of which has a regular dodecagonal (12-sided) plan with a central array of 12 pillars, can be documented, archived, and communicated as still images, the scores of decorated surfaces, and constant succession of new images on many of them, would require a commensurate number of photographs to do so. On the other hand, a low resolution SfM model can be easily navigated on a computer screen and then individual high-resolution stills consulted as necessary. Between February 2018 and May 2020 six sets of images (mean of 324 photographs each) were generated that document every surface on the radar building's interior, including walls, pillars, floor, ceiling, and structural vagaries. Using Agisoft Metashape each set was assembled into a navigable 3D model. This allows any of the interior surfaces to be inspected from any perspective as it existed at the time of recording, hence changes over the course of this period can be finely characterized. The superposition of new wall images was of particular interest, but the accumulation and removal of floor debris such as expended spray cans and fuel for small fires, is also relevant for understanding building use. Single models of two heavily decorated rooms in the operations building have also been produced.

5.2 Exterior drone photogrammetry

The heavy recent overgrowth of alder at Red Cliff makes it difficult to navigate the site away from the road and open area surrounding the standing buildings. To gain a better sense of the surviving Cold War ruins a drone (DJI Matrice with a Zenmuse X4S camera) was used to generate an orthomosaic and 3D model based on aerial imagery (Figure 16.2). The drone was flown by James Williamson (under an SFOC) along a pre-programmed flight path created in DJI GS Pro, generating 472 images that were then assembled in Metashape. The site proved difficult to document in this fashion. The cables anchoring the taller of two nearby antennae truncate the mappable area just south of the operations building, powerful downdrafts in the prevailing westerlies made it inadvisable to fly too close to the sheer 120-m cliff on which the site perches, and a light mist on the flight day is visible in the orthophoto (Figure 16.2a). Graffiti is reasonably legible on renderings of the roofed buildings' exteriors (much more so in the individual stills) and the digital model, showing the topographic skeleton of the site without the draped orthophoto (Figure 16.2b), reveals fine structural detail in the building ruins.

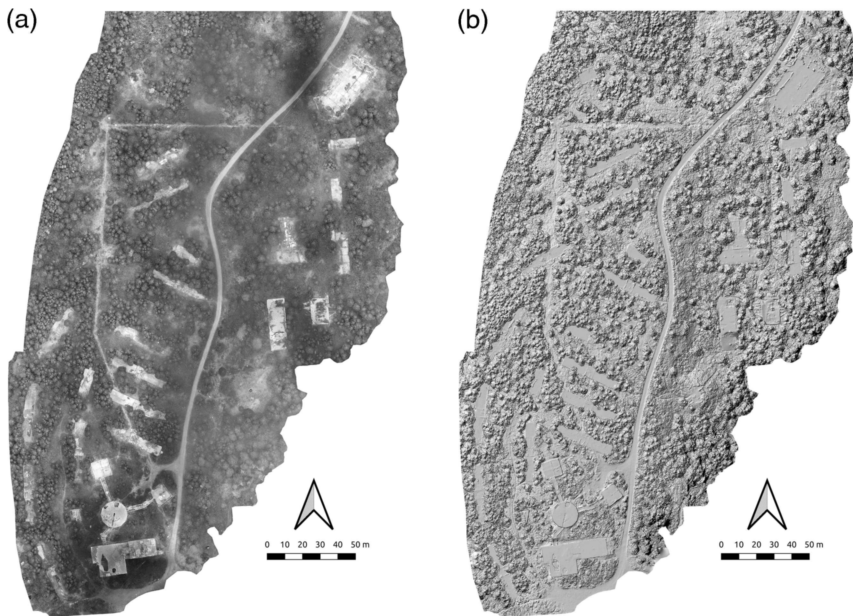

Figure 16.2 (a) Orthomosaic of Red Cliff assembled in Agisoft Metashape, from aerial imagery captured with a DJI Matrice on October 30, 2019 (created by James Williamson); (b) Plan view of Metashape model with orthomosaic removed.

6 Graffiti ontologies

Although contemporary graffiti now circulates within a global cultural network, where it is relentlessly mimicked and co-opted, it is produced by a relatively tiny community of practitioners which itself is fragmented into a multitude of local crews and unaffiliated individuals who operate according to esoteric, subcultural logics. This is, in part, a deliberate effect of the premise of illegality, which restricts legitimate membership to those willing to embrace its legal jeopardy (Monto et al. 2012). Related to this, graffiti art (to a much greater extent than street art) seems to be overwhelmingly dominated by youth, like the 10–30-year-olds held responsible for downtown St. John's graffiti (Fitzpatrick 2010), which means that graffiti law inordinately criminalizes youth. There are clearly marked ontological shifts associated with sequential moments in the life course, consequent not only on physiological ageing (morally construed as "maturation") but on the very different social, economic, ethical, and legal conditions that circumscribe them. For Canadian youth this includes daily institutional (school) confinement from at least ages 6–16, legal minority up to ages 18 or 19, and prolonged economic dependency that, increasingly in recent years, lasts into the 30s. Ontological difference and autonomy, within this juridically engineered dependency, is expressed to varying degrees in virtually every facet of choice available to them, including the deliberate production of a field of creative expression that operates largely outside of (though sometimes in engaged opposition to) the sanctioned social system. Some of the operational features of this field, as they are expressed in the Red Cliff graffiti setting, are outlined below.

6.1 Communities of discourse

The models generated to date at Red Cliff document the persistent use of the site as a quasi-public gallery and practice space by self-conscious graffiti artists with varying levels of skill and experience. The names of artists are conventionally recorded in the tags that sign pieces (e.g., "TEKAR '13'" at upper left in Figure 16.3) or are encoded in throw-ups. They may also stand alone as "landmarks" on surfaces that cannot easily be overpainted by other artists or authorities. This could be seen as an outgrowth of, and ironic reflection on, a long-running vernacular graffiti discourse on identity and authorship that often includes names or initials (Adams and Winter 1997). The names of graffiti crews are also tagged (e.g., "RC," Rong Crew, at the center of the SEMY-SEONE piece in Figure 16.3), and their members' tags sometimes distributed across a piece (at the bottom of the large letters in Figure 16.3), instantiating a familiar micro-style that distinguishes them from other crews. The array of fireplaces (the cinder block feature in the foreground of Figure 16.3), fuel piles, beer cans, and other refuse speak to the communal experience of crews and others, gathered for nighttime tagging and/or recreation. Individual and crew tags also occur across the larger region, including other isolated sites

Figure 16.3 Graffiti on interior north wall of operations building at Red Cliff, March 4, 2018, with cinder block hearth in foreground.
Source: Photo by Peter Whitridge.

(World War II–era artillery batteries, abandoned industrial facilities) and public downtown walls and alleys, where they are visible to a much wider audience and attract the attention of municipal authorities. The use of a cryptic visual grammar that is immediately legible to other artists tactically bounds a community of discourse, and, indeed, a nested series of such communities: graffiti artists in general, the local graffiti community, members of a particular crew.

6.2 Conflictual discourse

Formal conventions of respect and disrespect are enacted through the placement of commentary and subsequent pieces beside or atop earlier ones (at least four large, sequentially superimposed pieces are visible at the edges of SEMY-SEONE in Figure 16.3). However, with a small community of writers, many of whom periodically or permanently relocate to other cities or otherwise drift away from the scene, the skill reflected in succeeding pieces is variable. The parallel vernacular graffiti discourse intrudes through quickly sprayed and often profane annotations, sometimes clearly intended as defacements of well-executed pieces, while deliberate destruction of painted surfaces and architecture hastens the ongoing deterioration of the buildings. The graffiti discourse is in many ways inherently conflictual: by virtue of the limited available wall space new art must overwrite the old, while other wall users compete for a discursive niche and authorities periodically sandblast or overpaint the canvas, restarting the cycle. Ross et al. (2017, 415) refer to graffiti as

"an essentially performative process of 'narrative disruption'—an overlay, as it were, of countering, elaborating, competing and/or satirizing narrative." This narrative stratigraphy can frequently be discerned at Red Cliff, where older pieces that are stylistically distinct or employ different colors or paint types survive at the edges of later ones, and on the fragments that spall from the surface. Digital photogrammetry allows particular loci to be revisited at various moments in the past, isolating graffiti produced in the intervals: a snapshot of the radar building interior from 1998 can be precisely aligned with models generated in Meshlab based on 2018 and 2019 imagery (Figure 16.4), and a 2005 photograph of the exterior of the operations building with a model based on the 2019 Matrice flight (Figure 16.5). These examples are analogous to the use of imaging software to unstack the superimposed moments in long-running rock art discourses. Gunn et al. (2010) used D-Stretch's capacity to enhance subtle chromatic differences in pigments to discriminate ten overlapping instances of rock art production at the Jawoyn site of Nawarla Gabarnmung in Arnhem Land, Australia, sorting them into sequential episodes as a Harris matrix, and Tomášková (2015) similarly unpacked superimposed motifs at ancestral San sites in Eastern Cape, South Africa. In each case the materials, graphical idiom, idiosyncratic style, and discursive content can be read with the chronological evidence to discriminate the stylistic communities that produced the art.

6.3 Performance of authorship

Graffiti authorship is often explicitly claimed. Most obviously, pieces are signed with the writer's tag (or wholly based on it), throw-ups typically consist of stylized tags, and smaller tags often stand-alone. Artists also develop signature styles that are sometimes easily recognized. Tekar's work at Red Cliff and other locations around St. John's, Corner Brook, and Halifax can be discerned stylistically (characteristic signs, shapes, color combinations, and formal assemblies), and through the repeated incorporation of signature elements (e.g., for a period of time, a sharp-jawed

Figure 16.4 View of interior of radar building at Red Cliff, looking northwest; (a) May 1998; (b) February 10, 2018 (capture from Metashape model); (c) May 4, 2020 (capture from Metashape model).

Source: (a) Photo by Ralph Howell, courtesy of Military Communications and Electronics Museum, www.candemuseum.org.

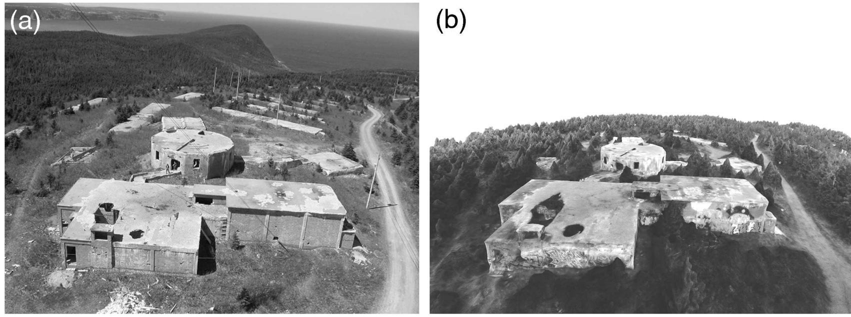

Figure 16.5 View of exterior of operations building at Red Cliff, looking northeast; (a) May 26, 2005; (b) October 30, 2019 (capture from Metashape model).

Source: (a) Photo by Tony Roberts, courtesy of Military Communications and Electronics Museum, www.candemuseum.org.

humanoid figure). Pieces were often photographed when fresh and posted in various online graffiti archives (e.g., www.fatcap.com/artist/tekar.html). Many artists' pieces employ a distinctive grammar that likewise assembles words, motifs, styles, and colors into hermeneutically dense, and usually self-referential, texts (Figure 16.3). The contemporary convention of claiming the status of king by incorporating a crown motif in a piece expresses authorship with a playful swagger, as does the deliberate creation of landmarks. The insistence on claiming authorship in some form, however occluded, is a hallmark of graffiti art, anchoring it in the ancient idiom of the name or initials scratched on a wall, but the deployment of idiosyncratic elements of form, content, and pigment like those disentangled by Gunn et al. (2010), whether self-conscious or not, also characterizes some rock art.

6.4 Crypto-public setting

The definitional illegality of graffiti restricts the sorts of art that can be produced at different sites. In general, the more public the site, the more attenuated the tag, but also the more renown that is returned to the writer who riskily executes a piece or throw-up there. A site like Red Cliff that is vacant, accessible, and free from surveillance constitutes an ideal crypto-public setting, affording the time and security for careful artistry executed over a period of days, weeks, or months, while guaranteeing wide viewership. Comparable abandoned buildings in the outlying region are less accessible to both writers and viewers. The highest visibility walls that afford an opportunity for complex pieces, such as the footings of highway overpasses and other abandoned military sites (which often fall under the jurisdiction of Parks Canada), are liable to be buffed by public maintenance crews. The advantages of crypto-public "accessible concealment" (and, to a certain extent, shelter from the elements) is reflected in the much heavier graffiti turnover on the insides than the outsides of the buildings at Red Cliff.

6.5 Multitemporality

Although the rate of graffiti production slows in winter and accelerates in summer, Red Cliff is visited year-round, accreting art and other traces of use (vernacular graffiti, fireplaces, refuse) even as the buildings undergo an inexorable structural deterioration. And like any archaeological site, Red Cliff is caught up in a longer temporal unfolding. After its abandonment Red Cliff was successively scavenged, used for military training, and scrawled with vernacular graffiti, before the recent surge in graffiti art. An extensive archive of personal photographs from 1952–1961 (Pinetreeline/photos/photo37.html) documents the everyday life of a remote, secretive military installation, while earlier coastal defense structures are scattered along the coast. The surrounding area had been logged and used for pasturage since at least the early nineteenth century, Gaulton et al. (2019) document incised graffiti on the Avalon Peninsula from the late seventeenth century, European fishers began visiting the region seasonally in the sixteenth century, and indigenous Beothuk were present when Europeans arrived. Although earlier traces are not always discernable, graffiti practice at Red Cliff directly engages with a prominent Cold War record. Seventy years of Red Cliff's history are persistently held in view, and reworked by its utilization, alteration, and deterioration as a contemporary graffiti art site. More so than the buried traces of earlier eras, contemporary archaeological sites such as Red Cliff broadcast their multitemporality, and specifically attract users eager to engage in a "time-play."

7 Conclusion

The social and cultural conditions of graffiti production at Red Cliff are not unusual in the contemporary world. The practice conventionally entails close-knit crews engaged in discursive entanglements with other crews in marginal, peri-urban settings such as abandoned buildings, reflecting and constituting their ontological distinctiveness. And all of these features—community, dialogue, performance, concealment, multitemporality—equally characterize many instances of graffiti and parietal art production in the past. The notion that ancient parietal art—which can often be presumed to have had powerful ritual associations—stands apart from contemporary graffiti is clearly true in some senses, but misses the point. There is no monolithic non-Western ontology from which parietal art emerges, but rather a historically vast array of locally situated communities of belief and practice that engaged with commensurately diverse sacred, social, and aesthetic discursive fields. Likewise, there is no monolithic Western ontology that frames contemporary graffiti production, although there is an emergent global graffiti discourse in which local crews variably participate. Contemporary graffiti can be taken as a special case of parietal art, but so too can any archaeological instance; each is likewise historically, sociologically, and aesthetically idiosyncratic, and demands its own close, local reading.

Surfaces accrete signs. The relative scarcity of ancient rock art shouldn't obscure the fact that people leave deliberate, legible traces of all kinds wherever they go, though only the most inaccessible and/or durable (like graffiti landmarks) manage to survive unscathed for millennia. Many of us carry writing implements that allow us to produce such marks whenever we like, and even when we are conditioned to confine them to socially appropriate surfaces they are liable to spill over onto other, illegitimate, ones. It seems likely that ephemeral, graffiti-like markings (sanctioned or not) were also periodically left on ancient perishable surfaces. The dichotomy between a pictographic rock art and a textual graffiti is both taphonomically blinkered and culturally chauvinist, like the prehistoric-historic one that demotes those without a written language to an ontologically subaltern stratum. Graffiti art represents a modern florescence of this widespread practice of routinized mark-making at a distinctive cultural moment, when a novel technology, pregnant with semiotic possibility, met a felicitous social and artistic milieu. The analogous fluorescences of rock art at different times and places in the past must similarly reflect the momentary constellation of mark-making practices, places, cultural meanings, and a community of practitioners interested in exploring them.

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