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ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF GRAFFITI AND STREET ART, JEFFREY IAN ROSS (ED.) (2016)

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Graffiti is commonly understood as one of the four core elements of hip hop culture – along with emceeing/rapping, deejaying and dance. It is a growing field in hip hop studies which has been lacking a focused volume despite the volumes on hip hop culture more broadly, such as Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal's *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (2012), Jason L. Oakes and Justin D. Burton's *The Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Music* (2018) and Justin Williams' *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop* (2015). The first-ever *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art* is a welcome addition in this respect. Edited by North American criminologist Jeffrey Ian Ross, the interdisciplinary volume features a wide range of global contributions from fields such as art, criminology, ethnography, photography, political science, sociology and visual culture. Ross is known for his work on corrections, violence, political and white-collar crime, and frequently appears on American TV as a commentator. He edited the handbook because issues in graffiti culture touches on both his own personal interest in visual culture and his background in criminology as it relates to the criminalization of graffiti. The topic seems of great importance for Ross because he also contributed several articles himself, including chapters on London graffiti, political dimensions and cinematic representations.

In the Foreword, Ross explains that graffiti and street art research is 'short on empirical scholarly analysis' (xxviii). Perhaps surprisingly to people outside of the research field, much of the literature comes instead from ethnography which centres on the graffiti artists themselves (5). He distinguishes street art from graffiti along four semantic fields: legality/illegality, visual style, perpetrator and location (1–3). Graffiti is commonly believed to be a more transgressive, criminal and underground culture while street art is a more commercialized and culturally accepted art form. While there has been much work on graffiti and street art, most notably by ethnographers Jeff Ferrell, Gregory J. Snyder and Nancy Macdonald, Ross argues that research needs to move away from 'descriptive' to more theoretical work (8) – work he describes as empirical. This research gap opens many possibilities for scholars inside and outside of hip hop studies who are concerned with questions of power and spatialized politics, (in-)visibility, visual methodologies and (mediated) urban territories. The *Handbook* therefore aims to provide a systematic, interdisciplinary and transnational overview of the

existing scholarship including 'important research, theories, and ideas related to the field of graffiti and street art' (xxviii).

The *Handbook* is divided into four parts, which explore different dimensions, discourses and battlefields. Part One provides an insight into the longevity of the cultural practice and fascinating chapters on different genres. Archaeologists J. A. Baird and Claire Taylor provide an intriguing account of ancient graffiti, which might lead some readers to reconsider why they understand graffiti primarily as a postmodern, urban and hip hop element. The authors demonstrate how ancient graffiti was a medium of communication between elite groups of society and how '[w]alls, floors, and potsherds' were their surfaces of choice (21). American studies scholar John F. Lennon's article on hobo graffiti situates contemporary writers' love of trains in the historic context of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century working-class mobility (32). Similarly, sociologist Robert Donald Weide, writing as a scholar-practitioner, adds freight train graffiti to the element's history (45). Latrinalia graffiti, a topic with surprisingly little research, affirm restroom walls as an important medium of communication (92) while prison graffiti's cultural meaning oscillates between violence, revenge and amusement (64–74). Although graffiti is considered a core element of hip hop culture, Part One shows that it is a much older and much more complex cultural practice. Its roots reach beyond rap music and hip hop culture as it 'was established long before hip hop music emerged in the South Bronx, and many of its practitioners do not identify with the music or its subculture at all' (139). The first part pays tribute to this long history, the wide variety of genres, surfaces, themes and visual styles beyond the iconic 1970s.

Part Two introduces the reader to the socio-ethnographic dimensions of graffiti writing. The chapters centre on the artists themselves, their motivations, identities and sense of belonging as well as how they situate their work in the urban context (139). Nancy Macdonald examines female graffiti, where artists struggle with heteronormativity and patriarchy, much in the same way as they do in the other core elements of hip hop. Female artists have two options: either they conform to male standards and the overarching patriarchic structures or they foreground their femininity while risking being pushed to the margins and not treated as 'real' artists (188). Similarly, in his contribution on writers' careers, Gregory J. Snyder acknowledges the racial, ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity of graf writers, while noting continued male dominance (206–07). He argues that graffiti writing can be interpreted as a variation of the American Dream as writers create their own version of bottom-up entrepreneurialism (207). Continuing this idea, design scholar Graeme Evans explains that graffiti and street art are becoming increasingly part of place making strategies in urban development and marketing as writers professionalize their art by way of official commissions (176–77). The section raises important questions and provides striking answers about the diverse practices and numerous global and local appropriations of graffiti and street art.

After exploring the sociocultural dimensions of graffiti and street art, Part Three takes the reader on a tour de force through different graffiti cultures around the world. This largest section of the book shows how graffiti's visual language is appropriated in Canada, Chile, China, Egypt, France, Japan, Palestine/the Palestinian territories, Portugal, the United Kingdom and the United States. Starting with New York City graffiti of the 1960s and 1970s (Austin), chapters examine the changing image of graffiti in post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans (Piano) and the dialectics between legality and illegality

in Montréal (Wacławek). In analysing walls and murals in Santiago de Chile, historian Rodney Palmer argues that graffiti in Chile emerges from a longer radical political tradition of protest and visual propaganda during the military dictatorship (259). Art historian Minna Valjakka uses the term 'urban art images' in Beijing and Shanghai to suggest a broader movement of visual urban culture which moves beyond the western graffiti tradition by using traditional Chinese letters (358). While the contributions sometimes resonate with approaches that Ross described as 'descriptive' in the beginning of the *Handbook*, they impressively echo graffiti and street art's discourses, trajectories and struggles established by Jeff Ferrell in his Foreword – such as the role of social media, the context of the neo-liberal city, and the struggle between commodification and self-expression (xxxi–xxxv).

The fourth part of the *Handbook* examines the larger socio-economic, judicial and political effects of graffiti and street art in the United States. In his article on NYC graffiti, sociologist Ronald Kramer echoes Ferrell's claim that graffiti hinders the commodification of urban spaces in the neo-liberal city (xxxi) by explaining that political elites and authorities view graffiti as a threatening practice (405) and employ a rhetoric of a 'moral panic' in which graffiti hinders capitalist development (412). Art historian Peter Bengtsen is critical of the removal of street art and graffiti from the streets, as both are art forms closely connected to their immediate surroundings in public space (423). Ross agrees by arguing that graffiti's general removal from the streets is impossible (410). Instead, he advises legislators, policy-makers and authorities to work with graffiti instead of against it (401). Removing graffiti from the streets, law scholar Danwill D. Schwender argues, would raise complex questions about copyright: if graffiti is an illegal act, how can artists claim copyright (456–58)?

The issues addressed in the *Handbook* offer many opportunities for more research from the perspective of global hip hop studies. It opens for researchers new ways to understand graffiti and street art inside and outside of the culture. Further, researchers can enrich their work on emceeing, deejaying and dance performances with graffiti perspectives to get a fuller picture of local hip hop communities (see Lammers 2013). They can study especially how issues of race, ethnicity, gender and class intersect with graffiti. Scholars might rethink existing visual culture methodologies (see Rose 2016) to make them fit graffiti and street art pieces. And they might explain graffiti's transition from real to virtual spaces by studying (social) media and popular culture representations using theories of convergence culture (Jenkins 2006).

The *Handbook* has very few weaknesses. And of those – such as the role of artists in the discussion – Ross anticipates that it 'might be useful to have a separate section where graffiti/street artists could "talk back"' (xxix) but decides against it because 'it would take the book in a different direction' (xxix). While I understand his reasoning, I deeply believe that this would have made the book even stronger. Artist–scholar collaborations are challenging and rewarding at the same time because they raise complex questions about knowledge production and distribution as well as scholars' and artists' responsibilities. Such questions are of great concern in this new journal, *Global Hip Hop Studies*, as well and I think such collaborations are a constant work-in-progress which should be guided by curiosity, openness and respect.

Nevertheless, Ross's *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art* breaks ground as the first interdisciplinary volume on graffiti and street art. It provides a comprehensive overview of state-of-the art research, rich histories and diverse transnational practices. True to its title, it serves as a solid reference

book for anyone interested in graffiti and street art because it also includes definitions of the most important terms in a separate section. Reading the *Handbook* while commuting by train in the Ruhr Area of Germany, this book added new dimensions in my own perception of artists, trains and public surfaces. Ross's volume is an essential read for anyone who wants to learn more about graffiti and street art.

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