Tell-Tale Signs: Unsanctioned Graffiti Interventions in Post-Apartheid Johannesburg

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As early as 1897, geographic maps of Johannesburg indicate that municipal authorities made an attempt to segregate groups of individuals according to their ethnicity. At the same time, they created laws to limit the physical and visual contact between African, colored, Indian, and white residents. Their initial efforts were unsuccessful (Apartheid Museum 2006, 22); however, they helped to establish a racial hierarchy in Johannesburg. In these spaces of the city, where the marginalized were once unwelcome through systemic racial discrimination, class bias, and forced separation, now appear unsanctioned graffiti. The physical presence of these bodies while producing unsanctioned graffiti markings in post-apartheid spaces should not be ignored, namely because it represents a radical act of transhistorical dissidence. Unsanctioned graffiti is a complex form of autobiographical representation that facilitates the physical presence of the body and the politic of the inscription. These artists and writers challenge the historical legacy of apartheid by using graffiti as a strategy of resistance. Graffiti interventions have aided in the reclamation of former sites and spaces of exclusion. In this sense, it is through graffiti that they generate "a moment of identity performance in place" that marks and remarks critical subjectivities in real space and time (Heddon 2002), while enacting defiance against status quo ethnic and class discrimination. Within this matrix of political resistance and body politics, these radical subjectivities raise questions about how unsanctioned graffiti performs criticisms of place.

Unsanctioned graffiti artists and writers in Johannesburg demonstrate a growing frustration with structural and systemic inequality that continues to hamper economic growth and social amity in urban environments and surrounding suburbs. Here, they take aim at the proceedings of local government, social welfare policies, corporate exploitation of labor, the (post)colonial project, violent crime, lack of employment, gender inequality, sexual assault, and other pressing social conditions. The visibility of unsanctioned graffiti projects in and around Johannesburg point to an experiential viewing dynamic that frames a kind of oppositional politics. While graffiti—as social commentary is not a new phenomenon in Johannesburg, the artists and writers who engage in this complex form of visual communication employ historical references and events related to the city, and South Africa more generally, in order to load their texts and images with personal and collective meaning. In this sense, unsanctioned graffiti in Johannesburg frequently takes on a dimension of activism in that it employs non-neutral forms of visual communication in an attempt to destabilize discrimination, prejudice, and xenophobia. Nevertheless, there exists an altogether-distinct category of unsanctioned graffiti in Johannesburg that is more concerned with the global popularity of hip-hop graffiti style and consequently remains apathetic to the political potential of graffiti marking. This is precisely the reason why several controversial graffiti projects by nonresident writers and artists such as Faith47 and ABOVE have been crucial in presenting an outsider’s perspective and a distinct political conviction. Ultimately, however, Johannesburg’s graffiti culture is unique precisely because it negotiates between historical trauma and the promise of renewal.

In this chapter, I explore unsanctioned graffiti practices in post-apartheid Johannesburg by proposing that inscriptions made by graffiti artists and writers deconstruct post-apartheid geographies. To better understand these apparatuses of social expression, I analyze the ways that graffiti artists mark the walls of Johannesburg to critique the colonial and apartheid project for which poverty, frustration, and inequity function as
visible reminders of its legacy. The first section of this chapter draws on interviews conducted with writers and graffiti artists to locate and analyze the evolution of urban street culture in Johannesburg since the fall of apartheid. I then move to debates around the city's nuanced laws surrounding the criminalization of graffiti and how this pertains to the city's 2006 public art policy. Drawing on cultural theorists such as Jürgen Habermas and Michael Warner, I use the notion of the modern public sphere in order to explore the tensions between public art and graffiti, while demonstrating how unsanctioned forms of visual expression can function democratically. The second section in this chapter conceptualizes how the physical body is utilized in unsanctioned graffiti interventions to shift relations of power, pose an oppositional politics, and enact resistance. This includes, among other things, how the graffiti tagging of personal signatures in South African indigenous languages such as isiXhosa perform a politics of place through embodiment. I conclude this section with a discussion of the paradoxical relationship between unsanctioned political graffiti and hip-hop graffiti to understand how urban street culture in Johannesburg exists within a complex set of global trends and cultural significations. The third and final section of this chapter responds to the first and second by demonstrating how some of the most politically consequential works created in Johannesburg are the product of nonresident graffiti artists and writers. These projects, and others similar to them, present what filmmaker and activist Oliver Ressler calls embedded art, or projects that contain elements of participation and performance (quoted in Cronin and Robertson 2011, 10). I outline how Johannesburg's architecture operates as a blank slate to criticize the city's socioeconomic conditions and historical traumas. In my conclusion, I use the work of urban theorists to discuss how Johannesburg has effectively redrawn boundaries of segregation since the fall of apartheid through various urban development projects, and how the destruction of graffiti now forms an indicator of separation on a grand scale.

CITY DRAWING

With a population of nearly 4,400,000, Johannesburg is the largest city in South Africa and one of the most ethnically diverse in the world. As the provincial capital of Gauteng, it remains the commercial hub of South Africa—namely, for hosting the corporate headquarters of European, American, and Asian mining interests. From 1993 to 2007, Johannesburg ranked 171st out of the largest three hundred metropolitan economies in the world, later improving its ranking to 85th from 2011 to 2012. The numbers are significant because they point to a recovery from major economic recession, and while marginally improving on employment rates, the city still lags on gross domestic product per capita (Brookings Institution 2014). Yet Johannesburg exists in a strange paradox, forever negotiating nominal economic growth with the most extreme poverty. It is a place where severe class and racial disparity has become another cliché, which many of the city's intelligentsia chose to overlook, ignore, or deny (Enwezor 2004, 25).

Within this climate of social discord, coupled with the city's problematic colonial and post-apartheid history, graffiti has proven a highly productive area of critical discourse (see Brenner 2002; Klopper 2000; Landau and Kaspin 2002; Peffer 2009; Waddacor 2014). From 1999 to 2014, the development of unsanctioned graffiti in Johannesburg encountered numerous transformations corresponding to periods of social unrest, the availability of materials, state-sponsored sporting events, enthusiastic younger generations, and the introduction of new hip-hop graffiti styles. For writer and graffiti artist Cale Waddacor, the graffiti and street art scene in Johannesburg has gradually shifted to encompass a more inclusive cultural discourse. During the early to mid-1990s, there existed "unwritten rules" pertaining to graffiti writers' aesthetic expression and antiestablishment ideals, which essentially restricted its social and cultural development. Questions such as "Why didn't you do a second outline?" or "Why are your letters not the same size as each other?" appeared to matter more than the benefits of stylistic innovation, pedagogy, and community engagement. Bullying and verbal threats put pressure on other artists and writers to conform to these conventions; thus, the graffiti produced during the early to mid-1990s in Johannesburg is somewhat adverse to the congenial atmosphere of the global hip-hop graffiti art movement that exploded in the early 2000s. With the continued global acceptance of graffiti art and other forms of urban street culture—triggered by artists such as Banksy, Shepard Fairey, Invader, and David Choe, among numerous others—including mural painting, rap music, and break dancing, freedom of individual expression gained impetus. The rules that previously dictated style and subject matter in Johannesburg subsided to the point where new writers were accepted and mentored into prospering cultural communities such as Newtown and Fordsburg. Works of unsanctioned graffiti, then, are not only joined to the architecture of the city but
also to a cacophony of social, political, and economic dynamics that help forge a greater sense of community (Heartney 1994, 162).

As much as the graffiti community in Johannesburg has grown since the fall of apartheid, graffiti artists and writers hold the rather unique position of cultivating a distinct cultural movement with little to no historical precedence to borrow from. This is in part due to the strict banishment of, and fierce prosecution for, any type of graffiti marking during the apartheid era. In this regard, Johannesburg’s graffiti culture is surprisingly little more than two decades old, which is barely enough time for two generations of artists and writers to learn and share their knowledge. The formal development of graffiti in Johannesburg and its neighboring districts is dependent on the hand of time itself. Often overlooked, the introduction of specific painting and writing tools, including stronger stencil materials, more durable markers, and premium spray paints, such as those manufactured by Montana and Molotow, have also contributed, in their own way, to this core development. The resulting shift has seen graffiti writers and urban artists who honed their skills by generating unsanctioned work on the streets, such as Gogga, Makione, Falko, Curio, and Rasty, garnering major commissions for corporate- and state-sponsored graffiti projects, acquiring representation in commercial art galleries, and being selected to participate in major curated exhibitions. As is often the case with forms of visual expression that attempt to make political statements, it becomes co-opted and assimilated by the cultural elite, and thus loses its political authority (Searle in Cronin and Robertson 2011, 5).

In cities around the world, police crackdowns on graffiti and other forms of urban street culture threaten the very energy of contemporary city life (Klein 2002, 311). Johannesburg has had an ambivalent relationship with graffiti art and writing since the end of apartheid. The city of Johannesburg establishes vague terminology surrounding the lawfulness of unsanctioned graffiti murals, while simultaneously condemning tagging and other kinds of “unsightly” markings. Even the city’s official proclamation that it is “now considered the capital of graffiti art in South Africa” encompasses contradictory signifiers of illegality (graffiti) and socially accepted norms of visual expression (visual art) (City of Johannesburg 2014). Still, the production of unsanctioned graffiti remains a criminal offense in Johannesburg, and carries with it the possibility of a jail sentence. The city’s most recent Public Art Policy, dating back to 2006, demonstrates a clear commitment to enhance the urban environment and the enjoyment of public space. The policy claims that public art is intended to confer “shared symbols” for constructing “social cohesion,” “civic pride,” and the forging of a “positive identity” for the city. “Through this art,” the policy reads, “the City projects its collective identity and vision, while individuals and community groups in neighborhoods are also empowered to also express their unique identities.” Point sixteen on the policy breakdown addresses “The Removal of Unwanted Graffiti”:

Special attention should be given to keeping major landmarks and declared heritage sites clear of unwanted graffiti. Working under the direction of the Manager: Public Art, an Anti-Graffiti Rapid Response Unit will be responsible for the timely removal of objectionable and unwanted graffiti from key points. Further, the City should be proactive in protecting prominent sites from unsightly graffiti by, where appropriate, applying treatments to discourage and/or repel graffiti. (City of Johannesburg 2006, 9)

In effect, the references to unsanctioned graffiti and the policy’s vague rhetoric toward “objectionable,” “unsightly,” and “unwanted” graffiti illustrate the fallibility of homogenizing graffiti’s most basic idioms—pieces, murals, bombings, tags, stickers, stencils, or wall art—within a comprehensive judicial and visual category. Moreover, there exists little to no transparency for who is responsible for adjudicating what graffiti is permissible and what gets destroyed or removed, assumedly placing the onus of responsibility on individual city workers, which, by mediating graffiti’s locations and messages, positions them as arbiters for taste, beautification, and censorship.

More recently, questions surrounding unsanctioned graffiti, street art, murals, wall art, tagging, bombing, and other forms of mark making as acts of vandalism have been the subject of passionate discourse by various media sources, citizens, and journalists. Published reports on the state of unsanctioned graffiti in Johannesburg center on its visibility in public spaces, its inherent social dimensions, and the indeterminacy of its illegal dynamics. According to one article, “If Johannesburg is to maintain a positive image and work against the escalation of crime, then ‘petty’ crimes like vandalism must be addressed before the environment of degradation and impunity worsens”; adding, “keep in mind that the prevention of petty crimes is a
significant step towards the prevention of major crimes (Witherden 2010).” What is often overlooked is the idea that Johannesburg’s policy toward unsanctioned graffiti carries with it strong ethnic and class bias. The spaces in the city with some of the highest concentrations of poverty, violent crime, and nonwhite residents, such as the “inner-city suburbs” like Hillbrow and “northern” townships like Diepsloot, where the city of Johannesburg states the most frequent instances of graffiti marking occur (City of Johannesburg 2014). Thus, the strong correlation between municipal policy, ethnicity, and graffiti indicates a systemic prejudice toward whom and what is being targeted in the prevention, removal, and potential prosecution of graffiti in Johannesburg.

As the most transgressive form of public art, a categorical definition of unsanctioned graffiti rests in the idea that the creative environment of the street is a medium and resource open to boundless exploration, exploitation, and intervention. But the issue of the criminalization of graffiti is less about a hierarchy of artistic practices and more about the fact that it is being executed in public spaces, on the privately owned sites of corporations, homeowners, and small businesses. According to an unnamed expert referred by the legal compliance department of the city of Johannesburg’s local government, the act of graffiti “may not be illegal, though the place where it is inscribed qualifies its illegality; specifically, when the wall, signboard, or bridge is the property of an individual, local government, or state (see Witherden 2010).

Part of the official crackdown on graffiti in Johannesburg is premised on the idea that these forms of social communication and visual aesthetics occupy the very bottom of the hierarchy of the arts. Yet “despite what they say,” remarks Banksy (2007, 8), “graffiti is not the lowest form of art”; rather, it punctures geographies of the city “with moments of fracture, spaces of disruption, and subjective uses of territory” so as to manifest a vibrant urban culture and public communication forum (see Deitch et al. 2011, 19–24). Often, these marks of defiance represent strategies of resistance against the intrusion and proliferation of corporate advertising imagery overwhelming the public spaces of Johannesburg. Specific locations such as government property, operational infrastructure, and Euro-American commercial advertising billboards mired in object fetishism have become a proverbial target for culture jammers and détournement. Graffiti artists and writers often hijack advertising space to corrupt corporate images through defacement, thereby transforming their original meaning into something new and antithetical. For Kim Dovey, Simon Wollan, and Ian Woodcock (2012, 22–23), graffiti addresses a “captivate audience” that it shares with architecture and advertising, yet differs in its informality, illegality, and transgression of codes. In effect, the rampant commercialization of graffiti is “not merely a war on vandalism and social chaos fought along strict legal boundaries as its agents often claim, but part of a war against all messages legal or otherwise that distract from the dominant presentation” (Weinberg quoted in Ouzman 2008, 244). Unsanctioned graffiti interventions are part of a larger strategy of reclamation intended to recapture sites and spaces of the city that have been sold to corporate advertising interests (Schiller and Schiller 2010, 11). In cities such as Johannesburg, the rules that apply to private property take precedence over the rights of freedom to self-expression (see Seno 2010, 23).

Those who comprise a public may not necessarily relate to visual categories of inclusion but instead to ontologies of address. For Habermas, the modern public sphere is both a conceptual and physical environment where criticisms of society at large are based on the basic principles of democracy. Within this environment, groups of individuals engage in free discussion (see Holub 1991). This, according to Pauline Johnston (2006, 12), is “a mode of interaction in which participants conduct themselves without regard for social status, believing that the authority of the better argument should be allowed to prevail . . . this newly emerging ‘public’ insist[s] on a principle of openness and inclusion.” For Warner (2004, 10), “To address a public or to think of oneself as belonging to a public is to be a certain kind of person, to inhabit a certain kind of social world, to have at one’s disposal certain media and genres, to be motivated by a certain normative horizon, and to speak within a certain language ideology.” Under apartheid, notions of “public” were divided across racial lines—the public was predominantly a white public, and therefore the potential for democratic discourse, following Habermas’s logic, was an impossible dream. Paradoxically, after the end of apartheid, every graffiti tag, mark, or inscription created on previously segregated walls by the nonwhite victims of forced separation may have in fact helped to forge a healthy modern public sphere. These works incorporated once silenced voices into an open dialogue of democratic communication (albeit through illegal modes of address). Consequently, then, the challenge to Johannesburg is finding
a productive way to reconcile inclusive social practices with prohibited modes of visual communication.

TELLTALE SIGNS

As a postmodern city, Johannesburg functions as a conceptual, geographic, and critical space that lends itself to history making through the inscription and circulation of graffiti, whose visibility can be usurped to move the powerless to the powerful (see Sassen 2011, 574). Graffiti tagging, in particular, may operate as a complex marker of social unrest, disenfranchisement, or economic inequity, but it may also operate more strategically, as a physical and conceptual reclamation of space. More specifically, “tagging” references a different kind of vernacular self-representation, one that was forbidden as an act of vandalism, trespassing, and as a form of political radicalism under apartheid. In effect, tagging is the blanketing of the city’s surface with pseudo-signatures that stand in for absent physical bodies. “Described as pollution, dirt, deviance, criminal defacement, or, more benignly, folk art,” Timothy Cresswell explains, it “has also been variously theorized as a marking of territory; or an expression of, or an insistence on, identity” (Heddon 2002). Tagging, among other things, is a form of autobiographical marking that remains resistant not only to the category of visual art but also to the limits of respectable aesthetic expression (Whitlock and Poletti 2008, xiii). It remains a mode of autobiographical intervention that confronts the everyday person as an egotistical pollution of the urban environment. As a distinct category of graffiti, it operates discursively and spatially, forming a kind of autopoietical mode of resistance because it simultaneously occupies and defines space (Heddon in Whitlock and Poletti 2008, xiii–xiv). Tagging in Johannesburg may be closely related to the idea of reoccupying both tribal homelands and desegregated geographies, representing, quite literally, the reinsertion of oneself in colonially-occupied space for the purposes of visibility, self-insistence, and embodiment. The autobiographical act of tagging is a postcolonial interventionist strategy of resistance to the ethnic and geographic separation that Johannesburg is founded upon.

Tagging and other forms of text-based graffiti in Johannesburg are also subject to linguistic taxonomies rooted in indigenous African language, colonialism, and hybrid speech. One such example is the increase of the inscription “AMANDLA TATA”—meaning “Power Father”—written in isiXhosa, one of the eleven official languages of South Africa—near Mandela’s one-time residence in Soweto during the period immediately following his death. The presence of text-based graffiti on Johannesburg’s walls written in languages such as English and Afrikaans is a particularly strong example of colonialism’s sustained presence on the physical topography and social identity of the city. Moreover, the intrusion of nonnative language structures among colonized peoples of the Global South typifies yet another layer of European imperialism that enforces cultural hegemony through language. A second strong example refers to graffiti stating “WE WON’T MOVE” in the area of Sophiatown (once Triomf), a place known for its forcible removal of the black populace in 1955 under apartheid. While Sophiatown remains one of Johannesburg’s most ethnically diverse districts, graffiti reading “WE WON’T MOVE” appears frequently as a visible reminder of the township’s unsettled relationship with the past. The veritable frequency of this type of unsanctioned graffiti is directly related to the idea of transhistorical resistance; more specifically, that the appearance of graffiti marking related to this event may function to prevent forgetting and encourage the production of collective memory. The intensity of anger, pain, and victimization experienced by the collective consciousness long after the forcible removal represents the presence of intergenerational trauma, defined as the diffusion of trauma and trauma’s aftereffects following a critical historical event.

Similarly, Sabine Marschall (2002) argues that urban murals and rural wall decoration illustrate an understated and deep resistance to colonial and apartheid legacies by having the physical body enter previous geographies of exclusion. While essentially a transgressive act of opposition to political hegemony—many of which still exist today—these mural and wall-based works represent possibilities for inclusivity and social change: “Murals appropriate spaces and buildings, and through these sites they celebrate cultural difference; they recover history and aspects of traditional heritage; they offer unpretentious, candid glimpses into the activities and environment of daily life. Murals essentially acknowledge and assert the presence of people who were not permitted to occupy these spaces in the past or whose identity and cultural heritage were and often still are ignored or discredited” (Marschall 2002, 51). The contemporaneous inscription of unsanctioned graffiti onto spaces clearly demarcated across racial or ethnic lines decades before, confronts history with a strategy of recovery. Graffiti can operate as a proclamation of physical presence and the embodiment of inclusion, where interventions into post-apartheid topographies—be they physical,
conceptual, aesthetic, or otherwise—fundamentally criticize earlier social policies and dominant ideologies. In this sense, unsanctioned graffiti is a different method of “delegitimation” that, as Stuart Hall (in Gerin 2013, 155) explains, occurs when cultural or ideological manifestations can be made vulnerable, exposed, and essentially stripped of their legitimacy.

In recent years, Johannesburg and its districts have been inundated with subversive graffiti that responds directly to Hall’s notion of delegitimation, such as the graffiti images featuring Hector Pieterson in the arms of Mbuyisa Makhubo in Soweto (fig. 13.1). This example engages with the concept of delegitimation through its reference to the 1976 student protests in Soweto over the application of Afrikaans Medium Decree, a domestic policy reform that sought to force black students to use Afrikaans and English languages during classes, which essentially devalued (and delegitimized) the students’ indigenous dialects. On June 16, 1976, tens of thousands of black students left school to peacefully protest the measures at Orlando Stadium until a riot broke out and left many students, including Hector Pieterson, shot to death by the police. The presence of images of the lifeless Pieterson hanging from the arms of fellow student Mbuyisa Makhubo are marked, and continue to be marked, by artists and writers on the architecture of Soweto and elsewhere in South Africa. Not only does this work, and works similar to it, attempt to delegitimize the incursion of colonial and apartheid forces on indigenous African cultures, but it also strikes out against the systemic protraction of racism and the devaluing of ethnic traditions by erecting unofficial graffiti monuments dedicated to the event and its victims.

Urban art discourse in Johannesburg—for which graffiti and street art is a part of—does not exist in a vacuum but derives from the global urban art movement, most especially from New York City and Europe. The global popularity of hip-hop graffiti art and culture is directly related to the lack of political graffiti in Johannesburg, though the same may be said for other cities around the world. For Waddacor, “Graffiti is connected with hip-hop and that is how it was brought to this country. Young teens found a bond with the culture and sub-culture and began to replicate what they saw.” Although hip-hop graffiti may remain altogether local and regional in its execution, urban street culture’s aestheticism circulates under the rubric of its cultural limitations. Klopper suggests that hip-hop’s influence on graffiti grew out of the New York City scene of the 1960s; however, once it traveled to South Africa, it was employed by marginalized youths from poor urban neighborhoods to speak as a form of autobiographical expression about their experiences. “Even so,” she writes, “when it first emerged in South Africa, hip hop probably had more in common with earlier cultural movements that had sought to express opposition to the apartheid government by turning to America for inspiration than with the Mass Democratic Movement of the 1980s” (Klopper 2002, 181). In recent years, the younger generation of graffiti artists, with little to no knowledge or memory of apartheid, has taken to the streets with spray cans. Tumelo Mosaka (2004, 31), curator of the exhibition “A Decade of Democracy: Witnessing South Africa,” produces a similar observation suggesting that since a decade after the fall of apartheid, a younger generation of visual artists, though socialized under apartheid, is unburdened by its tragedies—their work does not engage or respond to local politics or political vernaculars. During apartheid, graffiti and other forms of urban street art discourse were treated as antagonistic acts of defiance to the state, and people were jailed for graffiti because it was viewed as an uprising.
The lack of political graffiti in Johannesburg may be directly related to the idea that the city has fallen far behind others in terms of responding to the global urban street art movement, so artists and writers are attempting to strategically place themselves within it rather than draw their attention to a graffiti that encourages oppositional politics. In the period following 1999, while many resident graffiti artist and writers engage with the global urban street art movement, unsanctioned graffiti projects executed by outsider, nonresident artists and writers, including Faith47, ABOVE have embraced an oppositional politics, using it to expose and critique Johannesburg's inimitable relationship with global capital, apartheid, and resistance.

OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

In 2012, California-based graffiti artist ABOVE visited Johannesburg to produce a controversial work that soon received the critical attention of global media (fig. 13.2). ABOVE persuaded a community arts and cultural development organization to commission an enormous street-level wall text located on the east security wall in a district of Johannesburg known as Jewel City, Jewel City is the corporate base of operations for nearly three hundred mineral companies and reportedly the largest diamond exporter in the Southern Hemisphere, whose worth is estimated at more than seven billion rand (approximately US$7,000,000) (Smith 2012). ABOVE originally proposed to inscribe the words Diamonds are a woman's best friend in stylized black-and-white letters, an appropriation of the phrase diamonds are a girl's best friend made popular by the actress Marilyn Monroe. Unbeknown to the commissioners of the project, he supplemented the phrase with the quip “And a man's worst enemy” at the time of the work's creation. “What the owners didn't know,” says ABOVE, “is that I lied to them and was hijacking their wall... I assume the owners were so busy trading diamonds inside the mega centre that they never took the time to come out and see that I was painting a controversial wordplay about the diamond trade and how it's fuelled so much bloodshed in wars, making it one of man's worst enemies” (Smith 2012). For ABOVE, deception is a necessary, though Machiavellian evil: “I have justified my lying as I feel it created an epic social and political piece” (Kanani 2012). DIAMONDS ARE A WOMAN'S BEST FRIEND AND A MAN'S WORST ENEMY blurs the categorical distinctions between sanctioned and unsanctioned graffiti by employing bureaucratic means of permission through commission while delivering a rhetorical pronouncement critical of Jewel City's corporate mandate and problematic social practices. At issue for ABOVE and other social rights and labor activists is the violent pursuit, sale, and circulation of conflict diamonds—otherwise known as “blood diamonds”—exploited by rebel organizations to finance wars and threaten the sovereignty of African nation-states. Accordingly, ABOVE's wall piece not only affirms a penetrating critique of the conflict diamond industry in Johannesburg but also the encroachment of Euro-American hegemony on the natural resources and labor of South Africa.

Soon after DIAMONDS ARE A WOMAN'S BEST FRIEND AND A MAN'S WORST ENEMY was thrown up, authorities had it destroyed. Iain Nicol, asset manager at Redfine Properties, who owns the Jewel City vicinity, responded to the work by saying, “There's a place to do that and take on someone moving blood diamonds. We are not moving blood diamonds. There are probably more blood diamonds going through Antwerp, Israel and India” (Smith 2012). Though he discredits his argument by suggesting that blood diamonds “probably” exist in Johannesburg—but more are sold elsewhere—Nicol references the idea that there is a time and a place to “do” social activism. The strength of interventionist aesthetics lies precisely in its potential to surprise, provoke, and offend. By disrupting conventions of acceptable tropes of social activism, the work represents a powerful act of subterfuge—a condemnation of corporate denial and inactivity masquerading as cute streetart. It paradoxically cinemates itself as an act of vandalism while enmeshing property owners in critiquing their own corporate practices; this radical reversal of power relations delegitimizes the industry and officials who sanction conflict diamonds or choose to ignore their presence.

Likewise, Cape Town–based graffiti artist Faith47 also criticizes issues of economic disparity and class discrimination in post-apartheid Johannesburg through a series of sanctioned and unsanctioned graffiti and mural projects. Her work is strongly compelled by issues of empowerment—in the
city, women continue to encounter abusive domestic environments, social inequality, and it is reported that approximately one in three women have been raped. Arguably, she is best known for her 2010 series Freedom Charter, which reproduces particular words and phrases from the core principles of the controversial 1955 African National Congress’s Freedom Charter document. The Freedom Charter was born out of South African anti-apartheid political organizations calling on citizens to submit their visions for a new democratic social order; however, outspoken critics of the charter maintain that the legacies of imperialism have exploited the labor force, natural resources, and financial capital of South Africa to the point where nationalization is a cold fallacy (see Peffer 2009). By inscribing texts from the charter in geographies where economic and sociopolitical change is exigent—low-income communities, high-crime locations, condemned buildings, and squatter’s settlements—it is precisely this concept of intangible hope that Faith47 exposes. For instance, in Rest, Leisure & Recreation: SHALL BE THE RIGHT OF ALL (fig. 13.3), she takes issue with one of the ten demands listed in the charter: “There Shall Be Houses, Security and Comfort!” Affixed on a pillar under a bridge in the historical Newtown district of Johannesburg, the whimsical inscription of text contrasts sharply with what lies below—makeshift beds, various living supplies, and detritus. Against this climate of disillusionment, as manifested by the lack of affordable housing, the potential for radical social change lies in what might be considered an unobvious place. By marking the verisimilitudes of marginalization and poverty in and around Johannesburg, Faith47 politicizes overlooked topographies while emphasizing fractures in the social order. The almost-violent juxtaposition between these sites and its rhetoric of hope points to the charter’s ineffectual promises and failure to introduce meaningful structural socioeconomic.

More recently, in late 2012, Faith47 returned to Johannesburg with the purpose of executing an unsanctioned project titled The Long Wait (fig. 13.4), the first installment of the series Fragments of a Burnt History, which demonstrated a concern with the structural and systemic consequences of idleness, a lack of employment, and self-fulfillment through labor. The twenty-four works appear in several areas of the city including Soweto, Newtown, Maboneng Precinct, Commissioner Street, Jan Smuts Avenue, Oxford Street, Louis Botha Avenue, Braamfontein, Yeoville, and Rosebank. Executed in black-and-white enamel, figures are seen hunched over and dejected with gaunt faces and sunken shoulders, her drip technique striving to conceptualize how denizens of Johannesburg are threatened with the specters of inactivity and obscurity. For Faith47, the work makes a strong attempt to visualize “miners waiting for justice, workers waiting for a living wage, people waiting for service delivery, refugees waiting for assistance, we are all waiting for an honest politician. There has been so much waiting in this country that much time has been lost” (Krut 2014). She continues to expose these wounds much in the same way as ABOVE: by visualizing the perennial survival of its effects as they currently exist in reality and in the collective memory, and in this way, the work is heavily influenced by the earlier The Freedom Charter series in that it also draws attention to the structural and systemic imbalances in the city. In bringing attention to the vernacular, everyday proceedings of such topographies, she makes a conceded effort to snap individuals out of their passivity and into a more strategic oppositional politics. Finally, Faith47 positions the physical body in spaces and sites where it was previously excluded under apartheid law, and where opportunities for gainful employment are difficult, in order to draw attention to the painfully sluggish socioeconomic progress of reformation policies following the fall of apartheid.
CONCLUSION

In his examination of urban development in post-apartheid Johannesburg, Martin Murray (2011) argues that builders, developers, property owners, municipal authorities, and private security firms intended to model Johannesburg as a world-class city after the fall of apartheid. As a result of their quest to reshape the city under this rubric, they paradoxically succeeded in establishing new forms of spatial segregation between the upper classes and the black urban poor, effectively cutting them off from participating in the urban life of the city (Murray 2011; see also Gaule 2005). As Johannesburg and other cities in South Africa continue to structure and sanitize the urban landscape through the idealization of global capital, they also (see Bremner 2002, 171) “redraw” the boundaries of apartheid; however, it is the acts of everyday denizens that reinvigorate and renew the social life and topography of the modern city. The effort put forth by municipal officials to clean up particular areas and neighborhoods of Johannesburg, and therefore rid it of unsanctioned graffiti, tagging, culture jamming, and other unsightly markings, may suggest an effort to organize the city geographically based on ethnicity, class, and color. If this is so, then the boundaries for nonwhites and whites in and around Johannesburg are still being negotiated in ways similar to how they once were in 1897. At the present moment, municipal authorities are not drawing up spatial boundaries according to race, color, and ethnicity; it is where graffiti is destroyed and removed that may rightfully indicate the spatial boundaries between people.

Informed by the streets, it is fully possible for graffiti to represent a symbol of resistance to help forge a localized sense of community (see Lennon 2014). The heterogeneous images and texts created by graffiti writers are as important to understanding Johannesburg graffiti as are the body’s participation in such acts. Unsanctioned graffiti involves a symbiotic relationship between the aesthetic and the political; the spray can, like the body itself, symbolize apparatuses for resistance because law, society, and unspoken rules often dictate where they are not supposed to be. The deconstruction of unsanctioned graffiti practices in Johannesburg serves to critique, delegitimize, and resist dominant ideologies embedded by colonialism and apartheid. This work is intended to prevent against the disappearance of traumatic historical events in the collective memory and in the minds of younger generations, which, in turn, help to forge a unified front against the violence and repression that the official city limits of Johannesburg is founded upon.

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NOTES

1. For more information on the victimization of South Africa’s poor and an analysis of crime rates in South Africa, see Naude, Prinsloo, and Ladikos (2006).
2. C. Waddacor, e-mail communication, December 10, 2014.
3. Ibid.
4. The idea of street-as-medium is derived from the author’s reference to street-as-“material” “resource.” See Riggle (2010, 245).
5. See also McCormick (2011).
6. Slavoj Žižek (2012, 28) interprets Hall’s concept of delegitimation as a political struggle waged on the primacy of specific ideas and ideologies.
8. Though plagued with internal strife in recent years, the Kimberley Process has been a strong advocate for stemming the flow of conflict diamonds. For more information on the Kimberley Process, see http://www.kimberlyprocess.com/.
9. A 1999 survey of four thousand women, conducted by CIET Africa, a nongovernmental organization, reveals that one in three women were raped that same year in the city of Johannesburg, gaining the city a reputation, according to the article, the world’s “rape capital.” See BBC News (1999).

References


