

## 'Throw Word': Graffiti, Space and Power in Kingston, Jamaica

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# 'Throw Word'

## Graffiti, Space and Power in Kingston, Jamaica

RIVKE JAFFE, KEVON RHINEY, AND CAVELL FRANCIS

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### Introduction: Graffiti, space and power

A SPECIFIC JAMAICAN WAY OF expressing criticism is to 'throw word'. Similar to the African-American practice of 'signifying', this rhetorical device, developed in a context of power inequalities, allows critics to convey their disapproval of certain behaviour indirectly by speaking 'to the air' rather than to any one person. Those being reprimanded will be well aware that they are the intended audience but find it difficult to retort because, as the saying goes, "Throw a stone in a pigsty, the one that squeals the loudest is the one that has been hit."<sup>1</sup> This article examines textual graffiti in Kingston, Jamaica as a form of 'throw word', a way for socio-politically and economically marginalised citizens to air their often critical opinions of urban life. We explore how graffiti texts can be used to understand relations and contestations of power in urban space. The texts can provide insight into how certain urban actors give spatial expression to their concerns surrounding various issues relevant to the urban experience. We analyse the distribution of texts throughout the city and to what extent they offer a (not necessarily emancipatory) voice for marginalised groups, arguing that, in the final analysis, they reflect a conservative ideology that tends to bolster rather than undermine the dominant order in terms of political, class and cultural struggles.

There is a growing body of literature on graffiti, particularly within urban geography.<sup>2</sup> Most of these studies, however, have focused on large cities in the global north, such as New York and Philadelphia. Little is known about

graffiti in cities in the global south, such as Kingston. Graffiti in Kingston is markedly different from that commonly referred to in the USA, where scrawled names ('tags') and brightly coloured murals ('pieces') reflecting an urban subculture of graffiti writers are the main focus of research. In contrast, the graffiti in Kingston is more political, publicly oriented and often intentionally provocative. For the purpose of this article, the use of the term graffiti refers to the textual street-oriented forms of graffiti generally seen around the city of Kingston, Jamaica.

While geographers have long studied landscapes as texts,<sup>3</sup> graffiti not only alters or edits the text of the cityscape. It also forms an independent body of texts or narratives that refer to each other as well as to the 'canvas' of the city on which they are literally inscribed; collectively, then, graffiti forms a discourse. The discursive nature of Kingston's graffiti is best understood through a broader urban perspective. Factors such as crime, poverty, garrison politics and public sexual mores<sup>4</sup> contribute to the urban experience which finds discursive expression through urban phenomena such as graffiti.

Contestations over urban space are a well-established focus within the literature on urbanisation, and qualitative approaches within this field have shifted towards studying the intimate connections of space with knowledge and power. Following authors such as Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau,<sup>5</sup> we are interested in the manifestation of power in space, not only through the use of 'spatial strategies' (in de Certeau's terms) or 'disciplinary diagrams' (as Foucault puts it) of surveillance and control by those in power, but also through the spatial and discursive tactics of economically and socio-politically marginalised groups. This shift in emphasis also entails broadening the focus from struggles over access to and uses of spaces and places, to include the cultural politics of symbolic struggles over the meanings of places and socio-spatial boundaries.

Recent shifts within the spatial structure of cities, linked to neoliberal policies, evidence the manifestation of power in space.<sup>6</sup> The privatisation, regulation and militarisation of public space both reflect and contribute to power inequalities within the city. Where space was long considered a 'container' or 'backdrop' to social action, more recently authors have developed a more dynamic understanding of the role space plays in social action and specifically in social relations of inequality. On the one hand, space is the product of unequal social relations; that is, human agency – or the conscious and

unconscious efforts of individuals – contributes to patterns visible in urban space, from gates and defensive architecture to ghettos and no-go areas. On the other hand, space itself is a producer of unequal social relations, or rather, it forms the structure that enables or constrains human behaviour, from physical mobility options to opportunities for random encounters between very different groups in public space.<sup>7</sup>

Earlier authors studied how states implement spatial schemes to rule over their subjects. Foucault in particular studied the use of spatial techniques of domination, such as physical segregation, expulsion, isolation and surveillance.<sup>8</sup> De Certeau defines such hegemonic actions as spatial 'strategies' and contrasts them with the spatial 'tactics' of resistance citizens employ in their everyday uses of space. Through everyday narratives and uses of space, citizens can reinforce, contest or subvert the dominant power structure.<sup>9</sup> Henri Lefebvre, in his discussion of struggles over cultural meaning and the social production of space, distinguishes between an official, conceived space that consists of formal representations by state planners and maps, a more informal perceived space – the everyday spatial practices of popular life – and the lived space of artistic and imaginary representations, the location of more transformational or subversive practices.<sup>10</sup>

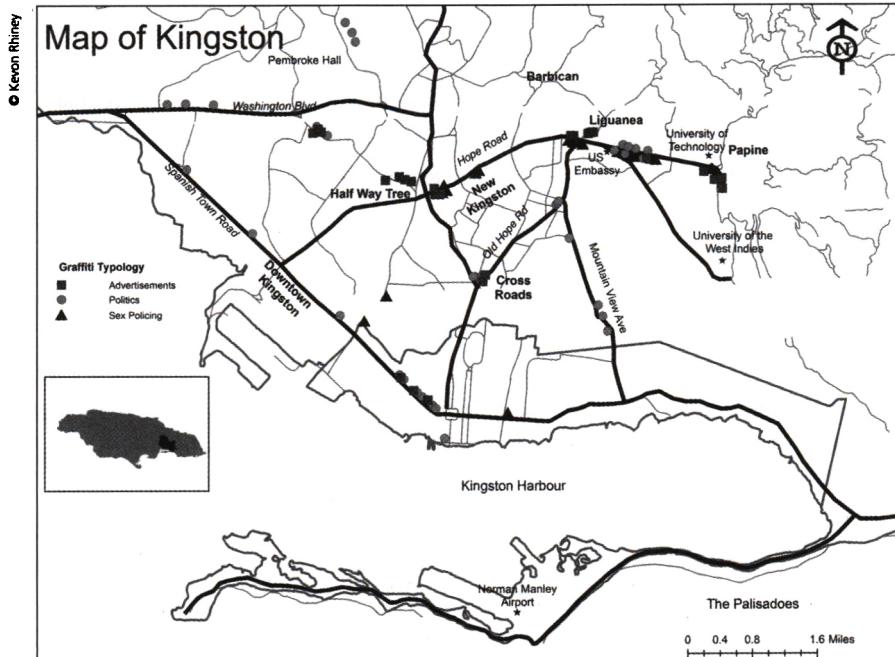
Power over space is intimately connected to knowledge and to its dissemination and entrenchment through discourses: the circulation of dominant texts or narratives that shape our ways of knowing. Graffiti as a body of texts or narratives, including artistic or gang graffiti as well as textual graffiti, has often been a communicative tool of those who feel excluded from formal structures of social, economic and political power. In increasingly regulated and commercialised cities, graffiti enables non-state, non-commercial individuals to mark urban space in an unauthorised way, "inscribing transgression on the urban landscape".<sup>11</sup> Graffiti also provides a 'shortcut to fame': rather than achieving fame by following the standard path of what one's society values, and having accomplishments according to the dominant norms, one can create a situation where the entire city is confronted with one's name (even though they may not be able to discern the difference between one tag and the next). In the case of tags, pieces and gang graffiti, it involves a systematic form of communication, a language known only to other practitioners, belonging to the same linguistic subculture of graffiti artists.<sup>12</sup> Authorship is generally only recognised by those already 'in the know'.

Textual graffiti, including political slogans, is often equally anonymous but generally more legible to the general public. Such graffiti allows citizens, who do not have easy access to the ears and eyes of the public through more conventional media (although radio talk shows remain a notable exception), to voice their opinions in the broadest way possible and re-write the city in doing so. The public visibility graffiti affords to marginalised social groups challenges official forms of governing sight within the city; as a form of ‘free speech’ it makes a powerful claim to recognition through urban space.<sup>13</sup> The scrawling of texts, then, can be a powerful subversive practice. Yet, analysing Kingston’s textual graffiti against the background of these debates, we argue that while the form that this mode of communication takes on may be transgressive, the messages conveyed through these social texts contribute to the maintenance rather than the erosion of the city’s class, political and sexual orders.

### **Kingston, Jamaica**

Given the significance of the urban socio-spatial structure posited above, graffiti cannot be analysed without first looking at the context of the particular city in which it is found. Kingston is the capital of Jamaica and is located on the southeast coast of this Caribbean island. It is a relatively small city with a population of 579,137 in the 2001 census, and like many other urban centres in the Caribbean, reflects its colonial history. This legacy is evident, for instance, in its strategic sheltered and coastal location, its urban primacy, its colonial architecture and infrastructure, and its demographic characteristics reflecting a history of plantation slavery.<sup>14</sup> In the course of the twentieth century, a rapid increase in the urban population and inadequate urban planning led to the development of numerous informal areas, particularly in the western section of the city.

This process of urban growth, termed “urbanisation without industrialisation”,<sup>15</sup> resulted in a concentration of high-density, low-income areas in the southern and western sections of the city, with middle- and upper-income communities found in the northeastern part. This division reflects a broader socio-spatial schism between the ghettos and garrisons of downtown and the spacious, well-guarded residential areas of uptown. The border between these two halves is often located across the hubs of Cross Roads and Half-Way-Tree



**Figure 1:** Map of Kingston, including distribution of graffiti.

Source: Fieldwork data.<sup>16</sup>

(see Figure 1). This urban structure of unequal social relations and spatial segregation is connected to a history of racialised exclusion, characterised by a strong correlation between class, colour and space.<sup>17</sup> In the 1960s, Colin Clarke emphasised Kingston's marked "racial and social cleavage".<sup>18</sup> While there have been significant changes since Jamaica's independence in 1962 to this colonially shaped urban class-colour divide, including the emergence of a black bourgeoisie,<sup>19</sup> the association of darker skin with poverty and downtown remains salient.

This urban rupture along lines of class and colour is cut through by political fissures. The two major political parties – the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) and the People's National Party (PNP) – had, and still have to some extent, relationships with their constituency termed 'garrison politics'. These politics entail using state resources to secure votes, and supplying loyal communities with material benefits such as housing or employment, thus creating a spatially delineated system of political clientelism and control in Kingston's impoverished inner city. However, for the party supporters, material benefits have not

been the sole issue; as Amanda Sives points out, the parties offered their followers “a sense of belonging, identity, and hope”.<sup>20</sup> Political alliance became a factor with more cohesive power than ethnicity or class, but, simultaneously, with incredibly divisive effects, leading to a situation termed ‘political tribalism’. Downtown inner-city communities in particular are divided along political party lines, carved during turf wars in which the two major political parties seek geographical control over specific areas as an electoral strategy. Party loyalty is based on feelings of community identity rather than different political principles and policies – the antagonism is more about turf than about abstract ideals. The creation, development and maintenance of these violently maintained garrisons are not accidents of history or geography, but part of a process deliberately fostered by political representatives in tandem with gang leaders.<sup>21</sup>

Contemporary Kingston is plagued by widespread unemployment, high crime rates and garrison politics. A large proportion of the urban population experiences an extremely marginalised existence, as they struggle to overcome exclusion from the formal economy and limited opportunities for socio-economic mobility or truly democratic political participation. While its complex problems have given Kingston a bad reputation at home and abroad, the city is still seen as Jamaica’s cultural, intellectual and political heart. Socio-political movements, cultural transformations, innovations in the music industry, and the newest fashion statements and dance moves almost always originate in the capital. Given their lack of access to formal channels of communication and influence, Kingston’s marginalised residents must devise alternative ways of expressing themselves. Along with popular culture in the form of dancehall,<sup>22</sup> textual graffiti forms such a communicative tool.

## Graffiti in Kingston

The focus in this article is on three types of graffiti. The first is political graffiti, which reflects the intense rivalry between Jamaica’s two main political parties over urban constituencies and electoral turf. A second form of graffiti that has appeared more recently consists of texts that prohibit specific sexual acts and give explicit warning of the dire consequences awaiting those who engage in them. The final strand of graffiti is related to the dancehall culture and involves

the self-promotion or grassroots advertising of a number of lesser known artistes.

### *Politics, identity and tribalism*

In 2007–2009, the main period of observation for this article, three major types of political graffiti were evident throughout Kingston. The first relates to the garrison-style politics witnessed in Jamaica, the second entails a series of commentaries on international politics (predominantly anti-US in tone), and the third ties into local school politics. Kingston's political tribalism is most violently evident in a series of politically motivated border wars between opposing garrison communities around election times. Within this specific political culture, party loyalty is associated with specific colours, hand signals, slang, and other visual and verbal symbols. The PNP is usually represented with the colours orange or red and the symbol of a balled fist, while the JLP is represented by green and the logo of a bell. In Kingston, it is common to see graffiti endorsing one party over the other. This graffiti is usually painted in the party's colour and tends to be spatially specific. As one moves through the city one is confronted with a large number of these graffiti bearing the party's name or logo. Like other graffiti, party political graffiti is illegal. Moreover, political parties have condemned it in Jamaica's 2005 Political Code of Conduct, a joint declaration agreed to in parliament with the intent of combating political tribalism.

During Jamaica's 2007 national elections we were able to make a number of observations. Leading up to the general elections, many instances of this type of political graffiti emerged. Most simply consisted of the name of the preferred political party, despite the recently endorsed Political Code of Conduct. However, a number of these graffiti went further to comment on party policies and political promises. One example commented on the then ruling PNP's reluctance to promise free education, referring implicitly to the JLP's election promise to implement this if voted into power (see Figure 2). This particular graffiti text proclaiming "Free education yes. Free tuition [sic] now" was painted directly outside the PNP's head office and was sprayed across an official, party-commissioned billboard depicting three of the party's founding fathers. Other graffiti included: "Dirty Nasty PNP" and "JLP naw [will not]

switch". Many referred explicitly to specific politicians, proclaiming "PJ [Patterson, the former PNP leader] = battyman"<sup>23</sup> and "Vote Portia [Simpson-Miller, PNP] or get gunshot!" or "Fedda Andrew [Holness, JLP] must go, new representatives, no attention no vote, people need help" (see Figure 3).<sup>24</sup> Specific policies were targeted – for instance, by the entrance to the Portmore toll road: "No toll!" Another graffiti, located intentionally on the wall of the university hospital, proclaims: "You can build gate but you can't provide health care." While some of these texts comment on specific policies or the contents of party programmes, most are visual indications of the often violent struggles over electoral turf and the associated political-clientelist spoils. Indirectly, then, these graffiti serve the interests of political stakeholders more than those of the inner-city residents in whose environment they are pervasive.

Another category of political graffiti in Kingston refers to international relations and events. When the British queen came to visit the Mona campus of the University of the West Indies in the early 1990s, someone sprayed the text "Nanny a fi we [= is our] queen", near the campus entrance, referring to Nanny of the Maroons, a national hero and historical figure who fought against the British. In addition, there are several more elaborate commentaries referring to a range of global issues and obviously anti-American in their stance. One example seems to speak specifically to September 11 and the US 'War on Terror', with the graffiti artist blaming the USA for the spread of terrorism: "September to remember III: The voice of the whistling tempest said: Free Manuel Noriaga [*sic*] from Yankee jail now. No terroist [*sic*] was at Durban [the UN anti-racism conference?] when you turned your back on it." This is followed elsewhere by the assertion, in apparently the same handwriting: "You were timed by Al-Qaida [*sic*] for it." Other instances include the venting of the author's discontent with Robert Mugabe's rule in Zimbabwe and the situation in Chechnya. In 2010, as the JLP government under then prime minister Bruce Golding attempted to stall the extradition of the JLP-affiliated 'don' Christopher "Dudus" Coke to the USA, a number of graffiti appeared throughout downtown Kingston, berating the role of PNP politician Peter Phillips in this transnational affair. One text read "Peter Phillips sell out JA to the USA", another stated "Peter Phillip [*sic*] sell out JA to the CIA", and yet another claimed that "Peter Phillips a DEA [the US Drugs Enforcement Agency]" (see Figure 4).

The third and final type of political graffiti we identified relates to 'school

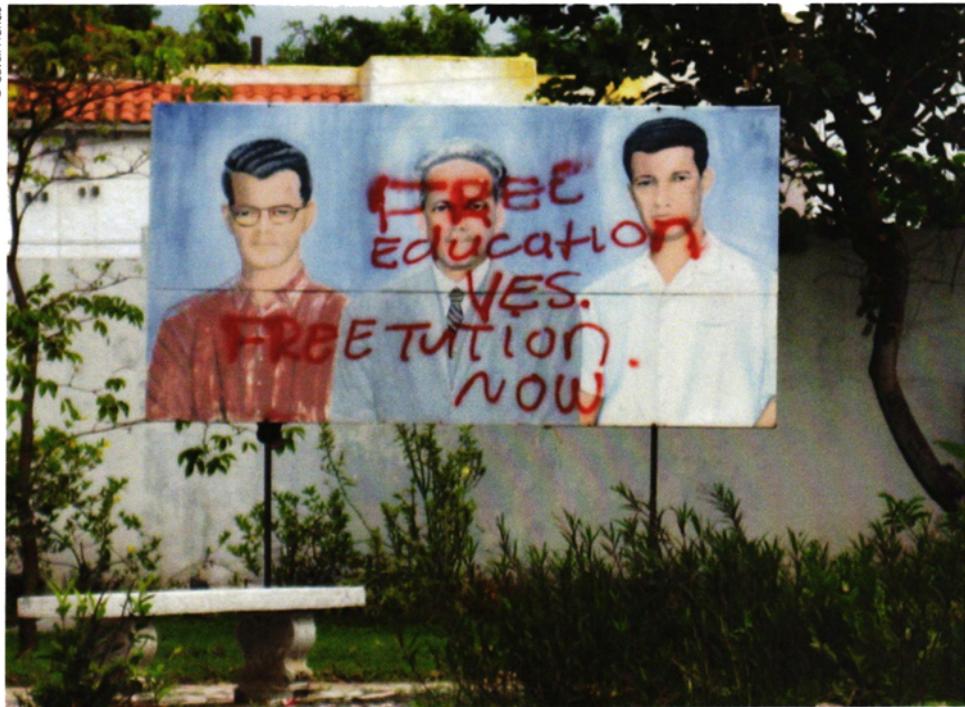


Figure 2: Anti-PNP political graffiti



Figure 3: Anti-JLP political graffiti

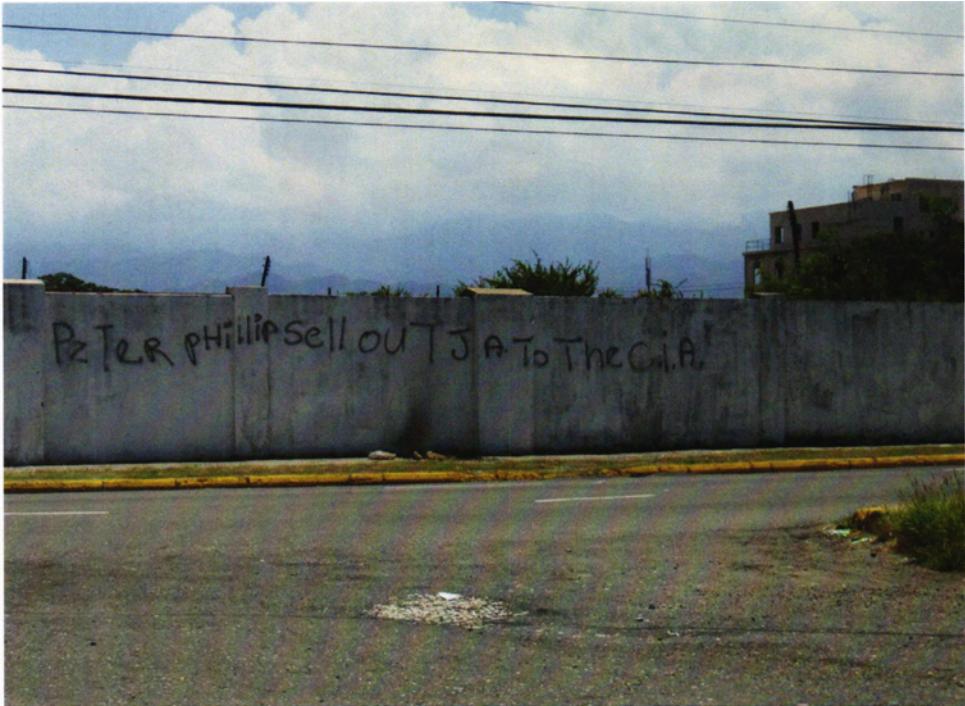


Figure 4: Anti-Peter Phillips graffiti during the Dudus affair

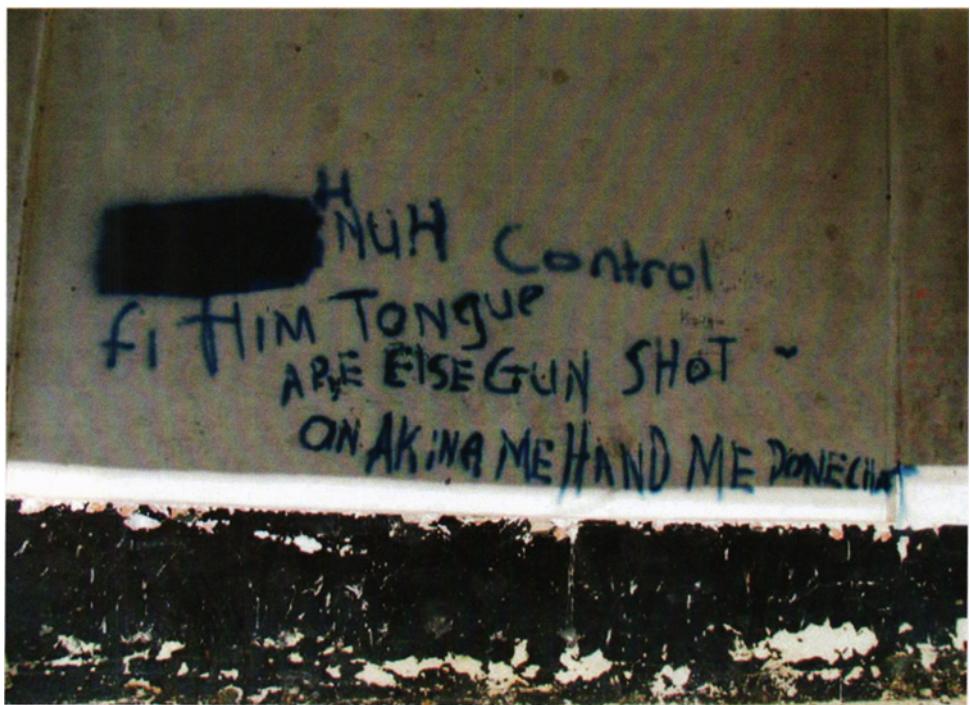


Figure 5: Sexual policing via graffiti: "Me done chat"



Figure 6: LA Lewis supports Tivoli Gardens 'don' Dudus



Figure 7: LA Lewis supports Matthews Lane 'don' Zeeks



Figure 8: Grassroots advertising



Figure 9: 'Gaza Strip', downtown Kingston, during the 2010 State of Emergency

politics'. Here school students engage in graffiti by scribbling the names of their secondary school throughout the city, often corresponding to the school colours and school uniform they wear. This graffiti reflects the intense rivalry between various Kingston high schools. In a few instances, this rivalry turns violent, particularly between students attending all-male high schools. Their graffiti is mostly seen in areas frequented by these students, such as Half-Way Tree, a major transportation hub for the Kingston Metropolitan Area. In a mildly scandalous incident in 2007, graffiti writers representing Calabar High School sprayed its name in several locations across the campus of the University of the West Indies, which is heavily patrolled by security guards. School graffiti is somewhat similar to party political graffiti, as the students involved in writing these graffiti display strong identification and fierce loyalty to a particular, institutionally defined group.<sup>25</sup> School competition is exacerbated in the annual 'Champs', a century-old athletics championship in which secondary schools across the island compete. For males in particular, school identities are maintained into adulthood, with alumni networks and old boys' clubs sustaining the bonds.

### *Sexual policing*

As in many countries, sexuality is an ambiguous domain in Jamaica. The explicit sexuality witnessed in the dancehall scene is involved in a dynamic dialectic with the puritanical sexual norms of mainstream Jamaican society.<sup>26</sup> Sexuality and sexual practices are hotly debated in Jamaica, most recently centring on changing sexual repertoires understood as linked to globalisation processes including migration and the influence of foreign media. Homosexuality and other 'deviant' forms of sex, including oral sex, are widely condemned, but are seen to be on the rise as a result of external influences, such as US cable television (and specifically the 'blue movie' porn channels) and the corrupted mores of deported Jamaicans and others travelling to and from foreign countries – specifically the USA, UK and Canada. The 'deformation' of sexual norms also appears to be associated with those who have higher levels of education and a higher socio-economic background. Concerns surrounding the much discussed marginalisation of males are related to such sexual politics and a widespread perception that hetero-normative Jamaican

masculinities are under threat. The anxiety surrounding perceived changes in gendered and sexual norms, discussed in detail by other authors,<sup>27</sup> is also evident in the expressions of one particular graffiti writer, who warns against specific practices such as oral sex or homosexuality. Painted boldly in large letters, these texts proclaim “Don’t bow [= practise oral sex]! Don’t suck!” (see cover image) and “Oral sex is dangerous cause hormone malfunction & gender bender”. Others warn that “hormone imbalance cause cancer and gayism lesbianism”.

In a less concerted effort, certain graffiti texts appear to police the sexual behaviour of specific individuals, presumably residing in the vicinity of the graffiti. One such text reads “—— [the name has been blacked out, perhaps by the accused] fi a use him hood ana use him tongue [should use his penis instead of using his tongue]”. Another text in the same handwriting proclaims “—— nuh control fi him tongue are else gunshot an AK ina me hand me done chat [must stop having oral sex or else he will get shot, and I have an AK-47 in my hand, and that’s all I have to say]” (see Figure 5). Another set of graffiti that we observed, however, specifically addressed safe sex, promoting the use of condoms. Interestingly, this subset of sexual graffiti seemed to be closely associated with a series of grassroots advertising graffiti promoting the dancehall artiste DJ Ryzin. It is unclear whether there was a direct link between the two or if they were just randomly placed.

### *Grassroots advertising*

A third category of graffiti identified in Kingston involved the promotion of various dancehall artistes, both lesser known and well established. The Jamaican music industry is very competitive; scores of inner-city youth see dancehall as a way to escape the poverty they experience, hoping to achieve the international fame of past reggae artistes such as Bob Marley, Peter Tosh and Jimmy Cliff. Many aspiring musicians may never break through, and many others struggle for years before making their mark in the industry. Most of these artistes must sign up with music producers who in some instances manipulate and exploit them. In an effort to circumvent or even supplement the standard route to fame, many of these lesser known artistes resort to graffiti as a means of self-promotion. Examples of this type of graffiti can be seen throughout the city and have been strategically placed near bus stops, road-

sides, sidewalks, school gates and in any other spaces providing the artiste with easy access and maximum exposure. Most famous of these, and probably the first person to engage in this form of self-promotion, is a local dancehall artiste by the name of LA Lewis. Starting in the early 1990s Lewis began to paint his name throughout the city, asserting his popularity through reiteration of phrases such as "LA Lewis we love you" and "LA Lewis big DJ". He also ventured into the territory of garrison politics, pledging his support to both Dudus, the long-time area leader of JLP-affiliated Tivoli Gardens, and Zeeks, the leader of the neighbouring PNP garrison Matthews Lane (see Figures 6 and 7). While musically LA Lewis has not made a major mark on the dancehall scene, today he has a website and his own clothing line that features T-shirts with some of his most famous quotes such as "LA Lewis the pore [sic] people hero".

Other examples include Althea "Da Chick" Hewitt, Malijah, Ghetto Bomb, to name a few (Figure 8). A recent graffiti urged readers to "vote for Norshous on Rising Star", the Jamaican version of *American Idol*, and spelled out the contending artiste's MySpace website. In addition to the textual broadcasting of performers' names, there are also various instances throughout urban Jamaica of party events being promoted by way of graffiti.

A different form of music-related graffiti came to prominence during the Gully/Gaza conflict of 2009, resulting from a 'clash' between Vybz Kartel and Mavado, two of the most successful dancehall artistes. Fans began to express their allegiance to either Kartel's 'Gaza' or Mavado's 'Gully', scrawling these two terms on walls in Kingston and beyond, marking territory for one or the other fan base (see Figure 9). The enmity between the two factions became so strong that violence erupted between warring fans; the extent of the conflict was such that the Office of the Prime Minister convened a conciliatory meeting in which the two artistes agreed to declare peace. It was also alleged that Dudus, the aforementioned Tivoli Gardens don, intervened and perhaps had a more decisive role in putting the conflict to rest.

## Analysis

This paper has examined three very different strands of graffiti in detail. The political rivalry, sexual policing and grassroots advertising evident in

Kingston's graffiti speak to anxieties over the competing uses of and influences on urban space, survival and order. Here, we situate these strands in relation to theory on urban space and power. The spatial exercise of power is evident in the production of knowledge and of difference in the way in which people and objects are represented in and through space. The construction of spatial categories – us and them, north and south, east and west, uptown and downtown, good and bad neighbourhoods, male and female quarters – is manipulated by those who stand to gain from such differences and hierarchies.<sup>28</sup> These imaginings of spaces are heavily politicised, both between nations, regions and hemispheres, and within cities down to the micro-space of the household. These spatial techniques can be discursive means of disciplining political subjects; yet establishing independent or counter-narratives can be an effective form of manipulating or contesting these structures. We argue that graffiti in Kingston presents such spatially embedded narratives, conveying contestations over urban space and meaning. First, we analyse in more detail the spatial context of Kingston's graffiti, discussing how their spatial distribution and differentiated responses reflect and reinforce struggles over resources and identity. Next, we examine how interventions at the urban scale link to global cultural politics. Finally, we connect graffiti's location in public space to transformations of the public sphere.

### *Spatial context of graffiti*

As with other illegal activities, it is difficult to discern who graffiti writers are or their exact motivations. However, the geographic location of graffiti texts offers a good indication of their intentions. The spatial distribution of these various texts is not coincidental.<sup>29</sup> The strategic spatial positioning of a text can serve to make its message more pointed, as when references to toll imposition and health care are sprayed near the toll road and the hospital gate respectively. In the case of party political graffiti, many are carefully positioned and incorporate references to specific policies. Given Kingston's spatial fragmentation, the placement of graffiti also allows for the targeting of specific audiences. Some are aimed at political targets, such as party headquarters, while others sprout up especially on the borders of political garrison communities. Many are clear spatial contestations over turf. The antagonistic texts

sprayed near party headquarters challenge political parties' dominance in their own 'home', while the 'border clashes' at the edges of politically opposed garrison communities pose a clear struggle over electoral and economic territory, similar (and related) to criminal gang activities. At stake here are not only the economic spoils connected to clientelist politics, but also a negotiation of urban identities. School graffiti, like the political tribalism evident in party graffiti, is a spatial expression of social othering – school affiliation as an issue of us against them – that includes a similar use of identifiable colours and symbols to mark and claim space.

The classed nature of Kingston's urban space has important implications in terms of graffiti narratives. Unlike the political and advertising graffiti, most of the texts condemning oral sex and 'gayism' were found along major uptown throughways. While, again, the author's particular intentions remain obscured, it is not unreasonable to suggest that these texts were placed in these locations strategically because of the classed nature of these spaces, and that they seek uptown Kingstonians as their audience. This sexual policing, then, can have class-specific intents, as its spatial location coincides with the social spaces of those people presumed to be more cosmopolitan and 'less Jamaican' in their sexual preferences. The responses to the various graffiti are also spatially differentiated – we observed that political graffiti, while illegal everywhere, was removed most speedily in affluent areas during the run-up to the 2007 elections. The map of Kingston (see Figure 1) gives a visual indication of the way in which the various types of graffiti were distributed. 'Turfist' party political graffiti was clustered most tightly around contested inner-city areas such as Mountain View and Red Hills. Graffiti policing sexual behaviour is clearly most prominent in uptown areas such as Constant Spring, Liguanea and Mona, and is especially close to the two main universities. Most graffiti, including commercial graffiti, is placed along major thoroughfares where it is in obvious view for those travelling by both public and private transport.

### *Scalar link-ups*

Graffiti narratives also present a politics of scale; spatial scales – themselves the outcome of negotiations and searches for new advantageous arenas of action – can be disruptive to established power structures.<sup>30</sup> Many of

Kingston's graffiti texts link up directly or indirectly to globalisation processes. Various authors have argued for a new, altered significance of the urban in the reshuffling of scalar hierarchies associated with globalisation.<sup>31</sup> These authors tend to focus on the urban as a critical arena in which the contradictions of global capitalist development are produced and contested. However, they tend to be less concerned with the role of the urban scale in global cultural politics than in global political economy.

The urban arena presents a potent scale for 'glocalisation': 'local' appropriations and contestations of 'global' processes.<sup>32</sup> Kingston's graffiti demonstrates such glocal negotiations in a variety of ways, as various preoccupations and anxieties related to what is seen as globalisation are played out on the canvas of the city. The sexual policing evidenced in other strands of graffiti is an urban protestation against 'global' threats – linked to migration and the proliferation of foreign media – to established 'national' sexual norms. The party political and school graffiti might be understood as an entrenchment of highly 'local' identities in the face of threatening 'global' forces that are broader than political economy alone. The exclamations regarding September 11, Chechnya, and so on reflect an author who is highly aware of and invested in world politics. Cultural economics play a part as well – as urban walls link up to the global, as LA Lewis cashes in on his urban fame to sell T-shirts on the Internet, and Norshous invites readers to check out his music on his MySpace page. In these varied ways, graffiti feeds into a production of urban scale that is interconnected with other scalar levels as it provides an arena for contesting and adapting external global cultural influences.

### *Public space and public spheres*

Graffiti can be seen as mobilising public space in order to democratise the public sphere, the domain in which public opinion is discursively shaped and that influences political action. A bourgeois public sphere as outlined by Jürgen Habermas<sup>33</sup> did not necessarily emerge in postcolonial cities such as Kingston. A formal public sphere, based largely on traditional media, is not open to all sections of the urban population (although the popularity of call-in radio talk shows implies that traditional forms remain relevant). In socio-spatially fragmented cities such as Kingston, multiple publics can be

argued to have emerged, corresponding roughly to the uptown-downtown divide. Alternative public spheres with counter-publics have developed, and downtown voices have found a variety of discursive outlets, dancehall music being the most prominent among them. If publics and counter-publics are understood as coming into being in relation to texts and their circulation,<sup>34</sup> graffiti texts can potentially produce a broad public as they span the city and address all who traverse it.

While until recently debates on the public sphere and public space largely remained separate, authors have begun to argue for a stronger focus on the role of physical public space in facilitating a democratic public sphere.<sup>35</sup> This occurs precisely as public space is threatened by processes of privatisation, commodification and militarisation. The public-producing graffiti texts claim urban public space as a site for intervention and debate over resources, identity and urban social order. For those excluded from formal structures of power and voice, graffiti can represent an alternative sphere for (cultural) political influence, in effect giving voice to the voiceless and producing new, broader publics. Kingston's public space is mobilised to make further claims to how urban space is organised and understood.

## Conclusion

The graffiti found throughout Kingston assembles to form a body of urban texts, a textual form of symbolism best understood in light of the city's political economy and the associated socio-spatial antagonisms. The textual symbolism of the different strands of graffiti reflects a range of urban anxieties. The political graffiti indicates the ongoing competition over political turf and the spatialised identity politics associated with this competition. Sexual graffiti is a form of policing, an attempt to maintain order in face of changing sexual norms associated with globalisation processes. Grassroots advertising graffiti, finally, is an expression of a specific informal economic strategy, a survival mechanism in the urban jungle that is Kingston's economy; although in the case of the Gaza/Gully conflict it echoed the violent identity politics of political tribalism.

We have attempted here a spatial analysis of texts, focusing on spatial context, scalar links and the mobilisation of public space in transforming the

public sphere. These texts, as narratives and counter-narratives, are in many ways related to struggles over power and meaning through space; political, class and cultural struggles are evident in the issues raised in graffiti. In a city where downtown voices are seldom heard, graffiti can provide a medium through which the voiceless can make their opinions known, an alternative public sphere. It offers the possibility of disrupting the urban order established by class and political interests, of being a non-violent, street-oriented form of protest.

Yet, despite this transgressive potential, and in its implicit or explicit critique of the dominant social order, Kingston's graffiti does not evidence a progressive worldview. Rather, the discourse formed by the texts is more often than not regressive, demonstrating a shared ideological conservatism. The 'tourism' expressed in the political graffiti reinforces rather than challenges the political manipulation of the poor as it plays into garrison politics. Sexual policing reinforces a limited and hetero-normative understanding of sexuality by threatening deviants with violence and ill-health. Grassroots advertising, finally, does offer a few individuals a chance to 'step up in life', if their self-promotion proves successful. Yet simultaneously it contributes to the increasing commercialisation of public space, space that in Kingston as elsewhere is already overcrowded with advertisements and exhortations to consume. The walls that divide the city – separating rich from poor, uptown from downtown, JLP from PNP – have the potential to talk back, to critique, or as Jamaicans say, to 'throw word'. But Kingston's transgressive texts, as spatial and discursive tactics of marginalised citizens, offer little hope for progressive urban transformation. Even as this graffiti needs public space to 'throw word', it contributes to processes of fragmentation and commercialisation of that same public space. ☐Q

## NOTES

1. Olive Senior, "The Story as *Su-Su*, the Writer as Gossip", in *Writers on Writing: The Art of the Short Story*, ed. M.A. Lee (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), 43.
2. See, for example, D. Ley and R. Cybriwsky, "Urban Graffiti as Territorial Markers", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 64 (1974):491–505; Tim Cresswell, "The Crucial 'Where' of Graffiti: A Geographical Analysis of Reactions to Graffiti in New York", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 10 (1992): 329–44; Don Mitchell, "The End of Public Space? People's Park, Definitions of the Public, and Democracy", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 85 (1995): 108–33; E. Chmielewska, "Framing [Con] Text: Graffiti and Place", *Space and Culture* 10 (2007): 145–69; Terri Moreau and Derek H. Alderman, "'Graffiti Hurts' and the Eradication of Alternative Landscape Expression", *Geographical Review* 101 (2011): 106–24.
3. P. Lewis, "Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Some Guides to the American Scene", in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*, ed. D.W. Meinig (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 11–32; J. Duncan and N. Duncan, "(Re)Reading the Landscape", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 6 (1988): 117–26; J. Duncan, *The City as Text: The Politics of Landscape Interpretation in the Kandyan Kingdom* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
4. Amanda Sives, "Changing Patrons, from Politician to Drug Don: Clientelism in Downtown Kingston, Jamaica", *Latin American Perspectives* 29 (2002): 66–89; Sonjah Stanley-Niaah, *DanceHall: From Slave Ship to Ghetto* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2010); Colin G. Clarke, *Decolonising the Colonial City: Urbanisation and Stratification in Kingston, Jamaica* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Imani Tafari-Ama, *Blood, Bullets and Bodies: Sexual Politics below Jamaica's Poverty Line* (Kingston: Multi-Media Communications, 2006).
5. Michel Foucault, "Space, Knowledge, and Power", in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 273–89; Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. S. Rendall (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1984).
6. Teresa Caldeira, *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Setha M. Low and Neil Smith, eds., *The Politics of Public Space* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Michelle Mycoo, "The Retreat of the Upper and Middle Classes to Gated Communities in the Poststructural Adjustment Era: The Case of Trinidad", *Environment and Planning A* 38 (2006): 131–48; Robert Kinlocke, "Fear of Crime, Demographic Identity and Gated Communities in the Kingston Metropolitan Area" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers, Boston, Massachusetts, 15–19 April 2008).

7. Tim Cresswell, *In Place / Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); A.R. Tickamyer, "Space Matters! Spatial Inequality in Future Sociology", *Contemporary Sociology* 29 (2000): 805–83; Kevin F. Gotham, "Toward an Understanding of the Spatiality of Urban Poverty: The Urban Poor as Spatial Actors", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27 (2003): 723–37.
8. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977); Foucault, "Space, Knowledge and Power."
9. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.
10. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991). Foucault, de Certeau and Lefebvre all implicitly imbue the state with more power than it may be able to exert in contemporary neoliberal cities. Commercial powers, and particularly the international conglomerates that have in some cases become largely impervious to government dictates, perhaps exert more influence on everyday urban life and spaces than do official state powers. It remains to be explored whether the same subaltern 'tactics' that subverted state force can do the same to commercial powers.
11. Sarah Giller, "Graffiti: Inscribing Transgression on the Urban Landscape", 1997, <http://www.graffiti.org/faq/giller.html> (accessed 21 February 2012).
12. M. Sanchez-Tranquilino, "Space, Power, and Youth Culture: Mexican American Graffiti and Chicano Murals in East Los Angeles, 1972–1978", in *Looking High and Low: Art and Cultural Identity*, ed. B.J. Bright and L. Bakewell (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995), 55–88; K.L. Adams and A. Winter, "Gang Graffiti as a Discourse Genre", *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 1 (1997): 337–60.
13. A. Norton, "Writing Property and Power", in *Public Space and Democracy*, ed. M. Henaff and T. Strong (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 189–200.
14. Rivke Jaffe, Ad de Bruijne and Aart Schalkwijk, "The Caribbean City: An Introduction", in *The Caribbean City*, ed. Rivke Jaffe (Kingston/Leiden: Ian Randle Publishers/KITLV, 2008), 1–23.
15. Colin G. Clarke, "Jamaica", in *Urbanization, Planning and Development in the Caribbean*, ed. R.B. Potter (London: Mansell, 1989), 21.
16. The graffiti marked on the map represent the results of extensive observation in the period 2007–2009; however, they are not exhaustive. In addition to these observations, this article draws on long-term ethnographic research by the first author on urban space and social stratification in Kingston.
17. Diane Austin, *Urban Life in Kingston, Jamaica: The Culture and Class Ideology of Two Neighbourhoods* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1984); David R. Dodman, "Community Perspectives on Urban Environmental Problems in Kingston, Jamaica", *Social and Economic Studies* 53 (2004): 31–59; David Howard, *Kingston: A Cultural and Literary History* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2005).

18. Colin G. Clarke, "Population Pressure in Kingston, Jamaica: A Study of Unemployment and Overcrowding", *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38 (1966): 179.
19. Don Robotham, "How Kingston Was Wounded", in *Wounded Cities: Destruction and Reconstruction in a Globalized World*, ed. Jane Schneider and Ida Susser (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003), 111–28; Clarke, *Decolonising the Colonial City*.
20. Sives, "Changing Patrons", 70.
21. Mark Figueroa and Amanda Sives, "Homogeneous Voting, Electoral Manipulation and the Garrison Process in Post-Independence Jamaica", *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 40 (2002): 81–106.
22. Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the 'Vulgar' Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993); Carolyn Cooper, *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Donna Hope, *Inna di Dancehall: Popular Culture and the Politics of Identity in Jamaica* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2006); Stanley Niaah, *DanceHall*.
23. 'Battyman' is Jamaican patois for homosexual.
24. Portia Simpson-Miller succeeded P.J. Patterson as the leader of the PNP and prime minister of Jamaica in 2006, following internal party elections. The PNP lost the September 2007 national elections, but Simpson-Miller became prime minister again in 2012 following a PNP victory in the December 2011 elections. Andrew Holness became leader of the JLP and prime minister in October 2011, following internal elections, after Bruce Golding stepped down.
25. Cf. A. Staiger, "School Walls as Battle Grounds: Technologies of Power, Space and Identity", *Paedagogica Historica* 41 (2005): 555–69.
26. Carolyn Cooper and Alison Donnell, "Jamaican Popular Culture", *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 6 (2004): 1–17.
27. Errol Miller, *Men at Risk* (Kingston: Jamaica Publishing House, 1991); Keith Nurse, "Masculinity in Transition: Gender and the Global Problematique", in *Interrogating Masculinities: Theoretical and Empirical Analyses*, ed. Rhoda Reddock (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2004), 3–37; Tafari Ama, *Blood, Bullets and Bodies*.
28. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference", *Cultural Anthropology* 7 (1992): 6–23.
29. Chmielewska, "Framing [Con] Text"; Cresswell, "The Crucial 'Where' of Graffiti".
30. Erik Swyngedouw, "Neither Global nor Local: 'Glocalisation' and the Politics of Scale", in *Spaces of Globalisation: Reasserting the Power of the Local*, ed. K.R. Cox (New York: Guilford Press, 1997), 137–66.
31. Saskia Sassen, *Losing Control? Sovereignty in an Age of Globalisation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Neil Brenner, "The Urban Question as a Scale

- Question: Reflections on Henri Lefebvre, Urban Theory and the Politics of Scale”, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 24 (2000): 361–78; Neil Smith, “New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy”, *Antipode* 34 (2002): 427–50.
- 32. Roland Robertson, “Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity”, in *Global Modernities*, ed. M. Featherstone, S. Lash and R. Robertson (London: Sage, 1995), 25–44.
  - 33. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).
  - 34. Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics”, *Public Culture* 14 (2002): 49–90.
  - 35. Mitchell, “The End of Public Space?”; M. Hénaff and T.B. Strong, eds., *Public Space and Democracy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); L.A. Staeheli and Don Mitchell, “Locating the Public in Research and Practice”, *Progress in Human Geography* 31 (2007): 792–811; J.R. Parkinson, “Does Democracy Require Physical Public Space?” in *Does Truth Matter? Democracy and Public Space*, ed. R. Geenens and R. Tinnevelt (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 101–14.