Notes from the Margins
Graffiti, Community, and Environment in Los Angeles

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In a concrete tunnel along the Los Angeles River during the 1940s and 1950s, a man with the initials JK carved out history and home. His name could have been Johnny K, Jorgenson Krag, John Kook, Johnson Kraft, Johnny Kake — all names that appear in his lists. He dated his work JK 1945, JK 1947, JK 1951, and JK 1952. JK was likely a veteran who had at some point been in residence at the Brentwood Vet’s Home, a place that appears among his lists in two separate river locations. Possibly, he had also been in jail — a con, “kon,” or “ex ex kon,” as he writes, dutifully replacing each of his “c’s with “k”s to honor himself and his initials.

JK’s lists comprise but one history within the interstitial landscapes under bridges, on rivers, in vacant lots, and down alleys in Los Angeles. This article examines three groups of people, hobos, pachucos, and railwaymen, whose written records revolve around iconic aspects of the Los Angeles environment: railroads, bridges, and rivers. Taking several examples of historical graffiti from these marginalized spaces, I position them within the context of what Ralph Cintron calls “condensed narratives of subjectivity.” In such narratives, icons function as entryways into personal histories. Los Angeles graffiti thus provides a window into alternative communities — and alternative histories — that critique both nostalgic and traditional views of Los Angeles and the American West.

Those who write graffiti look to walls and bridges for different reasons. They want to inform, to teach, or to threaten, but above all to make themselves known. The graffiti they left behind tell us interlinking stories of both marginality and community.

Narratives often result from a relationship with the environment, particularly with regard to people who are concerned with personal and place-based identities. While narrative links between environment and community remain an under-examined aspect of urban ecologies, the link between naming place and environment has been well examined in literature regarding indigenous societies. In anthropologist Renato Rosaldo’s work, for example, place names provide doorways into larger narratives. The names themselves are linked to the stories that Rosaldo attempts to solicit from his Ilongot informants, and these stories were inextricably bound to the land. Similarly, in the work of writer Jeanette Armstrong and anthropologist Keith Basso, American Indian conceptions of identity result from bonds between sacred places and naming. Identity among these groups is scarcely possible without a clear sense of place.

In urban interstitial spaces, material expressions like graffiti function similarly to these place- and name-based narratives, which can yield insights into the lives of people not generally included in the historical record. Here, places considered forsaken, destitute, abandoned, and even dangerous become loci for community-building. The traditional notions of house or neighborhood are replaced by bridge, tunnel, or hobo camp. Marginalized spaces and marginalized peoples go hand in hand.

Hobos, 1914-1940

Hobos have a history and a written tradition that date back at least to the end of the Civil War. It is a history of displacement and migratory labor, of people from particular locales taking their places with them in their travels. Men who no longer fit into the industrial framework of the United States took to the rails, moving from town to town, looking for work, telling stories, and sleeping in “jungles” or hobo camps.

Already by the 1920s scholars studied the graffiti of hobos, tramps, and wanderers. Sociologist Towne Nylander wrote that tramps developed “[a]n elaborate system of road signs . . . to discriminate between good and bad towns, relative to the activities of the police; also between houses where people give to tramps, or
where they are likely to call the authorities or loose the dog.” Similarly, sociologist Nels Anderson’s description of a hobo jungle is as relevant for the early twentieth century as it is today: it “should be located in a dry and shady place that permits sleeping on the ground. There should be plenty of water for cooking and bathing and wood enough to keep the pot boiling. If there is a general store near by where bread, meat, and vegetables may be had, so much the better. . . . It is well that the jungles be not too far from a town, though far enough to escape the attention of the natives and officials.”

Imagine a man reaching up to a bridge along the Arroyo Seco with a piece of chalk or a rock in hand. The Arroyo Seco has not yet been paved, and hobos flourish beneath the bridges that could shelter them, near the water that could nourish them, and close to the railroads that could transport them. On August 13, 1914, “Kid Bill” writes his name on a bridge that at the time is still sparsely decorated. His name survives under this bridge, which has provided safe haven for some of the earliest known hobo writing from the region. Along with Kid Bill, depicted in the far left of Figure 1, are the names of people like Kid Smith, Winey Pete, Kid Root, R. H. Williamson, Kid Burgan, Val Inferno, Kid Wanna the Jackass, Harden, the Tucson Kid, and Oakland Red.

The names suggest an iconic figure of the American West: the cowboy. On another portion of the wall, shown in Figure 2, is the work of J.W.T., also known as Chito, the Tucson Kid, written in charcoal in scroll form. This is juxtaposed with the image of a bucking bronco, with the words, “No. 1 Campion” next to it (out of view in Figure 1). A further reference to “la crica de tu madre” (your mother’s crack) and other obscure Spanish obscenities add color to the wall. Much like the vaqueros and cowboys of the nineteenth century, a mixture of Spanish and English coexist on these walls, as Spanish and English speakers alike shared this shelter of bridges and traveled from faraway places. They contributed, each in turn, to the frontier identity that has helped to define the West.

The writings referenced above were inadvertently saved by the great river paving projects of the late 1930s and early 1940s. To pave the Arroyo Seco and the Los Angeles River, engineers dug the river bottoms down by about 30 feet. In the process, the span of human reach — until then about 6 or 7 feet — was greatly elevated. This lowering of the river floor and the resultant inaccessibility of the marks, combined with the bridge’s ability to protect the marks from weathering, have preserved these fragile chalk, rock, and coal writings for over ninety years.

General concerns with work, with riding the rails, with taking on monikers, and with leaving marks behind probably had their start in the hobo community. Later, hobo signs would develop into a comprehensive
nationwide system of communication that Nylander refers to. Things like “a kind lady lives here,” or “good place for a handout” are signals to a marginalized community that is well aware of the meanings behind the symbols. Not all marks are friendly; one piece under a bridge further up the Arroyo Seco reads in slender pencil marks: “Okies go home.” Regardless of the intent, however, such marks represent forms of community that exclude as well as include.

**Pachucos, 1947-1948**

Within the context of trains, tracks, bridges, and rivers, another character enters our discussion. In 1947, a young boy named Ralph walks along the tracks that run alongside the Los Angeles River. He is from a neighborhood called Dog Town, and he has a tattoo of a cross on his arm that he has had since he was nine. He remembers the zoot suit riots just a few years before. He reaches onto the tracks, gets a hold of a rock, and begins to write his name on a concrete wall.

The graffiti remains, as does the memory. Sixty years later, Ralph describes how different things were back then:

Graffiti writing back in the 1930s and 1940s was more serendipitous than part of a program, an agenda. Because you didn’t have at your disposal all the writing paraphernalia that exists today. If you were out there, wherever you were, you’d come up on, you’d chance on something that you could scratch and carve or whatever. Whether it was a rock or a railroad spike, or a nail. You used all of that stuff to do your graffiti with. There weren’t spray can paints back then. Of course if you did get paint of any kind, you’d be in some kind of graffiti heaven I guess. But you would have to stumble on it. People were very poor then. They either had to steal things or save money to get what they needed. All you needed to do graffiti was just at hand. You just went with whatever was there. It was a totally serendipitous thing.\(^5\)

Some writings obviously took much effort, with pachucos venturing well up into the heights of the bridges. Kids would sometimes use the axle grease that was dropped from the train wheels, as was the case in Figure 3. With weathering from the sun, rain, wind, and dust, it would turn hard so that a person could pick up a gob of it, put it on his finger and run his finger into the gob periodically to get more. “You would do your whole *placa* and barrio and protective signatures so that other gangs would face eternal hell if they tried to say a lot of bad things about you,” Ralph recalls. Early gang members would write things like “Joe D/T 1948” “Eddie D/T 1947” “Killer de Dog Town 1948” “Huero de la Eastsid[e],” or, as in Figure 3, “Big Ted de D’T” — all...
the names of Ralph’s contemporaries in the Dog Town neighborhood.

The trains that ran along the river used to carry tramps and were peopled by some of the same workers, such as engineers and switchmen, who also used chalk and rocks to write out their concerns. Some neighborhood youths used to seek out the hobos. One man I spoke with described how he used to live periodically on the river during the summers as a boy in the 1950s. Hobos adopted him and taught him their craft — such as how to open cans with a rock or how to dig out a spot for a fire. “Unlike us,” he said, referring to his gang membership, “they didn’t develop any longing for a particular place; their place was on the road.”

The sensory experience of hopping trains, feeling the rhythm of the tracks, being part of the river, adventuring, and becoming intimately involved with the bridges in part linked these pachuco kids with the railwaymen and hobos. Kids from the neighborhoods around the tracks used to build rafts to float down the river then hop a freight to come home again. The bridges were their playgrounds. Again citing Ralph:

That bridge, you know, I used to climb that bridge. Hop on the arch. Climb up those arches, go up in and then they kind of round off. And then when you get up to the top, to the apex of this arch, there’s a pipe that runs up to the central piling. . . . We used to crawl on this pipe like this, you know. One slip left or right and we would be plunged, what, 50, 60, 100 feet, probably. There was only one accident in all that time — one guy that was trying to climb on it to Main Street. . . . He fell to his death.

In the callout box of Figure 4 is a pencil writing of the name Dopey of Dog Town. It reads “Dopey DT,” and was written by the young man who fell to his death in Ralph’s story. Though his life ended prematurely, the walls still bear testimony to his place within his neighborhood, the river and its environs.

Railwaymen, 1950s-1960s

While Dopey, Big Ted, and Ralph of Dog Town scrawled graffiti on or under bridges, those who worked on the trains traveled underneath and over them. According to one railwayman, both switchmen and engineers made frequent use of chalk as part of their jobs, which became a natural medium for their graffiti. Like the pachuco writing of the 1940s, the graffiti by railwaymen had a close connection to its hobo counterparts. As a 1938 issue of Railroad Magazine indicates, train writing was practiced by railroad employees as often as by hobos themselves. As with hobos, railway workers beginning in the late-nineteenth century created insignias, chalked them on boxcars, and watched the marks travel on the rails as they did.

Bill Daniel, who has extensively researched railroad graffiti, states that “[t]he development of boxcar art has been enriched by the two-way influence between tramps and trainmen. Although they are from two different classes, their drawings share common themes: frontier identity, freedom, and fantasy.” It is no coincidence that these themes relate to a similar figure in
hobo writing: the cowboy. For example, Daniel has extensively researched the writings of Bozo Texino, originally identified as J. H. McKinley, a Missouri Pacific engineer who adopted a cowboy signature. The sign is claimed by many and still found on trains to this day. Another railwayman, now known as buZ blurr, also uses a cowboy caricature. He writes:

As a third generation railroad man, who hired out in train service in 1962, I was aware of a long tradition of boxcar graffiti. In fact there were broadcasters within the railroad system long before Marconi’s radio [1901]. Romantics mythicized [sic] that these signature tags and character drawings were the work of hobos, but the most pervasive and persistent authors were trainmen, usually in the larger rail centers of big cities.

buZ blurr describes these chalk marks as being both “omnipotent” and “transient” and he describes the “railroad network of the north American continent” as his mass medium.¹

As buZ blurr says, the writer is “a broadcaster within the railroad system.” The powerful bonds among railwaymen appeared on bridges as visual reminders to all railwaymen — to join and be counted. One literal example of such graffiti under a downtown bridge gives the results of a Southern Pacific Railroad union election:

S-P Election [Southern Pacific]
3731 Votes Cast
2496-BRT [Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen]
1217 UROC [United Railroad Operating Crafts]
14 Void
3 ORC [Order of Railroad Conductors and Breakmen]
1 FORD (?)

Here the competition between unions, like the competition between gangs, was playing itself out on the bridge walls. A writer put the results of union voting into a public venue for other trainmen to see. In the context of daily work on the rails, the walls of bridges, if not on the boxcars themselves, were an ideal means of communication.

On a wider scale we see competition playing itself out along the underside of Los Angeles’s 4th Street bridge. A switchman once leaned out from a railroad car, his arm outstretched, trailing a piece of work chalk along the...
length of the wall to form a wavy line that followed the motion of the train. Above and below his line were other chalked writings: references to scabs, U.S. politics, and matters of union voting — all since covered by hip hop graffiti writing.

The existence of this graffiti powerfully depicts the development and fate of the union as both a social and economic influence. Until the 1970s, separate unions represented the individual job categories of railroad workers — engineers, conductors, switchmen, firemen, brakemen. The histories of the unions representing these workers were peppered with friendly and unfriendly rivalries. In Figure 5 we see a conversation between the Big 6 CYA (the Chicago Yardmen’s Association) and the more purist SUNA (Switchmen’s Union of North America). It begins with one switchman’s proclamation: “SUNA Govern by Switchmen for Switchmen ONLY, Your Trade Union, Join Today.” Next to that appears the taunt of a Big 6 member: “Ha ha ha, bologney [sic], Join the Big 6 — You get as much.”

This exchange dates from the final days of SUNA’s history. Beginning as a Mutual Aid Association in 1877, the union was formally established in 1894. In modern times, however, many unions were forced to combine in order to retain their numbers in the face of rapid technological and political change. The Switchmen’s Union ultimately dissolved in 1969 due to a merger with several other unions to form the United Transportation Union (UTU). Yet many switchmen resisted — and continue to resist — the identity of the union conglomerate that eventually absorbed them. As the motto of a 1961 newsletter of the SUNA Local 263 quipped, “We don’t claim to win ’em all — but we fight for switchmen only.”

In addition to internal union concerns, national politics were also common themes among railway writers. Along one wall, we read that “The PEOPLE wanted Kennedy,” or “Vote Adalai Stevenson in ’56.” According to one UTU member, such references would have fit into SUNA’s progressive mentality:

The Switchmen’s Union was a wonderful union. It was the most progressive union — a very liberal union. They supported Eugene V. Debs when he ran for president. He got more votes than any major candidate, and he was sitting in a jail cell. Then, all the unions all merged together except for
the engineers. The conductors, switchmen, and brakemen all merged. In numbers, there’s power. You can’t afford to be a small union anymore. Because you have big companies and you need resources to combat them.¹⁰

The graffiti reminds us of ways that railwaymen used to combat authority while encouraging mutual bonds among members. Powerless alone, they sought out a common cause together through union membership as well as through union rivalries. The bridge writings served to uphold that sense of community.

**Conclusion**

Two of the cultures discussed in this article—hobos and railway workers—were migratory, traveling from town to town, sharing the rails together. Each has cemented itself into American identity as part of a mystique of wanderlust and frontier adventuring.¹¹ Early gang members, however, remain a contentious third category. Gang culture has always been tied to a collective identity of place, and while the romantic tug of the pachuco era is sometimes felt within Latino or gang communities—or even within circles of L.A. history buffs—the idea of Latino kids flirting with gangs musters up images of criminality today.

Within this context we can revisit the work of JK, the writer with whom we began this story. He wrought compulsive lists in concrete of letters carved to quarter inch depth. These writings give us a cryptic history of both himself and his world:

4 LEAF KLOVER
STAY OUT OF JAIL

Though JK’s history may be seen as singular and esoteric, the themes he treats speak to recognizably American issues. He writes, as in Figure 6, of

TRUCKS, AUTOS, MAIL, MILK + BREAD, SHIPS, JOBS [in large letters], PAINTINGS, AIRPLANES, POSTAGE, ARMAMENTS, SHOES, KAR, STEEL MILLS, MUNITIONS, SHELTER, MARCHES, BOTTLES, FACTORIES, MOVIES, MUSIC + STORIES, SONGS, SCULPTURE, HISTORICAL KONSTRUTIONS [sic], N.Y.C., PITTSBRG, ST. LOUIS, WIFE?, HUSBAND?, KLASSICS, FINEX, L ANGLES.

The confluence of the three cultures of hobo, pachuco, and railwayman is in some ways akin to the confluence of the two rivers—the Los Angeles River and the Arroyo Seco—where people with very different stories often come together to share common spaces. Multiple histories overlap, and past and present seem to merge. A conglomeration of cultural truths surfaces at the intersection between water, transportation, and neighborhood, serving as a reminder of bonds as well as differences.

Ralph’s description of hopping a train is an experience shared by members of all three groups. “One of the things we did for fun,” he said, “was to hop trains”:

That used to be a big thrill — learning how to hop...
a train. The veterans, the more experienced guys would show us how to do it — how to deal with momentum. You know, the speed of the train versus jumping straight down on the ground. You could go straight flat on your face. So to compensate for that, we used to have to immediately go into a sprint. I mean a full sprint and when you're first trying that, it's really a, it feels like it's a death-defying act. Especially when you're a boy and you've never done it before.

Metaphorically, the stories of Ralph, JK, and similar figures are about the relationship of that which moves to that which is stationary — the train and the ground. The kind of writing that hobos, gang members, and trainmen engaged in ties marginal or migratory people to landscape. It fixes community in situ, on site, where names are situated in place and sometimes refer to place. The writings represent storytelling within material culture, where words act as indirect indices to the histories embedded within them. Then take the river itself, stationary yet constantly moving, whose once migratory paths are now fixed, yet whose waters are perpetually in motion. If the confluence of the two rivers of Los Angeles is now a landscape of marginality, a forgotten center of the city, the graffiti that remains there reminds us that people can transform even the most interstitial spaces into new frontiers for cultural identity. They are, as JK writes,

KONSTRUCTIONS
ON THE BORDER
TO THE
CENTURIES

NOTES
10. Lawson Chadwick (United Transportation Union alumnus), phone conversation with author, October 24, 2008.

Susan Phillips has been studying gangs and their expressive culture since 1990. She has received grants from the Getty Center, the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, and the Soros Foundation. She earned a Ph.D. in anthropology from UCLA in 1998, and her book, Wall-bangin: Graffiti and Gangs in L.A., was published in 1999 by the University of Chicago Press. She currently teaches urban and environmental studies at Pitzer College, where she also directs the Pitzer in Ontario Program. Her current projects include the study of a gang sweep, research into spatial justice issues involving youth violence, and documentation of surviving historical graffiti in the Los Angeles area.