**Figure 1.** Unknown graffiti taggers, 1500 to present

# Risky Pleasures: Using the Work of Graffiti Writers to Theorize the Act of Ethnography

**This paper is published in Qualitative Inquiry 16(10) 871–882 © The Author(s) 2010**
**DOI: 10.1177/1077800410383118 http://qix.sagepub.com**

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**Abstract**

Graffiti artists who deface and vandalize also highly aestheticise and politicize landscapes marking boundaries that are both territorial and ideological. Similarly, the privileged "I" within reflexive research seems to subvert a process of territorialisa- tion of the (un)authored research text with a kind of repetitious "tagging." This article will consider how the idea of graffiti tagging might be used to theorize acts of ethnography (and ethnographer) in an early years classroom to destabilize what might otherwise remain an unproblematic inscription or stain in data. I will draw from excerpts of classroom data to open up ways to think about particular understandings of the researcher as "I," casting shadows over the "I" that is written into versions of the child and the classroom.

I am amazed, o wall, that you have not collapsed and fallen,
since you must bear the tedious stupidities of so many
scrawlers.

Translated graffiti etched on a wall in Pompeii, circa 80 a.d.


**Figure 2.** Unknown light graffiti artist, 2008, photograph by Tomasz Ronda

**Ritual Transgressions**

Recently I came across the examples of graffiti above, which triggered a series of thoughts about the enactment of graffiti as a risky pleasure—a trace, sometimes staining or inscribing a surface, never able to "speak for itself," being scrawled across nonplaces (Augé, 1995), written by taggers seldom seen, but read by travelers passing through an array of urban corridors. The paradox of graffiti taggers' artistic/criminal enactments prompts me to reconsider the potential of using the idea of graffiti to theorize acts of ethnography (and eth- nographer as "I") in an early years classroom. Since post- structuralist reconceptualizations' of the qualitative researcher have abandoned any coherent or unified sense of myself to be an interminably fragmented subject, I am conscious that the reflexive "I" has
become a complex site of thoughts, attitudes, affects, beliefs, and values. "I" contaminate, yet nevertheless could be made indiscernible or at best made stable amongst the ways I frame and document children. Recognizing this unwelcome stability, I turn to adjacent dis- ciplines, such as graffiti art in the hope of finding new lan- guages to help me rethink my methodological (bad) habits.

A graffiti tag could be perceived as an aesthetic presenta- tion of "self" in an art world, simultaneously rendered an illegal act of defacement amongst a deviant subculture. This paradoxical performance evokes intrigue for me as I think about myself as the ethnographic "I" in data. I find the act of undertaking observations and grappling awkwardly with ways to document

what it is “I” am observing in the classroom to be an experience that could be understood to both aes- theticise and deface the (con)text “I” am constantly (dis) engaging with. By the 1970s, the growing complexity and creativity of graffiti tagging gave birth to the “masterpiece” (Ancelet, 2006), some taggers became “muralists” (Lach- mann, 1988, p. 237). This development from the simplicity of the graffiti writer’s signature toward a more complex “piece,” rendered the tag a way to “. . . get to have your name well known all around the place . . . they’ll see your tag and they’ll be like . . . . I know who writes that . . .” (Halsey & Young, 2006, p. 280), placing the tag before the public as often as possible (Lachmann, 1988). These signature mark- ings become meaningful in their repetition, which could be thought about in relation to the use of “I” in educational research (con)texts. “I” as the researcher’s tag could be per- ceived as an illicit, yet recognizable shadow moving across surfaces that shift between moments of trying to document what resembles reflexive and “immediate” classroom data (reconciling something “proper” of the classroom) and the illusively arbitrated wisdoms and public spaces of published academia (propagating recognition as the tagger’s “I know who writes that”). But as I think about graffiti taggers and the inscriptions they leave, often being accused of “defacing,” yet highly politicizing landscapes, marking boundaries that are both territorial and ideological with ritual transgression and a screaming expression of outrage (Fulbright, 2003), they also reclaim something of the hegemonic hold of cor- porate architecture over urban space (Brisman, 2007, p. 1). Similarly, the use of “I” as a tag within ethnography seems to have the potential to bring attention to the aesthetic and corporeal pleasures of observational writing that takes place within the corporate spaces of the classroom and published academia. I am conscious that the visceral elements of my own writing seem to become a territorialisation of my (un) authored research text via a repetitious and recognizable “tagging.” The research space being “tagged” (such as the early years classroom) seems symbolically or provisionally to become my own and I take as my tag, a word that seems to evoke the potential repetitiousness of the act: “researcher.”

In his research with graffiti taggers, Garot (2007) recalls that a question often expected, “where you from,” instead becomes, “what you write” (p. 50). Baudrillard suggests that the graffito is an empty sign and requires a repeatable form to become meaningful (cited in Neef, 2007). My thoughts linger here around the ways that as a classroom ethnographer I have become “what I write” as I repeatedly observe (scrawl over) children, remaining tied into familiar and sedimented ways of seeing, documenting, and understanding the class- room as a particular kind of accomplished graffiti piece. I want to use the idea of graffiti alongside extracts of data to open up ways to reconsider my methodological (bad) habits and write an interruption to repetitious ways of perceiving the classroom. All the data used in this article is taken from a funded project (Economic and Social Research Council 2006—2008), which set out to trace the emergence of chal- lenging behavior amongst children in their earliest years (5-6 years) at school. Based in 4 UK mainstream primary schools, and working in close collaboration with classroom teachers, this qualitative ethnographic study investigated how problematic behavior manifests itself, how it is dealt with by the participants, and how children’s positive and negative identities develop.

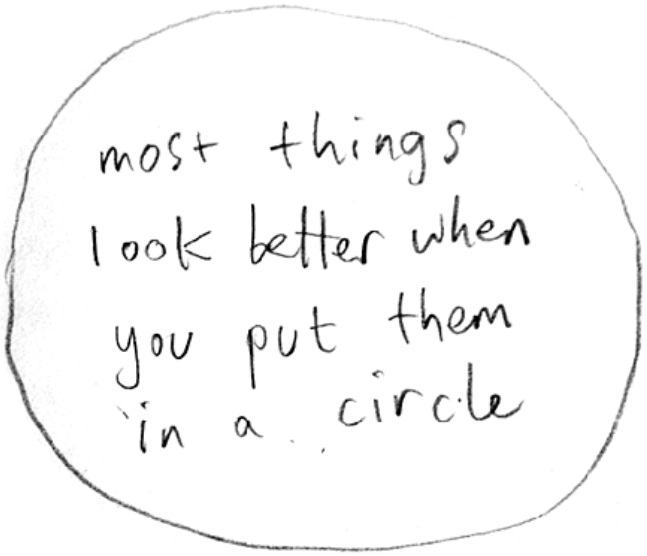


**Figure 3.** Banksy, 2006

The research adopted a discourse-based approach, informed by poststructuralism and the work of Foucault, especially as articulated by analysts of early child- hood such as Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, and Walk- erdine (1984), James and Prout (1990), Walkerdine and Lucey, (1989), Cannella, (1997), Davies (1989), Burman (1994) and Jones (2001). I turn then to the following two extracts of data, which begin to illustrate ways in which I understand myself to enact particular ways of seeing and being in the early years classroom.

Tuesday morning. I enter the classroom. Take my usual position (in the construction corner). Get out my tat- tered note pad and worn down pencil. This is a familiar scene, a familiar ritual and something I try to practice so that the children and the teacher find me less obtru- sive over time. I know I'm not invisible but perhaps I'm becoming a less obvious classroom feature, so that I'm able to observe without huge disruptions to the everydayness of classroom life. (Extract from class- room data, 2006).

Armed with my video camera, I follow the children as they walk into the playground. "Are you coming to play out with us?" David asks. "If that's ok with you" I replied. David was silent. It strikes me that the chil- dren walk around the school building casually, chatting to friends, there's no running or rushing . . . no sense of urgency to get to the playground itself. This leisurely walk seems to constitute part of the playtime experi- ence. Just having time to chat to friends seems valuable to the children. I walk behind them, filming them as they chatter, laugh, whisper, hold hands and skip along. One or two turn around to look what I'm doing. They seem used to me being there, at least in the classroom and rarely approach or even glance over at me when we're inside, but here, on our way to the playground, they keep turning around to check out what I'm doing before turning back to resume their conversations. I'm a familiar presence, but nevertheless, I still seem a little unexpected at times. Perhaps they're not sure if I'm watching them. Why would I be watching them any- way? Does it make some children feel uncomfortable if they thought my role was to watch *other* children and not them? Ethically, perhaps I've not made it clear why I'm watching a range of children. Interestingly have they noticed how much time I spend watching

other children, the usual suspects and not them? (Extract from classroom data, 2006)

Somehow, and particularly the first extract of data seems to evoke a sense of repetition, which like the graffiti tag, enables "what I write" to become meaningful (to myself) within familiar discursive territories that simultaneously encyst and unfold me (McLaren, 1997, p. 25). In the first extract above, the repetitious familiarity of where I sit, what I write with, and write on allow me to become written into the classroom scene. I had hoped that the discursive class- room narratives might increasingly encase me, almost justify my (un)traceability in the classroom, along with the other classroom furniture. But perhaps this repetition also inhibits the ways I am able to see, document, and understand the children and the classroom. Overfamiliarity seems to instill particular "practices of looking" (Kindon, 2003, p. 142), which could be understood detrimentally as ". . . a mode of seeing which thinks it knows in advance what is worth look- ing at and what is not . . ." (Hall, 2002, p. 65). The repetitious acts of the researcher's self-reproduction, which include where "I" sit, what "I" write in, and write on, may contribute to me only being able to reproduce recognizable classroom texts, familiar classroom stories, and sedated versions of children, which perpetuate something of the classroom's (and researcher's) status quo, ". . . identification can only be made through recognition, and all recognition is itself an implicit conformation of the ideology of the status quo . . ." (Freid- berg, cited in hooks, 2001, p. 124). In the second extract, I sense that this familiarity is still there—the children know I am in their school to write down the things they're doing, but I am also momentarily exposed to myself as the children turn back to look at and question me. This momentary exposure interrupts the repetitions and unfolds different questions and ethical dilemmas about why I was there at all. I am accepted as part of the classroom scene, yet rejected as an unwanted shadow as I follow them with a recording camera and micro- phone at playtime, perhaps a more intimate, private time for children. Across the school day, I find myself simultaneously included in the public space of the classroom but outed from more private moments. The (un)authored light graffiti at the beginning of this article could suggest that the "I" who writes the graffiti is made manifest in the competing discourses that circulate around vandalism, activist art, illegal activity, and sociopolitical allegiances. Perhaps as a researcher, the ethno- graphic "I" is made manifest in its contradictions and resis- tances. Although in the classroom I am in a public institution, occupying a public space, where the researcher takes on a particular public role, I also try to observe the private moments shared between children, for example, en route to the play- ground. Wallis and VanEvery (2000, p. 409) discuss the dichotomous notion of public/private moments in school and these different spaces not only seem to acknowledge but also resist and complicate any attempts to pursue my own repeti- tious sense of myself across different spaces that, at every turn, seem to undercut the multiple "realities" of school life for me as an educational researcher and for the children "I" am observing. Perhaps like tags left by graffiti writers, I have nothing other than the multiplicity of competing educational discourses that enclose, yet simultaneously disclose some- thing of me, as (con)texts across which to consider something of the *who* "I" am in the writing. By turning to graffiti art, I am trying to contemplate the paradoxical ways my observa- tions (scrawlings) become the discursive (con)texts that enable the ethnographic "I" to be critiqued. If there is no reality outside of which I can position myself to observe the children, there is also no pure way of seeing and no certain unmistakable communication or sign able to be made within what are understood as stable, discernable, discursive prac- tices that straightforwardly allow me to document and com- municate what I am seeing of the children. I also wonder am I only able to reflect on myself and my constitution as a researching "I," having already been constituted in some way that would allow the telling of my repetition as "I" in data? Graffiti writers seem to be able to represent something of *who* they are in

ways that allow for their telling of “I am here” or “I am amazed.” I want to interrogate how the ethnographic “I” becomes destabilized and resists a repetitious reconstitu- tion as it flails amongst complex discursive paradoxes.

**Striving to Capture, Retell, Communicate: Inscriptions of “I” in the Classroom**

Stanley enters the classroom first. I say, “Stanley, I really like your hat.” He comes over to me and sits on my knee. As the other children enter, he goes over to join them on the carpet. Minutes later, he returns to where I am sitting and sits on my knee again. He stays with me for a while but then rejoins his peers on the carpet. I notice Stanley sitting at the back of the group of children, gazing up at the shadows moving across the window blinds. The other children are listening to the teacher’s story, but Stanley prefers to watch the shadows. (Extract from classroom data, 2006)

I am observing a literacy lesson. The children are sit- ting on the carpet, focusing on the teacher, who is pre- paring the interactive whiteboard for a lesson. As usual, most children (particularly those toward the front) are sitting appropriately. However, those nearer to the back of the carpeted area (near to where I am sitting) are more relaxed. Some are fiddling with discarded pieces of paper and mangled paper clips they’ve found on the floor. “I hope you’re all sitting beautifully . . . at the back” says the teacher. I notice that some of those children who did not have their legs crossed, adjusted their seating positions in response to the teacher’s encouragement. “Now who can remember what we were doing yesterday?” About ten children put their hands up. The literacy hour takes on the familiar format that I recognize in so many primary classrooms. (Extract from classroom data, 2007)

In these brief extracts of classroom data, the use of “I” allows me to “be” reflexively amongst the data but almost indiscernible amongst the discourses that allow the data to be “told” and “read.” The “I” offers some sense of stability and distance from those “who I am not” as I retell the events in those moments. “I” is used in the extracts in different ways— to describe the researcher’s actions (“where I am sitting” and “I am observing”), her speech (“I say”), and her “self” (“I really like your hat”). However I would argue that “I” is assumed to be an almost transparent conduit through which images and recounts of the classroom and the children unfold. It is as if the reader can experience the scene uncomplicatedly via shared ethnographic eyes (“I”s). For example, in the second extract, there are references to the literacy lesson “that I recognize in so many primary classrooms” and the “appro- priate” ways of sitting on the carpet in anticipation of a lesson. “I” sparsely describe a classroom scene, assuming this is a familiar scene, one that would be understood by educational- ists in particular and culturally shared ways and therefore would not require much more detail or scrutiny. I omit many of the subtleties that could unfold through thicker descrip- tions, such as what the term “sitting appropriately” might mean. It is assumed (by me as researcher) that the reader knows what “I” am seeing because the “I” provides not only a portal, but a discursive (con)text, an assumed shared sense of knowing amongst those who engage with my thin descrip- tion. However, along with this assumed omnipotent “I,” comes the question “who *is* the researcher ‘I’ here”? Arendt (1958/1977) suggests *who* someone is “. . . retains a curious intangibility that confounds all efforts towards unequivocal verbal expression” (p. 181). She suggests the moment we try to say *who* someone is, our vocabulary leads us away into discussing *what* she is by “naming” or territorializing her—for example “the researcher,” “the graffiti writer.” She goes on to suggest that *who* someone is however, is made manifest through that person’s actions and speech, her “performances” or biography. In relation to the light graffiti at the outset of

this article, perhaps *who* the researcher "I" is becomes per- formed as I make a claim that "I am here" because "I" have written myself all over the "here" of the data. Within these extracts of data, perhaps who "I" am is made manifest through my actions in the classroom and these are read through mul- tiple discursive traits. For example, my body remains still in the classroom data yet, like a graffiti writer I find myself irreducibly bound up with the "presence" of the writing hand. My eyes ("I"s) seem to move to different parts of the class- room but as I pass through some children to reach others, I decide that some information is worthy of documentation, whereas other information is not. Just as the graffiti writer performs the artwork/criminal activity in the very moment she performs her tag, in the very moment that I scrawl the observational writing of the classroom, "I" perform the simul- taneous aestheticisation/defacement that becomes the data. There is no image of the classroom preceding or beyond my aestheticisation / defacement of it. The children and the class- room emerge at the very moment that I am writing them into being. My researcher tag allows me to invent the children and classroom I write myself into without any interruptions to my own act of re-creation. My toing and froing becomes aestheti- cally choreographed as I act out particular ways of seeing, selecting, and rejecting, including and denying, seduced by the lure of the researcher's privileged panopticon (Bentham, cited in Bosovic, 1995). With surveillance and the panoptic gaze saturating urban and city landscapes, Halsey and Young's (2006) paradoxical phenomenon (graffiti as both aesthetic practice and criminal activity) becomes something of my experience of the ways I experience this data as carved/crafted from the early years classroom. Yet my response to the extracts of data above is to recognize the workings of an assumed transparent "I" and my scrawlings that seek to cap- ture something of the children, which are both appropriated as familiar and safe to the reader in the process of perpetual re-creation of particular versions of what I am prepared, and able to see. However, if the "I" is my repetitious tag, I also need to recognize that, as with the graffiti tagger, the embod- ied "I" in data can be neither empty nor knowable, stable nor nomadic, discernable nor invisible, pure nor violated, whole nor partial, but perhaps, as with the grey concrete wall used as a canvas in the image below, the use of "I" in ethnography is not a portal at all, but could become a way to subvert and draw attention to itself as an obstruction.

Rather than an obstruction that could be overcome as though something of certainty lay beyond myself as researcher, the "I" becomes a way to rethink the obstructions and resistances I keep re-creating that allow me to paint the classroom scene I observe in particular ways.

**Figure 4.** Banksy, 2006

**Figure 5.** Banksy, 2008

In conversation with the graffiti artist Banksy, an old man was watching him write on the wall. He said, “You paint the wall, you make it look beautiful,” to which Banksy replied, “Thanks.” The old man then continued, “We don’t want it to be beautiful, we hate this wall, go home” (Parry, 2007). Thinking about this interaction and my shadowing of the children as they turned to watch me and the recording camera following them into the playground, there seem to be frustrations created by graf- fiti artists/researchers as they misguidedly assume their pres- ence and aesthetic/politicized documentations are welcome. Given such possible frustrations, I also want to reconsider ways to aggravate the “I” as a repetitious tag in data by reimagining it as always unsettled and always in process rather than finalized. I want to turn to some other classroom data to evoke further ways the researcher’s and children’s bodies affect one another through the very act of classroom observation and writing.

## Traces of “I” as Dysmorphic Collisions

I am sitting in the construction area. I am observing a group of four children getting changed. One of the children, Stephen, comes over to me and says, “What are you writing?” I tell him that I am writing all about the children getting changed ready for their Christmas party. “Have you written my name?” “No, not yet Ste- phen, but I will now.” “Write my name then because I’m here, I’m getting ready for the party. You spell it S-t-e-p-h-e-n.” I write his name (see start of this para- graph). When I write “I” (see sentence starting “I tell him . . .” above), Stephen asks, “Are you writing Isaac’s name now? That’s Isaac over there with the ginger hair and he’s wearing black trousers. He’s getting ready for the party, so you need to write his name down as well.” Stephen walks over to the carpet and sits down with the other children. (Extract from classroom data, 2007)

This extract of classroom data disrupts and makes the more stable, transparent, and accomplished "I" more complex. The data begins to illustrate a more elaborate dialogue that won- ders who is narrating who, interweaving the "I" who is engaged in observational writing with the "I" who is being narrated by Stephen, becoming a contributory presence amongst "live" classroom events and interactions. Similar to layers of interwoven graffiti, this data seems to be a point where different times and different "I"s mingle yet undo one another. Neef (2007) suggests that some graffiti writers work to make the invisible visible by integrating the surface's materiality, including its political order, into their art works.

They make an otherwise mute object speak back. Below, the graffiti's aesthetics use a *trompe l'œil* to draw attention to the materiality of the concrete wall as a barrier. The aesthetics seem to be used to subvert the idea of defacement where the graffiti is transgressive because it responds (Baudrillard, 1972).

In an attempt to make explicit the ways I understand the ethnographic "I" to become more disruptive and complex in data, the excerpt of data above shows how both myself and Stephen begin as the materiality of the classroom. We are contributors to a familiar scene—Stephen is one of 23 chil- dren in the classroom and one of four children getting changed at a table near to me. I am sitting, as usual, in the construction area, writing in my tattered note pad with my worn-down pencil. This familiar composition has allowed me to continue writing about the classroom and the children in all-too- familiar ways. However, as Stephen approaches me, he dis- rupts, and in doing so, contributes in a very different way to how "I" document the subsequent observation. When he approaches me and "I" begin to document his approach, we both become visible in the data, drawing attention to ourselves by speaking back to each other amongst a stuttering series of dysmorphic collisions and beginning to usurp the usual political and social order of the research process. Both Ste- phen and "I" have become graffiti's "double exposure" (Neef, 2007, p. 430)—preceding and beyond the researcher's cre- ation of data we seem invisible and mute but in the moment of writing, we become mutually embroiled, resplendent, and jarring (Neef, 2007). I wonder what this idea of the "double exposure" can do in relation to the paradoxical moments of writing the classroom into being, particularly given the unstable complex and disruptive relationship between the ". . .'I' who writes and the 'I' who is written, the 'I' who speaks and the 'I' who spoken . . ." (McLaren, 1997, p. 25). If "I" who writes and speaks here can think about the data (the "I" who is written and spoken of) as the layers of graffiti across defaced walls, I am aware that "I" cannot quite write all the classroom, or Stephen in any one moment, at any one time. Instead, through the ruptured moments of experiencing amongst the discursive meanderings of the classroom furore, I can momentarily write something of the interruptions, detours, the fleeting digressions that draw me toward my entanglement in the unfolding events, a disjointed, stuttering process. As with the graffiti that aestheticises/defaces urban corridors, I am able to re-create myself as an urban canvas. These ideas lead me to contemplate how reading the class- room data in an attempt to subvert any suggestion of a stable or naturalized gaze, I seem to aestheticise/deface myself as a reflexive researcher to articulate my(I)self as I think I should. For example, perhaps as a researcher, "I" expect that I should draw from my "outsider" researcher privileges (art work/criminal activities) to subvert the classroom common- law as part of a deviant research subculture, perhaps as an

"uncontrollable predator" (Castleman, 1982, p. 176), where "I" can allow Stephen to interfere with my observations as he interrogates what "I" am doing (t)here and asks about what "I" am writing. Stephen is able to question who "I" am and what "I" am doing. I thought "I" was writing about what

"I" was observing in the classroom, but of course, Stephen's interruptions to what "I" had expected to observe created different observations. Perhaps the uncomplicated idea of "I am here" could become a complex layering of tags and other images as these toings and froings enable the reading of the data to intricately entangle the "I" that is writing here, the "I" that thinks about the graffiti, the "I" that is written into the data with memories of the "I" that occupied the classroom space in those particular moments? These entanglements remind me of Augé's (1995) "non-places" (p. 103), marked by movement rather than stability, an ". . . histrionic multi- plication in a deluge of space, time, and event . . ." (Collins, 1996, p. 14), an interrelationship (and dissociation) of space, culture, and identity. Here, rereading this data and having to think how I write about the intricacies of Stephens interven- tions, the "I" in the data has become a series of reflections and recollections that continually move and reconstitute themselves to include interwoven memories of the classroom space. Royle (2003) discusses the strange but intimate links between writing and memory or forgetting and particularly how ". . . writing helps and hinders memory . . ." (p. 77). I would argue that my writing of "I" here, as a prompt to a memory of the classroom space, is no longer the "I" that I thought/had remembered it was (but perhaps I could never write about what it was anyway). It has become a complex site of multiple positions. Although McLaren (1997) notes, ". . . individuals consist of a decentered flux of subject posi- tions, highly dependent upon discourse, social structure, repetition, memory, and affective investment to maintain a sense of coherence in a world of constant change . . ." (p. 25), I would posit that rather than seeking to maintain any sense of stability in a changing classroom, I am attempting to provoke the incoherency of "I" in the data, in the graffiti, in the text I am constructing here. I want to disturb the repeti- tious "I" to invite different perspectives, different questions, and different dilemmas as possibilities. The many possibili- ties of "I" seem to maneuver amongst more complicated versions of "I" am (w)here, here, and (t)here that somehow enables me to challenge a straightforward sense of "I" and render the impersonations biographically in relationship with one another.

Vanderstaay (2005) reflects on the "I" of himself as researcher in relationship with those he is researching and adopts a more retrospective, distanced position, ". . . In fact, Serena told her neighbors and friends I *was* 'Clay's big brother.' This . . . explained my presence to neighbors . . . Otherwise, he told me, 'everyone gonna think you a narcotics agent.' . . ." (p. 379). Here, the "I" of the researcher is written into the data by others, Vanderstaay uses his own narration of Serena and Clay to write himself into their dialogue and thereby becomes entangled as a character within the research context—the graffiti tag writes itself into itself.

**Figure 6.** Banksy, 2008


**Figure 7.** Banksy, 2005

Cavarero (2000) reflects on "The Autobiography of Alice Toklas" suggesting ". . .the text functions as a sort of theater of the self . . ." (p. 34). Gertrude Stein herself appears in the text as a character, narrated by Alice, but the text is actually written by Stein, reflecting on herself through the eyes and thoughts of Alice. However, to do this, her writing has to assume the eyes of Alice to be able to construct herself from another's perspective. Although I am not writing myself *through* the eyes of an other, I am writing myself within the politics of difference *with* an other, *where* I find myself constructed by what I am not. My extract of data draws me into a child's narrations of my researcher role and tagger ("What are you writing?") but somehow attempts to write the "I" as more present ("I tell him that I am writing all about the children"), as it is told in movement across an evolving dialogue with Stephen. Stephen's understandings of the reasons for my presence urges me to write my involvement into his narration of my writing about the classroom experiences, which perhaps renders my act of writing in the classroom a commentary on my contribution to my own acts of deface- ment. My attempts to document something of the immediacy of myself writing seems to upset any sense of an already constituted "I," as Stephen's narration interrupts any tenden- cies to complete myself as "I" write.

Stephen watching me write his name as I watch myself writing his name, while interacting with him in "real" time, while all the time I am watching myself doing all this as I write this article, seems to completely unsettle the stabilities of the ethnographic present (Fabian, 2008) as an innocent, transparent scene into which the omniscient ethnographer can look without complication. "I" am

hopelessly distributed across and between these incompatible times, and the text gets entangled with the world in interesting ways. Stephen (the “real” one) intervenes in his “own” text, returning me to the graffiti wall etching in Pompeii, which has that same, self-referencing, yet self-displacing quality of the writing commenting on itself.

Similarly, Magritte’s “La trahison des images” (1928) juxtaposes the idea of a pipe with the image of pipe by writ- ing *Ceci n’est pas une pipe.*


**Figure 8.** "La trahison des images", René Magritte, 1928 -29

However notwithstanding readings of “I” as a parody of a relation or supplement of an absence (Cavarero, 2000, p. 87), this extract of classroom data does, nevertheless allow the telling of a fractured story of my(I) constitution (“Have you written my name?” “No, not yet Stephen, but I will now”). Here, perhaps I had not intended to write Stephen into the data, but he invited himself in by his own act of participation. Perhaps this moment of engagement opens up possibilities to reconstitute “I” as the researcher amongst the movement across the process of constitution itself. Biesta’s (1998) “ethical space” (p. 14) is built around Peperzak’s (1991) notion of “I am a hostage to the other” (p. 62), before I am a doer, a knower, I am already identified by the other from the outside. Peperzak suggests that Levinas also pro- poses an interesting dimension here, in that “while oneself can appear in an indirect language, under a proper name, as an entity . . . it still remains a no one, clothed with purely borrowed being . . . conferring on it a role” (Levinas 1968/1989, p. 96). This turns me to MacLure’s (2003) thoughts around the teacher (and researcher) being “made” (p. 80), alongside my ongoing contemplations around per- formances of “I” and would suggest that these ideas could be pursued further with Cavarero’s (2000) “the necessary other” (p. 88) entangled in the classroom data as my telling of the story of my(I) constitution as researcher. Before I am myself, I am identified and negotiated from the outside by “the necessary other,” which also might include the classroom as a stage for my performances as researcher, allowing par- ticular ways of being negotiated from the “outside.” The classroom is a purpose-built setting for the activity of educa- tion, with the appendage that research and therefore the “I” who enacts what “I” think is the process of research, is a necessary thread that enables education to keep reproducing itself. Within such a determined setting, I wonder if “I” have become constituted as the graffiti that prompted the unknown “scrawler” in Pompeii to reflect on the destruction that his very act of etching into the wall contributed to?

My etchings made at different moments in the classroom might change the threads of the classroom stories. For exam- ple, trying to stabilize the “I” as though relentlessly indiffer- ent, might

render Stephen's perception, astuteness, and curiosity around *who* "I" was and *what* "I" was doing lost and as a researcher, I might struggle to hinder the perpetual restoration of my own acts of repetition and self-reproduction that I noted in the earlier extracts of data. However, an unsta- ble, yet particular "I" in the data might conjure complexities as it could inadvertently express how Stephen negotiated the particularities of "I" as researcher in his presumption that "I" needed to be there. Stephen's version of me was someone who had come to write about what the children were doing in the classroom, but his version also incorporates the research participants being able to disrupt something of what "I" was writing, disrupting the traditions of the adult/child relation- ship. His version of "I" as researcher enabled me to afford him opportunities to question why the classroom and educa- tion itself needs surveillance to reproduce the processes that it interrogates. He upset more usual power dynamics that position the adult visitor, researcher, and observer as knowing and the child as observed, unknowing, and largely silent participant.

Stephen asks if he can write the alphabet in my note pad. I agreed. He starts to write it, but is interrupted when Miss smith shouts, "What are you doing?" Before he could reply, she says "How dare you touch and write on someone else's work!" Stephen flushes with embar- rassment and then tries to explain. "But I . . I . . . I" "Go and sit down!" finishes Miss Smith. "But I asked" says Stephen. "Yes he did" I confirm. "Oh, sorry Ste- phen. Good boy for asking Rachel" says Miss Smith. Stephen's face is still bright red. He looks very humili- ated and upset, with tears in his eyes. He goes to sit down on the carpet. (Extract from classroom data, 2007)

Here, Stephen's version of me as researcher in the class- room again seems to provoke and interrogate his own experi- ences of surveillance by interrupting a number of unspoken discursive relationships. He disturbs the usual researcher/ participant relationship by inciting direct and sustained inter- action, he makes a very proactive contribution to the data; he upsets Miss Smith's notion of the adult/child encounter by assuming *he* can write on *my* note pad; and he goes on to defend his actions even after being shouted at and clearly feeling embarrassed/humiliated. It also provokes Miss Smith into a reiteration of schooling rhetoric that nurtures respect for other peoples' work. My writing of "I" to myself in these extracts of data seems to upset a stable notion of "I" by repetition, as "I" was returned to myself via Stephen.


**Figure 9.** Unknown graffiti artist, 1998

"I" was able to record his participation in our surveillance of each other, as "I" wrote something about his watching and probing of me who was actually trying to stand back to question and watch him. I wonder in what ways my particular uses of "I" began to incorporate Stephen's version of me as "you," which rendered the classroom an awkwardly incestuous place that became a relational politics of the particular space "I" created in this data and the activities "I" perceived it to embody. Perhaps these extracts of classroom data have nudged some- thing of the "unvoiced" or excluded "I" to be retold through the self-narratives that I represent myself within? Perhaps Stephen has pushed me to contemplate who "I" am or might be(come) in the data, allowing me a moment to revisit Biesta's (1998) notions of spaces *where* the subject finds representa- tion. Without such attention to moments of "I" occurring in data, I might assume that "I" has become something compre- hensible to myself, a resemblance or uncanny impersonation, secure in my "knowing" that the meanings and subjectivation of reality that I understand as ways of seeing and being in the world have been validated in some way, where "I" am left undisturbed, both literally in the classroom and metaphori- cally in the data. Perhaps this authoritative (mis)recognition of myself might render me "permanent" or "fixed" in some way that makes any move to (un)knowing, an act of subversion.

However, if "I" could be rethought as the subject's momentary and parodic, urban performances in the research space, in my awkward relationships with those "I" observe, "I" could be understood only as a hybridity of shadows that mask and distort. This positions "I" as a complex process of deconstructing and reconstructing my particular understand- ings of the world "I" research, reconsidering my own "knowledge" of my(I)self and of others as unstained and always in renegotiated relationship with one another.

**Renegotiating the (Un)Authored (Con)Text**

Nietzsche (1908/1992) writes "I write myself to myself" (p. 3). Within this article, I have tried to enact a detour-like writing of myself to myself, a meandering, continually inter- rupting myself with pursuits that have unsettled the ethno- graphic "I" in data with seemingly irrelevant, but arguably contingent discussions about graffiti and urban corridors. I have moved tentatively toward ways to reconsider myself written into data as a more weaving and interlacing structure of "I" that allows threads to go off again, as a continual and haphazard "unfolding of Being" (Derrida, 1982, p. 22). Although my meandering threads will soon be tied back down, such a relentless process of constitution and dissolu- tion seems much akin to versions of graffiti across urban corridors that become living, layered documents of events and peoples, vigorous flailings, moments of politicized enact- ments. According to Wood (1992), Derrida claims that addressing a question or a problem head on is ". . . doubtless impossible, inappropriate or illegitimate, should we proceed obliquely [instead]? . . . diverting as quickly as possible the . . . straight line . . . we could replace it with nothing other than the detour . . ." (Wood, 1992, p. 11). Derrida suggests the detour, ". . . suspends the accomplishment and fulfillment of a 'desire' or a 'will' . . ." (Derrida, 1982, p. 8), a device that relentlessly postpones the end, committing myself to closure. I recognize that as with the ephemeral traces of light graffiti, as soon as the image of the ethnographic "I" is cre- ated, it evaporates and although its trails may be photo- graphed, seeming indelible on the surface of the paper, no sooner are they "present," than the stain becomes an absent trace, something other than what seems to remain visible in the photograph.

Writing this article has enabled me to think about the "I" in data as moving between repetitious

stains, straight, unin- terrupted lines and more haphazard, ephemeral traces and detours that move in and out of brief moments of data, only to be repeated differently, as I find myself tying myself up with other struggles and so the process will continue. Initially thinking of the ethnographic "I" as a repetitive graffiti tag enabled me to consider how uncomplicated and stable "I" had become in data. However, the complexity of layered graffiti "pieces" made across Augé's (1995) "non-places" (p. 103), which are marked by movement rather than stability, spaces where the tag becomes scrawled but not inscribed, visible yet not determined, aestheticised and simultaneously criminalized, has allowed me moments of reconsidering the fluidity of the ethnographic "I." As a "non-place," the eth- nographic "I" in the classroom seemed to experience a sense of dislocation and transgression. Malinowski begins his 1922 *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* with an abjuration to imag- ine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the dinghy that has brought you sails out of sight. Some of the extracts of data drawn on in this article seem haunted by the native underglass approach to ethnography, beginning with a similar invitation to place oneself (ethnographic eyes/"I"s) in the midst of a "tableau vivant" composed of village (classroom) and grinning natives (children). As the article moved on and I engaged with other excerpts, Stephen and other children refused to surrender as smiling natives and by doing so, created an opportunity to rethink the class- room as an "anthropological place" as something other than a series of isomorphism's drawn between being a person, acting as a person, and inhabiting a place. I began to think of the ethnographic encounter as a risky pleasure, where person (researcher) and place (classroom and children) have been dispersed, where my relationship with Stephen seemed to go some way in dispersing an assumed shared relational and historical place, allowing the data and the ethnographic "I" to have more creative movement and less assumed knowl- edge of the classroom and the child. Across this less assuming approach, the interference and dispersion of ethnographic eyes/"I"s seems to offer a differently emerging tale of the classroom. The instability of the "I" rendered the data con- tinually incomplete(d), which opens up an ongoing, rather than closed analysis. Stephen was not as resigned as Stanley to my aestheticised/criminalized excursions because he did not allow an uninterrupted or finalized version of "I," nor a fully constituted "Stephen" to be captured. This data refused to be still, but allowed the data to always keep moving outside of itself. I would suggest that this approach momentarily offers a different way to theorize acts of ethnography (and ethnographer as "I") in an early years classroom.

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