RED, READ, REMIX: A DOCUMENTARY AND CULTURAL EXPLORATION
OF METRO GRAFFITI

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By

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As transient expression, the practice of public name writing is uniquely paired with the experience of transit; particularly, public transit, in which a mass of strangers are at once exposed to a myriad of works by anonymous artists. Indeed public transit and public name writing have in common their communal attributes. The concept of temporality in the public sphere is embedded in both, conjuring thoughts on the passage of time and changes to place. Thus, metro graffiti becomes a cultural binary in city semiotics; the relationship between people and place, between aesthetics and shared space.

In Washington, D.C., the link between art and transit is best illustrated on the Red line route between Union Station and Silver Spring. Here, the interplay between shared place and practice is evidenced outdoors and above ground by the miles-long stretch of spray-painted names, messages and characters along the route. Optimizing on the Red line’s visibility and access to traveling commuters, the local graffiti community has unofficially claimed the surrounding Red line space in the decades since its inception. By
writing on the back of neighboring businesses, retaining walls, and abandoned buildings that parallel this transit site, countless Red line writers have appropriated space in the city and transposed their public identity onto its walls. In so doing, they create an indirect connection with commuters, as well as, the capital city, itself.

Figure 1.1: EXIST graffiti with view of the Capitol, undated. Photo courtesy of EXIST.

It is this social, site-specific and cultural link that I have endeavored to address in a documentary effort entitled, *The Red line D.C. Project*. As a thesis study in documentary form, *Red line D.C.* encases the story of the Red line by incorporating the accounts and opinions of the various actors who encounter the space—business owners, city administrators, metro riders, and especially, graffiti writers. The stakes of my research are wholly invested in the visual history and open space economy of the Red line. Using metro graffiti as a metaphor, I have explored the Red line’s significance to graffiti writers, its impression on commuters and imprint on the city’s collective memory. I situate the practice of graffiti in D.C. and on the Red line alongside recent changes to the Northeast segment, namely gentrification, construction and commissioned art. Therefore, metro graffiti serves as an entryway into the overlapping issues of public
space, including identity, ownership and communal culture. I use Red line metro graffiti as a synecdoche for the city, analyzing a fraction of the District’s social landscape so that I may better grasp the complexities of the whole.

In documenting Red line aesthetics, I have initiated a public dialogue about a dynamic always in flux and already in play. Underground expression above ground signifies the pulsating social rhythm of a city in motion. The view of the Red line and the spray-painted names on the wall blur as rapidly as the faces on board and, because of this, I take a nonlinear, multimodal and new media approach with my scholarship and filmmaking style. Capturing photos and footage of the present-day scene, collecting historic Red line photos, interviewing and engaging with Red line graffiti writers, riders and otherwise interested parties has all been for the purpose of open, adaptive and mediated discussion about Washington, D.C.’s aesthetics and identity.

Figure 1.2: Screenshot of Red Line D.C.’s website, April 2, 2012. Photo courtesy of Saaret Yoseph.

The main vehicle and platform for my extensive body of documentary work has been the project website: redlinedc.wordpress.com. I use this transformative online
space about the Red line to highlight my two years of research on-site and on-board the Red line; to re-contextualize the significance of metro graffiti beyond mundane encounters and assert the connections forged through transient transit expression. To this end, my thesis is an open-ended effort, one that does not attempt to encapsulate the Red line metro experience, as it is an ever-changing phenomenon, but rather supplement and add meaning to the experience through documentary form, digital experimentation and online analysis.

READING THE RIDING & THE WALL

Underlying the heart of my thesis is the inherent question: What does the Red line represent about D.C.? Problematizing my research in these terms, required me to find an appropriate framing story to “encompass and orient the myriad local stories … placing them into an understandable relationship to common visions of the city’s present and future.” (Austin 2002) Yet, because Washington is such a national and international hub, identifying a cohesive image of the capital city posed a challenge. Too easily, D.C.’s character is confused with its political core. Working against this de facto identity, I chose to move beyond the gravitas of the Capitol building or the magnitude of the National Monument in order to construct a new framing story for D.C.

In comparison, the identity of other U.S. cities is more defined. Perhaps, the narrative most applicable here is New York City, where transit is practically analogous to local culture. In his book *Subway City: Riding the Trains; Reading New York*, Michael Brooks asserts, “The subway represents New York City as surely as the freeway
represents Los Angeles.” (Brooks 1997) Author and graffiti historian Roger Gastman makes clear a similar assertion about New York City and graffiti:

The graffiti that developed on the New York subways and the cultural tradition started by the writers of the subway would provide the blueprints for all graffiti cultures the world over. (Gastman 2001)

Reinforcing this point were the statements of my own primary sources. Hardly a single writer interviewed for The Red line D.C. Project failed to mention New York City as an influence, if not overshadowing presence, on District graffiti. As a result, I relied heavily upon the work of authors, researchers and photographers like Nancy MacDonald, Norman Mailer, Jeff Chang, Martha Cooper and Jon Naar, among many others, whose documentation of and findings on New York City graffiti provided a fitting example for Red line research. Additionally, Joe Austin’s Taking the Train and Roger Gastman’s Free Agents were instrumental for city comparisons and case study. While Austin offers background on graffiti’s provenance and transit presence in New York City, Gastman’s regional knowledge situates the practice closer to home.

I also looked to a staple set of graffiti documentaries, namely Style Wars, Bomb It, Infamy, Graffiti Verite and others, to guide my production choices. Wanting to contribute a different kind of discussion about graffiti in public space, I sought these works out to
familiarize myself with the existing canon of graffiti cinema. Henry Chalfant’s *Style Wars* was particularly informative, as his film was essentially an expansion of the seminal book, *Subway Art*, co-authored with Martha Cooper. Both of these historical texts examined graffiti through “‘visual anthropology,’ the study of culture through visual means …” (Cooper 2009) and forced me to consider how my documentary might outlast its life on the screen. Importantly, close study of classic graffiti texts allowed me to bypass the basics of Street Art 101 in my own work. While the history and traditions of the culture are necessary foundations, situating my research exclusively on the Red line gave me the opportunity to delve into the meatiest parts of graffiti practice and its intersection with metro.

As it concerns the research setting, itself, a great deal of my scholarship was devoted to the social function and impact of public transit on city life. To this end, I gained a cursory knowledge of New York City’s transit history and revisited the Washington metro of decades past via historical texts and archived photographs. The Washington Star collection licensed to the Martin Luther King Public Library was integral to my localized investigation of the Red line as was Zachary Schrag’s *The Great Society Subway: A History of the Washington Metro*. This research was invaluable, allowing me to not only visualize the Red line in its early days, but to also understand the municipal ideals for metro before it even broke ground.

Much of the institutional decision-making over metro’s design was done with a grand public sphere in mind; the aim of fostering city living and a quality communal experience. In this pursuit, D.C.’s metro, with its high-vault station ceilings, careful lighting and carpeted trains, “emerged as public transportation intended not merely to
transport commuters, but to build in [Lyndon] Johnson’s terms, ‘a place where the city of man serves … the desire for beauty and the hunger for community.’” (Schrag 2006) The concept of the City Beautiful was born out of this institutional effort to build civic unity through thoughtful urban planning and design.

The Washington Metro\(^1\) was conceived in this vein. But like New York before it, the reality and modern-day image of Washington’s public transit system has not evenly matched up with its founding ideals. Over time, infrastructure is well worn by routine and the lived reality of metro accumulates “meanings that far exceed the subways actual circulation...” (Austin 2002) In this regard, the work of Michele de Certeau has been of practical use. His premise that “each individual is a locus in which an incoherent (and often contradictory) plurality” (de Certeau 1984) exists underpins my theoretical argument on metro graffiti. Though, Red line riders and graffiti writers may have different backgrounds, behaviors and interests, they are bound together by place and intrinsically connected to one another through the stimuli of their shared environment

\(^1\) I capitalize “Metro” when referencing the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, but plainly reference “metro” in the lower-case fashion when discussing the space or infrastructure.
This “language of connectedness” (Hiss 1990) through metro graffiti is a central theme in my documentary. The mobility of people on transit and temporality of place creates a ripe environment for social analysis. Particularly, because the subway is a sort of “nonspace,” which Garrett Chaffin-Quiray describes as, “neither yours nor mine, where we sit or stand by ourselves, often reading or sleeping, as we travel through a city we sample by looking out at ...” (Cangro 1997) To this point, the collision of nonspace and unsanctioned expression is especially meaningful. On the Red line, the liminal space that metro occupies, physically and figuratively, parallels that of graffiti’s place in the city. Thus, my study of underground art above ground is an exercise in the ephemeral social science of D.C.

Fittingly, public transit and graffiti are often discussed in living, breathing terms. Schrag references the “human character” of metro, while Jonathan Lethem observes “[t]he lapping of human moments form a pulse or a current, like the lapping of trains...” (Cangro 1997) Cooper goes further to connect the social value of the subway experience as “a communications network on which the names and messages of graffiti writers circulate throughout the city.” (Cooper 2009) Indeed, the communicative aspects of graffiti translate well when applied to public transit and the subway, itself, embodies as many humanistic characteristics as mechanic.

Yet, while the experience of public transit is innately social, the infrastructure and routine of metro demonstrates a detached public. In his account of rapid transit travels through the city of New York, Ken Wheaton points to the social disconnect that has become the norm. Wheaton believes that “[w]e’ve simply reached and are able to maintain a transcendent state of subway existence. We’ve transgressed the shackles of so-
called reality and arrived at a state of ignorant bliss.” (Cangro 1997) Passengers plugged into iPhones or other electronic devices divorce themselves from the physical space by simulating a private bubble. Books, newspapers, Kindles also offer immediate distractions from the ride; and with each passenger finding their own outlet, the communal environment of the metro is spliced for individual experience.

Figure 1.5: Passenger on-board with automated electronic sign, November 11, 2011. Photo courtesy of Saaret Yoseph.

Yet, it’s not just the commuters that limit the social potential of the space. The environment of metro is replete with the signage of authority and Big Brother restrictions. A typical metro scene includes prohibitive language—signs warning against eating, drinking, noise violations, and of course, trespassing onto unsanctioned parts of the system. The auditory announcements blare insistently with advice for first-time riders and instructions for regular commuters to be mindful of their activity, as well as that of others. Remarkling on the metro system’s affect on riders, transit consultant, Jarrett Walker, had this to say: “When you're automating communications, you're making it more and more a one-way conversation ... (Hendel 2012) In this sense, graffiti takes a re-appropriative part in the city’s transit dialogue; resisting the automation and organization of the Red line with visual, unfiltered and unsanctioned communication.
Of course, the discourse between writers and metro riders often occurs subconsciously. Neither, rider nor writer may be fully aware of the exchange, but indeed it is happening. They are both participating in the eclectic conversation of the cityscape.

In his book, Austin underlines the idea that subway writers contribute to a common city dialogue:

Their work circulated (often literally) through the most commonly traveled shared public spaces--the public square--of the city … In making these restricted choices, writers invited the urban community at large into a public conversation about their work, and as such, the practice of writing took on important social meanings that extended well beyond those intended or anticipated by the writers themselves. (Austin 2002)

Thus, the ambivalent commuter gazing indiscriminately out the window, the uninitiated “toy”2 making room on the Red line to add his name, are both tied to each other by place. However indirect, their connection is rooted to the Red line.

Furthermore, the mechanism in us to consume the competing stimuli of our environment is passively engaged by metro graffiti. As the train emerges from the underground tunnel at Union Station, the activity inside the train is compounded by a change of light and barrage of visuals outside the window. With apparent seamlessness, a car full of anonymous riders, adjusts to the scene change and accumulating stimuli:

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2 Vernacular for a new or unseasoned graffiti writer.
advertisements, metro car chatter, automated announcements, commotion from stop to stop and, of course, graffiti. Tony Hiss calls the phenomenon, simultaneous perception, an “underlying awareness … even when our concentration seems altogether engrossed in something else …” (Hiss 1990) In this regard, I observe Red line graffiti in the same manner as the advertisements, construction sites, industrial buildings and, especially, commissioned murals along the route. All of these names, brands, built structures and signs are added layers to the metro experience. As are the people on the metro.

Yet, unlike poster and billboard advertisements along the Red line, there is no transactional relationship with graffiti. Instead, a transitional relationship is forged between rider and writer. You may not be able to read them, but the names on the wall keep you company, at least until you go underground or get off at the next stop. As Brooks suggests, the illegibility of graffiti and blurred borders of the metro are precisely the appeal. He writes, “The human imagination rises to [the] challenge by seeking coherent images of its surroundings.” (Brooks 1997) In this vein, I attempt to find a coherent image of the capital city through its indecipherable metro graffiti.

With an eclectic mix of resources, both visual and written, spanning from New York City graffiti to Washington Metro history, my documentary re-engages the transient public with its changing local space. Through my online musings and cinematic ruminations, I qualify the communal attributes that both metro and graffiti situate and reverberate back into the city in order to make D.C.’s cultural landscape more legible.
METRO METHODOLOGY

As a native Washingtonian and frequent metro rider, my research interests have been directly influenced by my own experiences. After nearly a decade of riding the Red line, I became curious about metro graffiti once I fell prey to the work of JU (a.k.a. JUJU). Alongside spray-painted images of the Super Mario Brothers, Michael Jackson and Fresh Prince of Bel Air, among others, he left his name like a label that caught my eye. The more I spotted JU’s pieces, the more I felt connected to the anonymous artist and the surrounding space in which he would communicate with me. I wanted to find him, learn the meaning behind his name and his motivations for writing on the Red line.

But what began as a singular inquiry soon morphed into something bigger. My experience made me question that of other Red line riders, other writers, besides JU. To this end, I set off to collect as many Red line interviews as possible to speak to the collective, visual history of the space. I employed the techniques of documentary and participatory media to question the aesthetics of the Red line and understand what our everyday commute says about us, and the capital city. Now, that I have completed

Figure 1.7: JU’s Michael Jackson piece at Brookland metro station, July 7, 2011. Photo courtesy of Saaret Yoseph.
production of the film, I am currently in post-production working to complete a documentary about Red line metro graffiti in two, twenty-minute parts.

Though, I had no prior video production experience, I could imagine no other way to document the story of the Red line than through film. I took on the role of director and producer at the onset as well as cinematographer, but eventually ceded the latter role to colleagues, Julie Espinosa and Jeremy Mines. I researched the Red line online and reached out to local arts-based nonprofits: the now defunct Midnight Forum and Words, Beats, & Life, Inc., which both had legal mural productions along the Red line. At the same time, I was taking courses in the Communication, Culture & Technology program, such as Remix Culture and Critical Making: Documentary, to gain knowledge about documentary processes and approaches. Immediately, I learned the importance of locating myself in my research and filmmaking strategy. By inquiring about JU and asking questions about my Red line ride, I was required to investigate my own backyard; to reexamine the liminal space I inhabit every day and the people I share it with.
As mentioned, my methods were similar to that of Henry Chalfant and Martha Cooper’s visual anthropology of subway graffiti. My approach, on the other hand, likens that of Jon Naar whose photography of 1970s New York City graffiti was as much about the city as it was the writing on its walls. Wholly-invested in capturing lived space, Naar “had a special rapport with the changing face of urban identity” and “felt a personal responsibility to record this face as [he saw] it--warts and all.” (Naar 19) I utilized a similar style to my documentary approach. At once, observational and reflexive, I capture D.C.’s graffiti and its subway system with consideration of the people, the place and my place in it.

Additionally, Naar’s consideration of the “changing face” of his city is particularly salient for me. With the rapidly shifting demographics of Washington, the capital once called “Chocolate City” is now barely 50 percent black (Morello 2011). Predictably, the expanse of gentrification has not missed the Northeast neighborhoods along the Red line. In addition to ongoing construction sites dotting the area, the Metropolitan-Branch Trail (MBT) and commissioned murals on the path have introduced new faces and added layers of aesthetics to the space. And though, I am certainly no expert on gentrification, the implications it has on my research cannot be denied.
Therefore, I consider how alterations to the visual landscape, competition for space and access to the Red line have changed since its inception and the supposed heyday of graffiti. For me, context cannot be divorced from content.

Figure 2.2: Red line during metro’s construction, July 15, 1973. Reprinted with permission of the DC Public Library, Star Collection, © Washington Post.

Figure 2.3: Metro-Branch Trail sign, July 7, 2011. Photo courtesy of Saaret Yoseph.

Figure 2.4: Back of graffitied signs on MBT with mural in the background, July 7, 2011. Photo courtesy of Saaret Yoseph.
Given the crowd density and diversity of experience, my treatment of the Red line, in film and scholarship, demanded flexibility as well as humility. Thousands of metro-goers ride the Red line each day. At Union Station, alone, some 33,697 riders board on a given weekday (WMATA 2011). Innumerable graffiti writers have also left their mark there. Thus, as a first-time filmmaker and anxious master’s candidate, I wanted to avoid the impression that I was developing a comprehensive text on the Red line metro or D.C. graffiti history, for that matter. Though, my close reading of Red line graffiti has an authoritative voice, mine is not the only voice included. Rather, I took a discursive approach to my research study with an enduring set of inquiries:

1) What does the Red line represent about D.C.?
2) How does Red line graffiti impact commuters?
3) What does the space mean to graffiti writers?
4) How is the space changing?

Having these core questions in mind allowed me to consider the differing viewpoints of stakeholders, especially those of graffiti writers and metro riders. While I reached out to municipal representatives and local historians for interviews, the bulk of my first-hand sourcing came by way of graffiti writers and commuters. In this respect, my thesis emphasizes the lived reality of the space.

Figure 2.5: GRAVE at work on the Red line, February 10, 2012. Photo courtesy of Saaret Yoseph.

Figure 2.6: Metro riders on-board a packed train, undated. Reprinted with permission of the DC Public Library, Star Collection, © Washington Post.
By taking a discursive approach, I was able to concentrate on the actors tied to the Red line every day by practice, happenstance or routine. I tend to agree with Schrag, whom I interviewed for the documentary, that, “Metro belongs not to [the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority] but to the people …” (Schrag 2006). And while I was not able to capture the perspectives of all the people that ride or write on the Red line, my documentary effort began with the objective of inciting an open, public discussion about public space, with all the people willing to talk. Ultimately, I filmed and conducted interviews with a diverse set of participants, from active/inactive graffiti writers to a spokesperson for the D. C. Department of Public Works (which allocates funding for MuralsDC projects along the Red line).³

Though, the responses of these interviewees were invaluable, I must emphasize, again, that my documentary is far from complete. Considering the debate over “Tagging Rights” in D.C. and the increasing peculiarity of its relationship with mainstream culture, the staked investments in economies of prestige (i.e. fame culture) and space have never been higher. With this in mind, I maintain Chalfant’s endnote apology in *Subway Art* to be an appropriate disclaimer for those consuming my work:

> [We] would like to acknowledge all those great artists whom we missed due merely to circumstances of timing and location. We’re sorry! We never thought of the book as an exhaustive survey of the entire history of the graffiti movement; rather it was an extraordinary record of a movement that we had observed from our own point of view. (Cooper 2009)

Remaining cognizant of the many figures and facets involved in my subject-matter reminds me of my limitations as a researcher and filmmaker. Ultimately, the voices left

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³ See Appendix for full list of interviewees.
⁴ “Tagging Rights” was the title of a *Washington City Paper* cover story about graffiti in the city and the growing presence of legal murals in the District.
out of the documentary will be as consequential as those included. I received the same bit of caution from Red line writer, NEPAL. He once remarked to me off-camera about a similar tendency toward bias, noting that the first graffiti writer you meet can easily influence your overall perspective about graffiti. My first primary resource from the local writing community was Cory Stowers (a.k.a. EON), a former Red line writer, who has painted and produced numerous legal mural projects in the city. After meeting Stowers through a previous position at Words, Beats, & Life, Inc., I was introduced to other writers, but particularly members in his graffiti crew, 2DK, because those were the writers he was affiliated with and had direct access to. I did my best to collect an assortment of viewpoints, but there will undoubtedly be scrutiny over which writers are (and which writers are not) featured in the final, two-part documentary.

It must be noted, though, that my documentary is about metro graffiti; it is not a graffiti documentary, in the typical sense. Such films, like Infamy and Style Wars, well-executed as they were, seem to speak about and directly to a select group: writers and graffiti enthusiasts. In my mind, this only amplifies the one-way conversation occurring on metro so, instead, I chose to bring commuters into the fray and create a talkback of sorts. Taking my cues from the graffiti community, I co-opted a WMATA security advisement slogan for part one of the documentary series, See Something, Say Something. Done as rough cut for my Critical Making: Documentary class, the film short creates an indirect dialogue between Red line metro riders and graffiti writers. In addition to this piece, I have edited and produced a trailer for the project as well as audio clips, vignettes and interview excerpts for the website.
Though, rationalizing my documentary choices is a straightforward scholarly exercise, applying my research to create the final products of the documentary has indeed been a challenging process. With film production software, like Final Cut Pro, I am able to edit and arrange recorded images and audio to construct an overarching story. And interpreting the words of my primary sources to form this story is solely my responsibility, one that cannot simply be handled in expository terms. As Daniel Parseliti suggests in his *Subway Chronicles* narrative, even the most persistent of transit enthusiasts must resign to the fact that “explanation [gives] way to practice.” (Cangro 1997) Thus, the full extent of the metro experience can never fully be captured by words—or in my case, images. For a genuine encounter with simultaneous perception on the Red line, for the opportunity to defy the urge for complacency in public space, one would need to encounter metro first-hand. But, until then, my visual exploration of the Red line’s place in the city’s social fabric will need to entice more eyes to have their own experience.
REMOVING THE RED LINE

Without question, facilitating diverse and open-ended dialogue was a major priority over the course of my project. So much so that the final documentary product has been secondary to the discursive process of making the documentary. While the filmed interviews that I conducted elicited thoughtful responses from my participants, I aimed to supplement civic engagement by adding an online element to the film. This cross-platform style of filmmaking is a byproduct of documentary 2.0, a new wave in participatory media that utilizes strategy to spark community action and/or thoughtful discussion.

For my project, I aimed to draw more people to the Red line to witness the space for themselves and to re-engage those already using the space through an unconventional conversation. With this objective, I attempted to invite city-dwellers and surbanites, alike, to “bear on the problems of how our communities, regions, and landscapes should change.” (Hiss 1990) I launched the project website, redlinedc.wordpress.com, specifically for this purpose. I periodically posted blog entries about public transit and
graffiti I also shared updates on the film in order to expand the lifeline and impact of *Red line D.C.*

To inspire interaction between metro riders and writers, I would frequently pose questions to site visitors and followers via social media. I solicited crowd-sourced photos and video of Red line graffiti and asked metro-goers what questions they might have for graffiti writers so that I could add them to my list of interview questions. I wrote several blog entries on the impact of graffiti, prodding repeatedly about how others felt about public space, but unfortunately, online engagement has been low. However, I have still been able to optimize the site for research-sharing and as a transparent tool for working through the filmmaking process.

![Screenshot from the project website with video and blog posts, April 2, 2012. Photo courtesy of Saaret Yoseph.](image)

*Word on the Street: Red Line Riders Speak Out!*

This site is in need of some fresh multimedia! A little audio inspiration is exactly what we need to pickup momentum on discussion about red line aesthetics and history. Straight from the *Red Line* D.C. vault and submitted for your approval, a quickie interview with a willing red line commuter named Ellen. As we work with WordPress (and on our ever-growing technical skills), we'll do our best to share more of these conversational gems with you. Hopefully, this recorded fodder will inspire you to share your own experiences on the red line. Hear what one commuter has to say and sound off with your own opinion at citylovedc@gmail.com or down below in the comments section.

Bringing more bodies to the Red line and inspiring more inquiry about the space has been the primary goal of my multimodal approach to documentary. By engaging the
subject-matter from multiple angles of address, I am able to extend my unconventional conversation about metro graffiti beyond the storyline of two short films. To this end, my website serves as an essential, comprehensive and malleable apparatus for which to remix my Red line research and documentary work. With two years worth of blog entries and multimedia experiments I have found numerous entry-points for perspective on public space, city aesthetics and communal culture. Thus, the ultimate goal of my thesis has not been to frame the story of the space in concrete terms, but to continuously re-frame it for my audience.

I handle metro and graffiti as transitional concepts that exist in dialogue with us— and with one another. Using the project’s website to house this ongoing discussion about the space has therefore been about repositioning the actors and elements of the scene. For example, in the 4-minute vignette, *Who Is Ju?*, I contextualize the visual history of the Red line by inserting my own story, introducing myself as an actor so that I may explain the role that JU plays in my daily commute. Uploading this foundational video to the site places it in conversation with other Red line video remixes, like “Hopefully, they like it …,” an excerpted interview with graffiti writer-turned-muralist Drew Liverman. The video features Liverman talking about the Red line and his memory of the area, as well as the intentions behind the Red line mural he was commissioned to do near the Franklin st. bridge. Another video clip on the site includes an MBT biker speaking directly to, and in front of, Liverman’s mural, explaining his appreciation for the production and justifying his opinions on good versus bad graffiti.
The still-growing assortment of audio and visual clips that I have created to stimulate discussion about the Red line thoughtfully reference the stimuli of the environment, itself. One blog entry features a snapshot of an advertisement for Metro’s “See Something, Say Something” campaign; part one of my documentary includes a similar auditory warning from U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano. I
blend, isolate and emphasize these existing elements of the metro so as to reacquaint riders with them; to take them out of context and pilfer the one-way conversation occurring in public space. From ambient noise to individual works of graffiti, each of these transient ingredients are given new life and attention on my project website. Online, aspects of the Red line and the surrounding aesthetics are frozen in time; fragmented for easy consumption and careful scrutiny.

Figure 3.5: Screenshot from Red Line D.C. website, April 2, 2012. Photo courtesy of Saaret Yoseph.

I have maintained and added layers to the website as a means of documentary strategy; public discourse on aesthetics in public space. The online platform has been a place for me to bridge the gap between producers and consumers of Red line graffiti. Pulling from sources like 12 Oz. Prophet, a street art site frequented by writers, as well as, Washington Metro People, one metro rider’s personally-sourced photo blog, I am able to pair seemingly disparate experiences to the scene. Online, just as on-camera, I cite graffiti writers and commuters, alike to give a full sense of the Red line’s social dynamics and stakes.
The digital framework of my thesis documentary has also given me a great deal of flexibility with my research. I have been able to layout my academic inquiries, filmmaking choices and, effectively, make the process of production accessible to anyone interested. Site visitors are frequently solicited for comments, so that they have the opportunity to participate in the documentary as well as contribute to its development. Each time I have released a new video, created a post or produced a podcast, I have looked to my audience to share their thoughts and respond to what was made in order to incorporate community feedback into my project deliverables. The transparency of my website has made me self-reflexive, both as a visual anthropologist and filmmaker, and helped shape the course and content of Red line D.C.

Figure 3.6: Screenshot of filmmakers Saaret Yoseph and Julie Espinosa on the Red line, April 2, 2012. Photo courtesy of Saaret Yoseph.

As the over-arching feature of my project, the website has been the dialogic arm of my documentary. Publishing my work on Wordpress has allowed me to build a vivid constellation out of years-worth of original research and accumulated sources. Housing these materials online has allowed me utilize the internet, another nonspace like the
metro, as a place to reflect on and mediate the multi-layers of *Red line D.C.*

Allowing my work to be arranged rhizomatically has given me the opportunity to edit my research, photos and footage in the same nonlinear fashion that I would in Final Cut Pro. This disregard for formal structure or sequential design left room for my Red line remix; I was able to assemble in a multimodal fashion so that no one output was more significant than any other. Instead, my website embodies my entire corpus of research in all its mediated, re-mediated and ruminative forms.

![Figure 3.7: Screenshot from the project website of a graffiti writer handling a spray can, April 2, 2012. Photo courtesy of Saaret Yoseph.](image)

![Figures 3.8: Screenshot of Red line graffiti before being covered by a mural, April 2, 2012. Photo courtesy of Saaret Yoseph.](image)
As ephemeral elements of D.C.’s lived reality, both the Red line metro and its graffiti are observed in motion, live in flux and operate in constant play with the surrounding environment. I have seen first-hand how rapidly the view of the Red line can change overnight; how quickly a construction site appears or how effectively a new mural can erase the memory of the graffiti there before it. JU’s *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* piece, for example, sits atop a roof near Rhode Island Avenue metro station, buried under layers of paint; covered first by indiscriminate tags, then a colorful fill-in by NEPAL and, just recently, buffed over at the behest of the property owner. In this same manner, the digital threads of my documentary peel back the layers of the Red line metro experience, capturing the visual history and progressions of the space and, crucially, engaging these aesthetic changes through nontraditional, discursive documentary methods.

Figure 3.9: Rooftop image of graffiti over JU’s *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* piece, undated. Photo courtesy of NEPAL.

**GRAFF IN THE CITY: WRITING NOTES**

By now it is clear that graffiti writing is tied to the city and metro riding to the city experience. Though, D.C. is nowhere close to being seen as a graffiti Mecca, according to writer DROUGHT, the Red line is considered “the Mecca of graffiti in D.C.”
… anyone who’s getting up, is up on the Red line.” (DROUGHT 2011). Featured in part one’s rough cut, DROUGHT described his first experience coming out of the underground tunnel at Union Station and seeing the brightly-colored walls with other people’s names on them. He was immediately drawn to the space and compelled to leave his mark along with the many others that came before.

Figure 4.0: Red line graffiti with “DC” sprayed onto the wall, undated. Photo courtesy of NEPAL.

Yet, DROUGHT’s present-day recollection of the Red line, however true to life, is a far cry from the view of the Red line on opening day. On March 27, 1976, the Washington Metro only ran the 4.2 miles between Rhode Island Avenue and Farragut North stations (WMATA, Metro History). Today, “the Line,” as local writers often call it, spans approximately 32 miles, from Glenmont station in the mostly black and Latino Montgomery County to Shady Grove station positioned in the mostly-white and affluent Rockville suburbs. In between these stops are others, like Union Station and Gallery Place—Chinatown that not only serve as main city thoroughfares, but also fittingly
illustrate how rapidly—and regularly—the image of Washington, D.C. can “change gears.”

In terms of high-traffic areas and appropriation, Joe Austin’s *Taking the Train* addressed how graffiti writers tactically navigate space in the city. Whether in New York or D.C., “[t]he shared public spaces that writers’ ‘borrowed’ formed a kind of network that remapped the city.” (Austin 2002) In the Red line’s case, the above ground portions of the route became unofficial attractions, with writers traversing through the area for spots to write before the rest of the public was given access. Heather Deutsch, MBT trail planner for the D.C. Department of Transit, echoed this point during a preliminary interview. She explained that the neighboring space along the Red line, particularly the Rhode Island Avenue-Brentwood location, “has always been a place where people walked.” (Deutsch 2010) Since the MBT has been established she feels that accessibility to the Red line’s adjacent communities has opened up. Now, entry into the communities is “through the front door, rather than the back door.” (Deutsch 2010) The MBT’s

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5 The “Change Gears” mural, located in between Rhode Island Ave. and New York Ave. metro stations, was commissioned by the Department of Public Works under the MuralsDC program. The aerosol-based production was done by writers Asad (ULTRA) Walker and CHE.
double-fenced enclosures, consistent lighting and visible pathways change the ease of access for writers, while opening up the surrounding Red line neighborhoods to the general public.

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Figure 4.2: Spray-painted sign along MBT, April 22, 2010. Photo courtesy of Suni Shah.

Interestingly, this renewed interest that city and developmental arms have shown in the Red line vicinity has changed the value of the space for many writers. DROUGHT emphasized the incentive for writers, like him, to get up on the Line because of the visibility and guaranteed access it offered them to commuters. The level of restriction for the layman and difficulty attaining spots was as much a source of adrenaline as it was an indicator of subculture status. Jeff Chang dissects this counterculture philosophy when discussing 1970s New York City graffiti:

> Your name was your currency, and you created value by making your mark … fame itself was wealth, liability transformed into asset. Maybe you hung yourself off the side of a building or climbed the steel beams supporting an elevated subway station to rock a tag that would make cleaning men scream in frustration and the other writers shake in jealousy … The train riders would treat your tags as invasions of their daily anonymity. (Chang 2006)

In attempting to achieve graffiti fame, writers on the Red line laid claim to the space; earning agency over the years by defying authority and appropriating place.
Though, as commuters gain increased access to this storied graffiti turf, some writers no longer see the appeal of the Red line. Roger Gastman’s telling of D.C. graffiti history in the book *Free Agents* discussed the prestige once attributed to getting up on the Line, explaining, “If you wanted respect as a D.C. writer, you’d have to paint the Red line.” He cites 1984 as the beginning of graffiti’s emergence between Union Station and Takoma Park, and considers 1989-98 to be the heyday of Red line graffiti. Younger writers like, DROUGHT, FAME and GRAVE, on the other hand, believe the Red line to be at its zenith. Additionally, a few local legends, like CERT still consider the Red line to be prime graffiti real estate. The Red line, which Gastman calls “CERT’s backyard” was considered a first and longtime love by the man, himself. Interviewing CERT was essential to my research and a testament to how differently the space is valued, even within the graffiti community.

Likewise, the opinions collected from commuters about Red line aesthetics were as diverse as the passengers interviewed. Some confessed an appreciation for graffiti, while others relegated the writing on the wall to be nothing more than “white noise.” Yet, perhaps, the most consistent thread among commuter reports was an inability to read graffiti. For this reason, the majority of metro-goers I talked to, said they preferred to look at commissioned MBT murals, like Rhode Island Avenue’s “From Edgewood to the Edge of the World.” I was not necessarily surprised to hear this consensus. As Michael Brooks suggested in his own subway assessment, the human mind searches for legibility to make sense of its environment. Because the legal murals along the Red line are mainly pictorial, rather than letter-based, their aesthetics are more accessible for the everyday rider.
Moreover, these commissioned murals are products of community input and local compromise. Though, active and inactive writers are often employed to create these prominent Red line productions, their commissioned work is a matter of public art instead of public identity. A fair amount of the mural works have been produced by the nonprofit Words, Beats, & Life under the MuralsDC initiative, a graffiti abatement program under the D.C. Department of Public Works. I’m curious to learn how commuters’ attitudes about graffiti might change if they knew their favorite legal murals along the Red line were not only influenced by graffiti-style but created by graffiti writers, as well.

Does the readability of murals versus graffiti make the visibility of public name writing any less significant? In my mind, the answer is “no.” The lack of conscious understanding or interest in Red line metro graffiti does not diminish the daily consumption of these works by commuters nor does it undermine the decades-long tradition of getting up on the Line. Even in its illegibility, graffiti speaks to and about Washington, D.C., illustrating a spontaneous and ever-changing social dynamic that hardly folds neatly to expository form. This is why the adaptive manner of my documentary project online has been so complimentary to the spontaneous nature of the
space. Though, the glory days of the Red line may have ended, by some accounts, the enduring presence of graffiti in this ephemeral space indicates its changing cultural and communicative significance to the city.

‘WHY THE RED LINE?’

Unpacking the heft of metro graffiti has been no small feat. When I tell people about The Red line D.C. Project, I can usually anticipate the first question to follow. It’s one I often ask myself; an inquiry that has been echoed by commuters I have interviewed, and a question I have repeatedly posed to graffiti writers in the process of my research: Why the Red line?

In Washington, D.C., surely there are other metro lines that are essential. The Blue and Orange lines wind through the city center and out into Virginia, passing some of the most highly-trafficked and tourist-heavy stations in the system, including the Smithsonian, National Airport (Ronald Reagan-Washington) and Pentagon City. The Green line’s latent construction and politicized development was no doubt influential in
bringing commercial growth and “urban renewal” to the U st and Columbia Heights neighborhoods along that route. But the Red line, being the initial line to operate, has made an indelible first mark on the capital city.

In terms of graffiti, another city site is often referenced more prominently than the Red line. AUP or “Art Under Pressure,” the underground tunnel near L’Enfant Plaza is perhaps the most well-known graffiti hub among the local writing community, often noted as D.C.’s Hall of Fame.6 As Roger Gastman explains, “AUP was of tremendous importance because it was a meeting place and for a time was the spot around which D.C. graffiti revolved.” (Gastman 5) Though, AUP is undoubtedly an important space for local graffiti writers, its presence underground challenges its significance to the city-at-large. Red line graffiti is a vital cultural indicator precisely because it lives above ground and exists in the public sphere. For this reason, I believed metro graffiti in D.C. warranted meaningful and close study. Transit and art are bedfellows too fond to ignore.

As a daily Red line rider, the barrage of names that accompanied my trip became a point of fixed research. I set off to find the faces behind them, to learn the motivations of these anonymous assailants and their relationship to the Red line, but ultimately my project became about the Red line, itself. In the two years it took to develop my thesis and document place through practice, I was able to compile an inclusive picture of the Red line scene—warts and all. I endeavored to bridge the unseen distance we occupy in public space by considering the aesthetics we experience together. Quite literally, metro provided the window, graffiti the view.

6 A Hall of Fame is a site established in a given city or locality where writers congregate to contribute or appreciate graffiti done by others. Typically, the pieces considered the best or created by legendary writers are preserved.
## APPENDIX: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Interview Year</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tim Conlon</td>
<td>D.C. Commission of the Arts and Humanities</td>
<td>2010</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heather Deutsch</td>
<td>D.C. Department of Transit</td>
<td>2010, 2012</td>
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<td>Arondo Holmes</td>
<td>Hondo Coffee</td>
<td>2012</td>
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<td>Martin Irvine</td>
<td>Irvine Contemporary Gallery; CCT, Georgetown University</td>
<td>2010</td>
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<td>Nancee Lyons</td>
<td>D.C. Department of Public Works</td>
<td>2010, 2012</td>
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<tr>
<td>Robin Marcus</td>
<td>Writing Center, George Washington University</td>
<td>2010</td>
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<td>Mazi Mutafa</td>
<td>Words, Beats, &amp; Life, Inc</td>
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<td>Dominic Painter</td>
<td>Midnight Forum</td>
<td>2010</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cory Stowers</td>
<td>Art Under Pressure</td>
<td>2010, 2012</td>
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<td>CERT</td>
<td>Graffiti Writer</td>
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<td>Drew Liverman</td>
<td>Graffiti Writer</td>
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<td>DROUGHT</td>
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<td>EXIST</td>
<td>Graffiti Writer</td>
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<td>FAME</td>
<td>Graffiti Writer</td>
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