Gentrification and Graffiti in Harlem

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Abstract:

This paper set out to evaluate whether under conditions of gentrification, which causes change in population composition and street conditions, local graffiti would be influenced in Harlem. Graffiti is shown as an crucial and indispensable part of local street culture, which is a distinct part of each neighbourhood. Population composition and street condition are two features of gentrification. According to our theory, gentrification would lead to the change of street culture, which means as the population and cleanliness of streets vary, local graffiti would be affected as well. As gentrification has gradually become familiar to more and more people, many neighborhoods not only in New York City, but also in the whole world are facing the same problems about diminishing of street culture brought by gentrification. On the other hand, street culture represents the unique identity of each distinct neighborhood, and as one aspect of street culture, graffiti is known as the very common and popular way for people to express themselves in art form in public. Therefore, knowing about the relationship between gentrification and street culture is crucial. In our literature review, we have discussed several studies other scholars have done, which introduce graffiti and its social status.

In order to execute this research, we will use Google Map as a tool to observe the environment of the streets, and at the same time, we would do field works to verify the real
conditions. In order to show the different influences that different extents of gentrification have on graffiti, we would like to compare and contrast two specific regions changing over time, the West Harlem and the Central Harlem. These two areas are chosen because they have distinct housing prices, which indicate their different levels for being gentrified. Certain neighborhoods of the two regions would be selected randomly. As the turning point of gentrification is nearly impossible to be found, our group plan to focus changes of graffiti in West Harlem and Central Harlem in the past 10 years. We would also like to execute interviews to knowledgeable informants, the artists, within the neighborhoods, exploring their thoughts and real experiences on the change of graffiti. Thus, our sampling strategy would be respondent-driven, which is also called snowball strategy. We believe the real professions have their own circle and admired people, who would be virtually helpful to our interview session.

**Background and Significance:**

Since 1920s, Harlem, particularly Central Harlem, had become a black neighborhood due to the moving in of large amount of black people from Great Migration. However, starting from 1970s, gentrification happened since increasing number of other class groups of people came in.(Beveridge 2008) The population composition graph is shown below:

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1 Sources: 1910 to 1940, Census Tract Data from National Historical Geographical Information System, Compiled by Andrew A. Beveridge and Co-workers; 1950, Ellen M. Bogue File, as edited by Andrew A. Beveridge and co-workers; 1960 through 2000, Tabulated Census Data from National Historical Geographic Information System; 2006 Data from American Community Survey, U.S. Bureau of the Census. Boundary Files from National Historical Geographic Information System 1910 to 2000, U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2006. All data and boundary files available from Minnesota Population Center. Since results are tabulated from the sources indicated, they may not necessarily match Census published figures for population and race.
According to the U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development, gentrification is the process by which a neighborhood occupied by lower-income households undergoes revitalization or reinvestment through the arrival of upper-income households. (US HUD 1979) Street culture is a more general topic compared to graffiti, so that our study about graffiti generally reviews the influences of gentrification on street culture. Several features in street culture are revealed by graffiti. The changes brought by gentrification, for example, the change in population composition and street condition, also affect other aspects of this neighborhood. And the point we focus on is street culture, which is the popular style of an area. It represents the identity, style and characteristics of this specific neighborhood. (Lachmann 1988: 236) Therefore, from studying the change in street culture caused by gentrification, we can generally know the changes in overall neighborhood. To be specific, we choose graffiti, which is defined as an art form represented by pictures or words painted
or drawn on a wall, building, etc. based on Merriam Webster Dictionary\(^2\), as the great part of street culture.

We choose graffiti as an object of study because graffiti is the most remarkable feature to us when we walked through Harlem. While we passed through different parts of Harlem, we found the more gentrified and well-regulated the community is, the less or the more well-organized the graffiti is. So the change of graffiti is dramatic. Another reason would be more complex. Graffiti originated from New York by black people and Hispanic people from 1960s. In that New York is a quite dynamic and compact city, the youth felt a lot of pressure, especially, young black and Hispanic people who lived in special area like Harlem. So among pick-up basketball, hip pop, street dance and so on, graffiti became the most distinctive way for them to switch the emotion (Ley Cybruwsky 1974: 491)——they broke the restrain from their life by using graffiti to express their anger with racial discrimination, unequal right, etc. Thus, studying the influence of gentrification on graffiti, will contribute to help us figure out the general change of the neighborhood Harlem’s special identity, style and characteristics.

**Literature Review**

Graffiti is regarded not only as social indicator, but also as folk symbol in local people’s own right. (Ley Cybriwsky 1974: 492) So this meaning of graffiti brings up a question for us: What is the kind of people graffiti truly represents? In order to solve this problem, we read a few relevant academic literature.

“Graffiti writers are largely composed by poor blacks and hispanics. Statistically, 15 of 17 are blacks or hispanics. Of the 25 writers I interviewed, 19 were not part of that elite group of 17. Among the 19, which was not a random sample, 12 were black, 5 hispanic, and 2 white. 12 lived just with their mothers, 7 with both parents. 9 of the 12 single mothers were on welfare, while the other 3 worked at unskilled jobs. In five of the 7 two-parent households, both parents worked at unskilled jobs. In the 2 other two-parent households, the mothers were housewives, while one father held an unskilled, the other a managerial job.” (Lachmann 1988: 235) From this essay talking about Graffiti as Career and Ideology, it is clear to see that major composition of graffiti writers are non-white and poor kids. And almost all the kids have harsh living conditions due to their un-skilled parents. Accordingly, this common feature necessarily indicates several reasons drawing their aspiration. Firstly, graffiti gathers a large amount of poor black or hispanic kids together into groups, which gives them a sense of protection. Also, for proving their bravery and contempt for authority without participating in a serious crime, graffiti is the best means that allows these kids to proclaim the opposition to law relatively safely. (Lachemann 1988: 236) As a result, graffiti represents mostly black and hispanic people, especially the kids in poor living situations.

However, in Harlem, large amount of poor balck and some hisoanic peole are fored to leave due to gentrification. (Minnesota Population Center 1910-2006) With their leaving, the vreation and preservation of graffiti will certainly be influenced. Hence, we are going to study the change brought by gentrification on graffiti because of their common association to groups of black and hispanic people.

**Design (Data & Method):**
We are studying the relationship between gentrification and graffiti, where gentrification is the independent variable and graffiti is the dependent variable. And we expect the following direction of relationship: negative relationship between gentrification and graffiti.

We collect the data using both quantitative methods and qualitative methods. Quantitatively, to measure the amount of graffiti, the changes of graffiti over time and street conditions, we will use google map to explore the recorded street graffiti conditions, how the graffiti on the street walls look like years ago, and how the street conditions are. Population composition data will be collected from online census database. Qualitatively, we also interview graffiti writers to find how they felt about gentrification affects their creation, using respondent driven sampling.

**Neighborhood Selection:**

The reason we chose West Harlem and Central Harlem as two areas to study is the graph below that shows us different levels of housing prices in Harlem. As introduced in the background, more people are now moving in to Harlem. The higher housing prices of a region clearly indicate that more customers are interested in this area and they want to move into this area. The increasing amount of people who have the ability to afford increasing housing prices directly matches the meaning of gentrification degrees. Therefore, the higher housing prices are, the more this region is being gentrified. According to this graph, we chose two regions that seem to be gentrified most differently. (The color of west Harlem is the lightest, whereas the central Harlem has the darkest color.)
Measures:

The indicators of gentrification we are discussing in this proposal are change of resident population composition and street physical conditions. The indicator of graffiti is the amount of graffiti and its change over time.

Quantitative Data Collection:

Population composition: In order to find accurate data of population composition of people living in West Harlem and Central Harlem, we would like to search online for the data in Census database. We believe this data would be the most accurate and updated version of neighborhoods’ composition. Through the change of population composition, we could find
out the actual change and movements of people from different ethnicities, which would provide us a lot of useful information about the gentrification within the area.

*Street conditions:* For the exploration of street conditions, we choose to execute it in two ways. One is through looking at Google Map of Harlem street by street, and the other way is through observation in randomly defined area while confirming the information on Google Map. Using Google Map could be seen as one of the most effective way to explore the neighborhood. In this way, time and money would not be wasted. However, the accuracy of Google Map street view could not be guaranteed, so that our next step is to go into the field and to do observation ourselves in defined neighborhoods with in West Harlem and Central Harlem areas. The neighborhoods would be chosen randomly because one main purpose of this action is to check the differences between Google Map and real street views.

*Graffiti observation:* For the observation of graffiti, the methods applied would be similar to those of observation of street conditions. We would first use Google Map to do a broad counting and observation, and after that, we would actually go into the field and take pictures ourselves

**Quantitative Data Collection based on Respondent Driven Sampling:**

Respondent Driven sampling is applied to interview artistic related people, such as street artists. In the first place, we need to find a specialized street artist since he or she could offer us with other graffiti-related artists who he or she is familiar with. Then these people would be our targets to continue the interview. All of their recommendation are the resourceful information that enriches and optimizes our results of interview. Through those interviews, we will get to know how artists view the changes happened to graffiti for these past 10 years, and how they think the changes are related to the gentrification process. The
interviews would be conducted in both West Harlem and Central Harlem, with maximum amount of 20 people in each area.

**Sample Interview Question:**

The sample interview questions are shown below:

1) How long have you been living in Harlem?
2) When did you start creating graffiti?
3) How do you think Harlem has changed over the past decades?
4) We call this process as “gentrification”. Do you think it is a good thing or bad thing? Why is that?
5) Please describe about the graffiti-creating environment when you started doing graffiti. How is it different from nowadays’ environment?
6) How does gentrification affect your graffiti creation? Why do you think this is the case (that gentrification has influence on graffiti)?
7) Have you planned any strategies (changing creating places, propagandizing graffiti more, etc.) against the influences you received? What are them?
8) Do you have any comments, complaints or concerns about anything related to our topic?

**Discussion & Conclusion:**

Our expectation for the research is to see that there’s direct relationship between gentrification and the way of existence of graffiti. Since the research question asks whether gentrification influences graffiti in Harlem, we need a specific point that connects both of them, in this case the graffiti. Gentrification, as a fairly general idea of transforming in neighbourhoods, brings many changes to different communities. Street culture is also a
general topic that contains different categories; graffiti is only a part of street culture. However, as one of the features of street culture, graffiti is a common phenomenon that everyone may notice—graffiti has its reconstruction characteristic. If there’s connection between gentrification and graffiti, then the result could also answer the research question.

There are several weak points and challenges exist in our research.

One of the weak points is that we can only see the early graffiti in Harlem through Google Map or literature review. There are some details that won’t show up in the pictures such as color fading and people’s reaction when seeing these graffiti. New graffiti is still there in Harlem and we can simply just go there and visit. But none of the group members happens to live this area for a long time. The only way to know about the old graffiti is to look at the old pictures or to ask the residents. In this case we will know more about the new graffiti than the old one.

The challenge we are facing in this research is that it’s hard to find the person who’s familiar with the graffiti design in Harlem and also lived there for a long time. As we’ve mentioned previously where none of the group member happens to be the permanent resident of Harlem. It’s less likely for us to know someone lives in Harlem by personal. Even though the research is designed to use snowball strategy, finding the first person we are going to interview is quite hard. We need to look for a breakthrough point in order to get into this community.
References:


