

The Written Park: Reading Multiple Urban Park Subjectivities Through Signage, Writing, and Graffiti

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Abstract

Urban parkland is a quintessential form of public space. Various actors—from government managers, to civic groups, to individual visitors—actively negotiate and co-create the governance, use, and meaning of parks. One form of negotiation occurs through signage and writing. Here, we focus on 42 parks in New York City and the multiple narratives within them. Through coding the messages, material qualities, and meanings in 784 signs, qualitative analysis of graffiti in parks, triangulated with ethnographic field notes, we identify and discuss what sort of urban park subjectivities are being constructed. These include not only an “ideal park subject,” but also alternative subjectivities such as the neighbor or steward, the graffiti writer, and “free agents” who use wilderness as refuge. We seek to inform new ways of thinking about parks as social–ecological resources that are co-created by users and managers as places that allow multiple subjectivities to be expressed.

Keywords

urban parks, public space, signage, environmental subjectivity, governmentality

Introduction

Urban parkland is a quintessential form of public space and part of the broader public realm. It ranges from landscaped lawns, to forests, wetlands, and meadows, to ballfields, paved walkways, and promenades. These spaces have historical lineages that trace back to town greens and commons as important spaces for civic action, public assembly, and discourse; yet, the contemporary urban park is not always an entirely free, open, or democratic space (Blackmar, 2006; Harvey, 2006; Mitchell, 1995; Rosenzweig & Blackmar, 1992; Taylor, 2009; Zukin, 1995). These sites exist for public benefit, but as instruments of social policy, they can be highly regulated and privatized (Cranz, 1982; Smith & Low, 2006). From a management perspective, parks must accommodate multiple uses by broad publics in ways that preserve order, cleanliness, and safety as well as the sustainability of natural resources; as such, certain uses and users (e.g., drug use, sex, homeless encampments, foraging, hunting) are excluded from many parks.

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Parks are sites where various actors—government managers, civic stewardship groups, private businesses, and individual park visitors—actively negotiate and co-create their governance, use, and meaning (Campbell, Svendsen, Sonti, & Johnson., 2016; Svendsen & Campbell, 2008; Svendsen, Campbell, & McMillen, 2016). Often this negotiation occurs through public signage, writing, and art—in addition to shaping the landscape itself (Hermer, 2002). In a practice that Hermer and Hunt (1996) call “official graffiti,” the writing and posting of rules and regulations, as well as educational, environmental, and cautionary signs, informs and influences the behavior of the public, including park users. Rules and signage are designed to shape an “urban park subject” that conforms to the desired uses of the site, what Foucault might call “technologies of governmentality” (Foucault, 1979, 1991; Gabriel, 2011). However, multiple subjectivities are performed and expressed through interaction with parkland, not just the “ideal park subject” that is interpellated through formal signage and written rules. We can analyze these other subjectivities through written traces, including vernacular signs, posters, fliers, and graffiti.

In this article, we focus on New York City (NYC) parks and the multiple narratives within them, including those that are sanctioned, unsanctioned, marginal, and hard to detect. Through reading the messages in civic, private, commercial, and government signs that comprise the “linguistic landscape” (Landry & Bourhis, 1997) in parks, and through considering the material qualities of signs and the meanings they confer (Cook, 2015), we seek to understand whether, how, and for whom parks are functioning as public spaces. Research on linguistic landscapes has evolved in its methods and theoretical orientation over time, but often includes a focus on language (e.g., English over other languages in multiethnic communities) as a marker of power (Gorter, 2013; Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Lou, 2016). We analyze government, civic, and private signs as what Hermer and Hunt (1996) term “acts of everyday governance” (p. 455) in efforts to shape park subjects. To do this, we focus on text-based signs in NYC parklands. Our purpose is to inductively infer what writings and signage in parkland tell us about the expected and corrected behavior in parklands, including “natural areas” within parks.¹ We analyze which actions are privileged or encouraged and which are prohibited and marginalized to answer the overarching question: What sort of urban park subjects are being constructed? We also examine how park users, through their written interactions with parkland, create alternative meanings for these spaces and identify other ways-of-being. In so doing, we seek to inform new ways of thinking about urban parkland and natural areas as social–ecological resources that are co-created by park users and managers as places that allow multiple subjectivities to be expressed.

Governmentality, Park Subjects, and Emparking Nature

Building on Foucault’s examination of government as “the conduct of conduct,” the concept of *governmentality* explores “governmental rationality”—the practices, technologies, and techniques through which subjects are governed—including through acts of *self*-regulation (Gordon, 1991; Foucault, 1979, 1991). This understanding of power examines the role of knowledge, discourse, and diverse social institutions in shaping thought and behavior. Thus, it brings attention to techniques (or technologies) of the self and the way in which subjects come into being. The term *subject* has multiple meanings and connotations, which Agrawal (2005b) parses as: actors or agents; the state of being subjected or subordinated; and a theme or domain. In the Foucauldian understanding of power–knowledge and governmentality, subjects are produced or created within and through discourses. Discourses are ways of constituting knowledge—or knowledge frameworks—and the power relations that are embedded and expressed in those frameworks and practices (Foucault, 1971).

In applying this concept to the environmental realm, Agrawal (2005a) proposes the notion of *environmentality*, whereby people transform their actions, practices, and identities in relation to the environment, which itself is constituted out of discourses and ethical parameters that shape

understandings of what the environment is. People become environmental subjects through various regulatory strategies and community decisions with different relations of care and responsibilities to trees and forests (Agrawal, 2005b). Focusing on the creation of parks in early 19th-century Philadelphia, Gabriel (2011) examines urban environmentalism, identifying

three such governmental techniques: the production of park space as distant, and conceptually separate, from urban space; the production of park subjects who could only temporarily inhabit the space of the park for purposes of leisure; and finally, the erasure of non-capitalist economic activity within woodlands adjacent to urban spaces. (p. 125)

Thus, Gabriel explores how urban parks, urban *park subjects*, and the contemporary capitalist city are co-constituted. Examining more recent urban environmental management practices, Brand (2007) argues that neoliberal discourses work to create green subjects claiming, “the environment is employed as a means of constructing citizens’ sense of themselves and their obligations, in a manner perfectly attuned to the individualizing demands of neoliberal urban transformations” (p. 628).

One of the most noticeable ways that the “ideal park subject” is produced is through signage that directs people’s behavior in, interactions with, and perceptions of parkland. Valverde (2005) explains how prescribing behavior is one way to govern uses of space, rather than “governing through legal categories of personhood and group identity” (p. 37). Although what is considered appropriate use of a given space can change over time, as culture is a dynamic system, when concepts of “amenity,” “improvement,” and “highest and best use” become enshrined in signage “it acquires a facticity” (Valverde, 2005, p. 52) and can subordinate park users’ own preferences and norms for engaging with park lands. Hermer and Hunt (1996) assert, “Regulation even appears in places where we fully expect the opposite, such as the rule-littered space of ostensibly ‘wild’ or ‘natural’ parks and reserves whose contrast with our regulated urban environments forms their very attraction for our recreational activity” (p. 457). Building on this, Hermer’s (2002) study of North American parks and preserves describes the “vivid paradox” (p. 4) of *emparking* nature, whereby access to the wildness and freedom promised by nature only comes with accepting the incongruent presence of regulations typically associated with places that are artificial and restrictive. Hermer (2002) explains,

[P]arks do not simply “protect” nature, as we are so often educated to believe, but rather manufacture an experience of wildness and disorder . . . [which] also plays a central role in constructing particular social relations as “natural” and “normal.” (pp. 4-5)

With regard to regulating conduct, Hermer describes how behavior at campsites should maintain quiet, be decent (i.e., clothed), hygienic, alcohol-free, and fire-regulated. These and other orderings of conduct serve to promote self-regulation “in an environment where both personal and environmental risk are bound together” where wilderness is protected through “regulatory discourses that evoke hazards to both personal and environmental health” (Hermer, 2002, p. 98).

Emparking nature is done with specific populations in mind and reflects power relations and contested cultural meanings and uses of nature (Byrne, 2012). The dislocation and disenfranchisement of indigenous and rural populations from their homelands and sources of livelihood for the establishment of national parks and game reserves designed to “preserve nature” favors a particular view of nature and particular groups of people over others. Such “fortress conservation” has been applied to the savannahs of Africa (Brockington, 2002), tropical forests of Asia (Peluso, 1992), and the temperate forests of the United States (Kosek, 2006). In an urban context, we also see examples of displacement of communities through the creation of parkland as well as the exclusion of particular uses and users through their ongoing management, as was the case

with African American and White working-class communities who were displaced from their home at Seneca Village through the creation of Central Park in NYC (Taylor, 2009) and the subsequent exclusion of the Latino community's cultural practices from Central Park in the 1970s (Rosenzweig & Blackmar, 1992). More recently, Mitchell (1995) drew attention to the exclusion of homeless residents—as well as acts of counterprotest—that occurred in Berkeley's People's Park; and Campo (2013) described the emergent uses of the postindustrial Brooklyn waterfront—such as homeless encampments and band practices—that were excluded as parkland was formally preserved, regulated, and designed. Today, policies and programs of governments and nonprofit organizations work to shape park subjects by prohibiting certain acts of biological, cultural, and spiritual sustenance from occurring on parkland, in part to maintain desired order, safety, aesthetics, and sustainability. As urban parks must accommodate an increasingly large public, issues of inclusion and exclusion continue to vex public land managers.

Ways of Categorizing and Analyzing Signs

To facilitate our discussion of text on signs, here we provide an overview of how others have examined and analyzed signs. Jaworski and Thurlow (2010) describe three types of signs: those that mark turf boundaries (experiential spaces), indexical signs identifying specific places (representational, perceptual spaces), and overlaid signs such as graffiti (reimagining spaces). Complex networks of meaning are created by the interactions of these signs with each other and with the social actors who view them. Hermer (2002) identifies technologies that permit, prohibit, and restrict space, where permitting is often framed in terms of safety and health to guard against the “ever present risk” in parks (p. 105). Hermer and Hunt (1996) analyze roadside signs as acts of everyday governance, noting “It is this world of everyday regulation we seek to characterize as permeated with ‘official graffiti’ which consists of a great profusion of regulatory signs, symbols, and instructions that figure in everyday life” (p. 457). Cook (2013) frames the analysis on social roles associated with street signs into a system of control with categories of: licensors (e.g., national regulators), owners (e.g., restaurant proprietors), authors (creators of the message content), writers (i.e., professional signwriters), addressed and unaddressed readers. Cook (2013) also outlined four overall functional systems for signs: locating (e.g., house numbers), informing (e.g., opening hours), controlling movement and behavior (e.g., no parking, no smoking), and service signs (e.g., fire hydrant signs). More recently, Blommaert's (2013) ethnographic study of his own neighborhood in Antwerp, Belgium, identified permanent signs, event signs, and “noise” (e.g., objects in the landscape by accident, such as flyers on windshields).

The materials and lettering, grammar, and punctuation used to create signs help convey meanings about permanence and identity. Some are meant to last forever (e.g., engraved granite monuments), and others are expected to only last a day or less (e.g., chalk writing). Based on a study of street signs in Newcastle upon Tyne, England, Cook (2015) determined that “The force of the meaning of the sign clearly depends on the material it is written on and the tool it is written with” (p. 87). Carving into stone and metal surfaces suggest permanence, quality and, by association, status; handwritten and printed paper signs typically convey information about relatively temporary circumstances; and signs painted on board fall between stone/metal and paper signs in terms of their permanence (Cook, 2015).

Graffiti deserves special consideration here because it is a prominent element in NYC and other urban landscapes worldwide (van Loon, 2014), and because it does not conform to the meanings for other signage (e.g., as described by Cook, 2015). Global graffiti culture has stable, identifiable characteristics (van Loon, 2014), including achieving recognition and taking risks; thus, a preference for writing in public over private spaces. When walls are cleaned, painted over or “buffed,” there is a drive to quickly rewrite there again as an assertion of community rights over property rights (Waldner & Dobratz, 2013); however there are also elements of respect and

recognition of territoriality of other writers' work (van Loon, 2014) and for monuments, religious buildings, private home, automobiles, and statues (Ferrell & Weide, 2010). While there are norms within global graffiti culture, there are also variations. Political graffiti often represents oppositional messages against authority and is counterhegemonic (Waldner & Dobratz, 2013). Hip-hop art graffiti (Pennycook, 2010) is characterized by a certain aesthetic, although it can also have political messages. Legal or illegal, and regardless of the messages it promotes or the crew it represents, graffiti, more than other textual signage in public space, "disrupts the aesthetic of authority. It intrudes on the controlled 'beauty' of ordered environments, and compels those invested in these environments to respond to it as an ugly threat to their aesthetic domination" (Ferrell, 1993, p. 84, cited in Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010, p. 21). Graffiti has a multilayered history in the city of New York particularly since the 1970s, with two very different discourses in reaction to and structuring the perception of the practice. Cresswell (1992) argues that a "discourse of disorder" critiqued graffiti as "out of place" on the city streets and public places—dubbing it a form of blight, garbage or violence; whereas gallerists and art spaces recontextualized graffiti as "in place," valuable, and aesthetically important in the art gallery. Thus, the particular place in which graffiti is situated constructs whether it is "normal" or "deviant" (Cresswell, 1996). Cresswell (1996, p. 8) uses the graffiti case to show "the ways in which space and place are used to structure a normative landscape—the way in which what is right, just and appropriate are transmitted through space and place" (p. 8). Clearly the meanings of graffiti are dynamic and context-specific.

Approach and Method

This work is part of a larger study that aims to better understand the use, value, and meaning of NYC parkland through triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methods including observation of human use of parkland, randomized interviews with park users, photographic documentation of signs in the landscape, and ethnographic field notes (see Auyeung, Campbell, Johnson, Sonti, & Svendsen, 2016; Campbell et al., 2016, for complete methods). The study area consists of six parks managed by the National Park Service (NPS), 35 parks managed by NYC Department of Parks and Recreation (NYC Parks), and 1 park (Plumb Beach in Brooklyn) with portions that are managed by both agencies. Data collection occurred from June to September 2013 and from June to September 2014. To enhance reliability through corroboration and to provide greater richness of qualitative field notes, researchers worked in pairs and conducted full team debriefs at the end of each day (Kearns, 2005).

This article draws on observation and photographic documentation of all written signs and messages in parks within the study area, including graffiti, signage, stickers, and memorials, along with ethnographic field notes. Our mixed-method approach builds on multiple traditions in the field of linguistic landscapes and includes both quantitative analysis of the content, meaning, material, and placement of signs combined with qualitative interpretation of ethnographic field notes about the landscape and community context surrounding those signs (see, e.g., Blommaert, 2013; Lou, 2016; Zabrodska & Milani, 2014). Data collection excluded pictures of traffic signs or park name signs, which are completely standardized citywide, except in cases when this signage contained any additional text. An Excel database of 1,138 text-based signs was created. Nonsanctioned signage is removed with some regularity, so our counts underestimate the messages coming from the parks users themselves. When multiple signs were depicted in a single photograph, each individual sign was coded and treated as unique, except in the case of graffiti, as it is not always clear what consisted of an individual tag or a larger wall-sized piece, nor could we determine the chronology or synchronicity of tags. Thus, our quantitative analysis of 784 signs (out of 1,138) excludes graffiti. We describe qualitative results on graffiti in its own section of the findings. To address the methodological challenges of interpreting graffiti, we conducted

Table 1. Types of Actors Authoring Text in Parkland (Graffiti Excluded) ($n = 784$).

Actor	Count	%
City Government	339	43.24
Civic	85	10.84
Business	70	8.93
Individual	59	7.53
Federal Government	28	3.57
Multiple	14	1.79
State Government	4	0.51
Unknown	185	23.60

semistructured interviews with three graffiti writers (one of whom is also an academic focused on graffiti). These lasted from 1 to 3 hours and proceeded as conversations in response to our photographic data, where writers offered their interpretation of the meaning, messages, and geographic context of the signs.

All photographs were coded, categorized, and analyzed qualitatively for their written content, including the subject matter of the message, the actor authoring the message, any languages other than English, and their material form. The content was coded separately by two different researchers via an open coding scheme that identified key phrases and concepts (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2005). These initial codes were compared and discussed iteratively until consensus was reached among the coders, thereby enhancing reliability (Neuman, 2003). Each message was coded with up to three themes describing its content, as well as separate codes for actor type, actor name, material used, and language. Our focus here is on signs as they are defined in linguistics; signs are written text with literal meanings. In some cases, this includes abbreviations, such as a picture of a bicycle to denote a bicycle path or a pictogram. In this analysis we only include symbols² or signs that stand for something else (e.g., a cross), drawings, or visual art—when they were accompanied by written text. We also include graffiti, because it is both a written text and a form. While we acknowledge that other factors, such as emplacement and color of signage are important to consider, we did not systematically analyze these across the entire data set to focus in detail on the text itself, but we do consider emplacement and color of the figures in the discussion. (For a video collage demonstrating examples of handwritten messages and signage that were collected, see Supplemental Material available with the online version of the article.)

Results and Discussion

Adapting the framework for analysis of signage put forth by Scollon and Scollon (2003) and followed by Dowling (2010), we report who the actors, writers, and speakers are; what the content of the messages are; what languages and materials are used; who the intended viewers are, and what the social situations are.

Actors: Who Is Speaking?

Table 1 presents a summary of the types of actors that wrote messages in parkland and natural areas, excluding graffiti. Municipal agencies, including NYC Parks, as well as Departments of Environmental Protection, Sanitation, and Transportation, were most frequently documented. Clearly the creation of signage is related to land jurisdiction and management, as these are the entities formally responsible for naming conventions, wayfinding, and rulemaking. NYC Parks is by far the primary creator of signage on NYC parkland; but on NPS lands, signage from federal

Table 2. Thematic Content of Written Messages in Parkland (Graffiti Excluded) ($n = 784$).

	Count	% ^a
Rules	251	32.02
Advertisement and notices	153	19.52
Environmental	112	14.29
Cautionary	103	13.14
Educational	98	12.50
Memorial	74	9.44
Standard	73	9.31
Place name	66	8.42
Recreation	62	7.91
Wayfinding	48	6.12
Community program	42	5.36
Construction	10	1.28
Art	9	1.15
Religious	9	1.15

^aNote that percentages total to more than 100%, since each sign could be coded with up to three themes.

agencies is more common. Regarding nongovernmental actors, nonprofit and community-based groups were frequently identified and create signage related to a range of messages, including programs, place names, and memorials—described below. It is important to note that the actor could not be identified in nearly one-quarter of the signs that were analyzed. Other actor types that were less frequently identified included state agencies, private businesses, and individuals.

Messages: What Are They Saying?

We identified 14 subthemes in the content of written messages in parkland (excluding graffiti) (Table 2). Each of these subthemes is described below as part of broader thematic clusters that emerged from our findings and overlapped with the literature. Wherever known, the actors associated with these themes are identified and discussed.

Several themes pertain to *ensuring public safety and reinforcing particular behaviors and activities in parks*, including rules, cautionary signs, construction signs, and recreational signs. Accounting for nearly one-third of the signage in parklands, messages conveying rules and regulations were by far the most common, and were mostly created by government actors, including NYC Parks and NPS. However, roughly one-third of the signs where the author could not be identified were rules, due to the prevalence of rules in the dataset. Rules focus mostly on prohibited behaviors related to use and maintenance of the park, public health, safety, and ecological concerns (“no BBQ,” “no smoking,” “no feeding wildlife”). Other rules encourage behaviors that keep the park maintained and used as a refuge (“clean up after your dog,” “keep it clean,” “quiet”). The content of these rules aligns with the typology described by Hermer (2002) for rules in national parks pertaining to peace and quiet; decency; and hygiene and sanitation. The decision over which uses and practices have the potential to threaten those ideals is an interpretive act by the land manager. Cautionary signs (13.1%) warn the public of potential dangers in the park, ranging from pesticides, to herbicides, to rat poison, to thin ice. Construction signs (1.3%) designate construction zones, regulating access, describing expected timelines, and promoting public safety.

One use that was commonly designated through signage as sanctioned was sports and recreation (7.9%), ranging from exercise equipment with instructional signage, to signs demarcating ballfields as the home of particular little leagues. Barbecues are formally restricted to certain



Figure 1. Handmade sign designating an area for a party—Bronx Park, Bronx, New York, 2014. Source. Image courtesy of NYC Urban Field Station.

areas of parks where grills and coal disposal bins are made available. While the impetus behind this decision may be to prevent the potential for unmanaged fires, the effect is to spatially limit a practice despite a large demand by park users. As a result, we found examples of handmade signs, chairs, and streamers being used to claim barbecue picnic spots early (see Figure 1).

Other signs take advantage of the *park as public sphere where a nearby, local audience can be reached* to convey advertisements, notices, and messages about programs. Often these signs are posted along the park edge, at the visible boundary between the park and the community, presumably where a high degree of foot and vehicular traffic is expected. Advertisements and notices (19.5%) conveyed messages about both local services (“man with a van”; “babysitting”) and items for sale (“garage sale”; “for sale ‘98 Audi”). Many of these services or items were advertised by individuals or small, local businesses. A large proportion of notices related to animals—animals lost, found, and services available. Community programs (5.36%) include arts, sports, and movie events. Many of these signs are posted as fliers and at bulletin boards and were created by neighborhood groups.

Environmental and educational signs were designed to provide context to the public about parks spaces. Environmental signs (14.3%) directed attention to ecological features, management practices, and made calls for volunteers. The most common types were stewardship appeals (“It’s My Park Spring Clean-up”; “Adopt a Bluebelt”) and notices and rules related to restoration work (“please do not disturb the restoration area”). Other environmental signs included, for example, tree identification, trail signs, and “forever wild” designation signs. Educational signs (12.5%) primarily included content about the environment and local history; as such these two thematic categories had a high degree of overlap. These signs offered information about unique features in the landscape (such as a large tree, the “Alley Pond Giant”) as well as historical built environment structures (“Van Courtland House Museum”). Government actors most commonly authored this environmental and educational signage. In line with observations made by Hermer (2002) some of these signs portray humans as transient and unharmed, moving through nature that is immutable (“Forever Wild”) while other signs contrastingly portray humans as harmful (“Please do not disturb the restoration area”) and yet others depict nature as dependent on human interaction for survival (“If you love this park, preserve it. This fence saves lives”). The educational signs are important for creating the ideal parks subject as one that appreciates certain aspects of nature in the “right” ways. Indeed, we might more appropriately call these “educational” signs “informational signs intended to change behavior”—as they reflect a particular mode of outreach, rather

than other approaches to educational pedagogy. Only 6 of these 210 educational or environmental signs were in a language other than English (i.e., Spanish), presenting a missed opportunity to communicate to a broader spectrum of park users.

Another set of signs relate to *remembrances and spiritual expressions*, through memorials (9.4%) and religious statements (1.15%). Memorial signs denote built infrastructure (e.g. ballfields, playgrounds) and natural features (e.g. trails, gardens) dedicated in memory of people and events. Memorialized individuals are commonly neighborhood members, supporters of the park, and historical figures. Informal memorials include handmade signs, handwritten RIP messages, and crosses. Most of this memorial signage is created by civic organizations and individuals, while many formal memorials are created by NYC Parks. One example of civic memorials is the Stars of Hope that were placed around public spaces in the Jamaica Bay area following Hurricane Sandy, offering messages of recovery and resilience on brightly painted stars. Finally, a few handmade signs created by individuals included explicitly religious statements, such as Bible verses. (For additional analysis of memorials, art, and religious writing as evidence of psychosocial-spiritual connections to parkland, see Svendsen et al., 2016).

A final set of signs *demarcates space* through place names (8.4%) and helps park users navigate through wayfinding (6.1%). In addition to each NYC park having an official name, many features and zones within parks have specific names, such as Forever Wild sites that are designated as nature preserves. Playgrounds, nature centers, and ballfields also sometimes have unique names—some of which are also memorials, as described above. These unique and personalized place names may be indicators of place attachment among the users and stewards of the site (see McMillen, Campbell, Svendsen, & Reynolds, 2016) or the result of acts of renegotiation over the meaning of a place (see Rose-Redwood, Alderman, & Azaryahu, 2010). Most of these place name signs were created by the government entities that officially manage the sites. Other signs were created by public-private partnerships, such as Natural Areas Conservancy or the MillionTreesNYC campaign—reflecting the prominence of hybrid governance arrangements in parkland management. Wayfinding signs include trail markers, such as the Old Croton Aqueduct and the Brooklyn-Queens Greenway, as well as site maps showing current and/or historic site features. Temporary wayfinding signage includes arrows and event parking signs.

Languages and Materials: How Are They Saying It?

The vast majority of messages were written in English only. Just 36 signs (4.7%) in the database included languages other than English. The foreign languages identified were, from most common to least: Spanish, Chinese (traditional and simplified), Italian, Haitian, Russian, and Korean. The most commonly translated signs were standard park signs, rules, and cautionary signs (e.g., “Danger Thin Ice/Peligro Hielo Fino”). Official park signs were translated into traditional Chinese, but informal signs and fliers sometimes used simplified Chinese.³ Unlike the environmental and educational signage, the rules and regulations signs are translated into the languages most spoken in a given locality. This demonstrates there is a governmental awareness of the need to communicate in other languages and it demonstrates an ability to do it, although the translation of signage is done with discretion. A few caution signs were also translated into Spanish (notifying visitors of rat poison or thin ice). Given the linguistic diversity of NYC, with 48.8% of residents speaking a language other than English at home and 23.2% speaking English less than “very well” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013), one interpretation of the selective use of other-than-English is that it is a demonstration of social hierarchy and a subtle means of exclusion (cf. Dowling, 2010). For example, prior research has found that Latinos described feeling excluded from Los Angeles parks that did not have Spanish language signage (Byrne, 2012).

The materials used for signage and writing in parklands vary widely and reflect the resources that are available to actors with which to convey their messages, their preferred medium for

expression, and the intended life of the message. The more permanent a message is made, the greater its statement of a certain type of institutional power. Similarly, messages that are erased or defaced are statements of power. The removal or painting over of graffiti is a widespread practice. Writing over official signage (even without removing it) changes the meaning of the messages and offers an alternative comment on authority. The majority of signs (65.25%) were manufactured—made out of metal, plastic, wood, and stone. Generally, these materials are used by government managers because of a desire for standardization, durability, and permanence. At the same time, we found examples of civic actors using these materials, often in marking place names, memorials, and community spaces. We see the use of these durable materials as a substantial investment by civic groups in the marking of stewardship turf and engaging in forms of place making, creating new narratives on the landscape.

Other signs were less permanent in nature. Computer-printed posters or fliers (26.63% of signs)—primarily on paper with a few on plastic were created in nearly equal proportions by city actors, civic groups, and individuals. They range from informational fliers, to help wanted advertisements, to stewardship appeals. In general, these signs were not created to be permanent markers of place but are rather meant to convey a message about a time-sensitive event. Handwritten messages (i.e., in marker, paint, chalk, spray paint) represent smaller group of signs (8.13%). Although graffiti is handwritten, it is not summarized quantitatively and is described in a subsection below.

Discussion: What Park Subjectivities Are Being Constructed Through Writing and Signage?

This section explores the social situation and the intended viewers for a range of sign types in NYC parkland. Signs are created in an attempt to shape understanding, change behavior, or solicit an action. At the same time, they emerge as representation of the community that surrounds any given place. In describing the content, form, and context of each sign, we explore the governance approaches and park subjectivities that are mobilized and enacted through these texts. We also observe acts of turf marking and vandalism that suggest rearrangement of or resistance to existing management approaches. In presenting the subjectivities that follow, we recognize that they are not a definitive list—there are many other modalities and ways-of-being in parkland that have not been identified through this research. However, these four subjectivities became apparent through our textual analysis of signage and writing combined with interpretation of our ethnographic field notes.

“Ideal” Park Subject. Signs that are intended to shape and direct behavior are often posted at the main entrances to NYC parkland (Figure 2). They are generally made of metal, with white text printed on a dark green or black background—intended to be clear, durable, and authoritative. They are always posted in English, and often with translation to the commonly spoken languages of the surrounding community (e.g., Spanish, Chinese, Haitian Creole, etc.). The sign also includes a series of pictograms that can be interpreted in any language, including nonliterate viewers. As such, the sign aims to clearly communicate with a diverse NYC public.

The messages conveyed on the signs reflect an understanding of the “ideal park subject” that is meant to conform to particular rules and regulations that are set forth by the municipal land manager. They prescribe people’s interactions with nature and with each other. The text begins with a welcome emphasizing the shared, public nature of the space and its intended use for recreation. Throughout the rules, there is an emphasis on safety and cleanliness. Parks prohibit political speech, amplified sound, and commercial activity without a permit, which provides regulatory oversight of large assemblies and nonrecreational activity, thereby limiting the functions of this public realm. Other prohibitions apply to marginalized populations’



Figure 2. New York City Department of Parks and Recreation Standard Rules Sign (2013). Source. Image courtesy of NYC Urban Field Station.

activities, including panhandling and rummaging through trash receptacles, as well as illegal drug and alcohol use. Finally, prohibitions on barbecuing and off-leash dogs (except in designated areas) as well as dumping and feeding birds and squirrels relate to the desired maintenance of the park. The sign lists closing time of the park (dusk, midnight, 1 a.m.), which always excludes some portion of the night, as these are considered daytime resources that are not meant to be used (i.e., slept in, inhabited) at night. Finally, the names of municipal officials with jurisdiction over the park (mayor, NYC Parks commissioner) are listed as signs of authority, responsibility, and turf marking. In sum, we see the way in which the bounds of acceptable leisure practices and user behaviors are delineated through official park rules. These signs also indicate that there is an official, municipal governing body that presides over the creation and reinforcement of park rules and expected behaviors. As the following sections will show, in certain cases, when park users alter or disregard the established rules they are, in fact, reestablishing their own claims on public space.

Alternative Subjectivities: Neighbor and Steward. A wide range of institutional signs, community bulletin boards, and fliers reflect alternative subjectivities of the neighbor or the steward (Figure 3). These signs are often placed prominently at park entrances and edges to assure high visibility by community members, with bulletin boards becoming a “hub” for multiple messages posted in the form of fliers, or fliers taped to light poles, or other convenient surfaces. As described in the section on messages above, the content of these signs is varied, but often describes local place names, public events in parkland, and stewardship opportunities. These multivocal texts reflect both community needs and priorities around the use and management of parks sites. Some NYC parklands are managed jointly through hybrid governance arrangements including formal conservancies and alliances. For example, the Natural Areas Conservancy was created in 2012 as a private partner to support woods, wetlands, and meadows citywide through science, public programs, and shared management efforts. In addition to professionalized citywide groups, there are several hundred



Figure 3. Community bulletin board at McGuire Fields, Brooklyn, New York (2013).
Source. Image courtesy of NYC Urban Field Station.

community “Friends of Parks” groups that engage in the stewardship and programming of local parks. The signage of these groups ranges with their degree of formality, but often it includes maps, information on public programming, and web addresses. These private partners bring an additional set of resources, including paid staff and volunteer labor, to animate and program the space. These groups are not evenly distributed across the landscape; while not every NYC park has a designated “Friends Of” group or steward, some contain multiple, overlapping groups with different forms of engagement with the park—from sports and recreational uses, to environmental education, to community co-management of space. Some forms of engagement by neighbors exist in tension with the “ideal” uses of the park according to the official rules and government management practices. These uses can include going off trail, creating informal seating places or fire pits, and making rogue plantings. Overall, neighbors and stewards assert their rights and desires to influence the form and function of parks in a direct and accessible way through use, programming, events, hands-on work, and advocacy.

Alternative Subjectivities: Graffiti Writer. Although graffiti is prohibited in NYC parkland and park managers place an emphasis on removing graffiti whenever possible, we documented widespread examples of graffiti in parks, particularly in secluded areas, such as under bridge overpasses or behind isolated buildings (Figure 4). Generally, graffiti is created in spray paint or marker, but we also coded “scratchiti” carved into trees, benches, and concrete, as graffiti. The three graffiti experts we consulted saw the graffiti in our photographs as an activity that is primarily about notoriety, counterculture, and being left alone; and rejected the graffiti in the photos as gang graffiti. These experts identified a range of styles from a universal graffiti style written by those embedded in the culture to the inexperienced or idiosyncratic style of novice writers or “toys,” who were using sites in parks as places to practice their skills. They also noted writing that appeared to be by writers from other countries, perhaps Brazilian, French, Algerian, and that writers appeared to be primarily men, but also a few women.

Graffiti can be seen as personal and collective expressions of counternarratives to the ideal parks subject, displaying the alternative subjectivity of the graffiti writer. According to Bloch (2016a),

Graffiti signifies the presence of a person acting “out of place” by making a personalized claim for space, which rebukes conventions for private property, the rule of law, standards regarding the appropriate appearance of infrastructure, and mores regarding acceptable public behavior. (p. 456)



Figure 4. Graffiti spot at Forest Park, Queens, New York (2014).
 Source. Image courtesy of NYC Urban Field Station.

The notion that the presence of graffiti itself encourages more serious crimes (popularized through the “broken windows” theory) has been called into question and counterevidence has shown otherwise (Bloch, 2016b). To the contrary, what was once considered a violation of property is now appreciated by some as an art form that is worthy of galleries. Two of the experts we interviewed described how they have witnessed graffiti going from something that repels tourists to something that attracts them in their quest for “authentic” NYC experiences, in which case its counterculture nature is less emphasized and it becomes seen as a desirable way to mark the landscape. Graffiti writers reappropriate spaces within parkland as sites for private practice of a craft, for self-expression, and for interaction with a community of other writers—including by seeking notoriety and visibility through highly recognizable forms that are shared within that community and viewed by broader publics.

Alternative Subjectivities: “Free Agents.” Some visitors who we term here “free agents” seek out particular areas of parkland for the sense of freedom or wilderness that they can experience by interacting with spaces that appear to have less formally designated rules and park infrastructure. These spaces can offer a sense of anonymity, getting lost, or hiding out—a space to engage in private acts that one does not as easily engage in (e.g., sleeping, sex, drug use) in other park spaces, but also simply a space to be alone in a dense city. Natural areas in parks can be places of refuge, creativity, and self-expression (Svendsen et al., 2016), but at the same time, the strong sense of personalized attachment to place that appears to be “wild” and outside of formalized authority can lead to acts of resistance. A burnt or defaced park sign could be interpreted as an open act of defiance and/or an act of mischief, challenging authority and questioning who has the power to control space (Figure 5). While some park users are interested in engaging in the management of site through acts of stewardship and shared governance as described above, others instead rearrange and rework the landscape more directly through their patterns of use and simply through occupying space in different ways (e.g., sleeping, foraging plants, creating bike ramps) and at different times (e.g., at night, after closing hours) that are counter to the routines of the “ideal” park subject.

For example, Marine Park, Brooklyn has been a site of simultaneously high levels of community ownership but also resistance to public authority—with these different forms of use and stewardship often occurring in close proximity to each other. While the northern portion of Marine Park is developed as a traditional recreational park with ballfields, walking paths,



Figure 5. Defaced NYC Parks Rules Sign. Marine Park, Brooklyn, New York (2013).
Source. Image courtesy of NYC Urban Field Station.

playgrounds, and community center, the southern portion is dominated by a marine shrub–scrub natural area and a tidal beach. Known colloquially by some in the community as “the weeds,” some nearby residents do not even consider the space a park, but rather as a wild, largely ungoverned, “free space.” There is evidence throughout the site of temporary encampments, log circles, sitting places, and desire lines (informal trails). Marine Park is also a site of a range of recreation practices, including fishing, beach-going, mountain biking, paintball, and All Terrain Vehicle (ATV) use—a prohibited park activity that has tragically resulted in two deaths. Multiple acts of vandalism against parks property have occurred in the past few years. At present, the Natural Areas Conservancy is engaging with this community in a multiyear project to restore the shrublands by formalizing the trail system and making it safe and accessible. The Conservancy has employed local youth to assist with community engagement and restoration practices, as a means to build trust within the community and involve local residents in the stewardship and management of the site (Bowers, 2016). Rearranging trails through this space is a delicate act of balancing ecological and social needs and priorities; real trade-offs and challenges exist in how to keep a space feeling “wild,” “free,” and at the same time safe and ecologically sustainable. In places such as this, it may be unwise to expect either rules or design to completely override so many diverse subjectivities. Instead, the park planner may want to plan for shifting management and redesigns that are more fluid.

Conclusion

Through textual analysis of signage and writing in NYC parkland, we see the enactment of multiple subjectivities, which in turn reflect different expectations and desires for how parks should function as public space, as well as power differentials in who has authority to shape the management of space. Writing and signage are some of the means by which acts of governmentality—including control, compliance, and self-regulation—occur, but they are also means of renegotiation and resistance. The linguistic landscape—and its negotiation between multiple actors and discourses—is part of how the governance of public space occurs (Gorter, 2013; Zabrodskaia & Milani, 2014). This study has surfaced and identified multiple park subjectivities: the ideal park subject, the neighbor or steward, the graffiti writer, and the free agent. Although we present these

subjectivities as distinct, we recognize that people can inhabit these different subject positions in multiple ways at different places and times—including through writing, reading, and interpreting signage in parks. Thus, an important limitation of the methods employed here is that we cannot connect these subjectivities directly to actual living human subjects, which would require triangulation via interviews with park users, which remains an important area for future research (but see Auyeung et al., 2016; Campbell et al., 2016; Svendsen et al., 2016).

Following Hermer (2002), we find that government land managers are “emparking nature” through the creation of rules and regulations of how parkland should be used as leisure space that call into being an ideal park subject. These rules often relate to public safety and sustainability of the resource, but also exclude a wide range of practices and uses, such as hunting, foraging, camping, or sleeping (see also Gabriel, 2011). In addition, we also found evidence of park users and neighbors working as stewards to engage in acts of “emparking nature” through acts of co-management, programming, and public messaging. These acts are diverse, but often take forms of creating local place names, offering culturally relevant public events, and shaping landscape to reflect community priorities. At the same time, other park users engage in what we might term “deparking nature,” as they influence the norms of parks and reshape the space to enable creative expression—including graffiti writing, refuge, free play, or even resistance. The uses of parkland depart widely from the narrow set of behaviors prescribed by the ideal park subject—and depending on the particular practice—can be ignored, penalized, or sanctioned by public authorities.

The use, value, and meaning of urban public space are contested and changing. Parks have always been part of the public realm, and while they are spaces for recreation and ecological connection, they are also crucial spaces for assembly, protest, and dissent. Building on the work of Mitchell (1995) and Zukin (1995), Goheen (1998) notes that the meaning of public space is constantly undergoing negotiation through every day and quotidian acts:

The meaning of public space cannot be read from the record of official actions or policies; it is not the result of civic ordinance. It will be understood only by paying attention to the often confusing or seemingly trivial contests over the use and enjoyment of public space, whether old streets or new parks and cemeteries. The process of creating value is a continuing one: few episodes are ever thought to be definitive and even these are susceptible to being reinterpreted with the advantage of long hindsight. (p. 493)

The use of green space as “free space” or “safe space”—particularly for vulnerable or marginalized populations such as homeless people or queer people—has been documented in the literature (see, e.g., Campo, 2013; Gandy, 2012; Patrick, 2013). Often we see these sorts of spaces of expression in instances of the retreat of the state or of capital investment—after financial crises, or in postindustrial settings. A question becomes how might we foster acts of creative expression and refuge—or “plan for the unplanned” in good times as well? Can we create high quality park experiences that also leave room for co-creation and co-management? In other words, how can parks engage multiple subjectivities and function as a part of an inclusive, democratic public realm? Can the ideal park subject—and therefore the rules that govern the space—be reworked to reflect a broader set of uses and desires?

In densely populated growing cities, towns, and regions with limited park budgets, we recognize that balancing competing demands and uses on the public realm is a delicate act. These are questions very much at the forefront of praxis in urban natural resource management and planning. Indeed, this research was conducted in the context of an increasing commitment to planning for sustainability and equity in cities across the world. There are several inroads from practice that offer promising ways forward, including for researchers and practitioners to coproduce knowledge about how we create park spaces that are ecologically sustainable and socially inclusive. One way to broaden access to natural areas while also enhancing public safety and

ensuring sustainability of the resource base is through a coherent, legible trail system that is both universally recognizable (e.g., through icons, multilingual), but also locally specific (customized by local stewards, marked with local place names). Best practice designs can also redesign park edges, improving sight lines, entryways, and access points. Participatory design approaches have proliferated over the past few decades, by offering tools and methodologies for assessing open space for community inclusion and engaging local residents in collaborative design. Parks can also be enhanced to enable civic discourse and free speech—including through capital investment that anticipates and designs for these sorts of uses. These design and planning strategies could be expanded to consider the ways in which both physical forms and posted rules have implications for how spaces are perceived as welcoming or not. While many posted rules describe prohibited acts, signage can also discuss what uses are encouraged and invited (see, e.g., McMillen et al., 2016). In thinking about design not only of physical spaces, but also of governance—are there ways to engage residents in rule creation and acknowledge that co-management is a process that should be revisited in an ongoing cycle of care—akin to tree planting, repair, and upkeep of drains and faucets, basketball hoops, and hiking trails? One quintessential example of community managed space is the community garden, but how might we extend co-management to other site types? Such interventions involve reworking relations between humans and nature in novel forms and arrangements. Indeed, we see that public servants, community stewards, artists, activists, and residents all can work together as “citymakers” who constitute our public realm (Shepard, 2017)—including through our parklands.

Authors' Note

Heather McMillen's is now affiliated to Hawai'i Division of Forestry & Wildlife, Honolulu, HI, USA.

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Notes

1. In NYC parklands, “natural areas” include forests, wetlands, and meadows. There are 51 Forever Wild nature preserves across over 8,700 acres citywide (New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, 2017). Natural areas are open for visitors except in designated restoration areas that are fenced. Activities are often prescribed (e.g., no pets, no bicycles, no fires) to protect ecological integrity.
2. In semiotics, a “sign” is any material object that refers to something other than itself, which includes symbols—but we make a distinction here and limit our scope to text or images that have generally agreed upon specific meanings, rather than including all symbols (particularly those without text) that have a wider array of interpretive meanings.

3. Traditional Chinese is used mostly in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Simplified Chinese is used mostly in mainland China. Before the 1950s, traditional Chinese characters were used in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. After the 1950s, mainland China switched to simplified Chinese characters, and many older mainland Chinese people know both simplified and traditional Chinese (D. S. Auyeung, personal communication).

Supplemental Material

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Key Online Resources

- Natural Areas Conservancy: <http://naturalareasnyc.org/>
- New York City Department of Parks and Recreation: <https://www.nycgovparks.org/>
- New York City Urban Field Station: <https://www.nrs.fs.fed.us/nyc>
- Social Assessment of NYC Parks white paper: <https://www.nrs.fs.fed.us/pubs/50617>

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