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STICKERING THROUGH GRIEF: SUBVERTING NORMATIVE PRACTICES OF MOURNING AND MEMORIAL

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KEYWORDS

memory and place, memorial, queer theory, public mourning, graffiti, visual culture, cultural studies, witnessing

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Stickering through Grief: Subverting Normative Practices of Mourning and Memorial

_Abstract

Following the death of my close friend and artistic mentor Justin in 2021, my friends and I, connected by grief, embarked on a collective stickering project using Justin's graffiti tag. This initiative, spanning across North America and Europe, was conceived as a tribute to honour Justin's memory by occupying space and mapping our collective loss. The act of stickering emerged as a powerful medium for expressing collective grief, offering a form of affective mapping and anti-temporal mourning. This paper analyzes the stickering project to reveal how creative practices can function as a form of witnessing and transformation. It highlights the ways in which graffiti's autobiographical nature can evolve into a communal practice outside of its common subculture, pushing against the conventional cultural contexts within which graffiti typically operates. My analysis of this project draws on theoretical frameworks such as affective mapping, relationality, and testimony as developed by scholars including Dominick LaCapra, Kelly Oliver, Judith Butler, Leigh Gilmore, and Shelley Hornstein. Through this lens, the paper examines how the stickering project navigates the dynamic interplay between past and present, space and time, embodied experiences, and empirical knowledge. I attempt to further explore this anti-temporal dimension through the notion of 'grief-time,' modelled after 'queer-time,' as articulated by Jack Halberstam and Carolyn Dinshaw. This paper considers the transient nature of both graffiti and grief, underscoring the stickering project's role in confronting and negotiating the temporal aspects of mourning. It demonstrates how artistic and communal expressions can offer new insights into the processes of memory-making, creating an active practice of remembrance. This exploration of our collective endeavor underscores the transformative potential of creative practices in the face of loss and the complex ways in which they interact with the cultural and temporal dimensions of human experience.

> We like to speak of what the dead would've liked. We build totems and write poems when what most people would've liked is to not be dead.
>
> —Sloane Crosley, *Grief is for People*[1]

In 2021, my friends and family experienced the sudden loss of our dear friend Justin. Justin was essentially my older brother; a childhood friend to my older sister who spent many nights at our dinner table discussing music, art, and all things culture. Justin was a rebel through and through, and following his creative nature, he discovered graffiti as an outlet for expression and subversion. With his deep intellect and equal appreciation for everything unpretentious, Justin taught me everything about being

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cool. In the weeks after his passing, a mutual friend and artist, Michael Vickers, had the idea to print copies of a sticker Justin had made with his tag on it and distribute it among friends, a way to ensure we could all share in this altar building. I agreed to scan the sticker, and together we printed thousands of copies. A mailing list of familiar and new names was built across Canada. Through mailing envelopes and distributing Justin's work, a community art practice was initiated. Calling on the histories of mail art, graffiti, relational aesthetics, and social art, we spread the stickers across the country and then the world. Justin unwittingly brought together everyone from mothers to school teachers to coworkers to commit petty crimes in the name of grief and memory.

In this paper, I frame the collective sticker project as an example of communal grief, affective mapping, and anti-temporal mourning, combining concepts from the scholarship of Dominick LaCapra, Kelly Oliver, Judith Butler, Leigh Gilmore and Shelley Hornstein. By reflecting on the project, I aim to expand our current understanding of the legibility of mourning in public spaces and remembrance practices through graffiti. I will explore how the collective initiative speaks to the tensions between past and present, embodied and empirical ways of knowing, and the ephemeral qualities of graffiti and human life, as well as the tensions surrounding who can (or should) participate in such a particular subcultural experience. The stickering project exemplifies how creative practice can bear witness to the autobiographical nature of graffiti, while also expanding the form into a communal grief practice that subverts expectations of the cultural context in which it was produced while acknowledging the difficulty of time, distance, and logistics.

Fig. 1: Justin's original sticker, scanned

Grief is terribly absurd; it weighs down as much as it reorients, making navigation seem impossible. Socially, it is commonly understood that grief unfolds in stages, a

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classic narrative trope that helps mourners understand the potential feats of loss. These stages suggest a linear progression, a compounding practice that exemplifies the therapeutic desire to 'work through' tragedy or trauma. The emphasis placed on working through suggests a straightforward path that resolves in a complete location or status, one in which the process of grief can be completed. Those who have experienced grief can attest that this is not entirely true and that the supposed process of grief is instead anti-linear, anti-temporal, and often not something that is ever worked through. It has been three years since Justin died, and many of us still chat about how he visits us, the music that reminds us of him, or how our connection to technology results in unexpected encounters with his posts through Facebook Memories or auto-generated collages on our phones. Grief is decidedly out of the grasp of linear time. To better understand experiences that transcend our understanding of time as something that produces, works through, and succeeds, we might turn to queer theory, which can support a reading of what I will refer to as 'grief time' in parallel to 'queer time.'

Queer time, or alternatively the queering of time, is understood differently by leading scholars on the subject, as illustrated by a lively roundtable discussion featuring Jack Halberstam, Carla Freccero and Carolyn Dinshaw published by *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*. Jack Halberstam, author of *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* and *The Queer Art of Failure*, imagines queer time as a "[p]erverse turn away from the narrative coherence" putting forward queer time as a theory of how to be in the world and to critique social expectations.[2] Halberstam's writing on queer culture and subculture draws a connection between the artistic world in which Justin practiced and its re-conception of how time operates—both subversions of societal expectations of a public existence.

Carla Freccero, author of Queer/Early/Modern, discusses her writing about the dead and mourning as a working-through, but equally advocates a deeper connection to spectrality and haunting rather than a process that produces tidy conclusions.3 Acknowledging and working with the affective anti-temporal qualities of grief resonates with queer theory in the sense that it equally entails a rejection of narrative history or linearity. As Carolyn Dinshaw describes, this rejection apprehends expectations of temporal time, or "clock time," by conceptualizing the fleeting state of a present moment.[4]

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Each author who contributed to the round table expands definitions and expectations of time as it relates to queer history, life, and futurity. These conceptions of queer time provide a template for my understanding of 'grief time,' a non-linear, non-progress-seeking rejection of past expectations of grief as a set of stages to be completed. Grief time instead operates through recall, memory, and affective engagement with aesthetic moments and objects. Although connections between queer subculture and graffiti subculture are rarely attended to, they share a subversion of normative expectations; graffiti defies expectations of 'fine' art, value judgement, visibility, legibility, legacy, and risk, while embodying a deep performative and affective understanding of its canvas and context. Existing outside of normative artistic practices through its illegality, graffiti invites its separation from mass acceptance, a queering of legitimacy that intentionally speaks to its own community rather than to everyone.

Another potential salve to the queasiness of grief time may be its communal relationality. Despite at times being a profoundly isolating experience, grief is also deeply universal. In their works on grief and memory, Ann Cvetkovich and Judith Butler describe that there is a "we" experience to be had in the suffering; "[i]f my fate is not originally or finally separable from yours, then the 'we' is traversed by a relationality that we cannot easily argue against; or rather, we can argue against it, but we would deny something fundamental about the social conditions of our very formation."[5] Butler's writing is centered on the politicized nature of death and relationality. She considers our understanding of how, where, when and for whom we mourn. Meanwhile, as Shelley Hornstein establishes in her text "Representing Evidence," the societal expectation of mourning is that it mainly occurs at either the site of death or burial. Sometimes, this is the same location. This creates a site of commemoration where function and purpose are clear. In some instances, however, where the death or burial site is unavailable, we create alternative symbolic sites of commemoration, such as a loved one's favorite park or restaurant.[6] These compel us into a theatre of memory, one that celebrates access to the past by bringing it to the present, as art so often does, transporting us into non-linear narratives that escape time. But what makes mourning effective? According to Butler, mourning is a transformation or total submission to loss, something "larger than one's own deliberate plan, one's own project, one's knowing and choosing."[7] This relationality binds us through collective grief despite the societal expectation of privacy.

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Relationality is rooted in our ability to recognize, address, and respond to one another as social beings. As Kelly Oliver writes, recognition depends on a level of visibility, both politically and literally. Visibility holds power and comes with the potential for both recognition and misrecognition.[8] In the world of graffiti, legibility and visibility are competing elements. Graffiti is decidedly illegible; only those who have experienced its subculture and practice can interpret its unique language. Visibility, however, also plays a crucial role in graffiti's perpetual flux of permanence and erasure. Graffiti writers work tirelessly to remain 'up,' consistently tagging to remain visible to other writers, thereby staking claim to a level of authority and technical adeptness. Although always adding, graffiti is also always being removed. Graffiti exists to persist, an autobiographical and physical journal of 'spots' acquired.[9] Justin's tag was intentionally illegible to the average passerby and to many who knew him closely. In the mass distribution of the stickers, Justin's tag has gained legibility through recognition; the tag has changed its purpose from a tool of autobiographical mapping to a symbolic site of the memorial, transgressing subcultural and memorial expectations.

Our collective decision to increase the visibility of Justin's tags, despite his absence, reiterates our ability to recognize Justin in our individual lives and the immense connective power of one life to many. This form of distribution and reproduction is uncommon in graffiti subculture. Politically, adjusting the subcultural rules and expectations of the graffiti scene is not a line I would have intended to cross, and there is certainly a potential for resentment surrounding our appropriation of an artistic practice that does not belong to the majority of those placing Justin's tag. As a graffiti scholar, I agonized at the idea of both Justin and Justin's friends feeling embarrassed by 'normies' catching tags. But at the same time, I felt that the nature of the practice is oriented by subversion and the breaking of rules. Breaking tradition within a subculture feels out of sync, but then, so does grief, and so does the effort to map a memory.

Another adjustment to the rules of the subculture would be the mapping and documentation of the stickers and their locations, typically a practice only done by the police to detect the patterns and territories of graffiti writers. In this instance, the data felt less like snitching and more like a visual representation of Justin's social network. Initially, Jay, one of Justin's closest friends and his first graffiti partner in crime was doing this work. Jay maintained an Instagram page and hashtag, reposting submitted

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photos and posting his tribute art to Justin. Using Jay's posts, I plotted the locations of Justin's stickers, shown in the map below. This is only a portion of the locations we have travelled to, but without Jay's management of photos submitted by friends and collaborators, the map remains stunted. Sadly, unbelievably, Jay also passed away suddenly in October 2023. Since then, the Instagram page has remained dormant; the hashtag is hardly used, and the sticker's circulation has slowed. Logistically, time also drags out our fevered panic to embed Justin in our cities. With each sticker, we feel more secure in his lasting presence and participate actively in mourning. And each time they fade or we forget to bring them on our evening walks, time operates in the same non-linear fashion which I have come to know so intimately through graffiti and grief.

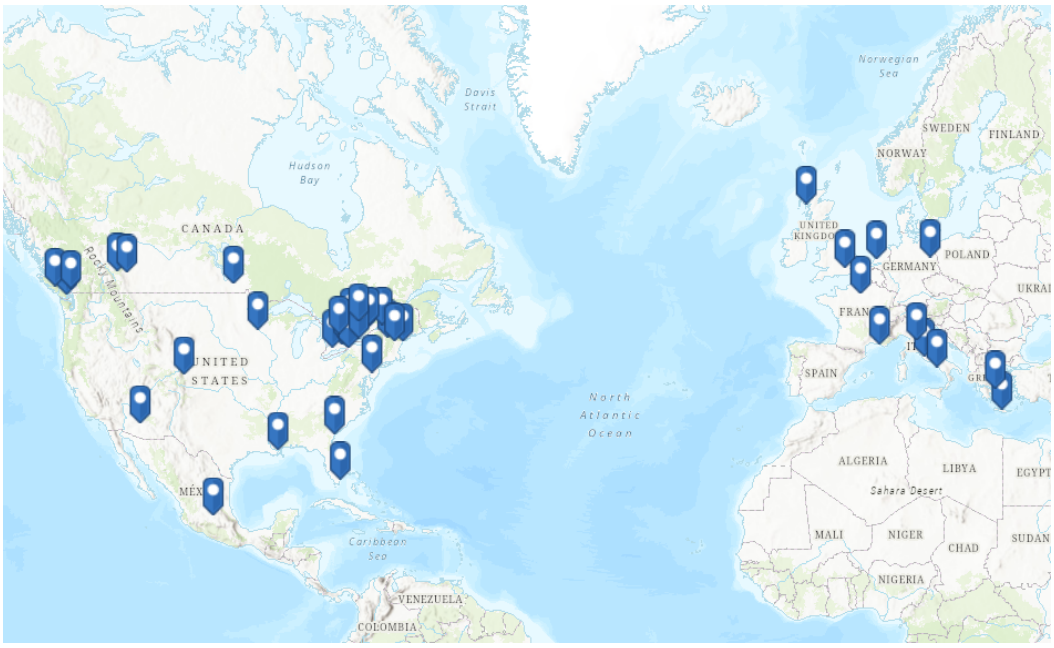

Fig. 2: Map of Justin's sticker locations as of 2023

As Jonathan Flatley writes, affective mapping refers to the personal, social, and political mapping of public spaces for orientation and emotional purposes.[10] Walking through a city, we can revisit moments in our past, whether collective, shared, or individual. A first date, a lost dog, an important phone call: all can all be charted and revisited spatially against linear time. This affective mapping is supported by aesthetic and affective experiences. When we happen upon a work of art, we are transported to a different layer in memory and time but remain rooted physically.[11] This paradox causes an important tension between the geographic and the affective, altering our relationship to time and space. The artworks, or stickers in this case, create new layers

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of contextual meaning assigned to a physical space. They can recall an earlier affective experience of placing the sticker or offer the knowledge that someone else in the collective has shared this space and affective experience.[12] This is a natural result of graffiti and its targeted legibility. The stickers will eventually fade or peel away, just like all tags or wheat-pasted works. Still, we persist, and graffiti writers persist, in order to maintain connection and visibility within public space.

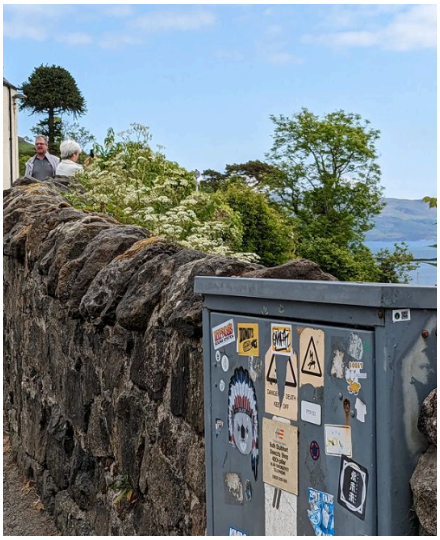
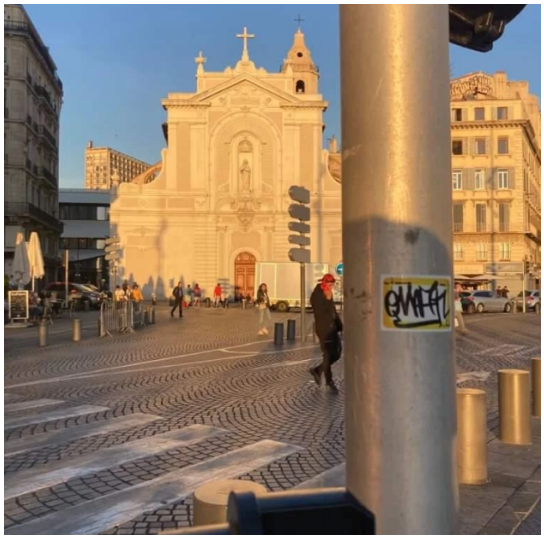

Fig. 3 & 4: Justin's sticker in Scotland and Italy

The communal and social aspect of bearing witness to and embodying Justin's artistic practice is a transformative experience of grief. This extension of his life shows the boundaries of an autobiographical practice, as noted by Leigh Gilmore. In Gilmore's work, she explains that there is a limit to what autobiographical work can achieve and present. There is an insufficiency in language to communicate social life as accurately as words can communicate the interior self. The responsibility to represent one's personal experience and have that representation deployed on behalf of a cultural movement is an immense weight.[13] The graffiti subculture thrives on this progression from individual expression to cultural totem. Through its exclusivity, it creates a protected subcultural art form that only speaks to others who create in its language and remains inaccessible beyond this context. Subcultures are at once a space of freedom and recognition, as well as an opportunity for misrecognition and exclusion. The margins of self-representation within the graffiti practice are strict, and as an autobiographical practice, our communal stickering has repeatedly broken these rules.

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To express our communal grief, we breached the limits of Justin's autobiographical practice and chose to adopt and expand it into a different cultural context.

The insufficiency of self-expression, of individual testimony to life, is also governed by the conditions of legibility and language. The stickers re-perform Justin's graffiti practice in a way that creates a private signal amongst the collective, but the legibility of Justin's tag performs graffiti's subcultural legibility to a different audience. The tension produces affective qualities of past and present, challenging linear temporality and working through grief time rather than normative time. Justin's unique tags outside of our stickering live on in many cities, tucked into corners and the backs of stop signs. His individual expressions also continue to gain visibility as the collective learns to identify them. Though these individual tags will not be reproduced in the way the stickers have been, Justin's visibility persists in spite of his absence. In our collective stickering practice, we continue to work through and with grief time, bearing witness to our shared loss.

Fig. 5 & 6: Justin's sticker on the Toronto Islands and Chicago

As symbolic markers of an affective map of North America and Europe, Justin's stickers are a memory tool, a re-presentation of a once unique moment. As Shelley Hornstein writes in her work on representation and re-presentation through art about the Holocaust, re-presenting is a way to make present what is absent. The stickers are a material meditation or monument that displays a re-presentation of something authentic and tangible—the loss of Justin and the aesthetics of his art. We cannot empirically evaluate the loss we have experienced. However, we can consider the ethics

of our re-presentation of Justin's art and our choice to convey his image in places he has never been. Perhaps best described as a theatre of memory, one that is not performative to conceal, but to repeat the past as an act of remembrance, the affective map of Justin's stickers is communal and individual, past and present, organic and re-presented, and a biographical extension of an autobiographical narrative.[14]

In creating our own sites of memorial and commemoration, we are obliged to question how we could ever *know* what Justin would want or approve of. I can imagine him both ecstatic with the idea of my dad stickering a stop sign in Atlanta and also deeply embarrassed by our abrupt disregard for the cultural rules of graffiti. But I have the pleasure to access these imaginings of him and his oscillating laughter and headshaking in my memories of the past and my imaginative future. With Justin's absence, the collective has communed in a shared experience, and together, we continue to embody the subcultural subversions of normative society and normative grief protocols. Practicing remembrance is an active, affective, and anti-temporal pursuit, one that I hope we will continue practicing through stickering as the years roll on. The pursuit has no finish line. Instead, we seek a connection to Justin and our memories, weaving in and out of the present moment, navigating grief time as an embodied tribute.

_Endnotes

1 Sloane Crosley, *Grief is For People* (New York: MCD, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024), 51.

2 Jack Halberstam, et al., "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2–3, 1 (2007): 177–195, here: 182.

3 Halberstam, et al., "Theorizing Queer Temporalities," 184.

4 Halberstam, et al., "Theorizing Queer Temporalities," 185.

5 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London/New York: Verso, 2004), 23.

6 Shelley Hornstein, "Representing Evidence," *Memory Studies* 15, no. 3 (2022): 595–609, here: 606.

7 Butler, *Precarious Life*, 21.

8 Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing Beyond Recognition* (London & New York: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 11.

9 Rachelle Sabourin, "In the Pursuit of Permanence, Is There Only Persistence?," *Street Art and Urban Creativity* 5, no. 2 (2020): 40–55, here: 52.

10 Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 77.

[11] Flatley, *Affective Mapping*, 80.

[12] Flatley, *Affective Mapping*, 81.

[13] Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography* (Ithaca/New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), 10.

[14] Hornstein, "Representing Evidence," 606.