

From Whom the Bell Tolls: An Analysis of a Space both Sacred and Profane

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Abstract

For over a hundred years the sextons and chimers of Stratford, Ontario, Canada's St. James Anglican Church have committed 'timeline graffiti' to the inner-most walls of St. James Belltower, and in doing so have unknowingly left behind a spectacular display of micro-historical storytelling and spatial negotiation. Like those who have readily written on the discolored walls of St. James Belltower, this article opposes the situation of graffiti in sacred space as being an automatic encroachment of the everyday profane on the sacred. Using a combination of document analysis (visual analysis) and autoethnographic techniques (reflexivity and narrative inquiry) I explore how the materiality of St. James Anglican Church's Belltower and the 'timeline graffiti' found therein represent a uniquely Canadian example of how the profane operates within, against and parallel to what has so quickly been deemed sacred.

Keywords: bell tower, sextons, chimers, timeline graffiti, the sacred and profane

Résumé

Depuis plus de cent ans, les sextons et les carillons de l'église anglicane St. James de Stratford, dans l'Ontario (Canada), inscrivent des "graffitis temporels" sur les murs intérieurs du clocher St. James et, ce faisant, laissent derrière eux, sans le savoir, un spectacle spectaculaire de narration micro-historique et de négociation spatiale. À l'instar de ceux qui ont écrit sur les murs décolorés du clocher Saint-Jacques, cet article s'oppose à la situation des graffitis dans l'espace sacré, qu'il considère comme un empiètement automatique du profane quotidien sur le sacré. En combinant l'analyse de documents (analyse visuelle) et les techniques autoethnographiques (réflexivité et enquête narrative), j'explore comment la matérialité du clocher de l'église anglicane St. James et les "graffitis chronologiques" qu'on y trouve représentent un exemple canadien unique de la façon dont le profane opère à l'intérieur, à l'encontre et parallèlement à ce qui a été si rapidement considéré comme sacré.

Mots clés : clocher, sextons, carillons, graffitis chronologiques, sacré et profane

1.0 Introduction

In popular culture graffiti is frequently represented as a medium of ‘deviant’ self-expression favored by young and rebellious members of society (i.e., adolescents, teenagers, or gang members) (Ferrell, 1996). Contemporary sociology, however, claims that these conceptualizations of graffiti do not afford enough attention to how graffiti and graffiti artists, regardless of age or occupation, contribute to human societies (Christenson, 2018). When removed from its deviant or criminal context, scholars, such as Curwen Best (2003) and Konstantinos Kalantzis (2015), suggest that graffiti can serve as importance discursive space for resistance, empowerment, social movement, and identity politics. Social scientists have begun to seriously deviate from discourses which situate graffiti within a context of illegality or age-based deviance, and now prefer to define graffiti as a stylistic symbol or phrase that is meaningfully deployed by persons at various stages of the life course (Symbaluk, 2014). As a way of knowing, the life course approach remains central for understanding how people undergo and respond to social transitions and bodily changes they experience throughout their lifetime (Martsin, 2019). Re-framing graffiti as both cultural artifact and as a practice engaged by persons at various life stages has offered new opportunities for scholars to critically engage with these inscriptions and the meanings they embody, even when found in spaces most unexpected (Falconer & Fall, 2022; McDowell-Loudan, 2002). Though it was never my intention to seek out graffiti in a sacred space, once stumbled upon I was persuaded to consider the greater social significance that the graffiti bore for its contributors, and how its very existence could contribute to an evolving literature on graffiti as liminal placemaking practice (Falconer & Fall, 2022). This article uses autoethnography (subjective self-reflection and narrative inquiry) and document analysis (visual analysis) to take readers deep into the belltower of Stratford’s St.

James Anglican Church, and behold the nearly 100 years’ worth of wall inscriptions committed by its caretakers (Kim, 2019). While not initially intended to be read, let alone interpreted by people from the outside world, much of the graffiti found on the inner walls of St. James’ belltower was meant only for the eyes of those that had occupational reasons to frequent it. I argue that the collective markings left behind by the “chimera”¹ and former sextons of St. James stand as a testament for how spaces deemed sacred can function in ways both sacred (divine) and profane (everyday/mundane) (Douglas, 2002). As a space left untouched by previous fieldwork, I was compelled to share St. James’ inscriptions with a wider audience and draw attention to how they can contribute to our understanding of how liminal spaces are developed when spaces and meanings are shared by persons across the life course.

2.0 Literature Review

According to Roger Levesque (2011) *graffiti* constitutes not just, “exemplified youthful exuberance, play, adventure, and perhaps even as a rite of passage for some youth, [but also] has become an extensive and expensive social problem” (p. 1212). Levesque, like his contemporaries Plenty & Sundell (2015), has chosen to locate graffiti within a context of illegality or deviance. While such studies have furthered branches of sociology and criminology concerned with youth culture, deviance, and criminality, it has left others, such as Michael Herzfeld (2009) and Nikki Jones (2010), to critique these classifications of graffiti as being inherently ageist and having the effect of actively silencing the societal benefits of graffiti and graffiti artists. For ethnoarchaeologist John Pedley (2002), studying graffiti teaches us about the important social and symbolic relationships that develop between humans and space across time. When situated within the context of cultural artifact – as an important alternative cultural expression - graffiti serves as conduit for rethinking the importance and complex place of social

interaction, space, and time in contemporary societies (Alderman & Moreau, 2011). My research at St. James' belltower follows in the footsteps of Herzfeld (2009), Jones (2010), and Pedley (2002), choosing to understand the 100 years' worth of graffiti found therein as important markers for human activity, intergenerational placemaking practice, and spatial negotiation. Before I disclose my research findings, I will now acknowledge and briefly review the primary sources that have helped guide the scope of my analysis.

While conducting 'fieldwork' in the *Bibliothèque Nationale* that Michel Foucault (2003) encountered eighteenth century *Records of Internment* and *Lettres de Cachet* (King's Orders). These documents -with some spanning a few pages and others reduced to a mere sentence or two - which would later inspire his famous essay, *Lives of Infamous Men* (2003). For Foucault (2003) these legal documents served as the, "particles", of human life (p. 282). According to Foucault (2003) and his contemporary Ann Laura Stoler (2009), the existence of these written records endowed them with the intensity of lives once lived - lives which would by now have been forgotten had efforts not been made to preserve them. While I take issue with Foucault (2003) and Stoler's (2009) inability to account for their own positionality in the outcome of their work, what I take from this research is that the material matters – and that documents can be layered with multiple meanings and truths. Foucault's (2003) approach to the material, as an indicator for human social interaction(s) - works well with several of the methods (i.e., document analysis and visual analysis) located elsewhere in this paper and has helped ground my analysis of graffiti at St. James' belltower within the study of social documents.

Unlike Foucault's (2003) *Lives of Infamous Men*, the second source, namely, Blackwell and Stanley-Blackwell's (1998) article *Graffiti and Sacred Spaces: Holy Trinity Anglican Church, Dorchester, NB*, directly addresses the topic of graffiti in a sacred space. While much of Blackwell and Stanley-Blackwell's (1998) research at Holy

Trinity Anglican Church focused on the classification of graffiti encountered as either pornographic, signature (autographic), or valentine graffiti (declarations of love), my interest in their work over another's was based on their ability to spotlight graffiti in sacred spaces as an important medium for cultivating new knowledge about the sacred (divine) and the profane (impure/everyday) (Douglas, 2003). Both authors point to this desperate need for the social sciences to rethink definitions of graffiti, and to effectively work together to craft new knowledge on the affective qualities for studying the presence of graffiti in sacred spaces (Blackwell & Stanley-Blackwell, 1998). I took their concluding statements as an invitation to explore further (by engaging applicable texts – such as those offered by Alderman & Moreau (2011), Cianca (2018), Sinha (2016) and Good (1999)) and expand upon in new ways. Like Blackwell and Stanley-Blackwell (1998), my research uses graffiti as a material means for exploring the liminal space -i.e., the rupture, overlap or blending of social space - that exists between the sacred and the profane (Crooke & McDowell, 2019).

Like Blackwell and Stanley-Blackwell's (1998) article, Nelson's (2018) *Mosaic and Tapestry: Metaphors as Geographical Concept Generators* stems from a literature operating outside of a pure sociology of space. Nelson (2018) focuses on the relations between landscapes and place, and how studying these relations can better our understanding of how/why people choose to accept or resist spatial negotiations. For Nelson (2018), place represents the social fabric, which is bound by humans to material landscapes - a sentiment which can resonate well with several classical works of anthropologist Mary Douglas (2003), whose work also maintains a place of importance in my project. While neither scholar addressed graffiti specifically, for my inclusion of their work here is based on how they approach place and placemaking practice. When discussing the construction of space or how landscapes become gridded with the social, both authors rely on the language of landscape and architectural

gridding as metaphor (Douglas, 2003; Nelson, 2018). While Douglas (2003) relies on the ‘grid’ metaphor to discuss how the social can become affixed to the material landscape, Nelson (2018) prefers to focus on the mosaic and tapestry metaphor as key approaches for making sense of places and placemaking practices. When Nelson (2018) suggests that landscape can be socially situated within the scope of either a mosaic or tapestry, he is pointing to how landscapes are inscribed by multiple social actors, with the result being an oftentimes messy layering of meanings, truths and material trances. For me each of these metaphors provides space to consider the larger web of connections that exists between both the graffiti found in St. James’ belltower and those that wrote it. It was while engaging these two metaphors in my analysis process that I developed a new classification of graffiti, what I have here coined as *timeline graffiti*. *Timeline graffiti* represents an individual, co-operative, or intergenerational endeavor to commit graffiti to a space with the intent of crafting a vernacular timeline of events. Interpreting portions of the graffiti found in St. James’ Belltower as *timeline graffiti*, with several contributors at various stages of the lifecourse has afforded me with two opportunities as a scholar. First, identifying the graffiti of St. James’ belltower as *timeline graffiti* has allowed me to undermine classical approaches to graffiti which situate its presence and practice within a deviant, criminal or age-based context. Second, examining the *timeline graffiti* found in St. James’ Belltower as tapestry allows me to demonstrate how occupational identities – in this instance the occupation of sexton or chimer - can actively convolute our understanding of the liminal spaces that exists between the sacred and the profane (Chawla & Rodriguez, 2011).

The final source, namely, Doris Jones-Baker’s (1981) *The Graffiti of Folk Motifs in Cotsworld Churches*, returns to the study of graffiti in sacred spaces. Although situated within a medieval European context, Jones-Baker (1981) was instrumental for developing ‘talismatic’ interpretations of graffiti in sacred spaces - a stance

which is now prevalent across Nautical Studies, Folklore Studies, and History (Bar-Oz, Tchekhanovets & Tepper, 2017; Cooper, Copeland & Dhoop, 2016). Jones-Baker (1981) argued that applications of graffiti to a sacred space had symbolic purposes, and evidenced a belief that by committing graffiti, wall writers could tap into the divine/sacred essence of both the church and its holy inhabitant. While my research takes a different approach to Jones-Baker’s (1981) work, her approach enables me think about the wall writers themselves as persons governed by their own complex histories, positionalities, and experiences. Like Jones-Baker (1981), and her contemporaries Arthur Obtuski (2021) and Christer Westerdahl (2013), I have realized that when working with graffiti in sacred spaces acknowledging what connects wall writers is just as important as regarding what is written. Seriously engaging with the context of graffiti – and not just its contents – can have the effect of offering new insights into the act of graffiti collectives. I have, thus, decided to use the graffiti left behind by these sextons and chimers as a tool – as a means for glimpsing their human essence - to better understanding their relationships to the belltower, church, other wall writers, and their own situated self. This approach has enabled me to acknowledge the interplay that occurs between ‘religion’, space, encounter, and ‘occupation’, and address how each in its own way contribute to the creation and continued construction of St. James’ belltower *timeline graffiti*.

Thus far I have briefly alluded to which sources have had the most impact on this project. It is important for me to note that though important, not all sources covered herein have had an equal effect in the final analysis provided in this paper. While works, such as Foucault’s (2003) *Lives of Infamous Men*, have served loosely as a bedrock for approaching graffiti in sacred spaces, and others, such as Nelson’s (2018) approach to using mosaic and tapestry as metaphor, have been called on directly in related sub-sections, each source has been selected based on its ability to meaningfully contribute new knowledge about graffiti,

placemaking practice, and the social construction of liminal space.

3.0 Methods

Though certain of my intention to apply a blend of autoethnographic techniques, namely, heightened reflexivity and narrative inquiry, to my work at St James' belltower, what was less clear was which method of document analysis to combine each with (Day, 2012; Jeong-Hee, 2016). My decision eventually came when considering the effect I wanted my research to have, namely, to provide alternative ways of thinking about the social significance of graffiti in sacred spaces. To actualize this goal, I avoided analytic forms of document analysis which could result in the application of interrogative techniques, such as a critical (i.e., critical discourse) or post-structural (i.e., narrative) inquiry (Tracy, 2013). I opted instead to apply another form of document analysis, and one which I felt could compliment an autoethnographic approach: visual analysis (Pink, 2021).

As a technique for studying the material elements of everyday objects and spaces, visual analysis requires an intense awareness of one's material world, its internal working logic, and the role that the material assumes in our co-construction of the social (Jewitt & Leeuwen, 2001). Especially when images, symbols or inscriptions are involved, visual analysis has been regarded by anthropologists, such as Stoler (2009) and Douglas (2003) and classical historians, such as Pedley (2002) and Mayor (2000), as an important form of academic inquiry. Visual analysis is unique in its ability to draw attention to and emphasize the social significance of even the smallest or taken-for-granted features of a document (Keegan, 2014). Its focus on 'the particular' permits scholars to consider the 'visual logic' (i.e., line, color, shape, texture, materiality, and historicity) of documents, and to formulate subjective interpretations of these artifacts in relational contexts (Coffey, 2013). Visual analysis diverges from methods which understand documents as fixed, linear, or teleological entities

(Paterson, 2009). This method is meant to further illuminate what is already there, and perhaps even more importantly, draw attention to what has been altered, censored, erased, or silenced (Trouillot, 2015). According to Amanda Coffey (2013), a good visual analysis relies not so much on the document, but on one's willingness to be open and perceptive to the various layers of meaning that adorn it. The document which I will examine comes in the form of grey brick and mortar. Yet it is not this belltower, which was built in September of 1909, or even the Anglican community of Stratford, Ontario it serves, per say that the bulk of my analysis aims to address (N.A., 2018). Instead, it is the various, "watermarks" (i.e., micro histories, confessional inscriptions, and *timeline*

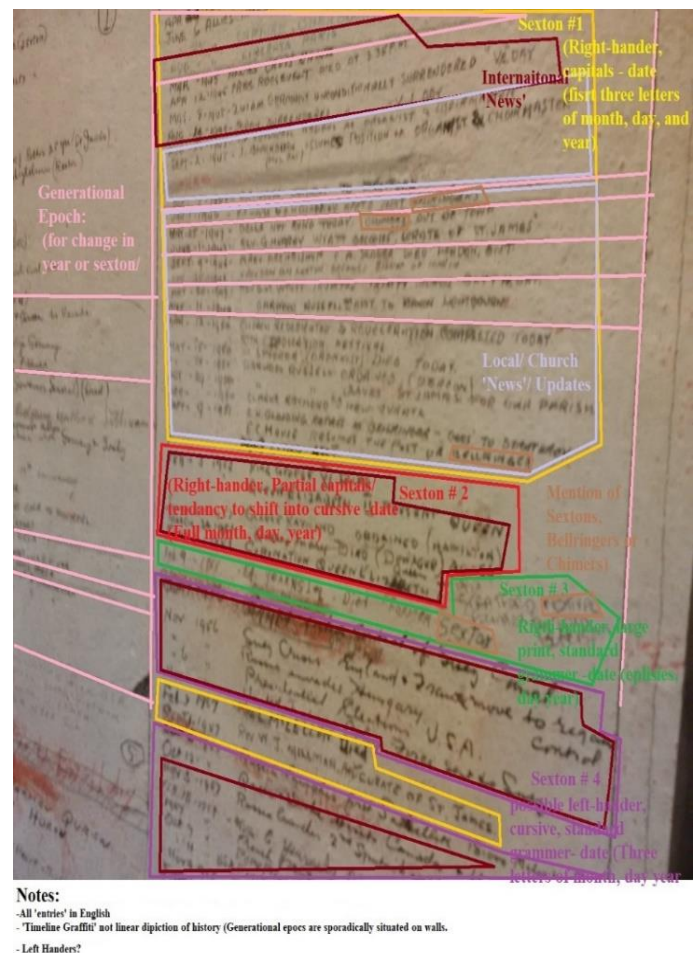


Figure 1 - Example of Coding

graffiti), that adorn its innermost walls which

captured my attention (Erickson, 1987; Stoler, 2009, p. 52). Crafting a sound visual analysis of these informal inscriptions required that I understand each line of graffiti in terms of its material context, and not necessarily the contents of what had been written (Coffey, 2013). I began by carefully documenting each wall of graffiti found in the belltower (via photography) for later spatial recreation, observation, and analysis. Once documented and reassembled through photographs I began the coding phases, whereby each line of graffiti was read, visually assessed for likeness of written style, literary composition, and materiality, grouped together based on likeness, and assigned a color for the purpose of differentiating between authors (example provided in Figure 1) (Charmaz, 2014). Once the initial coding phase had concluded, I began to formulate memos based on several emergent themes (i.e., generational epochs, local/church news/updates, co-author acknowledgment, or writers' gap) (Jnanathapaswi, 2021).

The process of selecting my document for study, however, required reflecting on how my upbringing might influence my perception of St. James' belltower, its employees and the graffiti found therein. Growing up, as quite possibly, the only self-proclaimed religion-less youth in Cottam, a predominantly Christian village in southwestern Ontario, once influenced me to shy away from houses of worship and spaces deemed hallow. Apart from the occasional family wedding ceremony or funeral service, I refrained from stepping foot in these sacred spaces. My avoidance of these spaces was not so much spurred by personal disdain but by, as Hertz (1960) might suggest, a belief that by being without religion that I would be barred from entering. I had led myself to believe that if I were to enter these places of worship, be they Hindu Temples, Mosques, Synagogues or Churches, that I would be singled out by their various gatekeepers as a non-believer, scorned for stepping foot where I did not belong, and cast out. However, on one fateful day in May of 2017, my way of navigating through sacred spaces altered course. Once a year my mother,

sister-in-law, close friend, and I embark on an overnight 'girl's trip' to the historic city of Stratford, Ontario. Anyone who has travelled to Stratford on a Saturday knows how difficult it is to secure municipal parking on York Street – Stratford's oldest shopping district. As fate would have it, upon crossing a great arched concrete bridge, we managed to secure a parking spot along the right bank of the Avon River. Upon stepping out of the car - I heard it, the rush of the river, and then the crisp metallic chime of not one but fifteen bells. I was struck by the melody, and realized that the bells were chiming the tune of a song by the artist Adele. Call it intuition, or even serendipity, but without meaning to I found my body crossing the paved street, and beyond a threshold of fragrant evergreens. After passing through a garden intended for the spreading of ancestral ashes, I



Figure 2 - St. James Anglican Church

drew near to the sharp sound of those colossal bells. Once at the first stone step leading to the wide, wooden door of St. James Anglican Church's belltower (as photographed in Figure 2), I stopped, daring to go no further. The sound, which had brought me here, ceased and I decided to take a seat on a nearby bench surrounded by blooming wine-colored crocus and golden daffodils. My travelling companions, ever patient with my tendency to meander, followed me to this place. Though all of us gathered near the soaring brick belltower we never expected that anyone would come to greet us, but within moments an elderly gentleman came hurrying from beyond the arched red door.

The gentleman asked if we would be interested in coming into the belltower to see 'the Chimes' - which we all accepted. Nothing could have prepared me for what I was about to encounter within. Perhaps only those who have watched the French film *Amelie* (2001) might understand how bewildered I was by the unexpected 'discovery' of an immense collection of penciled graffiti. All at once, I forgot that I was in a sacred space, in a House of God, and turned my attention to the thousands of handwritten and incised inscriptions around me. As if I were the first person to show interest in these inscriptions, the gentleman, who had acted as gatekeeper to this mighty belltower, recalled to me the history of the writings, and how they connected to the walls surrounding the belltower's fifteen-chime keyboard (van den Hoonaard, 2015). The graffiti found in this belltower, with most committed by the hand of a former sexton or *Chimer*, spanned over a hundred years. I asked if I might photograph the inscriptions, which was granted, and it is from these photographs that part of my analysis derived.

4.0 Theoretical Perspectives

While on my yearly 'girls' trip' to Stratford it was never my intention to seek out a fieldsite, and though I did stumble upon one, I had no desire to haphazardly apply a slew of theories during my initial encounter. It was not until later, after returning home with memories and digital

photographs in tow, that I thought about this graffiti in terms of its theoretical significance. In this way, my earliest encounters with the belltower of St. James were akin to a grounded theory approach, and more specifically a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014; Flick, 2018). First coined by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967), and later reworked by Kathy Charmaz (2014), grounded theory is an inductive approach to theory that relies on approaching the fieldsite with limited expectations of what one might find. As opposed to allowing a particular set of theories to drive research, grounded theory argues for emergent patterns in data to steer the theoretical direction of fieldwork and analysis (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

While sharing foundational approaches with grounded theory, such as relying on systematic analysis, iterative logic, and inductive reasoning, Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory proposes a different approach to researcher positionality, and the nature of reality. Constructivist grounded theory invites researchers to consider how lived experience, social positionality, and reflexivity contribute to the construction of social realities and identities (Gibbs, 2015). Charmaz's willingness to release grounded theory from its requirements of a single objective reality, the neutral observer and value-free expert, has reengaged my interest in it as a workable methodology for studying graffiti in a sacred space (Bowers et al., 2021). Constructivist grounded theory allowed me to set aside my biases toward spaces deemed 'sacred' (divine or pure), and it is for this reason that in the months following my initial engagement with my fieldsite that I could 'see' the significance of the profane (human/everyday) graffiti in the belltower differently (Gordon, 2016).

The presence of graffiti in this working belltower challenged my own preconceived notions of what a relationship between the sacred and profane must entail. In the conventional works of Durkheim (2008) and Douglas (2002) the relationship between the sacred (divine or pure) and profane (everyday/ mundane or impure) are

often depicted as distinctly dichotomous and yet dependent on each other's oppositional forces for their very existence. The sacred and profane constitute the conscious decision by persons to divide aspects of the social world into either of these two dissimilar and yet interdependent domains (Durkheim, 2008). While keeping with some of these traditional approaches to the sacred and profane, I have decided to take a slightly different approach to this relationship. Instead of focusing on the differences that exist between the sacred (divine or hallow) and profane (everyday), I spotlight the significance of the liminal relationship – the transitional space - that exists between the two (Wagoner & Zittoun, 2021). Though often portrayed as a sacred space due to its intimate ties to both the Church and the hallow ground which it rests on, I argue that, my own presence aside, the graffiti in St. James' belltower offers a unique opportunity to rethink conventional understandings of the sacred and profane - and can point to the liminality, namely, the betwixtness or in-betweenness, of this space.² For me, the graffiti in St. James' belltower acts as a conduit for exploring the liminal space that exists between the poles of the sacred (the belltower as a vessel for the divine) and profane (the belltower as a material space governed by the bodies of its caretakers) (Douglas, 2003). Drawing attention to how the sacred and profane can work together – instead of as separate or oppositional entities – enables this belltower to operate beyond its divine purpose as just a vessel for the Holy Spirit (Grenier, 2012).

5.0 Visual Analysis

When compared to operable houses of worship within the greater Stratford area during the early 20th century the overall construction and design of my document, namely, the crowned belltower adjacent to St. James Anglican Church, may seem to meet the standards of a bygone architectural style. Being one of several churches erected in a town reminiscent of a Gothic architectural aesthetic, St James' Anglican Church is beset with a variety of features commonly associated with late 19th century Western churches,

such as a belltower, belfry, main hall, and rectory (Blackwell & Stanley-Blackwell, 1998). Its defining feature, however, would be the belltower and its micro-carillon³, which was finally finished in 1909 with funds left to the church by a devout community member (N.A., 2018; Swager, 1993). The commercialization of the carillon across Europe began in the late sixteenth century and was popularized in Canada during the nineteenth century – a fact which greatly contributed to its inclusion in church tower design (Richardson, 2001).

Since 1909 St. James' belltower and micro-carillon have required the services of either a sexton or self-proclaimed, "**Chimer**", to both maintain, "**the Chimes**", and provide attention to its main bell, which must be mechanically cranked by hand on an hourly basis (N.A., 2018). It is important to note that prior to the dissolution of the Second World War, access to St. James' belltower and belfry was limited to the resident sexton⁴. Traditionally, within the religious sects of Canadian Anglicanism, the belltower, resident sexton and later Chimer were, regardless of need, seen as being further away from the sacred than other religious architecture and members of the church (Blackwell & Stanley-Blackwell, 1998). Perhaps, the subsequent creation and preservation of over a hundred years of informal inscriptions in St. James' belltower may be a result of a combination of both factors (i.e., the belltower as a working habitual space for mostly sextons and chimers, and the necessity for the belltower/chimes to have a caretaker).

5.1 Visual Logic: The Presence and Placeness of Graffiti in St. James' Belltower

In terms of location, the bulk of graffiti produced by the hand of either a sexton or chimer was located on the second story of St. James' belltower, and within the immediate vicinity of the chimes keyboard. For those unfamiliar with the use of this space explaining this tendency for most of the 'graffiti' to be located here may have to do with two basic reasons. First, that this room is the easiest to access, and therefore provides the most

opportune surfaces for graffiti (Keegan, 2014; van den Hoonaard, 2015). Second, that apart from the hourly ritual of resetting the chime, a sexton and later chimer would have been confined to working the church grounds or in this very small room which houses ‘the Chimes’ keyboard (Symbaluk, 2014).

With regards to natural and artificial sources of light, this cramped square space was dim, which proved difficult for observing many of the miniscule visual elements of the graffiti. This absence of adequate light, however, was able to be remedied by means of flash-photography. Upon reviewing these photographs, I quickly identified that in terms of language, every inscription could be equated with a distinctly Canadian – instead of an American - variation of the English language (Lavenda & Schultz, 2013). This absence of graffiti in other relevant languages, such as Québécois French, may suggest that both previous and current sextons either favored or wrote exclusively in terms of the English language (Robbins, 2013).

Though the use of the written English language was common among former and current sextons/chimers, the mediums that literate wall writers used to commit these inscriptions varied. Apart from a few entries dated between, “**November 9/ 70**” – “**Fall 1972**”, and October of 1986 - June of 1988 which had been written in bold black ink, most of these dated entries had been inscribed by a pencil in varying shades of grey. Considering common assertions offered by Blackwell and Stanley Blackwell (1998) about the impermanence of markings scrawled in lead and graphite, I was confounded by this preeminence of pencil markings at my fieldsite. For entries dated between 1914 to the late 1940’s, this reliance on a pencil instead of a quill or fountain pen may be because quills become inoperable if used on vertical surfaces, and that the ballpoint pen was not widely used in Canada until 1946 (Burke, 2000). This presence of penciled graffiti proved beneficial for further identifying which hand a sexton favored, a matter of personal interest to me at the time as I am left-handed and have now published

material on the subject (Wauthier, 2019). In following left-handed historian Fincher’s instruction, I determined that due to a lack of smudges and a tendency for the feathering of *t bars* from left to right, that the majority of ‘wall writers’ exhibited an inclination to favor the right hand (Fincher, 1993).

Regardless of content, graffiti, like all forms of written communication, can be interpreted as uniquely subjective and able to be equated stylistically with an individual (Keegan, 2014; Robbins, 2013). Although at times less difficult for me to identify, this delineation between individuals based on visual comparisons of handwriting proved to be monotonous due to the sheer volume of entries – a task which archeologist Feder (2008) might sympathize with. Spanning nearly one hundred years, these entries did not simply sporadically adorn the four walls of this space; instead, they were written in close succession in a descending order from ceiling to floor. I recall having to crouch down and crawl about, much like a sexton or chimer had once done, to fully appreciate what, when, and how something had been written. My efforts, however, were not just bound to my time physically observing these inscriptions but continued for several years, while working away from my fieldsite. After scanning through various photographs, which had been taken in May of 2017, I became accustomed to recognizing differences in letter formation, application of grammar, and favored method of handwriting (Coffey, 2013). This technique of identifying sexton and chimer wall writers allowed me to distinguish approximately 11 unique styles of handwriting⁵. Aside from attempts by sextons and chimers to develop vertical and horizontal lines to distinguish between various generational epochs⁶, I differentiated between wall writers based on several identifying markers, such as if the author printed boldly, employed cursive, or applied capital letters in accordance with western styles of grammar (Lavenda & Schultz, 2013). To illustrate, I considered the recorded contents of Figure 3, which range between March 1945-1958, and was able to distinguish three distinct wall

attentiveness by a resident sexton/ chimer for continued operability. The resident sextons of St. James would have spent time not just in the belfry of the tower, but also in the small earthen-scented room that houses the chimes' keyboard. An assertion which can be further supported by the observable fact that the bulk of the graffiti located in this belltower has been confined to this very same room (Erickson, 1987; Symbaluk, 2014.)

Research pertaining to either how profane spaces become sacred (i.e., Cianca (2018) on *church homes* during the ancient Roman empire), sacred spaces come into being (i.e., Sinha (2016) on how urban landscapes of Singapore become infused with the sacred) or how signs of the sacred can leech out of sacred spaces and into the communities beyond (i.e., Good (1999) on how space and competing religious cosmologies were mitigated in the South Indian town of Kalugumalai) can be found in abundance. However, less research has considered how architecture built for the purpose of housing the sacred is accredited with qualities that are simultaneously sacred and profane. This very explicit presence and continual preservation of the graffiti found in St. James' belltower by its caretakers can destabilize concrete attempts within the social sciences to delineate between the sacred and profane (Durkheim, 2008; Landry, 2017). For nearly a hundred years the interior of this seemingly impenetrable fortress, has acted as a space for former sextons and current chimers to bring forth, make manifest and transmit memories (Roach, 1996). This belltower represents not just a vessel through which a holy essence manifests, but also a space of "emplacement" for those whose occupation requires that they inhabit it (Edwards-Vandenhoeck, 2017; Pink, 2015, p.28).

When compared to the various one-off forms of literary (poetry), signature, and valentine graffiti located elsewhere, the graffiti found in this room are currently without classification. Upon first entering this room my eyes were drawn to each of the four cream and scarlet-colored walls, and all that had been written. I was overcome by what scholars would call graffiti – but what I

immediately interpreted as a handwritten timeline or historical record (Feder, 2008; McDowell-Loudan, 2002). Spanning hundreds of meticulously organized entries in a descending order from ceiling to dusty floorboard, most of the graffiti was clustered together, one right after the other, addressing events with hardly any association to either predecessor or successor (James & Mills, 2005). With the exception of entries dated between the years of the Second World War, it was not unusual to encounter entries which recorded a, "**TRAGEDY**", which occurred overseas, such as, "**May 30th 2002 – Queen Mum died today, age 101**", or, "**Feb 3/ 98- Diplomacy narrowly averts a 2nd Gulf War between U.S.A. and Iraq**", which was then immediately followed by a local or national celebratory event, such as, "**June 9/02 – The Queen's Golden Jubilee Service @ St James**", or, "**Feb 5/98 – Federal Gov't (Paul Martin Finance Minister) Brings down 1st balanced federal budget in 30 years!!**".

In terms of style, each entry in this 'timeline' was organized by first date, followed by event. However, it should be noted that the style in which these dates were recorded varied depending on historical context and the stylistic preference of the sexton writing it (Trouillot, 2015). Take for example the following two dated entries, which I have interpreted as belonging to both a sexton and chimer, written approximately 50 years apart: "**MAY 12 1945 PRES ROOSEVELT DIED AT 1:35PM**", "**Thurs Oct 28/00 –Former P.M. Pierre Elliot Trudeau dies age 80 in Montreal**". By visually comparing these two dated entries it becomes clear that the Western standard order of stating 'month', 'day', 'year' and 'time' are not something that sextons/ chimers felt to rigidly adhere to (Heintz, 2005). Still, as former examples would suggest, even amongst the same wall writer the written style and pattern for recording events could vary. This further solidifies this graffiti as being in part a result of the writer's own creative spontaneity when tasked with committing words to stone (Stoler, 2009).

Personal pronouns, such as ‘I’, ‘me’, ‘my’, ‘we’ and ‘our’, were entirely absent from the graffiti being analyzed. These meticulously dated and carefully clustered captions represent far more than meek attempts by resident sextons/ chimers to craft a testimonial to one’s own efforts and existence (Dillon & Garland, 2010; Schacter, 2017). Instead, the sextons/ chimers of St. James made a conscious effort to construct a linear timeline of history that was purposely devoid of conceding individual authorship. This choice may have been spurred by a belief that their voices, when compared to the so-called grander scheme of human History, bore little significance, and thus that a certain degree of personal distance be maintained between wall writer and the persons/events being recorded (Foucault, 2003; Stoler, 2009). Yet, in stepping back – and regarding not only what has been written but how each line of graffiti interact - I have been able to identify subtle transitions of authorship (Erickson, 1987; Tracy, 2013). By transition I am not simply referring to perceivable shifts in written style and form – but in subjecthood. As an author not alone in this endeavor to capture the pertinent ‘news’ of his or her lived reality, it is only through absence or passing that the mortality and authorship of these sextons are acknowledged by their predecessors and included in the timeline graffiti of St. James’ belltower. Entries, such as, “**Jul 9 1981 Stratford sexton found by {T.B.}**”, “**Dec 14/ 97 {P. R.} returns as Chimer**”, and, “**May 1998 – {C. H.}, Assistant Chimer, Graduates from Mohawk College in Music**”, capture attempts by sextons and chimers to pay homage to the services, accomplishments and life writing offered by either recently deceased predecessors, co-workers, or possible successors (Roach, 1996). I interpret this collection of entries not just as timeline for events, but as a tapestry of co-authored works (Nelson, 2018). Tapestry or bricolage is, as a concept, especially transformative in its ability to refrain from thinking about documents as fixed entities (Coffey, 2013). For human geographer Nelson (2018), the tapestry metaphor allows scholars to think about how the whole (timeline of

graffiti in St. James’ belltower) is devised of mutually constituting parts (St. James’ *timeline graffiti* as an inscribed collective memory practice). I argue that the survival of St. James’ *timeline graffiti* depends not on the indifference of its writers, but on the decisions that they embody after actively reflect on what previous authors have written and events being covered (Dilley, 2005; Foucault, 2003). These sexton/chimer wall writers, however, should not be regarded as dutifully carrying on the tradition of *timeline graffiti* or as merely picking up where one has left off. I suggest that the very existence of this timeline would not be possible without the subsequent disclosure, affirmation, and preservation of its contents by its co-authors (with example of this relationship evidenced in Figure 4). The validity of this timeline, therefore, is relevant only when the succeeding sexton/ chimer willingly acknowledges and negotiates the meaning(s) of the contents left by his or her predecessors (Edwards-Vandenhoeck, 2017; Symbaluk, 2014). As Erickson (1987) forewarns, graffiti is only welcome when it fails to be seen as menacing or profane. Therefore, the very presence of this *timeline graffiti* points to the fact that its co-contributors must regard the belltower as neither wholly sacred nor profane – but as a combination of both – as a place whereby graffiti within this particular context is devoid of impurity. In both co-constructing and preserving this collection of *timeline graffiti*, each sexton and chimer would have had to understand his or her written contributions as something other than a defamation of the sacred (the House of God). They would have had to think of the collective efforts of their *timeline graffiti* as something which operates somewhere between the realm of the sacred and the profane. For me the graffiti found in St. James’ belltower points to this idea that there exists a neutral space between the sacred and profane – a liminal space that is meant to bridge the two (Wagoner & Zittoun, 2021).

Nevertheless, I caution readers from perceiving each sexton's timeline as being cut from a similar cloth. Though physically the space between each entry is in terms of millimeters, the time between entries can span days, months and even years. Entries located back-to-back, such as, "**JULY 23/ 02 Pope John Paul II arrives[...]**", and, "**FEB 1/03 SPACE SHUTTLE COLUMBIA EXPLODES ON RE ENTRY**", illustrate how St. James' *timeline graffiti* can be understood as always undergoing a process of becoming (Douglas, 2003). Former and current sextons/chimers did not simply pick up where the former left off and commit their entries at one point in time. These inscriptions are more than just the sum of their contents; they are ones which have been entered by a multiplicity of persons at various

Regardless of what popular discourses about graffiti would lead us to believe, the hands which committed these inscriptions did not merely belong to the young and rebellious members of Canadian society. They belonged to a collective of people writing across the lifecourse (Martsin, 2019). While I may never know these sextons and chimers personally, what I have learned by engaging with their *timeline graffiti*, is that this nearly century long task was one that carried with it an immense responsibility to preserve the past, dedication to the present and a willingness to keep the timeline's possibility alive. I argue that this tapestry of graffiti represents a history of another kind, a history which is equally as subjective in its understandings of the social world as it is actively co-constructed by a very small group of human beings. A group of human beings who may or may not have any other connection to each other outside of shared religious beliefs, occupational ties, and this unique collection of graffiti.

Nearly a century of micro-historical writing on the walls of St. James' belltower have laid bare the process which sextons/chimers used to not only acquire knowledge about life outside of the belltower, but also how they made sense of these events. Entries which describe either world events as being, "**terrible and monstrous**" or attribute endearments to persons, such as referring to George Harrison as, "**the Quiet Beatle**" or Bob Homme as, "**the Friendly Giant**" work to solidity this claim. This assemblage of entries reinforces more than one's desire to write down history as they see it – it points to how graffiti can be used by writers to meaningfully respond to and remember events they feel personally connected to. With examples, such as entries, "**MAR 1945 ALLIES CROSS RHINE**" or "**Sep 6/97 – Diana's funeral⁸ at 9am GMT, broadcast around the world. Memorial Service at St. James' 12:30pm**", serving as powerful examples of attempts by sextons in the homeland to create long-distance connections to persons and events occurring far afield (Stoler, 2009).

6.0 Conclusion

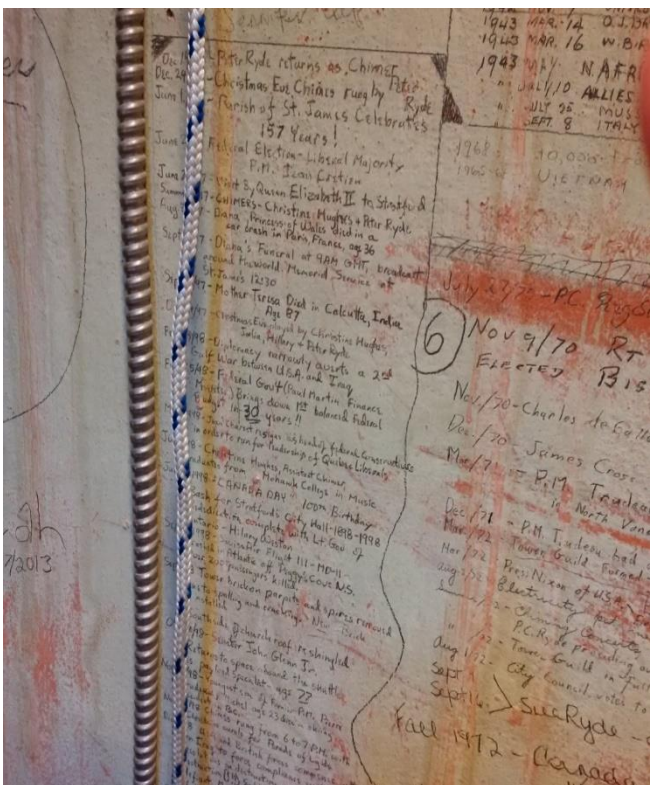


Figure 4 - Timeline Graffiti as Tapestry in St. James' Belltower

stages of being (Lavenda & Schultz, 2013). Each entry represents a very rare glimpse into a handful of lives, long forgotten by the constant inertia of over a hundred years of human History⁷.

Prior to my visit to St. James Anglican Church when I heard the chime of a church bell, I sought the source of the sound, namely, the belltower. It never occurred to me to consider the human element that resonates through that sound – and the possibilities that awaited me in the belltower. Now, regardless of if a church employs a resident ‘bell ringer’ or not, whenever I hear that crisp, metallic sound of a church bell, I am reminded of how it felt to stand in that small, dank room of St. James’ belltower. Standing in the space where countless generations of sextons and chimers had once stood, with the great canvas of the belltower spread out before me, strengthened in me a resolve to both see and write about graffiti differently. If I was to take part in countering popular assumptions about graffiti, I had to write about the *timeline graffiti* in St. James’ belltower and distribute my findings to a much wider audience. My hope is that in reading this paper others will be open to subjecting both graffiti and the spaces that it occupies to reevaluation. I realize,

however, that doing so would first entail a willingness to critically rethink what we know about the sacred and the profane. It is our duty as scholars to try to move beyond hegemonic narratives about the sacred and the profane – to seek out the liminality that exists between the two. When situated within sociological research the liminality of space can serve as a powerful conductor for both challenging classical readings of the sacred and profane as standalone, however interdependent concepts, and fostering new directions in the sociology of place and placemaking practice. I implore future scholars interested in studying contemporary expressions of graffiti in sacred spaces to not forget the all-too-human element that often operates within, against, and parallel to what we deem as sacred. For if we do forget this, then the social significance of the rich meanings, emotions, and memories bound up in the graffiti of St. James’ belltower would resemble nothing more than unwanted marks made by a great many pencils.

Notes

¹ During my coding process, I discovered that those who were permitted to play the carillon of St. James Anglican Church would refer to themselves as ‘Chimers’ in their writings and I have thus decided to honor this self-proclaimed identity in this paper.

² For insights into betwixtness please refer to Chawla, Devika & Rodriguez Amardo. (2011). *Liminal Traces: Storytelling, Performing and Embodying Postcoloniality*. SensePublishers, 68.

³ A carillon is a cluster of bronze cast bells which are usually played by means of striking keys and pedals to mechanically activate wires which strike corresponding bells.

⁴ The earliest bell ringers of St. James were referred to as sextons, but that name was later amended to ‘chimer’, which came to refer to anyone who was assigned the duty of hand cranking the main bell or playing ‘the chimes’ (micro carillon).

⁵ Although 11 styles of handwriting were identified I acknowledge that more than 11 individuals may have contributed to this cluster of wall inscriptions.

⁶ Upon first examining these hand drawn horizontal and vertical lines I initially thought that they were meant to distinguish between wall writers, however, realized that due to the sporadic positioning of clusters that these lines, which usually were accompanied by a number, such as “1” or “6”, represented an attempt by sextons and chimers to delineate between definitive periods of time.

⁷ For further inquiry into what I mean by ‘glimpses’ refer to Foucault, Michel. *The Essential Foucault*. Paul Rabinow and Nicolas Rose (ed.) *New York: The New Press*. 2003, 279.

⁸ As indicated by the entry located just prior to this one, when the chimer states “Diana’s funeral” they are referring to the funeral of Princess Diana.

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