



THE NARRATED WALL IN COMMUNICATION: Graffiti in Transnational Comics as a Visual Archive of Cities in Transformation

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how three transnational graphic novels –Flood! A Novel in Pictures (Drooker, 1992); BTTM FDRS (Daniels & Passmore, 2019); and Grafty's Wall (Ram, 2020)– transform graffiti and urban surfaces into “narrated walls,” sequential visual archives of cities in transformation. Through qualitative close reading of key panels, shared formal patterns are identified, ranging from the wall as the compositional axis of the page to the spatio-temporal braiding of narratives, as well as multiple scales that collectively trace a common trajectory from subculture to aestheticization to counter-archive. Flood! presents panoramic views of New York as palimpsests of resistance; BTTM FDRS depicts inscribed walls that consume Chicago's gentrified inhabitants; and Grafty's Wall portrays a progressive mural as a witness to real estate speculation. The article highlights the transmedial nature of graffiti –from ephemeral physical space to the enduring page– offering a critical reading of the changing city and its processes beyond institutional narratives. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to the study of urban visual culture by proposing comics as a counter-archive of spatial transformation.

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1. Introduction

That graffiti persists for as long as a wall exists is a maxim that captures the ephemeral nature of urban art: from tags that last only a few hours to pieces that endure for weeks, including palimpsestic murals that may survive for years before being erased or repainted. When the physical support disappears, however, this form of expression can also find new life—and new avenues of inquiry—through other media, from photography to video (Novak, 2015; Perroncel, 2018), as well as installation and graphic narrative. In light of this transitory condition, it is worth asking by what mechanisms of visual communication an ephemeral inscription in public space may become a lasting archive.

The remediation of urban art has been widely documented, from critiques of its mainstream institutionalization in festivals (Martínez, 2025) to analyses of its circulation on Instagram (Polson, 2025). By contrast, comics as a medium of preservation remain comparatively underexplored. Unlike the static photographic image, the sequential nature of comics provides an exceptional grammar (McCloud, 1993; Eisner, 2008) for narrating the disappearance of the wall: whether through their own temporal rhythms, through networks of meaning established between distant panels, or through shifts in scale ranging from the microscopic tag to the metropolitan panorama (Cohn, 2013).

At the same time, the contemporary city—neoliberal and often shaped by processes of gentrification—is defined by the constant transformation of its “common places” (Riggle, 2010), whether through demolitions driven by real estate development or through the more or less forced renewal of working-class neighborhoods. Within this framework, the gradual transformation of graffiti from a subcultural practice into, for instance, a fully fledged tourist attraction within the discourse of “creative cities” (Mould, 2015) is well established. Each such transformation entails a selective erasure of urban surfaces, whereby the wall—witness to these and many other urban processes—is systematically “purified,” in an ongoing contest between dominant metropolitan identities and an art form traditionally subject to criminalization (Young, 2014). Within this shifting ecosystem of urban palimpsests, comics emerge as a particularly powerful form of sequential archive.

This is possible insofar as the formal architecture of comics accommodates, first, a visual chronology of the wall across its full life cycle, from emergence to disappearance; second, a space of braiding (Groensteen, 2007), in which panels—whether adjacent or distant—interconnect, allowing graffiti to generate its own networks of meaning; and third, forms of temporal manipulation (Kukkonen, 2013), such as flashbacks or ellipses capable of condensing decades—and potentially vast spatial scales—within a limited number of pages.

This capacity positions comics as a critical medium for sociocultural communication (Lewis, 2023), enabling the exploration of urban memories—understood as ways of seeing and imagining the city (Christensen & Thor, 2017)—that graffiti preserves within the panel. It thus becomes possible to examine the formal migration of graffiti from the physical wall to its representation in comics, specifying which memories are preserved (demolitions, protests, or the substratum of an entire youth culture—Campos, 2013), and to what extent the medium amplifies or domesticates the conflictual charge of the original practice. While existing scholarship has addressed urban research in comic form (Cancellieri & Peterle, 2021; Museum of Graffiti, 2024), as well as graffiti on comics (Degand, 2022), less attention has been paid to graffiti within comics as a generative element of composition and representation. This study therefore seeks to address this methodological gap and to extend our understanding of urban art as a transmedial practice, already explored in other contexts (Li & Prasad, 2018; Morán, 2025).

To this end, the analysis focuses on three transnational graphic novels (two from the United States and one from India), which—across different genres and with varying degrees of semantic centrality—share the notion of the wall as a witness to the urban and/or personal transformation of marginal subjects, and in which graffiti functions not as a decorative element but as a structural one. In order to identify common patterns, the study examines *Flood! A Novel in Pictures* (Eric Drooker, 1992), *BTTM FDRS* (Ezra Clayton Daniels & Ben Passmore, 2019) and *Graffiti's Wall* (Ram V, 2020).

2. Theoretical Framework.

2.1. Urban Trace, Material Palimpsests, and Spray Paint as Counter-Memory

It is first necessary to understand graffiti as a practice of inscription in public space, in which the wall becomes a privileged surface for spontaneous and ephemeral memory (Figueroa, 2021; Gardner &

Fernández, 2021; Genet & Fernández, 2023). Within urban debates that position it between art and vandalism, graffiti operates as a form of spatial communication, leaving a material trace that records territorial conflicts, subcultural identities, and the superimposition of metropolitan temporalities according to specific moments and locations (Schacter, 2008, 2013). From this perspective, graffiti may be conceived as a non-institutional system of urban communication that competes with both mass media and official signage in its capacity to name and produce meaning within the city.

Its styles and visual grammars —tags, throw-ups, and master “pieces”— establish hierarchies of visibility (and permanence), functioning as spontaneous maps of a bipolar and mutually reinforcing tension: the lived city versus the planned city (Ross, 2016). In the contemporary context, graffiti also produces genuine time capsules upon the urban surface, ranging from the furtive mark of the nocturnal writer to the multiple palimpsestic layers that endure despite municipal cleaning processes (whose archival dimensions are examined in detail by Ronconi et al., 2025). From a criminological and cultural perspective, graffiti has likewise been conceptualized as a form of performance and a discursive practice particularly suited to articulating identity and conflict (Ferrell, 1996), Functioning in a similar way to the political cartoon, which is characterized by using cognitive frames that depict a segment of reality in a single image (Morales Domínguez et al., 2025).

As noted, the transforming city may itself be understood as an immense, slow, and persistent material palimpsest, in which neighbourhoods are demolished and renewed, granting graffiti its own historical trajectories of visibility (Brighenti, 2016). Political, economic, and real estate interventions entail the selective erasure of multiple urban surfaces, as walls are cleaned, repainted, or demolished, thereby shaping and reshaping cities in accordance with their historical development (Huyssen, 2003).

Within this cycle, graffiti may also operate as counter-memory (González, 2016; Cárdenas & Vergara, 2024; Guerra et al., 2025): while urban policies tend to privilege cleared and regulated surfaces, street interventions preserve traces of what the “official” city seeks to erase. Major metropolitan contexts such as those examined in this corpus exemplify this universal tension between the testimonial wall and the canonical or commodified wall, where spontaneous artistic expression collides with institutional imperatives. This dynamic is evident, first, in New York, where the gentrification of the Lower East Side —Eric Drooker’s formative environment— has been widely studied (Freeman & Braconi, 2004; Smith & DeFilippis, 2008); second, in Chicago, whose urban transformations and histories of segregated blocks and public housing have been analysed extensively (Venkatesh, 2002; Vale, 2013; Almagro, 2022); and finally in Mumbai, where large-scale clearance of informal settlements (slums) has been examined by Mukhija (2003), Chaskin et al. (2024), and, more recently, Jha et al. (2025).

If the migration of graffiti into media such as comics offers a preliminary response to the problem of the disappearance of its original support, this is because the medium surpasses the limitations both of the ephemeral installation and of the static photograph. Its specificity lies in its capacity to mobilize a particular temporal rhythm (Groensteen, 2013), through which panel sequences can narrate —and chronologically register— the evolution of the wall, from its emergence to its erasure. Through the spatial braiding described above, graffiti may also reappear across distant panels, creating conceptual networks beyond linear “real” time, and doing so across variable scales (Peeters, 1998; Postema, 2013). This quality of comics as a sequential visual archive of cities in transformation, we argue, transforms graffiti and urban surfaces into genuine “narrated walls,” a concept that will guide our methodological approach.

In contrast to the physical wall (three-dimensional, immobile, and perishable), the formal architecture of comics also expands the preservational possibilities of graffiti through its reproducibility (Gabilliet, 2010; Beaty, 2012, both address concerns regarding comics production and its relationship to art). Close-ups, flashbacks, and chronological condensations that protect graffiti from real-world demolition testify to the plasticity and temporal manipulability of the panel (Mikkonen, 2017). Meanwhile, the grid-based composition of the comics page (again Peeters, 1998; see also Pederson & Cohn, 2016 on the evolution of page structures) opens the possibility of constructing multiple and/or simultaneous walls, including double splashes (pages occupied by a single panel) that evoke the declarative presence of the real wall.

2.2. Transmediality of Urban Art and Selected Works

The transmediality of graffiti refers to its capacity to migrate across media while retaining its semantic charge, as occurs in the transition from the physical wall to photography or, in our case, from the street

to the printed page, among other intersubjective constructions and representations (Thon, 2016). In the graphic novels analysed here, this migration is not merely reproductive but structurally transformative, which justifies their selection for this study. Thus, the poster-like aesthetic of *Flood!* —a work extensively discussed by authors such as Berona (1995)— draws inspiration from “the woodcut artists Frans Masereel and Lynd Ward, Jungian psychology, and the street battles Drooker witnessed in his native East Village” (Cutchin, October 9, 2024). In this work, the city itself becomes a panoramic page, punctuated by sporadic scenes of graffiti that accompany the movements of an anonymous protagonist in the lead-up to an apocalyptic storm.

With “a palette that smells of graffiti” (Charles, n.d.), *BTTM FDRS* similarly integrates occasional inscriptions that shape the rhythm of a horror narrative which Conlan (2025) has interpreted as “an example of intersectional urban consciousness.” In the story, Darla, an African American fashion student, moves into an old industrial building in Chicago inhabited by a vast parasitic entity, a satire and metaphor of gentrification. Finally, in *Graffiti's Wall*, it is the physical mural —painted on the surviving wall of a demolished informal housing settlement in Mumbai— that generates the narrative sequence through its protagonist, Suresh (nicknamed Graffiti), who transforms it into a canvas for his life and that of his friends within the city’s changing and often criminalized environment. These precarious lives, as well as the politics of urban redevelopment, have recently been examined by Sarkar and Bhattacharya (2024).

The temporal and geographical disparity of the corpus thus responds to the transmedial and transnational nature of graffiti as a practice. The heterogeneity of the selected works allows for a comparative analysis of their migration from physical location to comics page, with the aim of identifying shared tensions both in the spatial representation of the transformable city (Dittmer, 2014) and in the depiction of its inhabitants. The focus on a universal urban phenomenon such as graffiti situates this study within a global perspective, common in visual culture research, that seeks to identify recurring patterns in the representation of the “testimonial wall” under the conceptual framework of Robinson’s (2006) *ordinary cities* —that is, regardless of metropolitan scale—.

3. Methodology

The corpus is therefore constructed according to this comparative logic, reproduced in studies of urban comics (Cancellieri, 2021; Davies, 2022), which privileges phenomenology over geographical essentialism. Accordingly, we propose an intensive, qualitative, and comparative method to conduct a sequential iconographic-critical analysis, grounded in the theoretical pillars outlined above and oriented toward identifying the narrated wall: comics studies understood as the study of a spatial device, the page conceived as an infrastructural form —in which compositions and panels emulate streets and walls— and the notion of *ordinary cities* as a way of reading different urban contexts without succumbing to taxonomic impulses. Within this framework, graffiti and inscribed surfaces are understood as centres of density, capable of condensing memory, conflict, and urban transformation.

Our procedure will unfold in four interrelated steps:

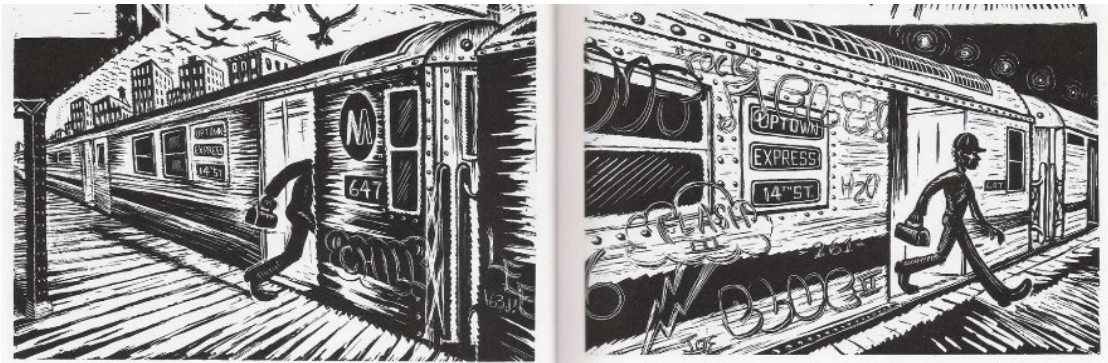
- 1) Identification of key panels: the selection of four panels or sequences from each work, according to a criterion of maximum analytical representativeness, in which the painted wall performs a structural function within the organization of the page or operates as a condenser of conflict (whether as subcultural trace, aesthetic agent, or counter-archive).
- 2) Application of a sequential visual and textual close reading to each work: first, a description of formal elements (composition), graphic typology (legibility, texture), and sequential rhythm (braiding or reiteration of motifs). This is followed by an analysis of semantic content (the meaning of inscriptions as discursive utterances, in line with Ferrell, 1996, and their communicative function within the narrative context of the works).
- 3) Urban-political interpretation (contextual): derived from the close reading itself, in order to determine what kind of city in transformation is represented in each case (demolition, renewal, protest, gentrification, and so forth).
- 4) Once these tasks have been completed, the analysis will proceed to a transnational comparison and thematic synthesis (systematization), structured around the proposed analytical blocks: subculture and the city in conflict, aestheticization, and counter-archive.

4. Analysis

4.1. Flood!

In *Flood!*, four sequences have been identified (pp. 18–19 and 49–50 —featuring the New York subway as protagonist— and pp. 51–52, 55–56, where graffiti is transformed into hieroglyphic forms that collapse the city into its more primitive layers). The panoramic panels on pp. 18–19 depict a journey through subway cars “bombed” with tags and throw-ups. Their horizontal composition turns the wagons into continuous bands of writing, in which scarcely any surface remains unmarked: overlapping inscriptions on the windows, references to rock music, and a cloud accompanied by a lightning bolt bearing the name “Flash III” occupy almost the entire visible surface, functioning as a typographic skin that exceeds the mere representation of the urban landscape, thus constituting a first narrated wall.

Figure 1. Sequence 1 (pp. 18–19). Next stop, the cultural underground



Source: *Flood!* (Eric Drooker, 1992).

From an urban-political perspective, these illustrations operate as an entry point into the subcultural underground: the train transports passengers, yet simultaneously serves as a mobile canvas through which the emblems of anonymous graffiti writers and crews circulate, producing a visual noise that colonizes the geometric order of the city. As an infrastructural form, the subway cars become panels within panels, as well as a mobile archive of stylistic identities and affiliations. Through the presence of the cloud and lightning bolt, the painted train also becomes a prefiguration of the flood (both literal and social) looming over New York City. At this early stage, however, the tone remains more realist than apocalyptic, foregrounding subcultural agency.

Figure 2. Sequence 2 (pp. 49–50). A mosaic of micro-narratives



Source: *Flood!* (Eric Drooker, 1992).

On pages 49–50, Drooker returns to this space but modifies the dispositif through two splash pages devoted to graffiti-covered walls at the subway entrance. This choice emphasizes the monumental dimension of the practice, as if the comic were offering a brief archaeological view of it. Nearly every surface appears saturated with graphic marks: tags, schematic figures (a saint, a wolf, a man with an arm in a sling), political and economic symbols, crowns, and pierced hearts. While the composition directs the gaze toward the vertical plane of the wall, and, in the second panel, depth becomes visually compressed, in both cases the graffiti takes over the visual field, neutralizing hierarchies between text and image.

The downward arrow on the first page, which serves as the chapter title (the L line on 14th Street, where Drooker grew up – Lanier, September 5, 2019), functions as an organizing vector within the composition. Sequentially, however, the page keeps the reader on the surface, emphasizing that, for the moment, the “journey” consists in interpreting graffiti as archive. The motifs themselves produce a political wall conceived as a mosaic of micro-narratives: affective dramas, civic protest, threats, and even echoes of sacralty within the marginal imaginary of graffiti culture. Such an accumulation of “stories” transforms the wall, as often occurs, into a palimpsest of anonymous lives which, in this case, the comic rescues from erasure.

Figure 3. Sequence 3 (pp. 51–52). Graffiti becomes hieroglyphic



Source: *Flood!* (Eric Drooker, 1992).

The final section of the work contains a third and fourth sequence in which New York ultimately sinks beneath the biblical storm, and in whose prelude the expressionist woodcut aesthetic—inherited from Masereel and Ward (Walker, 2007)—definitively condenses the decadence of the 1980s Lower East Side. In the first sequence, “civilized” façades and modern infrastructure (again within the subway) testify to the official city, intermittently marked by marginal graffiti. As the protagonist advances, however, the city and its cultural trends (such as breakdance performers) merge surrealistically with totemic panels and representations reminiscent of Egyptian hieroglyphs.

The sequence, structured through a clearly descending rhythm—from civilization toward a prehistoric syncope—elevates the marginality of graffiti into an ancestral language or sacred form of painting, invoking the primitive wall as a survivor of modernity’s collapse. Few arguments are as explicitly political as this newly stratigraphic city, an example of the author’s conception of the panel as “an ancient form of communication that resonates at a preverbal level” (Kushner, 2016), an idea that crystallizes in the following sequence, where the visual language moves from the Egyptian to the rupestrian.

In symbolic terms, this marks a culmination of the counter-archive: through a return to the instinctive and the shamanic in the face of impending catastrophe. Art, as a form of survival, appears here to prevail, dissolving civilization beneath the flood anticipated in the title, and even displacing the earlier register of the novel, previously grounded in a form of dirty realism described as the author's emotional response "to the changing urban landscape" (Lanier, September 5, 2019).

Figure 4. Sequence 4 (pp. 55–56). From the Egyptian to the rupestrian



Source: *Flood!* (Eric Drooker, 1992).

4.2. *BTTM FDRS*.

For the analysis of *BTTM FDRS*, we have selected one panel and three sequences: from the hermetic building in which the narrative unfolds (p. 109); from the warning traces left by the enigmatic Chucky regarding the monster inhabiting the building (p. 33, p. 63); from the urban street settings depicted throughout the comic (p. 38, p. 95); and from the graffiti displayed by the rapper Julio within his room (p. 140, p. 165).

From the initial image examined through close reading —not the first depiction of the building in the comic, but paradigmatic of its antagonistic— emerges a threatening monolithic structure occupying most of the frame. Industrial ventilators and chimneys reinforce an organic-mechanical appearance, while the crepuscular lighting further accentuates this projection onto the façades. At the lower right, a single graffiti inscription can be observed, articulated as a territorial performative utterance (Ferrell, 1996), bearing the word "Naw" ("Nah," as an emphatic negation), functioning as a solitary protest.

Within the context of gentrifying South Chicago, the expression may be interpreted as "no way" or even as a marker of racial resistance ("This is not our neighbourhood"), while, at a subtextual level, it operates as a warning directed at Darla, newly arrived in the building: "Do not move here," or perhaps even "You will not survive." The absence of other pieces or tags reinforces the prophetic-aesthetic quality of "Naw": by this point, the panel has already communicated a message to the reader, functioning as an early braiding node insofar as it re-emerges within the reader's visual memory once the horror —embodied in the amorphous creature bred within the house— unfolds.

From an urban-political perspective, the inscription may be read as articulating the voice of a displaced Black community, while the term itself acquires the status of an archive of dissent. In any case, the connection to the subcultural trace is evident: this constitutes the comic's initial narrated wall, foreshadowing the conflict between authorized architecture and marginal memory.

Figure 5. Panel 1 (p. 109). “Naw” as absolute negation and subtextual warning



Source: BTTM FDRS (Ezra Clayton Daniels & Ben Passmore).

The following panels demonstrate that, in this narrative, the narrated wall is not confined to the building's façade but also infiltrates its interior in an infantile and clandestine register. Two interwoven warnings appear in unusual spaces such as the underside of Darla's sink —“Chuckys hous” (p. 33) and “Dont tuch” (p. 63)— written in the same flat colour and with defective orthography, functioning as interior graffiti or as a form of domestic subcultural signage. Their placement in residual zones, invisible to official and even neighbourly scrutiny, is equivalent, on a micro scale, to the tunnels or underpasses where tags typically emerge in real urban space.

The compositions, set against a yellow background, enclose text and drawing within a kind of “warning bubble” —a panel within the panel— that dramatizes the revelatory capacity of the message. The same childlike hand reflected in the clumsy typography is echoed in the drawing of the monster, producing a pictogram of danger, almost signaletic in character, conveying a distorted safety warning. As an aesthetic agent, the colour, form, and stylistic qualities of these inscriptions suggest that the house has already undergone a process of internal reappropriation by someone who knows what the new tenants do not.

From our analytical framework, both messages may be interpreted as an intermediate link between subcultural graffiti and an archive of resistance: Chucky is not staging protest nor merely “decorating” the dwelling, but leaving preventive traces that encode prior experience with the hidden creature. Thus, if “Naw” condensed an emphatic repudiation of architecture from the exterior, “Chuckys hous” and “Dont tuch” condense localized, interior knowledge of the building. The counter-archive —here more closely tied to the specific narrative of the comic— preserves these inscriptions as evidence that the monster's prior presence is not recorded in news reports nor in official documentation, but rather in these precarious graphic traces, legible only to a limited number of characters.

Figure 6. Sequence 1 (p. 33, p. 63). Clandestine interior warnings



Source: BTTM FDRS (Ezra Clayton Daniels & Ben Passmore).

The third sequence presents gentrified exteriors marked by sporadic and indeterminate graffiti, signalling a shift toward the incomplete aestheticization of an equally incomplete neighbourhood. In line with Passmore's own reflection on the work as "a clear investigation into how many of us participate in the colonization and co-optation of our communities" (Rorty, July 8, 2020), the walls appear largely clean, yet graphic residues persist, evoking a faint subcultural spectrality. Within this same aesthetic register, the dominant violet palette introduces an atmosphere of decline.

In the first panel (p. 38), indistinct figures cover a fence through abstract lines that verge on visual insignificance. Meaning, however, persists through its discursive braiding with the second image: an aerial panoramic view of the gentrified neighbourhood in which, at the far left margin, the phrase "No limitz" can be discerned. This hip-hop-inflected expression invokes creative aspiration in the face of urban constraint. Yet within the same compositional frame, to the right, alongside metal shutters, a minor throw-up appears —sketch-like and barely visible contributing to a compositional asymmetry that implies lateral displacement: subculture is pushed to the margins while the visual centre appears "sanitized."

A political reading emerges if gentrification is understood here not as total erasure but as a process of selective cleansing and, indeed, of desertified creativity, whose remaining traces survive as gestures of curated "authenticity." Ironically, "No limitz" —the only fully legible inscription— endures at the edge of the panel as a tolerated or perhaps unnoticed relic of a neighbourhood in transition.

As a "neighbourhood marker," this aestheticized graffiti no longer appears to narrate active resistance, but rather functions as testimonial ornament within the framework of the "creative city" (Landry, 2000). The absence of clearly articulated meaning in most of the markings further diminishes the counter-archival function of urban art, contributing to an overall depoliticization of its effects and relegating its message to the level of landscape.

Figure 7. Sequence 2 (p. 38, p. 95). Subcultural ghosts in an unfinished neighbourhood



Source: BTM FDRS (Ezra Clayton Daniels & Ben Passmore).

The final sequence presents two small graffiti inscriptions in the chaotic room of the rapper Julio which, despite their minimal scale, articulate the last individual gesture of resistance expressed through this artistic practice before the building is entirely absorbed by the architectural organism inhabiting it. The two tags —"Death" (p. 140) and "RAD" (featuring the classic anarchist A, p. 165)—appear as micro-inscriptions within a domestic environment saturated with disorder.

"Death" appears first, positioned at the far left of a new panoramic scene and almost concealed within the compositional chaos, functioning as a kind of existential signature of the artist. At the textual and discursive level, it may evoke death —or at least oblivion— as an everyday reality in the South Side, while simultaneously operating as a *memento mori* in relation to the monstrous building. Its marginal placement further reinforces the logic of displacement previously observed on p. 33, as it constitutes yet another graffiti inscription relegated to the edge of the frame.

In the second panel —in which the monster transmits via television an image of Julio's bedroom— the viewer is able to discern "RAD" above the bed. Filtered through the closed-circuit system, the inscription shifts from physical ornament to devoured digital image. These domestic graffiti inscriptions visualize a subculture in a state of near extinction, marking the room as personal territory prior to its erasure.

From a political perspective, "Death" foreshadows Julio's fate, while "RAD" appears to ironize the impotence of anarchic resistance in the face of the building's totalitarian monster. Both inscriptions therefore constitute the most precarious and ephemeral form of archive: they record an individual voice whose reflection in the creature's televisual gaze anticipates the outcome —the building erases bodies

and minds—, and therefore any trace of personal graphic signature. From the direct refusal articulated in “Naw,” the narrative has progressively shifted toward the mediated residue (“RAD” on the screen).

Figure 8. Sequence 3 (p. 140, p. 165). “Death” as remnant and a mediatized “R@D”



Source: BTM FDRS (Ezra Clayton Daniels & Ben Passmore).

4.3. *Graffiti's Wall*

For *Graffiti's Wall*, finally, four “braided” panels were selected (three splash pages —pp. 42, 84, and 106— together with the final panel of the comic, p. 134), which progressively depict the protagonists’ trajectory —Suresh, Jay, Chasma, and Saira— along the wall that survives the demolition of the Mumbai slum.

In the first image, the isolated wall, standing amidst barren rubble, functions as the vertical compositional axis of the page. The phrase “No one gives a fuck,” the author’s initial declaration that no one will care about his work, appears in large, coarse lettering and constitutes the focal point of the image, more legible than the human figures themselves. Formally, the inscription operates as a panel within the panel: a secondary frame, or a mini-page within the page, as well as a purely nihilistic-subcultural protest that synthesizes both the discontent of former residents and the institutional disregard directed toward them.

The image represents the first milestone of a support that is particularly suited to narration —that is, of a future (counter-)archive— in which the architectural residue becomes the narrative’s point of departure, albeit still in an early register: neither style nor developed aesthetic is yet fully visible (apart from the use of colour), but rather a raw phrase that reflects a collective political trauma. One may therefore understand this moment as a narrated wall in embryonic form.

Figure 9. Panel 1 (p. 42). Post-demolition: “No one cares”

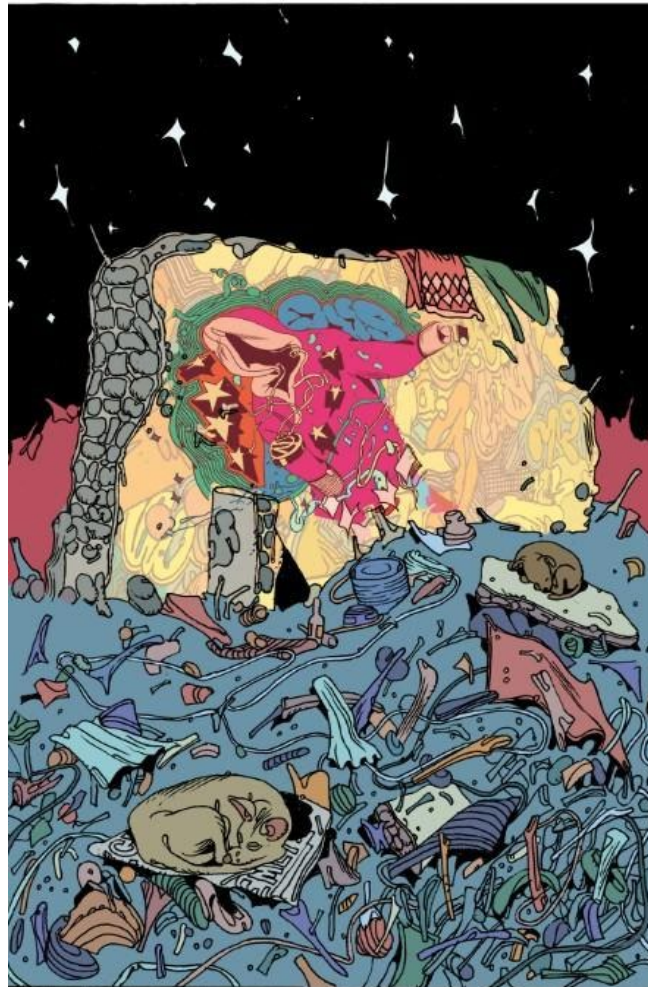


Source: *Graffiti's Wall* (Ram V). Graffiti, Jay, Chasma, Saira

Following several panels in which the wall begins its trajectory with highly desaturated letter-based pieces and figures, Grafity's decisive intervention becomes visible in the second splash page (p. 84), which, notably, does not include human characters. The demolished environment remains unchanged, and the composition retains its centrality; however, the surface is now partially covered by a more visually prominent piece: a hooded coat that functions as an initial figure and as an emerging chromatic density. This motif connects to the protagonists' musical affiliations —hip-hop, previously represented in earlier panels as a form of subcultural catharsis— within the “unusual amalgam of modern pop culture influences and local traditions, cultural remnants” (Silber, 2020) that, according to the author, define street culture in India.

The viewer's gaze is drawn directly to the piece, recognizing the emergence of a first visual signature with its own graphic style. The motif, upon which palimpsestic layering is already visible, signals a transition from the earlier textual inscription to a piece that suggests the emergence of a muralistic form, or a canvas of appropriation. From the perspective of sequential form and its urban-political interpretation, the splash page also marks a decisive shift from the wall-as-witness (a condition it still retains) to the wall-as-project, insofar as what is represented is no longer merely what remains or persists, but rather what is yet to come.

Figure 10. Panel 2 (p. 84). First indications of the “wall-as-project”



Source: Grafity's Wall (Ram V).

The third splash page (p. 106) coincides with the moment when Chasma, the future writer, meets the rebellious Saira and leaves with her. Now rising amidst fewer traces of rubble, the mural has progressed significantly toward the right; the surface appears saturated with colour, lettering, and motifs that condense the group's presence within the spontaneous “non-place” (Augé, 1993). The composition still grants the wall a central position, yet its graphic density has increased considerably: with scarcely any empty space remaining, the superimposed layers of paint become far more visible.

At this stage, the page becomes a paradigmatic instance of braiding material, insofar as it operates as a concatenation of dispersed narrative experiences within a single image. The composition may thus be “read” as both an aesthetic repertoire and a repertoire of resistance. This also has implications at the urban level, since the wall simultaneously transforms into an informal monument to the displaced community and to the intermediality of protest (graffiti–music).

Far removed from any form of institutional recognition, the accumulated layers —consciously emphasized through brightness and colour— transform the wall into a visual memory of the counter-archive. By this point, the surface already contains a sufficiently dense narrative (Ross, 2016), one that will not appear in any developer’s dossier for the neighbourhood’s reconstruction, nor in the architectural plans of the dwelling in which, ironically, the mural will ultimately end up.

Figure 11. Panel 3 (p. 106). The wall condenses narrative and coexistence



Source: Graffiti's Wall (Ram V)

The final panel of the comic (p. 134) presents the completed mural (including Saira’s face on the right), now relocated indoors, hanging in the living room or office of the capitalist who has built on the demolished site. After cynically declaring that “We are not here to change the city, but to make it beautiful” (p. 134), the character appears calm, positioned to the left and attended by a servant, within a panoramic composition that displays the artwork as a collectible object.

In this instance, the composition entirely reverses the relationship between wall and environment: the mural, formerly situated in an open lot, is now framed, illuminated, and isolated among furniture and large, expensive windows. The operation staged here is twofold. On the one hand, it involves spatial decontextualization, as the mural becomes a portable object —and, indeed, a luxury object— thereby erasing the material reality of the slum. On the other hand, a sharp symbolic-political reversal takes place: from counter-memory of demolition to trophy of its very agent; from testimony of subculture to cultural and aesthetic appropriation.

The wealthy figure now enjoys the artwork that was originally destined for erasure, within the logic of private property and, notably, of artistic elitism. In archival terms, the panel is equally striking: the graffiti survives physically, yet its meaning is entirely displaced. In other words, the narrated wall continues to tell the story of the neighbourhood and of its young inhabitants, but now before an audience for whom it was never intended. Rather than contradicting Robinson's (2006) concept of *ordinary cities*, this shift visualizes the power relations that we are invited to examine as an object of analysis within the urban context.

From a formal perspective, this coda articulates a miniature grammar of one of the many possible lives of graffiti within the changing city, as well as of comics as a counter-archive that simultaneously exposes its own limits in the face of co-optation.

Figure 12. Panel 4 (p. 134). Economic power intervenes in the wall–environment relationship



Source: Grafty's Wall (Ram V).

4.4. Transnational Comparison

The graphic novels analysed delineate an optimal comparative field for observing the migration of graffiti from the physical wall to the sequential page, revealing formal patterns that transcend the specific contexts of New York, Chicago, and Mumbai. In their translation into panels, the narrated wall emerges as a compositional axis functioning as a structural vector: in *Flood!*, subway spaces operate as horizontal or vertical bands that organize the rhythm of reading. In *BTTM FDRS*, the strategically graffitied building and marginal inscriptions propose different scales of communication; in *Grafty's Wall*, the wall systematically occupies the vertical centre of the splash pages. Following Davies (2022), this deliberate centrality constructs the wall as a kind of vertical gutter, structuring the page as a contested territory, in possible analogy to its function within real urban space.

Secondly, the braiding of graffiti weaves spatio-temporal networks of meaning that exceed linear narrative. In all three works, inscriptions reappear across distant panels as semantic nodes: the hieroglyphic and rupestrian imagery of *Flood!* connects with earlier subway tags; "Naw" functions as an anticipatory echo of the residual inscriptions in *BTTM FDRS*; "No one gives a fuck" resonates—even when no longer visually present—in the ironic conclusion of *Grafty's Wall*. Groensteen (2007) would describe these operations as semantic-spatial braiding: graffiti does not merely narrate locally, but rather archaeologizes the transformation of the city through successive chains of meaning.

The textual analysis also reveals recurring scales of graffiti representation in comics: from subcultural emergence ("Flash III," "Naw," "No one gives a fuck") to secondary aestheticization (experiments with throw-ups, "No limitz"), and from there to the mediatized archive ("RAD," within closed-circuit transmission, or the final mural relocated to the magnate's mansion). This progression

mirrors the typical cycle of urban art within the transforming city: eruption, selective cleansing, tolerance of the “relic,” and eventual commodification.

This shared morphology is not undermined by contextual differences; rather, it appears enriched by them. New York registers, symbolically, Eric Drooker’s memory and his relationship to housing through an image of purifying collapse; Chicago portrays gentrification —also racialized— through a bio-architectural structure that devours its inhabitants; Mumbai depicts the collective demolition of a slum through the progressive construction of a mural. Following Robinson (2006), the hierarchy of these *ordinary cities* does not derive from unequal development, but rather from their shared exposure to similar extractive pressures —real estate, racial, and cultural— which generate analogous graffiti forms.

Finally, the transnational comic may itself be understood as an infrastructural form (Davies, 2022), capable of revealing a palimpsestic city beyond its official narratives. The concept of the narrated wall therefore does not merely survive material erasure; from the page, it documents transnationally the very processes that produce such erasure, sequentially preserving what, in lived reality, is dispersed by the counter-force of institutional authority.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

5.1. Discussion

The sequentiality of comics overcomes the limitations imposed, for instance, by photography when communicating and archiving urban transformations. The page organizes chronological rhythms capable of narrating the genesis, apogee, and erasure of graffiti, from the progressive mural in *Graffiti’s Wall* to the declining scale observed in *BTTM FDRS*, or through the apocalyptic stratifications of *Flood!*. In contrast to graffiti’s ephemeral presence in the physical world, the reproducible nature of comics (Gabilliet, 2010) preserves the wall. In this sense, the analysed pages may be read as devices of urban communication, sites of negotiation and contestation of narratives between dominant and subaltern actors within the city.

Spatio-temporal braiding (Groensteen, 2007) further enables retrospective exploration of connections that initially remain invisible: subway tags become hieroglyphs; the general refusal expressed in “Naw” anticipates the particularized “Death”; and “No one gives a fuck” persists at a deeper level within the magnate’s mansion, unbeknownst to him. This networked quality transforms the pages into dynamic counter-archives that, beyond documenting, reconstruct memories on the verge of disappearance.

At the same time, it is possible to discern a limit to transmediality through the final panel of *Graffiti’s Wall*, which exposes the constraints of the graphic archive itself. There, the mural —initially conceived as counter-memory— becomes decontextualized and reconstituted as a trophy of real estate power. This visual subordination complicates the transmedial process: the inscription survives physically, yet its position and intended audience are radically altered, completing a symbolic shift from resistance of the displaced to reward for the displacer. This ambivalence does not invalidate the archival function identified above, but rather renders it more complex, as the counter-archive is shown to coexist with its own processes of domination. In *BTTM FDRS*, residual tags already function as vestiges of authenticity within a gentrified environment, while in *Flood!* hieroglyphic transformations figuratively sacralize punctual acts of protest. The narrated wall thus reveals a double agency: it preserves memory while simultaneously becoming material for renewed processes of commodification.

The very concept of the narrated wall establishes a bridge between visual culture, urban studies, and comics studies. In contrast to readings that have traditionally privileged the thematic content of graffiti (Degand, 2022), this study demonstrates its structural function: the wall does not merely illustrate the city but can sequentially organize it. Finally, the technique of sequential visual and textual close reading integrates formalism (Groensteen; Davies), discursive semiotics, and urban-political contextualization, thereby moving beyond isolated commentaries on either comics or the city.

Given its applicability to any corpus in which graffiti is present, the narrated wall may therefore operate as an analytical device in future research on urban visual memory.

6. Conclusions

Synthesizing our principal findings, the three graphic novels under examination delineate a transnational morphology of graffiti within the comics page, comprising:

- a) subcultural emergence as a rejection of destructive urban transformation (tags and throw-ups in the subway, “Naw,” or “No one gives a fuck”);
- b) an aestheticization tending toward residualization, functioning as an acceptable vestige within the “creative city” (hieroglyphic forms, sketch-like tags, “No limitz”); and
- c) a clear counter-archival function (the rupestrian dimension of graffiti, the progressive development of the Mumbai mural), oriented toward preserving processes that have been forcibly suppressed.

From a formal comics perspective, the wall organizes the page, as demonstrated throughout the analysis, as a compositional axis and as a node of braiding, transforming the sequence into a dynamic record.

We understand our principal contribution to be the concept of the narrated wall as a heuristic framework capable of bringing together urban studies, comics studies, and visual communication. In this context, graffiti does not merely decorate the city but structures it sequentially, revealing new forms of palimpsest through rhythm-braiding, scale, and rearticulation across panels. The scope and original intentions of the practice are thus extended toward transmedial configurations in which urban art survives its transitory condition in physical space, and in which the narrated wall archives cities that resist being read exclusively through official frameworks.

Methodologically, the sequential visual-textual close reading has proven to be a reproducible tool for analysing urban inscriptions in graphic media, favouring an intensive qualitative approach —four panels and/or sequences per work— that prioritizes dense interpretation over exhaustive descriptive cataloguing (Cohn, 2023).

Finally, this study opens potential lines of future research, including the analysis of the wall’s survival across other media (for example, within digital interactive narratives such as motion comics and AR graffiti, as well as in urban webcomics or ephemeral platforms such as Instagram Stories). Further expansion of the corpus would likewise be valuable in order to test the proposed morphological framework in other manifestations of comics addressing the transforming city, such as Japanese manga or Franco-Belgian *bandes dessinées*, which incorporate their own subcultural archives relating to migration, gentrification, and youth culture.

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