

# MARKING THEIR TERRITORY: A FEMINIST EXPLORATION OF GRAFFITI

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## ABSTRACT

Research on graffiti has traditionally focused on the aesthetic attributes of the crime. Whilst criminological and sociological research has indeed implicated young boys as the primary perpetrators, very little work has explored how graffiti can be understood as being complicit in both the construction and the demonstration of masculinity. Building upon ideas alluded to in Nancy McDonald's *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity and Identity* (2001), this paper will argue that graffiti is a crime reflective of the need for masculinity to be acted out, not only physically, but visually. It will argue that graffiti provides boys an opportunity to demonstrate the traditionally troublesome aspects of masculinity such as aggression, destruction, risk-taking, crime and territorialism, and that the physical and visual illustrations of these masculine attributes can make public space a fearful place to be, particularly for women. This paper will conclude by arguing that public policy practitioners need to think about graffiti as a contributing factor to women's social exclusion, rather than simply thinking of it as a blight on the urban landscape.

## Introduction

This paper will argue that the practice of graffiti, and the graffiti itself, is reflective and illustrative of the more troublesome aspects of societal masculinity. I will argue that graffiti is a crime reflective of the need for masculinity to be acted out, not only physically, but visually, and will argue that it is indicative of male involvement in activities that render public space somewhere to be feared – particularly by women. It will conclude by arguing that women's fears of public space can prove to be socially exclusionary for them.

Research has analysed graffiti from a wide range of frameworks. Jane Gadsby in her comprehensive 1995 review of the literature in this field identified nine theoretical approaches taken, including cultural, gendered, linguistic, folkloric, quantitative, aesthetic, motivational, preventative and popularisation (Gadsby 1995). While Gadsby's review does indeed mention 'gender', the research she documents examines gender-based differences in graffiti *content* as opposed to the gendered reasons that may explain why the crime was committed, or that explain the gendered nature of potential consequences.

While research focusing on gender-based differences in graffiti content (notably content of toilet wall graffiti) indeed constitute the majority of gender-related research in this area (Bates and Martin 1980; Ahmed 1981; Bruner & Kelso 1981;

Loewenstine, Ponticos & Paludi 1982; Hentschel 1987; Cole 1991; Otta et al 1993; Green 2003; Bartholome & Snyder 2004), there does exist one example of research drawing together the different kinds of gendered analyses of graffiti, offering some insights into this very male activity. Drawing on 29 interviews undertaken with graffiti writers in New York and London, Nancy McDonald's *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity and Identity* (2001) provides a useful foundation for analysing graffiti as an example of a gendered performance (Butler 1990; Beall 1993; Bornstein, 1994).

McDonald's book gives voice to the mainly male writers, allowing them to speak for themselves and give their own interpretations of their activity, and thus her narrative and analysis is somewhat limited. My research will expand on McDonald's work, building upon the ideas she touches upon and ultimately explaining how the practice of graffiti, and the consequences that ensue, are gendered.

## **Background and Study Limitations**

My personal research background has largely focused on sexist portrayals of women in public space. The use of public space to advance the needs and wants of men at the expense of women is illustrated well with advertising, particularly when highly sexualised portrayals of women are regular features of billboards. This research has led to me to think about the manner in which certain groups in society – advertisers, street harassers, and now graffiti writers - use public space, and in the process, socially exclude women (Rosewarne 2004). Because of these research interests, this paper will focus exclusively on graffiti done in public space. King and Setter in their article on young people and graffiti argue that '[t]he types and styles of graffiti are extremely diverse, spanning political protest, skilled artistic endeavour, and territorial or identity "tagging"' (King & Setter 2003, 2). As the title of this paper would suggest, this paper is going to focus on territorial or identity tagging rather than the political or 'artistic' kind. It should be noted that while stencil art and post-up art are other forms of graffiti that are attracting increasing attention (Dorrian and Recchia 2002; Manco 2002; Macphee 2004; Manco 2004), neither of these practices will be focused on in this discussion.

Graffiti has been understood as a 'problem' for over thirty years. Joe Austin claims that the mass media identified the graffiti problem in 1972 when a *New York Times* reporter noted that transport maintenance teams were finding it increasingly difficult to keep trains and stations clean (Austin 2001). While graffiti most certainly existed prior to 1972 (the political graffiti of the 1960s being a clear example) certainly the 1970s onward saw public space being vandalised on a scale - and in a manner - that society had not seen. '@149st' is a comprehensive web-based resource that provides a detailed history of graffiti writing. This website documents graffiti-activity taking place in the late 1960s and early 1970s with characters including 'Cornbread' writing their names all over Philadelphia and thus giving rise to the activity we describe as graffiti today (@149st 2003).

To argue that graffiti is a public policy problem, the extent to which we could dub it 'widespread' needs to be assessed. There are numerous impediments in attempting to quantify graffiti, particularly given that it is widely dispersed and clean-up efforts are not centrally administered. Clean-up costs do however, help illustrate the extent of

this problem. In 2003, a local councils survey in the United Kingdom (U.K.) tallied 7,855 incidents of graffiti and vandalism with this behaviour costing local councils an estimated £600m worth of damage annually. According to certain councils in the U.K., costs are continuing to spiral upwards. Wandsworth council, for example, spent £625,000 on cleaning graffiti in 2002, claiming that this figure was more than three times the mid-1990s bill (*The Economist* 2003). According to the National Graffiti Information Network in the United States (U.S.), graffiti eradication costs the public \$4 billion per year (Grant 1996). In Australia, the costs are estimated at \$200 million per year (Smith & Lee 2003). Such clean-up tallies indicate that graffiti is prevalent and help to illustrate the salience of this, and other studies, attempting to analyse the practice.

## **Social Exclusion**

This paper will not provide an exhaustive review of existing literature analysing graffiti: such research exists in comprehensive forms elsewhere (Gadsby 1995). Instead, the aim in this section is to review what existing literature can reveal about the profile of the graffiti writer in order to establish the case that graffiti is a gendered problem. This section will also identify the part social exclusion plays in a gendered analysis.

It is obvious by the title of McDonald's book that she interprets graffiti as a subcultural activity populated by young males. This profile is corroborated by research undertaken in Australia (Wilson 1987; Halsey & Young 2002). Other research has gone so far as to identify specific traits of graffiti writers. Martin *et al* argue that writers are more likely to report:

serious or extreme drug use, perceived academic failure, physical and sexual abuse, suicide thoughts and behaviours, and are more likely to indicate higher family pathology, parental overprotection and criticism, depression, hopelessness, anxiety, external locus of control and risk-taking behaviours, and lower parental care and self-esteem (Martin *et al* 2003, 7-8).

The correlation between graffiti and antisocial behaviour, as detailed by Martin *et al*, is corroborated by McDonald who documents that one of her interviewees claimed that 'most writers use graffiti, in some way or other, to compensate for personal problems and insecurities in their lives' (McDonald 2001, 60). Social exclusion is a theory I will refer to throughout this paper, therefore it is important to not only understand this concept, but to explore how men can be both victims of, and contributors to it. 'Social exclusion' is a broad term used to describe the collective attributes that prohibit a person participating fully in society. Traditionally, social exclusion has focused on poverty as being a major factor in people's exclusion, but as Jones and Smyth argue, many other factors are involved, for example, the idea of simply being young can contribute to your exclusion (Jones & Smyth 1999). Martin *et al*'s research on the specific attributes of graffiti writers also provides insight into other, more specific factors that, compounded with youth, can contribute to a person's exclusion. It might, therefore, be argued that the practice of graffiti itself is symptomatic of the social exclusion that young boys are experiencing. This idea links well with contemporary research arguing that there is a 'crisis of masculinity' (Sommers 2000; Tiger 1999; Faludi, 1999). While a Marxist, class-based analysis was

one of the first manners in which graffiti was analysed (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson & Roberts 1976), undoubtedly a social exclusion explanation for the participation of young men in graffiti would be a worthwhile research project. This paper however, does not take up this issue, instead, focuses on how graffiti itself can prove socially exclusionary.

While graffiti clean-up costs are measured with relative ease, as Christopher Grant in his article on graffiti and quality of life discusses, of equal importance are the 'intangible psychic costs of living in a city that looks as though it is under siege' (Grant 1996). It is these 'intangible psychic costs' that will be focussed on in this research. I argue that the actual act of graffiti poses consequences on public space that make it a fearful place to be, and that this renders public space exclusionary for women.

## **Masculinity**

To mount the case that graffiti reflects and produces masculinity, a definition of masculinity is necessary. This paper will define masculinity in the performative sense. Rather than it being something biological, it will be argued that masculinity is behaviour engaged in by boys to enforce and illustrate their biological identity. McDonald argues that 'masculinity is not an essence that one naturally exudes, it is something that gains its meaning through a process of construction and display' (McDonald 2001, 97). This performance can include how the body is used and the kinds of activities it engages in.

Research indicates that there are numerous distinct ways in which masculinity is affirmed through the use of one's body: i.e., through alcohol consumption (Capraro 2000; Hunt & Laidler 2001; Paton-Simpson 2001) and sexual behaviour (Ward 1995). While the connection between the affirmation of a masculine identity and violence is well documented (Hudson 1998; Harris 2000; Reilly, Muldoon & Byrne 2004), most relevant to this discussion, will be the construction of masculinity through engagement with crime (Messerschmidt 1993; Messerschmidt 1997). Biological explanations often link men's higher levels of testosterone production with men's disproportionate involvement in crime and violence: i.e., 'there are no differences between men and women except in a hormonal system that renders the man more aggressive' (Goldberg 1973, 233-234; see also Maccoby & Jacklin 1974; Miles 1992; Kipnis 1994). Of course, such biological research does not exist uncontested. Malcolm George's research attempts to move understandings away from what he terms the 'triad' of testosterone, men, and violence, and offers alternate psychological and social factors to explain the link (George 1997). Messner, drawing from the work of Fausto-Sterling and Pleck, in fact disputes the biological explanation all together, arguing that that while men have, on average, ten times the amount of testosterone than women, there is not a clear correlation between testosterone levels and aggression (Messner 1997). Kemper's study measured men's changing testosterone levels and their experiences within social settings, documenting that testosterone surges occurred *after* experiences of success and winning: i.e., by succeeding in the types of activities traditionally deemed to be *caused* by testosterone (Kemper 1990, 27-28). The idea that testosterone increases as *result* of engagement in traditionally 'masculine' practices instead of being *caused* by them is a fascinating theory. While this essay is not going to grapple with these debates any further, it is indeed necessary

to provide grounding for the ways in which masculinity will be explored in this research. This paper is written from the perspective that it is the performed acts and rituals that illustrate and explain masculinity.

## **The Physical Expression of Masculinity**

The notion of what it means to be a man is largely bound up with the activities participated in and the actions performed. Indeed, as mentioned above, research strongly connects crime with performed masculinity (Butler 1990; Beall 1993 Bornstein, 1994). This paper argues that this strong connection with crime, in this case with graffiti, can be explained because crimes like graffiti are physical acts that provide boys and men the opportunity to construct their identities based on their body's performance. This idea is illustrated well by McDonald who explains: 'male graffiti writers 'do' because 'doing' allows them to construct and confirm their masculine identities' (McDonald 2001, 96).

The necessity for the 'doing' to be physical in nature is all important in the construction of masculinity. The performed acts participated in need to reflect and reiterate specific aspects of maleness. Graffiti does this well in that the criminal, destructive, aggressive, risky and territorial aspects of the practice – each of which will each be explained in this paper - help construct the perpetrator as male. Connell explains that men dominate in participation in these kinds of performances:

... men predominate in warlike conduct in other spheres of life. Body-contact sports, such as boxing and football, involve ritualised combat and often physical injury. Dangerous driving is increasingly recognised as a form of violence. It is mainly done by men. Young men die on the roads at a rate four times that of young women, and kill on the roads at an even higher rate (Connell 2000, 214).

As mentioned above, there are important attributes that must be present in the physical, masculinity-affirming acts performed, as will be discussed. This paper will explore some of these traditional elements of practised masculinity that graffiti illustrates.

### *The Criminal Element*

The elements that make participation in graffiti important to the masculine identity are each somehow connected to the overarching appeal of crime to men. McDonald's interviews with graffiti writers help illustrate this idea:

'If your goals were legal, you would go to art school and be a brilliant illustrator or a brilliant artist... It all started in our adolescence, we were all pursuing the same sort of goal, be it on walls, to destroy' (Proud 2 in McDonald 2001, 72).

'I made a fair amount of money doing legal art for TV commercials and other film endeavours. In actuality, all of this paled to the thrill of being chased through back streets and narrowly escaping the beam of police headlights' (Teck in McDonald 2001, 73).

As McDonald surmises, ‘the adventure, excitement and release of the illegal exercise play a large part in initially captivating their attention’ (McDonald 2001, 72). Of course, it is important to understand exactly where the masculine appeal in crime participation lies. The Bem Sex Role Inventory is an often-used self-report measure of an individual’s perceptions of gender roles. In this inventory, a score is reached after you identify which characteristics and attributes best reflect your personality (Bem 1974). Characteristics defined as male include being self-reliant, self-sufficient, competitive, forceful and ambitious. The participation in crime undoubtedly reflects (and produces) these masculine-identified attributes. While it will be a point illustrated throughout the remainder of this paper, crime is also important to masculinity because it helps make people fearful of you and when the crime is visual like graffiti, makes an environment fearful also. This illustrates the very gendered nature of graffiti in that, whilst crime is disproportionately perpetrated by men, fear of crime is disproportionately felt by women.

### *The Destructive Element*

In a gender binary system, women are assigned the trait of ‘creation’ based upon their ability to produce children. This dualist system would therefore dub ‘destruction’ a masculine quality. Research implicates men in all kinds of destruction, war being the obvious example (Vettel-Becker 2002). Increasingly however, the links between masculinity and ecological destruction are becoming relevant (Strong, 1996; Peter *et al* 2000; Stibbe 2004). On the most basic level, graffiti is an example of urban environmental destruction. As Phillips in her book on graffiti argues, ‘[v]iewed from the larger society’s perspective, graffiti is always... cultural production through destruction’ (Phillips 1999, 23). While extensive research exists discussing the aesthetic attributes of graffiti (see Cooper & Chalfant 1988; Chalfant & Prigoff 1994; Granz 2004; Sutherland 2004) to brand something ‘art’ is subjective, and given that graffiti is illegal and yet is continually produced, it evidently is a sign of intent to damage or destroy. Research that links masculinity and environmental destruction claims that men think very differently about the environment than women. In regards to graffiti writers’ attitudes to the urban environment, Phillips argues that ‘[b]ecause of the destructive tendencies, graffiti says ‘fuck you’ to society...’ (Phillips 1999, 23). This ‘fuck you’ illustrates contempt for public property and contempt for users of public space.

### *The Aggression Factor*

Graffiti’s ‘fuck you’ to society that Phillips documents is further evidenced by the 1977 work she draws on that indicates that a large majority of the world’s graffiti involved the use of the word ‘fuck’ (Abel and Buckley 1977 in Phillips 1999). The symbolic ‘fuck you’ to society, and the actual repetitive use of the word ‘fuck’ in graffiti is reflective of the masculine attribute of aggression on a number of levels.

Swearing and the use of expletives have traditionally been deemed an antisocial (Benwell 2001) and aggressive act (Coates, 1993; de Klerk 1991, 1997) and, as corroborated by the Bem scale, is also deemed a masculine trait (Bem 1974). The issue of gender and swearing is complicated and is explored in much greater depth elsewhere (Stapleton 2003) however, it is interesting to note the levels on which

graffiti becomes aggressive: the use of language is one. It should also be noted, that while this paper is not focusing on the aesthetics, the style of graffiti has often been noted to be aggressive itself (Reichert 1999).

More so than the physical spraying of expletives onto a wall, it is acknowledged that the actual act of graffiti has a hostile element to it. As McDonald acknowledges, '[t]here is an aggressive quality to it, a release, as writers rattle the can and 'hit' the wall...' (McDonald 2001, 76). This kind of violence committed against public property is illustrated well in a writer's description of tagging a train:

'Slowly hits are beginning to appear, everybody is fighting for the best panels, the carriage stinks and is thick with mist. With the carriage totally killed, we move down to the next one, fucking that too' (Kers in McDonald 2001, 110).

As McDonald acknowledges, '[t]his account is drenched in militaristic imagery, tone and meaning' (McDonald 2001, 110). The wall is being attacked in a physical manner, in an illegal manner, with an aggressive style, often using aggressive language. The recurring theme of 'fucking' – as in fucking society and fucking the carriage – also stirs in a hostile sexuality analysis to the graffiti act. Aside from the multitude of meanings that 'fuck' has come to be connected to, the verb 'to fuck' is still the most common use, describing the penile, penetrative sex act. Given that 'fuck' is still routinely censored in newspapers, the offensive nature of the word has not dissipated; the hostility of the word when describing intercourse is not negated and the offensive, masculine nature of a graffitied space needs to be understood for what it is.

### *The Element of Risk*

Participating in any illegal activity is risky. There is a high likelihood that you are going to get caught and being apprehended includes a multitude of unpleasurable consequences. Research claims that risk-taking is inextricably bound to traditional understandings of masculinity (Sommers 2003; Larkin & Pines 2003; Evans & Davies 2000; Naffine 1987). The interest graffiti participants have in the risky nature of their pastime is corroborated by comments made by graffiti writers:

'I think it's attractive to boys because of the so-called machoism with regard to risk and adventure' (Drax in McDonald 2001, 98).

'It's a different buzz altogether doing illegal stuff... It's the fact that it's dangerous and you've done it' (Ego in McDonald 2001, 103).

'...I mean like why do they like driving fast cars and you know going and doing burn outs and stuff and the need for speed, there is that... it must be to do with that, the risk, the danger factor... (comments made to Halsey & Young 2002, 39).

While it is relatively easy to claim that risk-taking is a male preoccupation, it is necessary to understand why. I have argued throughout this piece that masculinity is constructed through the acts or performances that demonstrate it. Kimmel argues that masculinity is something granted to an individual by others: '[m]asculinity is a

*homosocial* enactment. We test ourselves, perform heroic feats, take enormous risks, all because we want other men to grant us our manhood' (Kimmel 1994, 129). In this explanation, the risk-taking is done to earn masculinity, not merely to practice it. Comments made to McDonald by writers would again correlate with Kimmel's analysis: '[i]t takes a lot of balls and skill to go out and paint a good piece' (Eez in McDonald 2001, 131). Whereas doing something that could result in imprisonment may seem stupid to some, to some males, such participation is seen as masculinity affirming. It is granting them their masculine status as well as helping them to demonstrate it.

### *The Role of Territorialism*

Territorialism is very important to understanding how masculinity plays into graffiti writing. When we think of the marking of territory, the image of dogs urinating against a fence or car tyre is the common image. Through graffiti, the writer is similarly branding space his own with aerosol paint in the same way dogs let others know the space is theirs. McDonald's interviewees illustrate this point well:

'You like seeing your name, you like knowing that, yeah, you've left your make. It's like you being there and other people seeing it' (Prime in McDonald 2001, 194).

'the underlying rule is just get up, put your name everywhere, do as much as possible in as many place as possible' (Dondi in McDonald 2001, 76).

The notion of territorialism being something male has its roots in war and geographic expansion: i.e., Vettel-Becker claims that war is 'a territorial game played by men to enact dominance, a social performance that inscribes gender identities on human bodies' (Vettel-Becker 2002, 80). Territorialism becomes important in a discussion of graffiti and gender, because the space has become male through the committing of crime, and this can prove socially exclusionary for women in that it makes the place somewhere women feel fearful and may decide not to go.

### *The Visual Expression of Masculinity*

The previous section discussed that the use of the word 'fuck' in graffiti, the practice of graffiti and the style of graffiti itself, illustrates a hostile masculinity and charges a space with an aggressive male sexuality. In this final section I will argue that not only is graffiti illustrative of the need for masculinity to be acted out physically, but it is important for the graffiti to have visual outcomes also.

Popular psychology argues that 'men are more visual than women' (Decker 2003; Bakos 1996) or that 'men are visual creatures' (Corcoran 2004; Hutcherson 2003; West & West 2002). This idea is used to explain many aspects of supposed 'traditional' masculine culture like pornography. There is great correlation in the manner in which visual images are perceived to arouse men, and the interest men have in leaving their own visual markings on sites: as a way to externalise arousal as well as to demonstrate presence and to indicate ownership (Rosewarne 2004). The comments made by writers to Halsey and Young reaffirm this position:

I don't know, it's just getting to have your name well known all around the place... They'll be like, they'll see your tag and they'll be like, that's good... and they'll be like, I know who writes that, I'm his friend...he's heaps cool (comments made to Halsey & Young 2002, 13).

Rather than thinking of graffiti simply as an aggressive and destructive act, it should be acknowledged that it leaves an aggressive and destructive *visual* outcome too. This is of particular concern to public policy practitioners in that this visually aggressive space becomes a site where women do not feel included.

## **Graffiti and the Social Exclusion of Women**

Despite the much-documented reality that women have much lower chances of public victimisation than men (Pain 2001), women feel less safe than men in society (Alvi *et al* 2001; Institute for Security Studies 2001; Pain 2001), both within their homes (Harris & Jensen 1998, 10) and out in public (ABS 2003; Valentine 1989; Hanmer & Saunders 1984).

Instances of street harassment make women feel fearful because the threat exists that something worse could ensue, and the assault may not stop at words (Junger 1987; Painter 1989; Crawford *et al* 1990; Stanko 1990; Painter 1992; Pain 1995). Graffiti works in a similar manner to street harassment in that the presence of graffiti around a public space illustrates to women that a certain kind of crime has been allowed to take place in an area, and the fear is that perhaps crime won't stop with graffiti. The British Transport Police corroborate with this argument, claiming that graffiti gives commuters the impression that control is out of the hands of authority and in the hands of vandals:

Stations and trains covered in graffiti make users of the railway think that the vandals are in control, not railway management or the police. This induces fear of being attacked and means that they may choose not to travel. This is particularly true of discretionary, usually leisure, travel - women in particular will fear to use the system at night (British Transport Police).

As Grant explains, '[t]he presence of graffiti discourages citizens from shopping or living in affected areas' (Grant 1996). This is social exclusion. When women have to modify their behaviour and place restrictions on their movements to avoid sites of perceived threat (Stanko 1985; Madriz 1997; Pain 1997), this is social exclusion. Male graffiti writers come to control public space by making such spaces visually frightening, but this control is also exerted in that the frightening environment becomes exclusionary for women and thus forces them to pose limitations on their own freedom.

## **Conclusion**

Rather than just being a crime perpetrated by men, graffiti actually plays an important role in defining what it means to actually be a man. Similarly, the practice of graffiti itself helps illustrate how masculinity is practiced in contemporary society and how inextricably bound attributes like crime, aggression, destruction risk-taking and territorialism are. While public policy practitioners have traditionally looked at

graffiti as an aesthetic problem, this paper has argued that it is essential to think about graffiti as a contributing factor to the social exclusion of women and that further policy research needs to be undertaken in this area.

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