



'Our desires are ungovernable'

Writing graffiti in urban space

MARK HALSEY AND ALISON YOUNG

University of Melbourne, Australia

Abstract _____

Our aim in this article is to contribute to the body of research on graffiti by considering some of the hitherto hidden aspects of graffiti culture. Drawing on detailed interviews with graffiti writers, we examine four main themes: motivations for graffiti writing; thresholds dividing 'art' from 'vandalism'; writers' reactions to 'blank' surfaces; and graffiti's relation to other types of crime. We orient our discussion towards the *affective* dimensions of the activity in the hope that the words of writers become a visible and productive presence in urban (and academic) space.

Key Words _____

affect • graffiti • urban space • writers' narratives

Introduction

Graffiti exists as a paradoxical phenomenon—as both aesthetic practice and criminal activity. Its practitioners often vigorously assert its visual merit and its cultural value. Its detractors recommend its removal from urban streetscapes and the prosecution of graffiti writers. It has also become an issue of great significance within public discourse and public debate. The mayoral regime of Rudy Giuliani in New York City, for example, from the late 1980s onwards gave defining importance to the issue of graffiti's eradication from the subway system in New York's claims to symbolic and actual regeneration. In Australia, candidates for local government have campaigned on platforms focused on graffiti removal from a municipality (such as the City of Casey in Victoria in 2002 and

2003). And in Britain, graffiti features as one of the activities targeted by legislation outlawing 'anti-social behaviour' (along with littering, fly-posting, spitting, public drunkenness and other behaviours).

Academic writing on graffiti has approached it in a number of ways, encompassing its analysis as sociological subculture, as juvenile delinquency, as a historical phenomenon and as a regulatory problem.¹ In addition, there exist numerous books, video games, websites and magazines devoted to graffiti, ranging from hip hop to culture jamming to stencilling.² In this article, our aim is to contribute to the body of research on graffiti by considering some of the hitherto hidden aspects of graffiti culture. These hidden aspects include: the complex of motivations for graffiti writing and the sense of cultural belonging graffiti can generate for young people; the shifting threshold between 'art' and 'vandalism'; writers' reactions to 'blank' surfaces and 'clean' spaces; and graffiti's interconnections with other criminal activities. It is these under-researched issues that render graffiti such a difficult problem, both for policy-makers (who tend to be unable to banish it from urban space) and for criminology (in that graffiti seems hard to categorize, since it might be either an illegal subculture, or an intractable problem for crime prevention, or an index of persistent juvenile delinquency).

Drawing on detailed interviews with graffiti writers, we wish to approach the problem otherwise, by focusing on matters of desire, pleasure and vision in the act of illicit writing.³ On a wall in Melbourne's suburb of Fitzroy, someone has written, in a rounded cursive script: 'Our desires are ungovernable' (see Figure 1). We have taken that notion seriously: interviews with writers demonstrated to us that graffiti is, overwhelmingly, about pleasure and desire in the act of writing. What follows is a discussion of graffiti culture and the risky pleasures it offers its members. Quite deliberately, we have chosen to focus on the experiences among a select group of writers. This, of course, limits our capacity to tell the story of any one writer in-depth or to flesh out the process of becoming a graffiti writer. However, our contention would be that becoming-writer is, in any case, a heterogeneous event—subtly yet importantly nuanced for each and every writer. Our intention in this article, therefore, is quite modest. We wish to open a space within debate on graffiti through which we might acknowledge the words of the writer as a visible presence in urban space.

Image, sign, affect: writing the corporeal

Grffiti writers—at least those interviewed during our research—recognize their works form a critical part of the plane of signification investing urban landscapes. Moreover, writers know that writing graffiti is far from a static or two-dimensional activity involving simply the application of paint to a surface. Instead, most understand graffiti writing to be an *affective* process that *does things* to writers' bodies (and the bodies of onlookers) as much as



Figure 1 The title piece of our article, Fitzroy, Melbourne. © Alison Young.

to the bodies of metal, concrete and plastic, which typically compose the surfaces of urban worlds. In short, where graffiti is often thought of as destructive, we would submit that it is affective as well.

The concept of affect has only recently been given serious attention within criminological scholarship (see Freiberg, 2001; De Haan and Loader, 2002; Karstedt, 2002; Sherman, 2003). Our main criticism of such work is that most commentators merge the idea of affect with emotion (terms which are in no way interchangeable).⁴ We do not intend to offer an extended theoretical overview of the development and deployment of the notion of affect in various arenas. Instead, we invoke the work of Brian Massumi (1992, 2002a, 2002b) who in turn draws on such authors as Baruch Spinoza, Henri Bergson as well as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.⁵ Massumi writes that affect is akin to the 'ways in which the body can connect with itself and with the world' (1992: 93). Elaborating, he remarks,

In affect, we are never alone. That's because affects . . . are basically ways of connecting, to others and to other situations. They are our angle of participation in processes larger than ourselves. With intensified affect comes a stronger sense of embeddedness in a larger field of life—a heightened sense of belonging, with other people and to other places.

(Massumi, 2002a: 214)

Affect, therefore, has to do with *intensity* rather than identity. This is important because it allows questions to be asked not only of writers (what does it feel like to write illicitly?) but of those who name or respond to graffiti in various ways (what feelings emerge from encountering graffiti? How do these relate to the politico-cultural and legal factors which limit what it is possible to say and do about a particular image?). It allows questions to be asked of these bodies on the understanding that one is never just 'a writer', or 'an observer', or 'a young person', or 'an outraged citizen', so much as locales of potential whose subjectivities are made and remade according to the (social) roles ascribed to them as well as the desire which invests various networks (familial, residential, pedagogical, cultural and so on).

To side with affect is to admit that graffiti connects bodies known and unknown through the proliferation of images. The connection might be a minor or substantial interruption to one's sense of the proper, or it might be a reinforcement of one's view of 'the sad state of the youth of today', or of the 'vibrancy' of counter culture, or of the failure of zero tolerance and rapid response removal policies. Whatever the case, *graffiti as image connects bodies*. But graffiti also forges connections in a way that is largely unremarked by those thinking and writing about its occurrence. Specifically and critically, graffiti connects the writer to the city through the very act of writing since it is this act which places quite strict demands on writers' bodies (whether intellectually in terms of having to transfer a design to a less than ideal surface, whether physically in terms of having to put up with cold, dark or generally inclement conditions for several hours while writing, whether culturally in terms of feeling the pressure to execute a good piece that will not be marked up by rival writers, whether legally in terms of the omnipresent threat of getting busted, whether financially in terms of what the writer forwent in order to be able to afford quality paint in the right range of colours and so forth). In the act of writing—that is, by using the aerosol can and the felt tip marker as key prosthetics for connecting 'self' and 'world' (but also as a means of collapsing such distinctions)—graffiti writers connect themselves to all the possible reactions the city can muster with respect to a particular image or set of images produced over time.⁶

Graffiti, therefore, should not be divorced from the event of writing illicitly. And, more directly, it should not be equated to the cultivation or search for identity. Fame (attaining the status or identity of a king) is in many instances important, but, as explained later, *pleasure* (the intensity of feeling which, for instance, accompanies the motioning of the aerosol can) is equally significant. Indeed, our conversations with graffiti writers indicate that writing induces a series of singular moments where identity is put asunder through the performance of what Deleuze and Guattari have called *becomings-immanent* (denoting moments where a body—for whatever period—inhabits space and time in ways which resist subjective and objective attempts to classify, name or order events). Our contention is that

illicit writing cannot be adequately described in binary terms (good versus bad art, criminal versus legal activity, creative versus destructive images, etc.). Instead, graffiti needs to be considered in a both/and manner. Certainly graffiti will always tend to be a target for debates about good and bad art or appropriate versus inappropriate placement. But graffiti also involves something beyond this—something intangible, something which resists attempts to capture its meaning, its purpose, its 'final' referent. This intangible, is, for want of a better term, the passing of affect. As Massumi puts it, 'Affect as whole, then, is the virtual co-presence of potentials' (2002a: 213). Beginning with motivation for writing, we offer in the following an account of these potentials as relayed by writers themselves.

Reasons for writing

For many who catch sight of a tag or a mural on a wall, their glance leads quickly to speculation as to why someone wrote that word or drew an image in such a place. Commonplace assumptions include the writer's supposed boredom, or the writer's desire to damage and deface, or the writer's lack of respect for others' property. Many of these assumptions also drive municipal graffiti management policies.⁷ One of the aims animating our research was a desire to go beyond such assumptions in order to discover writers' motivations for engaging in graffiti and for their involvement in graffiti culture.

Interviewees overwhelmingly indicated that their original involvement in graffiti derived from a combination of its aesthetic appeal for them and a sense that it was a gregarious activity through which they might make friends with others (in much the same way as other young people are drawn to dance venues or the football team for social interactions).⁸ Once immersed in graffiti culture, continuing to write was characterized by several factors viewed in highly positive ways by the respondents and describing powerful emotional and physical sensations in the act of writing (a dimension of writing we have called *affective* or *visceral*). These sensations include pride, pleasure, the enjoyment derived from sharing of an activity with friends, as well as the recognition obtained from the writing community. Subsidiary motivations related to less positive sensations of boredom and rebelliousness (these were mentioned by fewer writers).

Pride relates to the sense of accomplishment writers experience upon completing a piece because, for the writer, it is art, and because it has taken a great deal of their labour: AL felt pride when he looked at a completed piece because 'it's a piece of artwork that I did' (4: 17), and W endorsed that view, stating 'when I stand back and look at a piece I feel proud of myself . . . 'cos I put a lot of hard work into it' (25: 21). Many attribute a desire for recognition as a motivation for graffiti writing, as one police officer commented: 'They want to be recognized, they want to be praised within their circle of friends.'⁹ Our research did bear out the notion that recognition is important: the sense of *publicity* that graffiti can provide

for writers is another important reason for participating in the culture. AG stated, ‘[Y]ou get a mention, you know, people know you, you get well known and that. . . . I thought, “Oh yeah, you know, I’d like to be well known”’ (2: 20). Writers refer most often to the importance of *recognition by other writers* (in relation to their style, their prolific tagging or for getting up in inaccessible places). According to AR:

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.

(7: 30)

Some writers rejected the idea that graffiti was mainly about getting recognition:

Researcher: So who do you piece for?

Interviewee: Me.

Researcher: You did them for you?

Interviewee: I don’t have to prove anything. I don’t want to make anyone else happy. It makes me happy, that’s all I care about.

(6: 20)

Still, this individualism of approach was often situated within an acknowledgement of the importance of the writing community. And for some, the writing community was so significant that it came to stand in for their families or for the wider community:

Interviewee: It is related to a, a recognition and a self-affirmation, it’s like at home I got no attention like, you know, no praise for whatever I did, everything I did was criticized, I was, you know, there was tension at home, there was violence, I was kicked out of home age 15, um, my friends were very important to me . . . Through this connection with graffiti *I found a new family on the street* . . . I found a new form of recognition . . . A new form, my ego was nourished and . . . Um my god it felt good to, ah you know, put up my tag and then friends to say, yeah I saw, yeah I saw your piece on the weekend, yeah and whatever . . . Sort of like it’s, it was, it was *a communication amongst the family on the street* um so . . . Yep, it was, it was, yeah for a kid with bloody low self-esteem and I speak for most teenagers, um they’re finding a form of yeah, *a form of self-esteem amongst their peers, and recognition amongst their peers.*

(AL, 8: 12, emphases added)

It should be noted that discussions of graffiti which cite the desire for peer recognition as a factor in graffiti writing can tend to imply that such

a desire is a product of adolescence, of the need for affirmation experienced by an immature psyche. Such an approach seems unnecessary. Taking pleasure in publicity about one's activities and desire for affirmation by one's peers (and acknowledgement of the importance of peer recognition) animate many individuals and activities, such as awards ceremonies, citation indexes for academic journals, the pleasure of seeing one's name in print. Compartmentalizing such pleasures as adolescent in relation to graffiti writing would seem to be an unfortunately blinkered approach to what is, after all, a very commonplace pleasure. Regarding graffiti writers as all-too-human in this respect may help to defuse some of the more negative archetypes that coalesce around the body of the writer.

The sociality of *shared peer activity* is another important reason why writers are attracted to graffiti culture. AQ was motivated to begin graffiti through the encouragement of friends: 'Friends going, c'mon man, it's heaps good, people can see it and everything like, it's out there' (AQ, 4: 15). It is crucial to emphasize that this is not a question of peer pressure whereby individuals give in to demands to participate in something that they otherwise would avoid (only one writer, U, described his experience in those terms). Rather, it is a matter of developing activities that can be enjoyed by a group of friends *as a group*. The gregarious nature of graffiti culture is hence enormously significant: participants share knowledge of safe or exciting locations to write, discuss websites, display their photographs and go on group writing expeditions.

Few respondents represented their involvement in graffiti in terms that would be part of the conventional stereotype of the graffiti writer. *Boredom* and *rebellion* were the only negative motivating factors mentioned. AQ speculated that boredom was an impetus for other writers (as did W and U) although none saw boredom as a factor in their own involvement.¹⁰ The desire to rebel was seen as important by AR (21: 5) and admitted by AI, who stated 'I wanted to be a bad little rebel kid' (2: 13). Thus, the overwhelming results of the research, in terms of writers' reasons for writing, is that graffiti is a positive, pleasurable experience for them, on the whole unrelated to deliberate, 'anti-social' or negative motivations.

Many of the affective or visceral elements of writing that encourage writers to continue with graffiti come together in the notion of *pleasure*. Writers derived pleasure from many aspects of writing, but particularly from the physical experience of writing (that is, holding the spray can, seeing the finished work, feeling a bodily thrill and so on). Writers often simply expressed this as 'fun' (AR, AB, Z, N). Taking pleasure in the aesthetic was recounted by T:

If I'm pleased with it it's . . . a pretty good feeling really, like I've gone home a few times with big smiles on my face, it's just, oh yeah I'm hell chuffed cos I've just done this, like, big thing that looks pretty cool.

(7: 31)

The degree of excitement is demonstrated by AN's comment,

[I]t's just like you're winning a grand final, . . . just like you just wanna scream out and say, 'Yeah', you know, like you just actually done something good and then you know that you're not supposed to be able to do it, which is even better, I s'pose . . .

(4: 28)

And such pleasure is intensely physical, as AC makes clear:

Interviewee: I tried and I tried and I tried and I kept on getting better every time and it feels good because, like, you know, with my hand it feels really good . . .

Researcher: So, do you get a sensation from it through your . . .

Interviewee: Yeah, yeah from my hand.

Researcher: . . . your body, or your hand when you're doing the actual tag itself?

Interviewee: Yep.

Researcher: Right. Can you describe that sensation to me?

Interviewee: Feels, like, good like, cos just doing it like slow motion, it relaxes you . . .

(2: 14)

The physical act of writing the tag delivers a corporeal pleasure to the writer. Writing, with pen or spray can, and seeing the word or image take shape on the selected surface is thus a powerful physical experience for the writer. Since many discussions of graffiti assume that its main motivational pleasure for writers is the sight of its effects or knowledge of the annoyance that it might bring about for property owners, there has been little discussion of the pleasures derived for writers through the act of writing: seeing the can or pen in the hand, seeing the words take shape, feeling a connection between their control of the implement and the writing as it appears on the surface. That this pleasure is powerful should not be mistaken: many writers described graffiti as a physical *thrill* (AL, B), or as an 'adrenaline rush' (B, AR, AK, AN, U). U expressed this in the strongest terms, likening the pleasures of graffiti to that obtained from drug use:

When you start out in graffiti you don't think of [fights between writers] and by the time that you sort of catch on to that sort of thing happens, you're pretty much, you, it's like a drug, you're pretty much hooked on it . . .

(7: 15)

To that extent, graffiti can deliver pleasure that is similar to that derived from extreme sports (such as bungee jumping) or by other physically demanding activities such as skateboarding. Its illicit nature probably overlays the actual activity with a further charge, making it similar to

joyriding for its ability to deliver more pleasure than would be expected from the simple physical acts (writing on a wall, driving a car). Graffiti's pleurability thus is complex and multiple: writers take emotional satisfaction in evidence of their increasing skills as they command more ability to write more complicated lettering; they obtain a physiologically potent rush of adrenaline from its illegality (and sometimes from attempting graffiti in inaccessible or dangerous locations); and, perhaps most importantly, something in the act of writing feels 'right' to graffiti writers. This last aspect is perhaps the hardest for a non-writer to grasp, and is certainly related to the fact that writers perceive the urban landscape very differently from non-writers (writers see the landscape as a series of surfaces waiting to be written on, of which more later). It is this 'rightness' that motivates most writers to continue in the activity, in the face of possible arrest, security dogs and possible injury.

Thresholds of art and vandalism

Writers use an extensive vocabulary to describe their activities.¹¹ To trace one of the implications of this linguistically precise commitment to naming, one of the key objectives in our research was to discover how writers conceive of the divide—if any—between art and vandalism. Generally speaking, those who pieced considered their activities as a form of art—specifically of the aerosol variety. This was justified on one of three bases: skill, intent and aesthetics. In relation to *skill*, writers saw a parallel between the effort it takes to develop a style¹² as against how they ultimately name or label such activity. The following passages exemplify this idea:

Researcher: [W]hen you were doing illegal pieces, [did] you view what you were doing as art or vandalism?

Interviewee: As art, I would say, at the time, cos . . . you're thinking up your design, you know, you're putting a lot of effort into doing this. I mean, at the time you don't think it's vandalism. You think it's a way of displaying your name in an art form . . .
(A, 12: 30)

Interviewee: I think the tagging is a bit of vandalism, but the pieces . . . I call that art, graffiti art, that's what I call it.

Researcher: Why do you call pieces art?

Interviewee: Um, cos, I don't know, like, you gotta put a lot of thought into your pieces and stuff, like the letters, the shape of 'em, and all the colours that you're gonna use and like different things like characters and stuff.

(T, 31: 17)

Such views can be contrasted against those who thought tagging required little or no skill. For example, 'Tags are nothing. [Anyone] can go write

on a wall' (F, 3: 9); '[Tagging], it's not really art . . . cos, like, you don't have to be an artist to do a tag. It's heaps easy, you just write and go' (Z, 15: 16).¹³

The intention to express oneself through art (akin to using time productively) as opposed to indiscriminately marking surfaces (akin to 'wasting time') often served to divide instances of art from vandalism. The following passage brings the deliberative and contemplative dimensions of illicit writing to the fore:

Interviewee: Like, one time I drew a headmaster with a hat, playing with things and then a guy with a shotgun to his head, just about to blow his head, just to show I hate school. And later on as I got a bit older, I realized I'm not going to get very far if I don't stay at school and my message was to shove it up the teachers, just fuck 'em. If you're going to school, go to school to learn, but you can still do whatever you want out of school—and just tell everyone, basically, 'I'm better than everyone else, I'm going to school, I'm going to learn and there's nothing you can do to stop me.'

Researcher: And so how do you illustrate that in a piece? [. . .]

Interviewee: . . . Draw, incorporate books into it and then put an A+ next to it. Yep, sweet, I'm staying at school. Got a maths test, 98 out of 100 per cent . . .

(P, 14: 10)

In this last passage, the intention of the writer is to communicate a message about the particular emotions or frustrations thrown up by the school environment. Far from being conceived as an act of vandalism, this writer believed he was not only engaging in a process that assisted his own sense of identity and self-esteem, but was piecing to help motivate others facing similar challenges. Critical here is the fact that the message has a positive rather than destructive tone—encouraging young people to demonstrate their individuality *not* by leaving school but by excelling *within* its parameters.

Aesthetics was another factor playing an important role in determining the thresholds dividing art from vandalism. In many instances, writers acknowledged the subjective dimensions involved in judging their (and others') work. J said: 'I don't believe [it's graffiti] if it looks nice, you know' (5: 16). Again, intention was brought to the fore:

Researcher: Do you think graffiti is art or vandalism?

Interviewee: Oh, yeah, it's obviously both isn't it? In some forms it's vandalism. Some guys probably don't even differentiate between the two . . . They do graffiti, [they g]o bombing or trashing or whatever, [and] they want to label it as [art]. Obviously murals are seen as art. [But] if I don't like it I might

just think it's rubbish—then that wouldn't be art to me. If you can appreciate it, then I think . . . it is art. Probably within the right confines it always is art.

(D, 13: 13)

These writers evince considerably nuanced perspectives on how best to name the images produced through illicit writing (taking into account their own prejudices, the respective age of the viewer, the location of the image and the social context surrounding its production). What is interesting here is the degree to which writers acknowledged and respected competing views of what constitutes, for want of a better phrase, an 'aesthetically pleasing image'. This can be contrasted with the fairly rigid accounts tendered by many municipalities to the marking of graffiti more generally. However, despite a certain aesthetic tolerance emanating from some writers, the majority of those who pieced were adamant that their images had far greater aesthetic merit than those who tagged or executed throw-ups (as U put it, 'I'd say the actual tagging part of graffiti is just downright vandalism. It has no art or beauty to it' (24: 17)). Such views are generally consistent with ways in which writers defined 'graffiti', separating 'art' (piecing) from 'vandalism' (tagging) and 'artists' (or writers) from 'taggers', 'bombers' and 'vandals'.

Beyond such conceptions, writers spoke of graffiti as less an object existing 'out there' to be either admired or denounced as much as a cultural flow which one could interrupt by an injection of one's creative energies. Graffiti, in short, was something both literal and *affective* or *visceral* for many participants. This much is illustrated by the following responses to the question, 'what is graffiti?':

It's like putting a piece of you into your area.
(X, 17: 34)

[It's] running amok, having fun, being young.
(AJ, 15: 17)

It's just what people do.
(V, 12: 21)

A rush.
(H, 20: 17)

[A] nice feeling.

(J, 5: 16)

Overall, writers' positioning of the threshold dividing art from vandalism had very little to do with graffiti's status as a demonstrably illegal activity, and far more to do with the perceived impact of the image upon the environment. Here, writers can be seen to formulate quite complex criteria for determining whether an image enhances or detracts from a particular

aesthetic. Some begin from the point of view that the city has no pure or original surface to be kept intact (and that therefore any surface is 'fair game') while others are far more discriminating in their placement of the image (since their ethic dictates that certain locations should not be marked up).¹⁴ Whichever approach they take, how writers conceive of what they do has major implications for graffiti-related policies. For one thing, it is probably counter-productive to be thinking solely in terms of 'graffiti' when a great many writers are thinking about what they do as aerosol art, or as a vehicle for generating peer recognition, or as something that gives pleasure to both the writer and to at least some of his or her audience. Understanding illicit writers' conceptualization of their activities needs also to be located within the specificity of the writer's gaze upon the cityscape.

Reactions to 'blank' walls

There is good evidence to suggest that many illicit writers look upon urban and rural streetscapes in ways that differ from the gaze deployed by other bodies. However, this variance in ocular orientation is generally not, as many assume, one which has as its objective the destruction or defiling of property. Rather, it is a mode of envisioning which begins on the basis that the surfaces which make up the city are always already marked by signs of deterioration and decay (such as rusted facades, storm-damaged roofs, cracked stonework, weathered timber), and constituted by competing and questionable aesthetics (such as the signs telling of the presence and nature of business, or of political candidates, or of speed limits, no parking zones and one-way streets). The consequence of such a view is that orthodox notions of cleanliness and purity undergo something of an implosion. Indeed, for many writers, there are no such things as 'blank' walls so much as locales of, and for, a ceaseless writing. Such a writing never ends and is never completed (either by the illicit writer or by any of the city's more legitimate authors): as such it is a ceaseless *becoming-other*, taking place in the countless locales where each surface intersects with and is an extension of the numerous signifying practices of which graffiti is but one example. A selection of writers' comments here include:

Interviewee: Like, you see a blank wall, you want to be up there first, [like on] train lines mainly because that kind of stuff gets viewed on trains and it's like a negative area, really, for government and all that. They don't put up signs and posters and things, so it's all just negative space and that[s] [the] kind of place to do it. . . .

Researcher: [T]hat phrase 'negative space', can you just explain what you mean[] by that?



Figure 2 Office building, CBD, Melbourne. The windows on three sides of this building (those sides within public view) have been tagged in precise script. Each tag was written backwards (by two writers who were necessarily inside the building while putting up) so that work would be legible when viewed from the street. © Benjamin Pederick. Reproduced with permission.

Interviewee: Something that's not being used, . . . like a big blank wall, I think of that as like a negative space . . . Like not being used and you think, 'Yep, well, I could style that up and do a big blockbuster kind of style.'

Researcher: Right. . . . Why do you think some people want to keep it blank?

Interviewee: Oh, it's a community thing. It's like the community want to keep it nice and simple and clean and show . . . what they think is visually nice.

Researcher: Right, okay.

Interviewee: Where[as] like all of us, sort of, the younger people, or people in graffiti totally think it's somewhere where we can represent.

(I, 4: 25)

Researcher: [W]hen you look at [a] wall[], what do you see? . . .

Interviewee: Thinking it's gonna look alright when it's done . . . I . . . try to . . . make it look exciting instead of boring—[like] just looking at a wall.

(AC, 5: 28)

Interviewee: If there's a big wall there and it's just, like, white, it looks boring . . . But if it's got a few tags it'll look better.

(Z, 2: 25)

Of interest here is the relationship between surfaces and their affects. A uni-coloured wall is considered 'boring'—as 'negative space'—and therefore as something to be filled out or brought to life. Here, there is little if any conception of illicit writing detracting from or destroying the urban aesthetic. Rather, such activity adds to, and induces a performance from, otherwise 'lifeless spaces'.¹⁵ Most importantly, for many writers the surfaces that make up the built environment present more in the order of a *flow* than a structure. They are, in other words, canvasses permanently in waiting. When one writer remarks that he is 'thinking it's gonna look alright when it's done', the wall has already been actively transformed into a space replete with possibilities. This is accomplished through the nature of the writer's gaze, which does away with the actual (banality) and ushers in the virtual (creativity). The intensity and longevity of this mode of envisioning is illustrated by the following passage:

Researcher: [When] you were looking at a clean carriage, what is it that you saw?

Interviewee: [I] saw a potential panel . . . I did it with everything. Even when I was into skating, like years before, I'd be driving in the back of dad's car and as you drive down the street, you're looking at every kerb and every rail and imagining yourself doing stuff on it. . . . So it's just the same [with graffiti], and like you're on there, you're driving down the street and you're imagining like where your tag would be or how the train goes past and, yeah, imagining how cool it would look . . .

(AL, 33: 13)

This passage shows that there is no static manner by which to gaze upon the world. More specifically, it speaks to the fluid, or even volatile, nature of the relationship between words (such as train carriage, kerb) and their meanings (such as public transport/potential panel, edge of sidewalk/place to perform new tricks). There is in all this a way of visualizing spaces and their surfaces which has very little to do with aggression or destruction and more to do with the unfolding of a body (the illicit writer), its desires (to put up, to express, to communicate), its pleasures (in holding the can, in inscribing the letters along a chosen surface) and its capacities (to improve upon the last image, to put up more or less often, to make choices about locations, styles and surfaces).

Having so far addressed the affective and visceral aspects of writing, we will now consider the extent to which respondents located their writing activities within a culture of criminality, relating illegal graffiti to other types of crime conventionally thought to accompany it (such as damage to property, theft, drug use and violence). Our aim, in asking writers about these matters, was to discover the extent to which graffiti was regarded as a crime either in itself or as a corollary of other criminal behaviour. As we will show, writers' commitment to graffiti, their particular affective gaze upon the streetscape and regulatory policies come together in a complex entanglement of cultural codes, the desire to write and legal prohibition.

Graffiti and other types of crime

It's a form of organized crime, they steal cars, break into houses, cultivate drugs[,] [F]or many of them it comes as a package.¹⁶

Graffiti, unless done at a legal site, is an illegal activity. It is often represented as causally related to other types of criminal activity—as something that individuals drifted into as a result of other criminal behaviour, or as a form of crime that can then lead individuals to commit other offences.¹⁷ For example, newspaper coverage of a government report on young people in Victoria described the survey's attempt to measure involvement in 'anti-social behavior': 'according to the survey, the most common aspects over the past 12 months were shoplifting (29.7%), daubing graffiti (22.9%), taking part in a fight or a riot (18.3%), carrying a weapon (17.9%) or handling something stolen (17.6%)'.¹⁸ The effect is to suggest that the person who engages in graffiti may move on to the other activities listed, as if on a slippery slope downwards into criminality. We see this again in a story about two teenaged boys arrested for arson (and identified as suspects in the arson because they allegedly left their tags at the scene) and described as 'teenagers who had "graduated" from skateboarding to graffiti and vandalism'.¹⁹ Graffiti is also often claimed to be an

impetus towards drug use. A newspaper article on heroin use in Melbourne described one user: 'Ten years ago, he and all his friends wrote graffiti on trains. Eighty per cent of the graffiti writers he knows went on to heroin. "Heroin is in the next street to the graffiti street, you know," he says.'²⁰

The relationship between any one type of criminal activity and another is always complex. That is, such a relation usually proves to be anything but causal in any linear fashion. While the majority of participants in our research study indicated they had committed or were presently involved in other types of crime, this should not be taken to mean that graffiti 'causes' or leads to other crime. Nor should it be supposed that other types of crime lead to, or cause, graffiti. The most that can be said on the basis of responses given by the interviewees is that those involved in illegal writing are more likely to be exposed to, and possibly learn the techniques for doing, other types of crime, than those who have nothing to do with illicit forms of writing.

Further, an important distinction needs to be made here between *crimes committed in order to write illegally*, as against *other crimes* committed by those who happen, at certain times, to write illegally. In the former case, the obvious examples are stealing paint or pens, criminal trespass and damage to property. At least one of these offences will always be committed where writing occurs illegally (although it should be noted that not all writers steal paint or commit criminal trespass).²¹ Theft sometimes occurred as an adjunct to illicit graffiti: 'racking' or 'ganking' paint and/or associated instruments necessary for writing. Just under half of those who piece ($n = 9$) and tag ($n = 9$) remarked that theft of paint was quite common (many admitting that they themselves had stolen or continued to steal paint).²² Only a minority of interviewees said keeping paint under lock and key made it harder to obtain ('They got them big cages' (V, 7: 31)). More common were remarks which indicated most writers would simply get someone of suitable age to buy the paint on their behalf (M, 10: 33). Another participant said she obtains paint from her 'dad's shed' (AI, 10: 5).²³ Overall, however, the majority of those interviewed (especially muralists) bought paint at least some of the time, typically spending in excess of \$50 to do a good piece (X, 12).²⁴

Within the category 'other crimes' are offences not *specifically* related to acts of illegal writing but which are sometimes committed by those who have or continue to engage in illegal writing, such as illicit drug use and crimes of interpersonal violence. In the majority of instances, *illicit drug use* was limited mainly to marijuana ($n = 13$) with the use of speed and acid occurring much more sporadically. No participant admitted to heroin or cocaine use and indeed, contrary to the media views set out earlier, most seemed somewhat taken aback by questions which inquired after these 'harder' drugs. One writer commented, 'Heroin is a boundary for us' (T, 17: 31). Many (especially muralists) commented that the consumption of harder drugs adversely affected the quality of their work. This is none

too surprising, given that major pieces require sustained concentration and skill over several hours.

The level of *interpersonal violence* engaged in by interviewees was reasonably high. Certain modes of writing within hip hop graffiti culture seem to lend themselves to greater involvement in violent activity. In the main, this mode involved being part of a crew with just over one-quarter of participants admitting to crew membership (taggers ($n = 7$); muralists ($n = 5$)).²⁵ Overwhelmingly, the most common type of violence linked to illicit writing was that initiated in response to the 'lining' of one crew member's work by another. One participant commented, 'People get full on smashed for that' (AA, 10: 19). Another remarked that crews will 'try and stab each other' over lining (AF, 13: 14). This situation is echoed by a participant who said he'd 'seen a couple of people get sliced with machetes' (AR, 14: 340). Indeed one writer said that he himself had been stabbed in the chest and arm and that his 'knuckles are all fucked up from fighting' (W, 8: 7; see also T, 22: 19). Fights are generally not over until one side (or combatant) says 'stop the fight', 'runs' or is 'knocked out' (AR, 14: 20). Arranged fights between crews, with up to '300 people in each group' were also mentioned (AR, 14: 4).²⁶

These mass fights would usually take place at locations where everyone knows the escape routes—such as areas of derelict land, or the grounds of the local swimming centre or football oval—should authorities arrive on the scene. When asked what each crew was trying to achieve by risking serious physical injury in such a 'rumble', one participant remarked that each is looking to be 'the most respected crew'—both 'artistically' and physically (T, 20: 18). Inter-crew rivalry involves a high risk of injury: weapons can be involved (commonly trolley poles and knives, although a few writers claimed that sawn-off shotguns had been involved in the past). Some writers displayed scars resulting from stab wounds in such fights or recounted being beaten.

Of greatest concern here is the fact that, due to the unlawful and violent nature of crew conflict, participants were unanimous in saying everyone 'nursed' their own injuries—stab wounds included. It seems to be an unwritten rule of graffiti culture (or, at least, of crew culture) that any wounds or injuries were to be dealt with in private. No respondent characterized these violent clashes as particularly problematic; rather, they seemed to be accepted as an aspect of crew membership: perhaps an extreme example of how crew members unquestioningly back each other up in all sorts of situations. The refusal to seek medical attention or report any injuries means that fighting between crews is an almost entirely hidden phenomenon. Further research might be able to elucidate the frequency of confrontations; the numbers involved; and the extent of harm inflicted during them. At the moment, it is certainly worth speculating as to the interconnections of belonging, risk and violence that many writers seem to accept as a normal part of graffiti culture.²⁷

Theorizing the affective/writing the body

Graffiti management remains a high priority on most local and state political agendas. The regulatory strategies which ensue (such as banning the sale of spray paint to minors, forcing proprietors to store paint under lock and key,²⁸ setting up graffiti hotlines, responding rapidly within a 48-hour period to reports of graffiti, developing tag databases, adopting paint-resistant surfaces, implementing graffiti audits, exhorting members of the public to report graffiti to the police) show authorities attempting to make the desires of graffiti writers *governable*. With \$6.8 billion devoted internationally each year to removing graffiti, governing writers' desires (more accurately, removing expressions of desire) would seem to be the primary goal of municipal and state authorities. What is most perplexing here, from a theoretical viewpoint, is the relationship between graffiti policy and graffiti's continued (visual) prominence in those areas specifically targeted by reduction initiatives. While there are some limits to the inferences which can be drawn from the experiences of a group of writers in urban and suburban Melbourne and Adelaide (although the former city is acknowledged by several websites to be one of the top five international places to view hip hop graffiti and stencilling), we none the less propose that the persistence of graffiti as a problem derives as much from the general failure to take stock of the relationship between illicit images (what occurs on city surfaces) and illicit bodies (the thoughts, motivations and feelings of various writers) as from the ineffectiveness of any regulatory strategy. We would argue, therefore, that administrators and academics alike need to rethink conceptions of urban space, desire and illicit authorship with regard to graffiti.

For criminology, perhaps the most obvious point of reference would be to situate graffiti writing as event within cultural criminology. Lyng's (1990) notion of edgework, and more recently Presdee's (2000, 2001) writings on the carnivalesque transgressions which apparently define so much of (post)modern (criminal) behaviour, might seem to be particularly relevant. However, we believe that to situate graffiti in such a manner is to perpetuate the kinds of myths that have for some time been attached to the bodies of graffiti writers. In contradistinction to their engaging in edgework, there is a kind of pleasure generated through the act of writing that is not exclusively bound to nor a function of transgression. This much is most clearly demonstrated by the many formal and informal conversations we have had with so-called 'hard core' illicit writers who derive as much if not more satisfaction from completing a legal canvas. The 'pleasure' here is made all the more intense when such work happens then to be displayed in a gallery or sold for a small profit. When one talks to writers about why they do what they do, the resulting narratives tend to hang together around themes of respect, expression, design and quality of the image. Only very rarely do writers mention the thrill accompanying *the breaking of the law* as their *primary* motivation. Writers may be on the edge—in the sense that

they envision city surfaces from a standpoint distinct to other users of public space—but they are not edgeworkers. Far from being 'on the margins', their images occupy a central place in urban and suburban life.

We would equally take to task that brand of cultural criminology that inadvertently casts graffiti writers as disenfranchised or discursively effaced bodies who seek to challenge profoundly or, by way of contrast, seek to find a footing within, the 'oppressive' structures of late capitalism. Put differently, we have difficulty placing graffiti writers within a 'carnival [which purports to facilitate] a playful and pleasurable resistance to authority where those normally excluded from the discourse of power celebrate their anger at their exclusion' (Presdee, 2001: 26–7). Putting aside the issue of whether there is a single unified discourse of power and whether it is ever possible to occupy a point outside of such a discourse, we would take issue with the kind of subject constituted by such a view. So much of cultural criminology is concerned with the senselessness and excess of behaviour—of the subject who lets go, escapes the mundane, suspends rationality and who actively seeks out disordered and (temporarily) chaotic experiences. Indeed, the pre-eminent trope (or catch-cry) of cultural criminology would be something akin to 'transcendence through irrationality' (see Katz, 1988).



Figure 3 Train panel, by Bonez, 70K crew (1970s kids). Note the benevolent tone of the message 'Without weapon, Without violence, Without hate'. Source: http://www.melbournegraffiti.com/trains/images/95_jpg.jpg. Reproduced with permission.

To the extent that this holds true, we seriously question the idea that graffiti writers constitute, practise or conceive themselves as engaging in senseless or irrational acts. From the research findings presented earlier in this article, there is good reason to think that writing graffiti requires all those attributes typically associated with 'rational' behaviour—forethought, planning, design, practice, patience, alertness, attention to detail and so forth. Even the most hastily drawn tag has its own style that is itself derived from many hours of perfecting the image—even if this one image is less than 'perfect(ed)'. For us, graffiti writers are not so much seeking to escape or suspend reality so much as they are willing and knowing participants within various realities. Graffiti writers engage in events that do not fit neatly into the binaries marked out by late modernity. Graffiti is both a rational and irrational phenomenon *and* something besides. The subject of graffiti is not, therefore, reducible to this or that explanation. Only to the extent that lexicon falls short of capturing graffiti as event does it stand as concomitant with excess and irrationality.

Further to this, we would also want to resist the temptation to construct graffiti writing in terms of its masculine character or as a means for young men to lay claim to particular territories (Macdonald, 2001). Constructs such as masculinity—like constructs of class, race, ethnicity, age, intelligence—are in the order of the archetype or the mass. As such, they apply to *no* body in particular. Of course, we do not doubt that placing the concept, for instance, of 'hegemonic masculinities' (Connell, 1995) over the practice of graffiti writing would produce a particular kind of 'knowledge' (or, after Foucault, *truth effect*) of illicit writing. But our point is that recording graffiti as a gendered (or classed, ethnicized or psycho-socialized) event is very different to documenting graffiti from the point of view of writers themselves (which is in no way to suggest that one could ever get hold of a 'pure' or a priori narrative). Accordingly, if writers narrate what they do (predominantly) in terms of pleasure and pride, it is counter-productive to speak about what they do in terms of masculine scripts, class position and the like. The key question is: 'how do various lived bodies conceive of and speak about what they do?', rather than, 'to what degree can particular events be made to reflect various concepts or theories?' This goes directly to the tension between favouring an interpretive/constructivist approach to one's subject matter over and above contrasting methods of inquiry. In the main, cultural criminology has firmly (perhaps unwittingly) attached itself to a critical model of social inquiry. Such a perspective retains at its heart the belief in human emancipation from particular kinds of oppressive or ideological structures through rational inquiry. Under cultural criminology, the irrationality (of the excessive transcendent subject) has been counterbalanced by (and made to speak through) the rationality (of the researcher)—and it is the last that retains the hallmarks of a 'liberating' force. Bauman (1991) has warned at length against the dangers of various kinds of rationality and it should not be necessary to repeat his argument here.

In this light, we think it preferable to move away from the (ironically) essentialist leanings of cultural criminology towards an account of graffiti writing which is capable of reflecting the highly nuanced relationship between writers' bodies and the spaces/surfaces which shape and transform subjectivity. Two theorists who stand as possible starting points here, are Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. These authors have spoken in detail of two kinds of spaces—the *striated* and the *smooth*. Striated spaces—whose archetype is the city—'plot[s] out a closed space for linear and solid things' (1996: 361). It is a space dominated, as Deleuze and Guattari say, 'by the fall of bodies, the verticals of gravity, the distribution of matter into parallel layers . . .' (1996: 370). Smooth space, on the other hand, 'is directional rather than dimensional or metric. . . . It is a space of affects, more than one of properties . . . It is an intensive rather than extensive space, one of distances, not of measures and properties' (1994: 479). Historically, and significantly, the modern state has sought to transform smooth and nomadic territories into places where everything is ordered, numbered, monitored and controlled.²⁹ We therefore contend that smooth spaces—spaces replete with becomings and mutations rather than known and familiar objects (such as the litany of surfaces composing the city)—present as highly problematic in late-capitalist society. As Deleuze and Guattari remark:

One of the fundamental tasks of the State is to striate the space over which it reigns, or to utilise smooth spaces as a means of communication in the service of striated space. It is a vital concern of every State not only to vanquish nomadism but to control migrations and, more generally, to establish a zone of rights over an entire 'exterior', over all of the flows traversing the ecumenon. If it can help it, the State does not dissociate itself from a process of capture of flows of all kinds, populations, commodities or commerce, money or capital, etc.

(1996: 385–6)

In the present context, it is no exaggeration to say that the State has a marked and ongoing interest in the flow of paint. Such an interest exists not just because of the *images* projected into and onto urban spaces—spaces which should only be filled by 'solid things' like walls, billboards, telegraph poles, buildings and cars—but also because such images are thought to belie the presence (and frustrating absence) of highly problematic if not threatening bodies—namely, writers of illicit graffiti. Our contention is that the vast majority of such bodies are neither problematic nor dangerous but are taken as such because they interrupt the familiar, the known, the already named—in short, the categorical. Illicit writers are cast, in other words, as an Other and this is chiefly because they execute what has been called a *nomadic* rather than a Royal or concrete art. Again, as Deleuze and Guattari observe,

[The concrete] line is inherently, formally, representative in itself, even if it does not represent anything. On the other hand, a *line that delimits nothing*,

that describes no contour, that no longer goes from one point to another but instead passes between two points, that is always declining from the horizontal and the vertical and deviating from the diagonal, that is constantly changing direction, a mutant line of this kind that is without outside or inside, form or background, beginning or end and that is alive as a continuous variation—such a line is truly an abstract [and nomadic] line, and describes a smooth space.

(1996: 497–8, emphasis in original)³⁰

What we are trying to suggest here is that graffiti's authors write in ways which rupture orthodox senses of urbanity—of order, cleanliness, purity, integrity and so forth. We would also suggest that illicit writers spend much of their time using, creating and locating *smooth* spaces while the 'ordinary' citizen (in so far as he/she exists) spends much of their time acting in accordance with the dictates and pre-established schemas of *striated* space. Another way of saying this is that smooth space is generally characterized by 'free' action while striated spaces are associated with work (see Deleuze and Guattari, 1996: 490). As our research shows, illicit writers view the city not as a unified thing, but as a plane of multiple surfaces and interfaces. Here, there are no sheds, no schools, no houses, no shops, no offices, no telegraph poles. Instead there are sites where the alterity of the performing body comes to the fore more or less intensely. Aptly, Deleuze and Guattari remark that 'what defines [a] smooth space . . . is that it does not have a dimension higher than that which moves through it or is inscribed in it; in this sense it is a flat multiplicity . . .' (1996: 488). In the context of graffiti's authors, this statement can be taken to indicate a levelling of terrains (chiefly that of the city and its various streets, buildings, malls, warehouses, railways and so forth) normally taken to be replete with the signs of wealth, status and ownership. Perhaps, then, it is necessary to admit that illicit writers inhabit spaces *haptically*³¹ instead of optically—that for particular kinds of bodies a surface is never just 'looked upon' so much as it is felt or lived.

The implications of all this for criminological theory (as well as criminological policies on graffiti) are at least threefold. First, there is good evidence to suggest that present stereotypes of graffiti writers are precisely that: namely, stereotypes, and that many commentators have inadvertently upheld a good many of the myths surrounding graffiti's writers. But by their very nature, such frames are incapable of accounting for many of the factors contributing to the body of illicit writers—their desires, motivations, friendships and so on. For instance, the orthodox or technocratic view of such bodies tends to overlook the fact that many writers conceive what they do to be more in the order of a creative and pleasurable activity rather than a form of vandalism. Here, a great many writers perceive themselves to be engaged primarily in a performance (of an artistic, social, affective kind)—*not* a crime. This casts serious doubt upon the orthodox view that the majority of writers carry out graffiti in their capacity as

rebels, wayward youths, proto-revolutionaries, models of edgework or transcendent subjects.

Graffiti writers in fact view 'the writing event' and 'the built environment' (the two only being separable through discourse) in ways markedly different from those whose task it is to study or reduce incidences of graffiti. Far from being bodies involved in some egoistic/orgiastic pastime where the 'goal' is to randomly strike out at public (or to a lesser extent private) property, graffiti writers tend to mark particular places over others because there are better and worse surfaces on which to write. The writer who repeatedly tags a wall that is consistently painted 'clean' by authorities knows from experience that there is a better than even chance that a roller brush will eventually be used to bring the wall up to 'pristine' condition. If and when this occurs, this same writer knows that s/he has helped to turn a porous surface into a non-porous canvas. This latter surface is one this body can connect with in a more visually affective way (since the spray paint/image will not be as easily absorbed into the bricks and mortar). We see nothing malicious or orgiastic here so much as we detect something strategic and opportunistic. And we acknowledge that while being strategic does not make the activity any more or less noble or worthwhile, it does none the less make the body of the writer more complex (and thus irreducible to any single aetiological construct).

A second point to draw out derives from the realization that the overwhelming majority of writers conceive their activities to be governed by stringent ethical limits (such as those marking the differences between aerosol art and tagging, or which speak to the preference to put up on public property rather than private property, or to avoid writing on places reserved for the deceased, the elderly, the religious and so forth). This problematizes much work within cultural criminology, which has tended towards the view that crime is about the abolition rather than reconceptualization of limits to conduct. At a more 'practical' level, it can be simply observed that policies based on the idea that writers are engaging in a destructive activity, done chiefly out of rebellion or spite, without recourse to any kind of rules or regulatory constraints, will produce the very object they seek to banish from the environment.

Third, and finally, a micro-politics of the illicit writing body leads necessarily to the realization that the elimination of graffiti is neither possible nor desirable. It is not possible because one cannot permanently interrupt desire—in this case the desire for pleasure or recognition via the flow of paint. Illicit writers will always exist in one form or another. They may, in response to certain policies, change their medium (from ink to metal), their preferred surface (from cement to glass) and the images created (from neologisms to pictures), but writers will *not* cease to exist. And in this sense it is undesirable that the signs of illicit writing be eliminated. There are countless examples of such writing serving to interrupt our sense of the familiar, our sense of certainty, our sense of the established and proper order of things. And it is these interruptions that

contribute to the making of new subjectivities and dispositions (however small or fleeting these may be). There are certainly issues of propriety that need further negotiation in terms of the placement of images. But the problem of propriety should not be used to bolster zero tolerance policy stances. Indeed, one might say that the problem here is posed not just by those who write illicitly but by those who deem it necessary hurriedly to remove statements or pieces which speak of, for example, prisoners' rights, environmental degradation, violence against women or the often alienating nature of the school experience. Here, there is good cause to develop a more intimate knowledge of the desires and fears pervading not just illicit writers so much as those who would seek permanently to do away with (the writing of) such bodies.

Conclusion

In concluding we would argue that illicit writers constitute something of an urban (and suburban) Other. However, we would also submit that this Other is not something to be feared or denounced so much as *interrogated* (intellectually, culturally, historically, politically). In one of his early essays, Deleuze advances a conception of the Other based around potentialities rather than pre-existing states of affairs found in sociological constructions of the Other. It is a conceptualization that is vital rather than extraneous, embedded rather than epi-phenomenal. Here, 'the Other assures the margins and transitions in the world' (Deleuze, 1990: 305). More than this, the Other serves to orient each of us in space and time—indeed to remind each of their relationship to particular spaces at particular moments. Graffiti—both in the presence of its images and the absence of its authors—forces (for whatever duration) a reflexive relationship to self/selves. It may be somewhat trite to talk of graffiti writers as 'urban Others'. But in so far as the Other is someone (or something) whose lived experience remains unremarked or, as is more likely, unworthy of social valorization, this is precisely how writers feature in the political and public imaginary—as a body synonymous with the tag and its various forms (the throw-up, the piece). We have shown earlier, though, that graffiti writers are in no sense reducible to their tags—any more than a novelist is reducible to their published works. Further, in attempting to know something more about the lives of graffiti writers, we also learn something about bodies and spaces more generally—perhaps even something of our own political, spatial and visual orientations. In this regard, Deleuze has commented,

The [Other] relativises the not-known and the non-perceived, because Others, from my point of view, introduce the sign of the unseen in what I do see, making me grasp what I do not perceive as what is perceptible to an Other. In all these respects my desire passes through Others, and through Others it receives an object.

(1990: 306)

This is not so much a romantic vision as a rendering that provokes us to consider the role played by Otherness in our daily lives. To be sure, many—indeed the majority—may not like the various aspects of the possible world literally drawn and inhabited by illicit writers. But such a dislike does not negate the fact that this Other has the potential to point to alternative ways of engaging urban surfaces, moving through particular spaces, drawing particular issues to our attention. The world of illicit writers has been constructed as something to be feared or trivialized—to be erased from urbanity. But this takes as self-evident the notion that a world *without* illicit writers and their images would somehow be demonstrably preferable to the present state of affairs. And here it must be asked whether there is, or ever could be, a pure or original surface or aesthetic worth fighting for. We would contend that such a surface is an impossibility if only because so-called 'clean' or 'blank' spaces constitute, paradoxically, spaces of infinite variation and potential. The challenge, it would seem, is to engage openly and constructively with illicit writers in order that we might better understand why the city and the writing of its surfaces feature so prominently in all our lives.

Notes

1. Paradigmatic sociological accounts of graffiti writing are found in Abel and Buckley (1977), Feiner and Klein (1982) and Lachmann (1988). A lengthy account of public discourse on graffiti in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, along with a discussion of graffiti culture, can be found in Young (2005). Detailed study of hip hop mural painting can be found in Chalfant and Prigoff (1987) and Ferrell (1996), (2001), and the masculinity of hip hop graffiti culture is discussed at length in Macdonald (2001). The prevalence of graffiti in earlier cultures is discussed in Pritchard (1967). Mirzoeff (1995) and Baker (2004) consider the aesthetics of graffiti; while questions of preservation, removal, deterrence, its prosecution as property damage and other aspects of graffiti regulation are elaborated in Gomez (1993), Halsey and Young (1999, 2002a, 2002b), Halsey (2001) and White (2001).
2. Examples of books include: Powers (1999); Manco (2002, 2004); Publikat KG (2002); Hundertmark (2003); Baker (2004); Ganz (2004); Macphee (2004). Examples of websites (displaying graffiti images from around the world as well as hip hop fashion) include: www.hiphop-directory.com; www.watarush.com; www.dahub.com; <http://www.graffiti.org/index/best.html>; <http://www.bombingscience.com/shop-wears.htm>; www.woostercollective.com; www.stencilrevolution.com. Examples of video games include: *Grffiti* by Xevoz; *Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure* by Atari (the pre-release review states: '[The game's author has] teamed up with 50 of the world's most well-known graffiti artists to give the game a sense of

realism and truth that most people don't truly know'). Accessed 26 October 2004 at <http://ps2.ign.com/articles/538/538827p1.html>

3. The research project centred on 44 in-depth, semi-structured interviews by us with individuals who are or who have previously been involved in 'graffiti culture'. The overwhelming majority of interviewees were male ($n = 43$) aged between 11 and 28, reflecting the well-known fact that graffiti—like many other types of crime—is an activity most often undertaken by young men. Experience with—and length of time immersed in—graffiti-related activities, varied markedly across interviewees ranging from those who had done a 'bit of tagging' for just a 'few weeks' to those who had 'progressed' from tagging to throw-ups to (legal) pieces over a period of 15 years. At the time of writing, this remains the largest cohort of writers to be interviewed in-depth across a wide array issues such as: reasons for initial and ongoing involvement in graffiti's culture(s); effects of policing; views of other writers; attitudes towards legal walls; experiences of self and space, and so forth.
4. For the distinction between the two, see Massumi (2002b: 27–8). See Watson (1999) for an example of criminological work that invokes a productive reading of affect.
5. Our deployment of terms such as affect, pleasure, bodies and so on therefore derives from a very different tradition—that of post-Deleuzian social theory—than that which has animated much of cultural criminology's interest in the visceral enjoyment of graffiti and other illicit activities and which has given rise to works such as Ferrell (1996), (2001), Presdee (2000) and Ferrell et al. (2004).
6. Here arises the importance of Spinoza's conception of affect, which requires that all bodies be defined not on the basis of what they are but on the basis of what they can do. In the simplest of terms, what a body can do is affect other bodies and be affected by them. These are, as Massumi reminds us, inseparable events. Indeed, this is what is commonly called 'life'—the repeated passing from one affective and affected moment to the next.
7. See Halsey and Young (2002a) for an overview of some municipal strategies. Note that some councils are attempting a broader and more inclusive approach: for example the City of Yarra in Victoria has developed what it calls a 'whole-of-community' approach which attempts to accommodate the interests of key stakeholders (including writers, in that they are enabled by the policy to apply for permits to write at certain locations and in that individuals can apply to have some graffiti sites preserved rather than cleaned).
8. At first glance, this might seem to be a trite comparison. But our research indicates that doing graffiti is not simply a deviant or criminal—in short, wholly transgressive—experience. Instead, and similar to a multitude of other behaviours, participants begin writing illicitly not to do crime *qua* crime, but to connect with various social groups. Such connections, of course, might be fleeting or ongoing, violent or non-violent, seamless or

hard won. In most cases, being a writer shares many similarities with one's introduction to, and participation in, alternative activities. Graffiti writing is not football or chess. However, it shares with those pastimes a requirement of opening the self onto (initially) unknown sets of rules, terrains, biographies, as well as micro-histories of success and failure. In this sense, we wish to say, in the tradition of Sutherland, that graffiti writing is not something spawned by biological or psychological traits so much as it is a socially learned activity most often done in connection with significant others who may or may not be extant at the time writing takes place.

9. Chief Inspector Ian McDonald, officer in charge of Transit Services Branch, South Australia, 'Police target "gang" mural vandalism', *The Advertiser*, 31 October 2000, p. 5.
10. On boredom and criminality, see Ferrell (2004).
11. A brief glossary of such terms includes:
 - Tagging*: words (often neologisms) or numbers executed in condensed calligraphic form.
 - Throw-ups*: characterized by 'fat' bubble-style lettering. They are done very quickly (in the order of 30 seconds) and therefore tend only to exhibit the outline of a word (usually the person's tag name).
 - Pieces* ('murals'): the most complicated form of writing. A highly stylized and colourful version of a tag or crew name. Most take between one and six hours to complete. Larger pieces can take days (or, more accurately, nights) to execute.
 - Stay-ups*: graffiti placed in inaccessible locations.
 - Crew*: a group of writers who share a common tag (such as 'ISV' or 'Insane Salisbury Vandals'). Crews can range in membership from three to upwards of sixty persons, many of whom may not be known to each other.
 - Novices* or *toys*: those who have yet to master successfully a particular type of writing.
 - Kings* or *pros*: those who have gained respect from peers for their particular 'style'.
 - Lining* or *toying*: the process whereby one writer publicly denounces another's efforts to write. In the former, a line is drawn across the graffiti. In the latter, the word 'toy' is written across the offending word or image. Lining and toying are very serious issues among writers. It can result not only in humiliation (from having one's writing abilities publicly attacked), but considerable personal injury to those who toy or line the tag belonging to a crew or a gang.
 - Buffed*: the term writers use to describe the removal of graffiti by authorities.
12. Although, one highly experienced writer remarked, 'My style is to not have a style . . . Everything I do is a continuous experiment' (G, 11: 34).
13. In contrast, note the views of one writer, G, interviewed by Young in another study, who said of tagging:

A tag is like calligraphy to me . . . If you really look at it and appreciate it you just see style, you know? . . . It's just . . . it does look ugly if you see it from far away, but if you really sit there and look at it and just see how much control the writer has over the can, you just appreciate it, you know? . . . I do, like if I do like a real nice piece then I do put a nice tag next to it, you know? Something really nice that makes it . . . that finishes it off. It's your signature. Say like Michael Jordan on a basketball or whatever, that's just how it is.

(Discussed in Young, 2005: 69)

14. Many respondents maintained that there were ethical taboos as to which surfaces could be written on. The precise nature of these taboo surfaces and locations varied, but included: residential property belonging to elderly people; churches and cemeteries; windows; cars; war memorials; and 'anything natural' (such as trees). Many writers complained that the so-called 'younger generation' of writers showed less respect for these cultural taboos.
15. This can be contrasted against the following remark, 'They call [graffiti] a culture, but culture brings to society, it doesn't take from it' (Christopher Miller, President, Traders' Association, Knox City Council, Victoria, *The Age*, 12 January 2002, NewsExtra, p. 3).
16. Sergeant Paul Bartlett, Officer in Charge, Transit Tactical Unit, South Australia, *The Advertiser*, 22 November 2001, p. 9.
17. For a detailed discussion of the graffiti-crime nexus in media representations of graffiti, see Young (2005: 56–62).
18. P. Heinrichs (2000) 'How to Stop Teenage Alienation', *Sunday Age*, 14 May, 1, pp. 10–11, at p. 11.
19. C.J. Chivers (2000) 'Graffiti Leads Police to 2 Boys, Who Are Charged with Arson at a School', *New York Times*, 15 March, p. B3.
20. P. Wilmoth (1997) 'Our Heroin Children', *Sunday Age*, 18 May, pp. 10–11, at p. 11.
21. Graffiti is often categorized as vandalism, comparable to seat slashing or window-breaking, and graffiti writers are sometimes assumed to participate in such activities *because* they are graffiti writers. Interviewees were therefore asked about vandalism along with other criminal activities. Around half of respondents said there was little or no relationship between graffiti and vandalism. One writer summed up the general feeling here saying that graffiti could be seen as vandalism but that 'it's not actually physically smashing or anything, it's just putting up on the wall' (AQ, 8: 32). Further, 'People that do graffiti are like higher up. Like, people that vandal[ize] and that are just wannabes . . . They're intoxicated or something and they just trash stuff, and that's just petty shit' (AA, 17: 1). Others disagreed with such sentiments saying that graffiti is 'straight out vandalism' (V, 6: 16; see also AC, 9: 26) (but this view may be complicated by the fact that many respondents felt that tagging was 'vandalism' whereas pieces were 'art', as discussed earlier).

22. Indeed, at least three writers had broken into homes and/or businesses and a further participant had been arrested on break and enter charges linked to the desire for (spray) paint (Z, AA, AB, AC).
23. Coincidentally, two participants admitted to having fathers who owned or worked in paint-related/reliant industries—eliminating the need to steal paint.
24. As one writer put it, '[Buying paint is] heaps better cos then you can, like, choose your colours as well, like, get the good can . . . See you gotta buy different nozzles and stuff as well, to do pieces' (R, 16: 21; see also T, 25).
25. This should not be taken to mean that other participants were not exposed to or did not partake in violent acts that accompanied their form of writing. Indeed, around half of interviewees ($n = 20$) related direct or vicarious experiences of violent encounters of one type or another. Taggers ($n = 12$) attested more often to such experiences than muralists ($n = 8$).
26. It should be noted that crews are typically *not* the same as gangs. The former traditionally resorts to violence only as a means of resolving conflict with *other writers*. Here, violence does not define the crew so much as it is a sporadic by-product of membership. A gang, on the other hand, is defined by its willingness to use violence in highly unpredictable ways—sometimes to vandalize, other times to rob, still others to injure seriously, rape or kill. Illicit writers—although in no way foreign to scenarios which can lead to violence—are a distinct group of persons from those who carry out the kinds of violence just mentioned. As one writer put it:

I have a [. . .] couple of people that like to go out and we do all murals in a whole line, you know, like four or five murals in a line, and we're called a little name [i.e. a tag or crew name]. But that doesn't mean everyone's [in] a gang . . .

(AN, 18: 2; see also AF, 13: 19)

- There were examples where writers found themselves having to defend themselves against gang members—some sustaining reasonably serious injuries such as a broken cheek bone and/or nose (as did B). But in the vast majority of cases, writers' attitude towards the issue of gangs and violence was one of deference and avoidance. Most writers said they never went 'looking for trouble'. However, if someone else was to start trouble then they would, on occasions, be prepared to 'see matters through'.
27. Of further concern is the violence sometimes used by residents against writers, 'People get [. . .] bricks put over their head, baseball bats and stuff like that' (AA, 18: 2; see also S, 9: 26).
 28. This is what occurred in South Australia under the Graffiti Control Act 2001.
 29. See Halsey (2007, forthcoming).

30. Note also the comment that,

[T]he nomad line is abstract in an entirely different sense, precisely because it has a multiple orientation and passes *between* points, figures, and contours: it is positively motivated by the smooth space it draws, not by any striation it might perform to ward off anxiety and subordinate the smooth. The abstract line is the affect of smooth spaces, not a feeling of anxiety that calls forth striation.

(Deleuze and Guattari, 1996: 496–7, emphasis in original)

31. “‘Haptic’ is a better word than ‘tactile’ since it does not establish an opposition between two sense organs but rather invites the assumption that the eye itself may fulfill this non-optical function’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1996: 492).

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MARK HALSEY teaches in the Department of Criminology, University of Melbourne, and is an adjunct senior lecturer, School of Law, Flinders University of South Australia. Under the auspices of an Australian Research Council grant, he is immersed in a six-year interview-based study of young men subject to repeat periods of incarceration and release across juvenile and adult custodial spheres. Mark is the author of *Deleuze and Environmental Damage* (published by Ashgate) and his work has appeared in such journals as *Punishment and Society*, *British Journal of Criminology* and *Criminal Justice*.

ALISON YOUNG teaches in the Department of Criminology, University of Melbourne. She is the author of *Femininity in Dissent* (1990), *Imagining Crime* (1996) and *Judging the Image* (2005) and has published numerous articles on the intersections of law, crime and culture. She is currently working on a book examining cinematic images of violence and justice. Her research on graffiti was funded by a Discovery Grant from the Australian Research Council. The research has more recently been extended to examine stencil artists and street artists, and graffiti writers' narratives of cultural belonging.
