

Rob Weinberg - December 8, 2003

## Shooting the Messenger: *Rethinking Confrontation in the War Against Graffiti*

*To say as I have insisted we should say that property rules limit freedom, is not to say they are eo ipso wrong. It is simply to say that they engage a concern about liberty, and that anyone who values liberty should put himself on alert when questions of property are being discussed.*

Law Professor Jeremy Waldron, 1991 (Waldron)

### Introduction

In 1981, Sattar Ridha and at least 17 other high-school youth were hanged to death in Iraq for writing graffiti which politically opposed Saddam Hussein and his Baath Party (Finn).

Can you imagine why such a horror occurred? Americans would conceive similar narratives about the tragic confrontation: “resistance by an oppressed group,” “exercise of tyranny,” “death of courageous young innocents.” Regardless of the horror of the act, the narrative itself would be predictable - right out of our folklore of good versus evil.

Two years later black hip-hop graffiti artist Michael Stewart was arrested, beaten, and most likely strangled to death by several white New York policemen (Roberts). The confrontation proceeded from the streets to the newspapers and the courts; in the ensuing jury trial manslaughter charges against the cops were dismissed by the judge on a technicality amidst credible charges of a cover-up (Shenon “Charges Dismissed”). Though Americans would (and did) formulate different narratives over how unseen portions of the street confrontation must have transpired, most people could frame the whole event within familiar if opposing sets of themes : “racism/code of silence/cover-up,” “street crime/overzealous cops/had it coming.”

But how do you frame this more recent case of violence against graffiti writers? On January 31 of 1995, William Masters instigated a confrontation with two Latino graffiti “taggers” (writers who quickly write their names in a public place) on a public street in North Hollywood. He ended up shooting both, killing Cesar Arce, an 18-year-old Latino. Because one of the writers was found to be in possession of a “threatening” screw driver Masters, who was white, was charged only with possession of a loaded weapon (Associated Press, 24 Feb. 1995). The surviving graffiti writer, David Hillo, after recovering from the bullet Masters had put in his butt while he fled, was sentenced to 20 days in jail and 3 years probation for “vandalism” (Javier), while Masters was ordered to perform roadside cleanup (“Masters Sentence”).

The Iraq incident is a tragedy, but also an apparently simple story: a small/good versus powerful/evil classic. The New Yorker’s murder as a story looks like either an overzealous cops/code of silence or

homicidal/racist theme depending on whether the narrator is a propertied white citizen or a marginalized urban youth of color like the victim. Either story is tragic, but not too puzzling.

The third confrontation, the Los Angeles killing, is harder to fit into typical narratives. It's about a vigilante - a man who saw an apparently minor crime (graffiti writing) in progress in his own neighborhood. Knowing that he had with him a loaded weapon, he decided to approach and confront the two young Latinos, and in whatever confrontation ensued shot both of them, killing one. In an interview following the killing, Masters referred to his victims as "skinhead Mexicans" (Delios). He had a history of espousing vigilante views, and in another interview told the public that "Your duty is to carry a firearm and to protect the public security. This is your duty as a citizen of the United States, and as a citizen of this state. You are the reserve militia." (Associated Press, 24 Feb. 1995) Simi Valley Councilwoman Sandi Webb wrote the Los Angeles Times, giving "Kudos to William Masters for his vigilant anti-graffiti efforts and for his foresight in carrying a gun for self protection. If (Los Angeles) refuses to honor Masters as a crime-fighting hero, then I invite him to relocate to our town." (Delios)

American responses to graffiti writing have seldom been as extreme as these but have nevertheless frequently been couched in a rhetoric of warfare - us versus them, civilization versus chaos - while the amount the country spends on graffiti removal has climbed to \$10-\$12 *billion* from about \$5 billion in 1990. (McCrea) The war presents clear overtones of race and class confrontation, in which violently differing narratives dispute boundaries, values, and the definition of property.

Why do we wage war on graffiti, and what are we really fighting over? What do we hope to accomplish? In the ways we confront graffiti writers, are we affecting or even addressing graffiti's cause and comprehending its meaning, or are we only shooting the messenger?

## Graffiti

The Italians were the first to speak of "graffiti", and earlier used the word to represent a wide variety of public writings. In Italy today however the word refers exclusively to the flamboyant and colorful, usually artistic pictorial hip-hop style of graffiti. All other "plain" writings are referred to as "scritte" (writings). (Phillips 54). Writing in bathrooms and thoughtless scribbles on public walls are not considered graffiti by those who have studied graffiti cultures. Those wall markings are just words; graffiti is something else.

Graffiti flows from an inseparable confluence of art and confrontation. Murals are created using spray-paint to *resemble* graffiti - sometimes by professionals, sometimes by at-risk youth under the leadership of "responsible" adults, sometimes as civic-sponsored projects by artists who continue to write illegally on their days off - but these legal projects are not graffiti at all, though the less commercial ones may be

significant representations of cultural resistance. I agree with Susan Phillips who says that all three of graffiti's indigenous manifestations - gang, hip-hop, and political - are "inextricably linked with illegality." (20). Once extracted from this frame the concept of graffiti quickly diffuses to include all forms of written messages, "from skywriting to bumper stickers to tattoos." (Phillips 20) It loses its ability to provide a window into cultural opposition, a key inspiration for the evolution of the writing culture's self-knowledge and artistic methods. The cooperation required to meet the challenges of writing in patrolled "enemy" territory helped forge a multi-ethnic writing culture that played a large role in the creation of the larger hip-hop culture - which itself serves as the major reference point for cultural graffiti.

Almost all graffiti haters describe it as vandalism - an act that destroys property and order - but to its creators and admirers, it is the opposite: a creative act, one that builds value, culture, and presence where none existed. According to Alex Aquino, the President of Ace Beats Records in San Francisco, "In hip-hop culture, graffiti is our written language, that's our hieroglyphics, our fonts..." (Sharratt). Many analysts agree with Austin that "graffiti is not vandalism" but "an important grassroots urban mural movement" and the "most important art movement of the late 20th century." (Austin 6)

Whatever outsiders may think about their work, both gang and hip-hop graffiti writers believe it has artistic merit. Though hip-hop writing in particular has attained world-wide status as an important form of contemporary art, attempts to discuss it openly have been highly polarized - emotionally charged with the distress of municipal authorities and individual property owners who feel they must spend enormous time and money in eradicating it or who fear it as a harbinger of chaos, versus the admiration of cultural and artistic critics who see in it the emergence of a significant new and genuinely grass-roots art form.

Hip-hop youth of color risk their safety and freedom to "throw up" a quick clandestine set of initials on a wall just to prove they have spoken where the wider culture should prohibit their expression - and where any sense of personal fear should prohibit their presence. They spend long hours individually or as part of a crew planning and painting a "piece" - a masterpiece in their own eyes and in those of an international audience, of color and form derived from years of training. Gang members claim independence from the world of legal institutions by mapping the boundaries of their communities with letters that express their "style" and their affiliations by using prohibited symbols.

Without reference to illegality, graffiti loses its historic connection to the underclass in which it has consistently evolved in recent decades, and to the political and artistic expressions of resistance to the larger culture. It loses its power as a word.

A work of graffiti *could* be seen as a static object divorced from context - and it is increasingly seen that way today as street works are captured digitally and placed on internet sites such as [www.artcrimes.com](http://www.artcrimes.com) where they comprise amazing and much discussed galleries. But how graffiti behaves

within our own familiar haunts - where it is placed and how it takes form; its tendency to appear is if by magic without apparent agency and to disappear just as mysteriously – relies on the tensions between artist and opposer, and on the use of those specific limited materials which can be accessed (often through theft) by marginalized youth. From Phillips' perspective, graffiti is “all about people . . . about relationships, and individuals, and motives.” (23) Illegality, and the bold imposition of expression by marginalized youth from hip-hop and gang cultures upon the seemingly sacrosanct properties and territories of the dominant culture, *defines* graffiti, at least as much as do the media in which it is written and the forms - artistic and otherwise - through which it is articulated.

### Graffiti culture

Gang graffiti is historically rooted in the poor Latino and African American neighborhoods of Los Angeles, but has spread in recent decades to Chicago, New York, and other major cities. Gang members mark the boundaries of their territories with distinctive styles of lettering, informing surrounding gangs that this is their home. Gang graffiti writers may take considerable pride in their work, often creating careful compositions designed to reflect pride in their affiliation. Though during the social upheavals of the 1970's much gang graffiti became suffused with cultural awareness and directed itself outward toward the larger oppressive superculture in messages of opposition to white culture and police control, most before and since has been directed almost exclusively toward other gangs, and is “coded” so that very few people outside the gang culture have the literacy to read and respond to it. Still, gang graffiti with its frequent overt references to killing and isolation within distinct boundaries, goes beyond peer communication and clearly represents to the world at large the way gangs see themselves - as independent of the society at large; a “closed corporate community” that has “little to do with the larger system.” (Austin 73)

“Hip-hop” graffiti writers - world famous for their massive colorful works of illegally placed art - share the neighborhoods and cultural roots of gang members but seldom join gangs. Hip-hop writers work alone or as part of “crews” with the sole intent of creating art and magnifying their personal reputations for talent, prolificacy, and courage within the writing subculture. Unlike gangs the crews do not establish local territories but move widely about their metropolis, and unlike gang members, individual writers may work with more than one crew. The ideals of the writing culture support norms and a path of career development from early to late teens or beyond that parallels in many ways those of the superculture: hard work, progress and mentorship in craft, organization, courage, dedication, loyalty, tradition, and achievement. Coming from a largely disenfranchised, poor and minority youth subculture whose members

have little hope of experiencing success of position or property in the wider culture, they have established and thrive on what Bowling Green State University professor of popular culture, Joe Austin, refers to as a “prestige economy.” Writers acquire currency in this economy over time by the quantity, ubiquity, and artistic merit of their work, which is always signed so that eventually everyone in the writing community knows who wrote it. Intimidation and violence (“beef”) sometimes occur between hip-hop writers, and sometimes one crew will “vamp” another (steal all of their equipment), especially when lack of writing space encourages writers to trespass against their own cultural norm of not overwriting the work of others (Nader). But hip-hop crews lack the essential commitment to inter-group violence which characterizes those gang members who also write graffiti, and intimidating rival writers or overwriting their work seldom confers prestige.

Hip-hop graffiti writing evolved organically in New York City during the 70’s and 80’s as a reaction to a fortuitous set of circumstances. Writers are torn between the generally opposing requirements of clandestine generation (since writing is illegal) and public display (powerful currency in its members’ “economy of prestige”). The subway trains of NYC’s Transit Authority (TA) provided the ideal canvas - immobile and hidden from the public at night in train yards but visible to tens of thousands during the next day’s commute rush. Newly available spray paints and indelible colored markers provided perfect media: small enough for impoverished youth to shoplift and to conceal while traveling, fast to use, capable of providing professional results in a skilled hand. The lethal dangers of transit yards with their ever present high-voltage third rail and fast-moving trains and the unforeseeable presence of police able and willing to administer violent “street justice”, provided an arena full of ready-made contests to challenge the physical agility and peer organizing skills that young people seem eager to demonstrate. Trains, once painted in secret by writers and then sent on to their commute routes by the New York Transit Authority (TA), could be observed by writers and the general public from large areas of the City including the disenfranchised neighborhoods of the artists who could track each others’ progress by observing the code names with which their works are always signed.

Writing culture co-opted the Roman alphabet and consciously transformed it into highly stylized forms, artistically distancing its own emerging hip-hop culture from the usual representations of the commercial establishment surrounding and dominating the tracks. Each train became a canvas in an informal commons of resistance, art and prestige that provided critical display space and the mobility by which members of the writing culture communicated and gathered, and through which they created and regularly monitored each other’s claims of status by counting and evaluating each other’s writing from specified points on the train lines. So critical to writing culture was this commons that when the TA managed to take back the trains, finally “buffing” them of all graffiti around 1984, the culture suffered serious

fragmentation. Graffiti “bombers”, who obtain their prestige through the sheer number of places that they throw up their code-names, took to many new neighborhoods and buildings that had previously been spared such as churches and private houses (Austin 238). “Piecers”- writers who spend long hours creating a “masterpiece” - changed their canvases from trains to large stationary walls like warehouses and abandoned buildings in obscure areas. The visibility of art declined while damage to public property increased, raising public opposition.

### *Warrior culture*

In addition to facing down vigilantism and night-stick law enforcement, writers gain prestige by working where others feared to go: high on bridge works, near subway tracks that are frequented by trains and offer exposure to the lethal electric third rail, close to street traffic. (McNulty) Writers have been electrocuted, run over, and have fallen to their deaths.

Though hip-hop graffiti culture is one to which violence is largely incidental, it bears aspects of a warrior’s culture. Austin refers to the act of writing in areas that are prestigiously difficult to access as “counting coup”, an apt reference to the Native American warrior tradition of approaching an enemy in battle and touching him with a “coup stick” at great risk but without employing a weapon. Like members of most warrior cultures, most graffiti writers are male. Though there were important women writers in NYC, they constituted a small minority. Austin listed several cultural factors that may have accounted for their under-representation: they had domestic chores that made it harder to leave home; they faced the additional risk of sexual violence while working at night in alleys or in the shadows of abandoned buildings; boyfriends often asked them not to go out; and among the predominantly male crews, some simply refused to accept women as members.

Unlike warriors, hip-hop writers typically abandon their careers after their teen years, largely out of fear of the much greater penalties that courts enact upon adult offenders.

### *Commercial “graffiti”*

Some of what might loosely be considered graffiti - perhaps the majority of it - is simply commercial. Advertising and political bills are often glued or stapled illegally onto walls or posts by the thousands.

Though such commercial “graffiti” is just as illegal, and in some places more pervasive than authentic graffiti, its perpetrators do not come from resistance cultures as do gang members and hip-hop writers. Some corporations have even adopted graffiti as a method of co-opting youth culture. “Guerrilla marketing is a good way to appeal to computer programmers, or ‘hippies’ who don’t associate themselves

with Corporate America, says Katharine Paine, president of consulting firm Delahaye Medialink.”  
(Kessler)

IBM was forced to pay fines in 2001 after it hired people to spray-paint hundreds of advertisements for its products on the streets of San Francisco and Chicago as part of its "Love, Peace & Linux" campaign, and Microsoft was reprimanded for similar illegal street painting in New York City. (Sternstein) IBM, Microsoft, and commercial advertisers are part of the dominant culture, and there was little animosity in the civic reprimands these companies received. No corporate officer was recommended for punishment despite damages probably in excess of that produced by most cultural graffiti writers – though their one hireling who was arrested “was ordered to perform 30 days of community service in recompense for criminal property damage.” (Copeland) For the very reason that they do not challenge the larger culture, I do not consider these commercial efforts, though illegal, to represent true graffiti. IBM and Microsoft staged these fake “confrontations” with a society of which they are central members for commercial advancement. Their real involvement in a larger commercial “economy of prestige” is enacted through legally sanctioned presentations (ads), not graffiti.

Commercial culture, as part of the dominant culture, protects its space not only from illegal attacks, but from legal attempts to co-opt it. When Adbusters wanted to advertise a product specifically designed to counter corporate messages, only CNN would accept their paid ads (Wasserman). The dominant culture protects its messages in many ways; the war on graffiti is not merely a war on vandalism and social chaos fought along strict legal boundaries as its agents often claim, but part of a war against all messages legal or otherwise that distract from the dominant presentation.

### How cities justify the war against graffiti

Seeing graffiti and understanding that it has an *association* with vandalism, gang activity, crime, and an imagined impending social chaos, municipalities misidentify it as the *cause* of these problems. Municipalities play out cause and effect fallacies amidst varying degrees of panic and with little chance of affecting outcomes that would be positive for any of the involved parties. Municipalities appear to buy into two popular fallacies.

*The gang-causing fallacy.* In Bowling Green, Kentucky graffiti removal crews are “really trying to . . . send a message to this particular gang, saying, ‘We know where you’re spending your time, and we don’t want you spending your time there.’” (Gaines) After all, gangs rely on graffiti, and even violently confront each other over it. Erase graffiti, and you keep gangs away, right? This is why in Anchorage “we

have the graffiti program to remove it. A lot of it is gang related and we are trying to discourage all that kind of activity.” - (KTVA)

What evidence is there to support these municipal proposals that removing gang graffiti discourages gang activities, or moves gangs away? I have been unable to find a study suggesting that graffiti removal has any impact on gangs. To the contrary, those agencies with the most experience in resisting gangs use every method *but* graffiti removal.

Streetgangs.com lists many activities from which gang members have been enjoined by the courts (including some which, like graffiti writing, are already illegal), but graffiti is not among them (Streetgangs). Injunctions imposed by the Los Angeles City Attorney’s Office “may restrict members of a targeted street gang in a specific community from: loitering in public with other gang members; intimidating victims and witnesses; possessing or using guns, weapons, alcohol or illegal narcotics; disobeying a curfew imposed on the gang; and trespassing” but not from graffiti writing (Delgadillo). A recent Los Angeles City Attorney’s injunction seeks to keep alleged members of the 30-year-old Bounty Hunters gang “from standing, sitting, walking, driving, gathering or appearing anywhere in public view in the ‘safety zone’; confronting, intimidating, annoying, harassing, assaulting or battering anyone in the area; possessing guns or illegal weapons.” (Viacom). Graffiti writing, however, is nowhere enjoined.

The Los Angeles City Attorney defends his anti-gang injunctions because “If you deal with the smaller crimes, the entry-level crimes, that will lead to the more serious crimes to start to diminish.” This sounds very similar to the justification municipal leaders sound for *attacking* graffiti writing, but this experienced gang-fighter *excludes* graffiti writing from among the entry-level crimes for which he demonstrates concern in his injunction.

Are municipalities simply hoodwinked when they play “the gang card” to encourage removal of graffiti? Do they really believe they will reduce the presence of gangs, or are they merely trying to *hide* their presence from tourists and other commercial interests?

It is not even clear that civic leaders are able to correctly identify graffiti as gang-related, or even the presence of gangs within their city. A former deputy sheriff in Los Angeles County who moved to Anchorage responded to KTVA’s concerns about gang-related graffiti by asking if there are gangs in Anchorage at all. He asks “Are we talking about gang colors? Or about kids who leave the right or left shoulder strap of their overalls unbuttoned? Are we talking about a group of young black males standing on a corner in Mountain View, or about a group of young Asian males driving down Northern Lights at 10:30 on a Friday night, or about a group of high school football players going out for a late night snack after a game?” - (Trostle)

Gangs are very well studied in larger cities, but suburbs and smaller municipalities may jump to a number of conclusions about gangs and how they operate, particularly with regard to graffiti.

A more fundamental critique against the gang graffiti fallacy may be derived from an ACLU study showing that *no* gang injunctions reduce crime, but increase it and/or move it to outlying areas (ACLU). It's hard to imagine how the prevention of gang graffiti could be effective where even such comprehensive injunctions have failed.

*The "broken windows" fallacy.* It would be nice if washing away paint could stop real crime, as this columnist from the Omaha World Herald proposes: "Social psychologists have begun to learn that graffiti changes the character of a neighborhood. It marks a locale as a place where antisocial acts can be gotten away with. . . A well-known example of the connection occurred in New York City a few years ago. Instances of violent crime in the subway system plunged to a fraction of former levels after the city did just two things: It began aggressively cleaning up graffiti, and it cracked down on fare-jumpers." (Omaha) But Austin's studies of New York subway graffiti show that the opposite happened. After a decade-long battle with writers, the Transit Authority finally succeeded in removing all graffiti from its trains. The following year crime in the subways rather than diminishing reached at an all-time high - and for a much more substantial and traditional reason than any graffiti effect: the economy slumped. (Austin 226)

Hillsboro, Oregon Police Department's program coordinator for volunteer services claimed that "Unchecked, vandalism can lead to escalating crime . . . Property values fall, businesses fail, and newcomers choose other places to move to and spend their money" (Danks) Is there any evidence that graffiti and other forms of so-called social "disorder" have a causal relationship with crime? This is a popular belief held by municipal authorities, embodied in the so-called "broken windows" theory. A study by the National Institute of Justice shows there is little to indicate such a relationship. As part of the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods "a long-term study of the antecedents of antisocial and criminal behavior [is] being conducted among a large group of people in a number of Chicago neighborhoods." The study "proposes that both crime and disorder stem from structural characteristics specific to certain neighborhoods, most notably concentrated poverty and the associated absence of social resources." Though graffiti and other forms of "disorder" can influence investment and outmigration from a community, "policies intended to reduce crime by eradicating disorder solely through tough law enforcement tactics are misdirected." (Sampson and Raudenbush)

The confusion between cause and effect is self evident in a recent article in the London Economist which says "The nice thing about the newly declared war on anti-social behaviour is that it is easy to tell who is winning: just look at a nearby wall. If it is covered in graffiti--and, in an urban area, it probably is--then the baddies are on top. So precise is the indicator that police and local authorities have committed

themselves to an anti-graffiti offensive . . ." (Economist: "Britain: Wild Style") Following this logic, one might ban weather reports in order to prevent storms.

Municipalities make many other dubious claims on the destructive powers of graffiti and the magical effects of removing it:

*Control graffiti and you control anti-social behavior.* A UK government proposal would "clamp down on anti-social behaviour in which "crack houses" are to be closed; and it is to become an offence to sell spray paints to under-18s." Under this plan the families of youthful violators could lose their government living assistance, forcing them out onto the street. (Loney) There is little analytic value in a concept – "anti-social behavior" - that places graffiti writing and organized narcotics trafficking under a single consideration.

*Graffiti will damage property values.* "It certainly makes the city look depressed," - (Smithberger). The idea that graffiti lowers property values appears frequently in newspaper accounts, and as easy as the claim should be to investigate through real estate reports, I have found no reporters providing such an analysis.

*It scares children.* The English village of Huddersfield complains about recent graffiti in a pedestrian subway. "Children walk through the subway on their way to Outlane Junior School. It must be very intimidating for them." (Huddersfield) However, the local reporter fails to mention if any children complained.

*It's ugly.* For many people it certainly is. But lots of things are seen by many as ugly in a city and yet are seldom criminalized - billboards, automobile noise, diesel exhaust, foul language, dogs shitting, peeling house paint, weedy lawns, concrete, smog. If graffiti is ugly, why are corporations emulating it in their advertising campaigns? why are graffiti writers hired to decorate walls with so-called "graffiti art"? why do after school programs facilitate "graffiti" art on their playground walls, as long as it is in an officially controlled circumstance? The effects of removal are also ugly, since "it is difficult for the untutored eye to distinguish what is beautiful and what is not; what is anarchy and what is style; why irregular patches of beige [graffiti cover-up paint], often dripping around the edges, are preferable to elegant calligraphic curlicues in bright colors, carefully applied to express technique by avoiding drips and splatters." (Cavan)

*It makes people sick.* The proponent of a proposed anti-graffiti ordinance in Las Vegas claimed that "removing graffiti is necessary to protect the public health, safety and welfare of the residents of the county and to prevent blight upon the community." (Suprynowicz) Such claims are common but unsubstantiated.

## The real reasons cities war on graffiti

### *Racism*

Race and class seem to influence the reactions of municipalities as they try to control graffiti and its writers, who are usually youth of color from poor neighborhoods. Barring graffiti writers may be part of a larger attempt to bar these communities and their expressions from the municipal enterprise entirely. In observing municipal reactions to homeless people, Jeremy Waldron has written that “a rule against performing an act in a public place amounts *in effect* to a *comprehensive* ban on that action so far as the homeless are concerned” (Waldron 318, emphasis his). Similarly, barring graffiti bans public expressions altogether by inner city residents who lack access to any other means of publication such as magazine ads and internet web creation. Graffiti represents a tear in the municipality’s seamless commercial and political curtain, one through which the faces of the disenfranchised have inconveniently emerged.

Hip-hop graffiti has typically been written for artist expression and notoriety. But especially during the 70’s and 80’s its intent became political: “Across the country [in the 1980’s] countless shifting groups and collectives painted overtly political murals with and without official permission. These included an exploding number of Chicano murals in California; anarchist, labor and housing-rights murals along Haight Street and throughout the Mission District in San Francisco; and in New York the “La Lucha” project and Group Material’s excellent and broad-ranging poster and mural campaign.” (Lydersen)

It is not only illegal works that have been removed from neighborhoods. Legally permitted graffiti productions or “murals are the proof in many communities of color that someone in the neighborhood cares. Against gentrification, [these] productions are a form of community preservation.” (Chang). But being legal has not keep them from being destroyed when they stand in the way of gentrification as corporations take over the buildings and paint over murals, eradicating community voices and presence, asserting territorial affiliation with the national and multinational superculture.

“By the late ’70s, graffiti had moved from the trains to the walls, and become a key symbol in the efforts of mayors to gentrify low-income communities of color.” - (Chang) “Much of Manhattan’s public art of the old grassroots political forms—murals, posters, graffiti—is [now in 2002] in fact advertising for fashion, music, alcohol, software, food. The murals and stencils of political figures and issues done in the 80’s are largely absent.” - (Lydersen)

Official penalties for writers have frequently reflected a race and class bias, as when the white vigilante shooter was sentenced to minor community service while the graffiti writer he shot received jail time, or when charges of homicide against the white NYC cops were dismissed.

Harsh penalties are available for use at the discretion of prosecutors and judges. “With proof of damages exceeding \$500, prosecutors will charge [Minneapolis] taggers with a felony.” (Close) Writing is also a felony in New York State. (Buckham) In most states a felony is “any crime that is punishable by death, more than one year in jail, or more than \$1000 in fines.” And, a felony conviction “may impact other rights, such as possessing firearms, voting, and certain jobs. Common felonies include: murder, rape, robbery, burglary, aggravated assault, child molestation, most drug offenses, vehicular homicide.” (Giannini) However, vehicular homicide is sometimes a mere misdemeanor, unlike graffiti. “An article by the Kensington Welfare Rights Union notes that [in] Philly . . . graffiti artists can end up with \$10,000 fines and up to five years in jail.” (Lydersen)

When citizens who are part of the mainstream – the powerful or their children - commit graffiti crimes, penalties are often minimal. In a village in South Devon, England, “A 17-year-old Torquay youth who created "an eyesore" in historic Totnes by spraying graffiti over public buildings and road signs caused almost £2,000 damage . . . covering parts of the town hall, the swimming pool and an elderly woman's house in Cistern Street.” (Herald). The newspaper speaks of the boy’s aspirations to become a commercial artist, and of his fathers’ pride in his son and hopes for his future – not about pestilence or threats to public health and safety; his writing is not correlated with “crack houses” as has been the case elsewhere in England. The young man was fined less than a hundred dollars. I have already mentioned that IBM and Microsoft officials received no personal punishment when they painted graffiti in hundreds of locations in NYC, Chicago, and San Francisco (though the corporations themselves were required to pay for removal, and one of IBM’s hirelings was sentenced to a month of community service).

UCLA anthropologist Susan Phillips asks us to imagine what different sentences might have resulted following the vigilante shooting had the situation been reversed: if the two Latinos had been discovered standing gun in hand over a white Masters lying dead with a screwdriver in *his* hand. (Phillips 3)

### *Controlling the meaning of property*

Mark Tushnet asserts “that the notion of ‘rights’ is more of less window dressing for the assertion of power by those who already dominate.” (Rose 1994)

Graffiti is not considered vandalism by its proponents and though illegal, may not always be vandalism even from a more traditional perspective. Graffiti is frequently painted over older existing graffiti, and in so doing may well create no additional damage to the underlying property. It is often written on abandoned or condemned buildings of zero commercial value. Though officially unsanctioned, it may be welcomed as an expression of community if it is commensurate with the sensibilities to the neighborhood on whose walls it appears, and may be left undisturbed by local residents and other writers for months or years. It

may appear on railroad or street abutments where no business is affected. In these circumstances it is hard to equate it with vandalism - though in all these cases it is illegal.

Under California state law, graffiti has now been defined as vandalism. Penalties include imprisonment for up to 1 year, fines as high as \$50,000 for which parents are also liable, plus community service for up to 600 hours. Possession of graffiti implements with intent to write is itself punishable by up to 90 hours of community service. (California) A property owner sees graffiti as vandalism when it damages the surface of his or her property, perhaps expensively. But while vandalism implies deliberate destruction to someone's property as an end in itself, Joe Austin says that damage is *not* the intent of New York City's graffiti writers - they believe they are *enhancing* an industrial wall or train car when they spend hours creating a "piece" by using an art medium they may have spent years to perfect. Many observers from outside the writing culture agree.

Does a graffiti masterpiece that has taken several consummate artists many hours to create (albeit in violation of state or municipal codes) become the property of that artist, belonging within the domain and the history of the culture from which it is derived? Possibly so, at least from the perspective of the established culture of graffiti writers which receives increasing international recognition. Stepping back to a broader perspective, "when the ability to benefit from something derives from rights attributed by law, custom, or convention, contemporary theorists have usually called it 'property'." (MacPherson Ribot and Peluso, 162) When the New York Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) "buffs" a work from the side of a train, that may actually constitute vandalism - the MTA's expressed intent is to destroy the artist's work, to eradicate it. The removal of graffiti, though frequently referred to as "cleaning" as if it were the removal of bird droppings or the residue of some industrial polluter, is certainly experienced as a loss of work by its creators, their culture, and its appreciators.

#### *Property and the messages of civic visual space*

Graffiti is a highly visible symbol that the dominant society isn't completely in control and cannot arbitrarily dictate the terms of access to expressions that give cultural meaning to spaces.

"In the rhetoric of the ruling class, graffiti symbolizes anarchy, its very presence an unquestioned threat to social order. Graffiti destroys the beauty of the environment and challenges the resolve of the authorities to maintain their aesthetic vision of what public space should look like." (Cavan) In Minneapolis, a man was sentenced to two months jail time, five years probation, psychiatric evaluation and periodic drug testing after pleading guilty to "first-degree criminal damage to property" for painting a wall and a garbage can. (Gustafson) In Pennsylvania, the "Court sentence(d) Philadelphia graffiti vandal Brian Turner to [an] 11-23 months jail term with daily work release to paint over walls he defaced." (Ditzen) In a case

apparently devoid of any racial overtones, “Financial services executive David Bender, 32, was sentenced in Philadelphia to 310 days in jail for a graffiti spree during a Feb. 3 snowstorm. ‘The city is going to hell in a hand basket with this graffiti,’ said Judge Louis G. F. Retacco.” (Leavitt)

In New York City’s subway graffiti wars of the late 70’s and early 80’s, Metropolitan Transit Authority Chair Richard Ravitch characterized the subway system “as being on the verge of collapse” with an alarming “number of crimes, derailments, and fires” (Austin 213) as well as doors that stuck open or shut. A citizen might commute for some time without witnessing one of these disasters, but was *always* presented with graffiti which, thought municipal officials, must symbolize to her a failed control regime throughout the system. Mayor Koch admitted that the eradication of graffiti - a project for whose exclusive purpose he was diverting millions of scarce municipal dollars on new fences, attack dogs, vandal squads, and technology - would not solve the real problems within the system, but would have a “positive psychological impact” on riders (Austin 210) (not to mention on his own political future.) Graffiti removal, though elusive for many years, was still far more doable than fixing functional problems, and “would be conspicuous to the straphangers, to the [Metropolitan Transit Authority’s] state and federal funding agencies, and to the media.” (Austin 217) Getting control of graffiti would show that “The New Rome [NYC] was being rebuilt” and it “revived the city’s national and international image more generally.” (Austin 225) It would prominently demonstrate to New York’s international visitors, if only symbolically, that this was one city *not* going to hell in a hand basket.

Beyond the political need to control the symbolic content of municipal space, why are property owners and their municipalities so obsessed with even the small loss of control of visual space that graffiti symbolizes? I recall several years ago driving toward a typical Marlboro billboard in San Francisco, high above my head in a prestigiously expensive location near a freeway on-ramp. Two painted “Marlboro Country” cowboys were talking to each other. As I read the caption - “Bob, I miss my lung” - I suddenly realized that this was not a tobacco ad, but one of the new California State anti-tobacco health ads. I felt shocked (into delight) - as if the city’s and even the country’s seamless corporate landscape of messages had been severely breached in this one place.

The visual symbolism of property may be as important as its function. Carol Rose sees “property as an ongoing persuasive activity” in which human vision plays a central role. (Rose 270) According to her and other analysts, property is an interaction between people and not really a fixed object. What happens when a writer paints a train or a public highway overpass with his or her name and with the symbols of an inner-city hip-hop or gang culture not intended by the dominant culture to be associated with that space? Despite legal property documents in county offices, does graffiti so fundamentally change the nature of the property itself that its “owners” feel a desperate need to reclaim it? Buildings themselves may function

more importantly as visual representations of cultural dominance than as utilitarian devices, and they can be subjected literally to “desecration” (losing their sacred essence) as graffiti writing is sometimes called.

“Property, even understood as a set of claims against other persons, often revolves about access to some resource that exists in space and extension, and for that reason vision may be the first sense to be called upon in apprehending property.” (Rose 274) I was surprised some years ago to learn that though a large commercial building may feature one dominate corporate name at its apex (like the “Power Bar” building in Berkeley, California), the corporate owners of that name might only lease a small part of the building, not the whole thing or even a major part of it. They buy the rights to put their name atop the building as a persuasive suggestion that their organization occupies and controls a massive structure. For the building’s owners, the visual dominance that they sell is a property in itself, and creates powerful assumptions about the nature and ownership of the name holder over a much larger space than she actually occupies. Corporations use such high ground (on buildings and on other advertising media) to garner from the populace that most precious of all holdings - what their culture terms “mind share”: a slice of every citizen’s consciousness focused on their product or presence. The visibility of a corporation’s name is often a far more valuable “property” than any of its physical assets, which in fact it may only lease.

In 2001 a writer whose code name was “Mook” repeatedly outraged Pittsburg civic officials by spraying his name high atop very visible structures like bridge trusses. Because of its visibility his work was featured in the news, raising the sense of helplessness of officials - and their rhetoric: “City Public Works Director Guy Costa marvels that [Mook] hasn't injured or killed himself while scaling the spans. He admits his department has become "very frustrated" with Mook's antics. . . I'm surprised he hasn't fallen or gotten hurt. I'd actually like to see that -- see him break his arm or something." (McNulty) Graffiti ceaselessly shouts “I am (my name is) on top of you.”

The art forms of graffiti seemingly challenge the very structure of the walls on which they frolic. Advanced pieces are usually three dimensional and wildly dissonant with their surroundings, creating invasive architectures of their own that defy the civically agreed-upon ones that they efface.

## Conclusions

*What prevents a rethinking of the confrontation?*

*Underlying problems are ignored.* Two common epithets for graffiti writers are “mindless” and “thoughtless.” These are understandable reactions from a property owner who is suddenly faced with repainting a wall. But the terms also seem to represent an element of personal disregard, as if writers were non-persons without contexts. In NY in the 1980s, even as NYC pulled out of its fiscal crisis, “Less than

one in five teenagers overall and less than one in ten African American teenagers had a job, and the city still had the lowest ration of working teenagers . . . of any city in the nation.” (Austin 212) “The poor could be (and were) simply ignored or represented as another ‘quality of life problem’ for the city’s more prosperous citizens.” (Austin 213) The sharp, disregarding anger of graffiti haters seems evidence of a more general disregard for the communities and circumstances of writers and gangs. In Miller’s words, “The crusade against graffiti is part a strategy used by politicians to blame the victims of poverty for expressing their reality.” (138) Rethinking the war on graffiti probably means rethinking the confrontation between communities that takes place in our streets, job markets, courts, and in our ever growing prison system. These are broad social problems in which the confrontation with graffiti plays a role.

*We don’t want to see ourselves.* At times civic leadership has behaved much like a gang toward crews of writers. During the 1970’s and 80’s, municipalities gradually ratcheted up the rhetoric, penalties, and tacitly-sanctioned police street violence as they reacted to persistent graffiti writing. New York City, in particular, invoked fines so punitive that its juvenile courts frequently refused to sentence young offenders. Meanwhile citizens at large often surprised city officials by their disinterest in reporting graffiti writers when they saw them in action. Even today, “The general public tends to prove unhelpful [in supporting strong anti-graffiti measures].” (Economist, “Britain: Wild Style”)

The mayor and his TA officers thus often found themselves isolated from their constituents; in public pronouncements the mayor often sounded the anger and sense of betrayal of one disenfranchised. His officers began using brutality and humiliation in very personal confrontations - beating writers, or in one incident, forcing a writer to infuse his own Afro with his spray paint until it set into a mass that the writer had to later cut off. TA vandal squads sometimes crossing out writers’ tags (code-names) - exactly the means by which rival crews sometimes battled each other, and a sure message of confrontation when used by gang members. TA officers sometimes “threw up” their own tags on trains to provoke or discourage real writers by competing for prestige.

Even Mayor Kotch operated with some of the territoriality of a gang member, and in almost as much isolation from the sensibilities of his constituents (the wider society) when he built prison-style razor coil fences guarded by attack dogs around some train yards to repel writers. Public outcry forced him to abandon these methods. In a gang-like display of territoriality, he painted trains in these yards white - ostensibly as a “test lure” to prove the hoped deterrent effect of the new fences, but clearly recognizable as a territorial marker challenging the other “gang” (the writing culture) to a confrontation supported by violent capabilities (the police). The street strangulation of writer Michael Stewart by Kotch’s police itself echoes gang “justice.”

According to sociologists, the gangs of Los Angeles and other cities have for decades provided both a home and a hideous battle ground for young people. Murder and crime are a daily part of gang life. Its easy to forget that the United States, which provides so many possibilities to the enfranchised, has and uses the most powerful and best organized killing machine in the history of the world for the express purposes of maintaining *our* home and *our* territory. Such a comparison is crude at best and will be rejected by many. But more realistic self-reflection can help us see that the members of seemingly obscure and threatening communities are not so different from the rest of us; may, in fact, be people we can and must communicate with, rather than the authors of a plague or a pestilence.

### *The social value of graffiti*

In gang neighborhoods gangs admire the work of writers and they are given the respect usually granted only to fellow gang members. Graffiti writing may itself be an “outlet” - an illegal activity that serves as a substitute for gang membership for young writers living in gang-run neighborhoods. If so eliminating graffiti and its economy of prestige may encourage more youth to become gang members than would allowing it. It might be argued that specifically illegal production of graffiti (but not the civic warfare) should be allowed in order to preserve for young people this alternative means of membership in resistant communities.

People should study graffiti to learn about the writers’ world. For anthropologist Susan Phillips, graffiti became the key by which she eventually opened up communication with a culture – the gangs of Los Angeles – that was otherwise as inaccessible to her as hers was to them. Graffiti writers tend to be street smart. Beat cops might do well to overlook some of their “art crimes” (and perhaps they already do) in order to enlist their cooperation in solving real crime and other local problems. “Zero tolerance” is a political pitch, not a solution.

Graffiti may be one of the few forums that openly expresses the divide between marginalized communities and the “larger” society. Austin sees it as a means “adopted by those without power, to negotiate relationships with both the society from which they are disempowered and others within their own groups.” (20) We would do well to avoid a knee-jerk reaction every time graffiti communicates to us evidence of this divide.

We should devise a way to rescue selected graffiti projects from their illegal status and designate them as “keepers.” Some municipalities are already taking this approach, relaxing their desire for total control in exchange for communication. A committee could be created from art-minded youth with legitimate connections to the writing culture to decide which pieces bear keeping. Somehow the choices would need to parallel the writers’ own criteria for allocating prestige, as well as more generally accepted criteria and

the values of the communities in which the works live. To maintain their legitimacy in the writing community the committee would need to largely self-select their own membership and be semi-autonomous in their ability to choose art works and not be subject to the aesthetics of the dominant (civic) culture. If combined with consistent and effective removal of unwanted graffiti, certain pieces could be preserved without fearing they would start an “epidemic.” The work of selecting the committee in itself would create interesting cross-culture linkages. Illegal but excellent works would be preserved, and would serve to displace uglier throw-up tags.

Some such thinking is already underway. “In Chicago, the youth organizing group, the Southwest Youth Collaborative, sponsors a program called the University of Hip-Hop. Young people teach each other the hip-hop “elements” along with revolutionary history, with the aim of creating politically conscious graf murals in the Southside’s Englewood neighborhood.” (Chang) An organization like this might reach out to both sides in the confrontation to begin a conversation on legalizing some existing works.

### *Rethinking confrontation*

It is not graffiti, but as Carol Rose reminds us “force and violence [that] are the nemesis of property, and their frequent use is a signal that a property regime is faltering.” (Rose 296) The city of Vancouver seeks to forestall this demise by “advertising the location of mural walls where it is permissible to paint graffiti, and inviting private property owners to donate wall space to the program.” (Vancouver) While many civic groups and authors have suggested that legal space be set aside for graffiti artists to produce their “pieces” so that they have an alternative outlet to vandalistic writing, these efforts do not accommodate the essential confrontational nature of the graffiti sub-culture.

I agreed with Phillips earlier that graffiti is quintessentially illegal. But societies consist of many layers - multiple “semi-autonomous social fields” with their own abilities to “generate rules and coerce or induce compliance” (Moore 722). Even if a state or municipality had no “official” code making graffiti illegal, gang territorial lettering would still function as graffiti, since it plays a critical role in the coercive confrontation between individually structured societies where one gang’s set of symbols defies the laws - the coercive rules - of another. Graffiti, even when not overtly political, is a serious form of resistance to the values of a dominant culture enacted by distinct disenfranchised cultures. As long as writing on a wall challenges the control of a dominant culture, it supports the writing culture, even if in some cases it is technically legal. Softening Phillips’ strict framing of graffiti as something opposed by civic codes may provide some space for adjusting those codes without losing sight of the confrontational component that makes graffiti both a vital art form and an expressive bridge between opposing cultures.

Many civic programs have encourage adult-led, cooperative team mural projects including Judith Baca's artistically and socially monumental Los Angeles youth mural project, "The Great Wall of Los Angeles." (Baca). But such a project does not (and in Baca's work is not intended to) accommodate on its own terms a graffiti culture which is peer-oriented, anarchistic, and confrontational. Millions of Federal dollars have been spent on "authorized" murals under "expert" adult supervision - programs which "function to cool-out central city youth of color." (Austin 6). But it is unlikely that programs that require submission to adult authority can accommodate writing's peer structure and culture of resistance to provide essential currency in the economy of prestige. Perhaps at a minimum, any structured arrangement that attempts to accommodate graffiti culture's confrontational nature should enable challenges between competing writers, somehow at a level of heat that does not rise to "beef" or "vamping" or gang violence.

One pitfall of "officially sponsored graffiti" is that youth are already only too aware that Nike, The Gap, and many other corporations (even Microsoft and IBM) are dedicated to co-opting their culture by appropriating its symbols and styles. The most dedicated writers will want to contain their prestige within their own communities, and not yield it to official sponsors.

One newspaper columnist suggest "We should apply a more selective law enforcement paradigm, cracking down on individuals who deface public areas and private property, but encouraging, rather than discouraging, industries and railroads to allow artists to paint bare, boring surfaces." (Close) I think this idea is on the way to realizing an accommodation with graffiti culture - or more accurately, to initiating a negotiation.

To help consider how one might approach a negotiation between writers and civic leaders, consider the enforcement of traffic speed laws. An uneasy relationship between speeding and enforcement of the literal laws prevails, and its terms are under constant civic and regional renegotiation entirely outside of courts and legislative bodies. Cops use expensive radar, while drivers are allowed to purchase detectors specifically designed to elude it. Citizens complain to their city council when they think enforcement is overzealous, and as a result, local papers often announce the location of the next day's "speed traps" or the council asks officers to redirect their energies toward other crimes.

Despite the well-documented and deadly hazards of speeding, this kind of negotiation between law breaker and enforcer continues and it allows motorists to make a variety of choices based on their assessment of road conditions and their assumed likelihood of getting stopped. Where serious threats to bodily harm are present, patrol officers concentrate their efforts and make arrests. Offenders are seldom jailed on first (or even many subsequent) offenses despite the potentially lethal effects of speeding, as it is assumed that normal citizens will occasionally break the law.

Why is there a “zero-tolerance” war on graffiti, but not for traffic speeders? Why can automobiles engineered and marketed to encourage speeds far in excess of local laws be sold openly, while the sales of spray paints to the young writers who favor them in their writing are often banned? Why isn’t speeding an “epidemic” or thought to “lead to other forms of criminality” or to be a form of “desecration” or an “expression of social maladjustment” or “mental health problems” - all terms by which graffiti writers are commonly demeaned? Why aren’t speeders seen as “insecure cowards?” or as “violative of the good and welfare of the people” or as a “public menace” (more anti-graffiti terms that civic leaders use)? Why aren’t speeders shot by vigilantes? The most probable explanation is that speeders are “us”, but writers are “them.”

In reworking our confrontation with graffiti, it might be possible to draw lessons from rap, another manifestation of hip-hop culture. Rap has successfully established itself within the dominant commercial culture while apparently maintaining authentic roots in hip-hop and gangs with its representations of resistance and illegality. It would be interesting to try to understand how the violence that sometimes follows rap artists maintains its connection to those roots – and if that connection could be maintained without violence. Twenty years ago there was some hope that rapping and break-dancing were taking the place of street violence; perhaps there could be some analogous forum in which writers could act without setting the teeth of civic leaders on edge (more than necessary, anyway).

The world is heavily polarized between narratives of graffiti as an incredible messenger of cultural expression and art on the one hand, and a hideous destroyer of property and civic order on the other. Cultural dissonance and race drive the ensuing confrontations. There is a hard, panicky edge to the war on graffiti that in some ways echoes the war on drugs, both of which have been ongoing for decades.

Confrontation is a form of communication, and is an essential element of the work of graffiti writers. Cultural conflict must happen on some level in a pluralistic society. The stridency of the war on graffiti, like the geometric growth of our prison population, is evidence that we are failing to manage the confrontation.

Before we shoot the messenger, perhaps we should at least hear the message; and at best, realize that confrontation is a constant part of our world - something we can live with, adapt too, and actually use to build connections.

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