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# The Meanings of Graffiti and Municipal Administration

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This article explores various sociocultural aspects of graffiti, and examines municipal administrative responses to its occurrence. It is argued that the diversity of graffiti — in terms of its authors, styles and significance — poses a number of problems for agencies attempting in the first instance to classify graffiti (as “crime” or “art”) and in the second to control its occurrence (whether to “eradicate” or “permit”). Drawing on discussions with local council representatives and on interviews with graffiti artists themselves, the article challenges the stereotypical view of graffiti artists as immersed in cycles of vandalism and/or gang violence. Instead, the article brings to light the complex and creative aspects of graffiti culture and suggests that it is possible (indeed necessary) for regulatory bodies to engage with and promote graffiti culture and that, further, such engagement and promotion need not be seen as authorising a profusion of graffiti related activity across communities.

Graffiti is both art and crime. It is also an issue of great significance to local communities, local government, police, public transport agencies, and young people. Individuals within these groups can be affected in various ways by graffiti: some find the activity and/or its results attractive, while others see it as an index of social decline and youth criminality. Local government agencies and public transport authorities make significant financial outlays in graffiti prevention initiatives and graffiti removal schemes. Financial costs can also be considerable to private households, local traders and schools. It has been estimated that “graffiti vandalism costs the Australian community approximately \$200 million annually” (Keep South Australia Beautiful, 2000). Hundreds of incidents of graffiti and vandalism are processed as crimes each year. The majority, however, elude either civil or criminal sanction.

This article has three main objectives.<sup>1</sup> The first addresses the tendency (in some academic writing and in policy-making) to treat graffiti as a relatively homogeneous and somewhat simplistic phenomenon. The second argues for a

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nuanced understanding of graffiti and of municipal intervention in graffiti culture. Finally, the objective will be to briefly locate graffiti as one in a range of more or less legitimate signifying practices which flood contemporary social spaces. In relation to under-theorising the meanings of graffiti, criminology, as will be seen, is no exception in this regard. As with most disciplines, criminology charts what might be termed "a domain of objects" upon which it traditionally remarks. Up until the publication of Sutherland's revelations about white collar crime, Becker's work on social reaction theory, Taylor, Walton and Young's writings on "new" and subsequently "critical" criminology, and Smart's work on crime and gender, it would probably be fair to say that this domain of objects was quite limited or, indeed, static. Attention was largely directed toward determining the factors distinguishing biological and psychological traits of (working class) offenders from so-called "normal" individuals. The scope for analysing such aspects as the prevalence of deviance in professional life, the state as a criminogenic force, the inequities in the way crime is policed, or the role gender plays in offence demographics, was minimal. But subsequent to the emergence of these projects in the latter half of the last century, the discipline of criminology – or, in effect, the breadth ascribed to its objects of concern — changed markedly.

One facet of criminology's recent evolution is an interest in cultural forms. Thus, criminological research may now encompass such matters as cinematic or televisual representations of criminality, the criminological implications of sadomasochistic sex, and the possible effects of viewing violent media (see e.g., Ferrell & Sanders, 1995; Redhead, 1993; Stanley, 1996; Young, 1996; Presdee, 2000). However, the field of inquiry that has come to be known as "cultural criminology" is still an emerging field, with many lacunae and elisions. The cultural, criminological, and sociolegal dimensions of graffiti are yet to be critically incorporated within criminology's evolving domain of objects. In fact, as criminological object, graffiti retains the status of being predominantly unremarked. When graffiti has featured in criminological debate, it tends to be framed within discussions about (situational) crime prevention (Geason & Wilson, 1990) and/or juvenile delinquency (Ward, 1973; Collins, 1995). A small number of commentators (such as Ferrell, 1995) have engaged with the intricacies of graffiti culture, but from the perspective that graffiti is a subcultural activity performed by a subcultural group, rather than as a significant aspect of the negotiation of contemporary social space.

The major shortcoming of such framings is that each constructs graffiti always already in the order of "a problem" — whether the problem be disrespect, disorder, or a more general dis-ease with the aesthetic quality of urban, and to a lesser extent, rural landscapes. The quite narrow construction within and beyond criminology of what graffiti is, and is not, about, has helped suppress discussion of the complexities associated with graffiti culture (and, moreover, whether it is desirable or even accurate to speak of a unified thing called "graffiti culture"). Accordingly, it could be said that the vicissitudes of graffiti have been obscured in the rush to find a solution to graffiti as problem. Importantly, discussions of graffiti also often do not take account of the views of its practitioners: in this article, therefore, we draw upon interviews conducted with graffiti writers by one of the authors.<sup>2</sup>

In relation to the article's second objective — various municipal responses to graffiti in two Australian states — we aim to consider their regulatory strategies in the light of general considerations about graffiti's complexity and its relatively under-theorised status in much contemporary research. Although graffiti's place as a specific criminal offence is crucially important in terms of community attitudes towards the activity, we focus our attention on the regulatory strategies devised by municipal councils to respond to graffiti within their areas. Graffiti's status as crime inflects these responses: sometimes providing an impetus to view the activity in crimino-legal terms, sometimes prompting extra-judicial responses. The article thus elaborates in detail aspects of graffiti culture (both in Australia and with particular reference to the United States, since a form of graffiti was imported into Australia as part of hip hop culture).

Hip hop graffiti, in the form of tagging and painting murals, is emphasised because its practitioners constitute the majority of the population who will be targeted by any sociolegal intervention. Other forms of graffiti culture (such as that practiced by political activists in the form of slogans) are also discussed. It should be noted, though, that this article does not deal in any depth with historical graffiti, racist graffiti, or with the type of graffiti that has come to be known as "latrinalia" (that is, writing on bathroom walls). Historical forms of graffiti are not examined due to the relatively low attention paid by administrators to such writing. There are, however, important theoretical and practical issues arising from this "inattention" for the way we think about the relationship between graffiti generally and levels of community alarm. A key question here would be: at what point does graffiti pass from being a contemporary blight on the landscape to a valued "historical indicator" of sociopolitical events and issues? Such questions will be dealt with in-depth at another time (see Young, *in press*). We do not deal with racist graffiti because the motivations behind such writing are of a qualitatively different kind to those underpinning tags, throw-ups, pieces and slogans. Due to the complexities of the issue, we would, ideally speaking, reserve judgment on this type of writing for another paper or forum. In any case, the range of objects analysed by the present article — especially tags and murals — tend to be the most prevalent forms of graffiti and those which play on the mind of governments and citizens alike. Latrinalia is not dealt with here in part because it is not a frequent target for sociolegal intervention, in the way that tagging or murals on train line walls have been. Latrinalia has a specific communicative tone (often involving a conversational format) and is "public" only to the extent that members of the public see it when they use bathroom facilities and that it occurs on someone else's property.<sup>3</sup> (Graffiti on school desks is very similar: often conversational; public in a limited way; and involving commonly used tools such as ordinary pens.)

In this light, the graffiti we focus on takes place firmly in the public sphere: on street walls, on train lines, on trains. It is often viewed as affecting a whole community, not just the owner of the property or the limited numbers who happen to see it. A large part of this is "hip hop" graffiti: a type of writing and drawing with marker pens and aerosol paint that originated in the United States (and came to Australia in the 1980s) as part of the three main components of hip hop culture in general (the other two are rap music and break dancing), and using distinctive

calligraphy, images and colours to write or paint murals (called “pieces”) and signatures (known as “tags”). Equally significant in many Australian cities and towns, however, is graffiti in the form of slogans written with pens or aerosol paint, and covering topics ranging from the expression of love to political outrage. These two forms of graffiti are produced by very different individuals, for different reasons and may have different effects on the community around them.

Following a discussion of the types and meanings of graffiti, we move to consider and evaluate the types of regulatory responses adopted by a number of Australian local councils, and suggest how a deeper understanding of graffiti culture might influence the development of such responses in ways which have the least oppressive effects on the individual writer (by avoiding unnecessary fines or imprisonment and by nurturing creative talent in positive ways) and the most satisfying effects for a municipality (which do not necessarily equate to the eradication of all graffiti but might instead mean the considered placement of certain types of graffiti and the minimised incidence of other types). And, finally, the article suggests broadening the focus of analysis when considering graffiti even further, by situating it in the context of the production of authorised and unauthorised signs in the contemporary city.

## **Understanding Graffiti**

Graffiti is sometimes discussed in the same category as vandalism. It is therefore essential to understand what is meant by “graffiti” and “vandalism” and the points of overlap, if any, between the two. A strongly held official view is that the very act of graffiti frequently or always involves damage to public and private property (due to its effects on the surface it is written on, its effects on the visual field, or adjunct effects which might include damaging locks, gates and doors to gain access to favoured sites such as train stations, toilets, schools, sports facilities and so forth).<sup>4</sup> However, it is not established that persons engaging in graffiti carry out other types of vandalism (such as slashing seats on trains, breaking windows, and so on). Nor can it be said that people committing those types of acts of vandalism always — or ever — engage in graffiti. Indeed, many writers abhor acts such as seat-slashing. We would argue that the act of graffiti is fundamentally different from an act such as seat-slashing. This does not mean that graffiti is something entirely different from vandalism *per se*. It does, however, mean that illicit forms of writing are not reducible to the concept of vandalism. There are, as shall be seen, certain dimensions to graffiti — such as the motivations of various writers and public reactions to certain images — which problematise graffiti’s orthodox association with the broad offence category “vandalism”. Thus graffiti’s ambiguous status as art and damage requires it to be treated as at least partly distinct from more rudimentary or consciously formulated acts of vandalism.<sup>5</sup> In what follows, we therefore focus solely on illegal graffiti and municipal sociolegal responses to it.<sup>6</sup>

Despite views to the contrary, graffiti is not a unitary or homogeneous category. Gomez, for instance, makes the following central point:

[T]wo particular classifications encompass most types of graffiti and the motivations behind it. First, ‘graffiti art’ describes graffiti-type works that exhibit many of the characteristics of pieces normally termed ‘high art’ or ‘folk art’. The more intricate works of graffiti entitled ‘pieces’ belong in this category because they result from a

desire to create artwork. Second, 'graffiti vandalism' describes those mere scrawlings that are motivated by a desire to mark territory, create notoriety, or show one's defiance of the law and society' (Gomez 1993, pp. 634-35).

To expand on Gomez's point: "graffiti art" might include the elaborate paintings by artists such as Futura 2000 and Keith Haring, the images incorporated by recognised artists into their canvasses (such as Cy Twombly or Jean-Michel Basquiat), and the carefully designed, cartoon-like imagery which goes into the graffiti mural known as a "piece" (short for "masterpiece"). What Gomez calls "graffiti vandalism" would include the most common form of graffiti, tagging, whereby an adopted name is written in complicated calligraphy on surfaces including walls, fences, train seats and windows, bus shelters, and so on. Evidence suggests that tagging originated in the United States during the 1960s. Chalfant and Prigoff (1987, p. 42) state that tagging was carried out first in Philadelphia by Cornbread and Top Cat, then appearing in New York after the latter moved there in 1969 (although it was Taki 183 in New York who first achieved "fame" through the practice) (Feiner & Klein, 1982, p. 47).<sup>7</sup> For many years taggers used a derivative of the tagger's real name and their actual street number.<sup>8</sup> The current typical tag is likely to be either a neologism (such as Futura, Spie, or Kaws) or an actual word or name spelled in a "street" or hip hop style (such as Kaos, Phake, or Mpire) and written in a highly stylised format (illegible to outsiders).

Gomez's division is useful for its adverting to the fact that graffiti takes more than one form; however, it also perpetuates the commonly held view that graffiti is either "art" or "crime". Below, we show that graffiti culture and practice is somewhat more complicated than this dichotomy would indicate, in that both the aesthetic of graffiti and its toleration, criminalisation or appreciation in the community depend upon issues such as placement, content, and mode of address.

Gomez's division is also limited in terms of its applicability to the Australian context, where a very different type of graffiti is commonly found: the slogan. Slogans range from the personal ("Jane loves Ted", or "J. Kaminski is a slut"), through the gamut of political issues (environmental concerns, feminism, state politics, international relations and so on), but all share the common feature of being declaratory in nature, expressing a view to an audience. In sum, therefore, we would argue that in Australia illegal graffiti consists predominantly of four very distinct forms (tagging, throw-ups, pieces and slogans) and that this rarely acknowledged heterogeneity has important implications for the likely success of any graffiti-related strategy. Addressing this diversity will create the opportunity to develop a set of policies that retain the dynamic, economic and culturally invigorating aspects of graffiti whilst reducing those aspects that impact negatively on the community and the writers themselves.<sup>9</sup>

## Graffiti Culture

In some disciplines, graffiti has received a considerable amount of academic attention. Ethnographic sociological accounts have endeavoured to explain its manner of production, its appeal to writers, and its rise as a popular activity (see, e.g., Lachmann, 1988; Ferrell, 1996; Castleman, 1982; Carrington, 1989). Graffiti's long

history is worth emphasising since many assume it to be an exclusively contemporary phenomenon. However, it can be noted that Goethe scratched his name on the wall of Strasbourg Cathedral, and graffiti is thought to have been commonplace in Elizabethan England, the early modern period, and in ancient cultures (Freeman, 1966; Pritchard, 1967; Fleming, 1997).<sup>10</sup> Particular attention has been paid to graffiti as an aspect of hip hop culture, since it was the advent and expansion of hip hop that provided the impetus for graffiti to take on some of its contemporary forms (Castleman 1982; Cooper & Chalfant, 1984; Chalfant & Prigoff, 1987; Ferrell, 1996). Careful study of hip hop culture should be essential for any local graffiti initiatives, since its abatement is unlikely to succeed while hip hop culture retains any popularity with young people. As hip hop music increasingly embraces "gansta" ideology, graffiti's association with this musical form contributes to the popular linking of graffiti with gang culture and activity. While it is true that in the United States, some graffiti is produced solely as a means of gang communication, it should not be assumed that the presence of graffiti automatically denotes the existence of gangs (gang graffiti has a distinctive calligraphy and looks very different from hip hop graffiti; see Phillips 1999). In Australia, gang-related graffiti is by far the exception rather than the rule.<sup>11</sup> Beyond hip hop, it is clear that graffiti slogans have often played an important role in political activism (King, 1985; Peteet, 1994). For instance, around Melbourne graffiti has been used as a means of protesting the Gulf War, the destruction of old-growth forests, trends in corporate downsizing or job losses and so forth. Much of this type of graffiti also informs passers-by of the times and locations of mass rallies against these and other causes.

When established artists have made use of graffiti devices or when graffiti writers have been invited to exhibit in art galleries, the aesthetics of graffiti and its relation to conventional art practice has been argued at length.<sup>12</sup> Extensive consideration has, of course, been given to questions of preservation, removal, deterrence and prosecution (Barboza, 1993; Brewer, 1992; Geason & Wilson, 1990; Siegel, 1996).

### The "Causes" of Graffiti

Since, as has been illustrated, graffiti is a heterogeneous phenomenon it is difficult — and no doubt spurious — to look simply for "the causes" of graffiti. The significance of this for policy-makers is that unless a concerted effort is made to distinguish between different types of graffiti and perhaps to identify the type(s) of greatest concern to the particular community at any one moment, policies will be based on stereotypes rather than the varied actions, beliefs and desires of actual persons. Stereotypes reduce the diversity of the social world (such as the fact that each writer has a unique biography, peer group associations, beliefs and desires) to simple categories (like "deviant", "youth", "offender", "troublemaker", "artist") which cannot accommodate the complexity of the phenomenon and the culture.

Surveying public discourse on graffiti (encompassing media reports, policy documents, some academic writings, and reported public opinion) we find the following unchallenged assumptions: that graffiti is the work of teenaged boys; that graffiti is the result of unemployment or boredom; that graffiti is antisocial; that graffiti is associated with lower-income areas; that graffiti is associated with other criminal activity. When graffiti culture is examined in close detail, these stereotypes are unfounded. For

example, there is no typical demographic for writers. A portion comes from disrupted or chaotic homes but just as many come from stable backgrounds (Lachmann, 1988, p. 235; Halsey & Young, 2002). Gomez cites the examples of children of celebrities (like Robert De Niro and Jane Fonda) who have been arrested for graffiti-vandalism (1993, p. 642 n 53). Thus, while graffiti is often done by teenagers, there is evidence that writers with an aptitude for graffiti will continue the activity into their 30s and 40s. Indeed one youth worker from South Australia related the story of an accountant who, although now older and financially well-off, nonetheless continues to tag because "he loves the buzz".<sup>13</sup> Further, although many writers are male, female writers also participate in graffiti.<sup>14</sup> Thus the constituency of writers is diverse; similarly, their motivations for writing will vary. It should therefore be assumed that graffiti may be written by individuals in the following categories: those aged from 10 to 45; by males and females; by the employed and unemployed; by those in school and truants; by children of stable and unstable families; by students; by artists; and by the politically active.

Graffiti may be associated with lower-income areas because municipal authorities have fewer funds to cope with its removal, rather than because individuals from a lower-income background carry out quantitatively more graffiti.<sup>15</sup> Finally, a pervasive stereotype in popular and criminological thinking is that the presence of graffiti indicates vulnerability to interpersonal violent crime in the area. However, the main criminal activity associated with graffiti is stealing paint, which usually occurs elsewhere and without personal risk to local residents.<sup>16</sup>

Graffiti may be linked to unemployment, but it is not through the commonly assumed nexus of unemployment and boredom: rather, writers report that once they are employed, they are less likely to carry out illegal graffiti because they see themselves as having more to lose if apprehended. While graffiti may be regarded by some members of the community as anti-social, the activity may not be motivated by anti-social impulses. Motivations are various: tagging might be done to signal presence in a particular area; political slogans may be written to express a point of view (rather like an illegal form of a letter to the newspaper); while "piecing" is done to gain respect from peers for the writer's skill, and for aesthetic reasons (many writers talk of a wall being "empty" or "dull" before a piece is painted on it).<sup>17</sup> McDonald is at pains to stress that the writers he interviewed were not engaged in graffiti as a result of conflict at school, at home or at work, nor were they writing in order to confound social values. He argues instead that the writers see "no generational 'us' against 'them'", and that the writers do not construct themselves through the conventional social institutions of work, school or family. As he notes, "When asked to locate themselves spatially, 'Where do you come from?', the answer that the writers give is a train line" (1999, p. 149). Thus the assumed "antisocial" component of graffiti writing should be reconceptualised as a manifest indifference to the dominant order accompanied by a commitment to a social order reconfigured through the interim spaces of train lines, laneways and other "empty" surfaces.

### Situating Graffiti

Reading a city's graffiti provides an alternative or anterior urban geography. The places which become sites for graffiti are rarely selected arbitrarily; rather, locations are chosen according to the type of graffiti being written. A writer's signature tag

will often be written extensively on walls, at bus stops and on fences, marking the streets as "belonging" to a person or group. Political slogans may require a site which is visible to pedestrians or commuters, in order to communicate a point of view. Thus the feminist crew, "grr", would debate particular sites for their extensive graffiti campaign in Melbourne, seeking locations where there would be large numbers of people to view the graffiti.<sup>18</sup>

The walls along train lines are popular choices for pieces, and for "throw-ups" (less elaborate than a piece, a throw-up usually involves a simplified, large version of a tag typically written in bubble style lettering). Writers in Melbourne rate the Hurstbridge, Frankston, Dandenong and Belgrave lines as providing excellent examples of graffiti murals. The greatest prestige available in graffiti culture accrues to those who tag or piece actual trains. Trains have always been important to contemporary Australian graffiti practice, probably reflecting their significance in New York City's graffiti world. Trains provide a means for pieces to "travel" and to be viewed by people all around a city. Writers will tag trains, paint pieces from the windows down on the sides of trains (doing a "panel", with a very good piece of this type known as a "burner"), and if extremely talented or dedicated, cover an entire carriage (this is known as a "top to bottom whole car").<sup>19</sup> Writers who piece on trains and the walls alongside train lines often spend days "looping" (travelling around on the trains, looking at tags and pieces, and perhaps also stopping at various places to write).<sup>20</sup> Transit and municipal authorities have directed considerable resources at the eradication of graffiti from trains, seeking to clean painted trains as soon as they are discovered.<sup>21</sup>

### Graffiti as Cultural Form

Many people have never seen a writer going about their work, let alone discussed with one the activity's underlying purpose. However, this does not mean writers wish to remain anonymous or silent. Indeed, the public display of one's signature or tag is evidence that the individual wants some kind of recognition. Gomez writes:

The primary motivation of taggers is fame and recognition. A tagger's objective is to paint his tag or that of his crew in as many places as possible, because a tagger's recognition depends on how much he is 'up' (1993, p. 646, 653).

She goes on to cite the example of Chaka who managed to paint this tag no less than 10,000 times across California.

Most writers are motivated by the desire for recognition rather than by any overt urge to rebel or become "powerful" (Gomez 1993, p. 646). Feiner and Klein found three main reasons for graffiti writing: "to acquire fame, to command respect, and because 'there is nothing else to do'" (1982, p. 52). Note, however, that the vast majority of writers seem eventually to return to school to complete their education (Lachmann 1988, pp. 238-39). Other writers build on their graffiti interests to move towards a career in art or graphic design.<sup>22</sup> As noted above, writers sometimes speak of ceasing or reducing the amount of illegal graffiti once they obtain employment and as they grow older. Writer P comments: "Now, if I go out and if I even attempt to do an illegal piece, I just don't have the patience for it, I'm like, I've got a career, I've got other things to worry about, I've got more responsibility".

Tagging — as senseless and random as it may seem to outside observers — is a socially learned skill with a coherent internal hierarchy of symbols, practices and techniques (Lachmann, 1988; Chalfant & Prigoff, 1987). Some writers apologise when they perceive themselves to have written a poorly executed tag (or piece): comments include “too late, too tired”, “sorry about the drips”, or “hands were cold” (Cooper and Chalfant 1984, p. 52). A Melbourne writer, S, (who specialises in legal graffiti) commented that, to him, tags look “like cold spaghetti”. However, most writers of illegal graffiti admire a well-written tag: another Melbourne writer, G, stated:

A tag is like calligraphy to me, and if you really look at it and appreciate it you just see style, you know? I mean, I collect photos of pieces, but sometimes I've been walking and I'll see like an old school tag and I'll just get a photo of it because it's calligraphy, 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.

Tagging is also an ineradicable part of hip hop graffiti culture. As P commented: “You can't control [it], tagging's just one of those things, it's part of the subculture”. Tagging is generally how writers begin their graffiti practice and is seen as either a necessary stage to pass through or a necessary adjunct activity (to be able to sign a good piece with a stylish tag). Sometimes taggers can be frustrated or would-be muralists. Whilst many engage in tagging simply for “fame” and excitement, a large number would prefer, if given the chance, to acquire the knowledge and skills to do pieces or obtain their own “style”. To this extent, Feiner and Klein remark:

The quest for excellence and originality is an underacknowledged aspect of adolescence. Much practice goes into the writing of graffiti, as evidenced by the sketch-books that many writers keep and in which they practice stylistic innovations. In this regard it is like other adolescent activities in which constant individual practice to attain an acceptable level of competence allows close involvement with others. Participating in sports and playing a musical instruments are other examples. But, in underfunded urban areas, such facilities are not always available ... For many writers, the day gets organised around plans to write — where, when, with what, with whom (1982, p. 52).

Whilst tagging requires speed, persistence, a knowledge of territories, and the ability to obtain the right kind of marker pens and/or aerosols, the production of a piece or mural requires all the hallmarks associated with legitimate art.

Pieces may be commissioned or they may be done without permission. The more artistic writers often keep ‘piece books’ holding sketches of designs and photographs of completed works. Piece books and photo albums are widely discussed by writers, and prized photos are traded and copied (Gomez 1993, p. 647).

Critical to whether someone graduates from tagging to murals is his/her proximity to the knowledges and practices associated with producing murals: “[M]ost taggers do not enjoy proximity to established muralists, who could educate them to value mural quality over tag quantity” (Lachmann 1988, p. 237). One Melbourne writer

comments that toys (novices) "don't stick around long enough to gain respect... [T]hey drop off at the point just before they could become friendly with the other writers" (writer, Bumble, quoted in McDonald 1999, p. 142). As will be seen later, some municipalities have decided to promote connections among writers in order to enhance their cultural knowledge and writing abilities. As this overview of graffiti culture shows, graffiti is a more complex phenomenon than many policy approaches and public discussions acknowledge. The next section of the article examines the type and range of municipal administrative responses to graffiti. As will be shown, most are founded on an incomplete and stereotyped model of graffiti production, ensuring their limited effectiveness even prior to implementation.

### **Municipal Responses to Graffiti**

Our objective here is to analyse the kinds of initiatives and strategies in relation to graffiti presently adopted or about to be adopted by local councils in four Australian states.<sup>23</sup> More than half of the City councils in Victoria and South Australia were surveyed as to their approaches to graffiti (i.e., whether they had a formal policy for dealing with graffiti, which types of graffiti were viewed as most prevalent and problematic, how much they spent on graffiti removal, to what extent was offence displacement an issue of concern, which techniques appeared to be working or failing, and so forth). Twenty councils in Victoria and 12 councils in South Australia responded. Material was also obtained in relation to a small number of councils in New South Wales (four) and Western Australia (one). In total, information was gleaned (through phone conversations, meetings, email, mail, and Internet) from 38 councils (the vast majority of which were metropolitan based since each of the rural and regional councils contacted reported very low if non-existent occurrences of graffiti).<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that most councils described the graffiti dealt with as being of the tag variety. Some councils did, however, report other kinds of graffiti (such as pieces) and there were significant variations in different councils' tolerance to these other forms.

In addition to being the object of municipal regulatory strategies, graffiti is also regulated through the criminal law. It is classified as damage to property and a range of statutory provisions in the various States covers most aspects of the activity. For example, the *Graffiti Control Act, 2001(SA)*, s.9 sets out the offence of "marking graffiti": with "marking graffiti" defined as defac[ing] property in any way" and "property" defined to cover "a building, structure, paved surface, or object of any kind" (s.3). The Act also requires "retailers" to properly secure cans of spray paint or risk a maximum penalty of \$1250 (s.4).

Specific legislation exists to deal with graffiti on public transport. In Victoria, for example, the Transport Act 1983 s.223B(1) prohibits injuring, damaging or defacing property of the Public Transport Corporation, or adjacent property, by marking graffiti (with a possible punishment of up to six months' imprisonment). Being found on Public Transport Corporation property in possession of a "graffiti implement" "with the intention of using it for the purpose of marking graffiti" is also an offence (s.223B[4]); while as though to cover all possible bases, the Act also prohibits being found on Public Transport Corporation property simply in possession of a graffiti implement (s.223B[3]).<sup>25</sup> Marking graffiti is defined as "writing,

painting, spray-painting... scratching or burning" (s.223A[1]). Thus the Act aims to criminalise graffiti, written in any manner and with any possible implement, at or on trains, buses, bus shelters, train stations, and also on the property abutting the train lines or stations ("adjacent property" is defined in s.223A[1] as "any building, fence or other structure... near to and visible from... property of the Public Transport Corporation"). The two most popular objects of attention for hip hop graffiti writers, namely trains and the fences or walls overlooking train lines, are thus specifically addressed in the legislation.

We have characterised municipal responses to graffiti by means of a typology deriving from their underlying aims: removal; criminalisation; welfarism; acceptance of graffiti culture. Of the 38 councils surveyed, 14 operate policies focusing on the removal of graffiti; seven combine removal with a policy of criminalisation; three combine removal with welfarism; four combine removal, criminalisation and welfarism; one runs a predominantly welfarist policy; seven combine removal of illegal graffiti with an acceptance of graffiti culture; and two had no policies in place.<sup>26</sup>

*Removal* of graffiti is fairly self-explanatory: the graffiti is seen as something out of place, which must be erased in order to return the social space to its proper condition. Removal is thus a way of *re-appropriating* the space, both taking back the space from the graffiti writer, and returning the space to a condition of propriety. Council strategies may provide for removal to be done by council employees, by a contractor (such as Graffiti Eaters), by volunteers, or by the local resident or trader whose property has been affected. Bayside and Boroondara Councils in Victoria, for example, employ an outside contractor (although Bayside stated that in 1999 it was "way over budget" in its allocation of resources for dealing with graffiti, perhaps due to its reliance on a private contractor). On the other hand, the municipality of Casey (Victoria) recruits a volunteer network to carry out removal and enjoins those who supply bus shelters and park benches to the council to provide a free graffiti removal service. Greater Dandenong (Victoria) undertook to use council employees to remove all graffiti on council property, in order to set a benchmark against which to gauge the rate of recurrence and to encourage traders and residents to remove graffiti speedily from their own properties. Whoever the agent of removal might be, removal strategies are founded upon the assumptions that graffiti is a blot on the visual field and that its erasure returns the urban landscape to a pristine condition.

Strategies of criminalisation usually work in tandem with a policy of removal, since it would be illogical for a municipality to label an activity criminal yet leave the product of the criminal behaviour untouched. Thus councils which have adopted strategies of criminalisation also strive to remove graffiti quickly. Yet the criminalisation aspect of a council's policy usually seems to overtake others, so that adjunct strategies such as removal tend to become simply "assumed" or self-evident. The criminalisation aspect assumes a dominating force in the graffiti strategy of any council which has adopted it.

Criminalisation usually involves some or all of the following actions: mandatory reporting to police of all incidents of graffiti within the municipality; the subsequent prosecution of any identified writers; the definition of graffiti as contributing to

residents' fear of crime; viewing graffiti as a police problem rather than a council issue. Criminalisation and removal may be explicitly linked, as when convicted offenders are required to clean off their or others' graffiti as part of a community based order. An example of a strongly criminalising strategy is operated by Salisbury (South Australia): their aim is to supply the police with their tag database (over 500 different tags), and for the police and council to match tags to offenders through video surveillance, handwriting experts and private investigators who will "track" writers. The council describes its attitude to graffiti as "zero tolerance". The policy of Thebarton Council (South Australia) is also worth noting. Over the last few years, the council fostered close networks of cooperation between itself, the police, the public transport authority, parents, and schools in order to identify as many writers as possible. For example, art teachers monitor the contents of waste paper baskets in class and hand sketches of tags or pieces and the names of likely students over to the police. Over 150 writers have been identified in the municipality since 1996. The council reports that formal prosecution through the criminal justice system was used mostly as leverage (or intimidation), most writers opt to paint over graffiti as punishment, and graffiti has been much reduced within its area.

However, the most extensive (and perhaps expensive) strategy of criminalisation was that operated by Onkaparinga City Council (South Australia). Until very recently, its strategy was one of zero tolerance called "The Graffiti Solution". The council attempted to market it to other councils at a charge of \$8,900 per annum for three years with a monthly fee of \$100 to cover access to websites and updates. Onkaparinga has spent well in excess of \$500,000 since the financial year 1997/98 in pursuit of the eradication of graffiti. It hoped to be "graffiti-free" by the end of 2000, with a subsequent annual operating cost of \$60,000 per annum. The strategy's key component was the mandatory apprehension of writers and the use of the civil courts to recoup the costs of arrest and removal of graffiti. In 1999, 35 juvenile offenders were arrested and their youth allowances accessed by the courts in order to pay fines totaling around \$55,000. Every example of graffiti was photographed, catalogued, and put into a database. All street signs were coated in anti-graffiti film so that graffiti can be wiped off easily. Surveillance cameras were placed in hot spots (defined as any area hit more than 10 times per week). Significantly, though Onkaparinga are in the midst a substantial change of tack in relation to graffiti. Precisely what this will involve is unknown at the time of writing. Indications are, however, that a less punitive stance will be adopted. Other councils keeping a photographic database of tags in the hope of matching them to writers include Adelaide City Council, which keeps a record of over 10,000 tagging incidents in its databases at a cost of around \$10 per tag (yet no arrests had been made by the end of 1999). As of mid-2001, the council is considering whether to permit legal walls in select locations (*The City Messenger*, 6 June 2001, p. 11). Still, even if approved, the council urges that this should not be taken as evidence that their zero tolerance stance has made little impact on illegal graffiti.

The strategy of criminalising graffiti results from opposing the desires of the local council (to eradicate graffiti) and the writers (to write graffiti) in a manner whereby the interests of the former outweigh utterly the interests of the latter. Criminalisation or zero tolerance admits no type of graffiti to be acceptable: murals,

tags, slogans are each viewed as criminal damage and the writer as an offender to be apprehended, punished and, ideally, deterred from writing any further graffiti.

Deterrence is key; since the council wishes to reduce the incidence of graffiti (and, no doubt, its operating costs in responding to graffiti). The possibility of recidivism — that a writer could be caught, clean off graffiti as punishment, and then return to writing at another location — confounds the entire purpose of the policy. (Similarly, removal strategies have to invest hope in the notion that prompt cleaning will deter subsequent writing — otherwise removal simply provides a clean surface for the next piece or tag.) To avoid recidivism, criminalisation policies thus tend toward intimidation through increasingly large fines and, ultimately, through the prospect of incarceration. Issues to do with the creation of a criminal record for the writer, the ambiguity of graffiti (as a form of criminal damage which is radically different from vandalism such as seat slashing, which is not creative of an image), or the possible appreciation of graffiti by at least some members of the municipality, are discounted or ignored.

Welfarist aims are involved in several municipalities' graffiti strategies: this might involve outreach work through a youth worker (based on the assumption that most graffiti is done by young people); the provision of various community programs or facilities designed to deflect writers away from graffiti and towards some other activity; and attempts to provide job training schemes (on the assumption that employment might reduce the opportunities or motivation for writing). The main objective of Banyule City Council (Victoria) in its graffiti strategy is to provide amenities and social programs (such as Job Placement Employment Training) that will steer young people away from graffiti. Brimbank (Victoria) has an unemployment rate of 20–30% among its young people and decided to make the focus of its graffiti strategy the provision of youth-oriented activities (thus filling in time that might otherwise be spent writing graffiti).

Many councils link welfarist policies to mandatory removal; some, however, also conjoin welfarism with criminalisation, a move which would appear to involve a conflict of objectives. On the one hand, the council is acting with or as a policing force; on the other, it is inviting individuals to view the provision of amenities and programs as genuinely welfarist (rather than as devices with the real aim of graffiti prevention). The response of Maroondah City Council exemplifies this. The council urges prompt removal of graffiti and helps the police maintain a database of tags for the apprehension of writers, from whom restitution of costs for past and present removal can be sought. It also seeks to provide alternative community projects and educational programs to divert writers from graffiti activities. These latter welfarist services have least prominence in the strategy. The council claims to have reduced graffiti by 91% in its first 6 months of operation; however, as with all municipalities operating a severe criminalisation policy, it is likely that at least some writers will simply have travelled to other areas in order to tag and piece.

The final type of response characterising graffiti policy in Australia is acceptance of graffiti culture. This might involve the commissioning of murals by graffiti artists; community education on the nature of graffiti art; and the provision of art classes or workshops so that writers might improve their aerosol techniques. Councils adopting such a move still disapprove of tagging; however, their hope is

that tagging might decrease through two effects. First, as we noted above, many taggers lack the skills to progress to piecing or murals, should they wish to. Graffiti workshops teach taggers the skill to do pieces and thus encourage them to abandon prolific or random tagging (tagging would be confined to the areas around the piece). Second, the provision of dedicated sites for graffiti writing localises piecing and tagging: writers concentrate their efforts at particular sites, with the effect that random tagging should decrease.

Acceptance of graffiti culture is usually linked to other strands in a council's policy: removal of illegal graffiti might still occur, and the provision of welfare services is also logical. Through an understanding of graffiti's relation to hip hop culture, councils might well choose to provide a facility such as a skateboarding park. Any graffiti occurring at the site would have to be tolerated, and some system maintained for regulating the turnover of writers piecing at the site. This, unfortunately, has not been the case at the \$600,000 skate park recently opened in the vicinity of North Terrace and Morphett Street Bridge in the heart of Adelaide. The exterior concrete wall of the park (carefully hidden from city motorists and pedestrians) was painted with images of skate-boarders by a professional graffiti artist rather than by persons who use the space on a daily basis. Graffiti in the park is prohibited, reflecting the punitive stance taken by Adelaide City Council over graffiti in the central business district more generally. One of the claims of this council has been that the skate park has been, and remains, "graffiti free".<sup>28</sup> However, an inspection of the area reveals that this is not entirely so. Indeed the ban on graffiti within the park has arguably led to the displacement of graffiti (predominantly of the tag and slogan variety) to its perimeter — to, that is, the iron railings, footpaths, rubbish bins, bus stops, and toilets surrounding the park. Curiously then, the punitive attempt to render graffiti invisible has produced the very thing such policies seek to eliminate. There are, it should be said, periods during daylight hours when graffiti appears to be "absent". But this so-called absence is a result of the council inspecting and cleaning the site in the early hours of most mornings.<sup>29</sup> What the public "sees", then, is not a graffiti-free site so much as a carefully managed space situated between the routinised practice of removal and the omnipresent desire to write. The recent history of the skate park near the intersection of Chapel Street and Malvern Road, in Prahran (an affluent suburb just south of the Yarra River in Melbourne), also shows that councils cannot simply provide an amenity for young people without also thinking of how it is likely to be used. Legal pieces were commissioned here; however, after some time elapsed tagging began, then throw-ups were added over the pieces, and the look of the area deteriorated. Stonnington Council then painted over all the walls and has been attempting to prevent any further graffiti. According to Melbourne writer, S, the council failed to realise that having the site painted once was not enough. Tagging and throwing-up began once the works no longer looked "fresh":

[The site] needed to be monitored and the space recycled to give other artists the opportunity of showing off their talent. A program such as allocating space to artists for, say, a three month period, would have recycled the area, given the community a sense of ownership and pride, and also given an outlet to those that would otherwise be 'down the lines'. The cost of this to the council (paying for the paint) would be less than the upkeep they spend on it now.

Thus, acceptance of the culture of graffiti also requires appreciation of graffiti culture: councils need advice on and understanding of matters such as the innate competitiveness of graffiti writers (whereby writers paint over older pieces to prove their own style or to outdo another's style), and writers' acceptance of graffiti's inherent ephemerality (whereby writers know from the outset that each work is temporary and will be painted over, by other writers if not by regulatory agents).

Exemplary of the strategy of accepting graffiti culture is Geelong City Council (Victoria), who spent 8 years developing a non-punitive response to graffiti. They commissioned a graffiti mural in the city centre (which met with positive responses from all sections of the population). Three graffiti writers were employed to paint murals at the public swimming pool, again to popular acclaim. Paint and other materials for this project were donated by the Police Community Consultative Committee. One writer was employed at a school to teach art classes. The results included a noticeable decline in illegal graffiti in the city, and a wider sense of public appreciation for graffiti art (with related benefits of reduced fear of crime and reduced sense of spoiling of the urban landscape).

Other councils promoting aspects of graffiti culture include Mitcham (South Australia) who have contracted and permitted several legal pieces, and Gosnells (Western Australia) whose "Urban Art" program is said to have substantially reduced the incidence of illegal graffiti. Writers have been commissioned to paint murals on bus shelters and water tanks, often incorporating road safety and social justice issues. Four councils in New South Wales follow similar lines: Hurstville provides a legal wall (and reported lowered rates of illegal graffiti, a reduction in local fear of crime, and more positive attitudes towards young people in the community); Woolloomooloo commissioned murals for one of its housing estates and for its Police Station (with positive effects on the sense of amenity and community); and Parramatta and Warringah councils run workshops to improve the techniques of those interested in legal graffiti. Classes are taught by a former writer of illegal graffiti, and include "History of Graffiti Art", "Lettering Design and Layout", "Spraycan and Nozzle Techniques" and "Character Development".

### **Conclusions: Graffiti and Other Urban Signs**

Although councils which have been operating stringent removal and/or criminalisation policies might argue that they have experienced success in the form of high numbers of arrests or a reduction in illegal graffiti, it is our view that this success is obtained at the cost of either increasing numbers of individuals becoming involved (formally or informally) in the criminal justice system, or the further distancing of certain individuals from the community that they live in.

We would suggest, therefore, that municipal responses to graffiti should ideally eschew criminalisation or at least opt for a policy that combines acceptance of graffiti culture, welfarism and/ or removal in some way.<sup>30</sup> There are various reasons for this. First, once understanding of the complex social world of graffiti culture is gained, severe criminalisation of writers should appear less necessary. Second, no strategy will be effective unless it acknowledges individuals' desire for expression through graffiti writing and acknowledgment of that desire points towards the acceptance of graffiti culture to some degree. Third, writers are either involved in graffiti for a short time (in

which case mandatory prosecution might result in social stigma that could be avoided through other, less disabling means) or involved for aesthetic reasons (in which case prosecution might unfairly penalise individuals with artistic talent). Finally, the heterogeneous nature of graffiti culture means that single-pronged strategies (whatever their motivation) would seem doomed to failure.<sup>31</sup>

The long history of graffiti and the entrenched popularity of one of its current forms (hip hop) ensure that graffiti will not disappear: no matter what strategy is adopted, tags, slogans and pieces will continue to appear on walls and trains. This is not to state that “nothing will work” in the prevention of graffiti, but rather to point out that no matter how many are deterred by criminalisation and removal policies, others will continue to write and still more will enter the culture. The task, then, for municipal government is to ensure that its aim of graffiti management does not produce a growing population of individuals whose identities have been indelibly marked as “criminal”.

As is clear from our discussion, graffiti — no matter what its form — involves the marking of territories and surfaces. But in terms of the formulation of social and criminal justice policy, it must be remembered that graffiti is just one of a multitude of techniques used to mark the social world.<sup>32</sup> A brief glance at almost any urban landscape (particularly any city centre but also, increasingly, the suburbs and regional towns) will reveal a legion of competing logos (such as McDonalds, Nike, Coca-Cola, Westpac), images (for example, pop stars, movie stars, models, athletes, consumer items), and signs (No Standing, 20% Off, One Way, 10 km/h, Loading Zone, Pedestrians Only). Increasingly, the ability to “legitimately” (that is, legally) leave one’s mark is becoming directly related to one’s capacity to buy or rent space. With space becoming less about the corporeal bodies that move through it, and more about the corporate images that occupy or hold it, it should come as little surprise that graffiti is usually seen as “outside” or “beyond” the limits of “proper” expression.

We would argue, however, that graffiti persists because it is (and always has been) part of — not separate to — the world(s) we inhabit. This leads to the idea that “graffiti prevention” has as much to do with the authorship and aesthetics of the signs that occupy a given space, as it is about the removal of “unsightly”, “vulgar” or offensive “scrawlings”. Indeed, if aesthetics (what appears) and authorship (who is responsible) are the major factors driving attitudes toward graffiti (and its removal), then it would also seem necessary to question both the appearance and authorship of other kinds of signifying practices. On this basis, we would argue that the line separating so-called “archetypal” instances of graffiti (pieces, tags, slogans) from other forms and techniques of marking the world, is a line far less defined than any straightforward opposition between legitimate and illegitimate images. For, in a sense, are not companies like Nike, Coca-Cola and McDonalds prime examples of what might be termed “corporate taggers”, “corporate muralists” and “corporate sloganeers”? Granted, those individuals living in or passing through the inner Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy have been confronted with the claim that “J. Kaminski is a slut”, or that there should be “more fat women on TV”. But nearly all of us know that “Coke is it”, Telstra “makes it easier for you”, it’s “Mac Time”, and we should all “just do it”. In other words, if the proliferation of signs and their associated harms is of central

importance to policy makers and society generally, then graffiti and its writers might constitute the least of our worries.

Within criminological debates, we would suggest that graffiti be reconfigured as something more or other than a crime to be prevented or as a problem to be solved. As is evident from our discussion above, graffiti resides at the intersection of complex issues to do with causality, identity and, perhaps most importantly, the authority of various bodies (juridical, municipal, social, academic) to classify and censure images which mark various terrains. Given the amount of funds spent on graffiti removal (which, from the perspective of many graffiti writers, is in any case another form of defacement), it would be prudent to think through the definitions of graffiti presently extant in Australian jurisdictions. We therefore ask: does the presence of graffiti *ipso facto* equate to harm? Indeed, what exactly is the nature of the harm caused by marking various surfaces? Is it necessary at the juridical level to define graffiti as vandalism? Are the persons who tag trains, buses, schools and so forth one and the same as those who slash seats, break windows or commit arson? Should we call "criminal" the person who uses the side of an office block to publicise a rally on gay and lesbian issues, or environmental politics, or reconciliation and Indigenous rights? To date, none of these questions has been adequately posed or answered in either public discourse or criminological research. Much of the reason for this is that graffiti has been deemed peripheral to the core business of criminology. This is by no means to suggest that graffiti should constitute all or even a good part of the criminological gaze. For the question is not whether criminology can talk about graffiti — since in a limited way it already has — but why it shows so little interest in the nuances of the phenomenon. In other words, the most interesting issue for us is not what criminology should say about graffiti, so much as what might be said about criminology given its reluctance to deal with graffiti as something other than property crime or a sign of subcultural youthful discontent. Our final question, then, is this: when read as a sociocultural event, what does graffiti say about current framings of crime and criminology? Our suggestion is as follows: a reading of graffiti's place(s) in the contemporary city reveals in both public and criminological discourse the undeniably powerful effects of naming ("art", "crime", "vandalism"), the delimitation of signifying practices into authorised and unauthorised forms, and a preference for unambiguous objects of concern.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express sincere thanks to Peter Rush for commenting on earlier versions of this paper.

## Endnotes

- 1 Some of the information appearing in this article is drawn from a research report written for Knox City Council, Victoria, in December 1999. The article also draws from a number of years of research conducted by Alison Young on graffiti in the Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy. This research was supported by a Melbourne University Project Grant in 1997, and an ARC Small Grant in 1998. With funding from the Australian Research Council, Alison Young's research will be extended in 2001–2002 to compare local and state-based Australian socio-legal responses to graffiti with strategies in the United States and Europe. Mark Halsey is a

- member of and consultant to the Graffiti Culture Research Project Committee in South Australia and has just completed two reports based on interviews with 44 writers around metropolitan Adelaide (see Halsey, 2001; Halsey & Young, 2002).
- 2 Interviews for this study were carried out by Alison Young with 15 writers (mainly in Melbourne) during 2000.
  - 3 These less public kinds of graffiti can nonetheless be connected to serious social issues. A recent phenomenon in certain toilet blocks around Melbourne has been the writing of graffiti on floors (rather than walls or urinals). The reason for such graffiti remained a mystery for some time. Eventually, a Port Philip Council representative discovered that people using the toilet blocks in the St Kilda area as injecting rooms often ended up lying on the toilet floor after injecting. Those who felt the urge to write were subsequently left with little choice but to use the floor as their canvas (in conversation, 7 December 1999).
  - 4 See for example the views of this police officer: "It is all criminal damage ... and is no different from slashing seats or breaking windows and offenders are prosecuted accordingly"; "It may be artistic but if it costs somebody money to remove it, it is vandalism" (quoted in Sill, 2000, p. 144, 145).
  - 5 Over the course of consulting with 38 local councils around Australia (in the States of Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales) it was evident that graffiti poses a far more prolific and expensive problem to them than vandalism per se. A representative from Port Phillip Council said that if he had to choose between doing something about *either* graffiti *or* vandalism he would deal with the former. According to him, graffiti needs to be dealt with over and above vandalism due to its higher "shock value" and its "high visibility" which signaled the "onset of anarchy" whereas vandalism was something "out of sight" and as akin to what we often "see in our homes" (for example, a broken chair or window). Conversely, he said, "we don't deface (that is, graffiti) our own homes, do we?" (in conversation, 7 December 1999).
  - 6 Damage to property, such as breaking windows or slashing train seats, is therefore not the concern of this article. For research on the abatement of vandalism which does not involve graffiti, see Geason & Wilson, 1990; Levy-Leboyer, 1984; McKillop & Vernon, 1991; Sykes, 1979.
  - 7 Note the attitude of writer P to Taki 183's celebrity: "I've got mixed feelings about that because, I mean, he got a lot of credit but at the same time I think it was just a common thing to be out there".
  - 8 Thus "Taki" was a diminutive of "Demetrius", while "183" indicated that he lived on 183rd Street. One of the first writers in Melbourne was GS38: "GS" referred to his adopted name of "grand sorcerer", while "38" was his house number.
  - 9 It may seem counter-intuitive to emphasise the fact that writers experience negative consequences, given the criminological and legal tendency to construct "the criminal" as making a choice to pursue criminal activity and thus bringing any negative consequences upon themselves. However, we do wish to stress what risks are faced by writers. In the context of illegal graffiti, writers risk prosecution and punishment (in some states, punishment can be severe, especially for graffiti on trains) and the burden of a criminal record; a criminal record can also be gained through stealing ("racking") paint (paint is expensive, and the graffiti subculture rates more highly graffiti done with racked paint); and physical injury from writing in inaccessible or dangerous places, especially given that most graffiti is done at night or in haste. Physical injury is also sometimes sustained if the writer is apprehended: writer L described being knocked unconscious by a shop owner when caught writing graffiti; writer P's nose was broken when Transit Police found him painting a train (in interviews). Attitudes of (some) local council officials are also relevant here: for example, in the context of not being able to "nail" a particular graffiti offender, one South Australian official commented: "he's a brilliant artist but if I see him I'll break his fingers ... I'm sick of his graffiti" (in conversation, 29 November 1999).

- 10 Many examples of graffiti have been found at Pompeii. One of these dates from A.D. 79 and reads: "The man who wrote this did it because he wanted to". The oldest forms of graffiti are thought to be around 30,000 years old (Freeman, 1966, p. 148, 64).
- 11 A graffiti "crew" may seem to outsiders to be similar to a gang; however, they are very different. A crew is a group of writers who share a tag (such as Hillside Kings; COA, or Constantly On Attack; JBL which stands for Just Bustin' Loose, or WCA, for Wild Child Artists), and who "get up" as a group. Members of the crew are also likely to have individual tags and to piece and get up on a solo basis. In research by White et al. (1999), no evidence of gang activity in Australia has been found; however, the persistent association of graffiti and gangs no doubt accounts for many individuals' negative feelings about graffiti and for the reported feeling of personal vulnerability around graffiti hot spots.
- 12 On Jean-Michel Basquiat, see Mirzoeff, 1995; Ricard, 1981. On Keith Haring, see Haring and Kwong Chi, 1984 (both Basquiat and Haring were graffiti writers who became phenomenally successful mainstream artists); on graffiti into the artworks of Cy Twombly, see Krauss, 1993; on the exhibition of graffiti in art galleries, see Nadelman, 1982; Hoban, 1998.
- 13 In conversation, employee of Port Adelaide/Enfield council, 8 December 1999.
- 14 Some male writers minimise the efforts of women writers, stating: "women get scared and can't keep up" (Lachmann, 1988, p. 235); and "tunnels are too dangerous and dirty" or "no place for a girl" (Gomez, 1993, p. 642 n 54). Note the work of Carrington (1989) on girls and graffiti. Sites on the Net which include links to the work of female graffiti writers include: [www.graffiti.org](http://www.graffiti.org) (Art Crimes). In Melbourne from 1997-98, a female crew called grrr operated a highly visible campaign, writing slogans about images of women at carefully selected sites around the city.
- 15 Some claim that graffiti is more commonly done by individuals in wealthier suburbs (stating that children in higher-income families have more ready cash to buy paint): see the opinions of Rod MacKenzie, director of graffiti removal company, Graffiti Eaters, in Hunder, 1998, p. 3. It may be that greater wealth (individual or municipal) permits speedier removal, or that individuals with higher incomes may be more mobile, and thus might tag or piece away from their home location (perhaps to minimise the risk of detection).
- 16 For a criminological discussion which does not challenge the popular assumed link between graffiti and interpersonal violence, see Skogan, 1990. In the Australian context, see Grabosky, 1995.
- 17 Writer P commented: "I mean, if it makes you look out of the train window and think, I mean, have a thought go through your mind, then that's a good thing".
- 18 Interview with A, member of grr.
- 19 Melbourne writers describe the experience of painting a train thus: "if it's a train it's the best feeling when you get out of there. You feel like you're a real writer, you know?" (writer G), and (on seeing a painted train running) "It's great, you know, it's like a motional canvas" (writer P).
- 20 Discussed in McDonald, 1999, p. 140.
- 21 New York City's campaign to eradicate graffiti on its subway trains is well-known; in 1989, it was declared graffiti-free. To that extent the photodocumentary work of Cooper and Chalfant in 1984 on the New York subway now constitutes a historical archive. For a literary account of graffiti in the New York City subway and the motivations of the writers, see DeLillo, 1997. Melbourne transit authorities in 2000 announced plans to increase the surveillance of trains and apprehension of writers: see Das 2000.
- 22 A number of writers interviewed in Melbourne by Young either expressed an interest in such a career, or had already obtained employment in these fields. This trajectory is also noted by McDonald: "TDK... has been involved in graffiti for seven years and this has led him into college to study art" (1999, p. 141).
- 23 The authors would like to thank all council representatives who took the time to offer data and/or information for our research.

- 24 Quoted passages are derived either from conversations with relevant council officers or from materials sent to the authors.
- 25 Note that the penalty for both s.223B(3) and s.223B(4) is the same (10 penalty units).
- 26 Councils with a removal policy: Frankston; Greater Dandenong; Kingston; Maribyrnong; Melbourne; Nillumbik; Whitehorse; Wyndham (all Victoria); Campbelltown; Charles Sturt; Holdfast Bay; Marion; Norwood, Payneham, St Peters; Port Adelaide/ Enfield (all South Australia). Councils combining removal with criminalisation: Boroondara; Casey; Hume; (Victoria); Adelaide; Onkaparinga; Salisbury; Thebarton (South Australia). Councils combining removal and welfarism: Bayside; Knox (Victoria); Playford (South Australia). Those combining removal, criminalisation and welfarism: Banyule; Brimbank; Maroondah (Victoria); Tea Tree Gully (South Australia). Yarra City Council (Victoria) operated a mainly welfarist policy. Those combining removal with an acceptance of graffiti culture: Geelong; Port Phillip (Victoria); Gosnells (Western Australia); Hurstville; Parramatta; Warringah; Woolloomooloo (New South Wales). Darebin and Moreland councils (Victoria) had no policy in place.
- 27 It is worth noting the unique strategy implemented by Maribyrnong City Council (Victoria): council officers inform the property owner of the presence of graffiti and request its removal; if graffiti has not been removed within two weeks, a council officer will visit the premises and issue a notice to comply with the council's request for removal within 14 days. If, after 4 weeks, the graffiti has still not been removed, the property owner will be issued with an infringement notice and a warning that fines will be issued on a fortnightly basis until compliance occurs. The onus for removal is thus firmly placed on the property owner; and penalisation of the property owner then occurs if civic obligations are not met.
- 28 In conversation, 22 September 2000.
- 29 In conversation, 22 September, 2000.
- 30 It is important to note the policy currently being considered by the Crime Prevention Unit of the Victorian Department of Justice. Apprehended graffiti writers would be offered the possibility of signing up for graphic arts training, undertaking to do no illegal graffiti while in the training course and for a period of time thereafter. This very positive proposal avoids unnecessary imprisonment or fines, provides a qualification that could lead to employment in the arts field, and reduces illegal graffiti. The proposal would mimic the successful policy implemented in Greater Dandenong for joyriders (called "Handbrake Turn").
- 31 Collins (1995, p.5) advocates a "multi agency approach", conjoining "community, Juvenile Justice, local courts, local and state government, business groups, youth and social organisations, public transport organisations, law enforcement agencies, members of the culture and particularly arts and education bodies".
- 32 Austin argues that graffiti writers were actively resisting the "conflictual class hierarchy of urban names — a hierarchy that works to circulate the names of 'the famous' within the public sphere/public space while ignoring others" (1998, p. 242). It is not apparent in our research that such active resistance animates writing; however, we would certainly agree that social tolerance for certain types of names and images over others should be questioned more thoroughly.

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