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A Toronto, Ontario, Case Study

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Theoretical Approaches to the Collection and Appraisal of Graffiti Ephemera: A Toronto, Ontario, Case Study

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ABSTRACT This article explores aspects of the archival value of graffiti and street art. It applies an intersectional feminist lens and draws upon Althusserian subject interpellation to elaborate some potential techniques for appraising graffiti. Understanding graffiti as ideological calls can help us understand how graffiti acts on us and functions for us: as a record of oppression, institutional and social relations, and individual negotiations with power.

The article offers examples of graffiti acting as a form of speech for the unheard and marginalized and illustrates these examples with photographs of graffiti captured by the author and images of graffiti and street art located in various collections. It compares the appraisal and collection methods of the Urban Art Mapping Project, a North American participatory graffiti archive, with the Street-ARToronto (StART) street-art map maintained by the City of Toronto. Through these comparisons, the article argues for the evidential value of locally driven archives of the type of political graffiti excluded from the StART map.

RÉSUMÉ Cet article explore des aspects de la valeur archivistique des graffitis et de l'art de rue. Il applique une approche intersectionnelle et féministe inspirée de l'interpellation du sujet althussérienne afin d'élaborer des méthodes potentielles d'évaluation des graffitis. La reconnaissance des graffitis comme des appels idéologiques peut nous aider à comprendre la manière dont ils agissent sur nous et fonctionnent pour nous. Les graffitis peuvent être considérés comme une archive de l'oppression, évoquant des relations institutionnelles et sociales et représentant des négociations individuelles avec le pouvoir.

Cet article offre des exemples de graffitis agissant comme une forme d'expression pour les personnes sans voix et marginalisées, en illustrant ces exemples avec des photographies de graffitis réalisées par l'auteur ainsi que des images de graffitis et d'art de rue conservées dans différentes collections. L'article compare l'évaluation et les méthodes de collecte du projet Urban Art Mapping, un espace archivistique participatif nord-américain sur les graffitis, avec la carte d'art de rue de StreetARToronto (StART), une initiative chapeautée par la Ville de Toronto. À travers ces comparaisons, cet article insiste sur la valeur de témoignage des archives locales sur ce type de graffitis politiques, présentement exclus de la carte de StART.

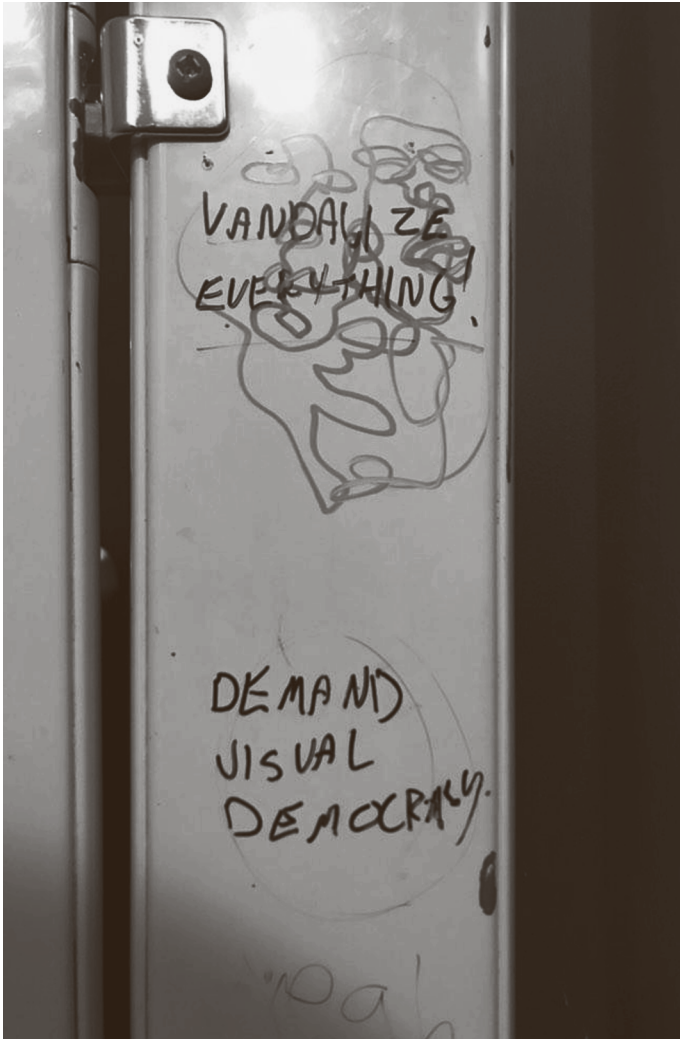


FIGURE 1 "VANDALIZE EVERYTHING [line drawing] DEMAND VISUAL DEMOCRACY," located in a bar bathroom, downtown Toronto. Photograph by Maddy Simpkins, 2020.

All across Toronto, drunk teens, gutter punks, and the otherwise voiceless participate in a human practice as old as cities themselves. They scrawl messages to lovers on bathroom stalls, condemnations of gentrification on condominium windows, and calls for justice wherever they will be seen. Against the visual scream of constant advertising, graffiti whispers traces of real human people – their affect and intent: “VANDALIZE EVERYTHING. DEMAND VISUAL DEMOCRACY” (figure 1). This anonymous call to action reverberates in my teeth. Vandalize everything. Demand visual democracy. From whom? For whom?

Simon Franklin used the word *graphosphere* as shorthand for “the totality of graphic devices used to record, store, display, and disseminate messages and information, and the social and cultural spaces in which they figure” in the writing cultures of early-19th-century Russia.¹ However, his term for this written aspect of Habermas’s “public sphere”² has far broader applications. The graphosphere is the entire space of the publicly visible word. It is public – not private; it is geographical, relational, and social; and it is almost totally dominated from the top down by state and corporate interests. “The spectacle is capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image.”³ The signs of capital rule the graphosphere, but this is nothing new. And what does graffiti have to do with archiving?

The Canadian concept of total archives refers to a shift in archival collecting practices away from a singular focus on state documents and toward records that reflect the “totality” of the national experience.⁴ In pursuit of this concept, Canadian archives have collected materials like oral testimonies, personal papers, letters, and, increasingly, multimedia records. Yet even a total archive will have gaps. Some records (voices) enter the public sphere already primed for erasure, disappearing (or being disappeared) before they can be collected. The following review of examples of graffiti located in relevant collections provides insight into why and how graffiti has entered the archive, while illustrating some

1 Simon Franklin, “Mapping the Graphosphere: Cultures of Writing in Early 19th-Century Russia (and Before),” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12, no. 3 (2011): 531–60, 531.

2 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 1.

3 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (London: Bread and Circuses Publishing, 2012), note 34.

4 Hugh A. Taylor, “The Collective Memory: Archives and Libraries as Heritage,” *Archivaria* 15 (Winter 1982–83): 118–30; Terry Cook and Joan M. Schwartz, “Archives, Records, and Power: From (Postmodern) Theory to (Archival) Performance,” *Archival Science* 2, no. 3–4 (2002): 171–85.

of the unique challenges posed by the collection and appraisal of graffiti. Additional examples of graffiti captured by the author will be appraised to illustrate some of the theory outlined below.

Graffiti lacks many of the characteristics we would associate with “good” records: The provenance is murky. There is rarely an identifiable author, unless declared by a pseudonym. There is little in the way of consistent forms or characteristics across time and space. Worst of all, graffiti may never truly be considered “complete” records. Although one author’s interjection might be finished, it may be fundamentally changed by the work of a later author. Graffiti writing is a time-based, three-dimensional action. Geographic information, like location and sightlines, can be semiotically significant. Dense spaces of graffiti often have layers, as new pieces cover up the old or interject to alter meanings in some way. Graffiti is also commonly subject to campaigns of erasure or deterrence. We might consider graffiti writing as akin to digital records; there is no such thing as benign neglect. To preserve graffiti requires active witnessing and constant and reoccurring action. I want to argue that graffiti is a direct and threatened source of information on the political, cultural, social, and economic day-to-day lives of a locale’s residents and that it is worthy of being targeted for preservation on its own merits.

Locating Graffiti in the Archives

Graffiti has previously been the subject of some targeted collection strategies. The Urban Art Mapping Project (UAMP), run by a team of researchers at the University of St. Thomas in Saint Paul, Minnesota, has developed and maintained several street art databases on subjects like George Floyd and anti-racist street art, eco street art, and COVID-19. The research team uses the phrase *street art* to refer to everything they collect, including stickers; rushed graffiti writing; and large, seemingly legal murals. The data in UAMP’s maps is concentrated in the United States and western Europe, with much less representation in Canada. The International Graffiti Archive (Intergraff) is a web archiving platform run by a small group of artists and writers, accepting submissions from all over the world, that specifically seeks to document illegal *tagging*, where graffiti writers

inscribe pseudonyms in stylized text.⁵ Intergraff's archive includes a section with Toronto artists, but the last update on the website is from 2013, and there is little sign of activity in the past 10 years. The richly interlinked history of graffiti and hip hop culture is also significant and accounts for the presence of graffiti photos and artists' black books⁶ in collections held by projects like Cornell University's Hip Hop Collection.

Graffiti also appears in Canadian archives intentionally, accidentally, and coincidentally. Library and Archives Canada (LAC) has acquired a number of mediated collections that document graffiti in Canada, including books and films devoted to the highly active subcultures in Toronto and Montreal. Canadian archives also have a few digitized images available online that depict graffiti, mostly as the background in images of human subjects.⁷ A search of the Archives of Ontario website returns just 11 results for *graffiti* across all collections. Here, graffiti seems to have entered the archive as incidental items within collections – for example, as an item of personal interest collected by an otherwise significant figure; as part of a collection assembled by a local artist;⁸ as an illustration of a newsworthy event (anti-Nixon graffiti captured on a train car);⁹ or as an object the Ministry of the Attorney General Communications Branch identified as vandalism in the 1990s.¹⁰

Most images in these fonds are not digitally available. A search of the City of Toronto Archives returns upwards of 350 results for *graffiti*, including multiple

5 Intergraff: International Graffiti Archive (website), accessed December 16, 2023, <http://intergraff.com/>.

6 Among graffiti artist communities, "black books" are more than an artist's sketchbook; they could be circulated and tagged by other writers, becoming a record of whom they had met and what sort of a relationship they had; works of art in their own right. Elizabeth K. Harris, "Bookmarks: Graffiti Artists 'Black Books,'" *Don't Take Pictures* (blog), August 8, 2016, <https://www.donttakepictures.com/dtp-blog/2016/8/8/bookmarks-graffiti-artists-black-books>

7 Exceptions to this description are images of graffiti that has been scratched into rock and photographed by soldiers as evidence of their own activity or of writing that appears on the side of a broken-down tank.

8 Archives of Ontario, F 4445-3: Robert Teteruck photographs of the Toronto Junction area, F 4445-3-0-0-6, "Graffiti, Junction Area," [photograph, black & white print], 1982, https://aims.archives.gov.on.ca/scripts/mwimain.dll/144/DESCRIPTION_WEB/WEB_DESC_DET?SESSIONSEARCH&exp=sisn%20162448. See figure 2.

9 Archives of Ontario, F 4396-1-1: CFPL-TV newsreel air-cuts, F 4396-1-1-4234, CFPL-FM Radio, "CFPL Television Newsreel Air-Cuts July 27/1972," 1972.

10 Archives of Ontario, RG 4-148: Ministry of the Attorney General Communications Branch photographs, RG 4-148-0-53, "Photographs depicting vandalism and graffiti," 199–, https://aims.archives.gov.on.ca/scripts/mwimain.dll/144/DESCRIPTION_WEB/WEB_DESC_DET?SESSIONSEARCH&exp=sisn%201393915.

collections of street photography, where graffiti is an intentional or coincidental subject, and municipal records related to the planned removal of graffiti “vandalism.” In Vancouver, Simon Fraser University holds the Gordon E. McCaw Vancouver Street Art Photograph Collection, which includes approximately 750 photographs of graffiti and street art taken there between 1980 and 1992.

Graffiti has entered the archive in the form of art objects, because of its cultural or aesthetic value or its political content, or as “evidence” of social problems. There is a significant possibility that “hidden” archives of graffiti, as captured in collections of street photography and municipal records of vandalism, could be unearthed, perhaps unmarked in the backgrounds of other collections or unprocessed backlogs, and connected. Canada is well positioned to build on the excellence of national total archive practices by extending these practices to the intentional collection and preservation of graffiti ephemera – even and especially of ephemera that appears to counter authority or social norms – since evidence of social dysfunction seems at least as valuable as evidence of a society’s intended or healthy functioning.

Legal Framework: Toronto Municipal Code

Graffiti “vandalism” is illegal in most parts of Toronto. In fact, the City of Toronto maintains an award-winning graffiti management plan. Chapter 485 of the Toronto Municipal Code is called “Graffiti.” This bylaw provides the basis for the Graffiti Management Plan and establishes an operating body, the Graffiti Panel, that with its executive director has the power to distinguish between art and vandalism. The bylaw provides means for the city to quickly clean up vandalism and supports programs that invite local artists to paint murals on underpasses, Bell Canada telephone boxes, or walls that have been identified as repeat targets for vandals. It also establishes a requirement for the city to regularize graffiti and street art – either by erasing it or by registering it and including it in a municipal database if it passes muster before the Graffiti Panel.

According to the City of Toronto website,

The Graffiti Management Plan contains four strategic elements:

1. Establishing a coordinating body for graffiti management activities.
2. Support and recognition for permitted graffiti and street art, including investment in programming that encourages the development of local artistic talent.
3. Support for victims of graffiti vandalism.
4. Ongoing enforcement against illegal tagging. . . .

Graffiti vandalism creates a nuisance that can adversely affect property values, business opportunities *and poses a risk to the health, safety, and welfare of a community.*¹¹

Chapter 485 of the Toronto Municipal Code also defines *graffiti art* and *vandalism*:

GRAFFITI ART – Markings made or affixed to property that are approved by the property owner or occupant, *where the markings aesthetically enhance the surface they cover and the general surroundings, having regard to the community character and standards.*

GRAFFITI VANDALISM – Any deliberate markings made or affixed on property that is not currently exempted or regularized by the Graffiti Panel, Executive Director or Council.¹²

What I mean to highlight here is the emphasis on aesthetics. There is an equation of aesthetic value (in practice, the aesthetic tastes of the Graffiti Panel and the executive director) with good character and community safety. Let us be clear: the idea of sprucing up the public visual sphere with beautiful, community-designed art is a good one. Yet the way that this and other plans like it are enacted appears in practice to be based primarily in a class-based concern to

¹¹ City of Toronto, "Graffiti Management," accessed December 16, 2023, <https://www.toronto.ca/services-payments/streets-parking-transportation/enhancing-our-streets-and-public-realm/graffiti-management/> (emphasis added).

¹² City of Toronto, "Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 485, Graffiti," section 485-1 in *City of Toronto Municipal Code*, October 25, 2011, Toronto City Council and Committees By-Laws and Municipal Code, https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/municode/1184_485.pdf (emphasis added).

protect private property. In effect, the classification of types of public expression as either vandalism or art acts as a filter that controls the content and style of the messages that are allowed to disseminate in the public sphere and are preserved in the city's archive.

The city-maintained archive of authorized art is called the StreetARToronto (StART) initiative.¹³ While this map is an interesting archive of public art (figure 2), it represents only a small sliver of the graffiti and street art culture in Toronto. The StART initiative is an archive of city-endorsed voices, painted deliberately to crowd out less desirable speech. Its stated purpose is to discourage unauthorized graffiti vandals from writing on walls by covering those spaces with murals.¹⁴ It is possible to interpret the distinction between street art and graffiti as a record of gentrification. In Minneapolis, the Urban Art Mapping Project researchers noted that the style of street art and graffiti varied across neighbourhoods based on their income:

You can notice the difference in income level between the neighborhoods where you find the art. If you're in North Minneapolis or uptown, the art is very pretty. It's very empowering, lots of beautiful colors. If you go to areas like Midway or where it's less and less income compared to uptown, you begin to see that the messaging and the colors are very gritty. It even tells in a more realistic way what's going on in that area as opposed to other areas that are not being affected by oppression.¹⁵

It seemed that in richer areas, the city shared its walls and gave artists authorized daylight time to share their voices, which often resulted in large, colourful, impactful pieces. In poorer regions, unauthorized authors must instead “throw up” pieces – put a tag or piece on a surface quickly – to avoid being caught by law enforcement. These messages, or “throwies,” seem often to end up messier, angrier, rawer. The aesthetic distinction here seems to arise from the difference

13 “StART Map,” StreetARToronto, accessed December 6, 2022, <https://streetarttoronto.ca/>.

14 City of Toronto, “Graffiti Management.”

15 Frederica Simmons, Amber Delgado, Rachel Weiher, Eve Wasyluk, Adem Ojulu, Olivia Tjokrosetio, Shukrani Nangwala, Heather Shirey, Paul Lorah, and David Todd Lawrence, “The Urban Art Mapping Project: A Discussion of Street Art Preservation and Antiracism,” *Journal of Folklore and Education* 8 (2021): 156–73, 166, <https://jfepublications.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/2021Urbanmapping.pdf>.

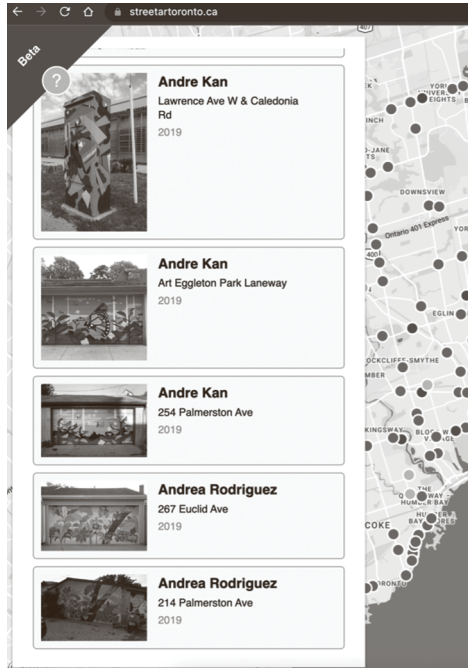


FIGURE 2 Screenshot of the StART user interface list view, showing pretty, brightly coloured murals. Source: "StART Map," StreetARToronto, accessed December 6, 2022, <https://streetarttoronto.ca/>.

between authorized and unauthorized speech, which is related in more complicated ways to the income level of the author – who may, after all, be a contracted mural artist living on the poverty line or a rich kid tagging for kicks. The takeaway should be that, to a degree, (un)authorized status was found to act as a filter in determining the shape of the content.

Note the differences, in stylization and content, between the messages in figures 3 and 4, which both come from the UAMP's George Floyd and Anti-Racist Street Art database.¹⁶

¹⁶ "Your Anger is a Gift," George Floyd & Anti-Racist Street Art, Urban Art Mapping Project, accessed December 15, 2022, <https://georgefloydstreetart.omkea.net/items/show/43>; @sotalettersco, "La Justice Pour George," George Floyd & Anti-Racist Street Art, Urban Art Mapping Project, accessed December 17, 2022, <https://georgefloydstreetart.omkea.net/items/show/1795>.



FIGURE 3 “La Justice pour George,” located on the business front of Cou Cou, a private French tutor in North Minneapolis. Source: The Urban Art Mapping Project (UAMP).



FIGURE 4 “Justice 4 George – Fuck 12” [blue text]; “Fuck 12” [black text]; “YOUR ANGER IS A GIFT” and Norse Rune “A” [red text], located on boarded-up windows in Minneapolis. Source: UAMP.

Though the message is identical in “Justice 4 George” and “La Justice pour George,” in figure 3, it is made beautiful with soft pastels and artistic fonts. The accompanying content is also different. Figure 3 shows “La Justice pour George” side-by-side with a wall of names of men and women murdered by police. “Say Their Names,” and its various modulations, is a powerful and popular call to action that pays respect to the victims of police brutality. Yet the space left in the wall, as if to leave room for the tally to increase, seems to speak to a bleak belief that the violence will not end. Contrast this with the context of “Justice 4 George” in figure 4, which leads into the message “Fuck 12,”¹⁷ a sentiment deemed worthy of repetition by another writer. This piece connects “Justice 4 George” with the action of the agent responsible for his death in a way the message in figure 3 does not – and even goes so far as to suggest what might be done about it. Hovering behind this is the message “YOUR ANGER IS A GIFT,” a raw and resounding reminder that anger, which can be a *creative* emotion, has historically been at the root of much political change.

In an era where calls for peaceful protest sometimes seem weaponized to ensure that protests do not disrupt or inconvenience anyone or anything, “YOUR ANGER IS A GIFT” reassures its viewers that anger and its consequences are reasonable and proportionate responses to the epidemic of police brutality. What has happened here? The filter of authority has stripped the activating anger from the message, which seems here to function to civilize discourse and dampen that generative anger. Consider what these pieces demand of us, as viewers. Justice for George, but *how*? Are we expected to make room for more names on the memorial? Or to “Fuck 12”? Instead of instructions to tear everything down and directing ire toward the violent arm of the state, we record and memorialize, as if being sufficiently aware of pain and suffering can change anything on its own. If this is replicated at scale, it could function to strip that creative anger from the public sphere.

17 The ‘12’ in “Fuck 12” is slang for police, thought to originate from Atlanta or a 1960s police drama *Adam-12*; see Ronada Dominique, “George Floyd & Anti-Racist Street Art by Todd Lawrence, Paul Lorah and Heather Shirey.” *Journal of American Folklore* 134, no. 534 (2021): 525-527, 527.

Anonymity and Ideology

Graffiti is inherently ephemeral. Its sentimental records are at risk of almost immediately disappearing. The UAMP argues that while graffiti “may be ephemeral and fleeting, it can reveal very immediate responses to world events in a manner that can be raw, direct, and confrontational.”¹⁸ Yet unauthorized graffiti is likely to be pseudonymous, when it is not outright anonymous, with complicated consequences for its relationship with power, function, and affect.

Hans Asenbaum conceptualizes anonymity through three dialectical sets of freedoms, “with each set consisting of one element conducive to and the other undermining democracy: (a) inclusion and exclusion, (b) subversion and submission, and (c) honesty and deception.”¹⁹ Anonymity permits both identity creation and identity negation, resulting in these opposing freedoms. Anonymity can *include* individuals in democratic and social spaces by suspending or mitigating visible markers of gender, race, socio-economic status, etc., levelling the socio-semiotic playing field by allowing ideas to stand on their own merit.²⁰ Anonymity subverts power when identity negation allows dissidents and marginalized groups to avoid being detected or surveilled and permits honesty through the negation of peer pressure, leading to “more sincerity in public discourse.”²¹ Yet anonymity can also *exclude* individuals by reducing accountability, which might encourage lying and deceit; the construction of fake identities; the abuse of power by authorities, who might act with impunity to subordinate marginalized peoples; and violent or otherwise extreme behaviour.²²

What does this mean for graffiti? Do writers use their masks more to deceive, to speak truth to power, to voice taboo prejudices, or just to speak their minds without fear of repercussions? What cues are there in a graffiti record that would let us appraise the power relations embodied in the script? How could we even begin to assess the honesty – to say nothing of the authenticity and

18 Simmons et al., “The Urban Art Mapping Project,” 157.

19 Hans Asenbaum, “Anonymity and Democracy: Absence as Presence in the Public Sphere,” *American Political Science Review* 112, no. 3 (2018): 459–72, 464–67.

20 This idea is echoed by the US Constitution and the US Supreme Court (see Asenbaum, 463) as well as in practices such as orchestral auditions, anonymous peer reviews, and the removal of names from resumes.

21 Asenbaum, 467.

22 Asenbaum, 464–67.



FIGURE 5 “Eric, call us,” located on a 7-Eleven store at College St. and Spadina Ave., Toronto.

reliability – of a piece of graffiti? If graffiti does something *to* us, or *for* us, what does it do?

Consider figure 5: the script reading “Eric, call us,” written on the outside of a 7-Eleven store on the busy corner of College and Spadina in Toronto. Anonymity as identity negation is something that we can practice on purpose, but it is also something that happens to us if we fall through the cracks. In this case, anonymity is part of the message. There is no *us* identified and no phone number provided; the writer might hope that the right Eric is in the neighbourhood, will see the message, and will know who to call. There is an element of desperation in the act of using the street as a network in this way. It suggests that Eric is



FIGURE 6: “THIS PHONE DOESN’T COLLECT DATA,” located on Bloor St., the Annex, Toronto. Photograph by Maddy Simpkins, 2020.

otherwise unreachable. This, then, may be a record of a person trying to find another whose stability has come under threat.

Obscene bathroom iconography might be what springs to mind when one first imagines graffiti. In one of the first studies to take bathroom graffiti seriously, Amardo Rodriguez and Robin Patric Clair found that

dominant groups – especially white heterosexual men – use the open nature of graffiti to intimidate and “discipline” minority groups. . . . graffiti allow for open discourses (sexist, racist, and homophobic speech) that organizations cannot sanction, but which may also act to establish or reinforce the privileging aspects of patriarchal practices, thus, supporting the hegemonic order.²³

²³ Amardo Rodriguez and Robin Patric Clair, “Graffiti as Communication: Exploring the Discursive Tensions of Anonymous Texts,” *Southern Journal of Communication* 65, no. 1 (1999): 1–15, 3.

Louis Althusser suggests that ideologies (in this case, taking the form of sexist, racist, and homophobic discourses) function by inserting the subject into practices governed by dominant rituals and orders. Interpellation occurs as subjects recognize that “it really is true that it is so and not otherwise,”²⁴ either accepting the positions they find themselves placed in or not.

I suggest that graffiti can be evidence of those ideologies and of people’s intentions to either submit to or subvert them. In contrast with the bathroom graffiti analyzed by Rodriguez and Clair, which was used as a tool of patriarchal discipline, figure 6 depicts a pay phone upon which someone has written a message calling awareness to what surveillance scholars would call dataveillance. Implicit in this message is the condemnation of that surveillance, making this an example of someone using the reduced accountability of anonymous graffiti to make a political statement.

Appraising Graffiti: The Instrumental, Consummatory, and Illegible

If graffiti has archival value, how might we discern and categorize its content, context, and function? An appraisal theory for graffiti records should take into account the “social and cultural spaces in which they figure,”²⁵ or “the context in which [they are] created.”²⁶ It should consider how thought is attached to specific actions within them,²⁷ and for what feelings and emotions they act as a repository.²⁸ It seems to me that these questions are best answered by combining a socio-semiotic, a functional, and an affective analysis.

²⁴ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. B. Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 108.

²⁵ Franklin, “Mapping the Graphosphere,” 531.

²⁶ Helen Willa Samuels, “Rationale for the Functional Approach,” in *Varsity Letters: Documenting Modern Colleges and Universities* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1998), 14.

²⁷ Terry Eastwood, “Towards a Social Theory of Appraisal,” in *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor*, ed. Barbara L. Craig (Ottawa, ON: Association of Canadian Archivists, 1992), 97.

²⁸ Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 28.

Appraising Graffiti: A Socio-semiotic Linguistic Approach

Anti Randviir establishes a socio-semiotic ontology, rooted in a Gramscian analysis of cultural hegemony, that focuses on the power relations inherent to the embodiment of graffiti writing.²⁹ For Randviir, graffiti is about cathartic territorialization, an act of conceptual or physical bordering; its meaning emerges from the conditions of its space and the time of its emergence. It is temporary, staged, theatrical.³⁰ He distinguishes between two types of graffiti: communicative (instrumental) and non-communicative (consummatory). In sociolinguistics, instrumentalizing communication means speaking strategically, in an attempt to achieve a desired outcome, while consummatory communication is only for the satisfaction of the speaker, without any intent to influence anyone else.³¹ Adopting this framework immediately allows the establishment of an appraisal criterion: is this graffiti instrumental or consummatory? This is not a value judgment but the basis for a utilitarian typology. Both types of graffiti can have political power and archival value.

Randviir also defines two potential types of space for graffiti: public (semiotically controlled) and anonymous (semiotically open). Public space is signified, segmented, and categorized through architecture, street names, and signage – for example, street corners, public bathrooms, busy shopping districts. Anonymous space is the peripheries, places not used frequently by the larger population, or those that remain without attention for some time – for example, stadiums, places for mass events or seasonal sports, deserted or abandoned places, or roads only passable by vehicles with no intended access for pedestrians.³² This schema may be overly reductive, but enough examples of such spaces exist to give these categories some descriptive value. Neither are these categories necessarily mutually exclusive or unchanging. Instead of a binary distinction between anonymous and public, we might consider a more mutable scale between poles of very high and very low semiotic control. Consider the characteristics of the spaces displayed in figures 7 and 8. The space under the rail bridge is fenced off; it is not meant for public access.

²⁹ Anti Randviir, "Transdisciplinarity in Objects: Spatial Signification from Graffiti to Hegemony," *Σημειωτική – Sign Systems Studies* 39, no. 2–4 (2011): 88–123, <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=118685>.

³⁰ Randviir, 93–98.

³¹ Randviir, 101.

³² Randviir, 105.



FIGURE 7 “BURN IN HELL TROY F.,” “TROY FORD IS THE FAT BULLY WHO KILLED MY LOVE AND TRUST TO BE CANADEN,” “DAVID ALLEN ROY FORD,” and “TAKES HOMELES PEOPLES HOPES AND DREAMS AWAY? WHY TAKE OUR STREET HOMES?,” located in fenced-off area under a railway overpass, near Fort York, Toronto.



FIGURE 8 “NO MO CONDO PLS.,” inside illustration with numbers 1, 1, 3, 3, located on a window of an empty building at College St. and Bathurst St., Toronto.

It stinks of automotive exhaust and the garbage that litters the ground. As best as I can tell, the graffiti in figure 7 reads as follows:

BURN IN HELL TROY F. TROY FORD IS THE FAT BULLY WHO
 KILLED MY LOVE AND TRUST TO BE CANADEN – DAVID ALLEN
 ROY FORD – TAKES HOMELES PEOPLES HOPES AND DREAMS
 AWAY? WHY TAKE OUR STREET HOMES?

An elucidation of some context may be helpful. The Ford family (the late Rob Ford and his brother, now Premier Doug Ford) has featured prominently in Ontario and Toronto politics. Under the Fords' supervision and also that of former Mayor John Tory, the City of Toronto has in recent years conducted an ongoing campaign to remove, destroy, or at least relocate out of sight any number of "street homes," despite failing to respond to community requests for improved shelter services.³³ Perhaps the writer was caught up in one of these sweeps and, having lost their home, was pushed to this anonymous, peripheral space marked by cancerous fumes and unsanitary garbage, where they communicated their frustration in one of the only ways left to them.³⁴ Graffiti like this is a record of someone who needed care – the speech of someone who was experiencing an institutional barrier and did not receive the necessary help. It is the writing of somebody trying to use this space to ask for help. Graffiti might be one of the last recourses someone has if they have been locked out of every institution – yet script that appears as a record of someone going through a period of instability is often quickly erased.

The second example, "NO MO CONDO PLS" (no more condominiums, please; figure 8), was captured at the corner of College and Bathurst, on the window

33 Samuel Greenfield, "Anti-poverty Activists, Homeless People Camp out in Front of Rob Ford's Office to Demand More Shelter Beds," *National Post*, February 13, 2013, <https://nationalpost.com/news/toronto/ontario-coalition-against-poverty>; Robert Benzie, "'You Just Can't Do That': Premier Doug Ford Says Those Experiencing Homelessness Can't Camp in City Parks," *Toronto Star*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.thestar.com/politics/provincial/2020/06/25/you-just-cant-do-that-premier-doug-ford-says-those-experiencing-homelessness-cant-camp-in-city-parks.html>; Kerissa Wilson, "Toronto's Ombudsman Says City's Approach to Homeless Encampments 'Outdated,' New Plan Needed," *CTV News*, July 14, 2022, <https://toronto.ctvnews.ca/toronto-s-ombudsman-says-city-s-approach-to-homeless-encampments-outdated-new-plan-needed-1.5987478>.

34 This graffiti walks a line between consummatory and instrumental. It is unlikely the Fords would ever see or be influenced by this writing, but perhaps the author hopes to produce sympathetic feelings in others. Yet again, perhaps the writing served simply as a vent for strong emotion.

of an old bank (where a Starbucks has now opened). The corner is busy with pedestrians and automotive traffic. The sign on the window designates the type of space: “Retail Available.” Another empty building in a neighbourhood challenged by gentrification. The conditions of the space provide the writing with form and meaning: please, let the pressures exerted on this neighbourhood by developers cease. The writing is here because the building is here; the building is here because the public is here. Considering the graphosphere by differentiating between public space and anonymous space, as areas under higher and lower semiotic control,³⁵ helps us understand how “Retail Available” (figure 8) functions as a domineering sign of capital, whereas the scene of the underpass (figure 7) is semiotically empty. This perspective could also shed light on power relations, which determine how access to speech is granted in the graphosphere, raising questions about the presence of an aesthetic filter of authority upon speech.

Appraising Graffiti: A Functional Approach

In “Rationale for the Functional Approach,” Helen Willa Samuels formulates a framework to allow archivists to deal with the explosion of records created by information-era organizations. Her primary contention is that archivists should start selection activities not by considering specific sets of records but by understanding the context in which records are created – establishing knowledge about what is to be documented and the problems in obtaining it.³⁶ This approach for analyzing organizations can be modified to allow us to ask the following questions:

- In what context is graffiti created?
- What (social) institutional functions does the graffiti serve?
- Can we create a typology for graffiti?
- What problems might be encountered during the execution of a collecting plan, or appraisal in practice?

Divining the context of graffiti is sometimes difficult but is often crucial to a proper understanding of the function and intent of a piece of writing. Consider the examples in figures 9 and 10, which were taken by the author in Toronto in the

³⁵ Randviir, “Transdisciplinarity in Objects,” 103.

³⁶ Samuels, “Rationale for the Functional Approach,” 11–25.



FIGURE 9 “KEEP UR DISTANCE!,” with painting of a raccoon holding a measuring stick, located on stairs to a park in Cabbagetown, Toronto.

past three years. Figure 9 depicts a raccoon saying “KEEP UR DISTANCE!,” while holding what appears to be a measuring stick. Although the piece is undated, we might presume this appeared sometime during the two years of lockdown and social distancing measures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. It may also help us to know that the raccoon is an unofficial mascot of Toronto – largely tolerated if not outright beloved. Knowing the context of COVID-19 allows us to interpret this piece of graffiti as an instrumental communication, whereby the author asks Torontonians to follow social distancing procedures. If COVID-19 disrupted our social functioning, then this piece functions as a call to obey the order that remained in that space of disruption.

Figure 10 depicts two different graffiti pieces, conceptually delineated by their paint colour and spacing on the garage door. However, the pieces interact with one another, providing additional information by their juxtaposition on the same



FIGURE 10 “BLM WAKE UP [blue text]; “Regis know her name” [red text]; and illegible tagging [white text in background], located in a cut-through alley in the Annex, Toronto.

surface. Due to the timing of this image capture, we cannot know if these pieces were written by the same author at the same time or if one appeared first and the other followed.³⁷ However, knowing the social context of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement allows us to interpret this acronym, and knowing that Regis Korchinski-Paquet fell to her death from her balcony in the presence of five Toronto police officers on May 27, 2020 – just two days after George Floyd’s murder – tells us that these authors are calling for racial justice and for awareness of the Korchinski-Paquet case. These pieces associate the local death of a racialized woman, in the presence of armed officers and escalating police action, with

37 To say that messages (especially overlapping messages) that appear to have been written with different mediums (e.g., different paint colours, changing handwriting) come from different authors is a helpful but not definitive guideline.

the international Black Lives Matter movement. They connect thought with action: the juxtaposition of “wake up” and “know her name” suggests that the authors perceive awareness to be aligned with justice. These are instrumental communications; these writers want their audiences to *do something* about this social injustice.

In exploring the idea of an institutional or social function of graffiti, I found myself turning to the idea of a call and response. Althusser’s famous example of subject interpellation (how ideologies call for individuals to respond as subjects) is the cry of the police officer, who shouts, “Hey, you there!”:

I shall then suggest that ideology “acts” or “functions” in such a way that it “recruits” subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or “transforms” the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there!”

Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was “really” addressed to him.³⁸

The individual who turns around has responded to the ideological call, subjectifying himself. Yet, there are other ways to call out. What if we interpret graffiti as ideological calls? The call goes out (as graffiti script); the *observer* may respond to the call, identifying themselves as subject to it, or they may turn away and resist. I am not unaware of the irony of using the metaphor of a police officer (the violent embodiment of the state) to analyze subaltern ideological calls. But consider all the queer, affective ways a person might respond to a cop yelling in the street: freezing, panicked environmental scanning, feeling imagined guilt, bolting. Yet again, how is the nature of the call subverted if, instead of an officer, it is your good friend waving you over?

³⁸ Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” 104–105.



FIGURE 11 “TRANS LIVES MATTER” [red text]; “AMEN” [large black text]; “NO CAP” [small black text], located in back alleyway off Major St., the Annex, Toronto.

Examine the call and response evident in the exchange of figure 11. What feelings provoked the first author and the respondents? What feelings are provoked in you as an observer who comes across this by surprise in the alley? For the person who notices, there may be a moment of positioning as a subject – perhaps as a trans person whose life matters or as a cis person who agrees or disagrees. Do you respond, “Amen” or “No cap”? Do you turn away? Do you feel unsettled or maybe a little disgusted? Perhaps you think the sentiment is nice but the author should not have vandalized somebody’s private property to write it. It is that kind of *uncivil* behaviour that turns people away from the cause. But civility is subjective, meaning different things to people with different value sets. It seems that, for these writers, the epidemic of violence against trans and Black lives is so far outside the bounds of civil behaviour that it outweighs the normative and legal conventions against graffiti. If the social contract is so broken that people might repeatedly watch bodies of the state commit violent

injustices in their community without significant consequences, must we really feign surprise when they reject its other constraints to raise their voices?

Appraising Graffiti: An Affective Approach

I turn now from intent to emotion, from function to affect. Ann Cvetkovich's 2003 book *An Archive of Feelings* is precisely that: an archive of feelings from lesbian public cultures, often formed of ephemeral materials, which she describes as "repositories of feeling and emotion," meaning that they are repositories of the affective practices surrounding their production and reception.³⁹ She calls for us to honour emotion in archival practices, especially as testimony to the feelings of trauma, joy, and anger experienced by members of marginalized and subaltern communities. Marika Cifor takes up this call and suggests that positioning affect as an appraisal criterion at multiple stages of the process offers the potential to change what is collected and why, enabling the collection of records that trouble dominant relations.⁴⁰ I suggest that a graffiti archive would be always already an archive of feeling. Both instrumental and consummatory graffiti – a cry for help, a call for justice, a condemnation or exultation, even a simple staking of territory – can be loaded with emotion.

However, to appraise for affect could mean attempting to divine the emotional state of invisible authors, a task fraught with risk. Some graffiti wears its heart on its sleeve; other graffiti is more oblique.⁴¹ In an archive of feelings, it seems that it should ultimately matter less that the affects represented are properly divined during appraisal than that they are simply present. A graffiti appraisal theory should honour the value of all these affects, whether they contain (or are meant to elicit) responses of anger, pride, or the simple joy of a small joke. Building an archive of feelings requires all sorts of parts; records loaded with anger, grief, sadness, pride, joy, and confusion all have value to a collection strategy that seeks to adequately reflect the life of the archived community.

39 Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 7.

40 Marika Cifor, "Affecting Relations: Introducing Affect Theory to Archival Discourse," *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 7–31, 18, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-015-9261-5>.

41 For example, figure 18 communicates nothing more or less than the affective charge of its two characters: "?!"; figure 19 depicts text on a sewer grate that reads, "THE MONKEYS – HONK IF YOU LIKE MONKEYS," which has baffled me for many years. (Presumably, this is either a misspelling of the American rock band The Monkees or a call-out to the actual creature?)

While all affects are valuable, some graffiti comes from marginalized and subaltern positionalities. In honouring affect, we can also borrow a page from Caswell's feminist standpoint appraisal theory.⁴² Standpoint appraisal asks us to consider whether records communicate the perspective of the oppressed and considers such perspectives essential to liberatory memory work that preserves "traces of the past for now, to build a liberatory now."⁴³ Emotions like joy and anger, especially when expressed from subaltern positionalities, might reveal positional truths about the social and cultural contexts from whence they originate. In some cases, honouring such affects inherently troubles dominant relations. For example, consider what the emotions expressed in figures 12–19 reveal about the writers and their perspectives. Figure 12 depicts a record of someone's attempt to protect others from a person they have experienced as a rapist; the writer's use of the street as a whisper network might also imply something about their perception of the traditional method of reporting a rapist. Figure 13 depicts a bench upon which someone has written "Love yourself – hate cops – KILL POLITICIANS" – a message that is violently radical in its affective charge and therefore destined for quick erasure. Honouring these affects would require a critical examination of the structures that produced this speech. The same is true of the calls in figure 14 ("FEB 2020 CANADA IS STEALING INDIGENOUS LAND AT GUNPOINT");⁴⁴ figure 15 ("HoW MaNY Kids HAVE TO DIE?");⁴⁵ figure 16 ("IT'S GOOD TO BE – GAY!!!");⁴⁶ and figure 19 ("NO NATION IN SUBORDINATION.")⁴⁷

- 42 Michelle Caswell, "Dusting for Fingerprints: Introducing Feminist Standpoint Appraisal," in "Radical Empathy in Archival Practice," ed. Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O'Neill, and Holly Smith, special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 2 (2021): <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v3i2.113>.
- 43 Michelle Caswell, "Feeling Liberatory Memory Work: On the Archival Uses of Joy and Anger," *Archivaria* 90 (Fall 2020): 148–64, 161.
- 44 This piece of graffiti also has the distinction of functioning *purposefully* as a record, based on its month-year dating format.
- 45 Although the timing of its appearance has led me to interpret this as a reference to the 2021 news cycle about the "discovery" of unmarked mass graves at Canadian residential schools, I cannot say for certain that this was the author's intent.
- 46 Subsequently, I saw this vandalized, first through the addition of *not* to the sentence – to read, "IT'S GOOD TO BE *NOT* GAY" – and then later, when *not* was scratched out. And although the sentence appears divided by paint colour ("IT'S GOOD TO BE" in green and "GAY!!!" in pink), having never observed an earlier version, I cannot say whether the original author's intent was this supportive message or was itself an act of vandalism.
- 47 The affective and ideological calls in this graffiti seem self-evident.

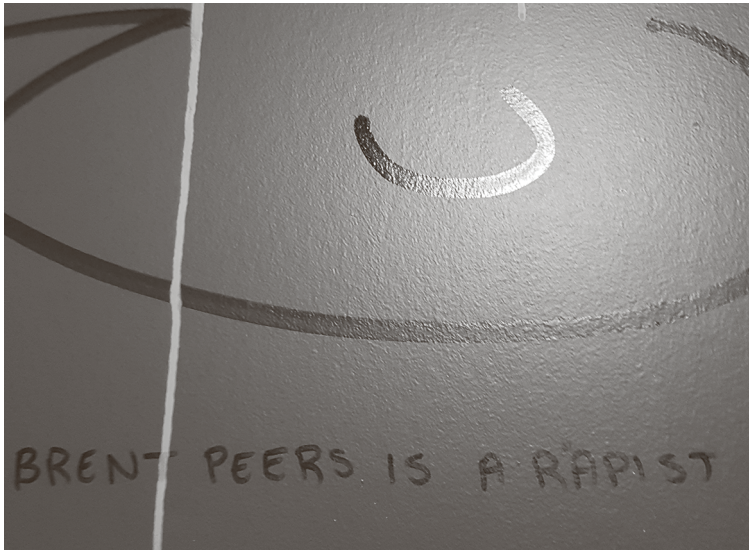


FIGURE 12 “BRENT PEERS IS A RAPIST,” located in a bar bathroom, downtown Toronto.

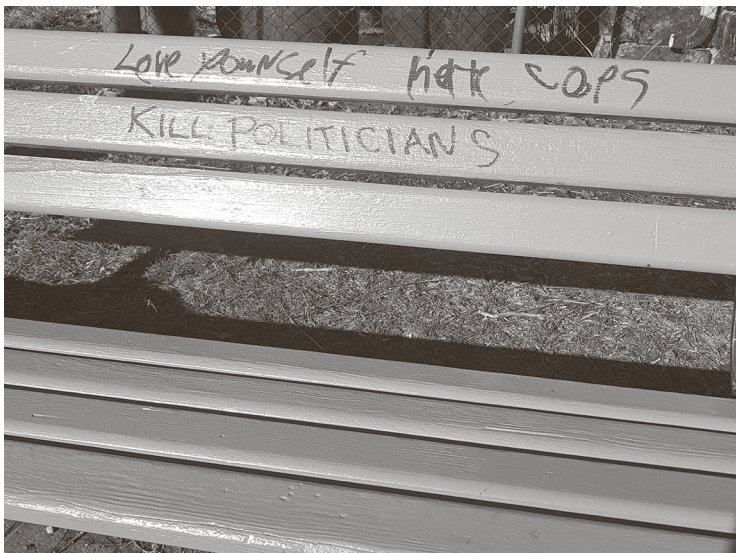


FIGURE 13 “Love Yourself – hate cops – KILL POLITICIANS,” located on a bench in a small park, the Annex, Toronto.

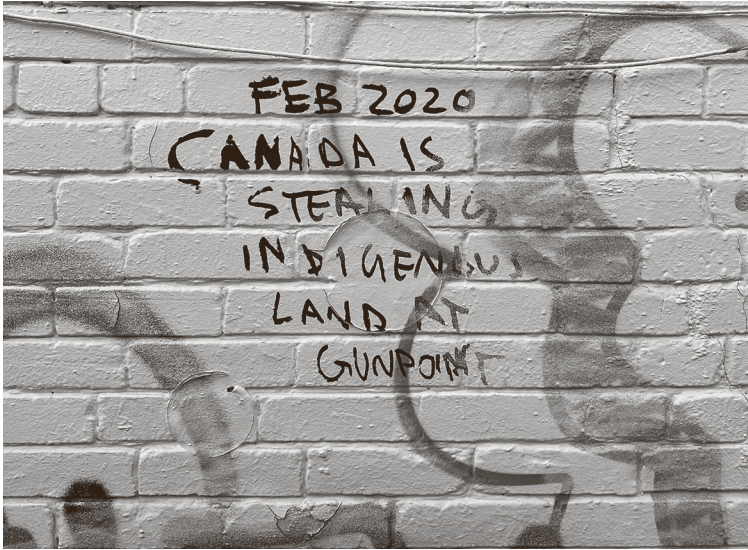


FIGURE 14 “FEB 2020 CANADA IS STEALING INDIGENOUS LAND AT GUNPOINT,”
Located in a back alley behind College St. restaurants, the Annex, Toronto.



FIGURE 15 “HoW MaNY Kids HAVE TO DIE?,” located on a building just off Bloor St., the
Annex, Toronto.



FIGURE 16 “IT’S GOOD TO BE” [green text] “GAY!!!” [red text], located on a residential street in the Annex, Toronto.



FIGURE 17 “?!” located in a back alley in the Annex, Toronto. Photograph taken by Natasha Rutters, 2020.



FIGURE 18 “THE MONKEYS – HONK IF YOU LIKE MONKEYS,” located on rainfall drainage grate at the entrance to a side alley in the Annex, Toronto.

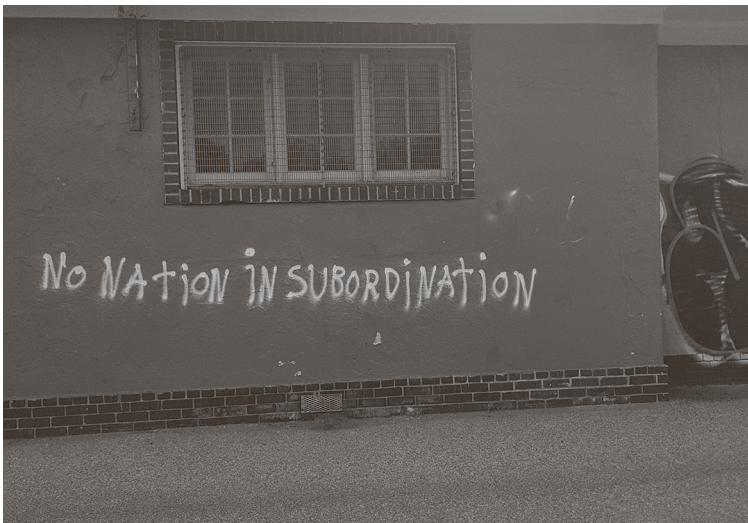


FIGURE 19 “NO NATION IN SUBORDINATION,” Located on a public building in Christie Pits Park, the Annex, Toronto.

Feminist standpoint theory calls on us to value records that can be activated in service of representation, justice, and reparation or as inspiration to imagine different futures.⁴⁸ Graffiti is cultural text loaded with the emotions, imagination, and political influences of its writers. Preserving these standpoints could fill in gaps in the traditional archival record. It could mean creating records of the affect and intent of subaltern and marginalized positionalities. Even graffiti that simply records presence communicates something to authority: “I am here, you have not stamped me out yet. I am here, I will continue to make noise.” Graffiti can be a way to criticize powerful bodies anonymously and safely – to call attention to injustice – and in doing so, to imagine a better future. These are records that would fill out the edges of a total archive of feelings.

Appraising Graffiti: Combining Approaches for the Total Archive

The themes of these pieces already suggest some potential social functions of graffiti, which might serve as categories for a typology. I suggest the following functions based on my subjective experience of what is already out there – the types of graffiti records that might be regarded as organically occurring. This typology is rudimentary, and many of these categories are not mutually exclusive. One piece of graffiti could perform many of the following functions. A graffiti appraisal plan will have to grapple with the challenge of multifarious meanings. An attempt at illustrating this schema is provided in figure 20.

First, is an ideological call present? Some graffiti may be purely instrumental – speech that serves a function but has no apparent intent to submit to or subvert hegemonic ideologies – for example, speech memorializing non-political figures (“RIP Connor 1990–2018 <3”) or utilitarian communication between individuals (“Eric call us,” “SLOW FOR THE CATS”). The intended meanings or functions of graffiti communications can be obtuse or even indecipherable without important context, leaving us to guess at an author’s intent; we might wonder what prompted messages like “HoW MaNY Kids HAVE TO DIE?,” “IN THIS GAME OF death,” or “GAY CRIMES.” When a call is identified, it may be classified according to its interpreted content. Such calls might include, but are

⁴⁸ Caswell, “Dusting for Fingerprints,” 28.

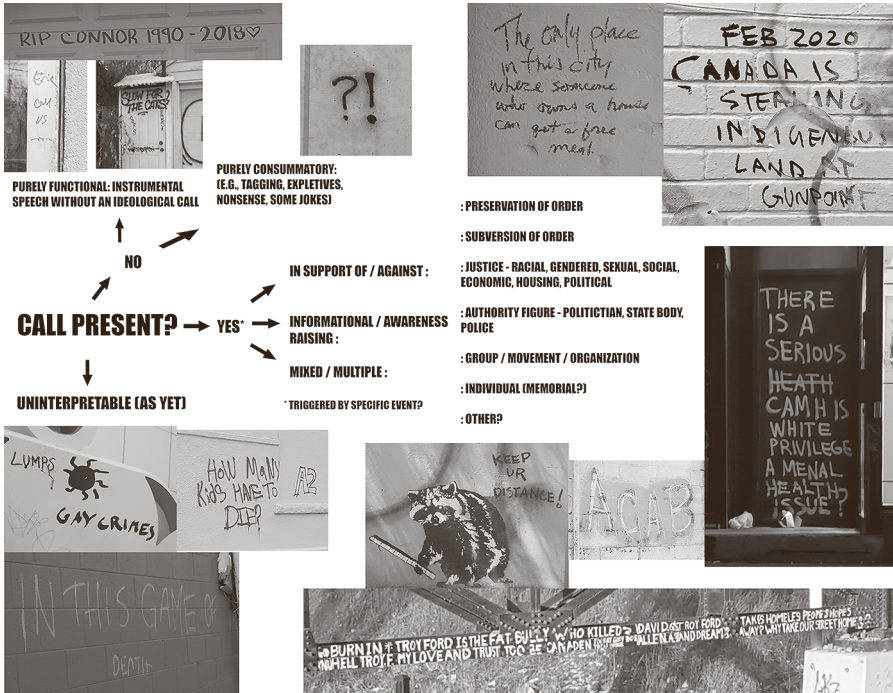


FIGURE 20 A flow chart illustrating examples of graffiti with and without ideological calls. Photograph of “Slow for the Cats” by Natasha Rutters, 2020.

not limited to, calls in support of or against something and calls that are intended to raise awareness or inform, while some messages might have mixed or multiple calls. For example, a call might be both in support of housing justice and against Doug Ford, or memorial graffiti for political and politicized individuals might be imbued with ideological meaning (e.g., “BLM . . . Regis Know Her Name”).

A typology that focuses on calls might discard graffiti that does not contain calls. I have thus far avoided mentioning the tagging present in the backgrounds of these images. Tags are a type of consummatory graffiti where the content is just the author’s pseudonym. The function of tags is typical of the type of cathartic territorialization⁴⁹ noted by Randviir; they mean “I was here.” As such, their semiotic influence is very specific. Most tags communicate little beyond this roll call function and so might be “noisy” to an archive targeting ideologically laden

49 Randviir, “Transdisciplinarity in Objects,” 95.

graffiti. Including tags would also vastly expand the scope of a targeted collection plan, so those enacting a collection plan with limited resources might need to discard tags that are not already associated with those pieces in some way.

Additionally, I have concerns about privacy, about minimizing surveillance, and about the ways a graffiti archive could be abused. I have doubts about the archival right to intervene from the outside, to make a record of something ephemeral that the author might have intended to be temporary. In a worst-case scenario, an archive that collected graffiti tags might be collecting evidence of criminal activity, which could be traced back to individuals. Though the chance of this seems slim, it still strikes me as best minimized. I pause here to note the subjectiveness of semiotic value and the rich informational content – and evidence of community – that tags provide for other graffiti artists, who are themselves involved in an ancient game with respectful rules and rule breaking. Appraising tags might demand a different strategy than the one I have proposed here, and it might be better carried out by graffiti writers themselves.⁵⁰

Hate speech and disinformation also contain ideological calls, which are typically targeted for swift erasure. Enacting a collections plan for graffiti would require choosing whether to preserve such speech and whether to make such graffiti publicly accessible in the arrangement. The UAMP admits conspiracy and denialism into its COVID-19 Street Art database, to represent the experience of the community more accurately,⁵¹ and it collects but does not publish racist and pro-police graffiti in its George Floyd and Anti-Racist Street Art database.⁵² These practices leave us in Toronto with the question of whether to first *collect* and then *share* graffiti that contains hate speech and symbols or conspiracy and disinformation (figure 21). Though I feel that records of hate and conspiracy can be rich evidentiary sources, I am sympathetic to concerns about amplification through publication and therefore to the need for sensitive arrangement and contextualization.

I have articulated a rudimentary typology based on social function. To this I have added the beginnings of a selection logic, which could guide the disposition

50 Intergraff has already documented years of Toronto tagging culture, though without a mapped arrangement style. Unfortunately, the web page for this community-led archival project now appears to be inactive.

51 Urban Art Mapping Research Team, "Street Art in Times of Crisis," Urban Art Mapping Project, accessed December 18, 2022, <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/about>.

52 Simmons et al., "The Urban Art Mapping Project," 169.

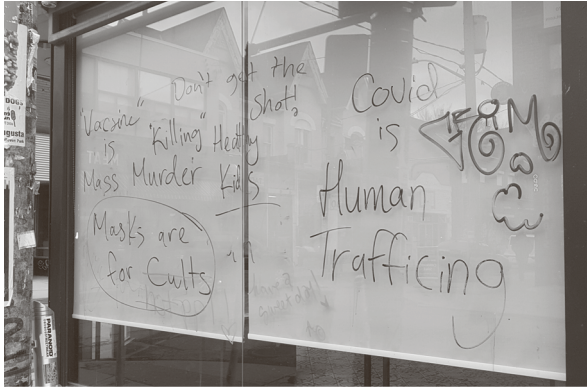


FIGURE 21 “Vaccine’ is Mass Murder”; “Masks are for Cults” [circled]; “Killing’ Healthy Kids”; “Don’t get the shot!”; and “Covid is Human Trafficking,” [with symbols], located on a storefront window in Kensington Market, Toronto.

of items during appraisal and arrangement.⁵³ It strikes me that the ideal graffiti archive would perfectly recreate the street in four dimensions, immersing viewers in the three-dimensional space and enabling them to view changes over time. It also strikes me that even constant re-recollection with the best technology (e.g., three-dimensional cameras and virtual reality headsets) could not keep up with the pace of graffiti’s natural development. Not only is the effectiveness of a graffiti archive as documentation threatened by the records’ natural, regular erasure and transformation, but the capacity to create a record that accurately reflects the community is heavily dependent upon the means of its collection. A graffiti archive collected by one person, as my own has been, is more properly called a collection than an archive, given the bias introduced by my own subjectivity in selecting records that are comprehensible to me.⁵⁴ I contend that a total graffiti archive would have to introduce subjectivity on a scale that would stretch toward an accurate reflection of the city. The most effective total graffiti archive would seem to require thousands of active guerilla archivists, who might also be records creators themselves. Such an archive would also seem

⁵³ I have thus far avoided discussing the semiotic potential and ideological calls of images in graffiti art, which I consider to be a topic deserving more examination than there is space for here. And, being limited by knowledge of only my own mother tongue and that French imparted by the Ontario education system, I also note now my bias toward the English language.

⁵⁴ For more graffiti examples, see Hive Mind (@hivemind__) on Instagram.

to be most useful to the community as an online, interactive map along the lines of the Urban Art Mapping Project or the International Graffiti Archive. Records creators and spotters might then make their own choices about what to include in each record and how to interpret the power relations, ideological functions, and affective potentials embodied therein, transforming everyone into guerilla visual archivists.

I have elucidated some ways that graffiti could be appraised. I have suggested that graffiti can be understood through lenses of power, function, and affect and therefore classified as instrumental or consummatory speech. Rich description of the social, political, and geographic context of graffiti, including the scale of semiotic control evident in the environment – from public (very high control) to anonymous (very low control) – seems crucial to building understanding. An analysis based on Althusser's interpellation can then be applied to determine if the graffiti, whether instrumental or consummatory, contains a "call" to a social function. Such functions should be described, if possible. Finally, an appraisal of the affective values of the record could take place, based on the following questions: What affects seem present in the writing? What affects is the writing likely to elicit in an observer? Is there evidence of positionality? What is it? As these are subjective questions, interpreting ideological calls and evidence of affect and positionality seems best undertaken within a participatory and/or community appraisal approach.

Conclusion: What Could We Learn from Graffiti?

Graffiti, as a record, gives insight into social systems and institutions. It may speak to which organizations someone has perceived as helpful and which as combative; it may act as evidence of events like street sweeps and their effect on the people targeted; it may show how the street can be used as a whisper network for people trying to protect each other, find each other, lift each other up, or communicate useful information. It may also embody social breakdown – as do records of COVID-19 and anti-vax conspiracy, hate speech, and responses to police violence. It is evidence of the active practices and ongoing resistance of marginalized peoples.

I will close with some research questions I think demonstrate the potential utility of a graffiti archive: Is it possible that authorized art contains not only

less political messaging but also less anger? How much anger would we see in vandalism? How much joy? Could we make an emotive map of a neighbourhood? A map of aesthetic styles? Even the absence of graffiti could be illuminating, particularly if it has been replaced with an authorized mural. Is there a quantifiable effect of the filter of authority on the aesthetics and content of an ideological call? Would we find the same calls replicated across street art and graffiti, or would some types be more prominent in some spheres/styles? What events, emotions, and actions would be salient across these styles? If there are the same calls, does the style impact the way that these are perceived and taken up?

I have argued that graffiti has archival value, that it can be a window into raw, direct, and confrontational responses to world events – in other words, that analyzing the content, affect, and intent of graffiti can reveal information about the “social and cultural spaces”⁵⁵ from which it derives. I will end by reiterating that archiving graffiti could be a method of preserving records originating from marginalized positionalities. In an archiving tradition that has heretofore prioritized conventional voice and structure, it could fill out the edges, thus contributing to the curation of a totalizing archive of feelings. Honouring the informational and affective value of the standpoint of graffiti records could open the door to critical perspectives on hegemonic power that inherently trouble dominant socio-economic relations. “Vandalize everything! Demand visual democracy!”

BIOGRAPHY Al Cunningham Rogers (they/them; she/her) is a researcher, communicator, archivist, and multimedia artist who resides in the unceded Indigenous territories of Tkaronto, or Toronto, Canada. They have a Master of Arts degree in communication and culture from Toronto Metropolitan University and will graduate this year from a Master of Information Science program in archives and records management from the University of Toronto. Al hopes to use her background in political science, communications, masculinities, and political violence studies to contribute critically to the archival and library sciences field. Their personal practices include writing, gardening, photography, and textile arts.

⁵⁵ Franklin, “Mapping the Graphosphere,” 531.