BOMB ALERT
Graffiti writing and urban space in London

> What sign should one recognise as our own? Certain graffiti, words of refusal or forbidden gestures inscribed with haste. (Vaneigem, 1961, quoted in Sadler, 1998: 97)

> Space is fundamental in any exercise of power. (Foucault, 1984: 252)

> In our society, how it runs, and how its laws run, fundamentally relates to property, the control of property, the control of space, you know? And graffiti, disregards, or says, "Fuck you" to all that, basically. It says: "No. We're gonna interact with this space however we want". (Interview extract)

Introduction

Although graffiti features on the cover of many a criminological textbook, serious theoretical engagement with graffiti writing remains few and far between (Ferrell et al., 2008: 101-2).[1] For the most part, the existing criminological literature on graffiti writing has tended *either* to consider this activity as sheer mindless vandalism – a phenomenon that requires no further comprehension, and only to be prevented and removed as efficiently as possible by administrative forms of crime control (see, for example, Geason and Wilson, 1990; Sloan-Hewitt and Kelling, 1990; Poyner, 1992; Smith and Cornish, 2006; Begum et al., 2009, Taylor and Marais, 2009; Taylor et al., 2010) – *or* to adopt an appreciative perspective, often with the effect of retroactively romanticising or politicising graffiti writing as a form of "resistance" (see, for example, Ferrell, 1996). The present article adopts a different approach, eschewing the moralising and managerialist tendencies of administrative criminologies as well as tedious "art-or-vandalism" debates, yet refusing to naively position graffiti writing as a proto-revolutionary act.[2] Rather, the article considers how we might conceive theoretically of the interrelationships between this specific form of criminality, urban space, and social control.

The article is based on three years of ethnographic research undertaken in London amongst a loose network of what British Transport Police term "serious graffiti vandals".[3] Participants were not "street artists" of the Banksy variety, nor did they consider themselves graffiti "artists". Participants had little interest in spending hours painting intricate and colourful murals; rather they identified

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[1] Notable recent exceptions include work by Halsey and Young (2006; Young, 2012; 2014), and Ferrell and Weide (2010).

[2] Although see Young (2014) for a recent, more nuanced discussion from within criminology.

[3] Recent research on graffiti in London is found methodologically wanting to say the least. A piece by Ross, for example, offers a review of articles mentioning graffiti or street art in *The Times*, '[i]n order to constructive as comprehensive a picture of possible of graffiti and street art' in the capital (2016: 277).

themselves as graffiti *writers*, "bombers" – or, simply, vandals. Their graffiti is comprised of "tags" and quickly executed two-colour bubble-letter style words, known as "throw-ups", carried out with the intention of rapidly saturating ("smashing" or "battering", in graffiti parlance) large areas of the city. Quantity here *is* quality (Schachter, 2014: xxii, n.8). Moreover, this type of graffiti is intended to be appreciated by other graffiti writers, and not the general public.

Fieldwork involved "hanging out" (Geertz, 1998), drinking and socialising with these young men (and they were, with one or two exceptions, men; see Macdonald, 2001); accompanying them as they bought and stole[4] paint, and on nocturnal spray-painting missions; and attending daytime painting sessions at legally sanctioned graffiti walls, as well as graffiti-related gallery events. I met and spoke with around thirty members of several major London graffiti "crews" (discussed below), many of whom were notorious to the authorities, and highly regarded within the capital's graffiti scene. I also spent countless hours watching and reading numerous graffiti videos, magazines and blogs in an attempt to fully immerse myself in the subculture. Alongside fieldwork, I conducted informal, semi-structured interviews with eighteen graffiti writers, including some of the most prestigious London bombers from both the past and present. Of this cohort, five participants had been to prison for graffiti writing offences (typically receiving between 12 and 24-month sentences for conspiracy to commit criminal damage), with several others having narrowly avoided receiving prison sentences.[5]

The article proceeds in two parts. Although the staples of graffiti writing remain virtually unchanged since the 1970s, it remains an at-times bewilderingly complex subculture; one steeped in tradition, and with its own elaborate hierarchies, internal divisions, etiquette, rituals and argot. Accordingly, the first half of the article delineates some of the major subcultural elements that comprise the 'day-to-day practice of graffiti writing' as it exists in present-day London (Ferrell, 1996: 57). In doing so, I hope to show how the practice is mutating and assuming historically and geographically specific forms, in part as a response to the city's shifting social-spatial terrain, and its changing contours of control. The second half of the article engages the theoretical work of the French Marxist sociologist and philosopher, Henri Lefebvre (1991), on the *social production of space*. I suggest that graffiti can be understood as simultaneously *disrupting* authoritative spatial orderings, whilst *superimposing* its own alternative social geography onto the city.

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[4] Although space precludes further discussion here, shoplifting (or "racking") has been an intrinsic element of the graffiti subculture since its very beginning (Castleman, 1982; Hager, 1984; Lachman, 1988). As far back as the early 1980s it was already an established 'tradition among most graffiti writers that all materials used in writing be stolen' (Castleman, 1982: 46).

[5] Despite repeated requests to interview officers from the BTP's Graffiti Unit, I was not granted access. However, I was able to arrange an informal interview with one BTP officer who oversaw some of the Graffiti Unit's work and had attended numerous trials of graffiti writers (including, though I did not let on at the time, some of those whom I knew personally).

Doing graffiti

Getting up: Tags, dubs, throw-ups and subcultural style

'The aim of the graffiti game', in the words of one participant, 'is to get your name up'. "Getting up" is the process of writing one's alias or tag repeatedly and extensively with the intention of achieving recognition amongst other graffiti writers. Writers achieve subcultural status by getting up as much, and over as large an area, as possible. For bombers in particular, getting up – with the intention of achieving "fame" (recognition amongst other writers) – is the single most important motive, over and above any aesthetic considerations (or "style"). As another participant succinctly puts it: 'Anyone that is doing graffiti and says they don't care about any kind of props [kudos] in the graffiti scene is full of shit'. "Going all-city" – tagging every district and / or public transportation line within a city – remains one of the highest accolades within the graffiti writing world. The dedication required in order to achieve this status, or that of a "king" (a very highly respected writer) can hardly be understated.

Undoubtedly the most controversial, yet arguably the single most important form of graffiti is the tag. Hated by much of the general public, and the scourge of the authorities, by whom it is regarded as, at best, "mindless vandalism", tagging is what most people think of when they hear the word "graffiti". Tags – broadly analogous to a signature – are the most quickly and commonly executed form of graffiti; usually written in one swift motion, and sometimes in one continuous line (known as "one-liners"). Because they are quick to execute and require limited resources, tags, along with throw-ups (discussed below), provide an effective means for writers to saturate large areas of the city in a relatively short amount of time ("bombing"). In addition to alphanumeric characters, tags are typically adorned with various embellishments (arrows, stars, halos, crowns, and so on). Tags preceded by the letter "3" are exhortations to "free" imprisoned writers, written as messages of solidarity by others. Tags preceded by the letters "RIP" are written in tribute to a deceased writer.

Illegible and unintelligible to the untrained eye, tags are often derided by non-writers as unsightly "scribbles" or "scrawls". When judged according to normative aesthetic criteria, there can be little doubt that tags are "ugly" or "unappealing". However, for those familiar with the chirographic conventions of subcultural graffiti, tags are not only comprehensible, but the object of aesthetic appeal, fascination and admiration, as the following interview extracts illustrate:

> It's like calligraphy: how you write your tag, how you write your letters, all the different ways you can write the letters... For instance, [NAME OMITTED], I always remember, his handstyle was amazing.
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> A lot of good tags have energy, you know? They have presence. You can understand by the flaring of it and things like that how someone's done it, and you know, the fucking flow they've got to it.

For many, the tag represents graffiti distilled to its very essence: 'the purist's form' (Sinclair, 1997: 3). A writers "handstyle" is honed through years, sometimes decades, of practice. Thus, 'a tag tells a story', one participant tells me: 'Years of history and refinement have gone into that'. Moreover, and as we will see, judged according to the aesthetic logic of graffiti, tags take on a rich and powerful significance. Tags are important not least because writers can deduce their peers' competence and subcultural credentials based on how well executed their tag is: the "style" and "flow" of the lettering, size, choice of placement, and so on.[6]

The quintessential "London-style" of graffiti, instantly recognisable as such, is the "dub". Dubs comprise simple, bold and blocky "straight letter" chrome or white lettering outlined in black. The emergence of this distinctive London style, 'more angular and harder-edged than the big-hearted original from New York', was evident as early on as the mid-1980s (Ashford, 2013: 154). Chrome paint is favoured as it is clearly visible in low light and on any colour surface owing to its high opacity and reflective qualities. Dubs take longer to paint than tags owing to their larger size, having to be outlined and filled in with a first colour, and then outlined again in a second, contrasting colour. Recent years have seen this characteristic London style of graffiti become less prevalent for at least two reasons. First, the proliferation of urban security measures such as CCTV cameras, as well as the increasing frequency of "the buff" (graffiti removal by local authorities) mean that this relatively time-consuming style carries increased risk (the likelihood of being detected and apprehended by the authorities) and decreased reward (the graffiti will likely remain for a shorter period).[7] Second, and equally important, is that a new generation of post-

[6] "Style" is governed by an esoteric and unspoken set of principles, foremost amongst which, and 'hardest to understand' is the 'mystical quality' known as "flow" (Siege 52, 2009: 68). 'It seems straightforward in concept – it's how the piece flows, rolls, travels from left to right. But there's a practiced science to it, one that every writer who cares about style has studied… It's how [the letters] overlap and touch, how a letter holds itself up against the one next to it… the shapes of the spaces in between the letters, are as important as the letters themselves' (ibid).

[7] "The buff" is the name given by writers to the authorities' efforts to remove or paint over graffiti. The act of "buffing" graffiti 'usually involves the application of a paint that is similar, though rarely matching, in colour and tone to the surface upon which graffiti has been applied; the 'buff' often assumes the formal envelope of the illegal mark in an orthogonal patchwork' (Brook and Dunn, 2013: 170). For the most part, writers accept the buff as inconvenient but inevitable. Nevertheless, writers tend to consider the likelihood of graffiti being "buffed" in deciding where to paint. It is for this reason that those areas in which graffiti is rarely removed are sometimes more likely to attract further unwanted attention from graffiti writers. However, this is just one of many factors influencing writers' decision of where to paint, in addition to visibility, volume of passing traffic, ease or difficulty of access, surface texture, security measures, and countless other circumstances. *Contra* Wilson and Kelling's (1982) analysis, an astute graffiti writer would be more likely to paint a highly visible, but difficult to reach (and, therefore, to remove) "spot" in an upmarket part of town, than a derelict, insecure, and easy to access location in a run-down area with a relatively low volume of passing traffic (Ferrell and Weide, 2010).

Internet writers with access to graffiti media from around the world have adopted stylistic influences from both the US and Europe. The past decade or so has thus seen a move towards American and European-influenced styles of graffiti being painted in London. Thus, subcultural styles become increasingly *liquid*, loosened from their original geographical specificity: circulating from street to screen and smartphone and back to the street again (Ferrell et al., 2008; Ferrell and Weide, 2010).

For both of these reasons, London writers increasingly eschew traditional "straight letter" dubs, in favour of "throw-ups". Throw-ups are more fluid and less bold than dubs; they typically consist of two-dimensional bubble-style lettering, and are designed to be executed – or "thrown up" – as quickly as possible, often in just one or two continuous lines, and in a matter of seconds. Throw-ups 'occupy, both technically and aesthetically, the middle ground between tags and pieces [full-colour murals]' (Ferrell, 1996: 83). Throw-up letters are often half-finished, at other times intersecting and overlapping with one another so as to share outlines, 'develop[ed] out of an economy of paint, time, and style' (ibid: 84). Furthermore, a writer's name is often abbreviated to a "two letter" (typically the first and second, or first and last letters of their alias) for the purpose of throwing up. Throw-ups are known as "outlines" if simply outlined in one colour, or "fill ins" if filled in with a second colour.

Trains, tracksides and the BTP

In order to understand graffiti's antagonistic social and spatial relationship with the authorities in London, it is important to know something of the subculture's history. The graffiti subculture as it is known today was born on the New York subway, where trains provided a moving canvas on which writers could display their names around the city (see Castleman, 1982; Cooper and Chalfant, 1984). One can trace the origins of the graffiti subculture in London to the UK publication of *Subway Art* (Cooper and Chalfant, 1984); a book 'full of [photographs of] trains covered in graffiti' (Judd, 2013). Known by many as "the bible" of graffiti, *Subway Art* quickly acquired the dubious accolade of becoming one of the most stolen books in Britain. Ever since it was first exported from New York during the 1980s, graffiti all over the world has centred around subways, trains, and "riding the lines" in order to view graffiti.

In London, trains and the London Underground (or "tube") network remain of central significance to the graffiti subculture. However, owing in part to the severe penalties for those who paint trains in the UK, it is the "tracksides" – the walls, embankments and anything within reach of an aerosol can surrounding the train and tube tracks – more often than train depots (or "yards"), where graffiti writing takes place. Tracksides offer numerous advantages to graffiti writers compared to painting on the streets, foremost amongst which is that after dark, it is possible to paint here almost completely undisturbed, sometimes for hours at a time. Since asides from the stations themselves, most of London's

railway infrastructure is unmonitored by CCTV, graffiti writers need only worry about avoiding the trains themselves, and maintenance workers (or "trackies") after service hours. In most instances, trackside graffiti tends to stay "up" for far longer periods than that which is painted on the street. This is especially the case if writers paint a location that is visible, yet either difficult to access, or on property not owned by the train operators (for instance, the roof of a warehouse adjacent to the tracks).

However, despite the predominance of tracksides in the UK, it is the trains themselves – owing both to their historical, subcultural significance, and the difficulty in painting them – that remain the most highly prized canvas within the graffiti subculture, with painting subway or metro trains regarded by many writers as the most prestigious achievement of all.[8] As one participant put it:

> Trains is where modern graffiti originated… throw-ups were made *for* painting trains [quickly]. And it's the fucking most difficult, it's the hardest thing to do, so a fucking panel [graffiti painted on the side of a train] is worth ten tracksides at least.

Because of London graffiti's historical location on and around the city's rolling stock and railway infrastructure, graffiti writers have long been pursued by the British Transport Police (BTP). The BTP is unusual in that the 'vast majority' of the force's funding comes from the UK's now-privatised train operating companies and Network Rail (BTP, 2014). As such, the BTP can be understood as a form of 'user-pays policing'; effectively acting as a commercial security vendor (Ayling and Shearing, 2008). It is perhaps for this reason, and at the behest of the train operating companies, that the force has invested so much time, energy and resources into apprehending and prosecuting graffiti writers, and repeatedly seeking the maximum possible prison sentences, which are intended as a deterrent (Saysell, 2014). Whilst the BTP have failed to eradicate graffiti, it is no exaggeration to say that the force's policies, tactics and successive clampdowns have shaped the subculture substantially, altering the dynamics within which writers work and in some ways, as I discuss below, 'amplify[ing] the very activity they wish to suppress' (Ferrell, 1996: 159). 'As participants in an ongoing process' both graffiti writers and the authorities engage with one another 'in a strange dance of criminality and enforcement' (ibid).

Since 1987, the BTP has had a dedicated Graffiti Unit (known to writers as the "graf squad"), tasked with identifying, apprehending and prosecuting the UK's "most wanted" vandals. Significantly, the BTP's strategy for tackling graffiti is modelled directly on that adopted by the New York City Transit Police Department (NYCTPD), the establishment of the Graffiti Unit having been inspired by the NYCTPD's "Vandal Squad". The BTP, in conjunction with train and London Underground operators, have mimicked the New York transit authorities' policy of refusing to put painted trains into service, which was, in

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[8] As Ferrell notes, graffiti writing occurs 'in a context which challenges, defies, and even celebrates the illegality of the act', and thus which 'can only be exacerbated' by heightened security measures (1996: 148).

turn, directly inspired by Wilson and Kelling's (1982) broken windows theory (BTP, 2013). That the BTP's policy is premised on "broken window" thinking is made particularly apparent in an early edition of the "graffiti" page on the BTP's website, which virtually paraphrases Wilson and Kelling's essay. Graffiti, it is professed:

> is often the first element in a spiral of decline. If graffiti is allowed to stay, others will feel free to add to it. Undesirable types – drunks, addicts, beggars, criminals – will believe they can act with impunity. This leads to a climate of fear. (BTP, 2003)

Tim O'Toole, the former managing director of London Underground, echoed this sentiment when in 2005 he proclaimed that, 'Graffiti on the Tube is not acceptable. It is intimidating and threatening to passengers – in short, it is psychological mugging' (quoted in TfL, 2005).[9] Detective Constable Colin Saysell of the BTP's Graffiti Unit – the only detective registered as an expert witness on graffiti, and whose zealous pursuit of the capital's vandals for almost thirty years has earned him a reputation amongst writers as the "bogeyman" of London graffiti – likewise describes himself as "disciple" of Wilson and Kelling's theory (Saysell, 2014; see Weaver, 2014).

Since the mid-2000s, the BTP have utilised criminal conspiracy charges in order to effectively prosecute entire "crews" of graffiti writers at once, culminating in lengthy prison sentences for several well-known London writers (Saysell, 2014). Whilst this has, according both to the BTP's own statistics, as well the beliefs of many of my participants, resulted in an overall downturn in train graffiti, it has also had an unintended adverse effect. As one participant explains:

> To a certain degree [imprisoning writers] worked [as a deterrent] in that it scared a lot of people... Some people stopped writing even, but following that came a second wave of more hardcore writers who knew the risks and were just… it made it a bit more of a "fuck the police" kind of thing. So there was a lot more less elaborate graffiti and a lot more damage: scratching, acid, paint stripper, etching.

Such a situation reaches its logical conclusion in an incident mentioned by another participant:

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[9] Such "common sense" thinking is decidedly uncriminological. Several scholars have suggested that it is 'evidence of dirt and order, rather than evidence of crime' per se, which is 'commonly elided with, and expressed as, fear of crime' (Fanghanel, 2015: 58; see Sampson and Raudenbush, 1999; Beckett and Herbert, 2008). Whilst it is clearly the case that graffiti is perceived by some to signify a threat to personal safety – although Ferrell (1996) attributes this perception, in part, to anti-graffiti campaigns – and that urban streetscapes are experienced differently by different body-subjects (see, for instance, Koskela and Pain, 2000; Pain, 2000; England and Simon 2010), "readings" of urban space are complex, nuanced and diverse (Rowe and Hutton, 2012). This issue is further complicated when one considers how graffiti has been enrolled by advertisers, retailers and restaurateurs in order to convey a sense of urban "edginess". Ironically, heightened surveillance and security measures can also increase fear of crime (Koskela, 2000: 247; see, for instance, Ellin, 1997).

> There's always a constant struggle between the system, the authorities, the buff – and the writers, as to who's going to maintain their presence […] Sometimes, out of frustration, writers will go and cause more damage. There was a time when about twenty Circle line trains were sprayed with black ink [from] end to end, that stained so hard it took them a month to remove. And that was mainly because they were buffing so much as part of the [London 2012] Olympics bid, and nothing was running [painted trains were not being put into service], and because they were trying to lock down graf. So some writers were like, "OK, fuck you then! We'll just do this. You don't like it? That's too bad, innit!" It was an expression of frustration. People would rather have full-colour pieces running, but if they're not gonna let them, it's like, "OK, well you can't stop this running!"

Today, in order to infiltrate the train or tube "yards" in which rolling stock is housed overnight, writers must overcome military-grade security: twenty foot high razor-wire-topped fences fitted with tremor sensors; motion-activated alarms; infrared CCTV cameras; manned watchtowers; and guard dogs (see Iveson, 2010). Even if such measures are successfully circumvented, writers will often have only a matter of minutes between security patrols in order to paint a "panel" (the side of a train) before making their escape. Furthermore, writers know that every panel they succeed in painting will be photographed by depot staff, and collected and entered into a National Graffiti Database maintained by the BTP, the Metropolitan Police and AGS One, a graffiti removal contractor. Thus, those writers who continue to paint trains quickly end up on the BTP's radar – something which many understandably seek to avoid. For an increasing number of writers – particularly amongst those I encountered – the 'ever-dwindling rewards and ever-increasing penalties' (Oswald, 2012) meant that painting trains was simply no longer worth the risk involved.[10]

(Anti)social behaviour: Crews and beef

Almost all serious writers are part of at least one "crew" (with some writers belonging to several). Typically known by two or three letter initialisms such as "AB" or "CDE", which can stand for any number of titles or phrases, crews are loose, somewhat informal associations of writers, who hang out, paint and rack together, as well as engaging in "beef" (conflicts) with other crews. Crews are not "gangs" but rather 'rhizomatic' social formations: messy, loosely-formed, amorphous, tangled, swarm-like associations of peers (Hallsworth, 2013). Nevertheless, some crews are extremely well organised and prolific. The undisputed "kings" of London graffiti – the DDS crew – have been breaking into the city's notoriously secure tube network for well over two decades, with Transport for London (TfL) holding them responsible for causing over £10

[10] However, since 2016, train and tube graffiti in London appears to have enjoyed a resurgence. The reasons for this are unclear, but may include cuts to railway security budgets precipitated by government-imposed austerity measures, and the recent disbanding of the BTP's Graffiti Unit.

million of damage (Atkins and Oswald, 2012). A 2009 BTP report describes another such group as 'conducting military style raids targeting trains and infrastructure' (BTP, 2009: 18). Importantly, as mentioned above, crews – rather than individual writers – are now increasingly being targeted by the BTP, and charged with conspiracy to commit criminal damage, an offence that carries significantly longer maximum sentences than individual convictions for criminal damage (Saysell, 2014).

"Beef" refers to conflict between different writers and crews. Beef is for the most part 'not actual' (Snyder, 2009: 61), but rather comprised of writers "crossing out", "taking out" or "dogging" their opponents: painting a line through, or writing insults or taunts over, their graffiti (an act of symbolic disrespect). Sometimes this is done anonymously, yet usually writers will write their name directly over that of their opponents. Successive retaliatory acts between individuals and crews – can last for years. Commenting on the New York graffiti scene, Snyder notes it is unlikely that writers will ever meet someone they have beef with face to face. However, this is certainly not the case in London, where, on more than one occasion whilst attending graffiti-related events with research participants, and in the presence of rival factions of the London scene, there was a palpable atmosphere of imminent violence. Whilst – according to some older participants – the London graffiti scene is nowhere near as violent as it was a decade ago, fights between individual writers and sometimes crews – an escalation from symbolic acts of disrespect – are by no means a rare occurrence. Several research participants had at one time or another been involved in physical confrontations over graffiti.

Graffiti and urban space

Having introduced some of the basic elements of the graffiti subculture as it exists in present-day London, I now want to consider how we might make sense theoretically of the interrelationship between graffiti writing and urban space. The city has been a 'flickering presence' within criminology since the discipline's inception (Hayward, 2004: 87). All too often, however, criminology has taken space for granted, 'as an inert material backdrop, or an aesthetic surface upon which criminal activities can be mapped', rather than a product of complex social, cultural and political dynamics (Campbell, 2013: 18). As a result, criminological understandings of space remain fundamentally underdeveloped and inadequate. In recent years critical and cultural criminologists, drawing on intellectual developments provoked by the 'spatial turn' in social theory, have begun to offer a more textured and nuanced rendering of the lived experience and socio-cultural complexities of (urban) space / crime (see, for example, Campbell, 2013, 2016; Ferrell and Weide, 2010; Hayward, 2004, 2012, 2016). However, this enterprise has thus far been a largely theoretical one.

The work of Henri Lefebvre (1991) represents a pivotal moment in the development of critical social theoretical understandings of space. For Lefebvre, *space* is not as an abstract, empty and neutral container, but rather is both a product and medium of social relations. Lefebvre's work allows us to

reconceptualise space as a complex and multidimensional social product and process; as a medium of social control; and as a site of contestation, negotiation and (re)appropriation. Although little used in criminological work, Lefebvre's conception of the 'production of space' by now represents a well-worn theoretical trope within human geography. Indeed, the idea 'that space is socially produced, or constructed, has become one of the foundations of contemporary social and cultural geography', and one can hardly understate the influence of Lefebvre's work here (Unwin, 2000: 11; see, for example, Harvey, 1989; Soja, 1989, 1996; Merrifield, 2000). Lefebvre's analysis has also undergone extensive development and critique in the decades since its publication, and this approach, particularly in its original formulation, is not without its problems (see, for example, Gottdiener, 1994; Blum and Nast, 1996; Unwin, 2000; Van Ingen, 2003; Elden, 2001, 2007).[11] Lefebvre's theoretical framework nevertheless provides an instructive point of entry for criminological analyses of urban space (although I certainly invite critique and further theoretical engagement).

Following Lefebvre, the key constitutive elements of graffiti writing outlined above can be conceived of as a set of 'spatial practices'. 'Spatial practice', for Lefebvre, refers to the routes and networks, the myriad urban flows and mobilities that enact, 'secrete' or 'propound' space (1991: 38). Indeed, both the act of writing graffiti, as well as the more-or-less enduring networks of peers ("crews") and their territorial affiliations, sites of subcultural significance, pathways taken through the city, and the arcane spatial knowledges passed down through successive generations of writers, all function to continually *reproduce* (the space of) the graffiti writing subculture.

A further two of Lefebvre's ideas are of particular relevance to the present discussion: *representations of space* (or 'conceived space') and *representational space* (or 'lived space'). *Representations of space* refers to 'conceptualised space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers… This is the dominant space in any society' (Lefebvre, 1991: 38-9), concerned with imposing order and codes (of movement, of behaviour, of identity). *Representational spaces*, by contrast, refer to:

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[11] Lefebvre's writing in *The Production of Space* has come under criticism for numerous reasons. The frequently opaque nature of Lefebvre's argument is compounded by the difficulties inherent in translating his writing from French to English. Indeed, Elden has suggested that 'Lefebvre's work has suffered as a *result* of being read in English' (2001: 820, emphasis in original). However, Unwin (2000) has suggested that Lefebvre's writing is, at certain junctures, so vague and self-referential as to lose meaning entirely. It has also been suggested that by foregrounding space, as well as 'insisting on separating notions of space from time', Lefebvre diminishes the significance of time itself (Unwin, 2000: 26; cf. Elden, 2007, Merriman, 2011). Furthermore, although Lefebvre lays claim to an emancipatory political project, 'the way in which the production of space transforms into political action' remains unclear. (Unwin, 2000: 24). Lefebvre has also been criticised for ignoring gender, race and sexuality (Blum and Nast, 1996; Van Ingen, 2003), although one critic concedes that Lefebvre's framework nevertheless 'sheds light on the production of gendered, sexualized and racialized geographies' (Van Ingen, 2003: 210)

> space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and users'… This is the dominated… space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects (ibid: 39)

Representational space is the space of embodied and immediate lived experience that incorporates 'complex symbolisms', and which is 'linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life' (ibid: 33). Following Lefebvre, then, we might think of the antagonistic *spatial practices* of graffiti writers, the BTP, and the buff as negotiating a continual tension between the imposition of authoritative *representations of space*, and the illicit production of an obstreperous and unauthorised *representational space*: the social and symbolic geography of the graffiti subculture. In what follows I consider, first, how graffiti writing disrupts the 'conceived space' of the city, and second, how graffiti simultaneously superimposes its own 'lived space', or social geography onto the urban streetscape.

A visible loss of control

Early on during the fieldwork, I asked a well-known London graffiti writer why he thought the sentences recently meted out to other writers were so harsh (for instance, in June 2013, London writer VAMP was sentenced to 42 months imprisonment). He responded, certainly, that the authorities saw graffiti as a "visible loss of control". Over the following months I would frequently recall this acute turn of phrase, wondering quite how to interpret it. The authorities recognise that for many people graffiti exists solely as a statement of delinquent disobedience:

> Stations and trains covered in graffiti make users of the railway think that the vandals are in control, not railway management or the police. (BTP, 2003)

Writers themselves are also cognizant of this. When asked why the authorities went to such lengths to pursue and prosecute him, another research participant couched his explanation in similar terms:

> We had [graffiti] on every other train, I had tags on almost every train going through London Bridge, Charing Cross, Waterloo. Obviously all the… centre of business, law, the economy is all in central London, so for someone else to have their name so frequently on the trains basically gives the impression that [the authorities] are not in control – which, in a way, they're not.

Another interviewee suggested that:

> When there's a piece of graffiti on a train and it goes into service and the commuters see it, I think from the train companies' point of view, from the police's point of view, the public see it and think that a criminal, somewhere, somehow, has defeated all of the measures that you have put in place to stop them doing it. They've got away with it, they've done it. And [the

> authorities] can't handle that the public are allowed to see that they've been undermined by graffiti writers.

A further participant explains that:

> As I've got older and you're more sort of socially and politically aware, you realise that the authorities, the reason they hate graffiti so much, is that it's a visual display of nonconformity.

It is my contention, however, that graffiti writers' illicit inscriptions can be seen to *signify* a loss of control in another sense. In order to understand why this is, it helps to know something of the mechanisms through which 'Power aspires to control space' (Lefebvre, 1991: 388).

A key strategy in the contemporary spatialisation of control is the use of various (semio-aesthetic and quasi-legal) forms of "zoning" in order to differentiate and designate the intended uses of various urban spaces, pre-configuring the types of social relations and interactions which take place therein (Merry, 2001). Accordingly, for Hayward, much contemporary "situational crime prevention" is concerned with linking:

> 'space' and 'use' in one unequivocal functionality… a project of semiotic disambiguation — the attempt to close down an object/place's spatial reference so that it has only one unique meaning. Seats are *only* for sitting on – not for sleeping, skateboarding, partying or busking on. Under this rubric, controlling crime becomes as simple as mapping place, function and meaning so that the rational utility-seeking subject no longer has to deal with any form of complexity whatsoever. (2012: 453)

It is this *representation of space* as a 'gapless, utilitarian, purposive and semiotically unambiguous grid' (ibid: 452) that graffiti interrupts. It is instructive at this juncture to invoke Jean Baudrillard's little-known but perceptive essay on New York graffiti, "Kool Killer, or the Insurrection of Signs" (1993). Baudrillard anticipates contemporary theories of so-called spatial governmentality, noting how '[m]ultiple codes assign a determinate space-time to every act and instant of everyday life' within the city (1993: 76-77; see, for example, Merry, 2001). For Baudrillard, graffiti disrupts and distorts this prevailing semio-aesthetic order or "semiocracy" – akin to a 'riot of signs' – and is thus inherently subversive, even if it is not necessarily politically conscious (1993: 78-9):

> [Y]ouths armed with marker pens and cans of spraypaint… scramble the signals of urbania and dismantle the order of signs. Graffiti covers every subway map in New York, just as the Czechs changed the names of the streets in Prague to disconcert the Russians: guerrilla action. (ibid: 80-81)

Significantly, Baudrillard rejects *both* the 'aesthetic reduction' of graffiti to "art" *and* the 'bourgeois humanist interpretation' that romanticises (and patronises) graffiti as 'a reclamation of identity and personal freedom' (ibid: 83). Rather, for

Baudrillard, 'graffiti has no content and no message' and it is 'this emptiness [that] gives it its strength' (ibid: 80):

> Invincible due to their own poverty, [graffiti] resist every interpretation and every connotation, no longer denoting anyone or anything. In this way, with neither connotation nor denotation, they escape the principle of signification and, as *empty signifiers*, erupt into the sphere of the *full signs* of the city, dissolving it on contact. (ibid: 78-9, emphasis in original)

Graffiti erupts into the hypersanitised consumer playground of stainless steel and glass, safe and familiar corporate logos, and predictable social encounters. Here is Baudrillard's "riot of signs"; the defiant ugliness of tags and throw-ups: streaks of ink, bursts of spray paint and the smear of acidic etchant fluid (see below), defacing signifier and signified alike. In this sense, graffiti is "of other spaces" (Foucault, 1986) or "matter out of place" (Douglas, 1966) that leaks, spills over and oozes across the demarcations of 'conceived space'.[12]

Astute though it is for such an early exposition from an "outsider"'s perspective, Baudrillard's essay nevertheless fails to account for graffiti as a practice of social, spatial and symbolic *construction*. It is to this socially and spatially *productive* element of graffiti writing – its *representational space* – that we now turn.

Rewriting the city

Not only does graffiti rupture authoritative representations of space, but graffiti writers themselves imbue their inscriptions, as well as the spaces and places they occupy – tracksides, trains, rooftops, and so on – with unique social and symbolic significance. Moreover, through their involvement in the spatial practice of graffiti, writers achieve an alternative and unique perception of their environment. At a fundamental level, writers come to both explore and navigate the city by means of writing and reading graffiti. As one participant comments:

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[12] Insight into the political implications of this process of 'disinscription' and its complication of the urban order of signs can be drawn from Schachter's (2014) reading of graffiti as a kind of civic dialogue. Schachter invokes the notion of agonistic pluralism (Mouffe, 2000, 2008) in order to comprehend graffiti's significance. Graffiti for Schachter represents a form of 'agonistic ornamentation', characterised by its illegality, by a 'desire for a very partial rather than wholesale inclusion in the public sphere', and by 'an often intentionally impenetrable appearance and… inward-looking approach' (2014: 47, 92). For Schachter, disagreement and disputation (or 'agonism') are taken to be 'necessary, rather than negative components of political and social life, constituents that are at the foundation of an active, vigorous instantiation of citizenship' (2014: 95; see Mouffe, 2000, 2008). According to this framework, graffiti functions as a kind of discursive challenge to common sense and taken for granted understandings of the city and its visual culture; it can be read as an 'agonistic intervention in public space' (Mouffe, 2008: 12).

> When I go places I read my environment by graf, that's how my eye works: I navigate with tags. If I'm in a city and I don't know where I am, I know I've seen that tag four blocks back… [and] I know I've been here today. That's my landmarks basically.

However, the significance of graffiti inscriptions for writers extends far beyond orienting oneself geographically. Tags and crew initialisms are read as physical extensions of individual or group personas and thus have an inherent sociality. Furthermore, graffiti has an 'indexical relationship to place'; its immanent sociality and symbolism is inextricable from its physical location (MacDowall, 2008: 134). An accumulation of tags on a wall can indicate who's been where with who, and when. If tags share the same medium and colour, perhaps a temporary alliance has been struck between crews, passing around a can of spray paint or a marker outside a nightclub. Even a simple tag can denote all kinds of information:

> Your tag gives everything away about you – I can tell what area of London someone's from, what era they're from, how old they are, how tall they are, if they're good at climbing or not, if they're a drunk tagger, if they're just an occasional tagger or if they're hardcore. I can read a lot [from tags].
>
> You can tell a lot about what someone's mindset is like, you know, [from] the way they've done a tag. You can more or less tell what kind of person they're gonna be, if you know graffiti really well [...] you can tell what they're into because of the style of graffiti they're aligning themselves with.

Moreover, whereas single tags can be visually interesting on their own (as in the aesthetic appreciation of handstyles discussed above), an accumulation of different tags 'play off of one another', revealing a kind of 'creative energy [to] a wall' (Snyder, 2009: 70). One participant notes that:

> To any member of the public walking past it just looks like a loads of scribbles on a [shop front] shutter, but if there's fifteen different tags on a shutter, that's a history there. In all those names, for a writer, who's part of that culture, there are stories. There's a history to the different styles, why certain people write in certain ways, why they lean their letters one way, why they do arrows, who influenced them to do that, why they use certain colours.
>
> There was a 24-hour shop in North London by where I went to school, which people had tagged all over the shutters before it was open 24 hours a day. I think they must have opened that shop in 2000 and then they closed down in 2012 and pulled down the shutters again. And [on the shutters] you had [tags by] all sorts of old crews… from around that area, you had some of our tags from back in the day, and it was mad! And it suddenly just triggered in my head all of these stories.

Thus, a wall or door with 'heavy layers of graffiti reveals a history to its viewers in the same way that the sedimentary layers of ancient ruins inspire archaeologists to tell tales of past civilizations' (ibid). These "stories" are what Snyder refers to as the 'narrative' of a wall (ibid: 69). For Snyder, *contra*

Baudrillard's claim that graffiti is a brute, "savage" assertion of presence with no content or message, such inscriptions express a significance beyond individual tags claiming space. A wall with numerous tags and throw-ups on it provides writers with an:

> opportunity to tell stories about the exploits of their peers… to narrate a scenario; not only who was here, but who was here first, who has beef with whom, who's more talented, who's in from out of town… whose tags are getting better, and whose are getting worse. (ibid)

Lefebvre acknowledges that '[*s*]*ocial spaces interpenetrate… and/or superimpose themselves upon one another*' (1991: 86, emphasis in original). In ascribing the city a new layer of meaning, graffiti 'superimposes its own geography over the state cartography, scrambling and blurring it' (The Invisible Committee, 2007: 108-9). In this way, writers '[re]territorialise decoded urban spaces – a particular street, wall or district comes to life through them, becoming a collective territory again' (Baudrillard, 1993: 79). As graffiti is written, "buffed" or removed by the authorities, "gone over", "dogged" or "taken out" by other writers, writers' cultural history, and the city as it is known to them, is literally and figuratively *rewritten*: a palimpsest comprising accretions not only of paint and ink, but of meaning and memory as well.

In addition to superimposing its own social geography, writing graffiti also engenders a new *way of seeing* urban space. Halsey and Young contend that there is 'good evidence to suggest that many illicit writers look upon urban and rural streetscapes in ways that differ from the gaze deployed by other bodies' (2006: 286). The 'writer's gaze', they write, envisages the city as a 'space replete with possibilities' for painting graffiti (ibid: 288). This suggestion was borne out time and again in both fieldwork and interviews, as the following interview excerpts illustrate:

> I think the average person, when they ride the train or ride the bus, they're not seeing the same thing we see. I love [painting] rooftops… [so] I have a habit for looking for rooftops, you're just always looking… for a potential spot, really […] I think you sort of develop the eyes for it, you just scan shit. Like, when I'm on the train I notice people sitting opposite me are looking at me, like, "What the fuck's he doing?!", because I don't even realise it but you're constantly scanning everything.
>
> When I'm on a train or bus, or looking along the [train] tracks, I'm deciding on what kind of plot I want to do, I'll see what space jumps out at me. What's the most noticeable? What would I look at first? I reckon that's a good place to put a tag or a dub.

In addition to envisaging possible locations for the act of writing itself, the 'writer's gaze' is also capable of visualising possibilities for *accessing* 'spots' – or "plots" as they are more often called in the UK: highly visible and often difficult to access spaces where graffiti might be written (see Ferrell and Weide, 2010).

> [Writing graffiti] makes you see the city differently. I think once you have a new set of skills, you're aware of what you can and can't do. So, for instance,

> if you're a good climber, you can look at a wall that someone else wouldn't even think of climbing up and you can say "I could get up there!" That is almost like a superpower! And, you know, when you've got the eye for it, you see steps in everything: "I could put my foot there, I could put my hand there, and I know I could reach the top and pull myself up" – It's a bit like rock climbing.
>
> You're always looking, like, whenever you see a fence that's a little bent over or something, you're always kind of thinking, "Can I get on [to the tracks] here? Can I get out here? Can I hide in this bit?" Sometimes you can know that you want to do a plot but you've never been there before, you don't know how you're gonna do it, but you go there and you can see little *clues* that other writers have been there. For instance, like, you might see the barbed wire on the fence has been pulled down, or the three-spike [palisade fence] has been bent. Or sometimes there'll be a little beaten path through the bushes or whatever that wouldn't be there for any other reason except to get to the tracks.

In his discussion of how *traceurs* (practitioners of parkour) regard the city, Bavinton (2007) offers a particularly perceptive analysis of how individuals engaged in certain spatially transgressive practices are able to reinterpret urban space. Drawing on the notion of "affordance" – the idea that 'the surfaces and structures that make up an animal's environment specify a range of possible actions for that organism' (Michael, 2000: 61; Michael and Still, 1992) – Bavinton argues that it is through discourse that meanings of space and objects are 'fixed', and certain ways of perceiving objects are prioritised, 'while alternatives are rendered invisible or inarticulable' (2007: 297). Through engaging in spatial practices which subvert such categorisations, it is possible to perceive alternative meanings and uses of objects and spaces beyond those which are discursively produced and ideologically constructed (Bavinton, 2007: 397-8). In doing so, the ideological categories, hitherto 'fixed' through discourse and Foucauldian "discipline", are able to 'be prised loose' (Bavinton, 2007: 398). 'The apparent dominance of an object by a socially constructed meaning claiming to 'define' it is never absolute' (Bavinton, 2007: 398) for such resistance is always possible, and leads to a process of 'liquification', in which 'categories and the relationships between categories are loosened and hard-won objects begin to lose their clarity as they melt away' (Michael and Still, 1992: 875). During the course of my fieldwork, and as a result of accompanying my participants on night time "missions", during the course of which we frequently had to utilise street furniture and architectural features in unconventional ways, I found myself developing a similarly alternative perceptual awareness. I began to notice, for instance, when a rivet was missing in a section of palisade fencing, allowing a metal railing to be swung to one side in order that one could slip through the gap; or when an electrical transformer box was positioned close enough to a wall or fence to be used to scale it. As Kidder (2012) notes, this capacity for a renewed interpretation of the urban environment does not reside solely in the eye of the individual, but rather is a collective and social process.

Conclusion

This article has endeavoured to introduce some of the major components of graffiti writing as a subcultural practice, as well as to think through how we might conceive theoretically of the interrelationships between graffiti writing, urban space, and social control. In doing so, the article has sought to show how graffiti writing in mid-2010s London has assumed historically and geographically specific forms. In particular, the policies of the BTP and of rail operators, premised on "broken window" thinking, have shaped the subcultural dynamics of graffiti writing in the capital, often with unintended and adverse consequences. The article has sought to contribute to the nascent spatial turn within criminology, engaging the theoretical work of Henri Lefebvre in an attempt to offer a more nuanced rendering of the 'lived' representational space of graffiti writing. It was suggested that graffiti can be understood as simultaneously *disrupting* authoritative spatial orderings (*spaces of representation*), whilst *superimposing* its own alternative social geography onto the city (*representational spaces*). Far from "mindless vandalism", for writers at least, graffiti functions to saturate the city with social and symbolic meaning. Moreover, participation in graffiti writing engenders new ways of seeing the city. As noted at the beginning of the article, graffiti writing in London remains a complex and nuanced subcultural practice. Moreover, the practice continues to transform, structurally and stylistically inflected with the city's shifting social and spatial contours. Space precludes a more complete exposition of the subculture's manifold intricacies, and further work remains to be done to trace London graffiti's past, present and future.

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