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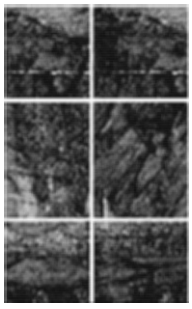

ARTICLE

‘Racist’ graffiti: text, context and social comment

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ABSTRACT

The research project, upon which this article is based, conceptualizes the act of graffiti in Bakhtinian terms as a ‘heteroglot’ *tangible* ‘utterance’: one that is uniquely visual, lexical, and time, place and space specific. The project set out to locate and examine ‘racist’ graffiti; specifically graffiti motivated or prompted by the presence of refugees or ‘asylum seekers’. Despite media reports suggesting that such graffiti was widespread, it proved almost impossible to find. Drawing upon a case study carried out in Sighthill Glasgow, the project was re-focused in order to explain the paucity of such graffiti. In so doing, alternate and clandestine forms of ‘racist’ graffiti became apparent. Inextricably linked to a ‘local code’ known and understood by residents, ‘asylum seekers’ *and* the local authority – who have responsibility for (re)defining and removing ‘racist’ graffiti – the social, ideological and institutional implications raised are particularly disturbing.

KEY WORDS

asylum seekers • graffiti • heteroglossia • racism • utterance • visual discourse

When the seeds of a research project involving graffiti were first sown, they grew out of a long-held casual interest in the visual and lexical elements of ‘writings on the wall’. This interest was further stimulated by work on ‘asylum seekers’ (Lynn and Lea, 2003); it seemed that asylum seekers were not only being subjected to physical violence and threats by ‘racist’ individuals in the communities in which they were living, but were also being intimidated through the use of ‘racist’ graffiti. This research sets out to examine such graffiti. Using a discursive and rhetorical approach we explore issues of text and context, and graffiti’s legitimacy as a means of uncensored or ‘free’ expression.

It is important to acknowledge, at the outset, that the term ‘asylum

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seeker' is a problematic one in that it is increasingly used in a pejorative sense. Its usage has a tendency to 'dehumanize'. The inclination is then to portray those individuals who come here in search of asylum as a faceless, homogenized group and the authors are aware that this is not the case. This must, however, be weighed against its usefulness as a commonplace, especially in relation to other works which make use of the term. As such the authors will make use of it here, but with reservations.

THE WRITING ON THE WALL

Far from being a recent phenomenon, graffiti has a very long history, stretching back to both ancient Egypt and the Roman Empire (Coffield, 1991: 23). But what exactly is graffiti?[1] According to the Concise Oxford English Dictionary (2002) graffiti is 'unauthorised writing or drawings on a surface in a place' (p. 615). Wallace and Whitehead (1991) expand this when they describe it as 'unwanted painting, writing, gouging or scratching on walls or other surfaces' (p. 62). Whilst this provides a wide rudimentary interpretation of what might constitute graffiti, a brief stroll through any city centre soon prompts the realization that there exists a variety of forms or genres.

Before elaborating on these, it is important to make clear that considering graffiti as a creative act runs contrary to the commonplace perception that any acknowledgement or identification of graffiti genres may be seen not only as an irrelevant exercise, but also a morally reprehensible one. This is the view espoused by politicians, the police, the criminal justice system, some criminologists and a large section of the general public who regard *any* act of graffiti as a form of 'deviant' or criminal behaviour (Wilson and Kelling, 1982; Halsey and Young, 2002). Graffiti is considered a destructive act, an act of vandalism or criminal damage: one that should not be legitimized or encouraged. Along with other 'anti-social' behaviours, graffiti is regarded as the herald of more serious criminal activity (Kelling and Coles, 1996). 'Racist' graffiti goes further still in that it is regarded (quite rightly) as threatening and oppressive – imbued with hatred and prejudice.

The two-sidedness of human thinking (Billig, 1996), a central tenet of a rhetorical approach, is such that what is regarded as destruction, deviancy and oppression for one becomes an act of creativity, resistance or liberation for another. Just as those who promote the virtue of the 'broken windows' or 'zero tolerance' theses (Wilson and Kelling, 1982) see it as a means to reclaim public spaces, there are many graffiti writers who have stated their intention to 'reclaim public spaces' also (The Media Foundation, 2003; Banksy, 2004). Herein lies an ideological dilemma for the postmodern academic who holds to the idea that *all* views are equally valid. Such an ethos has the potential to justify and legitimize the work of the 'racist' graffiti writer, and this is certainly not our intention here. Thus, it is important for us to exacerbate the contradiction inherent in this situation and so ease our ideological dilemma

by taking a stance. As such, whilst we *acknowledge* that 'racist' views are espoused by some, we regard any view that oppresses or seeks to oppress another person or group as surrendering its validity. That said, it will become apparent that this is an epistemological contradiction that will resurface in different guises throughout.

FROM HIP HOP TO SLOGANS

Whilst there is merit in identifying and classifying graffiti into a number of different genres, the act of categorizing graffiti according to its perceived genre is also fraught with difficulty. In this article we divide graffiti into three such genres: 'art' graffiti, 'slogans' (or 'public' graffiti) and 'latrinalia' (or 'private' graffiti) (Dundes, 1966; Abel and Buckley, 1977; Gadsby, 1995; Halsey and Young, 2002), all of which may include a 'racist', 'sexist', 'homophobic' or some other kind of bias. Our specific focus is 'racist' graffiti. Most obviously this is to be found within the genre of the 'slogan'; however, a less obvious incarnation is in the form of 'gang' graffiti, a subgenre of the 'art' form. We chose to focus on this form of graffiti; as it is available to a *general* audience, it is often unavoidable.[2]

A large proportion of the graffiti that is encountered on the street is of an abstract highly stylized 'art' form. This form, as it is presently practised, developed from the American 'hip-hop' gang and music culture of the 1970s and 80s (Coffield, 1991; Halsey and Young, 2002). Those who work in this genre call themselves 'writers'. At its most basic, the form consists of the artist's name – the 'tag' – that is written in a personal and stylized way. Somewhat similar is the 'throw-up' which can comprise letters, words or a list of names – a 'roll-call' if you like. The 'throw-up' is distinguishable from the 'tag' in that it makes use of only two colours. Both the 'tag' and the 'throw-up' are done quickly, usually within seconds. Finally, a third and more involved variant of this 'art' form is the 'piece' – short for masterpiece. This is a major work, one that might require several visits to the location to bring it to completion, with the attendant risk of being discovered or caught. To qualify as a 'piece' the work requires the use of at least three colours (Chad, 1997).

A variation on the use of the 'tag' and one that is predominantly, but not wholly, a US phenomenon relates to what is derisorily termed 'gang graffiti'. As the name implies, it relates to the street gang cultures that exist in towns and cities in the US, the UK and elsewhere. The 'tag' when employed as gang graffiti becomes a means to mark or denote urban gangland 'territory'. For those who work within the 'art' genre, this appropriation of the 'tag' by street gangs is seen to debase the genre: consequently 'writers' treat gang graffiti with derision. Nevertheless, as we shall see, it is an important part of the urban landscape, and one that in the course of this study will be seen to have a greater significance than was perhaps originally envisaged.

'Slogans' (Halsey and Young, 2002: 169) or 'public graffiti' (Gadsby,

1995) are quite different by comparison. Halsey and Young (2002) point out that:

> Slogans range from the personal ('Jane loves Ted', or 'J. Kaminski is a slut'), through the gamut of political issues (environmental concerns, feminism, state politics, international relations and so on), but all share the common feature of being declaratory in nature, expressing a view to an audience. (p. 169)

The use of the term 'slogan' is neatly descriptive and will be preferred here. Whilst on occasions 'slogans' may be technically skilful, generally they are inclined to be less artistically and aesthetically accomplished. With only a few exceptions (Banksy, 2004), there is no sense of an 'artistic' tradition in this genre; no sense that the 'writers' are bound by rules or conventions, or that they are even part of a 'community of writers', as in the 'art' form. Graffiti in this genre is inclined to be more eclectic in terms of the subject matter or 'message' being presented or declared to its 'audience'.

As an introduction to graffiti, this is necessarily specific and brief. However, regardless of how one views graffiti, it is hard to deny its impact upon social life. Whether as a tool of oppression or subversion, a means of social or political resistance, straightforward recalcitrance, or as a minor, but nonetheless unwanted, criminal activity, graffiti's gaze is panoramic: no subject or topic is off-limits. As there are no boundaries of good taste or censorship for it to exceed, any opinions expressed are frequently candid and, at times, hateful or offensive. It remains, for the most part, an illegal act, and for many practitioners this illegality remains the essential ingredient (Farrell and Art Crimes, 1994; Banksy, 2004). As far as this article is concerned, it is the unrestrained social commentary coupled with its visual, geographical and spatial aspects that are of particular interest.

A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

The aim of this article is to make sense of and to analyse, both lexically and visually, all the elements that are combined within particular forms of graffiti. Irrespective of how we might find it or where, and irrespective of the type or genre, all graffiti shares one common characteristic – it is undeniably visual. As we know, some forms are less intrinsically visual than others. Yet, even those forms which give a greater emphasis to the lexical are still undeniably bound to the visual: the 'writing on the wall' might consist of words or letters, but the viewer is never able to see them solely as such. The quality and skill of the rendering attract attention, as does the medium in which it is depicted. The scale, the colour and the location: all these details have significance, provoking the intrigue of the 'audience' to varying degrees.

Text, or more accurately the font or typeface in a book, is for the most part unseen by the reader, functioning as a neutral means to convey ideas or concepts – a process Halliday (1982) terms 'automatization': 'the

foregrounding of one [semiotic] is often accompanied (or achieved) by the backgrounding or "automatization" of other semiotics, to the point where they appear so normal and natural as to become "invisible"' (Iedema, 2003: 40). The 'writing on the wall' works differently. It is at once writing and motif – a spontaneous indelible record of (what is more often than not) an illegal act. This very act, the process of creation (or destruction depending upon your point of view), is interwoven with the message conveyed or the image presented. Where it is located, when it was put there and by whom are as significant as the graffiti itself.

Graffiti, therefore, is more than just a visual experience; it is a spatial one and a temporal one. Location, timing, the influence of social, political and cultural events, together with personal ones, and the element of risk involved in executing the deed are all factors that need to be considered along with the subject matter itself. This combination of factors establishes a unique 'set of conditions' (Holquist, 1981: 423) that culminate in a moment in time being spontaneously captured in spray paint, marker pen or whatever medium the graffiti writer chooses. Bakhtin (1981) has conceptualized the immediacy of the spoken moment as the 'utterance', and all utterances are 'heteroglot' – the singular for 'heteroglossia'.

As Holquist (1981) explains, 'heteroglossia' is:

> The base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance. It is that which insures the primacy of context over text. At any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions – social, historical, meteorological, physiological – that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions; all utterances are heteroglot in that they are functions of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup, and therefore impossible to resolve. (p. 428)

Graffiti we suggest is more than just an 'utterance': unlike the spoken word, which once uttered is gone forever, graffiti is an utterance in a tangible form – living on beyond the moment. It is 'heteroglossia' materialized and transfixed. Consequently, whilst it is undeniably a three-dimensional experience (Emmison and Smith, 2000), we will go further in suggesting it should rightfully be regarded as a four-dimensional one. A visible record of a temporal event, it retains the ability to pique the interest of others for as long as it remains in situ. Of course, the heteroglot experience is such that it can never be quite the same as it was when it was first created. Of all the methodological elements that contribute to and construct the framework for analysis in this article, this is the most important.

The criminal aspects of graffiti, its frequency, randomness or distribution – those more quantitative aspects – are not of concern here, although they will not be entirely disregarded. The principal interest lies with

texts. Whether they are visual or lexical, interpreting or deconstructing these texts is undeniably a qualitative activity (Burr, 1995: 164). This article, in reflecting a social constructionist view of the world, acknowledges that everyday life consists of social processes (Burr, 1995), and that the ideologies, opinions and attitudes that constitute these social processes are argumentative, subjective and contradictory. Views and counterviews exist to be defended or rebutted in a 'dialogical' process which ensures that ideologies and opinions are constantly shifting (Bakhtin, 1981; Billig et al., 1988; Billig, 1991, 1996; Myerson, 1994). Language is the medium by which the world is perceived and understood: it is both 'constructed and constructive' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 35). People do not use language to just say, draw or write things; they use it to 'do' things (Austin, 1962; Billig, 1991).

Billig (1991), amongst others, has noted how the giving or holding of opinions, and the close connection between these and 'common sense', was recognized by the ancient scholars of rhetoric (p. 20). Rhetoric – the art of persuasion and argumentation (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971) – is, as Billig (1991) points out, 'not confined to those dramatic situations when tempers are lost and doors slammed. Instead, rhetoric and argumentation are spread throughout social life' (p. 17). In trying to make sense of what writers of graffiti are doing with their texts, a rhetorical approach will inform us.

Rhetoric is not the only analytical tool upon which we intend to draw, however. Indeed, Billig makes another valid point when he writes:

> In order to analyse patterns of argumentation, the rhetorical meaning must be constructed by the analyst. This construction does not require a specific methodology, or a defined set of procedures ... The reliance upon a single methodology would inevitably dull the critical edge. (p. 22)

Consequently, our analysis is informed also by the work of discourse analysts, incorporating both the 'bottom-up' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Edwards and Potter, 1992) and 'top-down' (Parker, 1992; Van Dijk, 1997) approaches. Additionally, the emergence of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Van Dijk, 1997) is an important influence in that it recognizes that discursive practices 'help produce and reproduce unequal power relations' (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 258).

As incisive as rhetorical and discursive approaches might be, they are more usually associated with the analysis of lexical texts rather than visual ones; consequently, some guidance in undertaking a visual analysis is important. To this end, the reflexive approach towards the collection and analysis of visual data that Pink (2001) proposes will be adhered to. She suggests that 'the purpose of analysis is not to translate "visual evidence" into verbal knowledge, but to explore the relationship between visual and other (including verbal) knowledge' (p. 96).

In addition, Banks (2001), building upon the work of Wright (1999), refers to 'internal' and 'external' narratives in any analysis of visual work. The former being the 'content of an image ... this is not necessarily the same as the narrative the image-maker wished to communicate' (Banks, 2001: 11). The latter he describes as 'the social context that produced the image, and the social relations within which the image is embedded at any moment of viewing' (p. 11). Such concepts are particularly useful in imposing a sufficient measure of discipline to a visual (discourse) analysis, whilst maintaining a flexible and creative outlook, especially in this instance where graffiti is being viewed as an 'utterance' within a wider heteroglot experience.

Finally, the concept of 'multimodality' (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001) is an important one to retain throughout. As Iedema (2003) notes: 'Multimodality, here, is about recognising that language is not at all at the centre of all communication' (p. 39) and how 'materiality ("expression") serves to realize the social, cultural and historical structures, investments and circumstances of our time' (p. 50).

This framework for analysis, as comprehensive as it might be, is all very well, but it does not directly address the question of method – of exactly how the data were collected. Put simply, this was achieved through the first author travelling extensively on foot and being keenly observant in areas where 'asylum seekers' and refugees were living, and where the use of violence and the appearance of 'racist' graffiti were reported. Experience gained from collecting graffiti in all its forms at the outset of the project proved especially useful in identifying potential sites; where appropriate, local enquiries were made to further assist the process. Once located, data were collected using a high-quality digital still camera which automatically recorded the time and date that each photo was taken. Additional notes and observations were made at the time using a digital dictaphone or writing longhand in a research diary.

GATHERING THE DATA

Over the last few years, a relatively high number of 'asylum seekers' have found themselves 'dispersed' to particular areas of Glasgow as part of the UK's Asylum and Immigration policy. Significantly, there have been a number of tragic and well-publicized incidents involving newly housed refugees. Of these, the murder of Firsat Dag, a newly arrived Kurdish refugee stabbed to death on the Sighthill estate in August 2001 was the most extreme. Media reports at the time suggested that not only were 'asylum seekers' living in Sighthill being physically attacked and intimidated on a daily basis, but that 'racist' graffiti was also being used to identify the flats in which they were living (Sheridan, 2001; 'Sighthill', 2003; BBC online, 2004). In researching 'asylum'-related graffiti, therefore, it seemed only logical to visit the area and explore it with a view to producing a case study. At the beginning of May 2003 such a visit was made by the first author. The research took place over

two full days, the first of which was spent in Sighthill and neighbouring estates in the Royston area. The second day concentrated on the Gorbals district, the city centre, and finished off in the Kelvingrove area of the west end.

THE SETTING: HIGH BROW TO HIGH RISE

The city of Glasgow promotes itself as a 'European City of Culture' (Glasgow City Council, 2000) and it is certainly rich in terms of the arts and entertainment facilities it provides. As with many large cities, however, the prosperity that is now so clearly evident is not distributed equally; expanses of urban decay still exist. Sighthill, Gorbals and Royston are such places. They have a long history of social deprivation which manifests itself in high unemployment, poor housing conditions and high crime rates. Over the last few years, regeneration projects in Royston and Gorbals have succeeded in revitalizing these areas somewhat. Nevertheless, whilst much time, effort and money have been devoted to altering the public perception of these districts and improving the quality of life for the residents, they are unable to fully rid themselves of their historical reputations and some of the more undesirable characteristics that perpetuate the stigma. Thus it is that poor housing, crime and the threat of violence, mingled with an undercurrent of sectarianism amongst Catholics and Protestants, are still clearly evident. This is in addition to the racist intolerance directed towards those resident minority ethnic groups. Of the three districts, Sighthill lags behind the others in the regeneration process and is certainly the bleakest area.

Ghettos, graveyards and graffiti

The Sighthill estate comprises a large number of high-rise tower blocks interspersed with smaller low-rise buildings. There is also a primary school, a pub, a youth club and a small shopping complex which is relatively central. The shops, however, with only one exception, were boarded up and did not appear to be in current use. A large graveyard provides a backdrop to the area; it is clearly visible from most parts of the estate. The visual dominance of this burial ground has proved to be a source of concern amongst refugees living on the estate and contributes to the depressing tone of the area (Student Project, 2003).[3] By virtue of their very dominance, the high-rise towers were the first places to be checked in search of graffiti that might match our criteria.

Graffiti on the exterior walls of the high-rise towers was conspicuous by its absence. Where graffiti was present, with only two exceptions that we could find (one of which was on a low-rise block), it was not overtly 'racist' in content. It was clear that graffiti had existed on the walls of the tower blocks and had been painted over by the local authority. Interestingly, in most cases where this had been done, the graffiti writers had not revisited these locations to add more; thus, the effectiveness of the local authority in

removing 'racist' or offensive 'writings' was obvious. Glasgow City Council, like other local authorities, operates a strict policy of graffiti removal: any graffiti which is considered 'racist', sectarian or offensive is removed within two days. Graffiti outside these criteria, such as 'tags', gang graffiti and assorted art forms, are dealt with in a slower time frame – usually 10 days. Organizational demands on the council work force are such that despite their best efforts, they are not always able to keep to these deadlines (Glasgow City Council, 2000).

Considering the estate in its entirety, the shopping complex and the area around the youth club, more than any other locations in Sighthill, had the greatest concentration of graffiti, the majority of which consisted of crude 'tags', one of which (the letters 'SYM' or 'YSM') was particularly dominant. Indeed, the only high-rise block with any significant amount of graffiti on it was the one closest to the youth club. Enquiries made to some of the local youths who were socializing at the shopping complex revealed the meaning of the initials 'SYM' or its occasional variant 'YSM': the 'Sighthill Young Mafia' or 'Young Sighthill Mafia'. This group appears to be the dominant youth gang on the estate. They have gained notoriety for their intolerant attitudes towards 'asylum seekers', refugees and minority ethnic groups (Student Project, 2003).

By now, some important points were emerging. Whilst Sighthill had a great deal of graffiti, it was bereft of the kind that we sought. The 'SYM' motif was the dominant motif on the estate. Although not obviously 'racist' in content, through gaining an awareness of the gang itself, this leitmotiv began to assume a 'racist' and intimidating overtone or symbolism. Found in just about every corner of the estate, it was a constant reminder of the presence and activities of the gang, the subculture surrounding the gang, and the values held by that subculture. Thus, from the viewpoint of a graffiti writer – or more specifically, a 'racist' graffiti writer – pragmatism might dictate that the establishment's less vigorous response to what, on the face of it, appears to be little more than 'gang graffiti', is a rather more successful strategy to pursue. Indeed, the inference that may then be drawn is that to define graffiti as 'gang' graffiti somehow precludes it from having any kind of 'racist' bias. As previous research has shown, practitioners of the 'new racism' continually demonstrate a capacity to adapt to the social and legal constraints and responses engineered to curb their activities and the expression of their views (Barker, 1981); it is not unreasonable to speculate that this might well be the case here.

Glasgow Central to Gorbals and beyond

The second day of research began by walking from Kelvingrove to the Gorbals district, which is south of the river Clyde. A diverse and quite considerable amount of graffiti is to be found. However, as with Sighthill, overtly 'racist' material was virtually impossible to find. Aside from a number

of sectarian references, only one obviously 'racist' comment was located. This was near to St Georges Cross underground station in a narrow walkway next to the A804 St Georges Road, where it appeared with another clearly related, but not specifically 'racist', writing. The writing style, the content, the medium and the proximity to one another suggest that the same person had written both.

ANALYSIS

It was the original aim of this research project to analyse graffiti that was prompted or inspired by the presence of 'asylum seekers'. As the case study shows, this proved to be a much more difficult endeavour than originally imagined. Coming away from Glasgow, the data collected were not the data that had been anticipated: it had been both a frustrating and a rewarding experience. 'Frustrating' in that 'racist' and 'asylum'-motivated graffiti had proved so difficult to locate; yet 'rewarding' in the knowledge that objectionable or highly offensive graffiti was less prevalent than expected and that it was clearly being deterred. Just prior to visiting Glasgow, field trips had been made to Dartford and Ashford in Kent; both of these towns had experienced tension and violence between local residents and 'asylum seekers' 'dispersed' there. In both cases, media reports suggested that 'racist' graffiti directed at those seeking asylum had appeared throughout the town (The Monitoring Group, 2003). However, during the visits not a single example could be found.

The 'voice' of those seekers of asylum now resident in Glasgow was equally absent. Only one example of graffiti which could directly be interpreted as the 'voice' of (at least some of) the minority ethnic population was located. The 'tag' 'YKK' – found on a wall in the shopping complex on the Sighthill estate – appears to denote a gang called the 'Young Kosovo Kells'. Enquiries with the local population suggested that this gang existed as a rival to the Young Sighthill Mafia and was comprised, as the name suggests, of individuals from immigrant ethnic minorities. However, the reticence of individuals to speak on such matters and a lack of any other graffiti signifying this group would suggest that we should be circumspect in any observations or conclusions drawn.

In (re)considering the focus of the research project as a whole, the visit to Glasgow had important ramifications for the direction it might now take. The experiences in all three locations appeared to confirm, first, that this had not simply been a case of 'unfortunate timing' or 'bad luck'; although such is the spontaneous nature of these events that serendipity will always play a part. Second, the difficulty in locating 'racist' or 'asylum'-related graffiti (especially in a large city as culturally and ethnically diverse as Glasgow) may well suggest that reports of such graffiti are exaggerated – as often happens when a 'moral panic' develops (Cohen, 1972). Where 'asylum seekers' are concerned, this has frequently been the case. Third, the paucity of

'asylum'-motivated and 'racist' graffiti says much about the establishment response in removing it. Halsey and Young (2002) found that 'councils which have adopted strategies of criminalization also strive to remove graffiti quickly' (p. 175). It raises, too, the question of the way in which the local authority assesses or prioritizes graffiti into a hierarchy of seriousness and how 'racist' graffiti is actually being defined or interpreted. Consequently, the analysis that follows will be structured in two sections: the first examines those examples of 'racist' graffiti that *were* located. The second considers the way in which writers of 'racist' and 'asylum'-motivated graffiti appear to make use of a local 'code' and, in so doing, avoid the punitive 'gaze' (and response) of the local authority.

Analysing overtly racist graffiti

Figure 1 provides the only instance of 'racist' graffiti to be found on the high-rise tower blocks of the Sighthill estate.

Addressing the external narrative (Banks, 2001) of this photograph first: this graffiti was found at the base (on the very corner) of one of the high-rise tower blocks in Sighthill – home to a large number of people who have come here in search of asylum. The graffiti was near to the refuse service

Figure 1 'Racist' graffiti near the refuse service entrance in a high-rise tower block on the Sighthill estate, Glasgow.

entrance doorway (a grey metal door, heavily covered with graffiti consisting mostly of 'tags' with some 'slogans'), which on the day concerned was being used by caretaker/concierge staff who were putting out refuse for the local authority to collect – hence the presence of the baby-carrier and rubbish bag. A service road allowing access to residents' garages runs by this location; parallel to this road, less than 30 feet away, is a railway line that runs behind the garages. In essence, this location forms the back of the building. The entrance doors to the block itself were situated on the opposite face of the block.

The internal narrative (Banks, 2001) of the photograph shows the slogan 'BLACKS OUT NOW!' scratched onto a black painted reveal. The image of a cross within a crudely drawn circle is visible, the graffiti being positioned in the centre of the cross. Below it are indiscernible letters forming either a word or an acronym. The cross, circle and indiscernible wording are visible as 'under painting', having been obscured by the black paint put on the wall to obliterate them.

The slogan is pithy and overtly 'racist' in content, directed, as it is, at 'blacks' generally. The lexical element is not, in itself, obviously anti-'asylum seekers'. 'Blacks' is a generic term, now within the realm of common knowledge; '[it] is often used politically to refer to people of African, Caribbean and South Asian origin' (British Sociological Association, 2003). The view expressed is blunt and uncompromising. The use of an exclamation mark gives extra prosodic emphasis. The message acquires still greater significance, for those who are aware of it, by being positioned in the centre of the cross. This style of cross is frequently used by white supremacist groups, most notably the Klu Klux Klan, as a symbol of their 'racist' ideology and as a means to intimidate, coerce and define territory or areas which they regard as 'theirs' (Feaster, 1998).

Located at the base of a high-rise block housing large numbers of 'asylum seekers' and refugees whose ethnic origin may well fit the term 'black', it is not unreasonable to assume that the sentiment is directed primarily at them. Of course, the possibility cannot be ruled out that the graffiti might have been created by an 'asylum seeker' resentful of those regarded as 'black'. However, the use of the cross in the construction of the image, and the inherently white supremacist symbolism that goes with that icon, might weigh against such an interpretation. What is not in doubt is that the graffiti will be seen and read by all who pass by and who understand the English language. Being located where the refuse is collected may also be intentional: designed to add additional significance or symbolism by inviting the suggestion that those referred to have a status or worth equivalent to that of detritus. However, this must be weighed against the consideration that the writer may have chosen this location as opportune because the presence of the cross was still visible, despite the efforts to conceal it. Also, being hidden within the confines of the reveal, the 'writer' is no longer visible to the panoptic eye of the CCTV camera system which is advertised as being in operation around the base of the high-rise blocks.

While this 'writing' singles out specific groups of people as objects of hate or anger, it can also be seen as a plea – a rhetorical edict or proclamation encouraging others to the same view. Rhetorically, it is not especially sophisticated (either visually or grammatically). Allowing no argumentative latitude, it is definitive and monological, very much a case of 'the last word' (Billig, 1996: 135). It is also dependent on the belief that it appeals to some inherent 'natural' sense of collective (white) identity: us, as opposed to, or against, them. In this respect, it might allow interpretation as being 'asylum'-motivated graffiti although, when divorced from the local context, it is not obviously so. As an utterance it is the culmination of the heteroglot experiences present at that time and that place when it was written: it is 'ideologically saturated' (Bakhtin, 1986: 271). Those heteroglot experiences will be different now, but it remains a tangible utterance, affecting and influencing those who encounter it at this time. Of course, how it affects and influences people will always be contingent upon the heteroglot experiences of those viewing it. As Billig (1996), citing Bakhtin, once again reminds us: 'the rhetorical force of utterances is always to be assessed in terms of their dialogic context' (p. 19).

'BLACKS OUT NOW!' thus works on several levels. As an obvious and offensive 'racist' sentiment, it needs little elaboration other than requiring the viewer to have an awareness of common or taken-for-granted knowledge in relation to the term 'blacks', together with at least some awareness of the complex historical and ideological debates and struggles that continue to take place between white and 'non-white' peoples. On this level, it is accessible to a wide audience with little or no knowledge of asylum issues or of Sighthill. When considered in the context of its geographic location – in Sighthill Glasgow, at the base of a high-rise tower occupied by people residing there whilst seeking asylum – those debates and struggles become much more tightly focussed. A smaller, more actively or passively participant audience is now addressed; one that has greater or more detailed local knowledge. At this level, 'BLACKS OUT NOW!' conveys what would to the outsider be a rather more hidden message.

The second instance of 'racist' graffiti has some similarities to the first in the levels at which it may be 'read' or understood. Once again, there is no clear anti-'asylum seeker' bias. It was found not in Sighthill but in Glasgow city centre. As obviously 'racist' and offensive as its message might be – 'BLACK PAKI SCUM', Figure 2(a) – it also poses some problems of interpretation in that it does not stand alone; it appears to be the first part of a diptych of 'slogans', the second of which reads 'LAURA F.T. PAKIS', Figure 2(b). The conclusion that it is a diptych is a reasonable one to make in the circumstances as the two elements are written in the same coloured script and medium; apparently by the same hand, and in the same location – within a few feet of each other, Figure 2(c).

Elaborating on the external narrative for a moment, the graffiti is intermixed with a considerable amount of other 'writing', both 'tags' and

Figure 2 Graffiti in Glasgow city centre (a) 'BLACK PAKI SCUM'; (b) 'LAURA F.T. PAKIS'; (c) wall on which 'BLACK PAKI SCUM' and 'LAURA F.T. PAKIS' appear.

'slogans'. These are located on the white concrete stones which finish off the top of a stone wall bordering one side of a pedestrian walkway. The opposite side of the walkway is formed by the gable end wall of a residential house which abuts another stone wall similar to the first (Figure 2(c)). The greatest concentration of graffiti is on the edge of these stones rather than on the tops – the edges being more visible to those walking by. The walkway itself is narrow, secluded and not well used even though it is close to an underground railway station entrance.

In considering the internal narrative (Banks, 2001) of Figures 2(a), (b) and (c), the edge of the top-stones displays one long continuous string of tags and slogans. Writers have seemingly walked along marking the top-stone edges at various intervals. The visual effect this produces is complex. Colours, such as the green of the graffiti in question, recur, as do the other tags or slogans: this creates an interwoven, overlain pattern, which is rhythmic and fluid. The initials F.T. or F.T.G and V.G.M are repeated several times. Below the top-stones, the wall has a pebbledash finish that has been cleaned in places where graffiti has previously been removed.

Difficulties of interpretation arise when the second part of the diptych is read in conjunction with the first. Both instances of graffiti are sufficiently separate from each other in terms of physical distance and subject content for them to be regarded as two distinct entities. However, this proves difficult to maintain as it is impossible to ignore or escape the conclusion that both instances are the work of the same person. As has already been noted, the first part of the writing has an uncompromisingly 'racist' message that draws upon those same aspects of 'common' knowledge as the previous example from Sighthill. The second part of the diptych – 'LAURA F.T. PAKIS' – is quite esoteric by comparison. In isolation, it could easily be conceived of as a 'tag' or an example of 'gang graffiti' describing or celebrating 'Laura's' affiliation; not knowing exactly what the initials 'F.T' mean, however, precludes anything more than a tentative interpretation. When read as an adjunct to the first writing, it becomes still more confusing and dissonant, encouraging a reading other than as a 'tag'. Although the initials 'F.T.G' appear along the same stretch of wall, no additional clues to their meaning are forthcoming. Understanding or knowing what 'F.T' means – knowing the 'code' – is therefore the key to understanding the graffiti as being either a 'tag', 'gang graffiti' or a 'slogan' and of determining what the writer is doing with his or her talk.

Knowing the 'code' or the local context, as the case study began to make clear, can fundamentally alter the meaning of particular graffiti. Viewers' perceptions, their understanding of that which is now before them, are bound up with their knowledge and experience of the area, the individuals, the cultures and subcultures of those areas too. This is the essence of rhetoric in that how we perceive and understand the social world around us depends upon the extent to which we are informed about that which we see and experience. The effects of this therefore are that 'one must

understand words in relation to the contexts in which they are being used. Thus, the same word, or even sentence, may possess different meanings when applied in different contexts' (Billig, 1996: 121). This also echoes the postmodernist argument that any understanding of the social world can only ever be fragmented, incomplete and subjective (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Burr, 1995).

Graffiti may be regarded as somewhat mundane, trivial or puerile. However, graffiti makes special demands on the observer or passer-by as it prompts a more conscious awareness – for the briefest of moments at least – of the social and ideological processes that take place within everyday experience. As Bakhtin (1986) writes: 'The authentic environment of an utterance, the environment in which it lives and takes shape, is dialogized heteroglossia, anonymous and social as language, but simultaneously concrete, filled with specific content and accented as an individual utterance' (p. 272).

The first author's enquiries did not reveal any specific 'asylum' connection to the location of this graffiti – although this is not to imply that there is none, only that this researcher could not identify or establish this as being so. In the absence of a specific local context concerning minority ethnic groups of the sort described, it is only reasonable to assume that the opinion expressed is a more general one.

This graffiti is also detailed, if confusing, in the choice of ethnic minorities being subjected to abuse, particularizing them not as 'Black' scum, or 'Paki' scum, but 'BLACK PAKI SCUM'. Such a description could be considered a tautology perhaps in over-emphasizing the 'non-whiteness' of those it singles out for abuse: but the tautology may also be seen to function rhetorically in providing an extra emphasis. Alternatively, it may be that it is intended to refer instead to 'blacks' and people of Pakistani ethnic origin – a very general, if convoluted, description. Once again, there was nothing in the local context to indicate that there was any greater concentration of peoples from Pakistan or others who might be regarded as 'Black' in this area of the city. This extra hidden dimension to graffiti that comes with knowing the local context is one that now requires greater elaboration.

Knowing the 'code'

Within a very short time of the first author arriving in Sighthill, it became clear that a certain leitmotiv was in evidence throughout the estate: namely the initials 'SYM' or its variant 'YSM' (Figures 3, 4 and 5). Initially, this graffiti appeared to be quite esoteric. However, once an awareness of what these initials represent had been gained, as well as a wider knowledge of the activities and rationale of this subculture, an 'alternative reading' of the graffiti became possible. The graffiti in Figure 3 is a particularly good case in point. Located on the tarmac of a pedestrian over-bridge near to Baird Street police station, it was one of the first instances of graffiti encountered on the

Figure 3 'SYM' on the tarmac on the lead-in to Sighthill estate, Glasgow.

Sighthill estate, positioned, as it was, on the lead-in to the estate from the city centre. This is one of several examples of the initials 'SYM' painted on the ground on the estate.

Positioned on the pavement tarmac the graffiti is unavoidable to all those who pass over it. The staggered railings are a safety measure designed to prevent cyclists from having easy access onto the bridge. Negotiating them, even on foot, requires some extra care and pedestrians are inclined to look down towards the tarmac as they do this. Even the most unobservant of pedestrians is unlikely to miss this graffiti. The colour of the paint and the brush size of the marks encourage a 'double take' in that initially the impression is that these are, or might be, directions or instructions for pedestrians or pedal cyclists placed there by a legitimate authority. The very size of the writing is slightly overwhelming and has the effect of causing the viewer to 'stand back' to read what is written. From a purely practical viewpoint, it proved difficult to photograph in its entirety: the best viewing point for a photograph would have been the tower block next to it – access to which was denied to us. Situated at the base of the first high-rise tower block, it is clearly visible to all the residents of this tower block; indeed, anyone looking out of the windows of the high-rise block has a clear view of it. There is no other graffiti on the over-bridge save this: the choice of location appears to have been made with some deliberation.

With respect to the internal narrative (Banks, 2001) of the photograph, we see that the tarmac is wet. The reflections that this creates make the graffiti difficult to read, as does the angle from which the shot is

taken. This is made still more difficult by the inconsistency of the brush marks creating the letters. An 'S' and a stylized 'Y' are discernible; however the 'M' is less obvious (from the view in which the photograph was taken). Positioned centrally on the tarmac of the bridge, the graffiti is visually entwined with the centre posts of the safety railings, whilst the base of the 'Y' is visually bedded onto a joint in the tarmac. The stylization of the 'Y' is square and angular. This letter alone is embellished with serifs: its size and shape lend an anthropomorphic (if slightly satanic) quality and, as it is substantially larger than the other two figures, the 'Y' dominates this lexical trinity.

More generally, the size and location of this graffiti and the fact that the over-bridge is so open and exposed to the public view serve to create a latent sense of intimidation. Whoever wrote this was not deterred by risk of being found 'in the act' of writing it. This is emphasized all the more by its close proximity to the local police station, which is less than 200 metres from the over-bridge. As an act of defiance, it carries some weight. When the 'code' is understood and the 'hidden' meaning uncovered, this sense of defiance – of not being constrained by the legal safeguards and prohibitions that a large percentage of the population abide by – adds an extra rhetorical impetus to the motif. In spite of the large numbers of other instances of graffiti bearing this motif, the very act of having to walk over or around this one makes it difficult, if not impossible, to ignore – thus, it has a forthrightness that the others lack.

Figures 4 and 5 document the extent to which the 'SYM' or 'YSM' motif is prevalent throughout Sighthill. By comparison with the graffiti in Figure 3, which is a large and solitary example, well placed for maximum effect, these others are less outstanding. Interspersed with 'tags' and 'slogans' – 'FITZY' appears to be a prolific graffiti 'writer' and SYM gang member – they are rather more orthodox. Occurring on vertical surfaces and being of a less dramatic size, their individual visual presence is diminished. One or two isolated examples are more deliberately placed. The graffiti in Figure 5 uses the joint gap between the cement facings of the wall to form the vertical stem of the 'Y'. However, positioned at the rear of the youth club rather than a well-used public thoroughfare, it is more easily avoided and lacks the brazenness of the graffiti on the over-bridge.

Given its prevalence on the Sighthill estate, it became obvious that graffiti of this kind is removed with much less vigour by the local authority. Their response in grading and defining it as less of a priority for removal stems from its apparent 'harmlessness'. This raises some important issues in light of the frequent references that have been made to 'knowing the code' or the local context throughout this article.

Earlier, it was observed that the 'Sighthill Young Mafia' (SYM) have gained notoriety amongst local residents for their uncompromisingly 'racist' views: views which, it is alleged, ultimately manifested themselves in the most graphic and destructive of ways – the murder of Firsat Dag ('Sighthill', 2003;

Figure 4 Graffiti on a boarded-up shopfront in Sighthill Glasgow.

Student Project, 2003). It is pushing the bounds of credibility to believe, therefore, that the local authority and those who work for them are unaware of the inherently 'racist' significance or weighting that this 'gang' graffiti carries. Yet, it is allowed to remain in situ for considerably longer than the overtly 'racist' examples. What is actually said or written, therefore, is privileged over what might be implied, even though the latter may be just as

Figure 5 Graffiti at the rear of a youth club, Sighthill Glasgow.

intimidating or offensive as the former. The local 'code' is effectively being ignored and it seems, as we have suggested previously, that by defining this sort of writing on the wall as 'gang' graffiti, the 'racist' bias it exhibits is glossed over, or simply not addressed.

Furthermore, the response of the graffiti writers to this organizational or 'establishment' response is significant. Engaging the metaphor of war for a moment, we see that the 'racist' graffiti writers, like some kind of urban guerrillas, have altered and adapted their tactics to avoid the punitive response of the authorities. The value and effectiveness of coercion – by threat of reputation, fear and intimidation – is once again realized. Euphemism, the use of the 'code', of localized common knowledge becomes a most effective tool. Indeed, as Wieder (1974) writes: 'accountings-of-social-action, e.g., "telling and hearing the code", are methods of giving and receiving embedded instructions for seeing and describing a social order' (p. 224).

In speaking of the 'convict's code' as it is employed in penal environments and criminal subcultures, Wieder goes on to raise an important point by observing that: 'The dialogues between staff and researchers show that staff not only knew the code, but know how to use it as well. It was used as a wide-reaching scheme of interpretation which "structured" their environment' (p. 154). A similar observation could perhaps be made in relation to the local authority in Glasgow. If this is the case, it raises questions regarding the commitment of this local authority in truly seeking to eradicate 'racist' behaviours and attitudes towards certain sections of society. Defining one kind of graffiti as 'racist' and another as not presents an overtly monological authoritative view, allowing no space for dialogue about what is oppressive practice. It brings us almost full circle, begging the question: What is 'racist' or 'asylum'-motivated graffiti?

CONCLUSION

In exploring graffiti inspired or prompted by the presence of 'asylum seekers', the presumption of what might constitute 'racist' or 'asylum'-motivated graffiti had (perhaps arrogantly or misguidedly) been made; as was the extent to which such graffiti was prevalent. That these presumptions proved to be erroneous is both exciting and disconcerting. The realization that taken-for-granted knowledge can no longer be 'taken for granted' is exciting – this, after all, is the aim of the *critical* social scientist. At the same time, the realization that a supposedly critical social scientist, along with a large percentage of the population, has been labouring under a number of misconceptions – especially ones which are so potentially corrosive in the effect they can have upon people's lives – is particularly disconcerting.

'Racist' and 'asylum'-motivated graffiti, as this research project indicates, was an elusive entity, the 'establishment' response to it being both swift and decisive. For the graffiti writer wishing to disseminate this kind of opinion, the use of overt or explicitly 'racist' slogans is not an especially

productive pursuit. For the social scientist looking to record and subsequently analyse such work, this is especially problematic, and eventually necessitated a fundamental shift of emphasis in the direction that the research project would take. Conspicuous by its absence, it poses the question as to quite why this might be so (aside from the effective response of the local authority). It also poses the question of what, if anything, fills the void that is left? Central to this is how 'racist' or 'asylum'-motivated graffiti is defined, who defines it, and the responses of the graffiti writer and the local authority to those definitions. More than this, the research demonstrates that these elements are intimately bound up with the very essence of graffiti itself, which is time, place and space specific.

Thus, when graffiti is located at the base of a high-rise tower block occupied by 'asylum seekers' in Sighthill Glasgow, it lends itself to a very different interpretation than if it were written on a wall in Tiger Bay Cardiff, or a shopping centre complex in Plymouth, Devon. The 'local' context is all-important for two reasons. Not only can it be seen as prompting or inspiring the graffiti in the first place, but it also emerges as the key to subsequent interpretation or meaning. Those who are party to what takes place within a specific locale are thus able to draw conclusions which would evade the casual visitor or tourist.

Graffiti is anything but complacent or static. The graffiti writers, who are party to the local context (or not, as the case may be), react to those who respond to their 'work': and so a dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981) takes place. If the expression of an opinion or view is the intention of the graffitist (although this is not always the case) and the draconian response of the local authority to overtly 'racist slogans' makes their use ineffectual, then less obvious ways of conveying the same 'message' are arrived at. It became clear very early on in the field research that whilst overt 'racist' graffiti was scarce, other seemingly benign forms – particularly 'gang' graffiti relating to the Sighthill Young Mafia (SYM) – were abundant. As the extent of this 'gang' graffiti became evident (sufficient to prompt some local and then more wide-ranging enquiries, which revealed the SYM as being a group with an undisguised 'racist' agenda), a very different 'reading' of this graffiti became possible. The local context – the local 'code' – which is known and understood by residents, 'asylum seekers' and the local authority alike makes it clear that this graffiti, despite being less explicit, is no less 'racist' or oppressive – with a coercive effect just as intimidating and offensive. Yet it is never defined as 'racist' or offensive by those who have the power to define it and then respond to that definition.

This leads to some interesting conjectures and conclusions: first, 'racist' views appear to be defined as 'racist' only when they are explicit rather than implicit. Second, the perceptions of 'asylum seekers' and others who are likely to be offended and oppressed by the graffiti of the SYM, who target them specifically, are disregarded. Indeed, the authors are acutely aware that, aside from a singular instance, those individuals who are categorized as

'asylum seekers', refugees and minority ethnic group members appear not to utilize graffiti as a means of expression. Any other means they may employ to give themselves 'voice' are beyond the remit of this article. But clearly this is an area of research which requires considerably more investigation.

Defining what is 'racist' and what is not is clearly shown to be the preserve of those in authority (the local authority in this case), part of an 'authoritarian discourse' or monologue which seeks to have the 'last word' (Billig, 1996). Inevitably, we are forced to ask why this 'gang' graffiti is *not* defined as 'racist'. Certainly, for those who remain unaware of the 'local code' – which is invariably the bulk of the population outside of Sighthill – such 'writings' will never be regarded as anything more than a series of 'harmless' if tiresome 'tags'. There is, too, the change in response that would be required by the local authority (which is already hard pressed to meet the mission statement it has set in removing 'overtly racist' graffiti) if this 'gang' graffiti were also accorded the status 'racist'. Is it the case that the organizational, managerial and fiscal demands of the local authority take precedence over the fears of a comparatively small ethnic group? If that is indeed the case, then how many other 'local codes' or contexts are ignored? More important still, is this a valid enough reason to allow 'racist' views to continue? Paying closer attention to the language and discourse of the graffiti writer – the heteroglossia of the 'lower levels' or 'low genres' (Bakhtin, 1981: 273) – may well prove to be an effective and enlightening enterprise. Whilst Simon and Garfunkel were perhaps a little overzealous in proclaiming 'the words of the prophet are written on the subway wall' (Simon, 1965), they were not entirely in error. Whether we agree with or are offended by the 'writing on the wall', there is much to be gained from a continued study of society's graffiti.

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NOTES

1. In English, the plural 'graffiti' is invariably used to denote the singular form also. This is a convention we adhere to throughout.
2. Latrinalia may also contain racist overtones; however, it is more selective in the audience who may view it.
3. The authors are aware that a small number of the websites cited here are now either permanently or temporarily unavailable.

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