

The Art of Getting Even:

Exploring gender equality in the graffiti subculture

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Abstract

Throughout graffiti's history, women have been ignored, sexualised and undermined. But despite the subculture's history of gender imbalance, female graffiti writers are on the increase. This paper examines the reasons why more women are practising graffiti and evaluates the extent to which equality has been achieved. A focus on the North East of England reveals a persisting lack of female graffiti writers. While graffiti in larger cities such as London have somewhat diversified, in smaller and more isolated scenes gender perhaps remains imbalanced and should prompt further research.

Keywords: graffiti, gender, masculinity, digital era, handstyle, crews

Introduction

Women in graffiti have made their mark fearlessly, claimed space prolifically, pushed creative boundaries and unapologetically disregarded the law, social expectations and subcultural rules. But in a male-dominated art form, they have been few in number. I will examine women's position in graffiti history and the existing theories on their absence. I will aim to calculate an updated gender ratio and track how this has changed, if at all. I hope to discover which factors encourage women to enter the subculture and which deter them from becoming involved.

The dictionary defines graffiti as 'writing or drawings scribbled, scratched, or sprayed illicitly on a wall or other surface in a public place' (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2019). This paper will concentrate on graffiti as understood by members of the subculture: the illegal spray-painting of a name or 'tag' on trains, tracksides or other public and privately owned surfaces.

For a focused investigation, this paper will concentrate on the United Kingdom. Many female writers I interviewed belong to the acclaimed graffiti culture of the country's capital but my fourth section will specifically investigate the smaller and arguably more isolated scene of the North East of England, particularly the industrial city of Newcastle Upon Tyne. I will argue that, while London's graffiti culture has somewhat diversified, Newcastle's absence of female writers exemplifies graffiti's persisting gender imbalance.

Graffiti as defined above emerged in 1960s Philadelphia and was thriving by 1970s New York (Gastman and Neelon, 2011). In the North East it exploded around 1983, prompted by the city's new metro system (Mr Zee, 2018). Though women have been 'getting up' throughout the subculture's history, my research will focus on the past thirty years. This timespan includes Nancy Macdonald's research of the early 1990s, allows for living memory accounts of currently active writers, and enables an examination of gender in graffiti before and after the internet's emergence.



Fig.1 – Sear [date unknown]

1.1 A brief history of females in graffiti

Figure 1 demonstrates confident wild style lettering. A broad colour scheme places warmer oranges in contrast to dominating, colder blues. Multiple textures are displayed, from smooth gradients to cracks in the letters, which create an illusion of impact. Classic thick, black shadow alongside bright white highlights demonstrate a striking handstyle. All is executed with sharp, clean edges. This kind of spray can art takes experience and talent. ‘Sear’, the writer’s tag, is aggressive and reminds the viewer of burning pain. Powerful and active, it signifies mark-making. Through this non-gendered name, Sear makes the statement that she is here, claiming space and exhibiting skill.

In the past, academics, popular culture and graffiti writers often believed that graffiti is simply not suited to females. Women who disregarded expectations and pursued graffiti often became the subject of sexualised rumours (Macdonald, 2006), or were expected to purge their femininity and behave like men, ‘against their implicitly ‘natural’ gender inclination’ (Pabón-Colón, 2018). Their success might be attributed to their boyfriend, on the assumption that he trained her or put her name up himself (Macdonald, 2006). While graffiti attracts many practitioners for its rewards of fame, female writers – as the ‘other’ – have sometimes received additional attention. This denies the opportunity to gain fame from talent alone. According to graffiti writer She, ‘there was always that slight edge of little sister vibe. [Men] were quite protective and looking after you’ (She, 2018).

Sometimes this 'protective' attitude prohibited women from participating: '[in Milan] everyone was saying that security is so brutal [...] if you're a girl they would rape you. The lads I was with wouldn't let me go because of that [...] I felt like the choice was taken away from me,' recounts Bubbs (Bubbs, 2018). Female writers have been accused of 'exploiting their difference,' and consciously utilising this special treatment to advance their practice (Pabón-Colón, 2018). Crew membership and mentorship were also commonly denied to women (Pabón-Colón, 2018). Social gatherings and spaces such as jams, halls of fame and exhibitions – used for inspiration, networking and the exchange of piecebooks (Ferrell, 1996) – further represented male domination.

Macdonald theorised in *The Graffiti Subculture* that graffiti represents the opportunity for males to exhibit masculinity. She argued that female graffiti writers were then perceived as a threat to this masculinity and explains the treatment imposed on women – described above – as males safeguarding their subculture (Macdonald, 2006).

Fortunately, women disregarded these barriers and disproved misconceptions of female incapability through physical and artistic achievements:

Akit: I once walked along an abandoned elevated train track with, I dunno, 10 or 15 bridges to cross that ran over roads. Each bridge became incrementally more difficult to cross. First they were just rusty and shit, then it graduated to trapeze-wire-balancing-style on girders, or leaping from one to the other, with heaving traffic underneath. It was like game levels in *Donkey Kong* or something. Once across a bridge I couldn't go back or get down to the street, I had to go on. By the end of it I was practically hanging on to rivets to get across, trying not to fall to certain death. (Akit, *GraffitiLondon*, 2009)

Bubbs: Climbing a 10 foot wall to get to an amazing spot, going through fences to get to a yard, staying up all night to find a train to paint in a different country, tying two sets of ladders together with rope to get down into a really difficult spot [...] dodging out the way of trains, exploring abandoned buildings. (Bubbs, 2018)

These women, relentlessly successful, then inspired others to follow suit.

Gender in graffiti today

In *The Graffiti Subculture*, Akit expresses her graffiti passion – 'I'm totally obsessed with it, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.' But the book concludes with her frustration six months later that 'the rules are bent and a female writer will never be on par with her male equivalent' (Akit, cited in Macdonald, 2006). Sexist treatment led Akit to resent the subculture. Impressively, her painting obsession endured and she persisted. Her story demonstrates female strength. There is some suggestion that male barriers drove female writers to become 'tougher' (Lady Echo cited in Ganz, 2004). Ten years later, Akit displayed more positivity: 'staying the course has given me some kudos and respect.' She even retracts the suggestion that graffiti is an uneven playing field: 'male or female, if you play the game right – you're a winner!' (Akit, *GraffitiLondon*, 2009). Since the 1990s, female writers – and credit given to them – are on the increase.

Another ten years later and Akit tells me, 'the world is moving more towards equality all-round and graffiti is just another one of these things that includes more girls now' (Akit, 2018). Between 1971 and 2013, the percentage of women in employment in the United Kingdom rose by 14% (Skills Funding Agency, 2013). Over half of England's higher education students are female (Skills Funding Agency, 2013). Akit parallels society's – slowly – changing gender attitudes with graffiti's growing openness to women.

But do the values practised in graffiti directly reflect those of wider society? Graffiti is situated in the real world but follows its own rules. Macdonald hailed the subculture as a 'hidden "other" world,' which 'operates its own governing system' (Macdonald, 2006), illustrating the subculture as separate from social attitudes. Taylor asserts that practitioners find graffiti-writing 'addictive' (Taylor, 2012); it dominates their lifestyles. But they do have careers and families and are therefore not entirely isolated from

society. 'The graffiti world is a separate, parallel world,' offers writer Fransy (Fransy, in *Girl Power*, 2016); it reflects some beliefs of its surroundings but maintains a distance. I would argue that society's growing awareness of gender discrimination can account to some extent for the increase in female graffiti writers. For a fuller understanding of the change, however, I will focus on research within the subculture.

Graffiti culture has diversified. In the past twenty years, we have witnessed its commercialisation, the development of street art, and the digital era's influence – simultaneously embraced and resented by subcultural members. I argue that these three changes have helped accelerate female graffiti activity.

2.1 Graffiti as a mainstream trend

Handwork completed speedily. Fences and obstacles negotiated with physical strength. Constant vigilance for authorities and night-time dangers. Dedicated studying of site security, train schedules and guard rotation. Figure 2 – Akit's artwork – appears hasty. But whole cars – graffiti pieces which cover an entire train carriage – take weeks of planning. The artwork's documentation provides insight. Blurred and low-quality, the photograph was probably taken on an inconspicuous compact camera. The tight-perspective angle suggests it was taken hurriedly – looking back – seconds after the piece's completion and before getaway. This photograph expresses the characteristics of illegal graffiti. Studying it, we learn of the risks, danger and adrenaline inherent to graffiti's night-time adventures.



Figure 2 – Akit [date unknown]



Figure 3 – Akit [2018]

By contrast, I witnessed Akit complete a recent piece, Figure 3, over an entire day at a legal jam celebrating the centenary of women getting the vote. With no fear of arrest or sudden death, the relaxed atmosphere enabled a wider variety of pattern and detail within the bubble lettering. The documentation seems composed without time pressure. These artworks are now familiar in London's gentrified areas. Not always monetised but permitted by property owners, legal work produces a mixed reception among writers. Claw Money states that illegal work is 'the pinnacle of graffiti' (Claw Money in *Girl Power*, 2016); for writers, legal work lacks the same appeal. The abundance of legal work today demonstrates the adoption of graffiti into mainstream culture, regardless of writers' responses. The subculture has been appropriated into the gallery and advertising, despite the 'subverting, trivializing'

possibilities of commercialising a 'countercultural movement' (Kuttner, 2015). In the 1990s, Akit described graffiti as 'a clique,' as 'underground [...] it's for that certain sect of people' (Akit, cited in Macdonald, 2006). Today, Akit claims the culture is 'dreadfully mainstream' (Akit, 2018). But she cites this as one reason for the increase in female writers; more people have joined the scene, including women. Graffiti now appeals to a wider demographic. It is increasingly visible and accessible and consequently more women have been swept into the trend. Today legal jams are more common, partly because property owners are more willing to allow graffiti on private walls, and women have engineered all-female jams. The legality of these jams can be unappealing to writers. In the case of all-female jam *Femme Fierce*, participants became frustrated by the event's over-commercialisation, leading

to its abandonment a few years after launch (Pabon-Colón, 2017). Overall, however, these jams celebrate women writing, increase their visibility and inspire others. Growing bonds with wider society – due to mainstream attention – might also leave graffiti more susceptible to outside influences, such as an increasing awareness of gender equality. Despite criticisms that writers and academics associate with graffiti's growing acceptance – such as exploitation, monetisation and a move away from graffiti's origins – women are consequently less hesitant to join the subculture.

2.2 Street art culture

Related to but distinct from graffiti, street art has been developing in the past few decades and is often perceived as more open to women. The abundance of female street artists has been associated with its 'safe environment' (Ganz, 2004) – the works can be prepared at home and installed quickly. The freedom in materials allows the use of 'feminine' mediums such as 'guerrilla knitting', which apparently appeals to women (Fransberg, 2018). These ideas are easily read as reinforcements of the gender expectations which problematise graffiti. The absence of the tag somewhat detaches street art from the pursuit of ego. Some believe that women, with motivations beyond the ego, are therefore attracted to street art (Minna, cited in Fransberg, 2018). But many existing female writers exhibit hunger for fame; it is not a solely male desire. Fransberg approaches the growth of women in street art as a statement of 'individualism and selfhood' (Fransberg, 2018). Macdonald suggests that men in street art are usually 'supportive and embracing of the contributions of women' (Macdonald, 2016). Men don't need to protect this culture to preserve their masculinity. Women perhaps encounter fewer sexist barriers in street art.

While women are active in street art and this might lead them to graffiti, we must remember that the two are separate cultures, driven by different goals. It is 'not adequate to study street art and graffiti as one united group,' asserts Fransberg (Fransberg, 2018). Investigating street art

therefore provides limited aid to our understanding of gender in graffiti.

2.3 The digital era

The internet plays a controversial role in graffiti. Some complain that many now practise graffiti 'only to put it online' (Kiff, cited in Pablón-Colón, 2018). Akit prefers the 'thrill' of graffiti in situ (Akit, 2018). Others appreciate the increased visibility and international communication enabled by the internet. Positive or negative, the digital era is arguably the largest factor that has levelled graffiti's gender balance. Since its development, women use online zines, blogs and social media to promote their graffiti. Before, female writers were isolated from each other. Writer She 'never really considered [graffiti] as something for me because when I was a lot younger, there weren't a lot of females on the scene [...] It definitely felt like it was something really niche I was doing as a female' (She, 2018). The lack of role models meant that writing graffiti failed to occur to her. But now, women employ international communication for support. Previously, the temporal art form's documentation happened mostly through the exchange of piecebooks at male-dominated events. Graffiti heroes were hailed as men, by men. Now, female writers assemble their own online portfolios. Women are changing graffiti's unbalanced representation and 'reversing the effects of a canon constructed without them' (Pabón-Colón, 2018). Female writers' 'increased visibility' online provides role models for others and subverts gender expectations (Macdonald, 2016). This has created a more level playing field for graffiti writers.

The digital era has provided a platform for the formation of all-female crews. Crews, are usually formed through local bonds and physical collaboration. But through the internet, female writers form national and international crews, with the benefits – support, mentorship, sense of belonging – similar to that of traditional crews. Members of Girls On Top – the 'UK's first all-female aerosol crew' (Girls on Top, 2018) – are spread worldwide yet 'always in communication with each other' (Candie, 2018). They operate a website and Facebook page. Members explain Girls On Top's original motivations:

She: It was kind of necessary to create that space for other female writers [...] to put a message out there to say “nah it's not just a male arena, girls can be here too,” and let us unite the females on the scene together.

(She, 2018)

Candie: It definitely broke down a lot of barriers [...] to inspire, to show younger generations it's not just for boys. It shouldn't be intimidating. There are other girls doing it. I think it has trodden a path for other women.

(Candie, 2018)

Girls On Top act as role models, making apparent the potential of female graffiti writers. They ‘consciously refused to be dissuaded from participating,’ claims Pabón-Colón (Pabón-Colón, 2018), which inspires other females to act similarly. Other advantages of membership include technical guidance – ‘you can just be like “hmm should I do this colour key line?”’ (Candie, 2018); networking – ‘between you, you’ve got loads of connections’ (Pixie, 2018), and friendship – ‘we’re best buddies’ (Candie, 2018). Girls On Top exemplify how female writers use the internet to reap the benefits of crews otherwise denied to them.

The internet has encouraged female writers. But to what extent has it balanced the gender ratio? The internet ‘is ultimately going to benefit male writing too,’ comments Macdonald (Macdonald, 2016). It has the potential to breed the masculine behaviours practised on the streets, tracks and train yards. Pabón-Colón warns that writers whose ‘identity is represented and made visible’ will not necessarily be ‘liberated from the oppressive effects of that same identity’ (Pabón-Colón, 2018). Women are not in total control of their online representations, rather open to vulnerability and criticism. These criticisms might be founded in the same sexism rooted in graffiti’s past, rather than creative judgement. Nonetheless, women are claiming space online fearlessly and leading others to follow suit. The digital era has catalysed female graffiti activity.

The factors above help to explain graffiti’s increased openness to women. Female writers now enjoy access to jams, support from their crews and work alongside male writers. ‘Perceptions have changed. Men are not nearly as sexist as they have been,’ says Lady Pink (Lady Pink, in *Girl Power*, 2016). But has the fight been completely won?

Graffiti’s gender equality: has the problem been buffed?

Equality has been achieved and all problems are – metaphorically – buffed, or solved. This is an attitude I encountered regularly from female writers. Many seem reluctant to even discuss gender. Utah claims ‘I’m not a graffiti girl. I’m a graffiti writer. That’s it’ (Utah, in *Girl Power*, 2016); Akit agrees ‘I hate being called a female graffiti writer, it is redundant; I’m a graffiti writer’ (Akit, 2018). Girls On Top, initially united by feminist motivations, now emphasise, ‘we prefer to not be known as just girl writers. We’re writers, but we happen to be girls’ (Candie, 2018). These women refuse to be defined by their gender. They practise graffiti not because or in spite of being a woman, but simply for its addictive, adrenaline-releasing, creative potential. This abandonment of labels seems a positive demonstration of the graffiti scene’s progression. But I worried it rendered my research redundant: the writers themselves deny the topic’s relevance. What authority does an outsider have to disagree? Akit reminds us that people today are abandoning the confines of binary genders and are open to ‘women doing “male roles”, gay people being gay, people of colour being non-white, LGB, trans, asexual...’ (Akit, 2018). I was concerned that research which categorises and labels females is regressive. McRobbie recognises the risk that researchers ‘impose our culture-bound frame of reference’ on a subject and how ‘personal preferences surface [...] as we write up the research’ (McRobbie, 1991). It seems wrong to arrive at conclusions discordant with the voices of graffiti writers. Furthermore, graffiti is intended to be an anonymous artform which – partially – frees the artist from their identity. Perhaps audiences should be sensitive to this.

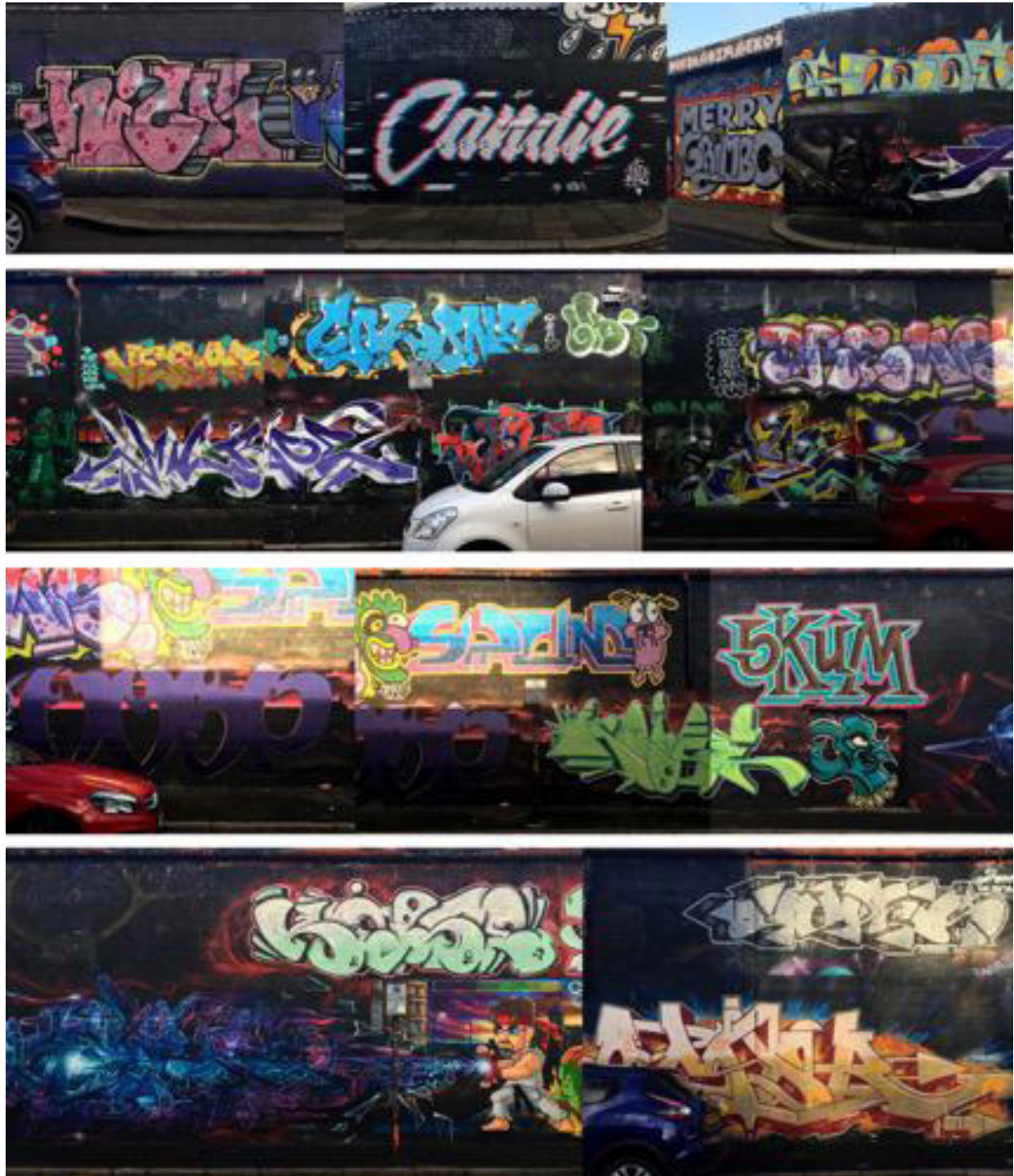


Figure 4 – The walls of Biscuit Tin Studios [2019]

I deliberated why women in graffiti might have such an aversion to this 'female' label. Perhaps it comes from a past focus on gender over talent and skill; of the 'shortcut to fame' and the sexualisation. Fransberg theorises that a writer's rejection of feminism is due to 'fear of exclusion' (Fransberg, 2018): because feminism conflicts with graffiti's performance of masculinity, it might result in a writer's isolation. Fransberg's argument, if correct, proves the persisting necessity to work toward a more inclusive playing field. Writer Motel7 abstained from interviews due to constant "'girl questions'" (Motel7, in Pabón-Colón, 2018). So, these attitudes might also be caused by outsiders' fixation on an aspect of identity that for writers holds no interest. These writers never wanted fame for their gender or from feminism: they want to earn respect for their determination and skill. But Pabón-Colón believes they 'perform feminist acts [...] when they take public space, exceed gendered expectations, raise each other's consciousness, and support one another's artistry,' and are 'a model for contemporary feminist movement' (Pabón-Colón, 2012). To Pabón-Colón, these writers are feminists whether they like it or not. She establishes the importance of recognising and remembering the struggle and triumph of female graffiti veterans who helped carve the path for future writers, rather than forgetting or refusing to talk about inequality.

Furthermore, graffiti photographer Martha Cooper says, 'before, women might have made up one 10th of a percent, and now maybe it's 1 percent' (Cooper, in Wyatt, 2013). Susan Farrell, creator of Art Crimes, estimates the growth as from 2 to 5 percent (Susan Farrell, 2014). Though difficult to produce reliable statistics, these women – experienced in graffiti observation – provide some indication. The number of female writers has perhaps more than doubled or even multiplied by ten, an impressive increase which might explain these writers' misconceptions of equality. But the figures are far from equal. Returning to gender equality in wider society, the United Kingdom's gender pay gap lingers at 18 percent (The Lancet, 2018). McRobbie believes that 'those utterances of forceful non-identity with feminism' are an example of 'post-feminism,' which risks the achievements of twentieth century feminists becoming 'undone' (McRobbie, 2004). In this sense, claims of equality in graffiti and rejection

of feminism could result in the reversal of advancements. It is important not to be content with progress so far but strive for absolute equality.

Another aspect which likely affects writers' perceptions of equality is their geographical location. Many writers cited above practise in London and internationally, where a selection of active, visible female writers exist. Smaller, less internationally connected scenes might not show so much progression. They are also the subject of less research, meaning that any inequality is more likely to remain ignored. Distant from London's evolving subculture, the North East serves as an interesting focal point for further examination of gender equality in graffiti today.

Gender in North East graffiti

Figure 4 shows the walls of Biscuit Tin Studios, an exhibit displaying North East graffiti talent. The building, which also houses the scene's favoured spray paint shop, has been relinquished to the control of local writers (McConway, 2019). While many North East writers get up illegally, the building is a platform for legal practice. A system of 'rotation,' means the walls are constantly painted over (Mr Zee, 2018), providing fresh brick for writers and maintaining the interest of onlookers. These images present the temporal art space on one day. They demonstrate diversity: in handstyle, from traditional bubble to experimental, abstract writing; in form, with names, characters and landscape; and in colour. But considering the identities behind the tags reveals less diversity: just two belong to women. Candie, from London, left her mark while visiting. Raven – the artist of the gory, deathly face on the corner to the right of the shutter – is the sole local female writer currently on the walls.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Male Customers	SHOP CLOSED						SHOP CLOSED
Female Customers	SHOP CLOSED						SHOP CLOSED

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Male Customers	SHOP CLOSED						SHOP CLOSED
Female Customers	SHOP CLOSED						SHOP CLOSED

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Male Customers	SHOP CLOSED						SHOP CLOSED
Female Customers	SHOP CLOSED						SHOP CLOSED

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Male Customers	SHOP CLOSED						SHOP CLOSED
Female Customers	SHOP CLOSED						SHOP CLOSED

Figure 5 – Table recording sex of customers in Colours spray paint shop, Newcastle [2019]

Figure 5 presents a further indication of gender ratio in North East graffiti. I asked Dan McConway, owner of the spray paint shop, Colours, to record the sex of customers over four weeks. The limitation on this study’s accuracy must be noted: customers might buy paint for non-graffiti projects; writers today often source paint

online; the time of year contributes to poor business. But the numbers offer a relevant hint, revealing that overall, just 5 percent of customers were female.

The gender imbalance on Biscuit Tin’s walls and of Colours’ customers suggests a serious absence of local female writers. Newcastle’s graffiti means that ‘writers from elsewhere come up here and their chins hit the floor’ (Fuller, 2011). The scene impresses and thrives. But while London’s writers vouch for graffiti gender equality, why does the North East scene still lack gender diversity?

Raven, along with one other local, active female writer, did not want to be interviewed. A male writer described Newcastle’s female writers as ‘more reserved than the males’ (Mr Zee, 2018). For whatever reason, this heightened urge for anonymity might explain their reluctance to speak. Possibly, these female writers are even plentiful – just better than males at remaining undetectable. The choice to remain highly anonymous – surely preferable to arrest – belongs to writers. Dedication to remaining incognito reduces visibility, however. It decreases the potential to inspire and attract other women to graffiti, and could therefore be one reason for the North East’s absence of female writers.

I spoke to Bubbs, who previously practised graffiti in Newcastle and now paints legally with Girls On Top in London and abroad. Her urge to write was motivated by the ‘competitive side’ of graffiti, often perceived as masculine.

For Bubbs, being ‘different from the female stereotype’ felt ‘natural’ (Bubbs, 2018). But in rejecting her social conditioning and following her instinctual urge, she was largely alone. ‘When I started I knew there was one other female writer,’ remembers Bubbs (Bubbs, 2018). A few decades later and seemingly little has changed in the North East. Other than isolation as a solo female, Bubbs’ account leads to no obvious explanation for this absence.

Struggling to find female voices, I asked male writers to evaluate the scene’s openness to women. Do writers here operate any of the sexist barriers described in *The Graffiti Subculture*? Young writer Angel Mob expresses a desire for female competitors, because ‘it would be more interesting’ and ‘more diverse’ (Angel Mob, 2018). ‘We embrace people. We’re friendly. We don’t really isolate people,’ claims experienced writer Mr Zee (Mr Zee, 2018). McConway asserts that he and his colleagues are welcoming to women entering his shop and encourage them to paint on the surrounding walls (McConway, 2019). Mr Zee and McConway have taught graffiti workshops to boys and girls, providing the mentorship previously denied to females. Mr Zee appraises female students as ‘more concentrated’ and their work as ‘of a better quality’ (Mr Zee, 2018); McConway agrees that they ‘pick it up a lot faster’ (McConway, 2018). Both assign this to a lack of ego. Whether or not verifiable, the teachers convey dismay at how these talented students tend to migrate to ‘other creative industries,’ over illegal, high-risk graffiti. I spoke to just a handful of male writers, whose responses were possibly guarded and less authentic than when in conversation with other writers. However, I detected no direct discrimination against women getting up. This openness is hugely positive but left me feeling far from understanding the North East’s persisting absence of female writers. I investigated further.

In section 2, I argued that the digital era, street art, and graffiti’s ‘mainstream’ revolution have all encouraged female writers. I wondered if gauging these aspects’ developments in North East graffiti might provide insight into my queries. I interviewed Dan McConway – knowledgeable about local graffiti through activity in Colours – and renowned writer of thirty years, Amor, on these three themes.

The internet and North East graffiti

In Section 2.3, I examined how the internet catalysed female graffiti. The North East, with access to the internet, suffers no lack of online graffiti activity. Through the Instagram account Newcastle Style, for example, writers upload graffiti photographs via a mediator who preserves their anonymity (McConway, 2019). Bubbs cites 400ml, a now inactive forum where ‘North East writers would post photos and chat about painting,’ as her introduction to graffiti (Bubbs, 2018). Admittedly, some North East writers show aversion to the internet. Amor complains that new writers ‘put five or six things online’ and receive recognition. ‘It takes more than five or six things to be a graffiti writer,’ he asserts (Amor, 2019). There is a sense that this misplaced acclaim undermines the efforts of hard-working writers. McConway expresses nostalgia for the pre-digital era, when ‘you’d have to get on the train, ride the tracks and that’s the only way you would see it [...] you’d have to be amongst it, doing it, to know what’s going on’ (McConway, 2019). Despite their reservations, Amor and McConway admit to having multiple Instagram accounts. Social media lends North East writers access to graffiti beyond their area. But some writers argue that consequently, European graffiti’s influence abolished ‘Newcastle style’ – a handstyle identifiable to the city (Vigo, 2018). Opposition to the internet is reported among writers in other cities and is not specific to Newcastle, however. Furthermore, it does not seem to hinder online graffiti activity. ‘I think people use the internet to promote graffiti as much the same here as anywhere else,’ concludes McConway. Women in the North East can witness and interact with graffiti online. However, as I acknowledged as a possibility in Section 2.3, male dominance is still present among North East social media pages. Though Bubbs remained undeterred, the lack of local female graffiti role models online might discourage women, as it enforces the expectation that this graffiti scene is for men. The urge to try graffiti might therefore be less likely to occur to women in the North East.

Street art in the North East

In Section 2.2, I explained that street art, without a focus on name and the pursuit of masculine performance, is often perceived as more open to women. Is there a street art culture open to women in the North East?

'There's never really been street artists,' McConway believes of the area (McConway, 2019). Newcastle's metro system breeds pure, illegal, trackside graffiti which defines the scene and is separate from street art, asserts Amor (Amor, 2019). Women might be led to graffiti via street art but its absence renders that difficult. McConway mentions locals Prefab77, 'who aren't street artists but do street artist type work,' by adopting an urban aesthetic which remains mostly within gallery walls. Though outside the graffiti subculture with its masculine associations, Prefab77's website broadcasts the caption 'gangs, tribes and fraternities' (Prefab77, 2019). Clearly masculinity still plays a significant role. Furthermore, there seems to be some animosity between the two cultures. Amor feels that street artists are driven by motivations of commodification, therefore are discordant with graffiti writers'. Both Dan and Amor refer to Prefab77 in degrading language. If street artists do practise here, their relationship with graffiti writers is perhaps unhealthy. Collaboration is unlikely. Therefore, a woman who begins to practise street art is less likely to migrate to graffiti. This might hinder the North East graffiti scene from welcoming all genders.

North East graffiti as mainstream

In Section 2.1, I argued that graffiti today is widely accepted and attractive to more people, including women. How mainstream is North East graffiti? Have perceptions softened? 'Attitudes have changed over the thirty odd years I've painted,' recounts Amor (Amor, 2019). He remembers people's fear when graffiti was new, as opposed to today's reactions from people who have grown up surrounded by it.

Grffiti's acceptance has largely been accelerated by commercialisation. Newcastle has seen an increase in 'commercial businesses using graffiti artists to do stuff' (McConway, 2019). But, McConway recognises, compared to London where 'there's loads of people who want commissions or jobs done,' Newcastle's scene has been less heavily commercialised. This is partially due to Newcastle City Council's zero tolerance policy on graffiti: 'if it's a council-owned shop, they can't paint the front of it'. Local businesses often cannot support graffiti. In his council-commissioned research, Fuller argued that Newcastle's writers have a negative relationship with authorities due to the 'lack of legal opportunities' available (Fuller, 2011). In Helsinki, Fransberg found that zero tolerance 'deepened the male dominance, as women were widely isolated from each other'. It meant that female writers, forced to remain anonymous, were disconnected from each other (Fransberg, 2018). Harsh legal consequences might explain why Newcastle's few female writers remain hyper-anonymous and less visible, and why the scene remains largely uncommercialised.

While elsewhere the fine art world has adopted graffiti, the Newcastle graffiti scene's relationship with galleries remains problematic. According to McConway, 'if there was a gallery that was open to local writers, they would jump at the chance' (McConway, 2019). But any attention paid to graffiti and street art focuses on international artists. Unit44 of Hoults Yard promotes art 'born upon the raw brick of the street' (Unit44, 2019). but lists exhibitions by artists from elsewhere. The Baltic's exhibition *Spank the Monkey* included graffiti-influenced artists, but emphasised international names over local ones (Baltic At, 2019). This attitude disengages the local graffiti scene. Furthermore, Amor thinks that galleries are 'scared' of graffiti and unwilling to be associated with vandalism (Amor, 2019). Anyhow, McConway and Amor place significance on the North East's non-commercialised, illegal graffiti: 'we don't have legal writers, who are self-promoting art businesses'; 'it's never something we've been interested in'. Galleries remain uninterested in local graffiti, while local writers' dedication to their anti-establishment, non-monetised artform prevails.

Though the North East has seen broadened attitudes and hints of graffiti commercialisation, the development has been seemingly slowed or obstructed by an unhealthy relationship with galleries and strict authorities. The scene, hailed as one of the 'most underground scenes in England' (Fuller, 2011), remains separate from wider society and less likely to attract attention from outsiders, such as women.

Regional characteristics in relation to graffiti gender

The area's broader characteristics also mould its graffiti identity. Size and geography might affect gender equality advancements in the area, in comparison to the capital. In Akit's view, 'London is the best and most diverse city in the world' (Akit, 2018). Unverifiable and biased, her statement contains some relevance. Ross names London as 'the second most renowned epicentre in the world for graffiti,' due to 'galleries, museums, auction houses, and art critics,' and 'a large creative class of people who serve as a catalyst for this kind of work' (Ross, 2016). London's artistic mass results in a diverse and busy graffiti culture. While Newcastle's art scene flourishes, its population and size are minuscule compared to the capital. The number of Newcastle's 'serious' writers has been estimated at just twenty (Fuller, 2011). In this respect, expectations of Newcastle's graffiti scene being diverse as London's are unrealistic. Akit continues that London 'can sometimes "set the trend" [...] which will then "trickle down" to other parts' (Akit, 2018). Perhaps London's graffiti gender diversity will follow this pattern and spread further north. Delays in this development might be assigned to Newcastle's geographical location. Distance from London and other cities somewhat isolates Newcastle from outside culture. Amor asserts that Newcastle's graffiti scene has always been 'self-contained' (Amor, 2019). London has 'easy access to other international centers of graffiti' (Ross, 2016), which diversifies its culture. By comparison, Newcastle is far from other cities and less internationally connected. During Amor and other practitioners' early writing days, travelling to London meant having to 'hide in the train toilet for three hours or six hours on a coach overnight,' which was 'hard' and 'cost money' (Amor, 2019). 'We were in a bubble,'

concludes McConway (Amor, 2019). Consequently, Newcastle's writers developed the scene independently without much outside influence. This led to a proud and unique identity but might have caused the area to miss out or fall behind on advancing ideals, such as on gender, which other cities were sharing with each other.

Concluding possible explanations for North East female graffiti absence

The North East graffiti scene, thriving and unique, is undeniably still male-dominated compared to advances elsewhere in gender equality. Its male participants seem supportive of females entering the scene, offering mentorship and access to legal wall space. Factors that have accelerated the number of women in graffiti generally, however, have developed differently in the North East. While the digital era has catalysed female graffiti activity, a lack of local role models online might discourage women in the North East from writing. While street art's development elsewhere has attracted women, its growth in the North East seems slow, and its relations with graffiti practitioners sour. Elsewhere graffiti has become mainstream, but in the North East it remains mostly uncommercialised and unendorsed by the fine art world. While London's busy creative activity, vast population and international connections place its graffiti scene at the forefront of developing gender ideals, Newcastle's geography maintains both physical and ideological distance from the capital and its scene is self-contained. Possibly a lack of existing research focused on the area's graffiti culture means that gender imbalance remains ignored; further attention paid to the issue might help to equalise the scene. The North East's lack of female graffiti role models is likely to maintain the imbalance. The scene needs active, prolific women made visible on the walls and trains, at public jams and online, to help other women realise their graffiti potential.

Conclusion

Women in graffiti today are inspiring and relentless. Their achievements deserve celebration, their rejection of labels demands respect. However, I argue that their persistent scarcity marks the need for serious consideration of graffiti gender imbalance.

Many female writers today seem unwilling to discuss or acknowledge their sex. Frustrated by the focus on their gender, they want recognition for their talent, skill and efforts alone. Some argue that gender inequality within graffiti has been amended and the conversation is redundant. Complacency, however, is dangerous. Graffiti experts confirm that graffiti's gender ratio has balanced, but only very slightly. The need to pursue equality is evident.

The North East graffiti scene illuminates this necessity. While female graffiti in cities such as London has increased, the North East's percentage remains low, despite its members' assurances of a welcoming attitude to aspiring writers of any sex. The few active women remain highly anonymous, perhaps hindering their ability to inspire others. Interviews with local writers revealed how factors that have increased female activity elsewhere – online female visibility; street art; mainstream acceptance – are developing in North East graffiti slowly or not at all. Admittedly, expecting an abundance of female writers in Newcastle on a similar scale as the capital – larger in size and population – is unrealistic. Additionally, Newcastle's distance from other cities has seemingly cultivated a self-contained environment. This has generated a unique style, but perhaps protected tradition from wider society's changing ideals. While elsewhere graffiti is diversifying, the North East awaits its female graffiti revolution.

The persisting absence of women in North East graffiti underlines the need for more discussion. It demands a celebration of feminism and the remembrance of previous female graffiti success. It demonstrates the importance of action, through online presence, public jams, workshops and pure, illegal graffiti visible and inspiring to women. Finally, it should prompt further research to document and explain the imbalance and recommend a plan for change.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Professor Richard Clay for his consistent guidance. For giving up generous time in interviews, I would like to thank Bubbs, Akit, She, Candie, Pixie, Amor, Mr Zee and Angel Mob. And importantly, I would like to thank Dan McConway for his vital mediation of interviews, facilitation of research and extensively giving open, welcoming support.