

# Bodies, doings, and gendered ideals in Swedish graffiti

## Abstract

Drawing from extensive fieldwork among graffiti writers in Sweden this article investigates gendered identity work and its consequences. It points to how potentially inclusive aspects of disembodied subcultural performances—that identities are negotiated through the material representation of the writer rather than on basis of the physical body—nevertheless work excludingly, especially so in terms of gender. This is so because identity work in graffiti revolves around a re-embodiment of identities through normative notions of the able, male and invisible body.

*Keywords:* gender, identity work, graffiti

IT'S FRIDAY AFTERNOON and I am walking the streets of Stockholm with one of my informants. As we pass a doorway she stops, points at two tags written in the same style with, what looks like, the same marker and adds in passing “that’s nice, I didn’t know they knew each other”. Looking at me, she then answers my tacit question of “what?” by saying that these two graffiti writers have a similar style and mindset, and that she admires them both, however she has never seen them write together before. We continue walking and I ask her if she knows both of them. She answers, “I have never met any of them, but like I said they have similar way of thinking of graffiti, I’m glad they hang out” (Fieldnotes Stockholm, May 2015).

During the three years that I have followed graffiti writers in Stockholm and Malmö, this kind of episode has continuously been replayed: participants constructing images of other participants through their graffiti without having ever physically met them. Similar to other subcultural groups – be it punks, skaters, climbers, goths etc. – graffiti centers on an emplacement of identities, boundaries and ideals within public space. It does not only occur in space, but also through space (Gieryn 2000). Yet, in contrast to other subcultural groups, this emplacement of the subcultural is largely disembodied. In contrast to punks or skaters for whom subcultural identities and activities are physically embodied in a here and now, subcultural identities and activities in graffiti are worked through the graffiti left behind. The physical person behind the tag remains absent from the present – including both its temporal and spatial aspect.

The last two decades of zero tolerance against graffiti in Sweden has deepened

this absence of the physical person behind the tag. The definition of zero tolerance in many Swedish cities as including a prohibition against all forms of graffiti, be it on legal walls, in galleries, or commissioned works, has largely meant that the graffiti writer has moved further into the shadows of the city (Kimvall 2012). The consequence of this absence of the physical body is that most writers were largely unaware of the physical features of other writers. This was often discussed as something positive and inclusive, that subcultural identities were based on doings rather than beings. What matters is your graffiti, not your gender, ethnic background, class, age, or body size. Among the more than 150 graffiti writers that I followed, as well as the hundreds of writers I was briefly introduced to, there was indeed a multitude of bodies.

Nevertheless, even though the doings of graffiti were largely disembodied, the boundary work of subcultural identities and activities in graffiti involves a re-embodiment of the body that effectively counters this inclusive belief. The body is re-constructed through notions of bodily features such as height, gender, courage, ability, ethnicity and age that are deduced from how the graffiti was written and where: "X has to be tall, I mean look at the heights of his tags." Or; "Y? I hate him, just a stupid fucking kid, you can tell from the style that he does not know anything about graffiti." Such deductions formed rumors that spread among writers and were used to define others. Both of the quotes above are examples of how writers talked about others without having ever met them, but both are also examples of how the re-embodiment of the subcultural identity is in conflict with the physical body of the particular writer. X that is here referred to as a he is a she, and Y is a thirty-year-old writer who has been writing graffiti for years. Whereas this conflict between the body behind the tag and the construction of that body through the tag is interesting, the point is rather how the plurality of bodies doing graffiti is reduced through the restoration of the symbolic to bodily form through taken for granted notions of what graffiti should be.

As is obvious in the quotes above these notions referred first and foremost to a male body, masculine pronouns being the standard referral when discussing and assessing other writers. When an identity or activity was re-embodied as feminine, it was exclusively negative as in "that has to be a girl, I mean it is way too arty." Similarly, age and ethnicity were rarely openly denoted as something positive: "you see that, that's a standard 14-year-old ghetto kid, just fucking things up." In most cases, other writers were assumed to be between 16 to 30 years old and white, the exception being terms like "kids" and "toys" that were frequently used to designate the inexperienced and childish as opposed to the worthy and committed.

Further, implicit in these re-embodiments are two interrelated bodily capacities, that of mobility and of access. Mobility here refers to an able body in motion. First of all, in the doing of graffiti; as in moving the body so as to paint fast and efficiently and reach a desired result. Second, it involves a stress on moving around between places, writing graffiti across the entire city, but also as in being able to move in and out of specific places, such as train yards and abandoned industrial buildings. Third, mobility also signifies being able to escape risks and dangers, as in moving away from the police

or guards, climbing a fence or jumping off a roof, avoiding trains and the electrified third rail, or as in physically confronting those who may interfere.

This ability to move freely in doing graffiti and escaping risk is based on being able to do so in the first place. It implies an unproblematic access so as to be able to move. Such access relates to what Goffman (1963) refers to as *passing*, that the disembodied doing of graffiti rests on being able to conceal crucial information concerning a criminal identity. Writers would remind themselves and others to manage their bodies and bodily conduct so as to be able to move, dress and behave in such a way that no one would notice or question their presence or writing. Not standing still for too long, not looking around too much, keeping a low profile. Or if spotted as potentially suspicious pretending to be drunk, talking on the phone, or urinating to disarm the situation. The disembodied doing of graffiti thus rests on notions of the able body as in the normal and invisible body. As note geographers Carrie Mott and Susan M. Roberts (2014), subcultural notions of the ideal privilege particular bodies while discouraging others.

These normative notions of the body in graffiti are highly gendered and racialized. They refer to bodies whose presence and right to move freely in public are rarely questioned, bodies that are able to exploit privileges of a continuous access to urban space. Not only does the notion of mobility exclude the non-able body in terms of the doing or moving, but notions of risks were entirely related to graffiti and not general risks that non-male or non-white bodies face, especially so in graffiti's pursuit of the urban margins at night. The able body as in moving and handling risks did not include the risks of violence, sexual harassment, rape, or being stopped and searched by the police due to racial profiling. Such risk management were not recognized as valid or related at all to graffiti among writers. Female writers for example talked about a double risk management: one related to graffiti and one to the gendered body in the city.

Instead of being validated as a further commitment, of doing graffiti despite risks unrelated to such doings, this risk management was rather defined as being a problem, that; "girls can't jump fences," "they are too afraid," "they can't handle being arrest", thus placing the female body in graffiti in opposition to the able and normal male body (MacDonald 2001).

This is obvious in how the re-embodied identity was negotiated with a physical body when known. To male writers this was rarely a problem, although writers often expressed disappointment when someone did not live up to the conceived image of the writer "first time I met Z, I was a bit disappointed, I mean he looks kinda nerdy, it was not what I had expected, but I guess it's good, cause no one would suspect him being a writer." As in this quote, known bodily features of male writers, although anticlimactic, were related to the doings of graffiti. One may look like a nerd, but it can be turned to one's advantage when writing. For non-male body it was the opposite, when being outed as female the re-embodied identity was repeatedly replaced by a non-normative body, placing them as "girl writers" or "girl bombers."

As a consequence, many of the female writers I followed sought to retain the distance between their physical bodies and their re-embodied and non-gendered – e.g. male – subcultural bodies. They would avoid frequenting open legal walls, or identify-

ing themselves with their tag to people whom they did not trust. In short, they did not only have to conceal their criminal identities to pass in public, they would also have to conceal their gendered bodies to pass as worthy subcultural participants.

To conclude, even though the doing of graffiti is intimately tied to bodily practices and plurality, the latter is confounded through a disembodied performance of identities through the symbolic. The lack of visibility, increased by two decades of zero tolerance against all forms of graffiti, works to reduce plurality as identities are re-embodied through gendered notions of who, what and how graffiti should be about. The stress on movement and access further these normative assumptions and work to exclude non-white and non-male bodies. Instead, the potential inclusivity that the anonymity of the physical person behind the tag opens for works to close the subcultural off. Even though the majority of writers that I have followed are white and male, graffiti is far from an all-male ritual. However, the re-embodiment of subcultural identities through normative bodily notions means that it often is performed as such. It creates a belief of a communal space that is conceived of as freed from the passive and fake, but also from women, creating and reinforcing masculine ideal and a conceived homosociality. The disproportion of women within the subcultural is thus a matter of an active exclusion of femininity, rather than due to women's lack of interest in graffiti, risk taking, visibility, or criminal activity (Mullaney 2007).

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