"Your wall cannot divide us": Graffiti in Cyprus and insights into conflict-affected landscapes

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Abstract

Graffiti in conflict-affected settings offers alternative understandings of local experiences and international challenges that intertwine with everyday routines and spaces. Urban walls deliver canvases to write, tag, and paint to express grievances and aspirations for more peaceful futures, illuminate societal concerns, and offer solidarity on issues that sit within and outside the confines of historical and present-day division. In this expanded visual essay, we explore the publicly available resource of graffiti to gain insights into the challenges and priorities of Cyprus' conflict-affected landscape. Drawing on observations on both Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot sides of the United Nations Buffer Zone, we explore the ways in which graffiti provides space to recognise alternative voices in a society where official and media discourses remain characterised by language of difference and political division. Insights gained through walking surveys conducted in June 2019 were augmented by discussions with local experts to further contextualise the observed graffiti content. We demonstrate the potential value for academics, policymakers, and practitioners of analysing the languages, symbols, and messages of graffiti. We conclude that this initial exploration establishes graffiti as more than 'vandalism' and expands our knowledge of conflict-affected landscapes as an indicator of the everyday and the interactions, priorities, and spatial politics of local people.

Keywords

Cyprus, conflict graffiti, conflict, graffiti, street art, walking surveys

1. Introduction

Walking through downtown Nicosia, the physically, politically, and culturally divided capital of Cyprus, two features dominate the urban landscape: the Buffer Zone (BZ) walls, established by the United Nations (UN) in 1974 after decades of tension to divide the Mediterranean island and establish some form of peace between the Turkish-Cypriot North and the Greek-Cypriot South, and graffiti[1]. Karathanasis (2008) describes the border as the most dominant feature of the conflict-affected landscape, and therefore by directly engaging with the border, graffiti writers simultaneously engage with the history and politics of the city. Pavoni, Zaimakis and Campos (2021: 12) assert that "social and political turbulence has always been a particularly fertile ground for the surfacing of graffiti", and in cases of conflict when formal channels of communication and repre-

1 Use of the terms 'graffiti' and 'street art' varies across fields and individuals (Vogel et al., 2020), and there are important distinctions. Graffiti commonly denotes unauthorised markings and street art has been synonymous with more artistic forms, including large scale (oft-authorised) murals. We adopt graffiti as a catch-all for the diverse range of public expressions on urban landscapes, including tags, text-inscriptions, slogans, hip-hop style street art forms, murals, and markings of other media and styles.

sentation are disrupted, the significance of graffiti as social commentary is heightened. In commenting on the bordered realities of walls and state power, Carastathis and Tsilimpounidi (2021: 422) “underscore the ways in which walls, in times of crisis, are repurposed as canvases of resistance, which communicate, amplify, and incite embodied resistance to authoritarianism and state violence”. As we will discuss, much scholarship on graffiti in conflict zones across the world attests to its powerful communicative, representative, and activist functions, offering alternative perceptions and narratives. Indeed, Vogel and others (2020: 2148) argue that for societies affected by conflict and division, graffiti “is a valuable, yet often overlooked, resource for scholars and policymakers.” That graffiti is distinctly a product of its urban spatial context (Ferrell and Weide, 2010), both shapes and is shaped by its locational setting (Karathanasis, 2021; Tsilimpounidi, 2015; Vogel *et al*., 2020), and occurs in heterogeneous but observable spatial and temporal patterns (Hána and Šel, 2021; Haworth *et al*., 2013), highlights the value of geographical enquiry for reading and understanding graffiti in conflict-affected spaces.

In this expanded visual essay, we explore the ability of graffiti to speak about local dynamics in societies affected by conflict and/or division. The visually informed essay form is advantageous in presenting and developing ideas using, much like graffiti itself, a combination of media, whereby strength lies in the synergies of text and images as distinct forms of expression (see Pauwels, 2012). Cyprus is fertile ground for such exploration; graffiti is abundant, exhibiting myriad forms and functions, including pieces that directly comment on the historical and contemporary context of division (Figure 1), and pieces that provide insight into other issues and priorities of local and international significance.

We begin with a brief discussion of graffiti in conflict-affected landscapes. We then present the historical and contemporary context of division in Cyprus, before outlining

Figure 1: Folk tale imagery depicts a young couple potentially unifying a divided Cyprus with a kiss. Artist: CRS[1], south Nicosia, Cyprus, June 2019, photographer: Billy Tusker Haworth.

1 CRS on Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/c.kakoulli/

how as researchers we explore these phenomena in the field. We concentrate our subsequent analysis on language, symbols, and local and global discourses observed in graffiti across Cyprus during an exploratory visit in 2019. In the essay we forward the central argument that the value of graffiti should not be overlooked, and researchers and policymakers should explore it further to gain powerful insights into everyday life in conflict-affected landscapes.

2. Graffiti and conflict-affected landscapes

Graffiti has been characterised by simplistic distinctions as either vandalism or art (Gomez, 1993). But graffiti represents myriad functions, motivations, and styles, from tagging and identity marking to larger scale community murals and other street art (Halsey and Young, 2002). It provides important accounts of identity, territoriality, and contestation (Evered, 2019), disrupting the authoritative spatial order of cities while simultaneously creating alternative social geographies (Kindynis, 2018).

In conflict-affected societies, borders and boundaries are omnipresent elements of the everyday that regulate economic, social, physical, and cultural movements and interactions (Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel, 2016; van Schendel, 2005). Thus, graffiti both reflects and shapes public spaces and attitudes (Leventis, 2016) and can challenge or uphold boundaries. Following that space cannot be separated from politics (Massey, 2005; Foucault, 1984), social science scholarship understands graffiti as an important medium for urban political communication (Obeng, 2000; Ryan, 2016; Awad, 2021), including during times of crisis (Leventis, 2013; Tsilimpounidi, 2015). In fact, scholars explicitly link civil resistance and geographical spaces, showing that spaces outside the influence of hegemonic power exist even in the context of authoritarian states (e.g., Busteed, 2005). Exposure of non-hegemonic voices and alternative political narratives is particularly useful when exploring landscapes moulded by crises and socio-political tensions (Tsilimpounidi, 2015; Panlee, 2021) as they often leave little room for other cultural, social, or socio-economic debates. Graffiti portrays diverse public attitudes at different scales, potentially generating both social change and tensions (Ley and Cybriwsky, 1974). Likewise, there is a demonstrable link that the success of resistance might be tied to *where* it takes place (Butcher, 2017), meaning that often activists choose specific spaces connected to their cause.

In landscapes of conflict and division, there are several ways to view graffiti (Vogel *et al.*, 2020). One is through the medium's ability to subvert dominant, oppressive powers quickly and publicly through using the streets as a setting to communicate regardless of legality. There is a long history of graffiti as a form of visual protest against authoritarian and repressive regimes, from messages of defiance in Nazi prison camps in Italy (Pugliese, 2002) and in Franco's Spain (Johnston, 2006), to bold calls to action for recognition and justice in murals across Latin America (Rolston, 2011; Ryan, 2016). Graffiti produced in the Occupied Palestinian Territories constitutes an example of the communicative and representative functions of graffiti during war and repression. This has included large-scale mural art and less formalised aerosol messages (Toenjes, 2015). Since the first Intifada and up to the time of writing, graffiti has been used by Palestinians as a tool for mobilisation and civil resistance; reclaiming space and challenging occupation; and as visualisation of a distinct national identity and sense of community to Israel (e.g., Peteet, 1996; Toenjes, 2015). Awad *et al.* (2017: 165) discussed graffiti during the 2011 Egyptian revolution, whereby "a wave of spontaneous novel artistic ways of resistance that used urban space in an innovative manner" was an important feature of the Arab Spring. Graffiti was used in Syria to publicly condemn the al-Assad regime through "a new grammar of dissent" (Halasa *et al.*, 2014: 101) and to foster solidarity within the resistance and Free Syrian Army (FSA) across the country (Alawadhi and Tulke, 2021).

Another reading lies in the hopefulness of messages shared through creative acts. Arthur (2015) explored how youth in Timor-Leste symbolised and (re)constructed national identity through positive graffiti messages and images of peace and unity to overcome societal divisions. This more constructive and less confrontational function offers a narrative of what is possible. Both ways of engaging with graffiti showcase an ability to capture the collective imagination, create a unified story and a shared sense of solidarity.

However, graffiti can also operate as a distinguisher of division and a mechanism for further intimidation and constraint on social and spatial movements (Vogel *et al.*, 2020). Graffiti read as territorialisation in societies impacted by division can influence who is likely to use urban spaces and

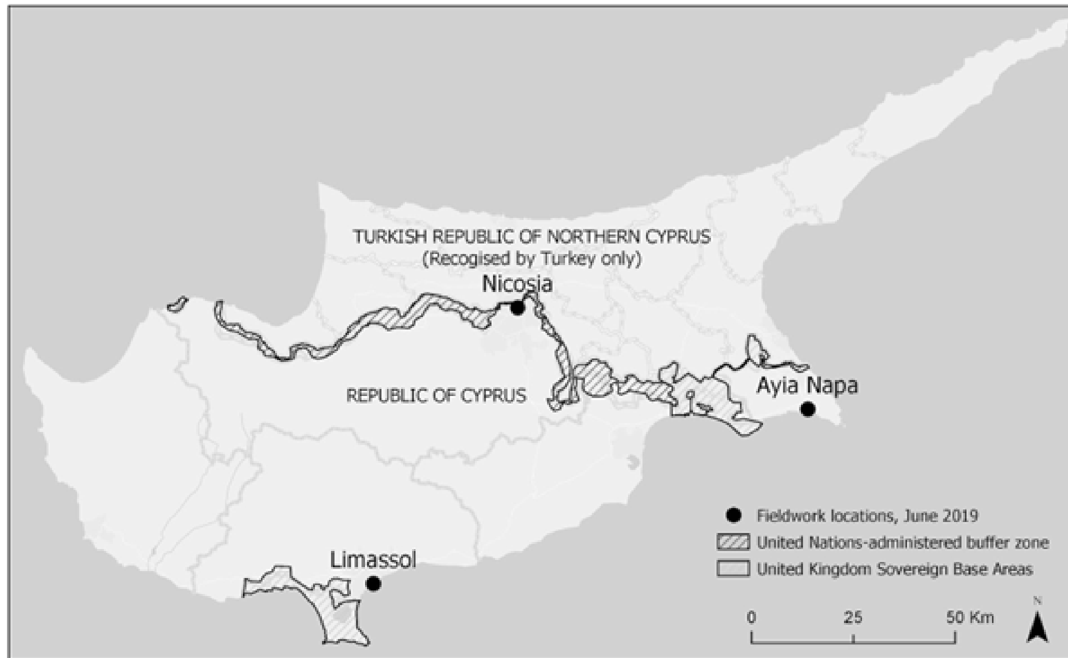

Figure 2. Study locations in Cyprus, June 2019, with the BZ line of division shown.

how. In Northern Ireland the prevalence of paramilitary murals, adorned with weapons and exclusive identity markers, like flags, contributes to spatial sectarianisation (Bush, 2013). If graffiti can be used to create an environment of social change and welcome, it can equally be employed to create unwelcome and entrench division.

3. Cyprus: conflict and division

Cyprus is typically defined as a frozen conflict, meaning that violence between Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots has ceased, but no formal solution to the 'Cyprus problem' has yet been found.[2] Despite decades of diplomatic interventions, competing claims over territory, sovereignty, identity, and political and economic rights have not been resolved (Vogel and Richmond, 2015). While both groups traditionally lived in mixed communities, ethnic tensions, stirred by British colonial rule and exacerbated by political developments in Greece and Turkey, escalated in the 1960s and led to the 1974 war (Kumar, 1997). To end hostilities and prevent future confrontations, the UN established a ceasefire line in August 1974, today known as the Buffer Zone (BZ) or Green Line, which remains in place (Constantinou *et al.*, 2020).

The island remains divided between the Republic of Cyprus (RoC), holding governmental power in the south only and the internationally unrecognised Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), north of the internal border. Spatially, Greek-Cypriots broadly understand the conflict as one of international military occupation of the island by Turkey, while Turkish-Cypriots understand it as a power struggle against Greek cultural domination and for their right to self-determination (Papadakis, 1998; Psaltis, 2016; Vogel, 2018). As such, the core of the 'Cyprus problem' remains contested, making it difficult to determine what a mutually agreeable 'solution' would be. Instead, the situation of division has become normalised; after decades of border closures, checkpoints opened in 2003 making cross-communal contact possible again but without addressing the physical, political, and cultural divisions. It is against this background that graffiti has been a prominent feature of urban landscapes in Cyprus, including along the BZ walls in Nicosia (Doering, 2009; Karathanasis, 2008; Kececi *et al.*, 2019; Leventis, 2016). "[Graffiti is] … a critique, a reflection, and an inseparable part of Nicosia's current and future urban processes" (Leventis, 2016: para. 2).

2 For more detailed history of the Cyprus conflict see: Trimikliniotis and Bozkurt, 2012.

4. Exploring and reading graffiti

We visited Cyprus in June 2019. Based in Nicosia, we explored graffiti on both sides of the BZ over five days. With no singular agreed upon methodological approach to the study of graffiti we drew from walking methods, visual methods, and a locally contextualised approach to developing a spatial understanding of graffiti. We wanted to observe graffiti in the most populous urban areas closest to the site of division and the main BZ crossing checkpoint of Ledra Street, which is also a popular hospitality and shopping area for locals and tourists. Within the city's Venetian walls, this location was chosen for its centrality but also for its liminality; as Karathanasis notes,

> "Nicosia within the walls presents an urban landscape that is marked by the material remains of division; a landscape in prolonged crisis. The Cypriot Green Line, the United Nations controlled Buffer Zone that divides the island, passes right through the middle of the Old Town, and serves as a constant reminder of war and partition" (2021: 204).

To complement our Nicosia observations, we spent a day each in the coastal locales of Limassol and Ayia Napa (Figure 2), two places also known for their graffiti and, in the case of Ayia Napa, a street art festival earlier in 2019.

To observe graffiti, we conducted exploratory walking surveys to gain personal experience of the physical, social, and historical (O'Neill and Roberts, 2019) through Old Town Nicosia. Young (2016) recognises that walking offers an ability to interact and be "in the midst" (92) of graffiti, a notion expanded upon by Fransberg, Myllalä and Tolonen (2021) who describe walking and the study of graffiti as intertwined in a "multisensoriality" (8) enabling one "to observe the location and materiality of graffiti and street art and the imagined bodily experience of their makers" (9). We recorded observations while walking using handwritten notes and geotagged photographs, enabling us to review images later and map graffiti locations. Prior to fieldwork, we researched online for known significant graffiti locations, including searching relevant terms on image-based social media (Instagram, Flickr), travel websites and blogs. These locations helped us structure our walking surveys but were indicative only and our observations were not limited to these areas.

Additionally, we invited two academics from the Near East University who have worked on related topics to lead us on a walking tour of graffiti in north Nicosia. This provided valuable local and contextual information relating to the graffiti, the division, past conflict, and present day cultural, social, and political life. We gained further insights from informal discussions with three Cypriot graffiti artists, one working in north Nicosia (TRNC), one in south Nicosia (RoC), and one who organises graffiti workshops and street art festivals across Cyprus. In June 2019, all three were active and we observed many of their pieces on our walking surveys. The inclusion of local voices in contextualising graffiti, in message and location, afforded deeper understanding of graffiti "as an expression of the interpretation of historical events by local peoples (Villajos *et al.*, 2019: 28).

We note that none of the authors speak fluent Greek or Turkish, limiting interpretations of some graffiti. However, much of the graffiti was based on images and symbols, and a substantial portion was written in English. One author has extensive prior field experience in Cyprus, and discussions with the local artists and academics also aided interpretations of the contextual meanings of pieces. Thus, we are confident in presenting insights from our explorations of graffiti in Cyprus but suggest further work examining the graffiti in Greek and Turkish more closely.

In the next sections we explore the language, symbols, and messages of graffiti observed in Cyprus, demonstrating there is much to learn about local cultures, politics, and everyday social life through graffiti.

5. Reading language

When searching for meaning in graffiti we must look at the content, what it says or depicts, how it was constructed and the style and communication medium adopted (Vogel *et al.*, 2020). In Figure 3 we see "YOUR WALL CANNOT DIVIDE US" stencilled onto a BZ wall near the Ledra Street crossing in south Nicosia. We observed this stencil at numerous other locations along the BZ wall – the medium of stencil facilitates ease of replication at multiple locations, expanding the potential audience.

The use of English is important here. In graffiti, language choices are always deliberate (Jørgensen, 2008) and inform about the writer, intended audience(s), and wider context. Using English is common in conflict graffiti to appeal to international communities for assistance or recognition (Arthur, 2019). For example, English has been incorporated into Palestinian graffiti to foster international pressure onto the Israeli state (Larkin, 2014). Language choices in Nicosia can be indirectly associated with the respective ethno-nationalist identities and thus the division, serving as an informal commentary on the city's experiences.[3] We saw Turkish and Greek messages painted with meaning for each respective in-group, but English was also used prominently. We infer that English was used to reach a wider international audience, including tourists, but also the UN specifically.

We can further read the message itself as directed at the UN (i.e., "your" wall), painted in its identifiable blue font, with a sense of collective pride and singular Cyprus identity expressed by the "us". Obeng (2000) describes how collective pronouns such as "us" are used in graffiti to promote a sense of community, while the pronoun "you" can signify otherness. Tolonen (2021) describes comparable use of language in Spain with graffiti relating to violence against women, using words such as "we" and "our" to position women as a collective body. Recognition and community are also communicated through non-textual forms of expression, including symbols.

3 For discussion of stencil art in Old Town Nicosia, with specific cultural, social, and political connotations and commentaries made through Greek language, see Karathanasis (2021).

Figure 3. "YOUR WALL CANNOT DIVIDE US" is stencilled in English onto the UN BZ wall near Ledra Street crossing. Artist: unknown, south Nicosia, Cyprus, June 2019, photographer: Billy Tusker Haworth.

6. A symbol of…

Recognisable symbols are commonly used in graffiti to make efficient political statements through visual connection to local or transnational communities, ideologies, or movements. Symbols like the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) peace sign (Figure 4) and the white dove were used to convey desires for peace and unity. These symbols were found in both north and south Nicosia, and on walls inside the BZ at the Ledra Street crossing. Figure 5 shows a large piece in north Nicosia with a white dove symbolising peace, but with prominent painted bullet holes, indicating a threatened or fragile peace in Cyprus.

Other prominent symbols in Nicosia included the Communist hammer and sickle, the Anarchist 'A' (Figures 6 and 8), gender signs (Figures 4 and 6), and even swastikas. These symbols carry universal meanings and can be understood by broad and diverse audiences. These symbols and other pieces also show that graffiti in Nicosia was not exclusively about the conflict and division, but reflected other local and global political, socioeconomic, cultural, and environmental discourses.

7. Local and global discourses

The presence of graffiti on other local and political issues suggests graffiti writers and Nicosia's population see beyond the conflict and division in their daily lives. However, it also suggests that existing formal social and political platforms for addressing societal issues may not be effective or have left some people feeling disillusioned. In Figure 7 we see direct commentary on contemporary political discourse in Cyprus. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdo�an is depicted as a girl skipping with a petrol hose in satirical reference to Turkey's contested oil exploration activities.[4] Found in south Nicosia (RoC), this piece is not directly about conflict, but still highlights that the roots of contemporary issues remain underpinned by ethnic division, competing territorial claims, critiques of 'the other', and connections to the conflict, illustrating the ongoing complex relationships between space and politics in conflict-affected landscapes. This piece is also an example of the use of humour and satire in graffiti, which, as Panlee (2021) describes in the context of street art used as protest against the military government's plans for required evictions in parts of Bangkok, can be useful in fostering energy for continued resistance.

Another issue highlighted on Nicosia's walls is the situation of migrant workers on the island. Their labour rights and legal protection have long been criticised on both sides of the divide. Human rights groups have called out the appalling working conditions and frequent sexual abuse of domestic workers, mainly immigrant women from the Philippines, Vietnam, Nepal, or Sri Lanka, (Kouta *et al.*, 2021). Hadjigeorgiou (2021) argues that poor migrant working conditions can be linked to conflict dynamics in three ways as Cypriots have (1) normalised nationalistic policies, (2) a skewed understanding of human rights (with a permanent starting point of 1974 rather than the present) and (3) a deprioritisation of a feminist agenda. The presence of the graffiti in Figure 8 aligns with news of a serial killer being caught in Cyprus in May 2019 who targeted female domestic workers, likely because of their vulnerable position in Cypriot society (Bathke, 2019).

Examples of global discourses depicted in Cyprus graffiti include activist graffiti in support of anti-sexism, antiracism, anti-capitalism (Figure 9), militant veganism (Figure 10), and the rights and inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual people (LGBTQIA+) (Figure 11). LGBTQIA+ themed pieces demonstrate how graffiti can provide marginalised groups a platform for expressing their voices, protesting negative views, and redefining and reclaiming their place in urban, social, and political spaces (Kececi *et al.*, 2019). This is especially important in Cyprus as, according to Kamenou (2020: 134), conflict-affected, postcolonial, and ethnically divided societies are prone to supporting traditional and binary gender roles to uphold national identities that were used to build (imagined) coherence. As such LGBTQIA+ voices and concerns find little other space in the public discourse.

4 Erdo�an's plans to drill for oil and gas reserves in the eastern Mediterranean have sparked tensions between Greece, Turkey, and Cyprus: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/18/greece-and-cyprus-call-on-eu-to-punish-turkey-in-drilling-dispute

Figure 4. CND Peace sign near the Ledra Street crossing. Artist: unknown, Nicosia, Cyprus, June 2019, photographer: Billy Tusker Haworth.

Figure 5. A piece near the BZ in northern Nicosia utilises an internationally recognised symbol for peace, the white dove, here marked with (painted) bullet holes. Artist: unknown, north Nicosia, Cyprus, June 2019, photographer: Billy Tusker Haworth.

Figure 6. Identifiable symbols such as the Anarchist 'A' and transgender symbols marked across Nicosia quickly draw attention to their meaning without the need for language or more elaborate designs. Artist(s): unknown, south Nicosia, Cyprus, June 2019, photographer: Billy Tusker Haworth.

Figure 7. A CRS piece comments on Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdo�an's oil exploration activities. Artist: CRS, south Nicosia, Cyprus, June 2019, photographer: Billy Tusker Haworth.

Figure 8. “SOLIDARITY TO EVERY MIGRANT WORKER”, with ANTIFA and anarchist “A” symbols. Artist(s): unknown, south Nicosia, Cyprus, June 2019, photographer: Billy Tusker Haworth.

Figure 9: A piece critiquing capitalism and technology consumption demonstrates how international artists writing graffiti in Cyprus reflect global discourses and transport them to local walls. Artist: Zoon, Limmasol, Cyprus, June 2019, photographer: Billy Tusker Haworth.

Figure 10: Militant calls to veganism scrawled in south Nicosia. Artist(s): unknown, south Nicosia, Cyprus, June 2019, photographer: Billy Tusker Haworth.

Figure 11: Graffiti supporting LGBTQIA+ equality and transgender rights. Artist(s): unknown; EASE, north Nicosia, Cyprus, June 2019, photographer: Billy Tusker Haworth.

8. Conclusions: 'vandalism' with value

Through exploring graffiti in divided Nicosia and Cyprus we gained valuable insights into the experiences of local people in a conflict-affected landscape. In central Nicosia, urban walls were sites of activism with political statements made about the division and peace in Cyprus and a range of contemporary social and political issues and everyday experiences. These insights demonstrate the power of graffiti as a window into the lives and minds of people living in conflict-affected landscapes, especially those who might otherwise lack a platform, which can bring attention to marginalised social issues.

The expanded visual essay style adopted in this paper offers promise for the field of graffiti and street art studies as a form of visual scholarship/academic communication. In the past, segments of the academy have displayed aversion to studies of graffiti, often largely due to personal opinions rather than critical scholarly understandings (Ross *et al.*, 2017). As the area of study continues to grow (Ross *et al.*, 2017), the hybrid approach of presenting visual elements situated within a broad academic literature context contributes to both a) moving scholarly communication beyond the confines of traditional text-dominated papers to better-value visual media like graffiti and b) adding deeper critical understanding and legitimacy to readings of graffiti.

In future work, questions of *where* graffiti occurs warrant further systematic investigation. For example, how do spatial patterns of graffiti content and quantity change across urban landscapes affected by conflict, in different regions of Nicosia and Cyprus, or with changing proximity to the BZ wall and sites of division? For instance, Abaza (2013) described how establishing prominent physical and political features in the landscape (segregating walls) led to increases in activist graffiti in post-revolution Cairo. A deeper understanding of this spatial component would provide greater insight into the social impact of such physical and political structures and specific sites of tension and conflict more broadly. Moreover, establishing correlations between sites of tension and increased presence of graffiti would help to identify rich data sources and field research locations for other studies of conflict, shedding light on the diverse experiences of people living at tense interfaces and in deeply divided contexts. We also advocate for more interactive and participatory research practices, such as walking interviews, capturing the perspectives and everyday experiences of citizens, graffiti writers, local authorities, and others from both sides of the division. Creative ethnographic field methods that allow researchers to reduce the 'academic distance' between them and their subjects and stand side-by-side (Lepp, 2021) with citizens and graffiti writers will reveal deeper insights into the local contexts, politics, perceptions, and motivations informing graffiti. This would further inform our understanding of this form of public expression and its functions, especially in terms of its relationship to grassroots activism, and avoid reductionist assumptions that graffiti is simply low-level criminality.

The 'art vs crime' binary is limited when reading graffiti. As we have seen in Cyprus, graffiti is more than 'vandalism' and expands our knowledge of peace and conflict as an indicator of the everyday (Mac Ginty, 2014), and of the interactions, priorities, and spatial politics of local people. Graffiti holds greater meaning for graffiti writers, local people, and outsiders alike. As researchers trying to understand life in increasingly complex landscapes, as policymakers and practitioners seeking to resolve conflict and foster peacebuilding, and as the wider public interacting with cities, we should all rethink how we view, understand, and use graffiti. To overlook the importance of graffiti is to risk missing the mine of insights it can provide.

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