Language and Intercultural Communication

ISSN: 1470-8477 (Print) 1747-759X (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rmli20

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To cite this article: Mabel Victoria (16 Jul 2025): Graffiti beyond words in times of crisis: 'DONT SUICIDE. YOU SHALL OVERCOME.', Language and Intercultural Communication, DOI: 10.1080/14708477.2025.2519910

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2025.2519910

Published online: 16 Jul 2025.

LANGUAGE AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2025.2519910

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Graffiti beyond words in times of crisis: 'DONT SUICIDE. YOU SHALL OVERCOME.'

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ABSTRACT

Set during the COVID-19 pandemic, this narrative explores my journey as a Filipina navigating Edinburgh amid heightened anti-Asian racism. A chance encounter with graffiti transformed how I understood space, identity, and resistance. Through personal reflection, the article highlights graffiti's potential as a form of intercultural communication and a site of societal resilience. Often dismissed as vandalism, these public messages offered solidarity and affirmation. Methodologically, this article emphasizes the value of serendipitous data in qualitative research, showing how unexpected moments can powerfully shape inquiry, amplify marginalized voices, and reframe dominant narratives during times of crisis.

Isinulat sa gitna ng krisis ng COVID-19, inilalahad ng naratibong ito ang aking karanasan bilang Filipina sa Edinburgh sa panahon ng tumitinding anti-Asyano na sentimyento. Isang di inaasahang tagpo sa graffiti ang naging mahalaga sa pag-unawa ko sa rasismo, pagkakabilang, at pagtutol. Tinutukoy ng artikulo ang papel ng graffiti bilang paraan ng interkultural na komunikasyon at katatagan ng lipunan, at pinapakita ang kahalagahan ng serendipitya o di planadong datos sa kwalitatibong pananaliksik, laluna sa pagpapalakas ng tinig ng mga nasa laylayan sa panahon ng krisis.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 4 April 2024
Accepted 6 June 2025

KEYWORDS
Graffiti; COVID-19; anti-Asian; walking; embodied methodology; racism

Introduction

The initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic brought to the surface xenophobia and racist behaviour, particularly against people of Asian origin (Corpuz, 2021). The pandemic highlighted how fear can exacerbate racism, a pattern historically observed with infectious diseases (Parks, 2023). It aggravated existing social issues, exposing the fragility of intercultural relationships. Indeed, the 'heightened tension and alienation between countries and cultures' (MacDonald & Ladegaard, 2024) provided 'fertile material for the mutual othering of nation states, and by implication their citizens both in the political and public sphere' (MacDonald & Ladegaard, 2024, p. 156). The widespread racism against Asian communities, who were often scapegoated as the origin of the virus, fuelled hate crimes, discriminatory practices, and xenophobic rhetoric both on social media platforms and everyday real life contexts (Parks, 2023).

There were other forms of COVID-related stigma and discrimination. In my country of origin, the Philippines, healthcare and hospital workers were ridiculed, subjected to offensive behaviour,

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evicted from dormitories, and denied entry on public transportation (de Guzman et al., 2022). This stands in sharp contrast with countries like the UK where medical frontline workers were treated as heroes and acknowledged with daily applause for their valuable services (Craig, 2020). These contrasting responses illustrate how national identity is not simply rooted in fixed values or shared norms, but dynamically emerges in everyday encounters shaped by multiple modes of meaning-making – including affect, language, images, materials, symbolic objects and the environment (MacDonald & Ladegaard, 2024; Zembylas et al., 2024).

I had been living in Edinburgh for nine years when the pandemic hit in early 2020. As an Asian, I felt a heightened sense of displacement which was terrifying and overwhelming. Never had my feelings of being 'out of place' (Cresswell, 1996; Tembo, 2021) been so acutely 'affectively attuned' and 'attentive to intensities' (Tembo, 2021, p. 1) than during the COVID-19 crisis. By 'crisis, I am referring to a 'process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in *stories* about navigating what's overwhelming' (Berlant, 2020, p. 10, my italics).

In this article, I present my reflective accounts which combines narration with reflection (Badwan & Hall, 2020) of the 'overwhelming' as an Asian woman. I explore the interplay between my embodied experience, urban space, and the ephemeral language of graffiti and its anonymous writers. I (re)immerse myself in the nuances of these encounters and attempt to make sense of the experience in the hope of arriving at an 'other(ed)' way of knowing (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). As Badwan and Hall (2020) argue, reflective accounts allows for the emergence of 'another kind of truth' (p.230).

The intersection of my race, ethnicity, nationality, skin colour, and cultural and linguistic background has always permeated and shaped my lived experience. As a plurilingual border-crosser, with more routes than roots, I once believed that I had cultivated the intercultural skills to navigate the complexities of 'affective encounters with whiteness' (Tembo, 2021). But the moment 'virus carrier' was forcibly branded onto my intersectional identity, it ignited in me not only a deep-seated rage but also an unsettling sense of helplessness. The stark reality of this dehumanizing label left me grappling for control. It was jarring to confront how my race and ethnicity reconfigured my movement through the city, interfering with the (dis) organization of the urban space (Elkin, 2016). My presence – suddenly marked by suspicion and fear – transformed what should have been neutral encounters into charged moments of discomfort and exclusion, making my sense of belonging feel fragile and conditional.

While this article is rooted in my personal experience, it echoes the stories of many others worldwide whose bodies, skin colour, and ethnicities made them targets of social injustice during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, de Borja (2021) highlights that more than 400,000 overseas Filipino workers lost their jobs, exposing the multiple layers of vulnerability and oppression the pandemic exacerbated. Asians facing COVID-related microaggressions and racial discrimination experienced increased mental health stress, hopelessness, and the internalization of negative attitudes (Wu et al., 2021). My experience is part of a wider narrative of marginalized communities whose resilience and struggles demand recognition and reflection.

The aim of this article is twofold: first, to share my 'reflective accounts' (Badwan & Hall, 2020) on how it felt to be positioned as a cultural 'other,' the object of blame and disdain for COVID-19; second, in response to the call of this special issue, to write in a way that engages both verbal and non-verbal modes of expression, attending to affect as an integral part of sense-making rather than treating it as separate from or opposed to rational thought. In addition, I attempt to contribute methodologically to the field of interculturality by demonstrating the value of serendipitous, fortuitous data in research.

In the following sections, I begin by providing the background of this study which emerged unexpectedly from a chance encounter with graffiti during a time of heightened anti-Asian sentiment. Unlike traditional research frameworks that follow a relatively linear process from problem identification to data collection, this study developed organically. I was unknowingly gathering data the moment I encountered the graffiti, which became the catalyst of this narrative account. After giving the context of the research, I present the graffiti 'data' alongside my initial reactions/

preliminary analysis. Following this, I describe my sense-making process in the form of literature review. After that I describe my 'methodology-on-the-go'. The organic, somewhat messy evolution of the research process is vital to acknowledge, as it mirrors my lived, embodied experience as a Filipina and my memorable encounter with graffiti. I conclude by reflecting on my personal connection to the graffiti and how this unexpected journey informs broader discussions within intercultural communication. By embracing the non-linear, emergent nature of the research, I hope to offer new insights into the role of naturalistic data and serendipity in the research process.

Walking and wandering the streets while Asian

Writing this reflective account initially felt like 'mesh works' (Vannini, 2015) as I grappled with unordered entanglements of images and words juxtaposed with the prevailing anti-Asian discourse. But the narrative is simple: During the earlier days of COVID-19, Asians like me faced unfair blame for the virus. This made me feel isolated, threatened, and scared. A chance encounter with suicide prevention (see Figure 1) and positive graffiti (see Figure 2) brought me comfort, and hope at the time of crisis. There was an unexplainable connection with the anonymous graffiti writers. This article is an attempt at making sense of this embodied and 'mysterious effect' (Saldanha, 2005, p. 707).

During the lockdown, while strolling through a wooded area in Edinburgh, I encountered another individual approaching me. It was at the moment they recognized my (after Amadasi & Holliday, 2017, pp. 243–244) Asian appearance that unease seemed to grip them. Consequently, they hurriedly walked through a muddy part of the path, glaring at me with disdain. Walking and wandering the streets during the lockdown I could not help but notice that other walkers, mostly white-bodied, maintained an unusually safe social distance away from me. I felt it – their eyes on me, heavy with what I perceived as suspicion and unease, as though I embodied the virus they feared. In that moment, I interpreted their gaze as a silent accusation, a discomfort

Figure 1. DONT SUICIDE, Edinburgh Aqueduct.

Figure 2. YOU SHALL OVERCOME, written on a wall near the Edinburgh Canal.

that seemed to hang in the air between us. It was a look that, to me, encapsulated the tension the pandemic had brought into everyday interactions. Within the sociopolitical climate of COVID-19, it seemed – from my perspective – that bodies marked by a certain colour and ethnicity were rendered suspect, unwelcome, even unacceptable. Of course, I acknowledge that my reading of their expressions may have been shaped by the heightened anxiety of the time. Those individuals may not have been consciously accusing me of anything at all – but the atmosphere of fear, media narratives, and my own awareness of anti-Asian sentiment converged to make it feel undeniably personal.

Around that same period, the media was saturated with reports of violence directed against the Asian community around the world. Newspapers poured out reports of hate crimes against Asians who were being blamed for the spread of the COVID-19 virus. I found it impossible to shut out disturbing images I had just seen on TV or read in the newspaper – an elderly Chinese woman being slapped and set on fire ('Covid "hate Crimes" against Asian Americans on Rise,' 2021); an 84 year old Thai immigrant being violently shoved to the ground (Lah & Kravarik, 2021); an unprovoked attack on a 65-year old Filipina viciously kicked and stomped in the head and stomach in broad daylight, with the attacker furiously yelling at her 'you don't belong here' (Wong, 2021). I heard the words 'you don't belong here' as if they were directed at me. My body shook uncontrollably – both out of fear and outrage. It was as though I was met with overwhelming hostility and rejection. The refrain of 'you don't belong here' echoed in my mind, a chilling reminder of the precariousness of my place in this city I had come to call home.

The forced imposition of a 'virus carrier' identity on Asians during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the deep-seated power relations that shape public perceptions and social hierarchies. This marginalization was reinforced through media portrayals and public discourse, exacerbating existing stereotypes and creating new forms of exclusion. The power dynamics at play here reflect how dominant groups and institutions can shape narratives to assign blame and reinforce racial hierarchies, positioning a group of people as outsiders and threats to public health. These power relations reflect a broader historical pattern of 'othering,' where minority groups are depicted

as inherently different or dangerous. The dominant discourse reinforced by government and media outlets perpetuated fear, which then legitimized discriminatory actions against Asians. This situation illustrates how power operates through discourse, not only marginalizing specific groups but also shaping societal perceptions in ways that uphold structural inequalities (Hall, 1994).

As someone of South East Asian origin, my individuality was abruptly subsumed into a monolithic stereotype fuelled by fear and misinformation. This reminds me of Adichie's 'the danger of a single story': 'to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing over and over again and that is what they become' (Adichie, 2009). The weight of this imposed identity as virus carrier evolved into internalized racism which felt like a constant, oppressive force, distorting how I was seen and how I saw myself, insidiously reshaping my personhood. This is akin to a much intensified version of Hong's notion of 'minor feelings' defined as 'emotions that are negative, dysphoric and therefore untelegenic, built from the sediments of everyday racial experience and the irritant of having one's perception of reality constantly questioned or dismissed' (Hong, 2020, p. 34).

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and triggered anti-Asian attitudes and behaviours making them more overt and rampant (Parks, 2023; Reny & Barreto, 2022; Zhao et al., 2022). Consequently, foreigners and minority communities were treated with 'extreme forms of discrimination' (MacDonald & Ladegaard, 2024, p. 155).

A serendipitous encounter with graffiti and unknown community of 'others'

In this encounter, a glimpse of light,
Amidst the shadows of our fight.
A reminder that beauty thrives within,
In the human spirit, resilient from within.

As I walked through the streets during the lockdown, being visibly Asian felt like a spotlight I could not escape. Each step carried a weight of uncertainty, and I could feel the tension tightening every muscle in my body. My heart pounded in my chest, a constant, anxious rhythm that accompanied me as I passed what seemed to me suspicious glances and wary eyes. Perhaps the fear was partly in my mind, but at that time, it felt unmistakeably real – a palpable force, threading through the air, making every movement feel precarious. The heightened state of alertness sharpened my perception, pulling into focus details that had once slipped past unnoticed – the bold scrawls of text on walls, benches, beneath bridges, and across pavements. What unfolded before me was a proliferation of graffiti – an umbrella term I employ here to encapsulate the illegal, unsanctioned, and unauthorized textual imprints that punctuated these urban spaces. Strangely, I found myself irresistibly drawn to a specific subset of this graffiti. From the very first encounter, I felt an ineffable bond, a wordless yet profound affinity with the anonymous graffitists, as if their inscriptions spoke to a shared experience, bridging a silent but powerful solidarity; by 'bond,' I am referring to the embodied, emotional, and psychological connection I developed in the process of meaning-making (Boğaç, 2020).

In the following two sections, I present visual images of the graffiti alongside my initial, unfiltered reflections. These graffiti – marked by messages of suicide prevention and positivity – serve not merely as data, but as affective encounters. My aim is to evoke in the reader the thoughts and emotions that arose in those first moments of witnessing them. It was these visceral encounters that prompted a turn to the literature, becoming the catalyst for engaging with scholarly work on graffiti as a means of making sense of what I had experienced.

Suicide prevention graffiti

I came across twelve instances of suicide prevention graffiti at various points of the Edinburgh Union Canal over a 4-kilometer stretch; no other occurrences were found anywhere else in the city. The deliberate placement of these messages – *NO SUICIDE* (Figure 3), *DONT KIL urself*

Figure 3. NO SUICIDE Graffiti, Edinburgh Canal Bridge.

(Figure 4) and *DONT KILL urself* (Figure 5) – along the canal evokes the impression of a thoughtfully calculated strategy to ensure visibility, coinciding with the surge in foot traffic along the waterway during the restrictive lockdown periods. As illustrated in Figures 3–5, messages were written in black paint on walls, benches, metal garbage bins, aqueducts, and bridges.

The grammatical irregularities in the graffiti, such as the use of 'don't suicide,' the omission of the apostrophe in 'dont,' and the shorthand 'urself' (yourself), made me wonder about the identity of the writer. These features suggest that the author may have prioritized the urgency and emotional impact of the message over grammatical accuracy. It is possible that the writer was in a highly emotional state or sought to convey support as swiftly as possible, emphasizing the message's intent rather than its form. This is plausible explanation given that graffiti writing is illegal in the UK and getting caught could incur a fine or jail sentence. The use of informal language and abbreviations is reminiscent of digital communication, such as text messaging or social media, which might suggest the writer is younger. Despite the deviations from standard grammar and spelling, it can be argued that the individual is likely deeply invested in the issue of suicide prevention but may struggle with, or choose not to prioritize, language conventions during moments of intense emotional expression. Alternatively, these linguistic patterns could reflect the influence of a first language that does not adhere to the same grammatical rules as English.

Positive messages graffiti

At a neighbourhood near the Edinburgh Canal, I noticed a subtle piece of graffiti written over a much larger image. It read 'You are loved' (Figure 6). Those simple words resonated deeply, as if they were meant specifically for me. In that brief moment, I felt an overwhelming sense of comfort

Figure 4. DONT KIL URSELF, written on the paved walk under a bridge.

and reassurance. Almost instinctively, I whispered, 'Thank you. I needed to hear that,' as though the anonymous writer could somehow hear my response. The experience was both aesthetic and deeply emotional, evoking a sense of ethereal connection, much like the feeling one might get when contemplating a powerful painting. That warm message shaped the course of my subsequent walks, inspiring me to explore more of the city in search of similar uplifting messages.

Most of the positive messages were written with a felt pen or scratched over an existing, much larger graffiti. Some were written on buff marks or vacant wall spaces that have been painted over to cover the graffiti (Figures 7 and 8). They were small and easy to miss, almost inconspicuous, if not for the fact that they were written over much larger pieces. The lettering, unlike that used by professional taggers, was not intricate – meant to be easily read, not deciphered (McAuliffe, 2012). This subculture of (positive) graffiti writers appear to be non-affiliated individuals for whom writing on a wall might have been a spontaneous action to express a sentiment or convey a message to passers-by (Bloch, 2021).

Surveying the literature as sense-making: the seductive 'demand of comprehension'

Graffiti as a form of human communication dates back to prehistoric cave paintings and appears throughout history (Haslam, 2012; Stanley-Blackwell & Blackwell, 1998). Graffiti and street art emerged in the 1970s in the US, mainly among African American and Latino youth in Philadelphia and New York City. They peaked in the 1980s and then spread to cities worldwide (Gonçalves & Milani, 2022). The prevalent thinking at that time was the notion of graffiti as transgression, vandalism or deviance (Docuyanan, 2000; Halsey & Young, 2006). Its scholarly potential was recognized in the late twenty-first century, leading researchers from various fields to study it as a reflection of social and political contexts and a medium for marginalized voices (Alonso, 1998; Marine et al.,

Figure 5. DONT KILL URSELF, written on a metal bin near a bridge on the Edinburgh Canal.

2021; McAuliffe, 2012; Sitas, 2020); a visual expression of ideology (Hughes, 2021), and as critical social and spatial practices with the power to signal particular types of racial and gender identities (Sitas, 2020); a form of identity construction and self-expression (Carrington, 2009).

The act of graffiti writing is a conundrum because while the writers 'make places', they are at the same time viewed as 'profoundly out of place' and 'at odds with competing and usually more dominant visions of the appropriate use of urban environments' (Docuyanan, 2000, p. 105). I should note that in some parts of Scotland (and other parts of the world) there are designated 'legal' walls where graffiti artists are permitted to paint or create murals without the risk of

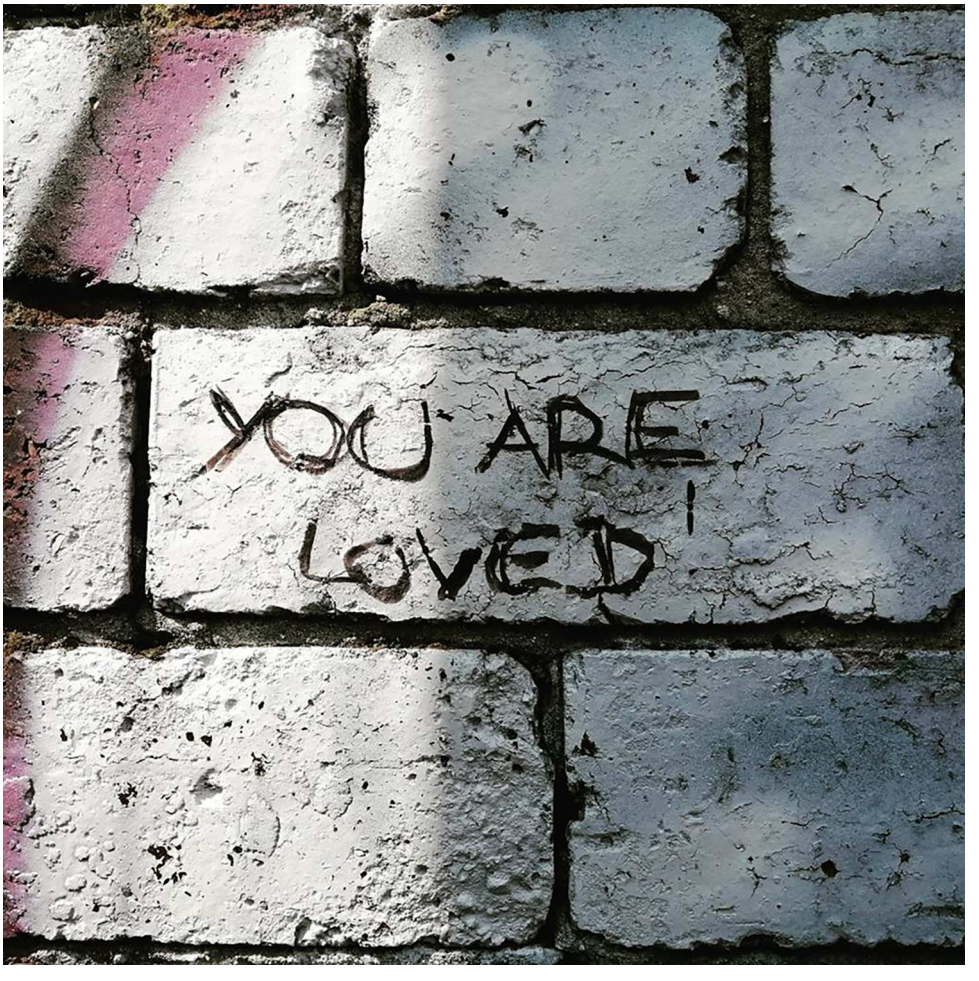

Figure 6. YOU ARE LOVED, written on a wall near the Edinburgh Canal.

legal consequences. Local governments or property owners often sanction these spaces to allow artists a legal platform to express their creativity. There are also the more commodified forms of street art such as those of Banksy, Shephard Fairey, Eduardo Kobra and Os Gemeos but my focus here is on text-based, unauthorized graffiti.

There are three broad types of graffiti – a tag, a throw up and a piece (Grodach, 2010; Jaffe et al., 2012; White, 2001). A tag refers to the nickname or pseudonym of the writer and is usually found written on walls, fences, and other vertical structures. A throw-up or throwie is a specialized type of tag, usually two dimensional forming bubble-shaped, rounded letters. A piece or 'masterpiece' is a full – colour mural which might include words and visuals. These pieces are sometimes considered as 'street art' to differentiate them from tagging or throw up. The type of 'textual graffiti' (Jaffe et al., 2012) I discuss in the Data Interpretation section does not fall neatly into any of the categories. It is not a stylized version of the writer's name nor is it an image-based colourful mural or street art. Rather it is a message-driven, plain black, and white writing that urges viewers not to commit suicide and to stay positive.

I now engage with further literature on graffiti and graffiti writers, drawing out connections with the concerns of the present study. It was, in fact, the urge to make sense of what Saldanha (2005) describes as the 'mysterious effect' of graffiti – both as material presence and as message – that

Figure 7. THE LESS WE HATE THE MORE WE LOVE, Edinburgh Leith Walk.

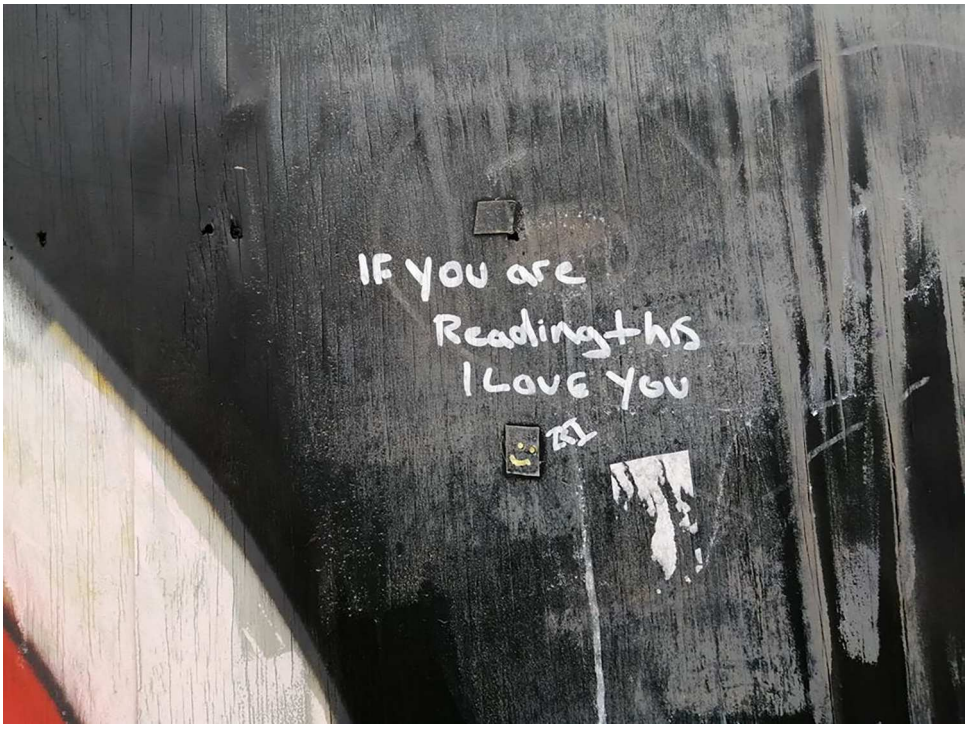

Figure 8. If you are Reading this I LOVE YOU, Edinburgh Leith Walk

compelled me to engage more deeply with the literature. This review traces the conceptual threads that helped illuminate my encounters and shaped the interpretive lens through which I approached them.

Over the course of several months, as I walked and became attuned to my bodily responses, I read extensively, and documented my data through photographs, gradually beginning to grasp the intricacies of graffiti subculture. I embraced the 'push and pull' of the 'sense of wonder and awe with a world that is forever escaping, and yet seductively demanding our comprehension' (Vannini, 2015, p. 22).

Graffiti as affective communication

Graffiti is indexical pointing to broader historical, cultural and social contexts (Carrington, 2009, p. 409). It also indexes the identity, group membership and ideology of the writers. Therefore, the markings on the wall provide a snapshot of the community, its people, and relationships. Indeed, if we assume that every piece of unauthorized text is a mini-autobiography of the writer as a cultural member of the community, then traces of their identity and the society in which they live are partly revealed in the graffiti (Bloch, 2021). Halsey and Young (2006) emphasize the affective nature of graffiti as an image which connects diverse bodies. As Massumi (cited in Halsey & Young, 2006, p. 277) argues:

> In affect, we are never alone. That's because affects are basically ways of connecting, to others and to other situations. They are our angle of participation in processes larger than ourselves. With intensified affect comes a stronger sense of embeddedness in a larger field of life – a heightened sense of belonging, with other people and to other places.

The complex interplay between materiality, urban space, relationships, people, and communities is often overlooked in intercultural studies. This interplay is noted by Phillips (2019) who considers graffiti as 'notes from the subaltern, the wanderers, the vilified, the vandals, the workers – from people who have broken the social contact of public space by actually inserting themselves into it' (Phillips, 2019, p. 8). She adds that the writings on the wall can tell us about 'people's perseverance through negative histories of racism, repression and exploitation (Phillips, p. 11).' Indeed, graffiti has been employed by marginalized or disempowered individuals to reclaim public space that is usually controlled by institutions and authorities.

Graffiti, power relations and marginalization

Graffiti carries the stigma of being associated with dirt, garbage and disorder (Cresswell, 1996, pp. 37–40). It is often considered a sign of sociological subculture, and anti-social behaviour (Halsey & Young, 2006); ' a canvas of the disfranchised' and the 'chaotic, untamed voice of the irrational' (Cresswell, 1996, p. 45). Just like me, an Asian in a white, Western space during the pandemic, I 'interrupt the familiar' (Halsey & Young, 2006, p. 294), make people feel intruded upon and uncomfortable in my presence. In an earlier writing, Cresswell (1996), notes that graffiti is (re)presented as the 'other' and is associated with immigrants and the third world. Graffiti writers frequently navigate this terrain as they engage in a form of expression deemed illegal and socially disruptive. The act of creating graffiti, while often driven by a desire to communicate and assert identity, places these individuals in a position of marginalization. They operate on the fringes of legality, their work criminalized and their presence in public spaces often unwelcome. This sense of being discriminated against is exacerbated by the societal judgment that frames their written messages as something to be eradicated at all costs (McAuliffe, 2012).

A parallel can be drawn to the experiences of many Asians who faced unjust accusations of being virus carriers at the height of anti-Asian discourse brought about by COVID-19 pandemic. This period saw a surge in xenophobia and racism, where Asian individuals were subjected to suspicion, hostility, and even violence solely based on their ethnic appearance. Much like graffiti artists, these individuals found themselves ostracized and criminalized, not for their actions but for their

identity. The experience of being 'out of place' was intensely personal and profoundly public, as their bodies became sites of transgressive visibility and unfounded fear (Corpuz, 2021; de Guzman et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2023; Reny & Barreto, 2022). Both scenarios highlight the pain of being perceived as an outsider, subject to societal scorn and exclusion. The graffiti artist's defiance in reclaiming public spaces and the Asian individual's resilience in the face of pandemic-fuelled racism speak to a broader struggle for acceptance and recognition. They reveal how societal structures can unjustly render people 'out of place,' framing them as transgressive or criminal, and underscore the deep need for empathy and understanding in confronting these prejudices.

Graffiti as resistance and community building: related studies

The stance on graffiti that this article takes aligns with Phillips (2019, p. 9), whose 25-year research on graffiti in Los Angeles yielded the city's century-old graffiti history. For Phillips, graffiti is a 'mode of community building and self-affirmation, a way to anchor wandering and to relieve oppression' and 'an assertion of belonging within complex, often hostile circumstances' (p.9). Phillips' idea of graffiti resonates with the study of Jaffe, Rhiney and Francis (Jaffe et al., 2012) in Kingston, Jamaica who find that graffiti is 'a way for socio-politically and economically marginalised citizens to air their often critical opinions of urban life' (p.1); and 'a communicative tool of those who feel excluded from formal structures of social, economic and political power (p.3).' In São Paulo, Brazil, Caldeira (2012) puts it succinctly when she argued that graffiti has given the subaltern a new kind of visibility and political agency. In her study, Caldeira explores how urban practices, such as graffiti and pixação in São Paulo, reshape public spaces and create new forms of visibility for marginalized groups. Her discussion centres on how these interventions challenge social inequalities, democratize public space, and expose power dynamics, although often in contradictory ways. Sitas (2020) explores how graffiti challenges conventional ideas about culture-led development. The project, Dlala Indima, demonstrated how marginalized youth in the Eastern Cape used graffiti as a tool for social change harnessing its power for fostering resilience and belonging. In another part of the world, Hansen (2021) explored the street art and graffiti that emerged during the 2017 Australian marriage equality postal vote highlighting how public spaces became battlegrounds for expression, where both supporters and opponents of marriage equality engaged in visual activism. There are a few other examples: in Spain Tolonen (2021) focused on the gendered construction of public space to show how posters, wall writings and stencils can be used to highlight violence against women; in Greece, Alexandrakis (2016) analysed how young Athenian artists used graffiti as a 'mode of political resistance to the material and symbolic violences of neoliberal governmentality' (p.293). This list is far from exhaustive but these case studies emphasize the idea of graffiti not only as a form of resistance to dominant discourses but also as a multimodal intervention, challenging the stereotypes imposed upon its creators/writers and opening a dialogue for the role of so called 'subversive writing' in contesting and reshaping dominant narratives.

Graffiti writers are often associated with young people. Considered powerless, 'excluded' and even 'exploited' by institutions, they see graffiti writing as a form of rebellion, a way of expressing dissatisfaction against power relations in society and as an act of fighting for social attention, equality and resources (Chan et al., 2016). I would argue that the suicide prevention and positive message graffiti writers in this study are perhaps motivated by compassion, a longing to connect and to be part of the community.

Methodology or making sense of and systematizing accidental research

When I started taking photos of the graffiti I had not realized that I was doing research, accidentally and serendipitously (Levitan et al., 2017; Poulos, 2016). Contrary to the traditional notion of the research process as somewhat linear, structured and systematic, much research is 'messy and accidental' (Todd, 2017, p. 125). With little background knowledge of graffiti, I 'went with my gut' to

research the topic. By 'going with my gut', I meant following my 'ethnographic hunch' (Pink, 2021) and trusting my intuition signalled by the physical signals in my body – goosebumps, increased heart rate – and a feeling of 'enchantment' 'whipping up a "gut feeling" about life' (Pyyry, 2019, p. 321). Taking inspiration from Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 22) a surprising set of fact, unexpected encounters, unusual events and absence of detailed knowledge can be powerful starting points of research.

In broad terms, my methodology is a an embodied form of 'active dwelling in the city' which involved 'reading and going back to walking, reading again, writing some and then walking with different concepts and ideas' (Pyyry, 2019, p. 322). It is embodied in that it is concerned with physical and socio-temporal contexts, and a focus on one's bodily sensations and experiences of walking, observing, sensing, feeling, and interacting with the urban spaces (Fransberg et al., 2023, p. 266). This approach rejects the dualism between mind and body; where the mind is seen as 'rational,' and the body is seen as 'impulsive' and 'irrational' (Fransberg et al., 2023). In this study, I view my body as a 'key instrument for knowing, sensing, feeling, and relating to others and self' (Vannini, 2015, p. 321), thus overcoming the mind–body separation. An embodied methodology is particularly well-suited for intercultural research because it acknowledges that humans are 'embodied minds' – beings whose thoughts, emotions, perceptions, and memories are inseparably linked to the body and senses. Culture plays a crucial role in shaping these embodied experiences, as it informs how we perceive the world, express emotions, and interact with others. Our gestures, body language, and movements are culturally informed, reflecting not only individual mental states but also the broader cultural frameworks in which we are situated. Thus, embodied methodologies offer valuable insights into how culture is experienced, communicated, and negotiated through the body in everyday interactions (Fransberg et al., 2023).

My 'embodied subjectivity' (Bridger, 2013) rooted in my petite, brown-skinned, middle-aged, Southeast Asian female body and situated in a particular time and place, influenced my perceptions, emotions, memories, experiences, behaviours, movements, and interactions with both urban spaces and texts (Fransberg et al., 2023). This embodiment influenced my behaviour and movement patterns, such as choosing to walk in public areas during daylight and avoiding isolated spaces, thus limiting my exploration to the more populated urban areas of Edinburgh. In research terms, my corporeality dictated the 'what' and the 'how' of my data collection. This embodied, multisensory research method can generate new ways of grasping the ephemeral, dynamic and communicative urban environments (Fransberg et al., 2023). In this study, walking is conceptualized as 'a series of perceptions, thoughts, emotions, and experiences' requiring 'one being present with all of one's senses' (Fransberg et al., 2023, p. 369). This resonates with psychogeography's notion of 'dérive' which roughly means 'to drift.' It does not equate to a lack of direction or destination; rather, it means allowing one's experience of the urban surrounding and the thoughts and feelings that it evokes along the way to dictate the trajectory of the walk (Pyyry, 2019). For the purposes of this study, drifting 'allows for ethnographies that are sensitive to spatial details and to the rhythmic pauses, stops, and re-starts of sensuous observation and reflection' (Vannini, 2015, p. 322). This enables the researcher to engage with the graffiti's materiality and affect in connection with the embodied experience and construction of meanings and identities within the specifc sociotemporal contexts (Vannini, 2015, p. 318).

I used to consider graffiti as nuisance, a collection of texts and images in public spaces with no agency besides being a passive backdrop to the urban landscape. But when the 'mysterious effect' (Saldanha, 2005, p. 707) of materiality and corporeality 'happened', the transgressive and out of place markings on public property become a gateway, welcoming me into a collective consciousness where I felt an undeniable sense of belonging and rhythmic coherence (Sekimoto, 2023).

Data interpretation

In making meaning of the photographs of the message-driven graffiti I had taken, I looked inward for bodily sensations that were experience *in situ.* They became tools for sensemaking and as

'evidence of the world that once was'(Pyyry, 2019, p. 320). My analytic process consists of 'gazing' at the photographs that were saved on my smart phone and laptop; then closing my eyes to re-experience their mimetic traces on my body appearing somewhat like 'a flickering apparition' or 'a flash of colour' (Stewart, 2017, p. 197). The process escapes formal coding or thematic analysis; it requires re-living what I felt in the presence of the graffiti. By 'connecting' with the visual images and then closing my eyes, I re-inhabit the space and time of the COVID-19 lockdown and 'encounter' with my objects of analysis. This is similar to what Stewart (2011) refers to as 'atmospheric attunement' or a deep re-engagement with specific spaces and places in terms of their qualities, rhythms, forces, relations, and movements. Indeed, graffiti has the power to delineate the immediate surface and at the same time contextualize the specific events intertwined with it (Chmielewska, 2007, p. 143).

In analysing my data, I pay attention to the deeply personal relationship I developed with specific types of graffiti during the COVID-19 pandemic – messages related to suicide prevention and positivity. I take inspiration from Stoller's (1997, p. xv) idea of sensuous scholarship which 'seeks to reawaken profoundly the scholar's body by demonstrating how the fusion of the intelligible and the sensible can be applied to scholarly practices and representations.'

Another aspect of the analytic process was going beyond the images. It involved imagining who the unknown graffitists might be. My endeavours to catch a glimpse of the enigmatic author(s) were in vain, leaving me without a trace of the individual(s) with whom I felt a bond and who gave me the courage to navigate the streets alone – as a woman of Asian heritage. The anonymous writers were probably 'regular' Edinburgh residents, non-artists who felt a need to connect with a community reeling from the devastating effects of the pandemic. Edinburgh, at that time, consistently topped the UK statistics for the highest number of COVID cases. Research shows that in times of crisis, individuals might take up the paint to repurpose the walls as canvases to effect social change and express their sentiments to the community (Bloch, 2021). Graffitists have likewise been known to use the walls to denounce and defend local, national and global issues that concern them (Kee et al., 2022; Lennon, 2022; Tolonen, 2021). To me, the suicide prevention and positive messages were intended as an appeal to the community not to give up because things will get better. The illegal and unwanted writings metamorphosed from mere unauthorized markings on public property into gentle whispers of comfort and assurance – 'you shall overcome' (Figure 2).

Why suicide prevention messages? The rate in the increase of suicide resulting from the pandemic varied depending on the modelling used (John et al., 2020). However, what remains indisputable is the widespread consensus that multiple pandemic-induced factors, including isolation, loneliness, unemployment, and anxiety, collectively contribute to the concerning upsurge in mental health problems including suicidal thoughts and self-inflicted harm.

The feelings evoked by the suicide and positive messages graffiti can only be described as 'enchantment' or 'a passing moment of intensity that can usually only be detected when it is already gone,' which is why it is difficult to put it in words (Pyyry, 2019, p. 321). The embodied sensation harks back to Basso's (1996) concept of 'interanimation' which in my understanding is the process whereby places and material objects are 'experienced as inherently meaningful, their significance and value being found to reside in (and, it may seem, to emanate from) the form and arrangement of their observable characteristics' (p.108). Citing Sartre, Basso adds:

> When knowledge and feeling are oriented toward something real, actually perceived, the thing, like a reflector, returns the light it has received from it. As a result of this continual interaction, meaning is continually enriched at the same time as the object soaks up affective qualities. The object thus obtains its own particular depth and richness. The affective state follows the progress of attention, developing with each new discovery of meaning . . . with the result that its development is unpredictable. (p.108)

The instantaneous bond and enchantment with the graffiti can be likened to a mirror reflecting the light it receives. As Pyyry (2019, p. 321) contends, 'enchantment makes common things feel strange, even surreal. It alters the conditions of being: something happens in-between things and

new knowledge emerges.' The photos of the graffiti that I had taken became more than images and definitely more than words; they evolved into prompts, stirring sensations of belonging in a specific moment in time and space. Each image, a blurry relic, carried the weight of remembered emotion, much like old photographs that stir something deep within when revisited. They evoke the unrepresentable – 'feelings' that envelope my body when I 'encounter' them on my walks. I use the word 'feelings' to refer to 'that nebulous affective content' (Elkin, 2016, p. 84) that is hard to articulate. Indeed, Elkin adds that the most interesting feelings 'are hard to put words to; we diminish their mystery as we hang official terms on them like christening a byway with official nomenclature; we try to find words that won't deflate them.'

Over time, the graffitied walls, bridges, metal bins and benches ceased to be mere urban fixtures. To me, they served as metaphor: just as the graffiti stood defiant, declaring its relevance in a city dealing with problems brought on by COVID-19, I, too, insisted on asserting my visibility and presence. I was 'out of rhythm,' 'out of sync' (Sekimoto, 2023) with the rest of the world but felt a sense of community and belonging with the anonymous graffiti writers.

Concluding remarks

In this article, I reflected on my experience when anti-Asian sentiment was rampant. My embodied subjectivity and perception were inevitably shaped by the prevailing sociotemporal conditions of the pandemic, suffusing the experience with anxiety. Although feelings of being scrutinized or unwelcome because of my Asianness were keenly felt, I recognize that these experiences were likely shaped by both external social tensions and my own heightened emotional state. Even as I acknowledge the role of my vulnerability, the social atmosphere of suspicion and fear made such perceptions difficult to disentangle from reality.

In the midst of chaos, I embraced an unfathomable sense of comfort from suicide prevention and positive graffiti. As Elkin (2016, p. 89) suggests, we need the unfathomable to exist as an escape from logic and scrutiny. The unauthorized texts created a sense of solidarity with the anonymous writers – individuals who, like me, were marginalized by society. What others dismiss as vandalism, I saw as a powerful act of defiance and visibility, where their struggle for presence mirrored my own. This shared sense of alienation fostered an unspoken, intercultural connection between me and these unknown 'others,' where our vastly different backgrounds intersected through our mutual experience of marginalization within the context of the pandemic. Just as graffiti writers reclaim public spaces to send messages to the community and assert their identities, I found ways to challenge the prejudices directed at me by venturing outside, asserting my being 'in place.' I also felt kinship not only with the anonymous creators but also with the countless strangers who read those same words and felt the same empowerment. Indeed, the wall represents 'a form of visual dialogue that are part of wider societal conversations' (Hansen, 2021, p. 477). As such, this study contributes in some ways to the field of intercultural studies by revealing how urban texts like graffiti can serve as tools for intercultural dialogue, bridging cultural divides and offering solace amid isolation and xenophobia. It highlights the role of reflective accounts in addressing societal challenges, using personal narratives to illustrate hidden cultural dynamics. By focusing on the intersection of individual experience and public space, I have hopefully contributed to current understanding of graffiti not only as a transgressive expression, but also as a form of community-building and resistance, with implications for public policy and social engagement. It should be noted that the context-specific nature of my experience, shaped by a particular moment of crisis does not diminish the legal and ethical complexities surrounding graffiti. However, I hope to have shed some light on how such urban texts, in unique contexts, can foster connection and dialogue, while acknowledging the broader legal frameworks they exist within.

Social spaces are intercultural 'contact zones' 'where multiple identities intersect and where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power' (Pratt, 1991). Graffiti and street art as a form of multimodal communication, holds the

potential to either foster intercultural dialogue or amplify social tensions, depending on its content and the power relations in play. By exploring how graffiti functions as a form of intercultural communication, we can analyse how it both reflects and reshapes the social dynamics in public spaces where different cultural identities converge (see Caldeira, 2012).

Methodologically, the unplanned data collection process underscores the importance of embracing the unpredictable and allowing space for spontaneous encounters with data. Serendipity, therefore, became not just a methodological pivot but a fundamental aspect of the research itself, guiding its direction and deepening its impact. The chance encounter with graffiti serves as a reminder that valuable data can emerge unexpectedly, disrupting the neatly defined stages of traditional research.

While this article is grounded in a specific temporal and geographical context, the broader societal challenges it addresses – racism, binary thinking, and exclusion – are ongoing concerns. As I continue to navigate public spaces in other cities, I notice how the dynamics of power and access to public discourse manifest differently across contexts. This personal transformation aligns with broader conversations about the role of graffiti and street art in tapping into the emotional and cognitive faculties of the viewer, encouraging them to think critically about the social issues being represented. My experience, for example, highlights how positive graffiti served as a counter-narrative to the anti-Asian rhetoric and violence that dominated mainstream discourse. This ability to disrupt and reshape discourse highlights graffiti's role in fostering resilience within culturally diverse communities.

The textual graffiti I encountered may now be ghosts of the past, fading beneath layers of new tags and buff marks, but their impact remains indelible. Their transience, rather than weakening their power, amplified their message. Those fleeting expressions of solidarity and defiance transformed me in ways that endure beyond their physical presence. Each time I revisit those spaces, the faint traces still speak, carrying the voices of unknown writers who whispered resilience through the walls. In this post-COVID era, where the shadows of racism, othering, and exclusion persist, I am reminded of one particular message: 'You shall overcome.' Though temporary in form, these graffiti voices continue to resonate, connecting us to a collective human experience of survival and hope in the face of adversity.

This paper contributes to the special issue by exploring how affective, material, and embodied forms of expression – specifically graffiti – create alternative modes of intercultural communication in the context of crisis. By attending to the emotional force and spatial politics of graffiti during the pandemic, the paper foregrounds how non-verbal, situated interventions challenge social inequalities and reconfigure public space as a site of solidarity, resistance, and relational meaning-making.

Each stroke, each word, a beacon of hope,
A chorus of resilience, helping us cope.
In this urban canvas, where spirits intertwine,
A reminder that we're not alone in this design.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Mabel Victoria, I'm a border-crosser – born in the Philippines, lived in the US and Canada, worked in Switzerland and Thailand, and now living, teaching, doing research in Scotland at Edinburgh Napier University. I have conducted research in five different countries. My interests are wide-ranging: intercultural communication, English as a lingua franca, linguistic politeness, dark tourism, and linguistic landscapes including graffiti. I like learning new and innovative methods of data collection.

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