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Prison inmate graffiti

Jacqueline Z. Wilson

Introduction

In the early 2000s I embarked on an ethnographic field trip to study decommissioned prisons across Australia that were, or were likely to become, prison museums. As a social historian with training in sociology and an interest in public history, I hoped to determine to what extent the former institutions I visited represented the lived experiences of those who had been incarcerated there. The project necessarily involved an investigation both of the sites as found and of their operational histories, plus a broad examination of the sociological and psychological nature of incarceration.

One of the methods I used in my efforts to glimpse, by inference, the narratives of the multitudes that had inhabited the sites was to photograph the abundant graffiti they left behind. This aspect of the work, which came to occupy a significant portion of my PhD and the resulting book (Wilson, 2008), was necessarily somewhat unstructured methodologically, reflecting in part the difficulties of doing research in some prisons – even decommissioned ones – arising from the obstructive influence of ‘gatekeepers’ among staff (Grimwade, 1999: 292–98; also Wilson, 2008: 19–20, 91), and also my intention to evoke from the sources primarily descriptive and qualitative discussion, rather than quantitative analysis.

This approach has some limitations from a social-science standpoint, and I applaud the work of others who both preceded and followed me for their more systematic approach (see, e.g. Klofas and Cutshall, 1985; Palmer, 1997; Dewar and Frederiksen, 2003; Yogan and Johnson, 2006; Casella, 2009; Johnson, 2009; Costanzo et al., 2013; Ismail, n.d.). Yet my study was and (to my knowledge) remains the only nationwide study of prison graffiti across a range of prisons, and as such provides some basis for a generalised overview of the field. It also incorporated one of very few comparative studies of female inmate graffiti undertaken anywhere (Dewar and Frederiksen, 2003; Yogan and Johnson, 2006; Wilson, 2008: 91–114; Johnson, 2009), and the first study of racist prison graffiti in Australia (Wilson, 2008: 115–130).

The study of prison graffiti is an emerging field. Compared to the abundance of research into graffiti created in the general urban environment outside prisons (which I will refer to as ‘mainstream’ graffiti), the prison variety has received scant attention. The earliest study of this subject was conducted by Klofas and Cutshall (1985). Their ground-breaking analysis of 2,765 items of graffiti extant in a decommissioned Massachusetts juvenile facility in the early 1980s,
amply demonstrated the potential for graffiti to provide insights into the culture, social norms and inmate hierarchies within a carceral institution; however, almost no further work in the field was done until the mid-1990s. Only within the past decade has there been any sign of the field burgeoning significantly. As such, it is a forum of diverse and, to some extent, contested, methodologies and scholarly perceptions. This arises from two broad factors: Unresolved questions regarding just what constitutes ‘graffiti’ in the prison context; and an increase (albeit sporadic and piecemeal) over the past decade in the opportunities available to scholars to access the interiors of former prisons for the purpose of studying and recording surface texts and images left behind by inmates.

The nature of prison graffiti

The first aspect, regarding the nature of prison graffiti, mirrors the complex debate addressed elsewhere in this book, regarding the ‘legitimacy’ or otherwise of the various forms of mainstream graffiti. In step with official attitudes toward much mainstream graffiti, its equivalent within prisons and other carceral institutions has traditionally been viewed by custodial authorities as an illegitimate activity, subject to prompt eradication if found and deemed a breach of regulations leading to punishment. There are apparent exceptions to this; many examples have emerged from former prisons of inmate art, often in the form of highly elaborate murals, which were either informally sanctioned by prison officers on the grounds that they gave the ‘crims’ something to do (especially if the prison in question was destined for imminent de-commissioning), or were part of official programs aimed at rehabilitation. Thus, for instance, tourist visitors to Melbourne’s Pentridge Prison after its closure in 1997 found the extensive exercise-yard walls of the notoriously harsh high-security discipline division, ‘Jika-Jika’, literally covered with full-colour, painted designs depicting a variety of non-prison-related subjects, and clearly created with the support of the Division staff.

This type of officially approved artistic endeavour, some of which may showcase examples of genuine talent, is of undoubted psychological value to the inmates who create it. In his study of what he famously termed the ‘total institution’, sociologist Erving Goffman dubbed such recreational-cum-rehabilitative pastimes ‘removal activities’ (1961: 69), in reference to the inmate’s need for structured activity that enables him or her to temporarily forget the awful daily realities of incarceration. As such, the works produced may also be of value to the researcher seeking clues as to what interested the inmate. Whether such artworks qualify as ‘graffiti’, however, is another matter.

In the strict sense of graffiti as graphic or verbal matter painted, drawn, inscribed or sprayed onto surfaces not originally intended for the purpose, perhaps the Jika-Jika murals and their ilk do qualify; I do not propose to adjudicate with any pretence at authority or finality on this question, other than to say that, although of some interest, such ‘authorized’ works are very limited in what they can tell us about the thoughts, affect or outlook of the typical inmate. Apart from anything else, they are more likely than not created by inmates of an artistic bent, or at least hopes of such. Also, they are intended as unequivocally public works (in the context of the prison environment, that is), and therefore are more likely to exhibit the more ‘assertive’ aspects of the inmate/artist’s persona.

The type of graffiti most likely to provide glimpses of the ordinary inmate’s unguarded preoccupations, state of mind and/or personal narrative is that rendered transgressively and clandestinely, with no requirement for artistic skill or aspiration, in the form of graphic images, written texts or both. Nor, it should be noted, does it require even a modicum of literacy; prison populations tend to comprise a preponderance of under-educated people, and graffiti
thus provides scope for those with few other avenues of self-expression. In this way, graffiti may be seen as a kind of ‘natural idiom’ of the prison.

Unlike approved artwork, the intended audience of transgressive graffiti is generally limited to other inmates, and as often as not, no audience is required other than the graffitist. This latter aspect – the occurrence of graffiti created and intended to be viewed entirely secretly – is unique to prison graffiti, and contradicts a seeming maxim of the field. As graffiti semioticians Bruner and Kelso (1980), speaking of mainstream graffiti, assert, ‘To write graffiti is to communicate; one never finds graffiti where they cannot be seen by others’ (p. 241). Likewise, criminologists White and Habibis (2005) state with equal certitude that ‘whether written by pen, spray can, or paintbrush, it is always public and displayed on someone else’s property’ (p. 86).

Much prison graffiti is indeed found in communal spaces such as exercise yards, shower facilities, toilets and so on, that correspond to mainstream ‘public’ locations (although still mainly aimed at fellow inmates rather than staff). It is in such environments that we most often find examples of successive or competitive ‘tagging,’ for instance. But at least as much is found in the quasi-private environment of the cells, where it is sometimes openly displayed on walls (and even ceilings), but often has been installed in locations only visible if something more than a casual effort is made to find it – behind semi-fixed objects such as beds, or on the inside surface of doors that when open, face the wall and thus may escape the notice of custodial staff. Cell graffiti may be created as entertainment, in the form of visual and/or verbal humour, as cathartic declaration of anger, desire, vengeance and so on, or as personal ‘diary’-style mementos – not necessarily in the serial form of a conventional diary, but rather as a sporadic, or even singular, record of whatever the inmate had on his or her mind at a given moment. In many cases they appear to be intended as straightforward affirmations of the individual’s presence, in some ways akin to mainstream ‘tagging,’ but often showing less bravado. As we shall see, this impulse to spontaneously inscribe such immediate preoccupations seems to amount, in many inmates, to something akin to instinct.

Whether appearing in communal or ‘secret’ spaces, it is this transgressive graffiti with which I am mainly concerned here, and which I have made the subject of my research over the past decade. Graffiti of this kind can take many forms and display many categories of content, some seemingly congruent with mainstream graffiti, but more often expressing sentiments and thoughts very much peculiar to the day-to-day experience of the carceral environment.

Accessing prison graffiti

I noted above that two factors influence the nature of prison graffiti research. The second one concerns access to the venues in which the graffiti may be found – former sites of incarceration. As I mentioned, this aspect has shown signs of improvement over recent years, partly due to fortuitous timing, in that a large number of aging prisons have been decommissioned in the last couple of decades, and have thus become, at least notionally, open for research. Also, there seems to be a dawning appreciation of the potential historical, sociological, and/or criminological significance of inmate graffiti among some former prison staff and/or the custodians of decommissioned sites (very often the same people; see Wilson, 2008: 52, 55–63).

This represents a significant shift in attitude, as the norm among prison authorities has been not only to oppose the creation of graffiti during the institution’s operational life, but also to eradicate it, or at least hide it from public view, after decommissioning. It is common for tourists at prison museums to hear from tour guides that the interior spaces they are viewing are in ‘original condition,’ just as the prisoners experienced them, without being told of the scrubbing and repainting that occurred after closure, in large part to expunge the graffiti
Other sections sequestered from public view may still contain all or most of the graffiti, but the conservation of such areas is all too often neglected, with consequent deterioration of surfaces.

Prison graffiti research therefore often depends on an element of serendipity. Thus, for instance, criminologist Lee Johnson (2009: 10) recounts that he gained the opportunity to view the interior of a recently decommissioned jail, because the local police chief was impressed by the ‘art’ he found inside and took the trouble to call Johnson with an invitation to examine it. Johnson notes that the officer’s motivation seemed to rest on a tacit distinction between illegal ‘graffiti’ and ‘art’ (2009: 10), and the resulting paper does indeed focus on a series of mostly pictorial renderings clearly not created with official approval (2009: 5–9, 13–14).

My own experience, although different, was no less accidental and was also heavily affected by official attitudes. As a social historian with an interest in institutions and sites of incarceration, I began a general study of the ways in which prison museums (and recently decommissioned prisons destined to become museums) across Australia represented the experience of imprisonment. After happening upon an example of inmate graffiti and musing upon both its ‘implied narrative’ potential and its obviously wilful inaccessibility – that is, a deliberate effort was made by curatorial personnel to conceal it (Wilson, 2008: 22) – I made a point thereafter of requesting access to the non-public areas, hoping to find and photograph more. In many prisons I visited, I was granted such access only grudgingly, and often under close and overtly disapproving supervision (Wilson, 2008: 24). Nor, I should add, was it ‘just me’; my experience echoed that reported by media and art theorist Daniel Palmer when he made a study of graffiti in Fremantle Prison (Western Australia) in the mid-1990s (Palmer, 1997).

This is not to say that I received no cooperation at all regarding graffiti, nor that disapproval of graffiti is universal; curatorial staff at a number of prison museums I studied or corresponded with demonstrated far more progressive views (without need, it must be said, for the graffiti to be deemed ‘art’). And as I noted earlier, there are signs that this is becoming more of a norm. Recent visual-ethnographic research by Costanzo, Bull and Smith (2013) into graffiti in Brisbane’s Boggo Road Gaol, for instance, suggests that they met far less resistance from the Boggo Road personnel than I did ten years earlier, and their data reflects this in its scope and the systematic analysis they have been thus able to conduct. This shift in official attitudes is reason for a degree of optimism regarding the future of the study of prison graffiti, and hence increased insight into the nature of the experience of incarceration.

Interpreting prison graffiti

What, then does transgressive graffiti tell us about the inmate’s ‘unguarded preoccupations, state of mind and/or personal narrative’?

The individual’s experience of incarceration is characterised by three main factors. The first, and most obvious, is deprivation of liberty, which of course constitutes the prison’s raison d’etre. Second is a radical loss of personal autonomy, both in the sense of physical confinement – the effects of which can include intolerable boredom – and in the unbending requirement to conform to the institution’s rules of operation. Third, and in many ways most confronting, is that the social environment of the prison is a ‘closed system’, in which rancorous and often violent encounters are the norm, and which fosters a sense of ambient menace that has been described as ‘permeat[ing] every second of everyone’s existence’ (Heilpern, 1998: 86). As former inmate turned playwright Ray Mooney (1997) puts it, ‘In [prison] there’s no walking away from anything’.

It is therefore unsurprising that a great deal of prison graffiti, especially that rendered by male inmates, reveals a preoccupation with issues of personal power, violence and the means to inflict
it, and/or the individual’s identification or notional connection with power groups (on the masculinist imperatives underlying such preoccupations see, e.g. Denborough, 2001; Holmberg, 2001; Levit, 2001; Messerschmidt, 2001; Sabo, 2001; Jewkes, 2002). These expressions are often couched in terms that also affirm the individual’s sense of self on more personal levels.

The descriptive analysis that follows mainly utilizes a selection of the prison graffiti I have observed in Australian prisons which in various ways address these issues. The examples are to an extent ‘local,’ but my discussion assumes certain universal, and globally ubiquitous themes regarding the subjective experience of imprisonment, in particular those concerning hierarchical power dynamics, preoccupation with and aggressive expression of sexual desire, racism, declarations of vengeance and violent intent. By and large, a perusal of the few international studies available confirms the validity of such assumptions: Firearms, swastikas, skulls, horrific and demonic images, visions of rape, sexist and misogynistic declarations of lustful intent and resistance, all abound in works on prisons in America (Klofas and Cutshall, 1985; Yogan and Johnson, 2006; Johnson, 2009), Malaysia (Ismail, n.d.), Britain (Commission for Racial Equality, 2003), and Ireland (Casella, 2009). However, some, possibly significant, differences also emerge, most notably the relative absence in Australian prisons of religious graffiti, compared to their American and Malaysian counterparts (Johnson, 2009; Ismail, n.d.), and the lack, also, of politically motivated resistance declarations, à la those found in Irish prisons (Casella, 2009).

Due to limitations of space, and the need to cover a representative range of examples, analysis of each graffito is necessarily brief and does no more than touch upon the thematic aspects. All the examples are found in Australian prisons except the first one, which is from the United Kingdom. The significance of this UK example lies in both the degree to which it conforms to the universal themes I have outlined, and the fact that it is one of the very few examples of transgressive prison graffiti to achieve public notoriety.

Memento mori

On 21 March 2000, Robert Stewart, a nineteen-year-old inmate of the Feltham Young Offenders Institution in London, bashed his twenty-year-old cellmate, Zahid Mubarek, to death as he slept. Mubarek was of Pakistani background; Stewart was white, and notorious for violent racism. Mubarek’s murder became a prominent cause célèbre and led to a series of inquiries into the failings of the corrections system.3

The particulars of Stewart’s terrible act and its legal and social consequences have been extensively dealt with elsewhere (see Keith, 2006a, 2006b; BBC, 2006). Of interest in the present context is an aspect of Stewart’s behaviour which the reports note, but which has hitherto prompted only minimal commentary.

After the murder, Stewart was moved to a ‘segregation’ cell. There he used the edge of his boot-heel to graffiti the cell wall. Beginning with the single word ‘Manchester’, he then scrawled the stark admission ‘Just killed me padmate’. This he followed with a crudely drawn swastika, and below that the letters ‘RIP’, then the cryptic sequence ‘OV M1CR’ (BBC, 2006).

Stewart was, presumably, expressing what was most on his mind at that moment. What we see here is a complex of impulses typical of much prison graffiti. The graffitist frames his action with a number of signifiers of personal identity, yet without actually naming himself. ‘Manchester’ is Stewart’s home town; the swastika symbolises and is consistent with his previously avowed white-supremacist attitudes (he later admitted also authoring an earlier in-cell graffito, consisting simply of the letters ‘KKK’; Keith, 2006a, 261); the letters ‘RIP’, which at first glance suggest a tincture of remorse or some acknowledgement of the gravity of his
actions, in fact are far more assertive, in that they echo a self-drawn tattoo he had sported for some time on his forehead consisting of a small Christian-style cross topped with the letters ‘R–I–P’. This tattoo has been interpreted as symbolising racist, National Front-style sentiments (Keith, 2006a: 218–220). The meaning of ‘OV M1CR’ is more arcane, and at this distance defies conclusive analysis beyond noting that ‘M1’ is the postcode of Central Manchester, and thus may well be a re-affirmation of the area with which Stewart most closely identified.

Stewart’s graffito is of special interest as an example of non-artistic prison graffiti created by a known inmate which has, almost uniquely, gained a wide public audience. It is also of interest to the prison graffiti researcher, for its banal typicality – notwithstanding its horrific genesis. The urge to impose oneself on the fabric of the institution, in the form of fragmentary personal narrative, symbolic or verbal identifiers, expressions of group membership and/or solidarity and declarations of affect or intent, accounts for a majority of the topics and themes routinely addressed by inmates on their walls.

**Racism**

A significant number of those inmates have racist sentiments to express, and Stewart’s graffito is of a piece with many I have observed. And as has been noted in other locales, the most aggressive racism tends to be expressed by white inmates (Klofas and Cutshall, 1985: 362–363). Swastikas, with or without commentary or slogans, abound on cell walls, as do affirmations of personal solidarity with the groups that regard such symbols favourably (there is evidence that the Ku Klux Klan have used prisons as recruiting grounds; Wilson, 2008: 122–123).

Figure 5.1, found in a cell of the former Melbourne City Watch House (MCWH), typifies this variety, in its graphic depiction of beleaguered yet indomitable Nazi ideology. Again, a Christian cross is juxtaposed with the racist symbol. The author’s ‘signature’ suggests either that his own background is British, or that he wishes to be identified with the British ‘bovver boys’, or ‘skin-heads’, commonly associated with neo-Nazi groups.

The graffiti of Figure 5.2, decorating a cell door in Fremantle Jail, is even more unequivocal, and in this case combines neo-Nazi ideology with a notional ‘resistance narrative’ in the form of an anarchist symbol and slogan.

The graffitist’s ideological allegiance and personal signifiers are trumpeted via cockily defiant symbols and slogans – some paradoxically juxtaposed. Nazism and anarchism have a long historical antipathy; their synthesis is a modern development signifying far-right nationalism combined with ultra-individualist antipathy toward authority. It is apparent that ‘Cliffy’ sees himself – or at least *represents* himself to himself – as a lone ‘resistance warrior’ standing against oppressive regimes within and outside the institution – ‘FTW’ is a common prison abbreviation for ‘Fuck the World’ – and against the racial element supposedly sullying the idealised nation.

**Bad intentions**

Notwithstanding the prevalence of racism in prisons, power-focused graffiti is by no means always ideologically or group-oriented; often it reflects nothing more than the values and lore of the underworld. A favoured category of image among some graffitists is the means of violent dominance.

Illicit weapons are, notoriously, ubiquitous in prison, but they are most commonly the stuff of close, face-to-face encounters. Yet knives and bludgeons – the kinds of close-quarters weapons most commonly found, in improvised form, inside – are in my experience rarely represented
Figure 5.1 ‘Keep the faith’ © the author
Figure 5.2 ‘Up the Nazi Party’ © the author
In graffiti. Far more likely to be rendered on cell walls, I found, are firearms, which, given their capacity to kill at a distance, are the antithesis of day-to-day prison life, which is an ‘intensely organic world in which personal agency is achieved through nothing other than proximity’ (Wilson, 2008: 75).

The shotgun in Figure 5.3 was drawn on the wall of a Boggo Road cell. Designed as a military/law-enforcement weapon, the SPAS 12’s compactness and rapid-fire capacity make it ideal for certain kinds of criminal activity. Its depiction in a prison represents the epitome of unattainable desideratum, and in this it typifies the fantasy element underlying much of the violent intent expressed in prison graffiti. This is a key difference between the content of ‘standard’ prison graffiti and that rendered by Robert Stewart, for Stewart’s graffito has the distinction of commenting on an accomplished deed.

Typical of power-focused prison graffiti, expressing fantasies of intended violence or vengeance is a succinctly eloquent message scratched into a wooden bench-seat in the male division of the MCWH: ‘Jail makes good men bad, so now its revenge to the bent cunt who put me here – poetic justice’. This graffito may be read as a blend of self-pity and self-affirming bluster, and exemplifies a common theme among many inmates in the graffitist’s attempt to lay blame for his physical situation, moral condition and notional future actions on agents outside his sphere of personal influence or responsibility.

The ‘revenge’ motif is common in prison graffiti, but is not always expressed in verbal form, nor is it always aimed at a specific individual or group; often it is graphically depicted, at times simply as an abstract idea. A cell wall graffito in Fremantle Jail typifies this ‘pure’ notion of revenge as ethos. A skull, an obvious symbol of death, has been drawn in marking pen, with...
enough care to suggest that the graffitist aspired to a precisely crafted effect. Apparently copied from another source using a pencilled grid that remains faintly visible, it sports a number of generic, horror-themed features – three bullet holes in its forehead, crooked and discoloured teeth, jagged highlights within the pitchy depths of its eye-sockets. It is accompanied by a caption, ‘Revenge is sweet motherfucker’ rendered with similar care, and resulting in an arresting tableau that may or may not have a particular target. In withholding that information, the inmate projects a sense of controlled menace absent in the previous graffito, for although that message leaves no doubt as to the depth of hatred aimed at ‘the bent cunt’ supposedly responsible for the inmate’s situation, his message serves more than anything to emphasise his incarcerated condition and therefore his current helplessness. The bullet-riddled skull and caption bespeak far greater self-assurance. This may be due in part to the relative equanimity arising from long-term residence in a cell, compared to the uncertainty inherent in the time spent in the MCWH, a temporary holding facility.

Sexual violence

One of the most feared and notorious aspects of prison life, and one which the curators of prison museums (in company with the legal system and the officedom of operational prisons) tend to be least willing to acknowledge, is sexual violence (Heilpern, 1998). Inmate sexuality, practical expression of which is necessarily homosexual, is an incessant source of tension, reflecting as it does the ‘precarious sense of masculinity’ of men in prison (Richmond, 1978: 55; see also Kupers, 2001; Donaldson, 2001; Paczensky, 2001). This tension inevitably leads or contributes to much of the violence that accompanies or passes for sexual relations, and means, too, that a great deal of sexual activity in prison takes the form of rape. It is a short step from there to a mindset that equates rape with revenge.

Figure 5.4 shows a Fremantle Jail cell graffito, drawn in pencil, in which a newly freed prisoner orally rapes a policeman. The image is replete with pornographic rancour and perversity, its deviance radically compounded by the notion of inflicting the act upon ‘Cunt-stable care’. This is an obvious reference to the mascot of the Constable Care Child Safety Foundation, a Western Australian police-community initiative begun in the 1980s to educate children about safety and crime prevention (Western Australia Police, n.d.). Thus the graffito’s subtext includes connotations of the violation of innocence.

Despite engaging in a homosexual act, the rapist’s heterosexuality is asserted through the homophobic condemnation he heaps upon his ‘faggot’ victim and the implied contempt shown for the victim’s acquiescence. This aspect, an affirmation of the prison’s ‘exaggerated version of heterosexuality’ (Jewkes, 2002: 18), is consistent with a norm of prison sexual violence that rape victims who take the path of least resistance in order to minimise the attendant violence often receive a bashing anyway, for ‘wanting it’ (Heilpern, 1998).

The notional rape of ‘Cunt-stable care’ is clearly far more an act of vengeful violence than of lust. It thus accords with the above observation regarding the nature of day-to-day personal power in prison, in that it almost invariably inheres in the proximate, in the inmate’s capacity for direct contact. All violence in prison is intimate. In instances of rape such as that depicted (which, although fantastical in some particulars, certainly has a basis in the realities of prison life), the question of weapons becomes almost irrelevant, for the chief instrument of coercion and dominance is, in essence, the phallus.

Conventional expressions of heterosexual desire, most commonly in the form of crudely drawn pornographic pictures of naked women, are common graffiti subjects. (Very rarely does
one find equivalent homosexual depictions.) Here, too, the prison’s undercurrents of violence and rancour often surface, although sometimes in forms that may well have been intended as positive expressions of affection.

Figure 5.5, a graffito in the MCWH, is a small masterpiece of incongruity, given the juxtaposition of virulent misogyny in the inmate’s declaration of intent and the conventional ‘love-hearts’ and paired names. In the process is epitomised the tension embodied in the prison’s ‘hyper-masculinist’ environment.
Even aside from their routine homophobia, prison inmates can be highly moralistic concerning what they deem unacceptable sexual transgression. This moralism, when combined with the prison’s prevailing ethos of indiscriminate acrimony, can give rise to strikingly dramatic expressions of vilification. On a cell wall in Boggo Road I found the following invocation to an unidentified paedophile: ‘This is a cell where every kidfucker hangs themselves. Do it dog. Ruff. Now. It's the least you can do’.

Figure 5.5 ‘When I get out of here’ © the author
The text is printed in red marking pen, and is accompanied by a carefully drawn hangman’s noose. The composition has then been framed with a border of brown pigment of uncertain origin, and below it in the same medium, as a kind of declarative coda, have been added the words ‘You die dog’.

Paedophiles are reviled at least as much in prison as outside. We can only guess the circumstances behind the message; it may be directed at a cellmate, a speculative future resident or an individual in the graffitist’s imagination or memory. The only certainty is the depth of condemnation expressed.

In an environment permeated with undifferentiated rancour, it is not a surprise to find expressions of hatred, frustration and fury that seem to be directed at no one in particular. Thus apparently random commands to ‘Fuck off and die!’ (in Gothic letters on a Boggo Road cell wall), and ‘Up yours to all of you’ (scratched into the paint of a lavatory door in MCWH women’s division) are common; whereas ‘Fuck this place forever’ (Fremantle Jail cell) condemns the institution in toto.

‘Time stops’

The latter two examples incorporate a fist with upraised middle finger. This defiant image, with or without accompanying text, is perhaps the most common graffito I observed in both male and female prisons across Australia. And at times, as in Figure 5.6 (Boggo Road cell wall), it represents a different but equally common motivation – the impulse simply to amuse.

Figure 5.6 ‘Santa’ © the author
A straightforward need for entertainment or amusement, for anything at all to relieve the boredom, is also clearly behind the creation of graffiti such as a push-button drawn on a Fremantle cell wall and captioned ‘Press for room service’, or the cartoon-style faces, figures and creatures that typify the often darkly ironic style of facetiousness to be found in almost any prison.

Amusement-oriented graffiti also frequently depict a further ubiquitous theme of prison life: illicit drug use and drug paraphernalia. These can range from jocular depictions of the drug experience, to items such as water-pipes, bongs and hypodermic syringes, to elaborate psychedelic montages.

Whether the graffito in Figure 5.7 was influenced in its creation by drug use is impossible to say, but its hallucinatory qualities certainly make such a suggestion plausible. An imposing cell mural in Fremantle executed in red and black pencil, ink and crayon and occupying the entire upper half of one wall, it is emblematic of many of the emotional and psychological aspects of the prison experience, with its personification of Death, demonic icons of hellfire and attendant naked woman. The agonising timelessness of incarceration is poignantly represented by the handless clock face with its redolent caption.

The size, deliberateness and complexity of this graffito make it, of course, a far cry from the modest and most often clandestine texts I defined in my introduction as central to my study of prison graffiti. It might seem more of a piece with the ‘legitimate’ mural works which, I argued, fail to provide us with candid glimpses of the inmate sensibility. I suggest, however, that by virtue of its location, lack of inhibition in execution and spectacular embracement of the transgressive, it is the antithesis of the officially sanctioned works the touring public views as ‘inmate art’.

The key factors in this judgement are its unabashed candour, its bleakly solipsist tone and the fact that its prime intended audience could not have been other than its creator. Having adorned his ‘bedroom’ – his sole quasi-private space – with this nightmarish vision, the inmate was apparently content to live with it. We must assume it went some way toward relieving the boredom.

Figure 5.7 ‘Time Stops’ © the author
Needless to say, such a work could not have actually remained secret; cells are routinely accessed by prison officers. But there is evidence that in some cases they turned a blind eye to what inmates got up to, especially in the latter years of institutions leading up to decommissioning. It is in graffiti produced during those transitional periods that we sometimes encounter texts of a didactic purport – messages to future outsiders. This seems to be the case in the brief message from a Fremantle cell reproduced below. It was not written by the creator of ‘Time stops’, but I believe it is instructive to consider it with that vision in mind.

Sixteen hours a day  
We are locked in here  
With the cockroaches and rats  
And with our shit bucket  
Could you handle it?  
How would it change you?

**Conclusion**

The above selection of images provides a glimpse into the subjective condition of imprisonment. Inmates create graffiti for a range of reasons, and to express a range of sensibilities, in the main radically unlike the feelings and perceptions that motivate the mainstream graffitist. Life inside the total institution has a banal intensity that impels, and may well compel, the expression of immediate experiences on the nearest available surface.

As I have said, the study of prison graffiti is a young field, and as yet it lacks the ‘critical mass’ needed to bring scholars together easily, to facilitate collaboration and sharing of information, and thus to provide the researcher with a sense of what areas need attention, what questions need to be addressed. A comparative smattering of publications worldwide comprise the sum total of relevant scholarship. Indeed, a search of the Internet using keywords such as ‘prison graffiti’, ‘prisoner graffiti’ or ‘inmate graffiti’ is likely to glean more web pages advertising graffiti eradication services than sites on graffiti created by inmates. Compounding the problem is the inter-disciplinary nature of the field (the works cited here have been produced by academics working in criminology, art theory, social history, archaeology, museology, architecture and sociology). This fragmentation will, I believe, ultimately prove one of the strengths of the field, but at this early stage it tends to result in a lack of cohesion among researchers – there is not yet a global scholarly ‘community’ of prison graffiti researchers.

Both the similarities and the differences between culturally disparate samples of inmate graffiti may provide a direction for researchers. A comparative global study of inmate graffiti, not only across national borders but also looking at that produced in the many different types of carceral institutions, may also prove fruitful. It is beyond the scope of this brief survey to do more than raise a few suggestions. The field is wide open.

**Notes**

1. The term ‘prison graffiti’, if taken literally, is problematic, and is employed here as a matter of convenience. In using it I refer to graffiti created by those confined in all forms of carceral institutions, including temporary police lockups, mental asylums and youth detention centres. A more precise term, which I use intermittently in this chapter, is ‘inmate’ graffiti. Likewise, the terms ‘prison’ and ‘jail’ are used indiscriminately to mean any site of legal imprisonment.

2. Old Adelaide Gaol makes a feature of some of its graffiti, and the management of the MCWH have taken considerable trouble to preserve the site’s abundant collection and make at least some available for public viewing.
3 The Mubarek case spawned a series of inquiries, culminating, in 2004, in the independent inquiry by High Court Justice Brian Keith, whose report (Keith 2006a, 2006b) stands as the most complete account of the affair. A useful summary of his findings is available from BBC (2006).

References


