

THE FEW AGAINST THE MANY: AN ANALYSIS OF GRAFFITI
PRESENCE ON THE EUGENE LANDSCAPE

by
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Graffiti has become increasingly prevalent in Eugene, Oregon, with both a strong online presence and a prominent visual existence throughout the city. This research investigates the impact of graffiti on the population of Eugene and examines the evolution of public opinion toward graffiti. Through interviews with members of the community (including downtown residents and University of Oregon students for a diverse sample) and analyses of online discourses before and after the city of Eugene began to sanction street art throughout the city, the study reveals a newfound and widespread appreciation for graffiti. While the specifics of these attitudes differ between most people interviewed, the findings suggest that graffiti in Eugene is not only tolerated but rather valued for its cultural and artistic merits.

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Introduction

How do cities affect people? How can we build cities sustainably in a way that maximizes the people's ability to live comfortably and equitably for generations? These questions have been asked and answered several times in the study of city planning and public policy. The study and practice of intentionally creating place out of space from a top-down perspective is a model in the growing arena that students of the field begin to see as a conceptual axiom – this becomes second nature. What, in other words, does a city do for a person? How does it impact an individual?

For example, this is commonly taught and understood when looking at the scale of urban centers. The majority of city planning in the United States is centered around the convenience of automobiles *rather than* the individual. Cars have become the focal point of most urban areas to the extent that studies involving traffic patterns and the optimization of vehicular movement is a field that has grown as rapidly as city planning. On average, roads take up 18% of the urban land space, with some districts taking up as much as 30% (European Commission 2021). Excluding parking lots, garages, and other various examples of vehicular infrastructure, up to nearly a third of an entire city directly consists of transportation exclusively for cars. Shifting from a person-centered city to an automobile-focused one inherently diminishes the human experience, leaving what *should* be the emphasis of a city as a secondary priority at best. This concept can also be observed through the inclusion of green space in a city, the perceived and actual safety of bikers based on natural protections from roads, and more. The landscape of a city directly impacts the individual who resides there.

So infrequently within the study of city planning and policy, however, are queries about how much impact a single person or a small group of people can have on the landscape of the

city through grassroots actions. This concept proposes a bottom-up approach, which this essay will begin to explore. Rather than questioning what a city does for a person, what does a person do for a city? How do the actions of one person affect the larger city landscape?

Layers of Affection in a City Landscape

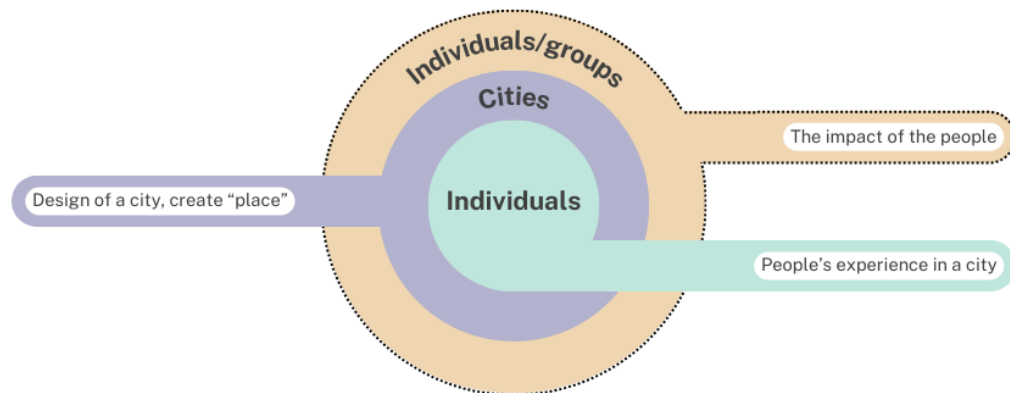


Figure 1: Layers of Affection in a City Landscape (Individuals/Groups)

With individuals and their experience within a city at the center of this diagram, it is well-known that cities directly affect individuals through their design and general creation of “place.” What is argued here, as outlined with the dotted line, is that individuals and groups impact cities on a mass scale, too.

This thought pattern goes even further. By taking a bottom-up approach to city impacts and how certain aspects of the city affect others, we can extrapolate beyond this two-tiered relationship. Scholars of city planning are constantly reminded that cities impact people. What I first bring into question is how, if at all, people (individuals, groups of people) impact the city. I further submit that it is the *government* through local policy (including but not limited to public expenditures, endorsements, legalization, and other governmental actions) that influences people. Individuals are impacted by cities, impacted by people, impacted by the local government.

Layers of Affection in a City Landscape

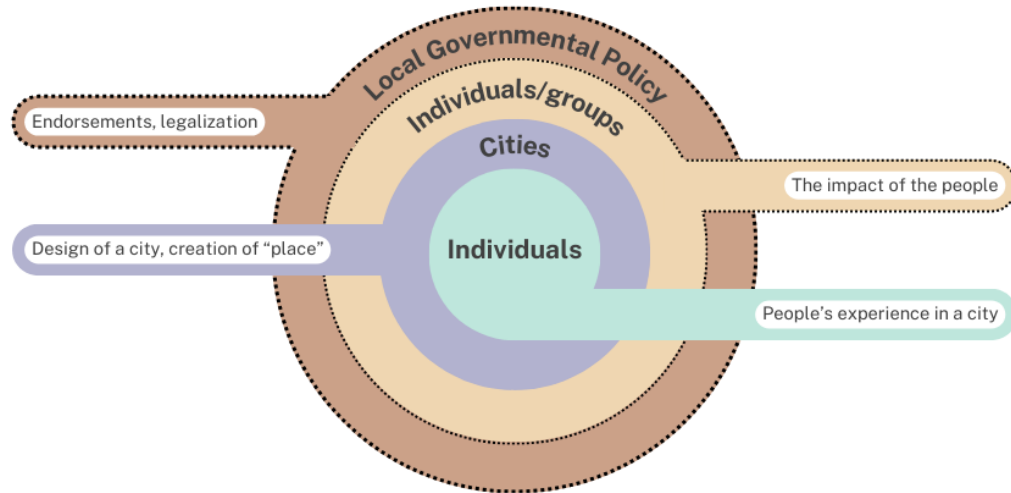


Figure 2: Layers of Affection in a City Landscape (Local Governmental Policy)

This extrapolation allows for additional layers of affection to be conceptualized. It is then argued in addition that the local government, through policy, endorsements, legalization, and other governmental actions, in turn, also impacts individuals and groups, which affect the city landscape.

Graffiti is the main mode of this exploration due to its relevance, the effect it has *from* an individual standpoint *on* the larger population, and the control that cities often take through heavy usage of policy surrounding graffiti.

I recognize that graffiti is not the only way a person or government can carry influence in the larger scheme of the city. There are, of course, sound arguments for other categories of influence to be explored that may have more effect on a population. This is not the assertion of this essay. Graffiti has a unique characteristic that other local actions and art pieces usually lack. In the public's perception of it, its semi-permanence, and the character which graffiti directly brings to the landscape of a city, this art form transforms the human experience into something tangible. This is an act that is forcibly shared with people around the artist, making it difficult to

escape from without the presence of policy regarding its removal – a rather common response with cities sometimes spending millions to clean the thrown-up paint (Shoenberger 2019). Through this less conventional method, influencers have access to a widespread reach and impact. This, in part, is what is explored here.

What is the general attitude towards graffiti in the city of Eugene, including street art? How and why has this changed over recent years, if at all? In this essay, I explore these ideas to address the central question: What is the impact that graffiti has on the population of Eugene? This essay answers this using an interview research method, gathering insight on the population of Eugene and the students at the University of Oregon as two separate but individually influential entities within the city, as well as a comparison of popular online attitudes of graffiti in the Eugene area, all while beginning to address the impact that governmental policy has on individuals as well.

Background

Historically, graffiti has been used for several purposes, including religious testimony and the small-scale advertising of secret meeting spaces such as places of worship or brothels. However, the modern perception of the usage of graffiti was popularized by an artist by the name of Cornbread. Initially a proclamation of love for a classmate, Darryl McCray began by painting the name Cornbread on the walls of buildings. This quickly turned the name into one synonymous with spreading messages to the populace. In protests of social issues such as police brutality, this singular individual began sparking larger movements locally, partly due to the fantastical nature of the illegality and risk associated with the actions of graffiti (White 2018).

This practice was not lost to history and is still practiced consistently. Whether it be from a popular and well-known figure such as Banksy or the larger hip-hop movement of the 70s, 80s, and 90s, the usage of street art to influence others on a larger scale begins to show the impact that a single person can have within the city sphere. This paper, in part, begins to explore that impact, and to what degree it exists locally.

For the purposes of clarity, it remains important to define the word “graffiti” as there are a few classifications and perceptions of the art form. In order to do this, I will utilize the definitions put forth by a 2021 study out of the University of Oregon’s Planning, Public Policy, and Management department on mapping graffiti around Eugene (Thompson et al, n.d.). There are three standard categories in defining the word, beginning with what is most closely adjacent to the concept of “street art”. This is, simply, graffiti that is for the sake of putting up art in a public realm. Typically image-based rather than script or handwriting, graffiti in the name of artistic merit can be (but is not required to be) commissioned and/or of higher quality. Like other forms, artistic merit can convey deeper messages with the artwork.

It should be noted that this category of street art in particular is split into two subcategories: sanctioned and non-sanctioned. Often paid for by the municipal government of the area, sanctioning graffiti subsidizes the piece both financially and through the allowance of its existence. The city is not the only possible beneficiary to graffiti though, as private agreements *and* public deals may lead to subsidized graffiti. This subcategory exists for any of these typologies but is commonly (especially in Eugene) reserved for pieces of street art and will be referred back to throughout this research.

Second is graffiti that pertains to any current social or political issues. This category could take several forms, whether it be for simple civic and local engagement or in direct protest to larger matters, such as national or international topics. As the UO's PPPM study has shown, often an opinion of a social issue will be presented on a surface, only to be quickly aided by additional graffiti in support or opposition underneath the original, creating a compounding graffiti piece. Social-issue graffiti has the ability to become unique in the street-defacement world as they deviate from the standard culture of avoiding covering up other works to make space for one's own piece by constantly crossing out others' works of graffiti.

Third is any and all graffiti that is "inappropriate". For the usage of this ambiguous word, the study defines inappropriate as typically pertaining to adult themes, including but not limited to sex, drugs, and cursing. The PPPM study made a point, however, that the standard of determining what graffiti is "inappropriate" is constantly evolving, so what is noted as "adult" in this essay or theirs may not be at the same standard during the reading of these.

What is not noted in the PPPM study, and what seems to be many pieces of graffiti in a city space, are throw-ups or tags. These are, simply put, individual marks typically consisting of artist names or other identifying factors. Most like the inappropriate or social issue graffiti

categories, these are usually quickly painted pieces to avoid the public's eye (pieces that were "thrown-up" hurriedly) that involve a lesser amount of effort on behalf of the artist. I note this category of graffiti for two reasons: first, due to the simple popularity of this art form. I assert that in any city where graffiti is a more popular and utilized method of art, tags are among the first pieces that people subconsciously see. Tagger graffiti, in other words, is synonymous with high-volume hits (Deborah Lamm Weisel 2002). Second, tagger graffiti allows an insight into the history and relevance of graffiti as a whole – an important step in determining the impact of graffiti, and thereby the individual, on the city landscape. Such as the beginnings of graffiti with actors like Cornbread, tagger graffiti was the foundation of the larger graffiti movement, paving the way for the other styles of this art form to exist and be conceptualized. Even this one actor who, in essence, developed graffiti, interchangeably utilized each of these types of definitions set out by the PPPM study, including tagger graffiti.

Along with these definitions, the existing literature in Eugene as it pertains to graffiti is minimal. Previous studies have tracked some graffiti across the city while establishing the typologies of the graffiti, and the city itself has mapped larger murals. Other than this, there has been little academic work done revolving graffiti throughout Eugene. This, in short, is where this essay fits into the conversation. By exploring the public perceptions of graffiti, this thesis shall dive deeper into the actual impacts that graffiti has on Eugene and its population, opening an unexplored dialogue about not only the relevance, but the importance that graffiti has on the city.

Impact as a concept will be measured in a few key patterns. First, public awareness and consciousness of graffiti will be questioned. If the population either isn't cognizant of the graffiti in the city to begin with, or if graffiti is so constant that it has faded into the background of people's experience with it, then graffiti will be shown to have little impact. However, if people

aren't ignorant of graffiti, further impact will be demonstrated by looking at how people engage with graffiti, if at all. Are people drawn in consistently, is this engagement positive/negative? Last, this essay will explore engagement with and attitudes towards graffiti over time, tracking any difference in influence by researching and comparing online sources and public forums.

Background in Eugene

To begin, it is important to recognize a notable event that took place in Eugene in relation to graffiti and street art. The 20x21EUG Mural Project is directly responsible for several of the current murals and art pieces around the city. The below summary, pulled from the 20x21EUG website, summarizes the efforts of the project:

“The 20x21EUG Mural Project is an initiative of the City of Eugene Cultural Services Public Art Program to create 20 or more world-class outdoor murals in Eugene between now and the 2021 IAAF World Championships. The project is led by a highly engaged committee representing collaboration across sectors including communications, law, architecture, small business, nonprofit and the arts. 20x21EUG aims to bring color and life to Eugene's urban landscape to foster pride and contribute to a sense of identity. As the project grows, it will seek artist exchanges between Eugene artists and international cities. In 2021, the project will be the focus of an exhibition at the University of Oregon's Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art and Eugene will host the world in the largest sporting event of the year. (20x21EUG, n.d.)

The website, as a part of this project, now directly supports 22 sanctioned murals (the earliest of which made in 2016, and the majority of them in 2017 and 2018), and the city of Eugene now has a map where visitors and citizens can engage in a self-guided tour to visit each of these downtown (see Figure 3 for one of these being painted). However, the actual impact of this has pushed past these 22 murals. The city of Eugene on their Mural Map (“Eugene Mural Map,” n.d.) recognizes a total of 65 public arts. This includes the now 26 works as a part of the 20x21EUG Mural Project and the 27 murals through the Urban Canvas Project, a similar effort around the same time that encouraged business owners to utilize their walls for mural uses and

specified public spaces (such as traffic boxes) to be legally painted on. The Eugene Cascades and Coast website, though, far trumps both of these numbers, leading website visitors to 114 murals around Eugene, including the older 22 murals through 20x21EUG (“Street Art in the City | Eugene, Cascades & Oregon Coast,” n.d.). Since beginning these public efforts for art throughout the city, an unexpected number of murals have emerged.



Figure 3: Adele Renault Painting a Pidgeon Mural in Eugene

As a part of the 20x21EUG Mural Project, Adele Renault (photo © Martha Cooper) is seen here contributing to the movement near Coffee Plant Roaster.

Historically in Eugene, the outlook on graffiti has been overwhelmingly negative. Before beginning interviews, I took to online forums to discover what the current and past attitudes towards graffiti were, and the “loudest” were certainly ones that had timestamps dating over nine years ago. I began this research by looking up “graffiti” in the r/Eugene subreddit, and sort by relevance, top posts, and comment counts. With these sorting methods, posts from about a decade ago *and* newer posts within the last few years both populated. Between nine and twelve years ago in the subreddit, several mentions of graffiti in the area are brought up, and next to none are in support of the practice, be it the posts themselves or the comments under these posts. For example, in 2016, there were multiple posts under r/Eugene asking the community what a

certain graffiti symbol signified, as seen in Figure 3. In none of these posts could the commenters come to a resolution about what the symbol meant, but consistently did the discussion under the initial question eventually digress into profanity directed at taggers. Several brought up the possibility that the symbol denotes acid or LSD being sold in the area, where some recognized “ED” in the symbol and attributed it to either gang letters or erectile dysfunction – both insightful looks into the attitudes of graffiti such as this. Regardless, graffiti is consistently looked down upon in these subreddits with commenters calling the practice “the doucheiest thing you ever heard” (“Anyone Know What This Symbol Is?” 2016) and calling taggers in the area “dickbags,” (“I Made This Video about the Eugene Graffiti Removal Crew ‘Huckleberry Patrol’” 2013). It was in the eye of the public, and a large part of the scene in Eugene. However, it was something that was generally despised from the larger population, taggers being constantly seen as a lower class of people.



Figure 4: Unknown Graffiti Symbol

As submitted by Reddit user u/tpjtjew, this symbol gathered lots of attention online circa 2016 with little success in arriving at a conclusion of the definition within the online forums. Some ideas by users included a call for acid or LSD, or a recognition of the letters ED within the symbol. (“WTF Is This Graffiti Symbol I Keep Seeing All over Town?” 2016)

Today, graffiti and street art still hold relevance like none other. Graffiti and street art remained primarily in the background of Eugene around the era of the early Reddit posts (shown by the generally small amount of traction that these posts garner, as well as the lack of media articles produced relating to graffiti or street art at this time). Most importantly to recognize for the purposes of this essay, though: even this little traction was still overwhelmingly negative. As of the last few years, even just online forums have exploded with mentions of graffiti. In general, discussion threads regarding local graffiti receive upvotes (positive reinforcement of a post on Reddit) and commenter numbers that at least double the amount that posts had a decade prior. Further, the general attitudes towards graffiti in the past decade have evolved tremendously. To explore this in the community of Eugene (to ensure that this evolution isn’t solely the groups of

Eugene that are online), I took to the streets of downtown Eugene and near campus to launch interview investigations.

Interviews

I began this interview process by selecting graffiti “hotspots.” I engaged in some prior research of these areas, but much of what I was led to was on the outskirts of town, which was away from what I largely wanted to focus on for this project. I loosely defined the area of interest, which is known as the downtown core, as between 7th and 11th Avenues North to South and between High and Jefferson Streets East to West. This is for a number of reasons. In terms of municipal land use, this general area provides several different base zones of the city (“Eugene Zoning Map,” n.d.). It includes zones C-3 (“Major Commercial”), C-2 (“Community Commercial”), S (“Special Area”), R-3 (“Limited High-Density Residential”), and PL (“Public Land”). The majority of this core, or what was highlighted more frequently, revolved around the Eugene Station and the several blocks north. This leads into the second reason why this area was chosen: this area, to the sense of the passerby, gathers a lot of attention and foot traffic. It is fairly consistently busy, both at night when graffiti is more likely to take place and during the day for pedestrian commuters. Within this area, I determined hotspot areas by walking about, marking spots that included a variety of types of graffiti (tags, images, and some murals or larger pieces) in an immediate vicinity. These hotspots were the areas in which I held interviews. Standing in front or to the side of graffiti sites, I engaged with every person that passed on foot to get an even sample.

Huckleberry Patrol and the Eugene Police Department

Police presence in graffiti culture, historically, has been a crucial player in the art form since its conception. As it has been mentioned, one of the ways in which graffiti is often utilized is in the form of social protest. While it is frequently seen on a national or international scale (some current examples may include governmental and presidential administration

disagreements or condemning/supporting the actions of countries on the global level), much of the protest has to do with local law enforcement as well (Choi 2020). Especially as it pertains to Eugene, general disdain of local and state police is common: graffiti including ACAB (All Cops Are Bastards, a political slogan) or 1312 (ACAB letters as their numerical placements in the alphabet) is usually seen throughout cities (Poulter 2020).

Police presence runs deeper than just a general dislike on behalf of the artists, though. The police in an urban area are often tasked with the cleanup of graffiti. This is not a perfect system, however. Especially in an area in which the amount of graffiti overwhelms the police force cleanup team, police are forced to pick and choose what to clean. This naturally creates a vetting system in which the police (or anyone who effectively erases graffiti) becomes the ultimate art critic, deciding what stays and what gets removed. Anecdotally, this remains true in countries where graffiti is a much more common sight or where perhaps the graffiti is a more integral part of the country/city's culture. In Spain and France, the police vetting process is much more frequently procedural than it is critical, even though this still certainly exists. While the police still, to a certain degree, pick and choose what paint to remove and what isn't yet worth their time, local law enforcement set certain rules for themselves, such as any graffiti above a certain height on a wall will remain untouched (see Figure 4). This leads to graffiti artists directly calling out the police with street art several stories high so that the police have no choice than to let it remain.



Figure 5: Upside Down Police Vehicle Graffiti

Located at the top of a building in Paris, even though the graffiti denotes anti-police sentiments, it is unlikely that the local police force will attempt to remove it due to common practice.

Because of all this, it is determined that our local police force, the Eugene Police Department, and specifically anyone that directly assists in the cleanup of graffiti is a key player in the culture of graffiti in Eugene. I was first pointed towards a graffiti clean-up team from an informal interview with a passing police officer in front of a graffiti hotspot. I scheduled an interview without knowing much about the team, other than the approximate times in which they patrolled and the building they operated from. The Huckleberry Patrol, as I learned the name later, was based near the Eugene Station out of the Downtown Public Safety Station and has been in action since 2007. They are primarily volunteer-based and today are able to be financially and operationally sustained through partnerships with the city of Eugene, taking care of and cleaning the downtown core.

In taking this interview, I was most interested in a few key points, aside from the basic structure of the patrol, such as where they worked and the makeup of the group. First, and as discussed, police are, in a way, the highest level of art critics in relation to graffiti. On this point, I wanted to primarily ask what the vetting process is for deciding what gets cleaned up and what doesn't. Second, I was curious about personal opinions that the Huckleberry patrol or the Eugene Police Department (both being directly or indirectly represented by my interviewee) had about

graffiti. Do volunteers work for this group out of spite for the graffiti actors, are they perhaps connoisseurs of art in the area, somewhere in between? Last, I was curious about any actors that the patrol may have been actively following, if any. With graffiti having some roots in gang activity, does the cleanup process go much farther beyond simply getting rid of the paint? Does this patrol unintentionally (or strategically?) assume the role of an investigation team?

I was able to secure an interview with Mike Mills who allowed a deeper insight and background to the Huckleberry Patrol organization. Mills had been volunteering since the beginning of the organization's inception and has thus seen the team grow, leading the team of volunteers today. At the beginning, the force consisted of a small task force that would go around Eugene on bikes and bike trailers to begin removing graffiti. The Huckleberry team still comprises of just a few volunteers that rotate in and out as needed. The Huckleberry Patrol has the ability to clean up any graffiti that is on public property: city buildings, street light poles, bus stops, etc. While they may not have direct jurisdiction about private property, most businesses or property owners in the downtown area often sign Hold Harmless Agreement, which allows the patrol to proceed without being held liable if their cleaning solution distorts the paint of the surface.

This cleaning solution, named the "World's Best Graffiti Remover," is what the Huckleberry Patrol primarily use around Eugene. In my interview with Mills, discussing this cleaning solution assisted in uncovering the complicated relationship history that the Huckleberry Patrol had with Eugene. According to Mills, this solution is now purchased by the city. When the Huckleberry Patrol was first beginning their practice of cleaning, they originally bought the solution themselves. More recently, however, through strategic relations with the local government, the city of Eugene now includes this solution in their budget, purchasing the

solution in 55-gallon drums. For both of these parties, this has come as a win-win action: the Huckleberry Patrol no longer has to come up with the money through fundraising and donations, and the city sees a return on their investment through the amount of tags cleaned. In the summer of 2024, Mills counts that the patrol “cleaned up a little over 14,000 tags in that May-to-October time span.”

Vetting process of the Huckleberry Patrol

According to Mills, the markings that the Huckleberry Patrol cleans up consists of “tags, stickers, and posters,” where they average “a little over 250 in a three-hour span.” While graffiti and paint may appear to be what the team is mostly cleaning, Mills expresses that there has been an increase in the use of stickers in the city.

Yeah, there's stickers everywhere... and then some taggers have had some stickers made with their tag on it. And I think the thought there is “if I'm going down the street and I want to tag this pole, I'm gonna take time to do this, but if I'm walking down, and I have a sticker, I can just slap it on as I walk by, so, it's not obvious that's what I'm doing, right?”

This frequently comes up, especially with some of the more famous graffiti artists in Eugene, in recent years. According to Eugene Weekly, local artist Suspish partakes in this sticker distribution, and the Eugene community is here for it.

Those of us wanting a little more Suspish in life can get stickers and tiny canvases emblazoned with Suspish Fish at Brick Builders on Willamette as well as at the Sidepocket Tavern on West 6th. Sometimes, Suspish sends out their “minions” (and please don't ask the minions who Suspish is because they won't say) to sell the art at places like Saturday Market. The minions get a cut of the profit, Suspish says. Suspish also plans to launch an online store. (Mortensen 2022)

Most of what gets cleaned from the Huckleberry Patrol though, aside from stickers and posters, are throw-up graffiti tags. According to Mills, this usually consists of artist initials potentially other small messages, but generally “you know it when you see it.” Although even this

subjectivity has proven to be controversial to the public. In asking Mills questions about the interactions with people when cleaning with the Huckleberry Patrol, he had this to say:

I mean, some people will stop to talk to us, you know: “what are you guys doing,” and we tell them, you know, what we're doing and everything. We get a lot of appreciation, thank you's and things like that for trying to help clean up the city. And then, once in a while, we'll get somebody that says “well, that's art.” You know, let's look at it: it's a A-J-K, is that art? I mean, I don't think so. You know, it's not a picture of an object or a scene of any kind.

As an aside, in this line of questioning, Mills reiterated that anytime he is volunteering in the public, Mills and the rest of the team is adamant on engaging the community through conversation. Generally, this relatively well-received, though it nearly always takes effort on behalf of the volunteer group before connection is made.

Most of what the Huckleberry Patrol sees and thereby cleans are these throw-up graffiti tags, often just consisting of, like Mills put it, initials like “A-J-K,” or something adjacent. In a similar vein, ambiguous tags, small messages, and vulgarity are most frequently targeted by the Patrol. Included in this vulgarity category, Mills made sure to point out, would be antisemitic tags, hate speech, and derogatory messages directed at the police departments, such as ACAB, 1312, or FTP. In these latter instances, Mills and his team would frequently and immediately “buzz out and try to take care of it” should it be on public property.

This, in short, is their vetting process. The Huckleberry Patrol will automatically attempt to clean a baseline of most graffiti unless they have an inherent artistic quality to them. Pieces that sport vulgar messaging, including any language that is negative towards the Eugene Police Department or police in general, are taken care of immediately. In addition, the Huckleberry Patrol will also remove stickers put on public property (or private property with permission) and posters (seemingly, posters that have been outdated or that include vulgar language, similar to graffiti).

Personal opinions of the Huckleberry Patrol, following graffiti artists

Midway through the interview, I asked specifically if Mills was a part of the patrol out of a broader opposition to graffiti. If, in other words, if he had joined and maintained the group possibly out of spite of graffiti as a practice. This was, in my own perception, what the public was calling for around the time that the Huckleberry Patrol was formed based on internet research of online forums. We talked about this twice in the interview, and both times began with the legality of the act: “I don't have any issues with anybody doing street art if they have permission from a property owner,” Mills said. “But most of what we see is just garble-de-goop, initials and things like that or vulgarity and things like that.” Further, he says that he loves the murals and street art, as it “really add[s] something attractive to our city.”

Mills continued to come back to vulgar graffiti throughout our interview. Because of this, and in interest to the degree in which the Huckleberry Patrol performs investigative actions on individuals or groups, I asked about gang activity in relation to the graffiti. This clean-up crew, as it was explained, was *not* part of the exploratory process, and simply documented tags:

I'm not going to say it's prevalent, but it's out there... What we do when we go out there, is we have a log, and we document what we see and where it's at. So, we document the location, and if we can interpret the tag, we write that down. And we also photograph it. So, the idea of doing that is if someone was caught in the act of tagging, they can go back—as it all gets entered in the computer—they could go back and say, ‘oh, this person's a prolific tagger.’ So now instead of having one charge of misdemeanors, you've got a procession of charges... People don't get arrested and prosecuted for tagging... But if they did, they could go into that base and say, “okay, it's not a waste of resources to prosecute that misdemeanor.” Now, it becomes something more than that. And it's more worth the time invested.

In the final wrap up of the interview, I asked if he had any last thoughts. Mills recalled a connection that he had with Ray Brown, a liaison between the Chamber of Commerce, the fire department, police department, city council, and the mayor. In this wrap-up, Mills said that he “talked to him about trying to find a business that might be willing to have a wall where street

artists could work, you know, ‘here, you guys can come here and do your thing, and maybe that's gonna be there for three months or six months, and then somebody else can come and do their thing,’ so that they can have an outlet for that urge to do something, you know? And that hasn't come to pass yet, but I—hopefully one day it will.”

Mills, as a representative of the Huckleberry Patrol and the Eugene Police, certainly doesn't hold any levels of spite for graffiti or graffiti artists. Several times throughout our conversation, despite the adversarial nature between taggers and the EPD or the Huckleberry Patrol, Mills was casually referring to taggers as intelligent, creative, talented, and poetic. Mills was even able to produce a name to me of a tagger that was present when he first started in the patrol. Jeffrey Fine, as Mills guessed, used to leave messages and poems for the police departments around the city of Eugene. He might have been a collegiate athlete at one point, according to Mills. This particular tagger was lost to the Huckleberry team – Mills guessed jail, rehab, moving from the city, or death, he wasn't sure – but Mills had a certain fondness for this artist and was melancholy when discussing his disappearance. This piece of the interview completely dismantled the typical narrative of police vs. criminals, revealing a much more nuanced relationship riddled with mutual recognition.

Public Interviews

In taking interviews with the public, be it in the downtown core of Eugene or in/around campus, I had three primary questions to determine attitudes towards graffiti and impacts (or a lack thereof) of graffiti in a person's daily life. These questions were meant to be jumping points for conversation, not end-all stopping points. I began each interview with a question about how frequently the interviewee notices or encounters graffiti or street art in their day to day. Is this graffiti in the front of their consciousness, or does it tend to fade into the background? Based on

this question, I had one of two follow-up sub questions. If the person said that they don't perceive graffiti often (and was a student), then I would ask if they were able to get off campus frequently, or if most of their days were on campus. If graffiti was apparent in their daily life, I would ask for any specific sites, tags, pieces, or murals in particular that would come to mind. The second question series would focus on any general feelings or perceived attitudes in relation to what they saw (if they do see graffiti around Eugene). What comes up for a person when in contact with this form of art, what feelings are elicited? Last, and to primarily further this discovery of a person's opinions of graffiti, I ask if the interviewee thinks the city should be doing *anything* – be it positive or negative – differently about graffiti? With this last conversation focus, I intentionally left it considerably open to interpretation, utilizing the direction in which the person takes their answer as a more genuine opinion, giving way to a brutally sincere outlook on graffiti.

The prescription on how many interviews to take based on the type of qualitative research, as I've found, varies considerably. In the case of this essay, both grounded theory, which "sets out to discover or construct theory from data," (Chun Tie, Birks, and Francis 2019), and a phenomenological approach are appropriate, yet both in general practice call for different standard sample sizes. For this project, and based on review of other recent qualitative studies, interacting with at least five people in both the downtown core and around campus respectively was sufficient for valuable data (Sharma et al. 2024).

In the downtown core, I interacted with a total of seven people in a few different locations. This total included one person that specifically asked not to be included *formally* based on their job status, one that asked to not be recorded but inclusion through statements was allowed, and five that were informal conversations. While I didn't directly use or quote the five

informal conversations, they allowed general information about the attitudes of graffiti in the area to be gathered, which remained synonymous with the prior two.

The first interview I took in the downtown core of Eugene ended up being the most insightful, despite some drawbacks. A Eugene citizen and frequent passerby of the hot spot that I was in front of, whom I will refer to as Bee, was more than willing to discuss graffiti around Eugene and be a part of this essay, however, they did not consent to being recorded vocally (but allowed statements). Bee began the interview sarcastically: as I asked how they felt about the graffiti in Eugene, they expressed their love for it, exclaiming the opinion that “there should be spray paint cans on every corner!” and that all markings should be subsidized by the government. Throughout my initial questions, Bee went up to the wall I was standing in front of, vaguely gesturing to the wall out of excitement and what seemed to be a hint of defiance, assuming that my interview would be in opposition to graffiti rather than a neutral investigation. As the conversation took a more serious tone, however, Bee’s sarcastic cheekiness towards the painted wall very quickly shifted into a very reflective and intimate appearance.

For this interview, we stood outside of Lucky’s, midway between 10th and Broadway on Olive Street. Ironically, this was directly across from the Downtown Public Safety Station where I took the interview with Mills just days later. This hotspot consisted of a large white rectangle that was perhaps six or seven feet tall and a few wingspans wide that contained numerous tags, stickers, messages, art pieces, and more. Additionally, just around the corner was an alley that had a few large, colorful pieces – technically in the sightline of the Safety Station but out of the general public’s eye. There was also a building that appeared to be abandoned and was now the site for a few miscellaneous tags, as well as a temporary loitering area due to the small roof overhang and wall on one side to protect from the elements. It was the large white rectangle on

the side of a building that Bee seemed most interested in. This was directly facing the street and sidewalk, so it would be a difficult sight to miss. In my questions about whether Bee was generally aware of any new additions to graffiti, they immediately were able to point out new tags and relate them to other locations where the tagger had recently visited. For the entirety of this interview, Bee focused almost completely on tagger graffiti and seemed to skip over any larger “street art” pieces – it was the small strokes of paint or little messaging that Bee was most interested in. We spoke about the evolving community that surrounds graffiti – new tags and art pieces allowed someone such as Bee, a passerby and ostensibly not a graffiti artist themselves, to track and appreciate the new art on their daily commute. On the opposite side of this same coin, when the graffiti is erased, it effectively erases the people that were present to create the tag and thereby erases the culture (be it passive as Bee experiences it, or active as a tagger might) that is directly involved with graffiti tagging. Seeing swaths of space that had been painted over, in other words, directly affects anyone and everyone in the community through erasure, regardless of how involved one might be in the process.

For Bee, this is something that is constantly a conscious concern. A lack of graffiti or general marks on the city from the people creates a universal experience for everyone who passes through. While, as Bee put it, this may be ideal for businesses and city governments who thereby stand out in the form of the city as a result, this becomes conversely harmful for the layperson, for the citizen. Bee, as I was constantly reminded throughout the interview, was very aware, generally, of graffiti throughout the city, and was proud of its presence in their home city.

Even students at the University of Oregon had at the very least some awareness of current graffiti around Eugene and on their routes through the city. On campus, I too was above the five-person minimum: four students formally submitted to a recorded interview, and four were

spoken to informally. A majority of the students who I interviewed utilized some mode of transportation (often personal cars) to get around Eugene. For a smaller graffiti artist, this could mean relevance death – graffiti is most often on the smaller, human scale, not one designed for cars. Despite this, the graffiti scene in Eugene remains a firm aspect of the student’s mental and visual landscape.

While simply noticing the graffiti in a relatively positive light is a crucial first step towards a progressive change in the Eugene society’s perspective on graffiti, this doesn’t truly get at *what* is being noticed. This was a vital portion of my interviews, especially with the members of the public. One pair of interviewees, Audrey and Kerry, agreed that it was the messaging over anything that stood out to them.

Audrey: There’s sometimes some really funny stuff... I don't know. There was one that I saw that was like, “I drew this when I was drunk.” It's really funny. Or...There's dumpsters that have pretty funny graffiti on it.

Kerry: Yeah. I get really invested in trying to figure out what's going on. Like what the vibe is. And it never ends well.

Mac: How do you mean the vibe?

Kerry: Well, I was like, okay, I'm reading it, and then I'm looking at the art around it, and then I'm like, “what's the deeper meaning?”

While the consensus between Audrey and Kerry towards graffiti was appreciative, the fact of the matter is that the public is *engaging* with the graffiti. In their case, it may be as little as laughing at a dumpster as one passes it, or so far as to fully attempt to decipher any messaging included, to put the graffiti into context with what’s around it and fully step into the artist’s shoes.

Regardless, graffiti in Eugene has become a positive and in-person public forum of sorts, inviting anyone and everyone to engage with the work.

Another interviewee, Lulu, took a different approach. Lulu similarly *noticed* graffiti constantly, going so far as to say that “that’s all I look for, honestly...” In this interview, Lulu

told me about having lived at 13th and Olive – a popular apartment building amongst students – in years prior, and this is where a lot of the graffiti would be spotted (which coincidentally resides *just* outside the downtown core boundary, so easily accessible to it). However, Lulu took less time to study the messaging of the pieces and more consistently appreciated for the aesthetics of graffiti and murals:

I think a lot about art. I don't know if people like—if it's just me, but Eugene is kind of ugly, like I'm not gonna lie to you! (Laugh) And it's, like, really cool, cause I feel like it's a very artistic community, and at least I do a lot in the art community. So, there's a lot of different styles, a lot of different people. Like, you could clearly tell. So, it feels like I'd notice different parts of the community, I guess. And it brings color because it's... Yeah, don't want to shit on Eugene too much. (Laugh) I really appreciate all the graffiti too. I don't even care if it's gross-looking. If it's colorful, I appreciate it.

Lulu, like Audrey and Kerry, continues to engage with the graffiti, albeit with varying buy-ins to the art form. As opposed to focusing on the content that the graffiti artists offer up to the viewer, Lulu subscribes to the general aesthetic of graffiti, most certainly seeing it as a positive aspect to graffiti creation and a way to brighten the city landscape.

Online findings

A decade ago, this sentiment towards graffiti would not have been at all similar to how Lulu, Audrey and Kerry, or Bee are viewing it. However, this goes past in-person summaries of graffiti responses and is equally reflected in online forums today. Overwhelmingly, on the same subreddits and general discussion topics as a decade prior, commenters and posts are hardly ever in opposition to graffiti and street art in Eugene – and when they are, it is out of desire to continue an already-present cleaning service like the Huckleberry Patrol performs, instead of out of spite for taggers and graffiti artists.

One resident artist who goes by the name of Suspish has garnered some attention in recent years, both online and in local news articles. With smaller beginnings in simpler letter tags, the artist gradually began focusing on more art pieces, often containing recurring characters. With the pieces becoming more and more elaborate as the artist was able to practice frequently, the Eugene population began picking up on the new paintings, eventually leading to a popularity with the artist.



Figure 6: Suspish Character

A commonly occurring fish character in Eugene, signed by Suspish in the corner.

In the same subreddit where commenters and posters used to type derogatory messages towards graffiti artists just over nine years ago, r/Eugene, commenters are now seeking out graffiti artists

with passion, and the name Suspish is not uncommon in these threads. In one post titled Anybody Know “Rango”? the original poster asked viewers to give the newer artist “props” for creating “impressive” graffiti. In response, commenters not only similarly praised the artist but also named Suspish in a similar fashion, almost noting them as a should-be mentor in the graffiti world. Commenter u/ballaedd24, for example, says that they’ve “seen Rango, Suspish, and others and they all make Eugene so much more pleasant, colorful, and interesting to be in. [They] wish there was more to break up these dull, dark, winter days,” (u/ballaedd24, 2023). In another post, under the newer subreddit r/EugeneGraffiti (created in 2021), poster u/TerribleTercel submitted a picture of graffiti on a metal box seemingly near train tracks in Eugene. The box appears to have recently been painted over, but the image focuses on the new graffiti, which spells out “This is UGLY, Bring Back The SUSPISH.” (u/TerribleTercel, 2022)

While these comment threads and posts specifically have highlighted the emerging graffiti “celebrities” in the area, the comments under each of these posts couldn’t be more different. Commenters are more consistently referring to graffiti and street art as a true art form. Very few commenters, if any at all, on these posts from more recent years are calling for the widespread removal of graffiti as a whole. Online, attitudes towards graffiti have wholly evolved, and sentiments have greatly improved in comparison to a decade ago.

This even proves true with online resources for Eugene citizens in relation to graffiti. Publicly and outwardly, the city of Eugene is officially opposed to the practice of graffiti. On their website, the Eugene local government provides up-to-date information on graffiti removal, including a brief introduction to the Huckleberry Patrol. Most importantly, though, at the bottom of the webpage, there is a section labeled “What to Do About Graffiti?” Here, they primarily suggest that citizens report graffiti if it is a bias or hate crime by calling the Eugene non-

Emergency Police main phone number, or even the city Facilities Department (“Graffiti Removal | Eugene, OR Website,” n.d.). In short, the website takes a relatively neutral approach to the crime, directing people to resources non-specific to graffiti. This is to be directly compared to an old version of the webpage for graffiti removal. Utilizing the WayBack Machine, there was a webpage just for reporting graffiti directly in the county (“Eugene/Springfield Graffiti Reporting Center” 2012). The GRAFFITI Reporting Center allowed for specific locations using detailed maps, photo entries, several text boxes for a person to describe locations of any graffiti, and even an entry to specifically accuse any person thought to have created the graffiti. This snapshot of the webpage was taken in 2012 and begins to depict the almost militaristic-like responses to graffiti and thereby the positions that the public had on graffiti, dramatically contrasting the more passive approach to graffiti mitigation or removal today.

This evolution of graffiti and street art sentiments has finally evolved to online locations that reach much further than local website destinations. Travel Oregon, as a part of the Oregon Tourism Commission, has several webpages describing and advertising the art and culture that Eugene now holds. Travel Oregon, similar to the city of Eugene website, encourages visitors to partake in self-guided tours to directly engage with the murals and surrounding graffiti works throughout the city, not just as something fun to do on a weekend but rather as a compelling reason to be a tourist in the state of Oregon. One article on their website, Oregon’s World-Class Murals (Bigg 2025), draws readers in with depictions of Eugene’s art and gives details about the backgrounds of some of the existing murals in the area before expanding outward to a few other artistic cores of the state. Graffiti, murals, and street art as a whole has changed the landscape of the city – if Eugene wasn’t already on the perceptual map of Oregon, projects by the Eugene local government such as the 20x21EUG or local artists demonstrating their craft have

accentuated the artistic culture of the city, drawing people in from international stages to visit Eugene.

This impact logically makes sense. The 20x21EUG Mural Project, essentially a policy change in the city,

Final Conclusions

Through the interviews taken around the city of Eugene and current online research, it has been shown that graffiti positively impacts people's lives in four main ways: community, comedic value, intellectual stimulation, and color/vibrance.

Community

Community, as seen in the interview with Bee, can be found primarily in tagger graffiti. Especially as it pertains to the downtown core, the recurring tags, the people that are frequenting the space, and the common messaging in the area brings people together – it's not just present, but the citizens of Eugene are perceiving this presence.

While especially online, this community aspect can also come from street art and imaging in graffiti (see Eugene's Suspish, Rango), community has been most commonly synonymous with tagger graffiti, particularly in person. For this reason, it remains important to place these public interviews within the context of the Huckleberry Patrol interview, as tagger graffiti is most frequently targeted by the police force. Because of this, the erasure of this typology of graffiti is therefore felt more intensely as a removal of community and culture from the area.

Comedic value

Graffiti that hold comedic value are also most frequently associated with tagger graffiti: quips and messaging are more commonly seen as hasty throw-ups rather than pieces created for artistic merit. Graffiti tags that benefit the public from a comedic standpoint are thereby also often targeted by the Huckleberry Patrol.

This is where this category of graffiti becomes contentious, and the value of the actions taken on behalf of the Huckleberry Patrol is directly shown in people's lives. The group of

comedic graffiti also tends to include the typology of vulgarity. In the interviews taken around Eugene, for example, noted in particular was tame drug use like as alcohol consumption.

Vulgarity, however, is one of the graffiti types that the Huckleberry Patrol cleans whether they are “on shift” or not – besides anti-police sentiments, vulgarity tends to have very little presence in the city sphere because of the Huckleberry Patrol. If vulgarity is generally perceived as having a negative impact to the average person, then the Huckleberry Patrol directly mitigates this impact, even if some of the vulgarity in Eugene contributes to a comedy appeal.

Intellectual stimulation

While it may not attract crowds en masse like some of the others may, intellectually stimulating pieces create an opportunity for people to engage with the graffiti like none else. Especially in a city that at least partially revolves around the University of Oregon (especially near campus and into the downtown sector), appealing to people of an academic nature (college educated or not) by painting thoughtful pieces allows for the piece to remain in the forefront of conscious thought of the public. These pieces encourage direct and long-term engagement and active thought about the graffiti (through the context of the piece itself and the graffiti that surrounds it) that have led to a positive impact in those that experience it.

Color and vibrance

The terms “street art” and “graffiti” in these interviews has been used interchangeably. While most may not generally consider graffiti “street art”, nor street art such as the large murals around Eugene “graffiti,” each interview that I took spoke about the color that “graffiti” and “street art” bring to the city equally.

Regardless of its form, graffiti as a practice has brought color to the previously “ugly” city landscape, as was described by a student at the University of Oregon and resident of Eugene.

Be it sanctioned murals, tags, or even script, the paint that has spread throughout the city creates an aesthetic that, through interviews with residents of Eugene, are appealing. Even if there was no intention of artistic performance, the presence of color through the paint engages the community of the city positively.

After the 20x21EUG Mural Project, this theme of a positive impact through color and vibrance became much more potent. Throughout this project, the city of Eugene itself was gaining media traction – news outlets and media sources were constantly picking up on the increase of sanctioned pieces. Post 2021, when the project officially concluded, Eugene became a prominent tourist destination, utilizing these murals as stopping points for visitors. More research is to be done on whether this recent global popularity was noticeable and beneficial for the Eugene population, but the simple argument that it added more color to the city is unquestionable.

In recent years, graffiti and street art have exploded in prevalence and presence throughout Eugene. Online, graffiti as a whole has become increasingly popular, bringing to light some local celebrities of graffiti, even if they remain anonymous. With the 20x21EUG Mural Project, several world-class muralists were also included in the Eugene art culture, making their mark on the street art across the city. This means little if the general population of Eugene remained indifferent in their day-to-day; changes can, in theory, be made with no impact on the greater city of Eugene. This, as it was found through interviews, was not the case. Not only do University of Oregon students and permanent residents of Eugene notice the graffiti throughout the city, but they also consistently engage with it. This engagement has been shown to positively impact a person's perception of the city, bringing an experience to Eugene that has never occurred before.

This experience and perception have been shown, however, to be unique. In each interview conducted, it was a common theme that the graffiti adds something tangible to the person's daily life. *What* it adds, however, varies with each person, some having common themes, but ultimately leaving the impact of what the city has to offer to individual interpretation. Whether this be adding a splash of color to their commute through the city, a poetic stopping point in one's day, or even a safe space where members of one's community can communicate and be present within the city sphere, each person seems to have a completely different takeaway from the street art.

Regardless of graffiti's exclusive and personal perception, the graffiti around Eugene, as it exists today, has been generally taken positively. When retrieving qualitative data from people, both in-person and online, a majority of the Eugene community has found graffiti around the city to be beneficial to their lives. Even the Huckleberry Patrol, tasked with the cleanup of graffiti, shares a similar sentiment, albeit naturally narrower (as opposed to finding *all* graffiti in the city beneficial).

Because of the findings of this paper, my recommendations to the city are as follows: continue this outlook on street art. Sanctioning art forms such as graffiti and allowing for controversial practices to exist throughout the city has the potential to change the dynamic of the city long-term. What remains unanswered, however, and requires further insight is whether the city and its governmental actions can be totally responsible for this positive change in outlook on graffiti. The general population's shift in outlook on street art and graffiti can certainly be correlated to movements such as the 20x21EUG Mural Project and the Urban Canvas Project, but specifically defining the city as the direct cause is hasty. Regardless, as Eugene continues to evolve, so too does the cultural impact that graffiti and street art have on Eugene's city

landscape. In Eugene, the city doesn't just create its culture – it allows it to flourish through brush strokes, sprays, and the voices of its community.

Appendix

Appendix A: Interview questions with Huckleberry Patrol volunteer Mike Mills

Is your service still going on in the in the colder months?

Do you cover the university campus under the “public property”?

Do you have a vetting process for cleaning tags?

On your website, I saw that you typically operate between 11th and 15th streets and then Ferry and Charnelton... is that outdated?

Does cleaning these get overwhelming?

Do you follow any taggers in particular?

Do you see any repeat artists or tags directed at you and the police?

How come you're a part of this patrol?

Typically, graffiti is seen as associated with gang activity. Is that prevalent now?

Do you keep track of how much damage is caused?

Do you ever get to talk to the public about your service when you are out in the city?

You said you were primarily funding through donations and volunteer work. Do you know what that donor base looks like?

So then does the materials, the “World's Best Graffiti Remover” and the paint... Is that primarily donated as well? Or is that in a budget?

Do you have any other thoughts you want to pass on generally?

Appendix B: Public Interview Questions

How often do you notice graffiti or street art in your day-to-day?

How do you travel most often? By foot, car, etc.?

What's your favorite?

When you see graffiti, give me your thoughts/feelings, what do you feel?

Do you think the city should do anything different about graffiti?

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