

An Initial Intimation of a yet Banal Discourse: Truck Graffiti

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Abstract: This article provides an initial discussion of truck graffiti. It reviews pertinent literature on graffiti which shows that, despite the fact that graffiti have attracted a number of researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds, truck graffiti have been under researched. It also specifically presents types of graffiti and approaches to graffiti research which demonstrates that, even though truck graffiti might be classified into “public”, they seem to have been overlooked in the realm of graffiti research. This situation insinuates that truck graffiti, particularly those in the Indonesian settings, warrants further exploration.

Key words: graffiti, truck, Malang, East Java, Indonesia

There has been a relatively large body of literature on Indonesia; a number of them deal with politics and economy (e.g., Manning & van Diermen, 2000; Schwarz, 2004; Sulistiyanto, 2004; Santoso, 2003; Niyomsilpa, 2004; Mundayat, 2004; Sulistyo, Achwan & Soetrisno, 2002; Effendy, 2003); some of them deal with the social condition (e.g., Dahana, 2004; Winarta, 2004; Herlijanto, 2003) and culture, including literary properties (e.g., Aveling, 2001, 2004; Acciaioli, 2001; Jordaan, 1997; Beatty, 1996). Yet, there has been, to the present writer’s knowledge, no record documenting research on graffiti in Indonesia.

My interest in truck graffiti started from a form of negative feeling I had every time I happened to see them along the streets in Malang, East Java, Indonesia and some other towns nearby, such as, Batu, Pasuruan, Probolinggo, Jombang, Kediri, Tulungagung, and Blitar. Yet, at times, such a negative feeling turned and perpetually turns to be positive, for frequently too, the graffiti are amusing. This kind of mixed-up feeling recently has ushered me to ponder about how they have such different evocations in my mind. I have been questioning why people should write

the graffiti, who write the graffiti, and who do the graffiti belong to. They invoke a negative feeling in me when they seem to me as something simple, dull, mundane, banal, and have nothing new to offer. On the other hand, they are amusing when they show a kind of creativity. Once, I noticed a graffito reading “PRA ONE @ YOU”. This impressed me a lot, for it seems to me to possess creativity. It draws on different sorts of materials.

Such a nascent positive feeling has recently grown up and stirred my curiosity. This, in turn, led me to make efforts to find some literature which bids ways to understand them. I tried to find the literature at the local district and university libraries and local bookstores in Malang. Yet, I failed to find any materials which directly address the phenomenon of truck graffiti, even graffiti in general in Indonesia. As well, I tried to find some materials through websites and yet, again, I could not come up with literature on Indonesian graffiti. All the literature I have found deals with graffiti outside Indonesia. This means that one aspect of Indonesian life, the existence of graffiti, specifically truck graffiti, has not been explicated. Therefore, attention to this area is important if account for Indonesian social life for betterment is at stake.

Graffiti are pervasive. They decorate (but might also deteriorate) public spaces, inclusive of the rear of a great number of trucks in Malang and thereabout. Apparently, due to the ubiquity, they summon a number of researchers with various disciplinary backgrounds to explore them. Yet, as abovementioned, the body of literature dealing with graffiti has been merely on graffiti outside of Indonesia (e.g., Obeng, 2000; Adams & Winter, 1997; Moonwomon, 1995; Gadsby, 1995; Rodriguez & Clair, 1999; Joswig-Mehnert & Yule, 1996; Best, 2003).

Graffiti research conducted by Obeng (2000), for instance, dealt with those in Legon (Ghana). It was focused on politics. Obeng looked at the graffiti in the area as a political discourse. Obeng found out that graffiti were employed by the socio-politically disadvantaged community members to put across their political aspirations. Graffiti were also found to be means of articulating anger and frustrations over the political restlessness in the country. Unlike the political concern of Obeng, Adams and Winter (1997) conducted research on gang graffiti. Their investigations came up with the findings that gang graffiti have something more than simply marking the gang boundaries; rather, they reflect and represent the socio-culture of the gang sub-culture. Graffiti are employed to show their

membership to the gang and the gang itself. They also reflect intra-and inter-gang social webs and the gang's worldview. They also serve as ways to show deference to the dead members of the gang.

Moonwomon (1995) analyzed women's bathroom stall graffiti as discourse which has to do with the politics of gender and race. Based on the data taken from the bathroom stall at the University of California at Berkeley, Moonwomon found that women's bathroom graffiti represent a community discussion whereby discourse about rape and responsibility woven with gender and race was heatedly spoken of. This includes the discourse of local and global societal practice and racist/nonracist voices within the circle of women community in the campus.

Graffiti research also deals with tagging, one form of graffiti. An instance of such a project has been done by Gross, Walkosz, and Gross (1997). Tagging is viewed as an individual expression. Gross, Walkosz, and Gross's (1997) took as their sites the cosmopolitan cities of Amsterdam, Paris, Vienna, Copenhagen, Auckland, and Victoria. This led them to conclude that tagging constitutes a sort of individualist defensive expressions in and against the current globalization.

Unlike all the above pieces of research, the project by Joswig-Mehnert and Yule (1996) was focused on how people (readers), in this case students, give responses or interpret graffiti. They took fifty-seven students as their research subjects. They asked the subjects to read twelve graffiti. They found out that the subjects tended to have various and different interpretations of the graffiti; the subjects also showed different foci of what they deemed interesting about the graffiti. Based on their data, they came to a conclusion that graffiti readers are likely to be faced with difficulties in interpreting the graffiti, for graffiti tend to be anonymous. This conclusion was also adumbrated by Rodriguez and Clair (1999) in their study on the discursive tensions of anonymous texts.

Vernedoe and Gopnik (in Gadsby, 1995) made a comparative study on art and graffiti. They viewed graffiti as a mixture of childish and adult condescending expressions (Gadsby, 1995). But Abel and Buckley (in Gadsby, 1995) looked at graffiti as a psychological phenomenon, that is, a sort of personal communication whereby the writers find no necessary social impediments, which people would normally face in ordinary situation in expressing their thoughts (Gadsby, 1995).

By and large, graffiti enjoyed a golden era in the West in the 1970s and 1980s (Best, 2003; Gadsby, 1995). This does not, however, imply that

graffiti nowadays have lost their momentum. Every kind of human activity and product has cultural values (Kuntowijoyo, 2002); it follows that graffiti, as human products, also boast values. And, truck graffiti are still produced by a number of people in Malang and thereabout. Since there has been no report documenting studies on truck graffiti in Malang, the unraveling of their cultural values are awaiting. Therefore, the present project has the guise of pioneering such efforts to explore the values of truck graffiti in Malang.

Often graffiti are anonymous. The corollary is that those who write (or those asking people or artists to write/paint/draw) graffiti have freedom to write or express anything for whomever, anywhere, and anytime, without fearing any threat or embarrassment from anybody. This means that graffiti are rhetorical media which are egalitarian for any kind of idea and/or feeling (Obeng, 2000). In other words, graffiti might serve as the balancing tools against the pervasive discourses often dominated by the ones in authority. So, studies on graffiti might be used to disclose the hidden ideology of the people having no authority and power (the dominated), who, frequently, constitute the majority in the society (Obeng, 2000). In other words, research on graffiti touches upon those in the grass root boundaries, that is, the majority whose aspirations are likely to be outside the public discourse (Obeng, 2000). This point constitutes part of the significance of the study on truck graffiti in Malang, Indonesia (this shall be discussed hereafter).

Compared to Best's (2003) study on graffiti on state-owned public transportation in Barbados, the present study is different in that it deals with trucks owned by private companies or individual businessmen. It also differs from the mural paintings on trucks as documented by, for instance, Jack Szwergold (2004). Szwergold's was intended, particularly, to document the pictures, whilst the present study is concerned more with the linguistic expressions of the graffiti. In Best's study, the graffiti were those made by students, who have different social status from the truck drivers and co-drivers of the trucks in the present study. Best (2003) pointed out that the readers of the public transportation graffiti in Barbados are segmented—of certain subgroup, whilst the truck graffiti in Malang invite unlimited audience to read. What is similar is that the truck graffiti in Malang and the graffiti on (public, yet private-owned) transportation in Barbados tend to be free from “wild”, stealthily-made response graffiti from unintended individuals.

NOTES ON GRAFFITI AND APPROACHES TO GRAFFITI RESEARCH

The term 'graffiti' is derived from Italian language and is the plural form of the word 'graffito' which means drawing or inscription. In English, the word 'graffiti' has undergone changes in meaning and relates specifically to writings in public spaces which are generally unexpected. The term has developed and now it has loose meanings; it relates to a certain painting technique of mural painting, i.e., 'sgraffito'. Graffiti now include any kinds of scratches, drawings, paintings, symbols, signs on walls, or anywhere no matter what constitutes the motivation of the writing. Due to this huge coverage of the term, some people, for instance Gadsby (1995), tried to make classifications of graffiti; she categorized graffiti into six main classifications: 1) *latrinalia*, 2) *public*, 3) *tags*, 4) *historical*, 5) *folk epigraphy*, and 6) *humorous*. The formulation of the categories will be discussed in reference mainly to Gadsby (1995).

Latrinalia emerged for the first time as it was used by Dundes to refer to graffiti found in toilets (Gadsby, 1995; Emmison & Smith, 2000). *Latrinalia* is one type of graffiti which has been extensively researched. It goes on par with the notion that the dirtiest, yet, the most widely disclosed place in the U.S. is toilet. *Public* refers to graffiti which are written on public spaces and sites, such as outside walls of buildings, trains and subways, and other public spaces available. *Public* is so called due to this nature; that is, it is for public and obtainable in public spaces. *Tags* might also be *public*, but, not always so. *Tags* might occupy public spaces just like the graffiti categorized as public; however, *tags* have their own specific characteristics, that is, the messages they convey are addressed to those within the social boundary of the people writing the tags. *Tags* tend to be unique and represent an individual. *Tags* might be names of individuals, but the very characteristic of *tags* is their individualist expression. In other words, *tags* are as individual as fingerprints. *Tags* tend to employ the attributes of the writer: name, initial, address, specific symbols of certain values, and so forth.

Different from the above points, *historical* signifies graffiti which are explored by those whose life spans long after the graffiti were produced. It follows that the researcher does not have direct access to the internal thoughts of the graffiti writers. The researcher can only find historical archives which might pertain to the graffiti in question. *Folk epigraphy*

suggests inscriptions made by ordinary people on walls, rocks, woods, and etcetera. Gadsby (1995) observes that such a type of graffiti tends to disappear as spray-paint is made available in the market. Humorous seems to be elusive to define. But, basically, any graffiti collected for entertaining purposes fall into this category. Figure 1 shows the comparative figure of how far people have researched graffiti as viewed from the types. The most widely explored is *public* and the runner up is *latrinalia*.

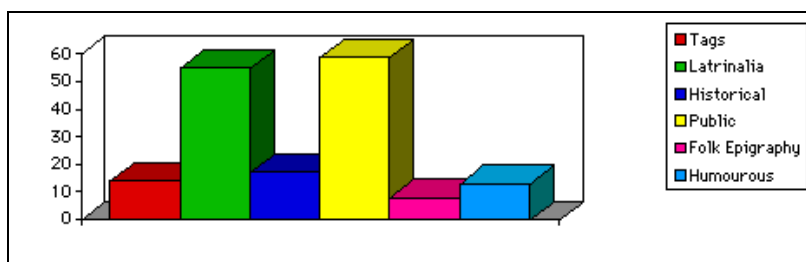


Figure 1. Comparative Amount of Research on Different Types of Graffiti (Gadsby, 1995)

Another point worth attending to is the classification of graffiti on the basis of the writer's motivation. In such a case, referring to Blume, Gadsby (1995) classifies graffiti into two: conversational and declarative. Conversational graffiti invite readers (whether or not intended by the first initiator) to join a sort of conversational flow. It is similar to making a script for conversation with a number of writers (interactants) participating. Different from natural-direct conversation, conversational graffiti invite both known and unknown participants. It needs to be noted, however, that not all graffiti invite participation from the readers. In the case that they are not intended for responses, the graffiti are likely to belong to declarative. In such a case, artistic graffiti and/or *tags* tend to fall into this category.

In order to better analyze graffiti, graffiti research needs to adopt the sociolinguistic approach (Gadsby, 1995). In her formulation, this approach might start with graffiti as a linguistic event. It then moves towards the discussion of other linguistic events surrounding or attributable to the graffiti, cultural facts and local traditions, and any other things influential to graffiti writers. In this case, she provides us with an interesting example endorsing the significance of sociolinguistic approach. It happened that on one occasion, Gadsby attended a Women Studies class at Vanier College, New York. At a point in that class, one of the students happened to look up

at the ceiling and noticed a piece of writing which read "cunt blood". At the end of the meeting, the students told the professor about the writing and the professor ascended a desk and added to it so as to read "cunt blood is sacred".

In Gadsby's observation, graffiti researchers who do not have direct experience of the writing process of the writing are likely to find it difficult to fully understand the end result of the writing unless they can recognize that the seemingly one piece of writing is actually composed by two different hands, of different motivations, without necessarily knowing who the writers are. Since, in Gadsby's point, the word 'sacred' is unlikely to come out of New Yorkers, the understanding might start with finding out the schedules of the classes, and that there are Women Studies classes in that classroom. This is the brief of contextualization which Gadsby means by sociolinguistic approach, which graffiti researchers are advised to employ.

Whatever form they have, graffiti have aroused the interest of myriads of people, whose stands might be positive or negative. The positive side is normally shown by those who then do some research and appreciation (e.g. academics) and the negative one by those who then might try to study them in order to find ways to eradicate them. Usually, this is done by governmental personnel and those who view graffiti as symptoms of socio-psychological diseases (Gadsby, 1995). In this regard, it is interesting to note that the police officers in the district of Kediri, East Java, Indonesia, did not mind about truck graffiti. They even organized a truck graffiti competition and offered some amount of award to the best contestants (Jawa Pos, 17 June, 2004). Even though they set the topic of the graffiti (which might mean a sort of cooptation), they showed their positive attitude towards truck graffiti; they did not even consider the possibility that truck graffiti might be dangerous to the traffic, despite the fact that they might be distracters to drivers behind the trucks with graffiti. This seems to be contradictory to the theme the police officers took, that is, "safe traffic".

A BRIEF VIEW ON TRUCK GRAFFITI IN AND AROUND MALANG

There are relatively myriads of trucks which are used to port goods into and out of Malang. It is not uncommon that the trucks, including the back part of the truck deck, are decorated in a colorful way. Neither is it rare that the writings (graffiti) are impressive, both in a positive and negative sense: positive due to their creativity, suggesting what Shklovskii

(in Selden & Widdowson, 1993) refers to as defamiliarization, and negative to their dullness. Yet, as abovementioned, this phenomenon has not been explored. As to why there has no study on this is probably because people just take them for granted due to their omnipresence.

Based on the data gathered during the period of field study (September 2003 and July 2004), I could say that the graffiti at both sides of the truck decks tend to be predominantly about the name of the company possessing the trucks and those at the back normally tend to be things other than the names of the company. I might also add that when the name of the company emerge at the back, it is very likely to be in the form of the initials of the name(s) of the company. Usually, such initials are put at the bottom left corner of the space at the back. As with the theme to write, it seems that it covers a very broad range: objectification of women, religious belief/teaching, mild-porno-related expressions (innuendos), geographical reference, ancestral reference, passion, frustration, social-status acknowledgement, etc. The sample photos of trucks with graffiti (Figures 1, 2, and 3) were taken during the field work.

Another point worth noting relates to the ownership of the truck graffiti. Basically, it might be said that the drivers (and co-drivers), whether or not they are willing, are the owners of such graffiti. In fact a number of drivers and professional painters providing the services to make the truck graffiti reported that it is the drivers (and co-drivers) who mainly determine whether or not the trucks are decorated with graffiti. Yet, there are occasions that the truck-deck manufacturers are those who determine the writing of graffiti. This is what has happened to the manufacturer of "MORO DADI" residing in the sub-district of Gondang Legi, Malang. It has staff with the expertise of writing graffiti on the deck of trucks. In brief, the idea of writing truck graffiti might originate from the drivers (and co-drivers), the (real) owners of the truck (usually businessmen), or the manufacturers of truck-deck. Yet, as the trucks run in the street, it seems that the writers (speakers or narrators or declarators) of the graffiti are the truck driver(s) and/or co-driver(s).

It seems that truck graffiti in Malang and thereabout (and possibly across Indonesia) demonstrate a similar dimension of production to those available in metropolitan cities in Europe and the U.S. Yet, it should not imply that the truck graffiti in Malang do not bear their-own significance. They have their own specific merits in couples of ways. First, the graffiti are written and exposed to public on vehicles of those who run business. Secondly, those who drive the trucks and "show off" the graffiti are drivers and co-drivers. At this point I need to say that most of the drivers and co-

drivers have relatively low education; it would seem unthinkable to expect them to be college or university graduates. And thirdly, the readers, due to the nature of truck mobility, are those of any kind of background, educated/uneducated, of high/low social status, positive/negative towards truck graffiti, etcetera. This intricacy warrants some kinds of explanation.

Reading the existing literature on graffiti written on transportation tools, it is obvious that the literature speaks much of graffiti which have been written in a stealthy way, such as those written on public transportation in New York and Barbados (see, for example, Best, 2003). That is not what the present study is all about. Rather, the truck graffiti under investigation are not written in a secret way due to their legality; rather, these graffiti have been written on purpose with a high degree of vivacity as a number of informants (drivers and co-drivers) have indicated. Occasionally, the drivers and co-drivers ask somebody (potentially “professional” artists) to apply graffiti as they aspire. In such a case, it might be the drivers themselves who pay for the service of the artists (ranging from 50,000.00 rupiahs to 125,000.00 rupiahs); they do not ask the truck owners for reimbursement. It follows that the truck graffiti “belong to” the drivers and co-drivers, instead of the truck owners. When the graffiti are written by the artists, they might use ordinary brush (see Figures 2 and 4) or airbrush (see Figure 3). The latter is relatively a new phenomenon in Malang.



Figure 2



Figure 3

Best (2003) observes that the graffiti on private-owned transportation seem to be made on purpose, that is, to protect the vehicles from graffiti which might be written out of the blue. In a hypothetical conclusion, Best observes that the absence of the private transportation from “wild” graffiti is due to the following points: 1) the private-owned transportation tends to undergo strict protection by the owners and 2) the private-owned transportation has been decorated with graffiti by the owners themselves; unlikely is there any room for others other than the owners to jot graffiti down on the transportation means, whilst the presence of graffiti on state-owned public transportation is attributable to the following factors: 1) members of the society tend to be ignorant of the state-owned public transportation (on par with other state properties) and 2) the graffiti on the state-owned public transportation are made as a way of expressing political actions.

Viewed from their physical appearance, truck graffiti in Malang, as a form of communication, could be said to be minimalist. They tend not to be verbose in the employment of words; rather, they are likely to be written in large-size characters. There is also a strong tendency that the graffiti do not constitute complete sentences. So, truck graffiti are different from *latrinalia* which tends to invite responses (other graffiti) in the forms of sentences; *latrinalia* tends to host “conversational” turn-takings and chains.



Figure 4

Probably, the truck graffiti writers (likely the drivers and co-drivers) intend to address as many audiences as possible within the speed limit of the truck; therefore, they express them in big-size fonts so as not to miss potential readers. As such, they do not need to construct complete sentences, and, after all, the space on the truck deck does not normally suffice for complete sentences with big-size characters. Thus, it is discernable why the truck graffiti in Malang and thereabout tend to be short phrasal expressions, even though there are some which form complete sentences (in an Indonesian sense), such as “PRA ONE @ YOU”. Hence, the minimalist technique of writing the truck graffiti is comparable to “pleading” the audience to read.

Viewed from the graffiti type (Gadsby, 1995), truck graffiti in Malang and thereabout can be classified into “public” in the sense that they are put on the rear of truck deck which go along public streets. This situation means that the graffiti are intended for public readership—public consumption. This being the case, the readers are by no means segmented or classified. It follows that truck graffiti seem to be a kind of egalitarian expressions and communications (Obeng, 2000).

With respect to the writing motivations, the truck graffiti in Malang and thereabout suggest the category of “declarative”. They were not intended to summon any response from the readers. This being the case, truck graffiti might be difficult to be classified as egalitarian, for the writers are on effective a position to “bog-down” the readers. When the readers consider the graffiti good, they might just enjoy them. On the other hand,

when the graffiti are calamitous, the readers are just let to feel “sick” inside. Hence, Obeng’s (2000) observation that graffiti are egalitarian media of expression does not seem to apply to truck graffiti, for truck graffiti are closed from potential public responses. It can be said, even, that truck graffiti are the “authoritarian” media of expressions for the underdog—the disadvantaged.

The crucial point to note here is that whatever the truck graffiti are and that they have something for the readers, either positive or negative, demonstrate that they are texts which proffer significance (meaning) (Riffaterre, 1978). This further endorses that studies on truck graffiti are commendable and insightful for a better understanding of the life of the labor-class elements (e.g., drivers and co-drivers) in Malang and thereabouts.

CONCLUSION

Works on both graffiti in general and transportation graffiti have not been adequately devoted to Indonesia. The truck graffiti documentation of New York (e.g., Szwergold, 2004) does not deal with language proper; rather, it has a modest intention of recording objects so as to last longer; analysis of the cultural significance they might offer is waived. It overlooks the idea that graffiti are also linguistic materials. Such a way of exploration might be interesting and revealing in a way, but does not account for the linguistic and cultural properties they might withhold. Neither is Best’s (2003) study readily transferable to Indonesian (Malang context) truck graffiti, for the specification of the object of study is relatively different from the factual object of truck graffiti in Malang. It is also true with some other well documented research on graffiti; most of them deal with complete sentences with turn-takings as markers of conversational properties constituting discourses (e.g., Moonwomon, 1995; Adams & Winter, 1997). This, once again, is not immediately ready for adoption in order to explain the phenomenon of truck graffiti in Malang. Hence, the fact that there is no research report on truck graffiti in Malang and even in the Indonesian context in general suggests the idea that research on this area is crucial, for when this is done, depiction and explanation about the cultural condition of Indonesia might be made more clearly.

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